NAPOLEON AFTER 200 YEARS

Patrick J. Walsh

Napoleon: A Life by Andrew Roberts
(New York: Viking, 2014)

Of Napoleon, Lord Rosebery wrote, "No name represents so completely and conspicuously dominion, splendor and catastrophe." His sympathetic yet evenhanded assessment of Napoleon appeared in 1901. Another Englishman, Andrew Roberts, in his new 926-page biography appearing on the two hundredth anniversary of Waterloo, writes in a similar vein.

In formulating an opinion on Napoleon one needs reminding that his rise to power came about as a result of the French Revolution. He did not start the revolution, though he did try to contain it. It was the extraordinary circumstance of that revolution that made Napoleon possible. Perhaps he understood this in declaring, "I am the revolution." Bonaparte believed in luck and in a mystery enveloping the visible world. He wrote "hundreds of years will elapse before circumstances will arise similar to those which concentrated such a mass of power to me."

His own synopsis of an extraordinary career is as succinct as was his writing style (much admired by Stendhal): "Corsican by birth, French by adoption, and emperor by achievement."

Napollione Buonaparte was born on the island of Corsica in 1769. His father, an impoverished nobleman, secured a place for his son (funded by the king's charity) in a military school at Brienne, France, in 1778. With a poor command of the French language, the nine-year-old Corsican was ridiculed by fellow students for his Italian accent. Yet this outsider would one day command them, their country, and half of the European population. Upon graduation in 1784, Napoleon gained admittance to the École Militaire, an officer's school. At sixteen, he became second lieutenant of artillery. One teacher described him as "knowing mathematics and geography extremely well . . . taciturn, loves solitude, very egotistical, ambitious and aspires toward everything." Interestingly the young student Napoleon once wrote in his geography notebook: "St. Helena, small island." He could not have foreseen his later exile, imprisonment, and death there.

Combining an outstanding intelligence with practical ability and unalterable determination to succeed, Napoleon rose swiftly. Two thirds of French artillery officers were among the aristocrats fleeing France. This situation led to Napoleon's rapid advancement. At the siege of Toulon, in 1793, he demonstrated great expertise in artillery placement and was promoted to general. In 1795, after he had saved the Directory from an uprising, the appreciative directors awarded the twenty-six-year-old general supreme command of the Army of Italy.

Bonaparte's conquest of Italy gained him international fame. He now changed the spelling of his name to sound French. Artists

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painted him. The French people cheered him. But some politicians feared him. They dispatched the hero to Egypt to open up Asian markets to French products and to establish a colony and a base to attack British possessions in India. In Egypt, Napoleon saw and conquered, but with destruction of the French fleet at the Battle of the Nile by Nelson, the project was soon abandoned. The expedition did, however, meet with scientific success: one of Bonaparte's soldiers uncovered the Rosetta Stone, and Egyptology began.

Returning to France in 1799, Napoleon received an invitation to join a coup to topple the failing Directory. Weary of perpetual revolution and instability, while facing a new allied coalition against France, the people looked to Napoleon as a corrective. Elected consul for life, Napoleon stabilized France's economy and reformed her legal structure. His Code Napoleon still exists in Europe. Turning his attention to religious reform, Bonaparte signed a concordat with the pope, which Hilaire Belloc applauded as a tremendous Christian act, although the restoration of public worship was not popular with the revolutionary left, whose policy called for a de-Christianized France. Nevertheless, as Roberts writes, Napoleon "dispensed with the absurd revolutionary calendar of ten week days and the theology of the Cult of the Supreme being."

In 1804, partly to discourage assassination and create a political permanence, Napoleon crowned himself emperor, saying, "I found the crown of France in the gutter and I picked it up." Napoleon secured France from internal revolution, but as Stendhal, one of his soldiers, pointed out, "it was a chimera to believe in any lasting peace between the new republic and old European aristocracies." For a French republic, even an imperial republic, in an age of kings had to be fought for and found itself dependent on military conquest for survival. Andrew Roberts says that "war was declared on Napoleon more often than he declared it on others."

Too often Napoleon has been compared to Hitler. Roberts quotes Churchill in an address to the House of Commons in 1944 saying, "it seems an insult to the great emperor and warrior to compare him in any way with a squalid caucus boss and butcher." Proof that Napoleon was not like Hitler or Stalin is that he never executed Foreign Minister Talleyrand or his minister of police, Fouché, though they continually conspired against him.

Napoleon fought sixty battles and lost only seven, but he could not win forever. A guerrilla war in Spain funded by England bled his resources and led to a falling out with his Russian ally and the subsequent disastrous invasion. Defeated by England and the allies in 1814, Napoleon was given a Lilliputian kingdom on the isle of Elba off the Italian coast. But unlike Gulliver, he was not a man to be pinned to the ground. Foolishly the restored French king refused to send Napoleon his pension agreed upon by treaty. Napoleon waited for an opportune time. After a year on Elba, he returned to power in France without firing a shot till his final defeat at Waterloo in 1815. This time the allies sentenced him to exile on St. Helena in the South Atlantic, where Napoleon died in 1821, thousands of miles from any continent.

Andrew Roberts's book is highly readable and wonderfully illustrated. But I found some aspects of it provincial. Allen Tate defined provincialism as an inability to transcend one's own time and its influence. Roberts is provincial in dismissing Napoleon's genuine religious nature, downplaying it as mere social utility and saying he was "at best skeptical of Christianity." There is much evidence to the contrary. I fondly remember reading in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* about Napoleon saying to his generals that the happiest day in his life was not in his glorious achievements but in receiving First Holy Communion. Belloc attests to this in his *Napoleon*: "His preparation for his First Communion he always remembered and that day stood out for him all his life."

We live in an oppressive age of secularism, which disregards religious belief. But a good historian must look beyond this to the historical record. For in exile on St. Helena, Mass was celebrated on Sundays and Holy days by priests sent by the pope at the urging of Napoleon's mother (who incidentally had given birth to her son on the Feast of the Assumption, August 15, 1769). Cardinal Fesch, Napoleon's uncle, picked the two priests dispatched to that island prison.

On his deathbed, jousting with his atheist doctor and fellow Corsican Dr. Antomarchi, Napoleon said: "Only a fool says he will die without a confessor. There is so much that one does not know, that one cannot explain." "I believe in God: I am of my father's religion. We cannot all be atheists.... How can you not believe in God? For all, everything proclaims his existence, and the greatest geniuses have believed it. But then you are a doctor. You people deal with nothing but matter: You never believe anything."

Before his death, Napoleon confessed his sins, received Communion, and his last will and testament reads, "I die in the Apostolic and Roman religion, in the bosom of which I was born fifty years ago."

Andrew Roberts touts "Napoleon as representing the Enlightenment on horseback." A voracious reader, Napoleon certainly read all the Enlightenment writers but was not of their mind-set. He was devoted to classical history and to French drama and tragedy, rather than to any work by French *philosophes*. Napoleon himself wrote a short history of Corsica and a novella. The Kennedy and Johnson administrations could have benefited from his insight that "savants and intellectuals are like coquettes; one may see them and talk with them but don't make one your wife or minister." Napoleon's love of Plutarch and history put him at odds with the optimism and excesses of Enlightenment thinking. His was of an older, more conservative outlook.

Appalled at the violence of the French Revolution, both Alexander Hamilton and John Adams predicted the appearance of a general like Napoleon restoring order to France. And in old age, John Adams delighted in discovering a new word coined by Napoleon. It would have pleased his English counterpart Edmund Burke, too. The word is *ideologue* and is credited to Napoleon. He used it in criticizing *philosophes* and Jacobin extremists and all those who try to make an idea reality despite the actuality of what exists.

Writing to Thomas Jefferson in old age about his discovery, Adams teased and suggested that the word must be equated with the word *idiocy*, calling ideology the "science of lunacy" and "Non Compos Mentacism," to the great chagrin of Jefferson, a supporter of the French Revolution.

John Adams, who witnessed Napoleon's rise and fall, should be allowed the final word on this unparalleled historic figure—"a whirlwind raised him and a whirlwind blowed him away to St. Helena."