

NAPOLEON, THE LAST PHASE

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Napoleon, the Last Phase by Lord Rosebery

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LORD ROSEBERY

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BY
LORD ROSEBERY



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CHAPTER I

THE LITERATURE

WILL there ever be an adequate life of Napoleon? Hitherto it has been scarcely worth while to ask the question, as we have been too near the prejudices and passions of his time for any such book to be written. Nor are we as yet very remote, for it may be noted that our present sovereign was all but two years old when Napoleon died, and that there are still probably in existence people who have seen him. Moreover, the Second Empire revived and reproduced these feelings in almost their original force, and the reaction from the Second Empire prolonged them. So we are still, perhaps, not sufficiently outside Napoleon's historical sphere of influence for such a book to be written.

Nor until recently did we possess anything like adequate materials. The pages and pages that follow Napoleon's name in library catalogues mainly represent compilations, or pamphlets, or lives conscientiously constructed out of dubious or inadequate materials, meagre bricks of scrannel straw. But now, under a government in France which opens

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its records freely, and with the gradual publication of private memoirs, more or less authentic, we are beginning perhaps to see a possible limit to possible disclosure. The publication of the suppressed correspondence removes a reproach from the official publication, and fills its blanks. And the mania for Napoleonic literature which has prevailed for some years past, unaccompanied, strangely enough, by any sign of the revival of Bonapartism as a political force, has had the effect of producing a great supply to meet a greedy demand—a supply, indeed, by no means always unquestionable or unmixed, but at any rate out of the harvest of its abundance furnishing some grains of genuine fact.

The material, then, varied and massive as it is, seems to be ready for the hand of the destined workman, when he shall appear. And even he would seem not to be remote. In the great narrative of the relations of Napoleon and Alexander of Russia we wish to see his shadow projected. Is it too much to hope that M. Vandal will crown the services that he has rendered to history in that priceless work by writing at least the civil life of Napoleon? Might not he and M. Henri Houssaye, who has also done so much so well, jointly accomplish the whole?

We speak of a partnership, as we do not conceive it to be possible for any one man to undertake the task. For the task of reading and sifting the materials would be gigantic before a single word could be written. Nor, indeed, could any one man adequately deal with Napoleon in his military and his civil capacities. For Napoleon, says Metternich, a hostile judge, was born an administrator, a legislator, and a conqueror; he might have added, a statesman.

THE LITERATURE

The conqueror of 1796-1812, and, it may be added, the defender of 1813 and 1814, would require a consummate master of the art of war to analyze and celebrate his qualities. Again, Napoleon the civilian would have to be treated, though not necessarily by different hands, as the statesman, the administrator, the legislator. Last of all, there comes the general survey of Napoleon as a man, one of the simplest character to his sworn admirers or sworn enemies, one of the most complicated to those who are neither.

And for this last study the most fruitful material is furnished in the six years that he spent at St. Helena, when he not merely recorded and annotated his career, but afforded a definite and consecutive view of himself. "Now," as he said there himself, "thanks to my misfortune, one can see me nakedly as I am." What he dictated in the way of autobiography and commentary has never perhaps received its just measure of attention. Some one has said somewhere that the memoirs he produced himself appear to be neglected because they are the primitive and authoritative documents, so far as he is concerned, of his life. People prefer to drink at any other source than the original; more especially do they esteem the memoirs of any who came, however momentarily, into contact with him. What the man himself thought or said of himself seems to most of those who read about Napoleon a matter of little moment. What they want to read is Bourrienne, or Rémusat, or Constant, or the like. They may, no doubt, allege that Napoleon's own memoirs are not so spicy as those of some of his servants, and that they are by no means to be always relied upon as unbiased records of fact. Still they remain as the direct deliberate declarations

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of this prodigy as to his achievements, and they contain, moreover, commentaries on the great captains of the past—Cæsar, Frederic, and Turenne—which cannot be without serious interest to the historian or the soldier.

Nor must this indifference to truth count for too much in an estimate of Napoleon's character. Truth was in those days neither expected nor required in continental statesmanship—so little, indeed, that half a century afterwards Bismarck discovered it to be the surest means of deception. Napoleon's fiercest enemies, Metternich and Talleyrand, have now given us their memoirs. But we should be sorry to give a blind credence to these in any case where their personal interest was involved. Napoleon at St. Helena was, as it were, making the best case for himself, just as he was in the habit of doing in his bulletins. His bulletins represented what Napoleon desired to be believed. So did the memoirs. They are a series of Napoleonic bulletins on the Napoleonic career, neither more nor less.

But there is one distinction to be drawn. In writing his bulletins, Napoleon had often an object in deceiving. At St. Helena his only practical aim was to further the interests of his dynasty and his son. So that where these are not directly concerned the memoirs may be considered as somewhat more reliable than the bulletins.

The literature of St. Helena is fast accumulating, and must be within a measurable distance of completion. Eighty-four years have elapsed since a greedy public absorbed five editions of Warden's *Letters* in five months: seventy-eight since the booksellers were crowded with eager purchasers for