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**Stuart Semmel**, *Napoleon and the British*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004. xii + 354 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography and index. Cloth, \$40.00, £25. ISBN: 0-300-09001-3.

Review by J. E. Cookson, University of Canterbury.

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Stuart Semmel begins his book with an extract from *Buonapartephobia* published in 1815 by the radical William Hone to ridicule contemporary vilification of Napoleon, particularly as practised in *The Times* newspaper. If we like to imagine the two views, pro-Napoleonist and anti-Napoleonist, competing for the attention of historians, the latter view, of course, has won handsomely. Over the years, a very great deal has been written about patriotic resistance to Napoleon and relatively little about the sympathizers—no less patriotic in their own eyes—who dominate Semmel's book. In his opening chapters, E. Tangye Lean in a rather unconvincing study of "Napoleonists" in British politics up to 1960, produced some valuable information on the admirers gathered around Lord and Lady Holland; but since then, the topic has been pretty much laid aside.[1] Semmel, indeed, perhaps feels he is standing on a lonely shore because he notes how the loyalism of the period has, in recent years, overtaken radicalism as the chief interest of historians. Linda Colley's seminal work on the "forging of the nation" has had a powerful related effect in that she depicted the war against the French Revolution and Napoleon as the culminating British nation-forming experience.[2] As Britain has now entered a period of bicentennial remembrance of resistance to and victory over Napoleon, we can expect the further triumph of the "anti-Napoleonists." Semmel has done us good service in bringing the other side out of the shadows.

Napoleon as the devil-figure of British imagination is well-known: a usurper whose ambition was satisfied only with an imperial crown; a military ruler who turned his soldiery against the "liberties" of Europe and who nourished a special enmity against Britain as the most unrelenting of his enemies; a despot who cowed his subjects with a powerful police and controlled press. The great merit of Semmel's book is that it reveals the complex discourse that lay behind the image. In this discourse, the main protagonists are seen to be loyalists, millenarians and radicals. Even loyalists were unsure of what Napoleon represented; whether he was a Cromwell or a Washington; whether he was the child of the revolution or its destroyer; whether the old national character of France continued under his rule or whether an entirely new society had been created around him. It is right, too, to emphasize the anxieties that existed behind the "war whoop" which so disgusted radicals. Among loyalists, there was hope but much less confidence that Britain would be capable of putting up a "national" resistance to Napoleon. The "declaration of the merchants and bankers" of the City in 1803 deserves to rank alongside the famous revolutionary decree of ten years earlier of the *patrie* in danger and the *levée en masse*. But it was introduced to the public with a speech that warned that Rome and Constantinople had fallen when their citizens trusted their defence to other hands. In other words, the exhortation to defend the country encased fears that the public spirit of the nation would not prove equal to the crisis.

It is good to have a whole chapter that acknowledges the close connection between religion and the politics of the war. Millenarian politics centered on the interpretation of Biblical prophecies, especially those concerned with the restoration of the Jews and the identification of the Antichrist. Politics, when held in this frame of reference, were deeply alluring to contemporaries, whether evangelicals or Unitarians ("rational" Christians), Churchmen or Dissenters. But the application of millenarian beliefs to politics was also ultimately unsatisfying because, if every event was taken to have a "first cause," the temptation was to fall into a fatalistic acceptance of what the times seemed to portend. Semmel tells us that Spencer Perceval, the "evangelical prime minister," felt it necessary in parliamentary debate to

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affirm the inscrutability of providential government (pp. 104-5). Prayerful human action as the best and only course of action to adopt, Semmel might have added, was easily the dominant religious response in Britain to the Napoleonic hegemony. Nevertheless, one measure of the huge impact of the French Revolution and Napoleon on the contemporary world was the amount of eschatological speculation that each provoked. Such great events were seen to have effected seismic changes in Europe's social and political order. Among the intellectual furniture of the age, providentialism, which was conceived to be a thoroughly rational enquiry, provided a practicable, credible way of reading the macro-history that the times required. Semmel notes how much the ambiguity of Napoleon's religious identity complicated the issue (p. 76). Was he the defender of toleration and protector of Protestants? Or had he restored Catholic France and advanced the power of Catholicism in Europe? Or was he a cynical *politique* and unbeliever who had perpetuated the "atheism" of the Revolution? Curiously, opposition millenarians, in defending Napoleon, stuck to the traditional English idea that Rome represented the Antichrist while loyalists often made a fresh reading that put the Devil's horns on Napoleon himself.

In an original book, the most original chapter is that on Napoleon's impact on radical politics. The establishment of the empire in 1804, Semmel says, particularly brought into play issues concerning monarchical title and political legitimacy in general. Loyalists declared that Napoleon in taking the crown had debased the monarchical principle because he lacked the hereditary right that placed the royal succession above political contentions. He was a republican, a ruler dependent in the last resort on the will of his subjects whatever splendid imperial façade he erected and political manipulation he practised to conceal that fact. Radicals in reply, Semmel emphasizes, adeptly made the point that George III occupied his throne on similar terms. In a revival of the debate about England's 1688 revolution, loudly heard when Burke and Price had contended at the beginning of the French Revolution, radicals argued that William of Orange's election to the throne had placed the crown at parliament's disposal, with parliament acting for the nation. Since the present dynasty possessed no inviolable hereditary title, George III's government could claim legitimacy only as far as it represented the popular will—not very far at all, radicals of course concluded. Napoleon, the "imperial sans-culotte," had at least built his regime on plebiscites and an impressive program of domestic reform. Towards the end of this chapter on pro-Napoleon radicals, Semmel points out that they found a further godsend in Napoleon's escape from Elba and the ignominious flight of the Bourbons from their own kingdom—recalling James II's flight in 1688 which had forfeited him the throne. France had chosen Napoleon, and to wage war against the right of a people to settle their own government was to wage war on behalf of tyrants.

Semmel usefully reminds us how much pessimism pervaded discourse about the war and Napoleon (pp. 14, 66). Radicals, with their critique of British government and the constitution, made their own contribution to national anxiety and talk of national decay. But loyalists, whatever patriotic bombast they broadcast, also exhibited concern about national defense and the "extent of national resources" as the war developed into a titanic struggle between the greatest land power and the greatest sea power, often compared to that between Rome and Carthage. Semmel analyzes the counter-invasion broadsides of 1803 "as a high-water marker of British invasion fears" (p. 63). The propaganda did not take the patriotic commitment of the poor for granted; for it said little about present satisfactions and much about the "miseries" the French would inflict, even on the most deprived. One aspect Semmel does not consider was the economic pessimism that pervaded British assessments of the war. A war of sorts was fought with statistics, as Napoleon's government showed off the wealth and population of the Empire and the British responded in kind in order to demonstrate that they possessed resources equal to the struggle. Much of Britain's anxiety came down to the question of whether a commercial society, however great its wealth, could defend itself successfully and hope for victory against a military society. Radicals—Major Cartwright is a good example—as well as loyalists wondered how the "military energies" of the population could be recovered when Britain's commercial success over a century or more had implanted a culture of self-interest and self-indulgence.

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The antithetical relationship of commerce and war was widely accepted and had deep roots in the history of the fall of Rome and in the Machiavellian-Harringtonian paradigm that a society was vulnerable if it did not organize its population for its own defense. British observers perceived Napoleonic France as a military society par excellence, again something that deserved more explanation in this book. The overthrow of the Bourbon monarchy, they believed, had liberated the energies of a people which were first channelled into national defense when the powers of Europe attacked the Revolution and then into wars of conquest. Like Cromwell, Napoleon had risen out of obscurity to leadership of the soldiery and, later, of a society dominated by the military and organized for war. In liberty-loving, conscription-free Britain, the Napoleonic conscription became the chief badge of the military servitude of the French. Hardly any notice was taken of the Code Napoléon or other domestic reforms. Semmel has a whole chapter explaining how pro-Napoleon radicals used Napoleon to define legitimate authority in terms of popular sovereignty as part of their challenge to the existing political order. On the other hand, he does not sufficiently recognize that anti-Napoleonists, for their part, used Napoleon's military regime to uphold the idea of liberty in Britain's history, government and national identity. Leigh Hunt's *Examiner* newspaper took the issue to them by claiming a contradiction existed between Napoleon's civil achievements and the military despotism he was accused of maintaining. One reason, surely, for the radical attack on military flogging was to draw attention to the tyranny British soldiers suffered compared with the more benign practices found in Napoleon's army.

In this period--and for quite some time afterwards--identity was mainly explored in terms of national character. "The laws of national character," pronounced John Stuart Mill later on, "are by far the most important class of sociological laws." Semmel has little to say in this respect. While he acknowledges that the British understood their history, system of government and identity in terms of the "liberty" they uniquely possessed, he might have considered that the British "love of liberty" was seen to be inseparable from the character of the British as a people. Further, both George III and Napoleon, in the loyalist imagination at least, were made into representatives of the national character of the peoples they ruled over. The cartoonists, Gillray especially, probably did it better than anyone; in Britain Napoleon was quickly aligned with the vanity, flamboyance, deviousness and inhumanity of the French. Similarly, George III was made to represent the steadiness, benevolence and decency that the British, the propertied classes anyway, liked to believe about themselves. At this time the self-image of the British as a just, humane and benevolent people was developing rapidly, and its part in the "forging of the nation" deserves to be better understood. The Jubilee of 1809 particularly focussed on philanthropic projects, led by the example of the king himself who donated a large sum for the relief of debtors. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that a point was being made that the French and Napoleon the warlord had launched brutality and misery on the world while the British had kept their humanity.

Much play was made on Napoleon's Corsican origins. Again, Semmel's argument might be extended to emphasize how British image-making tried to place Napoleon outside the pale of European civilization, as it happened thus anticipating the declaration issued from Vienna in 1815 on his escape from Elba. Corsica, with its banditry and feuding clans and without a history of statehood, was seen to exist on the margins of Europe. One reading of Napoleon's permanent enmity towards Britain, not mentioned by Semmel, was that he had carried the practice of the blood-feud into the European states system in defiance of the "laws of Europe"--the conventions regulating relations between European governments. But what is most interesting is that he first really captivated the British public through reports of the atrocities towards the Turks and his own soldiers he was said to have perpetrated during his campaigns in the East in 1798-9. This was at the time of the war against Tipu Sultan in India who was being presented to the British public as the epitome of oriental "perfidy" and cruelty; and the resemblance was invariably noted. The stereotype of the eastern tyrant--the "cruel Turk"--had been long and firmly held in the European consciousness; a ruler, capricious, merciless, treacherous, voluptuous. Napoleon's eastern sojourn and the events associated with it were never forgotten, the stories given impressive authority by the account Sir Robert Wilson published in 1802.[3] The duc d'Enghien's abduction and

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execution in 1804, for example, became the ruthless elimination of a contender for the throne, an act worthy of the most profligate tyrant. Napoleon, too, was accused of blood-lust in his willingness to sacrifice huge numbers of his soldiers for the sake of personal triumph. Peltier's case in 1803 was interesting because it threatened to implicate the British government in any plot to assassinate Napoleon, placing it outside the ambit of civilized conduct. Perhaps Napoleon, made into an outsider by his British adversaries, can be said to have secured some kind of revenge when there was uproar in Europe over the Royal Navy's bombardment of Copenhagen and its civilian population in 1807.

Semmel concludes his book by explaining that Napoleon in defeat and exile gradually disappeared from British political contentions, which saw him converted into a purely historical, though perpetually fascinating figure. More, though, could have been said. The completeness of the victory over Napoleon and his empire finally firmed up Britain's sense of national destiny, in the first instance especially among the religious-minded whose providentialism now directed them to believe in the nation's divine mission to civilize and Christianize the world. The anxiety and pessimism that had such a strong presence earlier evaporated quite suddenly as Britain completed a string of naval conquests in the latter stages of the war and as Waterloo provided all the proof that was needed of the country's military reputation and national character. In 1815, Britain truly acquired the moral armament to be a great imperial state. To the British Waterloo was an unqualified *British* victory, an occasion when the two greatest captains of the age finally met to put their armies and nations to the test. This is worth saying because if Napoleon drifted to the backdrop of history, Wellington came forward to stand as the model of the quintessential Englishman to serve another age.

There are, then, several other large contexts in which the subject of this book may be placed. The boundaries of Semmel's study are set by the sources he relies on. As he admits: "Journalism and political pamphlets form the backbone of this study" (p. 10). In the introduction, he defines his aim as the "reconstruction of Napoleon's place in the broad political culture of late Hanoverian Britain" (p. 14). The "British" who feature here are mostly radical and loyalist publicists writing for "those men and women who read pamphlets, newspapers, and monthly or quarterly journals" and not for a "narrow, privileged elite" (pp.11-12). Even so, one can make too much of the disconnection between popular culture, however broadly defined, and elite politics, for the two at least had an obvious meeting place in newspaper reports of parliamentary proceedings. The pro-Napoleon, anti-war members of the Whig opposition, led by Samuel Whitbread, are hardly mentioned; yet they had close contact with liberal intellectuals who were engaged in a struggle throughout the war with Establishment opponents. It was at this level that issues concerning the wartime economy, national mobilisation, the international obligations of governments and providential operation in history were mostly worked out and then mediated to a wider audience by the journalists and writers who are Semmel's main concern. *Napoleon and the British* tells us much that we need to know. But the politics of the war are still far from being an exhausted subject.

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## NOTES

[1] Edward Tangye Lean, *The Napoleonists: a Study in Political Disaffection, 1760-1960* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970).

[2] Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992).

[3] Sir R. Wilson, *History of the British Expedition to Egypt* (London, 1802).

J. E. Cookson  
University of Canterbury  
john.cookson@canterbury.ac.nz

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