

THE DEATH OF NAPOLEON

A letter written from St. Helena, to his mother, by Ensign Duncan Darroch¹:—

Deadwood, May 6th, 1821.

My Dearly-beloved Mother,—Before this reaches you, you will be aware of the state we are in here ; you will be aware of General Bonaparte being very seriously ill, as a man-of-war sailed a few days ago with despatches to that effect. It was impossible to write by her, she sailed so suddenly. Old Nap had been ill this long time ; but, about a week ago, he was given over—it was then that the ship was despatched,

¹ Duncan Darroch, the writer of this letter was born in 1800, the eldest son of Lieutenant-General Duncan Darroch, of Gourrock and Drums, in Renfrewshire, an officer of almost continuous foreign service from 1792 to 1815.

He entered the Army at the age of eighteen, gaining his commission by competition at Sandhurst, and served in the 20th Regiment at St. Helena during the captivity of Napoleon.

Domestic reasons caused his retirement from the Army in 1829 with the rank of Major, when he resided on the family estate of Drums for some years, until the failing health of his father caused him to remove to Gourrock. He succeeded to the estates in 1847, at the General's death. He died on October 13th, 1864. The following extract from the "Greenock Advertiser," of October 15th, 1864, will show what was thought of him in the neighbourhood :—

"We regret very much to record the death of this most amiable gentleman. As one of the very few landed proprietors in the vicinity of the town, his manly figure was familiar to the people of Greenock. For many years he has evinced much interest in all that concerned the welfare and progress of the burgh and port, and at all demonstrations and festivities he was a constant and welcome guest. He was a man of most kindly feelings and courteous manners, and in his immediate circle was greatly respected and beloved. Most loved when he was best known. No stronger evidence of his considerateness and kindness could be adduced than the long periods—forty years and under—which all his servants have remained in his employment. He was a spirited agricultural improver, and took great interest in the spiritual, mental, and moral improvement of his more humble neighbours. He was a good soldier in early life, and keenly promoted the organisation of the Volunteer Army. In the family-circle, especially, the departure of a relative so good, pleasant, and exemplary, will be deplored as an irreparable affliction."

It may be of interest further to record that at the disruption of the Presbyterian Church in 1843, he, being a personal friend of Dr. Chalmers, joined the movement, and presented a site for the new Free Church, besides liberally helping the organisation ; also, that he was succeeded in the property by his son, Duncan Darroch, of Gourrock and Torridon, N.B., a deservedly popular laird in the North, whose son again, another Duncan Darroch, is Captain in the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders.

The name "Duncan" has been the name of the eldest son, ever since the founding of his branch of the family by the grandfather of the writer of this letter. The name "Darroch" is the gaelic word for an oak, and it was taken in memory of an exploit of a remote ancestor, in troublous times, with an oak-cudgel. The family are descended from the MacDonalds of the Isles.

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and the other men-of-war were ordered to water and get ready for sea. He was lying insensible on the evening of the 2nd ; on the morning of the 3rd, he became sensible again, and knew the people around him. He then relapsed into a kind of inanimate insensibility, and became gradually cold, until yesterday morning, the 5th, when about 11 o'clock a signal was made by the Governor to the Admiral that he was expiring, and that a signal should be made immediately that he died. The Members of Council had been ordered on the 3rd to hold themselves in readiness to repair to Longwood to witness his death ; and, as to the Governor, he almost took up his abode in the new house. Things continued in this state until about 10 minutes before 6 o'clock in the evening, when he died, just as the sun was setting. The French Commissioner, the Admiral, and all the big-wigs were immediately assembled to see the body, and workmen were employed in hanging the rooms with black. Orders were sent for plaster of Paris, to take a bust of him ; but, I believe there is not enough in the island. They are trying how Roman cement will answer¹.

His death is announced in to-day's Orders, and that he is to be buried at Longwood with military honours. General Count Montholon has taken the management of the funeral : the body will lie in state, and we are to go up this evening to see it. I shall then be able to give you some more information about this wonderful man, who has for such a time kept the world in a ferment, and now lies an inanimate lump of clay, without a person near him at all related to him ! What a change the thread of his existence being severed has caused in this island ! People who have laid in stock to serve the troops will have it now lying useless on their hands. Horses that were this day week worth £70 will not bring £10. Our huts that we have been obliged to build to put our servants in, and which have cost from £6 to £10 each, are now useless, for this part of the island will be uninhabited after we leave it ; so that, we shall all more or less feel the effects of his death.

The report here is that we are to be reinforced from the 66th (who are to proceed home) and go on to Bombay, and sail up the Persian Gulf. He (Nap) has chosen an extraordinary place to be buried in, in case of his not being removed to Europe, and that is, in a place called the Punch Bowl, a little below the public road.

I have seen him lying in state. It was a most melancholy sight. We assembled at Longwood about 4 o'clock ; there were nearly all the

¹ See "The Story of Napoleon's Death-Mask", by G. L. de St. M. Watson.

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officers and private gentlemen in the island. After some little time we were admitted. The first room was empty, with the exception of one of the servants. In the second was the Countess Bertrand. She looked wretchedly ill and pale, her eyes red and swollen. I remained with some officers whom she knew, talking to her. She said she had had no rest for six days and six nights ; that she was glad that the complaint he had died of was such a one that it was impossible he could be saved, or that climate could have any effect upon him : it was a cancer in his stomach. His father died of the same. She said that she hoped to be permitted to go home, " now it was all over ".

After a little time, I proceeded through this room (which was the one he died in), and the dining-room, to where he was lying. I was ushered in by Captain Crockett (*sic*), the Orderly Officer. He (Gen. B.) was dressed in full uniform, green, turned-up with red, breeches, and long boots, a good many Orders on his breast, sword by his side, and cocked-hat on ; spurs also on. He lay on the iron camp-bedstead that he had carried with him always, and on it was spread his military cloak, on which he lay.

Count Bertrand stood at the head of the bed, dressed in black. The priest was kneeling by his side, and an attendant, who was the only person in the room that seemed to have life, showed it only by driving the flies away. His countenance was serene and placid ; it had, of course, fallen in. His features were handsome and bold, his hand very delicate and small and a beautiful colour. A crucifix was laid on his breast. His nose was particularly handsome. They had, in turning him on the bed, bruised it a little.

To see a man, who had caused Europe and the world at large so much trouble, lying in a small room, on his military cloak and camp-bed, dressed in his full uniform, with only two of his General Officers near him, was an awful sight. It struck me so. I could have gazed on him for hours, have taken his hand and kissed it ; but, I could scarce breathe. While I looked, I fancied him in the different situations he has been in at Lodi, at Marengo ! In fact, though I was scarcely two minutes in the room, more ideas crowded through my mind, driving one another out as quick as formed, than I could write to-night. On going out, I ruminated a long time on the instability of human affairs, and on the little use his conquests were to him then ! What would not thousands of people have given to see what I have seen ! He will be laid in his coffin, wrapped in his cloak, just as we saw him. The first will be tin, the second lead, and third and fourth wooden.

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I shall be on guard to-morrow, when I shall try to see him again. I have been so fortunate as to procure some of his hair, also a piece of lint dipped in his blood—curious keepsakes, certainly, but anything appertaining to such a great man is worthy of being preserved. I will conclude this on guard, as well as answer your last. Good-bye.

7th May, Longwood Guard, 7½ p.m.

I have had a great deal of trouble all day with people wishing to see Bonaparte. I have now got rid of everyone, and shall have time to talk to you, my beloved mother, a little while. I went up this morning soon after I mounted guard, and, after asking leave, went into the room. He lay just as before ; his countenance had fallen in a little more ; there were only the priest and attendant and myself in the room. I took up his hand and held it for some time, examining the fingers, and his features ; that hand which kings had kissed and which had caused so many to tremble. I never in my life saw a more serene and placid countenance. He seemed in a profound and quiet slumber, except for the livid colour of his lips and cheeks. On his left [breast] were a star and two Orders of some kind. These were all the ornaments about him. His hat was perfectly plain, with a black loop and small tri-coloured cockade. I went in afterwards with our men, and, as there were only two officers, Rae and myself, I stood at the foot of the bed while the men passed through. The men's countenances were capital ; as they looked on the body they were indescribable, at least by letter. The smell at this time began to be very strong, and I was glad to go away as soon as the men were gone. I was afterwards sent for by one of the doctors, and shown his heart and stomach, which lay in a silver urn by his side. They were covered with fat. In the stomach I was shown the hole that had caused his death—a hole that I could have put my little finger in. I had then an opportunity of observing the sword, rather old, with a gold and mother-of-pearl hilt, plain white belt, the one I suppose which he usually wore.

After going out this time, I went into the room where the Countess was sitting. After talking to her some time, she advised me to go back and look at him again, as the last time I should see that great man. I did so, and took him by the hand, and muttered an adieu to him !

I went in once again, when they were taking the cast of his head ; but, the stench was so horrible that I could not remain. Doctor Burton was taking it with the French doctors. About a quarter after four, the Governor rode up, and ordered Captain Croket (*sic*) to be on board the "Heron", and sail with the despatches at sunset. Accordingly, he was off in a great hurry, as the sun sets about a quarter before six now.

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We shall inter the remains of Napoleon Bonaparte in the Devil's Punch Bowl, at 11 on Wednesday, the 9th of May. His heart and stomach will be placed in a silver urn (soldered up) by his side, in order to be removed to Europe, should it hereafter be thought proper. We are to bury him with the highest possible military honours. It will be a dismal sight, certainly, but more of that hereafter. I must talk, as well as I can, of what goes forward at present. A most beautiful snuff-box, which has been bequeathed to the Countess, was shown me yesterday. On the lid was Nap's miniature, set round with the largest diamonds I ever saw in my life. To give some idea of it, it was valued at £——. The likeness was an extremely good one of him when in health. Our anxiety is now to know what will become of us. They say we (the XX.) will remain here, until advices arrive from home as to where we are to proceed to; but, all agree that we shall go eastward. If we do, many years will come and go before we see Europe again. Only one thing would make me wish that we should retrace our steps. You may easily guess what that is. As to everything else, I am very well content to go to New Zealand, if they choose to send us there. I hope we shall not go to the Cape. The 66th will go home immediately. You can have no idea of how lonely I feel on guard to-night. I know not how it is, but it is so. I have just posted the last sentries, I suppose, I shall ever post round his body. I cannot drive his countenance from my mind's eye; it haunts me continually, and the smell is still in my nose, and on my hands.

I daresay this event will make a great stir in England some time before this reaches your eyes, and you will be wondering why I have not written by the ship that takes the despatches. That is, however, easier said than done. No one can, I believe, write by this ship.

I forgot to bring your letter with me, and I, consequently, cannot answer it to-night. Good-bye.

Thursday, 10th.—We yesterday interred the remains of Napoleon Bonaparte with military honours. The funeral I will describe as well as I can. In the first place you must understand the figure of the ground near Longwood. The island, generally speaking, is composed of high and narrow ridges of hills running, or rather, diverging, from Diana's Peak towards the coast, where they terminate abruptly in tremendous precipices. The valleys between them are very steep.

Longwood is situated on one of the ridges, and the place Nap chose for his body to lie in was in the valley between that and James's Valley, where the town is, and which, from its circular form, is called,

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at least near the head of it, as I said before, the Punch Bowl. That part near the sea is called Rupert's Valley.

To get down to the grave, a road was made from the public road (which I forgot to mention runs completely round the Punch Bowl, within a few feet of the summit of the hill), slanting down into the valley, and commencing exactly on the side from Longwood. The troops of, which there were about 1,600, were formed from Longwood Guardhouse, on the bank above the road, in succession by seniority—20th, Marines, 66th, St. Helena Artillery, Regiment and Volunteers: on the left, eleven guns of the Royal Artillery, as the firing party. We were at open order, resting on our arms reversed, bands playing the Dirge. After a little time, the procession appeared through the gate. First came the priest, and Henry Bertrand carrying the censer; after them, Doctor Arnott and the French doctor. Next the undertakers, and then the body. The body of his own carriage had been taken off, and something like an open hearse put in its place. He was drawn by four of his own horses, with postillions in his Imperial livery. There was a plain mahogany coffin, and, instead of a pall, his cloak thrown over it. On the top, was a large book with his sword lying on it.

Napoleon Bertrand and the head valet walked on each side of the hearse. Six of our own Grenadiers, without arms, marched on each side. After the body came the led horse beautifully caparisoned. On either side rode Counts Bertrand and Montholon. After them, a small carriage with the Countess and two of her children in it. All the French were in black. The Naval and Staff military officers followed, and, as soon as the whole had passed the left of the line, we reversed arms and followed. The troops did not go down into the valley, but formed on the road immediately over the grave, in the same order, resting on our arms reversed, while the ceremony went on. On reaching the turning of the road leading down, the body was taken from the hearse, and carried by Grenadiers of the 20th and 66th Regiments, under the command of Lieutenant Connor.

I must now describe the grave, or tomb, that was prepared for him. The spot he chose is in the highest extremity of a small garden belonging to a Mr. Torbett. It is completely overhung, for a space of about thirty square yards or more, with five or six weeping willows. A little on one side was a spring of the best water in the island, and which he used every day to send for. This runs down the valley. There is no stream perceptible. Near the grave, the moisture is just sufficient to keep the turf completely green, and the place cool. Here the grave was

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dug. Its interior capacity was twelve feet deep, eight feet long, and six feet wide, surrounded by a wall about three feet thick all the way down, and plastered with Roman cement. About two feet from the bottom, and resting on blocks of stone, the stone-coffin was, constructed like a large stone-box, with the lid open, and the lid resting on one of its edges. Over the grave were placed beams and ropes to lower the coffin with. At each end of the grave, a triangle was erected, and a beam was laid from one to the other over the grave. Ropes, beams, and pulleys were covered with black. The grave was lined with black cloth, and the ground, for about two feet round, covered with it. The rest was green sod.

On the wooden-coffin being lowered into the stone-coffin, the lid was shut down, and the salute fired. They then proceeded with the Roman Catholic ceremonies. A subaltern's guard was then ordered from us to take charge of the tomb or grave, and three tents were pitched for their accommodation. An immense crowd assembled to witness the ceremony, and the Punch Bowl looked like a vast amphitheatre.

I gave you a wrong statement of the coffins. The first is tin, second mahogany, third lead, fourth mahogany, and fifth stone. They intended to bury him with a silver jug¹ of water, a plate, knife and fork and spoon, with some bread, and some of his own coins. But they were obliged to leave out the jug, bread, sword, and cloak, not having room for them. Sir Hudson would allow of no inscription on the coffin, so it was perfectly plain. Soon after the guard left, we marched off. I shall have the pleasure of mounting it to-morrow. The French people have laid out Bonaparte's plate, arms, clothes, etc., etc., for us to see, and we go up in about an hour's time to look at them.

We went up yesterday, my beloved mother, to see the effects of the great man. His bedrooms were arranged exactly as they used to be when he inhabited them. They were two rooms, about fourteen feet by ten feet each. They formed one of the wings of the house, and opened into each other at the ends. The one nearest the body of the house opened by a glass-door into the gardens. The better way will be to sketch it on a half sheet of paper, and enclose it to you. He had a bed in each room, exactly similar to each other; portable iron bedsteads, with brass-laths for the bed to rest on. The rooms were hung with white. Being field-beds, you know, the inner rail was low, and to each was tied a white pocket-handkerchief. Over the fireplace, which was at the farther end of the inner room, hung the portraits of his mother,

¹ Longwood, on a wind-swept plateau, 1,800 feet above the level of the sea, swept by south-easterly gales, had no drinking-water, other than muddy and unwholesome. Chinese brought water for Napoleon daily from his favourite spring in a silver-jug.

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Josephine, Jerome, and two of his son at different ages. A sofa was placed near the fireplace, and over it, hung Maria Louisa and her child, beautifully painted. As far as I could learn, he used to endeavour to hide his lowness of spirits; but, after everyone had left him at night, and he thought himself unobserved, it used to break out. He used to go to the sofa from one bed, and from that to another, and back again to the sofa; so that, he scarcely ever rested four hours together. The old house of Longwood where he lived is a wretched one. I had no idea it could have been so bad. His own apartments he had arranged very neatly, but the rest was in a horrible state. There is not a single window in the dining-room; three doors open into other rooms, and a fourth into the garden. I could not have lived as he did, I am sure, half the time that he did. He got enough to eat and drink certainly, but——¹. I am running on rather foolishly about things that don't concern me. His clothes were all laid out in one room—coats, breeches, hats, shirts, stockings, shoes and boots, spy-glasses, guns, pistols, cloaks, gloves, etc. The coats were plain uniforms of different corps. No ornaments, except the star and epaulettes. I tried on one of his cocked hats. He must have had an extraordinary wide head, for it would not fit me when put on square (the way he always wore it), but did when put on fore and aft. The pistols were the most beautiful I ever saw in my life. There is only one case². It contained two brace, beautifully carved and inlaid with gold and silver. His horse-furniture was there also, scarlet-edged with deep gold lace. The guns were fowling-pieces of different sorts. One had been sent him by our King. In the other room were the plate and china. There was one complete set of silver. There was a set of gold knives and forks and spoons. No plates or anything else. Of course the eagle, with the crown on his head and lightning in his grasp, was everywhere. There was a dessert and coffee-service of china, the most beautiful, I suppose, that was ever made. On each plate was represented some action of Nap's; but, the most curious plate of all was one with the map of France on it. Each landscape and figure represented could bear the most minute inspection. In each saucer, the head of some person was delineated. I have as yet forgotten to mention where I am writing from. I know you admire some of the names we give places, so you shall have this—Sepulchre Guard.

May 13th.—It is now near nine o'clock. The wind sweeps furiously through the Punch Bowl, and rattles over poor Napoleon's grave. I

¹ See letter of March 19th, 1820. Page 27.

² This is apparently inaccurate. The case, with a glass lid, given to Captain Engelbert Lutyens, contained only one brace of pistols. It weighed 14-lbs.

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have a sentry promenading each side of it, to catch him if he gets up. It is not finished. It is covered by a thing like a door covered with black cloth. Two of the French people came to pay it a visit to-day. They deplored his loss very much. One asked me for a piece of the willow that overhung his grave. I could not refuse it to an old servant. He divided it with the other, and put it in the crowns of their hats, and thanked me very warmly, and declared it of more value to them than crowns of gold. They then took a drink at his well.

May 20th.—This I hope will go into the Post Office this evening. I must, therefore, soon conclude. I have to give you a ground-plan of the house yet. A miniature painter here, a Mr. Rubige¹, has taken a very happy likeness of Napoleon after death ; he intends taking it home and engraving it. I have subscribed for two copies, which I have desired to be left directed for my father with Mr. R. Binnie. I hope you will like them. I would wish, if it can be done, that you would send me one. But perhaps it may get injured ; so, keep them till I see you. The likeness was taken on the second day after his death, just previous to the cast of the head being formed. Nap has left to Dr. Arnott, of Ours, who attended him, a gold snuff-box, on which, a few days previous to his death, he scratched an N. himself, and also 600 Napoleons, all nice new yellow-looking little fellows. The 66th return by some ships we have here, and embark in the course of next week. We gave them a farewell-dinner yesterday. Their men are allowed to volunteer to us. I think we shall go to India³ ; the next question is, when shall we return ? Heaven only knows. However, I am content whatever happens. We shall have to burn our furniture, I think, for the island is overstocked now by the 66th selling off. We shall have a glorious fire of huts, tables and chairs. I must make haste, and wish you good-bye. * * *

Your very affectionate Son,

(Signed) Duncan Darroch.

The sketch I would make just now would not be sufficiently explanatory. I must, therefore, send one of the house and grounds, bye and bye. Adieu. If you can do it with safety, I would wish you to send me one of the likenesses ; they are both paid for. Mind, "with safety".—D. D².

¹ William Rubidge, a portrait-painter.

² It must be remembered that this wonderfully interesting letter was written by a son to his mother. The writer was the youngest ensign of the 20th Regiment. He had not the knowledge and information of his seniors. The historian, therefore, must be kind in his criticism. The letter, reproduced by kind permission, is from a copy by the Rev. Charles Stuart Parker Darroch, Vicar of St. Thomas' Church, Southborough, Tunbridge Wells, a son of Duncan Darroch.

³ The 20th Regiment left St. Helena for Bombay, early in May, 1822. They were the last of the King's troops on the Island.