David M. Klocek

demonstrated that much of the opposition to slavery in the territories was also about excluding black people from the West. Pinheiro notes the connections between Catholics and blacks in nativist rhetoric but needs to examine in more detail the connections between these arguments (39–40, 49, 93, 111). Doing so would have connected better the nativist movement to the politics of slavery during the 1850s. That being said, Pinheiro’s book deserves a wide reading and should change the way that historians understand the effects of the Mexican-American War.

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The Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. is one of the world’s great libraries. I once read (many years ago, so it may no longer be true) that the person about whom the most books were written in the library collection was Jesus of Nazareth; and the second largest number of books was about Napoleon I. So, why should we notice yet another Napoleon biography? The answer is that there is an important new source: Since 2004, the Fondation Napoléon has been gradually publishing the entire surviving correspondence of the French emperor. The previous edition of correspondence was published in 1857 under Napoleon III, the emperor’s nephew; it was not comprehensive, and its composition was distorted to serve the political purposes of the ruler.

Roberts’s use of this collection of letters results in a more understanding and sympathetic picture of the emperor than the standard portrayal in the English-speaking world. Usually, Napoleon is depicted as a vain, self-aggrandizing tyrant, if also a military genius and skilled politician. When the mass of letters that he wrote (and he wrote a huge number, on many topics) is analyzed, we see, through Roberts’s clear and well-organized prose, the often reasonable political motives for what had appeared to be ego-centric acts, such as his assumption of the imperial title and his coronation. We see the emperor’s mercy towards potential assassins, wounded enemies on the battlefield, and disloyal collaborators. We see his care for his wives, indulgence toward incompetent siblings, respect for worthy adversaries, and generosity to mistresses. We also see a man of the Enlightenment: intelligent, practical, energetic, and a professional military officer who achieves supreme executive and legislative power and views
international politics especially from a national security perspective. But he is also a middle class Corsican, devoted to advancing the social and financial interests of his family. He fits these things together with a genuine dedication to his adopted homeland, which he serves bravely and without reservation.

Napoleon was a Roman Catholic but, as an Enlightenment thinker, he did not consider religion to be personally important. He was generally tolerant, unlike the many revolutionaries who supported him and who often used violence against the Church. During his time in Egypt and Palestine, he seriously considered converting to Islam, although only for the political effect that such a move would have on his relations with the locals. Religious loyalties thus were opportunistic. Roberts quotes the memoir of an English girl whom Napoleon befriended at the beginning of his exile on St. Helena. Answering her question about whether he could truly accept Islam as his religion, he said, “Fighting is a soldier’s religion; I never changed that. The other is the affair of women and priests. As for me, I always adopt the religion of the country I am in” (174). Also on St. Helena, he said that he liked Islam because it “has fewer incredible things in it” than his religion, but also that he “would worship the sun” if he had to have a religion (272). He professed his Church membership in his last will and received the sacrament of extreme unction just before his death, but he did not think that such membership was truly important.

The concordat that Napoleon concluded with the Holy See as First Consul (1802), which at first faced serious opposition from revolutionaries and former Jacobins who were now his supporters, thus was an important element of a strategy of re-establishing a stable social order following the many years of chaos following the overthrow of the Ancien Régime. Napoleon saw the Catholic Church in France as a force for stability that would promote the virtues and behavior that his government wanted: honest work, patriotism, marriage and family, and so on. Normalizing relations with the Catholic Church was popular and thus a smart move for reasons of state.

The conflicts that he later led France into with Pope Pius VII were seen by Napoleon as political. The pope refused to recognize both Napoleon’s awarding of the throne of Naples to his brother Joseph (1806) and his brother Jerome’s second marriage (1807). Further, the Papal States refused to participate in the continental blockade of British trade that France was forcing on its allies. A powerful country like France was not going to allow the tiny Papal States to get away with this, and so in February 1808 (with Napoleon back at home after the end of the war against Prussia and Russia), French troops were ordered to occupy Rome. The pope excom-
municated the emperor and, in June 1809, Pius VII was arrested and taken first to Savona and then to France, and the Papal States were annexed to France. The conflict simmered, but the pope’s imprisonment added fuel to the anti-French uprising in Spain. (Roberts had cited Napoleon’s comment to officials at the time of his coronation that they should treat the Pope as if he led an army of 200,000 [352]; for Napoleon, what counts is material power, and that is how he saw the influence of the head of his own Church, as the counterpart of a military commander.)

After his defeat in Russia, Napoleon attempted to get a new concordat with the pope in January 1813, but the pope annulled it a week later after the pressure Napoleon had imposed on him was withdrawn. Faced with enormous pressure himself from a united front of enemy countries, Napoleon released Pius in January 1814. As the pope celebrated Easter in Rome for the first time in several years, a defeated Napoleon contemplated his own abdication (he attempted suicide during Easter week). This same pope gave refuge to Napoleon’s mother in Rome after his final defeat and exile to St. Helena, and offered Mass for his soul when he heard of Napoleon’s death in 1821.

This year, 2015, is the two hundredth anniversary of Napoleon’s final defeat at the Battle of Waterloo. His biography, as retold sympathetically by Roberts, remains fascinating because his abilities, hard work, and genuine human virtues closely tie his personal story with the story of a great and influential nation. His story is a tragedy: A person from modest origins, through his own abilities and hard work, ascends to the highest position in his country and helps to make that nation the leading power of Europe; yet, he falls from this position due to his own flaws and misjudgments. His program, however, goes on; subsequent regimes in France do not repudiate it. Strong executive leadership in foreign policy, a stand in favor of universal values, an endorsement of merit and expertise in political and economic leadership—all of these characterize the role of France in international politics.

This biography is a concise account of an amazing life, but it is also the sad story of a man who relied only on himself and never came to know or accept God and His Church—a man who resembles the ancient pagan Romans that he so admired.