

I N T R O D U C T I O N

This is a book about the First Duke of Wellington's posthumous symbolization as a rallying sign for the English nation. It examines the duke's legacy as it was constructed, amplified, defended, and contested in Britain in and after 1852, the year of his death and his extraordinary state funeral. I am not interested in writing another *True Book about Wellington*,¹ reconstructing a subject whose as yet neglected biographical features wait in the margins of or at the interstices between the extant publications and manuscripts. Rather, I want to annotate what might be called the "Wellington effect," the way in which the heroic individual's eminence was persistently identified with national destiny.

Such a project inevitably confronts Wellington's fundamentally typological composition. The dead duke was repeatedly caught up in interpretive practices that stressed the quasi-symbolic relations between hero and nation. This hermeneutic system, in turn, invariably took the form of progressive revelation or what George Landow has called a "secularized figuralism."² Wellington could serve, according to rhetorical exigencies, as either a type or the antitype—either a deliverer of Europe from Napoleon's predations and hence an anticipation of the Continent's permanent release from the threat of French republicanism or the replete embodiment of an unsullied Englishness that had been prefigured in earlier, less illustrious soldier-heroes. In both cases, Victorian polemicists at midcentury consistently distinguished Wellington as the chief agent in an analogical scheme that construed national history, in the words of A. C. Charity, as a process of ongoing "'prefiguration' and 'fulfilment.'"³

Ultimately, Wellington's spectacular funeral pageant was a threshold event against which his life could be re-viewed and comprehended as the consummation of a national destiny intimately bound up with Englishness itself, with what it meant to be English in the middle of the nineteenth century. If there was any validity to the declaration made by the *Times* (London) shortly after his death that Wellington "was the very

type and model of an Englishman,"⁴ then his funeral could also mark the end, as Cornelia Pearsall has suggested, "not of just a great Englishman, but, more troublingly, of the last one, as if with him [went] the epitome of the national type."⁵ How this particular affinity between Wellington and Englishness was forged and came to be pervasively imprinted on the national consciousness, especially in the early months after the hero's death, is the subject matter of my book.

As a result of this focus on the multivalent afterlife of Wellington, my approach is synchronically interventionist rather than diachronically ordered. Readers looking for a sequential account of Wellington's life will probably be disappointed; those with little or no knowledge of his biography are referred to the following chronology as a point of entry into a study whose goal is to survey a cross section of texts and images in order to discuss how certain representations of the hero contributed to a nation's self-imagining.

My terrain is therefore constituted not so much by the readily available biographical material as by what the London-based *Examiner* of 1852 called the "Wellington literature," a corpus that the event of the hero's death, in particular,

suddenly called forth [and that] . . . extended into every department of writing . . . marked by every degree of intellectual merit. It . . . comprised short articles of every quality, singular for ability or singular for the absence of it, in newspapers, reviews, and magazines; orations in the senate, original or stolen; sermons out of all pulpits, from cathedral to meeting house; histories, new or reprinted, varying in literary merit over an exceedingly wide range; and poems of all ranks, from the Ode of Tennyson down to the Dirge of Tupper.⁶

The *Examiner's* mildly caustic assessment of the Wellington tributes, figured as indifferent literary effluvia motivated by the vanity and greed of their authors, reflected this periodical's long-standing political opposition to the High Tory duke. But the newspaper also put into focus the material *The Wake of Wellington* sets out to canvass: a profuse and, for some time after 1852, a dramatically proliferating Wellingtoniana.

One mid-Victorian biographer recognized that death itself generated a renewed interest in Wellington, a sudden reawakening of pride in national achievement that appeared to be unprecedented:

Multitudes of the young, who had not become familiar with Wellington's history, wished to become familiar with it now; multitudes of the old who had been contemporaneous with it, wished now to read it in regular form. . . . Authors, artists, publishers, and miscellaneous venders could scarcely supply the market quickly enough for the popular demand. All sorts of Wellingtoniana, literary and artistic, historical and curious, old and new, great and small, were in peremptory request. . . . In short . . . emphatically and almost in the style of hero-worship, Wellington was "the topic of the day."⁷

By the time he published his influential two-volume biography near the end of the nineteenth century, Herbert Maxwell was able to claim that "it is hardly possible to open a book dealing with civil, military, or social affairs in England . . . without finding constant allusion to Wellington."⁸

The way in which the hero was laid to rest had much to do with the creation of an insatiable Wellington market. As the London and provincial papers tried to impress upon their readers, the duke's death was celebrated on a spectacular, unprecedented level. His state-sanctioned funeral took two months to prepare and drew more than one and a half million spectators to London. In the following pages, I consider the cultural repercussions of this funeral—how they were registered in that constellation of posthumous representations that seemed consciously driven to transfix Wellington into a revered, indeed an unequalled national hero for the mid-Victorians. If this "fixing" had its inaugural moments in Wellington's early successes on the battlefields of India and western Europe, it had its most extraordinary instantiation in the public spectacle of the duke's funeral on 18 November 1852, which laid to rest the man one eulogist called England's "incomparable Hero and Patriot" with "a ceremony that surpassed all former sepulchral grandeur," causing "all the sensibilities of human nature [to rise] to a wonderful height of melancholy rapture."⁹ According to another contemporary observer, the nation could "fairly

assert that there is no precedent at all for the celebration of the funeral worth consulting, simply because there is no precedent in our history of the life or death of such a hero—of so great and good a man.”¹⁰

I adopt three senses of the term *wake* as I interrogate these claims about the unrivaled nature of Wellington’s heroic distinction, in the process drawing out the various meanings implicit in my title. Most obviously, I employ the word to denote a vigil that simultaneously deplores and hal- lows the passing of a hero whose “manners . . . opinions . . . aspirations . . . [and] prejudices, seem to have been wholly English.”¹¹ Hence, *wake* also implies a requiem of sorts for the English, left behind to witness and mourn the passing of an exceptional incarnation of themselves. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* notes, the word *wake* derives in part from the ecclesiastical Latin *vigilia*, or certain feast days preceded by services last- ing through the night, and so encompasses the idea of festivity or making holiday. Wellington’s wake was certainly an occasion for ostentation and circumstance; one cleric regretted “the burying of his corpse with empty pomp, and noisy, griefless, sorrowless, selfish parade.”¹² Rather than dwell on the authenticity or hubris of the celebrants’ grief, however, I would like to maintain a distinction: instead of attempting to retrieve that which, in the end, is inaccessible and unverifiable—the actual emotional states of mourners lining London’s streets or crowded into St. Paul’s Cathedral—I am concerned with the ways in which a self-described community of mourners was transformed by spectacle.

This distinction leads to a second sense of *wake*: the track left by a passing, a path of disturbance. Differentiating between the natural body (the corpse) and the social body (the permanent commemorative image left behind in iconography, memorial, or effigy), Nigel Llewellyn has noted that “funerals of the great were . . . deeply memorable occasions which helped construct and reconstruct the complex patterns of social ex- perience.” Public mourning, according to Llewellyn, “was almost totally concerned with signifying practice rather than with psychological ther- apy. . . . [During] the death ritual the natural body was virtually forgotten and culture’s concern was to support the accumulation of meanings at- tributed to the social body.”¹³ Focusing primarily on that liminal period of approximately two months between Wellington’s expiration and funeral,

when the public and its representatives accustomed themselves to a hero's death and prepared for his final departure by planning appropriate observances, this book taps into that "accumulation of meanings" ascribed to the duke's social body.

One way in which that body could be represented, for example, is shown in the special masthead for an *Illustrated London News* (*ILN*) supplement (18 September 1852), wherein the duke appears in the guise of a Roman potentate, his aged and withered frame made virile, his neck made muscular, his pointed jaw squared, and his notoriously beaked nose made elegantly aquiline (figure 0.1). This Romanized, laureled Wellington, whose cameo is surrounded by the instruments and emblems of war, is a striking amelioration of the effigy as it appeared in a camera lucida sketch by the sculptor Thomas Milnes, who was granted access to the corpse shortly after Wellington's death (figure 0.2). It is also far from reminiscent of the toothless and haggard face imprinted for posterity in the death mask (figure 0.3). The Wellington of the *ILN* masthead instead demonstrates that such relics of moribundity were part of a large and diverse commemorative practice that ranged from the production of gaunt mementos mori to the aggressive promotion of what Frank Turner has called the "Victorian cult of Julius Caesar."¹⁴ "There was in [the Duke's] features," the *Leeds Mercury* claimed on the same day the *ILN* supplement appeared, "a character something of the stamp of the ancient Roman: his bust might be placed between the old bronze head of Junius Brutus and that of the first Caesar of the Capital, without being challenged as out of place."¹⁵ If Victorian Britain appropriated classical models because it saw affinities between its own imperial objectives and those of its supposed cultural forebears, the Victorian funeral looked back as effortlessly as it searched for ideals of heroic masculinity.¹⁶

Wake, of course, also has a third meaning: the act of awakening. Anyone familiar with British military or political history will know that Wellington's name does not need to be roused from obscurity. Indeed, "any author who undertakes to add yet another book to the corpus of Wellingtonian literature, vast as it is, may justly feel that he has a need . . . to account for his temerity."¹⁷ It is my comparatively modest goal to wake Wellington from the torpor of the conventional biographical lore that has



FIGURE 0.1 Special mast-head, *Illustrated London News*, “Life of the Duke of Wellington” supplement, 18 September 1852.



FIGURE 0.2 *The Duke of Wellington, after Death*, camera lucida sketch by Thomas Milnes, 1857. © National Portrait Gallery, London.

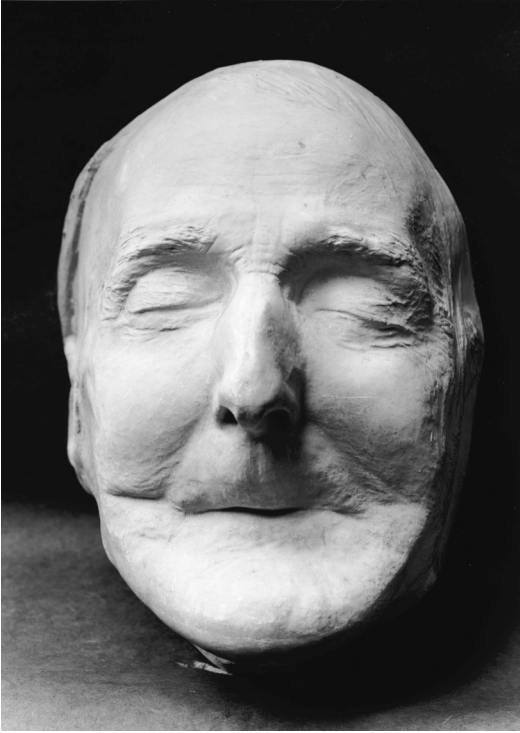


FIGURE 0.3 Wellington's death mask, by George Gammon Adams, 1852. © National Portrait Gallery, London.

enshrined him within a narrative “straight line” that invariably attempts to show how the duke “had worked his way up from the lowest reaches of the Irish peerage by a combination of talent and influence.”¹⁸ The question to be asked, then, is not “Who was Wellington?” but “What purposes did Wellington serve?” How was Wellington’s story told and retold, and what significance did the Victorians invest in these different rehearsals of renown or infamy?

These stories were particularly multifarious in late 1852. Whereas clergymen set about sanctifying Wellington’s elaborate funeral by arguing that “rites suited to the age, rank, station and character of the departed, are not displeasing to God, nor contrary to his holy word,”¹⁹ poets indulged their theatrical inclinations in an attempt to adequately describe the occasion. The miscellaneous writer Nicholas Michell was especially expansive:

A Nation, like one man, seems here,
A Nation comes to drop a tear,
A Nation sighs above the bier—
O Death! Is this thy prey? . . .
 Words fail to paint the scene whose glory
Excites the land, shall live in story;
It awes the mind, and dazzles sense,
Gloom striving with magnificence.
Wealth, art, and power combine to throw
A halo 'round our cloud of woe;
 A world seems met—all-glorious sight—
To honour this great funeral rite.²⁰

Given such hyperbole, it is perhaps not surprising that Wellington's funeral has often been maligned by cultural and literary historians as the cynosure of outlandish ritual, as "the high point of Victorian funeral extravagance," or as a "fine example of the Victorian exhibition of funerary display taken to extremes of redundancy."²¹

Recently, though, more sustained and less dismissive attention has been given to the organization and cultural aftereffects of the funeral. In an essay on the "immortal" Wellington, Neville Thompson provides a schematic survey of some of the stylized lamentations that helped to perpetuate prevailing romantic ideas about the death of heroes.²² Iain Pears discusses antithetical representations of Napoleon and Wellington, offering some important insights into Wellington worship and patriotism at midcentury.²³ John Wolffe devotes a chapter specifically to Wellington's funeral in his book on grieving, religion, and nationhood in Britain, tracing in some detail the convoluted involvement of many different agencies in the funeral preparations and the reactions of those many spectators who were stirred by "a wish to observe a grand spectacle and to participate in an historic community and national event."²⁴ And in an article cited earlier that seeks to explain the Victorians' "extravagant desire for proximity to [Wellington's] remains," Cornelia Pearsall poses a question that resonates with the present study's central interest in the hero's cultural afterlife: "What *can* these remnants . . . all of the products spawned in the wake of one man's death . . . tell us about Victorian culture?"²⁵

The scope of all four investigations into “what it was to be English” in the wake of Wellington, however, is quite severely limited; the studies do not satisfactorily flesh out the modes and meanings of Wellington’s postmortem reconstruction and modification, even as they establish conclusively that the funeral was “a public spectacle of an unprecedented and unmatched character.”²⁶ As initiatory explorations of Wellington’s procession and obsequies, they bespeak a rich site of meaning that deserves further scrutiny, suggesting that the duke’s death gives present-day observers a chance to study an instance of Victorian self-display and, within the dramatically condensed time frame of a few months, Victorian self-fashioning.

More sustained exploration along these lines has, indeed, been undertaken since the mid-1990s, but Wellington has fallen outside its purview. The life and times of Queen Victoria, for example, have been meticulously reassessed by scholars such as Adrienne Munich and Gail Turley Houston, who attempt to situate their prominent subject within a larger “web of cultural forces that were conflictual, simultaneous, and always in process.”²⁷ These scholars have done much to uncover and illuminate the often contradictory interpretations of Victoria’s cultural images in order to understand what different people, to use Munich’s phrase, “make of their given world.”²⁸ Stephen Behrendt also deserves special mention for his conscientious examination in *Royal Mourning and Regency Culture* of the “person, events, artifacts and public culture that intersected in the event of Princess Charlotte’s death” on 6 November 1817. “What these intersections reveal about how culture functions,” Behrendt argues persuasively through an analysis of the literary and extraliterary artifacts produced to commemorate the princess, “can tell us much about the perennial attraction of private and public mythmaking.”²⁹ The theatrically mourned Charlotte provides a superlative illustration of the ways in which historical figures come to be invested with qualities of myth, qualities that conflate the personal and the public or domestic and national interests.

Whereas Victoria and Charlotte have been critically engaged as both complex figures and “ideas” accommodated by Victorian culture “to represent its self-interested moment,”³⁰ Wellington remains predominantly tied to the biographical subgenre of the male, British, military hero, notable

for its quest for historical authority and its drive toward a certain type of untainted purity, within and yet largely isolated from cultural practice. It is precisely as a challenge to this conventional narrative that a prolonged case study of the duke through the lens of death commends itself.

Of course, the nineteenth century witnessed numerous imposing funerals. Horatio Nelson, William Pitt, and Charles James Fox, for example, had all been buried with ceremony in 1806. Nelson's body was borne on a miniature wheeled version of the *Victory*, the ship he commanded at Cape Trafalgar, through the streets of London before being lowered into a vault in St. Paul's Cathedral—a well-staged, allegorical production of the vice admiral's last journey that was to be carefully studied and in several ways mimicked by those responsible for Wellington's procession and the design of his ornate funeral car.³¹ Richard Sheridan, the impoverished Irish dramatist, was honored with a magnificent Westminster Abbey funeral in 1816, and George Canning was buried near him in a state ceremony some eleven years later. William Gladstone's 1898 funeral—other than Wellington's, the only post-1806 instance of an officially public funeral for a nonroyal personage (that is, a funeral requiring prior parliamentary resolution)³²—saw the great statesman's body conveyed by special train from Hawarden to London, where three hundred thousand people passed by his catafalque in Westminster Hall in the two days preceding a burial service that, in its solemn grandeur, was widely thought to have been “an authentic expression of the national mood.”³³

Only the queen's funeral, however, can be said to vie with Wellington's for the depth of its symbolism, although the transportation of Victoria's body early in 1901 from Osborne House to London by royal yacht and private train was intentionally designed to produce an aura of circumspection rather than make a public statement about the passing of the nation's “mother.” Whereas Victoria's funeral “has become part of the English saga, for people saw in her passing the end of their own way of life,”³⁴ Wellington's death was construed as the definitive consummation of the Napoleonic era, at least as it had been experienced and represented in Britain. Although clearly both an extension and a perpetuation of the lionizing biographies that had found their inspiration in the duke ever since he cleared the French out of Portugal and Spain between 1808 and

1814, the posthumous Wellington literature developed distinctive “Victorian” characteristics, reflective of the social, political, and historical scene of the 1850s. I attempt to gain some purchase on this distinctiveness and to outline its contours by reading “the literature” through the public celebration of the military hero’s death in seven chapters.

Chapter 1 outlines the chief contours of Wellington’s allusiveness—the ways in which he kept turning up or leaving traces of himself in genres as various as the novel, the newspaper, the biography, and the memoir. A brief consideration of representative texts from these genres demonstrates their contribution to an iterative process whereby the duke’s reputation was framed and promoted through the repetition of increasingly formulaic anecdotes and allusions. Chapters 2 and 3 follow analogous paths of inquiry, suggesting that Wellington’s funeral was a portentous affair, anticipated in unique ways by other “national” events and modes of heroic representation. Chapter 2 revisits the Great Exhibition of 1851, that much analyzed gathering of nations, as an occasion from which Wellington’s funeral took its measure. Chapter 3 traces the discursive consolidation of three exceptional traits in the dead Wellington: simplicity of character, common sense, and the veneration of duty. Wellington’s death by natural causes at Walmer Castle in Essex, a comparatively unpretentious edifice of the Cinque Ports, came to be seen as an eminently suitable demise for a man widely regarded to be the pattern of candid austerity.

Chapter 4 inquires into the sorts of opportunities and anxieties that arise when a state funeral is, by necessity, postponed for a significant period of time. A bewildering array of artworks and commemorative objects relating to Wellington were produced and sold between September and November 1852. Postmortem mementos revitalized the duke’s reputation, but they also raised questions about which images and relics most faithfully represented Wellington. The chapter traces a shift, marked primarily by the press, away from initial anxieties about crowd control to a retrospective reading of participants’ good behavior as an armistice between classes. Chapter 5 focuses on the procession and burial, attending in particular to the perceived aesthetic success or failure of both. Although it was ultimately sanctified by Prime Minister Edward Stanley, Earl of Derby as a stellar example of “perfect organization” and “admirable arrangements,”

the funeral attracted a range of contentious responses in its immediate aftermath, from indiscriminate acclaim to hostile revulsion. The chapter considers the various, often contradictory effects the public spectacle had on observers, and it closes with a look at the ways in which various clergymen exonerated the gorgeous procession from possible charges of secular excess.

Chapter 6 reads Wellington through and against the fractious Irish press in an attempt to account for the various counterdiscourses that threatened from the margins of the seemingly unanimous, positive legacy of the war hero. Typically, the detractors expressed their aversion to the Wellington worship from outside England, downplaying the “real importance of the subject” of Wellington’s death by astringently remarking that obsessive coverage of the event resulted from “the dearth of other topics susceptible of being written about.”³⁵ Chapter 7 serves as a fitting epilogue, taking up once again Wellington’s “incarnation” of the nation’s blood in order to explain the 1883 banishment from Hyde Park Corner of Matthew Cotes Wyatt’s colossal equestrian statue of the duke. This chapter chronicles a sculptural travesty, but it also argues that, as an expression of the “industrial sublime,” Wyatt’s statue failed to correspond with the most popular image of Wellington as the nation’s dutiful servant. In the frustration of sublime ambition that resulted in the statue’s rather unceremonious removal, we witness an important debate about the nature and form of public commemoration.

What follows, then, is a study of an exemplary life not as the linear unfolding of an “assured and evolving career”³⁶ but as it can be read through and after the fundamentally transmogrifying event of death. This approach reads Wellington “backwards”: reading for and through the vitality of his death at the advanced age of eighty-three, against the flow of that Victorian biographical tradition wherein “the vacillations and discontinuities of character are . . . resolved through the secular structures of aims, motivations, drives, pursuits, vocations, directions and meliorations—in short, ‘rise, progress, improvement.’”³⁷ As I have noted with regard to recent considerations of Queen Victoria’s and Princess Charlotte’s legacies, this tradition has been challenged by scholarship that encourages students of the Victorian era to engage in radical and unapologetic adaptations of

seemingly stable cultural texts. A self-conscious practice of adaptation offers an alternative to the heroic portraits of moral rectitude whose most prevalent form, Martin Stannard notes, is the “two-volume eulogy, designed to assist with our fathers’ decorum at the lying-in-state of our great men.”³⁸ The risk of falling back into an ingenuous duplication of either the form or the credos of the decorous eulogy is attenuated once “we agree to see that those who read . . . are in fact always ‘after’ and always ‘aftering,’ always restoring, adapting, supplying, making texts and promulgating meanings.”³⁹

The Wake of Wellington is such an exercise in “aftering”: interpreting and providing a critical framework for what followed after Wellington, from a historical point that comes well past that initial period of post-humous after-ness. In the case of Wellington, I approach death and its celebration as the initial moments that inaugurated after-ness, opening up the floodgates of possibility for an enormous variety of ideologically inflected eulogizing. To read the celebration of death in these terms is to complicate the more self-evident claim that “life becomes transparent against the background of death, and fundamental social and cultural issues are revealed.”⁴⁰