

# Napoleon's Death and the Poisoning Theory

By Emilio Ocampo, FINS

In recent years there has been a great debate among scholars about the cause of Napoleon's death. The debate can be narrowed down to three competing theories. The first maintains that Napoleon died of hereditary stomach cancer, as asserted by the British government at the time, or of some other natural cause. The second theory asserts that Napoleon's death was hastened by the unhealthy climate prevailing at St. Helena and by poor medical treatment and specifically rules out any foul play. According to the third and most controversial theory Napoleon was deliberately poisoned. Although this last theory has led to some very heated arguments among historians it was not so controversial at the time of Napoleon's death. Some hitherto unpublished letters and diaries from his supporters in England show they thought so as well.

The origin of the poisoning theory can be traced back to Napoleon himself. Napoleon's suspicions in this regard were first recorded by his personal doctor at St. Helena, the Irish surgeon Barry O'Meara in May 1816, shortly after the arrival of Sir Hudson Lowe to the island. Lowe had brought along two of his closest confidants to assist him in his role as Napoleon's guardian: Dr. Baxter, a Scottish doctor who had served under his orders in Capri and Colonel Sir Thomas Reade, who would become his right hand man at St. Helena. Lowe immediately tried to force Dr. Baxter on his prisoner. Napoleon obviously refused. "What a *coglione* to think that a man in my situation would take a surgeon selected and sent to him by his jailer?" he said to O'Meara, in a comment that the doctor edited out of his best-selling *A Voice from St. Helena*. "Being sent by him, I could have no sure idea that he wasn't come for the purpose of poisoning me."<sup>1</sup> Napoleon even confronted Lowe

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<sup>1</sup> May 6, 1816, in Barry O'Meara, "Talks with Napoleon", *The Century Magazine*, New York, Vol. 59, (November 1899-April 1900), p.611.

with his accusation: "If Lord Castlereagh<sup>2</sup> has given you orders to poison us and kill us please do it as soon as possible." Following this episode Napoleon told his companions in exile that he was sure he would be assassinated at St. Helena.<sup>3</sup>

Napoleon's suspicions resurfaced in late 1816 when he started suffering from recurrent colics. The colics were so strong enough that Dr. O'Meara was asked to check whether the wine served at Longwood contained any lead.<sup>4</sup> It was no longer Dr. Baxter but Colonel Reade who by this time worried Napoleon. One day, after noticing a strange taste in the wine, he told one of his companions: "This rogue Reade is quite capable of trying to poison me. He has the key to the wine cellar and he can change the corks." General Gourgaud thought Napoleon would be well advised "not to be the only one drinking wine at Longwood" but recorded in his memoirs that his master felt safe "because Balcombe<sup>5</sup> is responsible for our food supplies. And O'Meara and Poppleton<sup>6</sup> are decent fellows. They are above that sort of thing."<sup>7</sup> However Napoleon entertained no illusions about the fate that awaited him. "A man must be worse than a blockhead who does not perceive that I was sent here to be killed."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Stewart, Viscount Castlereagh, (1769-1822) was England's Foreign Secretary.

<sup>3</sup> Conversation on May 16, 1816, in Henri Bertrand, *Cahiers de Sainte-Helene*, Editions Albin-Michel (Paris, 1959), I, 39.

<sup>4</sup> Conversation on September 9, 1816, in Barry O'Meara, *Napoleon in Exile or A Voice from St. Helena* (London, 1822), I, 116, 120.

<sup>5</sup> William Balcombe, (1779-1829), was purveyor of Longwood until March 1818. He was very friendly to Napoleon.

<sup>6</sup> T.W. Poppleton, an officer of the British army stationed permanently at Longwood. He also left St. Helena in 1818.

<sup>7</sup> June 29, 1817, Gaspar Gourgaud, *The St. Helena Journal of General Baron Gourgaud* (London, 1932) 220.

<sup>8</sup> Conversation on August, 1817, in O'Meara, II, 142.

As it turns out, Balcombe, Poppleton and O'Meara would all leave St. Helena months after these episodes. And although Napoleon's suspicions about being poisoned subsided, he was sure that the objective of the British government was to get rid of him. In September 1817, he told O'Meara: "The pistol, the sword, poison, or moral assassinating [sic], as [Castlereagh] and [Bathurst]<sup>9</sup> are doing to me. It is the same in the end, excepting that the latter is the most cruel... The intentions of [Bathurst] are to impose restrictions of such a nature, that I, without degrading my character and rendering myself an object of contempt in the eyes of the world, must imprison myself; thereby in the course of time to bring on disease, which in a frame impaired by confinement and the blood being decomposed must prove mortal, and that I may thus expire in protracted agonies, which may have the appearance of a natural death. That is the plan, and is a manner of assassinating just as certain, but more cruel and criminal than the sword or the pistol."<sup>10</sup>

In mid 1818, after O'Meara was forced out of St. Helena, Napoleon said: "The crime will be committed much faster. I have lived too long for them."<sup>11</sup> O'Meara certainly believed so as on his return to England he told several people that his own removal from Longwood "was the precursor of Bonaparte's death either by poison or from want of proper medical advice." The Irish doctor pointed his finger directly at Lowe and said: "If I had attended to all that the Governor wished, Bonaparte would not have been alive at this moment and I should now be in great favour... Poor fellow, he has been taking calomel<sup>12</sup> these last six weeks for the liver complaint and when I left him, he said there was no doubt my removal was a prelude to assassination."<sup>13</sup> Months after his arrival in London, the Irish doctor started a public

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<sup>9</sup> Henry Bathurst, 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl Bathurst, (1762-1834) was Secretary of War and the Colonies and the cabinet member responsible for Napoleon's safety.

<sup>10</sup> Conversation on September 26, 1817, in O'Meara, II, 240-241.

<sup>11</sup> Conversation on July 25, 1818, O'Meara, II, p.416.

<sup>12</sup> Calomel was a commonly used laxative that contained mercury chloride. According to the proponents of the poisoning theory, calomel was used in conjunction with orgeat with bitter almonds to poison Napoleon.

<sup>13</sup> Testimony of Captain Wauchope, commander of HMS *Eurydice*, in BL Mss Add 20155 Sir Hudson Lowe Papers, f.52.

campaign in favour of Napoleon through *The Morning Chronicle*, arguing that the climate of St. Helena had seriously injured his health. O'Meara's efforts attracted the wrath of the British government, which expelled him from the Royal Navy. He remains one of the most enigmatic and least understood figures of the St. Helena saga.

Napoleon was left without a personal physician until September 1819, a doctor named Francesco Antommarchi, two priests, Buonavita and Vignali, and two chefs, all selected by Cardinal Fesch, Napoleon's uncle who lived in Rome.<sup>14</sup> How much freedom Fesch had in selecting Napoleon's new companions is unclear. The Vatican States were under the tight grip of Cardinal Consalvi, who like Count Metternich was an implacable enemy of Bonapartism, constitutionalism and liberalism in all their variations which at the time were stirring trouble all over Southern Europe.<sup>15</sup> It is hard to believe Consalvi would miss such a good opportunity to spy on Napoleon. A Corsican by birth, Antommarchi was an anatomist experienced in dissecting dead bodies and had never in his life practiced medicine. He was a peculiar choice to take care of a patient who was supposedly suffering a serious liver illness. The Russian Commissioner at St. Helena thought Antommarchi was a "subtle and clever Corsican" but totally unsuitable for his new position. Napoleon agreed. He found his new doctor presumptuous and uncouth. He openly wondered why Fesch had not sent him a French doctor. Faced with the alternative of no medical treatment or having to see a British physician, Napoleon apparently resigned himself. After an initial and brief examination of his patient, Antommarchi diagnosed an obstruction of the liver.<sup>16</sup>

Despite this diagnosis, two months later, by the end of November 1819, the Russian Commissioner at St. Helena reported that Napoleon's health was excellent, which was notable considering that with the advent of the spring, dysentery, liver diseases and fevers wreaked havoc among the British troops stationed near Longwood. Even Balmain and Montchenu's secretary fell ill and complained of liver ailments. Napoleon instead was full of energy, "amusing himself with gardening" and putting

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<sup>14</sup> September 1819, Bertrand, *Cahiers*, 2: 396.

<sup>15</sup> Consalvi to Metternich, January 4, 1818, d'Estampes and Jannet, *La Francmaçonnerie*, 248-249, 256.

<sup>16</sup> Report N°25, October 1, 1819, Balmain, *Reports* 223.

“his whole suite hard at work –men, women, even old Father Buonavita.”<sup>17</sup> Like Voltaire’s *Candide*, Napoleon had decided to cultivate his garden. Lowe reported that nothing could “exceed the bustle and activity which has been recently displayed by General Bonaparte, in giving directions about his flower garden and superintending the workmen employed at it. He is hemming it in all round with as bushy trees and shrubs as he can get transplanted.”<sup>18</sup> Napoleon believed Lowe only wished for his death. “He calls for that moment; it comes too slowly to satisfy his impatience,” he told Antommarchi. “But let him be comforted; this horrible climate is charged with the execution of the crime, and it will fulfil its trust sooner than he expects.”<sup>19</sup>

By the end of 1820 Napoleon told Antommarchi that he no longer had “any strength, activity or energy left.”<sup>20</sup> In early 1821 captain de Gors, secretary to the French Commissioner at St. Helena, met twice with Antommarchi. Lowe noted with concern that “if the meetings go on between Captain de Gors and the persons at Longwood, I must necessarily interfere, but hitherto they may have been from accident alone.”<sup>21</sup> Antommarchi’s conduct raised Lowe’s suspicions but apparently not enough for him to interfere. Another time doctor was spotted visiting Marquis de Montchenu, the French Commissioner, after going to the pharmacy in Jamestown.<sup>22</sup> It is hard to believe that the ailing marquis would require treatment by someone as incompetent when he had all the Royal Navy surgeons at his disposal.

On 5 December, Montholon wrote to his wife that Napoleon’s illness had “taken a turn for the worse.”<sup>23</sup> It was around this time that Antommarchi started to give his patient a drink called *orgeat* to help “reduce gas.”<sup>24</sup> *Orgeat* is a bittersweet syrup made with almonds, sugar and

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<sup>17</sup> Report N<sup>o</sup>29, December 1, 1819, Balmain, *Reports*, 228.

<sup>18</sup> Lowe to Bathurst, December 1, 1819, Forsyth, *History of the Captivity*, III, 198.

<sup>19</sup> Francesco C. Antommarchi, *The Last Days of the Emperor Napoleon* (London, 1825), I, 114.

<sup>20</sup> Antommarchi, December 26, 1820, I, 362.

<sup>21</sup> Lowe to Bathurst, November 16, 1820, BL Loan 57/45 Bathurst Papers, ff.188-189.

<sup>22</sup> Report of Lieutenant Crand, November 22, 1820, BL Mss Add 20131 SHLP, f.234.

<sup>23</sup> Charles Montholon to Albine, December 5, 1820, Gonnard, *Lettres*, 63.

<sup>24</sup> Antommarchi, October 29, 1820, I, 381.

rose water, which, as we shall see, can also be used for other purposes.

Doctor Antommarchi’s treatment –strong doses of tartar emetic– was wreaking havoc on the patient.<sup>25</sup> Napoleon’s distrust of Antommarchi was so strong that he refused to drink anything he prescribed. But the Corsican doctor managed to enlist the unwitting support of Bertrand and Marchand, who surreptitiously put this substance in Napoleon’s drinks. Lowe informed Bathurst that “when pressed to take medicine, he [Napoleon] declined doing so, saying he had already taken too much, and ascribed his disease in a great degree to what he had taken. He had conceived a dislike therefore to Dr. Antommarchi.” Napoleon’s “apathy and indifference... were extreme” and he “could not now bear the sight of him [Antommarchi] and it was only by stealth that he [Montholon] could get him into his room.” Napoleon thought “it was owing to the medicine he had taken that he was so ill.”<sup>26</sup>

Shortly after this conversation, Bertrand asked Napoleon if he had drunk his tartar emetic. Napoleon furiously turned to Marchand: “Since when have you allowed yourself to poison me by putting emetic drinks on my table? Did I not tell you to offer me nothing I have not authorized? Did I not forbid that? Is this how you justify my confidence in you? You knew it. Get out!”<sup>27</sup>

With the passing weeks Antommarchi’s behavior became more erratic. Montholon found his conduct “inexplicable.”<sup>28</sup> Napoleon was fed up with his doctor and told Bertrand that he didn’t want to see him ever again.<sup>29</sup> Lowe turned down Antommarchi’s request to return to Europe. Even though the doctor “appeared much exhausted... and much agitated in his mind” Lowe believed he was “much embroiled with General Bonaparte.”<sup>30</sup> Was Antommarchi the poisoner? Was he feeling remorse? Days earlier Antommarchi wrote to a friend: “I declare to you, to the Imperial family, to

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<sup>25</sup> Technically, antimony potassium tartrate. It is a highly toxic substance that is used in the textile industry to bind dyes to fabrics.

<sup>26</sup> Loweto Bathurst, March 20, 1821, and Gorrequer’s Report, BL Mss Add 20132 SHLP, f.283-284, f.289.

<sup>27</sup> March 27, 1821, Marchand, 528.

<sup>28</sup> Charles to Albine de Montholon, April 9, 1821, Gonnard, 78.

<sup>29</sup> April 9, 1821. Bertrand, *Cahiers*, 3: 110.

<sup>30</sup> Lowe to Bathurst, April 10, 1821, BL Mss Add 20133 SHLP, f.33.

the whole world, that the malady from which the Emperor is suffering is due to the nature of the climate and that its symptoms are of the utmost gravity."<sup>31</sup>

By mid April, Napoleon's health had deteriorated so much that Montholon and Bertrand agreed to call an English doctor. Dr. Arnott initially thought that the patient was fine but after few days he realized he was mistaken. Like Antommarchi, he recommended strong doses of calomel, a mercurial powder used as a purgative. The medicine immediately produced "a heavy evacuation of blackish matter, thick and partly hard, which resembled pitch or tar."<sup>32</sup> Napoleon grew suspicious. When Arnott suggested a dose of quinine, he asked if it had been prepared in Jamestown or at Longwood. Arnott replied that it had been prepared at Jamestown's pharmacy. "Had the pharmacist had been stopped by Sir Thomas Reade?" Napoleon asked. The doctor didn't know. Then Napoleon asked for a drink. "Orgeat?" asked Bertrand, who was standing by his bed. "No," said Napoleon, "just water and wine."<sup>33</sup>

Despite his request to drink water and wine, in the last weeks of his life Napoleon was constantly given glasses of orgeat, which "suddenly appeared on his bedside table." The combination of orgeat and calomel can provoke arsenic poisoning "without recognition in the presence of physicians." Since the stomach naturally rejected this combination and provoked vomiting, the would-be poisoner first had to diminish the body's natural self-defense mechanism. The solution was to give the victim strong doses of tartar emetic, which in large quantities corrodes the lining of the stomach and prevents it from expelling poisons. Antommarchi had prescribed doses tartar emetic to his patient for several weeks to induce vomiting. These doses were administered always "shortly prior to receiving his abnormally large dose of the purgative calomel."<sup>34</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Ben Weider and David Hapgood, *The Murder of Napoleon* (New York, 1982), 218.

<sup>32</sup> St. Denis, *From the Tuileries*, 271.

<sup>33</sup> April 18, 1821. Bertrand, III, 128.

<sup>34</sup> Ben Weider and Sten Forshufvud, *Assassination at St. Helena Revisited* (New York: Wiley, 1995), 430-434. Ben Weider and John Harry Fournier, "Activation Analyses of Authenticated Hairs of Napoleon Bonaparte Confirm

As he entered the last phase of his agony, an almost delirious Napoleon asked Bertrand. "Which is better, lemonade or orgeat?" "Orgeat is heavier, and less refreshing," responded Bertrand. "Which do the doctors advise?" asked Napoleon. "The one you fancy," the marshal said. "But lemonade's just as good?" Napoleon asked. "Yes, sire," was Bertrand's response. "Is orgeat made from barley<sup>35</sup>?" Napoleon asked. "No, Sire. From almonds," Bertrand replied. Napoleon then asked for a drink "made with cherries." None was available. During the night, he asked the same questions several times and requested a drink made with cherries -his favorite- to no avail.<sup>36</sup> Days later Napoleon turned to Dr. Arnott and said: "I am slowly assassinated with great precision, with premeditation, and the infamous Hudson Lowe is the executioner of your minister's high works."<sup>37</sup>

In early 1821, a few months before his death, Napoleon again voiced suspicions that he was being poisoned. When given a drink that had a strange smell he turned to Montholon and said: "Here. Taste this. I do not know this smell," he said to Montholon. Only after receiving Montholon's assurances, Napoleon agreed to drink it. This strange incident was followed by a conversation during which Napoleon observed that while in power he had escaped poisoning ten times and observed that "people now rival in this respect the skill of Catherine de Médicis." According to Montholon no one took fewer precautions against such dangers than Napoleon, who believed that "our last hour is written above."<sup>38</sup> Napoleon had no doubt he was being murdered and only days before his end he said to one of the English doctors attending him: "I am slowly assassinated with great precision, with premeditation, and the infamous Hudson Lowe is the executioner of your minister's high works."<sup>39</sup>

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Arsenic Poisoning," *American Journal of Forensic Medicine & Pathology* 20, no.4, (December 1999), 378-382

<sup>35</sup> Barley was sometimes used as an antidote for arsenic poisoning.

<sup>36</sup> April 29, 1821, Bertrand, III, 177.

<sup>37</sup> Marchand, 543-544.

<sup>38</sup> Charles Tristan de Montholon, *Récits de la captivité de l'Empereur Napoléon à Sainte-Helene. Avec une introduction de M. Maillefer* (Paris, 1847), II, 499.

<sup>39</sup> Jean Bourguignon (Ed.), *Memoires de Marchand* (Paris, 1985) 543-544.

*The Reaction of Napoleon's Supporters in England*

News that Napoleon had died reached London on July 4, 1821. Since the beginning of the year there had been speculation in the press about the state of his health. But as late as the third week of May, *The Courier* –mouthpiece of the Tories and “the greatest liar of them all,” according to Lord Byron– denied that Napoleon was ill and declared that he “was certainly indisposed but not to such degree as to cause the slightest apprehension for his life.” By then, Napoleon had been in his grave for two weeks. The newspaper accused Napoleon’s inveterate English supporters of distorting the truth to obtain his liberation on the grounds of ill health.<sup>40</sup>

Napoleon’s supporters in England were more numerous and respectable than it is usually acknowledged today. The group included figures as diverse as Lord Holland, member of a prominent Whig family, and his wife Elizabeth Vassall Fox, who ran one of London’s the most exclusive literary and political salons; Charles Grey, 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl Grey, who as Prime Minister during 1830-1834 introduced the Reform Act; Lord John Russell, who would become Prime Minister during the Victorian era; general Sir Robert Wilson, the Scarlet Pimpernel of the Napoleonic wars; Sir James Mackintosh, the Scottish essayist; Henry “Orator” Hunt, a radical reformer; William Cobbett, the celebrated journalist and John Cam Hobhouse, writer, politician and a close friend of Lord Byron. *The Morning Chronicle* expressed the views of the most moderate members of this group whereas Cobbett’s *Political Register*, *The Examiner*, *The Statesman* and other lesser-known pamphlets voiced the opinion of the most radical ones.

Hobhouse learned that Napoleon had died when he ran into an unidentified acquaintance on the street. “So our old friend is gone. He’s dead at last,” said the acquaintance. “Who?” asked Hobhouse. “Why haven’t you heard it – Bonaparte!” Hobhouse couldn’t believe the news, but his friend insisted. “Yes, he’s dead this [is] certainly true. Gravesend had the news this morning.” Hobhouse then walked to Brooke’s, the traditional Whig club and read about Napoleon’s death in the evening papers. “Yes. He is dead. He died on the fifth of May of a cancer in the stomach after an illness of 40 days... it is said he was sensible to within five or six hours of his death,” he wrote in

<sup>40</sup> *The Courier*, London, May 19, 1821.

his diary.<sup>41</sup> At Brooke’s, Hobhouse ran into Sir James Mackintosh who said: “What a sensation this would have made nine years ago & what a sensation will it make nine hundred years hence.” According to Hobhouse, Mackintosh went on to say he thought Napoleon “the best of the great conquerors,” but aside from these comments, “there was no other talk about the death of this wonderful man.”<sup>42</sup>

The following day, July 5<sup>th</sup>, the headlines of *The Courier* announced: “Buonaparte is no more! He died on Saturday the 5<sup>th</sup> of May.” The newspaper reported that Napoleon had died of hereditary stomach cancer and that he “was sensible until the end and died without pain,” which was a gross distortion of the truth, and then went on to make one of the most inaccurate predictions in the history of British journalism: “If we may hazard an opinion, the celebrity of this extraordinary man, less extraordinary by his talents than by the vicissitudes that have marked his reign, is destined to decrease from age to age.”<sup>43</sup> The ineffable Lewis Goldsmith, a venal journalist who after being on Napoleon’s payroll for many years had later slandered him and even proposed his assassination, wrote in the *British Monitor* that “no man in this country could possibly be so much affected at hearing of his death as I was and still now am whilst writing this. The grave closes all enmity... he was always kind and attentive to me.”<sup>44</sup>

King George IV was apparently elated to hear that his “worst enemy” had died, but was slightly disappointed to learn it was Napoleon and not his estranged wife Caroline of Brunswick. It is not clear whom he feared more. There is no question the King and his cabinet were relieved by the news of Napoleon’s death. As a foreign diplomat observed, as a result of it the British treasury gained “at least £300,000 a year.”<sup>45</sup> More importantly, the anarchists, reformists and troublemakers all over Europe would lose the symbol of their struggles. The reaction of other members of the British royal

<sup>41</sup> John Cam Hobhouse Diary, July 4, 1821, in BL Mss Add 56542 Broughton Papers, ff.44-45.

<sup>42</sup> John Cam Hobhouse Diary, July 4, 1821, in BL Mss Add 56542 Broughton Papers, ff.44-45.

<sup>43</sup> *The Courier*, London, July 4, 1821.

<sup>44</sup> *The British Monitor*, London, July 8, 1821.

<sup>45</sup> E. Beresford Chancellor, *The Diary of Philipp von Neumann*, (London, 1928), 64.

family was quite different. Queen Caroline, who would soon follow Napoleon into her grave, thought that Napoleon's death would be "a black speck" in England's history.<sup>46</sup> Her brother-in-law the Duke of Sussex, thought the event marked the end of "a most disgraceful transaction in which the Ministers have made this country to participate. To be the persecutor of fallen glory and the gaoler for the European sovereigns is not the situation in which England ought to have been placed. Peace to the remains of that great man, whom history will treat hereafter with greater justice than his contemporaries have hitherto done, while our disgrace will I fear be handled with all due severity."<sup>47</sup>

Although expected, the news caused a deep impression among Napoleon's English supporters. Henry Hunt, who was serving time in prison for organizing the Peterloo<sup>48</sup> demonstrations, eulogized Napoleon in the most exaggerated language:

*The mighty is fallen! And shall no more be seen!.. Such a meteor has Napoleon been; but even he, who made tyrants tremble... is now no more. True history will faithfully record his deeds, his valour, his unrivalled genius, his magnificence, his justice, impartiality, wonderful capacity in the field and in the cabinet, his gratitude, his honour, his universal knowledge and skill in all arts and sciences, the first of men, the most wonderful man that ever existed!*<sup>49</sup>

At Holland House the atmosphere was gloomy. "What a melancholy end to so illustrious a life. England will now open her eyes and will see the shame, disgrace, and atrocity of his imprisonment," wrote Lord Holland's son. His anger was directed to the British ministers: "Their object is now accomplished, may the curses of an angry heaven fall upon them, and may they pay doubly and

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<sup>46</sup> The diary of John Cam Hobhouse, July 4, 1821, in BL Mss Add 56542, f.44.

<sup>47</sup> Mollie Gillen, *Royal Duke: The Life of Frederick Augustus* (London, 1976), 186.

<sup>48</sup> In August 1819, Hunt convened a massive demonstration in Manchester in support of parliamentary reform. The local authorities sent cavalry troops to disperse the crowds but the situation got out of control and eleven people died. The episode passed on to history as the "Peterloo massacre."

<sup>49</sup> Henry Hunt, *Memoirs of Henry Hunt* (London, 1822) II, 28-29.

trebly the sorrows of his breast."<sup>50</sup> Sir Robert Wilson was also "crushed" by Napoleon's death and by the callous reaction of his enemies to the news. Wilson was "so out of humor at the brutal sentiments" he heard that he was not able to write to anyone for several days.<sup>51</sup> A highly decorated veteran who had at one point been one of Napoleon's earliest and most effective detractors, starting in 1814, he had undergone a radical political transformation that had converted him into an ardent Bonapartist. The French ambassador in London didn't fail to notice that Wilson was one of the few of English Bonapartists who publicly mourned Napoleon's death.<sup>52</sup>

As Napoleon's English supporters recovered from the news of his death, they turned their attention to its possible causes. Although some accepted the cancer story they argued that St. Helena's insalubrious climate and the restrictions imposed on Napoleon had hastened his death and thus still blamed the British government. But most suspected foul play. Lord Holland considered Napoleon's death to be "a legal or political murder, a species of crime which tho' not uncommon in our age is in my eyes one of the blackest dye & most odious nature."<sup>53</sup> Sir Robert Wilson was so suspicious that Napoleon had been poisoned that he specifically asked Montholon and Bertrand for their opinion when they returned from St. Helena. Apparently both quite rejected "the idea of poison."<sup>54</sup> The poisoning theory became so widespread in Paris, particularly after it was "corroborated by letters from St. Helena," that the correspondent of *The Times* thought it would be difficult "to disabuse" them.<sup>55</sup> Sir James

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<sup>50</sup> Henry E. Fox, *The Journal of the Hon Henry Edward Fox 1818-1830* (London, 1923), 76-77.

<sup>51</sup> Wilson to Lord Grey, no date, 1821 in Grey Papers, Durham University Library, GRE /B60/4/121.

<sup>52</sup> Caraman to Pasquier, July 6, 1821, in Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, Correspondance Politique, Angleterre, N<sup>o</sup>614.

<sup>53</sup> Undated notes, in BL Mss Add 51529, ff. 129-130.

<sup>54</sup> Wilson to Grey, August 1821, in BL Mss Add 30123 Sir Robert Wilson Papers, f.243.

<sup>55</sup> Fazakerly to W. Ord, Paris, July 12, 1821, and Schubart to Murray, (at *The Times'* office in London), Paris, July 26, 1821, in Comte Herisson, *The Black Cabinet* (London, 1887), 262, 266. See also Maximilien Lamarque, *Memoires et Souvenirs*, Paris, 1835, Vol.I, p. 21 and Georges Lote, "La Mort de Napoléon et l'opinion Bonapartiste en

Mackintosh was one of those who did not believe in the explanations proffered by the British government and decided to ask O'Meara and another surgeon of the Royal Navy named J. M. Roberts for their opinions. Their replies have never been published before and provide some interesting perspective on the subject of Napoleon's illness and death.

In the opinion of Dr. Roberts, the official explanation behind Napoleon's death was evidently wrong. "Had he died of a protracted disease the body would have been extenuated, the adipose substance absorbed and universal derangement have ensued in the viscera." As to stomach cancer, "it is wholly out of the question, no person ever died of that disorder *teres et rotundus*<sup>56</sup> as he did... It is probably from the adhesion I alluded to above that his liver had been previously affected." Roberts noted how peculiar it was that Dr. Antommarchi<sup>57</sup>, who since the end of 1819 had been Napoleon's personal doctor, had not signed the report "of the inspection of the body." He blamed poor medical treatment for hastening Napoleon's death and ventured the opinion that if Dr. Arnott—who he knew personally—had treated the patient from the start he would have probably survived. Roberts added that "it may not be irrelevant to notice that Desgenettes<sup>58</sup> told me at Paris in 1803 that Buonaparte had contracted while in Egypt the Leprosy (*Lepra Arabum*) for which he was then taking large doses of arsenic. What effect this may have had upon his system I cannot determine but it is highly conjecturable that some hepatic affection induced by the climate of which he never got perfectly well together with despondency of mind brought on the disease in the stomach by which he was cut off."<sup>59</sup> It is interesting to note that in his letter Dr. Roberts mentioned arsenic as a relevant factor in Napoleon's death.

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1821", *Revue des Etudes Napoleoniennes*, Paris, Jul-Dec.1930, Vol. XXXI, 43-46.

<sup>56</sup> Latin expression that in this context means "in such fine, rounded shape condition."

<sup>57</sup> Francesco Antommarchi, (1789-1838), was a Corsican anatomist sent to St. Helena by Napoleon's family to serve as his personal doctor.

<sup>58</sup> René-Nicolas Desgenettes, (1762-1837), was a medical officer during Napoleon's Egyptian campaign and inoculated French troops against the bubonic plague.

<sup>59</sup> Roberts to Mackintosh, London, August 26, 1821, BL Mss Add 52453 Mackintosh Papers, f.68.

O'Meara replied to Mackintosh almost a month and a half later, after he had been able to gather more information and had met with Montholon, Bertrand and Antommarchi. The salient paragraphs of his reply to Mackintosh are reproduced below:

*The following are the principal circumstances I have as yet collected relative to the malady of the late illustrious captive. During the first six or eight months subsequent to Antommarchi's arrival, his state of health improved considerably and the hepatic obstruction under which he had laboured appeared to have given way to the means which had been put in practice. He rose every morning about 4 or 5 o'clock and proceeded to the garden further the weather would permit and employed himself in gardening for several hours, sometimes without interruption until 12; labouring the greatest part of the time himself with a spade on with some other implement requiring considerable bodily exertion.*

*All his household and likewise out and each person had a regular task imposed upon him under the superintendence of Napoleon himself and I am informed that he took good care that nobody should be a moment idle, however lazily he might be inclined. During this time he effected so many improvements and alterations in Longwood ground and beautified the place so much that the change appeared (to those who had been about for a short period) farther as the operation of the lamp of Aladdin than the labour of human being. This active scene however was not of long duration. In August 1820 symptoms of obstruction of the liver and derangement of the stomach made their appearance. He lost his appetite, his flesh and in some degree, his spirits. Several different modes of medical treatment were commenced but no one continued long enough to be beneficial. From my own knowledge of him I am aware that he was a very difficult patient to treat. He had got the old doctrine in his head that most complaints were merely efforts of nature for relief and thus it was improper to meddle with or disturb her in their operations. Always pertinacious in his opinion, he adhered to this to the last. He appeared to have lost hope, which he had before entertained of being released from his prison either by the Parliament or by the course of event in Europe and to think himself abandoned by fortune and by his friends and relations.*

*These circumstances combined with the petty and perpetual annoyance of the Governor [Lowe] preyed upon his mind and rendered him melancholy and perhaps careless of existence. For the last four or five months he paid no attention to dress (in which he had been particular before) wearing during the day a morning gown and in the evening merely putting on a grey great coat and round hat when he went out in the carriage. He became emaciated and so feeble that the horses were never put out of a walk. For the last two*

months of his illness mass was celebrated every Sunday in his apartments and every day for fifteen days before his own death. Previous to that count he went through all the forms and duties presented by the Roman Catholic Church. A few days prior to it, he was informed that a very large comet had made its appearance upon which he immediately observed that if foretold his approaching dissolution as Caesar's had formerly been by the appearance of a similar planet. An almost constant rejection of food was one of the most teasing symptoms with which he was afflicted.

The last article of solid food which he took for a considerable time was potatoes cut as thin as the back of a knife and fried crisp which remained on his stomach when nothing else would. When his body was opened his stomach was found greatly diseased and in some places of a cartilaginous hardness ulcerated & as you have seen in accounts published in the Gazette. Instead however of the liver being sound as there is stated it was found very much enlarged in volume, thickened and obstructed and an adhesion had taken place of the upper convex orifice to the diaphragm so strong as not to be separated except with the knife. These appearance were put down in the first report taken with the body before the eyes of the surgeons and agreed to lay all of them after which the English surgeon left the room and had an interview with the Governor. On their return that part relative to the enlargement of the liver and its obstruction was struck out for which reason and because of it Napoleon was styled "Napoleon Buonaparte." Professor Antommarchi could not sign it when required to so do. Antommarchi demanded permission to bring his stomach to Europe which the Governor would not grant. Persisting in his malevolence even when his prisoner was no more, he would not permit that "Napoleon" should be inscribed upon his tomb or simply the following "Born at Ajaccio on the 15 of Aug. 1769". It will be some satisfaction for you to learn that the Governor did not obtain possession of his real will as means were taken prior to his decease to put it out of his reach. This is however "entre nous." He [Antommarchi] has left Manuscripts enough to form about 24 volumes in octavo which are all safe and will ultimately be published in this country. During the greatest part of his illness and even when upon his death bed the Governor agents persisted in asserting that nothing was the matter with him a that he was "shamming" and it was only six days before his demise that they allowed his illness to be publicly spoken of. Some months before application had been made for a removal to Europe for the benefit of his health, some days subsequent to [the] last event a letter was sent purporting to be the reply of His Majesty's government regretting that existing circumstances did not admit of a compliance with the request but desired the patient to be of good heart as in the course of time it might be granted! ... It appears to me that Napoleon during the few months in which he appeared to enjoy health was in a forced state struggling against the advances of a

malady which he hoped to conquer by exercise and temperance... I do not think that the stomach could be converted in part into a cartilaginous mass in ten or twelve months. But this is merely matter of opinion. I confess also that until the arrival of Antommarchi, I had my suspicions partly arising from the official statement in the Gazette and the letters which were published in the ministerial papers and frankly from reasons which I have had the honour of formerly to explain to you.<sup>60</sup>

Even though O'Meara ruled out outright assassination, he always blamed the British Government for creating the circumstances that led to Napoleon to his grave. The comments of Doctors Roberts and O'Meara regarding the inaccuracy of the autopsy were confirmed also by Montholon who said that Antommarchi had let himself be intimidated by fear of persecution in Europe. "The liver was much worse than he said in his report."<sup>61</sup>

Joseph Bonaparte, who lived in exile in the United States, was also deeply suspicious about the official explanation behind his brother's death. Fearful of the possibility of a hereditary cancerous condition, he underwent a thorough medical examination but was found perfectly healthy and in fact lived another twenty-three years. "I can no longer doubt today that my brother died a victim to the cruelty of his enemies," Joseph wrote to an American friend. "But for them, he would have lived in this country as healthy as I, who am older than he was and not so strong in constitution; and there would have been no discussion in order to find reasons for his death, which have nothing to do with the true one." Napoleon like Julius Caesar, "believed his enemies incapable of a great crime, and like Caesar, the victim of Sulla's party, he perished at the hands of the European oligarchy."<sup>62</sup> General Gourgaud, one of Napoleon's companions at St. Helena asserted many years later that "it was not true that Napoleon died of same illness as his father as asserted by the British government. At St. Helena he never complained of stomach pains; two

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<sup>60</sup> O'Meara to Mackintosh, London, August 26, 1821, BL Mss Add 52453 Mackintosh Papers, f.70.

<sup>61</sup> Montholon to Joseph Bonaparte, London, October 5, 1821, in Pierre E. A. Du Casse, *Memoires et Correspondance Politique et Militaire du Roi Joseph*, (Paris, 1853-54) X, 259. At the end of his letter Montholon wrote three lines in cipher, but the key has never been found.

<sup>62</sup> Joseph to Mr. Hopkinson, Point Breeze, December 24, 1821, in F. Marion Crawford, "Joseph Bonaparte in Bordentown", *The Century Magazine*, New York, May 1893, 87-88.

sisters have died and not of cancer, five brothers still live and never had symptoms of this hereditary illness." According to Gourgaud, future historians would not give any credit to this explanation and "grave suspicions would remain about the causes of Napoleon's death."<sup>63</sup>

Antommarchi is clearly an important piece of the puzzle surrounding Napoleon's death. Proponents of the poisoning theory exonerate him –too quickly perhaps– because he was Corsican and had been chosen by Cardinal Fesch. However, many of those who believed Napoleon had been murdered pointed their finger to "some Italians who were sent [to Saint Helena] some time ago from Rome."<sup>64</sup> Antommarchi's strange conduct during the last months of Napoleon's life raises serious questions. Napoleon blamed him for his illness and requested his replacement. Interestingly, Antommarchi "was himself conscious of his want of capacity" and knew that the effect of "what he prescribed frequently proved the very reverse of what he foretold and expected." Napoleon proposed several candidates to replace him and "particularly desired that his family might be entirely excluded from all interference whatever in the choice of any of them." It was not so much "the fault of the family as of the position in which they were placed in an ecclesiastical state where they could not act with sufficient independence in making a selection," Napoleon had said. He wished therefore to leave it "entirely to the decision of the King of France and his ministers... nearly all of whom had served him in the same offices and who so well knew his habits and dispositions. For instance, there was Pasquier, who had been for ten years his minister... There was Decazes himself, once his private secretary who knew him intimately for several years, and who was in possession of many secrets known to none but himself."<sup>65</sup>

But even if Antommarchi was the poisoner, he was clearly following orders. Who wanted to see Napoleon dead? The list is endless. The Count of

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<sup>63</sup> Gaspard Gourgaud, *Lettre de Sir Walter Scott et Réponse du Général Gourgaud* (Paris, 1827) 30-32.

<sup>64</sup> Fazakerly to W. Ord, Paris, July 12, 1821, Herisson, *The black cabinet*, 262. See also Lamarque, *Mémoires*, 1: 21 and Planat to Eugene Leblon, Paris, July 11, 1821, Planat de la Faye, 393.

<sup>65</sup> Report of a conversation with Montholon by Capt. Gorrequer, January 1821, BL Mss Add 20132 SHLP, f.76.

Artois was probably at the top. Ever since 1815 the French Bourbons had asked themselves what would happen if "the English ministers had changed, and in their place those who had declared against Buonaparte's detention?" What if he had escaped to America and then returned to France "to set all of Europe on fire and deluge it with blood?"<sup>66</sup> Metternich was also quite relieved at Napoleon's death, as he blamed him for all the troubles affecting Europe, particularly the uprisings in Italy, which threatened the stability of the Habsburg Empire. Years later he revealed that Napoleon's only hope before his death "was the completion of a project which had been formed in America to get him off the island."<sup>67</sup>

But without any concrete evidence, and having been rejected by those who shared Napoleon's last moments, the poisoning theory was gradually abandoned until recently when technological advances allowed for the examination of Napoleon's hair. The Bonapartists nevertheless insisted that their idol had been murdered and blamed the British government. Called to testify on O'Meara's behalf in a trial for slander initiated by Sir Hudson Lowe, Count Montholon unequivocally stated that "the term of Napoleon Bonaparte's life was shortened by the moral assassination of which he was the victim at St. Helena as much from the effect of the restrictions and administration of Sir Hudson Lowe as from the effect of the devouring climate of the said island."<sup>68</sup>

The discovery of traces of arsenic in Napoleon's hair has reignited the debate about whether Napoleon was poisoned. Unfortunately, in many respects we are not closer to the truth than two centuries ago. Napoleon's life at St. Helena remains riddled with enigmas. As to his death, maybe nothing more fitting than the conclusion reached by Henry Hunt: "That such a man as Napoleon should become obnoxious to all tyrants and despots is no wonder; and it is not my object at

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<sup>66</sup> M. Stafford to the Earl of Carlisle, Paris, July 9, 1821, Herisson, *The black cabinet*, 258-260. The quote belongs to the Marquis of Castel-Cicala, the representative of Bourbon Naples in Paris and a fanatical royalist.

<sup>67</sup> Gentz to Lowe, Vienna, December 9, 1825 and Unsigned Memorandum, Vienna, December 1825, BL Mss Add 20233 SHLP, f.256 and f.260.

<sup>68</sup> Montholon's declaration at O'Meara's trial, April 11, 1823, in BL Mss Add 20230 Sir Hudson Lowe Papers, f.134.

present to inquire whether his terrestrial race were terminated by assassination, or the quick or slow effect of the poisoned cup, for that will always remain in a state of mystery as inexplicable as the verdict of an Oldham inquest."<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Hunt, II, 28-29.