



FELIX MARKHAM
NAPOLEON

A startling new interpretation of his life and legend based on recently discovered documents.

"A MASTERPIECE"—*Wall Street Journal*

"EXCELLENT"—*The New Yorker*



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A magnificent reconstruction of Napoleon's life and legend written by a distinguished Oxford scholar.

Napoleon Details

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Author : Felix Markham

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From Reader Review Napoleon for online ebook

Robert says

This book is a 25th anniversary reprint, representing one of the first English scholarly histories of this interesting character. It provides a nice overview of the life and times of Napoleon.

Since I didn't know a whole lot about Napoleon before reading this book, I found it filled the informative need well. Where the writer really captivated my interest (as all good historians do) is in the anecdotal accounts of Napoleon's personality and interactions. These accounts go a long way towards separating the man from the myth. I feel that most Americans are stuck with the Napoleon of "Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure" and know very little about the real person. After reading, I found Napoleon to be a much more sympathetic and complex character.

Although not my favorite history that I've read, Markham does an admirable job, particularly in leaving the decision of how we are to think of Napoleon up to the reader while still providing some possible conclusions. I found his anecdotal accounts of Napoleon a bit too sparse to my liking and some of the battles were blow-by-blow accounts, such that I found myself getting lost in the forest of towns, rivers, and countries that were being invaded and doing the invading. The maps at the end of the book are helpful for that (I realized this a bit late in the book).

Don't know much about Napoleon? Pick up Markham's Napoleon for a short, interesting take on this prominent figure of history.

Marius Pontmercy says

I found this a very interesting book, filled with information and facts. Still, it is not for "beginners" in Napoleonic history. There are just too many facts, events and names that will not ring any bells unless for people having a relatively high understanding and knowledge of the time period.

I would recommend it to those who are truly interested in Napoleon, but I would not recommend this to people that have just a slight interest in things.

Remarkably, the part that I will remember best from this book is the Afterword by Steven Englund. My feelings about Napoleon are hard to explain. I can not say that he is a "good man", because he is (at least partially) responsible for the death and suffering of millions. But on the other hand, there is something immensely fascinating about this man. In the Afterword I found - for the first time - my feelings written down in words in a pretty accurate way.

David says

A review of this enjoyable book in three parts: "Why This Book is Ideally Read on a Kindle", "Reading as a Strategy to Snag and Hold onto a Romantic Partner", and "Do I Care?".

Why This Book is Ideally Read on an Ebook Reader

Before launching into some grousing, I would like to thank the inexplicably-named Pickle Partners Publishing for rescuing this pre-electronic-age (1963) book and converting it. As it turns out, happy accidents of technology made this book ideal for my Kindle as currently configured.

I find Popular History to be a very enjoyable genre. Nevertheless I run occasionally into the hunk of non-fic. that self-advertises as for the layperson, but then lets loose with an avalanche of historical, philosophical, geographical, and other categories-ical references that are not usually stored in the easily-accessible parts of the working memory of an average person like self. I assume this sort of book happens when an expert on an era/topic/etc. is commissioned to write a popular history, but he (I think it is frequently enough a male failing to use this pronoun) has spent too long in the ivory tower and has no conception of what the average reader may or may not know about his topic of specialization. I have complained previously on this site that preventing books like this from seeing the light of day should be the responsibility of the editor or somebody else in the publishing racket, but seeing how this phenomenon is at least (2018 – 1963 =) 55 years old now, it seems unlikely that it will go away any time soon.

Happily, a late-model Kindle ebook reader with internet connectivity helps the reader escape from the barrage of inexplicable references that often occur when reading inattentively-edited attempts at Popular History. With wi-fi enabled, I found that, merely by placing one of my sausage-like digits on the offending word, I could, about 75% of the time, get a satisfactory one-paragraph explanation either from the device's onboard dictionary or instant Wikipedia-accessing function. This increased my enjoyment of this book quite a bit. It is otherwise quite readable and gallops along at an enjoyable pace, not surprisingly given the variety of accomplishment in, and action-packed pace of, the life of the titular.

The other 25% of the time, I just mumbled something like “Probably French place” or “Probably Russian general” to myself and moved on.

Reading as a Strategy to Snag and Hold onto a Romantic Partner

Decades ago, I met and got to know the future Long-Suffering Wife (LSW) and quickly decided she was “a keeper” for many reasons, one of which was she seemed much more likely to have a long and well-paying career ahead of her, relieving me of the responsibility of finding and holding a tedious (i.e., any) job for years on end.

The problem was: how to endear myself sufficiently to allow future LSW to somehow gloss over the less attractive aspects of my personality? My working theory was, if I just hold on long enough, she will just simply get used to me and think (like Molly Bloom) “as well him as another”. What could I do to ensure she'd keep me around?

At that time, she was a graduate student. When I saw her ridiculously long reading list, I sensed an opportunity to ingratiate myself. I knew I had hit on a winning strategy when she appeared the next day with a great pile of German literature in translation and thrust them at me, saying: “Here, read these and tell me what I think about them.”

Lo, the years pass and now LSW finds herself on the delivery end of the education racket, which is to say, she will soon be teaching others, specifically, soldiers. Her future employer gives her a (somewhat shorter than before) list of books the teachers and students are expected to be familiar with. This book is on the list. Having been spared the fate of having to work for a living, I am sufficiently grateful to take this perfectly

entertaining book in hand and give her the Cliffs' Notes version. As an additional benefit, this book also gives us something to talk about over evening meals. Making compelling conversation is sometimes a little difficult in the fourth decade of our alliance. LSW didn't even seem to mind the occasional dramatic readings of select passages.

In our far distant past, man hunted and killed animals, and then came home and presented the bloody carcasses to their mates as evidence of their worth as a provider. In our time, the presentation of knowledge to one's beloved can serve the same function, at a far lower level of personal bodily risk, showing that our day and age, while not without its drawbacks, has many happy advantages of which we may not be sufficiently appreciative.

Do I Care?

If anyone ever reads this far, they might be justified in thinking: "Okay, so you met cute a long time ago, why is this in a book review?"

After reading the book under the circs. described previous, I thought, hmm, what exactly are our future military leaders supposed to get out of this book? I answer myself as follows:

A long time ago, the best teacher I ever had (Mr. Cauley) said that Napoleon's Big Idea (which, like many Big Ideas, seems blindingly obvious in retrospect) as a military leader was "concentrate your fire on a single point in the enemy line". This book, published more than ten years before Mr. Cauley told me this, contains the same contention and, I suspect, was directly or indirectly responsible for the idea's appearance in suburban high-school classrooms like mine, years later.

If this Big Idea as I understand it is being taught in military circles, it might lead to two questions:

1) How do you choose the spot to concentrate your fire? In some cases, the answer might be relatively simple, as in a case where the enemy has the lack of foresight to form a line in a V-shape with the pointy end facing toward your army. It seems pretty obvious: attack the pointy end. But what about other circumstances? Do you just choose a spot at random?

perhaps more importantly

2) Does the Big Idea transfer from the literal battlefield of guns and cannons to the metaphorical global battlefield of ideas, diplomacy, hard and soft power, etc.? Should nations concentrate their persuasive powers, charm, diplomats, etc., on a single point on the line between us and them, and then metaphorically fire away? When you are holding Napoleon's hammer, does everything look like a nail?

Justin Daniel says

I have always found the person of Napoleon fascinating. When I was in Paris last year, I went to a place called Les Invalides. There is a chapel there that houses some of France's most memorable leaders. Enshrined in that place lies the grave of Napoleon that attracts millions of visitors every year. But Napoleon has been described in history as the first dictator; a tyrant; a radical; and an emperor. But what makes Napoleon so special, and why is he still considered one of France's heros?

Well I think Felix Markham presents Napoleon in a balanced way in this book, "Napoleon." I have often wanted to read a book on Napoleon, but in order to understand Napoleon, you have to understand the French Revolution. Earlier this year, I reviewed a book for a class I had to take on the French Revolution and Napoleon. I reviewed William Doyle's book "The Oxford History of the French Revolution" which was a great introduction to the time Napoleon found himself in.

Napoleon grew up in Corsica, which was an island in the Mediterranean south of France. It was always a contested island, and the French invaded it around the time Napoleon was born. Napoleon's father and mother were freedom fighters for the small island nation, but succumbed to French rule. Napoleon never forgave his father for this treachery. As he grew up, he went to school on mainland France and eventually found himself enrolled in a military school where he was to become an artillery officer. When he became an artillery officer, he never really had a chance to ascend through the ranks because in the old regime (see my review of the French Revolution to understand this), the nobility were the only people who could advance far into the military. When the French Revolution happened, this did away with the old regime and Napoleon won a decisive battle against the English. He was promoted to Brigadier General and eventually put in charge of the French Army that was to conquer parts of Italy.

In the Italian campaign, Napoleon won victory after victory with his brilliant military tactics. The government was very poor and his troops had not been paid for some time; Napoleon won the confidence of his men by allowing them to gather the booty of Italian treasures and they charged through the land. Paintings, statues, gold, coins, ancient antiquities were all liquidated to France during these campaigns.

After the Italian campaigns, Napoleon devised a plan to halt the British dominance in the Western world. It would be near suicide to invade the British mainland, so Napoleon would strike at the British colony of Egypt. In the Egyptian campaign, Napoleon again found his mark as he conquered the land. Unfortunately, his entire fleet was shipwrecked by the British, stranding Napoleon and his men in Egypt. Napoleon, seeing events in France progress to the point where a power vacuum was coming, made his way back to Paris to take advantage of the situation.

Eventually Napoleon orchestrated events to where he would become the defacto dictator of the country. This stabilization was actually ultimately good for France; what was not good was the wars that ensued. Napoleon wanted complete power, and he instituted himself as Caesar of the French Empire. Following this, he took to Prussia and Russia where he won victories at places such as Austerlitz that demonstrated he was in total control.

Napoleon's fatal mistake came in his assault into Russia. He was stymied that Spring into the summer, and the cold came upon the Le Grande Armee before they reached Moscow. When they did eventually get to Moscow, there was no one there to strike up a peace deal; rather, the Russians had set fire to the city. Defeated, Napoleon set off for France as his army continued to dwindle. The cold, lack of food, and attacks from the cossacks continued to drain his numbers. Just over a million set out to conquer Russia and only around 10,000 returned.

Napoleon built up another army but it wasn't enough; he had to capitulate and was sentenced to exile in Elba. He wasn't there for long however; he broke free of his imprisonment and set out to Paris. He regained control and fought one last decisive battle at Waterloo with a coalition of forces against him commanded by the British. He lost this last battle and was sentenced to exile on St. Helena where he died sometime later.

You can see that the legacy of Napoleon is mixed; on the one hand, he somewhat strengthened and saved France from the democratic disaster of the previous decade. The French Revolution took a toll on the people

and Napoleon brought stability and order to chaos. And Napoleon was in all regards a genius. He was a tactician whose skills would only be dwarfed by men like Rommel in Italy and Africa. But on the flip side, he was brutal and took massive risks that endangered the French warriors of the time. He did a lot of harm to France mixed in with the good.

Napoleon's legacy is difficult. But one thing is for sure; he is a very interesting character to study. I think Markham's brief study on Napoleon is palatable enough for both the novice and the ardent historian.

Cesar Lozano says

I picked up this book at a sale in my university; it cost me \$2 and I did not know what to expect given it was written in '66. Well, to my surprise I was pleasantly satisfied by it... it reads very well (Not academic), and provides just enough detail to keep you engaged all the way through.

Good read for anyone who is interested in this time period and Napoleon's life.

Paul says

Felix Markham wrote: "It would be futile to attempt a summing-up or a verdict on Napoleon as a man or as an historical phenomenon. It is better to try to let the facts speak for themselves..." (p. 265) Evidently, this is what he strove to do. First published in 1963, Markham's "Napoleon" made a splash as the first full biography of Napoleon to make use of (then) newly available primary sources: letters written to Napoleon by his second wife, the Empress Marie-Louise, discovered and published in 1955 (Napoleon's letters to her had been discovered and published only in 1934); and the coded diaries of General Henri-Gratien Bertrand who was with Napoleon during his exile on St. Helena (decoded and published between 1949 and 1959). A concise volume (266 pages plus appendices), it nevertheless packs much detail which can be difficult to absorb without some prior familiarity with Napoleon and his times. The close-set type of the Mentor edition compounds this difficulty. (I recommend reading Paul Johnson's "Napoleon" first; telling it as an extended persuasive essay, Johnson gives less detail but preserves the basic arc of Napoleon's story, which it is helpful to know while navigating Markham. And he does cast a verdict, futile or no!) If one bears with it, the reward is a rounded and human portrait of Napoleon.

Markham lets us appreciate Napoleon the general through a close account of two examples he considers "typical ... of Napoleon's strategy": the Italian campaigns and Waterloo. He challenges the common judgment that Napoleon's boycott of English goods - the Continental System - had little effect, offering documentation of its economic and political impact on England. He challenges the argument (accepted by Johnson) that Napoleon died of stomach cancer: "It was Napoleon's wish that there should be an autopsy to determine the cause of his illness [which had been diagnosed twice as chronic hepatitis:]. ... The stomach was found to be perforated by a hole 'large enough to admit a little finger,' but adhering to the liver in such a way as to block the perforation ... the liver was enlarged ... The official post mortem report concluded that death was due to a 'cancerous ulcer' of the stomach, which showed signs of lesions 'about to become cancerous.' This report was highly convenient to ... the English Government, as it showed that Napoleon died of the same disease as his father..." He describes the politics and conditions of Napoleon's exile, which

introduced so much controversy and distortion into the record that biographers and historians must rely upon to render Napoleon and his times.

A highlight of this book is Markham's account of how Enlightenment ideas, liberalism and nationalism spread as the Code Napoleon was imposed on states beyond France's borders. He includes both a class analysis - "Northern Italy, western Germany and the Low Countries, unlike Spain, had a substantial middle class which would welcome these reforms ... Napoleonic officers and civil servants were to form the spearhead of the Risorgimento [in Italy:] after 1815." - and a cultural analysis - "After the shock of Jena, the younger generation of intellectuals such as Fichte, Arndt and Schlegel began to formulate the concept of a united and independent Germany and to preach patriotic resistance to Napoleon. ... At the turn of the century, the romantic movement began to modify the rationalism and cosmopolitanism of the Enlightenment; by its interest in custom, history, and tradition, and in the language and literature of the Volk, pioneered by Herder, it gave a powerful stimulus to national consciousness. The initial enthusiasm of German intellectuals for the French Revolution gave way to a conservative and religious reaction which condemned the anarchy and atheism of the Terror, and exalted the spiritual superiority of a distinct, unique German culture. But nationalism was still conceived in cultural, not political terms." And he notes parallel development inside regimes opposed to Napoleon: "In Austria, too, reform was the work of a handful of patriots, and was hampered by Emperor Francis' distrust of 'Jacobinism.'" He opens a window into the ways early-nineteenth-century Europeans thought about "reasonable" and republican reforms, shedding light on why Europe's governments took the shape they did.

Sarah says

This was a required reading for a college course. While this may not be in my area of interest, this book was still well written and interesting to read.

Kurt says

Markham's book is dated (1963), but it is still a very good work in that it allows the non-historian to access Napoleon's military and political genius in a relatively short (300 pp) treatment. What you'll learn about Napoleon from Markham: 1) his concern for not offending the Muslims in Egypt in 1799 when he invaded to challenge the British and Admiral Nelson (much like General Petreus today in Iraq); 2) Napoleon arrested Pope Pius VII since he was sour on Napoleon's divorce from Josephine (sounds like Henry VIII); and 3) Napoleon's eventual diplomatic failure against the Austrian chancellor Metternich (read Henry Kissinger's *A WORLD RESTORED*-1957, if you want more on the conservative realist Metternich). Here's what else, I took away from the book: 1) Napoleon's Corsican (both parents were from the Italian boot) background affected how he looked at the world; 2) he had a reformist bent politically and the revolution of 1789 led him this direction (so we can thank him for codified law in Europe (and Louisiana) today; 3) he was a brilliant military strategist; 4) unlike Hitler he used diplomacy once military conquests were finished to solve geopolitical issues; 5) he created an empire to dominate Europe to spite his rivals the hated British; 6) he overkilled the use of war as a diplomatic tool which led to war weariness in France by 1812; and 6) he was a paradoxical leader, an anti-Royalist nationalist who became a authoritarian emperor. It is a good book, but Markham assumes the reader has taken a Western Civ course in college (or at that time in 1963 high school). For politics and social history this is not the work for you. It is not really a biography either. It is more of a military history sprinkled with the former elements. It is a decent introduction without a lot of academic

gobbledygook.

Windsor says

The only short book on Napoleon I like. Amazing overview. This is the first book I ever give any of my friends who want to learn about him.

Antigone says

Markham's biography stands as one of the more popular works in the Napoleonic oeuvre. It is comprehensive, well-researched and relatively accessible. He does fall prey to that habit of experts in a given field, assuming far too often that his reader is aware of the fundamentals. This is especially irksome when it comes to the battlefield, where he's fleet enough to hold interest but still manages to sail strategic troop movement and command philosophy like Frisbees over the head. In the afterward (penned by Steven Englund), the bulk of the praise goes to Markham's objectivity. It is rare to find such an even-handed study of Bonaparte coming from an Englishman. And since Englishmen write most of them? This sets the book apart.

I'm going to go even further to say that much of the work on Napoleon appears to have been produced by avid, whiskered boys who care more about the wars and the weapons and the testosterone required to mount a campaign to rule the world than they do the finer points of this history. These are largely enthusiasts who can easily be imagined commandeering a mudroom to set up Waterloo-to-scale on an old table tennis platform. I'm certain nine out of ten of them would toss a limp wave in my direction, assuming with no evidence whatsoever that I'm talking about some romantic urge to hear more about Josephine. And I'm not. And stop being a Neanderthal. And Wellington's artillery goes over *there*.

Under such circumstances, what I appreciate has a tendency to be drawn from my own extrapolation. Case in point:

The island of Corsica was rife with revolution when Napoleon was born upon it. His father was operating as a guerrilla fighter and his mother was wandering the hills as a refugee during the final months of her pregnancy. Things settled down when the French won out and his parents, by all reports an attractive and dynamic couple, befriended the new governor, de Marbeuf. It was this connection that brought the family forward and granted Napoleon enrollment at Brienne, a school for the nobility in France - where he excelled in mathematics and took great joy in staging mock battles in the snow. So promising a student was he that he went straight from Brienne to the Ecole Militaire in Paris; an equivalent of Sandhurst and/or Annapolis. He flew through this school, skipping several intermediate grades, and was quickly given the rank of Lieutenant of Artillery at Valence (where his initial service was limited to suppressing food riots).

Napoleon returned to Corsica during this time. His father had died, and he picked up the gauntlet to take a leading role in organizing a National Guard and obtaining a decree from Paris proclaiming that Corsicans, alongside the revolutionary French, were to be accorded full rights and liberties as its citizens. Unfortunately, political stability did not last. The island fell to civil war until one of its leaders (Paoli) ended in delivering it to the English. The Buonapartes, on the wrong side of this equation, were condemned to "perpetual

execration and infamy." Their property was pillaged and the family fled into exile (at Marseilles) where they remained for several years subsisting primarily on Napoleon's army pay.

From which I extrapolate (it must be said, in a manner I find amusing) the following:

"Napoleon, the landlord is asking for the rent."

"Napoleon, Mama wants a chicken."

"Napoleon, Pauline very much needs a new dress."

"Napoleon, Lucien would like a letter of recommendation."

"But Joseph doesn't *want* to enlist in the army..."

"Napoleon, I know you're busy fighting in Italy, but can you tell us how to exchange for gold these silly assignats?"

Now who, in their right mind, thinks these years as sole support of a family of tempestuous Corsicans did *not* inform his subsequent choices when parceling out crowns later on? These people became the placeholders of his Empire - and, frankly, I just don't think this exile in Marseilles gets anywhere near enough historical press.

Markham gives Napoleon's youth a solid ten pages. And that's ten pages more than what one usually encounters, I have to hand him that.

Tommy Trionfetti says

Excellent single volume biography.

Brent M. Jones says

There is a great deal that can be found about the life of Napoleon and the complexity of all that he accomplished. The book, *Napoleon* by Felix Markham, is a short, easy to read, biography about Napoleon Bonaparte, the French leader who pronounced himself emperor and conquered much of Europe in the early 19th century.

Napoleon was born in 1769 and in 1785 he joined the French Army. In 1793 he went to the war in Toulon where he assumed the place of a wounded commander and with victory became a brigadier general at the age of 24.

The British were aligned with Turkey and then with Russia and they declared war on France. In 1799 Napoleon learned that a Turkish Army was planning to invade Egypt, so he attacked and defeated the Turks.

When he returned to France he took complete control of the French government. With many years of revolution, the French people wanted one strong leader, so Napoleon ruled France as a dictator. In June 1800, Napoleon led the French to defeat the Austrians and then they signed a Treaty with them.

In 1802 the French people made Napoleon first consul for life. He believed that Britain and France would eventually be at war, so he sold the Louisiana Territory to the United States to get money needed.

Napoleon crowned himself emperor in 1804 with his Senate's approval, and he dominated Europe. In 1805 Austria, Russia, and Sweden formed an alliance against France, but later that year Napoleon defeated the Austrian and Russian armies at Austerlitz in Austria. In 1806, Prussia joined Russia in a new coalition, but they were crushed as Napoleon overwhelmed Russian armies at Friedland and then again in 1809 at Wagram. He eventually added Holland and Northern Germany and seemed unstoppable.

Napoleon felt France was threatened by actions of Russia and in 1812 he sent 600,000 men into Russia, but the Russians only retreated. Napoleon pushed on to Moscow only to find the city nearly empty. Much of the city had been destroyed by fires, set by retreating Russians. Napoleon waited with bitter cold coming expecting Alexander to return, but he never did. The winter brought starvation and exposure causing 500,000 of Napoleon's men to perish. He returned to France and surprisingly the people still supported him, but his enemies had been encouraged.

After his return in 1809 he married Josephine de Beauharnais who was 46 years old. He felt his biggest problem was not having an heir so in April of 1810 he divorced Josephine and married Marie Louise who was 18 years old. In 1811 they had a son and named him Napoleon.

Napoleon took his armies to Germany to fight the alliance again, but this time his troops were outnumbered and defeated. This loss was the cause of eventual collapse of the Napoleonic Empire. The enemy alliance pursued him and in March 1814, they captured Paris and Napoleon was exiled from France.

One more time Napoleon gathered some troops marched into Belgium where he hoped to defeat Britain's separate armies of the Duke of Wellington and Blucher of Prussia. Napoleon defeated Blucher and attacked Wellington at Waterloo, but he was beaten, and Napoleon fled to Paris but he was captured and sent to the barren British island of St. Helena in the South Atlantic where he died on May 5th 1821.

If Napoleon is a historical figure you may have wanted to learn more about you will find Felix Markham has brought his life and the many events that he touched into focus. It was really surprising to see the full scope of his ambition. For more on this book see web site: www.connectedeventsmatter.com

JoséMaría BlancoWhite says

This little 1963 book of about 250 pages of tightly pressed print gives a more than sufficient first overlook at this man's life and era. It covers, I believe, all the facets of his life, from family man, through lover, to war titan, politician and emperor. From his Corsican cultural inheritance to his Saint Helen exile and even the immediate post-Napoleonic times. The story is not entangled as one might expect from having so much to tell about in so reduced a space, but it is lively and amazingly devoid of any bias or prejudice. To the point, giving each important issue its time and space, if however pithy, and moving forward never losing a bit. Perhaps one should expect a little more ink spent on big issues like the great battles, say Waterloo for instance, dealt with in just a couple pages, which could have been done to the detriment of his years on Saint Helen, and rightly so. In my opinion.

But overall a very good place indeed to get started on the times and on the extraordinary man known by history as Napoleon Bonaparte. What comes out of the reading of this book is the plain facts and the plain man.

D.Richard Lewis says

Great! but incomplete....The author was not aware that Napoleon was poisoned over a period of time with arsenic put into his wine by a man with him on Saint Helena, named Montholon. This man had good reason to want to murder Napoleon...Napoleon was having an affair with this man's wife and the King of France had ordered Montholon to do this or Montholon would be sent to the front lines in the war.....This information was in the book by Ben Weider: "The Murder of Napoleon." It has been confirmed when Napoleon's hair was examined for arsenic poisoning, that there was arsenic in Napoleon's hair....and all the symptoms of arsenic poisoning were present while Napoleon was dying and sick.

Betsy Balcombe says

How Markham could condense the life of one of the greatest military stratetgists, statesman, and just plain genius is incomprehensible. The length of this book could easily be devoted to a detailed study of one of Bonaparte's greatest battles, like Austerlitz. Perhaps the author's intention was to produce something quick and succinct.
