

# Teaching the Age of Revolutions

## HA Teacher Fellowship Programme 2018 (Secondary)

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### Residential course at Waterloo, Belgium

A little later than intended, here is the first of our reports on the activities of the Teacher Fellows working on the Age of Revolutions project. The programme opened with some introductory lectures on the Battle of Waterloo and the nature of warfare more generally in the Age of Revolutions. The next day involved a visit to the site of the Battle of Waterloo itself with expert guides providing a fascinating and inspiring commentary and insight into various aspects from the strategy right through to the challenge of providing medical care in a battle situation. There were also visits to sites in Waterloo itself, including the house, now a museum, which Wellington used as his headquarters. We then asked the Fellows for some reflections on their experience, and it would seem that the event certainly had an impact.

#### Key points emerging about the history were...

Almost all of the teachers valued the strong focus on up to date subject knowledge provided by a range of experts:

- Pandora's box was definitely opened during the four days! I'm definitely inside the box still and will tentatively follow the large footsteps of the various presenters trying to bring some hope to navigating this complex period. We need to be confident in what we know and confident to know what we do not know. This is my first key reflection: my lack of knowledge sometimes sees me fill in the gaps by giving simple commanding statements. For example, I will explicitly inform students that 'coffee shop culture' helped spread the ideological movement! **I do know** about the key Enlightenment thinkers; but **I do not** have the faintest clue about the 'coffee shop culture'. Perhaps an area for my project to take me into.

For some it was significance attributed by recent scholarship to war as a driving force in this period:

- The Residential was a really interesting and thought-provoking four days. I found the talks on the final day about developments in the way in which historians approach the Age of Revolutions particularly useful, as they were so up-to-date and helped to improve some of my (clearly) outdated understanding. Arthur Burns' point that perhaps we should see war as the driving force for change rather than revolution, was fascinating and really relevant to my A level teaching. This point goes far further than the textbooks tend to. We consider questions such as 'to what extent did war radicalise the French revolution?' and introducing students to this new argument will help them to challenge the premise of the question and so really unpack the concepts involved.

## So what about the impact back in the classroom?

For some it was an opportunity to consider the power of narrative and how it might reshape some of their teaching:

- Walking the albeit altered terrain, stopping to reflect on what various testimonies could tell us about a particular moment in a particular spot was very powerful. I have since thought about how as a teacher I might make better use of narrative to help students understand the past as something felt and experienced and a bit messy, not just the culmination of factors or trends or forces. I would like to be able to use this approach more in my teaching.
- The residential was so valuable because it provided a real immersive, subject base, CPD. The experts on hand added another layer to my knowledge, particularly of Waterloo. Although I've taught this at A Level for the past two years, with hindsight, it has been a rather one-dimensional approach. Their anecdotes and knowledge of individual experiences gave a richer tapestry to the battle. The visit to the church opposite Wellington's headquarters really brought this home and when teaching the Battle to Y13 it will be interesting to use these individual experiences and follow their journey through this period. The weekend also provided an opportunity to re-connect with what the priorities should be - thinking, learning and engagement and with like-minded colleagues.
- The weekend has made me re-evaluate the way I teach A level history and politics. With regards to growth of nationalism I was struck by the instant memorialising of the battle (epitomised by the growth of Thomas Cooke's business) and its connection to a sense of national identity. I found Arthur Burns' point that Conservatism also had to reinvent itself post French Revolution very interesting. Another fascinating point was that some women in the 18<sup>th</sup> century were disabled from taking part in politics because of the physical rigors of child birth. I knew about the link between healthcare and women's rights in the 20<sup>th</sup> century but had not gone on to consider these earlier periods - I am clearly going to have to read Amanda Vickery's book!

## References

- Glover, G. *Waterloo in 100 Objects* (The History Press, 2015)