



Napoleon: A Life

Andrew Roberts

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The definitive biography of the great soldier-statesman by the *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Storm of War*—winner of the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize for Biography and the Grand Prix of the Fondation Napoleon

Austerlitz, Borodino, Waterloo: his battles are among the greatest in history, but Napoleon Bonaparte was far more than a military genius and astute leader of men. Like George Washington and his own hero Julius Caesar, he was one of the greatest soldier-statesmen of all times.

Andrew Roberts's *Napoleon* is the first one-volume biography to take advantage of the recent publication of Napoleon's thirty-three thousand letters, which radically transform our understanding of his character and motivation. At last we see him as he was: protean multitasker, decisive, surprisingly willing to forgive his enemies and his errant wife Josephine. Like Churchill, he understood the strategic importance of telling his own story, and his memoirs, dictated from exile on St. Helena, became the single bestselling book of the nineteenth century.

An award-winning historian, Roberts traveled to fifty-three of Napoleon's sixty battle sites, discovered crucial new documents in archives, and even made the long trip by boat to St. Helena. He is as acute in his understanding of politics as he is of military history. Here at last is a biography worthy of its subject: magisterial, insightful, beautifully written, by one of our foremost historians.

Napoleon: A Life Details

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From Reader Review Napoleon: A Life for online ebook

Nooilforpacifists says

Gushing bio--unusual for an Englishman. Roberts claims that newly available letters present a vastly more favorable portrait than previously available to scholars. "All too often historians have taken at face value the biographies written by people around Napoleon, whereas many of them were deeply compromised, to the point of being worthless unless confirmed by a second source." The problem is that although Roberts tries to be balanced, and points out the warts, his over-the-top admiration for his subject distorts the lens of otherwise excellent research.

One example--Roberts extols Napoleon's re-created nobility: "Unlike anywhere else in Europe, a French family's noble simply lapsed if the next generation hadn't done enough to deserve its passing on." A paragraph later, however, he describes the new hierarchy -- "a complete reordering of the system" -- from top to bottom without placing the new peers. Instead, he digresses into a discussion of the exact mix of liberty, equality and fraternity the new scheme supplied.

Similarly, Roberts's discussion on Napoleon and the Jews is muddled. On one page, he touts (reasonably enough) the Decree on Jews and Usury. A page later, Napoleon is upholding prosecutions of Jewish moneylenders, and the best Roberts can manage is that "Napoleon was personally prejudiced against Jews to much the same degree as the rest of his class and background."

While the book is readable, the writing is not page turning. Lots of facts; snippets of stirring writing (the best of which is when Roberts called something "yet another example of the luck that [Napoleon] was starting to mistake for Fate."). So far, most interesting thing I've learned is that Napoleon's autobiography "Le Mémorial de Sainte-Hélène" was the bestseller of the 19th Century, topping "Uncle Tom's Cabin".

In sum, Roberts is unparalleled as a researcher. But he doesn't provide the reader reasons why any particular piece of previously accepted Napoleonic legend should be rejected in favor of his new interpretation. And, although his writing is good enough, he's hardly a compelling read like Ian Toll, Corrigan, Nicolson, Stephen Taylor or Donald Thomas; better than N.A.M. Rodger, however.

Born in quasi-obscurity on Corsica, Napoleon (a native Italian and Corsican speaker) was trucked off to learn French, then to a military academy. Napoleon not only was an excellent student but -- ill-dressed and awkward, with plenty of time on his hands-- he read of heroes and conquerors past: Caesar, Alexander the Great, etc. Napoleon's fascination (for the non-French) is in part because he may have been history's most successful autodidact. For that reason alone, more bios, and more reading, are justified.

"Napoleon represented the Enlightenment on horseback."... The ideas that underpin our modern world--meritocracy, equality before the law, property rights, religious toleration, modern secular education, sound finances and so on--were championed by Napoleon."

"An astonishing number of his letters throughout his career refer to providing footwear for his troops."

"One of the reasons why he maintained such a fluid campaign [in Italy] was that he had no resources for anything else."

"The strength of the army', he stated, 'like power in mechanics, is the product of multiplying the mass by the velocity."

"Napoleon was capable of compartmentalizing his life, so that one set of concerns never spilled over into another -- probably a necessary attribute for any great statesman, but one he possessed to an extraordinary degree."

"Severe to the officers,' was his his stated mantra, 'kindly to the men."

"I have no doubt there will be lively criticism of the treaty I've just signed,' Napoleon wrote to Talleyrand the [day after signing the treaty of Campo Formio], but he argued that he only way to get a better deal was by going to war again and conquering 'two or three times more provinces than Austria. Was that possible? Yes. Probable? No' He sent Berthier and Monge to Paris with the treaty to expound its merits. They did such a good job, and so enthusiastic was the public enthusiasm [sic] for peace, that the Directory ratified it swiftly despite several of its members privately regretting the lack of republican solidarity shown to Venice. (It is said that when asked about the Venetian clauses, Napoleon explained 'I was playing vingt-et-un, and stopped at twenty.')

Napoleon's general orders for army behavior in Egypt: "Every soldier who shall enter into the houses of the inhabitants to steal horses or camels shall be punished,' he instructed. He was particularly careful to give no cause for jihad. 'Do not contradict them,' he ordered his men with regard to Muslims. 'Deal with them as we dealt with the Jews and the Italians. Respect their muftis and imams as you respected rabbis and bishops. . . The Roman legions protected all religions. . . The people here treat their wives differently from us, but in all countries the man who commits rape is a monster."

"Soldiers! You came to this country to save the inhabitants from barbarism, to bring civilization to the Orient and subtract this beautiful part of the world from the domination of England [sic--England was not running Egypt at the time]. From the top of those pyramids, forty centuries are contemplating you."

The closest Napoleon came to being killed was in Israel, while crossing the Red Sea, as the tide came in: "[T]hey got lost as night fell, and wandered through the low lying marshy sea-shore as the tide rose: 'Soon we were bogged down to the bellies of our mounts, who were struggling and having great difficulty in pulling themselves free. . . It was nine at night and the tide had already risen three feet. We were in a terrible situation, when it was announced that a ford had been found. General Bonaparte was among the first to cross; guides were situated at various points to direct the rest. . . We were happy not to have to have shared the fate of the Pharaoh's soldiers."

"Even if Acre had fallen, and the Druze Christians and Jews had all joined him, the logistics and demographics would not have permitted an invasion of either Turkey or India"

"Long accused afterwards of deserting his men, in fact he was marching to the sound of the guns, for it was absurd to have France's best general stuck in a strategic sideshow in the Orient when France itself was under threat of invasion."

"The greatest long-term achievements of Napoleon's Egyptian campaign were not military or strategic, but intellectual, cultural and artistic. The first volume of Vivant Denon's *l'Égypte* was published in 1809, its title page proclaiming that it was 'published by the order of His Majesty Emperor Napoleon the Great'. . . although not politically triumphalist, the multiple volumes of the *Description de l'Égypte* represent an apogee of French, indeed Napoleonic, civilization, and had a profound effect on the artistic, architectural, aesthetic and design sensibilities of Europe. . . Tragically, the Institut near Tahir Square in Cairo was burned down during the Arab Spring uprising on December 17, 2011, and almost all 192,000 books, journals, and other manuscripts -- including the only handwritten manuscript of Denon's *Description de l'Égypte* -- were destroyed.

"he forgave Josephine totally, and never made allusion to her infidelity again, either to her or anyone else."

"only two letters of his survive for the twenty-three days between his arrival in Paris on October 16 and the 18 Brumaire when the coup was launched, neither of which was compromising. For a man who wrote an average of fifteen letters a day, this time everything was to be done by word of mouth."

"They put the orders of the officers under which which they had served . . . before those of their elected officials. When it came down to a choice between obeying those giants of their profession or the politicians buying for their arrest in the Orangerey, there was simply no contest."

"Talleyrand was characteristically profiting from the situation. When Napoleon years later asked him how he had made his fortune, he insouciantly replied 'Nothing simpler; I bought rentes [government securities] on the 17th and sold them on the 19th.'"

"In his first week as First Consul, Napoleon wrote two letters proposing peace to Emperor Francis of Austria and to Britain's King George III. 'I venture to declare that the fate of all civilized nations is concerned in the termination of a war which kindles a conflagration over the whole world,' he told the latter. When the British foreign secretary, Lord Grenville, responded by saying that Napoleon should restore the Bourbons, Napoleon replied that if the same principle were applied to Britain it would result in the restoration of the Stuarts."

"'A newly born government must dazzle and astonish,' he told Bourrienne at this time. 'When it ceases to do that it fails.'"

"Within a week of Brumaire, as a result of the new sense of stability, efficiency and sheer competence, the franc-dollar and franc-pound exchange rate rates had doubled."

"The art of policing is punishing infrequently and severely."

"In November 1799, some 40 percent of France was under martial law, but within three years it was safe to travel around France again, and trade could be resumed. Not even His Italian victories brought Napoleon more popularity."

"Napoleon took a deep personal interest in the strategic dissemination of news. 'Spread the following reports in an official manner,' he once instructed Fouché. 'They are, however, true. Spread them first in the salons, and then put them in the papers.'"

"All the leading French admirals -- Gentaume, Eustche Bruix, Laurent Trugent, Pierre de Villeneuve, as well as Decès -- opposed the English expedition."

III

"[T]he duke [d'Enghien] had offered to serve in the British army, was receiving large amounts of money from London, was paying British gold to other émigrés, and was hoping to follow the Austrians into France should they invade. He had also corresponded with William Wickham . . . that is, the British secret service. [A]lthough he was not specifically aware of the Cadoudal-Pichegru plot [to assassinate Napoleon], he was clearly holding himself in readiness. It hardly constituted strong enough grounds to have him executed, however, except as a ruthless message to Louis XVIII to call off my further plots."

Roberts's absurd justification for Napoleon's becoming Emperor: "France was de facto an empire by 1804, and it was only acknowledging that fact that Napoleon declared himself an emperor de jure, just as Queen Victoria would become for the British Empire in 1877." Roberts ignores what made Napoleon an illegitimate ruler, much less Emperor: the regicide, the phony plebiscites, and the fact that -- at the time -- France had little territory beyond today's hexagram: part of the Rhineland, and Northern Italy (the latter of which hardly counts since it was stolen from the chinless Hapsburgs).

The Emperor "took the somewhat convoluted and seemingly contradictory style 'Napoleon, through the grace of God and the Constitution of the Republic, Emperor of the French.'"

Preparing for the coronation, "Napoleon ordered his officials to treat the pontiff as though he had 200,000 troops at his back, just about his greatest complement."

Roberts says, contrary to most other sources, "Although [Napoleon] lifted the Charlemagne replica over his own head, as previously rehearsed with the Pope, he didn't actually place it on top because he was already wearing the [crown of laurels, meant to invoke Rome]. He did, however, crown Josephine."

"He never did understand that a fleet which spent seven-eighths of its time in port simply could not gain the seamanship necessary to take on the Royal Navy at the height of its operational capacity."

"The fall of Berlin came so quickly that shopkeepers did not have time to take down the numerous satirical caricatures of Napoleon from their window."

After the battle of Friedland: "Soldiers! On 5 June we were attacked in our cantonments by the Russian army, which misconstrued the causes of our inactivity. It perceived, too late, that our repose was that of the lion, now it does penance for its mistake... From the shores of the Vistula, we have reached those of the Nieman with the rapidity of the eagle."

In establishing brother Jérôme as King of Westphalia, Napoleon wrote, "It is essential that your people enjoy a liberty, an equality, a well-being unknown in Germany... The population of Germany anxiously awaits the moment when those who are not of noble birth but who are talented, have an equal right to be considered for jobs; for the abolition of all serfdom as well as intermediaries between the people and their sovereign."

"As the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars progressed, the casualty rates in battles increased exponentially [sic]: at Fleurus they were 6% of the total number of men engaged, at Austerlitz, 15%, at Eylau 26%, at Borodino 31% and at Waterloo 45%."

At the famous meeting in the middle of the river at Tilsit--"The Tsar's first words were 'I will be your second against England'"... Napoleon immediately appreciated that a wide-ranging agreement would be possible -- indeed, as he put it later, "Those words changed everything."

It was the late-night conversations about philosophy, politics and strategy that shaped Napoleon's relationship with the Tsar.

Years later, Napoleon said--"Perhaps I was happiest at Tilsit. I had just surmounted many vicissitudes, many anxieties, at Eylau for instance; and I found myself victorious, dictating laws, having emperors and kings pay

me court."

"The simple fact that Napoleon had missed was also the most obvious one: its vast size made Russia impossible to invade much beyond Vilnius in a single campaign. His military administration was incapable of dealing with the enormous strain that he was putting on it. Each day, in his desperation for a decisive battle, he had fallen further into Barclay's trap."

"In retrospect, it would have been better for the French had [Moscow] been razed to the ground, as that would have forced an immediate retreat...Napoleon eventually chose what turned out to be the worst possible option: to return to the Kremlin, which had survived the fire, on September 18, to see whether Alexander would agree to end the war."

"[T]he real significance of the rain was that his artillery commander, General Drouot, suggested waiting for the ground to dry before starting the battle the next day, so that he could get his guns into place more easily and the cannonballs would bounce further when fired. It was advice that Drouot was to regret for the rest of his life."

"If it had not been for you English, I should have been Emperor of the East; but wherever there is water to float a ship we are sure to find you in our way."

Philipp says

If you're looking for an overview of Napoleon's life and google around, this is usually the biography you end up finding, readable, engaging, thrilling, more than 900 pages long. Roberts is a military historian, so the focus is definitely on military action, less on other interesting aspects of Napoleon's life like, for example, the specific art style of the Napoleonic era.

The majority of this book's maps are maps of battlefields and positions, the largest part of the text is descriptions of the various battles, which is perhaps unsurprising for a biography of a man who made his name in war. Especially in the last chapter Roberts makes a lot of Napoleon's military background, which I'm sure many won't agree with:

Much has been written about his Corsicanness, his origins in the petit noblesse, his absorption of the ideas of the Enlightenment, and his inspiration by the ancient world, but the years he spent in military schooling at Brienne and the École Militaire affected him even more than any of these, and it was from the ethos of the Army that he took most of his beliefs and assumptions.

The focus on war is the trick that makes book so fast-paced, the battles are almost described like sports matches with tactic errors and routes and whatnot, you almost (almost!) forget that every time Napoleon stirred 100,000 Europeans had to die.

Roberts' viewpoint is, let's say, conciliatory - he likes to look at instances where history judged Napoleon harshly and tries to defend Napoleon, often by assuming the most positive view ('Yes, Napoleon wrote this error in his letter, but he was probably betting on it being intercepted, thereby confusing the English!', or, 'an overzealous underling probably did that', and so on), sometimes by painting other politicians in a worse light ('[Napoleon] cannot be accused of being the only, or even the principal, warmonger of the age').

There are a few cases where Roberts criticises Napoleon more than other historians: his treatment of women and the laws he introduced (sexist even for his time, women as birth machines for the army), or the way he treated Jews ('Napoleon therefore hardly deserves his present reputation in Jewry as a righteous Gentile').

Reading this I learned lots of fun things, Roberts has a knack for finding these small side-actors who deserve their own books:

[Pauline Fourès] later made a fortune in the Brazilian timber business, wore men's clothing and smoked a pipe, before coming back to Paris with her pet parrots and monkeys and living to be ninety.

What's ridiculous is how fast-paced Napoleon's life is, you can't help but compare your own life. He learned French at 9, joined the army as a secondary lieutenant at 16, brigadier general at 24, commander of a whole army at 27, Emperor of France at 35, lost everything and was exiled at 45, died (as Roberts is adamant, of stomach cancer like his father, not of any poisonous plot) at 51. That to me is the biggest strength here, how Roberts succeeds in depicting Napoleon's sheer energy and speed (often by citing from Napoleon's many micro-managing letters).

Another fun thing I learned is that if there are indeed infinite universes where everything possible has happened, then we live in one of the few universes where Napoleon *didn't* die on the battlefield. I think there are at least 20 sentences like this, perhaps somebody else should count?

With the Emperor riding beside him, Desvaux was cut in half by a cannonball.

or this one:

[..] where a howitzer shell disembowelled a horse [Napoleon] was riding but left him unscathed.

and so on!

Overall, very, very interesting reading, I can see why this is generally recommended as *the* general Napoleon biography.

Napoleon's life and career stand as a rebuke to determinist analyses of history which explain events in terms of vast impersonal forces and minimize the part played by individuals. We should find this uplifting, since, as George Home, that midshipman on board HMS Bellerophon, put it in his memoirs, 'He showed us what one little human creature like ourselves could accomplish in a span so short.'

P.S.: Did you know Napoleon was nearly exiled to Botany Bay (the one in Sydney) instead of St. Helena? I didn't!

P.P.S.:

Only those openly denouncing Napoleon were liable to arrest, and even this mild crackdown was carried out in a classically French eighteenth-century manner. When the royalist Charles de Rivière 'proclaimed his hopes a little too spitefully and prematurely', he was sent to La Force prison, but was later released when a friend won his freedom in a game of billiards against Savary.

Caidyn (SEMI-HIATUS; BW Reviews; he/him/his) says

This review and others can be found on BW Book Reviews.

3.5/5

If there was a gif that summed me up with this book, it would be this:

Basically, I literally know nothing about Napoleon. For most of the book, I legitimately thought that Napoleon was a part of the original Revolutionary government and then he weaved through to the top or was at the top for a while. That's why I was always super confused when I read about Marie Antoinette and why they never mentioned Napoleon. All because I never really looked into post-revolutionary topics since I just like dear Marie.

This book, alas, is not for a noob such as myself. It's about 1000 pages long and I listened to it. If I had been reading it, I may have given up and shelved it under a book I'm pausing for whatever reason. There were just so many names, some were important and some weren't. It covered basically everything about Napoleon. I would have been much happier with a book only about his childhood or rising through the ranks or his downfall or his marriages and affairs. It came down to me literally knowing no names and having to try to get everything down.

My caveat is that this book is well-written. It truly is, and Roberts tackles this huge topic very well. Even though I had no clue who some people were, I could keep track of most things and make some connections to an earlier part of the book. The biggest thing was that this book challenged my view of Napoleon. I've always heard of him as a horrible man and no one really liked him, but, really, he seemed pretty decent and

respected people no matter what rank they were. Sure, I don't agree with his land grabs, but he wasn't some demon antichrist I've heard for most of my life.

While I wouldn't recommend this book for a beginner, I do think it's something valuable that people who actually have background knowledge to read or have in their collection of books about him.

Christopher says

(Full Disclosure: I received an advance uncorrected copy of this book for free through Goodreads' First Reads program. However, the views expressed are my own and do not reflect that of the author, the publisher, or Goodreads).

Like the great ancient conquerors which he admired, Napoleon stands as a colossus on the historical stage. Yet he is little known nor well understood by people today, especially as his reputation has been marred by superficial similarities to Hitler and the "Black Legend" of libelous claims made by his detractors after his fall from power. Enter this wonderful biography by Mr. Roberts, who has written a couple of books on the Napoleonic era and is currently a fellow of the Napoleonic Institute. In around 800+ pages of narrative, Mr. Roberts dispels the Black Legends that cropped up and shows Napoleon to be not some kind of proto-Hitler, but as the last and greatest of the Enlightenment despots that appeared on the world stage during the 18th century. Napoleon had all of the admirable qualities of an enlightened dictator including being intimately involved in the regeneration of France after the devastation of the Terror during the French Revolution, being a true patron of the arts, establishing equality under the law through the Code Napoleon that would be copied on every continent except Antarctica, and the establishment of a semi-meritocratic system with the legion d'honneur. He also had the bad qualities too, including the launching of a coup that overthrew an unpopular, but democratic government, the end of most forms of political freedom, especially press freedom, the rare execution of dissidents, the tacit approval of mass murder tactics in the Peninsular War, and, most famously, his pride. Of course, what Napoleon is best known for are his battles and Mr. Roberts does not fail to deliver as he describes Napoleon's military reforms and his tactical and strategic brilliance quite clearly. His descriptions of specific battles are almost pulse pounding in their descriptions of cavalry and artillery and acts of bravery. Mr. Robert's also brings two very interesting arguments to the table as well. The first is that Napoleon, in contrast to his portrayal by proponents of the "Black Legend", was actually quite warm and forgiving to nearly everyone, like his hero Julius Caesar. Not until the end does Napoleon seem to hold a grudge against anyone, but Napoleon never seems to avenge any slights against himself. The second interesting argument is that, contrary to popular belief, the Russian invasion was not the product of massive hubris and ego, but rather the culmination of a series of miscalculations after the peace at Tilsit that any body in a similar position could have made. Is there any way Napoleon could have planned for the Typhus fever that would ravage his army? And many of his best advisors had been killed or were unavailable to dissuade him from war with Russia in any meaningful way, though many of his advisors at the time did try to. And, yes, there were a few places where Napoleon could have stopped his army and gone into winter quarter before arriving in Moscow, but he reached those sites so early in the campaign that he could be forgiven for wanting to drive into Moscow and seek out a decisive victory. Certainly Napoleon was a proud, perhaps even egotistical man, but Mr. Roberts ably argues that Napoleon was just as brilliant as Napoleon thought himself to be. Napoleon's personal life is also given equal weight and one feels a sense of sadness from Josephine's infidelities at the start of their marriage, the pain of their divorce for dynastic reasons, and the fact that though his second marriage to Marie Louise seemed a happy one and would produce a son whom Napoleon would dote on, after leaving her for the front in 1814 Napoleon would never see his second wife or son again and Marie Louis would soon cheat on him and seemingly hate him so soon afterwards, even going so far as to trying to turn their son against him after his death. And speaking of his death, the last chapter of the book describing Napoleon's exile on St. Helena is almost excruciating as the great man seems to slowly dissolve

away within a few years after his death. Mr. Roberts brings Napoleon to life quite well. The only black mark I have against this book is that Mr. Roberts argues that Napoleon was a witty tease and that many of his more eyebrow raising quotes were made in jest. But this is one area where Mr. Roberts fails to make that case convincingly as some quotes would have a remark that this was said in jest and others wouldn't. However, this is a rather small mark against an otherwise great biography. I highly recommend this to anyone who is interested in knowing more about the great Emperor of the French Empire.

Leah says

Abandoned at a third of the way through. The book's getting great reviews so it must be one of those cases where the author and reader simply don't 'gel' but I'm finding it as turgid as wading through treacle. After reading some truly great, well-written histories and biographies over the last few years, this one is simply failing to inspire my interest - despite the fact that Napoleon must surely be one of the most fascinating characters in history. Oh well!

Bou says

After reading his excellent account of the Storm Of War, I had high expectations of Robert's newest release, his biography of Napoleon. I was not dissatisfied.

I suspect you can fill half of the New York's library with books dealing with Napoleon and as I understood these can be divided in two sorts: you either hate him, or you love him.

Andrew Roberts is comfortably between these two camps. He does not praise him, but is here and there rather critical of Napoleon's decisions. He is unbiased and stays to the facts, but while reading the book my admiration for Napoleon has grown quite a bit. I mean, who can compare his self to this guy, who was emperor at 38? I'm 38, and all that I've managed is to become a consultant at an energy company.

As a novice reader in the Napoleon subject (I am ashamed to admit) Andrew stays to the facts, which is quite comfortable in that respect. He does deliver his tale with objective reasoning, introduces a lot of names that I've never heard of, but this is not a hinderance. Andrew Roberts seems to have had access to a lot of letters from Napoleon to various friends and relatives, which gives you the feeling that you to get to know Napoleon quite personally. Also, here and there you can't suppress a quick smile if Andrew mentions some nice anecdotes and some interactions between Napoleon and the common soldier.

So this book met in all aspects my expectations. I can imagine that for the more experienced Napoleon reader, this will not hold many surprises, but for a beginner in the Napoleon subject, this is an excellent introduction. Al in all, 5 stars!

♥ Ibrahim ♥ says

I don't feel worthy to rate Andrew Roberts. I am speechless! How do you rate a giant scholar?! I first gave this book to my son so he could admire Napoleon and, sure enough, my son fell in love with the Napoleon presented to him by Andrew Roberts. He was glad to know that Napoleon didn't have much friends and he was alone most of the time at home reading and reading. I find the book amazing: it is both a story that a ten-

year old son would enjoy and a well-researched history book for scholars to discuss. I love the British style of the author in writing and I feel that I am really getting educated while reading. I am inspired by every page as I read. This is my book of Saints, and I say it with a smile; I mean I am truly more inspired by this book than by many other books. So Napoleon's native language was Corsican? And he learned French at ten and he spoke it with a heavy Corsican accent and got teased about it at school as well as in the army? I am impressed! The man continues to fascinate me and win my utmost admiration and respect. I wish Egypt, my homeland, had made better use of his coming there instead of resisting him... Oh well!

Steven Peterson says

A magnificent biography. The author notes that he has access to thousands of previously unavailable letters of Napoleon. These letters add a great richness to this volume, and provides a somewhat different picture of Napoleon than I had had before. One of the strengths, too, is that Andrew Roberts has a cool eye toward Napoleon. He speaks highly of his major accomplishments, such as a massive change in the legal system, and he criticizes him for his weaknesses--such as the Russian campaign, his lethargic performance at Leipzig (leaving his best field commander, Davout, on garrison duty with a large force when he was badly outnumbered), and his subpar performance at Waterloo. Hence, a nuanced biography.

The book takes a chronological perspective on the life of Napoleon Bonaparte. We follow the trajectory of his life--from his youth on Corsica to his developing military career to his first experiences in battle to his rapid rise in the military hierarchy to his leading of armies to his accession to leadership of France to his reforms to his leadership in wars. Over time, his victories became more labored (think Wagram) and then he suffered reverses as he began to forget some of his own maxims of war and battle. The arc from the Russian campaign to Leipzig to Waterloo shows him performing with little brilliance (as he had, for instance, at Austerlitz). His best generalship in the late period, in fact, was his fighting retreat from Waterloo. The book discusses his short exile on Elba and his return to France as well as his longer (and more miserable) exile to St. Helena.

On a personal level, we see the tensions within his own family, his relationship with Josephine, his children, the varying relationships with his top commanders (Davout, Oudinot, Ney, Murat, Bernadotte, Kellerman, and so on). And so on. The book also details his reforms in administration, his interest in science and literature, his intellectual curiosity. We see a complex and intriguing human being--flawed but also a major force within France.

Some pluses: numerous maps, to provide perspective on campaigns and battles (although some are not as useful as others); nice slick pages of paintings of key actors of the era.

Overall, a major look at Napoleon and well worth reading.

Kinksrock says

This biography has much in common with its subject in that it is great but flawed.

The Napoleon presented in this book is indisputably great. He is recognized as one of history's great generals, with an impressively strategic mind (until he made the mistake, later repeated by Hitler, of invading Russia), but he is more than just a military man. He was incredibly progressive for his time, passing laws to expand the civil rights of minorities, such as Jews, and taking steps to harmonize weights and measures. He

was also a lover of the arts. There is much about him to admire.

But "great" does not mean everything he did was "good". He could be brutal. His treatment of the former slaves in Haiti under Toussaint LOuverture is beyond cruel when viewed with our modern sensibilities.

So Napoleon was great, if not always good, and is indisputably worth your time to read a 810-page one-volume biography of him (not counting notes and index, which bring it up to 926 pages).

This biography is packed with facts about Napoleon. Somewhere in the comments on goodreads, one reader compares it to taking a drink of water from a firehose. That's a good analogy, and it describes what you are getting yourself into when you pick this book up. For the most part, it is compelling, and rarely boring (with the exception of the 6-page Epilogue, which is basically just a list of people who outlived Napoleon with what they did).

This book is a great achievement, but, like Napoleon, it has flaws. I found the battles hard to follow, and more and better maps would have helped me. The maps that stand out as helpful were the two that charted the Battle of Waterloo. (I dare you to read that section without the Abba song popping into your head at least once.) Otherwise, the maps might as well be Jackson Pollock paintings. I mention this issue a lot with history books. We readers of history love maps. Give us more. If the battle has many stages, provide more maps please.

The other flaw I found is that, for such a scholarly work, the occasional misspellings and grammatical errors were distracting. Then there's sentence that appeared on page 715: "She [Marie Louise] had no intention of being not very unhappy." That's three negations in one sentence. If you can figure out what that sentence means, please tell me.

My criticisms are not meant to dissuade you from reading this book. You should read about Napoleon, and this book is a great place to begin (at least it was for me). This book is a great achievement, but, like Napoleon, and both come with flaws.

Liviu says

excellent pro-biography of Napoleon based in part on new archival material

the usual story (eg Andre Castelot's pro biography is still my #1 work on the subject, while Napoleon own memorial from St Helena is still excellent in the pro camp) but written in a modern style, emphasize the many positives of the Emperor, the context of the times (while on occasion arbitrary and tyrannical, his peers from the era, the famous dynasty but otherwise nobodies kings of Austria and Prussia and the young and changing Alexander were much worse as repeatedly shown - not to speak of how his many French enemies or traitors like Constant, Talleyrand, Fouche who all finished in high positions rather than in a dungeon or worse), while also noting his negatives and blunders (most notably the advancement of his family to positions of power they were totally unqualified for, Moscow and Waterloo)

excellent stuff and highly recommended

Gonzo says

Confession off the bat: This is a great biography. Well written, well researched. Hagiographic perhaps, but not in a way that makes your teeth chatter. Maps are a little shaky at the beginning, but become better throughout. All in all, head and shoulders above almost all modern biographies.

But this is Andrew Roberts here, writing about Napoleon, his hero! As such, let's hold him to a higher standard and see if he succeeds. Roberts openly admits that Napoleon is a hero of his. The book, as such, is five parts biography, one part advocacy. Roberts wants to save Napoleon from the likes of Alan Schom, whose 1998 biography painted the Little Corporal as the predecessor to the Nazis, Fascists, and Stalinists who did so much to paint the last century in blood. No! Roberts tells us. Napoleon was not Hitler! Napoleon was a combination of Washington, Jefferson, and Hamilton in one man! He is the quintessential self-made man! The slayer of the Old Regime! Certainly he deserves our respect!

It's a credit to Roberts's ability as biographer (as opposed to hagiographer) that I dislike Napoleon more after reading this book than before (though my sympathies are aroused for the Young Werther-wannabe that Bonaparte sometimes inhabited). First off, Roberts's emphasis on Napoleon being "self-made" are overrated. The dictators of Nazi Germany and the USSR had equal claims on being self-made (more than Messers Churchill and Roosevelt ever could claim!). Who cares about being self-made if one's accomplishments are treacherous?

So what were Napoleon's accomplishments? Those of the military variety scarcely need be mentioned; he was a genius on par with Caesar and Alexander. But military genius is not inherently good or bad; how can we deny that the men running the Wehrmacht were geniuses, if not only for our moral revulsion? Thus, I found it very interesting to read about NB's behavior in Egypt and Palestine: As Roberts tells us, Bonaparte was actually considering converting to Islam and joining the Ottomans in order to fulfill his dream of conquering India and fully imitating Alexander. This is astounding. Napoleon, the paragon of rationality, the guardian of the French, the expounder of the Enlightenment, was ready to join one of the most backwards empires in Europe in order to quench his desire for glory. Forget Caesar--Napoleon could have very easily reenacted the tragedy of Coriolanus.

Roberts's writing about the Levant also gets tedious in a modern fashion. With respect to the slaughter of Turks at Jaffa, there was "of course, a racial element to this; Napoleon would not have executed European prisoners-of-war." (190). Of course, the fact that the French opponent Jezzar was in the habit of sewing Christians into sacks (described on page 191 for goodness' sake!) probably has as much explanatory power as the "racial element." The fact that NB treated his "non-white, non-Christian enemies" (201) with greater cruelty is more owing to the barbarity of the Turks than anything else.

I bring up this scene because the book is, thankfully, free of most of the ugly bugaboos of modern academia. Roberts, here, dabs his toe into race-as-everything explanations, but elsewhere they are absent. Absent, too, are the sub-Freudian explanations which at times characterize other biographies. (Wouldn't Napoleon have been better if he hadn't suffered from a Napoleon Complex?) Roberts lets Napoleon be a man, and not a symptom of a nagging disease or aggregation of a million social variables. This is much appreciated.

The problem with Roberts is that he is still a modern, through and through--a man born of the world Napoleon created, if you will. Napoleon's most important contribution, after all, was the creation of the technocratic, liberal state. Roberts never passes up the chance to laud Napoleon's belief in the meritocracy and equal political rights. The politics of the Revolution are forcibly applied across Italy and Germany, and Roberts never questions the rightness of this once. After all, who can argue with the equality of man? Then again, what was the difference between the terror practiced by the French army and that practiced by the rolling Soviets in 1948? What is the difference between ISIS now? It would be nice if Roberts considered the perspective of, well, the rest of the whole of Europe at the time. France was a revolutionary, terrorist state with no little respect for national sovereignty and none for kings. Perhaps the Czar of Russia is not the best representative of the Old Regime, but certainly there were civilized Prussians and Austrians who might have

stood in as a counterpoise to French terror? Certainly Edmund Burke!

This is the main problem with the book. Roberts is a great author of military battles and lifetimes, but he is lousy as an author of ideas. Roberts seems to consider himself above ideology, a man so certain in progress that he need not consider alternatives. At times his political analysis is so inept and unctuous you'd think you were reading *The Economist*. Roberts lauds the fact that Napoleon instituted meritocratic reforms throughout his rule; he also notes that these reforms were in part to resemble NB's modern military. Napoleon modernized and made efficient the French state--again, like the military. Does anyone else see a pattern here? One has to wonder if the "liberated" peasant or Jew would not have preferred his former servitude to freezing to death outside Moscow. But!--progress...progress...

Naturally, Roberts hates the Church above all things. NB's cruel and stupid invasion of Iberia is justified by Roberts as an act of--you guessed it--modernization. The backwards Spaniards were lagging on the long arc of history, still adhering to the Inquisition (fatalities of which couldn't hold a flame to Wagram, Borodino, etc.). In all the 800 pages, I don't think I can remember Roberts criticizing Napoleon's Spanish policy but for the fact that he should have been more severe and gone to the peninsula himself. This is astounding. From 1795 onward, Spain was an acquiescent, weak power, and posed no serious threat to French interests. Beyond raw lust for power and cruelty, there was no reason to subject Spain to the lawless treatment she received at the hands of the French. Why is there no voice condemning this tyrannical, despicable course or action? Roberts provides us with no countervailing voice, and becomes sycophantic in his praise (or, more accurately, lame criticism) of NB. But the Iberian policy was a failure at every level: Morally, militarily, and politically (let us remember that the illegal and unscrupulous Louisiana Purchase did about as much for European decline as any other one act).

The reason Roberts can't come to criticize Napoleon for his mass slaughter of men is that he doesn't seem to realize the possibility for another side, i.e. that the Old Regime had a right to defend itself (or at least to not be destroyed at the price paid). It's hard to read this and think that Roberts has not been struck by the worst of revolutionary impulses, i.e. that the ends justify the means. Hundreds of thousands killed--but isn't the Code Napoleon nice? States destroyed, cultures ruined--but the Jews! They're free! There are even some homosexuals working in Provence! How can you argue with Progress?

Beyond political naivete, Roberts contradicts himself in his descriptions of his hero. However much he may like to twist it, the Peace of Amiens was broken by Napoleon. Yes, the later coalitions formed and waged war on him, but only after his tyrannical decrees made war all but inevitable. Napoleon was a bully, and this trait served neither him nor the citizens of Europe well. There is something of the swash-buckler in such behavior which is intriguing and captivating--but again, is such decadence worth the hundreds of thousands rotting across Europe?

And so, while Roberts has saved Napoleon from the pathetic over-analyzers and the postmodernists, he has not moved on to perform the greatest task of the historian: To make us understand Napoleon's time and context. Without an understanding of the appeal and fault of the Old Regime, we can never be sure what NB is really up against, or if the wars he waged to defeat its tenets were really worth it. Perhaps such consideration is not necessary. Napoleon was intriguing enough without such considerations, perhaps. But Roberts cannot succeed in his larger project--convincing us that Napoleon was of another league than Hitler, Stalin, etc.--without convincing us that his wars were worthwhile. And he simply hasn't done this. He's only succeeded in forgetting the dead.

These considerations aside, Roberts does a nice job of letting us inside the mind of this great genius. Most interesting are Napoleon's letters to Josephine, and his other ruminations on the romance. The image of NB waiting on Elba, rooms reserved for his son and empress, is incredibly moving, no matter who the tyrant. His letters are funny, his personality is affable, his heartache is sincere. Proust said that falling in love is the only poetic thing most men ever achieve. Greater than his faux-royal processions and bloody military feats, his

success and failure in romance stuck with me the most throughout reading.

Nonetheless, I still can't help but think that Roberts has not achieved his goals. Yes, Napoleon was a "great man" in the Carlyle sense, but by creating the modern state he ruined the conditions whereby later men might become great. He modernized his country, but so did Jefferson and Hamilton, without the bloodshed. He led an army, but led it to endless war, unlike General Washington who led his to peace and prosperity. Even America's murderer-tyrant, Abe Lincoln, attempted no coup and wouldn't even disallow the 1864 election which may have ruined his war. These are acts of true character; acts of true moral courage. Napoleon, as one man, may have bettered this group, but his faults and crimes loom much larger. His hubris alone killed more than his weak principles. Roberts never captures Napoleon's strange contradictions, the mix of the squalid and the grand in the man. For now, it does us readers well to remember how many of the great patriots we dote upon might have just as well become our oppressors, lashing us alongside of the Turks.

Jean says

I have been fascinated with Napoleon for as long as I can remember. Needless to say I have read extensively about him. This new book about Napoleon was given to me by a friend who knows of my obsession.

Napoleon Bonaparte, Emperor of France and by many people's reckoning the most brilliant general of modern times. As a child Napoleon studied the careers of history's titans with a view to following their footsteps. He was a general by age 24 an emperor at age 34. He promoted on merit not birth rank or political favor and changed the French military and government accordingly.

In research for this book Roberts walked almost everyone of the 60 battlefields. He also made use of the new scholarly edition of Napoleon's 33,000 letters. The effect is a huge, deep, witty, humane, and admiring biography of 900 pages. The Napoleon painted here is a whirlwind of a man, not only a vigorous and supremely confident commander, but an astonishingly busy governor, and correspondent. Roberts points out that Napoleon was a master of multitasking, had a great sense of humor and was a great negotiator.

Robert's new book tries to understand why this peculiarly brilliant Corsican managed for so long to dazzle the world. Roberts's book is not just another brilliant narrative biography of Napoleon but also an essay on statesmanship and meditation on history itself. Throughout his life, Napoleon wrote and spoke of himself as though he was already an immortal: his world view was molded by the concepts of duty, glory, and genius: his law code, he thought would "live forever". Napoleon would therefore be delighted to know that he is the subject of historical obsession nearly two centuries after his death.

Robert has been indefatigable in tracking down memorabilia and visiting sites of battles, palaces and places of exile. This is all richly depicted and woven into a narrative that is told with the aplomb of an accomplished historical storyteller. Roberts points out that the laws and structure of modern France, indeed, to a significant degree, of all Europe, derive from those created by Napoleon.

If you are interested in Napoleon I would recommend this book.

Andrew says

Napoleon: A Life, written by Andrew Roberts, is an absolutely astounding biography on one of modern history's greatest conquerors, Napoleon Bonaparte. Born in Corsica and resentful of French rule over the

island, he eventually gave up his nationalist views and joined the French army as an artillery officer. Rising through the ranks during France's bloody Revolutionary period, Napoleon eventually became the centre of a coup d'etat attempt by a number of conspirators to overthrow the ineffective and chaotic French revolutionary system. Napoleon outfoxed his co-conspirators, and took full military control of France, eventually proclaiming himself an Emperor. What followed was a whirlwind of political reform, French expansion and military victory. Italian, German and Austrian states were all defeated by Napoleons armies, and the geopolitical situation of Europe was drastically changed. Multiple coalitions consisting of almost every European power were allayed and defeated 5 times, until the disastrous Russian campaign and Napoleon's Hundred Days out of political exile. He ended his life in captivity on British owned St. Helena, far away from the political gambit of Europe.

Napoleon was an energetic, meticulous and rebellious figure. He did away with most established conventions, dismissed most religious traditions (at times dabbling in Islam, and considering marrying a Russian Orthodox princess). He took personal control over much of the facets of his Empire, simultaneously fighting major campaign battles while engaging in reforms at home, offering advice to his subordinates and involving himself in minute disputes and issues. He married for love, and was with his wife, Empress Josephine, for 13 years before divorcing and marrying an Austrian princess in a political move to try and end Austria's stringent opposition of French power.

Napoleon was also Machiavellian to his core. Nothing was done if not for political gain. Every victory became a grandiose tale, and every defeat (what few there were) was played down or exaggerated. He arranged spectacles with his soldiers, awarded them for bravery on the battlefield (once quipping about how men would live or die for a bit of metal) and eating and sleeping in their camps on the battlefield. His long memory served him well, as he would remember details about individuals he had crossed briefly years before. He stacked the European states with his own family (much to his detriment) and espoused his liberal/revolutionary ideals only as long as it served. He quickly disposed of them after he became Emperor.

Roberts biography is similarly glowing. Was Napoleon perfect? Obviously not. If he was, he would not have ended his days on St. Helena. He often insulted others behind their backs, had a long memory for slights, took meticulous control of everything around him, and of course, lost it all due to his grandiose ambitions. Even so, his large number of military victories, his complete reform of the European system with liberal ideals (surpassing even Britain and the United States of the time in some respects) and the lasting impact of these changes cannot be renounced. Roberts does a fantastic job showcasing the life of an Enlightened Despot, or a cheeky Corsican Jacobite, depending on how you see it.

This book is well researched and brimming with detail, right down to some of Napoleon's odd quirks, such as his poor French, his feverish disregard for sleeping, his poor ways with the women in his life or his incessant need to involve himself in the love affairs of his family members. The book also gives detailed blow-by-blow accounts of the famous battles he fought, such as Austerlitz, with troop movements, battle maps and casualty figures. The political system Napoleon set up is examined in detail, and its successes and flaws noted.

I could write more, suffice to say that Napoleon: A Life stands out as a fantastically detailed account of the life of one of Europe's most influential historic figures. Napoleon left an impact on the European state system which was felt for years after his death. His Napoleonic code was in force until early in the 20th century in some parts of Germany. His political reorganizations of Italy, Germany and Poland helped stoke nationalistic movements in each of the countries that would have drastic impacts on Europe's political borders. His defeat marked the hegemonic achievements of the British Empire, which would last right up till 1945. His charismatic charm and leadership capabilities became legendary, and continue to influence people to this day. Napoleon's grand ambitions to be Europe's modern Julius Caesar or Alexander the Great were almost achieved, save for the fact that he eventually lost, and Napoleon will surely be remembered as one of histories greats. Roberts biography is a fantastic and detailed look into the life of Napoleon Bonaparte. It

should not be missed.

Donna Davis says

Robert Andrews has created an historical masterpiece in this massive tome, a biography of Napoleon. Thank you and thank you again to Net Galley and Viking Adult Publishers for the ARC.

Andrews is well known among historians; his scholarship and experience firmly establish him as an expert in the field of European history, especially military history and biography. The recent availability of a vast treasure-trove of primary documents made this biography possible, together with a tremendous amount of work and travel. He visited libraries and battle sites where Napoleon had been before him, before all of us. (And he set off the alarm in Napoleon's throne three times!)

How long did this take, I wonder? By the time it was published, Andrews must have felt an overwhelming sense both of loss and of satisfaction.

As for your humble reviewer, I came to read about Napoleon, whose military career, rule, and downfall I had studied only at the shallowest level during my undergraduate years a whole long time ago, through the back door. My field is the American Civil War, but I was intrigued by the number of Civil War heroes (and others) who had studied Napoleon's methods in detail, and referred to them when creating their own battle plans. What was it about Napoleon?

Generally, my advice to those contemplating reading a lengthy biography is to get the basics down first, but I didn't follow my own advice here. I had the opportunity to get the ARC at the end of November, and it was now or never. I decided to plunge in, poorly prepared though I might be. When I was finished, I found I had bookmarked or made notes in over 700 places in this 926 page work. So whereas I won't use all of my references, I can truthfully say that there is no filler, no fat. If you haven't the patience for almost a thousand pages of Napoleon, then don't go there, but for heaven's sake don't pretend that more is included here than is necessary for a thorough, scholarly, yet interesting treatment.

Having said that much, I also have to confess that I struggled somewhat with the ARC. My knowledge of European geography is pretty basic. I know where most of the countries are, what their climates are like, and for the most part, where the borders are located. When we morph into the Napoleonic era, I really, really needed maps, and that's the price one sometimes pays for an ARC: your "map" is [map insert] noted. There will be a map; I don't get to see it. So I gamely brought myself to my desktop for the first four Coalition Wars, and was lucky enough to find an interactive map that gave me part of what I needed to know. In some places, Andrews explained what took place so well that I could see most of the battle inside my head. But as of the fifth coalition forward, I quit trying to find my own maps when I couldn't follow the action, and just read what was in the book.

All told, Andrews corrected some misperceptions I had developed regarding Napoleon. My own view had been that there was a heroic French Revolution, followed by what are usually termed "excesses" by the Jacobins who began the Revolution. (Today these en masse trips to the guillotine would be called atrocities.) But could the whole thing be salvaged? It seemed such a terrible waste to have a popular revolution, throw out not only a monarchy but one unusually lacking in decency toward the peasants and urban poor of France, and then have it all come tumbling down. And it also seems like a waste to have an autocrat take over. This was my perspective before reading Andrews's biography.

Though his approach is both scholarly and balanced, Andrews offers a positive portrait of Napoleon, whom

he treats with a fond, almost affectionate narrative. He points out that Napoleon kept the Bourbons off the throne for over twenty years, and it's true that they returned in 1815 after Napoleon's first abdication. Things got really ugly then. And he also points out that Napoleon's career was unusually complicated. The point is well taken.

For example, who invades neighboring nations, overthrows their leaders, presumes to rewrite their constitution without consulting anyone that lives there...yet bestows upon them more civil rights than they have ever had before? And who else would insist in his terms for peace not only remuneration so that he can pay his troops and the annual benefits of military widows, but also demands that great works of art, privately owned, be turned over to him...whereupon he places them in a gallery where all visitors can enjoy them?

Mind you, the man is no Robin Hood. Far from it! He makes it clear from the beginning that he has no use for the 'hoi polloi', and whenever he ceases privately held property, he also sees to it that the previous owner is compensated.

The word "hubris" is often applied to Napoleon, and if not him, then who? Andrews argues that he might have been successful...if only. And there's the rub, right? Because initially, he and his troops travel fast and hard. In the beginning, he asks nothing of them that he would not do himself. His opponents, on the other hand, are spoiled and effete. They travel with vast amounts of personal baggage and servants. They can't move until they personally have this, that, the other. And in the end, that is the guy that Napoleon becomes.

The text is made more lively throughout with quotations of Napoleon himself, a prolific writer and a brilliant, articulate speaker.

The chapters are organized according to place, generally speaking, and this is very useful when the reader needs to go back and fact-check.

Andrews argues that Napoleon's autocracy-as-meritocracy might have been successful if he had applied the standard to all of the dynasties he created after toppling their rulers that he applied to France. Nepotism created endless problems, and though Napoleon somehow thought that he personally might make up for the failings of his relatives, there is only so much one man can do. The many, many worthless siblings and other relatives he installed as instant royalty drained his resources and made problems that didn't have to happen. His first wife, Josephine, was such an obsessive spender that one hates to think of the number of children under age six who might have lived had the wealth been more widely distributed.

Napoleon's most loyal base of support was within the military, but he fought so aggressively that too many soldiers died, and the backlash was bound to come sooner or later. Yet the military base he so depended upon wanted him back again after just ten months of Bourbon reign.

Could Napoleon have been successful if he had left the Iberian peninsula alone? If he had avoided attacking Russia? Napoleon himself, upon looking back while in exile during his last years, recognizes that trying to best Britain, with its unstoppable navy, was folly; yet he certainly kept them busy for a good long while.

At one point, he reflects that if he had known he would end up defeated, he could have made different choices. He would like to be allowed to emigrate to the United States; who knows, he could have founded a state there! And here, my jaw drops as I imagine that instead of selling the Louisiana Purchase (which doubled the size of the USA) to the USA via President Thomas Jefferson, he had decided to settle it. But being Napoleon, would it have even stopped there, I wonder? He hated Britain and had nothing against US rulers; maybe he would have been able to kick the British out of Canada instead of fruitlessly attempting to rout them from their homeland.

Suddenly I can see how Andrews has become spellbound by what might have been. He has spent a lot more

time with this material than I have, and it's starting to affect me, too!

I know that some of those who read my reviews are teachers. I don't see this as high school material; a small portion of it could be selected for honors level seniors or community college students perhaps, but then you have huge books to buy in order to use just a portion. I don't see even the most gifted teenager sticking it out from start to finish. Though the narrative is engaging, the definitive biography is epic. It requires patience and dedication on the part of its readers. Developmentally, most young folks in their late teens and early twenties just won't be there yet.

But if you are in doubt, buy one copy and read it yourself, then pass it around a little bit and see how it goes. Likewise, if you are homeschooling a truly extraordinary teenager that you think would gobble this up, buy it, read it (because you can't home school anyone using a text you have not personally read), and then if you still think it may work and your student is game, give it a try.

All told, the price you will pay for this remarkable single volume biography is nothing compared to its worth in your own library, even if only used as a reference source.

Antenna says

I embarked on this great slab of a historical biography - 820 pages excluding sources and notes - in an attempt to understand to what extent Napoleon was truly "great", particularly after reading a popular biography of Josephine which seemed to sell him short.

In the course of wading through the mud and slaughter of his interminable military campaigns, I concluded that he was a remarkable man whose greatness stemmed from enormous energy and vision, insatiable curiosity, the capacity to absorb a huge volume of facts, the confidence to take risks in putting ideas into practice, great tactical skill, flexibility and speed in conducting campaigns - when he had a single enemy to contend with and a small enough army to control personally - undeniable courage, a keen sense of self-publicity and understanding of how to motivate men at all levels - this sometimes deserted him - through a mixture of praise, rewards and decisive orders when needed. He was also capable of moments of refreshing candour and regret as to his shortcomings, and possessed a sense of humour and charm which captivated even some of his enemies.

On the downside, his desire to emulate Caesar and Alexander the Great may have led to megalomania, his attention to detail made him a control freak, as Emperor he made himself an unbridled political dictator, although he listened to the opinions of others and adopted a more democratic approach towards the end when he was fatally weakened. His continual exaggeration of enemy losses and playing down of his own may have been judicious PR, but suggests a failure to face up to his frequent squandering of the lives of the men he had inspired to follow him. He was a male chauvinist - although perhaps most men were at the time - and he made some major errors.

The most costly of these was the attempt to fight on two fronts simultaneously - Russia and Spain, and to allow himself to be lured as far as Moscow, over-extending his supply lines and then underestimating the time needed to limp back to France before the onset of winter. The shocking death toll of more than half a million soldiers, and the destruction of his horses made it hard to put up an effective defence with fast-moving cavalry when the extent of his conquests set most of the rest of Europe against him. He picked the wrong issues for stubborn obsessions, such as an unworkable scheme to block trade with Britain with which

he annoyed the Tsar by trying to impose it on Russia, or the rejection of fairly reasonable peace terms when his luck had run out.

In an academic yet mainly very readable text, the author fired me with some of his own enthusiasm for Napoleon. I found myself rooting for him and wishing he had desisted from some campaigns to build his reputation as a social reformer - even as a prisoner on Elba, he arranged the provision of fresh water, improvement of roads, irrigation schemes, etcetera. He may of course have been in a cleft stick, in that he had to wage war to avoid being overrun by belligerent neighbours outraged by his assumption of a crown.

I realise that many chapters on military campaigns are unavoidable, and was impressed to learn that the author had clearly tramped many of the sixty main battle sites in person, but I found the information perhaps inevitably too condensed with indigestible lists of names of commanders, companies, details of troop movements, villages and rivers. It is frustrating that maps are not always supplied, and when included, often omit place names mentioned in the text, an indication of location, topography and scale to help one understand the course of events. I did not want to interrupt my reading to go and search for these details elsewhere. It would have been helpful to include more of the factual information in clear tables, charts and timelines - together with better maps- for easier reference.

Overall, this is an impressive work which has increased my understanding and appreciation of a fascinating historical figure.

Bettie? says

Read by John Lee. ~33hours

Description: Austerlitz, Borodino, Waterloo: his battles are among the greatest in history, but Napoleon Bonaparte was far more than a military genius and astute leader of men. Like George Washington and his own hero Julius Caesar, he was one of the greatest soldier-statesmen of all times.

Andrew Roberts's Napoleon is the first one-volume biography to take advantage of the recent publication of Napoleon's thirty-three thousand letters, which radically transform our understanding of his character and motivation. At last we see him as he was: protean multitasker, decisive, surprisingly willing to forgive his enemies and his errant wife Josephine. Like Churchill, he understood the strategic importance of telling his own story, and his memoirs, dictated from exile on St. Helena, became the single bestselling book of the nineteenth century.

An award-winning historian, Roberts traveled to fifty-three of Napoleon's sixty battle sites, discovered crucial new documents in archives, and even made the long trip by boat to St. Helena. He is as acute in his understanding of politics as he is of military history. Here at last is a biography worthy of its subject: magisterial, insightful, beautifully written, by one of our foremost historians.

Picked this one up to coincide with the 200 anniversary of Waterloo.

Fantastic. The most comprehensive biography of Bonaparte that I have had the pleasure to encounter. Fully recommended.

The Battle of Waterloo was fought on Sunday, 18 June 1815, near Waterloo in present-day Belgium, then part of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands. A French army under the command of Napoleon was defeated by the armies of the Seventh Coalition, comprising an Anglo-allied army under the command of the Duke of Wellington combined with a Prussian army under the command of Gebhard von Blücher. (wiki sourced)

Hadrian says

In 1806, during the Battle of Jena, the philosopher Hegel went out to survey the scene from a hill top. He saw the emperor Napoleon ride past, and what he saw transfixed him. I quote: "I saw the Emperor, this world-spirit (*Weltseele*), go out from the city to survey his realm. It is a truly wonderful experience to see such an individual, on horseback, concentrating on one point, stretching over the world and dominating it."

Andrew Roberts' view is slightly less positive. This biography is an attempt to rehabilitate Napoleon from those who would compare him to the omnicidal dictators of the 20th century. He sees Napoleon as an embodiment of the Enlightenment, a polymath, a patron of art and science, a legal reformer, and a figure who created modern Europe, perhaps comparable to Charlemagne.

Roberts is well prepared to write a volume of this size and scope. He makes extensive citations of the new collected edition of Napoleon's letters (33,000), and has visited some fiftysix battle sites of Napoleon's campaigns.

The result is a book rich with detail and charming anecdotes, and a view from the very top. You even understand Napoleon's writing tics - he has a habit of writing 'My health is good' (*Ma santé est bonne*) in his letters, even after military catastrophes or poor health. Roberts also treats most of the established memoirs with skepticism, saying that most were written 30+ years after the fact, and personal opinions could have tinted their memories. He also avoids the silly conspiracy that Napoleon was poisoned at St. Helena.

His depiction of Napoleon's military career is excellent. He begins with the early victories of tactical genius against unprepared opponents, continues on to his great triumphs at Marengo, Austerlitz, Jena, Friedland, and the rest, then the catastrophic Russian invasion, all the way through to the end with multiple blunders at Waterloo. He describes the strategic implications of the major battles, but also includes individual details, including his harangues to his troops. He describes how these victories happened - with superhuman determination, an uncanny instinct for warfare of maneuver, and often sheer luck.

As for Napoleon's political intrigue and his flaws, Roberts is more ambivalent. He is ready to equivocate that Napoleon was not alone in terms of plunder (Wellington gleefully did the same in Portugal and India) and he even edges towards Napoleon's own military failures by acknowledging Napoleon's guilt, even after the Russian debacle. But what most comes through is his inhuman determination to continue and his obsession with victory, even as his country became exhausted. If he was not such a person, then he would not be Napoleon.

He is also attempting to justify the baser aspects of Napoleon's own authoritarianism. His legal code abolished the nobility, granted freedom of religion, and influenced many other European codes for decades. But Napoleon did not always follow his own precepts - his miserable treatment of the Jews and the rights of women is a major setback. The Continental System was a source of major grumbling by Napoleon's neighbors, but that is not too dissimilar to what the other colonial powers did the rest of the world.

Still, the result of Roberts' work is worthy. This is a fast read and the 900 pages feel like they are 400. For other specialized aspects of Napoleon's career you could do better (Chandler's *The Campaigns of Napoleon*) but this is an uncommonly interesting book. Napoleon is a man of vast contradictions, capable of charisma and brutality, and this book somehow grasps of all of these.

Michael Flanagan says

I sat before this very daunting looking book, coming in at over 900 pages, feeling slightly excited as my expectations were high after Dr Roberts last offering. I have read a few books about Napoleons campaigns before but never had I taken a look at the entire life of the man.

I am pleased to write that this book delivers an informative and enthralling read that sees the pages melt away as you are pulled into Napoleons life. This book is very balanced, with the author trying to peel back the stories and legends around the man to tell as best as possible the real story behind the man.

The huge amount of research that went into this book is evident and gave the author some great insights into Napoleon's characteristics. This book is a must read for anyone that loves history.

Louise says

This is a life so big that 800+ pages can hardly contain it. Philip Dwyer started a more feasible format in: *Napoleon Vol I: The Path to Power 1769 - 1799: Path to Power 1769 - 1799 v. 1* several years ago. Full books have been written about single weeks in his life. Andrew Roberts is to be saluted not only for his research, but for his ability to condense the outsized story of Napoleon Bonaparte into one book.

Roberts brings out the best in his subject. He shows Napoleon's acts of empathy, his ability to converse with the distinguished thinkers of his day, his Code and its long lasting effects, his connection with his troops and brilliance on the battlefield. He abbreviates the bad, for instance writing that he left his troops in Egypt "without orders" rather than say he abandoned them.

I was struck on how well Napoleon fits Malcolm Gladwell's theory expressed in *Outliers: The Story of Success: The Story of Success*. While experienced in political turmoil, Napoleon's family was distant from France where/when standing with one side meant persecution when the other side came to power. His dubious noble status could be played either way in the time when nobility as a requirement of generalship was questioned. With his education, ambition and determination he was able to excel in a career (general/emperor) that could only be obtained/created by commoners in Europe in this sliver of time.

While the actual battles are the least of my historical interests the story can't be told without them. Roberts does a good job with context, logistics (although he along with everyone else leaves to the imagination what is done with 20,000 POWs) and strategy. There are clear maps of campaign routes and battle positions. The discussion culminates with Waterloo, where, after you understand the brilliance of Napoleon's previous career you understand, logistically what went wrong. This leaves you to guess about Napoleon's health (you learn of his weight gain on Elba and perhaps a hemorrhoid problem that interferes with his horsemanship) and mental state (he has only 3 Marshalls from the past, the others have died or betrayed him).

I learned a lot from small things (Napoleon wrote novels in his youth and Josephine's teeth were black from sugar cane) to large (the unusual "friendship" of Napoleon and Alexander I and the "unforced errors" of Waterloo). While the section on the Louisiana Purchase in only 2-3 pages, I know more clearly his motives which show the far reach of his thinking (distant colonies will only rebel, better to let the Americans drain the British with them). The treatment of Spain and Portugal is the best I've read. The Moscow episode and retreat is so heart-wrenching, you forget that Napoleon was the aggressor. The cast is so large that in the Epilogue, there were so many whose names I'd forgotten, I stopped checking the index.

While the character of Napoleon remains cryptic, the excerpts from his letters and diaries are helpful. From the preface you learn that newly available primary sources were used. The layout of the "Notes" makes it difficult to find which ones the new ones are and/or to use the "Notes" in general.

There are many color plates including portraits of the principals and renditions of the battles, treaty signings, buildings, caricatures, possessions. The Index got me everywhere I needed to go.

I could spend a year finding sources and reading biographies of the colorful people of this era. Of the French, the most intriguing are Talleyrand and Marshalls Nye and Bernadotte; of the Corsicans any member of Napoleon's family; and of the opponents, the Duke of Wellington and Alexander I.

This is a notable assemblage of the life of Napoleon. I am uncertain if its positive spin is the result of weeding out a lot of previously covered material or the weeding out of previous bias. Writers of these "big" biographies have to make decisions on how to present facts to make them readable. In this bio, sometimes the facts won making many areas a cumbersome read; nevertheless, I stayed with it and I am glad I did.

Thomas says

I read a review that said this was bias, that 'Great' is not a term we should use for Napoleon. First, this book is not bias and shows Napoleon warts and all. The author brings up contrary evidence from detractors but properly dismisses them as bias when appropriate. Second, in the concluding chapter it is pretty clear that Napoleon is a Great, and that his disaster's were merely the result of hubris, something that affects all Greats, from leading surgeons to Ronda Rousey. His legacy has lasted and on a purely numbers game he is one of the leading men of history.

I have also read that you can judge a book (or I suppose writer) by the amount of other books they spur you to read. Eg I just started Duff Cooper's 'Talleyrand', and plan to read books on Nelson, Catherine the Great, the Congress of Vienna, Prussia and the Russian Campaign. All this a result of learning the fascinating ins and outs of the life of Napoleon.

Of course the battle accounts are detailed and interesting, but it is more Napoleon's letters and communications that really entertain and enlighten. It's a tragic story, but one that is important and we all should know.

Oh yeah and the audiobook wrapped up as I opened the door after my morning walk, great timing.
