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978-1-108-08131-3 - Napoleon in Exile: Or, A Voice from St. Helena: The Opinions and Reflections of Napoleon on the Most Important Events of his Life and Government in his Own Words: Volume 1

Barry E. O'Meara

Excerpt

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A VOICE
FROM
ST. HELENA.



IN consequence of the resolution which had been adopted by the British government to send the former sovereign of France to a distant settlement, and communicated to him by Major-General Sir Henry Bunbury, under secretary of state, on board of the *Bellerophon*, '74, Captain Maitland, at Plymouth, a few days before, Napoleon, accompanied by such of his suite as were permitted by our government, was removed on the 7th of August, 1815, from the *Bellerophon* to the *Northumberland*, '74, Captain Ross. The vessel bore the flag of Rear-admiral Sir George Cockburn, G. C. B. who was entrusted with the charge of conveying Napoleon to St. Helena, and of regulating all measures necessary to the security of his personal detention after his arrival at the place of his confinement. Out of the suite that had followed his fortunes on

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board of the *Bellerophon* and *Myrmidon*, his majesty's government permitted four of his officers, his surgeon, and twelve of his household, to share his exile. The undermentioned persons were consequently selected, and accompanied him on board of the *Northumberland*:—Counts Bertrand, Montholon, and Las Cases, Baron Gourgaud, Countess Bertrand and her three children, Countess Montholon and child, Marchand, premier valet de chambre, Cipriani, maître d'hôtel, Pieron, St. Denis, Novarre, Le Page, two Archambauds, Santini, Rousseau, Gentilini, Josephine, Bernard, and his wife, domestics to Count Bertrand. A fine youth of about fourteen, son to Count Las Cases, was also permitted to accompany his father. Previous to their removal from the *Bellerophon*, the swords and other arms of the prisoners were demanded from them, and their luggage was subsequently examined, in order that possession might be taken of their property, whether in bills, money, or jewels. After paying those of his suite who were not permitted to accompany him, only four thousand Napoleons in gold were found, which were taken possession of by persons authorized by his majesty's government.

When the determination of the British ministers to send Napoleon to St. Helena was communicated to his suite, M. Maingaud, the surgeon who had accompanied him from Rochefort, re-

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fused to follow him to the tropics. M. Maingaud was a young man unknown to Napoleon, and had been fortuitously chosen to attend him until M. Fourreau de Beauregard, who had been his surgeon in Elba, could join him; and I was informed that even had he been willing to proceed to St. Helena, his services would not have been accepted. On the day that Napoleon first came on board of the *Bellerophon*, after he had gone round the ship, he addressed me on the poop, and asked if I were the *chirurgien major*? I replied in the affirmative, in the Italian language. He then asked in the same language, what country I was a native of? I replied, of Ireland. "Where did you study your profession?" "In Dublin and London." "Which of the two is the best school of physic?" I replied that I thought Dublin the best school of anatomy, and London of surgery. "Oh," said he, smiling, "you say Dublin is the best school of anatomy because you are an Irishman." I answered that I begged pardon, that I had said so because it was true; as in Dublin the subjects for dissection were to be procured at a fourth of the price paid for them in London, and the professors were equally good. He smiled at this reply, and asked what actions I had been in, and in what parts of the globe I had served? I mentioned several, and amongst others, Egypt. At the word Egypt, he commenced a series of

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questions, which I answered to the best of my ability. I mentioned to him that the corps of officers to which I then belonged messed in a house that had formerly served as a stable for his horses. He laughed at this, and ever afterwards noticed me when walking on deck, and occasionally called me to interpret or explain. On the passage from Rochefort to Torbay, Colonel Planat, one of his orderly officers, was taken very ill, and attended by me, as M. Maingaud was incapable, through sea-sickness, of offering any assistance. During the period of his illness, Napoleon frequently asked about him, and conversed with me on the nature of his malady and the mode of cure. After our arrival at Plymouth, General Gourgaud also was very unwell, and did me the honour to have recourse to me for advice. All those circumstances had the effect of bringing me more in contact with Napoleon than any other officer in the ship, with the exception of Captain Maitland; and the day before the Bellerophon left Torbay, the Duke of Rovigo, with whom I was frequently in the habit of conversing, asked me if I were willing to accompany Napoleon to St. Helena as surgeon, adding, that if I were, I should receive a communication to that effect from Count Bertrand, the grand maréchal. I replied that I had no objection, provided the British government and my captain were willing to permit

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me, and also under certain stipulations. I communicated this immediately to Captain Maitland, who was good enough to favour me with his advice and opinion; which were, that I ought to accept of the offer, provided the sanction of Admiral Lord Keith, and of the English government could be obtained, adding, that he would mention the matter to his lordship. On our arrival at Torbay, Count Bertrand made the proposal to Captain Maitland and to myself, which was immediately communicated to Lord Keith. His lordship sent for me on board of the *Tonnant*, and after some preliminary conversation, in which I explained the nature of the stipulations I was desirous of making, did me the honour to recommend me in strong terms to accept of the situation, adding, that he could not order me to do so, as it was foreign to the naval service, and a business altogether extraordinary; but that he advised me to accept of it, and expressed his conviction that government would feel obliged to me, as they were very anxious that Napoleon should be accompanied by a surgeon of his own choice. His lordship added, that it was an employment which I could hold perfectly consistent with my honour, and with the duty I owed to my country and my sovereign.

Feeling highly gratified that the step which I had in contemplation had met with the approba-

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tion of characters so distinguished in the service as Admiral Lord Keith and Captain Maitland,* I accepted of the situation, and proceeded on board of the Northumberland, stipulating, however, by letter to his lordship, that I should be

* It is no small gratification to me to be able to produce such a testimonial as the following from a captain with whom I served in three different ships.

November 5th, 1814.

Dear Sir,

The attention and meritorious conduct of Mr. Barry O'Meara, while surgeon with me in the Goliath, calls upon me as an act of justice to him and of benefit to the service, to state, that during the fifteen years I have commanded some one of his majesty's ships, I have never had the pleasure of sailing with an officer in his situation who so fully answered my expectations. Not being a judge of his professional abilities, though I have every reason to believe them of the first class, and know that to be the opinion of some of the oldest and most respectable surgeons in the navy, I shall only state, that during a period of very bad weather, which occasioned the Goliath to be extremely sickly, his attention and tenderness to the men was such as to call forth my warmest approbation, and the grateful affection of both officers and men. Were it probable that I should soon obtain another appointment, I know of no man in the service I should wish to have as surgeon so much as Mr. O'Meara. As, however, in the present state of the war that is not likely, I trust you will do me the favour of giving him an appointment, as an encouragement to young men of his description, and believe me,

Dear Sir, &c. &c. &c.

FREDERICK L. MAITLAND.

To Dr. Harness, &c. &c. &c.

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always considered as a British officer, and upon the list of naval surgeons on full pay, paid by the British government, and that I should be at liberty to quit so peculiar a service, should I find it not to be consonant to my wishes.*

During the voyage, which lasted about ten weeks, Napoleon did not suffer much from seasickness after the first week. He rarely made his appearance on deck until after dinner. He breakfasted in his own cabin *à la fourchette* at ten or eleven o'clock, and spent a considerable portion of the day in writing and reading. Before he sat down to dinner he generally played a game at chess, and remained at that meal, in compliment to the admiral, about an hour; at which time coffee was brought to him, and he left the company to take a walk upon deck, accompanied by Counts Bertrand or Las Cases, while the admiral and the rest continued at table for an hour or two longer. While walking the quarter-deck, he frequently spoke to such of the officers as could understand and converse with him; and often asked Mr. Warden, (the surgeon of the Northumberland), questions touching the prevailing complaints, and mode of treatment of the sick. He occasionally played a game at whist, but generally retired to his cabin at nine or ten o'clock. Such was the uniform course of his life during the voyage.

* Appendix, No. I.

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The Northumberland hove to off Funchal, and the Havannah frigate was sent in to procure refreshments. During the time we were off the anchorage a violent *scirocco levante* prevailed, which did great mischief to the grapes. We were informed that some of the ignorant and superstitious inhabitants attributed it to the presence of Napoleon. Fourteen or fifteen hundred volumes of books were ordered from England for Napoleon's use by Count Bertrand.

We arrived at St. Helena on the 15th of October. Nothing can be more desolate or repulsive than the appearance of the exterior of the island. When we had anchored, it was expected that Napoleon would have been invited to stop at Plantation House, the country-seat of the governor, until a house could have been got ready for him; as heretofore passengers of distinction had invariably been asked to pass the time they remained on the island there. Some forcible reason possibly existed, as this courtesy was not extended to him.

On the evening of the 17th, about seven o'clock, Napoleon landed at James Town, accompanied by the admiral, Count and Countess Bertrand, Las Cases, Count and Countess Montholon, &c. and proceeded to a house belonging to a gentleman named Porteous, which had been taken for that purpose by the admiral, and was one of the best in the town. It was not, however, free from inconvenience, as Napoleon could not make his

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appearance at the windows, or even descend from his bedchamber, without being exposed to the rude and ardent gaze of those who wished to gratify their curiosity with a sight of the imperial captive. There was no house in the town at all calculated for privacy, except the governor's, to which there belonged a court, and in front there was a walk upon the ramparts facing the sea, and overlooking the Marino, which proximity to the ocean probably was the cause of its not having been selected for him.

The inhabitants of the island were in very anxious expectation during the greatest part of the day to obtain a sight of the exiled ruler when he should make his *entrée* to the place of his confinement. Numbers of persons of every description crowded the Marino, the street, and the houses by which he was to pass in the eager hope of catching a glimpse of him. The expectations of most of them were however disappointed, as he did not land till after sun-set, at which time, the majority of the islanders, tired of waiting, and supposing that his landing was deferred until the following morning, had retired to their homes. It was also at this time nearly impossible to recognize his person.

Counts Bertrand and Montholon, with their ladies, Count Las Cases and son, General Gourgaud, and myself, were also accommodated in Mr. Porteous's house.

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At a very early hour on the morning of the 18th, Napoleon, accompanied by the admiral and Las Cases, proceeded up to Longwood, a country-seat of the lieutenant-governor's which he was informed was the place deemed most proper for his future residence. He was mounted on a spirited little black horse, which was lent for the occasion by the governor, Colonel Wilks. On his way up he observed a neat little spot called the Briars, situated about two hundred yards from the road, belonging to a gentleman named Balcombe, who, he was informed, was to be his purveyor, and appeared pleased with its romantic situation.

Longwood is situated on a plain, formed on the summit of a mountain, about eighteen hundred feet above the level of the sea; and including Deadwood, comprises fourteen or fifteen hundred acres of land, a great part of which is planted with an indigenous tree called gunwood. Its appearance is sombre and unpromising. Napoleon, however, said that he should be more contented to fix his residence there, than to remain in the town as a mark for the prying curiosity of importunate spectators. Unfortunately the house only consisted of five rooms on a ground-floor, which had been built one after the other, according to the wants of the family, and without any regard to either order or convenience, and were totally inadequate for the accommodation of himself and