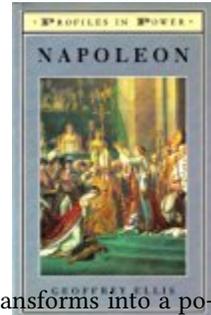


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Geoffrey James Ellis. *Napoleon*. London: Longman, 1997. viii + 290 pp. \$48.75 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-582-02548-6; \$24.00 (textbook), ISBN 978-0-582-02547-9.

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In his new work *Napoleon*, author Geoffrey Ellis attempts to provide a book that is both a biography of the French emperor as well as a general history of the Napoleonic era. His goal is to provide a useful text for survey courses on Modern European History or specialized courses on the Napoleonic era. Although Ellis is successful in several of the areas which he explores with his work, the book does contain some serious weaknesses which undermine the overall quality of his tome.

Ellis displays a solid grasp of his subject and an understanding of Napoleon Bonaparte as a man and as an emperor. Ellis emphasizes Napoleon's Corsican roots and stresses that this Corsican heritage played an important part in the development of Napoleon's character (pp. 8-12). The author delves into Napoleon's personal life as well, with a discussion of the future emperor's early amorous adventures and some speculation on his sexual initiation. Yet here Ellis digresses into pure hypothesis, including undocumented remarks alluding to homosexual practices among the cadets attending the *ecole militaire* at Brienne. He also refers to Napoleon's love affair and marriage to Josephine Beauharnais as an expression of an "oedipal fixation" (citing Harold T. Parker "The Formation of Napoleon's Personality: An Exploratory Essay" *French Historical Studies* 7, Spring 1971: pp. 9-10) based on the rather superficial evidence that Josephine was six years older than Napoleon and possessed (in Parker's opinion) a certain physical resemblance to Letizia Bonaparte. Ellis carries this hypothesis to rather fantastic lengths when he espouses the belief that "this same mother-image may itself have been a powerful inspiration of Napoleon's brilliant actions during the first Italian campaign" (p. 26).

Ellis's book begins as a biography but suddenly (and

rather confusingly for the reader) transforms into a political/social history of the Consulate and Empire. Ellis's account of the famous coup of 18 Brumaire (9 November) 1799 which brought Napoleon to power is both brief and inaccurate. According to Ellis, when Napoleon faced the Council of 500, he "appears either to have fainted or to have been knocked to the ground unconscious. It was then that Lucien [Napoleon's younger brother] saved the situation. His [Lucien's] dramatic declarations on behalf of his brother's good faith and respect for the Republic persuaded both councils to disperse" (p. 32). This account of the coup by Ellis, which is disturbingly undocumented, is in complete variance with every major work on Napoleon, including Felix Markham, *Napoleon* (New York, 1963), J.M. Thompson, *Napoleon Bonaparte* (New York, 1952), Georges Lefebvre, *Napoleon: From 18 Brumaire to Tilsit*, (New York, 1936), and Vincent Cronin, *Napoleon*, (London, 1971). According to these works, Lucien did indeed give a speech after Napoleon was assaulted in the Council of 500, but not to the members of the council, but rather to the assembled grenadiers gathered outside the Council's chambers under the command of the future Marshal Joachim Murat. Napoleon also addressed these men (hardly the act of an unconscious man) with the words "I went to speak with them [Council of 500], and they answered me with daggers." Napoleon then displayed a cut on his face which he had suffered during the scuffle inside. At this the grenadiers (soon to form the nucleus of Napoleon's Imperial Guard) fixed bayonets and charged into the Orangerie at St. Cloud and chased the council members into the night, thus establishing Napoleon as First Consul and ruler of France (Felix Markham *Napoleon*, New York, 1963: p. 76).

Perhaps the most glaring weakness of Ellis's work is his failure to adequately discuss the military aspects of

Napoleon and his empire. Although Ellis devotes many pages to a discussion of the economic and social structure of Napoleon's Empire, he fails to grapple with the military culture which formed the very foundation of the Empire. Napoleon rose to power through his brilliance as a military commander, expanded and maintained his realm with the might of his Grande Armee, and in the end was brought down when this army which was the instrument of his power was destroyed in the snows of Russia. Yet in a work which comprises 290 pages of text Ellis devotes only thirteen pages to La Grande Armee, and fully half of these are spent discussing conscription and desertion rates. In the little space which Ellis does devote to military matters, his analysis is both superficial and erroneous.

For example, Ellis writes that "His Imperial Guard [was] rarely exposed to the heat of battle, and then only as a last reserve to add lustre to the hour of victory" (p. 88). Ellis does not distinguish between the Guard cavalry, Guard artillery, and the Guard infantry; nor for that matter between the Old Guard, Middle Guard and Young Guard. If one is speaking specifically of the Old Guard infantry (the "Immortals" or "the grumblers"), then Ellis is partially right as Napoleon was indeed hesitant to commit his favorites to the battle, as at Borodino (7 September 1812) when his failure to commit the Old Guard infantry perhaps prevented the French from decisively defeating Kutusov's Russians. (See Philippe-Paul de Segur, *Napoleon's Russian Campaign* Boston, 1958). Yet when Napoleon did commit his Old Guard infantry, it was hardly for show, but rather as a decisive "knockout punch" delivered to a battered but still defiant foe, such as when the Old Guard smashed through the Prussian center at Ligny (16 June 1815) to bring Napoleon his last victory; a maneuver which was attempted unsuccessfully two days later at Waterloo. The Old Guard cavalry and artillery were repeatedly used on the battlefield, however, (especially the artillery) while infantry and artillery of the Middle and Young Guard were in the thick of every major battle from the time of their inception in 1812 to their demise at Waterloo in 1815 (See Henry Lachouque & Anne S.K. Brown, *The Anatomy of Glory: Napoleon and his Guard*, London, 1997).

In spite of its numerous shortcomings, Ellis's *Napoleon* does offer some worthwhile information. His discussion of Napoleon's relationship with the Vatican is particularly enlightening, and Ellis does reveal some solid scholarship and excellent analytical skills in unraveling and deciphering the fascinating relationship between Napoleon and Pope Pius VII. Ellis also has a su-

perb chapter entitled "Representations of Power, For and Against: Public Opinion, Education and the Arts" (pp. 155-188), which attacks the popular notion that cultural creativity was completely stifled during the Napoleonic era. Certainly the arts flourished, even if their major theme was Napoleon and his conquests. Ellis writes that "The Neo-classical and Romantic styles were eminently adjustable to the personal glorification of the first consul and emperor. His celebrated Roman head, his great battles, the Imperial coronation, courtly pageants, the lingering fascination with exotic motifs and remembered scenes in Egypt, all in some way inspired the artists" (p. 159). Ellis also includes a solid examination of the "first painter to the Emperor" Jacques-Louis David and his magnificent art which epitomized the neo-classical style and also helped pave the way for the era of romanticism which would follow. Ellis's work is also strong in its discussion of economic issues relating to the French Empire, including a solid critique of Napoleon's Continental system.

Perhaps the greatest contributions of Ellis's work are provided in his final chapter "The Historiographical Images of Power" and his concluding bibliographical essay. Ellis does a marvelous job, vaguely reminiscent of Pieter Geyl's classic work *Napoleon: For and Against* (New York, 1949), of outlining many of the major historiographical debates which have swirled around Napoleon almost from the moment he went into exile. Ellis provides an excellent discussion of Napoleon's own views on himself and his career, as well as those of his contemporaries. Ellis goes on to provide a solid overview of how perceptions of Napoleon and his impact on European history changed over the decades which followed his death. While this chapter is very informative, it is also frustrating as it concludes its analysis of Napoleonic historiography at the rather premature date of the 1940's. Ellis's bibliographic essay which follows is solid and attempts to pick up where his historiographical essay left off by discussing more modern works on the subject, albeit without the depth of analysis provided in the preceding chapter. Military historians will be particularly frustrated to find that Ellis lists only four books on the Napoleonic Wars, and provides very little commentary on any of them. Thus he neglects many classic works on Napoleon and his Grande Armee, which the reader should not find too surprising by this point given Ellis's scant coverage of this vitally important topic in his book. Another major omission from both the historiographical essay and the bibliographic essay is any discussion of biographies of the leading supporters and/or opponents of

Napoleon. Given the plethora of superb biographies on the numerous important and colorful personages which played such vital roles during this period of European history, I feel this is a major oversight.

In conclusion, Geoffrey Ellis's *Napoleon* fails to accomplish its task of being both biography and survey. While Ellis skips over large and important topics such as the Napoleonic Wars, he delves into minutia such as desertion rates and a faint-hearted attempt at psychohistory which is wanting in both psychological and historical terms. I believe that the most important contributions of the work to Napoleonic studies are its dis-

ussion of social and economic issues and especially the very well written historiographical essay which, in spite of its abrupt end, makes the book worth reading for anyone specializing in Modern France or the Napoleonic Era. However, such deep historiographical issues may place the text beyond the grasp of students in a survey course, and thus I would recommend this book for classroom use only with specialized courses on the Napoleonic era.

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