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Philip Dwyer, *Napoleon: The Path to Power*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007. xiii + 651 pp. Maps, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$35.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-300-13754-5.

Review by Michael V. Leggiere, University of North Texas.

On the inside flap of the Yale University Press dust jacket, Charles Esdaile provides a typical laudatory blurb, claiming that Philip Dwyer's *Napoleon: The Path to Power* "is the best biography of Napoleon that has ever been written in the English language, and conceivably the best biography of Napoleon ever, in any language." Contrary to Professor Esdaile's flattering observation, *Napoleon: The Path to Power* is not a biography and should not be categorized or recommended as such. Describing this book as a conventional biography does a disservice to Professor Dwyer, creates expectations that his work cannot satisfy, and in general detracts from its quality and original contributions. Moreover, Dwyer did not intend to provide a new account of Napoleon's military exploits. In fact, the book says little of Napoleon's achievements as a military innovator and commander other than to clarify some enduring popular yet false perceptions. Instead, Dwyer has provided the best political history of Napoleon's early life ever in any language. Readers are spared both a long polemic and pages of introductory drivel that fail to reveal the author's *casus belli*. Employing a powerful prologue to establish his argument and capture his audience, Dwyer succinctly explains his motive: "Indeed, Napoleon contributed much towards constructing his own myth, from his youth even until he fell from power, when, while in exile, he dictated his memoirs to a group of disciples who took down his every word in the hope that his version of history would prevail" (p. 1). It is precisely this question that Dwyer answers: How did Napoleon and those around him construct his image and market it to whoever appeared interested? As Dwyer himself states, "The following pages are about understanding how Napoleon went about constructing his life, and how he constructed his own legend" (p. 8).

Two major themes dominate the book. First, Professor Dwyer provides a superb study of Napoleon's modern use of propaganda. The book expertly chronicles Bonaparte's numerous media blitzes, reports to the government, self-aggrandizing use of the arts, and the resulting capture of French public opinion to the extent that the name Bonaparte became synonymous with that of a savior by 1799. Second, Dwyer employs the tools of psychobiography to reach the "understanding" of the forces that shaped Napoleon's life and, at the same time, how Napoleon constructed his life. Rather than offer a traditional descriptive narrative, Dwyer places his central emphasis on Napoleon's psychological motivation: his youth, upbringing, loves, hopes, fears, and, in particular, the darker aspects of his personality that drove him. Consequently, *Napoleon: The Path to Power* is first a political and iconographical history of Napoleon's early life and second a psychological analysis of what Dwyer contends to be a conflicted young man.

Critics of Dwyer's methodology will have much fuel. On one hand, revealing that Napoleon relied on propaganda to promote himself does not constitute an epiphany and adds little to the literature that can be termed "new." Indeed, Napoleon was a "politician," and throughout western civilization extending back to the Caesars of Rome "politicians" have harnessed the arts to magnify their glory and further consolidate their rule. On the other hand, psychobiography and its parent, psychohistory, have well-documented shortcomings. Psychoanalysis, which often does not enjoy the support of credible research,

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emphasizes speculation on psychological motivations and analyzes the subject after the fact, sometimes at the expense of conventional historical analysis.

While acknowledging these specific criticisms that could be levied against Dwyer's main themes, this reader found that first, the author bases his work on solid foundations and second, eighteenth-century historiographical trends bolster Dwyer's correct interpretation of Bonaparte as a modern propagandist. To begin, Dwyer stops short of actually attributing Napoleon's actions to psychological turmoil and instead *suggests* that Napoleon's mood may have prompted his behavior at specific times. One example is Dwyer's treatment of the massacre at Jaffa: "The massacre was committed from a position of weakness, that is, out of a desire to impose authority and to terrorize the opposing camp. Bonaparte must have hoped that news of the massacre would weaken any future resistance. To that extent it was a political act, but it also testifies to a complete disregard for human life bordering on the pathological, to an authoritarian, repressive style of rule that did not originate in the 'Orient' but which already existed, to an extent, in Corsica and which was certainly present in Italy. As for Bonaparte, it is impossible to say whether his lack of humanity was an inherent latent trait that had now come to the fore—had the realization that Josephine was unfaithful made him even more callous and unfeeling towards those around him?—or whether he had simply become immune to suffering. There was now a ruthlessness about him that was taking alarming dimensions" (pp. 421-22). While some could view this as a matter of semantics in which the mere suggestion amply substitutes for the direct accusation, and thus attack Dwyer for not being bold enough to openly and fully state his case, the author skillfully supports his notions with plenty of erudite research and critical historical analysis. Dwyer supports his 519 pages of text with over 1,500 endnotes. Quality does indeed eclipse quantity, as the breadth and depth of the sources Dwyer consulted is nothing short of impressive. He bases his arguments on a thorough synthesis of published primary material supported by a smattering of archival documents. Regarding the overall picture of Bonaparte as a pioneer of modern propaganda, Dwyer provides numerous examples to support his claim. He finds that during the First Italian Campaign, "the accounts of the battles and the conditions in which they were fought, the missives that were regularly sent to the government and the people of Paris so that they were constantly kept abreast, were all techniques of self promotion. Bonaparte, in other words, was particularly adept at flagging his own achievements. Other generals . . . published their letters to the Directory in newspapers . . . but their accounts lacked the flair and excitement that Bonaparte was able to convey. Like so many modern-day administrators, they were not writing to be read . . . whereas Bonaparte was writing for the public, instinctively aware of the importance of the newspapers as a medium. Moreover, many of the so-called letters to the Directory were also printed as posters destined for the walls of various French towns" (pp. 206-207). "The interesting thing is that Bonaparte was perhaps the first figure in modern history to foster the illusion of avoiding public acclaim when his real goal was to attract it. It was a ploy that worked." (p. 323) The reason why this worked, and the reason why Napoleon was able to employ propaganda in a modern sense, was because of the existence of a politically-conscious, informed public opinion which the eighteenth-century produced.

Dwyer's extremely interesting prologue barely spans eight pages, yet a reader need only scan it to gain a complete appreciation for Dwyer's methodology and to feel the full weight of his argument. To establish his thesis, the author uses the example provided by the combat on the bridge at Arcola on the banks of the Alpone River on 15 November 1796 when troops under General Bonaparte's personal command failed to cross a wooden bridge in the face of Austrian artillery. Using the words of not merely eyewitnesses, but the very officers of Bonaparte's staff, Dwyer interprets the combat for what it was: a French failure. With the troops cowering behind dykes to shield themselves from the dreadful Austrian artillery, the French General Augereau grabbed a standard and charged the bridge followed by a handful of bold soldiers. After his small escort had been cut down, Augereau retraced his steps and escaped unscathed. Not to be outdone, Bonaparte repeated the scene, dragging his poor staff with him. Several fell and some received mortal wounds; intensified Austrian fire turned Bonaparte's charge into a rout. The general himself fell victim to the stampede of fleeing Frenchmen, falling into a ditch where he probably would have drowned had not his men fished him out. Dwyer cites General Joubert's

evaluation of the combat: "Never have we fought so badly, never have the Austrians fought so well" (p. 3).

After recounting the events at Arcola, Professor Dwyer turns to the core issue of the book: Bonaparte's propaganda machine and the Napoleonic version of the "Big Lie." "This is not how the battle, described by Bonaparte as having decided the fate of Italy, or the behavior of the French troops, was presented to the public back home," writes Dwyer (p. 3). The author notes how within a short time the roles of Augereau and Bonaparte became reversed in the story so that the former actually followed the latter's lead. Dwyer concludes: "The cowardice, or common sense, depending on one's point of view, of the troops was expunged entirely from the official report. Indeed, the fact that the attempted crossing failed was discreetly forgotten" (p. 4). Dwyer's presentation of this evolution in the manner in which the events at Arcola were portrayed brings to mind Nazi veneration for the failed 1923 Munich Beer Hall Putsch. "The heroic image of Bonaparte successfully charging the bridge was transformed, within a short space of time, into a propaganda cornerstone, represented in countless engravings and paintings." Of course leading the way was Antoine-Jean Gros's *Bonaparte at the Bridge of Arcola*, "the first iconic painting of Bonaparte" (p. 4). As Dwyer concludes, the strength of the painting was not historical accuracy, but its ability "not only to allow people to recognize Bonaparte, but also to identify with him" (p. 5). According to the author, Bonaparte was able to use the First Italian Campaign to continue "the tradition of romanticizing and idealizing war" in order to feed the French public's increasing need to worship "the ideal of the heroic individual. Bonaparte was instinctively able to exploit this need for the hero" (p. 7).

From this stirring prologue, Dwyer brings the reader to Corsica and Napoleon's childhood; 500 pages later the book ends with the coup of Brumaire and Bonaparte's rise to power as First Consul. Space does not permit a complete rendering of all of the author's intriguing and provocative points--there are many and they are all interesting--yet a few examples will suffice to describe the general tone of the book. Although the scant details of Bonaparte's youth is excusable in light of the fact that Dwyer did not seek to write a biography, the absence of a detailed, insightful discussion concerning Napoleon's education on Corsica as well as his relationship with Carlo and Letizia (especially the latter), remains a curious omission. Instead, Dwyer looks for the influences that molded Bonaparte's psyche. Concerning his father, the author concludes that "Carlo was ambitious, driven by a desire to get ahead socially" and that Napoleon sensed an "obsequiousness in his father towards people in authority. But it was, nevertheless, ambition, not sycophancy that Carlo passed on to his sons; they would never hesitate to approach the great and the powerful to solicit favors" (p. 16). In this regard, Carlo, once the close associate of the father of Corsican freedom, Pasquale Paoli, established close and beneficial relations with the French forces that occupied Corsica. Carlo's "cooperation, or collaboration, was to be rewarded materially in a number of different ways . . ." (p. 25). Primarily, Carlo was able to secure appointments for his sons and daughters to the prestigious schools in France that were reserved for the children of the nobility. Napoleon went to military school rather than his older brother, Joseph, who was enrolled in the seminary at Autun. Dwyer dispels the popular belief that Napoleon received the appointment to military school because of his martial superiority over Joseph (oddly, Owen Connelly's 1968 biography of Joseph Bonaparte is not included in the bibliography). As the author explains, in Corsica the church took precedence over the state, meaning that the first born was destined to be a member of the clergy. In France, however, the first-born would have been pursued a career in the military. Thus, "personal inclinations had absolutely nothing to do with the choice of careers: tradition, family contacts and lack of suitable alternatives did" (p. 26)

Equally important to Napoleon's "construction" was Carlo's "cooperation or collaboration" which sowed the seeds of turmoil in his son's heart. Torn between his love for Corsica and his task at Brienne of assimilating himself to the people who conquered and now ruled his native land, the young Napoleon

succumbed to depression, according to Dwyer. He describes Napoleon's state of mind while at Brienne as "melancholic" (p. 38). Carlo's death on 24 February 1785, contends Dwyer, "brought no external outpouring of grief" on Napoleon's part (p. 39). In fact, the author cannot find any indication that Carlo's death adversely affected Napoleon. "This does not mean that Bonaparte did not love his father, but it is safe to say that his feelings were ambivalent." Dwyer also speculates that this ambivalence may have been caused by "deeper, underlying reasons. It is possible Bonaparte resented his father, even if unconsciously, for having sent him away . . . so many years ago" (p. 39). Dwyer, who suggests that Napoleon may have been "embarrassed by his father's social position, or rather his lack of it," concludes that Napoleon's view of his father bordered on the "disdainful" (pp. 40-41). Finally, Dwyer reiterates Connelly's position concerning the popular belief that Napoleon assumed the role of head of the family after Carlo's death simply because Joseph was weak. Although the author provides no source documentation to support it, he asserts that the dying Carlo tasked Joseph with devoting "himself to his family duties." Unable to break his promise, Joseph left France, forgoing a career in the military (he had left the seminary) and returned to Corsica. However, he still needed formal preparation for a career and so enrolled at the University of Pisa in Tuscany. Dwyer speculates that "this is perhaps why Bonaparte took an active role in family affairs" (p. 42).

Although Dwyer forgoes an in-depth analysis of Bonaparte's young years on Corsica, he does provide a satisfactory description of Napoleon at Brienne. This period of Napoleon's life is rich with barely substantiated stories that fill the pages of popular biographies. In an interesting tactic, Dwyer does not waste his time attempting to prove or disprove stories whose sources "are unreliable" and "written many years after the fact." He spares the reader an investigation of these stories and their sources, and instead comes to the conclusion that "Napoleon was probably a loner, a marginal figure. There is nothing to indicate the contrary. . . . This is not to say that . . . Napoleon didn't have a relatively normal childhood. What it does show is that, in the face of tremendous difficulties, Napoleon could adapt and flourish" (p. 31). In fact, Dwyer asserts that "the point is not whether these and other stories are true . . . nor so much what they may or may not tell us about Napoleon as a child, but rather what they tell us about the way Bonaparte, as adult, wanted to be seen, and how Bonaparte's childhood was mythologized over the years" (p. 30). In addition, the author cautions that the popular image of Napoleon at Brienne as a disadvantaged, "asocial loner, picked on by his fellow students, who displayed martial virtues—including stoicism and selflessness—is, in some respects, a political image that needs, accordingly to be treated with a certain amount of skepticism" (pp. 31-32). According to Dwyer, Napoleon and/or his supporters purposefully fabricated "the image of an outsider who had been chosen by destiny in childhood to play a great role and whose heroic potential was evident even as a boy" (p. 31).

We see the next step in Napoleon's evolution take place at Auxonne in 1788 on the eve of the Revolution. "Bonaparte was becoming much more communicative, much more confident, and it was undoubtedly this confidence that made him amenable to chatter. This character trait was to last right up to the First Italian Campaign in 1796. . . . At Brienne and the *Ecole militaire*, his manner was more forced: he was a foreigner. . . . At Valence and Auxonne he seems to have been happier, perhaps not as hard on himself. He was, in short, enjoying his youth for the first time. . ." (p. 49). Returning to Corsica, the turmoil of the Revolution soon followed Bonaparte to his island paradise. Dwyer provides detailed yet succinct coverage of the revolution in Corsica, making the point that Corsicans were "fighting to become an integral part of France and to break any obstacles that prevented this from happening" (p. 57). Dwyer of course chronicles Napoleon's involvement, claiming that "on 30 November 1789, a letter drawn up in Ajaccio, probably inspired by Bonaparte, stating that the troubles in Corsica stemmed from the uncertainty about the island's future," was read to the National Assembly (p. 61). This reviewer would have liked to see some definitive substantiation of the statement: "probably inspired by Bonaparte." Regardless, when news reached Corsica that on that same day the National Assembly had declared Corsica an integral part of the French kingdom, Napoleon hung a banner stating: *Vive la nation*,

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*vive Paoli, vive Mirabeau*. Dwyer views this as an “apparent evolution in Bonaparte’s thinking on France and Corsica. If outwardly he had integrated into French society, inwardly he still defined himself in opposition to the French” (p. 62). “When Bonaparte now cried ‘*Vive Mirabeau*’ alongside his customary ‘*Vive Paoli*’, it was the first instance of his identifying with the French, rather than rejecting them as he had done so emphatically up until now. This does not mean that he had become French—he was still Corsican above all else—but he was now identifying for the first time with Corsica *and* France” (pp. 64-65).

Dwyer arrives at some of his more profound conclusions by analyzing the essays Bonaparte penned at this time, such as the 1789 short story *Nouvelle Corse*: “the violence running through this and other stories is particularly noticeable. There are any number of ways of explaining this: as a literary artifice to heighten sympathy for the victims; as a normal outpouring of aggression on the part of a young man; as a cultural expression of revenge (the Corsican vendetta); or as a comparatively simple expression of rage against all those whom he felt had hurt him (his parents, the French)” (pp. 63-64). Related to this and of course later in his life is the deep impact Josephine’s infidelity had on Napoleon. “It is fair to say that, from this point on, a change came over Bonaparte. He may not have lacked barefaced ambition before this revelation, but much of that ambition had been directed towards impressing, if not pleasing his wife. To an extent, therefore, he had been motivated by romantic ideals rather than ruthless political goals. That was about to change” (pp. 377-78).

Philip Dwyer has made a considerable contribution to Napoleonic historiography. While his conclusions about Bonaparte’s use of propaganda are solid, his use of psychohistory to “construct” Napoleon is less convincing but extremely thought-provoking. Some will find themselves agreeing with Professor Dwyer’s suggestions and speculations, while others, particularly apologists, will be horrified by how the author portrays Bonaparte as a Hitler-like psychopath in his megalomania and disregard for human life. Perhaps too advanced for students, this book is a must read for doctoral candidates and specialists in the field and will remain authoritative for the foreseeable future, particularly for its treatment of a variety of subjects that could not be discussed in this review, such as Napoleon’s interactions with his siblings, his relationship with the Directory, the invasion of Egypt, and the coup of Brumaire. Many will come away from reading this work with a completely different view of Napoleon than when they first opened the book. Professor Dwyer should be commended, and we can only hope that the second volume is just as good.

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