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Edited by D. A. Bingham

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A Selection from the Letters and Despatches of the First Napoleon

Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821) is best remembered for establishing the First French Empire, declaring himself Emperor of the French in 1804. His military campaigns across Europe sparked the Napoleonic Wars (1803–1815) and profoundly shaped European political and economic activities during the early nineteenth century. These volumes, edited by military officer and historian Denis Arthur Bingham and first published in 1884, contain translations of a selection of Bonaparte's letters. Bonaparte was a prolific letter writer, and the translations in these volumes describe a variety of domestic and international situations, including his early military career, his reports on the invasion of Egypt, and his criticism of his relatives who he had installed on the thrones of various conquered countries. Arranged by year with concise explanatory notes, these volumes provide a valuable and fascinating resource for the study of Bonaparte's career and character. Volume 1 covers his childhood and career until 1802.

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With Explanatory Notes

VOLUME 1

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With Explanatory Notes.

BY
CAPTAIN THE HON. D. A. BINGHAM,
AUTHOR OF "MARRIAGES OF THE BONAPARTES."

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PREFACE.

IN the selections which we have made from the voluminous Correspondence of Napoleon we have confined ourselves to letters of general interest and such documents as throw light upon the character of one of the most wonderful men ever born. Much has already been written about Napoleon; but people still write about Cæsar. The marvellous career of both captains furnishes an almost inexhaustible mine for the student of history. Both left behind them something more than the names of their victories, something more solid than their material conquests. As we find the portrait of Cæsar in his Commentaries, so we find the portrait of Napoleon in his Correspondence. We fancy that the selections we have made will give a fair insight into the character and genius of the man who, succeeding the Revolution, re-established order in France and swept like a hurricane over the rest of Europe, destroying in his passage a great deal that was rotten. Voltaire says that the highwayman was succeeded by the conqueror, and the rapacity of Napoleon,

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which stands out most glaringly in his Correspondence, betrayed his descent. He shows himself an inveterate plunderer. It will be seen that he always had peace on his lips, but war was in his heart. His professions in favour of peace were rapidly followed by bloodshed and rapine. That he alone was the author of "those big wars," which, to many, "make ambition virtue," is proved by the calm which succeeded his removal from the throne. The principles upon which he governed are no longer in favour in France; he certainly did not succeed in establishing the dynasty he was so anxious to found. Imperialism has for the moment few adherents; and yet the work of the Great Napoleon has not been obliterated; his Code, his administration, and many of his vast public works bear witness to his genius and his glory. The stranger who visits Paris must be struck with the magnificence of the monuments dedicated to his memory: the triumphal Arch, which four *régimes* helped to construct—Empire, Restoration, Constitutional Monarchy, Republic—the Column of Vendôme, the splendid tomb under the dome of the Invalides—these, and the broad avenues, the streets and the bridges called after his marshals or his victories, speak of his fame. The Legion of Honour which he founded is the only order which survives. Other capitals have good reason to remember the great soldier—Moscow and Madrid, Florence and Milan, Berlin and Vienna; everywhere traces of him in Rome, Naples, Lisbon, Cairo, Munich, and Amsterdam. By sea alone

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he was powerless ; no naval victory figures in the list of his triumphs. There are islands which may almost be said to belong to him—Corsica where he was born, Elba where he was confined, and St. Helena where he died.

If some of the letters we have selected exhibit Napoleon in an unfavourable light, we must remember what Dr. Johnson wrote, that—“No person ever rose to supreme power in whom great qualities were not combined with a certain meanness which would be deemed inconceivable in ordinary men.” But in few heroes has this mixture been more evenly distributed. His last letter, craving the hospitality of England, and written when escape was impossible, is a sad example of this want of dignity which excited the epigram of the Abbé de Pradt and some of the severest stanzas of Byron.

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