

THE AUSTRALIAN NAPOLEONIC SOCIETY

[The material below is a partly summarised version, embracing subsequent questions and discussion, of the talk given to the Annual General Meeting of ISFAR held at the Alliance Française de Melbourne on 14 November 1999 by Daniel Duldig, who has been Vice-President (1996-97) and President (1997-98) of the ANS, where he is now a committee member and new member co-ordinator.]

There are many Napoleonic organizations around the world today. For example, there is one in Southern India, two in the USA, another in Georgia, formerly part of the USSR, and most countries will have some sort of formalised or informal interest group. As well as these organizations there are re-enactor groups who "dress up" in period costume and re-enact events, battles or participate in celebrations of historical episodes such as the landing at Botany Bay. In 2000 and again in 2015 there will be a very large re-enactment in Belgium of the Battle of Waterloo on its anniversary (June 18). The number of participants in military costume of the period will run to over 10 000 with contingents from all corners of the globe including Australia. In Australia we have re-enactors of French and British troops of the period as well as devotees of civilian life of the times.

Canada is home to the International Napoleonic Society (INS), established by Ben Weider, a multi-millionaire with a passion for all things Napoleonic. Mr Weider's wealth derived from an enormously successful "body-building" business, however he now seems to devote much of his life to promoting the remembrance of the Napoleonic period, and supporting academics and societies world-wide with similar interests. To that end he recently donated more than \$1US million to Florida University to establish another Chair in the History Department devoted to the study of the French Revolution and Napoleonic periods. He also donates towards a prize for the best new work published in the Napoleonic History field each year, awards Fellowships to the INS and bestows medallions and certificates to meritorious workers in the field. He has published a few books and papers about the Napoleonic world, the most important being a work on the theory that Napoleon was poisoned on St Helena by one of his French fellow exiles who was working secretly for the French monarchy. The theory has many merits but will probably never be conclusively established unless Napoleon is exhumed and a further autopsy undertaken.

Although the Age of Napoleon ended nearly 200 years ago there has been no reduction in the interest or controversy surrounding the man and the times. Napoleon has had more books published about him than any single individual (last count I believe was 250 000+), and there is a renaissance of interest occurring presently as we live through the bi-centennials of most of the crucial events of that time. Controversy is ever-present, as witnessed by the recent publication of a book on the campaign of Waterloo suggesting that Wellington had misled his Prussian allies into fighting Napoleon unsupported two days before Waterloo and then had concealed the fact afterwards. The storm of outrage in Britain at the suggestion that the Iron Duke could have been so dishonourable reached the pages of the *Times* and probably tripled book sales!

There are many views on whether Napoleon was a genius, a man without conscience, a hero or a criminal. There will never be a definitive answer as to the nature of this man, and although recent trends seem to be towards labelling him a "Great Bad Man"; this is patently too simplistic and reflects a twentieth-century view of a man born in the eighteenth century. The interest for most of us lies in the fact that as with all history, there are no simple answers, only more questions. The French Revolution and Napoleonic Era represent a time of considerable upheaval throughout the world. The dawn of the Industrial Age witnessed citizen armies, the first "Nation State" at war in the case of France, the birth of true nationalism in Germany, Austria, Poland, Italy and later in South America. The Revolution saw men promoted based on merit rather than on birth, heralded the introduction of a new legal system in France that spread to the rest of Europe with Napoleon's armies, brought us the metric system and established Egyptology as a science. The colour of the armies of the period in all their finery, the romance of the story of Josephine, the tragedy of Napoleon's son, the inevitability of Napoleon's final exile and death - who could fail to be captivated?

The Australian Napoleonic Society was formed in 1995 to provide a forum for the exchange of all views and information pertaining to the Napoleonic era (1769-1821+). Our objectives include the production and distribution of the association's quarterly journal, *The Communiqué*, and an abiding wish to inform and enlighten anyone with an interest in this fascinating period of history.

At present we hold eleven monthly meetings in Melbourne, one being the Annual General Meeting held in September, and another a Christmas

Dinner. The rest are as described in more detail below. There is a branch of the Society in Sydney which holds five meetings a year and a new branch in the ACT. Hopefully more will follow around the country in the coming years.

Our membership is diverse, and our interests in the period extend from the cultural and social history through to the more well-known campaigns and battles. Perhaps uniquely, our Society has an interest in the period prior to Napoleon's ascendancy as well as the Consulate and Empire periods. We have made a deliberate decision to thus include the years of the Revolution as well as the time immediately following Napoleon's death.

Our monthly meetings, held at the Naval and Military Club in Melbourne, may include a guest speaker, film or debate and have proven to be a tangible and valued benefit to members. We now try to audiotape the meetings so that members interstate or overseas can have access to this wonderful resource. Subjects covered in our meetings have included: the Terror; the precarious position of artists during the Revolution; inventors; rare book restoration and care; small unit tactics of the Napoleonic Wars; command control during the Napoleonic Wars; figure painting techniques and research; ceramics, music and architecture of the period.

One of the strengths of our organization lies in the committee structure that governs our day-to-day running. Each year we elect a new Vice-President who is "promoted" to President the next year. The benefit of this structure is that no single member can be President more than once every three years (a retiring President takes up the post of Immediate Past President and cannot be reelected Vice-President immediately), and each President has at least a year's experience on the committee before obtaining the presidential position. We hope that this structure can provide both continuity and stability whilst avoiding stagnation.

Members are entitled to discounts at Military Simulations, Mind Games, Tin Soldier, Elite Miniatures, Napoleons military bookshops, Hylands military bookshop etc.

Membership enquiries to <dduldig@mira.net> or Tel/Fax 03-9571 6967. Categories of membership are: Patron \$50/year (no extra benefits just our undying thanks!); Normal \$30; Overseas \$40A; Concessional \$25.

Daniel Duldig

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