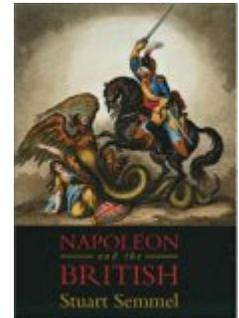


Stuart Semmel. *Napoleon and the British*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004. xii + 354 pp. \$40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-09001-7.



Reviewed by Noah Shusterman

Published on H-War (November, 2005)

In recent years, the analysis of literature and of reading habits has expanded out of the realm of literary history to claim a prominent role in cultural history and even, at times, political history. But what does it take to expand the analysis of literary sources into an analysis of the larger society which produced and consumed those sources? Is it enough simply to show that a given idea was "thinkable" at the time? Is there a quantifiable or verifiable way of studying a text's influence? And to what extent can printed sources written *for* the lower classes be used as evidence for the opinions and views *of* those classes? Those are some of the questions which Stuart Semmel's *Napoleon and the British* raises. The book also provides fertile material for thinking about those issues. The one limited aspect of the book is the author's refusal to attack those questions at any sort of comparative or methodological level, preferring instead to aim his book directly, and at times almost exclusively, at specialists of Georgian England.

This is not to say that Semmel's work lacks for grand aims. The very idea of writing a history of British opinions of and attitudes toward Napoleon

has a certain chutzpah, given the strength of the received narrative. It is generally accepted that the people of Britain hated and despised Napoleon; that they did so since the time of his invasion of Egypt; and that that hatred intensified (not without reason) throughout the Napoleonic wars. Even today, English biographers of Napoleon are more critical than French biographers. At first glance, the topic seems hardly worthy of an article, let alone a full book. But things were not so simple, as Semmel proves. There was a strong current of English (or British; Semmel uses the two terms more or less interchangeably) thought that supported Napoleon. "To a much greater degree than has been recognized," Semmel writes, "many British radicals continued to have kind words to say about Napoleon, and continued to use him as a cudgel with which to chastise their own rulers. There was a continuous, if at times attenuated, tradition of British radical admiration of Napoleon, stretching from the earliest days of his military career through his consulate and empire and on into the period of his exile" (p. 135). After the peace of Utrecht, this current was particularly strong, briefly enjoying official en-

dorsement; it weakened but did not disappear during the ensuing years. Then, finally, the one hundred days and the exile to St. Helena increased Napoleon's prestige in England. This support was found primarily, but not exclusively, in opposition writings; but different writers had different reasons for voicing their support for Napoleon. As Semmel shows, a writer like William Hazlitt was not as isolated in his support for Napoleon as generally believed. But the goals of the book go beyond just showing the support for Napoleon. Semmel argues that the Napoleonic era, and Napoleon himself, brought forth a major change in the way that the British understood France; and, given that being British meant being not-French, any change in the way that "France" was understood necessarily meant a change in the self-understanding of the British people.

Not surprisingly, British opinion of Napoleon changed over the course of the Napoleonic wars. During periods of active fighting between England and France, there was less explicit support of Napoleon among Britons. Those periods also coincided with increased anti-Napoleonic propaganda, some in the form of broadsheets, some in the form of newspapers and pamphlets. Military historians will be particularly interested in Semmel's analysis of this wartime propaganda and its quasi-official status. As he shows, certain writers willing to criticize Napoleon enjoyed government support. Others wrote similar tracts without such support. It should be noted, however, that military historians looking for any new insights into British battle tactics, attacks on the continental system, etc., will find little if any information here. Even the topic of conscription, which would seem potentially germane to Semmel's task, is not addressed. Instead, Semmel's target is much more elusive: what was it that the British people thought of Napoleon?

Asking such a question necessarily raises methodological questions, given the overrepresentation of elite sources from the period. In his

introduction Semmel identifies the sources of evidence for his study as accounts of popular behavior and "printed genres that demanded no great measure of literacy, if any," including broadsides and caricatures, as well as popular songs. But it is slightly more challenging written accounts--journalism and pamphlets--that "form the backbone" of the study (pp. 9-10). Semmel's account is therefore a history of what people wrote about Napoleon; but it is also a history of what they read about Napoleon--a history not only of ideas and discourses, but also of the distribution and reception of those ideas among the population. In other words, it is not only what was written that Semmel writes about, but also the publishing history of many of those tracts, as well as some discussion of readership practices. And for Semmel the ideas which political writers propagated would spread throughout all of Britain, given the way that people shared newspapers and other writings, making readership far larger than the press-run numbers would indicate. "Even the illiterate," he claims, "were within reach of papers read aloud at the local tavern" (p. 12).

What, then, did the British people think of Napoleon? For Semmel, Napoleon was not only a challenge to the British people's army and navy, but also to their very categories of thought. From the start, Napoleon represented an enigma to the British people. He did not fit the categories into which other leaders could be put. He was not a hereditary monarch, but he did not seem to be much of a Jacobin, either. Was he a conqueror, in the tradition of Alexander and Julius Caesar? A usurper, in the tradition of Cromwell? Was he a Catholic? A Moslem? An atheistic Republican? All the varieties of traditional category were tried, all the varieties of parallel examined. Napoleon simply did not fit any. He "resisted being pinned down (as, indeed, he does to this day)" (p. 19).

This left people eager to describe Bonaparte the choice of either labeling him some sort of monstrous mongrel, whose hybridity threatened

the existing categories of thought, or of considering him something "unprecedented, a type unto himself, *sui generis*" (p. 31). More biblically minded analysts argued over the role of Napoleon in the fulfillment of biblical prophecies. Was he the Antichrist? Some thought so. But such a characterization was problematic. The Catholic Church was Protestant England's traditional religious fear and Napoleon did not fit into that paradigm, unless Napoleon himself could be considered a true Catholic. The biblical commentators did not think he was.

Not everyone was willing to accept this change; instead, many reduced the malignity of the Catholic Church. This "eschatological demotion" of the Catholic Church from the role of Antichrist was a move that Semmel calls a "revolution in typological thinking" (p. 84). But many biblical exegetes remained skeptical of the idea of Napoleon as Antichrist. They did not see Napoleon as the messiah, they just saw the threats to Britain coming from other sources, including from the decadence and dissolution of the British people themselves (p. 91).

In biblical interpretations as in political interpretations, pro-Napoleonic opinions were always in the minority. Semmel does not deny the existence of widespread loyalist opinion during the Napoleonic Wars; his goal is rather to deny that it enjoyed the unanimity that some would give it. Still, the pro-Napoleon forces he identifies were not so much pro-Napoleon as "anti-anti-Napoleon" (p. 135). And even those who sympathized with Napoleon did not support his policies in Spain (p. 138). The critical developments that really changed opinions of Napoleon came after 1814 and "derived less from his victories as general and emperor than from his defeat and exile" (p. 222).

When Napoleon first abdicated in April 1814 there were celebrations throughout Britain. Many towns even constructed effigies of Napoleon to burn during the rejoicing (p. 148). (The lack of at-

tention Semmel pays to these celebrations is puzzling, given his attention elsewhere to "accounts of popular behavior.") Nor did the tales of Elba do much to strengthen Napoleon's reputation among Britons, even among his sympathizers (p. 157). Many felt that he should have died in battle. Others felt that Elba was too kind a sentence; that he should have been sent someplace harsher, or that he should have been tried before an English tribunal. According to Semmel, Napoleon's "place in the British political and historical imagination might have been very different had he remained on Elba" (p. 157). But there was also disappointment among the British for the Restoration government now in power in France. Louis XVIII was clearly not ruling as a constitutional monarch; he had, moreover, been put into power not by the will of the people, but by the bayonets of foreign armies. There was, therefore, something of a nostalgia for Napoleon among the English opposition, a nostalgia nourished during the one hundred days.

When Napoleon left Elba, marched through France, and took over the reins of the government once again, the unfolding situation raised serious questions in Britain. The ease with which Napoleon retook power and the huge public support he received in France had a huge impact on British opinion of Napoleon of the role that Britain was playing in the international situation. Not everyone supported going back to war, especially since people expected this new round of fighting to last far longer than it did. The refusal of Louis XVIII to rule constitutionally made support for his cause even less attractive to the British people. In contrast to the autocratic rule of the Bourbons (and in just as much contrast to the legacy of his own rule) Napoleon presented himself as a constitutional ruler during the one hundred days. It was a claim that British loyalists disputed, and not without reason. But according to Semmel, "many on the British left believed Napoleon had indeed reformed himself" (p. 163). France now had two rival leaders. One was an au-

tocratic monarch with no pretence of ruling constitutionally and, apparently, little public support. The other was extremely popular among the French (a point that even Napoleon's British detractors acknowledged), and presented himself as a constitutional ruler. By British political standards, many in the opposition felt that it was Napoleon who was truly the "legitimate" ruler of France, not Louis XVIII.

Semmel discusses the issue of "legitimacy" at several points in his book, bringing it to center stage in chapter 6, "Radicals, 'Legitimacy,' and History." It is one of the most interesting sections of the book. Napoleon's detractors, in England as elsewhere, often derided his origins and his claim to the title of emperor. According to many, Napoleon was a "usurper" and not a legitimate ruler. "Loyalists sought to treat Napoleon's claim to power as different in kind from the claims of Europe's established dynasties," Semmel writes (p. 108). But what was it then that made a ruler legitimate? The criticism of Napoleon's right to rule meant that the right of any hereditary ruler was now open to debate in a "more general question of what constituted legal power" (p. 108). Indeed, "the introduction of 'legitimacy' into British political discourse seems to have been directly connected to the peculiar case of Napoleon" (p. 111). For loyalists, Napoleon lacked the pedigree that other European monarchs enjoyed; he was of low birth, and had not inherited the throne in an appropriate manner. But such an argument, coming from a defender of the English crown, had certain problems. What did such an argument mean, in the light of the Glorious Revolution of 1688? How was the Hanoverian monarchy legitimate, if Napoleon's was not? As Semmel shows, the discussion of Napoleon's legitimacy (or illegitimacy) became a debate not only about who should rule France, but about what the proper criteria were for choosing a ruler in any country, but especially in England.

Napoleon's tenure in St. Helena also caused some controversy in Britain. Some commentators felt that the treatment of Napoleon fell short of British standards in several respects. First had been the failure to try Napoleon after Waterloo. There had been ample opportunity to bring Napoleon to England for trial; indeed, it seemed that the British Army had gone out of their way to avoid having any sort of legal proceedings. In the summer of 1815, Napoleon was being held in the *Bellerophon*, in the English town of Torbay and then in Plymouth Harbor. Not only was he not put on trial, but he became the subject of popular curiosity: a sight to see. This, too, commentators criticized. Crowds flocked to the harbor to see the fallen emperor. According to one periodical, there were more than 10,000 boats in the harbor, with an average of ten people to a boat. While some of the observers were there out of curiosity, most seem to have been there out of sympathy and even admiration, a point that even Napoleon's detractors did not deny (p. 171).

Overall, Semmel succeeds admirably in reexamining British opinions of Napoleon. On a historiographical level, he also gives a significant critique to the overemphasis on loyalist sentiment in early-nineteenth-century Britain. But there are other implications of his work that he seems not to want to address. Given the breadth of research and the originality of the scholarship, the most frustrating aspect of the book is the way that it limits its potential audience and, in some ways, its potential impact. Semmel seems to have little interest in addressing anyone outside of the realm of specialists in Georgian England. This limitation comes out in two ways. First, the book assumes a significant knowledge of the period on the part of its readers. While Semmel does a good job of introducing many of the unknown authors that he discusses, those who played a relatively major role in the politics of the day, such as Cobbett or Hazlitt, are introduced with little or no background information. Non-specialists will find themselves searching reference works for back-

ground information. The high level of assumed knowledge also means that this book would be a hard sell for even an advanced undergraduate course. More importantly, Semmel does not seem to have any interest in engaging in any of the historiographical or methodological issues that the book brings up. He borrows from some recent work in the history of the book and of reading. But he has little to say about the implications of his work for other histories of reading.

And the work does share some of the uncertainties of its genre. For instance, Semmel says that in examining the propaganda campaign of 1803, historians "cannot easily assess how they were read. But we can gain some inkling of the target audience's sentiments through the distorting mirror of what authors feared their audiences might believe" (p. 54). The loyalist confidence, he finds, belied a deeper "unease." But Semmel also writes that the broadsides, and more generally the propaganda campaign of 1803 "provides the cultural historian with an invaluable window onto popular conceptions of Napoleon, and, more generally, onto late Georgian loyalist ideology" (p. 41). This is a very different claim, and Semmel does not so clearly prove it to be true.

The decision not to discuss these issues, if unfortunate, seems to have been intentional. It is therefore up to historians of other subfields to shape their opinions about the implications of Semmel's work. Those interested in the political history of early-nineteenth-century England, however, would do well to consult the book. The history of British opinions of Napoleon turns out to be less simple than we thought.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Noah Shusterman. Review of Semmel, Stuart. *Napoleon and the British*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. November, 2005.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10941>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.