

University of Michigan Law School

University of Michigan Law School Scholarship Repository

Reviews

Faculty Scholarship

2007

Review of Napoleon and the British

Donald J. Herzog

University of Michigan Law School, dherzog@umich.edu

Available at: <https://repository.law.umich.edu/reviews/60>

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.law.umich.edu/reviews>



Part of the [Comparative and Foreign Law Commons](#), and the [Legal History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Herzog, Donald J. Review of Napoleon and the British, by S. Semmel. *J. Brit. Stud.* 46, no. 3 (2007): 696-7.

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Scholarship at University of Michigan Law School Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Reviews by an authorized administrator of University of Michigan Law School Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact mlaw.repository@umich.edu.

STUART SEMMEL. *Napoleon and the British*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004. Pp. xii+354. \$45.00 (cloth).

Was he fascinating or repulsive? The bold courier of republican liberty under law or the scabrous carrier of lethal Jacobin corruption? Heaven-sent deliverer or providential scourge? Even his name was up for grabs: was it Bonaparte or Buonaparte? One need only dip into contemporary sources to realize that the British were obsessed with Napoleon. Stuart Semmel has done a first-rate job combing through those sources and using them to illuminate political culture. (Semmel does not offer the primary quotations I will use here. I offer them for fun, or to pile on with glee, and not at all to reproach him.) Do not mistake his book for an overstuffed quotefest. Semmel's analytic work is sometimes understated but consistently first rate.

Especially impressive, though here perhaps I reflect my background in political theory, is Semmel's treatment of *legitimacy*. Radicals treated the category with disdain, even contempt. Consider William Hone, in *The Right Divine of Kings to Govern Wrong!* from 1821 (London): "Kingcraft rears up its terrific mass, muffled in the mantle of Legitimacy; its head cowed and crowned, and dripping with the holy oil of Divine Right; its eyes glaring deadly hate to human happiness; its lips demanding worship for itself" (11). But this seems baffling. Should not political authority be legitimate? Semmel reports (and the *Oxford English Dictionary* confirms) that *legitimacy* took on its specifically political meaning in the early 1800s. Not that, before those years, people did not argue about who had a right to rule. (You cannot read the 1649 transcript of Charles I's trial and miss that.) But—here is the crux—*legitimacy* quite deliberately conflates "having the right to rule" with "having a lawful birth." The language insinuates that only lineal descendants of the rightful king may rule. It is Orwellian, as we would say, in making it hard to articulate any other view.

So how could Napoleon be the rightful ruler of France? He was not even French. Thus, the sneering force of spelling his name *Buonaparte*; thus, the *Anti-Jacobin Review*'s tirelessly branding him "the sanguinary Corsican," "the pestiferous Corsican," "the wily Corsican," "the blood-thirsty Corsican," and "the brutal Corsican." Semmel lovingly explores the ironic twists and turns this standard conservative maneuver invited. So, how could George III, of the house of Hanover, be the rightful ruler of Britain? Because, presumably, George I was second cousin of Queen Anne, but that in turn makes one wonder about the status of the Old Pretender, let alone the rather more abrupt breaks endlessly punctuating the allegedly serene parade of eldest sons peacefully mounting the throne. English monarchy, as radicals demonstrated over and over, had a profane history far removed from its own pious aspirations. Or again, Tories could not help scoffing that Napoleon's own family background was extraordinarily undignified. Some radicals denied it, but others took it as a great tribute to the career open to talents—and were happy to find providential endorsement of their principles in Napoleon's astonishing successes.

Similarly, the authorities were playing with fire—and they knew it—in paying journalists willing to call for Napoleon's assassination. (In November 1804, Robert Southey, still nine years away from becoming poet laureate but already having abandoned his youthful radi-

calism, dreamed he was in Napoleon's palace—and revealed that he'd had such dreams before. "Bonaparte struck me; I had an axe in my hand; he saw that I was half inclined to cut him down, and attempted to kill me. I struck him with the axe, and brought him down, and dragged him out into a public hall, not being yet dead, and there beheaded him. This is the first time I ever killed him in self-defence, though I have more than once done it upon the pure principle of tyrannicide" [Edward Dowden, ed., *The Correspondence of Robert Southey with Caroline Bowles* (Dublin, 1881), 367].) But for decades regicide had been way beyond the pale, even blasphemous. Here again radicals were happy to seize on conservative arguments and turn them against conservative causes: if violence against unjust leaders was permissible . . .

I have only two criticisms of this fine book. One doubtless is aimed against Yale University Press, not Semmel: the splendid color dust jacket aside, the artistic reproductions are scant and poorly done, blurry and small enough that it is utterly impossible to read what is printed on them. Contemporary engravings are spectacular grist for Semmel's mill, so this is a lost opportunity. I aim my second complaint not particularly against Semmel but a whole way of conceiving and doing this kind of historical work, namely, accepting the off-the-shelf distinction between intellectual and social history. For two reasons, Semmel punts on the matter of how good or bad conditions for Napoleon were during his exile on St. Helena. One is that it is hard to know and remains controversial: fair enough. But the other runs this way: "For the historian of British opinion, what matters is not the actual conditions Napoleon faced, but the controversy itself" (212). I take vigorous exception. One crucial way to probe these "opinions" is to see how they cast what "facts" we can get our hands on, to see in what ways they were reasonable, in what ways not.

Finally, Semmel is exceedingly quiet about a political moral of his story that he must grasp. The British view of Napoleon turns out to be all about the British, virtually not at all about Napoleon or the French. The gyrating popular discussion is an exercise in narcissism, not in trying to learn anything about life across the Channel. Not for the first time, foreign affairs turned into an excuse for gazing into the mirror. Nor for the last.

Don Herzog, University of Michigan