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Emilio Ocampo, *The Emperor's Last Campaign. A Napoleonic Empire in America*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2009. xx + 503pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliographical essay, and index. \$39.95 U.S. (cl). 978-0-8173-1646-4.

Review by Malcolm Crook, Keele University, United Kingdom.

“The misfortune to us at the moment is, that Buonaparte remains in existence. Saddled as the world must be with this fallen despot, it is of the utmost moment to place him where he can never disturb its repose again.”^[1] Such was the prescient apprehension expressed by Sir Charles Stewart, Castlereagh’s half-brother, in 1814, when he learned of proposals to place Napoleon on the Mediterranean isle of Elba. This location was indeed insufficiently secure and, less than a year later, during the astonishing episode of the Hundred Days the Emperor would return to his imperial throne in France. After defeat at Waterloo the question of ‘what to do with Boney’, as the British put it, became a matter of vital importance. This time St Helena, an isolated spot in the South Atlantic, was chosen as a much more suitable destination. Napoleon would spend the last six years of his life there, but his British jailers were understandably nervous that their illustrious captive might yet prove hard to hold.

Emilio Ocampo’s *The Emperor’s Last Campaign* demonstrates that Hudson Lowe, who became governor of St Helena shortly after Napoleon’s arrival, had good reason to lose sleep over the situation. Despite the remoteness of the island, the precautions taken to restrict shipping in the surrounding area and the additional fortifications that were constructed, there were frequent alarms. Napoleon himself was closely watched and restrictions of movement were imposed on his person, yet he and his entourage continued to communicate with the outside world. However, the ‘emperor’, as he insisted on being addressed, placed his hopes in a change of regime in Europe and was not disposed to countenance the indignities of escape. To that extent the title of this study is somewhat misleading, because Napoleon did not actively seek to end his captivity by military means; as he insisted, he would only leave ‘with his hat on’ (p. 79). The campaign that aimed to spring him from St Helena and create a new Napoleonic empire in Latin America was actually the work of his followers.

There were, to be sure, plenty of Bonapartists in Europe, not least in Britain, where sympathisers around the Holland House circle were bold enough to raise questions about Napoleon’s island prison in parliament.^[2] In France, by contrast, any machinations had to be conducted clandestinely, given the crackdown imposed by the re-restored Bourbons. However, the real base for operations to free the emperor was established in the United States, where Joseph Bonaparte had taken refuge (Napoleon having, to his later regret, spurned suggestions that he too seek asylum across the Atlantic in the wake of Waterloo), along with a series of Napoleonic veterans and erstwhile collaborators.^[3] Most notable among the former was general Lallemand, who set up a French exile colony, first in Alabama, then in Texas, while the latter included Regnaud de Saint-Jean-d’Angély, a count of the Empire. This diaspora served as the seedbed for manifold plots and conspiracies linked to Napoleon’s escape, not only on account of its greater proximity to St. Helena but, above all, because of opportunities offered by the dissolution of the Latin American empires of Spain and Portugal, which lay even closer to their quarry. The prospects for liberating Napoleon were inextricably linked to the struggle for independence in Central and Southern America.

Books on Napoleon, not to mention his battles and generals, are still rolling off the press, and the anticipated crescendo in 2015 will surely turn this flow into a flood.[4] Much of this output is repetitive, but at least some new ground is being broken during the bicentenary. This particular volume, an English version of the longer work that appeared in Spanish in 2007, is certainly an original piece of work. Based on extensive consultation of published sources and research in both public and private archives, many of them located in Britain, it has now appeared in a good English translation thanks to a new Atlantic Crossings series edited by Rafe Blaufarb.

The Emperor's Last Campaign is a veritable mine of well-documented information. There are 100 pages of notes, though only a brief bibliographical essay is included in this version, and it is crammed full of fascinating material on a galaxy of characters. Yet it relies far more on aggregation than analysis: in the effort to be comprehensive little is omitted and it is often hard to distinguish wood from trees. The resulting account thus tends to tax the reader, to whom few concessions are made as the narrative proceeds, in sections, from one year to the next, from defeat to demise, 1815–1821. A list of characters, for a cast as long as *War and Peace*, would certainly have helped, and the absence of any maps is a matter of great regret, for few of us carry a mental image of the South Atlantic or enjoy familiarity with the topography of St. Helena. An acquaintance with the early nineteenth-century history of Latin America is equally essential in order to appreciate the historical context in which conspirators and liberators were moving.

In sum, more critical reflection is required on the dizzying activity that is relayed here. Should Governor Lowe's recurring nightmares, like the reports of worried British or French diplomats located in America, be taken so seriously? Too many plots were flights of fancy that had never stood any chance of success, the ranks of conspirators always riddled with spies, while rumour abounded. The idea of floating barrels into a secluded bay on St. Helena, where they would unfold into boats, like the notion of using tiny steamships designed to circumvent the island blockade, were pure fantasies. Most far-fetched of all was the mysterious construction of a submarine on the river Thames, which was apparently discovered and destroyed on a dark November night in 1820. Ocampo, who approvingly cites some lines from Tennyson on his flyleaf— "The world which credits what is done, Is cold to all that might have been"—is too willing to credit similar hare-brained schemes, which were far from ever coming to fruition.

What this complicated story really tells us is that widespread sympathy for Napoleon burgeoned in the wake of Waterloo, following his revolutionary re-incarnation during the Hundred Days. The campaign he so effectively waged on St Helena created a mighty legend of the emperor-liberator, while the basis for his posthumous image was being laid all over the western world. This latter-day Prometheus on his lonely rock attracted not just rebels and romantics—individuals like the Chilean independence leader of Irish descent, Bernardo O'Higgins, perfectly fitting that bill—but many dedicated radicals too. Henry Hunt, the celebrated British democrat, was overreacting to news of Napoleon's death when he described him as "the most wonderful man that ever existed" (p. 397), but his ill-judged remark is indicative of pronounced Bonapartist enthusiasm after 1815.

Most important, as this study amply demonstrates, was the active role played by *grogards*, the Napoleonic veterans who possessed not only the military expertise, but also the incentive, once the Restoration had cast them aside, to play a vital part in promoting further unrest. A host of soldiers from the *grande armée* became active in the Americas, serving under French generals like Lallemand or Brayer.[5] Counterparts who remained in Europe, often masons and members of secret societies, were subsequently involved in the rash of revolutions that erupted in the Mediterranean around 1820, as Napoleon's long shadow continued to provoke paranoia among the allied powers. Indeed, the overthrow of the Bourbons in Spain, with which this particular outbreak of insurrection began, would signal the end of its imperial hegemony in Latin America.

To suggest, as Ocampo does, that Napoleon was ‘committed to the independence of the Spanish colonies’ (p. xx) is, however, highly debatable. More likely the emperor hoped to annex fresh territories to replace the losses France had sustained in America and the Caribbean. However, following his invasion of Spain in 1808, the Hispanic empire, already undermined by preceding revolutions in the western Atlantic, was beginning to unravel. This age of unrest, spanning the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, would in fact constitute the greatest upheaval in the southern hemisphere since 1492. Ironically, independence was to be achieved in Mexico or Chile just as Napoleon was reaching the end of his life on St. Helena. The successor states were obliged to look elsewhere for a champion.

There was, needless to say, acute rivalry among the maritime powers over the fate of Latin America, with wariness regarding British ambitions in the area shared by both the French and the Americans. In the end the USA would prove the chief beneficiary, expanding at the expense of Spain when Florida and Texas became part of the Union. Still more significant were the precocious but neglected experiments in democratic nation-building that ensued in Latin America, even if Ocampo is somewhat dismissive of their achievements. Nonetheless, working on the vast canvas of the western hemisphere in this highly detailed study, he integrates the histories of two continents and in the process reveals their interconnections. Above all, his effort reminds us that the age of Napoleon was a truly global one, though its transnational dimensions are only just beginning to be explored.[6]

NOTES

[1] Sir Charles Stewart to Lord Bathurst, 7 April 1814, cited in Sir Archibald Alison, *Lives of Lord Castlereagh and Sir Charles Stewart*, 3 vols (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood, 1861), vol. ii, p. 460.

[2] Stuart Semmel, *Napoleon and the British* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004).

[3] Paul F. Brunyee, *Napoleon’s Britons and the St Helena Decision* (Stroud: The History Press, 2009) and Brian Unwin, *Terrible Exile. The Last Days of Napoleon on St Helena* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010) are just two examples of recent publications covering the same, final years of Bonaparte’s life.

[4] Rafe Blaufarb, *Bonapartists in the Borderlands: French Exiles and Refugees on the Gulf Coast, 1815-1835* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006).

[5] Patrick Puigmal, ‘Indépendance, politique et pouvoir au Chili et en Argentine : attitudes des officiers napoléoniens dans les armées de libération (1817-1830)’, *Napoleonica. La Revue*, 2 (2009).

[6] David Armitage and Sanjay Subrahmanyam eds, *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context, c.1760-1840* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009) and Richard Bessel, Nicholas Guyatt and Jane Rendall eds, *War, Empire and Slavery, 1770-1830* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010).

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