

## ○ REVIEW OF PHILIP DWYER'S *NAPOLEON: THE PATH TO POWER 1769–1799*

*Andrew Webster*

Andrew Webster, of Murdoch University, reviews *Napoleon: The Path to Power, 1769–1799* by Philip Dwyer (London: Bloomsbury; 2007, pp. 480. Price GBPE20 hb.).



Publisher's website: [www.bloomsbury.com](http://www.bloomsbury.com)

Was it circumstances, or was it *him*? It is the inevitable question when one considers the career of the young Napoleon Bonaparte and his extraordinary rise to power amidst the tumult of revolutionary France. How did he come so far, so fast? Philip Dwyer's engrossing study, *Napoleon: The Path to Power, 1769–1799*, the first instalment of his two-volume biography, provides a thoughtful and ultimately convincing answer. This is that rare beast: a first-rate combination of impressive scholarship and enjoyable writing. Deeply researched (there are 77 pages of notes), the book still reads like the roaring story of a young man on the make. Dwyer has also included a range of well-chosen illustrations, which he takes considerable care in analysing, with the highlight a fascinating mini-study of the 'many faces of Bonaparte': eight portraits from the period of his first fame, all but one by artists who had never actually met him.

Dwyer's mastery of the broader context of this turbulent period allows him to situate Bonaparte's story concisely and precisely while always remembering that this is a biography, not a history of the Revolution. In particular, Dwyer lays welcome emphasis on Bonaparte's Corsican dimension. It was there that Bonaparte received his political education – and Dwyer's story is excellent in capturing just how political rather than military were his early ambitions. Commissioned as an officer of the artillery in 1785, at sixteen years old, Bonaparte was an insignificant figure during the initial years of the revolution and reached the rank of captain at age twenty-two never having seen an actual battle.

Yet he could perhaps be forgiven for coming to believe that destiny had reserved a special fate for him, as time and again in the years that followed it seemed that he was in the right place at the right time. In 1793 Bonaparte distinguished himself at the siege of Toulon after political connections led to his sudden appointment to command the artillery when his predecessor was fortuitously wounded. Two years later, his career having stalled, he was languishing in Paris when the *Vendémiaire* uprising against the formation of the Directory broke out. His role in repressing the mob, combined again with his political connections, earned Bonaparte promotion

to general of division and shortly afterwards his astonishing appointment as commander of the Army of the Interior. He was twenty-six years old. Dwyer is enjoyably scathing on this overnight emergence as a figure of national importance: 'And for what? For having fired, perhaps, a couple of cannon shot at a mob in front of a church?' (177).

But there was more to it than that, as Dwyer's patient and incisive narrative makes clear. Throughout his rise, Bonaparte's undeniable luck in being handy at the vital moment was combined with, on the one hand, his obvious technical competence, energy and willingness to take active measures (such that people were willing to turn to him in a pinch because he had shown that he could get things done) and, on the other, the active intervention of his political supporters who found it in their own interests to promote him (with the unsettled times providing the opportunity). It was more than mere circumstances that produced such disproportionate outcomes for Bonaparte's early endeavours.

But he was still very much a mere political appointee: the man today considered the greatest military genius of his time had, as yet, no experience manoeuvring a regiment, let alone an entire army. Keen to prove himself in the field as a genuine military commander, it was once more political connections that secured Bonaparte's appointment as commander of the Army of Italy in early 1796. What followed was a succession of stunning victories: as Dwyer comments, 'nothing in Bonaparte's life so far prepares us for his achievements in Italy... even he probably had no idea what he was capable of' (195–6). By 1797 Bonaparte was a figure with a national heroic reputation. The campaign was indeed conducted with extraordinary energy and skill, yet what truly set him apart (both then and later) was his ability to exploit his military successes for political gain, through his astute and very modern use of propaganda to construct, manage and enhance his public image. Bonaparte had engaged in mythmaking throughout his life, even as he lived it, and in Italy he cultivated the legend of a dynamic young genius who triumphed against the odds. (Happily, Dwyer is scrupulous in noting where favourite tales are likely apocryphal or even deliberate later inventions.)

All the character traits that one associates with 'Boney', the tyrant of Europe, it seems were indeed there from the beginning: he was imperious, bold, arrogant, hasty, callous, daring (to quote from a single paragraph on page 90). Yet Bonaparte's public persona – confident, decisive, heroic, in control – was at odds with his private insecurities. Dwyer emphasises the role played during these years by Josephine, the older and self-assured woman who attached her fortunes to this clearly rising star. They married just before Bonaparte's departure for Italy; she was likely his first serious involvement and Dwyer speculates that it was a desire to prove himself to her that spurred his ambition during the Italian campaign. While this seems somewhat tenuous ground, in emphasising Bonaparte's tormented feelings at separation from his new wife (the reverse was certainly not true), Dwyer does reveal an unexpectedly vulnerable young man. 'Everyone abandons me. I am alone, a prey to my fears and to my misfortune', he wrote as Genoa, Tuscany, Rome and Naples all fell before him (241).

Italy gave Bonaparte his 'apprenticeship in power': he would return a genuine popular hero, a politically astute general and a self-confident individual with a strong sense of his destiny. Italy also saw the expansion of Bonaparte's ambitions, as he became ever more consciousness of his own talent and certain in the superiority of his own judgement. What followed was the aimless expedition to Egypt (1798–99), where for the first time he experienced defeat. He proclaimed victory nonetheless and, abandoning his troops, returned to France. In many ways he was fortunate

to have spent those months out of the country, for he now returned as the ‘man of destiny’, untainted by the regime’s perceived failures, ready to set things right. While the rhetoric of the subsequent military coup was stirring – ‘What have you done with the France that I left in such a brilliant state? I left you peace, I found war. I left you victories, I find defeat!’ (487) – Dwyer’s riveting account makes clear its truly farcical dimensions.

So, was it circumstances, or was it him? The answer is, inevitably, both. Bonaparte was equipped for the challenge: it was energy and audacity that the moment required and he had both in abundance. But the time was clearly propitious for an individual who could manipulate public opinion to advance rapidly by exploiting the weaknesses of a badly distorted political apparatus. As Dwyer concludes, ‘it is not so much a question of luck, coincidence, or concordance of circumstances... but more about an astute exploitation of the opportunities Bonaparte saw before him’ (516). The true period of Bonaparte’s ability to dictate circumstances still lay ahead in 1799: the thirty year-old master of France would within five years be the master of Europe. For this story, one can only hope that Dwyer provides us with a second volume to match the high quality of the first.