

ST HELENA IN THE ROYAL COLLECTION

by Trevor W. Hearl

Visitors to London this year have had a rare opportunity to see a few of the St Helena items in the Royal Collection as they are now on display at the Queen's Gallery, Buckingham Palace, in the exhibition "A Royal Miscellany". They include two watercolours of Longwood House sketched in 1816 by T Oben of the Military Depot and a Star of the Legion d'Honneur embroidered in silver thread with sequins worn by Napoleon at Lonhich he is said to have given to a Quartermaster Stevens. There is also a portrait of Napoleon shortly before his death in 1821 by E Purcell, and even a specimen of his hair. More importantly historically, however, is Napoleon's letter of surrender sent to the Prince Regent on 13 July 1815, though by the time it reached London, he was on his way to St Helena aboard HMS *Northumberland*.

On October 15, the 175th anniversary of Napoleon's arrival at Jamestown was marked, and the 150th anniversary of his body leaving St Helena for Paris. Whether or not visitors to the Queen's Gallery were aware of this topicality, they can hardly miss the exhibit as it is the last one (No. 271) in the exhibition beside the exit door. The sumptuous catalogue explains how some of the objects reached the Royal Library. Purcell's portrait, for instance, was accepted by Queen Victoria from a descendant of Lord Castlereagh's secretary, while the Star of the Legion of Honor was given by Quartermaster Stevens to Lt. Gen. Sir Charles Doyle, although how it later reached the Royal Library is not stated. The items were framed in 1928 by the Librarian, Sir Owen Morshead, who took a particular interest in Napoleonica. Surprisingly none were noted in Dr Arnold Chaplin's *A St Helena Who's Who* (Second edition, 1919), the meticulously researched "Directory of the Island during the Captivity of Napoleon".

With this unique collection of Napoleonic memorabilia from St Helena on display at Buckingham Palace, readers must wonder what other treasures of St Helena are held in the Royal Library at Windsor Castle. Happily, I can now answer that question, having been privileged, on your behalf, to view the material representing the Colony in the Royal Collection. My invitation came from Assistant Bibliographer, Mr Stephen J Patterson, who kindly displayed and discussed the pictures, maps and other objects for my benefit.

Most of the Library's St Helena books and pictures were published between 1815 and 1840 to meet popular demand for news and views of the Island during Napoleon's exile. The splendid volumes of coloured aquatint engravings by GH Bellasis and Lieut. WI Pocock are there, as their subscription lists suggest, but so too is the modest broadsheet of Wallis's *Descriptive Sketch of St Helena*, (Second edition, 1815) and Barnes' *Survey* of 1816. An interesting selection of engraved prints of Longwood, the Briars (H Humphries) and the Tomb (Lt. Wm. Langdon RN), is

enhanced by an unusually fine illustration of “Lower Parade James Town St Helena, with a View of the Remains of the late Emperor Napoleon passing down on the 15th October 1840” by Sgt. Jno. Patterson of the 91st Regiment, printed by “BW Thayer’s Lithography, Boston”. But the most striking view of the Island -- after Pocock’s panorama -- is a fine watercolour “taken at 5 miles distance” by WJ Huggins, showing the Bengal Fleet leaving the Island. There was also an engraving of this view by E Duncan (1832). Huggins, a former sailor in the East India Company’s service, was then marine painter to the King. Of three photographic illustrations, two show Longwood House and the Tomb probably during the war years, while an albumen print more usually depicts New Longwood House in the late 19th Century.

The Royal Library is as much a museum as a library, however, and possesses a few curiosities from Napoleon’s St Helena. The most intriguing are two round boxes, about four to five inches across and two to three inches high, intricately carved with scenes from Longwood and the Tomb, one in ivory, the other in tortoise shell, fine examples (presumably) of Chinese “export art”. But the objects that would attract keener interest from Napoleonic scholars are two relics believed to have come from Longwood House - a piece of salmon pink wallpaper with a gold acanthus leaf design, and a small draw-string bag made from the printed cotton hangings of Napoleon’s bed - and an original pencil sketch of Napoleon on his deathbed. It is the one by Lieut. George Welsh RN of HMS *Vigo*, sent to his mother with a letter examining the circumstances:

You must remember that it was taken after a lingering illness when his body was very much emaciated and after it had been opened which reduced him to a mere skeleton. His face, which appears in the pictures so much out of proportion, retained its plumpness till the last. The features had collapsed a little and the mouth had fallen open which, when he was alive, he always kept shut. So that you must take my picture as it is; a striking likeness of Napoleon the day after his death, and I challenge anybody to produce a better.

These unique items were bought for the Royal Collection at auction in 1934; a reproduction of the sketch can be seen in *The Graphic* of 9 September 1911. It may surprise readers that St Helena’s long association with Britain, as its second oldest colony, is represented in the Royal Library mainly by matter of Napoleonic interest and confined to this brief span of years. Certainly the standard works of the Island’s history and natural history, such as the classic volume of JC Melliss in 1875, do not appear to have been acquired. This apparent neglect is unlikely to continue, however.

Her Majesty the Queen enjoys taking her guests into the Royal Library at Windsor to show them items in which they would have particular interest. She is concerned, therefore, that the library should reflect contemporary interests, and in particular, that the Commonwealth today should be prominently represented. And that, of course, includes St Helena. By a happy coincidence, Dr Philip Gosse’s *St Helena 1502-1938* has been just published in the new South Atlantic Library series

and readers will be pleased to know that a copy has been accepted by the Royal Librarian, Mr Oliver Everett. "It is an admirable addition to the Library and fills a major gap in our collection", he writes.

Consideration of further St Helena material must depend upon the Library's needs. But I understand that the next volume in the series, Dr Quentin Cronk's Endemic Plants of St Helena, to be published late this year, would also be a welcome addition to the Royal Collection. St Helenians, who are noted for their strong attachment to the Crown, will be proud to know that their Island is thus gaining a new-found recognition on the shelves of Her Majesty's Library at Windsor Castle.

(NOTE: I wish to express my grateful thanks to Mr Stephen J Patterson for enabling me to view the Royal Collection of St Heleniana at Windsor, and to Mr Oliver Everett for permission to quote from the letter of Lieut. George Welsh, RN).

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