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HERE ARE FOUR RECENT BIOGRAPHIES of Napoleon Bonaparte, and, as they arrived simultaneously, here also is a question every biographer of Napoleon asks, usually in the first few pages: why are there so many biographies of Napoleon?

It’s a good question, one that might require a book-length answer. “People are sometimes astonished by the large—even enormous—number of studies that have been devoted to Napoleon: several tens of thousands, and the list grows longer every day,” writes Patrice Gueniffey, in the first volume of his biographical study—this one going only as far as 1802, Bonaparte’s 33rd year, in a mere 1,000 pages. The list grows like Topsy. Munro Price, quoting yet another biographer of Napoleon, claims there have been “[w]ell over 200,000 books...written about him since his death.” That makes a huge understatement of Andrew Roberts’s assertion that “More books have been written with Napoleon in the title than there have been days since his death in 1821.”

It’s a publishing trend that started early. Only ten years after Napoleon’s death, his private secretary, Louis Antoine Fauvelet de Bourrienne, was able to complain about the “multitude of publications under the titles of historical memoirs, secret memoires, and other rhapsodies which have appeared respecting Napoleon.” His complaint, of course, appears in his own Memoirs of Napoleon Bonaparte (1829-31).

So, four more biographies of Napoleon—no doubt amid others going to press as these four come off. Do we need more?

If you have to ask, the answer’s no, one would think. Yet every time the question is posed, a biographer feels compelled to reply in the affirmative, usually in the opening pages of the longest imaginable version of the short (5’6”) man’s short (not quite 52 years) life, and invariably without providing an answer beyond the obvious. One buys and reads Napoleon biographies for reasons difficult to explain. Goethe, quoted by Emil Ludwig in his 1925 biography of Bonaparte, speaks for many, many readers...
Price or Philip Dwyer makes one wish for just when he says, “The story of Napoleon produces wisely, to metaphysics: he quotes Chateau-works projects, political plotting, and manip-\text{-}way lies mortification, for Napoleon is more Napoleon actually \text{did}\text{,} but that the book unable to soothe the same discom-\text{-}ment that afflicted Goethe. Reading Roberts or Price or Philip Dwyer makes one wish for just a little distance on the whole business. Eventually, the main thing about Napoleon finally \text{floats into view: a better way to write his biog-raphy is to stand back far enough that you can see his vision from afar.} Guenniffy’s more poetic text does this well, at least in its first volume, and provides a bet-\text{-}ter glimpse of the “what” Goethe was looking for, which was a deeper understanding of the meaning behind all the events in the emperor’s life. To do this, Guenniffy resorts, perhaps wisely, to metaphysics: he quotes Chateaubriand’s claim that “[a]n unknown Bonaparte precedes the immense Napoleon, [but] the idea of Bonaparte was in the world before he was there in person: it secretly shook the earth. In 1789, when Bonaparte appeared, people felt something tremendous, an anxiety they could not account for.” Guenniffy expands:

The irruption of the great man into history does not depend on the birth of an individual endowed with uncom-mon abilities and on the efforts he later makes to dominate his period. The role played by Napoleon depends primarily, not on his existence, but rather on the crisis provoked by the French Revolu-\text{-}tion. Great men arise from times of crisis, from periods that allow talented individuals to make use of their capaci-ties and especially their will, to an ex-\text{-}tent and with an intensity unknown in ordinary times when customs, laws, and institutions circumscribe the will’s action within narrow limits. Peaceful times have no need for great men.

In fact, Guenniffy might have even gone further by noting that the revolution in turn was the result of dry rot in the ancient edifice of the French nation itself. Revolutions do not sweep healthy nations. They come about when the central myth of a nation can no longer be supported by the obvious facts. Nations jump sharks on a rising tide of disbelief. People knew that under the myth of grandeur that defined the French nation during the \text{Ancien Régime} were two warring, \text{rotting half-nations,} one of corrupted, exotic Catholicism and the other militantly, insistently Masonic, in both the literal and the figurative sense. And under that were centuries of lousy government and \text{psychotic eruptions, such as the 16\text{-}th century wars of religion.}

\text{The history of great men does not merge with the history of their time,} Guenniffy observes. “That is, in a way, the paradox of the great man: he is caught up in history to the point of coalescing with it...he gives it a character that is all his own and whose secret resides in him and in him alone.” In the case of Napoleon, the secret was ex-tremely ill-kept. He was famously the possess-\text{-}or of a massive ego, one so powerful that, as Dwyer notes, it “dominated his relations with other people, even those he supposedly loved.” It also characterized his policies and his ac-tions, which may be what Guenniffy means when he says Napoleon “coalesced” with his-
tory. He had a glorious vision of his role in life; there was no room for circumstances or personalities that interfered with what he saw so clearly. As Munro Price notes, “throughout his life [he] remained undaunted by obstacles others would have regarded as insuperable.” This remarkable self-confidence, Price says, made him “one of the great men of history” by making him live up to his own myth:

\begin{quote}
First and foremost, he was a military genius, though his real talent lay in the application of new strategy and tactics rather than their creation. Just as re-markable were his administrative gifts, which had steered France away from post-revolutionary chaos and imposed a structure of government, much of which remains in place today.
\end{quote}

\begin{center}
\textbf{Napoleon's vision has, in many ways, survived five republics, two more monarchies, a German puppet regime, and another ersatz empire. He is es-sential to the continued existence of France. During his disruptive lifetime, he offered to the French nation a sensible conflation of his glory with that of the nation, one that helped the whole enterprise cohere. Napoleon's triumphs became the triumph of all living Frenchmen, and the old France was quickly forgotten, made useless and left behind by the emperor's quick-moving legions.}
\end{center}

The emperor may have died long ago, but France still sees itself covered in "la gloire”—even if nobody quite knows what that means in the 21\text{-}st century, when all that \text{gloire} is dimmed by the fog of E.U. bureaucracy. But at the end of the 18\text{-}th century and the beginning of the 19\text{-}th, everybody knew what \text{gloire} was. It was the heritage of a once-great people, now buried in the chaos of revolution. The 19\text{-}th century building in which I sit now, for example, is built atop a lasagne of Franes: layers of French nations. Down below me someplace is a Roman villa, a medieval abbey, an old chateau, and a cella full of good, cheap wine, and that’s just a few square meters of France. Like-wise, Napoleon’s France was an empire built on the rubble of the old Europe, piles of ru-ined churches, the litter of political and social mayhem, and the barely recognizable debris of sucked royal houses. Napoleon arrived and with the subtlety of a bulldozer smoothed it all out and paved it all over. Everybody knew an older France, one grander than any Cor-sican dream, was down there somewhere, but people were tired of looking for it. Their new, improved France was (and apparently contin-ues to be) an appealing idea.

At the same time, Napoleon conflated, at least in the minds of Frenchmen, the essence of France and the idea of Europe. “The core of Napoleon’s personality,” Price writes, “was a driving need for domination.” That kind of ambition sees things in an orderly, logical way. Napoleon created modern Europe by mak-ing it the logical consequence of all that had preceded it. It was a concept that proved to be invulnerable. Island Britain, for example, will never quite succeed at being a part of Na-poleon—at least until it obviously didn’t.
These are all magnificent works. Price’s end-of-the-road narrative brings a simple clarity to his portion of this vast plain of knowledge, and he weaves proper skepticism through his well-wrought narrative, pointing out that had Napoleon been less psychologically impaired by his egotism, many lives might have been saved, and with them his country. Price points out that his “need for domination was perfectly well suited to dictating peace terms to a defeated enemy... [b]ut it had no place in negotiations between equal partners seeking peace through rational compromise.”

Dwyer is likewise clear-eyed about his subject, pointing out his “irrational sense of invincibility,” his stubbornness, his inability to trust his subordinates, his “[h]ubris, arrogance and an utter inability to admit his mistakes,” traits which were “the hallmarks of his monologues.” To these vices was added his inability to realize that his problems were caused by “invading Russia in the first place, adopting a Continental System that obliged him to try to blockade Britain in an effort to pursue the phantom of economic dominance, fighting a war on two fronts [and]...being drawn deep into Russia in spite of himself.” Dwyer makes Napoleon familiar to most of us by building his narrative around expertly sketched flaws and foibles. He apparently thought, for example, he could talk his way out of his troubles, as though that Russian defeat “were simply a matter of putting up a good argument, rather than dealing with a reality that touched the lives of millions of people.”

Patrice Gueniffey’s Bonaparte is beautifully written, and its portrait of Talleyrand is masterly. If you need more Napoleon, Gueniffey’s next volume is a good bet, and provides an interesting contrast to the work of these other, Anglophone biographers. When the narrative in this volume succumbs, as it must, to the detail-bedecked excess common to all Napoleon biographies, however, it recedes into a familiar conformity.

Roberts is a prolific biographer and one of the best. His Napoleon is a terrific read, filled with detail—it’s as close as we will ever come to a one-volume Bonaparte encyclopedia—and his descriptions of battles and political conflicts—and even committee meetings—are very good, and in places almost cinematic. He was able to use the huge trove of correspondence now being released by the Fondation Napoléon, and, as he reports in his book, he has visited almost all (53 of 60) of the Napoleonic battlefields of Europe. Napoleon: A Life is upholstered with don’t-tread-on-me rhetorical defenses: the book opens with his acknowledgment of the help given to him by President Nicolas Sarkozy of France and Prime Minister David Cameron of Great Britain, not to mention Henry Kissinger. But what gives his book charm is the thing most would say diminishes it: he is in love with his subject.

This is a phenomenon common to many biographers, but sometimes, as when Roberts feels his man has been wronged, it causes temporary madness. He seems angry at Winston Churchill, for example, who took pains to warn against comparing “the great Emperor” with the “squid-like caucus boss and butcher” that was Hitler, but nonetheless sensibly encouraged Britons to “achieve our Waterloo” through a “determination to fight on, as Pitt and his successors fought on.” Roberts protests:

To demonize the character of an enemy while the war is being fought is perfectly understandable—an opponent’s personality is fair game, after all—but it is unnecessary two centuries after his defeat.

This is a lover’s defense—overblown and unnecessary. Two centuries after his defeat, Napoleon is nothing but personality. Besides, he can take it. Maybe we shouldn’t be told that an earlier biography (Correlli Barnett’s) “sits in [Roberts’s]...study alongside a lock of Napoleon’s hair, a commiseration letter from his successor, a piece of the wallpaper from the room in which he died....”

France resembles Roberts’s study in that there are souvenirs of the emperor everywhere. There are almost as many Places Napoléon in France as there are biographies of his namesake. The Place Napoléon in the center of La Roche-sur-Yon—a tiny village converted by Bonaparte in 1804 into a departmental capital to help persuade the restless locals to stop their constant rebelling against Paris—provides a landing spot for a massive statue of the great man. It towers over an unused parade ground designed long ago to accommodate 20,000 soldiers. You can see Napoleon from miles away. But the bands and soldiers have all gone home, and the commerce of the city crowds around. You can stand in a corner of the open space, look at the statue, and, like Goethe, feel there maybe should be something more in it.

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