CHAPTER 2

The Myth of Waterloo

In the summer of 1815 events on the battlefield at Waterloo, where the French were dealt the fatal blow, temporarily suppressed literary preoccupations about the domestic language policy. Napoleon had relinquished his imperial throne, though not his sovereign rights, on 6 April 1814 after the fiasco of his Russian campaign and was exiled to Elba. He did not stay for long: he left the Mediterranean island by 26 February 1815 for what would later be described as the 'Hundred Days Campaign'. On his way north he reassembled his fragmented troops and put a Grande Armée [Great Army] of 200,000 men back on its feet. Within three weeks he arrived in Paris and was welcomed enthusiastically, while the recently installed King Louis xviii fled with his government in a northerly direction and found shelter in Ghent. On account of these developments sovereign prince Willem swiftly crowned himself King of the Netherlands on 16 March 1815. On 14 June 1815 Napoleon and about half of his troops crossed the (present day) French-Belgian border towards the allied troops who had already arrived in Brussels. Fear of a new annexation to France somewhat softened the Southern Netherlanders’ mistrust of the new reign of Orange. Many Southerners joined the Netherlands’ troops, although a significant proportion of Wallonians went over to Napoleon’s side. The Netherlands army, comprising 25,000 men commanded by the Crown Prince of Orange, constituted an integral part of the Duke of Wellington’s English army. General Blücher commanded the Prussian forces. After skirmishes at Quatre-Bras, Ligny and Genappe on 16 and 17 June, the allied armies, together comprising about 120,000 soldiers, and the French prepared for the decisive battle at Waterloo on the morning of 18 June 1815.1

Wellington claimed the allies’ victory on the evening of 18 June after a fierce contest. The unity within the Netherlands army, and the heroic role of the Crown Prince of Orange who had paid dearly for his valour with a bullet wound, made the Battle of Waterloo henceforth into an almost mythical event that would be lauded during the whole Dutch Period. Willem i himself readily stoked up that myth. The bloody battle had the potential to grow into a symbol of unification and reconciliation, replacing the nation’s memory of its divided past.2 It is evident that Willem was fully aware of the battle’s nation-building effect in his address to the States-General on 8 August 1815, scarcely two months after the victory, in which he forecast that ‘the story of Quatre-Bras and
Waterloo would ‘point to’ two dazzling pillars of the new Netherlands state. He considered himself fortunate to be the father of two sons whose ‘turn it was to help plant those pillars with their arms and sprinkle them with their blood’. He was referring first of all to the injuries that the enemy had inflicted on his progeny, and then he was metaphorically applying his paternity to the vision of his new role as monarch. Willem had already intimated in his proclamation of 2 December 1813 that after the House of Orange’s nineteen years of absence from the Netherlands, he himself regarded it as being ‘restored to the people, whom I have never ceased to love […] as a father in the midst of his family’. The family metaphor connected Willem with Waterloo, for he characterised the contestants from North and South as sons who had unanimously fought for liberation and moreover who embodied the starting point of the new state. Northern and Southern engagement in the battle made Waterloo into a national event, a *lieu de mémoire* [realm of memory] that the whole Kingdom would be able to cherish. This creation myth clearly made no mention of the fact that preparations for the nation had already begun before Waterloo.