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Patrice Gueniffey, *Bonaparte 1769-1802*. Trans. Steven Rendall. Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press. 2015. ix + 1008pp. 39.95\$. ISBN. 9-780-674-368-354.

Review by Ambrogio Caiani, University of Kent.

It has become something of a truism that the Emperor Napoleon is one of the most biographized individuals in history. Many scholars repeat the figure of four thousand direct accounts of his life and fifty thousand works that contain his name in their title. Yet, biographers who have shown true insight into this complex personality, or who have revealed something new about this historical titan, have been few and far between. The nineteenth century, as William Morrissey noted, hailed the “*memorial de sainte hélène*” as the new gospel of the age.[1] Although not much read today, it was a veritable publishing furore. In some ways, as Sudhir Hazareesingh has suggested, the Emperor metamorphosed into a political Christ, whose ghost and teachings were to overshadow the nineteenth century.[2] Unsurprisingly, Napoleon was the least perceptive of all biographers when it came to gauging the depths of his own personality, psychology, and propulsive force, not unusual for the time, given that both Fouché’s and Talleyrand’s memoirs are equally unrevealing about the character of their authors.[3] Paradoxically, for a man in exile and starved of European news, he spoke poignantly to the concerns and divisions that distinguished early nineteenth century society, an impressive accomplishment given how his South Atlantic prison sought to quarantine him from European politics. Napoleon’s successful self-mythologisation explains why so many nineteenth century biographers felt compelled to write accounts that were either “for” or “against,” an argument driven home with gusto by Pieter Geyl after the Second World War.[4]

The challenge of writing about Napoleon is that, like so many great men, he is beyond good and evil. This is why Andrew Roberts’ most recent hagiography *Napoleon the Great* is so deeply flawed.[5] As Alessandro Manzoni put it, Napoleon, the hero and symbol, personified two centuries in conflict with each other.[6] Thus, the best biographies tend to be written by those who have a keen appreciation of the revolutionary strife that set France ablaze for almost a decade after 1789. Indeed, Georges Lefebvre’s treatment of the man as the last enlightened despot contextualised him better than most of the early biographies.[7] More recently, analytical accounts of this remarkable life by Luigi Mascili Migliorini, Thierry Lentz, and Mike Broers have delved, with unprecedented rigor and insight, into this man and his times.[8] This was a modern epic that shattered the primacy of antiquity as the principal repository for models of *vita proba*. Bonaparte’s life seemed to emphasize that the best for humankind was not in the past but yet to come. It seemed that he had resolved the great battle between the ancients and the moderns in favor of the latter.

It is within this broader understanding of the man, the time and the place, which has come to characterise the New Napoleonic history, that one can situate Patrice Gueniffey’s freshly translated biography.[9] As the author observes shrewdly (p. 3), no one portrait of the Emperor is quite the same or manages to capture a single reality of the individual being painted. Despite the difficulties in portraying the essence of a man who was both an individual and a time period, this biographer seeks to *see* or rather catch a true glimpse of this astonishing life. His reason for doing so is as frank as that of the mountaineer: Napoleon deserves academic attention because “he is there....” Gueniffey, one of the

foremost intellectual historians of France, endeavors to describe the ambivalent Corsican, ambitious officer, and master politician without embellishment. A Bonaparte plugged into the ideas, politics, and opportunities of his age, emerges clearly and enticingly throughout this volume. This was a life that was not linear, and to do it justice, many tangents and detours are necessary. The result is a gripping and page-turning book, which is no small feat for a tome weighing in at over eight hundred pages. The twists, turns and *coups de théâtre* presented here are worthy of the great novel that was the life of the future Emperor of France. Unlike the man he ultimately became, Bonaparte (the title is not chosen at random) always possessed some sort of vision or plan that guided his ascent to power. One is led to suspect that the Emperor of the sequel tome will resemble more the Genghis Khan of international relations described so memorably by Paul W. Schroeder. [10]

This biography is an unapologetically conventional narrative that follows the path to glory of the second born son of a Corsican notable right up to the assumption of the life Consulship in 1802. The author makes no assertion of having discovered new documentary evidence or of originality. Nevertheless, the depth of scholarship and erudition deployed in this work is prodigious. Gueniffey is without rivals when it comes to nineteenth-century French historiography. Despite this, it was not the main narrative that this reviewer most relished, but those passages where Cervantian tangents were deployed in order to pepper the text with unexpected insight and interpretative originality. The best example of this tendency can be found in the sub-chapter, "A Wart on France's Nose" (pp. 128-134). Here the text is interrupted by a fascinating digression into Bonaparte's ethnic identity and its relationship to the "Corsophilia of the 1750s and 1760s" (p. 129). Controversially, for Gueniffey, it is clear that, by the late 1790s, Corsica was a burdensome legacy that Napoleon sought to put behind him. The Paolism of the eighteenth century and the nobility of these indomitable Mediterranean islanders had lost its luster. Corsica had become a backwater that represented many of the problems that the Revolution was fighting to resolve. Similarly excellent is the detour into "Napoleon and Robespierre," (pp. 153-159), that examines in depth the protagonist's engagement with revolutionary politics. This is where Gueniffey is clearly most at home.

Equally original is the discussion of how Napoleon's romantic imagination, as captured in his unfinished youthful novella "Clisson and Eugénie," found its expression in the relationship with Josephine. [11] Judiciously, the question about whether this first marriage was true love is not pursued to absurd lengths. It was never that simple. The young revolutionary general did fall head over heels for this older woman, yet this union had never been solely about romance. It was interwoven with politics and influence from the very outset. They had been introduced by Barras after all! It would evolve eventually into a very solid working partnership (especially around the time of the Brumaire Coup). What emerges in Gueniffey's "Bonaparte" is the image of a "wheeler-dealer" who knew how to use political contacts to further his career. He even managed to extract support from Carnot and Salicetti, who found him antipathetic. Yet, this ruthless manipulation of individuals was counter-balanced by the endearing quality of never forgetting a good turn. Eminently insightful is the realization that Napoleon forgave civilians most things, whereas military incompetence or misbehavior was something he found difficult to swallow.

The sub-chapter "A New Hero" speculates perceptively on how the Revolution had in some ways prepared the stage for a new breed of "great men." As the author puts it: "Bonaparte also incarnated the Revolution's belief in the power of the will" (p. 294). The myth of the hero from which Bonaparte benefitted allowed him to bridge the gap that separated the values of the old regime elite from those of the new revolutionary world. Gueniffey deserves to be quoted at some length on this:

"In a certain way it was up to the men of war to succeed where those of 1789 had failed: war allowed them to appropriate the values of the aristocracy that enabled them to achieve equality *from above*, whereas in the political order the attempt had been made to achieve it *from below*, at the price of destroying all the old values. Thus, the army achieved of a whole generation" (p. 295).

Despite the clear admiration for this man *hors de pair*, this is very far from a hagiography. Bonaparte made mistakes, and some of the most memorable sections of the narrative can be found in the dissection of the strategic flaws that doomed the Egyptian campaign and almost caused the failure of the Brumaire coup and defeat at Marengo.

This is certainly an excellent biography, but it is not without flaws. Military and diplomatic history are clearly not Gueniffey's *métier*. The descriptions of battles, campaigns, and negotiations are the most stale and unimaginative sections of the book. These aspects are apparently a secondary concern, a fact reinforced by the lamentable quality of the half dozen or so maps provided. Troop movements are difficult to follow, and the geography of Bonaparte's world is nebulous at best. Perhaps graver still, the book presents a very French Bonaparte who showed little or no curiosity, let alone understanding, of the Italian lands or Egyptian flood plains he traversed. The author's engagement with the English, German, and Italian historiographical tradition surrounding Napoleon's early career is virtually non-existent. It would be absurd to deny that the French context is of paramount importance, but this should not detract from the truly European dimension of Bonaparte early life and career. In his second volume, in particular, the author may find the perspective of non-native historiography helpful in building a better, more rounded appreciation of the Emperor.

Admittedly, these flaws do detract from what is otherwise an absorbing biography and perhaps limit its appeal for a non-French audience. Time will tell. Perhaps the unsung hero here is Steven Rendall, who has produced a translation that has felicitously converted the French prose into a crisp and highly readable text. Having recently completed a translation myself, I know this is no easy task, and translators, when they get it right, deserve the highest praise. The book deserves consideration as an important and scholarly biography of Bonaparte's rise to power. It is judicious, well written, and brimming with fascinating tangents, which are its greatest asset. Yet, somehow, the riddles of the Napoleonic sphinx remain, and perhaps will always remain, unanswered....

NOTES

[1] Robert Morrissey, *Anatomy of Glory, from the Ancien Regime to the Fall of Napoleon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 147-178.

[2] Sudhir Hazareesingh, *The Legend of Napoleon* (London: Granta, 2004, 40-71.

[3] Emmanuel de Waresquiel, ed., *Mémoires et Correspondances du Prince de Talleyrand*, (Paris : Robert Laffont, 2007) and Louis Madelin, ed., *Les Mémoires de Fouché* (Paris: Flammarion, 1947).

[4] Pieter Geyl, *Napoleon: For and Against* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1949).

[5] Andrew Roberts, *Napoleon the Great* (London: Viking, 2014). ""

[6] "Ei si nomò : due secoli, l'un contro l'altro armato, sommessi a lui si volsero, come aspettando il fato; ei fe' silenzio, ed artibro, s'assise in mezzo a lor." Alessandro Manzoni, *Il cinque maggio* (Milan, 1821).

[7] Recently republished, George Lefebvre's 1935 *Napoleon* (London: Routledge, 2011).

[8] Luigi Mascilli Migliorini, *Napoleone* (Salerno: Profili, 2014); Thierry Lentz, *Le Grand Consulat, 1789-1804* (Paris: Fayard, 1999); and Michael Broers, *Napoleon: Soldier of Destiny* (London: Faber and Faber, 2014).

[9] Michael Broers, "Napoleon, His Empire, Our Europe, and the New Napoleonic History," in Michael Broers, Peter Hicks, and Augustin Guimera, eds., *The Napoleonic Empire and the New European Political Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 1-17.

[10] Paul W. Schroeder, "Napoleon's Foreign Policy: A Criminal Enterprise," *The Journal of Military History* 54 (1990): 147-162.

[11] Further evidence that statesmen should avoid writing Mills and Boon-style fiction. See Peter Hicks, ed., *Clisson et Eugénie* (Paris: Fayard, 2007).

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