

Book Reviews

David A. Bell. *Napoleon: A Concise Biography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. Pp 139. \$18.95.

David Bell quips that among historians Napoleon is a “heavy” rather than “cottage” industry (125). Indeed, since 2000 alone numerous excellent biographies of this world historical figure have appeared in English, which prompts the question: why another one? The answer lies in Bell’s subtitle. Unlike other works that run to many hundreds of pages if not multiple volumes, this svelte study performs its work in 113 lively pages. As a renowned revolutionary-era historian at Princeton University as well as a public intellectual whose essays and reviews appear in *The New Republic*, Bell possesses unsurpassed credentials to deliver on his goal of providing “an accurate, readable portrait of Napoleon that incorporates the results of recent scholarship but is also concise and is accessible to those without specialized knowledge” (x).

Bell’s work will become indispensable not only for the undergraduate classroom and advanced secondary students but also for non-specialist instructors assigned to teach lessons on the Napoleonic period. It is both admirably thorough despite its concision as well as a pleasure to read thanks to the author’s talent as a story-teller and writer. All major events and themes receive due attention, as Bell chronicles Napoleon’s astounding career from the early years as an ambitious Corsican and French revolutionary general—wildly successful in Italy, less so in Egypt—to his ascension as First Consul in 1799 and then reign as Emperor from 1804 to 1815. Somehow, a short work about a complex figure never feels rushed, and Bell’s knack for the intriguing anecdote serves the dual purpose of engaging the reader while reinforcing central themes. For example, the opening scene about the dramatic “encounter at Laffrey” in 1815, at which Napoleon, having escaped from his exile on Elba, confronts and wins over Louis XVIII’s soldiers during the Hundred Days, exemplifies for Bell the “stage management” (4) that is critical to an understanding of Napoleon’s

career and subsequent legacy.

Already valuable as accurate and captivating biography, this study simultaneously offers an important interpretation of the Napoleonic phenomenon. Drawing on insights from his 2007 work, *The First Total War*, Bell demonstrates convincingly how the political upheaval of the French Revolution and accompanying transformations in the nature of warfare provided the indispensable context for a talented and ambitious Corsican to become a significant French general by age 26 and “the new Caesar” (25) before age 30. Bell’s depiction of Napoleon’s complex relationship with the French Revolution—the man whose rise stemmed from the Revolution and who in 1804 claimed “I am the French Revolution” both incarnated and undermined revolutionary principles—is one masterful element of a masterful book.

Nonspecialist readers will especially benefit from the epilogue in which Bell first assesses Napoleon’s legacy among the general public and historians from 1815 to the present and then concludes with his own judicious evaluation of that legacy. In the end, Bell acknowledges Napoleon’s political and military genius and comprehends the reasons why subsequent generations have remained fascinated with the “sense of sheer human possibility” (113) that Napoleon’s life represented. At the same time, and while correctly rejecting any false analogy with twentieth-century dictators, Bell expresses sympathy with the school of historical thought critical of Napoleon: “The reestablishment of slavery, the endless slaughter on the battlefields, the authoritarian rule, the imperial ventures [in Haiti and Egypt] all make for a damning and lengthy indictment” (112). Throughout the biography, however, Bell focuses on understanding his subject rather than prosecuting him.

It is neither a surprise nor a criticism to suggest that, in a brief book about a monumental life, concision exacts an occasional cost, such as in the following instance: on page 55 we learn that Napoleon and Pope Pius VII negotiated a Concordat in 1801;

the pontiff's attendance at the Emperor's coronation ceremony in 1804 is noted on page 61; we next encounter Pius VII on page 81, after unexplained clashes with Napoleon have led to the pope's imprisonment in French territory. Bell simply does not have space to follow all the twists and turns in, and provide context for, the tumultuous relations between the papacy and Napoleon from 1796 to 1815. To explore this and other topics in greater depth, readers can consult the endnotes and guide to further reading—useful resources that provide yet one additional reason to recommend this book enthusiastically to university and high school students.

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Jane Ziegelman and Andrew Coe. *A Square Meal: A Culinary History of the Great Depression*. New York: Harper, 2016. Pp. 314. \$15.99.

A Square Meal is a highly entertaining book tackling the food history of the Great Depression. In it, the authors have combined many threads of the story: how nutritionists thought Americans should eat in the face of economic collapse; how families faced with shortages actually ate; and how politicians thought about and inadequately addressed the problem of hunger. The authors put their work into a larger historical context, examining how World War I changed the government's and the public's approach to food, as well as American food traditions in the years leading up to the Depression.

The authors begin with World War I and the food lessons generated by that conflict. They also spend a significant amount of time discussing food in both Herbert Hoover and Franklin Roosevelt's White Houses, making clear that food took on contrasting political meanings in each. In the Hoover White House, opulent dining was meant to signify that the Depression was temporary and business as usual should dominate. The frugal,