This third title in Cabasson’s ‘Napoleonic Murders’ series is set in Paris during the dying days of the First French Empire in March 1814. The country has been invaded by the armies of the 6th Coalition against France but Napoleon hopes to defeat them on the battlefield even though his forces are vastly outnumbered. As the Emperor fights a surprisingly successful campaign, the Allies change their strategy to focus on seizing the French capital, believing the empire will crumble if it falls. Paris now lies under serious threat of capture by a foreign army for the first time in four hundred years.

As Joseph Bonaparte and his Regency Council struggle to organise the city defences, a senior French officer is found murdered in the most brutal fashion by monarchist conspirators. Their secret society is bent on undermining the government and helping the Allies, but Joseph also fears that they intend to assassinate members of the Imperial family – possibly the Emperor himself. He orders Lieutenant Colonel Quentin Margont to investigate by masquerading as a royalist and infiltrating their organisation. Not only is he expected to unmask the murderer but find and identify the Tsar’s secret agent and thwart further assassination attempts. The capital becomes a hotbed of intrigue and betrayal as frightened people desperately switch allegiance hoping to be on the winning side and Margont faces enemies far more dangerous than any he would encounter on the battlefield.

This is a very intriguing book not least because the background concerns the Battle of Paris, which most historians shy away from as few reputations were enhanced by this tragic incident where thousands of lives were lost and victory was achieved more through treachery than military skill. Cabasson portrays the confused and simmering atmosphere of a capital under threat adroitly, with danger waiting around every corner for his protagonist, who plays an undercover role that goes against his republican nature.

Yet there is also humour in this tale and Margont’s initial interview with Joseph and Talleyrand is a delight as the three men argue in a rapid three way exchange. Out of his depth, the Emperor’s brother struggles to conceal his ineptitude, while Margont seethes in insubordinate rage as they send him on a suicide mission. Meanwhile Talleyrand watches in amusement, but makes occasional barbed and perceptive comments, and this scene makes a great opening as Margont sets out armed with incomplete information from disingenuous superiors on a mission he never requested.
As the eponymous detective tries to penetrate the conspiratorial web, he encounters other well-drawn characters and scenes in the Parisian underworld, which combine to make this novel an interesting and exciting read. Margont himself has also matured as a character and, although I would recommend reading the prequels beforehand, this book could stand up well on its own.

A scene I found particularly intriguing was when Margont allows his sergeant a few precious hours of leave, knowing they may both die defending the city against the impending Allied assault. While his sergeant visits his mistress, Margont wanders around the Louvre entranced by its beautiful works of art while pondering over whether he has drawn the right conclusions from his investigation. Anyone who has visited the Louvre will appreciate this concept and I was impressed by the imagery and descriptive power of Cabasson’s prose in these passages.

I feel that this third title is the best of the series but hesitate to delve any further into the plot as it contains many unexpected twists and revealing them would spoil a reader’s enjoyment. The city itself provides an excellent backdrop for Margont’s investigation and his description of gambling dens, taverns, lunatic asylums and backstreets were highly convincing along with the portrayal of various groups trapped within the city awaiting their fate. Cabasson has clearly researched this novel well and the impression he creates seems extremely authentic with few anachronisms.

This is an excellent novel and one of the few that I have picked up numerous times to re-read well remembered passages for sheer pleasure. It covers an interesting yet rarely examined event and I hope that the author is considering a sequel so that this Napoleonic detective can investigate once again.

Reviewed by David Buttery

Placed on the Napoleon Series: October 2019