

## The best books of the week

### History books

#### Napoleon and his Marshals – the fragility of loyalty

Andrew Roberts offers a rich collection of personal stories that dissect the rivalries that came to define the emperor's military elite



'Napoleon Bidding Farewell to Marshal Jean Lannes' (1858) by Dorian © Fine Art Images/Heritage Images/Getty Images

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There is no shortage of messiahs in this world. A glance in the mirrors around the Palace of Westminster, in which every passing politician imagines a reflection of glory, will prove that. The tricky part is finding the disciples. In the years after the French Revolution there were many others who claimed the crown, or at least its power, but none but Napoleon Bonaparte came close to mastering the throne.

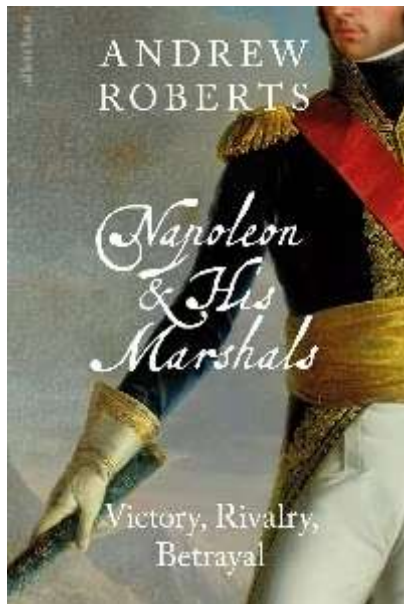
Bonaparte's genius was more than battle tactics; it was picking talent, promoting leaders and building a team that could deliver his every need. From Alexandre Berthier, whose administrative skills managed the details and logistics Bonaparte would not, to the emperor's brother-in-law Joachim Murat, who excelled as a cavalry commander, and his right arm Michel Ney, whose *Military Studies* rewrote infantry tactics of the day. Each brought skill and, at the beginning, loyalty to the great man. As Andrew Roberts makes clear, that wasn't enough.

They were collected over time. Some, like André Masséna, were his lieutenants from the very beginning in the army of Italy in March 1796, the last, Emmanuel de Grouchy, just before the end at Waterloo in 1815.

Despite rewards from money and baubles to land and titles, those who held the newly created rank of Marshal of the Empire, a military honour above all else and awarded to only 26 men over the years of Bonaparte's rule, were far from united. "The default position among the marshals was one of mutual antagonism."

*Napoleon and his Marshals* recounts, in sometimes gruesome detail, the violence and emotions of the relationships that turned shared ambition into rivalry, and teamwork and honour into naked greed. Their brief flowering of military panache took France from revolutionary catastrophe to inevitable defeat in 20 years. Their interlude is the long-remembered *gloire et grandeur* of the First Empire.

Roberts sets out to reveal "the dark underside of the lust for glory" that the emperor unleashed in his men, "as well as aspects of his own character and approach to leadership that ultimately left him almost completely bereft of the support he so desperately needed as he faced his Waterloo".



The emperor, whom Roberts is correct in calling simply Bonaparte until self-elevation to the imperial estate, makes republican fashions incompatible with his dignity, conquered princes and popes. Of his closest acolytes, two became monarchs, six princes and more than a dozen dukes. One of the kings, Bernadotte, founded a dynasty whose heirs still reign in Stockholm.

Could it have been different? For Roberts the answer is clear: no. From the beginning, deep rivalries shaped the marshalcy. After Bernadotte's tactical failure at the Battle of Wagram (July 1809) in leaving his

Saxon troops exposed to Austrian artillery until their nerves broke and they ran; Masséna abandoned the future King of Sweden without a word. Despite their long friendship, the silence of disgrace caused an enduring rift and even eventual victory just outside Vienna was not enough to prevent the marshal's disgrace and his return to Paris.

But on such moments fortunes are made. Bernadotte's attempts to spin his way out, as today's politicians would say, drew the ire of Bonaparte himself, but he was still of the military elite and the only marshal available when an army was needed to defend Antwerp. That campaign restored his name in the north and later won him a throne.

It is the personal stories that come out so clearly in this book, the politics of people and place. To rulers, losing friends is as important as winning them, a subject Lord Roberts of Belgravia understands well.

Jean Lannes, so close to Bonaparte that he still addressed the emperor by the informal "*tu*" rather than "*vous*", was killed at the Battle of Aspern-Essling in May 1809. Such friendship could never be replicated and the loss hit him hard. To replace Lannes, Bonaparte named three generals to the marshalcy, each for their own cause. As Roberts records: "Macdonald was named for France . . . Oudinot was named for the army; Marmont was named for friendship," went the word of the day, because not one could replace Lannes.

The rank had once meant the keeper of the king's horses, but was recreated in 1804 to mean military potentate and came to define the Napoleonic age. Like the innovation in the corps system of battle, it predated the empire, but Napoleon perfected it. His most trusted lieutenants carried the baton and many were married into the wider family, creating a new imperial, martial aristocracy.

### **Could it have been different? From the beginning, deep rivalries shaped the marshalcy**

They came from a variety of backgrounds. The once royal guard Berthier, until the Bastille ended all that; the anticlerical Lannes from Nice who defeated papal units in Italy; Étienne Macdonald, who was part of the Scottish exiles fighting in Europe's militaries; and Józef Poniatowski, a Polish prince who brought

armies on the march to the gates of Moscow.

But they each brought their ambitions too. Lannes, so bold in battle and so close to Napoleon, was dispatched for a time as ambassador to Portugal in punishment after his rival Murat highlighted his "peculations" while in office, including spending almost double the sum on Imperial Guard uniforms that had been budgeted. As Roberts points out, they were both trying to satisfy the emperor, but authoritarian regimes are fickle; they lead to revolution and betrayal.

This is what this book exposes so well. From Ney's denunciation of Bonaparte from the Chamber of Peers just after the defeat at Waterloo, to Bernadotte's siding with his enemies at the subsequent Treaty of Vienna, the politics of power are made clear and the end was inevitable. Despite the glory and panache of battle, their loyalty was to themselves.

Over the 20 years from Bonaparte's first army command in Italy to his final exile on St Helena, arriving on the remote island on October 15 1815, Bonaparte's team was never one that could hold, nor one he thought would. In the end, only two marshals actively commanded in his last battle and four marched behind his coffin when it was reburied at Les Invalides in 1840. Perhaps that's the truth about power. It is always fleeting, as Westminster's mirrors make clear.

**Napoleon and his Marshals: Victory, Rivalry, Betrayal** by Andrew Roberts *Allen Lane £40, 704 pages*

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