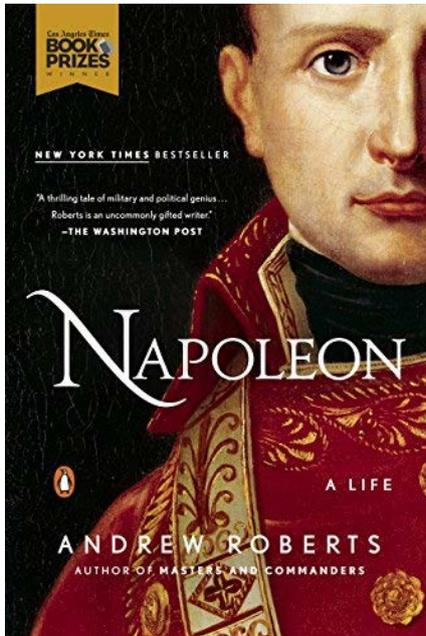


The Napoleon Series Reviews

Roberts, Andrew. *Napoleon the Great (a.k.a Napoleon: A Life)*. London: Allen Lane, 2015. 926 pages. ISBN# 9780141032016. Paperback. 12,99 € \$14.



In his book *Napoleon the Great* Andrew Roberts provides a well-written and engaging account of the life of Napoleon Bonaparte. Drawing upon thousands of recently published letters written by Napoleon himself, Roberts attempts to paint a realistic picture of the man and give insight into his thoughts and motivations.

To begin, Roberts is an engaging writer, he makes good choices regarding which details of Napoleon's life to focus on, and the narrative structure of this biography is a surprisingly fun and quick read, especially considering the book's 900 page length. What I found most enjoyable in Roberts' writing was his insertion of interesting factoids and anecdotes. For instance, the story of Napoleon recognizing a soldier who had fought with him years earlier, and immediately giving him a promotion. Even if apocryphal, these little 'slice of life' moments help us to understand the myth and the draw towards this larger-than-life individual. The inclusion of over 80 color plates further helps in fleshing out the cast of characters and the setting of Revolutionary France.

This book is not intended for someone looking for any detailed analysis, but it is a fitting introduction to Napoleon as a person and provides a decent overview of the events of the era. Roberts does not linger too long on any one topic, and either briefly summarizes or even neglects any events which do not involve Napoleon directly (a common shortcoming of many books of about this era). This can lead to moments of uncertainty (e.g. what exactly is going on in Spain?), but this may have been a necessary sacrifice to keep the narrative flowing and to keep the book to a reasonable length. On the other hand, the battles and campaigns which did involve Napoleon are given a fairly thorough description and the inclusion of 29 maps helps a great deal in the understanding of these events.

Roberts also shows a willingness to tell both sides of the story. While it is quite clear that Roberts is a great fan of Napoleon, he is not afraid to point out when the man was outright lying about his performance on the battlefield, rigging election results, or making gross errors in politics or battle. While it may be argued that Roberts gives Napoleon a pass on a certain issues (such as the massacre of prisoners-of-war at Jaffa), Roberts does attempt to put these obscene acts in context without outright endorsing them. Furthermore, Roberts does give credit where it is due (unlike

Napoleon himself), correctly stating the significant contributions of Napoleon's ministers and marshals.

The only real failure of this book, in my opinion, is that it presents everything from Napoleon's perspective and gives little insight into the motivations of his opponents and allies. As a result, things can come off a little one-sided at times, with Roberts painting Napoleon as a victim of foreign aggressions bent on restoring the Bourbon monarchy, without any thought as to their underlying motivations.

In conclusion, this is a well written and engaging account of the life of Napoleon. Perhaps not a definitive chronicle of the Napoleonic Era, but certainly an excellent introduction to the man for whom the era is named.

Reviewed by [Christian van Someren](#)

Placed on the Napoleon Series: October 2018