

THERE'S SOMETHING NEW ABOUT THE “LONGWOOD ENIGMA” HERE

by Trevor W. Hearl

Let not the title of Martin Levy's *Napoleon in Exile* dismay you, for it is one of those rare books about Napoleonic St Helena (there must be 450 about it already) which offers something new about the Longwood enigma and related island affairs between 1815 and 1822. In fact it has a “Homes and Gardens” theme. The author, a London-based furniture historian, has for years enjoyed the serendipity of finding, in houses and museums across the world, fine pieces of furniture claiming a Napoleonic provenance from St Helena.

They all stemmed from a unique event in the annals of interior decoration, the design and furnishing of Napoleon's Longwood houses which, to his surprise, has never been studied. What came to light proved so remarkable that he felt it should be more widely known. The Furniture History Society agreed, and this fascinating fully illustrated and documented 214-page monograph is the result.

The story opens in August 1815 when the Prince Regent, sanctioning Napoleon's exile to St Helena, ordered a complete residence to be sent out for him and his entourage, furnished “with every possible gratification and comfort”. This included “furniture, linen, glass-ware, clothes, music and musical instruments, which Buonaparte and the whole of his suite can possibly want for a period of more than three years”, clothes, for example, to match Napoleon's “favourite colour, dark green, shirts, cravats, pocket-handkerchiefs, boots, shoes and stockings”, with similar supplies for “friends and suite”.

The house was entrusted to the Woolwich architect William Atkinson, and the furnishings, down to the last toothpick, to leading interior designer George Bullock. Mr. Levy, a leading authority on Bullock, has already shown himself to be no mean historical detective by his 1991 *Apollo* article on a Longwood chair. His latest revelations of Britain's attempt to provide a home on St Helena fit, if not for a king, at least for “a fallen emperor”, will open intriguing new vistas on the Longwood scene for all devotees of “our island story”, whether followers of Napoleon or not.

The Prince Regent's order had to be met in six weeks! Pressed into service like the slaves of ancient Egypt, designers and craftsmen got plans for the house, and 500 tons of equipment, on board ship in Plymouth within a month, while materials poured into Woolwich “as fast as the articles can possibly be landed [...] 23,000 slates this week [...] 52,000 more in three weeks”. Craftsmen, too, were sent out - John Paine and Andrew Darling, who became Superintendent of Works under the East India Company and then the Crown, until his death in 1841 - and at enormous effort and cost (over £10,000 for materials alone), all reached Jamestown by mid-May 1816 ready for building to begin. The Governor, Lt. Col. Sir Hudson Lowe, rode over to Longwood to tell Napoleon that “the materials have arrived

for the new house. Did he have any desires on the subject?" Napoleon met his enquiry in silence, "with head lowered and eyes glaring", as he later told Las Cases, who heard the storm break from the next room. "You have been sent to kill me, Sir", bellowed his master. Lowe's polite replies only enraged him further. It was two years before the Governor ignored Napoleon's perversity and had work started on the New House. He was clearly not the man to cope with "the exiles!"

Longwood Old House had been hastily enlarged and an attractive cottage built next door for the Bertrand family for which Lowe had allowed furnishings, curtains and chandeliers to be used from those sent for the New House, requiring replacements when that was nearing completion. Some pieces were made to Bullock designs on the island by Chinese craftsmen under Andrew Darling's supervision, others for servants' rooms and domestic use came from service stock, and yet others had to be sought from new "Royal Warrant" suppliers in England as Bullock had died suddenly in 1818 at the age of 36 seemingly from the stress of it all. Nor were the gardens ignored; enormous labour went into them to satisfy Napoleon's supposed tastes, as well as his petulance. The finished product put him briefly into a quandary, whether to accept it or not. On balance he thought not, and so the exiles mocked the New House, in the words of Napoleon's valet Aly the Mameluke (Louis St Denis) quoted in Octave Aubry's *St Helena* (1936), for its "tinted" wall-papers, carpets of "ordinary thick green cloth", shabby hangings and furniture, "not a clock nor a vase, not a picture on the walls", too few mirrors, and "curtains of a flowered cotton [...] in fashion a century ago". (See page 453).

As Napoleonic literature generally agrees with Aly, Levy's book raises a larger issue. Will *Napoleon in Exile* tempt writers to bring a touch of reality into their analysis of the Longwood story, or will the British always be seen as keeping Napoleon in a cattle-shed? If reason prevailed there would be no need to ask the question, but the omens are not propitious. Frank MacLynn's recent (1997) biography of Napoleon, for example, offering "a clear synthesis of our existing knowledge", dismisses St Helena as "an unhealthy spot where amoebic dysentery, caught from a parasite, was an endemic problem, no less than 56 men out of 630 in the 2nd Battalion of the 66th Regiment [...] succumbed to it". (p. 640). Yet listed among MacLynn's sources is *Surgeon Henry's Trifles* in which the regiment's medical officer states unequivocally: "St Helena is certainly a healthy island, if not the most healthy of this description (i.e. tropical) in the world. During one period of twelve months we did not lose one man by disease out of 500 of the 66th [...] Notwithstanding the assertions of Napoleon's adherents [...] we had [...] no endemic disease in the Island". (p. 165-6). If this did not deter MacLynn from flying in the face of the evidence, what chance do Levy's revelations have of being accepted by Napoleonic authors?

Napoleon had the last laugh, of course, as Longwood New House must surely rank as one of the classic "white elephants" of all time. What could a tiny island ever want with a 56-room sumptuously appointed house spanning 23,000 square feet with marble fireplaces and palatial rooms 15 feet high? The Government pondered its possibilities as a school, a chapel, military accommodation, official gov-

ernment residence, and so on. Governor Dallas (1828-36) lived there in the 1830s as being more convenient and healthy for his large family than Plantation House, but it was altogether too large and grandiose to fill a role on the island. Among its many temporary tenants, ironically, was Earl Bathurst commanding the 4th Glo'sters in 1900 guarding Boer prisoners of war at Deadwood Camp, whose forebear, the 3rd Earl as Secretary for War and the Colonies, had provided the house in the first place. It was finally demolished by the Government after ill-usage during World War II. But I have strayed far beyond the scope of the work under review.

After Napoleon's funeral on 9 May 1821, Andrew Darling was told to catalogue and auction the contents of the three houses - the Old House, the New House and Bertrands' - though some went as cabin furniture for the exiles' voyage home. The sale, held in the Court House on ten days between April and August 1822, included horses, carriages, furnishing materials and even ironmongery in store, in all over 700 lots, artfully described as "belonging to the late Emperor Napoleon", but in tiny print "property of Government". Incredibly an almost complete catalogue has survived in America listing buyers and prices, providing fascinating appendices, enabling St Helena-watchers today to see what Col. Hodson, Thomas Brooke, Sir William Doveton, Capt. Broadway, and scores of others whose names are familiar to followers of island history took home with them from the sale. By diligent research the author has traced some of it to their present homes, giving readers the chance to see some of these well-travelled treasures for themselves in houses open to the public or museums - Russell-Cotes Art Gallery at Bournemouth, Musée de Malmaison near Paris, and Playfair Library at Edinburgh University - or on St Helena at Plantation House. But how much still remains on the island unrecognized? Local merchants and carpenters were among the keenest buyers, with the Solomon brothers the biggest purchasers. It must have been an unusually "democratic" occasion, with "other ranks" of the St Helena Regiment rubbing shoulders with, and perhaps bidding against, their officers (Corporal Morse spent £2.12s.0d. (£2.60) on three tables, a hammer and a hatchet!), while artisans and laborers pounced eagerly on any bargains. Nor was the fair sex left out. Lot 2, a chest of drawers, went to "Mary Scott" for £2.11.0, and a wardrobe to "Miss Young" for £17, with proletarian purchasers identified only as Daisy, Ruby, and Plum. Perhaps the most intriguing item was knocked down to "Polly Henry", "Lot 310: One 6 ft. Patent Mangle with Mahogany Lid & box bottoms &c. Complete". It must have been a state of the art domestic appliance as it cost her £22.10s.0d! But she had twelve weeks to pay and may have estimated that after wringing 450 large sheets at the regulation rate of 1/- a sheet, it would pay for itself. Was Polly Henry a well-known local "character" in her day? I noticed a memorial outside St James' Church to a Mary Henry who died on 16 November 1846 aged 74.

Such material lends itself to whimsical speculation. Homagee "the hangman" bought a bedstead for 11/- and Capt. Dalrymple a chariot and four-horse harness (the 1822 equivalent of Governor Stimson's 150 mph Jaguar), but what did Sir William Webber Doveton want with a carpenter's bench or Major Cole with two para-

sols, and the Rev. Boys with four brooms? But I have said enough to show that *Napoleon in Exile* is a book “to instruct and entertain”, as the Victorians used to say. With so much intriguing detail it seems churlish to reveal that eagleeyed readers will spot the occasional error, most notably that it is not the Briars house, but the Pavilion that still stands (p. 28), that Andrew Darling was a resident - he lived at Rose Bower - and not a visitor in 1840 (p. 33), and that Longwood had been the Lieutenant-Governor’s, not the Governor’s, country retreat in 1815 (p. 84, note 66). Such slips, however, are unlikely to mar enjoyment of a book that will appeal not only to all who relish an excursion through the highways and byways of “our island story”, but also to those fond of delving around in stately homes and gardens. Until now we have had to rely on the useful outline in Norwood Young’s two-volume *Napoleon in Exile at St Helena* published in 1915 and still a good source, but here we have the full fascinating story. And though it is rash to say that it is “unique”, the provision of Longwood New House must surely represent one of the most purposeless and prodigal exercises in the history of “ideal homes”. Perhaps it was just as well that it happened “out of sight and out of mind” 4,600 miles away on a remote tropical island. But as one of those “Tales of the Improbable” lurking behind the facade of textbook history, would it not make a wonderful TV documentary!

Levy, Martin. Napoleon in Exile: The Houses and Furniture supplied by the British Government for the Emperor and his Entourage on St Helena. Furniture History Society, 1 Mercedes Cottages, St John’s Road, Haywards Heath, Sussex RH16 4EH United Kingdom. 220 pp. 68 b/w illustrations, 246 x 186mm. ISBN 0 903335 08 5. £20/US \$38.

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