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A landmark new biography that presents the man behind the many myths. The first writer in English to go back to the original European sources, Adam Zamoyski's portrait of Napoleon is historical biography at its finest.

Napoleon inspires passionately held and often conflicting visions. Was he a god-like genius, Romantic avatar, megalomaniac monster, compulsive warmonger or just a nasty little dictator?

Whilst he displayed elements of these traits at certain times, Napoleon was none of these things. He was a man, and as Adam Zamoyski presents him in this landmark biography, a rather ordinary one at that. He exhibited some extraordinary qualities during some phases of his life but it is hard to credit genius to a general who presided over the worst (and self-inflicted) disaster in military history and who single-handedly destroyed the great enterprise he and others had toiled so hard to construct. A brilliant tactician, he was no strategist.

But nor was Napoleon an evil monster. He could be selfish and violent but there is no evidence of him wishing to inflict suffering gratuitously. His motives were mostly praiseworthy and his ambition no greater than that of contemporaries such as Alexander I of Russia, Wellington, Nelson, Metternich, Blucher, Bernadotte and many more. What made his ambition exceptional was the scope it was accorded by circumstance.

Adam Zamoyski strips away the lacquer of prejudice and places Napoleon the man within the context of his times. In the 1790s, a young Napoleon entered a world at war, a bitter struggle for supremacy and survival with leaders motivated by a quest for power and by self-interest. He did not start this war but dominated his life and continued, with one brief interruption, until his final defeat in 1815.

Based on primary sources in many European languages, and beautifully illustrated with portraits done only from life, this magnificent book examines how Napoleone Buonaparte, the boy from Corsica, became 'Napoleon'; how he achieved what he did, and how it came about that he undid it. It does not justify or condemn but seeks instead to understand Napoleon's extraordinary trajectory.

Napoleon Details

Date : Published September 6th 2018 by William Collins

ISBN : 9780008116071

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Format : Hardcover 576 pages

Genre : Biography, History, Cultural, France, Nonfiction, European History

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Literary Soirée says

NAPOLEON: A LIFE goes deep into the psyche of the Emperor of the French in this myth-shattering, beautifully written biography. "What a novel my life has been!" Napoleon once said of himself, as the author spins a compelling narrative of the boy born into a poor family, by twenty-six an army general, transformed into a brilliant military commander through marriage with an older woman who seduced him. Within a few years he helmed Europe with power unseen in modern history, his downfall equally stunning. Historian Adam Zamoyski cuts through shopworn mythology to deliver a true portrait of a true legend, set against the scrim of European Enlightenment. Zamoyski wrote the acclaimed 1812: Napoleon's Fatal March on Moscow and its sequel Rites of Peace, among others. 5/5

Pub Date 09 Oct 2018

Thanks to Perseus Books, Basic Books and NetGalley for the review copy. Opinions are fully mine.

#Napoleon #NetGalley

Anne Morgan says

Napoleon Bonaparte is one of those larger than life figures who becomes a myth, a hero, and a villain, and in the process the true human being often disappears. In Napoleon: A Life Adam Zamoyski works to discover the man behind the legend. Zamoyski works to place Napoleon in the context of his time period, both politically and philosophically. He works to explain the occasionally unexplainable mindset of the French Revolution and French Republic so that readers can understand how ready France was to accept someone like Napoleon as their leader.

Zamoskyi warns readers in his introduction that he examines the military aspects of Napoleon's life only as he feels they effected his political and personal situation. This leads to an uneven study of the military aspect of Napoleon, heavily emphasized in the beginning and much less so by the 1812 campaigns in Russia. Waterloo receives barely a page and a half. But since these are well researched and frequently written about in other books, I think the unevenness worked in the book's favor. More is certainly known about those times than about Napoleon's family, his work on restoring France, or his behavior to enemies and colleagues.

Here we discover Napoleon's formative years on Corsica and his work to define his life on his own terms. Corsican traditions emphasized family above all and Napoleon followed this throughout his life- while his brothers and sisters only considered family when it benefitted them directly. Napoleon was a man who grew up despising the idea of love, only to fall head over heels in love with Josephine- who I also learned far more about in this book than I had ever known before! He was not a man who was comfortable delegating authority, which became a serious problem when he was on campaign and trying to run an empire. Even when he wanted peace, he felt his only true claim to the throne of France was as a general.

A well-written and well researched book, Zampyshki's Napoleon delves behind the myths to get as close to the man as possible. Neither a saint nor a demon, Napoleon is instead presented as a man with both genius and faults, who retained until the end of his life an incredible charisma that caused men to devote their lives to his star, even when it seemed hopeless. Which is perhaps a large part of why he is still so fascinating today.

An excellent biography for those interested in learning more about French history and the Napoleonic Wars, as well as the self-made man behind the legend.

I received an ARC of this book from NetGalley in exchange for an honest review

Hasso von Moltke says

I've always been intrigued by Napoleon, although it can at times be difficult to dig through the mythos that surrounds him. As this book reveals, quite a bit of that mythos was built up by the man himself, a shameless self promotor. Mr. Zamoyski digs deeply into this man who proved so influential and reveals a complicated man. Throughout his career Napoleon inspired both love and hatred, and, in spite of his often poor manners and childish behavior, he possessed a charisma that even his opponents had to acknowledge was spell binding.

Mr. Zamoyski has crafted an intriguing account of Napoleon's life, drawing a great deal on the accounts and impressions that he left upon his contemporaries. The focus of this work is less on battles and campaigns and more upon social and political history of the Emperor. His courtly life and the odd attempts he made to recast himself as a dynast, particularly his strange emulation of the Bourbons, are delved into in great detail.

In spite of the already long length of this work, I found myself wanting more details of particular events that are just glossed over. There are quite a few events that were briefly touched upon that I wish Mr. Zamoyski would have delved deeper into. I also felt that the ending left a bit to be desired, like the fates of Napoleon's family, step-children, Marshals, opponents, and others who played significant roles in the Emperor's life.

All in all, I enjoyed this extensive outline of Napoleon's life very much, with my biggest complaint being that I want more.

I received a copy of this book through netgalley.
