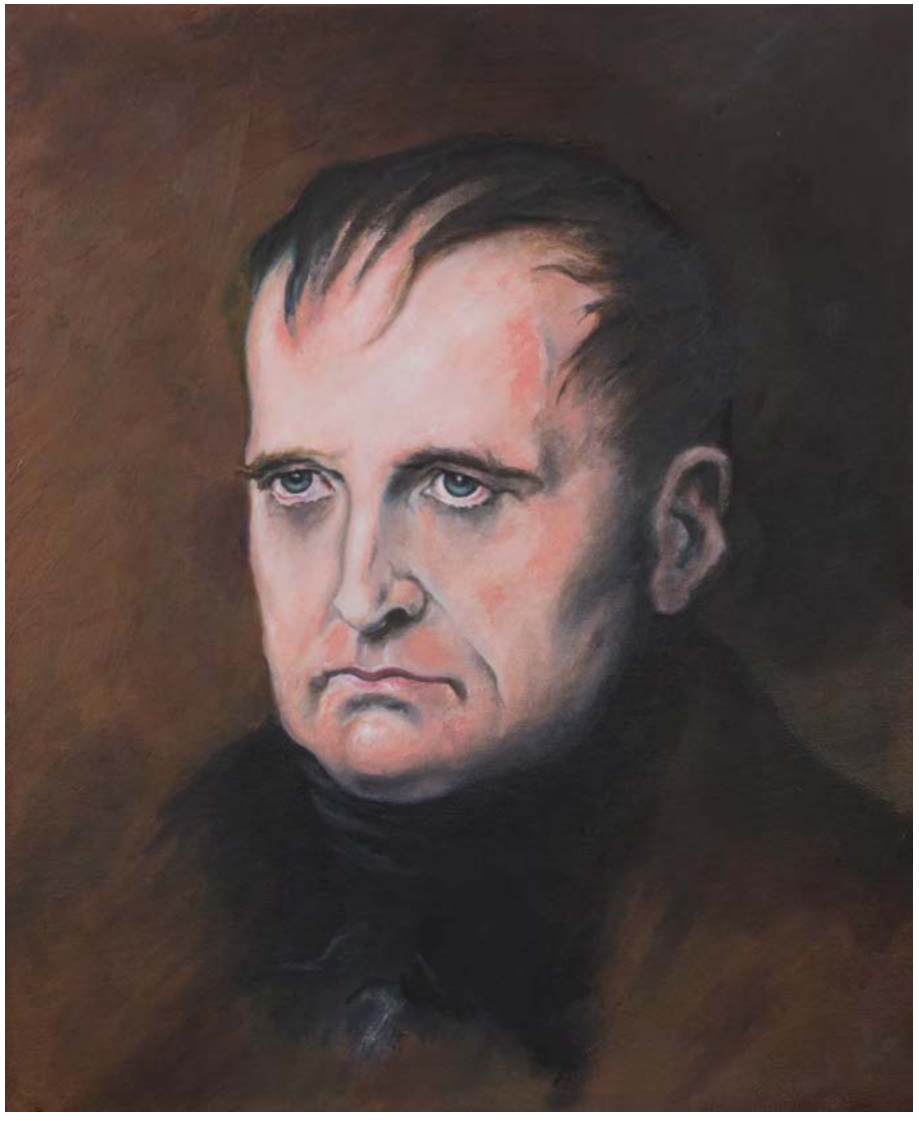


(KGM. ©Andrea Press).

NAPOLEON THE MAN: A PORTRAIT IN DETAIL

Curiously enough a feasible and generally agreed depiction of Napoleon, both from the physical and psychological point of view is difficult to fix up, despite (or perhaps because of) the prolific source of pictorial, sculptural or written depictions flowing unceasingly since the earliest times of his fame. On the other hand, the highly controversial nature of the character have inspired –now and then- some myths backing an almost grotesque picture that, surprisingly, is naturally supported by many people even nowadays. Kind of example Napoleon is almost universally depicted as a ridiculous short man while the truth is that he was probably slightly above the average height for the period.

Constant, his faithful '*valet de chambre*' told us[1] that '*Sa taille était de cinq pieds deux pouces trois lignes*' what would be the equivalent to 5 feet 6 inches (169 cm.). This measurement is well backed for a number of sources with very slight variations; the last of them being perhaps the measurement of the corpse after his death[2]. Hatred, political propaganda and the fact that many of Napoleon's generals and marshals were unusual tall men (Murat is reported to be 6 feet tall (183 cm.) are probably lying behind this misconception.

His most prominent physical feature would be the head. Again according to Constant: '*Sa tête était très forte, ayant vingt-deux pouces de circonférence*'[1] that is almost 7½ US hat size (60 cm.). Certainly a notorious head for a man his height though it is interesting to notice those measurements taken by Antommarchi during the autopsy tell that '*the circumference of the head was twenty inches and ten lines*[3]*...*' that is 7⅛ US hat size (56'7 cm.), what makes a significant difference. Two hats at the Musée de l'Armée in Paris[4] are reported to be 7¼ (58 cm.) and 7⅛ size. So, even though Napoleon's large head seems to be a clear prominent feature remarked in more period reports, a size of 7⅛ or 7¼ seems far more feasible than Constant's estimation that, on the other hand, would render a monstrous big head in a man his height...

1. *Mémoires de Constant, premier valet de chambre de l'Empereur. Napoléon. An intimacy account of the years of supremacy 1800-1804. Proctor Patterson Jones.*
2. *The Last days of the Emperor Napoleon. Doctor F. Antommarchi. London 1825.*
3. *Old English unit of uncertain length most frequently understood as 1/12 of an inch.*
4. *Napoléon et Ses Soldats. L'Apogée de la Gloire1804-1809. Paul Willing. Collections Historiques du Musée de L´Armée.*

The Emperor, after the usual remarks on the weather, the course of the ship or the wind, entangled in some theme of conversation, or retrieved some of the previous days. Then, after strolling ten or twelve times across the bridge, he used to lean over the penultimate gun on the left of the ship, besides the rail. Such practice didn't pass unnoticed to Midshipmen and soon everybody aboard referred to this gun as the 'Emperor's gun'. Memorial of Saint Helena. Las Cases. (KGM. ©Andrea Press).

ABOARD THE NORTHUMBERLAND

The vessel HMS Northumberland was an imposing 74 gun, third rate ship launched in 1798 that had served in the Egyptian campaign in 1801. Gun deck length was 182 feet (55 m) and beam 48 feet 7½ inches (almost 15 meters). Crew was nominally of 640 men, but Marchand says in his memoirs that there were 1080 people on board at the time of Napoleon's arrival[1]. It was commanded by Captain Charles Bayne Hodgson Ross. This was the vessel that, accompanied by seven more and an additional store ship was to convey the former emperor to Saint Helena.

Lord Bathurst[2] gave detailed instructions to Cockburn about how Napoleon should be treated and, accordingly, the latter would make a point in checking Napoleon in what he thought to be a battle to hold the moral superiority befitted to an Emperor in an obvious situation of captivity. This essential contradiction would be the main cause in a pugnacious conflict between Napoleon and his jailers all during his exile, and even after his death. As the title of Emperor would have been clearly incompatible with his condition of prisoner, it was always firmly denied to him.

Consequently Cockburn was ordered to avoid any acknowledgment of his imperial rank. Napoleon on his side had no other choice than 'playing the Emperor' to the end for the sake of his dynasty and the future of France and even Europe; at least in the light of his own conceptions derived from the experience of his hazardous life.

According to Keith, the Emperor 'appeared to be in perfect good humour' aboard the Admiral's barge that took him to the Northumberland, *'talking of Egypt, St. Helena, of my former name being Elphinstone, and many other subjects and joking with the ladies about being seasick'*[3]. So, when climbing to the ship that would take him to his prison and final destiny, he sported perfect mind control and good spirit. When he finally set foot on the desk a total hush came over the crew.

1. *Marchand Memoirs. Proctor Jones's first English edition.*
2. *Barthurst was Secretary for War and the Colonies until 1827 and, as such, instrumental concerning the treatment given to Napoleon.*
3. *The Life of Napoleon I. John Holland Rose, M.A. George Bell and Sons 1902.*

Then, when he received the uncovered salute said loud and clearly to Cockburn ***'Here I am, General, at your orders'***[1]. Immediately after Keith and Cockburn accompanied him to his cabin of 12x9 feet (366x274 cm.) which he accepted *saying* ***'the apartments are convenient, and you see I carry my little tent-bed with me'***.[2]

Not surprisingly, the Emperor's presence aboard the Northumberland roused great excitement and curiosity among the men during the first days. (Bombled. ©Andrea Press).

He was lodged in the quarter deck, next to the admiral. According to Saint Denis, always ready to consign any minute detail[3]:

1. *Napoleon's Last Voyage. Extract from a Diary of Rear-Admiral Sir George Cockburn. Simpkin, Marshall & Co. 1888.*
2. *The Life of Napoleon I. John Holland Rose, M.A. George Bell and Sons 1902.*
3. *Souvenirs du Mameluck Ali (Louis-Étienne Saint-Denis) Sur L'Empereur Napoléon. Payot, Paris 1926.*

'The Emperor used to wake up at 7 or 8 in the morning. He had his breakfast between 9 or 10 and rested just wearing a robe or in shirtsleeves until 3 or 4 in the afternoon, when he dressed. Then he went into the after or great cabin to play checkers with some of his generals until the admiral appeared to announce dinner was served.

In the morning he used to call some of these officers for chatting and updating himself with the last news aboard. Most of the time however he would be reading seated on his armchair.

The quarterdeck comprised a dining room with two entrance doors to port and starboard. Just in the centre of the room was a large square table fitted with two round side tables hanging from its left and right sides. A third one (perhaps just one of the other two) could hang under the centre.

To port, next to the partition wall of the Emperor's cabin was placed a big sideboard serving as a buffet.

The door was built inside a huge recess measuring some feet with two small doors built-in left and right, leading to two cabins: the Emperor's to port and the admiral's to starboard. Both cabins were cut irregularly as to keep the main room squared.

The after or great cabin was of common use. Two small doors opened to the two cabins and each one was furnished with a bed hanging from two iron forks. The admiral tried to convince the Emperor that he would find this bed comfortable. It was fitted with a kind of canopy made with a white cotton fabric decorated with red foliage.

I don't remember whether the Emperor did ever use that bed. He rather favoured his iron portable bed despite the fact that it was fitted with wheels and was certainly not the best choice in a ship.'

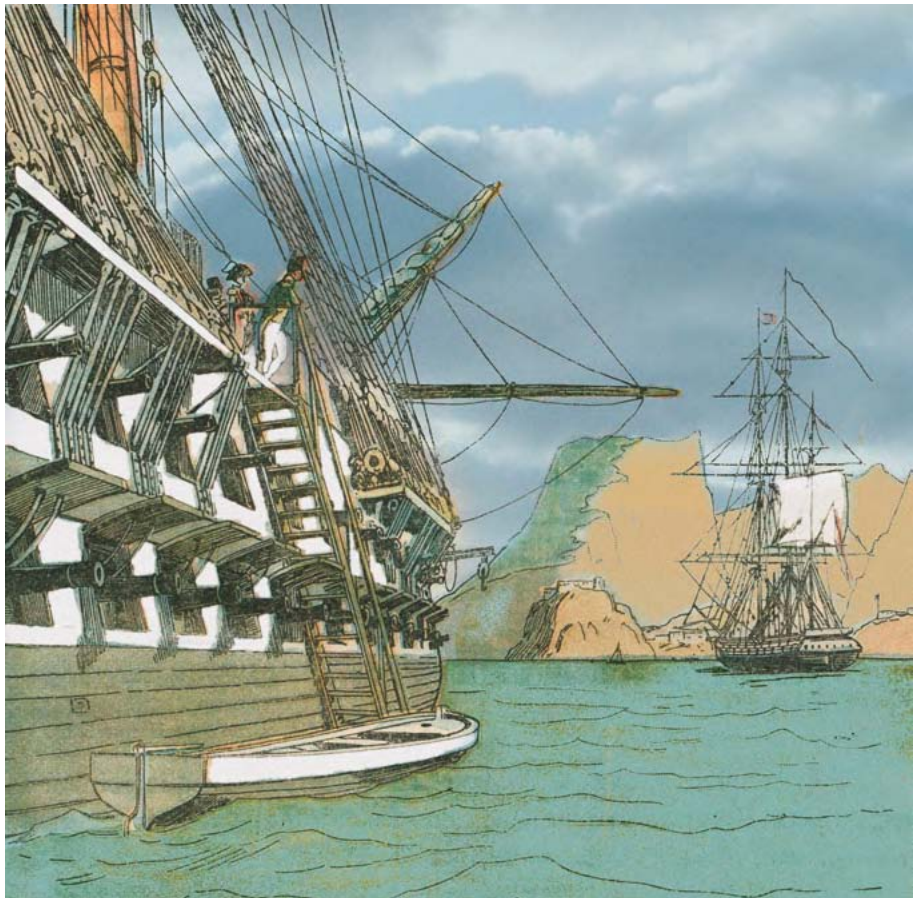
In contrast with the rather hagiographical memories left by Napoleon's French companions, Cockburn's diary[1] portraits our man under a quite different light in which the almost cheerful mood of the first days would alternate with periods of deep sulkiness or even depression. Cockburn pictures the Emperor as always keeping a polite, sociable façade with the English but, at the same time, struggling to maintain the psychological game alluded to before. One good example of this would be Cockburn's account of Napoleon's behaviour of one night in which *'heavy rain and the wind gradually died away until it failed us altogether and was succeeded by a southerly wind. To my great surprise, after General Buonaparte had eaten his dinner he got up to take his walk as usual, and upon my remarking to him that it was still pouring with rain, and therefore advising him not to go out in it, he treated it lightly and said it would not hurt him more than the sailors he observed at the time catching*

1. *Napoleon's Last Voyage. Extract from a Diary of Rear-Admiral Sir George Cockburn. Simpkin, Marshall & Co. 1888.*

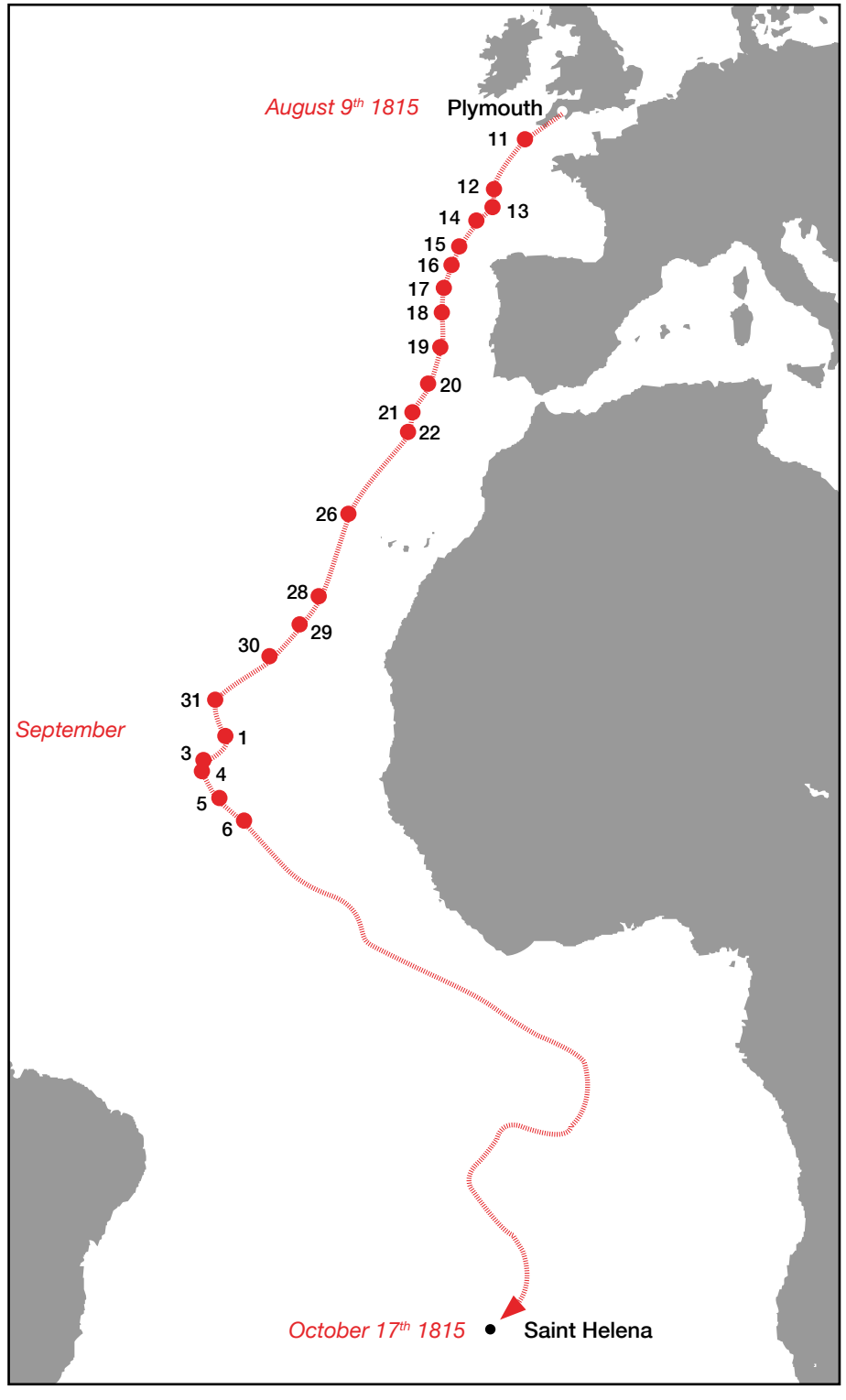
1815
October

From the 23rd September to this day, the 6th October (which period, like the preceding, I combine to avoid uninteresting monotonous details), we have had the wind with little or no variation from the S.W., accompanied by a heavy swell from the westward, the weather being cloudy and very cool, almost indeed amounting to cold, but without rain.

From the 6th October the wind, remaining from S.S.W. to S., allowed us to continue on the larboard tack without losing ground to the northward, until we got at last the S.E. Trade on the 11th inst., having, however, previously passed the thirteenth degree S. latitude; and even then the Trade hung considerably to the southward, but the ship being so much to windward this became immaterial to us, and with a fine, strong, fair wind we made between two and three hundred miles a day until we reached Saint Helena this morning (the 15th), the sixty-sixth day since we quitted the Lizard.



The Northumberland arrives to Saint Helena. (Bombled. ©Andrea Press).



Napoleon´s route to Saint Helena according to Sir George Cockburn´s diary

companions. Instead, Fesch just as he did with Antommarchi, failed to meet Napoleon's expectations by sending to Saint Helena a couple of Corsican priests who could only speak Corsican and Italian, not matching at all Napoleon's requirements.

One was a gouty, 67 year old deaf man: the abbé Antonio Buonavita. A missionary in Mexico in old times, he had been Madame Mère's chaplain too. He was affected by a number of illnesses that didn't improve under Saint Helena's climate and had to leave the island on March 1821. His rather non significant role in this drama practically consisted in celebrating Sunday's masses. Buonavita would disembark in Europe to find that the Emperor had already died. After some bitter disagreement with Madame Mère about his pension he returned to his old missionary life until his death in 1833.

The other was a more colorful, younger priest intended to be an assistant to Buonavita: the abbé Ange Paul Vignali, another rough Corsican who was hot off the seminary and, like Buonavita, quite deficient in manners and education; even though it seemed he had some medical knowledge... At least he was more active than his elder, to whom he assisted in marrying Saint-Denis and Mary Hall, besides baptizing a couple of newborns or teaching Bertrand's children Latin. In all, a prominent feature of Vignali's personality was probably a daring sense of humour, as shown by the practical joke he played in July 1820, when dressed like Napoleon galloped in front of the astonished English garrison[1]. (See page 263).

But doubtless the most significant service rendered by Vignali at Longwood was being Napoleon's last chaplain who administered his last sacraments and performed his funeral.

Back in his birthplace Vignali remained there until his death in June 1836. Involved in a family vendetta he was shot by an unknown murderer...

The priest Ange Paul Vignali. (KGM. ©Andrea Press).

1. *Sainte-Hélène. Île de Mémoire. Fayard.*

THE DOMESTIC STAFF

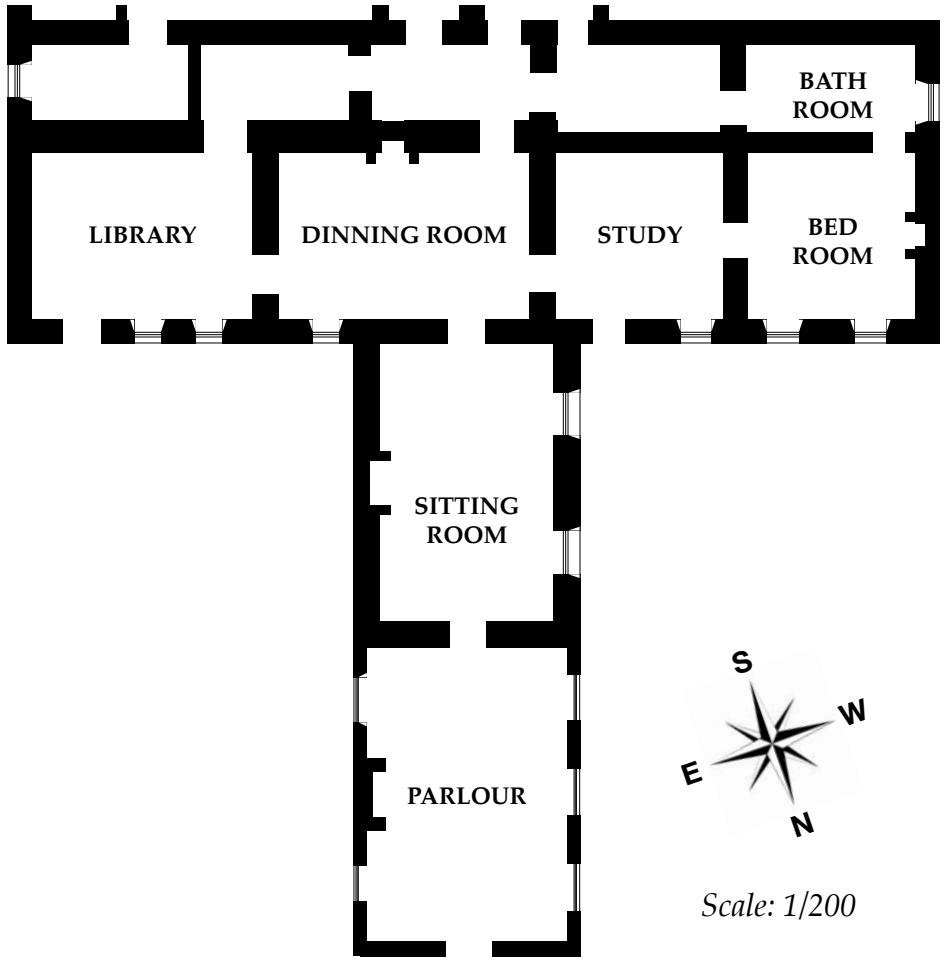
Most of Napoleon's servants at Saint Helena had also been in the Emperor's service before the captivity. A majority of them also set an unparalleled example of loyalty under difficult circumstances. They never failed either in keeping the stiff etiquette judged by Napoleon as inalienable from his imperial status. Accordingly, all his retainers wore at Saint Helena the same livery they sported at the Tuileries: a green frock embroidered in gold or silver; fine wool white waistcoats; black silk breeches; white silk stockings and black buckled shoes. Clad in these anything but comfortable outfits, they performed their duties to perfection until the end...

Noverraz

At Longwood, those ingratiated by the Emperor with an audience would face at the threshold of the room in which Napoleon was about to receive them a gigantic man of imposing appearance, clad in the resplendent imperial livery: Noverraz.

(KGM. ©Andrea Press).

The Swiss Jean Abram Noverraz (1790-1849) was a surly man of about 190 cm. (6 feet 2.8 inches) in height. He had entered the Emperor's service as a footman in 1809 proving to be a fully loyal and dependable butler, ready at anytime to risk his life to protect his beloved Emperor. Such was the case at the time of Napoleon's first abdication in 1814, when the Emperor was crossing Provence on the way to Elba and Noverraz kept him holding his sword against the enraged, menacing populace that surrounded them when reaching Orgon in April of that year. Napoleon by his side was very fond of Noverraz whom he nicknamed the '*Ours d´Helvétie*' (Swiss Bear), bequeathed a considerable sum in his testament and even appointed him depositary of some precious hunting items that were to be delivered to his son when he turned sixteen years old.



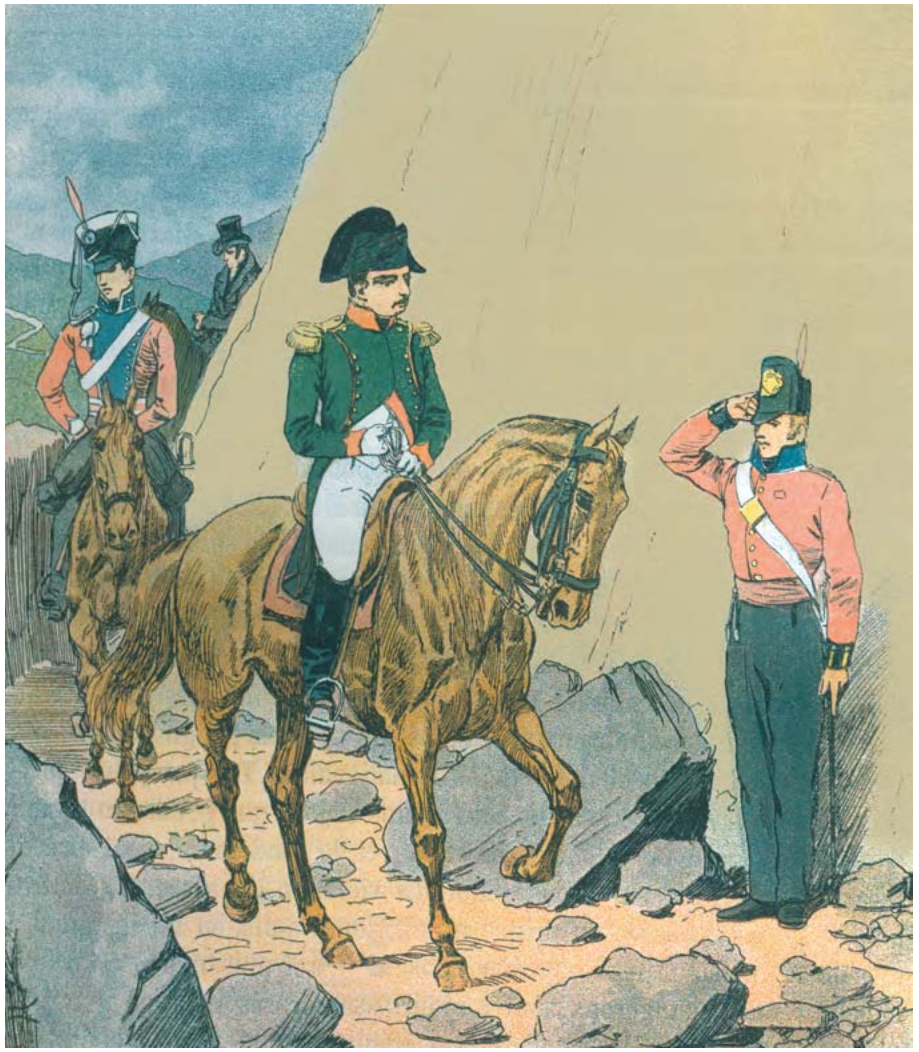
Scale: 1/200

Loongwood House.

A view of the left T-cross of the building showing the library door to the garden

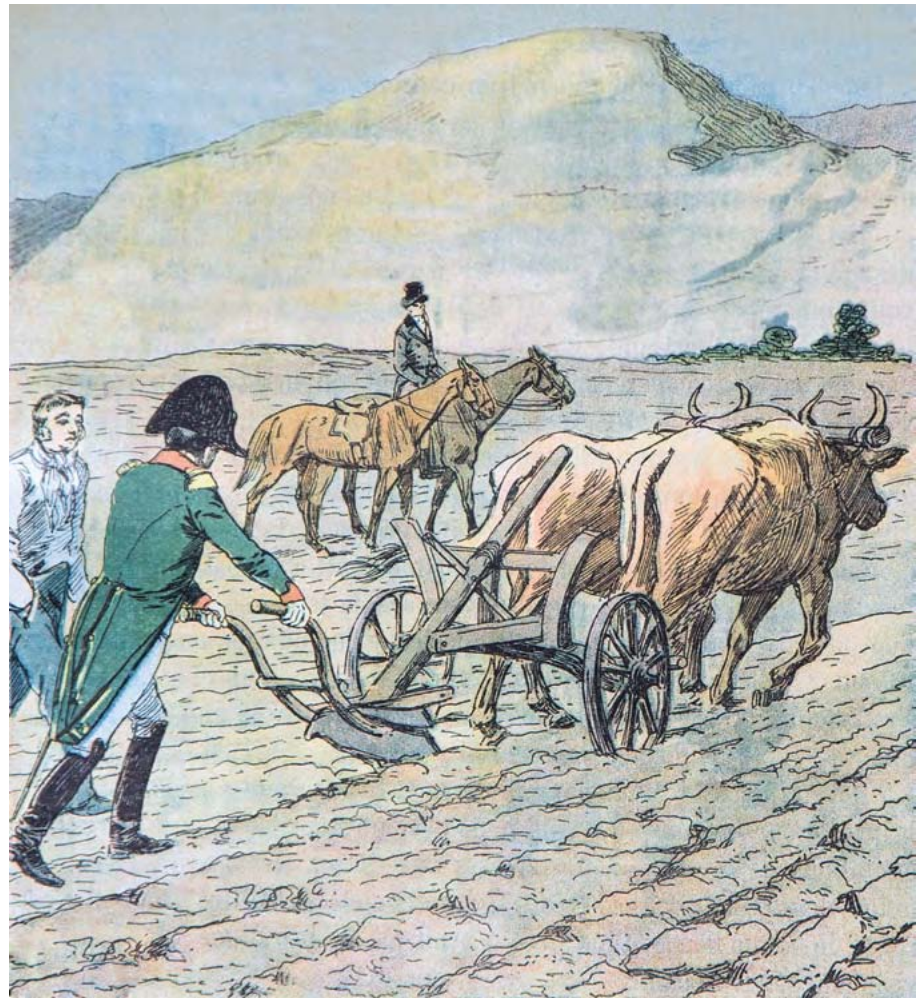
A view of the right T-cross showing the door and windows to the Emperor´s study and bed room

His first bath and some intimacy after five long months, or even the unexpected arrival of the picturesque and intriguing Captain Piontkowski who disembarked from the store ship Cormorant on 29th December and went immediately to Longwood offering himself at the service of the Emperor[1] surely added some colour to the situation. Perhaps he had the first clear indication of what was coming when he was aware of the fact that going beyond the established limits around the house was strictly forbidden unless he was 'accompanied' by a British officer...



Napoleon's first outing on horseback at Longwood. (Bombled. ©Andrea Press).

1. *A Polish Exile with Napoleon. G. L. DE ST. M. Watson. Harper & Brothers, 1912.*



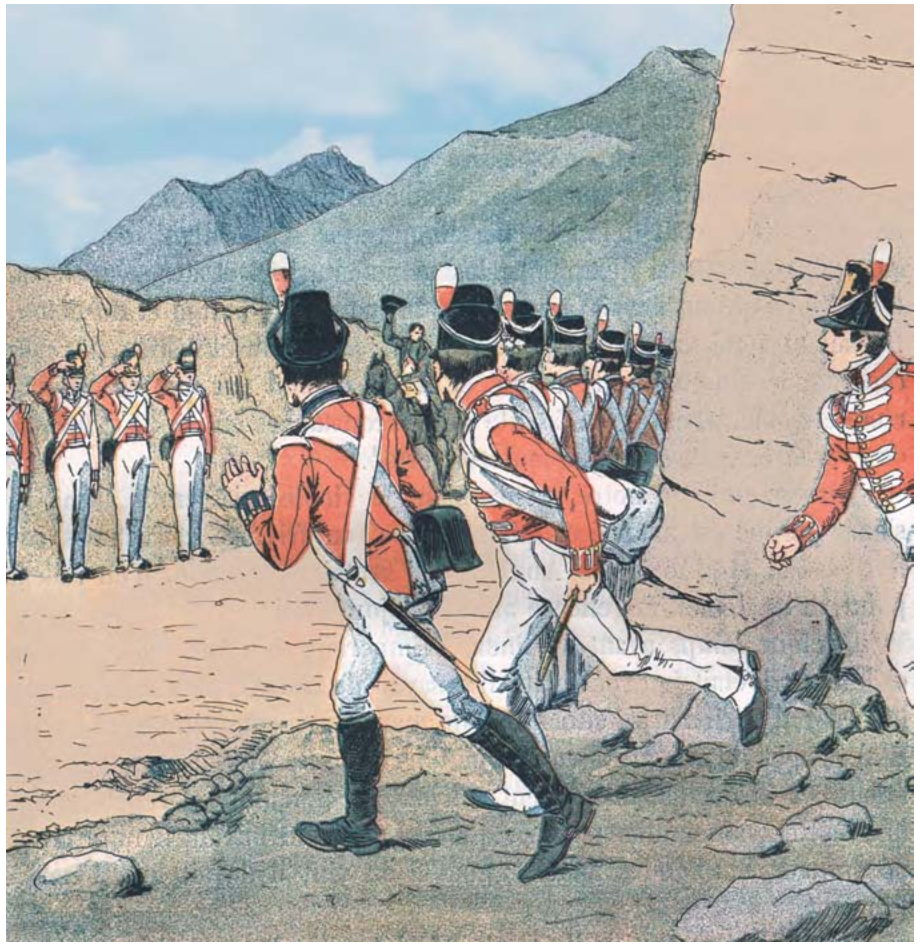
Saturday 30th, December 1815. Coming across a field being ploughed, the Emperor dismounts and, taking the plough from the hands of a greatly surprised peasant, draws a long furrow by himself very fast and pronouncing no other words than ordering Las Cases to give one napoleon to the peasant (Le Memorial de Sainte-Hélène. Le Comte de Las Cases. Garnier Frères. Paris 1895). *(Bombled. ©Andrea Press).*

the following morning (during which interval he had seen General Bertrand, and probably heard the conversation I had with him) he had recovered his temper, so much so as to send for Dr. O'Meara to breakfast with him, when his conversation almost entirely ran on the accusations which had been brought against him by Sir Robert Wilson for his conduct in Syria, and what he had been accused of in respect to Captain Wright, alleging the injustice of both, and saying he doubted not Sir Robert Wilson would, during his late residence in France, have ascertained upon what slight foundation his accusations stood.'[1]

Profoundly irritated by Lowe's impassibility, the Emperor certainly lost his temper confronting this new governor who was absolutely not that '*class of persons who are the most likely to be worked on by him*'. He had clearly overreacted and probably thought that this kind of emotional outburst –so strikingly contrasting with Lowe's dignified coolness– didn't fit with the imperial condition so dear to him. On the last day of May he would go over the incident regretting his behaviour, even though any apology had to be discarded, given the 'circumstances'...

Monday 20th May 1816. Napoleon takes a nap watched by Las Cases. (Bombled. ©Andrea Press).

1. *History of the Captivity of Napoleon at Saint Helena. From the letters and journals of the late Lieut. Gen. Sir Hudson Lowe and official documents not before made public by William Forsyth, MA. Harper Brothers. 1853, New York.*



Tuesday 28th May 1816. When riding by the British camp, every soldier ran to fall in before Napoleon. (Bombled. ©Andrea Press).

June 1816

Napoleon entered June in a depressive mood which would only be alleviated by taking three-hours-long hot baths and engulfing himself in long conversations and digressions on a variety of topics –mainly literature and history– so reflecting and examining his past with a sharp critical eye. He pondered the alternative choices to wrong decisions made in the past and projected what could have happened had he moved differently. However, this critical analysis was mostly referred to tactical decisions that could perhaps have been better. Or, in other words, regarding the means of his political and military activity, but never the ends, by which he resolutely always stood.

At this point Napoleon threw out the towel with Lowe. He finally acknowledged to himself that Lowe would never be cajoled into anything; that his play of high-worded admonishments and exhortations to honour, etc., had produced no effects. Lowe was no fool and there was no point in prolonging such an awkward situation. Besides, that man´s coolness and inaccessibility infuriated him so jeopardizing his dignity and his honour.

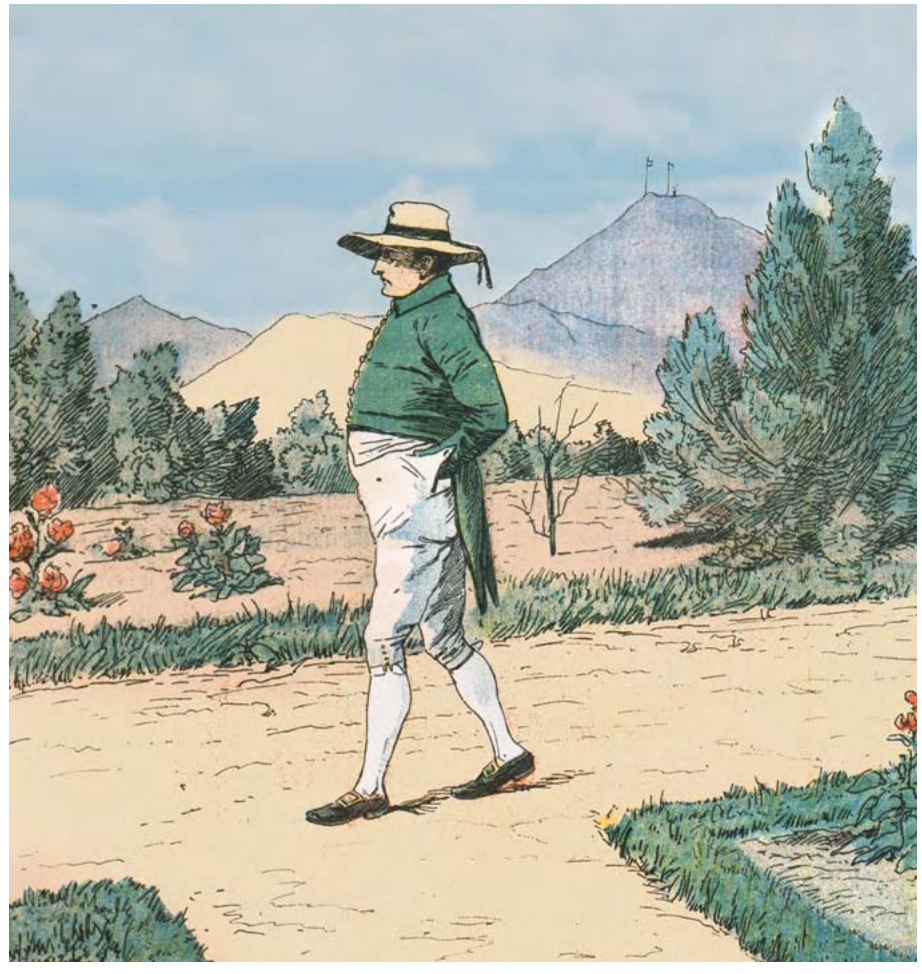
Shortly after this rather stormy meeting, the Emperor announces to Las Cases that he will never meet the governor. Next time that the latter would see him he would be dead... (see page 83)

Bad weather outside the house. Bertrand and Napoleon kill the time playing chess. (Bombled. ©Andrea Press).

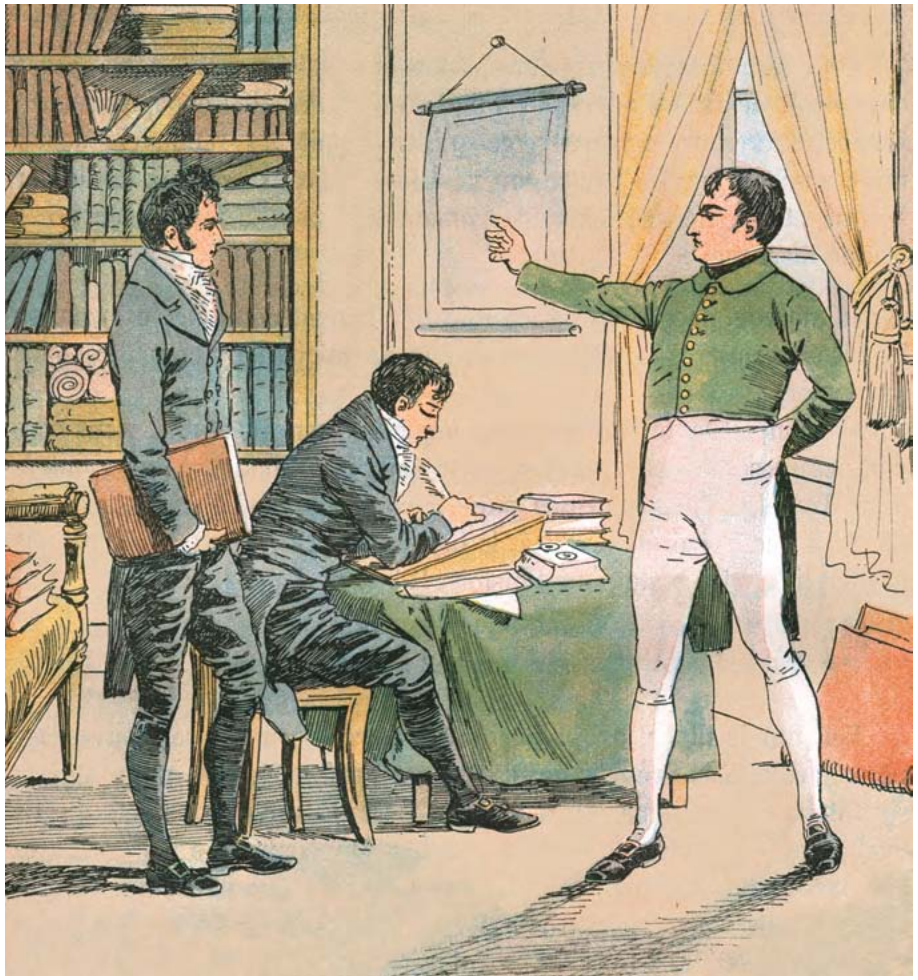
September 1816

Bad weather still going on. Heavy rain...

The battle between the exiles and the governor about the ever discussed problem of Longwood's squander with supplies reach a climax this month. On one side the constant complaining of the French about the poor quality of their nutrition. On the other side is Lowe's determination to reduce the expenses. He fixes a limit and declares that any excess should be covered with Napoleon's personal funds. The Emperor maintains that what's left of his fortune is in the hands of his friends abroad, to whom he is not free to write with instructions. This is a jumble with apparently no way out, as no party is prepared to compromise a solution.



Sunday 15th September 1816. Taking advantage of one of the scarce sunny days this month the Emperor goes alone for a stroll in the garden. (Bombled. ©Andrea Press).



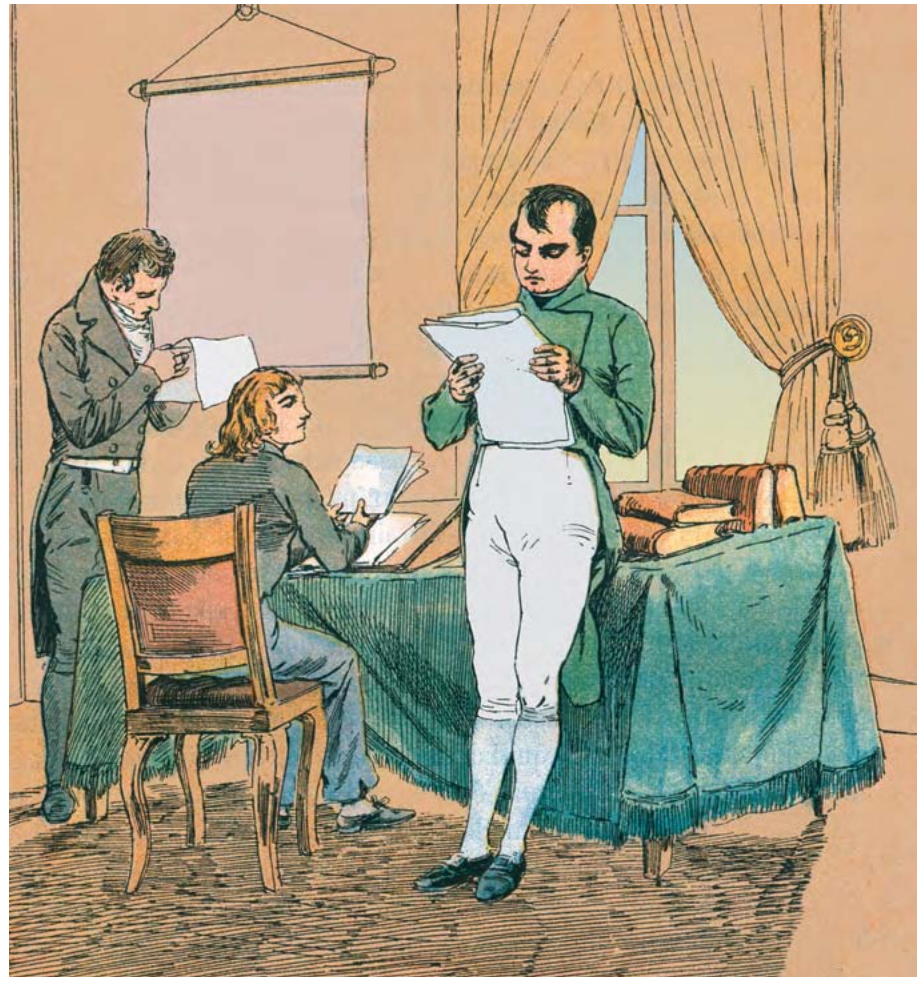
Prompted upon reading in a British newspaper about the 'big Napoleon's hidden treasures' the Emperor dictates a long list of the great civil works executed all across Europe under his ruling. (Bombled. ©Andrea Press).

The waste at Longwood is no way Lowe's invention, but a reality sustained by the facts and numbers of the immoderate French consumption of eatables and –very especially– spirited drinks; which on the other hand might be quite understandable, considering the idleness and the boredom borne by the captives.

Napoleon, now decided to give his battle till the end, is prepared to take advantage of any opportunity to leave perfectly clear to the world the humiliation and crudeness he and his party are subjected to on the island. He could very probably have implemented a proper solution by defraying the extra cost himself but, instead, chose to play a rather theatrical effect by ordering to break down part of his

magnificent silver ware in pieces and sell them at Jamestown. Then Lowe, aware of the move and its potential propagandistic effect blocked the operation...

Uneasiness and hatred increase each day but now there is no way back and just two possible ways ahead for Napoleon: eventual deliverance from Saint Helena after nearly a year of seclusion, not entirely impossible depending on the evolution of the political affairs in Europe, or just remaining there to the end of his life. In both cases the magnification of this privations and miseries, and the emphasis on blaming the British in the figure of Hudson Lowe were the best course of action as, even if there were no release ever, these vexations and sufferings would consecrate his figure and political system for many centuries to come...

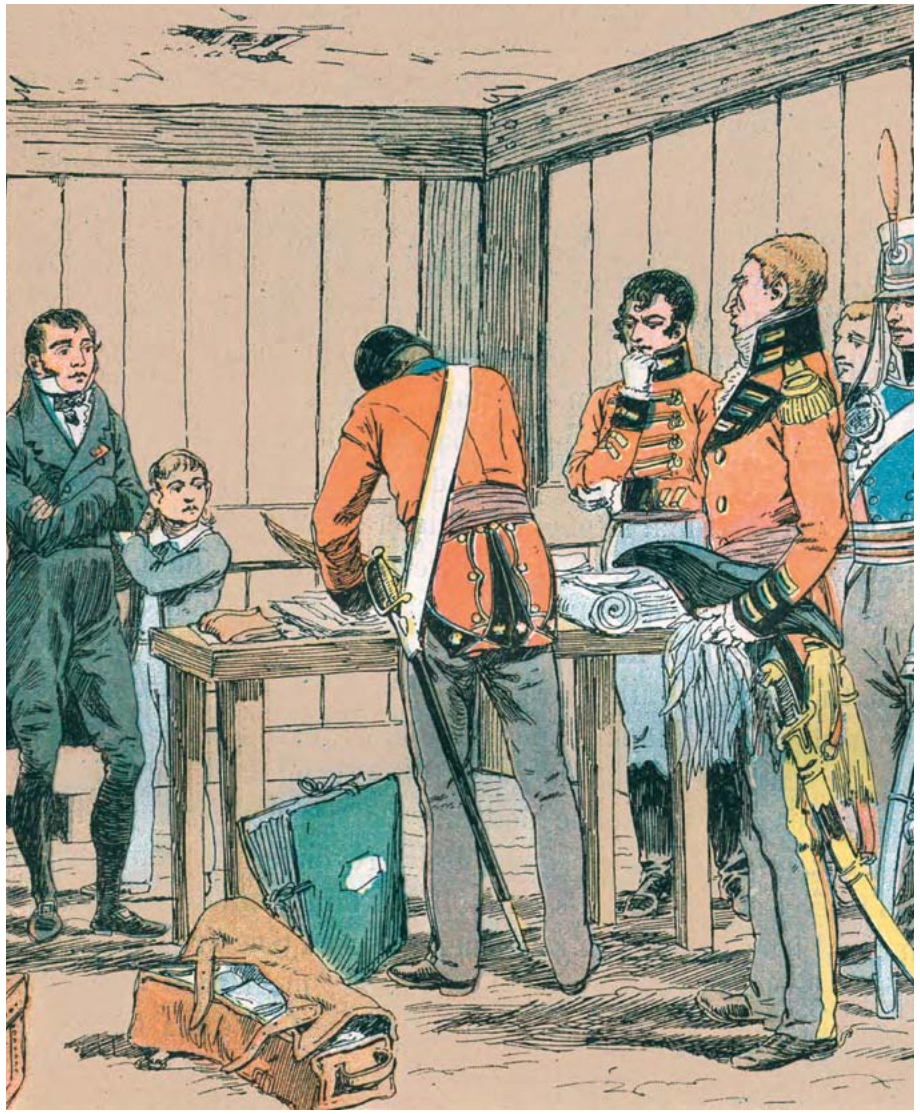


In the course of a work session with Las Cases and his son the Emperor recognises he is not able to 'decipher' his own writing… (Bombled. ©Andrea Press).

November 1816

Nice weather. The Emperor seems to be in good health, but the atmosphere at Longwood rarefies. Idleness and boredom are taking their toll at Longwood. Envy and jealousy are commonplace. Especially, Montholon and Gourgaud couldn't stand the closeness between Las Cases and the Emperor. There was a lot of quibbling like questioning who of them should precede the others when entering the dining room, the quality of their respective lodgements and so on... Only Bertrand seemed to stand above all that pettiness. This was only the beginning of a degradation process around the figure of Napoleon as the radiating centre of this minuscule, artificial world.

Las Cases is estranged from Longwood. (Bombled. ©Andrea Press).



Hudson Lowe seizes Las Cases's papers. (Bombled. ©Andrea Press).

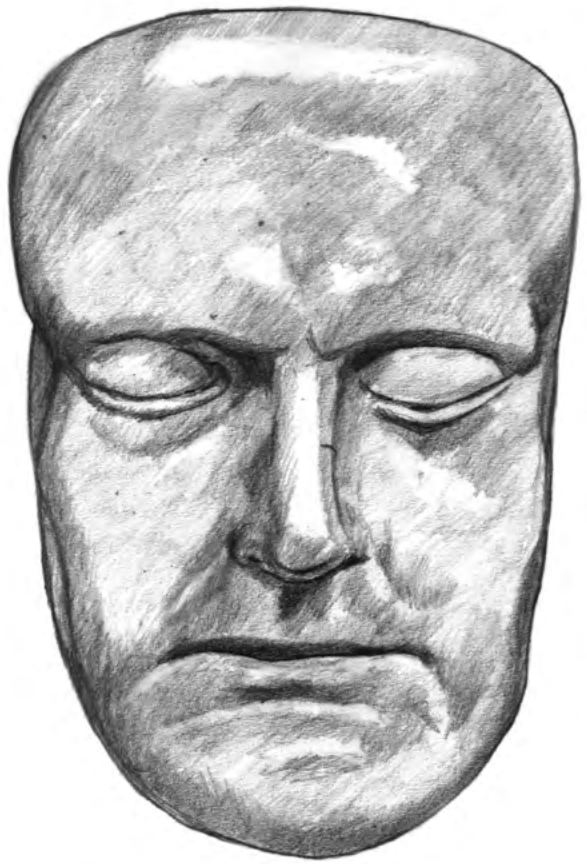
But Las Cases wasn't the only one hurting sensitivities at Longwood as Cipriani, the Corsican valet and factotum, was also greatly envied because of his particular and mysterious bond with the Emperor, to whom only he could speak in Corsican (see page 113).

November's days slipped away with a conciliatory Napoleon always trying to bring his party together; which proved to be a strenuous and mostly fruitless effort that often drew him into gloomy moods at which he shut himself in his inner rooms.

the mould was performed Bertrand and the others, disliking the appearance of the real imprint, decided to ameliorate the real Napoleon mask by the simple procedure of exchanging it with that of Cipriani produced at the time of his death in 1818 (see page 113). Subsequent manipulations on this Cipriani mask would have resulted in the 'official' death mask of the Emperor, as it is (with slight variations) known nowadays.

Beyond the alembicated nature of these theories, the lack of veracity of this mask would still stand from mere dispassionate observation.

The Arnott mask.



(KGM. ©Andrea Press).

This is a mask reputedly taken by Dr. Arnott[1] with surgical wax on the night from the 5th to the 6th of May which has been sometimes

1. *Archibald Arnott (1772-1855) was a British Army surgeon most remembered for being Napoleon's last physician at Saint Helena. He was present at the autopsy.*

credited as authentic, which is quite surprising as anyone familiar with human anatomy rarely could fail to notice that, if this is indeed a real casting taken from a death mask mould, it would have been so crudely and clumsily manipulated that any resemblance between this mask and the original casting would be merely coincidental.

The Rusi Mask.

(KGM. ©Andrea Press).

So called because it was exhibited at the Royal United Service Institute from 1947 to 1973, this would be the original casting taken from the mould made by Burton/Antommarchi. This is a highly detailed mask that undoubtedly corresponds to a real dead man, with no apparent manipulation.