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Napoleon and the British

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The literature on the role of the French as ?other? in the formation of a British national identity in the eighteenth century is probably not as rich as many readers might think.(1) Indeed, the literature on French Anglophobia seems a little more sustained.(2) Semmel?s work, which looks at the impact of Napoleon on British political and cultural discourse, makes a valuable contribution to the former. That Napoleon made an impact on British society is hardly surprising considering the length of the wars. That he was often used by opponents of the government (radicals for the most part) in support of a reform agenda, and that he had a ?positive? influence on that discourse is a little more unexpected.

Anglo-French rivalry was, of course, a long-standing feature of European diplomatic and commercial relations during the eighteenth century, to the point where some historians refer to the Napoleonic Wars as the last phase of the ?Second Hundred Years? War? that only finally, and decisively, came to an end at the battle of Waterloo.(3) One of the more interesting aspects of this rivalry is that, according to Semmel, Napoleon, and to a lesser extent France, provided Britain with a yardstick by which it could measure its own national character. Napoleon, argues Semmel, ?unsettled Britons? certitudes about their enemy and themselves? (p. 6). Indeed, Napoleon?s own character and ethnic identity were so open to interpretation that he is said to have inaugurated a ?new, more equivocal phase in British thinking about France? (p. 6) in the process. It was almost as though Napoleon was held up as a kind of mirror and that, depending on who was looking into it, the image was seen as either a positive or a negative reflection of the British political system. Put another way, Napoleon was such an ambiguous character that political commentators in Britain, depending on whether they were radicals or loyalists, could see in him either tyrant or liberal, either legitimate or illegitimate ruler, either sans-culotte or destroyer of the Revolution. In fact, the British found

many different ways of interpreting Napoleon, but let me focus on just a few examples from Semmel?s work.

First, Napoleon complicated British thinking about its own national identity. In the opening chapter of the book, the reader gets a detailed analysis of the types of epithets that were used to describe Napoleon. ?Corsican usurper? was one of the more common. This questioned Napoleon?s legitimacy not only because of his ethnic origins ? he was born outside of France ? but also the means by which he had attained power. That much is pretty straightforward. Semmel takes this a little further, however, by arguing that as a consequence, Napoleon ?unsettled relations?, and complicated the ?traditional dichotomies drawn between Britain and France? (pp. 15?6), and in so doing, blurred British conceptions of national identity. If we accept Semmel?s argument, reasonable enough in itself, we are left wondering what implications this has for the development of British national identity. If Napoleon threw Britons? (and by this he essentially means English (pp. 7?9, 15?7)), perceptions of themselves into doubt, if Napoleon raised questions about Britain?s own destiny, then this is important, according to Semmel, because it was at the origins of a debate about political legitimacy and constitutional reform in Britain.

Questions over Napoleon?s legitimacy ? largely arising out of the manner in which he came to power, that is, through a coup, and what the British referred to as the transformation of a republic into a military dictatorship ? led radicals and reformers to question George III?s right to rule, but it also led to questions about the English Revolution of 1688, as well as the Hanoverian succession. The British, after all, went through their own crisis of legitimacy, in part brought about by George III?s mental illness, when a regency was established in 1811. British radicals thus used Napoleon ?as a cudgel? with which they rebuked their own rulers (p. 135). Indeed, they continued to question their own rulers even after it was evident that Napoleon was defeated. One of the last chapters in the book (pp. 175?99), covering the period between Napoleon?s first abdication (1814) and his death while in exile on St Helena (1821), roughly coincides with a period of radicalism and protest against state corruption in Britain.

Loyalists (as opposed to radicals), on the other hand, were often able to use Napoleon to defend the British monarchy, but even they seem to have been permeated by self-doubt and anxiety. Loyalist pamphlets during the invasion scare of 1803, for example, often questioned the nature of the English character (the subject of much of chapter 2) to the point where Semmel concludes that the British self-portrait was ?ambivalent, problematic, and troubled? (p. 40). In this part of his study, Semmel uses contemporary English broadsides and caricatures (most of them anti-Napoleonic) as a window not only onto popular English conceptions of Napoleon, but also onto the ?deep unease of the loyalist mind? (p. 54). As the author is all too aware, however, these broadsides (many examples of which are given) were not of the people, but rather addressed to them. It is difficult, therefore, to get a sense of what people thought of either the broadsides or Napoleon, although the broadsides seem to express an underlying fear that Britain had somehow reached its peak and was now in decline (p. 66). The conclusion drawn by Semmel is that a ?deep, seemingly inescapable anxiety over the state of the British nation ran rampant? in the early years of Napoleon?s reign (p. 70).

Just as the British had trouble defining Napoleon politically, not to mention his national identity, so too did they have trouble understanding his religious significance, largely because he refused to fit into any simple category. Was he anti-Catholic? His behaviour in Italy in 1796?7 led some to think so, but then how does one account for the Concordat? Was he restoring Catholicism or destroying it? Certainly, Napoleon?s domination of the Catholic Church after 1804 ?cast a shadow over British discussions on the rights of domestic Catholics? (pp. 78?9). But the point Semmel makes is that contemporaries could interpret Napoleon?s religious policies virtually any way they wanted. The onslaught of an atheist Republican government against the Catholic Church, both within France and in other European countries, did not do anything, for example, to appease the anti-Catholic Francophobia that dominated much of the English pamphlet and broadside literature of the day. On the contrary, there had been a tendency to displace the traditional popular association of the Antichrist with Rome onto Republican France (p. 76). It did not take much of a leap, once this pattern had been established, to then project the image of the Antichrist onto Napoleon. It was an image, moreover, that flourished in most parts of Europe, and certainly in Spain and in Russia after the French invasion of those countries. In Britain, one pamphleteer by the name of Lewis Mayer ? who today would best be categorised as belonging to the religious loony fringe, and who was the author of

texts like *Bonaparte, the Emperor of the French, considered as Lucifer and Gog* (1806), and *The prophetic mirror or a hint of England, containing an explanation of the prophesy ? proving Bonaparte to be the Beast* (1806) ? counted the number of emperors, popes and heads of state ?alluded to by the horns of St John?s first Beast, Rev. 13? and came to the conclusion that there had to date been 665 ? Napoleon was the 666th (p. 83). It is a delightful example of the identification of Napoleon, or at least Napoleonic France, with the Devil, and it was not an isolated one.

If Napoleon was loathed by most loyalists during the wars, all of this was to change after his fall from power. Increasingly, he came to be seen in a more favourable light by just about everyone, it would seem, in British society. Exile to St Helena and the conditions in which he was kept in captivity had a great deal to do with that. A similar phenomenon was taking place in Restoration France, that is, Napoleon was undergoing a transformation in the public eye from despot to liberal, largely in reaction to the unpopular Bourbon government.(4) In his years in exile (Napoleon died in 1821), the British establishment came under fire from radicals (the subject of chapter 7) for the manner in which Napoleon was treated. At the heart of this criticism seems to have been a fear that the Prince Regent would want to imitate his continental counterparts and undermine the constitution. Napoleon?s exile, in other words, was seen as a threat to existing British liberties ? he had been judged and sentenced without any recourse to the law. (No doubt in contemporary society Napoleon would fall under some sort of anti-terrorist legislation.) Critics were unsympathetic to the decision to detain Napoleon, but even most of those who conceded its necessity objected to the conditions in which he was kept. What matters to Semmel, however, is not the actual conditions under which Napoleon suffered, but rather the controversy that it created in England at the time and the debate that raged between radicals and loyalists (p. 212) over this question. In exile, Napoleon took on renewed interest as a focal point for political discontent, but this time around he began to be used in moral and even aesthetic questions as well (p. 226). By the 1840s and 1850s, plays, poems and the literature praising Napoleon had become much more commonplace. The nation that once reviled him now admired him.

Certainly an examination of Napoleon?s place in British political and cultural discourse after Waterloo is a valuable thing ? there is little of any note on this subject ? but it is a shame that the process by which Napoleon was transformed from ogre to popular icon could not have been explained in a little more detail. That is perhaps my only criticism of this book. Otherwise, Semmel does not fall into the trap of simply accepting the print culture of the day ? mainly newspapers and political pamphlets but also caricatures, poems, plays, engravings, paintings and letters ? at face value. There is a thorough analysis of the texts and images selected, and there are many, many examples chosen to illustrate the points that he wants to convey. What is clear from this book is that Napoleon was a subject of controversy in Britain, and had an influence on British political discourse, in ways that we do not see repeated today in the face of the pervading fear in the English-speaking world ? terrorism and the threat of radical Islam. Does this mean that Britain in the eighteenth century was a more healthy, vibrant, open and democratic society than it is today? That is perhaps taking things a little too far, but certainly the lack of a vigorous political opposition, plus the lack of serious introspection, to governments? attempts in the English-speaking world to whittle away long-held individual rights before the law, in the name of protecting society from terrorism, is discouraging to say the least. Certainly, neither the United States nor Australia seems to be wracked with self-doubt and anxiety about national identity and one?s place in the world. Is Britain? If only we could hold up our enemy before us in order to reflect on who we are and what our place is in history in the same way that Britons did two hundred years ago.

Notes

1. See Gerald Newman, *The Rise of English Nationalism: A Cultural History, 1740?1830* (New York, 1987); Stella Cotrell, ?The Devil on Two Sticks: Franco-phobia in 1803?, in ed. Raphael Samuel, *Patriots: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity*, (1989, 3 vols.), i. 259?74; Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707?1837* (New Haven and London, 1992). These works can be complemented by Robin Eagles, *Francophilia in English Society, 1748?1815* (2000). For the Romantic literature see Simon Bainbridge, *Napoleon and English Romanticism* (Cambridge, 1995). Back to (1)
2. See David A. Bell, ?Jumonville?s death: war propaganda and national identity in eighteenth-century France?, in ed. Colin Jones and Dror Wahrman, *The Age of Cultural Revolutions: Britain and France, 1750?1820*, (Berkeley, 2002), 33?61; Frances Acomb, *Anglophobia in France: An Essay in the History of Constitutionalism and Nationalism* (Durham, NC, 1950); and its opposite, Josephine Grieder, *Anglomania in France, 1740?1789: Fact, Fiction, and Political Discourse* (Geneva, 1985). For British reactions to the Revolution see Norman Hampson, *The Perfidy of Albion: French Perceptions of England during the French Revolution* (New York, 1998).Back to (2)
3. See, for example, François Crouzet, ?The second Hundred Years? War: some reflections?, *French History*, 10 (1997), 432?50.Back to (3)
4. See Sudhir Hazareesingh, *The Legend of Napoleon* (2004).Back to (4)

The author thanks Dr Dwyer for his thoughtful review, and does not wish to comment further.

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