

Chapter 11

A Curious Coincidence? Catherine Younghusband and the Obins Memorial

By a seemingly curious coincidence, two memorials lying side by side in Prestbury churchyard, Cheltenham, commemorate leading personalities in the garrison guarding Napoleon in exile on St Helena (1815-21) (*illustration 20*).¹

The older of the memorials is inscribed to Hamlet Obins (1775-1848), “Lieut-Col in Her Majesty’s Service, formerly of the XXth Regiment”, and his wife Annie, “widow of the above” (†1851). The other, its inscription placed head to toe with the Obins’ one, begins with the words “Also to the memory of/His eldest sister/Sarah Ann Catherine Younghusband” (1779-1860) and is also inscribed to his unmarried sisters Amy, Sibella, and Letitia Whinyates. The brother in question is presumably George Burrington Whinyates (*1783), who died aged twenty-five, although his grave is located a few plots south-east of Catherine’s.

Hamlet Obins had served on St Helena, where he was senior Captain in the 20th Foot, from 1819 until Napoleon’s death in 1821, when he transferred to the 53rd, which he later commanded in India before retiring in 1830. Previously, from 1807-11, he had served as Aide-de-Camp to the Governor of Cape Colony.² Hamlet died in 1848 at the age of seventy-two at Tenby, Pembrokeshire, probably while on holiday in that popular

¹ *Ed:* Hearl’s original text has been extensively supplemented with additional information, especially on Robert Younghusband and Annie Obins. An extended conclusion has also been added.

² Peter Philip, *British Residents at the Cape, 1795-1819* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1981), p.307.

Georgian health resort. His widow, Annie, seventeen years younger, died at Cheltenham three years later, aged fifty-nine.

Catherine (as she was always known) was a member of that leading Cheltenham military family, the Whinyates, and is included in a remarkable family group of ten, painted in 1840, at the Cheltenham Art Gallery and Museum (*illustration 21*). Catherine died at Cheltenham in 1860 “in her 81st year”. Her memorial makes no mention of her husband, though she was the widow of Major Robert Younghusband of the 53rd Regiment, who had died in 1853 aged sixty-eight. They too had been stationed at St Helena, from 1815 to 1817, where, as historians of the period agree, Catherine had been “a source of great trouble to her husband”.³



illustration 20: Younghusband/Whinyates & Obins memorials, Prestbury churchyard; George Whinyates’s grave is at the top right

Despite Hamlet and Annie Obins’ apparent links with the Younghusbands through St Helena and the 53rd Regiment, there is no evidence that their paths ever crossed, as the Younghusbands left the island in 1817, two years before the arrival of Major and Mrs Obins.

Catherine Younghusband was already the widow of Capt. Robertson of the Bengal Artillery, with a four-year-old daughter, Emily, when, in June 1811, aged thirty-one, she married the handsome Capt. Robert

³ Arnold Chaplin, *A St Helena Who’s Who, or A Dictionary of the Island During the Captivity of Napoleon* (second edition) (London: Arthur L. Humphreys, 1919), p.114.

Youngusband of the 53rd Foot at Calcutta.⁴ Six years older than her husband, high-spirited, intelligent and ambitious, she soon became the dominant partner.

They arrived at St Helena with the Regiment at the end of October 1815, a fortnight after Napoleon, who was then lodged temporarily at The Briars while Longwood House, the Lt-Governor's country residence, was being enlarged and renovated for him and his entourage. Catherine, determined to meet the ex-Emperor, was soon making social calls, with eight-year-old Emily, on the wife and daughters of the merchant, William Balcombe, who lived at The Briars, a stratagem which shortly brought success.⁵ Napoleon, seeing an elegant lady in the garden with a pretty young daughter, could not resist coming out demanding "Qui est cette Dame?". Speaking first in French and then in Italian, in both of which he found her fluent, he ushered her into the house to give an impromptu recital of Italian airs "in style grandissimo", including an Italian duet with Emily. He was captivated. "Ah! voilà une femme d'esprit!", he later exclaimed to his attendants, further intrigued by learning that she claimed descent from Oliver Cromwell!⁶ When, after Christmas, he was settled in at Longwood House, he invited her to dinner, a privilege so rare that, during his exile, it was shared by only two other Englishwomen, Mrs Skelton, wife of the dispossessed Lt-Governor, and Lady Malcolm, wife of the naval commander on the St Helena station. Again she was asked to sing Italian songs, accompanying herself on his newly arrived grand piano, which she declared, diplomatically, "much better" than the Governor's at Plantation House. A few days later she paid a "morning visit" to Longwood when Napoleon took her for a drive in his "barouche and four [...] insisting on my sitting next to him". The Marquis de Las Cases confided to her, "he has paid you more attention than he has paid to many Queens".

⁴ A Youngusband pedigree appears in *The Genealogist*, Vol.2 (Old Series), p.53.

Ed.: A miniature of Robert Youngusband was sold by Ellison Fine Art in 2012, but permission to publish a photograph of the miniature was refused by the current owner. The miniature dates from circa 1817 and shows Robert in red uniform with gold lace and epaulettes, the latter with balls of the grenade device of the Grenadier Company. It is in a gold frame, the reverse with a gold monogram RY on plaited hair under glass.

⁵ Catherine Youngusband is the anonymous author of 'Reminiscences of Napoleon Bonaparte, at St Helena' by "a lady", *Blackwood's Magazine*, Vol.35, No.217 (January 1834), p.48-55. Six of her lively letters from St Helena were also published in *Blackwood's Magazine* (No 1,582), August 1947, p.144-153, and provide a unique and colourful insight into the early period of the Napoleonic exile on St Helena.

⁶ For details, see James Waylen, *The House of Cromwell: A Genealogical History of the Family and Descendants of the Protector* (rev. edition) (London: Elliot Stock, 1897), p.148.

Catherine did not fail to befriend such senior members of Napoleon's entourage as Las Cases, the chief Secretary. Indeed she wrote to her aunt, Lady Roche in Ireland, that she would rather talk and listen to him "than to almost any person I have ever met". Her closest confidante at Longwood, however, was Countess Bertrand, wife of General Bertrand, the self-styled Grand Marshal of Napoleon's 'Court', and daughter of Arthur Dillon, Lieutenant-General of France's Irish Brigade. "I have seen her every day [...] and do all I can to alleviate the uncomfortable state of a woman of high rank, placed in a Hovel without any comforts."

Proudly she told her aunt in March 1816 that few "know so much about the Court at Longwood as myself". But her letter hinted that there were storm clouds on the horizon: "Sir Hudson Lowe is expected daily. Everyone regrets the approaching departure of Governor & Mrs Wilks".

The amiable East India Company Governor, Manxman Mark Wilks, who, with his staff, had accepted their unexpected French guests like any other distinguished visitors, as 'gentlemen', was replaced by a military Governor with relevant European experience, with orders from Earl Bathurst on behalf of the Allied Powers, to treat 'General Buonaparte' with 'indulgence', but as a prisoner-of-war. Thus General Sir Hudson Lowe was cast, from the outset, in the role of 'Napoleon's Jailer', and Catherine's affable fraternization with the French would henceforth be deemed impolitic in the wife of a senior regimental officer of the garrison. Indeed, after Lowe's arrival, she seems to have paid Longwood less attention, perhaps because her curiosity had been satisfied. But her troubles were, in fact, only just beginning.

The Younghusbands' brushes with authority centred on a house which Catherine persuaded her husband to build at Longwood. Tired of living in tents⁷ or rented cottages, and distressed by losing "the greater part" of her stored crockery, linen, clothes, saddles, boots and chairs in a fire, Catherine demanded a "family home" of her own. But its construction diverted scarce labour and materials from urgently needed public works, provoking official displeasure, subsequently exacerbated when Younghusband, prompted by his wife, claimed compensation from the authorities for providing his own accommodation, which the government refused, with a reprimand for impertinence!

But it was the use of the house for Catherine's social activities that brought them their most serious problems. One outstanding incident occurred at the maiden meeting of the St Helena Turf Club in April 1817,

⁷ Henry William Edmund Petty-Fitzmaurice, Earl of Kerry (ed.), *The First Napoleon: Some Unpublished Documents from the Bowood Papers* (London: Constable & Co., 1925), p.191-2.

when she invited members of Napoleon's entourage to refreshments between the races, not only to meet officers of the garrison, but the Allied Commissioners to whom they were officially *personae non gratae*. To host a mixed party in the relaxed social setting of a race meeting was the height of political indiscretion. When it was reported to the Attorney-General that Madame Stürmer, wife of the Austrian Commissioner, had even been seen chatting convivially with General Bertrand, he was furious, and advised Governor Hudson Lowe to "turn her off the island" forthwith.⁸ After all, this was not her first serious offence. When, in November 1816, Napoleon's Secretary, Las Cases, had been arrested and later deported for maintaining forbidden correspondence with Napoleonists overseas, a search of his rooms revealed that he had also been carrying on a clandestine correspondence with Mrs Youngusband!⁹ That Hudson Lowe did not take his Attorney-General's advice and 'turn her off the island' after the race-meeting is therefore all the more surprising, and may say something of the strength of her personality. She was, as Napoleon observed, "une femme d'ésprit"! But she was also an inveterate gossip and it was this proclivity which now got her husband into hot water.

Catherine liked to shine at her house parties as a witty and well-informed hostess. Unfortunately, circumstances at St Helena provided nothing if not fertile ground for rumour and recrimination with the result that her spicy speculations almost forced her husband into a duel with a fellow-officer of the 53rd, Capt Charles Harrison, and led to an action at law, brought by the wife of another of his subordinate officers, Lt Michael Nagle, against Catherine for having "aspersed her character". The brunt of the case had to be taken by her husband, however, as it brought public humiliation on the Regiment, and he was held responsible for the damages awarded Mrs Nagle - £250 no less!¹⁰ The Court seems to have taken into account that she was a clergyman's daughter.

The Youngusbands left St Helena, no doubt with great relief, on the reduction of the 2nd Battalion of the Regiment in July 1817, arriving in Cheltenham, with Emily, on 2 October. Although a letter to her aunt tells of Catherine's move from Cheltenham to Shrewsbury,¹¹ the headquarters of the 53rd, the Youngusbands appear eventually to have settled in

⁸ Barry O'Meara, *Napoleon in Exile, or A Voice from St Helena* (London: Simpkin & Marshall, 1822), Vol.I, p.507-8.

⁹ Norwood Young, *Napoleon in Exile: St Helena, 1815-1821* (London: Stanley Paul, 1915), Vol.II, p.262.

¹⁰ Gilbert Martineau, *Napoleon's St Helena* (London: John Murray, 1968), p.151-2.

¹¹ *Ed.* Details taken from the description of lot 1,250, Auction 81, 22 August 2012, BSA Auctions, Leominster.

Cheltenham. The town was, after all, noted for a “social scene” comprising “an almost self-sufficient group of men who shared the common background of service in the French Wars and enjoyed their retirement in Cheltenham to the full”.¹²



illustration 21: Catherine Younghusband (second from left)

But it was not all play. In the late 1830s, Robert was a director of the Bayshill Estate Company “which had been expressly formed by a group of local gentlemen in order to develop the estate”.¹³ He also served as a Paving (or Town) Commissioner,¹⁴ and once became “the general topic of conversation throughout the town” when he saw the need to defend his honour in a duel with the Hon. Craven Berkeley.¹⁵ At the time of the 1841 census, Robert and Catherine (and their three servants) were living in Hewlett Street (now Road), but by 1843 Robert’s business ventures were

¹² Gwen Hart, *A History of Cheltenham* (second edition) (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1981), p.191.

¹³ ‘Bayshill Estate’ entry in Alwyn Sampson and Steven Blake, *A Cheltenham Companion* (Cheltenham: Portico Press, 1993). Also see Gwen Hart, *A History of Cheltenham* (second edition) (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1981), p.172.

¹⁴ Gwen Hart, *A History of Cheltenham* (second edition) (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1981), p.279.

¹⁵ *The Cheltenham Looker-On*, 29 July 1837, p.491.

evidently in trouble, as the *London Gazette* records that a “Fiat of Bankruptcy” had been awarded against “Robert Younghusband, late of Hewlett-street, and Naunton, in the parish of Cheltenham, in the county of Gloucester, Esq. Brick Maker, Dealer and Chapman”.¹⁶ Other directors of the Bayshill Estate Company also faced financial difficulties.¹⁷ There is no mention of any of this in Arnold Chaplin’s account in his *A St Helena Who’s Who*, which merely states that following his retirement from the army, Robert had lived at Middleton Hall, Belford, Northumberland, and then, until his death in 1853, in Alnwick, Northumberland.¹⁸ By the time of the 1851 census Robert was indeed already shown as living at 8 Victoria Place, Alnwick, but there is no mention of Catherine, the only other member of his household being Isabella Brown, house servant, aged thirty-eight. It is not inconceivable, following Robert’s bankruptcy and return to his native Northumberland, that he and Catherine were by then living separate lives. And although Robert’s death is mentioned in the *Cheltenham Looker-On* as “regretted by many friends”, there is no reference to his wife.¹⁹ Catherine had clearly chosen to remain in Cheltenham, which was after all her family home and whose ‘social scene’ also included the military wives and daughters. She died there in 1860 aged eighty, though on this occasion the *Cheltenham Chronicle* noted that she was the “relict of the late Major R. Younghusband, of the 53rd Regiment”.²⁰

The world of the 1840s Cheltenham pump room is indeed a very likely setting within which Catherine and Annie may have struck up a friendship based not only on their husbands’ careers in the 53rd Foot, but, more importantly, on their common familiarity with the ‘Court of Longwood’. Moreover, Annie’s house at 29 Clarence Square²¹ was a mere five minutes’ walk away from Catherine’s house at 9 North Place.²²

¹⁶ *The London Gazette*, Issue 20,236 (23 June 1843), p.2,139 (this erroneously refers to “Haunton” instead of “Naunton”). Also see *The London Gazette*, Issue 20,229 (30 May 1843), p.1,825 and *The Cheltenham Examiner*, 17 May 1843, p.3. Ed: Robert Younghusband’s ‘trade’ was stated this way for legal reasons.

¹⁷ ‘Bayshill Estate’ entry in Alwyn Sampson and Steven Blake, *A Cheltenham Companion* (Cheltenham: Portico Press, 1993).

¹⁸ Arnold Chaplin, *A St Helena Who’s Who, or A Dictionary of the Island During the Captivity of Napoleon* (second edition) (London: Arthur L. Humphreys, 1919), p.114.

¹⁹ *The Cheltenham Looker-On*, 24 September 1853, p.617.

²⁰ *The Cheltenham Chronicle*, 28 August 1860, p.5. Also see *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, Vol.209 (July-December 1860), p.442.

²¹ *The Cheltenham Looker-On*, 28 September 1850, p.12. She had moved there in 1850 from 12 Pitville Lawn, the home she had shared with her husband.

²² *Slater’s Commercial Directory, 1858-1859*, Cheltenham edition.

While Annie may not be remembered as having played that prominent a role in island society during the period of Napoleon's exile, she was certainly no stranger to it. Not only had Abbé Ange Vignali, Napoleon's chaplain, been a visitor to the Obins' house, but "Major and Mrs Obins" were included in a list drawn up by Countess Bertrand of people who should be given passes to visit her at Longwood, "as she was somewhat particular with reference to those with whom she associated".²³ The friendship between Annie Obins and Countess Bertrand is also attested by Capt. Engelbert Lutyens of the 20th Foot in one of his letters to General Gorrequer, in which he relates that "Countess Bertrand [...] felt very weak and unwell, and that she thought she should adopt Mrs Obins's plan (leave her husband and go to Europe)".²⁴

Given Catherine's and Annie's common friendship with Countess Bertrand, and the likely friendship between these two women themselves, struck up in Cheltenham military society, it cannot have been a mere coincidence that they were laid to rest side by side. The fact that Annie and Henry Obins had already been buried near one of Catherine's brothers probably made the decision much easier. And after all, as Catherine writes at the end of her *Recollections*, "military men and women seem all brothers and sisters".²⁵

²³ Arnold Chaplin, *A St Helena Who's Who, or A Dictionary of the Island During the Captivity of Napoleon* (second edition) (London: Arthur L. Humphreys, 1919), p.108, 217.

²⁴ Engelbert Lutyens, *Letters of Captain Engelbert Lutyens, Orderly Officer at Longwood, St Helena: Feb. 1820 to Nov. 1823* (Lees Knowles ed.) (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1915), p.34 (the letter is dated 23 April 1820). Knowles comments that the Countess "was probably poking fun at the officer's wife".

²⁵ 'Reminiscences of Napoleon Bonaparte, at St Helena' by "a lady", *Blackwood's Magazine*, Vol.35, No.217 (January 1834), p.55.