This book is about a major historical figure, Napoleon III, and a political regime. It is both about great figures in history and the contexts—the political institutions and social networks—within which they were located.

First the book examines ‘the circumstances and relationships that made it possible for a grotesque mediocrity to play a hero’s part’ (Karl Marx); how the disorder caused by the 1848 Revolution, and the introduction of male suffrage, enabled Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte to secure election as president of the Republic and subsequently to launch a coup d’etat. The book then considers the ways in which power was exercised by the new imperial regime, by analysing the institutions of state and the mechanisms through which these interacted with society.

The eventual growth of opposition, reflecting alternative political loyalties, led Napoleon III to contemplate the transition from an authoritarian towards a more liberal rule, a process fraught with difficulties and social and political tension. Nevertheless, the establishment of the Liberal Empire appeared to have secured the regime’s future; but at the point of success, the decision was taken to go to war against Prussia, which resulted in a catastrophic defeat and the destruction of Napoleon III’s empire.

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In memory of my father, Godfrey David Price (1908–1968) and of my mother, Martha Price (1916–2000)
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Abbreviations

AHG  Archives historiques du Ministère de la Guerre
AN  Archives nationales
APP  Archives de la Préfecture de Police
BN  Bibliothèque nationale
DM  Division militaire
(G)OC  (General) officer commanding
jp  juge de paix
MI  Minister of the Interior
MJ  Minister of Justice
NLW  National Library of Wales
PG  Procureur général
PI  Procureur impérial
PR  Procureur de la république
TP  Travaux publics