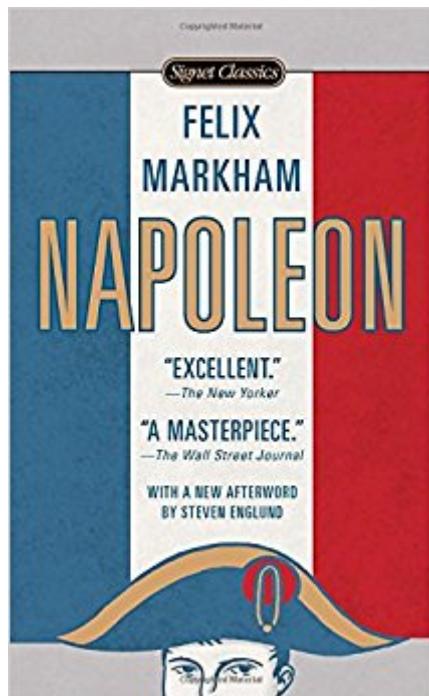


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# Napoleon (Signet Classics)



## Synopsis

This magnificent reconstruction of Napoleon's life and legend, written by a distinguished Oxford scholar, is based on intimate documents—including the personal letters of Marie-Louise and the decoded diaries of Grand Marshal Bertrand, who accompanied Napoleon to his final exile on St. Helena. It has been hailed as the most important single-volume work in Napoleonic literature.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Excellent. The New Yorker A masterpiece. A Wall Street Journal A The university lecturer in history at Oxford has approached the impossible; he has written a new life of one of the most written-about figures in modern history with freshness, vivacity, fine scholarship, and penetration. A The Boston Globe A Markham has achieved a startlingly vivid and coherent picture of Napoleon's career, of the social and intellectual influences that molded it, and of the men and forces that opposed it. The military events, the political movements, the personal intrigues all appear, each in its proper places and perspective. A Los Angeles Times

Felix Markham (1908–92) was born in Brighton, England. After graduating from Oxford, he

taught history there for some forty years. Among his books are Napoleon and the Awakening of Europe and The Bonapartes. He was also the editor and translator of such works as Henri Comte de Saint-Simon, 1760–1825: Selected Writings. Steven Englund took a doctorate from Princeton after studying at Cambridge. He has taught at UCLA, the Université de Paris VIII, Sciences Po, l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, and is now Distinguished NYU Professor at the American University of Paris. His books or coauthorships include The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community, 1930–1960 and Napoleon: A Political Life, which was winner of the History Grand Prix of the Fondation Napoléon as well as the J. Russell Major Prize (for best book in English on French History, 2004) of the American Historical Association. Among the publications he contributes to are *La Revue des Deux Mondes*, *Le Monde*, *La Revue d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine*, *Commonweal*, and *Cross Currents*. He was a Guggenheim Fellow from 2005 to 2006.

I have always found the person of Napoleon fascinating. When I was in Paris last year, I went to a place called Les Invalides. There is a chapel there that houses some of France's most memorable leaders. Enshrined in that place lies the grave of Napoleon that attracts millions of visitors every year. But Napoleon has been described in history as the first dictator; a tyrant; a radical; and an emperor. But what makes Napoleon so special, and why is he still considered one of France's heroes? Well I think Felix Markham presents Napoleon in a balanced way in this book, "Napoleon." I have often wanted to read a book on Napoleon, but in order to understand Napoleon, you have to understand the French Revolution. Earlier this year, I reviewed a book for a class I had to take on the French Revolution and Napoleon. I reviewed William Doyle's book "The Oxford History of the French Revolution" which was a great introduction to the time Napoleon found himself in. Napoleon grew up in Corsica, which was an island in the Mediterranean south of France. It was always a contested island, and the French invaded it around the time Napoleon was born. Napoleon's father and mother were freedom fighters for the small island nation, but succumbed to French rule. Napoleon never forgave his father for this treachery. As he grew up, he went to school on mainland France and eventually found himself enrolled in a military school where he was to become an artillery officer. When he became an artillery officer, he never really had a chance to ascend through the ranks because in the old regime (see my review of the French Revolution to understand this), the nobility were the only people who could advance far into the military. When the French Revolution happened, this did away with the old regime and Napoleon

won a decisive battle against the English. He was promoted to Brigadier General and eventually put in charge of the French Army that was to conquer parts of Italy. In the Italian campaign, Napoleon won victory after victory with his brilliant military tactics. The government was very poor and his troops had not been paid for some time; Napoleon won the confidence of his men by allowing them to gather the booty of Italian treasures and they charged through the land. Paintings, statues, gold, coins, ancient antiquities were all liquidated to France during these campaigns. After the Italian campaigns, Napoleon devised a plan to halt the British dominance in the Western world. It would be near suicide to invade the British mainland, so Napoleon would strike at the British colony of Egypt. In the Egyptian campaign, Napoleon again found his mark as he conquered the land. Unfortunately, his entire fleet was shipwrecked by the British, stranding Napoleon and his men in Egypt. Napoleon, seeing events in France progress to the point where a power vacuum was coming, made his way back to Paris to take advantage of the situation. Eventually Napoleon orchestrated events to where he would become the defacto dictator of the country. This stabilization was actually ultimately good for France; what was not good was the wars that ensued. Napoleon wanted complete power, and he instituted himself as Caesar of the French Empire. Following this, he took to Prussia and Russia where he won victories at places such as Austerlitz that demonstrated he was in total control. Napoleon's fatal mistake came in his assault into Russia. He was stymied that Spring into the summer, and the cold came upon the Le Grande Armee before they reached Moscow. When they did eventually get to Moscow, there was no one there to strike up a peace deal; rather, the Russians had set fire to the city. Defeated, Napoleon set off for France as his army continued to dwindle. The cold, lack of food, and attacks from the cossacks continued to drain his numbers. Just over a million set out to conquer Russia and only around 10,000 returned. Napoleon built up another army but it wasn't enough; he had to capitulate and was sentenced to exile in Elba. He wasn't there for long however; he broke free of his imprisonment and set out to Paris. He regained control and fought one last decisive battle at Waterloo with a coalition of forces against him commanded by the British. He lost this last battle and was sentenced to exile on St. Helena where he died sometime later. You can see that the legacy of Napoleon is mixed; on the one hand, he somewhat strengthened and saved France from the democratic disaster of the previous decade. The French Revolution took a toll on the people and Napoleon brought stability and order to chaos. And Napoleon was in all regards a genius. He was a tactician whose skills would only be dwarfed by men like Rommel in Italy and Africa. But on the flip side, he was brutal and took massive risks that endangered the French warriors of the time. He did a lot of harm to France mixed in with the good. Napoleon's legacy is difficult. But

one thing is for sure; he is a very interesting character to study. I think Markham's brief study on Napoleon is palatable enough for both the novice and the ardent historian.

This book is the perfect biography of Napoleon for a student just beginning to take up the story of the early 19th century. It perfectly balances the career of the mighty Corsican with the context of the times in which he worked. It is also delightfully free of any Freudian analysis of Napoleon and sticks exactly to the facts. It is written for all time. There are no references to ephemeral pop culture or events which were contemporaneous to the times in which it was published (1963). One can read this book and get the gist of Napoleon without becoming lost. Once I started reading the book I couldn't put it down. Additionally, this book has a turn of phrase which needs additional remarks. One phrase is "peace with honor" and one must wonder if President Nixon latched on to this concept after reading this book.

While the book had some interesting facts about Napoleon and his rise to power, the writing was a bit heavy. I understand it is history but I have read other history books in which the writing was just a little bit better organized and not so heavy.

Very good. I can easily tell why this is a classic. I wish that I was told that this was a diplomatic history almost exclusively as opposed to a military one. Perhaps because of this I learned something I had not already known (I have read a great deal of Napoleonic history).

Great Book

I was lost in the detail.

There are probably few men in history that have made such an impact upon mankind and are so well known as Napoleon. Presenting a biography that succinctly tells the story of his life cannot be an easy task, and there is always the prevailing danger of falling back into detailing the history rather than the person. The Napoleonic time (about 25 years) is so full of people, battles, ideas and events that anyone is easily overwhelmed. Mr. Markham, being an Oxford scholar, has clearly studied in depth his subject, and he can only be commended for preparing this volume. The constant struggle to keep the contents of the book as small as possible is readily apparent, but nevertheless the reader gets a good overview of Napoleon's life, from his birth at Corsica until his exile and death at

St. Helena. Unfortunately, the author at times simply cannot put aside the many historic events happening at the same time, and thus in many parts the book turns from a biography of Napoleon into a history book about the Napoleonic times. In the end, I was left with the impression that I didn't really get to know Napoleon - the person - much better, and that the book strayed too much into history telling. As interesting as these times were, I bought a biography of Napoleon, not a history book, and thus the reader can and should expect more about Napoleon and less about the history surrounding him. Having said that, and trying not to be overly strict, this is still an interesting read while not the definitive Napoleon biography, and thus would rate it 3.5 stars if possible. If you are looking for an introduction into the history of the Napoleonic times, coupled with some facts about him, this is probably your book.

Felix Markham is a very strong writer that has the ability to convey his thoughts on the subject of Napoleon to the average reader. Of the books I have had the 'pleasure' of reading for upper level history courses, Markham's book is the only one that was well written. His ability to capture Napoleon in a light rarely seen was outstanding.

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