

NAPOLEON AND ST. HELENA

by
Captain W. J. Howson

*How far is Saint Helena from the
field of Waterloo?
A near way—a clear way—the ship
will take you soon,
A pleasant place for gentlemen with
little left to do.*

Kipling

St. Helena was discovered on May 21, 1502, by Joao de Nova Castella. He was Portuguese, and he kept very quiet about the island because little was known of it until it was "rediscovered" by Sir Thomas Cavendish in 1588. The Dutch annexed it in 1645, but abandoned it as a victualling station four years later in favour of the Cape of Good Hope. Britain took possession in 1661 and although the Dutch captured it in 1672, it was retaken a year later and has remained British ever since.

The island is some 10½ miles long and 6 miles wide; of volcanic origin with the central spine rising to 2,700 ft. The aspect from seaward is forbidding, high near-vertical cliffs, interspersed with steep ravines where grow sparse clumps of samphire. Away from the coastal regions, however, there is an abundance of sub-tropical vegetation where fruit and vegetables will grow in profusion. Landing is possible at several places, but is highly dangerous except at one or two points on the north-west or leeward side, the island being in the path of the perpetual south-east trade winds.

The island would have probably remained an obscure victualling station, and with the advent of the steamship and Suez Canal, of diminishing importance, had it not been the scene of the last exile and death of one of the greatest conquerors the world has ever seen.

As night fell on June 18, 1815, and an ashen-faced Napoleon, surrounded by the fleeing remnants of his army, rode south away from the shambles that had been Waterloo, he was still Emperor of France. In spite of his fatigue (part of the time he had to be held in the saddle), his mind was actively planning a continuance of the struggle. There were still two complete French armies in the field and Grouchy—whose non-appearance at Waterloo was largely responsible for the loss of the battle—was skillfully extricating his Corp of 33,000 men from the ruins of the campaign and would march on Paris. His brother Lucien and



Marshal Davout both advised Napoleon to dissolve the Legislature and proclaim himself dictator.

But when he arrived in Paris on June 21 he found he was too late. The Chambers had already resolved that any attempt at dissolution would be treason, and although Napoleon could probably rely on the support of the army, it would have meant bloodshed and revolution, so bowing to the inevitable, the next day he signed his second and last abdication. Although he proclaimed his infant son Napoleon Francis as his successor, this was ignored and the obese Louis XVIII was eventually reinstated as King of France.

On June 25, as Napoleon's continued presence in the capital was an embarrassment to the Government, waiting to ingratiate itself with the new regime; he was persuaded to go to his country house at Malmaison. Four days later the guns of the advancing Prussians could be heard and, as it was common knowledge that Blücher had threatened that if he caught him he would hang him from the nearest tree, Napoleon again left, this time for the seaport town of Rochfort, which he reached on July 2. It had at first been his intention to take refuge in America, and two frigates were ready to embark him and had he done so at once it is quite probable that he could have run the British blockade, as the Navy were unaware that he had left Paris. But he vacillated, beginning to toy with the idea of seeking asylum in England, until shortly he had no options left. The blockading fleet had been warned and avengeful Louis was sending representatives to Rochfort, so on July 13 he surrendered to Captain Maitland of H.M.S. Bellerophon.

It was ironic that Napoleon surrendered to the one instrument above all others that was responsible for his downfall—the Royal Navy. Many years later the American historian Admiral Mahan was to write, "It was those storm tossed, far distant ships on which the Grande Armée never looked, that stood between it and the dominion of the world".

On the Bellerophon he wrote his

famous letter to the Prince Regent, claiming the protection of the laws of "... the most powerful, constant and generous of my enemies". Unfortunately no one was feeling particularly generous at that time. Napoleon had kept Europe in turmoil for the past twenty years; he had already come back once from exile, when although the majority of the French populace had been apathetic, the army had flocked to his standard, a fact which influenced the four major allies into thinking that he was far too dangerous a person to have around. By a convention signed by England, Austria, Russia and Prussia in Paris on August 2, England was to be responsible for his safe keeping with the other three powers sending observers to his place of confinement. It was obviously impossible for him to remain in England living the life of an English country gentleman, as for one thing he was a symbol of revolution and civil disturbance was far from unknown in Britain at that time. He could have been made much of by the radicals in the opposition, besides which he was an embarrassment to the government in their already shaky dealings with the Bourbon King in Paris. At last it was decided to send him to the remote island of St. Helena. It was subsequently revealed that Napoleon had very nearly suffered the fate of Marshal Ney, that of being handed over to the French to be shot.

On August 4 Bellerophon left Torbay, where she had been anchored while Napoleon's fate was being decided, to rendezvous with the "Northumberland", which had hastily been fitted out to accommodate him and the small court that he was allowed to take into exile. The principals were Marquis de Las Cases and his son, Baron General Gourgaud, and the Counts Bertrand and Montholon and their wives. As Napoleon's own doctor refused to go with him, he was given the services of Dr. O'Meara, a Royal Naval surgeon. On August 9, after the transfer had taken place, under command of Admiral Cockburn, the flotilla of transports and escorting warships set sail for the 4,000-mile voyage south. They anchored in James Bay, St. Helena, on October 15, 1815. Napoleon had five years and seven months to live.

The next day Cockburn went ashore to find suitable accommodation for Napoleon and his entourage. The biggest house on the island was "Plantation", the home of the East India Company's Governor, and he understandably refused to give it up. The only other suitable house was "Longwood", the summer residence of the Lieutenant Governor, and although this was still not big enough, it was capable of being enlarged.

After dark Napoleon landed, staying for the night at the Porteous House. This was cramped, noisy and, from all reports, not very clean, being nothing more than a lodging house, catering for seamen. Some ten years previously Sir Arthur Wellesley had also spent a night there on his way