

TWO NAPOLEONIC COLLECTIONS

THE PIERRE-JEAN CHALENCON COLLECTION

Treasures of the Emperor and Imperial France

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THE MABEL BROOKES NAPOLEONIC COLLECTION

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The Jean-Pierre Chalençon Collection of nearly 300 items, some of them borrowed here in Australia or from overseas, was notable first of all for its lavish presentation in a number of rooms, each devoted to some theme in a roughly historical sequence following the story of Napoleon. The exhibits were supported by ample explanatory material and by a catalogue, also lavishly produced as to the illustrations, but with exhibit notes and historical summaries of which more later.

The sub-title of the exhibition hardly does justice to its scope, which takes in not simply the imperial Napoleon but the man from birth to death, thus presenting both a brief illustrated biography and a history of his regime. Beyond these again are suggestive pointers to the history of the fine and decorative arts from the period of Louis XV onwards, showing developments of style from the rococo to the neo-classical and its special expression in Empire style. The whole material and cultural background against which the story is played out is evoked through furniture, drawings, paintings, books and their bindings, and engravings. These last, as an explanatory note points out, had been given 'droit de cité' by Napoleon. They were after all something like the news photographs of their day, but with an embellishing function which served to transmute the sordid confusion and bloody slaughter of the battlefield into representations of heroic leadership and military glory.

Quite naturally, there is considerable stress upon Napoleon's campaigns and here the exhibits are particularly graphic. The detritus of war becomes realia in great quantities, with the pierced helmet, the shattered weapon and the flattened bullet being so much more telling than these same items in their pristine state. There is also a profusion of items of equipment, uniforms, decorations and medals, battle orders and military documents.

Looking at an item like the modern re-creation of one of Napoleon's famous camp beds, one is struck not only by its solidity and weight, from a time before light-weight materials and modern mass-production, but by the enormous amount of work by the skill of human hands which went into maintaining France for so long on a war footing. It has been said of Hitler that if, *per impossibile*, he had not waged war, every German family could have owned its own house and car. One wonders what greatness France could have attained under the impossibility of a pacific Napoleon. But then he so often mistook the shadow for the substance, as was so convincingly demonstrated by the irredeemably vulgar and profligate ostentation of his self-coronation ceremony.

The historical notes and those on exhibits are a puzzling mixture of the reasonably informative and the inaccurate or incomprehensible. Thus, we are told that one of the young Napoleon's books was 'the Scottish poem Ossian' (p. 6); on p. 9, the 'Chronology of the Empire Period' tells us that '...of the 600 000 who crossed the Niemen in June, less than one in twenty survive' [i.e. less than 30 000], but on p. 24, 'Only 60 000 men returned home'. On p. 11, '... disaster struck when the French fleet was completely destroyed by Admiral Nelson', but in fact four French ships escaped.

Misspellings and typos abound: Marshal is consistently 'Marshall' throughout, some proper names are deformed out of recognition and use of accents is very spasmodic. The most startling typo comes with the news that: 'He also opened the Louvre to public [sic] viewing on a regular basis.' Obviously too much concentration on nudes!

There is an incongruous foreshortening of time with:

Four months after he came to power he authorized the departure of the Baudin expedition to Australia. Soon kangaroos hopped around Josephine's park, black swans glided over her lake and glorious wattles, eucalypts, melaleucas, flannel flowers and casuarinas bloomed at Malmaison. (p. 13)

The Baudin expedition did not even return until 1804, so if this is 'soon', what is 'later' like? Finally the story of the famous 'mot de Cambronne' is reduced to: 'Cambronne was famous for standing his ground against the English in battle and swearing at them!' (p. 26) With this, it is impossible not to think of a certain Monty Python film.

THE MABEL BROOKES NAPOLEONIC COLLECTION

The Mabel Brookes Napoleonic Collection had its beginnings at St Helena, where William Balcombe, the great-grandfather of Dame Mabel Brookes, was the Naval Agent for the British Fleet and Purveyor for the East India Company.

When Napoleon arrived at the island, accompanied by a military escort, his own household or mini-court, and various officials, it transpired that his destined place of captivity, a house named Longwood in the interior of the island, had not yet been made ready for him. Meanwhile, until April 1816, he was lodged on the property of the Balcombe home, The Briars; in an outbuilding; this was a small pavilion in front of which was pitched a tent where he took his meals. During his stay there he developed a friendly relationship with members of the family and in particular with one of the daughters, Betsy, who as Mrs Lucia Elizabeth Abell was later to relate her memories of him in *Recollections of the Emperor Napoleon, during the first three years of his captivity in the Island of St. Helena* (London, 1844).

The Balcombe family later returned to England and from there came to Sydney in 1824, when William Balcombe took up an appointment as the colony's first Treasurer. In the 1840s the family moved to a property on the Mornington Peninsula which they named The Briars after their St. Helena home. With them came the various items given to them by Napoleon, which successive generations preserved and added to. This process reached its peak with Mabel Brookes, née Emmerton, whose mother was née Balcombe. In 1810 she married the future Sir Norman Brookes, who was already famous as an outstanding tennis player and had extensive business and pastoral interests which meant that the couple had a very high profile in Melbourne society and became actively involved in a whole host of worthy causes. She was able fully to indulge her passion for Napoleoniana, expressed not only in purchase of items to add to the collection, but in that of the freehold of The Briars on St Helena, which she presented to the French Government, a benefaction which led to her being made a chevalier in the Légion d'Honneur in 1960. Among her various books is *St. Helena Story* (London: Heineman, 1960), which gives an account of her Napoleonic forebears and her own abiding interest in Napoleon.

To ensure the undivided survival of her collection Dame Mabel, who died in 1975, bequeathed it to the National Gallery of Victoria, which was thereby confronted with a dilemma, as many of the items: manuscripts, prints, books and heterogeneous objects, fell outside its charter, which embraced only furniture and works of art. Coincidentally in 1976 The Briars was given jointly to the National Trust of Australia (Victoria) and the Shire of Mornington by the a'Becketts, the last branch of the Balcombe family to live there. Ultimately, over some years a process of negotiation has led to the Gallery's accepting the collection on the basis that it would be placed on permanent loan with the National Trust for display at The Briars, which is administered jointly by the two bodies to which was donated and is classed as an associated property by the National Trust.

The collection is now housed in the refurbished homestead, which forms the centre of a complex of historic farm buildings, including a collection of historic farm machinery, plus an Information Centre and Josephine's Restaurant, with these buildings in turn forming the centre of "The Briars Historic Park". This includes extensive wetlands, bird observation hides and woodland trails.

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In many ways this collection of 230 separate items is the ideal complement to the Chalencon Collection in that it is more focused upon Napoleon himself and naturally upon the St Helena years, for which the Chalencon Collection has some 46 items. However the Mabel Brookes Collection too contains items from the European period, most notably a very fine fall-front secrtaire with medallions of Napoleon and Josephine, various military documents bearing Napoleon's signature, and a collection of lampoons about him and his imperial pretensions. Furniture and crockery from the Balcombe household, forming part of the nucleus of the collection, would fall into the same category.

Although one of Napoleon's reasons for leaving Elba was said to be that he had had wind of plans to transfer him from his tiny exile kingdom to St Helena, when he eventually surrendered to the British after Waterloo and some days of dithering, he failed to realise that he was not in a position to

have granted his wish to be allowed to stay in England. When it was made clear to him that he was to go to St Helena regardless, he seemed almost to think that he had been tricked into surrendering, be it said with some justification given the self-serving manoeuvres of Captain Maitland, commander of H.M.S. *Bellerophon*. From this situation emerged a copious correspondence of which the collection has contemporary copies, along with many letters regarding arrangements for the journey to St Helena and the journey itself. Subsequent items reveal that once on St Helena, he was still trying to impose his will upon his captors.

Given all the trouble that the escape from Elba and the Hundred Days had caused, the wonder is not that the British sent him to St Helena and imposed some stringent measures of security upon him, but that they allowed him to maintain so many of the old trappings of office and the style of domestic life that went with them. He had after all arrived at St Helena with copious baggage and a retinue of some twelve persons, to which must be added in some cases wives, children and domestics. All this was a far cry from the treatment he had meted out to his imagined or rather fabricated enemy, the duc d'Engbien, or the conditions of imprisonment of Toussaint l'Ouverture, who had taken at face value his egalitarian and liberationist rhetoric. During the whole course of his exile, though, there was to be a spate of documents regarding the harshness of his treatment.

To do with the island itself there are various maps, as well as sketches, prints, drawings and watercolours of landscapes and buildings, while Napoleon, alone or with others, is set in the scene of a number of watercolours, sketches and prints. In particular, naturally, there are prints of The Briars and various depictions of Longwood. Just to keep this large domestic establishment which was also a small court functioning smoothly was a complicated logistical and financial exercise, as is witnessed by ledger sheets, supply lists and documents to do with supply expenses.

The death of Napoleon led to various sketches and prints of him on his deathbed and of his later to be emptied tomb. Even before his death, locks of his hair seem to have been a much sought-after item, while after it they and other associative items assumed something like the status of relics of the saints. Apart from various locks of hair there are other relics, mainly pieces of clothing or even scraps of cloth, but also a copy of the death mask, executed with such difficulty and the subject of a subsequent mythology. There are also pieces of more intrinsic value such as personal

jewellery, a bust, a plaque, miniatures, a snuff box, and porcelain decorated with Napoleonic motifs.

Finally, the collection is rich in books both contemporaneous with Napoleon and more modern. One of the most interesting of these would have to be Mrs Abell's memoirs, after which would come the accounts by various French and British officers who were in close contact with him. Above all though, are the famous memoirs dictated by the man himself to a number of the French officers in his suite.

We are grateful to the National Trust for a photocopy of the catalogue of the Mabel Brookes Collection, another smaller publication *The Napoleonic Collection*, 1989 presenting a selection from the above, and for brochures presenting the National Trust itself and The Briars Historic Park, all of which were used in the preparation of this report. (Other sources used were: *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol. 7, W. H. Frederick, 'Brookes, Sir Norman Everard (1877-1968)' and Vol. 13, J. R. Poynter, 'Brookes, Dame Mabel Balcombe (1890-1975).')

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