

# Napoleon and His Teeth

## Xavier Riaud

What do we know about Napoleon's mouth and teeth<sup>1</sup>?

He was born with teeth<sup>2</sup>. Witnesses maintained that Bonaparte had met a lady from Toulon who had fallen in love with him "simply because of his teeth."<sup>3</sup> Constant, Bonaparte's servant mentioned his master's nice teeth when he returned from Egypt. In 1798, Bonaparte<sup>4</sup>, who was only a General at that time, bought his first dental kit. Does Alexandre Dumas<sup>5</sup> not think the same when speaking of Bonaparte in the days following Brumaire 18th: "He had the same pretension for his teeth; indeed, his teeth were nice, but they were not as splendid as his hands."

Napoleon's personal hygiene was highly methodical and meticulous. Brushing his teeth was a task that he particularly valued.

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<sup>1</sup> Riaud Xavier, *Les dentistes détectives de l'histoire*, [The dental detectives of history] L'Harmattan (éd.), Collection Médecine à travers les siècles [Medicine throughout the centuries Collection], Paris, 2006, 53-57.

<sup>2</sup> Lamendin Henri, *Petites histoires de l'art dentaire d'hier et d'aujourd'hui (Anecdodontes)*, L'Harmattan (éd.), Collection Ethique médicale, Paris, 2006, 11-12.

<sup>3</sup> Lamendin Henri, *Napoléon, des dentistes et l'Histoire...*, [Napoleon, dentists and History] in *Le Chirurgien-Dentiste de France*, 6-13/01/2000 ; 966/967 :66-71.

<sup>4</sup> See Tallandier M.A., *Discours prononcé aux funérailles de Biennais* [Speech delivered at Biennais' funeral], Paris 1843.

<sup>5</sup> Dumas Alexandre, *Les compagnons de Jéhu* [Jehu's companions], Phoebus (éd.), Paris, 2006, 426.



*Dubois-Foucou*

In this respect, the Emperor disposed of a dental kit. Therefore, in Ulm and Austerlitz, Napoleon had a campaign casket, made up of 103 individual items, that he was reported to have used every morning. In 1810, the Emperor had a kit essentially made up of rugines to remove the tartar from his teeth: a casket which Grangeret, the famous cutler, repaired the same year. <sup>6</sup> When he died, Napoleon's last will and testament stipulated: "I bequeath to my son my golden dental kit which is at the dentist's". Moreover, from 1806 to 1813, Napoleon had Jean-Joseph Dubois-Foucou (1747-1830) at his service to take care of his teeth.<sup>7</sup>

According to F. Masson, one of Napoleon's greatest historiographers, the care that the latter gave to his teeth was such that "all his teeth were beautiful, strong, and well-

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<sup>6</sup> See Rousseau Claude, « Histoire de l'aménagement du cabinet dentaire - L'instrumentation: les « outils à dents » des nécessaires de Biennais. L'énigme du nécessaire dentaire de l'empereur de la Fondation Napoléon », in *Actes de la SFHAD*, Saint Malo, 1998, <http://www.bium.univ-paris5.fr>, 1-7.

<sup>7</sup> Société Odontologique de Paris, *Les daviers de Napoléon* [Napoleon's forceps], <http://www.sop.asso.fr>, 2006, 4.

arranged".<sup>8</sup> He added: "He would carefully pick his teeth with a toothpick made of boxwood, then he would brush them for a long time with a brush soaked in opiate, floss with thin coral, and rinse his mouth with a mixture of brandy and fresh water. Finally he would clean his tongue with a silver scraper of silver gilt or tortoiseshell." In 1806, Gervais-Chardin, "perfumer of Their Imperial and Royal Majesties", delivered 52 boxes of opiate toothpaste worth 306 francs and 15 dozen toothpicks made of boxwood and ivory. On October 25<sup>th</sup>, 1808, he delivered 24 dozen of these toothpicks, 6 boxes of thin dental coral worth 36 francs, and 28 boxes of superior quality opiate valued at 168 francs. On March 20, 1815, Tessier, the perfumer, provided him with 3 boxes of opiate made of ebony, which was worth 18 francs, and 28 pots of rose-flavored opiate worth 56 francs.

It seemed that during his reign the monarch never had to ask Dubois-Foucou for his service, apart from personal cleanings.

In 1815, while he was embarking for the island of Saint Helena, a British officer named Maitland, who was the commander of the HMS Bellerophon, remarked: "His eyes are light grey, his teeth are in good

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<sup>8</sup> See Lamendin Henri, 6-13/01/2000, 66-71. Once ablution was completed, he carefully cleaned his teeth, brushing them for a long time with a toothbrush soaked in a special opiate, then he rinsed his mouth with a mixture of brandy and fresh water." (See Cabanès A., *Dans l'intimité de l'Empereur* [In the intimacy of the Emperor], Albin Michel (éd.), Paris, 1921, 57)

condition."<sup>9</sup> Another officer, present at that very moment, said: "pale blue eyes, and unpleasant teeth". As for Lady Malcolm, she described Napoleon with "pale or grey eyes, white teeth in good condition and equal, but small". As for Bunbury, he maintained: "he has grey eyes, his teeth are unpleasant and dirty". Lord Rosebery declared that: "the Emperor's teeth are bad and dirty, and he barely shows them." Lastly, Augustin Cabanès (1928) related that: "Napoleon ate liquorice which eventually blackened his teeth." He added that "this assertion would need to be confirmed."

During his exile, the Emperor suffered from dental abscesses, which appeared to come from his right upper wisdom tooth, which was extremely loose.<sup>10</sup> In the memorial of Saint Helena, Las Cases dated the first episode of dental inflammation on October 26<sup>th</sup> 1816. "I found him with his face wrapped in a handkerchief: 'What is the most terrible ache? What is the sharpest pain?' he asked.<sup>11</sup> I answered that it was always the one of the moment that was the worst. 'Well, then it must be the toothache!'

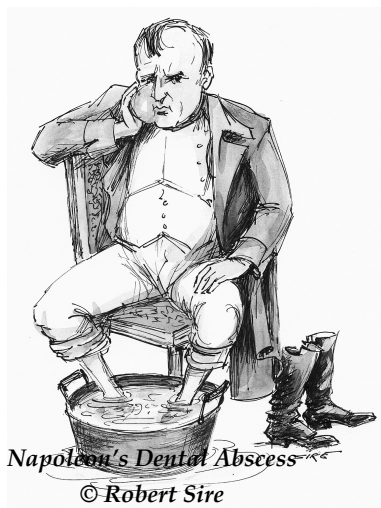
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<sup>9</sup> See Lamendin Henri, *Anecdodotes*, 49-50.

<sup>10</sup> Balcombe Betsy, *Napoléon à Sainte-Hélène* [Napoleon in Saint-Helena], Plon (éd.), Paris, 1898, 22-23.

<sup>11</sup> De Las Cases Emmanuel, *Mémorial de Sainte-Hélène, Le Grand Livre du Mois* [Memorial of Saint-Helena, Number One Book of the Month] (éd.), Tome IV, Paris, 1999, 64-119 (republishing of the first version of 1822). Las Cases gave meticulous details on Napoleon's toilette: After shaving his beard, and cleaning his face, last of all "comes the story of his teeth". Las Cases was banned from Saint Helena in December 1816. He also alluded to "scorbutic symptoms" from which Napoleon suffered during his exile in Saint Helena.

Napoleon replied. Indeed, he had a fierce inflammation; his right cheek was swollen and extremely red. I started to alternately warm a flannel and a cloth that he would apply in turns on his sore cheek, and he said that made him feel better." On Sunday 27<sup>th</sup>, "his headaches and toothaches were extremely intense. The inflammation had not diminished at all..." On the 30<sup>th</sup>, "today, the Emperor was not feeling better. That night, the doctor came; he said that he had brought harmless gargles, but he had great



difficulty using them. The Emperor's lips, throat and mouth were covered with spots. He said he could barely swallow or speak". On Thursday 31<sup>st</sup>, "he was suffering a lot, especially from the spots that were covering his lips." On November 2<sup>nd</sup> 1816, "the inflammation was even more decisive."

On Tuesday 5<sup>th</sup>, "his mouth was on the road to recovery but his teeth remained extremely sensitive." On Saturday 9<sup>th</sup>, "when having his dinner, the Emperor was feeling much better, was very happy and

even lively; he was congratulating himself on having gotten over his last illness without taking medicine or paying tribute to a doctor."

At that time, Baron Sturmer, sent from Austria to Saint Helena, wrote to Metternich: "He is in good health, and threatens to live for a long time." Further, he added: "He has a gumboil".

At the time, Barry O'Meara<sup>12</sup>, his Irish doctor, reported that Napoleon had symptoms of scurvy. In 1817, either the Emperor had swollen legs or the scurvy was spreading over his gums. In July, he suffered once again from an inflammation of the face due to his bad teeth. The doctor



*O'Meara*

wanted to extract one of them that was very loose, but Napoleon refused the operation. In November, O'Meara noted: "He

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<sup>12</sup> Lamendin Henri, 6-13/01/2000, 66-71. One of Napoleon's teeth, extracted by O'Meara, is exhibited at Madame Tussaud's Museum in London, and is reportedly a third upper molar. Recently, one of his teeth was sold for the modest price of 19,336 euros.

complained about a pain in the right cheek which came from his bad tooth. His gums were spongy and were bleeding from the slightest touch of his hand. Few days later, he wrote: "the Emperor's gums are extremely sore.

They are spongy." then "the right part of his jaws is significantly swollen." Eventually, Napoleon conceded to have the tooth extracted. The doctor executed the extraction after having made the Emperor sit on the ground. Major Gorrequer<sup>13</sup>, Sir Hudson Lowe's<sup>14</sup> secretary in Saint Helena, remarked: "He (General Bonaparte) recently lost a tooth (wisdom tooth). It was his very first surgical operation, and under such circumstances his behaviour was far from brave. In order to be able to extract the bad tooth, Doctor O'Meara was forced to have the Emperor held down on the ground. From then on, he complained a lot and kept to his bedroom where he demanded that a fire be lit despite the hot season. There, he remained roasting for hours..." It was the very first tooth to be extracted from Napoleon's mouth. Until then, he had never really suffered from his teeth. According to the Frenchman, "this tooth was barely rotten and could have been filled" (this is taken from Baron Sturmer's account). On

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<sup>13</sup> See Société Odontologique de Paris, « Les daviers de Napoléon » [Napoleon's forceps], in <http://www.sop.asso.fr>, 2006, 4.

<sup>14</sup> See Rousseau Claude, « Histoire de l'aménagement du cabinet dentaire - L'instrumentation : les « outils à dents » des nécessaires de Biennais. L'énigme du nécessaire dentaire de l'empereur de la Fondation Napoléon », in *Actes de la SFHAD*, Saint Malo, 1998, 1-7.

the occasion of this operation, Betsy Balcombe<sup>15</sup> apparently exclaimed: "I beg you pardon! You are complaining about the pain caused by an operation of such little importance! You, who assisted at countless battles, and escaped a shower of bullets, you who got injured so many times! I am ashamed of you. But anyway, give me that tooth!" Montholon<sup>16</sup> dated this operation on November 16<sup>th</sup>, 1817. To combat scurvy, O'Meara used antiscorbutic plants (fumitory, cochlearia, etc.) and opiate toothpaste containing the same plants triturated with canned roses. In a report dated July 9<sup>th</sup>, 1818, O'Meara<sup>17</sup> related that "the gums (of the Emperor) appeared spongy and scorbutic. Three molars were affected. Given the circumstances, I considered that they must have been caused by inflammatory affections of the muscles and membranes of the jaw. Besides, I thought that catarrh had been caused by those affections. I extracted them at appropriate intervals. To destroy the scorbutic aspect that the gums had, I recommended the use of vegetables and acids. I was successful. It disappeared, then reappeared again and was cleared up by the same means. The tongue was almost

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<sup>15</sup> See Société Odontologique de Paris, « Les daviers de Napoléon » [Napoleon's forceps], in <http://www.sop.asso.fr>, 2006, 4.

<sup>16</sup> Bastien Jacques & Jeandel Roland, *Napoléon à Sainte Hélène – Etude critique de ses pathologies et des causes de son décès* [Napoleon in Saint-Helena- A critical study of his pathologies and the causes of his death], Le Publieur (éd.), 2005, 26-29, 48, 53.

<sup>17</sup> Lamendin Henri, 6-13/01/2000, 66-71. Later on, O'Meara commercialised «toothpaste from O'Meara, Napoleon's former doctor in Saint Helena. »

constantly white." According to Marshal Bertrand, Napoleon suffered from other dental problems after January 1818, but remained vague on the dates.

In 1821, during the night of 4-5<sup>th</sup> May, Napoleon died around 4 o'clock.

After studying his case, Dr Sven Forshufvud (?-1985), a Swedish dentist and biologist, noticed after reading the accounts of several testimonies, that the Emperor was infected with 28 of the 31 symptoms found in chronic arsenic poisoning.<sup>18</sup>

Derobert and Hadengue gave more details about Napoleon's oral symptoms during his exile: "Within chronic arsenical intoxication, the ulcerous stomatitis of variable levels always takes the aspect of dental pyorrhoea."<sup>19</sup>

O'Meara's prescription based on mercury and calomel certainly did not help the recovery of Napoleon.

According to an 1823 written account of Dr Walter Henry, doctor in the 66<sup>th</sup> British infantry regiment, "the skull was not

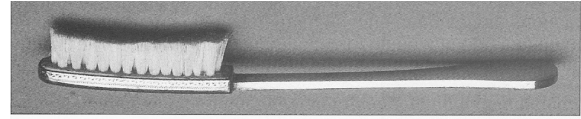
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<sup>18</sup> Riaud Xavier, *Les dentistes détectives de l'histoire*, [The Dental Detectives of History] L'Harmattan (éd.), Collection Médecine à travers les siècles [Medicine throughout the centuries Collection], Paris, 2007, 69.

<sup>19</sup> Derobert L. & Hadengue A., *Intoxications et maladies professionnelles*, Flammarion (éd.), Paris, 1984. A stomatitis is the inflammation of mucous tissues in the mouth, and pyorrhoea is an infectious destruction of the tissues. It was a Swedish dentist and biologist, Dr Sven Forshufvud (?-1985), who hypothesised that

found in chronic arsenic poisoning (Riaud Xavier, *Les dentistes, détectives*, 68-72).

opened"<sup>20</sup> during Napoleon's autopsy which took place on May 6<sup>th</sup>, 1821, at 2:30 pm.



*General Bonaparte's Toothbrush*

In 1821, during his burial, the testimonies of Bertrand, Montholon, Marchand, Ali, Antommarchi<sup>21</sup>, Darroch and of English officers, reported that his face and head were entirely shaved, that his mouth was closed, and that his features were greatly altered making his face disfigured and unrecognizable.

On October 15, 1840, during the exhumation in Saint Helena, the body found in the coffin was more or less intact. How could the deterioration process have stopped nearly 20 years later?

The Surgeon-Major Guillard, the only surgeon present during the exhumation on the island, made the first observations. His description is extremely eloquent: "The head, slightly raised, was found covered with yellowish, hard and very adherent teguments. Such was the outline of the

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<sup>20</sup> Bastien Jacques & Jeandel Roland, *Napoléon à Sainte Hélène*, 101, 106, 112 et 120.

<sup>21</sup> It is worth noting that Doctor Antommarchi was reported to have made a facial print of Napoleon allowing for the creation of a funeral mask. But it also seems that the origin of the mask is questionable from a historical point of view, because it shows odd similarities with other members of Bonaparte's family (See Roy-Henry Bruno, « Napoléon repose-t-il aux Invalides? », in *Historia*, 2000; 638: 42-48).

orbits whose upper extremities were covered with brows. Under the eyelids, the eyeballs were still apparent and had lost little of their volume and their shape (...). The cheeks were puffy (...); the lips which had thinned were spread open and three extremely white incisors could be seen under the lower lip, which was slightly lifted on the left (...)"<sup>22</sup>

The doctor also claimed that the dead man's face had a beard and that the head had hair. The features were not altered and were young and noble.<sup>23</sup>

In his 1825 account, Dr Antommarchi claimed that:

"His mouth was still smiling and the felt part of it was slightly tensed by the sardonic smile." Antommarchi confirmed that the body was not embalmed. The doctor is reported to have practiced phrenology by examining and measuring the defunct's skull.

As for Jean-Joseph Dubois-Foucou<sup>24</sup> (1747-1830), he was successively a dental surgeon under Louis XVI (1754-1793), Napoleon 1st (1769-1821), Louis XVIII (1755-1824) and Charles X (1757-1836). As a matter of fact,

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<sup>22</sup> See Roy-Henry Bruno, « Napoléon repose-t-il aux Invalides? », in *Historia*, 2000; 638: 42-48.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 638: 42-48.

<sup>24</sup> Riaud Xavier, « Une histoire dans l'Histoire: Les dents de Napoléon » [A History within History: Napoleon's teeth], in *The International Napoleonic Society*, 2006, <http://www.napoleonicsociety.com>, 1-7.

his name was simply Dubois, but he added to it the name of Foucou, taken from one of his relatives, who was an artist. In 1775, he upheld his thesis entitled: "De dentis vitiose positorum curatione" and became a member of the Royal Academy of Surgery. He was also the instigator and designer of the caskets of the dentals sets of Napoleon<sup>25</sup> and Louis XVIII. By 1826 he was no longer working, however he kept his title.

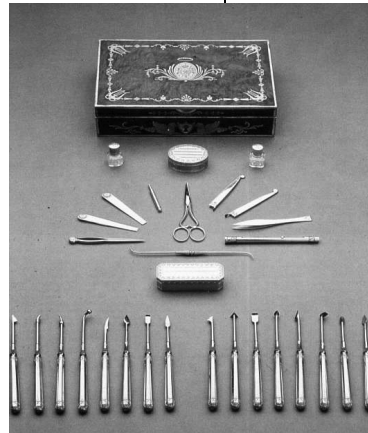
It was reported that a toothbrush was always found in the Emperor's campaign caskets<sup>26</sup>, as seen in the case of the one kept in the Carnavalet Museum in Paris. This kit was made by Biennais who completed it in 1805. This set was reported to be "acquired by the Rotshschild family from a soldier who stole it from the train luggage of Napoleon during battle of Waterloo in 1815" (See Rousseau Claude, 1998).

The handle is bright red, the hair was made of wild boar hair and the screwed head was interchangeable. The imperial "N" was carved upon it. This dental set was given to Napoleon by General Bertrand who had to transmit it to the King of Rome for his 16<sup>th</sup> birthday. Unable to do so, he bequeathed the set to the city of Paris.

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<sup>25</sup> See Rousseau Claude, « Histoire de l'aménagement opératoire du cabinet dentaire - L'énigme posée par l'attribution à Louis XVIII ou à Charles X d'un « nécessaire à dents » de Pierre-François Grangeret », in *Actes de la SFHAD*, <http://bium.univ-paris5.fr>, 1-7.

<sup>26</sup> Bogopolsky Sacha, *La brosse à dents*, 20.



*Napoleon's Dental Kit*