

**Schom, Alan. Napoleon Bonaparte. New York: Harper Collins, 1997.**

R. Thomas McDonald

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**Schom, Alan.** *Napoleon Bonaparte*. New York: Harper Collins, 1997.

Undertaking a manageable biography of Napoleon Bonaparte is a daunting venture whether in an academic context or in a popular one. Alan Schom has proven his daring and has succeeded in providing both a sound and readable overview of one of the colossal figures of European history. Only Charlemagne and Adolph Hitler have refashioned Europe as profoundly and one must look to Cyrus, Alexander, Augustus, Timur, Shih Huangdi and Genghiz Khan for comparable figures from other periods and cultures. Both Napoleon and Schom are conscious of the role that the general, First Consul, and Emperor played, for good and ill, on the European stage. The challenge lies in evaluating that role and there, naturally enough, Bonaparte is the more certain of the benefits of his career for both France and Europe.

Schom is no Bonapartist. His sensibility is of the twentieth rather than the early nineteenth century with its burden of *la gloire* and its revolutionary elan. The heroism and the heroics of the military profession are continually weighed against the waste, both economic and human, of the repeated bloody campaigns which culminated in the great defeat of 1815. He sees the corpses, the burned villages, the unplanted fields, and the horrors of what poor attempts were made to treat those wounded by the prototypes of mechanized warfare. He also sees Bonaparte's lack of adequate scouting and preparation and his unreasoning assumption that France was an inexhaustible reservoir of money and manpower to simply be called up when needed. Here is an author whose judgments are those of a *philosophe* or of an economic analyst, a realist on the same wave length as Fouché and Talleyrand. From this point of view, the Napoleonic phenomenon can only be seen as a product of spin management and a triumph of public relations.

Given these assumptions, the Bonaparte of this biography emerges as far more a political than a military genius. His control and manipulation of information sources and official documents becomes, even prior to 18 Brumaire, a major factor in his advancement and in the mythology of the Empire culminating in his *Memoires*. First manifest in the disastrously conceived and implemented Egyptian campaign which was transformed from a military debacle into a romantic adventure to be finally concretized into an exotic decor, his ability to mould reality to his own advantage eventually evolved into the delusionary isolation of the last years of his reign and the cloud-castles of Saint Helena. The famous Bonaparte "luck" is for Schom founded on an extraordinary ability to deceive and manipulate not only the individuals around him, but an entire nation.

But there were the victories. From Toulon to Borodino war was not only an extension of diplomacy but, in many instances, a substitute for it. The use of firepower and the resources of the *levee en masse*, resources fashioned respectively by the *ancien regime* and the Revolution, were applied to more traditional forces by an officer corps trained, as was Bonaparte himself, under the monarchy but reordered by the revolutionary ideals of promotion on the basis of merit. Schom's excellent thumbnail sketches of Bonaparte's chief associates and enemies include those of his marshalls. One would be hard put to assemble a more diverse and quarrelsome batch of subordinates who are seen by the author as ranging from incompetent to downright treacherous. Far from being a team of

loyal supporters, a picture of mutual detestation and competition based on envy emerges. There is also a distinct tendency to disobey orders and to refuse to aid each other or to run amuck as witness Ney's suicidal cavalry charges at Waterloo. Whatever the moral of the story, one is left with being unable to attribute Bonaparte's military successes to anyone other than himself. The battles are described in some detail and appropriate maps are included at easily referred to locations in the text.

As with most biography, it is difficult to draw boundaries between the subject's personal life and official role. The focus here is on Bonaparte himself and his personality. It strives to bring him down to earth in spite of his own efforts to remain an icon. The viewpoint is that of his opponents. His foibles are closely scrutinized and his miscalculations pointed up. His increasing isolation from everyone after his coronation and his remarriage calls to mind the chilling description of him by Mme. de Stael. Here is a man of the eighteenth century out of his context. His inability to deal with the "grass roots" resistance in Spain or with the Tsar Alexander's refusal to acknowledge defeat via negotiations not only reflects a personal failure but a failure of his world view, that of a man following a "proved" plan of action which has always worked but which for some reason has now betrayed him. Military successes should always be followed by diplomatic negotiations confirming one's advantage. The Hundred Days were a last attempt to make the magic formula work.

Napoleon Bonaparte's career is replete with conflict. Not only does it transcend his personal life in its military, economic, political and diplomatic manifestations, but it is part and parcel of it in his relationships with his family and associates. The use of memoirs throughout this book is most effective. They impart a great deal of warmth and liveliness to the narrative which is well larded with quotations and vignettes. They must, of course, be treated with some care as each of them has a point of view; little Saint Helena narratives as it were. Virtually everyone seems to have been "scribbling away" often, of course, to justify their actions or to even a score or two. We must nevertheless be grateful to them for their insights and to Alan Schom for gleaning these many passages from them and arranging them so fetchingly in the context he has constructed for them.

R. Thomas McDonald

Fairleigh Dickinson University