

## REVIEWS

Taken altogether, Uythoven has produced a solid contribution to the neglected field of French Revolutionary War history, and a much-needed corrective to an overly British view of the struggle. It is by no means the last word, but Uythoven's book will make it much more difficult for English-speaking historians to ignore the Dutch aspect of one of Britain's most significant continental campaigns during the 1790s.

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**Charles J. Esdaile, *Napoleon, France and Waterloo: The Eagle Rejected*. Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2017. 257pp. ISBN 9781473870826 (hardback). £25.**

Those who have any interest in history, from the novice to the professional historian, at some point inevitably ponder the alternative outcomes of a specific historical event. The first chapter of Professor Charles Esdaile's *Napoleon, France and Waterloo: The Eagle Rejected* is very much in this genre. Although Esdaile utilizes accounts from French and Anglo-Dutch participants to paint the picture of Napoleon's victory at Waterloo, his point of divergence with history comes when Wellington, rather than Uxbridge, was escorted from the field to have his leg amputated. In the aftermath of Wellington's departure, an overwhelmed Uxbridge issued orders for the Anglo-Dutch army to retreat. Napoleon had won. In this somewhat unorthodox book, Professor Esdaile tells us that while this alternative ending is purely 'fantasy', it was "by no means implausible" (16). The question of what if Napoleon had won at Waterloo lingers throughout this relatively short book.

In accordance with what appears to be his life-long professional mission, if not obsession, Professor Esdaile seeks in this work to cast another harpoon into his white whale: the Napoleonic Legend and, by extension, Napoleon himself. The opening line of his Preface states: 'Two hundred years on from the fall of Napoleon, one thing is certain, and that is that the Napoleonic Legend is as strong today as it ever was' (viii). It may as well be 'to the last I grapple with thee; from hell's heart I stab at thee; for hate's sake I spit my last breath at thee', so seethed Herman Melville's Captain Ahab. Esdaile ever strives to deconstruct the Legend and to reject the notion that Napoleon stood for anything that may be interpreted as progressive or commendable. Many of the eyewitness accounts that Esdaile cites are British rather than French; the few French contemporaries that he does cite are well-known for their hatred of Napoleon; and most of the French historians he cites are likewise anti-Bonaparte. He chastises

## REVIEWS

numerous modern historians, including respected scholars such as Michael Broers, Alan Forrest, and Stephen Englund for finding in Napoleon a reformer 'who was genuinely committed to building a new social and political order that was in many respects admirable' (viii). He continues by expressing his disgust that 'Napoleon remains a figure who continues to be associated not just with such personal qualities as romance, heroism and adventure, nor even with military genius, but also with freedom, progress, democracy, and all the advances of the modern world' (viii). Esdaile seems genuinely bothered by the fact that the merchandise at the Waterloo gift shop gives the impression that Napoleon did indeed triumph at Waterloo. This of course is used to reinforce Esdaile's contention that Napoleon may have lost the war but he won the peace, thanks to the Legend.

The purpose of *Napoleon, France and Waterloo: The Eagle Rejected* is to put into words what anyone who has studied the matter even in brief already recognizes: that had Napoleon actually won the battle of Waterloo on 18 June 1815, the chances of him winning the war remained remote at best. Regardless, Esdaile seeks to answer the question of what might have happened had Napoleon won at Waterloo. This paradigm is Professor Esdaile's *Pequod*, upon which he sails the literary seas to reject 'the simplicities of such Bonapartist apologists as Henri Houssaye', whose four substantial volumes on 1814 and 1815 he sees as 'deeply misleading' due to Houssaye's contention that Napoleon had the support of the masses in 1814 and 1815. Although Esdaile successfully uses the first chapter to employ alternative history as a hook to draw the unsuspecting reader into the book, he firmly rejects the idea that *Napoleon, France and Waterloo* is an exercise in counterfactual history. Instead, he asserts that he has produced a 'scholarly examination of a series of concrete situations from which certain conclusions may be drawn as to the likelihood of what would have transpired had Napoleon triumphed at Waterloo' (xi). While this is the very definition of counterfactual history, Esdaile does devote a portion of the book to evaluating the situation in 1814, while the rest of the work serves to propose and examine possible scenarios of the aftermath of a French victory on 18 June 1815.

At times, Professor Esdaile asks too much of the 'concrete situations' from which he seeks to draw his conclusions, leaving the reader to think that evidence is used to fit the argument rather than to make an argument. Nevertheless, there is much in Professor Esdaile's book to commend. It is provocative and has much merit, and is certainly well worth reading, beneficial to both the novice and the scholar.

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