

A DISTANT THUNDER

Napoleon, Australia and the National Library

(This is a revised version of an article which first appeared in the *National Library of Australia News* in October 1997.)

When the Second Fleet brought the belated news of political upheaval in France to the nascent penal colony of Port Jackson in June 1790, Captain of the Marines Watkins Tench wrote: 'The French revolution of 1789, with all the attendant circumstances of that wonderful and unexpected event, succeeded to amaze us.' Little did he know that the Revolution would soon lead to war between Britain and France and that in less than four and a half years he would be a P.O.W. in Brittany.

The Revolution and the execution of Louis XVI in 1793 whom Tench, doubted was 'a tyrant. . . [or] a sanguinary and perfidious man',² paved the way for the rise of Napoleon. The basic facts of his rise to power are well known. Born Napoleone Buonaparte in Corsica in 1769 he was educated in France from an early age and entered the army. As a young artillery officer Napoleon distinguished himself during the siege of Toulon in 1793 and was quickly promoted to Brigadier-General by Robespierre. He later helped Barras to suppress the Paris rising in 1795 with a 'whiff of grapeshot' and soon after was given command of the army in Italy. There, though he looked like a boy riding his father's horse, he gained stunning victories over the Austrians at Arcola, Rivoli and Mantua. In 1798 he led an expedition which captured Malta and Egypt. However, Admiral Nelson's destruction of the French fleet in the 'Battle of the Nile' and the French army's inability to capture Acre, thwarted Napoleon's plans for further conquests in the Levant.

Abandoning his floundering army, he returned to France, overthrew the Directory in a *coup d'état* and became First Consul. He then set about reforming the country's administration and laws in a manner which left a permanent imprint. After further military victories at Marengo and Hohenlinden, Napoleon made an initial peace with the Austrians at Lunéville in 1801 and with the British at Amiens in 1802. This brief 'Peace

of Amiens' had significance for Australia, for it was then that the French authorities in Mauritius (then known as the Isle de France) allowed two significant trading expeditions to Port Jackson. These expeditions made the British administration nervous. Not only was Governor King anxious to curtail any possible trade in Mauritian rum, he was also nervous about Mauritius-based, French aggression. Thus, in August 1803, he wrote to Lord Hobart:

'Altho' there is no other inducement for the French to cast their eyes on this country in case of a war but its recommendation for fertility, the spirit of conquest, extending their dominions, &c., yet I consider it my duty most respectfully submitting to your Lordship's consideration the possibility in any future war of the Government of the Isle of France annoying this colony, as the voyage from thence may be done in less than seven weeks; and on the same idea this colony may hereafter annoy the trade of the Spanish settlements on the opposite coasts.'³

The Peace of Amiens also enabled Nicolas Baudin and his scurvy ravaged crew, on their major voyage of exploration in southern waters, to visit Port Jackson safely. Despite Governor King's suspicions of French intentions, the officers and crew of Baudin's ships, the *Naturaliste* and the *Géographe*, received the full hospitality and assistance of the infant British colony. But while in Port Jackson, François Peron, the *Géographe's* naturalist, and Lieutenant Freycinet, under the guise of scientific research, undertook methodical spying in the colony. In fact, Péron later recommended, in a report to Governor Decaen of Mauritius (December 11, 1803), that the newly founded British settlement at Port Jackson 'should be destroyed as soon as possible'. In Péron's opinion, France could 'destroy it easily', but would 'not be able to do so in 25 years time'.⁴

Péron's espionage appears to have been unofficial. Baudin's expedition had never received orders to visit Port Jackson. Yet, in 1810, when Napoleon's attention turned to the East Indies, he wrote to Decrès, the Minister of the Navy, and proposed to 'take the English colony of Jackson'. Napoleon's information on Port Jackson almost certainly came from François Péron's *mémoire politique*.⁵

Port Jackson remained safe from Napoleon. But the most significant repercussion of French attention to this region (aside from scientific discoveries) was that it precipitated British settlement of Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania). Governor King was convinced that Baudin's expedition was a prelude to the establishment of a French settlement. He responded by

despatching Lieutenant Robbins to examine Port Phillip, King Island and other possible sites for a southern British settlement which would pre-empt any French move. Although Port Phillip was initially decided upon, an early party which arrived on the Mornington Peninsula, in October 1803, moved to the Derwent estuary in February 1804 and six months later Hobart was founded.

In the same year as Hobart was established, Napoleon was proclaimed Emperor. In renewed campaigns against his European rivals, he achieved more stunning military victories at Austerlitz (1805), Jena (1806) and Friedland (1807). Nevertheless the Emperor of the French made a profound mistake in invading Spain in 1808. With his inability to fully appreciate sea-power and his fleet resoundingly defeated at Trafalgar in 1805, he failed to subdue Britain. And in 1812 his invasion of Russia led to a horrendous winter retreat. Gradually his enemies began to close in on him and France was invaded by Wellington's army from Spain and by the Allies from Germany. Forced to abdicate at Fontainebleau in April 1814, he was banished to the island of Elba - over which he was given humiliating sovereignty. But in less than a year, in an electrifying 'Hundred Days', Napoleon had escaped, rallied his old generals and troops, deposed the recently restored King Louis XVIII and made a desperate last ditch attempt to secure France's borders at Waterloo in 1815. The miracle was not to be. The Emperor was forced to abdicate yet again and endure stringent exile on the isolated Atlantic island of St Helena until his early death in 1821.

It is not surprising that the life and influence of such an extraordinary man as Napoleon Bonaparte should be well represented in the National Library's collection, whether it be in contemporary periodicals such as the *Sydney Gazette* or in published books. The library has a great many biographies of Napoleon including early works such as an 1827 edition of Sir Walter Scott's *Life of Napoleon Buonaparte* and Baron Karlo Excelimanns' *The Eventful Life of Napoleon Bonapart* published in four volumes in 1828. There are several important contemporary accounts of his campaigns. These include a 1799 Edinburgh edition of François Pommereul's *Campaign of General Buonoparte in Italy*; Sir Robert Thomas Wilson's *Brief Remarks on the Character and Composition of the Russian Army* (1810); Baron Antoine-Henri Jomini's *Traité des grandes opérations militaires* (Paris, 1811); a French edition of Ernst Otto Innocenz Freiherr von Odeleben's account of the 1813 campaign in Saxony (Paris, 1817); and the memoirs of Napoleon's aide-de-camp Comte Jean Rapp (1773-1821) published in London in 1823.

Other significant nineteenth-century inclusions in the collection are Napoleon's *Political Aphorisms* edited by James Alexander Manning (London, 1848); *The Confidential Correspondence of Napoleon Bonaparte with his Brother Joseph Sometime King of Spain* (London, 1855); and most importantly Adolphe Thiers' (1797-1877) monumental twenty volume *History of the Consulate and the Empire of France under Napoleon* (London, 1870). There is also an 1811 legal work on the 'Code Napoléon' and even an 1808 Spanish copy of the controversial 'Imperial catechism' Napoleon ordered printed in an attempt to ensure religious-based submission to civil authority. But perhaps the most surprising item associated with Napoleon in the National Library is a damask tablecloth (measuring 1980 x 365 cm) embroidered with the Imperial crown and the letters 'N.B.'. It was a gift from Mrs Leonila Mealey of London in 1946.

Just as Napoleon in power was a source of great fascination to the nineteenth-century public, so too was Napoleon in exile. In captivity he had little to do but reminisce and mythologize the principal events of his life and ultimately portray himself as a romantic martyr. The National Library possesses an 1823 English edition of Napoleon's own memoirs dictated to the Comte de Montholon and an 1823 Paris edition of the Comte de las Cases' *Mémorial de Sainte-Hélène*. Furthermore, it holds a number of imprints (including an 1822 second edition) of his surgeon Barry Edward O'Meara's book *Napoleon in Exile; A Voice from St. Helen's* and another early medical account, J. Hereau's *Napoléon à Sainte-Hélène* (Paris, 1829). Another example, in the collection, of a memoir by an eager scribe of Napoleon's expostulations, is a signed copy of John Henry Vivian's (1785-1855) *Minutes of a Conversation with Napoleon Bonaparte during his Residence at Elba in January, 1815* (London, 1839).

Napoleon in death was also a source of great curiosity. The National Library possesses several contemporary images of his tomb on St Helena (before his remains were removed to France and placed in a splendid red porphyry sarcophagus in Les Invalides in 1840). These include a pencil and wash sketch by Charles Robert (circa 1825); a watercolour by Augustus Earle (circa 1829) and a lithograph by Edouard Jean Hostein (1833).

Finally, Napoleon himself is well represented in the pictorial collection. In the Rex Nan Kivell Collection there is a 19.6 cm porcelain bust of the emperor; a 1799 mezzotint of 'Le Général Bonaparte' by Pierre Michel Alix (1762-1817); an engraving of Napoleon as First Consul by William Dickinson; and a January 1815 stipple engraving by Robert Cooper of a

portrait by Jacques-Louis David (1718-1824). The Rex Nan Kivell Collection also contains an 1810 stipple engraving of the Empress Josephine (NK3511).

Though Napoleon may have been a distant thunder for Australia, that thunder still echoes in the pages of our early history and among the treasures of our National Library.

Edward Duyker

Sylvania, New South Wales

NOTES

¹ Tench, W. A., *A Complete Account of the Settlement of Port Jackson*, London, 1793

² Ibid.

³ Governor King to Lord Hobart, 7 August, 1803, *Historical Records of Australia*, Series I, vol. IV, p. 358

⁴ A translation of the full text of Péron's *Mémoire politique* can be found in Appendix B of Ernest Scott's *The Life of Captain Matthew Flinders, RN*. Sydney, 1914, pp. 436-64.

⁵ Cornell, C., *Questions Relating to Nicolas Baudin's Australian Expedition, 1800-1804*, Adelaide: Libraries Board of South Australia, 1974, p. 16