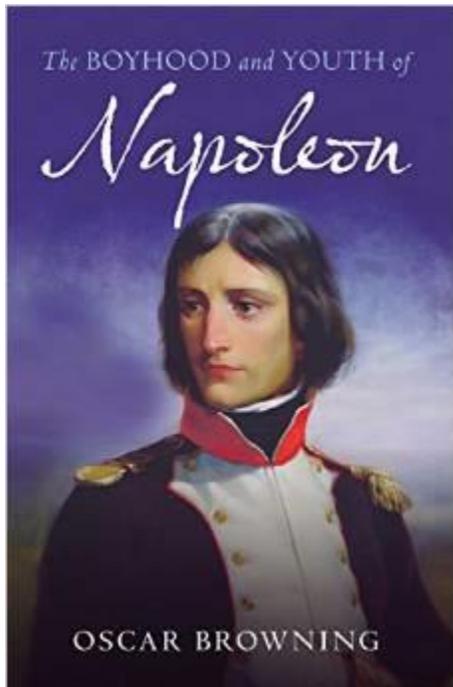


## The Napoleon Series Reviews

### The Boyhood and Youth of Napoleon

Browning, Oscar. *The Boyhood and Youth of Napoleon*. Haverton, PA: Casemate, 2015. 157 pages ISBN: 9781781550113. \$21.95. Softcover.



Oscar Browning's *The Boyhood and Youth of Napoleon* is based on a sealed packet of papers found in Napoleon's study during the Hundred Days. The packet was marked "À remettre au Cardinal Fesch seul" was delivered to the Emperor's uncle in Rome, but remained unopened. Following Fesch's death in 1839, Fesch's papers including the unopened packet were sold and eventually came into the possession of Lord Ashburnham. In the 1880s the papers were cataloged by Frédéric Masson and in 1895 Masson published the papers as *Napoléon Inconnu* along with other manuscripts Masson had collected concerning Napoleon's youth. Arthur Chuquet then used Masson's work as the basis for his *La Jeunesse de Napoléon*. Oscar Browning (1837-1923), a disgraced former master at Eton, used Masson's and Chuquet's works, as well as every book "contained in the admirable bibliography of Kircheisen, which bears on this period," (p. 12) to produce this popular biography of Napoleon's early years. Originally

titled *Napoleon, The First Phase* (1905) in obvious imitation of Lord Roseberry's well-known, *Napoleon, the Last Phase* (1900), to whom Browning dedicated his work. Browning, obviously interested in the Napoleonic era, had previously published *England and Napoleon in 1803* (1887).

In *The Boyhood and Youth of Napoleon* Browning tells the story of Napoleon from his antecedents in Italy through the siege of Toulon in an easy, readable style. Browning tells the reader that his goal is to put Napoleon "in a human light." In Browning estimation even as a young boy Napoleon was already marked as special. Normally the oldest brother would be designated for a military career, while the younger would go into the priesthood. Napoleon got the best of Joseph, who was considered good and quiet, while Napoleon was pensive and clever. Thus it was Napoleon who was marked for a military life. The two oldest Bonaparte brothers were sent to school at Autun to improve their French and prepare for entering their respective schools. Napoleon went on to the royal military school at Brienne, where Napoleon was particularly fond of mathematics, geography and history. Browning notes that Napoleon was an "indefatigable reader." Having success at Brienne Napoleon was recommended to continue his studies at the prestigious *Ecole Militaire de Paris*.

Napoleon was later to complain that the *Ecole Militaire* was too luxurious (it was estimated that each cadet cost the treasury £170). When Napoleon founded his own military schools, the students had no servants, groomed their own horses, kept their own rooms clean and ate garrison bread instead of white. Despite Napoleon's criticisms many of those who taught Napoleon were later rewarded by Napoleon when he became First Consul. Many of Napoleon's classmates had to make their own choices concerning their destinies and emigrated during the Revolution, fighting in the armies of France's enemies (the most famous being Phéliepeaux).

Having left school and being stationed in Valence with the Regiment of La Fere, which Browning describes as "one of the best in the French army," Napoleon's story becomes one of the young soldier trying to determine if his destiny lay in Corsica or in France. Patrice Gueniffey quotes Jorge Luis Borges concerning biography that one of its concerns is discovering "the [moment] in which the man knows once and for all who he is." (Bonaparte (2015), p.15) Oscar Browning is writing about Napoleon discovering whether he will be Napoleon the Corsican patriot or Napoleon the French soldier. Between 1786 and 1793 Napoleon had spent two years and nine months with his regiment, and five years and nine months on Corsica involved in family and political business. Though this may seem excessive, it was not quite that unusual in France's peace-time army. Browning points out that in spite of Napoleon's absences, the army continued to promote him on schedule. In the end due to both the opportunities that arose due to the Revolution and the war and politics in Corsica, Napoleon's destiny lay in France.

The book contains four appendices. The first contains a selection of the documents concerning Napoleon's youth. The second is a criticism of Bourrienne's spurious memoirs. The third discusses the writings of Napoleon that Masson had catalogued. Finally, the fourth is "Original Documents from the British Museum Concerning the Siege and Evacuation of Toulon."

Reviewed by [Tom Holmberg](#)

Placed on the Napoleon Series: June 2015