

The English Life of Louis Napoleon Bonaparte

The Life of Napoleon III in the context of Anglo-French Relations

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Note: It is to be regretted that due to the altered pagination of this Internet version of the book, both page numbering and the Index have had to be omitted. To facilitate reading or downloading, the twelve chapters have been posted as separate pdf files, while the relevant footnotes have been transferred from the end of the book to the end of each chapter.

Preface

IN 1832, Benjamin Disraeli made the eponymous hero of his novel *Contarini Fleming* say ‘read no history, nothing but biography, for that is life without theory’. This is a sound observation, and far too often have the analyses of historical events been attempted solely through the critical interpretation of the ripples produced rather than through an appreciation of the person who gave rise to them.

Nowhere in the nineteenth century is this more apparent than in the study of the French Second Empire, which has never been articulated with the rigour associated with its antecedent. More than any other regime in history, the invitation to interpret it solely through its perceived actions and the commentary thereon have been irresistible in the venerable halls of academe, giving free reign to the prejudice associated with current political perceptions in scholarship. While more favourable revisionist work at last gathers pace in Canada and America, in ‘old’ Britain and France, vituperative nonsense continues to be published as though the first years of the French Third Republic were still with us.

But the Second Empire cannot be understood when separated from the figure who created and represented it – an obvious condition, but one that nonetheless is often not respected. Thus this book examines in detail Napoleon III’s *vie Anglaise quotidienne* in the context of Anglo-French relations. This anglocentric approach is justifiable: for fifty years no nation played a more significant role in shaping the character and policies of the most influential political figure in mid-nineteenth-century Europe than did England. This book is therefore the study of one foreign personality and the nation that welcomed him – both literally and as a political force on the European stage – with the friction and enmity, joy and amusement, pathos and absurdity, respect and veneration, engendered by the often dramatic and ambiguous geopolitical relationship between Britain and France. But it is also a tale of the mentality of nations as much as a celebration of the individual; a study of attitudes, impressions, and opinions from politicians to poets and beyond at a time when personal (and personality) politics and international diplomacy dominated the domestic and foreign affairs of sovereign nations: and when the consequences of a handshake could determine a policy statement on invasion as much as an invitation to dinner.

In his 1909 book *The Rise of Louis Napoleon*, Frederick Simpson noted that Napoleon Bonaparte remained ‘the most over-analyzed character in history’. Eighty-eight years later, in yet another biography of Napoleon I, his nephew was dismissed as a mere ‘epigone’, and his rule as a ‘carnival empire’. Sadly, those men (it is always men) who make idols of Mars cannot appreciate creative originators; or, as Santayana put it, ‘a dreamer consenting to dream of the actual world’. So long as egomaniacs directly responsible for the slaughter of millions, and the economic, social, and physical destruction of human communities, continue to attract adulation, Louis Napoleon will inevitably be represented as a grotesque palimpsest of his uncle’s ego. However, critical appreciation of the man who was decades ahead of his time should reverse republican rhetoric, declaring that it was Louis Napoleon who, for all his faults, was the *true* Bonaparte, and Napoleon I the aberration who in any just and moral society should be condemned as the ‘false Napoleon’.

Note and Acknowledgements

All the quotations in this book taken from published sources do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the authors from whose works they have been taken. Quotations in English leading to a source in another language have been translated by the author. Russian words have been transliterated using the Library of Congress System; Chinese using the Wade-Giles system where Pinyin might lead to unnecessary confusion ('Canton' rather than 'Guangzhou'), but Pinyin where this has gained universal currency ('Beijing' rather than 'Peking'). The French custom of conjoining forenames has not been followed.

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