INTRODUCTION

[Lockhart, 1794-1854]

"Nations yet to come will look back upon his history as to some grand and supernatural romance. The fiery energy of his youthful career, and the magnificent progress of his irresistible ambition, have invested his character with the mysterious grandeur of some heavenly appearance; and when all the lesser tumults and lesser men of our age shall have passed away into the darkness of oblivion, history will still inscribe one mighty era with the majestic name of Napoleon."

These enthusiastic words, too, are Lockhart's, though they are not from this history, but from some "Remarks on the Periodical Criticism of England," which he published in Blackwood's Magazine. They serve, if they are taken in conjunction with his book, to mark his position in the long list of the historians, biographers and critics who have written in English, and from an English or a British point of view, upon "Napoleon the Great." Lockhart, that is to say, was neither of the idolaters, like Hazlitt, nor of the decriers and blasphemers.

One recalls at once what he said of "the lofty impartiality" with which Sir Walter Scott had written of Napoleon before him, and with which he appears to have faced his lesser task. As a biography, as a writing of history, as an example of historic style, Lockhart's comparatively modest essay must be called a better performance than Scott's. But "the real Napoleon" has not yet been painted.

Lord Rosebery, in his book on Napoleon: the Last Phase, asks if there will ever be an adequate portrait? The life is yet to be written that shall profit by all the new material that has come to light since Scott wrote his nine volumes.
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In 1827, and Lockhart published his in 1829. But Lockhart's book has still the value of one written by a genuine man of letters, who was a born biographer, and one written while the world-commotion of Napoleon was a matter of personal report. It is tinged by some of the contemporary illusions, no doubt; but it is clearer in its record than Scott's, and while it is less picturesque, it is more direct.

His comparative brevity is a gain, since he has to tell how, in brief space, "the lean, hungry conqueror swells," as Lord Rosebery says, "into the sovereign, and then into the sovereign of sovereigns."

In view of the influence of the one book upon the other, and the one writer upon the other, it is worth note that Lockhart had a fit of enthusiasm over Scott's Napoleon when it first appeared, or rather when he first read the first six volumes of the work, before they were "out," in 1827. He thought Scott would make as great an effect by it as by any two of his novels. This proved a mistaken forecast, but Scott was paid an enormous price—some eighteen thousand pounds. When then John Murray, who had already co-opted Lockhart as his Quarterly editor, thought of inaugurating a "Family Library," and he proposed to his editor this other Napoleon book, it must have seemed in many ways a very attractive piece of work. But owing partly to Lockhart's relations with Scott, and partly to the need of avoiding any literary comparisons, these small, fat duodecimos appeared anonymously. That was, as it has been already mentioned, in 1829, two years after Scott's book.

To-day, it makes a capital starting-point for the long Napoleon adventure, whose end, so far as it is prolonged by fresh literary divagations, seems to be as remote as ever.

It is from the French side that one might chiefly draw those vivid and sometimes questionable glimpses at first-hand, that can best add to Lockhart's presentment. One must compare his retreat from Russia with Rapp's and other remembrancers' accounts, and be reminded by Rapp to go on to Jomini's Vie Militaire, and even turn for a single
personal reminiscence to a flagrant hero-worshipper like Dumas, in his rapid and military biography.

"Only twice in his life," said Dumas, "had he who writes these lines seen Napoleon. The first time on the way to Ligny, the second, when he returned from Waterloo. The first time in the light of a lamp, the first time amid the acclamations of the multitude; the second, amid the silence of a populace. Each time Napoleon was seated in the same carriage, in the same seat, dressed in the same attire; each time, it was the same look, lost and vague, each time, the same head, calm and impassible, only his brow was a little more bent over his breast in returning than in going. Was it from weariness that he could not sleep, or from grief to have lost the world?"

This is the French postscript to many English books about the victor and loser of the world.

The following is a list of the works of John Gibson Lockhart (1794-1854):—

Peter's Letters to his Kinsfolk, by Peter Morris the Odontist (pseud) 1819; Valerius, a Roman Story, 1821; Some Passages in the Life of Mr Adam Blair, 1822; Reginald Dalton, a Story of English University Life, 1823; Ancient Spanish Ballads (trans) 1823; Matthew Wald, a Novel, 1824; Life of Robert Burns, 1828; History of Napoleon Buonaparte, 1829; History of the late War, with Sketches of Nelson, Wellington and Napoleon, 1832; Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott, 7 vols 1836-8; Theodore Hook, a Sketch, 1852

Lockhart was a Contributor to "Blackwood," and Editor of the "Quarterly Review" from 1825 to 1853.