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Great Men and Small Ways

Many of the 'Great Men' of history led surprisingly conventional private lives. This is in many ways true of Napoleon, one of the towering figures of modern history. But in his case the contrast between the limitless visions and grandiose schemes of his public persona on the one hand and the curiously conventional and frugal aspects of his personal sphere on the other hand suggests something else - perhaps even a hidden yearning for another life altogether. Was he the victim of his 'greatness'?

Not much is known about the domestic arrangements, personal habits or small-talk of Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar or Charlemagne, so maybe their private lives were as epic as the image handed down to posterity. But when considering the dominant historical figures whom we do know more about I am struck by the glaring contrast between their overwhelming ambitions and their anything but heroic private lives. Extreme examples are Hitler and Stalin, whose boundless megalomania seems utterly incompatible with their limited tastes and petit-bourgeois outlooks.

When I set out to write my biography of Napoleon, I wanted to get away from the 'Great Man' concept, because I do not believe that some men or women are 'greater' than others – some may achieve great things while others just get on with their own lives, but that does not make them 'great' and the others in any sense 'small'. What I did not anticipate as I started my research was just how un-'great' Napoleon was or what an ordinary man he was in many ways.

There was certainly nothing humble or ordinary about his ambitions. He was born into a world which he quickly realised was imperfect and he was gripped by the urge to put things right. As a child, he saw the barbaric means used by the French to pacify Corsica – with the corpses of recalcitrant Corsicans strung up by the wayside as a warning to others. He dreamed of liberating his island home from the French whom he regarded as brutal colonialists. As he progressed through the military academy of Brienne and

then Paris's École Militaire, and went on to take up his posting as an artillery officer. He read widely, acquiring a formidable degree of knowledge about the world and its history, all of which led him to conclude that it was being badly managed by incompetent, dishonest and malevolent people through inefficient institutions along principles which made no sense. By the end of his teens he had become convinced that the world was a mess and badly needed reorganising, and he therefore welcomed the French Revolution. Without any means of influence in Paris, he set his sights on reforming Corsica. It was only when he had to abandon the island that he threw in his lot with France, supporting the extreme policies of Robespierre and the Committee of Public Safety. In the course of his first campaign in Italy he saw for himself how outdated and inequitable the local governments and institutions were, so he set about reforming them, meaning to create a rational modern Italian state. When he was sent to conquer Egypt, he set himself the task of reforming not just that but much of the Middle East as well, hoping to spread Enlightenment values and institutions throughout the area. When at last he had seized power at home, he set to work rebuilding France as a modern state. Following his triumph over the Third Coalition at Austerlitz, Jena, and Friedland, he reformed most of Germany and parts of Poland, Italy and South-Eastern Europe according to his own vision. Given the chance, he would have transformed the world.

His achievements were on a par with his ambitions. He not only endowed France with structures and institutions which have largely survived to this day, he brought social justice, the rule of law and good government to much of Europe, and the example he set in this respect influenced the shape of government in many other parts of the world. He took up arms mostly out of necessity, in order to defend France and later the new order he had set up in Europe against two aggressive rivals for dominance, Britain and Russia, backed up by a number of reactionary states. Yet his conduct of military operations was brilliant and the outcomes made of him the greatest general in history.

Unsurprisingly, many saw in him a superhuman genius and he became the object of widespread adulation. He actively encouraged this through every medium at his disposal, most notably the plastic arts, enhancing his political ascent and surrounding his new station with trappings that suggested the hand of God, if not actual divinity. No other figure in modern European history achieved such status.

Yet more than once in the course of his career he declared that he would like to retire from public life, settle as a landowner in the country and satisfy himself with the function of a Justice of the Peace. 'In three years' time I shall retire from public affairs,' he declared one evening in 1802, when as First Consul he had become effective dictator of France. 'I will have an income of fifty thousand livres, and with my tastes that is more than I need. I will have a country estate, because Madame Bonaparte likes the country.' After a moment he added that he would fulfil his civic duty in the locality as a Justice of the Peace.¹ This usually brings a sarcastic smile to the lips of those who read these words. But they should not be dismissed out of hand, as there is much about Napoleon's character to suggest that, given the chance, he would have enjoyed such a life – and suited it admirably.

Napoleon's outlook on life was rich in contradictions. It was the product of the rationalism of the French Enlightenment, the cult of Greek and Roman Antiquity then in fashion, and the sentimentality of the early Romantic movement, all of it superimposed on an Italianate religious piety, a Corsican belief in providence, and a Mediterranean sense of family.

Perhaps the most eloquent testimony as to his views is provided by what he regarded as his greatest work, the *Code Napoléon*. It was the work of a commission of four distinguished lawyers, his role consisting mainly in concentrating their minds and imposing his vision, for, as the leading light of the commission Jean-Étienne Portalis explained in the introduction, the *Code* was essentially a rule-book for the secular modern society he wished to create. Napoleon's influence is clearly in evidence in its stress on property and the family as the twin pillars of this new society.

His Corsican background strongly affected those clauses which dictated how the family should function, with its head having absolute power to control the behaviour of all its members, and particularly that of the womenfolk. 'Women need to be contained,' he declared, explaining that they were flighty, unreliable and spendthrift. 'The husband must have the absolute power and right to say to his wife: Madame, you will not go out, you will not go to the theatre, you will not see such and such a person.'² While it did have roots in the Corsican sense of family hierarchy, this was also something of a *cri de coeur* based on his own experience of women.

Being serious-minded and applying himself assiduously to his studies during his time at Brienne and then the École Militaire in Paris, 'he groaned at the frivolity of other pupils' according to his friend Alexandre des Mazis. He was also shocked by their 'depravities' and felt the authorities should do

more to curb them. He went so far as to upbraid another friend, Laugier de Bellecour, for indulging his homosexuality with other cadets and declared pompously that they could not remain friends unless he reformed his morals. When Laugier accused him of being a prig, the young Napoleon attacked him physically.³

Des Mazis explained that Napoleon 'was of a moral purity very rare among young men', but that is a polite way of putting it.⁴ All the evidence suggests that he was, as many young people are, confused by the contradiction between his emotional stirrings and his intellectual convictions. Among the books which influenced him most in his teens were Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse* and Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's *Paul et Virginie*, and their sentimentality is reflected in his early contacts with young women in local society when he was posted to his artillery regiment in the provinces. He was attracted enough to flirt with a number of them but, as he would later admit, 'nothing could have been more innocent' and he almost certainly never touched any of them.⁵

Whether he felt any desire to do so is difficult to establish. A couple of years later he would affirm that love was an entirely superfluous emotion and felt strongly enough to write a *Dialogue sur l'amour*. It is a Platonic discourse addressed to des Mazis, who kept falling in love and boring Napoleon with expressions of his emotional turmoil. While Napoleon admits to having been in love himself, he argues that love is nothing more than a vague physical sensation dressed up with 'metaphysical definitions'. "I believe it to be harmful to society, to the individual happiness of mankind, and that it does more harm than good." And although Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* was one of his favourite books, he complained of the absurdity that man, 'this sex which is master of the world through its strength, its industry, its mind and other faculties, should find its supreme felicity in languishing in the chains of a weak passion and under the sway of a being more feeble than itself in mind and body'.⁶

The 'great man' had by then done some research on the subject, on a cold November night in 1787. On leaving the theatre where he had watched a play, the nineteen-year-old lieutenant strolled through Paris's red-light district, the Palais-Royal, and picked up a prostitute. His advances were gauche, betraying a sense of disgust at the condition the poor girl had been forced into (having been seduced and then dumped by an officer and thereby banished from society), and it was only after she complained at being kept talking in the cold that he went with her. We know this because he sat down the next morning and wrote up the whole episode, complete with dialogue,

as though it had been a laboratory experiment, without mentioning whether he had found the experience enjoyable.⁷

Probably not, since he showed little interest in women over the next years. 'Liberty is a woman far more beautiful who eclipses (the women he met)', he had written after the outbreak of the French Revolution, and he devoted his energies to what he hoped would be his political career in Corsica.⁸ His attitude to women in general did not alter even when, in December 1795 he was seduced by Josephine de Beauharnais and experienced true sexual pleasure for the first time, which sent him into a frenzy of adoration of her more often encountered in a callow teenager than a general of twenty-six. In fact, her infidelities only confirmed him in his view of them as weak, untrustworthy creatures who needed to be controlled and confined to the functions of breeders and home-makers.⁹ That, and his inability to control her pathological urge to spend money on clothes, found expression in the *Code Napoléon*.

His unease when it came to dealing with women and sex in general seems to have had more to do with control than with any moral misgivings. Through the *Code* and other institutions he meant to mould French society in such a way as to prevent any future revolution of the kind he had witnessed; the national system of education he put in place was undisguisedly intended to 'direct political and moral opinion'.¹⁰

Having a logical and practical cast of mind, Napoleon liked order. He was inordinately proud of having instituted the *cadastre*, a land registry which clearly defined all property ownership. He re-introduced the *livret*, a card everyone had to carry identifying their profession, even if it was only that of a manual labourer. He expended much thought, energy and millions of francs on tidying up Paris, buying up and tearing down gothic survivals to make way for broad straight avenues, building the embankments along the Seine and many of the bridges; removing old cemeteries, building fountains, introducing street-lighting and generally cleansing the city. He did the same for towns and cities all over France and even beyond.

This love of order spilled over into a passion for tidiness. He insisted on keeping registers of all the bed-sheets and other linen in the Palace of the Tuileries and defining what lengths of candle-stubs should be used where. He was also inordinately fond of *nécessaires* of various kinds – boxes or chests containing all the necessities for washing and shaving or reading and writing while travelling or on campaign.

The pursuit of order also spilled over into an urge to control the behaviour

of those around him. He strongly disapproved of his younger brother Lucien's marriage to the lowly Christine Boyer, and his sister Caroline's to the dashing but socially inferior Joachim Murat. 'I do not like these silly little love-marriages,' he declared and refused to attend either the civil or the religious ceremony, but he did insist on choosing a name for their son.¹¹ He would not allow his younger sister Pauline to marry Stanislas Fréron, whom he considered to be of no consequence politically, and forced his youngest brother, Louis, to marry the daughter of Josephine even though they hated each other and resisted the match, which was to prove a very unhappy one. And this tendency was not limited to his family. He ordered his aide Antoine de Lavalette to marry Josephine's niece Émilie and insisted on naming Marshal Bernadotte's son Oscar, after a hero in one of Ossian's (James Macpherson's) Odes, which he was so fond of.

Concurrent with this love of order was a priggish distaste for 'disorder,' by which he meant unseemliness. From the moment he moved into the Palace of the Tuileries as First Consul, he began sanitising his entourage and turning it into something resembling a court, going so far as to bring back whatever court functionaries of the *Ancien Régime* had survived to designate how it should function. Anyone with a shady past was given to understand they were not welcome, whatever their claims to friendship or even political gratitude: one of the first victims was Thérèse Tallien, a great beauty and old friend of Josephine who had helped the young General Bonaparte in difficult times. The relaxed manners of the Revolution and the Directory were frowned upon, as was the revealing female dress of those times.

This had more to do with the idea of appearances than with any sense of morality: while he laid down the law to others and was horrified when younger members of his entourage showed signs of affection, let alone lust, for each other, Napoleon himself behaved as he thought fit, often making coarse jokes in front of the ladies and philandering as he wished. This tendency grew with every step he took in his ascent. On becoming emperor he forced his then Grand Chamberlain Maurice de Talleyrand to marry his mistress and having done so to exile her to his country estate and never to bring his 'whore' to sully the imperial court.¹² He would not allow his Master of the Horse Armand de Caulaincourt to marry the love of his life because she was a divorcee.

As he wished to cement his relations with foreign courts with dynastic marriages he desperately tried to tidy up the marital status of his closest family. He had already married Pauline off once, to General Victor Emmanuel

Leclerc in order to corral her sexual promiscuity, and after his death once more arranged a seemingly marriage for her. He was incensed on hearing that his brother Jérôme had married Elizabeth Patterson, an American merchant's daughter, and forced him to repudiate her and his son so that he would be free to marry the daughter of the King of Württemberg. In order to wipe the slate as clean as possible, he even badgered the Pope to dissolve Jérôme's marriage, even though it had not taken place in church.

Napoleon also went to great lengths to try and tidy up the unseemly marital status of his brother Lucien. After his first 'unsuitable' wife had died, Lucien had fathered a son by and then secretly espoused a divorcee with a poor reputation. This had only come to Napoleon's notice when he had hatched a plan to marry Lucien to the widowed Bourbon Queen of Etruria, which would have been politically convenient. The two brothers fell out over the matter and Lucien moved to Rome where he led a private life. In an effort to bring him back into the fold, Napoleon arranged to meet him in Mantua in December 1807. He offered Lucien any throne he liked in Europe but insisted that he must first divorce his wife, whom he deemed too common and, being a divorcee, unsuitable. He would make her Duchess of Parma and Lucien would be able to go on living with her as his concubine, but not as his wife. Lucien retorted that Napoleon himself was married to a divorcee with an unsavoury past, adding: 'and at least mine isn't old and doesn't stink like yours'. Napoleon spent six hours trying to win over his brother, saying he would recognize his two daughters as princesses of France and arrange for the elder to marry the Prince of the Asturias and become Queen of Spain. But he would not recognise Lucien's son, since he had been born out of wedlock.¹³

This urge to tidy up what he saw as unseemly disorders and improve appearances escalated after he divorced Josephine and married Marie-Louise, the daughter of the Emperor of Austria. She came from probably the most respectable and devoutly Catholic family and court in Europe, and Napoleon did everything he could to adhere to its standards. As a result, 'the court had grown rigid and lost everything it still conserved of social ease,' noted a lady who had been away from Paris for a few years.¹⁴ 'I do not think there could have been a court where the morals were more pure,' agreed Josephine's daughter Hortense.¹⁵ Anyone tainted with the merest whiff of scandal was sent away and those who were indispensable were instructed to improve their image. Napoleon's Arch-Chancellor and long-time closest collaborator, Jean-Jacques Cambacérès, whose homosexuality was no secret to anyone in Paris, was ordered to ostentatiously pay regular visits to an actress in the

Palais-Royal known for bestowing her sexual favours liberally.¹⁶

It is hard to believe that someone with Napoleon's sparkling intelligence could for one moment have believed that such measures would fool anyone and not open him to ridicule. How could a man who had achieved such epic feats, a man who had, as one of his generals had put it, the ability 'to dare and to keep daring',¹⁷ a man who believed that Fortune had singled him out,¹⁸ a man who came to believe he had a star in heaven guiding his destiny, a man who had fallen in love with and married a courtesan of great intelligence and character, how could such a man content himself with the intellectually limited *Hausfrau* Marie-Louise, and why did he care a fig what anyone thought about the sexuality of his distinguished Arch-Chancellor?

Yet when one considers the almost supernatural course of his early career - from the moment in 1796 when he took command of the Army of Italy and won a string of victories which fascinated even his enemies, one of whom wrote that 'Bonaparte makes one think of those heroes who could cleave mountains with a flourish of their sword',¹⁹ to the moment in 1807 when he embraced a defeated Tsar of Russia on a raft moored in the river Niemen - so much of what he did off the battlefield and outside the council chamber seems utterly out of character and incompatible.

Considering how relatively happy he was to tend his 'little cabbage-patch', as he referred to his kingdom of exile the Island of Elba, where by his own admission he settled into a very 'bourgeois' way of life, it seems not entirely improbable that, had fate decreed otherwise, he really would have been quite happy as a minor landowner in some remote part of France. He would have been a pillar of the community, keeping up appearances while carrying on with his maids, ostracising less reputable neighbours and railing against their scandalous conduct. As a Justice of the Peace he would have handed out severe sentences and lengthy homilies to those who had transgressed against his view of social harmony. And, as he would demonstrate later, on Saint Helena, he would have enjoyed gardening and playing with children.

Notes

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