

Elba and Napoleon

At 8 pm on May 3rd 1814, Napoleon Bonaparte, the former Emperor of the French, arrived in the pretty harbour of Portoferraio on the island of Elba, aboard the British frigate *Undaunted*; he disembarked the next day at 2 pm, to be met by the sub-prefect, local clergy, and other officials. With him were his faithful generals Bertrand, Druot and the former commander of the Imperial Guard, Pierre Cambronne, along with 600 Guardsmen. Ten months later, on the night of Sunday February 26th 1815, he departed under cover of darkness aboard the the brig *L'Inconstant*, the tiny flagship of his equally tiny navy, and embarked on the inveterate gambler's last throw of the dice - the so-called Hundred Days in which he recovered France and almost defeated the British and Prussians at Waterloo.

Napoleon's exile on the island of Elba is one of those footnotes of history that are always rather intriguing. What must it have been like for this towering military and political genius to be reduced to sovereignty over a mere 220 square kilometres and 11,400 inhabitants, a speck of rock in plain sight of the coast of Italy, just 10 kilometres away? At times, it must have seemed like a sick joke - Napoleon himself disparagingly referred to Elba as "an operetta kingdom" - yet at other times it seemed as if he had resigned himself to his fate and was content to live in a form of retirement.

Mind you, Napoleon's version of retirement would exhaust most people. During his 300 days on the island, he reorganised his new kingdom's defences, gave money to the poor, reformed the customs and excise system, repaired the barracks, built a hospital, paved parts of Portoferraio for the first time, organised regular rubbish collections, set up a court of appeal, and established an inspectorate to widen roads and build bridges. In between times, he read voraciously (and left a library of 1,100 volumes to the city of Portoferraio), played with his pet monkey, grew avenues of mulberry trees, and planted vineyards. I rather suspect that any modern government that was this active would be politically unassailable!

Imagine, too, the effect on the people of the island when this semi-mythical man, demonised and lionised in about equal proportions across Europe, was deposited among them. What must they have thought? They had had little say in the matter. In fact, the decision to send the defeated emperor to Elba was one shrouded in mystery: another emperor, Alexander II of Russia, had simply announced it, leaving his other allies with no choice but to accede. Quite what his motives were are hard to discern. Partly practicality, placing Napoleon somewhere he could be easily monitored, and partly a desire to humble the great ogre by putting him on the smallest, most insignificant piece of territory he could find, albeit one where his personal safety could reasonably be assured.

In any event, history records that the night before his disembarkation from the British ship of the line *Undaunted*, most of the three thousand inhabitants of Portoferraio placed candles in their

windows as a sign of welcome. Proclamations telling the Elbans that Napoleon had ‘chosen’ their island for his ‘sojourn’ because of the kindness of its people and the mildness of its climate were posted up all over the capital, and thus flattered, the islanders worked through the early morning to build a stage upon which Mayor Traditi could welcome their new sovereign and hand him the keys to the town. The crossing from ship to shore took a full hour, so crowded was the harbour with sightseers in their rowboats, and there was a big crowd on the quay, among them a sergeant who Napoleon had decorated years earlier; on being recognised, the man wept and the wily emperor had conquered yet another crowd.

Today, Elba is a very popular holiday destination for Tuscans; a mere three hours from Florence by road and ferry, it is accessible and yet it also feels remote. Leaving Piombino, the sheer volume of ferry traffic is a testament to its popularity: in the summer months there are three ferry companies that service the island, providing a virtually continuous service every half hour or so. Forty minutes after leaving the rather unlovely industrial port behind us, our Toremar ferry was sliding into the sheltered harbour of Portoferraio, which looks much as it must have when Napoleon arrived two centuries ago, a semicircle of water lined with shops and warehouses (and restaurants, which probably weren’t there in Napoleon’s day).

Beyond the waterfront, the arch of the so-called water gate took us into the town centre and the Piazza della Repubblica, which in Napoleon’s time would have been called the Piazza d’Armi. What might once have been a fine open space is now pretty much a car park, ringed with shops and restaurants, the town’s fine Duomo at one end facing off against the town hall at the other. As piazzas go, fairly unremarkable.

Portoferraio gets its name from the iron ore that used to be the island’s principal export, a trade that was important enough to justify the investment in substantial fortifications to protect it when the Medici took over the place in 1546. Forts Falcone and Stella dominate town and harbour from their rocky perches at the eastern and western extremities of the little peninsula, and the Linguella tower protects the harbour entrance. Thus protected, early nineteenth century Portoferraio would have been as secure a capital as any former emperor might desire.

A steep walk through narrow back streets and up long flights of stairs brings the visitor to the retired emperor’s city pad, the Villa Mulini. The building’s official title is actually the ‘Palazzina dei Mulini’, which seems appropriate for a place that is rather larger than your average villa, but nowhere near grand enough to really wear the title of palace with pride. Still, it’s a pretty nice retirement option, sited high on the cliffs where there is a breeze even on the hottest days. In fact, there were once two windmills on the site, long demolished, from which the place gets its name, ‘mulini’ being Italian for ‘windmills’.

Originally two rather squat buildings that had once been used as a cottage by the island's governor, its position atop a sheer sea cliff and overlooked by the guns of forts Stella and Falcone made it an attractive option from a security point of view, and it was conveniently distant from the hubbub of the town. So the emperor bought it and set about refurbishing the place by adding another storey where he intended to accommodate his wife Marie-Louise and their young son when they were reunited, an event he longed for and that had been promised under the terms of his abdication; he was not to know that this was never going to happen, since Marie-Louise's father, Emperor Francis of Austria, was determined to prevent her from doing so, in violation of the terms of the peace treaty.

Inside, the bedrooms and more intimate living rooms are all on the ground floor, all furnished with items from the imperial period, either originals or reproductions. A book-lined study contains Napoleon's desk, and would once have housed a very impressive library which he had compiled from all over Europe. In another room his campaign bed is displayed, an affair of iron and canvas, a reminder of one of this man's many contradictions: though he had at his disposal such sumptuous palaces as Versailles, the Tuileries, and Fontainebleau, he was also at heart a soldier for whom this simple contraption was as comfortable as a four poster.

The upper floor is dominated by a large and airy reception room whose floor to ceiling windows open to the garden, giving it a wonderfully open and airy feel. It is easy to imagine the diminutive emperor holding court here, charming his rusticated and provincial subjects with his quick smile, boundless energy and formidable memory for faces and names. A man who understood the importance of maintaining appearances, he made sure that a proper court protocol was devised and strictly enforced, both in the palace and as he travelled around the island. Yet, far from looking down on his Elban subjects, Napoleon seems to have treated them with courtesy and affection, surreal though his situation must have seemed compared to the glittering recent past.

Apart from the accommodation for the Emperor, the house eventually became a home to his mother, Letizia, the fierce old matriarch who was probably the only woman other than Josephine of whom Napoleon was genuinely afraid, and his sister Pauline, the only one of his rather grasping brood of siblings who came to join him in exile. She sounds like she would have been rather fun to know. Possessing the same furiously energetic disposition as her brother, she was fond of sailors and loved a party; she was also a natural conspirator and no doubt served as a clandestine carrier of messages back and forth to the mainland as Napoleon's eventual escape was planned.

Villa Mulini wasn't Napoleon's only residence on the island; he paid 180,000 francs to buy a farmhouse in San Martino, virtually in the middle of the island, which he proceeded to have decorated as a summer residence, in a lavish style that nostalgically recalled his victorious time in the Egyptian campaign. Having got it started with his usual energy and enthusiasm, he seems to have got bored by it, and in the end only ever spent a few nights there.

‘What a pity the man wasn’t lazy’, the slippery but witty French statesman Talleyrand once quipped about Napoleon. His energy was legendary, and even on Elba, his supposed ‘isle of rest’, he seemed to be forever in motion, riding all over the island accompanied by his faithful general Bertrand, or the supervisor of the island’s mines, Andre Pons, or occasionally the British commissioner to the island, Neil Campbell. Bertrand at least had become inured to his master’s ways over many years, but the other two both complained of their exhaustion after a day spent with the emperor. Inspecting mines, ordering the building of roads, planning upgrades to the port and to fortifications, reforming the taxation systems, issuing a new constitution and overhauling the laws, designing a new flag, drilling his little army, obsessively supervising the renovation of the Mulini, all this and more kept him occupied and consumed all the energies of his aides.

But it wasn’t enough. A few days after his forty-fifth birthday, the villagers at Marciano Marina, on the northern coast of the island, reported seeing two women and a child landed on the beach there. The immediate assumption was that empress Maria-Louise had arrived at last, albeit in clandestine fashion. In fact, the visitors were Napoleon’s sometime mistress, the Polish countess Marie Walewska, her sister, and Alexandre, Marie’s young son by Napoleon. The little party was taken up into the hills behind the town to a little house attached to a shrine which had been commandeered for the occasion by the emperor, where they spent two days with him before sailing off again, just as mysteriously.

Was the visit purely a matter of pleasure? Or did Walewska bring Napoleon news or letters from the outside world? She later hinted as much, suggesting that Napoleon considered his exile temporary and that she had brought information he needed to help him decide when would be the most propitious moment to end it. The briefness of the stay, and the presence of her sister and child in a small and cramped hermitage, which would no doubt have dampened any amorous intentions, suggest that the visit was a matter more of business than pleasure. This was still some six months before his final escape, and it may be that at this stage he was simply weighing up his options and keeping an eye on events.

Walking in his garden on a bright summer’s day, it is hard to resist posing the question of why, given such idyllic surrounds, Napoleon would have ever wanted to leave. The emperor himself frequently said that he was content to see out his days here, and that his days of world domination were done. But perhaps he was just gulling his ‘jailers’, the commissioners who were appointed to make sure he behaved himself. Of course, such a tiny dominion would probably never have been enough for such a titanic force of nature, and his erstwhile enemies, in their foolishness, also did their level best to offer him sufficient provocation to take his final gamble. They withheld the payments that had been promised for his upkeep, and they denied him access to his wife and son. But most of all, the Bourbons, having returned to power without learning or forgetting anything, soon reduced France to such a state of discontent that Napoleon was pretty sure he would get a good reception if he

came back. And so, on that dark and moonless February night, he slipped aboard *L'Inconstant* and sailed off to his destiny at Waterloo.

For most modern visitors to Elba, Napoleon's exile is just a matter of no more than mild interest, since most come to soak up the sun and enjoy the island's pleasant beaches and resorts. But the story of how one of history's giants came to live in a lilliputian kingdom for a while, before going off to face a tragic destiny that ended in yet another island exile on a much more inhospitable rock in the middle of the Atlantic is a fascinating one, full of odd little mysteries and speculation. Ideal territory in many ways for a novel; to the best of my knowledge the only book that has written along these lines is A.P Herbert's *Why Waterloo?*, which I read many, many years ago. Perhaps one day I will have a go at it myself.