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Autobiography & Memoir

With Napoleon in Russia: The Illustrated Memoirs
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Greenhill Books
978-1-85367-454-9
(February 19, 2006)

One of history's greatest military catastrophes, Napoleon's Russian campaign of 1812, has spawned an immense literature. Now, almost 190 years later, American readers have easy access to a pictorial record. Faber du Faur, aged thirty-two, served in the Kingdom of WÃ¼rttemberg's contingent. He made numerous on-site sketches during the invasion and retreat. In 1831, he worked up a color plate album. Purchasers would be present "at the battlefield of Borodino…gaze at the gilded domes and roofs of Moscow…watch the fire take hold…witness endless sacrifice…cross the snowy plains of Russia…" A handful of these plates has been endlessly reproduced; the bulk has languished without re-issue. Hence the value of this publication.

The 1812 campaign involved more than 500,000 soldiers from some twenty European nations and states. Close to 400,000 advanced into Russia; fewer than 40,000 returned. Of 15,000 WÃ¼rttembergers, 100 survived. The horrific accounts of General de Caulaincourt (Napoleon's chief equerry), Count de Ségur (an ADC), de Fezensac (an infantry officer), Captain Roeder (a highly efficient Hessian), and the unforgettable Sergeant Burgogne, rogue par excellence, were all issued or re-issued in English between 1926 and 1985. These accounts have begged for illustrations of French troops and weapons, Russian landscapes, battlefields, villages and peasants, Moscow, Cossacks, and above all the terrible, winter-savaged retreat. Yet only Burgogne's memoir with twelve small plates (Folio Society edition, 1985) could be termed "illustrated."

Faber du Faur drew in the field rather than dreaming in the opera-set workshop. He focused on military operations and survival strategies, on reality and accuracy, not romanticism and invention. Some of his work-ups from sketch to plate are a trifle stilted, but throughout the book, the balances between topographical and architectural backgrounds and men and action

foregrounds make for engaging compositions. Many plates are heightened by the presence of civilians—Russian peasants, Jewish merchants, village maidens—their garb carefully drawn. Others feature the “borrowed” pony or “found” goat, the campfire and tobacco pipe. Some have an unexpected “find the Emperor” challenge. Faber du Faur’s commentary is modest but serviceable; events are sequential and locations can be found on the front-matter map.

Congratulations are due to Jonathan North, a Napoleon scholar and translator; to the Anne K. Brown Collection, Brown University; and Greenhill Books for this splendid production.