

Napoleon's Exile to St Helena

By Martin Levy

In memory of Trevor Hearl

An important and recently rediscovered drawing by Joseph William Rubidge of the exiled Napoleon (1769-1821) on his deathbed in Longwood House on the remote South Atlantic island of St Helena, was exhibited at the 1997 International Fine Art and Antique Dealers Show.¹ (*fig. 1*) This celebrated image, previously only known from an engraving,² was later given 'imperial' treatment by the *New York Times* in a feature entitled 'A Conquerer Captured in His Final Moments'.³ The article concluded with an apposite quotation from Lieutenant George Wood (1796-1874), who at one stage owned the drawing: 'When pale in death upon his lowly bed / As in deep sleep the mighty chieftan lay.' Wood, who was present at Napoleon's funeral as well as at his exhumation in 1840, published *Poems* (1853), including four referring to Napoleon.⁴

Of all historical postscripts, Napoleon's exile to St Helena (1815-21) perhaps ranks as high in the public imagination as



Figure 1 (detail). Joseph William Rubidge, *Napoleon on his Deathbed*, 21 May 1821. Pencil and grey wash. David and Constance Yates.



Figure 2. J.B. Coombs, after Benjamin Robert Haydon, *Napoleon Musing at St. Helena*. Engraving. Private collection.

any other. As the painter Benjamin Robert Haydon (1786-1846) wryly observed, the ‘poetry’ of his ‘melancholy conclusion ... rendered him already as much a character in history as Mithridates or Hannibal’.⁵ The engraving *Napoleon Musing at St. Helena* (fig. 2) after Haydon’s *Napoleon Musing After Sunset* (1829) depicts the brooding Emperor in a resigned and thoughtful mood.⁶

Over twenty years ago Dr Susan Conner, of Tift College, listed 435 books dealing specifically with Napoleon’s final six years, and the number has since increased.⁷ The modern historian has the benefit of innumerable first-hand accounts of Napoleon’s detention, voyage and exile, but none is without prejudice or rancour. In assessing any aspect of the fallen Emperor’s sojourn on St Helena every word written needs to be dissected with care. It is impossible to find a truly impartial contemporary assessment of Napoleon’s treatment, from either side of the Channel; the same invariably applies to modern accounts.

From the moment that Napoleon came into British hands, the Government was determined to transport him well out of harm’s way; to put him in a place where his charismatic power could no longer exert influence. As the Prime Minister Lord Liverpool (1770-1828) wrote in June 1815: ‘We incline at present to the opinion that the best place of custody would be at a distance from Europe, and that the Cape of Good Hope, or St Helena would be the proper stations for the purpose.’⁸ With what was considered by many, not just the Whig opposition, as a blatant disregard for the Constitution, Parliament was by-passed and the decision on exile taken by Ministers alone. In the face of vociferous dissent, the press was used to put a positive gloss on what was indeed a *fait accompli*.

In its issue dated 23-25 October 1815, a week or so after Napoleon’s arrival on St Helena, *The London Packet*, in common with other newspapers, including *The Times*, reported the:

HOUSE AND FURNITURE FOR BUONAPARTE — The Prince Regent, that the modern Themistocles, who sought refuge from fate, under his Royal Highness’s protection, should be furnished in his banishment with every possible gratification and comfort which the taste and fitness of an ample supply for his domestic economy was calculated to afford, last month issued, thro’ Earl Bathurst, to one of the most ingenious artists of the Metropolis [the cabinet maker George Bullock (1782/83-1818)], an order comprising every species of *furniture, linen, glass-ware, clothes, music and musical instruments*, which *Buonaparte and the whole of his suite* can possibly want for a period of more than three years.⁹

There were also voices who supported and favoured the course of action taken in the name of the Prince Regent, later George IV (1762-1830). His sister, Queen Charlotte of Wurtemberg, wrote: ‘Allow me to offer you my warm congratulations on [Napoleon’s detention] and to say how proud I feel that even our enemies acknowledge the generosity of the British nation ...’ She continued urging her brother to ‘unite prudence with lenity ...’. Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832), writing a little later, accepted that there had been debate over his exile, but opined that if

a person so formidable as Napoleon should be debarred from the power of making a second avatar on the earth, there is perhaps no place in the world where so ample a degree of security could have been reconciled with the same degree of personal freedom to the captive, as St. Helena.¹⁰

Popular opinion was captured by William Warden (1777-1849), the surgeon on board the *Northumberland*, which conveyed Napoleon on his voyage into captivity. Indeed the opening paragraph of his *Letters from St. Helena* confirms the fascination in Napoleon’s fate:

Having sailed ... on board the ship which carried Napoleon Buonaparte to St. Helena, and having remained several months on the Island, the enquiries concerning him, on my return to England, were so repeated, that I may be said to have been in a state of constant persecution from the curiosity which prevails



Figure 3. Lt. Colonel Planat, *Napoleon on the Bellerophon*, 24 July 1815. Pen and ink. Private collection.

Figure 4. Denzil Ibbetson, *Napoleon on the Northumberland*, 1815. Pen, ink and watercolour. Private collection.



This sketch of Napoleon was made on board the Northumberland
 when he was on board the Bellerophon, by the Commodore Denzil Ibbetson
 who gave it to me in that Island. *Richard Hook*

respecting that extraordinary character.¹¹

Describing the period when Napoleon was on board the *Bellerophon*, prior to being transferred to the *Northumberland*, Warden recorded:

Such has been the attention which this eminent person has attracted; so great the daily crowd of boats, and other vessels filled with curious spectators, (some of whom it is confidently said, have come from remote parts of the country, and even from London,) to snatch such a glimpse of him as could be caught at the distance they were obliged to keep ...¹²

When Napoleon gave up his fate to the British, he appealed directly to the Prince Regent in his famous letter, dated 13 July 1815:

Altesse Royale,

En Butte aux factions qui divisent mon pays et à l'inimitié des plus grandes puissances de l'Europe, j'ai terminé ma carrière politique, et je viens comme Thémistocle m'asseoir sur le foyer du peuple Britannique. Je me mets sous la protection de ses loix, que je réclame de votre Altesse Royale comme au plus puissant, au plus constant, et plus généraux de mes Ennemis.¹³

The small pen and ink caricature (fig. 3) is inscribed and dated on the reverse: 'Napoleon Bonaparte - / on Board the Bellerophon / July 24th 1815. / In Tor-bay - drawn by / his

Chamberlain -'. The artist is Lt. Col. de Planat, one of Napoleon's officers on the *Bellerophon*, but not one of those who accompanied him to St Helena. The atmosphere on board on the day in question, as Napoleon approached Dartmouth, was captured by the Captain, Rear-Admiral Sir Frederick Maitland (1777-1839):

At day-break on the 24th July, we were close to Dartmouth. Count Bertrand¹⁴ went into the cabin, and informed Buonaparte of it, who came up on deck about half-past four, and remained on the poop until the ship anchored at Torbay. He talked with admiration of the boldness of the coast; saying "You have in that respect a great advantage over France, which is surrounded by rocks and dangers." On opening Torbay, he was much struck by the beautiful scenery; and exclaimed, "What a beautiful country! It very much resembles the bay of Porto Ferrajo, in Elba."¹⁵

The excitement generated by Napoleon's arrival is attested to by the scene of the *Bellerophon* at anchor off Torbay, incorporating another Planat profile of Napoleon dated 25th July, recorded in an engraving speedily published on 3 August 1815.¹⁶

On 7 August 1815 Napoleon and the entourage who were to accompany him to St Helena boarded the *Northumberland*, under the command of Sir George Cockburn (1772-1853), for the seven week journey. The tedium of the voyage is captured in what would appear to be a version of a well-known portrait (fig. 4) by Denzil Ibbetson (1788-1857).¹⁷ On several occasions in his diary, Cockburn described Napoleon's appearance and



Figure 5. The house of Henry Porteous, where Napoleon spent his first night on St Helena. Photograph, 1920s. Private collection.

Figure 6 (right). Anonymous, Longwood House, St Helena, circa 1821. Pen, ink and watercolour. Private collection.



demeanour. For example, in the entry for 19 August, Cockburn noted:

... General Buonaparte, since on board the "Northumberland," has kept nearly the same hours: he gets up late (between ten and eleven); he then has his breakfast (of meat and wine) in his bed-room, and continues there in his *déshabillé* until he dresses for dinner, generally between three and four in the afternoon; he then comes out of his bed cabin and either takes a short walk on deck or plays a game of chess with one of his Generals until dinner (which is five o'clock).¹⁸

On 25 August, Cockburn reported that Napoleon 'was on deck but little before or after dinner; he seemed to have lost his appetite, and was in low spirits ...'.¹⁹ Perhaps it was on just such an occasion that Ibbetson made his drawing. The inscription reads: 'This sketch of Napoleon was made on board the Northumberland, / Man of War, on her voyage to St Helena by Mr. Commissary Ibbetson / who gave it to me in the Island / Theodore E Hook'

Ibbetson, who was one of the few officers to remain on St Helena throughout the exile, made several sketches of

Napoleon on the Northumberland, and others of him and his entourage on the Island.²⁰ Theodore Hook (1788-1841), a 'doubtful character'²¹ was briefly in St Helena on his way back from Mauritius under a cloud for his careless handling of the financial affairs on that island. He penned, while trying to get back into the good graces of the Government, *Facts, Illustrative of the Treatment of Napoleon Buonaparte in Saint Helena* (1819).²²

Arnold Chaplin, in his chapter 'The Artists in St. Helena'²³ recalls that 'those in St. Helena who possessed any artistic talent were constantly seeking opportunities for executing a "Portrait of Napoleon from Life" or were engaged in sketching or painting views of Longwood and other places of interest on the Island.'²⁴ Listed alphabetically from Frederick Allison to George Welsh, more than 50 names are recorded.

While some attributable drawings survive, many others are by unidentified hands.

Napoleon and his entourage, which included Comte de las Cases (1776-1842), Général Gourgaud (1783-1852), Général Comte Bertrand and Comte de Montholon (1783-1853), set foot on St Helena on 15 October 1815. The ex-Emperor's first night was spent at an inn in the port of Jamestown (*fig. 5*) belonging to Henry Porteous, who was in charge of the East India Company's gardens on the island. For the next nearly two months, Napoleon resided in a pavil-

ion (still standing, and now a small Napoleonic museum) attached to The Briars, a house belonging to William Balcombe (1779-1829), superintendent of public sales for the East India Company. The house is situated on the road between Jamestown and Napoleon's home for the rest of his life, the Longwood estate.

In a letter dated 22 October 1815, Cockburn informs the Admiralty in London about possibilities for Napoleon's residence:

...having visited the different houses & estates through-



Figure 7. Lt. Colonel Basil Jackson, *The Longwood Estate, St Helena*, circa 1821. Watercolour. Private collection.

out the Island & the Governor ... most fully consenting with me in considering Longwood not only the best, but the only place on the Island calculated to answer for the future residence of Genl. Bonaparte, I have not hesitated in fixing upon it ... Longwood is detached from the general inhabited parts of the Island ... is more distant from parts of the Coast of the Island always accessible to boats ... The house is certainly small, but it is I think equal in size and convenience to any of the others I have seen on the Island (out of Town) excepting the Govrs Plantation House ...²⁵

Longwood House, which had been the Governor's summer residence, required considerable work, but

Napoleon was eventually able to move in on 10 December 1815. The house was only intended as temporary accommodation pending the construction of a new house on the estate. In the event, although a new building was eventually completed, Napoleon never moved in.

Many surviving views, sufficiently similar to allow that they have a degree of value for their accuracy, depict Longwood House. The anonymous watercolour (*fig. 6*), probably painted in 1821, shows 'The house in which the Emperor Napoleon expired after a confinement of nearly six



Figure 8. New Longwood, St Helena. Photograph, 1920s. Private collection.

years.' Various rooms are numbered, and their positions indicated on the walls of the house. These details correspond with similar information given in other published sources, and so can be taken to be an accurate record.²⁶

Las Cases recorded his impressions of the house in his *Journal*:

The entrance to the house [shown here on the left] was through a room which had just been built, and which was intended to answer the double purpose of an anti-chamber and a dining-room. The apartment led to another, which was made the drawing-room [no. 2 on the present drawing]; beyond this was a third room running in a cross direction and very dark [no. 3]. This was intended to be the depository of the Emperor's maps and books ... The Emperor's chamber [no. 4] opened into this apartment on the right hand side. The chamber was divided into two equal parts, forming the Emperor's cabinet and sleeping-room. The room: a little external gallery served for the bathing room ...²⁷

Initially, the rooms at Longwood House were fitted out with items found elsewhere on the Island. By the following summer, however, some of the furniture commissioned by the British Government, and manufactured by the English designer and cabinet maker George Bullock, had arrived and been put into circulation.²⁸ An impression of Napoleon's

bedroom at Longwood, during the early days was given by Barry O'Meara (1782-1836), Napoleon's medical attendant until Lowe dismissed him from the Island in 1818.

It was about fourteen feet by twelve, and ten or eleven feet in height. The walls were lined with brown nankeen [Chinese lacquer], bordered and edged with common green bordering paper ... Window curtains of white long cloth, a small fireplace, a shabby grate ... a paltry mantelpiece of wood, painted white, upon which stood a bust of his son ... The floor was covered with a second-hand carpet ... in the right hand corner was placed the little plain iron camp bedstead,²⁹ with green silk curtains upon which its master had reposed on the fields of Marengo and Austerlitz. Between the windows there was a paltry second-hand chest of drawers, and an old bookcase ...³⁰

There were many factors that contributed to delays in constructing the house that would become known as New Longwood. Not the least of these was Napoleon's stubborn refusal to discuss proposals presented by Hudson Lowe. Their deep mutual antipathy made progress well nigh impossible, and it was only the insistence of Earl Bathurst (1762-1834), Secretary of State for the Department of War and the Colonies, that work eventually began in 1819.³¹ By this time, the original plan, drawn by William Atkinson (c.



Figure 9 (opposite) . Side chair by George Bullock, 1815. Ebonised beech, parcel gilt. Private collection.



Figure 10 (right). Table by George Bullock, 1815. Mahogany. In the collection of Lennoxlove House, Haddington.

1773-1839), had to be adapted and reduced in scale. Some of the intended occupants such as Las Cases and Gourgaud had left the Island, and Bertrand had his own house. So the proposed two-storey structure was reduced to one, to provide accommodation for Napoleon and for the Montholons. Although materials had been sent out for the construction of this house, much by now had been used elsewhere. Some items were sourced on the Island, but other specific requirements had to be sent out from England. The total cost for constructing and decorating New Longwood would amount to nearly £20,000. This is in addition to the approximately £11,500 charged by Bullock in various accounts submitted in 1815 for the furniture and other fittings.³²

The Longwood Estate is accurately recorded in a water-colour (*fig. 7*) inscribed on the mount with the name of the artist, Lt. Colonel Basil Jackson (1795-1899). Jackson was responsible for repairs at Old Longwood (the structure placed high up to the right), for building Bertrand's house (the house in the background) and, with Major Anthony Emmett (1789-1872), for New Longwood (the low structure

to the left of the group of buildings). The validity of Jackson's composition is confirmed by a late nineteenth-century photograph, taken from a closer viewpoint, slightly to the left.³³ Jackson made several sketches of Longwood, and of Napoleon himself.³⁴

The elegant villa, which Napoleon witnessed under construction, and in which he set foot, apparently, on only a single occasion, was ready for occupation in April 1821. By this date, however, Napoleon was not well enough to move; he died on 21 May. The house survived until the 1920s, but by then was in a fairly sorry state (*fig. 8*). The veranda is still, at that period, supported by the 10 iron columns supplied in 1820 at a cost of £6. 10s. each.³⁵

George Bullock, during his brief London career (1813-18), presided over the production of some of the most remarkable furniture produced during the Regency period. The cabinets, tables, chairs and so on that emerged from his workshop, behind his house in Tenterden Street, off Hanover Square, are distinguished by the strength of their design, for which Bullock himself was largely responsible. From an historical perspective, his commission to supply the

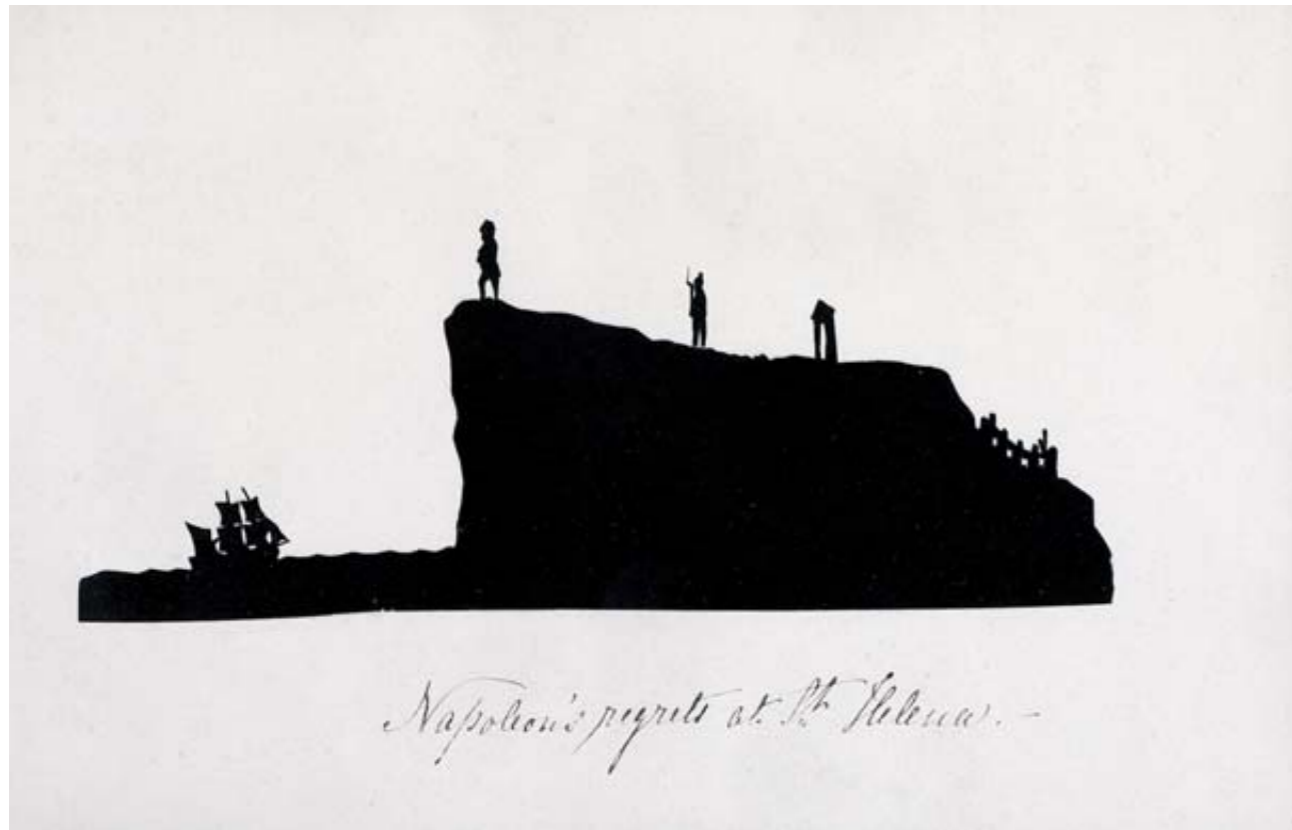


Figure 11. Anonymous, *Napoleon's regrets at St Helena*, nineteenth century, ink and cut paper. Private collection.

furnishings, fittings and other materials ordered by the British Government, required to decorate the house, was the crowning glory of his short life and career. Not only did he supply furniture from his own workshops, but he also oversaw orders from other leading manufacturers including Rundle & Bridge, Matthew Boulton, Parker & Perry and Wedgwood.³⁶ Bullock's fifty-eight page Account, dated 1 January 1816, records the furniture and upholstery supplied for the rooms of the planned new house, together with all the ceramics, silver, etc., and a multitude of sundry materials ranging from wooden buckets, sulphuric acid and lead pencils to paints and wall papers.³⁷

Napoleon in Exile (1998) included illustrations or descriptions of all the then known furniture from Bullock's workshop, supplied for the use of Napoleon and those who accompanied him to St Helena. It was assumed at the time that more would emerge, and this remains the case. Illustrated below are two recently identified pieces that can be added to the tally.

The chair (fig. 9), in an English private collection, may be one of the '8 Ebonized Chairs covered with Tabouret' charged at £42 for the set, and intended for Napoleon's 'Sitting Room'.³⁸ The label on the back of the chair claims,

inaccurately, that the chair was taken by Napoleon to St Helena on the *Bellerophon*, although it undoubtedly forms part of the furniture that came out the following year.

The small table (fig. 10) is a previously unidentified model; it may be one of the 'Small mahogany table[s]' supplied at a cost of £3. 10s. for Officers' bedrooms, and now at Lennoxlove. It has a silver label inscribed: 'This table / formed part of the / Bed Room Furniture of the / Emperor Napoleon / AT LONGWOOD / during his exile at / St Helena'.³⁹

There can be no doubt that Napoleon would have preferred to have spent his final years in less isolated circumstances than were offered by the remote rock that is St Helena. The former Emperor probably saw himself as a Prometheus-like victim, suffering a slow and painful demise. His longing for freedom is well-captured in an anonymous silhouette *Napoleon's regrets at St Helena* (fig. 11). But as Haydon observed, his 'melancholy conclusion ...' has done much to sustain him as a great 'character in history'.

Notes

- 1 See Martin Levy, *Napoleon in Exile* (Leeds: Furniture History Society, 1998), fig. 40.
- 2 Engraved by H. Meyer, this was published in August 1821 by Colnaghi, in London. Rubidge, who was on St Helena at the time of Napoleon's death, was the only professional artist to make a likeness during the captivity (see Arnold Chaplin, *A St. Helena Who's Who* (London: Arthur L. Humphreys, 1919), p. 166).
- 3 By Paula Deitz, 12 July 1998, p. 32.
- 4 Chaplin *op. cit.* (see note 2), pp. 137-38.
- 5 Quoted in Stuart Semmel, *Napoleon and the British* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 241.
- 6 The engraving is after the prime version, painted in 1829 for J. Kearsy. 28 versions and replicas are known, including one transferred in 1994 from the National Gallery, London to the National Portrait Gallery, London (NPG 6266).
- 7 Susan P. Conner, 'St. Helena and the Napoleonic Legend' in Donald D. Horwood, ed., *Napoleonic Military History A Bibliography* (Chippenham: Greenhill Books, 1986), ch. XVI.
- 8 Quoted in A. Aspinall and E. Anthony Smith, *English Historical Documents 1783-1832* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1959), pp. 937-938, no. 575.
- 9 Quoted in Levy (*op. cit.*, see note 1), p. 5.
- 10 *The Life of Napoleon Bonaparte* (1829, Edinburgh: A. & C. Black, 1876), V, p. 249.
- 11 William Warden, *Letters Written on Board His Majesty's Ship the Northumberland and at St Helena ...* (London: R. Ackermann, 1816), p. v.
- 12 *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.
- 13 Quoted in William Kirk Dickinson, ed., *The Surrender of Napoleon* (London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1904), pp. 54-55. The original letter is in the Royal Collection; it was exhibited in *A Royal Miscellany from the Royal Library at Windsor Castle*, The Queen's Gallery, London, 1990, no. 271.
- 14 Comte de Bertrand (1773-1844) who, accompanied by his wife and children, was one of Napoleon's loyal friends who voyaged with him to St Helena. His house, built by the British, survives; illustrated in Levy, (*op. cit.*, see note 1), fig. 30.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 108.
- 16 Reproduced in Norwood Young, *Napoleon in Exile: St. Helena (1815-1821)*, I, (London: Stanley Paul & Co, 1915), opp. p. 68.
- 17 The present drawing, or perhaps another version, was recorded in the collection of A.M. Broadley; see Young, *Ibid.*, opp. p. 68. Broadley's collection was recorded in Walter V. Daniell, *Collectanea Napoleonica* (London: W.V. Daniell, 1905), but the

present drawing cannot be identified in this volume.

- 18 *Extract from a Diary of Rear-Admiral Sir George Cockburn With Particular Reference to Gen. Napoleon Buonaparte on Passage from England to St. Helena, in 1815* (London: Simpkin, Marshall & Co., 1888), p. 41.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 49.
- 20 Chaplin, *op. cit.*, (see note 2), p. 87.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 86.
- 22 Semmel, *op. cit.*, (see note 4), pp. 213-17. Hook's pamphlet defended the actions of the much derided Sir Hudson Lowe (1769-1844), the Governor of St Helena, whose fractious relationship with Napoleon dominates histories of the exile.
- 23 Chaplin, *op. cit.* (see note 2), pp. 157-75.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 157
- 25 British Library: *Lowe Papers*, Add. Ms. 20,114, ff. 250-51.
- 26 See, for example, Count de Las Cases, *Journal of the Private Life and Conversations of the General Napoleon at Saint Helena* (London: Henry Colburn and Co., 1823), I, frontispiece; reproduced in Levy, *op. cit.* (see note 1), fig. 28.
- 27 *Ibid.*, pp. 30-31.
- 28 Levy *op. cit.* (see note 1), p. 32.
- 29 *Ibid.*, see n. 69.
- 30 Barry O'Meara, *Napoleon at St. Helena* (first published as *Napoléon en Exil, ou l'Echo de Saint Hélène* (1822), revised edition (London: Richard Bentley & Son, 1888), I, pp. 49-51.
- 31 Levy, *op. cit.* (see note 1), ch. 3.
- 32 *Ibid.*, ch. 1.
- 33 *Ibid.*, fig. 29.
- 34 Chaplin, *op. cit.* (see note 2), p. 88.
- 35 The National Archives, Kew: *Gorrequor Papers*, J.76/6/1. For a contemporary hand-coloured aquatint of New Longwood see Levy, *op. cit.* (see note 1), fig. 33.
- 36 *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- 37 For more on George Bullock, see Clive Wainwright, *et al.*, *George Bullock: Cabinet-Maker* (London: H. Blairman & Sons/John Murray), 1988. Bullock's account for St Helena is reproduced in Levy, *op. cit.* (see note 1), Appendix 3.
- 38 See Levy, *op. cit.* (see note 1), Appendix 1, nos 15 and 16. I am grateful to Mary Ann Apicella for drawing this chair to my attention.
- 39 I am grateful to Stephen Jackson for drawing this table to my attention, and to Lyndsay Stuart for her help in obtaining a photograph.