

# How Secure Was St Helena in 1815?

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by Trevor W. Hearl

With millions in Britain and east of the Rhine hoping in 1815 to be assured of St Helena's security, it is surprising how little attention historians have given to the matter. Indeed, with the benefit of hindsight, they have taken it so much for granted that Hudson Lowe's sensitivity on the point is portrayed as if some defect in his character! It was no flippant matter on the Island, however, and as late as 1883 Benjamin Grant's *Guide* reminded visitors that the "civilized world owes it a great debt for keeping the Conqueror in safe custody." Security was, of course, the first consideration 'at the highest level', when St Helena was suggested as the fallen Emperor's next place of abode. Brasshats at Horse Guards were rather dubious about the mutinous tendencies of the St Helena Regiment, as shown in 1811, but a Regiment of Foot would cover that contingency and, as the late Governor, Major-General Beatson, assured them, the Island's coastal artillery and telegraph system made it virtually impregnable.

St Helena may have been familiar to every traveller who had returned home from the Cape and all points East, but to few others. When therefore at the end of July 1815 rumours in the press began hinting that the escapee from Elba and Waterloo might be destined for this South Atlantic outpost, everyone asked "How safe will that be?" For some at least their fears were allayed within a few days by a 30-page *Descriptive Account of St Helena*, subtitled "An Enquiry into the Degree of Security from Europe which that Island may Afford", published by John Murray. Its author, James Johnson (1777-1845), was surgeon-in-ordinary to HRH the Duke of Clarence, later William IV, with whom, in the words of the *Dictionary of National Biography*, "he enjoyed much friendly intercourse". We may reasonably assume, therefore, that his views were shared by, if they did not originate from, the bluff future 'Sailor King'. But Johnson had other qualifications for the work, among them authorship of *The Oriental Voyager* (1807), a 400-page guide to "all the principal Places [...] visited by our East India and China Fleets", compiled after his four-year voyage as surgeon aboard HMS *Caroline*. This, of course, included St Helena,



which he had explored on horseback from dawn to dusk on 24 December 1805, devoting no fewer than 22 pages to its charms. Here it must suffice to say that, like most visitors, he was entranced by the Island's landscape, but less impressed by the innkeeper who told him he should make do with "good salt junk and plenty of grog".

How secure would an erstwhile conqueror of Europe find St Helena ten years later, however? Johnson argued that, given the least chance, Napoleon's "sanguinary and war-thirsty adherents" would mount a rescue attempt using either internal bribery, external force or stratagem, or a combination of all of them. Fortunately there was nowhere in the world better able to counter such schemes. It was "more impregnable than either Gibraltar or Malta", and more reliable than anywhere against "domestic treachery". The only plan to stand any chance of success was for agents to smuggle messages to Napoleon arranging to spirit him away in a whaleboat to be picked up at Ascension Island. But, "without giving way to the ignoble impulse of insulting or oppressing the captive foe", this was easily scotched. The citadel at High Knoll was "remarkably eligible for Napoleon's abode", not only for security but, with views over both limitless ocean and homely landscape, for reflecting on one's follies. Ascension Island must be guarded, ships - "especially American vessels" - prevented from hovering off the coast, and Jamestown dosed to commercial shipping except, probably, the Company's Indiamen, as resulting discontent would create a greater security risk.

It is interesting to reflect how close Johnson's ideas came to reality. Ascension Island was guarded, and even Tristan da Cunha for a while, leaving St Helena these unexpected legacies of Napoleon's detention. Jamestown was closed to all except the Company's shipping, though the exclusion of American vessels was resented by Islanders, as they enjoyed bartering with them and three years of trade had already been lost during Britain's war with the United States (1812-14). By coincidence it was "the man who burned the White House" in 1814, Admiral Sir George Cockburn, who escorted Napoleon to St Helena. Finding him "bombastic, uncouth and disagreeable" on the voyage, the Admiral was in no mood to compromise over security when they reached the Island, but his decisions differed from Johnson's expectations on at least two cardinal points. Firstly, High Knoll - then the home of Robert Leech (1750-1818), Second Member of Council -



was not considered, Cockburn agreeing with Governor Wilks' choice of Longwood as being relatively isolated, surrounded with open, level ground easily kept under observation, and "most distant from the coast, so that boats could not possibly remove Bonaparte by a *coup de main*." The second point of disagreement was on the assumed loyalty of the people. Cockburn had 72 deported to the Cape from "the tenor of their behaviour"! One wanders how far the Solomons avoided this fate as tradesmen always came under particular scrutiny, being suspected by servicemen of putting, in military parlance, "money before honour".

Johnson's theory of a possible rescue attempt was completely eclipsed by reality. In the event Napoleon's would-be rescuers planned to use, not a whaleboat, but a submarine built and tested on the Thames! The builder, Lymington-born smuggler Captain Tom Johnstone (1772-1834) - a character well-known to the Duke of Clarence, incidentally, who would have nothing to do with his sly schemes for underwater warfare - was reputed to have been offered £40,000 for his vessel and further "large amounts" for using it at St Helena. It got no further than the Thames, but another was said to be on the stocks at Pernambuco and, according to Lord Rosebery - one of the few to have considered "the question of custody" - these threats remained "the constant bugbear of British Governments". Perhaps Hudson Lowe had more cause for sleepless nights than is generally realised. By an odd coincidence the author and artist of the celebrated *Five Views of St Helena* in 1815, Lieut. William Innes Pocock RN, was one of Britain's leading exponents of submarine design. In an involved tale woven around these events, published in 1944 with the uninspiring title *Being Met Together*, the author, Vaughan Wilkins, claimed that "there is nothing in the story of the St Helena venture of the submarine *Mute* that transcends contemporary report and surmise." Yet the best evidence suggests that, whenever the matter of escape was raised, Napoleon insisted that he would remain where he was. Just imagine the scene as our intrepid submariner actually crawled into Longwood! What is the French for "Get lost"? Even so, details of rescue schemes would make fascinating history.

James Johnson's hitherto overlooked 1815 pamphlet is no less intriguing as a 'find' for St Helena literature. In August 1815 it must have been among the first, if not the very first, item of Napoleonic

St Heleniana. Hastily printed at Portsmouth to meet an ephemeral demand, it was promoted by John Murray, whose publishing house retained an interest in 'exile literature' until as recently as the late Gilbert Martineau's English trilogy on the theme. The pamphlet is not listed among Johnson's works - mainly popular medical texts - and there is no copy in the Bodleian Library, though Rhodes House at Oxford now has a photocopy. Though they will rarely admit, it researchers usually have to thank antiquarian book-, map- and printsellers for their discoveries - in this case it was spotted by John Lawson of Didcot, doyen of St Helena literary sleuths. So browse through your local bookshop; there must be a lot more St Helena material waiting to be brought to light. 🐦 [1999]

### References:

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**'Je Fume en Pleurant mes Péchés'**

Paris: Se Vende a Paris, chez  
 Genty, Rue St. Jacques, No. 14,  
 1815