

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Patrice Gueniffey. *Bonaparte: 1769-1802*. Translated by Steven Rendall. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2015. 1024 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-36835-4.

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Patrice Gueniffey devotes the introduction of his monumental *Bonaparte* to how complicated and varied the depictions of an artillery officer from Corsica are and have been since before the man's death. Subject to innumerable works (Gueniffey claims several tens of thousands of books, and notes that the French National Library holds over five thousand effigies of the man), his actions and memory have been tied to almost every political, historiographical, and personal agenda, and although he died relatively young (fifty-one), he lived long enough to see his own legend eclipse reality. Gueniffey's broad introduction and extensive use of secondary sources demonstrates that he has studied a great many of those thousands of books and depictions, and the result is an impressive achievement.

Bonaparte focuses on Napoleon's life from his birth in 1769 to his appointment as consul for life in 1802. There is a temptation to describe this as the first half of Napoleon's life, but in fact only nineteen years separate his assumption of the title first consul and his death on St. Helena, so this work actually covers the majority of Napoleon's life. Gueniffey's explicit goal is to examine Napoleon as a modern individual, "who rose to unprecedented heights and who ... pushed back all known boundaries. Not a model, but a dream" (p. 11). With that goal, it makes perfect sense to start at the beginning. This focus allows Gueniffey to provide more insight into Napoleon's early years than most biographies, and the emphasis is both illuminating and welcome. There follow sections on his arrival on the wider French stage, the Italian campaign, the Egyptian expedition, the return to Paris, and finally his climb to first consul.

Bonaparte is unquestionably and unapologetically a

biography, despite the poor reputation that dogs that genre within the academy (which Gueniffey discusses and dissects). It is a biography, however, that knows its historiography, both within the biographical field and the wider area of Napoleonic studies and associated histories, and engages with it. Acknowledging the political bones that underpin the old historiographical debate brought on by the new social history, Gueniffey places his work between the *ancien régime*/autocratic and aristocratic top-down history and the democratic bottom-up history. This, as he points out, fits Napoleon perfectly, for the man was both a revolutionary general and an emperor, who unquestionably shaped the world around him, but was also shaped (and brought low) by it. He was a self-appointed autocrat who instituted mass conscription, developed a remarkable intelligence network to spy on his own people, and reinstated noble titles. But he also raised men far beyond their birth station, was adored by his soldiers, and instituted a series of liberal reforms that shaped France, and to a lesser extent Europe, for a century.

The book has much to recommend it. It is written in a fluid and intellectual style, and wonderfully translated by Steven Rendall. It draws from an extensive mix of primary (although mostly published, rather than archival) and secondary sources, and will appeal to both the academic (who will value its insight and breadth) and the lay reader (who will enjoy its style and clarity). It is, as mentioned, a biography, but it draws useful analytical techniques from political, economic, and cultural history. Its military sections are also worthy of praise—Gueniffey writes about battles and war clearly, and those chapters are supplemented with excellent maps. In addition, there is some thoughtful rumination on the decline of military

history in the academy and the post-World Wars shift in the view of conflict in general.

Two points are particularly worthy of praise. First, despite the nature of the man and his achievements, *Bonaparte* never feels deterministic. Although Gueniffey admits that this project started as a much more focused examination of Napoleon's Hundred Days in 1815, it does not feel like it was written backwards. He makes no secret of his admiration for Napoleon, but does not describe his rise as inevitable. Second is the work's clever use and interpretation of names. Gueniffey uses the shift in Napoleon's preferred name as a lens through which to examine identity both private and public, providing insight into a self-made man with a remarkable talent for

public relations and propaganda. It is no accident that this book is called *Bonaparte*, and I would be very surprised if its companion volume is not titled *Napoleon*.

Bonaparte is not a small book, nor, for all that its writing style is enjoyable, a quick read. But it is a worthwhile one. It will be a matter of personal opinion whether Gueniffey achieves his aim of depicting Napoleon as a modern individual and dream, but even if he falls short of that goal, he has produced a work of breadth and insight. Gueniffey states in his introduction that "no biography can be 'definitive'" (p. 7). That is unquestionably true, but for Napoleon's life up to 1802, *Bonaparte* is as close as we have come for quite some time.

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