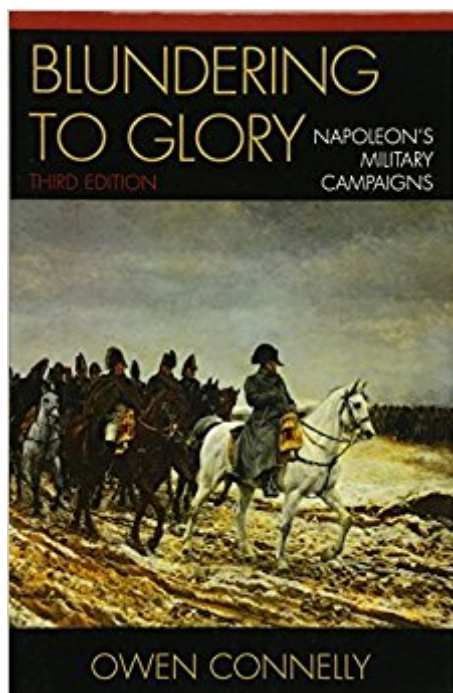


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# Blundering To Glory: Napoleon's Military Campaigns



## Synopsis

Renowned for its accuracy, brevity, and readability, this book has long been the gold standard of concise histories of the Napoleonic Wars. Now in an updated and revised edition, it is unique in its portrayal of one of the world's great generals as a scrambler who never had a plan, strategic or tactical, that did not break down or change of necessity in the field. Distinguished historian Owen Connelly argues that Napoleon was the master of the broken play, so confident of his ability to improvise, cover his own mistakes, and capitalize on those of the enemy that he repeatedly plunged his armies into uncertain, seemingly desperate situations, only to emerge victorious as he "blundered" to glory. Beginning with a sketch of Napoleon's early life, the book progresses to his command of artillery at Toulon and the "whiff of grapeshot" in Paris that netted him control of the Army of Italy, where his incredible performance catapulted him to fame. The author vividly traces Napoleon's campaigns as a general of the French Revolution and emperor of the French, knowledgeably analyzing each battle's successes and failures. The author depicts Napoleon's "art of war" as a system of engaging the enemy, waiting for him to make a mistake, improvising a plan on the spot-and winning. Far from detracting from Bonaparte's reputation, his blunders rather made him a great general, a "natural" who depended on his intuition and ability to read battlefields and his enemy to win. Exploring this neglected aspect of Napoleon's battlefield genius, Connelly at the same time offers stirring and complete accounts of all the Napoleonic campaigns.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Connelly's summaries of the action are clear and concise; his description of the social and political context in which Napoleon fought is exquisite; his portrayal of the personalities of Napoleon's marshals is lively and insightful; and his portrait of Napoleon's ambition and drive to win is superb. (Military Review) A thoroughly stimulating and enjoyable volume. Connelly examines all the campaigns with exemplary conciseness, and the same is to be said of his treatment of the battles. . . . Whether this book entertains or (occasionally) infuriates, it makes a reader think. (Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research) This is a concise, clear, authoritative account presented in a felicitous literary style. Of the many works on Napoleon's thirty-year career, this is the best brief account. (Canadian Military History) Readers will find this book useful to have in their library. Connelly gently but surely draws the readers into questioning whether or not Napoleon ever had a strategic aim. (Journal of the Royal Artillery) Owen Connelly, one of the leading American historians of the French Revolution's "Napoleonic Era, has that rare gift of being able to take complex and complicated information and produce a tight, smooth-flowing narrative. What is unique about this study is that it is both scholarly, based upon excellent research with good maps and a fine bibliography, and also written in a language [students] will appreciate and understand. Highly recommended. (CHOICE)

Owen Connelly is McKissick Dial Professor of History at the University of South Carolina. He is the author of *On War and Leadership*, *Napoleon's Satellite Kingdoms*, and *The French Revolution and Napoleonic Era*. He is a member of the Institute for Advanced Studies, Princeton University and past president of the Society for French Historical Studies. He served as an infantry officer in the Korean War and as an instructor at the U.S. Army Florida Ranger Camp.

This book presents a concise (234 pp.) account of Napoleon's military campaigns from the First Italian Campaign (1796-7) to Waterloo (1815). It is very clearly written, consistently and well argued, and accessible to a specialist and non-specialist audience alike (if this is the first substantive book you read about Napoleon's campaigns, you are likely to gain from it a good idea about how they transpired and a reasonable idea about why). Connelly's core argument is that Napoleon's genius lay not in his ability to plan, nor in his strategic insight. On the contrary, this book concludes that Napoleon never had a plan and that on the occasions when he strategised, the strategy he developed often proved upon implementation to have been based on faulty assumptions. Furthermore, Napoleon was not the tactical innovator he is often credited as being, although he was responsible for the important reorganisation of the French army

based on a corps structure (rather than a brigade or division structure, as had hitherto the case). Napoleon subordinated both of these organisations to the corps). He seems instead to have perfected the existing tactics of his era to an unsurpassed extent (this achievement should not be understated but, as Connelly highlights, perfecting existing methods is not the same thing as outright innovation). Napoleon's true genius, according to Connelly, lay in his ability to scramble, i.e. to quickly improvise solutions to tactical problems as he identified them. As a result, until the Russian campaign of 1812 he was able to achieve victory by capitalising on his enemies' mistakes and covering his own. But he was also lucky for a time in that he was able to fight each of France's enemies one-by-one, and thus with equal or greater numbers. After 1812 he found himself fighting against all of Europe at once as well as fighting against more competent enemy commanders than had previously been the case, and his luck ran out. No amount of scrambling could then save Napoleon from defeat. The key role Napoleon's corps commanders played in contributing to French victories or defeats is also a core theme of the book. Prominent examples Connelly discusses include the Battles of Marengo (14 June 1800) and Jena/Auerstedt (14 October 1806), where Marshals Desaix and Davout respectively were arguably more responsible for the French victory than was Napoleon himself; and the Peninsular War (in Spain from 1808-13), where a series of French commanders mismanaged the campaign over a prolonged period. In addition to chronicling Napoleon's campaigns Connelly also touches on his character, revealing him to have been "nothing like the public image he cultivated". Instead, "the real Napoleon was a loner and a workaholic: hard, cynical, calculating, tireless, and bent on success at any cost" (p. 1). The first chapter elaborates why Napoleon was the man he was by recounting the story of his childhood, upbringing and early military experience. Napoleon's character and his public persona are occasionally revisited through the rest of the book. The most interesting example of the latter, at least for this reviewer, is a detailed description of how Napoleon's propaganda changed the popular French understanding of what happened during the Battle of Marengo. Connelly highlights the differences between the actual battle and the subsequent accounts given by the French *Depot de la Guerre* on Napoleon's orders. This discussion also provides a very interesting insight into Napoleon's character (see pp. 64-8). Despite such occasional revisitations, explicit discussion of Napoleon's character and how it influenced his campaigns remains scant after the first chapter and this aspect of the book is noticeably under-developed. In terms of design, the book is compact (I was able to easily travel with it in my carry-on luggage) and the use of maps is excellent (the book includes 32 detailed yet easy-to-follow maps of Napoleon's campaigns

and major battles). Although a comprehensive source list is included (one must note that the included sources are almost exclusively secondary) there is no in-text referencing. This makes it difficult to pinpoint which source Connelly is referring to and when, something that is especially evident in the case of quotes. This aspect of the book could be frustrating at times. Overall this book provides a very well written, accessible account that successfully challenges the conventional history of Napoleon's campaigns, wherein he tends to be portrayed as a tactical and strategic genius. He was neither of these things, as Connelly expertly establishes, but there is still much to be learned from his campaigns. These lessons are also concisely captured in this book and for that reason I recommend it to anyone seeking to know more about Napoleon's military campaigns.

Mr. Connelly asserts that much of Napoleon's success was a result of his ability to take advantage of opponents' mistakes and the availability of excellent subordinates such as Lannes, Davout, and Massena. For example, Mr. Connelly points out correctly that lack of competent subordinates was a major factor that led to Napoleon's loss at Waterloo. I recommend this book for anyone interested in Napoleon. It's well written, has nice touches of humor, and provides details about Napoleon, his generals, and his strategy and tactics that you will not find elsewhere. Don't get me wrong, my *Campaigns of Napoleon* still comes first, but it was wonderful to place the two books side by side and unearth golden insights into Napoleon that I had not yet discovered. My only complaint, hence the four stars, was the lack of good maps to follow the description. Mr. Connelly includes serviceable maps for each campaign but I frequently had trouble finding the town or location he referenced. Also, matching arrows on the map to his written narrative was confusing. As a result, I used other reference material to follow the book's descriptions. For those readers, like me, who consider Napoleon to be one of history's greatest military geniuses, be ready to get irritated with every minor mistake of Napoleon being pointed out and most of the credit for his victories being doled out to various marshalls. But seriously, in Mr. Connelly's defense, that's the point of the book, to point out Napoleon's mistakes and recognize his genius in turning blunders into victory.

How did Napoleon succeed in battle? According to Connelly it was by having detailed and perfect plans that fell apart leaving Napoleon forced to improvise. Napoleon's ability to improvise on the battlefield were the true ways he won. His enemies expected him to follow his plans which were easy to discern and when he did not he won battles. This provides excellent accounts of various battles and does so without becoming bogged down in details. I highly recommend it for those

starting out with Napoleon and want to understand how he won battles. (as someone who did their thesis on Napoleon this book would have been invaluable at the time). The book is well written and a quick read that will help understand the Napoleonic wars in the context that they were in.

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