



CNI

COMMENT - Commemoration and celebration

The 200th anniversary of the battle of Waterloo prompted John Dunlop to give this Thought for Today on BBC Radio Ulster.

To get here this morning I drove down Wellington Place which leads from the front of Belfast Inst and the Black Man to the front of the City Hall. I say all that for the benefit of all those people, including Belfast citizens, who don't know where Wellington Place actually is. Some of you may live in Wellington Park or attend Wellington College.

Yesterday marked the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Waterloo which pitted the two great generals, Wellington and Napoleon, against one another.

Wellington, who was born in Dublin, said the result was "the nearest-run thing you ever saw in

your life”. Had the gates of a farmhouse not been closed and had the Prussians not arrived at the last moment, the outcome might have been otherwise and the subsequent trajectory of the history of Europe, including that of Britain and Ireland, would have been very different.

It was a pivotal event which marked the end of Napoleon’s grand designs and opened up alternative opportunities for others; including the expansion of the British Empire and the rise of German nationalism.

The battle began around mid-day on a damp Sunday and about 10 short hours later it was all over. The French lost 25,000 killed and wounded and Wellington and his allies lost 23,000; which amounted to nearly 5,000 casualties per hour; not to mention the many 100s of horses. It was an event marked by careful planning, strategic leadership in the height of the battle, ghastly carnage, slaughter and heroism.

Wellington, having lost many of his generals, friends and soldiers, said afterwards “Nothing except a battle lost can be half as melancholy as a battle won”

The battle of Waterloo will be re-enacted this weekend on the battle-field itself as an act of commemoration, and will involve people from both sides of the conflict and will be observed by thousands on specially constructed stands.

There is a difference between celebration and commemoration.

Celebration of past victories are difficult experiences for those on the losing side and for their descendants, who may have suffered humiliation and subsequent catastrophic loss. For them, to be reminded of the event cannot occasion other than pain. For it to be associated with scenes of triumphant and arrogant superiority by the victors makes it doubly so.

Commemoration on the other hand can provide space for reflection about ancient events, their causes and subsequent alliances and mitigate/dampen the base passions of pride and nationalisms. Since Waterloo, Britain and France have been allies in 2 world wars against Germany. All quite different alliances than those at Waterloo.

We are in the Decade of Centenaries; within which pivotal events took place, each with the potential to arouse our passions. Celebration might occasion defensive and divisive reactions while commemoration might lead us to reflect on those things which “With the benefit of historical hindsight ... we would wish had been done differently or not at all” to quote the words of the Queen in Dublin Castle.

We can maybe handle commemoration together, while celebration might be much more difficult.

The Reverend Dr John Dunlop is a former Moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland