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Andrew Roberts, *Napoleon the Great*. London: Allen Lane, 2014. Notes, Bibliography, Index. Cloth. xxxv + 936pp. ISBN 978-1-846-14027-3 (Paperback). Price £9.09.

Two hundred years after his defeat at Waterloo, Napoleon's reputation is enjoying something of a revival. Books and magazine articles about him pour from the presses, with Andrew Roberts's *Napoleon the Great* one of several substantial studies to emerge in 2014 alone. It is, as one might expect from an accomplished writer of biography and military history, an impressive book, which, over nearly a thousand pages, carries the reader with pace and gusto through the life of a man whose dream of empire transformed Europe. Born on the fringes of France, in a Corsica newly annexed by the French Crown, Bonaparte was the beneficiary of the meritocratic values which Revolutionary France espoused. The army, like politics, suddenly offered a young man of talent unparalleled opportunities for advancement and the chance to make a mark on the world. The young artillery officer was a general at 24, who went on lead military campaigns in Italy and Egypt, mount a *coup d'état* against the Directory, and establish his political power as First Consul, then as Emperor. He went on to conquer much of mainland Europe, imposing modern administration and accessible justice, introducing the rule of law, raising taxes and conscripting soldiers wherever his armies went. Seen in this light, Napoleon's is a heroic tale that inspired many of his contemporaries – among them artists and composers, poets and novelists – and that has continued to fascinate succeeding generations. Andrew Roberts is the latest in a long line of writers to fall under his spell.

Of course, Napoleon achieved a great deal, both on the battlefield and, even more, in the realm of civil governance. In the many parts of Europe where individual rights were rarely respected, the Napoleonic Code could seem a guarantee of liberties. And the fact that so many of his administrative and judicial reforms lived on under very different regimes after 1815 surely demonstrates the quality of the institutions he imposed on the territories he conquered. There is much to admire in these achievements, and Andrew Roberts clearly admires them. Indeed, he seems to go out of his way to avoid any criticism of the Emperor. Even those excesses that have been widely denounced as crimes or acts of wanton cruelty, such as the execution of the Duc d'Enghien, or the poisoning of his soldiers at Jaffa to prevent their capture by the Turks, are explained rather than condemned. And perhaps too little is made of the huge cost to France in men and resources of his interminable wars, for which he must accept at least a share of responsibility. By contrast, Roberts rightly lingers on his more positive attributes – his undoubted charm and ability to win over others; his patronage of science and the arts; his understanding of his army and empathy for his

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men. Napoleon comes across in these pages as a man of vision, a man of order, too, an unapologetic modernizer who set out to stabilize France after the upheaval of the French Revolution.

His military campaigns are described in graphic detail; here Roberts shows an enviable command of tactics and strategy to portray a general of exceptional flair and ability. But what of the title - *Napoleon the Great* – on which so much debate has centred since the book's publication? It is a title which Napoleon never himself claimed, even if he did compare himself at various times to both Alexander the Great and Charlemagne. Though the wording may shock some of Roberts's readers, I do not find it in any way outrageous. What it does do, though, is to accentuate, even more than the biographical form itself, the role of the individual over longer-term structural change, and, even if inadvertently, it can appear to reinforce the Great Man view of history, an approach that has often bedevilled Napoleonic history in the past. For the imperial project was never the work of one man. It required others, who shared the same vision, to draft laws, to lead armies, to administer annexed territories. When Napoleon was finally defeated, it was not he alone who felt undone. A whole generation of Frenchmen - lawyers, army officers and administrators - feared that their life's work lay in ruins.

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