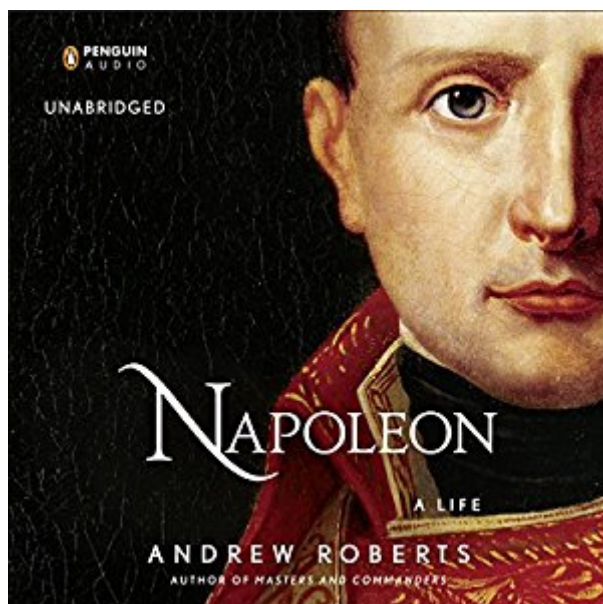


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Napoleon: A Life



Synopsis

The definitive biography of the great soldier-statesman by the New York Times best-selling author of *The Storm of War*. 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 best-selling book of the 19th century. An award-winning historian, Roberts traveled to 53 of Napoleon's 60 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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This is not only the first one-volume history of Napoleon but also THE book on Napoleon to read if you are new to his life-history or looking for a fresh take. Thanks to the recent release of his private letters (33,000+) and a fellowship at the Napoleonic Institute, Roberts has a far wider and deeper look into this infamous leader than any other author has had before. I sometimes find one-volume

efforts unwieldy, but Roberts has been providing this style of high-quality history reading ever since "The Storm of War" and "Masters and Commanders", and this book simply follows suit! To say it simply, he knows the material and shares it well. I wouldn't call myself an expert of western history, really an amateur aficionado at best, even though I've read a lot about world politics of the time including biographies of the personalities and memoirs by the participants. This book sets a great foundation for Kissinger's "A World Restored", which picks up after the fall of Napoleon. For far too long, Napoleon has been subjected to over-sized myths and slanderous libel. Roberts' thesis is that Napoleon was not at all some kind of proto-Hitler dictator but rather the last and greatest leader of the Enlightenment who had many admirable qualities. A surprisingly sympathetic view from a Brit! Of course he had an ugly side (responsibility for wars that killed 4-6 million isn't easily forgotten or forgiven) but I was impressed to learn of his involvement in the regeneration of post-Revolution France, patronage to the arts, and establishment of equality under the Napoleon Code.

In 1841, Scottish historian Thomas Carlyle penned *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and The Heroic in History*. One of the first histories to bring forth the "Great Man" tradition of history--the view that certain individuals are driving forces of history, and simply knowing about such individuals would give one a good command of the history of that era, Andrew Roberts, an English historian, joined this small but notable rank of Anglosphere historians to laud Napoleon as such a figure. What makes this work even more incredible, all things considered, is that an English historian would write and publish a biography of Napoleon that is certainly apologetic and positive on the eve of the bicentennial of the over mythologized Battle of Waterloo where British Nationalists have long wanted to assert that this event, rather than the terrible campaigns of 1813-1814 where Britain played a minimal role, as the *Götterdämmerung* of Napoleon's life and empire. Therefore, the biography written by Andrew Roberts stands drastically apart from the majority of scholarship in the last 40 years of Anglosphere scholarship that has undeniably attempted, with vigor, sometimes very eruditely, and at other times poorly--to destroy the "great man" historiographical tradition and with it, any attempt to view Napoleon as "Great" in the same tradition of the other "Great" leaders in world history.

Why do we need another book on Napoleon? After all, as Mr Roberts admits right at the very beginning of his book, every aspect of Napoleon's life "has now been documented, explored and picked over in the most astonishing detail". Yet, for someone who is interested in the life of Napoleon, he had had an advantage over those biographers of previous generations; because he

could use over a third of the 33000 letters which have recently been published and which serve as a template for this new amazing and highly entertaining examination of Napoleon's life. In addition, Mr Roberts has personally visited fifty-three battlefields where the French Emperor has commanded his troops and has been regularly "astounded by his instinctive feeling for topography, his acuity in judging distance and choosing ground, his sense of timing". The reader approaching this book may think that the military aspects are the central theme of it, but this assumption is wrong. For the author offers a vast and panoramic depiction of almost all the possible angles of Napoleon's life, sometimes doing this in a microscopically examined way. Some examples of this include the various menus used by Napoleon or anecdotes about his vivid experiences in the bedroom or his amorous conquests. It is at this point where the author destroys the myth of a great romance with Josephine, because she took a lover immediately after their marriage and her husband had three times as many mistresses as he acknowledged. The central question of this volume is as follows: can Napoleon be called "the Great"? What are the criteria that win a ruler this sobriquet? To quote again, "Alexander, Alfred, Frederick and Catherine were huge figures who decisively influenced the history of their times".

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