

“SECRET” NAPOLEON CODE BOOK FOUND

by Trevor W. Hearl

The recent discovery of a “secret” manuscript code book, devised in 1815 to counter Napoleonic attempts at rescue or escape from St Helena, have excited French historians, according to a report in *The Times* (28 February 2001). Described by an expert on French history as “the gem” of a Napoleonic collection, this particular code book has been gathering dust for over 30 years in the library at Stirling University in Scotland, having been donated in 1969 with 57 other documents by an American collector, Burt Eddy Taylor of Michigan.

Said to reveal “British paranoia” at the possibility that Napoleon might give his guards the slip at St Helena as he had at Elba, the book apparently belonged to Governor Mark Wilks, who brought it home to the Isle of Man in 1816 when he was retired by the British Government in favour of Sir Hudson Lowe.

Readers of my article on “St Helena’s Early Telegraphs” in the St Helena and Dependencies Philatelic Society Newsletter (1986)¹ and later, the *Anthology* (1997)² may recall the circumstances behind this “secret” code. A new system of signals was required in 1815 to meet a novel situation. St Helena’s existing “aerial telegraph” system, using balls on a frame, devised by Governor Patton in 1803 to inform the garrison when ships were in the offing, was recognized, for all its imperfections, as being one of the most efficient in the world.

Indeed, it was given as one of the reasons for choosing St Helena as a suitably secure place of retirement for Napoleon. But in 1815, it mystified the sailors and soldiers sent out to augment the island’s resident garrison and was not designed to report on internal affairs. Capt. Henry Huff Pritchard of the St Helena Artillery was therefore told by Admiral Sir George Cockburn to devise “a more simple and rapid” method using flags. Like the previous system, it signalled numbers referring to messages in a code book.

Thus, all the Longwood exiles were given numbers (“General Buonaparte” was 767) and if one of them went missing, his number would be hoisted up with a dark blue flag signifying “Missing”, repeated at all the signal stations around the island until cancelled.

Mysteries now surround the operations of the system, however. For example, no signal mast has yet been found in any contemporary report or picture of Longwood, despite the misleading assertion by the former custodian, M. Gilbert Martineau in *Napoleon’s St Helena* (1968) that “the rusty pulleys of the aerial telegraph installed by a previous governor were cleared; and an office was set up at Longwood making it possible to communicate immediately to the authorities”.

A piece of local doggerel, Sally Phil’s Poem, quoted by Philip Gosse in *St Helena 1502-1938*, asserts that:

*“At Longwood the signals were placed on a pole, and passed to the Governor through the post at High Knoll”.*³

Yet, Ken Denholm spent months there in 1994 researching his history of communications on the island, *From Signal Gun to Satellite*, without finding any evidence of a signal station at Longwood prior to 1836 when the Colonial Government closed all the telegraph stations, and Jamestown's merchants had one built outside Longwood Old House to be kept informed of shipping approaching the port. The Napoleonic signal office must have operated with considerable discretion! The last known message to have been sent from the Orderly Officer at Longwood was on 4 May 1821 when Lt. W. Crokat signalled "No. 2" to the Governor the code for "Napoleon is unwell".

A copy of Captain Pritchard's St Helena signal book was offered for sale in 1914, according to Sir Lees Knowles in *Letters of Captain Engelbert Lutyens* (1915, p. 187); another copy was reported to be in the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich (ref. SIG/B/57). The *Times* report gives examples of the book's coded messages: "General Buonaparte is out, but within the cordon of sentries", - and adds that there are also instructions "what to do in the event of an escape".

Having aroused such interest in the press, perhaps the "discoveries" will reveal more of its "secrets". Meanwhile, the university is trying to trace Mr. Taylor's descendants, presumably to let them know that his bequest is being put to good use. And if there is no copy on St Helena perhaps they would like to offer St Helena a facsimile for its new museum.

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¹ Trevor Hearl, "St Helena's Early Telegraph," *St Helena and Dependencies Philatelic Society Newsletter* (Columbus, Ohio: St Helena and Dependencies Philatelic Society, 1986), 14.

² Trevor Hearl, "St Helena's Early Telegraph," in *St Helena, Ascension, and Tristan da Cunha Philatelic Society's 20th Anniversary Anthology*, ed. Russell V. Skavartil (Columbus, Ohio: St Helena, Ascension & Tristan da Cunha Philatelic Society, 1997), 73.

³ Philip Gosse, *St Helena 1502-1938*. (Oswestry, Shropshire, United Kingdom: Anthony Nelson Ltd., 1990), 411.