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Matthew D. Zarzeczny, *Meteors that Enlighten the Earth: Napoleon and the Cult of Great Men*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing: Newcastle upon Tyne, 2013 pages, vi-241. \$75.99 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1443842075.

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Harold Parker, the late, eminent scholar of the French Revolution and Napoleon at Duke University, once wrote a series of articles and papers on Napoleon's self-made image. Many of these appeared in *French Historical Studies* and in the *Proceedings of the Consortium on the Revolutionary Europe*.^[1] Parker convincingly argued in these works that Napoleon crafted his image, and that his persona evolved over the course of time. Parker was not the first to make these observations, and many historians since the nineteenth century have remarked on Napoleon's purposeful comparisons with figures such as Alexander the Great, Caesar and Charlemagne, among others.

With this as background, enter Matthew D. Zarzeczny's book, which is a largely unaltered version of his doctoral dissertation. The author advances three central arguments at the conclusion of his first chapter. He pronounces first that military glory was "only one of several traits that he [Napoleon] identified as belonging to great men" (p. 22) Zarzeczny then asserts that Napoleon linked himself to Alexander and Caesar. Lastly, he declares that, "Napoleon's cult of great men extended beyond antiquity and changed with circumstances." (p. 22) He supports his assertions through a chronological lens. After a chapter on historiography, Zarzeczny addresses eighteenth-century notions of great men. He then progresses respectively from Napoleon's youth to the French Revolution and Empire, tackles Napoleon's attitudes after his defeat, and finally, his legacy. Throughout, he interprets art and literature in order to explore why Napoleon selected certain historical figures to join his pantheon. This particular aspect of Zarzeczny's work is detailed and impressive. He clearly dissects neo-classical and Romantic notions of greatness.

Telling, however, is an essay in the *Acknowledgements* that the author wrote for his doctoral exams positing a fictional conversation between Napoleon and the Roman emperor Trajan. He uses the dialog to introduce the concept of "great men" to his readers. The inclusion of this essay lends a sense of pretension that unhappily sets the tone for the rest of this work.

Zarzeczny's interpretation is well-trodden ground, and, in fact, there is nothing new here about Napoleon's use of classical heroes and historical figures to shape his image during his reign. Most recently, Michael Broers and Philip Dwyer have clearly and plainly articulated this conscious and deliberately contrived relationship.^[2] Zarzeczny knows this, and weaves many of these works into his own. It is therefore surprising that he contends in his *Preface* that, "Napoleon appears only fleetingly in David Bell, Jean-Claude Bonnet, and George Armstrong Kelly's discussion of the cult of great men.^[3] None of the burgeoning historiography adequately takes Napoleon's place in the story of this cult into perspective." (p. xi). Zarzeczny's use of the very same authors to juxtapose against his thesis is not limited to the *Preface*, but he refers to them throughout the book, turning them into a straw man.

The author addresses the host of historians who have examined Napoleon's use of great men, but argues that these writers have not properly applied a chronological context to their works. For example, when

discussing Annie Jourdan's *Napoléon, Héros, imperator, mércène*, Zarzeczny avers, "[s]he also uses some different evidence than I use in my dissertation. Thus, we overlap in our interest in the topic of Napoleon and the cult of great men, but our presentation of the topic and selection of the evidence differs" (p. 12).^[4] The book is replete with similar contentions, which do not strengthen the author's argument. Zarzeczny is intent on separating his work from all the others in order to create a false sense of originality. Instead of placing his book within the existing historiography, he is determined to advance his thesis as if it is somehow a new interpretation.

Zarzeczny believes that one can better understand Napoleon's concept of "great men" by examining those whom he chose to extol. This is certainly reasonable, and one must credit the author for this aspect of his study. No doubt, Zarzeczny is meticulous in exploring the evolution of the use of "great men," analyzing the reasons for Napoleon's perception of their "greatness" and placing their respective elevation into heroes within a chronological context. Zarzeczny considers Napoleon's use of the "cult of great men" exceptional, but much of the book's focus actually establishes how this method was consistent with past practice. Indeed, monarchs had employed the tactic of making purposeful parallels of themselves with "great men" to enhance their public image and rally support for their policies for centuries. Such propaganda was time-honored, and not something that Napoleon invented.

In summary, while the author's argument is sound, it is neither original nor new. Moreover, there are numerous redundancies in this work as well as structural and grammatical issues that undermine its quality. It requires a great deal of editing to convert a dissertation into a published book. The fact that this was not done well is a fault of both the author and the publisher.

NOTES

[1] See, for example, Harold T. Parker, "Napoleon's Changing Self-Image to 1812: A Sketch," *Proceedings of the Consortium on Revolutionary Europe* (1983): 91-95, and "Napoleon Reconsidered: An Invitation to Inquiry and Reflection," *French Historical Studies* 15 (Spring 1987): 142-156.

[2] Philip Dwyer, *Napoleon: The Path to Power, 1769-1799* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2007); Michael Broers, *Europe under Napoleon, 1799-1815* (London: Arnold, 1996).

[3] Zarzeczny is concerned with Bell's, *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1600-1800* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003). For Bonnet he cites, *Naissance du Panthéon: Essai sur le culte des grands hommes* (Paris: Libraire Arthème Fayard, 1998) and for George Armstrong Kelly, *Moral Politics in Eighteenth Century France*, (Waterloo: Waterloo University Press, 1986).

[4] Annie Jourdan, *Napoléon, Héros, imperator, mércène* (Paris: Aubier, 1998).

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