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H-Diplo REVIEW ESSAY 183

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Mark Braude. *The Invisible Emperor: Napoleon on Elba From Exile to Escape*. London: Penguin Books, 2018. ISBN: 978-0735222625.

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REVIEW BY AMBROGIO CAIANI, UNIVERSITY OF KENT

The isle of Elba, off the Tuscan coast, is remarkably beautiful. Blessed with fine beaches, a wonderful climate, and delicious cuisine, today it is a popular tourist hotspot. In the past, the significant iron deposits made the island an important mining site, which brought profit to its rulers. In mid-1814, Elba's Governor, General Jean-Baptiste Dalesme, must have felt a little like Hiroo Onoda, the famous Japanese soldier who, alone, stranded on Lubang Island, persisted in fighting World War Two for his God-Emperor until 1974. Similarly bereft of news, Dalesme was continuing a war that was already over. Since 1810 he had been assigned to this quiet Mediterranean outpost. The closest he came to combat was taking the odd pot-shot at Royal Navy vessels that were passing by. Unlike Onoda's case, events quickly took a decidedly unexpected turn.

On 3 May the frigate HMS *Undaunted* sailed into Portoferraio, Elba's principal town. To everyone's amazement, the Emperor Napoleon disembarked and took possession of his new miniature empire. Under the terms of the Treaty of Fontainebleau, agreed with Tsar Alexander I, the defeated Emperor of the French was granted lifetime sovereignty over the island. On arrival the auspices seemed unfavourable to Napoleon. When asked his opinion of the Elbans, Dalesme replied "the people of Elba are good, gentle and in no way resemble the people of Corsica [!]." A few days later, while Napoleon was surveying one of the beaches of the island, a local inhabitant emerged out of nowhere screaming "long live the king of England!" Napoleon grabbed the hilt of his sword; tragedy was luckily averted thanks to the quick thinking of his entourage who chased the impertinent subject away.¹

Mark Braude's book *The Invisible Emperor* retells the remarkable tale of how, for ten months, Napoleon ruled over this Mediterranean 'Lilliput.' It is an intriguing story, and one which the author tells exceedingly well. The style is lucid, and this makes the book gripping and page turning. The narrative is sensibly chronological and weaves together three interrelated stories into one. Naturally, the first is that of Napoleon's time on the island. His volcanic energy made him restless during this period of enforced confinement. He gave himself a busy routine of administration and law-making, behaving as if he still ruled a vast Empire. During his time on Elba, he attempted to modernise its infrastructure, especially the roads. Less positively he tried to squeeze his subjects and the local iron mines for every penny they were worth. Braude tells of the astonishing number of tourists who were admitted into his presence for private audiences. It seems that the stricken Emperor was affable and welcoming to those who were granted an audience. He gave the appearance of bedding down on his new island home. Much time was spent refurbishing large houses in order to transform them into proto-Imperial palaces. In time a minor Italian princely court was expected to emerge. Napoleon also spent some time, unsuccessfully it must be said, in wooing the local population. Welcome celebrations and official festivities at Portoferraio were supposed to convey the

¹ Pierre Branda, *La Guerre Secrète de Napoléon, Île d'Elbe 1814-1815* (Paris; Perrin, 2014), 68.

appearance of order and stability. While on the island, Napoleon bestowed on his bewildered subjects fundamental laws in the form of a constitutional charter.

The second narrative strand of the book revolves around the position of Napoleon's second wife, Marie-Louise, in this drama. Braude describes with tact the ambiguous position she occupied after the fall of the Empire. Despite her initial reticence to marry, she and Napoleon had developed a political partnership of sorts. His exile and her new position as Duchess of Parma put her in an invidious position. She seems to have experienced a crisis of loyalty in 1814. This was not helped by the fact that her letters, and those of Napoleon, were intercepted by the Habsburg police. Communications with her husband were impossible. Equally, her son was taken to Vienna. Here he would live a life of gilded isolation in Schönbrunn, with the title Duc de Reichstadt. Marie-Louise's determination to join her husband on Elba was lukewarm at best. The trauma of the Empire's collapse had taken its toll on the sometime Empress. She spent most of 1814 at the spa town of Aix-les-Bains, seeking to restore her health. Eventually, she gave up on trying to communicate with Napoleon and settled into her existence as Duchess of Parma. Braude somewhat underestimates her intelligence and resilience in his account. As Charles-Éloi Vial has shown elsewhere, Marie-Louise was a remarkable woman,² who ruled her north Italian duchy with the self-assuredness of an enlightened despot. She used all the knowledge she had gained from Napoleon to create a model state which boasted some of the highest literacy rates in Italy.³

The final strand of the book focuses on the diplomatic events and wrangling of the European powers in the aftermath of their victory. Once Napoleon was in exile, the Allies attempted to give France a stable constitutional monarchy and, at the Congress of Vienna, sought to create a stable post-Napoleonic order in Europe. Most of the material treated in these pages is well-known, and the book does not tread new ground. Braude tells the familiar story of how the Bourbons returned to France, and how an attempt was made, through the first Treaty of Paris, to be generous to the defeated. Some pages are also given over to how the initial negotiations in Vienna were unproductive and slowed down by the festive atmosphere. Braude argues, compellingly, that the diplomats and monarchy in the Habsburg capital quickly felt uncomfortable with Napoleon's proximity to Europe. The British, and others, wondered whether Madeira or a little-known island called Saint Helena, far away in the South Atlantic, might not be safer places of confinement for Bonaparte. The situation was exacerbated by the fact that the Bourbons in France failed, or more accurately refused, to pay the fallen Emperor's two-million-franc pension.

Such issues certainly increased Napoleon's anxieties, and he knew that his position was insecure. A visit to the island from the shadowy Bonapartist conspirator Pierre Alexandre Fleury de Chaboulon was a vital turning point. He advised the Emperor that Louis XVIII had made the vital error of alienating the army. The Bourbon restoration was a far from stable regime and had an evident vulnerability. This secret meeting on Elba convinced Napoleon to stake everything on one last big gamble.

Evading unnoticed from Elba with his small thousand-man army was going to be a delicate task. It appears the Emperor only told his inner circle about his plans, and spent most of February giving the impression that he was resigned to his fate. Towards the end of the month, when the British commissioner Sir Neil Campbell was away in Livorno, Napoleon decided to make his move. Once the British were out of the way, the army was mobilised and a small flotilla of vessels was prepared for departure. Once underway news spread rapidly of the Emperor's bid for freedom. The appositely named, HMS Partridge, and no fewer than three Royalists French ships gave chase. Yet, failing to spot the fugitive near Corsica the pursuers made the fatal mistake of turning back, assuming that the Emperor was making a run for Naples to join with his brother-in-law Joachim Murat, King of Naples. In so doing, they left the field open for the fateful landing at Golfe-Juan near Saint Tropez. The 'flight of the eagle' had begun. As Braude shows well, the gamble paid off. Once the fifth line infantry regiment defected to Napoleon at Laffrey, it created a domino effect that took him all the way to the Tuileries Palace in Paris. This restoration of the Imperial throne was a military coup that highlighted how divided France remained after the

² Charles-Éloi Vial, *Marie-Louise* (Paris: Perrin, 2017).

³ Marco Boscarelli, *Dall'ancien Régime a Maria Luigia in un centro minore degli stati Parmensi* (Milan: Giuffrè, 1980), 176-197.

fall of the Empire. By March 1815 Napoleon was back in power and he had his loyal soldiers to thank for that. As Talleyrand once quipped: “one can do many things with bayonets apart from sit on them!”⁴

Braude’s book is to be welcomed as the first well-informed English language study of Napoleon’s brief reign on Elba. It is well read and based on some of the latest studies written in French.⁵ Indeed, on many levels it is a good distillation of Pierre Branda’s highly original and extremely scholarly *La Guerre Secrète de Napoleon, Île d’Elbe 1814-1815*.⁶ In making this story accessible to a broad Anglo-Saxon readership the author has provided a great service. The perhaps most interesting aspect of this book is its rescuing from oblivion of Sir Neil Campbell. Wounded badly during the French campaign of 1814 by friendly fire, this soldier seemed like the ideal British candidate to act as the allied commissioner despatched to keep an eye on Napoleon in exile. This book shows that Campbell was an intelligent soldier, with some diplomatic talent. The problem was that he was left without clear instructions on what his role as commissioner was supposed to entail. History has dismissed Campbell as the man who let Napoleon escape in order to ‘visit’ his Italian mistress in Livorno. The truth is rather more complicated, and Campbell’s reports and writings are a vital and underused source of the Elban episode. His writings deserve to be better known and understood. Indeed, Castlereagh, the foreign secretary, who was no pushover, did not blame his official for allowing the French Emperor to flee. Remarkably Campbell was able to return to England and resume his military service, just in time to witness the last moments of the battle of Waterloo.

On the whole this is a book that will be relished and enjoyed by a very wide readership. Its original contribution to scholarship and international history is less obvious. These pages certainly will revise history’s judgement of Sir Neil Campbell but, other than this, it is difficult to identify any other scholarly, let alone archival finds. The first exile and the flight of the Eagle have been treated in rigorous detail in Italian and French historiography.⁷ Much of this scholarship remains inaccessible to monoglot English audiences. Braude has done a magnificent job in unlocking this material for Anglo-Americans readers. He has done so with considerable insight and narrative flair. He is a born storyteller, and I for one will look out for his future books. *The Invisible Emperor* will certainly make its way onto university reading lists and undergraduate students will become more aware of the Elba episode in the Napoleonic saga. The postscript emphasises how the Emperor’s brief sojourn near the Tuscan coast allowed him the opportunity to re-brand himself. The young Victor Hugo spent part of his first year of life on the island as the son of one of the soldiers in the miniature army on Portoferraio. Both Stendhal and Chateaubriand, for admittedly different reasons, visited the island. Ultimately this affair inspired Alexandre Dumas to write *The Count of Montecristo*, and made a stopover at Elba the cause of Edmond Dantes’s unjust incarceration. The island became something akin to a site of pilgrimage and memory during the romantic age. Napoleonic tourism to this day remains a vibrant source of attraction for both history buffs and the curious.

Without Elba the memory of Napoleon would have been very different. It must also be remembered that Europeans, especially the French, paid a heavy price in terms of blood and violence for his return. As Philip Dwyer has shown in his recent study of Napoleon’s second exile on Saint Helena, the Emperor had considerable time to refashion himself as a liberal

⁴ Emmanuel de Waresquiel, *Fouché, Les Silences de la Pieuvre* (Paris: Tallandier, 2014), 277.

⁵ Jacques-Olivier Boudon, *Napoléon et la dernière campagne: Les Cent-Jours 1815* (Paris; Armand Colin, 2015); Antoine Casanova, *Napoléon et la Pense de son temps* (Paris, Boutique de l’Histoire, 2008); Patrice Gueniffay, *Bonaparte 1769-1802* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015); Thierry Lentz, *Nouvelle Histoire du Premier empire, Les Cent-Jours* (Paris: Fayard, 2010); Natalie Petiteau, *Napoléon de la mythologie à l’histoire* (Paris: Seuil, 1999); and Emmanuel de Waresquiel, *Cent Jours, Le tentation de l’impossible: Mars-Juillet 1815* (Paris: Fayard, 2008).

⁶ Branda, *La Guerre Secrète de Napoléon*, passim.

⁷ Luigi Mascilli Migliorini, *500 giorni, Napoleone dall’Elba a Sant’Elena* (Rome: Laterza, 2016); Ilaria Monti, *Napoleone Bonaparte, La corrispondenza dell’Isola d’Elba 1814-1815* (Self-published, 2019); the classic study is Vincenzo Melli, *L’isola d’Elba durante il governo di Napoleone I* (Florence: Stabili, 1913).

and promethean figure during his second exile.⁸ His return from Elba for many was a Christ-like resurrection. As Sudhir Hazareesingh has highlighted in his research on the Napoleonic legend, for decades after 1815, sightings of the returned Emperor continued in France.⁹ The rise and fall of Empires are a well-established genre of world history. However, the story of an Emperor exiled to an island and making a daring escape to regain his Empire is pretty rare. That Napoleon's gamble was successful makes him a truly unique figure. Braude brings this exceptional tale to life with panache and incisive detail.

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⁸ Philip Dwyer, *Napoleon: Passion, Death and Resurrection 1815–1840* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

⁹ Sudhir Hazareesingh, *Legend of Napoleon* (London: Granta, 2004).