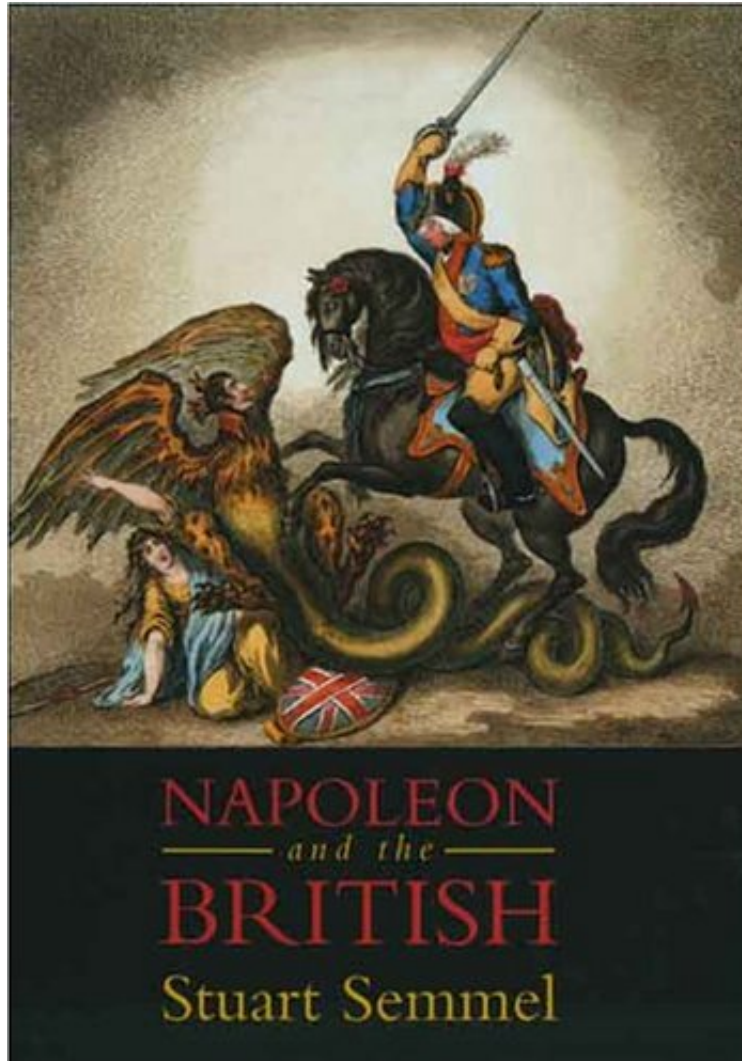


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Napoleon and the British

Stuart Semmel

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Stuart Semmel : Napoleon and the British before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Napoleon and the British:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. A interesting look on British thought but difficult to get through By Lehigh History Student If you are curious about how the British felt about Napoleon than look no further. This book is an excellent account of how the British perceived not only Napoleon but the French Revolution. From Edmond Burke's opinions to parliament this book analyzes the whole package. The prose is a little difficult to get through leading to my three star rating but overall this book provides some interesting information that is unmatched in any other text. If you want to look at relations between the countries this is a good place to start. On that note however the

book is really not for beginners but is a good addition to a reading list on how Napoleon's obsession with Britain led to his downfall.⁶ of 8 people found the following review helpful. Bugbears, Buonapartephobia and Useful Idiots By Tom Holmberg

In 1815, Napoleon was, to establishment Britain "the vile Corsican! ... a Wretch! ... a notorious Impostor! ... a mere Brigand! ... that cowardly and perfidious Traitor! ... the Arch Rebel! ... the Corsican usurper! ... l'Empereur de la Canaille ..." Or so a broadside entitled "Buonapartephobia" reported, ridiculing the extreme rhetoric used to vilify the former Emperor. William Hazlitt, Napoleon's admiring biographer, was to observe that "Every body knows that it is only necessary to raise a bugbear before the English imagination in order to govern it at will." In response to the French Revolution and the creation of the French empire, there arose an extreme form of popular "loyalism" in Britain—"the heart-on-sleeve popular conservative ideology that proclaimed (sometimes in bombastic tones) love for king and country." For those espousing this view, Britain was "the only bar that stands between Napoleon and the empire of the world," conveniently ignoring Britain's own imperial ambitions. In its most extreme form, loyalism could almost cheer Prussia's defeat at Jena by Napoleon as fulfilling Britain's messianic destiny to stand alone against the French tide. Wordsworth decried a future where Britain "shall have no more formidable enemies [and thus bring about] the extinction of all that [Britain] previously contained of [the] good and great..." The poet continued, "If a nation have nothing to oppose or to fear without, it cannot escape decay and concussion within." Britain was searching for a sense of identity and Napoleon was to become a key yardstick by which Britain could define itself. Stuart Semmel has produced an imaginative look at the variety of opinion on Napoleon's rise, progress and fall. A study of what was written about Napoleon, and what was written about him necessarily affected what was thought about Napoleon or at least what the writers wanted Britons to think about Napoleon. Semmel has consulted a myriad of contemporary speeches, pamphlets, broadsides, poems, quarterly reviews, caricatures, plays, newspapers, songs, diaries, etc. of all stripes to explore the protean opinions of the British. Because Napoleon refused to be easily categorized many British observers had difficulties pinning him down. Was he monarchical or Jacobinical? Was he the destroyer of religion or its restorer? Did he continue the Revolution or end it? Was he a "pygmy" or a "Colossus?" Robert Southey who was criticizing the Consular government for not concentrating power in the executive in 1800 was complaining about Napoleon's tyrannical power a few years later. The British could cast all the contradictory epithets and accusations at the French emperor without concern whether taken as a whole they made up a coherent narrative, whether or not they made sense, much less whether they were true or provable, because it didn't matter as long as some of them resonated with the British population. Even individual commentators might swing wildly in opinion from year to year. Richard Whately (*Historic Doubts Relative to Napoleon Bonaparte*) asked rhetorically if the story of Napoleon "had been fabricated for the express purpose of amusing the English nation, could it have been contrived more ingeniously?" The renewal of war in 1803 saw the unleashing of, in Semmel's view, a propaganda campaign "unprecedented in its scope." Pamphlets, caricatures, handbills and songs were churned out by writers and artists, under the supervision of a handful of publishers, assuring a "remarkable uniformity of message and image." Broadside were "all calculated to raise in the lower classes," one publisher stated, "a just detestation of the character and base designs of the enemy." Some of these publications were subsidized by the government, while others were purchased by "noblemen, magistrates, and gentlemen" for distribution to the less fortunate. At the heart of the loyalist critique of Napoleon was the concept of legitimacy (a concept which probably equally consumed Napoleon). Wordsworth, the former republican turned loyalist, compared the French return to monarchy in the guise of Napoleon's imperial crown to a dog returning to its own vomit. Others continued with the Jacobin trope-refusing to abandon an epithet that they had sent so much energy upon and that had for so long served them well-only to name Napoleon a Jacobin crowned. The opposition, on the other hand, used Napoleon's self-made crown as a means of critiquing hereditary monarchy. On a deeper level Napoleon was like a tailor's dummy on which British loyalists could pin all their fears and anxieties-fears of modernity, of change, of the lower classes, of reform, of the decay of a largely mythical British character, of Catholic, Jewish or female emancipation, etc. Napoleon was a means to renew all that had been seemingly lost in modern times by allowing loyalists to define British in opposition to whatever characteristics the writer which to impart to the chameleon-like Napoleon. A use to which modern inheritors of the "black legend" still put him. Alan Schom or Paul Johnson would be readily recognizable to readers of Lewis Goldsmith or Henry Redhead Yorke. The most interesting aspect of Semmel's book is the discussion of those in Britain who refused to follow the government line on Napoleon. Unlike some in Britain like Coleridge and Wordsworth who, after Napoleon's taking power, renounced their former republicanism for strict loyalism, many radicals were more ambiguous about Napoleon. "To a much greater degree than has been recognized," Semmel comments, "many British radicals continued to have kind words to say about Napoleon, and continued to use him as a cudgel with which to chastise their own rulers." To some extent the extreme nature of many of the loyalist assaults on anyone seeking to reform the current system forced radicals to turn to Napoleon to critique the establishment. In the end, Napoleon "functioned in British radical argument as a counter-monarch...he posed a contrasting case that enable the interrogation of monarchy." Opposition critics drew parallels between Napoleon's actions and Britain's. Napoleon's imperial ambitions were compared to Britain's, Napoleon's assaults on "innocent" nations compared to Britain's attacks on Denmark, Napoleon's destruction of the Inquisition and the imprisoning of the Pope compared to Britain's persecution of Catholics in Ireland. Napoleon's recently-minted

titles were compared to the relatively recent origins of Britain's own royal family and the equally recently-minted imperial title of the Austrian king. Some radical argued that despite everything for many in Europe the French conquerors were an improvement their own home-grown "tyrants." William Cobbett, almost a special case, claimed that the government had done more harm to the English Constitution than Napoleon ever had. Napoleon, Cobbett observed, had introduced trial by jury to France while the Ministry was eroding it in Britain. To assume that all the anti-Napoleonists were Jacobins, fellow-travelers, or "useful idiots" would be to accept on face value the loyalists' characterization of them. Whether in the McCarthy era or our own, the book demonstrates the long-term futility of the extreme rhetoric on both ends of the political spectrum, where ideology overwhelms common sense. The difference was that writers in the Opposition were very likely to pay for their exercise of free speech with prosecution in court or a lengthy prison terms. The most absurd case was Thomas J. Wooler, publisher of the radical "Black Dwarf", who was arrested in the spring of 1817 and charged with "a libel upon King John, King Charles the First, King James the second, and King William the third: besides the commons house of Parliament, and the whole people of England, under the familiar appellation of John Bull." Napoleon's role for many Britons was as ambiguous and protean then as it is today. Those with strong, clear, unchanging and unnuanced opinions, whether pro or con, are those whose opinions were most actuated by ideology. In the end, Semmel observes Napoleon "would continue to be a subject of historical controversy, about whom radically contradictory things could be written, and would continue to inspire artistic production...But later British treatments of Napoleon were, interestingly, independent salvos...rather than thrusts and parries in an ongoing battle." But the rhetoric of the battles of the early nineteenth century continued to inform many later writers. Not a history of Napoleon (Semmel avoids expressing his own opinion on Napoleon), actual facts of Napoleon's life are largely irrelevant to Semmel's account. Instead this is a history of British opinion about Napoleon. Opinion doesn't necessarily need to be strictly based on facts and often wasn't. After all British mothers were allegedly frightening their wayward offspring with the bogeyman of Boney coming to get them. Throughout Napoleon's public life a debate raged in the British political (and literary) press. Any politically aware Briton could not help having been caught up in the torrent and often tossed upon its stormy seas. Semmel summarizes a wealth of contemporary political rhetoric from a wide variety of sources which the reader will never encounter on their own without immersing oneself in the ephemeral literature of the day. Several examples of contemporary political cartoons are presented, but in black-and-white and often too small to read the caricatures' text. Perhaps a section of colored, full-page reproductions would have done better justice to these illustrations.

What did Napoleon Bonaparte mean to the British people? This engaging book reconstructs the role that the French leader played in the British political, cultural, and religious imagination in the early nineteenth century. Denounced by many as a tyrant or monster, Napoleon nevertheless had sympathizers in Britain. Stuart Semmel explores the ways in which the British used Napoleon to think about their own history, identity, and destiny. Many attacked Napoleon but worried that the British national character might not be adequate to the task of defeating him. Others, radicals and reformers, used Napoleon's example to criticize the British constitution. Semmel mines a wide array of sources ranging from political pamphlets and astrological almanacs to sonnets by canonical Romantic poets to reveal surprising corners of late Hanoverian politics and culture.

From Publishers Weekly From his earliest success as a young general until well after his death in exile, Napoleon Bonaparte was a source of fascination for Britons. In this engaging study, Semmel "explores the ways in which Napoleon Bonaparte mattered for Britain" over the course of roughly six decades, from 1796-1855. A self-described historian of British opinion, Semmel is less concerned with events than with British perceptions of them, and he draws on the full spectrum of political discourse about the "Corsican Usurper" for his research, from the most popular expressions (such as broadsides, pamphlets, patriotic songs and almanacs) to the most elite (i.e., newspapers, oil paintings and biographies). In so doing, Semmel finds that Napoleon served three broad ideological purposes for the British. First, he functioned as a lens through which Britons could examine larger political and social issues to dissect "their own identity, constitution, and history." Second, he served as a kind of blank screen onto which the British could project their anxieties about national decline, social unrest and their own "sins" of empire—such as India and the slave trade. Finally, "Little Nap" provided British radicals and reformers with a "potent instrument with which to investigate the condition of British liberty... and to pick apart loyalist conceptions of monarchy and legitimacy." Semmel adroitly navigates this complex ideological landscape, never letting the reader lose sight of the fundamental issues at stake (whether religious, socioeconomic, philosophical or political). Although the book will clearly appeal to academics who study 19th-century Europe, Semmel's portrait of a nation displacing its debates about domestic issues and anxieties onto an enemy may also intrigue readers with a more general interest in politics and history. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. "A thorough and illuminating book."—Paul Johnson, *The Sunday Telegraph*