



Napoleon: Shadows & Gardens
Dr Ruth Scurr

6 May 2021

Introduction

Yesterday was the 200th anniversary of the Emperor Napoleon's death on the South Atlantic Island of Saint Helena. In this lecture I will evoke the trajectory of his extraordinary life by talking about some of the gardens that he passed through and the shadows he cast within them.

But first I want to explain why I am taking such an unusual, some might even say surreal, approach to the life of one of the most important historical figures there has ever been. As you see, I'm illustrating this first part of my lecture with René Magritte's plaster copy of the Emperor's death mask overpainted with sky and clouds.

Gardening was the first and last passion of Napoleon Bonaparte, a figure still recognized by his silhouette two hundred years after his death.

Between cultivating his first garden at school in Brienne-le-Chateau, in northern France, and his last in exile on St Helena, he won and lost an empire.

He was born in Ajaccio on the island of Corsica, on 15 August 1769. He became Napoleon, Emperor of the French in 1804, and abdicated a decade later. In 1815 he escaped from a brief exile on the island of Elba to reclaim his empire for almost a hundred days, lost the Battle of Waterloo, and was sent to St Helena, where he died on 5 May 1821.

At the beginning and end of his extraordinary life, gardening offered Napoleon a retreat from the frustrations of powerlessness. A clever Corsican boy, who won a scholarship to a military school in France, he spoke French slowly with a heavy accent. He wanted, at times, to shut himself off from his peers, to read, think and remember his home and family on the island of Corsica. He was powerless in the ordinary sense; a child from a secure but modest background with an unknown future ahead of him.

After he was sent into exile on St Helena at the age of forty-six, gardening was Napoleon's last burst of activity before he died. On the advice of his doctor, he made an elaborate garden where sunken paths helped him evade the surveillance of the British guards. He swapped his iconic bicorne hat for a battered straw one and set about cultivating the only patch of ground remaining to him. His interactions with the natural world at the end of his life resonate with those of every man or woman who enjoys gardening in retirement or in retreat from the stresses and strains of the world. But Napoleon was no everyman.

Earlier in his life, his relationship with nature was determined by his ambition, first to advance himself within the chaotic aftermath of the French Revolution, and then to become the most important and feared man in Europe. Even in exile, there were echoes of grandeur in the extensive and meticulous plans he laid out for his last garden.

Napoleon spent five years at the military school in Brienne-le-Chateau and six on St Helena. These blocks of time enclose his life like bookends. They are the periods during which he had little control over the conditions of his everyday life and found refuge in growing plants. In between his first and last gardens, the arc of his life rose towards the sky, before falling back down to earth. As his power grew, then declined, he rarely had time for gardening himself; but he passed through many gardens, large and small, public parks or private green spaces, admiring them. Often, he ordered improvements, commanding other people's labour, always imagining a grander garden than the one that existed. He was a garden-watcher and enthusiast, alert to the science and art of cultivation. He valued gardens as places to walk in at his own pace as he reflected on the frenetic events by which he hoped to secure the future of France. For someone almost always in motion and in a hurry, more often at war than not, gardens offered rare opportunities for calm and pleasure. They were a counterpoint to the many battlefields; discrete settings in which the terrain and the weather were as important as they were in combat, but for creative not destructive purposes.

On two significant occasions, one at the start of Napoleon's career, the other at the end, a garden became a battlefield, and the distinction was lost. The first was the Tuileries gardens in central Paris, where in 1792 he witnessed the massacre of Louis XVI's Swiss Guard and the fall of the French monarchy; the second was the walled garden of Hougoumont at Waterloo. In both these gardens the piles of dead and mutilated bodies formed a terrible contrast with horticultural attempts to impose order on the natural world.

Napoleon wanted to impose order on France and dreamed of expanding the nation's territory within Europe and beyond. In 1802, when he was First Consul and not yet Emperor, Samuel Taylor Coleridge described him as 'Poet Bonaparte – Layer out of a World-Garden'. Almost a decade later, despite his dismay at the violent outcome of Napoleon's power, Coleridge proposed 'a series of lives from Moses to Buonaparte of all those great men, who in states or in the mind of man had produced great revolutions, the effects of which still remain, and are, more or less, distant causes of the present state of the World'.

Napoleon epitomised the ideal of a self-made man; the corporal from Corsica who came to rule over Europe and crowned himself Emperor of the French. His authority was not inherited, but hard won through military and political genius. His rise to power would not have been possible without the French Revolution, but when he made himself hereditary ruler of France, he betrayed the revolutionary ideals that gave him his first opportunities.

As a biographical subject, Napoleon has always attracted great male writers who identify with him. Walter Scott travelled to Paris to interview Napoleon's former colleagues and published *The Life of Napoleon Buonaparte, Emperor of the French* in 1827. Thomas Carlyle, who declared that 'The history of the world is but the biography of great men', included Napoleon in *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* in 1841. But, as David Sorensen has pointed out, Carlyle's attitude to Napoleon was ambivalent: sometimes he characterised him as 'our last Great Man', at other times he criticised him for 'grandiose Dick-Turpinism, revolutionary madness, and unlimited expenditure of men and gunpowder'. Ultimately, he saw Napoleon as a reckless gambler whose immense temporary success ended in him 'losing his last guinea'.

Carlyle asked that Napoleon be judged according to 'what Nature with her laws will sanction. To what of reality was in him; to that and nothing more.' *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* was published the year after Napoleon's remains were brought back to Paris from his modest grave on St Helena to be interred in Les Invalides, in a sarcophagus and setting worthy of a world-changing emperor. In 1842, a year after Carlyle's book was published, Charlotte Brontë, aged twenty-six, went to Brussels to improve her French. Sixteen kilometres from Waterloo, she wrote a short essay on 'The Death of Napoleon', which began by asking: 'How should one envisage this subject? With a great pomp of words, or with simplicity?' She distanced herself from great orators,

writers and politicians, and set out from the perspective of ‘the ordinary person’ for whom Napoleon would always be a soldier of fortune:

“Let her then approach with respect the tomb hollowed out of the rock of St. Helena and, while refusing to bow down in adoration before a god of flesh and clay, preserving her independent though inferior dignity of being, let her take care not to cast a single word of insult at the sepulchre, empty now, but consecrated in the past by Napoleon’s remains.”

Bronte contrasted the glory of Napoleon which grew overnight, ‘like Jonah’s vine’, to the glory of the Duke of Wellington which grew ‘like one of the ancient oaks that shade the mansion of his fathers on the banks of the [river] Shannon’. Wellington was her hero, but Napoleon, the outsider, the young soldier with nothing behind him but courage and talent, was closer to her own experience of the world. On 4 August 1843, the teacher she was in love with gave her a fragment of Napoleon’s coffin from St Helena, which had been given to him by a friend who had been Napoleon’s nephew’s secretary. She turned it over in her hand and reflected that we all have only the idea of Napoleon we are capable of having. There are no definitive biographical portraits, only one person looking at another – mediocrity looking at genius perhaps – and casting a cold eye.

Bronte’s cold eye inspired me to write about Napoleon. ‘What are you going to find to say that hasn’t already been said?’ an older, male, supportive but sceptical colleague asked at the outset. But if there are no definitive biographical portraits, no final word or conquest of another person’s life, then there is always something new to say, no matter how many regiments of biographers have marched across the same ground.

Napoleon is the most masculine of subjects and very few women have written his biography: a fact that would have pleased him. He condescended to and dismissed bookish women of the time, especially the novelist and liberal political theorist Madame de Stael. When she first met the young hero, de Stael tried to talk to him about revolutionary politics. In response he asked her how many children she had. He believed women should be concerned with childbearing, not politics or literature. ‘I do not like women who make men of themselves, any more than I like effeminate men,’ he told his secretary. In retaliation, de Stael wrote eloquently about Napoleon’s egoism. ‘He regards a human being as an action or a thing, not as a fellow-creature. He does not hate more than he loves; for him nothing exists but himself; all other creatures are ciphers.’

A shadow is a dark area or shape projected by a body coming between rays of light and a surface. Napoleon was often compared to the sun and his first wife, Josephine, adopted the heliotrope as her emblem with the motto ‘Vers le Soleil’ (Towards the Sun). But in this lecture, he is not the sun. Instead, he is firmly situated within the natural world. He is seen by tracing the shadows that he cast over the lives gathered around his and the shadows that he threw across the lawns of specific gardens, a brooding and mysterious presence.

Napoleon’s shadow, unlike his instantly recognisable silhouette, is not singular or monolithic. The enormity of what his life meant for France, Europe and the world cannot be disputed. But is his shadow great or monstrous? There are many thousands of books about him and almost all of them come down on one side or the other of this question. Rather than weighing Napoleonic questions, or reconstructing the motives behind his world-changing actions, I have set out to ground his life by situating it in a series of gardens where the shadows he casts are various and changeable, plural not singular.

Gardens

The Tuileries Gardens

In August 1792, when he was a young republican soldier, Bonaparte witnessed the fall of the French monarchy in the Tuileries gardens.

Later in life, he told his brother Joseph that the carnage he saw in the garden that day affected him more profoundly than any of the subsequent battles he participated in.

Around nine hundred Swiss Guards attempted to protect the royal family from the revolutionary crowd. A hundred and fifty of them had already accompanied the king on his sad walk across the gardens to the Legislative Assembly where he resigned his crown. As he left the Tuileries for the last time, the king remarked that the autumn leaves were falling early that year. The rest of the Swiss Guard remained at the now empty palace. Despite having cannon and ammunition, hundreds were slaughtered in the Tuileries gardens. This was because they had received the order from Louis XVI to lay down their arms and return to their barracks. They obeyed, and almost seven hundred of them were killed, their bodies piling up by the round pond in the formal garden while the palace was pillaged. The contrast between the geometrical precision of the garden layout, with its neat, symmetrical topiary, and the corpses of the dead and dying was shocking.

The Tuileries gardens dated back to the mid-sixteenth century, the time of Catherine de' Medici, the wife of Henry II of France, and mother of Francis II, Charles IX and Henry III. A hundred years later the designer Andre le Notre transformed them into a formal garden in the French style known as *jardin à la française*, for the Sun King, Louis XIV. Favouring straight lines and symmetry, typically including long avenues of trees, often chestnuts or elms, and closely cut hedges, of privet or beech or boxwood, formal ponds or fountains, gravel paths and parterres, Le Notre's gardens reflected the orderly triumph of man's will over nature. Interspersed among the geometrically arranged plants were beautiful marble statues.

With retrospect, Bonaparte was not sure if it was the smallness of the space, the unusual spectacle of a bloody battle inside a garden, the density of dead bodies piled on top of one another on the ground, or the fact that he was still young and inexperienced and this was the first time he had ever seen bloodshed, which accounted for the deep and lasting impression of horror that the massacre of 10 August made on him. He remembered walking through the garden in the aftermath and seeing well-dressed women behaving with gross indecency, mutilating the genitals of the murdered Swiss Guards, seemingly civilised people descending to bestial behaviour. Afterwards, making the rounds of the nearby cafes, he noticed the anger in people's faces, sensing revolutionary rage in every heart. He thought he caught people looking at him with hostility and defiance, as though he was somehow suspicious for remaining calm and not sharing their anger. He was more likely in shock, unsure of his future and of what to think in the midst of the Revolution. But the sense that the crowd might suddenly turn on him, as it had turned on the king and his Swiss Guards in the Tuileries gardens, never left Bonaparte, it only got stronger, more plausible and haunting over time.

The Jardin de Plantes

At the heart of revolutionary Paris, on the left bank of the River Seine, there was a botanical garden. Before the Revolution it was the Jardin du Roi, the King's Garden. Louis XIII's doctors established it in the mid-seventeenth century to grow medicinal plants. Later the Comte de Buffon transformed it into one of the greatest gardens in the world. For fifty years, until his death in 1788, the year before the Revolution began, Buffon planted, propagated and researched in the garden.

Bonaparte was introduced to the Jardin des Plantes through his friend Jean-Andoche Junot who became his aide-de-camp during the siege of Toulon in late 1793. Junot's uncle, the Bishop of Metz, was a distinguished naturalist and a close friend of Louis-Jean-Marie Daubenton, who had been demonstrator of the king's cabinet (or collection) of natural history under the Old Regime, and was charged with establishing a modern museum, the National Museum of Natural History.

When Junot and Bonaparte were in Paris together they often went for walks in the Jardin des Plantes.¹⁰ Bonaparte loved to go on tours of the greenhouses. The greenhouses were not yet what Junot's future wife Laure Martin de Permond would later describe in her memoirs as 'the finest temple ever raised to nature in the midst of a city', but they were already filled with rare and fascinating plants.

In the spring of Year 3 (1795), Paris was starving. At the Jardin des Plantes there was nothing to feed the animals in the menagerie, not even horsemeat, and over half of them died and became specimens in the museum. Less than a year after the fall of Robespierre, famished citizens looked back with fondness to the regime of Terror, remembering that then there was at least bread. It was in this context of a nation exhausted by six years of revolutionary uncertainty and foreign and civil wars that Bonaparte began his rise to power through the army.

As he conducted his conquering march through Italy during the first Italian campaign, Bonaparte collected natural history specimens and fine art. The Directory, which was struggling to govern France, appointed a Commission of Arts and Sciences to help him, which included scientists, naturalists and artists.

On 9 Thermidor, Year 6 (27 July 1798), the Directory celebrated its four years in government since the fall of Robespierre with a two-day Festival of Liberty. The procession began in the Jardin des Plantes at the Natural History Museum, where live animals, including camels, ostriches, lions and gazelles, and forty-five cases of specimens were loaded onto wagons decorated with tricolour ribbons and garlands. Then came a detachment of troops and more wagons carrying rare books, manuscripts and works of art.

The crowds sang: 'Rome is no more in Rome. It is all in Paris.' Without Bonaparte's conquests, Rome would still have been in Rome and there would have been no loot to parade. But he was nowhere to be seen; he had already set sail from Toulon for Egypt on a voyage of exploration, leaving his growing reputation for military glory to hover over the festivities. The parade included two floats that bore enormous representations of the rivers Tiber and Nile. On behalf of the Republic, Bonaparte had dominated the land watered by the Tiber; next would come the land watered by the Nile.

Egyptian Gardens

In Cairo Bonaparte found a newly built, freshly furnished palace that seemed almost to be waiting for him. This was the palace of al-Alfi Bey on Azbakiyya Square in western Cairo. The Azbakiyya area, close to the lake filled by the Nasiri Canal during the annual flooding of the Nile, had been gradually rebuilt after a fire in 1776. The Alfi Palace was on the waterfront and had just been finished according to the owner's taste, and was, conveniently, still uninhabited when Bonaparte arrived. The palace Bonaparte appropriated had a very large garden, which became known as the 'Jardin du General en Chef'. He compared it to the gardens of nunneries in Italy; full of magnificent trees, great arbours, and the most glorious grapes in the world, but completely lacking in paths and alleys. He ordered improvements, arranging for the installation of walkways, marble basins and fountains, grafting French features onto the existing garden. In his memoirs he claimed that 'the natives of the East are not fond of walking; to walk when one might be sitting appears to them an absurdity which they can only account for from the petulance of the French character'. He did not mention that before his time, the waterfront of the Alfi Palace had been a public promenade.

Bonaparte had a lifelong interest in science and was deeply proud of his election to the National Institute had been created by the constitution of 1795 to replace the royal academies which had existed before the Revolution. He boasted that he provided Parisian circles with a remarkable

spectacle: the young general of the Army of Italy in the ranks of the institute, discussing profound metaphysical matters in public with his colleagues. He was determined to establish a new branch of the National Institute in Egypt. For this purpose two more palaces were appropriated: those of Qasim Bey and Hassan Bey Kachef, surrounded by beautiful gardens in the al-Nasiriyya quarter, about two kilometres east of Bonaparte's headquarters in Cairo. At the time, the vast walled gardens, bordered by countryside stretching towards the Nile, were already divided up in the manner of agricultural fields and planted with willows and a variety of crops. There was a complex system of canal irrigation and cascades of water several storeys high. These waterfalls were surrounded by pavilions and terraces shaded by trees. Qasim Bey had opened his magnificent garden to the public, so there were coffee houses, seating areas and latrines for general convenience.

Everything was confiscated and converted into the new institute, the main purpose of which was 'to foster the spread of Enlightenment and knowledge in Egypt'. Scientific discovery, rigorous classification of phenomena and the application of reason to understanding the natural world were among the aims of the institute, but so too were the more worldly goals of local administration and governance. Bonaparte ordered the establishment of a French and Arabic press, a physics and a chemistry laboratory, a library and an observatory in the garden of the new institute. 'The real conquests, the only unregretted ones, are those against ignorance. The worthiest and most significant occupation for nations is to enlarge the frontiers of human knowledge,' he declared.

The chronicler and scholar Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti visited the institute and was shown the library, the many books on Muslim history and science, and saw the efforts the French scholars were making to learn Arabic. He was also shown the laboratories and the observatory. In his chronicle he wrote: 'They possess extraordinary astronomical instruments of perfect construction and instruments for measuring altitudes of wondrous, amazing and precious construction.' Describing the site of the institute, the naturalist Étienne Saint-Hilaire remarked that the immense well-watered garden, planted with many species of trees and full of birds, would soon surpass the Jardin des Plantes back in Paris.

The vast walled garden of the institute covered approximately thirty acres. The scholars could walk in it deep into the evening, admiring the beauty of the sky, the perfume of the orange trees, the mildness of the temperature. 'It is our garden academus,' Saint-Hilaire wrote proudly to his father. Writing to his wife, the mathematician Gaspard Monge described this garden of the institute, after it had been flooded with the waters of the Nile, as charmingly verdant, almost an earthly paradise. Soon a fully-fledged botanical garden, filled with animal and vegetable curiosities, it was considered a realisation of the highest goals of the Enlightenment.

In contrast, the scholars were dismissive of other gardens they found in Cairo. In the *Description de l'Égypte*, the cartographer Jomard recorded that there were twenty-two important gardens in the city but warned readers not to imagine gardens in the European sense; instead, these gardens were more like plantations 'consisting of dense shrubs and vines, bananas, orange and lemon trees, acacias and sycamores'. He echoed Bonaparte's complaint that Egyptian gardens were not designed for walking in, but for enjoying from a seat inside a trellis-covered kiosk.

Malmaison

Josephine bought Malmaison, the 'mala domus' or 'bad house', before Bonaparte returned from Egypt. It became their marital home. They had visited it together in Nivose, Year 6 (January 1798), before he left, but reached no agreement on the purchase, which he considered too expensive.² On 2 Floreal, Year 7 (21 April 1799), she promised to pay 225,000 francs for the house, which dated back to the fourteenth century, situated eleven kilometres north-west of Paris, surrounded by parkland, forests, fields and streams running into the River Seine. The previous owner a wealthy financier, had had a garden of great beauty laid out in the English style. The designer, Jean-Marie

Morel, was a leading advocate of the *jardin à l'anglaise* and the author of *Théorie des Jardins*, published in 1776. Instead of the strict formality of the traditional French style, which Napoleon much preferred, the *jardin à l'anglaise* included winding paths, asymmetric plantings, groves, lakes and follies. When Josephine bought the house of her dreams, she was determined to make an even more enchanting English garden than the one that had existed before the Revolution.

As Bonaparte's power grew, so too did Josephine's ambitions for her garden at Malmaison. She wanted it to be 'the most beautiful and curious garden in Europe' and a rival to the best botanical gardens in the world, Kew in London and the Schonbrunn and Belvedere gardens in Vienna. As the wife of the First Consul Josephine often demanded plants from the Jardin des Plantes. But the exchange was not one way; from the beginning there was close cooperation between Malmaison and the Natural History Museum, enthusiastic sharing of samples and botanical knowledge. Sometimes Josephine's requests included plants that were not ready to move, but otherwise the professors were happy to send her what she asked for, knowing that the plants would be well cared for at Malmaison.

Growing a Crown

By Year 10, Britain was France's only unvanquished enemy. The two countries had been at war for almost a decade, since the execution of Louis XVI and the start of the Terror early in 1793. The Peace of Amiens, under which Britain finally recognised the French Republic, ended hostilities, but only lasted just over a year. It was signed on 4 Germinal, Year 10 (25 March 1802) and it ended on 28 Floreal, Year 11 (18 May 1803). During that brief interval of peace, Britain could afford to ridicule and dismiss the threat of Bonaparte. On 21 Pluviose, Year 11 (10 February 1803), Samuel William Fores published a satirical print in London, part of a folio of caricatures that could be loaned out for an evening's entertainment, called *The Rival Gardeners*. The artist, Charles Williams, depicted George III and Bonaparte in their gardens on opposite sides of the Channel, each growing a crown in a tub hooped with gold. George III is plainly dressed, wearing a gardening apron and leaning on a spade. Bonaparte is in military dress, but has also donned a gardening apron and over-sleeves. George III's crown thrives at the top of a vigorous oak sapling; but Bonaparte's crown droops, unsupported by a wilting plant. Behind Bonaparte are rows of red flowers in pots, labelled 'Military Poppies', and a wheelbarrow, filled with coins, into which he has stuck his sabre. On the side of the wheelbarrow is written: 'This is manure from Italy and Switzerland.' The caption above Bonaparte's head reads: 'Why I don't know what is the reason – my Poppies flourish charmingly – but this *Corona Imperialis* is rather a delicate kind of plant, and requires great judgement in rearing.' George III, pointing to his healthy crown, replies: 'No – No – Brother Gardener – though only a ditch parts our grounds – yet this is the spot for true Gardening, – here, the *Corona Britanica* [sic], and Heart of Oak, will flourish to the end of the World.' Floating in the Channel between Britain and France is a cudgel carved with the words 'British Oak'.

At this time, Madame de Stael noticed how 'monarchical institutions were rapidly advancing under the shadow of the republic'. There was now a praetorian guard, crown diamonds had been used to decorate the First Consul's sword, and his dress, covered with gold, echoed the Old, pre-revolutionary, Regime. He seemed to her a parvenu with all the audacity of a tyrant. She left a withering account of his smile:

"His smile has been cried up as agreeable; my own opinion is that, in any other person it would have been found unpleasant; for this smile, breaking out from a confirmed serious mood, rather resembled an involuntary twitch than a natural movement and the expression of his eyes was never in unison with that of his mouth; but as his smile had the effect of encouraging those who were about him, the relief which it gave them made it be taken for charm."

Within a year, de Stael's outspokenness would result in Bonaparte exiling her from Paris for a decade, insisting that she stay at least forty leagues away. On the day she was given twenty-four hours to leave, she was struck by the beauty of the sun and flowers. 'How different are the sensations which affect us from the combinations of society, from those of nature!', she remarked.

Imperial Gardens

Dominique Vivant Denon, Director of Museums in Paris, advised Napoleon that the most useful thing he could do in Rome was to create a salubrious space in the centre of the city. He suggested a vast garden to include the Capitol, Forum and Palatine, stretching as far as the Oppian and Caelian hills. The ancient monuments, Rome's sole resource, would be spectacular ornaments in such a garden. Denon thought the cost would be around 3 million francs. He knew that Napoleon was particularly keen to create jobs for the poor, left vulnerable and without sustenance by the closure of convents and the end of old religious practices, but suggested that expenditure could be lowered significantly if soldiers were deployed to shift the earth. He assured the emperor that the result would be 'the most splendid garden in the universe', a sublime space containing the most magnificent monuments of ancient Rome. In just three or four years, Napoleon would have done more for the Romans by creating this vast garden than the popes had ever done.

In Paris, Napoleon wanted to build a new forum to rival that of ancient Rome. For many years, there had been talk of connecting the Louvre to the Tuileries Palace to make a larger centre of government at the heart of the city. The construction of the Rue Rivoli, running parallel to the Seine on the other side of the palace gardens, was part of this plan. Begun in 1801, when Napoleon was First Consul and named after his most dramatic victory in the first Italian campaign, the road opened up a direct route between the Place de la Concorde, the Tuileries Palace and the Louvre. The long, straight Rue Rivoli was to be lined by strictly regulated buildings, with standardised arcades and balconies. It would be a triumphal route and a place for Parisians to promenade. It would also remove impediments to accessing and defending the centre of government, making it easier to prevent revolts of the kind that had ended the monarchy in the Tuileries gardens on 10 August 1792.

As Napoleon's power increased, his architects, Charles Percier and Pierre Fontaine, joined in sincerely with his dreams of urban planning, delighting especially in the idea of redesigning the space around the Tuileries Palace and removing the traces of the Terror. In 1806, Fontaine noted in his journal that it was still possible to see holes made by cannonballs and the date, '10 Aout, 1792', inscribed on the facades near the Place du Carrousel. Now plans were in place to turn the centre of Paris into 'le forum Napoleon', a Roman space at the heart of the first city of the Empire.

Percier and Fontaine's main achievement was the Arc du Carrousel, situated between the Louvre and the Tuileries Palace, celebrating the Battle of Austerlitz. It was consciously modelled on the arches of Septimius Severus and Constantine in the Roman Forum. The emperor hoped that aside from the aesthetic benefits of opening up the Place du Carrousel, getting rid of ramshackle buildings and a narrow street so close to the Tuileries, where plotters could hide, would increase security.

After the birth of his son, known as the King of Rome, on 20 March 1811, Napoleon planned a new enormous palace and garden on Chaillot Hill on the north bank of the river Seine between Versailles and Paris. In the Emperor's dreams, and those of his architects, the new palace would be far superior to that at Versailles. The first stone was laid on 15 August 1812, Napoleon's own birthday, and the same day as the attack on Smolensk, a walled city 360 kilometres south-west of Moscow. Despite the disastrous Russian campaign, Fontaine did not notice any slowing down of the project on Chaillot Hill until the following year.

Following calls for Napoleon's abdication in 1814, the fantasy palace on the banks of the Seine shrank to a garden pavilion. The final plan was a landscaped garden that would have incorporated

the work that had already been done on the foundations of the non-existent palace for the King of Rome.⁹⁵ The construction of the nearby Arc de Triomphe ceased in 1814 when the monument was just over five metres tall. And 'le forum Napoleon' at the centre of Paris was left incomplete, the Louvre and Tuileries still not joined or integrated, except by the unfinished Rue Rivoli.

The Walled Garden at Waterloo

Napoleon and Wellington had never faced each other on a battlefield before. When they did so at Waterloo, both commanders decided that the chateau of Hougoumont, in a hollow just south of the Mont Saint-Jean ridge, was a crucial stronghold to be kept or taken at whatever cost. Hougoumont was a set of buildings, including a chapel, manor house and farm, arranged around two courtyards and mostly enclosed by high garden walls.

During the Battle of Fleurus in 1794, when French emigre forces opposing the revolutionary army had occupied Hougoumont, they found it to be a fully functioning farm, with all kinds of agricultural equipment and livestock. At that time they knocked loopholes in the garden walls so that they could fire at the enemy without being seen. Some of the loopholes were still there when Wellington sent his forces to occupy Hougoumont twenty-one years later.

In 1861, Victor Hugo spent two months exploring the battlefield and the remains of Hougoumont, which was once again a functioning farm. Hugo wandered around the garden. He could see that it had once been a 'seigneurial' garden in the old formal French style, but he found it full of gooseberry bushes and overgrown by brambles. He counted forty-three of the stone balustrades on the terrace still intact, but others were lying on the ground, marked by bullet holes, and one stood on its stem 'like a broken leg'. Hugo walked in the orchard and counted thirty-eight loopholes in the garden wall enclosing it. He thought the wall looked ready for renewed fighting. And yet the orchard was 'as susceptible to the month of May as any other'. There were buttercups and daisies and high grass, carthorses grazing and washing hanging out to dry on ropes suspended between the trees. One frail apple tree had been bandaged, like a wounded soldier, with a poultice of straw and clay. It was not the only ailing or dying tree. 'Nearly all the apple trees are decrepit with age. There is not one which does not have its bullet or biscayen ball. The skeletons of dead trees abound in this orchard. Crows fly in their branches, and at the far end is a wood full of violets.'

There was deep irony and melancholy in the carpet of violets, the symbol of hope for Napoleon's return from his first exile on Elba, that Hugo saw or imagined in the wood beyond Hougoumont. As he understood it, Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo was also the definitive defeat of the French Revolution. 'the mounted Robespierre was unseated,' he claimed at the end of the chapter in *Les Misérables* entitled 'Is Waterloo to be Considered Good?' Robespierre never fought in a battle, might not even have known how to ride a horse, and almost certainly never owned one. There could not have been a greater contrast between Robespierre, the academic lawyer whose name became synonymous with the revolutionary Terror, and the soldier Napoleon who had devoted himself to France's glory. 'If glory lies in the sword made sceptre, the Empire was glory itself,' Hugo wrote. Yet Napoleon owed his opportunities and all his power to the disruption caused by the Revolution of 1789: when he finally lost everything at Waterloo, what remained of the Revolution fell with him.

His Last Garden on St Helena

In September 1819, the new doctor Napoleon's mother sent him arrived on Saint Helena. Francois Carlo Antommarchi, was an Italian physician who made the plaster cast of Napoleon's face after he died which became his death mask. Antommarchi urged his patient to resume exercise. 'Where?' Napoleon asked. 'In the gardens, in the fields, in the open air,' the doctor advised. Although he was feeling better, Napoleon remained resistant to exercising under the surveillance of the British 'redcoats', so Antommarchi suggested gardening. 'You must dig the ground, turn up the earth, and

thus escape from inactivity and insult at the same time.’ The suggestion was well received. ‘Dig the ground! Yes, doctor you are right, I will dig the ground.’ By the next morning, he had appointed his Swiss servant Jean-Abram Noverraz, who had previous agricultural experience, as his chief gardener. They were already discussing elaborate plans for expanding the existing garden.

Napoleon seized on Antommarchi’s idea for at least two reasons. Gardening would boost his levels of physical activity and would also increase his privacy. He hoped to devise a means of screening from view the barracks and the telegraph pole that sent daily updates on his whereabouts to Plantation House. Suddenly, nothing but gardens was talked of at Longwood. Napoleon wanted to grow fruit and vegetables, to construct shady walkways and to hide the sentinels from his windows, so that he looked out on greenery, rather than being reminded of the surveillance to which he was subject. He was delighted with the elaborate birdcage that Chinese labourers, brought to St Helena by the East India Company, made for his garden, even though all the birds he put in it died.

In a candid moment, he told General Baron Gourgaud that if he had not been a captive, the life he lived on St. Helena would have suited him very well. ‘I should like to live in the country; I should like to see the soil improved by others, for I do not know enough about gardening to improve it myself. That kind of thing is the noblest existence.’ At the end of his life he believed, ‘Man’s true vocation is to cultivate the ground.’

Conclusion

Napoleon’s life was epic in its intensity and impact, but a mere speck of time within the history of the natural world. When he was dying on St Helena, when the power and will to garden even a small plot of land had left him, he knew that he was surpassed by nature, but that he had claimed a place in history: his shadow would continue to fall over the world for centuries beyond his death. By going back to the gardens Napoleon made at the beginning and end of life, by watching him pass through other gardens on his rise to and fall from power, I have sought to return him to the context within which he lived. I have accepted that there were, and are, many Napoleons. He can be – and often is – described in what Charlotte Bronte called ‘a great pomp of words’. That, certainly, is what he intended. But he was also fascinated by details: the empirical facts that he would have classified and collated if he had been free to pursue a scientific career. By narrowing my focus to gardens, I have found space for the small details that are pushed aside in grander, more conventional narratives. All gardens combine basic facts – the type of soil, the kinds of plants – with abstractions: the seasons, time, eternity. In tracing Napoleon’s shadows in gardens, I have neither bowed down in adoration nor proscribed him. I have looked carefully at his effect on others in various green spaces and I have found that Madame de Stael was wrong to write: ‘In every respect it is war, and only war, which suits him.’ Gardens suited him too and the shadows he cast within them yield new ways of seeing his life.

© Dr Scurr, 2021