

THE REMOVAL OF NAPOLEON'S REMAINS FROM ST. HELENA TO FRANCE, OCTOBER 1840.¹

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Introduction

LIEUTENANT (later General Sir) John Henry Lefroy, R.A., was one of the young officers of the Royal Artillery chosen in 1839 to head magnetic observatories in various parts of the empire in an extensive survey of magnetic phenomena. The survey was conducted by the Royal Society with the support of the British Government. Lefroy was sent to St. Helena and while there was permitted, as one of the British officials on the island, to witness the disinterment of the remains of Napoleon Buonaparte, Emperor of the French.

Lefroy's letter to his sister, written at the time, delivers a plain unvarnished tale. It is here reprinted for the entertainment and satisfaction of those of us engaged in wishful thinking about other little corporals.

The literature about Napoleon has been fairly thoroughly sorted and indexed, but this fragment has, I believe, gone unnoticed.

Lefroy's Memoir.

The greatest event of 1840 was the arrival of the French frigate, *La Belle Poule*, on the 8th October (Captain Hernoux), bringing the Prince de Joinville, youngest son of Louis Phillippe,² Marshal Bertrand,³ General Gourgaud⁴ (two of the companions in exile of

¹Appreciation is expressed to Colonel Charles MacInnes of Toronto, a grand nephew of Lady Lefroy, for permission to reproduce part of General Sir John Henry Lefroy's *Autobiography*, which was "printed for private circulation only", in 1895.

This excerpt is from pages 43-47.

²Francis, Prince de Joinville, third son and fourth child of Louis Phillippe, King of France, 1830-48.

³General Henri Gratien Bertrand, 1773-1844. Bertrand had been commander in Spain and Italy, 1795-97. Later he was defeated by Blücher at Wartenburg in a brilliant minor action that culminated in the battle of Leipzig, 1813. He accompanied Napoleon to Elba and shared his exile on St. Helena. After Napoleon's death in 1821 he returned to Paris and was pardoned by Louis XVIII.

⁴Baron Gaspard Gourgaud, 1783-1852, was one of the generals who accompanied Napoleon on his campaigns after 1805. He saved Napoleon's life at

Napoleon), M——,⁵ his valet, and the Count Chabot, afterwards well known as Count Jarnac,⁶ who was the Commissioner (French) appointed to superintend the solemn removal of the remains of Napoleon to France. On our side, Captain Alexander, R.E.,⁷ was appointed Commissioner. The Governor,⁸ who was an old Peninsula soldier, hated the whole affair, shut himself up, and left the management and reception to Colonel Hamelin Trelawney, R.A.⁹

The Prince was a fine young man, about six feet three inches in height, but slightly built. He declined society, and went about in his loose white trousers, old coat, and tarpaulin hat, much as he pleased. About thirty years later I was presented to him at Shoeburyness, and, on reminding him that it was not the first time, I had found him very gracious. He and I alone remain of those who witnessed this disinterment.¹⁰

It was Louis Phillippe's policy to put as much ceremony as possible into the solemn restoration of Napoleon's remains.¹¹

Brienne in 1814 and shared his exile on St. Helena. He assisted in the publication of Napoleon's memoirs, dictated in exile. See his *Sainte-Hélène; journal inédit de 1815 à 1818 avec préface et notes de Vicomte de Grouchy et A. Guillois*. Paris, 1899.

⁵Louis Marchand. At Plymouth, before sailing into exile, Napoleon was allowed to take twelve servants. Louis Marchand, then twenty-four years old, was picked for the post of first valet. His mother was "the good Chanchan", nurse to the King of Rome. He was both servant and friend to Napoleon.

⁶Philippe-Ferdinand-Auguste de Rohan Chabot, Comte de Jarnac, 1815-1875, was a French diplomat. In 1874 he was named ambassador for France in London.

⁷That Captain Alexander, R.E., was in charge of proceedings for the English at this time appears to be all that is known about him.

⁸Major General Middlemore, Governor of St. Helena, 1836-42. For his part in the Peninsular war, particularly in the action at Talavera in Portugal, 1809, Wellington recommended him for promotion: "He is an excellent officer, and if his conduct then did not, I may say, demand promotion, his good conduct and attention to his duty would warrant it."

⁹Colonel Hamelin Trelawney, R.A., succeeded Middlemore as Governor of St. Helena in 1842. He died in 1846.

¹⁰Lefroy. "George Bennett, now (1887) resident at Cape Town, reminds me that he also was present on this occasion." Bennett was an old school-fellow of Lefroy's, and in 1840 held a commissariat-clerkship on St. Helena. See Lefroy's *Autobiography*, p. 41, and p. 43.

¹¹Louis Phillippe was the umbrella man of the Orleans monarchy, and the words of Flambeau in Rostand's "*L'Aiglon*" aptly describe his position: "*le roi,*

Many days were wasted over negotiations—discussions as to what honours should be paid, how many guns should be fired, and the like. Our Government had directed the Governor not to recognize him as an emperor if he could help it! The Governor was not going to be bothered with a diplomatic question, and the French speedily found out that they had only to put on pressure to carry that point, which determined the land salute as 103 guns. But the sturdy captain of H.M.S. *Dolphin*, Littlehales, declared that he was “General Bonaparte” in his instructions, and as a general only would he acknowledge him; he should only fire 21 guns. Here was a delightful field for diplomats, but Count Chabot’s gammon was all in vain. Littlehales stuck to his point, and the Prince refused to return his visit or go on board his ship.

Note by Lady Lefroy

Since these pages were written, a long-lost letter of Lieutenant Lefroy to one of his sisters, giving an account of the opening of Napoleon’s tomb, was found, and it is inserted instead of the recollections which were written in 1887. The accuracy of the latter is remarkable, but the letter written at the time is fuller, and will probably be more interesting to the reader.

Letter from J. H. Lefroy to his Sister

Longwood,¹² St. Helena,
October 17th, 1840.

You will not give sixpence for an account of the removal of Boney’s remains that is not written at the time, so I mean to give you a plain matter-of-fact description, to repress my Pegasus, and not to be either poetical or sentimental.

I had the good fortune, by special favour, to witness the whole. The ceremony, however, was so far private, that none were allowed

le roi même à cette heure (1830) n'existe qu' à la condition d'être bonapartiste”. They were even more true in 1840, when the crescendo lip-service at the Napoleonic altar culminated in the removal of the bones of Buonaparte to *les Invalides* in Paris, in preparation, perhaps for a later ceremony at this shrine (1940) at the behest of the evil spirit that whispered, “*In nomine Napoleoni omne genu flectatur.*”

¹²During his exile on St. Helena Napoleon was lodged at Longwood, where he died in May 1821. Longwood was Lefroy’s residence while he was director of the magnetic observatory there, 1840-42.

to be present but those officially appointed. It was agreed that the exhumation should commence at midnight on the 5th; twenty-five years to a day since he landed on the island. The parties present were the Count Chabot (Chief Commissioner), Marshal Bertrand, General Gourgaud, Las Cases,¹³ Marchand, Archambeau,¹⁴ and another old attendant of the Emperor's, two or three French captains, L'Abbé Coqueran,¹⁵ and four or five of the English colonial authorities, the judge, etc.

It is in a wild spot that he lay, and the midnight assembly formed as picturesque a scene as I have ever witnessed. The sentries posted on the hills, the black labourers, the soldiers of the guard and working party, mixed up with the muffled figures of the authorities attending, in the imperfect light of the lanterns by which they worked, would have formed a scene for Rembrandt.

I arrived after twelve, when the work was commenced. The iron railing was down on three sides of the tomb, the ground strewn with tools and tackling, and they were then loosening the slabs of freestone that sealed the vault. One by one, by main force, with levers and rollers, they were heaved off, and we saw the walled space, filled in with clay and stones, at the bottom of which he lay. The night was wet and dark; it helped the picturesque, but it added nothing to the comfort or the facility of the work; but the workmen plied their task so well that in three hours and a half, seven feet of tamping were removed, and the solid masonry was reached.

The first layer of masonry, besides being set in most tenacious cement, and of the hardest stone, was clamped and leaded together, as if those who had laid him there had meant to defy disturbance. Nearly five hours were consumed in removing the thickness of one foot of the covering. The lower part, to render it perfectly watertight, was all Roman cement, as hard as stone. However, early

¹³Emmanuel-Auguste-Dieudonne-Marius-Joseph, Marquis de Las Cases, born in 1766 in the Château Las Cases in Languedoc, chose to accompany Napoleon to St. Helena, perhaps with the purpose of becoming the Homer of a new Iliad. His "Diary aboard the Belle Poule" is another record of this exhumation Odyssey.

¹⁴Two brothers Archambeau, whose rank was that of footmen, later that of coachmen, and who were known to be very excellent drivers, went with Napoleon to St. Helena in 1815.

¹⁵Abbé Coquereau's *Relation* is another account of this event.

in the morning they found out; much to everybody's delight, that they had got down to the actual slab of the sarcophagus, and had not much more to do.

Interesting as the occasion was, one does not stand out in the wet and cold, from midnight to sunrise, without some little impatience. Bertrand disappeared early, and many more from time to time were longer getting their coffee than was exactly necessary. Some sort of accommodation of sofas and chairs had been provided in the house hard by. I got a doze for half an hour in the nest of the officer on guard. It was necessary to let in the bolts and rings into the upper stone of the vault; this took some time, but by twenty minutes to ten everything was ready. Imagine our eager looks as one heave at the tackling lifted the massive slab, and lo! before us were the relics of the "mighty dead," in their still repose.

As an official formality, it was requisite to measure the vault, the coffin, etc., to identify them. This sort of thing had been done by Count Chabot at every step. The Abbé then took his post at the head of the grave, and we listened, bareheaded, to the "De Profundis," and other prayers which he pronounced. His own splendid robes (the crucifix and holy-water vessel were new to me), and the Latin service, with the low response of two pale choristers who stood on either side, made a very impressive part of the ceremonial. This service was short, but he then went aside and pronounced a long one all to himself.

The doctor had tools for making a hole through the coffins (tin, mahogany, lead), to inject creosote, but they decided on opening it entirely. There had been many strange rumours circulated, such as that the body had been changed. They wished to set all these to rest. However, one of the officials entered a protest against the opening, and would not be present, and it is a question whether there was proper authority for so doing. No one was allowed to be present but the Commissioners and others ordered to attend. The body was found perfectly preserved, as if buried yesterday—the features distinguishable, the dress unimpaired. Some were affected even to tears at seeing so wonderfully revived, as it were from the dust, the master they had loved and served. I heard Marchand say that he was almost more like himself than when interred. The slight swelling had restored some-

thing of roundness to the features; the beautiful hand, for which he was remarkable, was calmly extended beside him; the vase, the coins, the decorations, all in their former place. The body was, I believe, not embalmed, so that this is due to the manner in which everything had been hermetically sealed; corruption and the worm had spared him who had given them so many a banquet. It seems as if half the horrors of death were gone, when even to the body it may thus become a long unbroken sleep.

You may have read the account of the ebony coffin they had brought with them; his own coffins were all deposited inside it, and the whole again in another sort of sarcophagous of oak, making an immense weight (twenty-three cwts.) for the hearse which was to take it to the ship.

The procession did not start from the tomb before four in the afternoon. It was a small one, for there are few troops here, and the weather was vile—a wet cloud over the whole time.

The island militia regiment marched first, then the regulars, then the priest with his assistants bearing the crucifix preceding the hearse. It is almost worth while going to Paris to see the splendid pall. I have never seen anything so rich and beautiful. It is of immense size, I daresay fourteen by ten feet, of purple velvet richly embroidered (with golden bees), divided into four by a very broad cross of silver lace edged with gold. The embroidery of the border alone cost £1,000, beautiful scroll work, with magnificent wreaths at the angles, and outside of all a broad border of ermine.

The angles were held by Bertrand, Gourgaud, and Marchand. The Governor and an immense number of officers, French and English, followed. I saw the procession pass me twice, but preferred not joining it, which I was not obliged to do, and I did not follow it to Jamestown to see the embarkation. I was told, however, that this was a pretty sight. I fancied that as it was late and wet it might be deferred until next day, and I was tired enough with my night's watching to be glad to get home.

Minute guns were fired all the way, and a royal salute from the battery, but not from the English man-of-war. However, with this latter exception, everything was done as if he were emperor, a thing we never acknowledged before, which makes the *amende* to France and directly inculcates all preceding governments. I

would have stuck to the "General Bonaparte" as long as there was a "shot in the locker."

The Prince de Joinville met the procession at the wharf, and himself steered the boat that took off the body. He did not go about much, partly because the Governor was not able to entertain him, and there was nobody else to do so. He came one day to Longwood with a number more, including Bertrand. It was rather interesting to see Bertrand again on the spot with which his name is so much connected. I asked, might I have the honour of showing H.R.H. round the house? "Thank you, sare, I never drink wine," was his reply, in a very mild voice. He is extremely tall and thin, of a serious but very intelligent countenance, clever, gentlemanly, and very agreeable when he pleases; draws well, especially caricatures, plays the piano, speaks and reads English and Spanish, and is, in fact, a very superior person. He had not time to visit the observatory, and stayed but a few minutes.

Marchand and Bertrand came again, but I was out. However, I met them all two or three times, and saw a good deal of them, the Prince excepted. Bertrand and Las Cases, who paid me a long visit, asked me for a selection of island minerals, so I made one for each. All the French were eager to get them. One of my neighbours came to beg some one day. "Bless me, sir, they is a-craving of them everywhere." I gave away dozens. Nothing amused me, so much as their anxiety to obtain relics of any sort or kind. Handfuls of earth, water from Napoleon's spring, leaves, flowers, bulbs—nothing came amiss to them. One merchant employed a stone-mason to go over the hills and bring some of all he could lay his hands on.

I don't know whether I have ever mentioned that I have formed a collection of more than 200 specimens (of minerals) belonging to the island, which is very profitable to me. I make exchanges. I got from the French doctor some from the plains of Troy, and I shall have no doubt by-and-by some of real value and interest.

I must tell you one amusing thing. An English merchant vessel came around the point while the French were firing salutes all at once. She thought they were attacking the island, put about, crowded all sail, and fled for her life.

If I remember right, *La Belle Poule* put to sea the same evening,

the body lying in a kind of *chambre ardente* on the main deck. At that moment the relations of England and France were strained to the utmost degree. The audacious and aggressive policy of Lord Palmerston, coupled with the indolence and weakness of Lord Melbourne, had brought matters to such a pass, chiefly over the Syrian question, that a declaration of war was daily expected, and the moment the ship got beyond the three-mile radius she cleared for action. Bulkheads were knocked down, cabin furniture of a costly kind thrown into the sea.

Littlehales, in H.M.S. *Dolphin*, followed her at a safe distance, determined if he got a chance to pitch a shell or two into "old Boney's coffin." Being much the best sailor, he might have done it with impunity.

The French behaved handsomely.

[From here on the narrative tails off into rambling reminiscences, irrelevant to our present purpose.]—A.D.T.