

## NAPOLEONIC SONGS

*Napoleon Buonaparte died at St. Helena in 1821. Mr. Kidson's article is specially appropriate as a centenary tribute.*

*My uncle, Captain Flanigan,  
Who lost a leg in Spain,  
Tells stories of a little man  
Who died at St. Helene;  
But bless my heart, they can't be true,  
I'm sure they're all romance;  
John Bull was beat at Waterloo!  
They'll swear to that in France.*

WHETHER, to-day, our brave allies still have the impression which Praed assigned to them in 1830 (an impression which certainly existed among a section of French society) we cannot now tell. But France has ranged side by side with British soldiers, and many a Waterloo have they fought together in the recent war; and an opportunity has been given to show the stuff both England and France are made of against a common enemy.

It is a hundred years since the exile of St. Helena passed to a Divine judgement; and we may well leave it at that, though it has become the fashion for English writers to glorify his memory and find greatness in his public actions, with the addition of much virtue in his private conduct.

We have always proved ourselves generous enemies when the fight was over, and our present-day estimate of Napoleon has not been tinctured by rancour. We have forgotten our early nineteenth-century contempt for the little man before his hopes and victories were shattered at Waterloo.

We look with merely a collector's eye upon the gross caricatures and ribald verses that poured forth in such quantity in those early days, and we now look to authorities to give us truer pictures of the man, and to blot out memories of our grandfathers' impressions.

Still there was always a small section of the English people who, during Napoleon's career had the greatest sympathy with his aims. He was the puller down of thrones; he was the enemy of tyrants. They forgot that he set up afresh the thrones he had destroyed and became an ultra-tyrant himself.

Meanwhile the lampoonists were busy ridiculing 'the little great man,' and the caricaturists, with young George Cruikshank is their head, at work with their etching-needles drawing absurd likenesses of the Little Corporal.

The song writers, too, found in him a capital theme, and many witty ephemeral songs were sung all over the country. A couple of these with their music lie before me as I write, and some verses may be quoted. The first is by Charles Dibdin, jun., the clever son of the writer of sea songs.

There had been exhibited in Bristol and London a skeleton of a mammoth, or (more properly) a mastodon, discovered in America and sent on exhibition to England in 1802-3. The obvious suggestion of 'Boney Part' was not lost upon the comic writers of the day, and so Charles Dibdin produced the song 'The Mammoth and Bonaparte, written by Charles Dibdin, jun., and sung by Mr. Townsend with universal applause at Sadler's Wells Theatre, adapted for the pianoforte by W. Reeve.' William Reeve, the clever composer of the period, did not write the melody, but used the once popular tune, 'Bow wow, wow.' This lively air had done duty for many fleeting ditties, and was again to be used for Thomas Hudson's 'Guy Fawkes,' and forty or fifty years ago for the Music Hall song of which the burden was, 'By studying economy I live like a lord.'

But for Charles Dibdin's song:---

*Of all the sights in London town that take the folks' attention,  
The mammoth is a wondrous form, enormous in dimension,  
'Twas brought from North America, and on it wags are donart, sir,  
For as it is a skeleton they call it Bonypart, sir.  
Bow, wow, wow, etc.*

*This mammoth any day you'll see your course to Pall Mall keeping,  
And when you're there you only need a shilling pay for peeping.  
Its fame reach'd France and Bonyparte he wanted it to view, sir.  
Then let him come, and when he does; he'll pay for peeping too, sir.  
Bow, wow, wow, etc.*

*To buy this mammoth France proposed, but Bonyparte he said, sir,  
I'll have it as a lawful prize when England I invade, sir;  
'Twill be all fish that comes to net then, wherefore need we buy, sir?  
Says John Bull, 'If you do come you'll have other fish to fry, sir.'  
Bow, wow, wow..*

And so forth, for many doggerel verses. Another song in ridicule of Napoleon by Thomas Dibdin, the brother of the foregoing Charles, was also set to the air 'Bow, wow, wow.' It is entitled 'The Negotiation, or John Bull versus Bonaparte, written for the Installation Ball and sung by Mr. Fawcett, with unbounded applause, the words by T. Dibdin.' It alludes to some fruitless negotiations towards peace conducted by Lord Yarmouth and afterwards by the Earl of Lauderdale in June and July, 1806. It begins:-

*Come listen every lord and lady, squire, knight and stateman,  
I've got to sing a little song about a very great man;  
And if the name of Bonapart should mingle in my story,  
It's with all due submission to his honour's worship glory.  
He fell in love with Egypt once because it was the high road  
To India for himself and friend to travel by a nigh road,  
And after making mighty fuss and fighting night and day there,  
'Twas monstrous ungenteel of us who wouldn't let him stay there.*

Then follow more verses of a like character.

Another song of the same period has this verse:-

*We've wonderful foes on the seas  
Who kick up a wonderful riot;  
We'll bang them with wonderful ease  
And make them all wonderful quiet.  
In Egypt we'd wonderful works;  
Bonaparte, that great undertaker,  
Went to take the whole land from the Turks,  
But he couldn't take one single Acre.*

England has fought with many enemies, but only the French have been honoured with our defiant songs. It has been truly said that Charles Dibdin the elder did more to man the English Navy than the press gang. His songs were chiefly directed against the French, and Napoleon, of course, came in for his satire in some of them. One notable song of his, which may be compared with Rudyard Kipling's 'Absent-Minded Beggar,' was 'Freedom's Contribution.' Originally sung in one of his table entertainments called The Sphinx in 1798, it aided greatly a voluntary contribution towards a defence of the country against a threatened French invasion. Charles Dibdin's patriotic efforts met with an inadequate reward in the form of a pension, but for some reason, difficult now to fathom, this meagre acknowledgement was stopped by a succeeding Government, much to its disgrace.

We have, besides those of Dibdin's, a rich array of sea songs, mostly with themes of defiance of our French enemies. I don't know whether France retaliated and sang songs in ridicule of our English fighting men - I think it probable - but I doubt whether the hearty British brag will be found present in such.

Perhaps the two best known of our English sea songs of this type and of the period I am dealing with are 'Hearts of Oak' and 'The Saucy Arethusa.' This latter song first appeared in the opera *The Lock and Key*, 1796, and it deals with sufficient accuracy with a naval engagement that took place in the English Channel in June, 1778. While the professional musician and song writer were taking Napoleon for their theme, the ballad-monger and the folk-song singer were not far behind. We find, for example, such songs as 'The Deeds of Napoleon,' one verse of which begins:-

*That hero came from Corsica and proved himself a don,  
Though kings he did dethrone, and thousands made to groan,  
Yet we miss the long lost Emperor Napoleon.*

'The Isle of St. Helena' is another effusion of the ballad-monger. The first verse runs:-

*Now Boney he's away from his warring and his fighting,  
He's gone to the place he can never delight in;  
He may sit now and tell of the scenes he has seen-a,  
While forlorn he may mourn on the Isle of St. Helena.*

Then comes 'Napoleon's Farewell to Paris':-

*My name's Napoleon Bonaparte, the conqueror of nations;  
I've banished German legions and drove kings from their thrones;  
I've trampled dukes and earls and splendid congregations,  
Though they have me now transported to St. Helena's shore.  
Etc., etc.*

Another folk ballad is 'The Dream of Napoleon.' It is quite remarkable that all these ballads sound a regretful note that Napoleon has been banished and that his career is ended. There is no doubt that among many of the lower classes great admiration was felt for him. It was probably the Irish element kept this alive. Of other folk-songs equally in sympathy with Napoleon I may mention 'The Grand Conversation on Napoleon,' which gave rise to other 'Conversations,' one of which dealt with the events of the Russian tsar.

One wonders whether in a future age the same sympathy will be extended to that sham Napoleon, the German Emperor, for he certainly never had a popular song in dispraise of him.

FRANK KIDSON.