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Brian Unwin, *Terrible Exile: The Last Days of Napoleon on St. Helena*. London: I. B. Tauris, 2014. 231 pp. Illustrations, maps, bibliography, and index. \$22.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-1780767383.

Review by Ralph Ashby, Eastern Illinois University.

The exile of Napoleon on St. Helena has been a topic of peculiar fascination for two centuries, indeed, virtually from the moment the erstwhile Emperor was confined to the island. To be sure, this fascination may be largely a matter of taste, depending upon the interests of the individual. Those interested in the topic clearly include author Brian Unwin, and so his work in this case would appear to be a labor of love. Unwin is not alone in this. The story of Napoleon's exile has inspired dramas and films, including *Eagle in a Cage* (1965 and 1972) and *Monsieur N* (2003). Unwin acknowledges that there are already many other written works on the exile.

The author therefore attempts to make clear in his Preface (pp. xiii-xv) his motives and goals for writing the book. His stated desire at least partially to rehabilitate Sir Hudson Lowe is all well and good, although hardly necessary. Those who have already read enough Napoleonic history to know who Lowe was are unlikely to regard him as a true villain in any case. Overall, Unwin's Preface and Introduction (p. 1-9) are rather awkward and lack focus and do not persuade the reader that there is a great need for this particular work. Likewise, the first chapter, "From Waterloo to Rochefort," is not extremely insightful or helpful.

Matters improve, for the book if not for Napoleon, once Unwin gets the Emperor on St. Helena. There, his research and knowledge allow for a smooth and competent narrative. Unwin provides some keen insight regarding the other "Principle Characters" on St. Helena, whether they be the British captors or the French who accompanied Napoleon into exile. The "four evangelists" who served Napoleon's purposes with their memoirs include Henri Bertrand, Gaspard Gourgaud, Charles de Montholon, and Emmanuel de Las Cases, and they feature heavily in Unwin's narrative. Yet, their purpose in the book is limited. They are there to help propel the drama. What they wrote is of secondary importance, but why they wrote it, and what they did on the island, matters more to Unwin. The British characters, less familiar to many readers, are shown empathetically, their frustrations and trials apparent as they are portrayed.

Criticisms of Lowe from some of the British officers who served with him are in many ways more scathing than what he received at the hands of French authors. Major Gideon Gorrequer's diaries are discussed with a certain relish (pp. 149-153). The merciless lambasting of Lowe by British as well as French critics rather undercut the author's earlier stated wish to rehabilitate the St. Helena Governor. This is perhaps for the best, as what actually emerges is a believable depiction of a flawed human being in a position of responsibility.

What of the portrayal of Napoleon? Can we learn anything about the man from the narrative of his exile? Unwin is nothing if not fair in this regard. What we find is ultimately consistent with what we know, or what we think we know, about Napoleon. The friendship with Betsy Balcombe, the attempts at gardening, the trysts with Madame Montholon: all are familiar to those with a passing knowledge of the

exile on St. Helena, although such tales will be new for some readers. Throughout the exile, Napoleon did not lack for reading materials, nor did his household lack for supplies of food and wine. Nonetheless, as the narrative progresses, readers can well expect that Napoleon will certainly die of boredom sooner or later, unless another illness overtakes him first.

The book would be better if Unwin's knowledge of the Napoleonic period in general were stronger. As it is, there are a number of historical gaffes sprinkled throughout the narrative, as the author attempts to give us some "back story" or construct context. An example includes the description of the King's German Legion as "mercenaries" (p. 90), a very disappointing mischaracterization of what was essentially a Hanoverian Army in exile, loyal to George III in his previous role as Elector. Another misleading fumble is when we learn of Napoleon's "...inauspicious start—he had only passed out forty-second out of fifty-eighth in the École Militaire in September 1785..." (p 191). Unwin inexcusably fails to mention that in so doing, Napoleon had completed a three-year course of study in only one year, at the remarkable age of sixteen. There are numerous other errors of a similar nature, showing an apparent lack of in-depth knowledge of the Napoleonic era. To list them all would be tedious and petty. It is a truly unfortunate problem, and detracts from the overall quality of the book. The fact that some readers will not recognize such errors is the opposite of an excuse for making them.

Perhaps the greatest strength of the book is Unwin's thorough familiarity with the island of St. Helena itself. Through his visits and research, he is an authority on the subject. The author's descriptions of the island add an extra dimension to his narrative that would have been impossible had he not been so familiar with it. Because the island is so inaccessible and unvisited, Unwin has something concrete to contribute in this regard. Other strengths Unwin brings to his work are his fluency in French and his painstaking and thorough research when limited to the topic of Napoleon's exile. In addition, Unwin is impressively familiar with St. Helena historiography, perhaps more so than any other Anglophone author. Yet, even here there is a bit of a problem. With so many monographs on the same topic available, what does Unwin's labor of love offer to Napoleonic scholarship?

The topic of Napoleon's exile has not been neglected in extant general works and biographies. Many of these works are of very high quality. Thorough treatments of Napoleon at St. Helena are given in Felix Markham's *Napoleon* [1], J. Christopher Herold's *The Age of Napoleon* [2], and David P. Jordan's *Napoleon and the Revolution* [3], just to name a few. Such works have the advantage of inherent context, and the period of exile can serve simultaneously as an epilogue, a denouement, or as a vehicle for analysis, perspective, and evaluation. Is there then a scholarly purpose for a new narrative monograph dealing with Napoleon on St. Helena? Perhaps such a purpose is not necessary. Perhaps the human drama, the pathos, the irony of a great fall from power is sufficient. If so, then the target audience is not necessarily professional historians. Yet, even if he is aiming at a broader intended audience, other types of challenges present themselves to the author. Are the readers to be moved, inspired, depressed, or merely entertained? If it is not to be a work of quasi-fiction, such as *Eagle in a Cage* or *Monsieur N*, then an author must decide how much historical detail to include, and how to present it. The reader needs to care about the story, so exposition becomes vital. Otherwise, if the reader is already at least partially knowledgeable about the topic, then context and accuracy become vital. Unwin's project was full of potential pitfalls from the beginning, whether he was aware of such risks or not. It is safe to say he would not have been dissuaded anyway. A labor of love is not turned away by such considerations.

NOTES

[1] Felix Markham, *Napoleon* (New York: New American Library, 1963), pp. 241-254 passim.

[2] J. Christopher Herold, *The Age of Napoleon* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), pp. 424-437 passim.

[3] David P. Jordan, *Napoleon and the Revolution* (London and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), pp. 230-237, 273-283, 296-298 passim.

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