

## THE EXHUMATION OF THE EMPEROR'S BODY

The Prince de Joinville, son of King Louis Philippe, in command of the frigate Belle Poule, was given the commission to bring away the body of Napoleon Bonaparte from the island of St Helena. With him went the following former inmates of Longwood: Count Bertrand, with his son Arthur, born at St Helena; Baron Gorgaud, Aide-de camp to the king; Baron Emanuel Las Cases, the son of Count Las Cases; Marchand, one of the Emperor's executors; St Denis Noverray, Pierron and Archambaud, the domestics who had remained with their master to the end; and Coursot, who had been at Longwood during the last two years. La Cases senior, aged seventy-four, was unable to undertake the voyage. It is a singular fact that all who left France with Napoleon in 1815, and went on to St Helena, were alive twenty-five years later.

The Belle Poule arrived in Grahamstown Roads on the 8<sup>th</sup> October, 1840. The Prince de Joinville was hospitably welcomed by the Governor, General Middlemore, and it was arranged that the removal of the coffin to the French frigate should take place on the 15<sup>th</sup> October, the anniversary of the day when the Northumberland, in 1815, reached St Helena with its illustrious passenger.

The exhumation was commenced at midnight on the 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> October, 1840, under the direction of Captain Alexander, R.E.

M. de Rohen Chabot, the special Royal Commissioner, represented the Prince de Joinville.

The Longwood party was admitted inside the wooden railings, with the abbe Coquereau and two choristers, Dr Guillard, surgeon-major of the Belle Poule, and other French Naval officers, and Leroux, the plumber. The English party admitted inside the railings included, among others, Colonel Hodson, whom Napoleon has christened "our giant", and Mr. Darling, who had assisted at the interment.

A detachment of soldiers set to work. It rained without ceasing. The special report of Captain Alexander says:

We first caused the iron railings which surrounded the tomb, together with the strong stone work into which they were fastened, to be removed; we then came to the exterior covering of the grave, which, occupying a space of 11 feet 6 inches in length, and 8 feet 1 inch in breadth, was composed of three slabs of stone, 6 inches thick, enclosed in a second border of masonry. At half-past one this first covering was entirely removed.

On its removal, we discovered a rectangular wall, forming, as we afterwards ascertained, the four sides of a vault, 11 feet in depth, 4 feet 8 inches in breadth, and 8 feet in length. This vault was entirely filled with earth to the depth of about 6 inches from the slabs of stone which had been removed. After having removed the earth, the workmen, at a depth of 6 feet 10 inches, encountered a horizontal layer of Roman cement, extending over the whole space enclosed within the walls, to which it adhered hermetically. This layer having been, at 3 o'clock, entirely laid bare, the undersigned Commissioners descended into the vault, and ascertained that it was perfectly entire and undamaged in any way. The above-mentioned layer of cement having been broken, another layer was discovered beneath it, 10 inches thick, formed of rough-hewn stones, attached by iron tenons; it required four hours and a half of labour to remove the layer. Dr Guillard then purified the tomb by drenching it with chloride, and the slab was raised by order of the undersigned English Commissary, by means of a crab, and laid on the edge of the grave. As soon as the coffin was discovered, all present uncovered their heads, and M. L'abbe Conquereau sprinkled holy water upon it, and recited 'De profundis'.

The undersigned Commissioners then descended, to examine the coffin, which they found in good preservation, excepting a small portion of the lower part, which although it stood on a strong slab, supported on cut stone, was slightly injured. Some sanitary precautions having been taken by Dr Guillard, an express was sent to his Excellency the Governor, to inform him of the progress of the operations, and the coffin was raised out of the vault, and carefully removed to a tent prepared for its reception. At this moment, M. L'abbe, in accordance with the rites of the Catholic Church, read the service used on the taking up of a corpse.

The soldering was slowly cut, and the lid cautiously raised; I then perceived a white covering, which concealed the interior of the coffin, and hid the body from view; it was of wadded satin, with which the coffin was also lined. I raised the covering by one end, and rolling it from the feet to the head, there was presented to view the body of Napoleon, which I immediately recognized, so well was the corpse preserved, and so much truth of expression did the head possess.

Something white, which seemed to have detached itself from the satin, like a light gauze, covered all the coffin contained. The head and forehead, which adhered strongly to the satin, were very much covered with it; but little was to be seen on the lower part of the face, the hands or toes. The body of the Emperor lay in an easy position, the same in which it had been placed in the coffin; the upper limbs laid at their length - the left hand and lower part of the arm resting on the left thigh - the lower limbs slightly bent. The head, a little raised, reposed on the cushion; the capacious skull, the lofty and broad forehead, were covered with yellow integuments, hard and strongly enduring. Beneath the eyelids were to be seen the eyeballs, which had lost little of their fullness and form. The chin itself had suffered no change, and still preserved the type peculiar to the face of

Napoleon.

The remains of the Emperor Napoleon are at present contained in six coffins:

1. A tin coffin

2. A mahogany coffin

3. A leaden coffin

4. A second leaden coffin, separated from the previous one by sawdust and wooden corners.

5. An ebony coffin.

6. An oak coffin, to preserve that of the ebony from injury.

Drawn up at the Island of St Helena, the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the month of October, 1840.

CAPTAIN ALEXANDER, R. E.

REMI GUILLARD, DOCTOR OF MEDICINE,

Phillipe de Rohan Chabot, Commissary of the King

Many of the principal inhabitants of the island followed the passage of the hearse to the boat, dressed in deep mourning. During the whole journey the forts were firing minute guns.

Soldiers of the garrison, their arms reversed, lined both sides of the road the whole distance to the quay. His Royal Highness the Prince de Joinville received the Imperial coffin from the hands of General Middlemore and Captain Alexander, R. E. and thanked them in the name of France, for the testimonies of sympathy and respect which the authorities had exhibited throughout.

The coffin was taken on board at 6.30 p. m. of the 15<sup>th</sup> of October, 1840. It was placed in a mortuary chapel which had been placed between decks. On the 18<sup>th</sup> of October, 1840 the vessel sailed for France.