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Philip Mansel, *The Eagle in Spendour. Inside the Court of Napoleon*. London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2015. x + 246 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography and index. \$28.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN (hb) 978-1-78453-175-1. eISBN 978-0-85773-895-0.

Review by Michael Broers, Oxford University.

In this new edition of his classic account of the Napoleonic court, Philip Mansel speaks more truth than he knows when he says: “The hostility of a large part of the population of the Empire had been one reason for the creation of the court. It was intended to be a symbol of the power, magnificence and stability of the regime...The Emperor’s insecurity helps to explain why he had so many palaces, arranged in such ultra-monarchical fashion, and why he was surrounded by such a large and formal court” (p. 163). It is a genuine insight on the part of the author. Indeed, Mansel has found the essence of the entire regime in these words, although the nature of his book does not insist upon this point, as his major concern is to explore the workings of Napoleon’s most self-conscious creation. Nevertheless, Mansel’s observation, and many others like it in *The Eagle in Spendour*, show how far ahead of his time Mansel was when he published the first edition of this book in 1987. As one rereads the text in this new and timely edition by I.B. Tauris, the impression returns, over and over again, that Mansel offered a future generation of Napoleonic historians a more clear-eyed appraisal of the regime than many available at the time. Shorn of its original “coffee table” lavishness, the reader can concentrate on the thesis behind *The Eagle in Spendour*, get inside the book, and thus, “inside the court,” but also inside the regime.

It is now the subtitle that truly matters, and I.B. Tauris are to be congratulated for reprising Mansel’s important thoughts for a readership now fully immersed in the Renaissance of Napoleonic studies that was only in its infancy when *The Eagle in Spendour* first appeared.

The Napoleonic regimes (the Consulate and the First Empire taken together) were, in great part, defined by insecurity. It is not known with certainty whether Napoleon actually said “I cannot afford to lose a battle,” but he conducted his life and regime along exactly those lines. The number of attempts on his life runs into three figures, particularly in the early years of his rule, and he never allowed any units of the *Grande Armée* into Paris, save his own Imperial Guard, which was always under his sole command.

Napoleon understood how precarious his existence would always be. Indeed, it worsened as his power grew, and few scholars have captured the material expression of this insecurity better or more poignantly than Mansel. Napoleon kept moving. He was never secure in the heart of Paris, nor in its western suburbs, where he had been hated from his first intervention on the national stage, when he led the ruthless suppression of the royalist revolt of *Vendémiaire* in September 1795. He usually chose to enter his capital from the east, through the *sans-culotte* neighbourhoods he went to great lengths to cultivate by giving them artificially low conscription quotas and assuring their supply of affordable food: hence, his love of Fontainebleau, which he restored with such gusto, raising it from a near ruin in 1803,

to the mock-Renaissance majesty it retains today. It was a safe haven, on the right—properly “left”—side of town. Mansel sees through the grandeur to what drove it.

Napoleon’s almost insatiable desire for more and ever more grandiose palaces and his obsession with creating a stifling, meticulous court etiquette were anything but the product of hubris. He seldom believed his own publicity. A new and growing body of scholarship on the extra-French parts of the Empire (far more extensive than France proper by 1810) has revealed just how unpopular the regime was among many members of the elites it had to woo and strove to assimilate into a French-dominated, pan-European hegemony. The court and its settings were meant as exercises in “shock and awe,” directed towards German, Dutch and Italian elites, recalcitrant and reticent alike. They were a confession of weakness, if not yet of failure. Mansel’s chapter on “The Family Courts” is particularly interesting when set within the parameters of this new scholarship on the non-French empire. His lively account of the court of Louis Bonaparte in his kingdom of Holland is redolent of French cultural imperialism, in this case explored through farce, more than that of subaltern studies, and all the more acute for it. Louis was there to drag a provincial, uncultivated people into the chic, modern world of post-revolutionary France. At times, despite its insights, this chapter inevitably seems dated. His observation that Jerome’s court at Kassel was marked by easier social relations between French and German courtiers is more explicable in terms of the regional context: these were areas closer France in pre-imperial culture than in Italy or Spain.

Mansel’s accounts of the Italian courts also need to be revised somewhat, in the light of later research: Pauline Bonaparte was a much more effective conduit of imperial assimilation than he allows, but equally, the constraints on her while manoeuvring among the Savoyard nobility were subtle, if very real. Élissa, in Florence, strove with some success to place Tuscans in high office and tried to keep a semblance of authority there. She soon repented of the former ambition, however, and failed utterly in the latter, as the Florentine elites soon realized that real power lay in Paris and were drawn there, if they were drawn at all. The local context of the family courts is much better understood now than in 1987, but these lacunae do not detract from Mansel’s work, so much as to remind the reader of the extent to which he pointed the way. In this sense, *The Eagle in Splendour* belongs in the same context as Marie-Blanche d’Arneville’s study of the wider urban environment created in Paris under Napoleon, which explores how the public spaces of the capital were meant both to impress and to inculcate the progressive values of the new regime.[1] It was not just the court or its seats that were meant to overawe, but the imperial capital as a whole.

There is also something of this sense of context *avant la lettre* in his chapter on “The Courtiers.” As Mansel states with enviable clarity, “The most unusual aspect of the court of Napoleon was its courtiers. It was the first court in European history at which senior positions were held by non-nobles” (p. 81). Again, a profound comment on the very essence of the regime springs from this acute, empirical observation, and Mansel provides the ammunition for a deeper exploration of this unique set of circumstances. The milieu he depicts in *The Eagle in Splendour* was the expression of the hopes and frustrations of the regime’s key policies, as seen at its very heart. In his pioneering, seminal work of 1980, Frédéric Bluche set the two pronged policy of *ralliement* and *amalgame* at the very heart of the Napoleonic project.[2] Mansel shows throughout *The Eagle in Splendour*, but particularly in this chapter, how they also sat at the heart of the court and defined its composition. The court reflected the unashamed elitism of the regime, but this was the elitism of *Figaro*, a very particular breed of snobbery: The old nobility who came forward to serve the regime in the field or in its bureaux were embraced, but never to the exclusion of the men and women of the Revolution who had risen with Napoleon. It was an elite that valued public service and martial prowess. Mansel points to Napoleon’s aversion to “trade” throughout, yet this was not derived from a desire to ape the old order but, rather, from something deeply revolutionary: the engrained royalism of large sections of the commercial bourgeoisie, together with the disdain that all career soldiers of the old order, whatever their own origins, felt for those who bought their commissions.

The increasing presence of nobles at court was never to the exclusion of the revolutionaries who were Brumarians of the first hour, nor to that of loyal public servants. Exclusion marked political failure, but the absence from court of so many sectors of French elite society revealed the borders of the Napoleonic Pale. Many older families stood aside, out of ideological, even more than political distaste for a regime they saw as just as anti-Catholic as any of the 1790s, particularly after the break with Rome in 1809. The discordance between large swathes of the commercial classes and the regime could be mutual; war was bad for trade. When Napoleon entered Berlin in triumph in 1806, he was met by a delegation from Paris asking him, reproachfully, if this was the end they so needed. Even within the loyal ranks of courtly collaboration, *amalgame* was no easy matter on a daily basis, and Napoleon had imposed a rigid etiquette on his courts from the outset, at Mombello in 1796. It was the solution of a soldier as much as of a parvenu. Yet, if the court was about anything, it was an exercise in healing the wounds of the past. Mansel remarks that, in contrast to the Bourbons, who had furnished their palaces from their own workshops, Napoleon drew on French industry. This was practical patriotism and the politics of reconciliation, as when he chose the Lyon industry to provide his acres of silk. Lyon, the second city of France, had been all but crushed in the aftermath of the Federalist revolt of 1793-94 and had turned to counter-revolution as a result. Napoleon saw that silk worms could grow on olive branches as well as on mulberry bushes, and he used his quest for grandeur in the service of *ralliement*.

The Eagle in Splendour has re-emerged, Phoenix-like, into a very different world of Napoleonic scholarship thanks to I.B. Tauris, not less for a reasonable price. However much Mansel's original work may be dated in places, or would shine all the brighter were it set in the context of the vibrant new literature of the period, its virtues appear all the more clearly in its new, more modest format. What Mansel gives his readers in this new addition, as in 1987, is an elegant, erudite exercise in a Weberian analysis of authority and the quest for legitimacy.

NOTES

[1] Marie-Blanche d'Arneville, *Parcs et Jardins sous le Premier Empire. Reflets d'une société* (Paris: Fayard, 1981).

[2] Frédéric Bluche, *Le Bonapartisme. Aux origines de la droite autoritaire (1800-1850)* (Paris: Nouvelles Éditions Latines, 1980).

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