

Review Article

Napoléon n'est plus? Reflections on a Bicentenary

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On a July evening in the summer of 2021, the cool air inside the Dôme church at Les Invalides provided a welcome respite from the lingering Parisian heat. The site was quiet, with few taking advantage of the museum's extended opening hours, and as I descended into the crypt that has, since 1862, housed Napoleon's remains, I realized I was the only visitor. In the cavernous silence it was just me, the enormous red porphyry sarcophagus that contains what's left of Napoleon Bonaparte, and a new addition. Suspended above the tomb was the skeleton of a small horse, its left foreleg raised, as if captured forever in motion.

The equine skeleton is *Memento Marengo*, a work by the French artist Pascal Convert commissioned as part of *Napoléon? Encore!*, an exhibition of contemporary art organized by the Musée de l'Armée and Éric de Chassey, director of the Institut national de l'histoire de l'art (INHA), to mark the bicentenary of Napoleon's death on 5 May 1821.¹ The work is a 3D-printed copy of the skeleton housed at the National Army Museum in London, said to be that of the mythic Marengo, Napoleon's favourite horse.² As Convert has noted, the work is rather different in tone and subject matter to his previous commemorative commissions, including his 2003 memorial to executed Resistance fighters at Mont-Valérien.³ The artist imagined *Memento Marengo*, as the title suggests, as a kind of modern *memento mori*: a recognition of Napoleon's rise and fall and his ultimate mortality. Citing ancient burial practices in which warriors were

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¹ The exhibition will run until February 2022. See <<https://www.musee-armee.fr/en/programme/exhibitions/detail/napoleon-encore.html>>.

² Whether this horse was, in fact, Napoleon's at all remains somewhat of a mystery: J. Hamilton, *Marengo: the Myth of Napoleon's Horse* (London, 2000). In the case of Convert's artwork, however, what matters is less whether this is the 'real' horse and more its symbolic value.

³ 'Mont-Valérien', Pascal Convert,

<http://www.pascalconvert.fr/histoire/mont_valerien/monument.html>

buried with their steeds, Convert imagines the horse as 'a celestial vehicle to carry the spirit of the dead [soldier] on to new battles'.⁴

Memento Marengo cleverly reflects the tension between Napoleon as mere mortal and the persistence of his legend. The sight of the horse's skeleton in the grandiose setting of the Dôme church inevitably reminds the visitor of the mortal remains encased and hidden from view in the sarcophagus below, while simultaneously invoking the familiar iconography of the providential man on horseback.⁵ Yet the work has not been well received in some quarters, including among some of those most closely involved with the Napoleonic bicentenary. For them, the work is both disrespectful to Napoleon and to the setting of the Dôme church, with Thierry Lentz, director of the Fondation Napoléon, questioning whether it showed sufficient respect for the 'national necropolis'.⁶ In *Le Figaro*, Pierre Branda, historian and *directeur du patrimoine* for the Fondation, denounced the work as a 'fake', referring to the uncertainty surrounding the origins of the skeleton in London.⁷ Yet Branda's criticism of the work went further than merely questioning its authenticity or appropriateness. *Memento Marengo*, he argued, 'symbolised the deconstruction of French history'. 'This emaciated horse is like a Trojan horse for bad thinkers [*mauvais penseurs*]', Branda claimed, 'Their targets are carefully chosen. They spare the minorities to offend the majority'. The furore over Convert's work left its mark in the Dôme church, too. On an interpretative sign (unrelated to the artwork) near the entrance to Napoleon's crypt, I noticed that someone had scrawled 'CHEVAL SCANDALEUX'.

The controversy surrounding Convert's *Memento Marengo* is emblematic of what *Le Parisien* referred to even before the May anniversary as 'the bicentenary of discord'.⁸ In the absence of a central state commemorative committee, the Fondation Napoléon, in line with its mission of promoting the study of both empires and preserving Napoleonic heritage, has been the main driver and overseer of activity in what the Fondation has designated '2021 Année Napoléon', in partnership with a broad range of cultural organizations, associations, French embassies (in Malta and Belarus) and the network of 'Villes impériales' across France.⁹ The proliferation of bicentenary events is in stark

⁴ P. Convert, [interview] in *Napoléon? Encore!* [exhibition catalogue] (Paris, 2021), 62.

⁵ As I have noted elsewhere, the work can also be read as a nod to the 'long tradition of Napoleonic kitsch' and public display. L. O'Brien, 'The celebrity horse that's putting Napoleon in the shade', *Apollo* [online], 6 May 2021, <<https://www.apollo-magazine.com/horse-napoleon-tomb-bicentenary/>>.

⁶ See <<https://twitter.com/thierrylentz/status/1385849210218680322?s=21>> (24 April 2021). The Dôme church is also the resting place of Vauban, Foch, Lyautey and other French military leaders.

⁷ P. Branda, 'Un squelette de cheval en plastique sur le tombeau de Napoléon: "une idée grotesque et irrespectueuse"', *Le Figaro*, 6 May 2021, <<https://www.lefigaro.fr/vox/histoire/un-squelette-de-cheval-en-plastique-sur-le-tombeau-de-napoleon-une-idee-grotesque-et-irrespectueuse-20210506>>.

⁸ C. de Saint-Sauveur, 'Napoléon, le bicentenaire de la discorde', *Le Parisien*, 7 Feb. 2021.

⁹ 'Année Napoléon 2021', *Fondation Napoléon*, <<https://fondationnapoleon.org/en/activities-and-services/telling-history/napoleon-year-2021/>>. The 'Villes impériales' form a network of towns with connections to Napoleonic history and heritage, including places such as Fontainebleau, Rueil-Malmaison and Brienne-le-Château, which use the branding as a way of boosting heritage tourism.

contrast to the rather muted reaction to news of Napoleon's death in exile in 1821.¹⁰ Yet this bicentenary was never going to pass without controversy, particularly in the aftermath of the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020 and increasing interest in the place of imperial legacies and slavery in public history. In the case of France and Napoleon, this manifested itself in a renewed focus on the reimposition of slavery by Napoleon in 1802 and the violence of French troops in Haiti and the Antilles, as well as other long-standing themes including Napoleon's misogyny and authoritarianism.

The experience of the *Année Napoléon* in 2021 speaks to several broad themes: state commemoration, particularly of controversial figures; popular engagement with the past; and the impact of anniversaries on scholarly work, both in terms of the involvement of scholars in shaping commemorative activity and how anniversaries can provide a platform for developing their fields. Anniversaries, in Tyler Stovall's memorable phrase, are 'dates on steroids': an opportunity to 'mobilize...public interest in that event and in history in general'.¹¹ But historical commemorations—especially when they concern a figure as significant but divisive as Napoleon—cannot escape their political context. 2021 has raised important questions about the place of Napoleon in contemporary France, including the uses to which his memory is put: in particular, how the bicentenary, as the case of *Memento Marengo* shows, became mired in highly politicized concerns about perceived threats to French history and values writ large. In reflecting on the experience of the *Année Napoléon* across three key areas—state commemoration, exhibitions and public engagement and writing Napoleonic history in 2021—this essay aims to consider the implications of the bicentenary for the reception and future of Napoleonic studies, which I understand in its broadest possible sense.

I

In March 2021, the Élysée spokesman Gabriel Attal confirmed that President Emmanuel Macron would mark the bicentenary of Napoleon's death.¹² No detail was given at this stage as to what the state ceremony would actually entail: a reflection, perhaps, of continued uncertainty about the impact of COVID-19 on event planning and of the controversy that already surrounded potential state involvement in the anniversary. In early February, *Le Parisien* outlined these tensions, with Macron ostensibly caught between 'deux feux mémoriels': on one side, those who (such as the left-wing

¹⁰ As Thierry Lentz notes, the lack of reaction in 1821 was in part a consequence of censorship. The circulation of pamphlets about Napoleon throughout the summer of 1821 suggests a continued interest in him and his fate. T. Lentz, *Bonaparte n'est plus! Le monde apprend la mort de Napoléon: juillet-septembre 1821* (Paris, 2019), 115–24.

¹¹ T. Stovall, 'Happy Anniversary? Historians and the commemoration of the past', *Perspectives on History* (April 2017), <<https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/april-2017/happy-anniversary-historians-and-the-commemoration-of-the-past>>.

¹² 'Macron Commémora Le Bicentenaire de la Mort de Napoléon, Dit Attal', *Reuters*, 10 March 2021, <<https://www.reuters.com/article/france-napoleon-idFRKBN2B21R6>>.

politician Alexis Corbière) argued that ‘the Republic does not have to celebrate its gravedigger’, and on the other, ‘des “napoléonistes”’, concerned that a rejection of the bicentenary by the state might reflect an effort to ‘cancel’ Napoleon and turn France into an ‘amnesiac nation’, in the words of the veteran Napoleonic historian Jean Tulard.¹³ Debates such as this over Napoleon, his legacy and the extent to which he should be commemorated in the present are nothing new in modern France, despite the tendency in some of the bicentenary discussions and coverage to act as if he had only become a controversial figure in recent years. As Jacques-Olivier Boudon told *Le Parisien*, ‘With only a year to go until the presidential election [of May 2022], there are risks associated with celebrating such a divisive figure.’¹⁴

It was eventually confirmed that the ceremonies on 5 May would be relatively low-key: a speech delivered at the Institut de France to a select audience, including some *lycée* students, and a wreath-laying ceremony immediately afterwards at Les Invalides. 5 May would prove a busy day for wreath-laying. In the morning, wreaths were placed at Napoleon’s tomb by the current Prince Napoléon, the designated heir, accompanied by the president of the Fondation Napoléon, Victor-André Masséna, and by representatives of the Souvenir napoléonien, another organization that promotes Napoleonic memory and history.¹⁵ A troop of reenactors in full Napoleonic-era military dress stood sentinel above the tomb during the ceremonies, before the annual anniversary mass for Napoleon was held at the church of Saint-Louis-des-Invalides. Regardless of how limited the state ceremonial would be, Macron’s decision to do *something* on the anniversary of Napoleon’s death was a significant one. Not since August 1969, when Georges Pompidou travelled to Ajaccio to mark the bicentenary of Napoleon’s birth, had a French president actively participated in a Napoleonic commemoration.¹⁶ The anniversaries of the early 2000s—Austerlitz in 2005 and even the 2002 bicentenary of the reimposition of slavery—were ignored by Jacques Chirac’s government.¹⁷ And, unsurprisingly, there was no statement from the Élysée in spring 2021 on the 150th anniversary of the Paris Commune of 1871. As Sudhir Hazareesingh has noted, Macron’s explicit participation in commemorating Napoleon was perhaps a natural decision for a president with one eye on the impending election, whose vision of himself as someone who

¹³ de Saint-Sauveur, ‘Napoléon, le bicentenaire de la discorde’.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Fondation Napoléon, ‘Retour en images et vidéos sur les cérémonies du 5 mai’, 13 May 2021, <<https://www.napoleon.org/histoire-des-2-empires/articles/2021-annee-napoleon-retour-en-images-et-vidéos-sur-les-ceremonies-du-5-mai-2021-a-paris-et-a-sainte-helene/>>.

¹⁶ “‘Napoléon Bonaparte est une part de nous’: Emmanuel Macron célèbre le bicentenaire de la mort d’une figure controversée”, *Le Monde*, 5 May 2021, <https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2021/05/05/emmanuel-macron-celebre-les-200-ans-de-la-mort-de-napoleon-figure-toujours-contestee_6079228_823448.html>.

¹⁷ The lack of interest in the 2002 anniversary is particularly striking, given that the 150th anniversary of the definitive abolition of slavery in 1848 had been marked only four years previously in 1998.

transcends divisions of left and right aligns neatly with 'the Napoleonic myth of a saviour who combines an appeal to order and progress'.¹⁸

Presidential participation aside, however, the extent of the French state's involvement in the 2021 bicentenary was significantly reduced in comparison to the state's much more central role in the commemorative programme for 1969—global pandemic notwithstanding. In 1969—in line with other historical anniversaries before and since, such as the centenary of the revolution of 1848 in 1948 and the bicentenary of the French Revolution in 1989—a state commemorative committee oversaw the schedule of events, with culture minister André Malraux announcing a programme of no fewer than fifty Napoleon-themed television shows to begin in April 1969.¹⁹ In 2021, in contrast, the Fondation Napoléon took it upon itself to lead the planning for the bicentenary in the absence of a state-organized central bicentenary committee. In the summer of 1969, three major, intersecting exhibitions organized in Paris—at the Grand Palais, the Archives Nationales and the Bibliothèque nationale—examined Napoleon's life, legend and personality, and were organized under the auspices of Malraux's office for Cultural Affairs and the Réunion des Musées nationaux.²⁰ As the *Année Napoléon* shows, in the succeeding five decades the commemorative initiative (saved for events of major importance, such as the centenary of the First World War) and the bulk of the commemorative labour has shifted firmly towards interest groups and specialist societies as well as cultural institutions, some of which are, of course, in receipt of state funding.

In the time between Malraux's unveiling of the programme of commemorative events in April and the anniversary of Napoleon's birth in August 1969, France had witnessed the abdication of yet another providential leader with the resignation of Charles de Gaulle in late April. As a result, de Gaulle avoided having to directly 'confront the Napoleonic legend' in Ajaccio, which may have come as somewhat of a relief.²¹ It fell to Georges Pompidou to outline a vision of Napoleon for the troubled Fifth Republic as the 1960s drew to a close. The emphasis was firmly on *gloire*: Napoleon's individual glory, but more importantly '*nos gloires*', those achieved by France as a whole. 'There is no name more glorious than that of Napoleon', Pompidou proclaimed.²² While this glory was uniquely French, Pompidou also sought to frame Bonaparte as a great European, the federal visionary, and to harness the Napoleonic legend

¹⁸ S. Hazareesingh, 'Une part de nous', *Times Literary Supplement*, 8 July 2021, 7.

¹⁹ O. Hahn, 'Napoléon jusqu'à l'indigestion', *L'Express*, 24 June 1969, reproduced on <https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/politique/1969-commemoration-napoleon-jusqu-a-l-indigestion_2079252.html>.

²⁰ See the catalogue for the Grand Palais exhibition: *Napoléon: Grand Palais, juin-décembre 1969* (Paris, 1969).

²¹ R. Gildea, *The Past in French History* (New Haven, 1994), 110.

²² G. Pompidou, 'Discours du 15 août 1969 à l'occasion du bicentenaire de la naissance de Napoléon', *Institut Georges Pompidou*, <<http://www.georges-pompidou.org/georges-pompidou/portail-archives/discours-du-15-aout-1969-loccasion-du-bicentenaire-naissance>>.

to endorse the European Community.²³ For Pompidou, though, Napoleon's legacy could also provide a unifying message in other ways. With the tumult of 1968 and 1969 still looming large, he described how Napoleon had enabled the French people 'not to forget their divisions, but to overcome them in the name of rebuilding national unity'.²⁴

What Napoleon, then, would emerge from Macron's speech under the Dôme of the Institut de France? As 5 May neared, the Élysée was keen to remind the event's critics that the intention was not to celebrate but to commemorate. With one eye firmly on May 2022, the bicentennial ceremonies were presented as another instalment in Macron's stated plan to 'confront the past *en face et en bloc*' and to offer a 'balanced' vision of French history.²⁵ Early in the speech, the president contrasted what he described as the 'exalted celebration' of the *retour des cendres* of December 1840, when Napoleon's body was returned to France, with the 'enlightened commemoration' of 2021.²⁶ Here Macron echoed a common trope in debates around the bicentenary, both among Napoleon's critics and his most vocal supporters: that he had been a figure of universal admiration for previous generations. Those familiar with the history of mid-nineteenth-century France would certainly have been bemused at the president's image of Frenchmen and women united in feverish adulation for the *petit caporal*. Though the *retour des cendres* of 1840 was greeted broadly enthusiastically, it also provoked considerable political anxieties and criticism—as Napoleonic commemorations so often do.²⁷

As expected, Macron's speech did not ignore the darker elements of the Napoleonic regime—the reimposition of slavery in 1802, but also the enormous loss of life caused by the Napoleonic Wars. Yet this explicit recognition of Napoleon's problematic actions and legacies was couched by Macron in terms that reiterated the triumph of republican values. Napoleon may have reimposed slavery but, as Macron put it, 'the Second Republic repaired this mistake, the betrayal of the spirit of the Enlightenment',²⁸ adding that the Republic honoured Toussaint Louverture and the Abbé Grégoire within the Panthéon. While Napoleon 'was never really concerned with loss of life', the French Republic had, since then, 'emphasised the value of human life above

²³ Gildea, *The Past*, 110.

²⁴ G. Pompidou, 'Discours du 15 août 1969'

²⁵ Macron has referred to his desire to 'regarder l'histoire en face' in previous contexts, most notably in response to the completion in January 2021 of a report authored by Benjamin Stora on the memory of colonialism and the Algerian War: B. König, 'Rapport Stora: Emmanuel Macron entend sortir du déni et construire une mémoire', *L'Humanité*, 21 Jan. 2021, <<https://www.humanite.fr/rapport-stora-emmanuel-macron-entend-sortir-du-deni-et-construire-une-memoire-699056>>.

²⁶ E. Macron, '5 mai 2021. Discours du président de la République à l'occasion du bicentenaire de la mort de Napoléon Ier', *Palais de l'Élysée*, <<https://www.elysee.fr/front/pdf/elysee-module-17623-fr.pdf>>

²⁷ On the *retour des cendres* and the debates surrounding it: S. Hazareesingh, *The Legend of Napoleon* (London, 2004), chapter 6, and P. Dwyer, *Napoleon: Passion, Death and Resurrection, 1815–1840* (London, 2018), chapters 9 and 10.

²⁸ E. Macron, 'Discours du président de la République à l'occasion du bicentenaire de la mort de Napoléon Ier'.

all else, whether in war or in pandemics'. Bonaparte could not repress the revolutionary, republican spirit: '1789 was stronger than Napoleon.'²⁹

Despite his insistence on the triumph of the progressive republic over the errors of the Napoleonic era, the general tone of Macron's speech was (as Hazareesingh observed) 'unapologetically celebratory'.³⁰ Napoleon's life was, in Macron's view, a vital, final break with the *ancien régime* and the transition to a new age, an 'epiphany of liberty'. In a striking turn of phrase for a president criticized for his rightward drift and efforts to assume greater control over presidential powers, Napoleon represented 'an ode to political will'. For all Macron's attempts to draw a distinction between the unthinking hero-worship of the nineteenth century and the rational commemorations of the present, at times his descriptions of Napoleon's achievements and his continued appeal came close in spirit to some of the nineteenth-century novels he has cited elsewhere as a personal influence.³¹ Here was Napoleon as the 'first of the Romantics', the inspiration to artists and writers, and a figure who continued to inspire as an example of the importance of 'taking risks, having confidence in the imagination, and being completely oneself.'³² Warning against 'anachronistic' attempts to 'judge the past with the laws of the present', Macron stated plainly: 'Napoleon Bonaparte is a part of us [*une part de nous*].'³³ This statement can be read as a reiteration of Macron's all-encompassing vision of French history—'nous assumons tout', as he put it, adapting Napoleon's own words. But it also raises questions of inclusion and exclusion in the modern republic, particularly in the context of greater efforts to promote awareness and understanding of colonial history in France and the ongoing marginalization of particular communities— especially French Muslims.³⁴ If Napoleon is a part of 'us', then who are 'we'—and who gets to determine who 'we' are in 2021?

II

The average French citizen (or visitor to France) was most likely to encounter the *Année Napoléon* via one of the many exhibitions, cultural events or re-enactments held across France, or perhaps through the press or a television documentary. Although COVID-19 restrictions in France undoubtedly impacted some of these events, with museums not allowed to reopen until 19 May, the widespread prevalence of Napoleonic-themed exhibitions suggests that—despite the controversies surrounding the bicentenary—Bonaparte remains potentially big business. The Napoleon packaged and presented for audiences in

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Hazareesingh, 'Une part de nous', 7.

³¹ E. Macron, *Revolution*, trans. J. Goldberg and J. Scott (Melbourne and London, 2017), 12–13, where the then-presidential candidate describes his move to Paris and excitement at living 'in places that existed only in novels' by Flaubert, Hugo and Balzac.

³² E. Macron, 'Discours du président de la République à l'occasion du bicentenaire de la mort de Napoléon Ier'.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Hazareesingh, 'Une part de nous', 8.

2021 is perhaps more complex and multi-faceted than he may have appeared in previous contexts—the ‘man of a thousand and one faces’, as the Château de Malmaison’s exhibition of representations of Napoleon put it.³⁵ The major shows of 2021 blended a re-treading of familiar ground with some important new departures, integrating new research and approaches to Napoleonic history and biography, while reflecting a persistent desire for a degree of intimacy with this most familiar, but ultimately unknowable, historical figure.

At Les Invalides, the Musée de l’Armée’s *Napoléon n’est plus* traced Napoleon’s death and the eventual fate of his remains. Opening with François Rude’s plaster model for his work *Napoléon s’éveillant à l’immortalité* (1846), the show brought visitors face to face with some of the most intimate of the Napoleonic ‘relics’: the surgical tools used to carry out his autopsy, blood-stained sheets from that event and some of the various death-masks created on Saint-Helena. *Napoléon n’est plus* directly explored the blurred lines between political, personal and religious devotion in Napoleonic ‘fandom’, presenting some of the reliquaries created by Napoleon’s admirers and acolytes alongside images including a mosaic of Horace Vernet’s depiction of a resurrected Napoleon striding purposefully out of his tomb.³⁶ Towards the end of the exhibition, a 1936 letter from Charles de Gaulle to his children, describing childhood visits to Napoleon’s tomb, served to reinforce the lineage of French providential leadership from Napoleon to the general. ‘My childhood was cradled in the legend of the Eagle,’ de Gaulle wrote, ‘at the foot of the Emperor’s tomb, I was told many times of his actions and exploits...’³⁷ An interpretative text accompanying de Gaulle’s letter implied that Napoleon could still provide inspiration for present generations. Referring to the ‘courage and inspiration’ drawn from the tomb by French soldiers during the First World War and de Gaulle in the Second, it asked the visitor in 2021: ‘And what about you? What are you seeking from it?’

The biggest of all the bicentenary shows is *Napoléon*, staged at the Grande Halle de La Villette, the former abattoir and meat market turned exhibition and concert venue on the north-eastern fringes of Paris. Organized primarily by the Réunion des Musées nationaux and costing €4m, it was hoped that *Napoléon* would be a blockbuster to surpass the record-breaking Tutankhamun exhibition held at the same venue in 2019.³⁸ Ticket sales, however, have been less than spectacular, with only around 135,000 sold by September.³⁹ Besides the

³⁵ *Napoléon aux 1001 visages* (Chateau de Malmaison, 5 May–6 September 2021).

³⁶ As Alison Hafera notes, Vernet’s painting (now lost, but surviving via the aquatints and prints produced of it) was part of a genre of images that sought ‘to sacralize Napoleon by conflating his image and body with Christian iconography’: A. Hafera, ‘Visual mediations of mourning and melancholia in France, 1790–1830’ (PhD, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2015), 142–3.

³⁷ Letter from Charles de Gaulle to his children (around 1936), reproduced in *Napoléon n’est plus* [exhibition catalogue] (Paris, 2021), 294–5.

³⁸ de Saint Sauveur, ‘Napoléon: le bicentenaire de la discorde’.

³⁹ B. de Rochebouët, ‘Bicentenaire de Napoléon: chapeau aux enchères pour la fin des festivités’, *Le Figaro*, 24 Sept. 2021, <<https://www.lefigaro.fr/culture/encheres/bicentenaire-de-napoleon-chapeau-aux-encheres-pour-la-fin-des-festivites-20210924>>. The show’s run has been extended until December 2022.

subject matter, the combination of continued public health restrictions, far fewer international visitors (who, *Le Figaro* suggested, may be more likely to visit a Napoleon exhibition) and the rather steep €20 admission price has clearly not helped matters.⁴⁰ Despite his smaller-than-expected audience numbers, at La Villette Bonaparte is a kind of rock star: Jacques-Louis David's dynamic hero crossing the Saint Bernard pass stares imperiously at Parisians from the exhibition posters, echoing visions of Napoleon as celebrity and enigmatic *enfant terrible*.⁴¹ Indeed, in recent years the gift shop at Les Invalides has sold a line of t-shirts depicting Napoleon alongside classic rock lyrics.⁴² Arriving at the Grande Halle, it is difficult to shake the sense of arriving for an audience with a historical superstar. NAPOLÉON is emblazoned across the entrance in huge letters, like a headline act. Inside, visitors enter the show to the strains of an indie pop guitar riff: 'Napoleon Says' by the French band Phoenix. The exhibition's scenography is highly theatrical, and deliberately so. The show's curators conceived of it not so much as a traditional exhibition but rather—in the words of Jean-Baptiste Clais, a Louvre conservator closely involved in its design—as a 'biopic' of someone who 'created his own times'.⁴³

In the midst of this theatrical bombast, the most significant part of *Napoléon*, particularly in the context of the debates surrounding this bicentenary, is a small area devoted to Bonaparte and slavery created in partnership with the Fondation pour la mémoire de l'esclavage.⁴⁴ For the first time, the 1802 decrees maintaining slavery in certain French Caribbean territories and re-establishing it in Guadeloupe have been put on public display. Napoleon's colonial policies, events in the Antilles and their consequences are narrated for visitors through filmed interviews with historians and writers, including the late Marcel Dorigny and Marlene Daut, whose March 2021 opinion piece in the *New York Times* became a lightning rod for criticisms of the bicentenary.⁴⁵ Curators of previous Napoleon shows have not completely ignored these themes. In his introduction to the catalogue for the 2013 exhibition *Napoléon et l'Europe*, the then-director of the Musée de l'Armée, General Christian Baptiste, noted the importance of slavery in the Napoleonic story (as well as the growing interest in the topic), but argued (perhaps as a way of fudging the issue) that the Caribbean deserved

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ On Napoleon and celebrity: among others, L. Brudy, *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and its History* (London, 1997), esp. part V, 'The democratization of fame'; A. Lilti, *Figures publiques: l'invention de la célébrité (1750–1850)* (Paris, 2014).

⁴² A particular highlight of this clothing line is a t-shirt showing a silhouette of Napoleon with an electric guitar slung across his back (based on a *Born to Run*-era portrait of Bruce Springsteen) with the slogan (in English) 'Born in Ajaccio - On Tour'. At the time of writing, these shirts were still available for purchase from the Musée de l'Armée gift shop online.

⁴³ B. de Rochebouët and É. Biétry-Rivierre, 'À La Villette, Napoléon à l'heure du sacré', *Le Figaro*, 30 May 2021. <<https://www.lefigaro.fr/arts-expositions/a-la-villette-napoleon-a-l-heure-du-sacre-20210530>>.

⁴⁴ 'Exposition Napoléon: Bonaparte et l'esclavage', Fondation pour la mémoire de l'esclavage, 12 March 2021, <<https://memoire-esclavage.org/exposition-napoleon-bonaparte-et-lesclavage>>. The FME also had a 'carte blanche' day at La Villette in July 2021, with roundtables and performances featuring Black French and Antillais scholars, writers and artists.

⁴⁵ M. Daut, 'Napoleon isn't a hero to celebrate', *New York Times*, 18 March 2021.

greater, more specialized attention than an explicitly Eurocentric exhibition could offer.⁴⁶ The inclusion, however limited, of these events in the narrative of Napoleon's life at La Villette in 2021 therefore marks a major departure in the history of Napoleonic exhibitions in France, and in the public acknowledgment of French colonial legacies in the Caribbean. This is a testament to the work over many years of scholars and activists in France and elsewhere, as well as of organizations such as the Fondation pour la mémoire de l'esclavage. In the Antilles, meanwhile, local politicians and historical groups creatively expressed their rejection of the official state commemorations. Josette Borel-Lincertin, then-president of the Guadeloupe departmental council, told *Le Monde* in April 2021 that the only fitting response was to send 'the echo of our sorrow' back across the Atlantic to France.⁴⁷ Each night from 5 May to 28 May, the anniversary of the defeat of the Guadeloupean resistance in 1802, buildings at Pointe-à-Pitre and Basse-Terre were illuminated in blood red.⁴⁸

For all its breadth and detail, one leaves *Napoléon* at La Villette thinking of the quotation from Balzac's *Autre étude de femme*, reproduced on the cover of the exhibition catalogue: 'Who could ever explain, portray, or understand Napoleon!' The scale of the exhibition makes it difficult to pin its subject down as multiple Napoleons emerge: the military leader, the patron of the arts, the authoritarian ruler and the isolated exile. Then again, perhaps this is an accurate reflection of Napoleon's essence. Here is a man who created a persona of power, who gradually disappeared 'Bonaparte' into 'Napoleon' and who therefore made it very difficult—despite the best efforts of his many biographers—to discover the 'real' person behind the performance. *Napoléon* does not engage very much with representations of Napoleon, or the emergence of the Napoleonic legend. Other bicentenary exhibitions examine this in more detail. The Château de Malmaison's *Napoléon aux 1001 visages* drew primarily on the museum's own rich collections to examine the many visions of Napoleon, from the Canova bust that greets visitors in the entrance hall to the monstrous ogre of British and German caricature. But it is the Musée de l'Armée's *Napoléon? Encore!* that really speaks to the making and remaking of Napoleon's image over the last two centuries, its meaning in the twenty-first century and its centrality to the Napoleonic story in all its myriad forms. The criticism of Convert's *Memento Marengo* has perhaps overshadowed the richness of the show, which brings together thirty contemporary artists from around the world, including from Algeria, China and Russia, to interpret the Napoleonic image and legacy 'without succumbing to the facile symmetry of hagiography or demonisation'.⁴⁹ With the artworks displayed throughout the

⁴⁶ C. Baptiste, 'Introduction', *Napoléon et l'Europe* [exhibition catalogue] (Paris, 2013), 12.

⁴⁷ J.-M. Hauteville, 'Bicentenaire de la mort de Napoléon: aux Antilles, une commémoration qui se passe mal', *Le Monde*, 24 April 2021. <https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2021/04/24/bicentenaire-de-la-mort-de-napoleon-aux-antilles-une-commemoration-qui-passe-mal_6077928_823448.html>.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ É. de Chassey, 'Quelques questions', *Napoléon? Encore!*, 16.

Musée de l'Armée, including in spaces usually closed to visitors and alongside thematically appropriate historical objects, *Napoléon? Encore!* encourages visitors to reflect on Napoleon's transformation into a malleable, adaptable image, and the persistence of that image two centuries after his death.

The show explicitly seeks to make more visible those whose lives, though interwoven with the Napoleonic story, have been marginalized: to shine a light on those 'left in the shadows in mainstream historiography and by the iconography of a lone hero.'⁵⁰ Hervé Ingrand's 'Der schwarze Teufel' ('The Black Devil'), a tribute to General Alexandre Dumas whose title evokes the nickname given to him by Austrian troops, shows Dumas fighting the Austrians almost single-handedly at Clausen Bridge in 1797, simultaneously appearing in every part of the scene. The Franco-Canadian artist Kapwani Kiwanga's *Nations*, an installation of banners representing the battle for emancipation by enslaved people and free people of colour, adapts contemporary European prints of events in Haiti in order to decentre the master narrative from 'great man' figures (whether Napoleon or Toussaint Louverture) to the 'anonymous fighters' Kiwanga is drawn to: 'I don't think it's very relevant today to want to write the kind of history that focuses on powerful men.'⁵¹ For the duration of the exhibition Kiwanga's hand-embroidered banners hang alongside those of French regiments and captured enemy flags in the church of Saint-Louis-des-Invalides. Here, as Éric de Chasseay explains, these stories can 'find their place - admittedly, temporarily - in the national narrative.'⁵²

III

The furore around *Memento Marengo* suggests that such challenges to the national narrative are not always readily accepted. At times, the *Année Napoléon* has felt less about interpretations of a man who died 200 years ago and more like a new front in what some consider a culture war. The subsuming of the bicentenary into this context, alongside wider debates around perceived efforts to 'cancel' the past, has implications not just for commemoration and public history but for the future of Napoleonic history and studies (and here I include work in art history, literature, theatre studies and other related disciplines). What, then, are the opportunities that emerge from the bicentenary—and what are the problems that the *Année Napoléon* leaves in its wake?

The groaning tables of books covering every aspect of Napoleon's life and regime that were a feature of French bookshops and the gift shop at La Villette this summer (including, importantly, a selection of works on the Haitian Revolution) are testament to the continuing scale and power of the Napoleonic publishing industry. At first glance, then, the field appears in good health and the appetite for new work on Napoleon remains strong. The preparation and

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁵¹ K. Kiwanga [interview], *Napoléon? Encore!*, 92-3.

⁵² De Chasseay, 'Quelques questions', 22.

Some of the debates around the bicentenary, however, have raised troubling questions about the future of Napoleonic studies: in particular, the extent to which the field (especially in a public-facing context and in France) has made space for new historical approaches and perspectives. In a *Le Monde* article on the current state of historical research on Napoleon, Natalie Petiteau argued that the emphasis on biography, on 'histoire événementielle', and on Napoleon *the man* has limited the scope for truly innovative scholarship.⁵⁹ In the same piece, Sudhir Hazareesingh suggested that mainstream Napoleonic history, particularly in France, does not reflect the diversity of approaches that drive work in other areas. 'History, now, is more global, more spatial, more cultural', he noted, adding that 'You don't really see that with Napoleon.'⁶⁰ In some ways this is a fair assessment but, as the ambitious, important recent work described above suggests, it does not reflect the whole picture. The problem, then, is not that innovative work is not being *done* on Napoleon but rather that it has not always been given sufficient room in a field that remains rather political and military in its outlook. Work on material culture and Napoleon as patron of the arts aside, the diversity of Napoleonic history has not been very visible during the bicentenary, particularly in its public-facing elements. The *hors-série* special issue produced by *Le Figaro* encapsulates the problem, with an overwhelmingly biographical focus on Napoleon and his role as 'the conqueror of the centuries'.⁶¹ With only one female contributor, Gwenaële Robert, among the assembled ranks of the French Napoleonic establishment, this commemorative magazine also reflects the gender problem in Napoleonic history: it is a field dominated (and not just in France) by white men.⁶²

Some have sought to explain the persistent traditionalism of the Napoleonic historical establishment by pointing to the disconnection between Napoleonic scholarship in France and academic history as practiced in universities.⁶³ With a few notable exceptions, the historians and scholars who have dominated the bicentenary—in publications, contributions to exhibitions, media appearances and commentary—overwhelmingly work outside of academia.⁶⁴ The currents that shape academic debates and approaches to the past may therefore feel at odds with a form of Napoleonic history that, while still rigorous, increasingly

⁵⁹ F. Georgesco, 'Bicentenaire de la mort de Napoléon: beaucoup de parutions, peu de regards neufs sur l'homme, son oeuvre, et son époque', *Le Monde*, 5 May 2021, <https://www.lemonde.fr/livres/article/2021/04/29/bicentenaire-de-la-mort-de-napoleon-beaucoup-de-parutions-peu-de-regards-neufs-sur-l-homme-son-uvre-et-son-epoque_6078463_3260.html>

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Napoléon. Lépopée - Le mythe - Le procès*, *Le Figaro* hors-série (Paris, 2021).

⁶² To their credit, the *Télérama* and *Le Monde* hors-série issues offered more diverse perspectives, both in terms of the gender balance among the contributors (most of whom were journalists rather than historians) and the topics covered, with *Le Monde* foregrounding the global dimensions of Napoleon's legacy.

⁶³ See comments from Hazareesingh, Jean-Clément Martin and Patrice Gueniffey on the issue in Georgesco, 'Bicentenaire de la mort de Napoléon', and Aurélien Lignereux's interview with André Loez on *Paroles d'histoire*, 5 April 2021, <<https://parolesdhistoire.fr/index.php/2021/04/05/189-le-bicentenaire-de-napoleon-avec-aurelien-lignereux/>>.

⁶⁴ There are notable exceptions, including Lignereux and Jacques-Olivier Boudon.

rooted in original sources and important archival work, is often more 'traditional' in its approach. These different perspectives on Napoleonic history can, and should be able to, co-exist. Yet in the heated context of the bicentenary, it appears that some of Napoleon's contemporary supporters have come to see the concerns of twenty-first century academic historians—including gender, identity, representation and global connections—in explicitly hostile terms. These approaches are seen not as opportunities to diversify and enhance the field but rather as existential threats to 'history' itself.

In some cases, it is as if the theoretical, ethical and political dimensions of contemporary academic history are anathema to the study of Napoleon. Much of the early chapters of Thierry Lentz's *Pour Napoléon*, published as a defence of Napoleon for the bicentenary, focus on criticizing those who Lentz calls the 'do-gooder ayatollahs [*ayatollahs du bien*]', the 'deconstructing-globalisers [*déconstructeurs-globalisateurs*]' who promote a multiculturalism that 'seeks to deconstruct national histories'.⁶⁵ Lentz is correct when he notes that Napoleonic history is not as stale as some critics (or, as he calls them, 'militants') might suggest.⁶⁶ But in framing his polemic as a 'plea for history' and for 'historical facts', to be contrasted with the presumed errors of others, Lentz situates his defence of Napoleon within the context of a so-called war on history, a form of culture war that has become increasingly prominent in conservative politics on both sides of the Channel and beyond.⁶⁷ Echoing Branda's commentary on *Memento Marengo*, Lentz goes so far as to argue that perceived criticism of Napoleon—even the established interpretation of the Code Civil as patriarchal—is part of a plot to 'make the French people disgusted by their history' in order to 'throw aside knowledge and reason to benefit minority passions with a media presence'.⁶⁸

The adoption of this position by the head of one of the central and most powerful organizations for Napoleonic history—in Aurélien Lignereux's phrase, the 'keepers of the flame [*gardiens du temple*]'—is concerning when considering the future of the field and the legacies of the bicentenary.⁶⁹ While motivated by a desire to defend Napoleonic history, Lentz's criticism of vital contemporary approaches and concerns only serves to alienate scholars who, like myself, have come to the field engaged with the theoretical frameworks and contexts he appears to denounce. The heightened tensions surrounding the bicentenary have, in some quarters, manifested themselves in a rather binary attitude to what it means to write Napoleonic history, broadly understood: on

⁶⁵ T. Lentz, *Pour Napoléon* (Paris, 2021), 22–8.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁶⁷ On the 'war on history' in a British context, P. Mitchell, *Imperial Nostalgia: How the British Conquered Themselves* (Manchester, 2021); A. Lester, 'History reclaimed: but from what?', *Snapshots of Empire* [blog], 15 Sept. 2021, <<https://blogs.sussex.ac.uk/snapshotsofire/2021/09/15/history-reclaimed-but-from-what/>>; S. Knight, 'Britain's idyllic country houses reveal a darker history', *New Yorker*, 23 Aug. 2021.

⁶⁸ Lentz, *Pour Napoléon*, 38.

⁶⁹ Lignereux, *Paroles d'histoire*.

one side, denunciations of criticism as a threat to national history; on the other, a perception that anyone working on Napoleon or related topics must be an apologist or a fan. Rather than encouraging new work, these binaries might well serve to exclude or discourage scholars from exploring fresh perspectives in Napoleonic studies. Indeed, even established scholars in the field, such as Natalie Petiteau, have moved on to pastures new, citing the 'harsh and closed-off attitude of the Napoleonic milieu'.⁷⁰

Instead of resigning ourselves to the status quo, however, perhaps the most worthwhile response to the *Année Napoléon* might be to consider it a provocation: an indication that the field needs to become more open and more inclusive. For all the debates and controversies, the experience of the bicentenary has shown that there is still interest in, and considerable scope for, reinterpreting and reassessing Napoleon, particularly in terms of his legacies and image. The explicit integration of race, slavery and colonial violence into the narrative of Napoleonic history told via the major exhibitions, both at La Villette and in *Napoléon? Encore!*, is a significant step forward—though there is much more work still to do in this area. I am inclined to agree with Natalie Petiteau when she suggests that more innovative work may emerge once the bicentenary year is over and the frenzy of commemorative activity dies down.⁷¹ It remains to be seen whether, as Sudhir Hazareesingh mused this summer, Emmanuel Macron's decision to publicly commemorate Napoleon might lead him to 'a sticky end' at the ballot box in May 2022.⁷² As scholars, though, we can only hope that one major outcome of 2021 is an approach to Napoleonic history that is more diverse, more engaged with contemporary concerns and more willing to make room for a broader range of voices and perspectives.

⁷⁰ Georgesco, 'Bicentenaire de la mort de Napoléon'.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Hazareesingh, 'Une part de nous', 8.