

Conspiracy on St. Helena? (Mis)remembering Napoleon's Exile

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Napoleon lived in exile at Longwood House on St. Helena under close British guard for sixty-eight months from October 1815. He died there, probably from stomach cancer, on 5 May 1821. Nineteen years later the French Government repatriated his body, which now rests under the dome of the Hôtel des Invalides in Paris. This is the accepted narrative. In the last few decades, however, a number of books in English and French have tried to refute this historical orthodoxy and proffered instead a series of sensational revelations: Napoleon escaped from St. Helena, leaving a double in his place; he died on St. Helena not from natural causes but at the hands of a poisoner; his ashes reside in the basement of Westminster Abbey because the perfidious British Government turned over someone else's body to the French in 1840.

The aim of this paper is not to disprove these conspiracy theories point by point, but rather to understand the thoughts, motives and methods of historical analysis that underlie them. Whether or not these theories are true has little, if any, real historical significance because they do not involve vitally important events (Napoleon having ceased to be a political force in 1815), nor are the people who propagate them motivated by extremist and controversial ideological views. The "St. Helena Conspiracies" therefore do not arouse the same emotions as conspiracy theories that (for example) purport to raise disturbing questions about the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963, the destruction of the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001, or even the birthplace of Barack Obama in 1961. But whatever their nature, all conspiracy theories – whether trivial or potentially explosive – thrive and proliferate in the same general cultural environment.

Conspiracy theories have always existed, but never more than today, when, as Peter Knight has observed, they

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have become a regular feature of everyday political and cultural life, ... as part and parcel of many people's normal way of thinking about who they are and how the world works.... [C]onspiracy has become the default assumption in an age which has learned to distrust everything and everyone.¹

Although most conspiracy theories are about current or near-contemporary events, conspiracy theories about past events also flourish. According to one French publisher, quoted in a recent magazine article on conspiracy theories about the past:

the current age ... encourages fantasies All these works that advance conspiracy theories to the theme of 'everything is hidden from us, we are being lied to' anticipate and amplify the intellectual reflexes of people who are disoriented.²

The internet plays a major role here. James Shapiro, in a book about unorthodox theories as to who wrote Shakespeare's works, points to "the level playing field provided by the Web," which has few or no scholarly standards and which exists "in a world in which truth is too often seen as relative and in which mainstream media are committed to showing both sides of every story." Clumsy amateurs, unpracticed in evaluating and interpreting historical sources, as well as cranks of every sort, stand here on equal footing with trained historical experts: "In this new battleground for hearts and minds, academic authority no longer [counts] for much; the new information age [is] fundamentally democratic."³ What David Aaronovitch says of one particular conspiracy theorist (who writes about the events of 9/11) is true of most: his work "maintain[s] the outward limbs and flourishes of scholarship" but contains "evasions, half-truths and bad science."⁴

Perhaps not surprisingly, all the aforementioned conspiracy theories about Napoleon on St. Helena were already in circulation in the early nineteenth century. During Napoleon's captivity, there were real plans to get him off St. Helena (although there is no evidence that the Emperor was ever party to them or even that he wanted to escape)⁵ and rumours spread in Europe that he had in fact managed to get away.⁶ His death in 1821 "gives rise to conjectures that spread rapidly among the public," wrote a pamphleteer that same year, and "it must be agreed that several things seem to give grounds for suspicion."⁷ A Parisian doctor observed in 1829 that the opinion that Napoleon had succumbed to poison "was for a long time accepted in Paris, [and] it is still

¹ Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X-Files* (London, 2000), 2-3.

² Marianne Payot, "Les historiens s'en vont en guerre," *L'Express*, 16 April 2009, 100-103.

³ James Shapiro, *Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare?* (New York, 2010), 8, 216.

⁴ David Aaronovitch, *Voodoo Histories: The Role of the Conspiracy Theory in Shaping Modern History* (New York, 2010), 338.

⁵ Gilbert Martineau, "Projets d'évasion," in his *La vie quotidienne à Sainte-Hélène au temps de Napoléon* (Paris, 1966), 235-64; idem, "Plans of Escape," in *Napoleon's St. Helena* (Chicago, 1968), 183-207; Ulane Bonnel, "Espoirs de délivrance," in *Sainte-Hélène, terre d'exil* (Paris, 1971), 229-57.

⁶ J. Lucas-Dubreton, *Le culte de Napoléon* (Paris, 1960), 96ff.

⁷ Dr. Jean-Claude Bésuchet de Saunois, *Réflexions sur la mort de Napoléon, suivies de quelques considérations sur l'empoisonnement par les substances introduits dans l'estomac* (Paris, 1821), 6.

current in the departments.” Moreover, “these tales were not only rumours among the people but were spread and accepted by educated persons of the best social classes.”⁸ After 1840 there were rumours that Napoleon’s grave on St. Helena had been found empty because the “sacrilegious English” had removed the body years before; as a result, Napoleon was not really in the Invalides.⁹

These rumours have assumed pseudo-scholarly form only in the last few decades. The first of these conspiracy theories – that Napoleon escaped from St. Helena – has had little resonance (although it still pops up on the Web), is poorly documented and can be quickly dismissed. It was first advanced in 1947 in an apparently self-published book by Pierre Paul Ebeyer, a Cajun-American whose family “revered [Napoleon] as a second God.” Ebeyer thought it inconceivable, given Napoleon’s “mammoth intellectuality in all fields,” that he could not have gotten away from his jailers had he so desired. He therefore concluded that since Napoleon *could have* escaped from St. Helena, he necessarily *did* so (precisely on 27 August 1817), reaching Europe in the spring of 1819 and dying there in about 1835.¹⁰ His only evidence was the fact that Napoleon rarely showed himself to any Englishman after 1817.

In 1974, another American, Thomas G. Wheeler, seemingly unaware of Ebeyer’s work, advanced a similar theory in a book that *Time Magazine* called one of “the season’s riper exotics.”¹¹ Wheeler based his theory on the oft-repeated legend of François-Eugène Robeaud, Napoleon’s alleged double; he argued that Robeaud was on St. Helena and took Napoleon’s place there after his escape. The Robeaud story has been told many times over the years.¹² According to the earliest known printed version (1911), supposedly derived from the memoirs of a police agent named Ledru (purportedly published in Liège in 1840 but not to be found in any library today), Robeaud was born in Baleycourt (Meuse) in July 1781 and served in the *3e régiment de voltigeurs* where his colonel selected him to act as Napoleon’s double.¹³ V. Schleiter, *député-maire* of Verdun, noted in 1934 that “[t]he precise details of dates, names, places, and various testimonies ... give to this story the appearance of incontestable authenticity,” but his own investigations proved that no Robeaud had ever been born in Baleycourt.¹⁴ Wheeler nonetheless believed in the Robeaud story (“circumstantial, not improbable, amply detailed”) and, even though he knew of Schleiter’s refutation, insisted that “there *was* a Robeaud. His

⁸ J. Héreau, *Napoléon à Sainte-Hélène: Opinion d’un médecin sur la maladie de l’Empereur Napoléon et sur la cause de sa mort; offerte à son fils au jour de sa majorité* (Paris, 1829), 11-12.

⁹ Albéric Cahuet, *Napoléon délivré* (Paris, 1914), 222, who comments that “this is nothing but fantasy embroidered on history and a childish improbability.”

¹⁰ Paul Pierre Ebeyer, *Revelations Concerning Napoleon’s Escape from St. Helena* (New Orleans, 1947), 108, 134.

¹¹ Thomas G. Wheeler, *Who Lies Here? An Inquiry Into Napoleon’s Last Years* (New York, 1974); R.Z. Sheppard, “Books: Top Bananas,” *Time Magazine*, 24 June 1974.

¹² See especially Pierre Artigue, “Napoleon’s Double,” *Coronet* 3:1 (November 1937): 24-28. Mabel Brookes, *St. Helena Story* (New York, 1961), 229, apparently believed in the existence of Robeaud, but found a successful substitution “hardly likely.” See also “Was Napoleon Poisoned?,” in Lionel and Patricia Fanthorpe, *The World’s Most Mysterious Murders* (Toronto, 2003), 151-56; Richard Girling, “Who killed Napoleon? How did he die? Who is in his tomb?,” *The Sunday Times*, 12 January 2003.

¹³ Paul Cazaubon, “La mort de Napoléon,” *Le Petit Fougereais*, 26 April 1911, 1. The story undoubtedly has earlier roots, but I have been unable to find them.

¹⁴ V. Schleiter, “Le Napoléon de Baleycourt,” *Mémoires de la Société Philomathique de Verdun (Meuse)* 18 (1934): 215-18.

vital dates are known, his regiment and the name of his colonel, the officer who discovered him.”¹⁵ Wheeler provides his readers with speculation and inference (there are no notes), but his knowledge of Napoleon and his times is superficial. In short, there is no documentary basis whatsoever for the theory of Napoleon's escape, and it has had relatively little success in historical or even pseudo-historical circles (apart from the Web). On the other hand, it has recently inspired at least one novel (Simon Leys, *The Death of Napoleon*, 1986) and two films (*The Emperor's New Clothes*, 2001, and *Monsieur N*, 2003).

A much better case has been made for the poisoning theory, which consequently has had a far greater echo. A Swedish dentist, Sven Forshufvud, launched it in 1961, after reading the memoirs of Napoleon's valet, Louis-Joseph-Narcisse Marchand, and identifying some of the symptoms of arsenic poisoning in his descriptions of the Emperor's fatal illness. Forshufvud was also the first to designate one of Napoleon's entourage, General Charles-Jean-François-Tristan de Montholon, as the likely assassin.¹⁶ The Canadian millionaire Ben Weider met Forshufvud in the 1960s, and in 1978 they jointly published an elaborated version of the thesis.¹⁷ Weider subsequently became the major proponent of this poisoning theory, publishing several books and keeping up a decades-long press campaign.¹⁸ Forshufvud and Weider believed that Montholon acted as a Bourbon agent working for the Comte d'Artois. They initially claimed that British authorities were uninvolved, but Weider later revised his position (without explaining why) and argued that they were indeed complicit in the assassination.

A Frenchman, René Maury, has devoted three books to supporting Weider's contention that Montholon poisoned Napoleon,¹⁹ but has rejected the idea that Montholon did so on behalf of the Bourbons. In his first book (1994), Maury ascribed complex psychological motives to Montholon, who not only expected a large inheritance from Napoleon, but also wanted revenge for the humiliation that Napoleon had inflicted on him in 1812, when Montholon entered into an “unsuitable marriage” with a twice-divorced woman, and later on St. Helena, when Napoleon took the very same Madame de Montholon as his mistress. In addition, “[i]n assassinating [Napoleon], [the aristocrat] Montholon was also assassinating the French Revolution.”²⁰ Montholon was thus “fundamentally a pervert” and “the greatest criminal genius of all time.” Madame de Montholon was his accomplice, and she and her husband were an “infernal couple,” a “diabolical couple” and a “couple of perverts.”²¹ Then the Baron de Montholon-Candé opened his family archives to Maury, whose reading of unpublished correspondence

¹⁵ Wheeler, *Who lies here?*, 137, 206-208.

¹⁶ Sten Forshufvud, *Who Killed Napoleon?*, trans. A. H. Broderick (London, 1962); idem, *Napoléon a-t-il été empoisonné?* (Paris, 1961). The story of Forshufvud and his research is told in Ben Weider and David Hapgood, *The Murder of Napoleon* (Toronto, 1982).

¹⁷ Sten Forshufvud and Ben Weider, *Assassination at St. Helena: The Poisoning of Napoleon Bonaparte* (Vancouver, 1978) and *Assassination at St. Helena Revisited* (New York, 1995).

¹⁸ Weider and Hapgood, *The Murder of Napoleon*, also translated as *Qui a tué Napoléon?* (Paris, 1994); Ben Weider, *Napoléon est-il mort empoisonné?* (Paris, 1999); idem., *The Poisoning of Napoleon: The Toxic Agent was Rat Poisoning* [sic] (Montreal, [2006?]).

¹⁹ René Maury, *L'assassin de Napoléon, ou le mystère de Sainte-Hélène* (Paris, 1994); idem, *Albine: Le dernier amour de Napoléon* (Paris, 1998); idem and François de Candé-Montholon, *L'énigme Napoléon résolue: L'extraordinaire découverte des documents Montholon* (Paris, 2000).

²⁰ Maury, *L'assassin de Napoléon*, 206 (quotation), 217-18.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 31, 196, 147, 169, 186.

between the Montholons dramatically altered his views. Maury's second book (1998) was a "fictionalized biography" of Albine de Montholon in which Napoleon's murder became the culminating incident in "a magnificent love story" between the countess and the Emperor, a theory that he further developed in his third book (2000), co-written with Montholon-Candé. Now the claim was that Montholon slowly poisoned Napoleon with arsenic only in order to make him sick, so that the English would send him back to Europe for his health. Napoleon's death was accidental and wholly unintentional.²²

Numerous articles and at least one extraordinarily bad book by a homeopath have followed along these lines.²³ Although several recent scientific studies are highly critical of the evidence for the poisoning theory²⁴ and others offer convincing medical explanations (other than poison) for Napoleon's death,²⁵ both the poisoning and Montholon's guilt have made their way, as established facts or at least reasonable hypotheses, into several recent biographies of the Emperor.²⁶

In contrast, a third conspiracy theory, advanced by the so-called "substitutionists," has met with much less acceptance from biographers. In 1969, Georges de Rétif de la Bretonne, a photographer and journalist, published a book with the inflammatory title *Englishmen, Give Us Back Napoleon!* claiming that the British government had secretly removed Napoleon's body from St. Helena in 1828 and substituted the corpse of his major-domo, Cipriani Franceschi, who had died on the island in February 1818.²⁷ The theory rests on alleged discrepancies between the state of the body, coffins and grave in 1815 and how they were found at disinterment in 1840. Most notably, while Napoleon was supposedly buried in only three coffins in 1815, the authorities found four when they opened the grave fifteen years later. Bruno Roy-Henry has built on Rétif's work, publishing two books and maintaining a Website (<www.lempereurperdu.com>) dedicated to the cause.²⁸ Despite its improbability, the substitution theory has been enthusiastically picked up by "pop" histories.²⁹

Why do people believe in such improbable conspiracies? Yves-Marie Bercé, a

²² Maury, *Albine*, 18, 21.

²³ Bernard Charton, *Napoléon empoisonné à l'arsenic: Enquête historique et médicale du Dr Bernard Charton, homéopathe* (Embourg, 2002).

²⁴ Dr. Jean-François Lemaire, Dr. Paul Fornès, Dr. Pascal Kintz and Thierry Lentz, *Autour de "l'empoisonnement" de Napoléon* (Paris, 2001); J. Thomas Hindmarsh and Philip F. Corso, *The Death of Napoleon: The Last Campaign* (n.p., 2007).

²⁵ Dr. Guy Rérolle, *Point Final... Sainte-Hélène, 5 mai 1821* (Paris, 2002); Dr. Jacques Bastien and Dr. Roland Jeandel, *Napoléon à Sainte-Hélène: Étude critique de ses pathologies et des causes de son décès* (Paris, 2005); Robert Richardson, *The Apocalypse of Napoleon Bonaparte: His Last Years from Waterloo to St. Helena: A Medical Biography* (Wykey, 2009); Dr. Howard Martin, *Napoleon's Poisoned Chalice: The Emperor and His Doctors on St. Helena* (Stroud, 2009).

²⁶ For example, Alan Schom, *Napoleon Bonaparte* (New York, 1997), 775-787; Frank McLynn, *Napoleon: A Biography* (New York, 1997), 658-60; Steven Englund, *Napoleon: A Political Life* (New York, 2004), 455-56.

²⁷ Georges Rétif de la Bretonne, *Anglais, rendez-nous Napoléon!* (Paris, 1969).

²⁸ Bruno Roy-Henry, *L'énigme de l'exhumé de 1840* (Paris, 2000); *Napoléon: L'énigme de l'exhumé de Sainte-Hélène* (Paris, 2003).

²⁹ See, for example, Franck Ferrand, "L'énigme du tombeau," in his *L'histoire interdite: Révélation sur l'histoire de France* (Paris, 2008), 133-63. For discussions and refutations of the theory, see Dugue MacCarthy, "Les cendres de l'Empereur, sont-elles aux Invalides?," *Revue de la Société des Amis du Musée de l'Armée* 75 (1971): 31-43, and Jacques Macé, "Le corps de Napoléon est bien aux Invalides," *Revue du Souvenir napoléonien* 445 (February-March 2003): 34-44.

noted historian of early modern France, has observed that “conspiratorial hypotheses are always infinitely seductive because they certify those who maintain them to be independent thinkers and they give the illusion of not being the dupe of appearances.”³⁰ Or, in the words of David Aaronovitch, a student of what he labels “voodoo histories,” “the believer in a conspiracy theory or theories becomes, in his own mind, the one in proper communion with the underlying universe, the one who understands the true ordering of things.”³¹ One fruitful approach to understanding conspiracy theories would therefore be to study the “experiences and worldviews” of the theorists themselves and how these “determined the trajectory of their theories,” as James Shapiro does in a stimulating book on those men and women who have contested Shakespeare’s authorship of the works of Shakespeare.³² Unfortunately, little is known about those individuals who have promoted the St. Helena conspiracies, although most appear to be unabashed admirers of Napoleon. Weider, for instance, not only published tendentious books and pamphlets extolling the Emperor as friend of the Jews and a pacifist,³³ but also saw himself as literally acting on his behalf: “I did nothing more than carry out the last wish of the Emperor Napoleon, who wanted the cause of his death known...”³⁴ Not surprisingly, Rétif de la Bretonne’s enthusiastic admiration of Napoleon has a strong taint of Anglophobia.³⁵ Bruno Roy-Henry, on the other hand, is more balanced in his assessment: “Obviously I am an admirer of Napoleon. Without being an unconditional [one], of course. There are stains of this record...”³⁶

All of the conspiracy theorists evince a self-confidence and indeed self-satisfaction. This attitude is most extreme in the worst of the lot, Pierre Paul Ebeyer, who was an out-and-out incompetent with patchy knowledge of French history, woefully inadequate bibliography (despite spending “over three weeks” at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC), weak French (the language of his childhood) and clumsy prose:

Since it appears I have acquired a most thorough knowledge of Napoleonic history at St. Helena, thanks to much modern literature on the subject which has permitted me to consolidate collectively previous knowledge with that recently discovered, I am naturally in a more advantageous position to absorb and fathom the minds, both great and small, back of the much misunderstood drama at St. Helena.³⁷

Wheeler sounds a similar (albeit more muted) note: “if the accepted dogma be scrutinized with less myopic reverence and with a shrewder, more discriminating vision, a novel and startling concept at once leaps forth as not only a distinct possibility but as an

³⁰ Yves-Marie Bercé, *La naissance dramatique de l'absolutisme 1598-1661* (Paris, 1992), 45.

³¹ Aaronovitch, *Voodoo histories*, 337.

³² Shapiro, *Contested Will*, 10.

³³ For example, Ben Weider, *Napoléon: Liberté, égalité, fraternité: Essai* ([Montreal], 1997).

³⁴ Quoted in Robert Leblond, “Ben Weider obtient la confirmation du FBI sur sa thèse du meurtre de Napoléon,” *Journal de Montréal*, 6 September 1995. For Weider’s life, see Joe Weider and Ben Weider, with Mike Steeve, *Brothers of Iron: How the Weider Brothers Created the Fitness Movement and Built a Business Empire* (Champaign, 2006).

³⁵ Rétif de la Bretonne, *Anglais, rendez-vous Napoléon!*, 11.

³⁶ Roy-Henry, e-mail to the author, 2 July 2010.

³⁷ Ebeyer, *Revelations*, 137.

exceedingly probable solution to a good many mysteries.”³⁸ Maury limited himself to the succinct declaration that “[o]n this St. Helena dossier, [professional historians] have all been wrong without exception, committing sometimes elementary errors,” while boasting that “History, like women, sometimes gives herself to *amateurs*.”³⁹

The refusal of the vast majority of academic historians to embrace their conclusions rankles with all of the conspiracy theorists. They do not blame any weakness in their own theses but rather accuse academics of corporatist disdain for outsiders to the historical profession. Weider, for instance, has written that historians could not accept Forshufvud’s thesis because “not only was [he] a historian by avocation rather than by right of academic degrees but he further was disturbing about an accepted ‘fact’ of history....”⁴⁰ A recent newspaper article about Weider describes him as claiming that “[r]esistance to his theory comes from the fact researchers and historians are loath to accept the hypotheses of a non-scientist who made his fortune in body-building....”⁴¹ Or, to quote Weider directly:

Sure they’re not happy with me over there [in France]. After all, French historians earn a living commenting on these matters and they completely overlooked an important factor which was picked up more than 30 years ago by me, an amateur historian from the colonies, along with a dentist from Sweden.⁴²

Roy-Henry speaks for all of them when he declares that in his “search for the truth,” he is not discouraged by “[t]he incredulity of experts, the smile of friends, [and] the skepticism of most historians,” whose “arguments remain non-existent or simply pathetic.”⁴³

The conflict between professional historians and conspiracy theorists was recently put this way by the weekly magazine *L’Express*:

“The historian doesn’t have it easy,” sums up Colette Beaune [professor at the Université de Paris-X and biographer of Joan of Arc], “he needs confirmation from the sources, while the hypothesis is enough for the myth-writer (*mythographe*).” “We accept all debates,” adds Thierry Lentz, director of the Fondation Napoléon, “but the burden of proof should not be reversed. It’s up to those who contest the accepted theses to prove their argument.” “Not at all,” retorts Franck Ferrand, author of *Prohibited History*.... “Doubt should benefit the accused, that is today the reinterpretation....”⁴⁴

Ferrand’s position is, to say the least, bizarre – the revisionist becomes the “accused” and the historical profession bears the burden of refuting him!

³⁸ Wheeler, *Who lies here?*, 13-14.

³⁹ Maury, *Albine*, 15; idem, *L’assassin de Napoléon*, 72.

⁴⁰ Forshufvud and Weider, *Assassination at St. Helena*, 21, 41.

⁴¹ René Bruemmer, “Local Napoleonic scholar stands by poisoning theory,” *The Gazette* (Montreal), 12 February 2008, A10.

⁴² Claude Arpin, “They are not amused: Napoleon societies belittle Montrealer’s theory that Bonaparte was poisoned,” *The Gazette* (Montreal), 12 October 1995, A6. See also Weider and Weider, *Brothers of Iron*, 282.

⁴³ Roy-Henry, e-mail to author (short quotation); *Napoléon: L’énigme*, 11-12 (longer quotation).

⁴⁴ Payot, “Les historiens s’en vont en guerre.”

The conspiracy theorists' way of constructing a historical argument demonstrates their fundamental misunderstanding of the historical method. They raise doubts about an established interpretation and construct new hypotheses based on (often minor) inconsistencies in the historical record, while usually ignoring or dismissing the overwhelming evidence amassed by professional historians. For instance, Wheeler explained that "there do exist a series of clues – some of those 'loose ends' earlier referred to, which inevitably attract the eye and the curiosity of those chronically dissatisfied with the apparently similar structure of much accepted history."⁴⁵ Forshufvud observed that "if we study attentively the whole mass of memoirs published concerning the events at St. Helena ... if with all these bits and pieces we put together what seems like a jigsaw puzzle, we do get a coherent picture."⁴⁶ Weider subsequently described his Swedish friend as "an archeologist" who "worked not with the shattered bits and pieces of materials from the rubbish piles of antiquity but with words ... from sentences formed currently with the experiences at Longwood...."⁴⁷ Similarly, Weider saw his own work as "[t]he careful piecing together of the elements of evidence, separately slight and open to question, into a completed mosaic powerfully incriminating in total effect...."⁴⁸ Maury declared that his thesis was based on "clues and assumptions" (what he does not say is that his assumptions are usually stronger than the clues), while Roy-Henry evoked the "bundle of assumptions" (most of them in fact highly questionable) underlying his theory.⁴⁹

The problem, as any diligent historian (or lawyer or policeman for that matter) knows, is that no two witnesses to an event will tell exactly the same story and historians need extensive knowledge and good judgment in order to evaluate their sources. Paradoxically, it can be the differences and divergences that make testimony credible; identical accounts most likely result from collaboration or (more seriously) deliberate collusion. The Comte de Las Cases, the most famous of the St. Helena memorialists, said as much when he argued that it was the minor discrepancies between his and Dr. Barry O'Meara's published accounts that proved their accuracy and reliability. Their two versions, he said, showed "[a] perfect similitude; because even the slight differences are to some extent the guaranty of each, in that they are inevitable; where has one ever seen two men, writing about what they have been witness to, not differ?"⁵⁰ In the case of Napoleon's St. Helena exile, the historian finds it particularly hard to sift through the testimony in order to write an accurate version of events because of the very nature of the evidence. As George L. de St. M. Watson observed a century ago:

Few episodes in modern history have so baffled the diligent seeker after the truth as the Captivity [of Napoleon]; and that not so much from the lack of material as from its unreliability, wholly or in part. The atmosphere is so charged with invention, calumny, innuendo, make-believe, suppression, conjecture, gossip, scandal, bad blood, espionage and so forth, that even the most robust inquirer is

⁴⁵ Wheeler, *Who lies here?*, 113.

⁴⁶ Forshufvud, *Who Killed Napoleon?*, 11.

⁴⁷ Forshufvud and Weider, *Assassination at St. Helena*, 44.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴⁹ Maury, *L'assassin de Napoléon*, 32; Roy-Henry, *L'énigme de l'exhumé de 1840*, 132.

⁵⁰ Emmanuel de Las Cases, *Le Mémorial de Sainte-Hélène*, Marcel Dunan, ed., 2 vols. (Paris, 1983), 2:480 ("Résumé de juillet, août, septembre, octobre [1816]").

gradually and unconsciously demoralized, and ends by casting away the buckler of his impartiality.⁵¹

In such a situation, it is easy for conspiracy theorists to “cherry pick” their evidence by choosing from a welter of testimony the “proof” needed to sustain their arguments, while ignoring or discarding as unreliable anything that contradicts or undermines their theory. Here are two specific examples of this practice chosen from among dozens of others. The “substitutionists” argue that Napoleon was buried in three coffins (one inside the other) in 1821, whereas there were four coffins in 1840. Furthermore, they point out that although Dr. Antommarchi claimed that he had placed the urns holding Napoleon’s heart and stomach in the corners of the innermost coffin in 1815, these lay between his legs in 1840. In fact, however, almost all the contemporary observers on St. Helena agreed that Napoleon was buried in four coffins. There were three coffins on the evening of 7 May (when the official report was drafted and signed, later giving rise to the confusion), while the fourth coffin arrived the next day.⁵² As for the location of Napoleon’s viscera, why take Antommarchi at his word, when “[b]y the universal consent of all St. Helena students and writers, his book is a tissue of vulgar boasting and deliberate falsehood”?⁵³ There is a more credible claim by Dr. Rutledge that it was he who put the heart and stomach in the coffin; Rutledge did not mention where, but a witness, Sergeant Abraham Millington, later reported seeing him place them between Napoleon’s legs.⁵⁴

In short, the methods used by the conspiracy theorists amount to what the French call *instruction à charge*: seeking out proofs to support the case against someone while ignoring or explaining away any contradictory evidence. When it comes to the courts,

⁵¹ G. L. de St. M. Watson, *The Story of Napoleon’s Death-Mask* (London, 1915), 7.

⁵² For the official report, see Louis-Joseph-Narcisse Marchand, *Mémoires de Marchand, Premier Valet de Chambre et Exécuteur Testamentaire de l’Empereur publiés d’après le manuscrit original*, Jean Bourguignon, ed., 2 vols. (Paris, 1952-1955), 2:345. Dr. Rutledge’s report to Sir Hudson Lowe, 7 May, confirms that Napoleon was put in three coffins (tin, wood, lead) on the evening of the 7th; see William Forsyth, *History of the Captivity of Napoleon at St. Helena; From the Letters and Journals of the Late Lieut.-Gen. Sir Hudson Lowe, and Official Documents Not Before Made Public*, 3 vols. (London, 1853), 3:292. But François Antommarchi, *Mémoires du docteur F. Antommarchi*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1825), 2:170-71, Mameluk Ali, *Souvenirs sur l’Empereur Napoléon* [1926] (Paris, 2000), 277, and Marchand, *Mémoires*, 2:344 all explicitly state that in the end there were four coffins (tin, mahogany, lead, mahogany); Ali specifically mentions that the fourth arrived “the next morning,” i.e. on the 8th. Henri Gratien Bertrand, *Cahiers de Sainte-Hélène*, Paul Fleuriot de Langle, ed., 3 vols. (Paris, 1949-1959), 3:199-200 says that there were two coffins (tin and lead) on the 7th and that a third (mahogany) arrived on the 9th, evidently forgetting that he signed the official report clearly stating that there were already three coffins on the 7th. See also Andrew Darling’s account, “Napoleon’s funeral—a lost record,” *Times Literary Supplement*, 30 September 1915; translated with notes and comments by Jacques Macé as “Les obsèques de Napoléon: Journal d’Andrew Darling, tapissier à Jamestown,” *Revue du Souvenir napoléonien* 445 (February-March 2003): 46-49. Also: “Cercueils de Napoléon,” in Jacques Macé, *Dictionnaire historique de Sainte-Hélène* (Paris, 2004), 159-61; “Les cercueils de Napoléon,” in Mameluck Ali (Louis-Étienne Saint-Denis), *Journal du retour des cendres 1840*, Jacques Jourquin, ed. (Paris, 2003), 265-67.

⁵³ Watson, *Napoleon’s Death-Mask*, 8.

⁵⁴ Memorandum of Dr. Rutledge, in Forsyth, *History of the Captivity*, 3:291-92; Millington’s testimony, first published in the *Ceylon Chronicle* (1838), is reproduced in Albert Benhamou, *L’autre Sainte-Hélène: La captivité, la maladie, la mort et les médecins autour de Napoleon* (London, 2010), 343. In a later memorandum (1825), Rutledge specifically refuted Antommarchi’s statements and claims: see Arnold Chaplin, *Thomas Shortt (Principal Medical Officer in St. Helena) With Biographies of some other Medical Men associated with the case of Napoleon from 1815-1821* (London, 1914), 28-32.

this leads to grave miscarriages of justice. Looking back on the case of a Canadian convicted of murdering his wife but later proved innocent, a law professor explained that "[o]nce it was decided there was something suspicious..., you then go looking for information that would support that conclusion. You build a case. You justify a conclusion you've already reached." Referring to another false conviction in Canada, a retired chief justice warned that "you can get blinded by scientific results, but don't scrutinize them sufficiently to say, 'Hey there may be other possibilities.'"⁵⁵ It would be foolish to believe that professional historians are always immune to such an all-too-human tendency, but training in historical method generally promotes careful and dispassionate evaluation of evidence. As Bernard Faÿ concluded, after summing up the disagreement among doctors and historians over the possible causes of Napoleon's death (cancer? ulcers? hepatitis?—he did not mention poison):

Laymen can draw nothing from this macabre debate except that in this, as in everything else, science and history reach definitive conclusions only where passions are in no way involved. In all other cases, the strength of human feelings spreads a fog that does not permit reason to decide.⁵⁶

It is precisely this fog that has clouded the judgment of the conspiracy theorists.

Almost none of the conspiracy theorists demonstrate a mastery of the vast literature relating to Napoleon's exile, to say nothing of its broader political and social context. Their bibliographies are usually woefully inadequate and notations to indicate sources are almost always non-existent or haphazard. The one exception when it comes to careful notations is Roy-Henry who, at least in his second book, provides his references. But even Roy-Henry, like all the others, relies entirely on published memoirs and documents. And yet the Hudson Lowe Papers – 88 volumes in the British Library⁵⁷ – offer a mass of manuscript reports on the captivity, as well as copies of correspondence exchanged between the principal actors in the story and their friends and relations in Europe. In addition, the manuscript versions of published memoirs often contain key passages that never made it into print. Albert Benhamou, a talented non-professional researcher, has recently demonstrated how careful use of these sources can still shed new light on an old story and clarify previously obscure points.⁵⁸

It would be tedious and time-consuming to go through each of the conspiracy theories in detail to rebut them, but one incident – the death of Napoleon's majordomo, Cipriani Franceschi on 27 February 1818 – can serve here to illustrate the way that they deal, or fail to deal, with the facts. Cipriani's unexpected and sudden death has suggested to some writers that a poisoner was at work at Longwood, while the purported disappearance of his grave has led others to conjecture that it was Cipriani's body that the English turned over to the French in 1840.⁵⁹ The "fact" of the vanished grave is easily

⁵⁵ "Justice blinded by poor science, closed minds," *Toronto Star*, 23 February 2002.

⁵⁶ Bernard Faÿ, *L'agonie de l'Empereur: Récit historique* (Clermont, n.d.), 86.

⁵⁷ "The Manuscripts Relating to the Captivity," in Arnold Chaplin, *A St. Helena Who's Who* (London, 1919), 235-47. For a criticism of the selection of these papers in Forsyth, *History of the Captivity*, see G.L. de St. M. Watson, *A Polish Exile with Napoleon* (London, 1912), 5-37.

⁵⁸ Benhamou, *L'autre Sainte-Hélène*.

⁵⁹ On Cipriani, see Henri Rossi, *Les Corses des services secrets de Napoléon en exil* (Ajaccio, 2007), 77-101.

dismissed because it arises from a simple misunderstanding. The grave has “disappeared,” as the French consul on St. Helena reported in the 1960s, only in the sense that it can no longer be identified among dozens of others. Many of the tombstones from the early 1800s have fallen into disrepair and the inscriptions are worn away and illegible.⁶⁰ The poisoning theory constructed around Cipriani’s death is a more complex mystification.

Almost every book on Napoleon’s St. Helena exile recounts that while serving dinner, Cipriani suddenly fell writhing to the floor with abdominal pains, even though this scene comes from Montholon’s notoriously inaccurate memoirs, which the novelist Alexandre Dumas touched up.⁶¹ There was actually nothing particularly dramatic or inexplicable about Cipriani’s illness. Dr. O’Meara recorded only that Cipriani “had been unwell for several days before he complained, during which, in all probability, latent inflammation had been going on.”⁶² General Bertrand noted drily that Cipriani fell ill on Monday and died on Friday of “corruption in the intestines.”⁶³ He later wrote to Cardinal Fesch, Napoleon’s uncle in Rome, that a servant’s child and a maid had also recently “died of the same complaint,” adding: “Liver complaints, dysentery, and inflammation of the bowels carry off many victims amongst the natives, but especially among the Europeans.”⁶⁴ No one seems to have been suspicious about these deaths in 1818, although in 1961 Mabel Brookes, descendant of William Balcombe, Napoleon’s English purveyor on the island, put forward the dubious and unsubstantiated claim that “[Napoleon] and many others guessed how much more [than disease] lay behind the death of his *maître d’hôtel*” and also told Weider that her great-grandfather had suspected poison at the time. She added that “O’Meara perhaps feared to voice his thoughts, especially as two others, a woman and child, had died in similar fashion.”⁶⁵ This death of a small child and a child’s nurse “at about the same time” as Cipriani’s caused Weider to speculate that the demise of all three resulted from “carelessness or misadventure” or perhaps from “arsenic ... added to some sweetmeat or cake.”⁶⁶ Others have suggested that Cipriani may have stolen and drunk some of the Emperor’s own wine, which Montholon had laced with poison.⁶⁷ None of the contemporary memorialists, however, even hinted at foul play⁶⁸ and archival sources clear up any lingering mystery. The Lowe Papers contain a detailed doctor’s report on the three deaths, which occurred during an epidemic aboard the ships at anchor off St. Helena:

⁶⁰ Thierry Lentz and Jacques Macé, *La Mort de Napoléon: Mythes, légendes et mystères* (Paris, 2009), 177-78.

⁶¹ Charles-Jean-François-Tristan de Montholon, *Récits de la captivité de l’empereur: Napoléon à Sainte-Hélène*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1847-1848), 2:260-61; on their unreliability, see Macé, *Dictionnaire historique*, 336; idem, *L’honneur retrouvé du général Montholon* (Paris, 2000), 199-205.

⁶² Barry E. O’Meara, *Napoleon in Exile; or, A Voice from St. Helena: The Opinions and Reflections of Napoleon on the Most Important Events of His Life and Government, in His Own Words*, 2 vols. (London, 1822), 2:389.

⁶³ Bertrand, *Cahiers*, 2:73.

⁶⁴ Bertrand to Fesch, in O’Meara, *Napoleon in Exile*, 2:389.

⁶⁵ Brookes, *St. Helena Story*, 203-204; “Napoleon ‘Murder’: Aust. Clue,” *The Sun-Herald* (Sydney), 4 February 1962, 11.

⁶⁶ Forshufvud and Weider, *Assassination at St. Helena Revisited*, 273-74.

⁶⁷ Charton, *Napoléon empoisonné*, 158.

⁶⁸ Gaspard Gourgaud, *Journal de Sainte-Hélène, 1815-1818*, Octave Aubry, ed., 2 vols. (Paris, 1944), 2:358; Marchand, *Mémoires*, 2:184-85; Bertrand, *Cahiers*, 2:73; O’Meara, *Napoleon in Exile*, 2:386-91.

I have the honour of enclosing the minutes of the case of Cipriani [...] who died of inflammation of the bowels on the 26th [in fact: 27th] of last month [February] at Longwood. The disease was well marked on the 23rd and recourse was had immediately to the most powerful remedies. But the attack was so violent in this case, and ran its course with such rapidity that all art was in vain to stop it. It is possible that mortification of the intestine had taken place on the night of the 26th. Several pieces of mortified intestine were colmated, and when Bonaparte was informed of this, he was convinced that a true idea of the nature of the complaint had been formed and said it would not now be necessary to open the body which accordingly was not done.⁶⁹

This same report indicates that Madame Montholon's maid (a slave named Eleanor Dias) also died of an "inflammation of the bowels," but this was a full two weeks after Cipriani. Furthermore, the child who died from dysentery was under the care of a wet-nurse in town.

It is in this way that facts, sloppily collected, can be wrenched out of context, misunderstood or even distorted by well-intentioned but untrained amateur historians who elaborate complex conspiracy theories that ultimately rest on little except suspicion and innuendo. Much can be said about their technical deficiencies, but the conspiracy theorists lack far more than essential historical skills: the ultimate problem is that they have no "historical sense." In the words of Sir Lewis Namier: "[T]he aim [of the historical approach] is to comprehend situations, to study trends, to discover how things work: and the crowning attainment of historical study is a historical sense – an intuitive understanding of how things do not happen (how they did happen is a matter of specific knowledge)."⁷⁰ Conspiracy theorists reject standard narratives of the past as fraudulent because they are unwilling to accept that critical and dramatic historical events most often result from happenstance or from the confluence of complex impersonal forces. For them, events are instead the deliberate product of manipulation by clever and deceitful people acting behind the scenes, and only they – the conspiracy theorists – are perceptive enough to penetrate the veil of deceit and shrewd enough to understand what "really" occurred.

⁶⁹ Dr. Baxter to Governor Lowe, quoted in French in Benhamou, *L'autre Sainte-Hélène*, 139. Mr. Benhamou has kindly supplied me with the original English.

⁷⁰ L.B. Namier, *Avenues of History* (London, 1952), 4.