

BRITAIN AND NAPOLEON

The French Revolutionary wars, 1787–1802. By T. C. W. Blanning. London: Longman, 1996. Pp. xvii + 286. ISBN 0-340-56911-5. £15.99.

The wars of Napoleon. By Charles J. Esdaile. London: Longman, 1995. Pp. xii + 417. ISBN 0-582-05955-0. £14.99.

The Younger Pitt: the consuming struggle. By John Ehrman. London: Constable, 1996. Pp. xv + 911. ISBN 0-09-475540-x. £35.

British victory in Egypt, 1801: the end of Napoleon's conquest. By Piers Mackesy. London and New York: Routledge, 1995. Pp. xii + 282. ISBN 0-415-04064-7. £45.

Britain and the defeat of Napoleon, 1807–1815. By Rory Muir. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996. Pp. xiv + 466. ISBN 0-300-06443-8. £29.95.

Traditional historians of war and foreign policy in Britain have often been accused – sometimes justly – of all manner of sins, among them Anglo- and Eurocentricity. There is no trace, however, of insularity in the five new publications by John Ehrman, Rory Muir, Piers Mackesy, Charles Esdaile, and T. C. W. Blanning on the struggle with Napoleon. The global sweep of that conflict, to quote Rory Muir's *Britain and the defeat of Napoleon*, forces the historian to address an 'interlocking mosaic of problems' (p. xii), spanning the Baltic to the Cape of Good Hope, and the Indian subcontinent to the Caribbean.

I

As Tim Blanning points out in his characteristically trenchant and persuasive *The French Revolutionary wars*, two explosively contradictory currents underpinned the revolutionary critique of the *ancien régime* in France. On the one hand, the foreign minister Vegeennes's policy of disengagement in Europe and concentration on overseas expansion led to the charge that traditional French interests in Germany, Poland, and the Ottoman empire were being abandoned; these charges were lent added force by the association of Queen Marie Antoinette, a Habsburg princess, with the hated Austrian alliance (p. 5). On the other hand, failure to exploit victory in the American war, the humiliating collapse of the French-backed Patriot movement in Holland in the face of a British-sponsored Prussian invasion, and a disadvantageous commercial treaty in 1786 ('Eden Treaty') all fuelled not only an enduring Anglophobia in French society, but also a desire to renew the great eighteenth-century struggle for mastery with Britain overseas.

The result was the final and most protracted phase of the 'Second Hundred Years War' (1689–1815) (p. 196). By the end of the 1790s, the Revolutionary armies had emerged victorious: the Austro-Prussian invasion was repulsed at Valmy; Belgium, Holland, the Rhineland, and Italy were overrun; and the British-funded First Coalition against France finally collapsed in 1797. This string of successes has commonly been attributed to Revolutionary élan and innovations in logistics, infantry tactics, and conscription. These factors did indeed play a role, but as Blanning points out most of the 'innovations' in fact dated from the *ancien régime*: 'Revolutionary warfare was not revolutionary. Everything commonly regarded as its essence had been invented earlier'

(p. 17). This was as true for the artillery reforms of Gribeauval as for the new light infantry tactics of the duke de Broglie. Only the ferocity and unscrupulousness with which the Revolutionary governments shocked the old Europe was new. Similarly, as Charles Esdaile points out in *The wars of Napoleon*, the French victories after 1797–9 reflected not so much the strength of the ‘nation in arms’ as Napoleon’s ‘victorious synthesis’ (p. 69) of cohesion and dispersal, skirmishing and crude column shock tactics, mass mobilization and the voluntary principle. By 1806, within seven years of taking power at the coup of Brumaire, Napoleon had defeated Austria (twice), brought Prussia to heel, humbled Russia, dissolved the Holy Roman Empire, set up a string of satellite kingdoms, and seen off a British expedition to Holland; by 1812, he had defeated Austria again, seen off another British expedition to Holland, overrun Spain and was on the verge of invading Russia with the immense *Grande Armée*.

On the high seas, however, it was a different matter. At first sight, this is surprising. A central plank in the pre-Revolutionary critique of the *ancien régime* executive had been the demand to confront Britain overseas and reduce her influence in continental politics. As Tim Blanning points out, the recondite Nootka Sound debate – concerning France’s obligation towards Spain in her colonial dispute with Britain in western Canada – revealed a strong strain of Anglophobia in the national assembly which underpinned the conventional anti-royalist universalist rhetoric; this found expression in the unanimous support for the motion for war against England in the national assembly in February 1793 (pp. 93ff). Moreover, the naval gap between the two countries narrowed – at least nominally – during the first years of the Revolution: between 1789 and 1793 French naval construction actually outstripped that of Britain, as indeed it periodically did under Napoleon. Moreover, throughout the 1790s, the French showed themselves capable of mounting large-scale amphibious operations such as Hoche’s expedition to Ireland in 1796, which was only frustrated by adverse winds, and Napoleon’s descent on Egypt, at 40,000 men and nearly 300 ships the largest such undertaking until the British fiasco at Walcheren in 1809. But it soon transpired that the Revolution had debilitated the French navy as much as it rejuvenated the army. There were many reasons for this: the traditional naval recruiting region in western France was strongly royalist in sentiment; the constant British blockade made training and manoeuvring very difficult; and, in any case, the army was generally given first priority in the distribution of resources. Hence, after the catastrophe of Trafalgar in late 1805 the French fleet abandoned the high seas altogether and resorted to commerce-raiding. To quote Blanning this led to an impasse ‘because the British could not defeat the French on land and the French could not defeat the British at sea’ (p. 271).

The man who most had to grapple with this impasse was the prime minister, William Pitt the Younger, on whose shoulders with one brief exception the conduct of the war rested until 1806. As all of the authors stress, neither Pitt nor most of the British establishment were ideological crusaders against the French Revolution. In July 1789 Bishop Porteous had noted in his diary: ‘This day Mr Pitt dined with me at Fulham. He had just recd. news of the French Revolution and spoke of it as an event highly favourable to us & indicates a long peace with France’ (p. 42). It was to be the first of many premature judgements on Pitt’s part, culminating in his famous prediction in February 1792 that there would be no war in Europe for fifteen years. Similarly, as Piers Mackesy points out, both Abercromby and Hely-Hutchinson, the two British commanders in Egypt, condemned the ‘mad crusade against opinions’ (pp. 9, 145). Hardline legitimists, such as William Wickham, were very much the exception and their plans for royalist insurrection were only countenanced as part of a broader

strategic design against France. Rather, what motivated Britain to confront Revolutionary France were traditional fears for the Low Countries and the European Balance, coupled with equally traditional opportunist colonial ambitions. In short, to quote Charles Esdaile, ‘To attempt to explain the Napoleonic Wars in terms of clash of ideologies is ... futile’ (p. 2). Defeating Napoleon became not so much an ideological as a power-political imperative for the British leadership.

This is the *Consuming struggle* referred to in the final volume of John Ehrman’s classic biography of Pitt, which covers the last nine years of his life (1797–1806). As Pitt was to remark towards the end of the contest, probably around 1804: ‘I see various and opposite qualities – all the great and all the little passion unfavourable to public tranquillity – united in the breast of one man [Napoleon], unhappily whose personal caprice can scarce fluctuate for an hour without affecting the destiny of Europe’ (p. 688). Already in October 1797 Bonaparte had been appointed commander-in-chief of the ‘Army of England’ (Muir, p. 2), before he was deflected by the Egyptian campaign. Moreover, as Ehrman forcefully reminds us, his rise to power in France coincided with a low point in Britain’s fortunes not merely abroad but at home. The year 1797 saw the final defeat of Austria and the First Coalition; a run on the bank of England; naval mutinies at Spithead and the Nore; and a French incursion into Wales. The following year saw a traumatic rebellion in Ireland, while the turn of the century brought a subsistence crisis with concomitant domestic unrest. Periodically, indeed, home affairs had prior claim on Pitt’s attention, as evidenced by his repressive Combination Act (1799) against the radical societies; but the primacy of the struggle against Napoleonic France soon reasserted itself.

As Ehrman shows, the core of Pitt’s ‘grand design’ for the restoration of the European balance was his unswerving commitment to direct intervention on the European mainland. Here Pitt was firmly within the eighteenth-century mainstream Whig ‘continentalist’ tradition which his father, the Elder Pitt, had once ferociously criticized, but later became a zealous convert to; it was also the creed of his arch-Whig coalition partner and cabinet colleague, Lord Grenville. In 1794, at the height of the struggle with Revolutionary France, Pitt had observed that ‘This country had never so successfully combated [France] as when its maritime strength had been aided by the judicious application of a land force on the continent’ (p. 4); these words echo almost verbatim parts of the duke of Newcastle’s famous continentalist manifesto in 1748. Again and again, Ehrman emphasizes how Pitt refused to be distracted by – apparently – cheap colonial chimeras; he was a confirmed enemy of any ‘peripheral’ strategy. ‘Victory’, Ehrman writes, ‘must be sought in Europe’, not in the West Indies, the Indian subcontinent, or other far-off theatres. At the same time, however, and here again he was in the classic Whig continentalist tradition, Pitt was convinced that ‘a favourable balance on the continent could be held to provide the ultimate security not only for the offlying island itself but also for the system of power and wealth deriving from overseas trade and possessions’ (p. 448). One might add that this indeed had been the lesson learnt by the Elder Pitt and fatally forgotten between 1763 and 1783: maritime supremacy and the European commitment were two sides of the same coin; the latter was essential to the preservation of the former. Failure to hold France in check in Europe jeopardized not merely the security of Britain but her standing overseas, as the invasion scares of the 1790s and 1804, as well as the French expeditions to the Caribbean, to Egypt, and to Ireland so clearly demonstrated.

It should thus come as no surprise that, for most of the nine years under consideration, Pitt remained preoccupied with the creation and funding of new coalitions against

Napoleon. Indeed, much of Ehrman's biography is taken up with negotiations with Austria, Russia, and, more futilely, Prussia. A by-product of the discussions with Russia in 1805 was Pitt's plan for a general 'Public Law in Europe', which committed the coalition partners not merely to the restoration of the European balance of power, but also to the maintenance of collective security in peacetime; this scheme anticipated the Vienna Settlement, the Congress System and has since become a classic text of British foreign policy (p. 731). The Third Coalition of Austria, Russia, Sweden, and Britain thus started out promisingly, with a realistic prospect of Prussian support by November 1805. Pitt's hopes were raised by the decisive victory over the Franco-Spanish fleet at Trafalgar. It was on the occasion of a celebratory dinner at the Guildhall that he spoke perhaps his most famous words: 'England has saved herself by her exertions and will, as I trust, save Europe by her example.' But before the year was out, Napoleon had crushingly defeated the Austro-Russian armies at Austerlitz, thus confirming the pattern of French supremacy on land and British supremacy at sea established in the late 1790s. On hearing the news Pitt may or may not have said 'roll up the map of Europe. It will not be wanted these ten years' (p. 822), but his last reported words were certainly 'Oh, my country! how I leave my country' (p. 829).

II

How did Pitt leave his country? If his personal political legacy proved ephemeral, the same was not true of the legacy in foreign policy. As Ehrman points out, 'Some debts were direct and strong: in the persistent wartime commitment to a continental strategy, in the pattern of approach to peacemaking as the war approached its end' (p. 843). For the one thing his successors did *not* do was roll up the map of Europe. On the contrary, as Rory Muir shows in his stimulating *Britain and the defeat of Napoleon*, which takes up more or less where Ehrman leaves off in 1806–7, Britain persevered with the 'continentalist' strategy until its triumph in 1814. Despite the disappointments of Ulm, Austerlitz, and Friedland, and the temptations of Trafalgar, Britain did not turn its back on Europe. This is a theme to which Muir returns repeatedly, as when he writes that 'colonial operations were peripheral to the main conflict, for Napoleon could only be defeated on the mainland of Europe' (p. 18), or when he observes that 'The war in the Peninsula ... could not bring victory. If the continent was to be redeemed it must be on the battlefields of central Europe' (p. 176).

At the same time, however, military-political realities after 1807 ruled out a rapid return to large-scale coalition warfare. 'Britain', Muir argues persuasively, 'lacked the military resources to create lasting strategic opportunities for herself on the continent' (p. 32). An expedition to Stralsund in 1807 ended in total failure. In any case, the Franco-Russian *rapprochement* at Tilsit that same year carved up Europe and the Middle East into spheres of influence at Britain's expense; this arrangement was confirmed at the summit at Erfurt a year later. Britain was reduced to a policy of strategic Micawberism, waiting for something to turn up. Yet at first she proved singularly unable to capitalize on Napoleon's self-inflicted difficulties. The first operations in aid of the Spanish revolt in 1808 were a disaster and soon became mired in domestic political controversy; and the chance to overturn Napoleon in central Europe was fumbled, when Britain sent Austria less aid for the war of 1809 than she needed, but more than could really be afforded. As if all this were not bad enough, the expedition to Walcheren in support of continental operations turned out to be an even greater fiasco than the previous ill-fated excursion to Holland exactly ten years earlier.

These further catastrophes, coupled with the apparent stability of French hegemony on the European mainland, forced the British leadership to change tack. Unlike the decade preceding the Third Coalition, 'British ministers had become convinced that it was a mistake to seek to persuade other powers to enter the war' (p. 177); they would have to commit themselves voluntarily. This policy was put into practice in 1812–13 during the dramatic aftermath of Napoleon's defeat in Russia when, to quote Muir again, the strategy of British ministers remained not to 'induce or pressure any power to go to war, but to...give support and encouragement to any ally who did appear' (p. 220). But these were tactical variations on an old theme: the overall commitment to Europe was never in doubt. Indeed, after 1810 British land forces were engaged on the continent, in Spain, to an extent previously unknown; the brunt of the struggle was now being borne by the Anglo-Portuguese army under Wellington rather than the Spaniards themselves (p. 115). Moreover, in March 1814, Castlereagh signed the treaty of Chaumont, by which massive British subsidies underpinned the final coalition against Napoleon. And throughout the peacemaking of 1814–15, British statesmen were preoccupied not with colonial gain, but with the European balance, collective security, and the containment of France. Lord Harrowby's statement that 'Antwerp and Flushing out of the Hands of France are worth twenty Martiniques in our hands' was made in 1813, but it might just as well have been spoken by Pitt in 1792–1804, or, for that matter, by the duke of Newcastle in 1748.

Yet this continental policy was furiously contested at the time, not merely inside and outside of parliament, but within the cabinet itself. As Ehrman shows, Pitt's own secretary of state for war, Henry Dundas, was a powerful advocate of the 'maritime' approach which eschewed expensive subsidies and continental entanglements in favour of colonial gains (p. 143). In its more radical variant, this strategy involved recognizing Napoleon's hegemony on the mainland of Europe in return for undisputed supremacy overseas; in its more restrained – Dundasian – incarnation, colonial gains were conceived as bargaining counters in a final settlement with France; the short-term difference between the two approaches was minimal, however. This maritime critique reached a crescendo in 1800 in a series of memoranda by Dundas demanding an orientation towards South American markets, New Orleans, and the River Plate; the continental policy was rejected as being 'calculated beyond our means' (p. 354).

The British expedition to Egypt in 1801 was thus a classic example of the 'maritime' approach and a personal triumph for Dundas; the foreign secretary, Lord Grenville, had wanted to husband the forces involved to support a future Austrian revival. Piers Mackesy's *British victory in Egypt, 1801: the end of Napoleon's conquest* is the first detailed account of this little-discussed campaign, which he invests with considerable strategic importance. After the collapse of the Second Coalition, Mackesy argues, it was no longer possible to ignore the small French force left behind by Napoleon in Egypt for fear that it might act as the springboard for a renewed French drive on India; in any case, there was the risk that Napoleon might want to hold on to it at a general peace. But Mackesy also sees the victorious campaign as part of the redemption of the British army after the defeats of the 1790s. All of the peerages awarded to military heroes for the past ten years had been to naval men; and the humiliating withdrawal from Holland, where the duke of York had famously marched his men to the top of the hill and marched them down again, had reduced morale to a very low ebb.

The hero of this story is the liberal and humane General Sir Ralph Abercromby whose views Mackesy describes as 'in the political spectrum of the day...tinged with pink' (p. 8). He came from a family of 'conscientious lairds, the very opposite of the

Irish gentry whom Sir Ralph despised'. Indeed one of his less successful postings had been to Ireland in 1797–8, where he had found in the Ascendancy party adversaries no less opinionated but more cunning than he. It may have been with some relief that he set off to deal with a less intractable problem in the Middle East. Abercromby was not an obvious choice for the command, for he had hitherto a reputation only for masterly retreats, but he proved an inspired one. Rather like Napoleon, he achieved a winning synthesis between the open-order tactics of the 'Americanists' and the mass formations of the 'Europeanists' (pp. 29–30). Tragically, Abercromby himself was killed in action, so that the campaign had to be brought to a victorious conclusion by his Irish second-in-command, Hely-Hutchinson.

It is easy to see the attractions of the maritime policy. The victory in Egypt was indeed an example of what could be achieved by well-led British troops, supported by naval power within a limited area of operations. Moreover, the war overseas could be financially lucrative. In 1798, for example, Pitt estimated that nearly 10 per cent of British national income came from the West Indies alone (Ehrman, p. 144); and Ehrman's list of British colonial gains throughout the decade is truly staggering: Tobago, St Pierre et Miquelon, Pondicherry (all 1793), Martinique, St Lucia, Guadeloupe (all 1794), Ceylon and the Cape of Good Hope (1785), Trinidad (1797), Minorca (1797), Surinam (1800), and so on (p. 421). Yet as Ehrman and Muir are at pains to point out, the maritime strategy involved considerable costs too. The protracted campaigns in the West Indies, for example, proved a much greater quagmire in terms of blood and treasure than did any European operations by the British army throughout the 1790s (Ehrman, pp. 203–9); as Muir reminds us, there were still 20,000 men stationed in the West and East Indies in 1807 (p. 15). Similarly, forces on the Indian subcontinent numbered more than 140,000 by 1800, and while the main burden fell on the East India Company, some of the costs were borne by the metropolis. Moreover, while London demanded a policy of restraint, Britain found itself constantly being committed to expansion by over-zealous local commanders and thus to larger commitments of troops deployed outside Europe than she would have liked. A further complication was the American war of 1812–14, which Muir condemns as a 'foolish and unnecessary war' (p. 232) and a 'pointless distraction' (p. 240). The net result was that out of a force exceeding 300,000 effectives, Britain was never able to mobilize more than 60,000 men for the land war in Europe.

The Egyptian victory – *pace* Mackesy – was not entirely unproblematic either, for unkind observers might point out: that the French forces there were going nowhere, threatening no one and as effectively imprisoned as they would have been in a POW camp; that the troops used to attack them *could* have been used elsewhere; and that one of the paradoxical outcomes of the campaign was that the terms of the capitulation enabled the French to repatriate what was left of their garrison to fight another day. In the end, as Ehrman argues, while India and Canada might have been conquered in Germany, the reverse was not – could not be – true (p. 443). Of all the wartime administrations only the short-lived Ministry of All the Talents was wholeheartedly committed to a maritime strategy at the expense of traditional continentalism. Pitt – and the same is largely true of his successors – saw clearly that a maritime strategy, while less expensive in the short term, could not end the war on its own, promised eternal conflict not only with France but with all those offended by the naval blockade, and was thus likely to be more costly in the long run (p. 374).

III

If the main centre of attention throughout the years 1797–1815 was on foreign policy and war, this period was also one of great domestic turmoil. As Ehrman shows in such detail, the day-to-day business of parliamentary politics, elections, patronage, and high political intrigue continued in parallel with the progress of the war. Similarly, Muir chronicles, albeit in less detail, how the struggle against Napoleon after 1807 coincided with the scandals surrounding the duke of York and Mary Clarke, the collapse of the Portland ministry, the murder of Spencer Perceval, the rise of Lord Liverpool, the financial crisis of 1810, the fraught inquiry into the Walcheren affair, the demand for franchise reform, another Regency Crisis, and much else. Muir justifies his relative neglect of the domestic context by the fact that its ‘impact on the government and on the conduct of the war was slight’ (p. 159). Hence, for a systematic account of the social distress and political radicalism generated by the burgeoning ‘industrial revolution’ – if such a term may still be used – one must turn to Charles Esdaile’s *Wars of Napoleon*, which, unlike most comparable syntheses, treats Britain as an integral part of Europe.

But domestic affairs also interacted with the war effort. As Ehrman shows, one of Pitt’s primary concerns at home was to strengthen the home base (pp. 98–129), not merely as a precautionary measure against French-backed unrest, but also as a means to ‘develop the nation’s capacity for a struggle whose length could not be guessed’ (p. 68). Indeed, all over Europe, as Esdaile demonstrates, the French challenge led to far-reaching internal changes, often involving the ‘emulation of the French’ (pp. 182–216). But unlike, for example, the Prussian Reform movement or the transformations in the satellite republics and kingdoms, changes in Britain were less programmatic and more piecemeal. To quote Ehrman: ‘Pitt sought improvement, where possible through improved institutions. At the same time he was not attracted to structural change’ (p. 472). This is not to say that Pitt shied away from radical measures, such as the income tax, and later the property tax. An even more radical change was his support for Catholic Emancipation: addressing the confessional inequalities of *ancien régime* Britain was believed to be necessary both as an accompaniment to the Act of Union with Ireland and as a device to tap into the vast reservoir of Irish Catholic manpower (pp. 158ff). In the end, however, the measure foundered on furious parliamentary and royal opposition to emancipation; Pitt resigned in consequence in 1801, bringing his first eighteen-year ministry to a close. That, at least, is the received wisdom: Ehrman adds a variation to the effect that Pitt had reached the end of the road and simply ‘preferred to go out on a high note’ (p. 523).

Plans for domestic change in Britain did not end with Pitt’s resignation in 1801, or for that matter with his death in January 1806. As Muir reminds us in his introductory chapter, the Ministry of All the Talents (1806–7) also attempted to implement Catholic Emancipation, or at least to lift restrictions on Catholics holding commissions in the army. Once again there was stiff royal and parliamentary opposition and once again – echoes of 1801 – Grenville’s ailing ministry seized on the opportunity to resign (p. 9). However, the claim made on the dust-jacket that the author ‘looks beyond the purely military aspects of the struggle to show how the entire British nation played a part in the victory’ is perhaps a little misleading: unlike Ehrman’s biographic focus, which covers both internal and international questions in equal detail, Muir’s emphasis is firmly, and perfectly justifiably, on military and diplomatic developments. Again, it is Esdaile who supplies us with a systematic discussion of Reforming measures, such as they were, during the final decade of the struggle with Napoleon. He presents us with a paradox.

On the one hand, the level of British military mobilization – which had reached about one-sixth of the population by the end of the war – was probably higher than that achieved by Napoleonic France (p. 144). On the other hand, the various political and confessional inequalities associated with the *ancien régime* survived the period largely intact. Napoleon, he concludes, was defeated ‘without any fundamental reformation in either Britain’s way of making war or her system of government’ (p. 143).

This brings us to the reasons for the defeat of Napoleon and Britain’s role in it. Conventionally, British naval supremacy is said to have played a crucial role. According to Blanning, for example, the real turning point was the decisive naval defeat at Aboukir (1798) in Egypt, which ‘condemned to destruction Napoleon’s empire even before it had been created’ (p. 196); this antedates the conventional watershed of Trafalgar (1805) by a number of years. The deeper underlying reason for British naval supremacy he locates in the superiority of the fiscal-military state (pp. 212–13) – to borrow John Brewer’s terminology – which proved better able to mobilize the resources of the nation. John Ehrman also speaks of the ‘unique system of public credit’ in Britain (p. 419) and the sophistication of its economy, which employed only one third of the population in agriculture (in most European states the figure was closer to three-quarters), thus releasing manpower for work in the factories or service in the army; Esdaile calls this ‘booming to victory’ (p. 158). Piers Mackesy argues that the tide turned in Egypt in 1801, but the idea that this sideshow marked ‘the end of Napoleon’s conquest’, particularly when there were so many conquests still to come, is not persuasive; it was hardly even the end of the beginning.

What Blanning and Ehrman, and particularly Muir and Esdaile, who concentrate on the final decade, all insist on is the centrality of the broader European context. As Ehrman reminds us, Napoleon’s armed camp at Boulogne was broken up in August 1805, two months *before* Trafalgar, not by any British naval action but by the threat of the Austro-Russian coalition in the east (p. 791). 1805, to parody Pitt’s Guildhall speech, was thus less a case of England saving herself by her own efforts and Europe by example, than of Austria saving Britain by her rashness. Similarly, Rory Muir makes realistic claims about the British contribution to the defeat of Napoleon after 1807. He points out that ‘By far the most important campaign for Britain in 1809 was fought on the Danube hundreds of miles from the nearest British troops’ (p. 91). He also plays down the Peninsula War, whose importance is sometimes somewhat inflated in traditional British accounts. ‘It seems clear’, he writes, ‘that the Peninsula was a great but sustainable drain on Napoleon’s army and finances’ and he reminds us that even after four years of campaigning in Spain, Napoleon was still able to assemble the largest army the world had ever seen to attack Russia (pp. 379–80). Moreover, Muir reminds us that had Napoleon prevailed in Russia, ‘the spring of 1813 would probably have seen French reinforcements pour over the Pyrenees’ (p. 216), nullifying Wellington’s famous victories of 1812. ‘Napoleon’, in short, ‘was finally overthrown by the combined efforts of almost all the powers of Europe’ (p. 380).

The struggle against Napoleon was not the first British confrontation with a European hegemon, nor was it the last. The divide between ‘continentalists’ and ‘colonialists’ was part of a long-standing debate stretching back through the eighteenth century to the wars of Grand Alliance against Louis XIV. Similarly, at least three of the authors make explicit reference to the parallels with a contest still to come, that with Hitler’s Germany during the Second World War. Thus Ehrman, himself a veteran of the last war, compares the decision to weaken the Channel fleet in 1798 in order to detach a squadron for Ireland to Churchill’s decision to send most of Britain’s remaining

tanks to Egypt in 1940, also at the height of an invasion scare (p. 140). Towards the end of the book, he observes that 'To all intents and purposes, after eight years of warfare Britain stood alone' (p. 411); again the rhetoric parallels that of the 'very well, alone' phase of the Second World War after the fall of France. On another occasion, Ehrman notes that 'Britain failed to set Europe ablaze' (p. 471), a formulation with strong, and no doubt intended, echoes of Churchill's famous instruction to Special Operations Executive to 'Set Europe ablaze.'

Similarly, Mackesy's account of the Egyptian landing and its aftermath evokes the D-Day landings of 1944, with chapter headings such as 'Beach-head', 'assault landing', and 'breakout'. It thus comes as no surprise to find a reference to the infantryman's practice of marking the location of the wounded with a bayonet in the sand, 'a device his successors would use a century and half later in the long summer grass and corn of Normandy' (p. 139); Mackesy himself served in the Scots Greys during the campaign in northern Europe, 1944–5. He ends his study with an explicit comparison between the achievement of Abercromby and that of Montgomery in the Western Desert 1942. In a phrase redolent of the title of the volume of Nigel Hamilton's acclaimed biography of Field Marshal Montgomery, Mackesy concedes that Abercromby 'may not have been one of the great masters of the battlefield' (p. 240), but insists that like his eminent successor in Egypt, he restored the confidence and fighting power of the British army. Twentieth-century parallels are also to be found in *The French Revolutionary wars and Britain and the defeat of Napoleon*. Muir's eighth chapter is entitled 'The turn of the tide', an echo of Arthur Bryant's edition of Alanbrooke's war diaries, published during his later patriotic incarnation. Similarly, Blanning compares the transition to 'Revolutionary war' at the National Convention in August 1793 to Goebbels's infamous speech at the Berlin Sportpalast on 18 February 1943, when he inflamed his audience with calls for total war; he adds in a footnote that when he made this comparison in the course of a lecture at Princeton in April 1989, 'great offence was taken by Professor Robert Darnton, who told me in no uncertain fashion that I should omit it from any subsequent publication' (p. 101 n. 105).

If these comparisons, *pace* Darnton, stimulate more than they irritate, this is a tribute to the quality of the works under review. Blanning, in particular, is an example of how academic history can be written with verve and passion, without in any way sacrificing standards. Like its illustrious predecessor, *The origins of the French Revolutionary wars* (1986), this latest work is no ordinary synthesis but a *tour de force* which combines a solid archival grounding with the penchant for anecdote and paradox which has so influenced generations of his students, the present reviewer among them. It is only regrettable that Blanning did not say more about the anomalous position of the king's patrimony of Hanover, which was neutralized after 1795 and the victim of a Prussian invasion in 1801; this criticism applies to all the other authors as well, with the exception of Mackesy, whose work is justifiably focused on events in Egypt. Esdaile's successor volume in the same series conforms more to the standard genre of the synthesis. What it sacrifices in style it gains in structure, however, and it should be the first port of call for those interested in a systematic overview of Napoleon's hegemony and the European reaction to it, both diplomatic and domestic; an excellent chronology, an extremely detailed annotated bibliography, and numerous maps are appended.

Mackesy's *British victory in Egypt* crowns a distinguished career and a long line of works on Britain's conflict with Revolutionary and Napoleonic France: *The war in the Mediterranean, 1803–1810* (1957), *The strategy of overthrow: statesmen at war, 1798–1799* (1974), and *War without victory: the downfall of Pitt* (1984). It reads well, with vivid

descriptions of the bizarre blend of French militarism and oriental decadence prevailing in Napoleon's eastern-most possession. The broader strategic sweep of the earlier works is somewhat lacking, however, and the focus is more tactical; heavy reliance is placed on dense description. Occasionally, there is a quaint note of Scottish patriotism: Scottish officers tend to be 'studious, brave and decisive in combat' (p. 25), while the English sometimes come across as snide and ineffectual and the Irish as devious and feckless. The author also objects to the 'padding' out of line regiments with Irish militia (p. 33); here one feels impelled to remark that Wellington achieved his greatest victories with little else, and knew it. But these are parochial objections, and in no way alter the fact that Mackesy has written a work of considerable weight, which will go a long way towards reviving the reputation of Abercromby and antedating the recovery of the British army to 1801.

Ehrman's third and final volume of *Pitt* also crowns a life's work. Never before has Pitt found such an indefatigable and sympathetic, but no means uncritical, biographer. The great issues of the day – especially the *Consuming struggle* of the war against France – are discussed with formidable erudition and elegance. The sensationalist approach so familiar in recent biographies is eschewed in favour of a sensitive handling of delicate issues, in particular his sexuality and his illnesses; Ehrman is a writer of taste and humanity with a keen sense of the questions that really matter. Inevitably, in a work of such scope, some of the more recent literature has been overlooked, for instance Philip Dwyer's studies on Anglo-Prussian relations around 1800; the same criticism might also be made of Blanning. Some of the judgements on foreign statesmen are also a little awry: the Prussian Hardenberg, for example, is described as 'known to be an anglophile' (p. 812); 'believed to be an anglophile' would be more accurate.

Rory Muir on the other hand, is more surefooted when it comes to the world outside Britain. He is certainly no hagiographer of the duke of Wellington, the subject of his original doctoral dissertation; indeed, on occasion he sides with his Spanish critics (pp. 98–9). Overall, Muir's book is an extremely valuable contribution to our understanding of Britain's role in the second half of the Napoleonic wars: it synthesizes a very broad range of manuscript sources and printed documents to produce sound judgements; the omission of V. R. Ham's dissertation on British policy in northern Europe and Daniel Baugh's seminal article on the 'blue-water' policy before 1815 is puzzling, though. Only right at the end is there a jarring and entirely egregious note, which is quite out of keeping with the tone of the work in general. His chapter on the 100 days concludes as follows: 'It would be another century before Britons would again be called upon to fight to preserve that disunion in Europe which was so essential to Britain's security and independence' (p. 373). Surely, if anything, the wars of Napoleon, and Muir's own book, show that British security depended if not on unification then at least on European unity in the face of a rampant France?

PETERHOUSE, CAMBRIDGE

BRENDAN SIMMS