TAKING FRENCH LEAVE

Masonic English Napoleonic Prisoners 1803–1814

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Between 1803 and the Treaty of Paris in 1814 it is estimated that more than 122,000 soldiers and sailors were landed in England. Of these 17,000 were exchanged for English prisoners in France or invalided home, but more than 10,000 died and hundreds of officers broke their parole and escaped. By comparison, in May 1803, at the time of the 2nd Prairial[1] decree and following a mass arrest, there were 16,000 British prisoners including 400 tourists who had missed the chance to escape, a number of merchants on business in France, and British residents who became *détenus*. The French authorities now paid not one farthing for the maintenance of the prisoners, but left them either 'to starve or to be a burden on the British Government which, by contrast, regularly remitted the whole cost of the support of the English captives in France to the Imperial authorities.[2]

[1] The ninth month of the Revolutionary calendar.
[2] A. Alison, *History of Europe* (London: William Blackwood and Sons 1854–60), Vol. IV.

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Napoleon's wars had a devastating effect on the countries of Europe and cost them dear, but France paid the lowest price of all, £255,000,000, while the cost to England was £831,000,000.[3]

Napoleon's Guests

Napoleon's 'guests' were housed in fortresses mostly in the very north and east of the country and which were known as *dépôts*. The system was essentially the same as that in England: the lower ranks were accommodated in ancient cold and wet fortress prisons, while the parolees were usually free to find their own accommodation, food, and clothing. No allowance was forthcoming and the monies sent to France both by the British Government and the families and friends of the detainees seem to have been subject to taxation. The best known *dépôts* were Verdun, Bitche, Metz, SarreLibre, Valenciennes, Arras, Givet, Besançon, Longwy, and Auxonne. In England French prisoners were often allowed, especially in parole towns, to seek employment and to make and sell items. I have found no similar activity in France.

M. Alexandre Lardier visited French Napoleonic detainees all over Europe during the war and some of the accounts he gave in his book *Histoire des Pontons* published in 1845 bring tears to the eyes.[4] The following poem was written by a Royal Marine called Samuel Oakes, a prisoner in Givet prison, as the first letters of the lines of his poem show, and where he expected to die.

> Galled was my neck by strong Iron chains
> I suffered much, tho' vain it was to complain
> Vainly I thought my suffering could not last
> Er'e this mortal thread of life was past
> Torn were my feet by the stones for want of shoes
> Poverty and misery before me were my views
> Recalled was often my Nation & my home
> I bore with patience the sequel of my doom
> Sometimes I wanted even bread to eat
> O then I knew that Liberty was sweet
> Never more I thought to see my home again.....

Yet it was here, in this place of misery, miles from the sea, that the British naval prisoners achieved an astonishing feat. When the frigate *Minerva* ran aground off Cherbourg, amongst those captured were Captain Jahleel Brenton and the Naval Chaplain, Revd Robert Wolfe. These two men established a school of navigation for imprisoned sail-

[3] *Leicester Daily Post*, 26 February, 1903.

[4] A. Lardier, *Histoire des Pontons et Prisons d'Angleterre pendant la Guerre du Consulat et de l'Empire* (Paris: Au Comptoir des Imprimeurs-Unis, 1845). Lardier wrote a large number of books on history, prisons, and crime. He was for some time himself imprisoned in the hulk *Guilford*.

ors which is said to have given purpose to the imprisonment of many young sailors, and prepared them well for employment on their release. We believe that a number of Frenchmen also profited from the skills taught by this initiative. One remarkable student artefact from Givet has been preserved, *William Carter's Navigation Book, Givet Prison*. This as yet unpublished handwritten work includes water-colour drawings of ships, nautical scenes, instruments and equipment, navigation calculations, and notes on seamanship.[5]

The 1st Battalion of the 9th Regiment of Foot and its Travelling Military Lodge No. 183 is Imprisoned

On 10 November 1805 three ships carrying the 1st Battalion of the 9th Regiment of Foot set sail for service in France. However, two ships were blown off course but the third, *Ariadne*, carrying the Masonic headquarters of a military lodge, Lodge No. 183B, Minute Books, and Archive, was shipwrecked on the French coast near Calais on 16 December 1805. All the staff officers and 262 soldiers were captured by the French and held as prisoners of war until January 1814. This regiment's travelling military lodge – No. 183B – held a warrant granted by the Ancients Grand Lodge on 19 February 1803. It is not clear in the records, but this lodge may also have obtained a warrant dated 4 November 1773 issued to a lodge meeting in Captain Philip Webdell's Company, Royal Regiment of Artillery, as Lodge No. 183A which lapsed in 1782, but the number was transferred to a new lodge. The warrant includes an endorsement confirming its transfer to a group of non-commissioned officers of the 9th Regiment of Foot. With more than 120 members it continued to meet throughout their detention in Valenciennes first at the Pavilion of Liberty and then in 1811 at the houses of George Burleigh, Mr Leferty, Viscount Barrington, Mr Liffen, Mr Lovelace, and Mr Leffen; then from 1812 at Mr White's house.

Membership of the lodge was opened to others beside non-commissioned officers, and now included some high ranking officers, prisoners of war from other regiments, navy and merchant seaman, and one peer, Lord Barrington. Ordinary seamen and other ranks were housed in the fortress of Valenciennes of which nothing now remains.[6] The lodge was quickly open for business and its first meeting in France was held on 30 January 1806 in the house of Bro. Francis Smith at 7 *Rue de Cordon* with a sergeant, W. Bro. E. Butler, in the Chair. It is worth noting that Bro. Butler acted as Worshipful Master throughout the imprisonment and until 1817. At this first meeting in France there were thirty-two Masons present including 'Viscount Barrington by proxy' and a candidate was proposed, initiated and passed.[7] And on 4 August that same year nine NCOs were

[5] *William Carter's Navigation Book, Givet Prison, France*, Unpublished Notebook, 1807(Newport, RI: Naval Historical Archives).

[6] United Grand Lodge of England Archive

[7] E. Murray, 'Captive Lodges of the Napoleonic Wars', *Transactions of the* [Leicester] *Lodge of Research* (1954–55), 19.

initiated and passed. On St John's Day the WM conducted a divine service when forty-two brethren, including M. de Chevrand, a visitor from the *Loge La Parfaite Union*, were present. Records of such fraternization are few, but it is good to find confirmation that it happened.

Curiously some accounts of the progress of Lodge No. 183 through captivity tell only part of the story. It began its new life in 1806 full of promise. It seems likely that one of the nine brethren initiated on 4 August was John Blade, believed to be a seaman and whose 'recognition of membership certificates for Craft, Royal Arch, and Knight Templar degrees', all signed by the Master, Wardens, and Secretary on the same day, 12 November 1806, have come to light in the Henry Coil Library and Museum of Freemasonry in San Francisco.[8] On the face of it the future, although they were prisoners, looked bright. Sadly that was not to be and several years were to pass with no meetings at all. It is possible that the cost of meetings in the Pavilion of Liberty rapidly ate up available resources and new meeting places needed to be found. It is also likely that the lodge's membership qualifications – only N.C.O.s – limited the amount of money available. We do not know just how money was transferred between the two countries, but we do know that greedy Commandants – Wirion is the best example – 'taxed' monies received by prisoners who were also made to pay for 'delapidations' in the dépôts. It is almost certain this was what forced the lodge to offer temporarily membership to higher military ranks and wealthy détenus (hence names like Barrington, who may have been a joining member) and the gentlemen living a relatively normal life in Valenciennes. The Antients Grand Lodge did send some money. The Stewards' Lodge Minutes show that on 21 January 1807 the Master and Wardens, together with other members of the lodge, were 'ordered 4 Guineas each', and a little while later a further 20 Guineas was voted for the Brethren. However, a later application in September 1807 was turned down because only five of the brethren were members of lodges in the Antient Constitution: a foretaste of what was to come in England in the next six years.

It looks as though no further meetings took place until 30 March 1809, when the Treasurer, Bro. Saunders (his Christian name does not appear in the French records) was asked to produce the lodge accounts and the money he held on the first Thursday in May 1809. He did not appear and neither did the money, £11.0.1. What happened to him and the money we do not know. The lodge did not meet again for another two years when the Master, Bro. Butler, asked that the lodge should meet every two weeks, but this seems to have gone by the board. The last meeting was held on 20 January 1814, and five days later the brethren dispersed and Bro. Butler brought the lodge back to England where it

[8] Information from Bro. Adam Kendall of Quatuor Coronati Lodge, formerly Collections Manager in the Henry Coil Library.

shook off all the misery and hopelessness of the last eight years, and, having adjusted to the Union of 1813, resumed its Masonic duties.[9]

Viscount Barrington

Viscount Richard Barrington from the little that we know of him remains something of a mystery. He had two brothers, one older and one younger, but the three brothers are all given the same birthdate in 1761. The family was distinguished: his grandfather, originally John Shute, a lawyer, theologian, and politician, was given the title of Baron Barrington in the peerage of Ireland. The 2nd Viscount was Chancellor of the Exchequer, while his uncle, Samuel Barrington, was a rear admiral, and another uncle, Shute Barrington, became Bishop of Salisbury and later of Durham. His father was Maj. Gen. the Hon. John Barrington, younger son of the 1st Viscount, and in 1793 Richard's elder brother, William, became the 3rd Viscount. Richard inherited the title when his brother died in 1801. The title became extinct in 1990. When and how Richard became a Freemason is difficult to determine, since we know so little of him. He certainly went to America and possibly the Caribbean, presumably in connexion with family business there. In 1783 he married an American, Susan Budden, from Philadelphia but there were no children. He must have returned to England around this time when his brother William became the 3rd Viscount but we hear nothing more of him until he is recorded as being raised in *Loge La Parfaite Union* in Valenciennes on June 24th, 1804. The official French record also places him in Verdun around the same time, but that is probably because in the 1803 decree all British prisoners were to be detained in four cities: Verdun, Valenciennes, Charlemont, and Bitche.

The lodge *La Parfaite Union* is itself very interesting. It was originally the *Loge Saint Jean* founded by the Grand Lodge of England in 1733. It 'joined' the Grand Orient on 3 August 1789 after the fall of the Bastille on 14 July and the start of the French Revolution. How Richard Barrington came to be in France in 1804 we do not know, but, having found a reference to him relating to his concern for an escaped prisoner of war, we learn that he had at least one servant in livery. It seems likely therefore that he and his wife together with their attendants were visiting or holidaying in France, and fell foul of the 2nd Prairial decree in May 1803 which said:

> All the English enrolled in the militia from the age of eighteen to sixty, holding a commission from His Britannic Majesty, who are at present in France, shall be made prisoners of war, to answer for the citizens of the Republic, who have been arrested and made prisoners of war by the vessels or subjects of His Britannic Majesty before the declaration of war. The ministers, each, as far as concerns him, are charged with the execution of the present decree.

[9] Murray, 'Captive Lodges of the Napoleonic Wars', 19–20.

The First Consul (signed) Buonaparte[10]

Thus the 4th Viscount Barrington became a *détenu* and in December 1803 was required to report to Verdun and to give his parole in writing. On 22 December 1811 Lodge 183 was summoned after a break of two years. After various proposals and agreements to meet regularly, the WM produced several 'authentic documents' respecting the conduct and behaviour of Bro. Viscount Barrington, 'not only derogatory to his dignity as a Mason, but shameful and scandalous as a man, being nothing less than a dereliction of all his Masonic duties and a breach of all his obligations.'[11] The lodge then unanimously expelled him. What he had done we shall never know and since he was, as far as we can tell, a visitor to Lodge 183 but a member of *Loge La Parfaite Union*, his expulsion is curious. The travelling lodge thereafter never met at his house again, and on 8 December 1813 he died from a contagious disease contracted from some French inmates.[12]

Détenus and General Wirion

To begin with life for the détenus, especially the wealthy ones, was relatively reasonable. They had to report once a week and there was a curfew at 10.00 p.m. Relations with wealthy French citizens were usually good and frequently they contributed towards schools in the prison *dépôts*. In large measure their popularity with locals was simply that they spent a lot of money and many towns and cities were keen to house English *détenus*. But herein lay a problem. Napoleon realised what was happening and wrote to the Minister of Police, Fouché, saying that, if he did not keep the rents that they charged to the English down, he would have them all sent to other places. Napoleon had not been amused when he discovered that rents had risen from 36 to 300 francs. He might have been successful in preventing a good deal of profiteering, but there was one man whose greed and abuse of prisoners continued regardless and was truly appalling. He was the Commandant of Verdun, General Wirion, aided and abetted by his wife. Wirion was a very distinguished soldier and lawyer, and for his military service had been elected a Knight of the *Légion d'Honneur*. His final position as Commandant of Verdun might be considered successful in that he accumulated an immense fortune, but his manner of obtaining it together with his disgrace and his final act brought an end to a reign of terror. All of the people who have written about life in France, and particularly as pris-

[10] Like all decrees and laws this, together with the letters to and from Napoleon, form part of the National Archive. *Correspondance de Napoléon ier* was published by order of Napoleon III in 1862. It is believed it was issued because Napoleon feared that Englishmen unchecked in France following the declaration of war could become a serious threat to France.

[11] Murray, 'Captive Lodges of the Napoleonic Wars', 19–20.

[12] Barrington's illness, death, funeral, and place of burial, like much of the rest of his life, remain a mystery. The only mention of what caused his death I have ever found is in a letter to Richard Langton from an unnamed prisoner in Valenciennes.

oners of war or *détenus* in Verdun, in the first decade of the nineteenth century speak ill of this offensive man.

Lord Blayney

Major-General Lord Andrew Blayney, the commanding officer of the 89th Regiment of Foot, 'Blayney's Bloodhounds' as they were known, was taken prisoner at the Battle of Fuengirola when he made a raid into Spain from Gibraltar. He spent four years in captivity and later wrote a vivid and detailed book about the time he had spent in Spain and France.[13] From the start of his journey to four years' captivity in Verdun, a distance of some 1,360 miles, he was generally treated with the respect his rank and title deserved. Shortly after his capture he was approached by the Polish General Milhaw, who noticed that he had no sword. He said that no doubt some of the soldiers had taken it and, on hearing that, the General took off his own sword which he declared had seen much service in many campaigns and presented it to Blayney. The general remembered him from Egypt,[14] and Blayney, who spoke French and Spanish and knew Latin and Greek, had much conversation with him, despite the pain he was in, before being obliged to mount a horse and begin the long journey northwards.

This odd procession of prisoners, Blayney on horseback and the lower ranks marching, eventually reached Granada where, when they entered the square, the first object they noted was a garrotte – a method of executing those whom the French categorized as brigands or rebels. It seems that during Blayney's stay several were killed every day. Blayney, however, had an agreeable stay, though he was not impressed by the food, and his hosts even took him to the theatre where he was seated on a gold and crimson chair. He was also taken to the Alhambra, and his comments on architecture and paintings enable us to see what an educated and knowledgeable man he was. But he never ceased to be the commanding officer.

Prisoners of a variety of nationalities were housed in the Alhambra, and the English were very much in the minority. Discovering that fights often took place, leading he said to battles, he intervened and quietly requested that the men be separated. That was done immediately. The day before they left Granada a soldier appeared while he was at breakfast with the General and said that some escaped prisoners had been recaptured. With no question or discussion the general told him to hang them straight away and dismissed him.[15]

The motley crew of English, German and Spanish prisoners continued on their northward journey and stopped overnight in the village of Carolina. There they learned that

[13] A. T. Blayney, *Narrative of a Forced Journey through Spain and France, as a Prisoner of War, in the Years 1810 to 1814* (London: E. Kerby, 1814).

[14] The 89th Regiment of Foot was posted to Malta in 1800 and to Egypt in 1801 for the Egyptian Campaign.

[15] Blayney, *Narrative of a Forced Journey*, Vol. I, 130. This was General Sebastiani and the inhumane behaviour was typical. Blayney, as a prisoner, was unable to intervene without putting his own life on the line.

brigands intended to attack the convoy, so soldiers were stationed around the village and a council of war was held by the principal officers who decided that they would kill the Spanish prisoners at the moment of attack and they had them tied together in twos to await their fate. Blayney was told of this the next morning, and was further informed that they had decided not to kill the English prisoners because they might like to help fight the brigands. Blayney replied thus:

> . . . any violence perpetrated on an individual subject of England would be severely retaliated . . .[16]

The convoy set off and there was no attack by brigands and no prisoners were harmed. The convoy next halted at Manzanares and Blayney took a walk into the countryside where, some country people finding that he was an English officer, told him of their terrible treatment by the French and said that if any officers wanted to escape they would be provided with horses, money, and guides. Blayney spoke of his parole and the liberality of his captors and refused their offer. When the journey continued he became aware of the brutality of the escort, whose only response to any complaint was to beat the prisoner with the butt end of a musket. Having witnessed this, Blayney remonstrated with the commanding officer in the strongest terms and refused to go another step – even though death would be the consequence – unless the man responsible were punished. For the rest of the journey the offender became a prisoner.[17]

Madrid, which they eventually reached, was to prove interesting. It was here that Blayney was either initiated into Freemasonry, as the French records suggest, or that he accepted, as a Mason, an invitation to an unnamed French lodge in the Spanish capital. In his own words he says:

> I received a visit from an officer of the 26th *Chasseurs à Cheval*, to request my company at a masonic meeting. The forms of admission were very serious; but I went through them sufficiently well, and received a warm welcome from the brethren, particularly from Colonel Vial, commanding officer of the 26th *Chasseurs*, who was master of the lodge, and who invited me to supper and to dinner the next day.[18]

The detail is frankly unimportant, for we now know that he was a Mason, and the friendship between a captive and a captor in wartime shows the strength of the Masonic bond. From what we have seen of Blayney's conduct and his care for his men, he exemplifies every

[16] Blayney, *Narrative of a Forced Journey*, Vol. I, 172. The question here is not simply the cruelty displayed in the treatment of the Spaniards but the suggestion that the English, to save their own lives, would fight for the French, something that Blayney would never condone.

[17] Blayney, *Narrative of a Forced Journey*, Vol. I, 211. Blayney again displays behaviour which makes him a superb commanding officer and again risks his own life for the common soldiers who, although they are prisoners, are still human beings.

[18] Blayney, *Narrative of a Forced Journey*, Vol. I, 265. This may well be Bayney's initiation, as the French records believe.

Masonic virtue. Indeed, the very next day he learnt that several of the prisoners had been obliged to be sent to hospital, and that some serious quarrels had taken place between the English and the Germans. He then found that the only provision yet supplied to them was bread and water. He asked whether the government really allowed nothing more, and then found it contracted for half a pound of meat per man per day. He went to the *Adjutant de Place* who tried to bully him into silence, but he refused to remain a tame spectator whose duty and humanity he felt it was to interfere in this cruel and fraudulent treatment of men. The *Adjutant* then tried to draw his sword against Blayney, who put his life on the line again and then wrote to General Beliard. In consequence the meat ration was reinstated. He also obtained permission for one in every ten of his men to go out and wash the clothes of the others, something previously denied them.

Lord Blayney Detained for Breach of Parole

Soon after that the march north began again with 2,600 prisoners including many Spanish who had been used as slave labour in Madrid.[19]

Segovia may have been good to visit from a historic and architectural viewpoint, but there were several events of a depressing nature. Blayney was visited by an Irish priest who took him to the hospital, where he found many English soldiers from the 61st and 78th regiments who had lost limbs and whose treatment he found sadly lacking. The priest, who was the hospital chaplain, introduced him to the director, but it is unlikely any change came about. Blayney was also shocked when walking in the city he heard himself wished 'Merry Christmas' in an English voice. He found the voice came from a lad named Archibald Linsay, imprisoned in irons, cold and hungry in an upper room with no fire and a grate for a window. His crime was that he had refused to fight for the French. From there he was taken to a place of execution where the remains of the skull of a Spanish lieutenant, who had been shot there the previous day, littered the ground.

On leaving the city early in the morning he found an officer waiting for him at the gate to take him to Messrs Hervot and Cavallos, who had prepared a sumptuous breakfast for him, and M. Hervot presented him with a silver cup as a *souvenir de l'amitié éternelle*. On parting they embraced and bade each other an affectionate farewell. This does not seem the usual action of members of opposing sides in a bitter war, but more like Freemasons again putting fraternal affection above the constraints of conflict. On 14 April he entered Verdun and was taken to the commandant, Colonel Courcelles, signed his parole, and was allowed some liberty.

[19] Blayney, *Narrative of a Forced Journey*, Vol. I, 323. Elsewhere the difference between slavery and imprisonment is considered in this paper when prisoners write to Wilberforce. Slavery in France was ended in 1794 by the Revolution, but Napoleon restored it in 1802, when he wished to use prisoners of war as slaves. It was finally abolished in France in 1848.

General Wirion

Not long after his arrival Colonel Courcelles was replaced as commandant. The first new commandant was a General Rousell, but after a few months he was replaced by General Wirion, who, says Blayney:

> was as great a rogue as the Revolution has produced. Under him everything was venal and the prisoners of all ranks were plundered, both by himself and his underlings in every possible manner. From those whom he knew possessed fortunes, he extorted immense sums as the price of the indulgences he granted them, or refraining from sending them to Bitche,[20] which he had the power to do without assigning any cause. Many of them, after suffering two years of the most complicated misery in its dungeons, when they returned to Verdun were still quite ignorant of the motives.

Rich prisoners often invited Wirion to dine and allowed him to win considerable sums of money, but, when Wirion left, two guards would enter and tell them they were leaving immediately for the march to Bitche. He was served by an army of spies and secret police, who made life almost intolerable for the prisoners. Every conceivable means of extracting money from the prisoners was in use: lotteries for horses, or articles that did not exist, and the winner usually dispatched to Bitche. When Berthier was War Minister the many complaints about Wirion from prisoners were ignored, since Wirion was his protégé and even the sudden incarceration of Sir T. Lavie, the senior naval officer, and the refusal to allow him pen and paper, was also ignored. But the appointment of General Clerke as Minister of War brought about a renewal of complaints from prisoners – and this time they were listened to. Wirion was summoned to Paris to explain himself, but he was unable to prevent a public inquiry being ordered, although even Bernadotte, who was to become King of Sweden and Norway, pleaded for him, and Napoleon was willing to allow him to clear himself before a court martial. Unable to face this he dressed himself in his best uniform, put on his medals, took a carriage to the Bois de Boulogne, and blew his brains out.[21]

The worst place in the citadel of Verdun was the *Tour d'Angoulême*, or Round Tower, a circular building with only two rooms, one above the other. This was used for recaptured fugitives who lay there on straw, in irons, and devoured by vermin, before they were transferred to Bitche. This fortress, known as the 'Place of Tears', stands on a solitary rock a thousand feet high. A great number of the prisoners were housed underground in vaulted rooms known as *grand* and *petit souterrains* which were cold and damp; in winter moisture oozed through and froze solid. In summer they were hot, ill-ventilated

[20] A much hated and cruel *dépôt* in North Eastern France near the German border

[21] Blayney, *Narrative of a Forced Journey*, Vol. 2, 167. Wirion, assisted by his appalling wife and some colleagues who were afraid of him, was quite the nastiest person in this sad episode. Yet Napoleon appeared to approve of him and even offered him a chance to clear himself when his thieving ways were finally brought to book.

and offensive. Here were to be found the worst prisoners from all the other *dépôts* with the dissolute, the abandoned, the profligate, and the drunken. No distinction was made for rank, and despair and misery had driven most of the inmates wild; guards did not dare to enter the *souterrain* especially at night.

Blayney, being an aristocrat and a high-ranking prisoner on parole, mostly enjoyed a very different way of life in Verdun. He established himself in a house outside the town, but as soon as he was settled he set about looking into the situation of his men, which he found 'distressing for want of clothing and scanty nourishment.' He was able to persuade the government to make an allowance for clothing and to allow him to give them half their pay. However, he was soon arrested and taken to solitary confinement, which lasted for seven weeks until he was freed and learned the reason for his imprisonment (during which he was required to pay for the guards) and the removal of his private papers. It transpired that a senior French prisoner in England had escaped and tried to urge other prisoners to overthrow their gaolers. Lord Blayney's incarceration was intended to prevent the English from punishing the officer.[22]

Of his confinement he remarks: 'I feared nothing so much as being removed to Bitche, of which place I had received such accounts as left scarce a doubt of death being preferable.' For Blayney, a professional soldier who had fought in battles around the world, faced death often on a daily basis, and carried on when wounded, to state that he feared Bitche more than anything and would rather die gives some indication of the horrors experienced there.

On arrival at Bitche prisoners were searched for weapons and then put into the subterranean great dungeon, where there were three or four hundred midshipmen, soldiers, sailors, and others jumbled together. The place was bitterly cold and damp and the prisoners' clothing was insufficient, especially in winter when the walls were covered in ice. They were each allowed one blanket – usually a condemned one from the soldiers' barracks. They were allowed into the open air for a little while each morning and afternoon. Inevitably prisoners longed to escape and some reopened an underground tunnel which led eventually through several doors to an exit some seventy feet below. Many of the prisoners were anxious to get out but one of their fellow prisoners, named Williams, had told the commandant what was to happen. The commandant stationed a group of soldiers around the exit and told them not to shoot until a good number of men were outside. The orders were followed exactly and at least a dozen men were killed and their bodies put on show in the yard of the fortress.

The writer says that this was not by any means the only instance of prisoners being killed in a cruel and wanton manner. Among the most lamented was Mr Thomas Thom-

[22] Blayney, *Narrative of a Forced Journey*, Vol. 2, 183. Blayney's 7 week incarceration in Bitche was not to punish him, but again he had to pay for his own imprisonment. Being Blayney he made good use of his solitary confinement.

son of his Majesty's cutter the *Dove*, who was run through the body with a bayonet by a sentinel who quitted his post by sixty yards for the purpose.

Richard Langton's Narrative

Curiously, this unknown gentleman who watched Thomas Thomson being murdered was not the only English prisoner to witness the atrocity and write about it afterwards and in some detail. On 18 May 1809, Mr Richard Langton, whom I take to have been a wealthy merchant, left Liverpool in the brig *Scorpion* on a voyage to the West Indies.[23] Two days after sailing they sighted two men o' war which they took to be English, and it was only much later when they were fired at that they realised these were French ships. There was great consternation on board when they thought about the six years the two countries had been at war and no exchange of prisoners had taken place. Nevertheless, the brig was boarded, much of the luggage and goods stolen, and Mr Langton and the Captain and crew were taken on board one of the French ships and they set sail for Cherbourg. From there the prisoners were required to walk first to Cambrai and then to Auxonne in Burgundy. Langton was not unhappy and was well-treated in Cambrai, spoke well of the commandant, and became a parolee. As such he was permitted to make his own way to Auxonne. There he lodged with a French family and in large measure enjoyed the time he spent in that town, through which several notable people passed including the now ex-Empress, Josephine, and Mme de Staël,[24] who engaged him in conversation while her horses were changed and told him that England was the happiest country and not mired in misery like France. She considered Napoleon a tyrant who thought of people as if they were chessmen whom he could move as he desired. After nine months and with no prospect of going home Mr Langton decided that he must escape, regardless of the punishment if he were captured. He contacted a Swiss man who had successfully helped four of his friends to escape and who, four weeks after leaving, were back in England. He was joined in this venture by a friend; they agreed a price with the Swiss, half being paid with the remainder to be made available to him on completion, and a rendezvous was arranged. They escaped from the citadel by climbing down a rope and, assisted by heavy rain and the dark night, made their way to the rendezvous. Thus began another trek across France, but this time in a cabriolet.

Eleven days after leaving Auxonne they passed Lille and Ghent and finally arrived at the coast, where their hope of taking a ship to England was rapidly dashed and they were arrested. They were interrogated, but the officer believed they were spies landed by a British man-o'-war. On 25 December it was decided they should be sent to Antwerp at a price of ten francs per day. It was not until January that the spy story was shown to be

[23] R. Langton, *Narrative of a Captivity in France 1809–1814* (London: Smith & Elder,1836).
[24] Mme de Staël, a French-Swiss woman of letters, political theorist, and conversationalist.

a fiction, and it was decided that they should be sent to Valenciennes. Prisoners though they were, they were charged 100 francs for the three days it took to get there:

> Soon after arriving, an English servant in livery, came with Lord Barrington's compliments, requesting our names, and to know where we had been taken. Soon after answering these inquiries, his lordship again sent to say that he would be glad of our company to dine with him the following day . . .[25]

Residing at Valenciennes till 10 January, but despite receiving kindnesses and attention from Lord Barrington, who provided lunch every day at his house, they decided to go back to Auxonne. It took from 11 January to 9 February, twenty-nine days of marching and confinement in the various prisons along the way, to reach Auxonne. While at Dijon he had been forced to watch the execution of two Spanish soldiers, whom he describes as fine young men who insisted on drinking a toast to their king before quietly dying with dignity. It seemed that Auxonne was to be decommissioned, since too many prisoners had escaped, so Langton and his companion were redirected to the hated fortress of Bitche.

A week after his arrival at Bitche Langton witnessed the horrific murder already recorded by another English inmate, Lord Blayney's acquaintance.

> About three o'clock in the afternoon, a midshipman, named Mr. Thompson, one of the finest young men in the fort, was casually passing to the barrier, at the entrance to the courtyard, where the towns' people were permitted to offer fruit and vegetables for sale, under the immediate eye of the sentry, one person only being permitted to pass the gate at a time. Two soldiers of the garrison, off guard, had just come through the passage, when one, in a state of intoxication, turning abruptly to Thompson, used an expression not uncommon with them, viz: To h..l with King George, to h.ll with the English. Our companion speedily returned the compliment . . . The soldier then made a blow at our friend; being a good pugilist it was not only parried, but returned with an effect which brought the pot-valiant soldier to the ground. The sentry, seeing the occurrence, came deliberately from his post, a distance of several yards, and bringing his musket to a charge, stabbed Thomson in the abdomen. He fell almost instantly, not however before striking the sentry in the face. I afterwards observed the sentry coolly wipe the point of the bayonet with his sleeve of his coat . . . and returned to his post.[26]

Several sailors in the vicinity tried to give assistance but Thompson was dead when he was carried indoors. He was buried at a crossroad and the prisoners in the souterrain where he was stationed declared he was the best officer they had ever had. The matter was reported to the Minister of War and eventually the killer was called to trial in Metz, and the prisoners who had witnessed the incident were summoned as witnesses. The soldier was allowed to make his own way to the trial; the witnesses were taken in handcuffs and

[25] R. Langton, *Narrative of a Captivity in France 1809–1814* (London: Smith, Elder & Company, 1836), Vol. I, 156–60.

[26] Langton, *Narrative of a Captivity*, Vol. I, 190.

under guard. Inevitably, the murderer was acquitted since Thomson had struck him. That he was dying as he did was no defence. Although Thomson was killed in the citadel and the sentry's post was outside he was still held to be not guilty.

Langton gives many examples of the inhumanity he experienced and witnessed whilst in Bitche. He tells of prisoners being forced to labour on public works around France, their heads shaved and one leg chained to a metal ball. He talks of the outrageous exchange rate for money sent from England, and tells of the distress caused by an 1812 decree in which all letters and packages sent from England were to be burned, regardless of contents. But the saddest notice he received was of the deaths on 8 December 1813 of Lord Barrington and Mr Slack in the prison of Valenciennes. It seems they died of a contagious disease and, curiously, this is the only reference to the cause of Viscount Barrington's death I have ever been able to find.

After two years and seven months Langton was able to secure his release from Bitche and was sent to Verdun, where he became friendly with Lord Blayney and found a much more civilized lifestyle.

Verdun, says Langton, stands on the direct route from Paris to the Rhine and the army often passes through there. Napoleon, on his way back to Paris, stopped at the Three Moors Hotel for the *table d'hôte* where Langton had also gone to dine, and it was there he came face to face with the self-crowned Emperor of the French. Many people, reporting a meeting with Napoleon, spoke of him as very handsome with eyes of an intense blue, and a good listener with a great intellect. Langton saw him as his gaoler, and the killer of thousands, and seemingly, very few of his own people were interested in seeing him, and there was just a hint of applause as he entered his carriage. Someone, travelling at that time through France, remarked that the towns and villages appeared to be entirely populated by old men and women. Napoleon's wars had decimated the young men of his own country, but the tyrant's reign was approaching its close.

A Century Later

In Paris in 1913, a century after the Napoleonic wars, Léonce Grasilier published a pamphlet entitled *Evasions de Prisonniers de Guerre Favorisées par les Francs- Maçons sous Napoléon 1er*. There is a curious quotation at the head of the pamphlet: *Je suis franc-maçon: Ces bétises-là servent toujours à quelque chose* . . . This from a letter from a named Royalist conspirator after his arrest to Fouché, Minister of Police. 'These stupidities are always used for something' is presumably intended as a comment about Freemasonry and the pamphlet is at pains throughout to justify the actions of people now discredited, including Napoleon himself, and to prove that French Freemasons were responsible for the large number of escapes by English prisoners. I find it interesting that, while he names his pamphlet *Evasions* in the plural, he cites just two named and known escapees, and

he does his intentions no favours when he quotes Napoleon's curt reply to a letter from General Clarke, Minster of War, about escapees. He says, 'In general prisoners are held in the North. It's very simple – send them into the middle of France. I'm astonished I have to tell you this.'[27] Discussing the situation of prisoners, Grasilier says that life, depending on their conduct, could be made much sweeter by being allowed to leave the prison to get work in the workshops and factories which could be to their benefit. And Officers and others were allowed to travel in France or to live places like Paris and Orleans.

We saw earlier that a century later a modern critic seems to be under the same delusions as Grasilier, who thinks it outside the scope of his study to sketch the life of prisoners in the *dépôts*, especially the English, since it is easy to show that nothing there approached the horrors of the hulks. The trouble with this is that, as with comments about slavery, it is an idealized version. We have seen from Blayney's book how the Spanish prisoners were treated, and Langton talks of the chains, leg irons, and ball of those sent out to work on roads etc. It was not the case that the *détenus* were left to luxuriate in Paris:

> A new decree of the First Consul[28] ordered the removal of all British subjects from Paris, Fontainebleau, and other places to the fortified town of Verdun, where they were required to report themselves to the Mairie at intervals of five days. The members of the aristocracy then incarcerated comprised one Duke, two or three Earls, and other Peers with Baronets, captured naval and military officers, Members of Parliament, artists, clergymen and tradesmen.[29]

Grasilier then takes issue with Lord Blayney's 1814 account of his imprisonment in what he calls 'his well-known book', saying it encouraged 'national prejudices'. On the matter of conduct and punishment Napoleon wrote to Fouché 'that General Wirion in Verdun had made it known that the first person who escaped would be tried by a military commission and shot for breaking his parole.'[30] It seems the Emperor approved of this action.

Yet Grasilier maintains that although this order is severe, it is justified and we should not think that Napoleon was devoid of magnaminity and leniency with regard to prisoners of war. And then we come back to Wirion who, not content with amassing a fortune by imposing fraudulent taxes on the prisoners, cheating the *détenus* out of their money, and allowing his wife to acquire dresses by underhand means, developed a hatred of Freemasons, particularly English Freemasons. We saw that while the French prisoners in England,

[27] Letter from Napoleon to General Clarke, Minister Of War, from Schoenbrunn Palace, Vienna, on 17 August 1809. *Archives Nationales*.

[28] Napoleon before becoming Emperor.

[29] J. B. Macaulay, *The Life of the Last Earl of Stirling* (Paignton: W. A. Axworthy, 1906) 13.

[30] All these letters are preserved in the *Archives Nationales*. The number of English Masons in the lodge in Wirion's letters are first not less than 100 in his July 9th letter, and then on 28 July it is more than 70. The French records show these figures to be nonsense.

no matter what their rank, were able to establish lodges in their parole towns and prisons, not a single lodge was formed in France by English Masons. It therefore followed that English prisoners who were Masons or wished to become Masons, joined French Lodges.

Grasilier recognizes that Wirion's conduct was wrong, inspired as it was by money. But it was Wirion who first denounced the 'curious' activities of the Freemasons of Verdun with regard to the English prisoners. He had noticed for some time that the escapes of prisoners were more frequent amongst those in his charge and that there were large numbers of them who were Freemasons.[31] So there was propaganda put about relating to the Freemasons of Verdun and especially the English prisoners, who were said to be idle, miserable, and embittered by their fate.

In an excellent piece of writing Grasilier says that in the lodge they felt as though they were freed from their incarceration, sheltered from the rigorous surveillance, far from the hard discipline, and freed from submission to military authority. But what, he asks, can be more agreeable to a prisoner than the realization of the one object above all his hopes – liberty? What greater demonstration of brotherhood can there be than to help a prisoner gain his liberty? And, having to his own satisfaction shown the culpability of Freemasonry in freeing prisoners, he reproduced a series of letters from the National Archive.

On 9 July 1808 Wirion wrote to the Minister of Police. He said that in Verdun there was a lodge of Freemasons which had admitted English prisoners of war, and he maintained that the number of English was not less than a hundred and that they were subject to the military police. The lodge was made up of Frenchmen living in Verdun and included a number of civil servants. But military police were not allowed to enter a Masonic lodge in order to look at the behaviour of the English. He then talks of a parolee, Yves Hurry,[32] who has broken his parole and escaped from the dépôt. He believes he has been assisted by M. Le Maire, a rich innkeeper, and he encloses a police report in which the gentleman does not deny helping and knows that he is not speaking like a true Frenchman, but thinks that, if he were a Mason, the policeman would think as he does.

Frankly, Grasilier could not have chosen worse than using Wirion and his letters as evidence for his assertion that English Masons were assisted to escape by their French brethren. While Wirion's appalling greed and behaviour may not have been immediately obvious to his contemporaries, it was certainly well-known a century later. I therefore view with suspicion the content of his letters and the very convenient 'confession'. I cannot believe that a man of Wirion's reputation would not seek the most serious penalty for any Frenchman aiding prisoners to escape. And I cannot help feeling that M. Mohle's written French might just be leading everyone, including Wirion, astray. After all, no sensible person would boast of aiding and abetting an escaped prisoner in wartime. My reading

[31] See previous footnote.

[32] Wirion spells his name incorrectly as "Harry"

is that *Le Maréchal des Logis* was invited by the Mayor to drink a glass of wine at the house (or hostelry) of a man named La Guerre, (a very rich innkeeper, Wirion adds in a post script) in the Faubourg-pavé. Hence, if the very curious name is a pseudonym, and if someone did help Yves Hurry to escape, it is easy to see why there were no repercussions.

On 28 July 1808 Wirion writes to a senior member of the Council of State, the Count Real, on the same subject. He explains that when a Mason is raised to the third degree he is given a certificate as a Master Mason, and that these he has confiscated and sent to the councillor as he will others he finds. He believes with certitude that not less than seventy Englishmen have been admitted to the Verdun lodge. He says that one who escaped, Edmond Temple,[33] had a certificate, as does his latest escapee, Yves Hurry. The following day, he writes again, having obtained a few certificates, but believes there is a considerable number yet to be taken. Two years later Wirion was dead.

Another Point of View

Some time after this was published there was a very interesting commentary on Grasilier's paper. The writer signs himself 'O.K.' but we have no idea who he was. Interestingly, the list of prisoners seeking the return of their certificates in Grasilier's pamphlet is with one exception unlike the official French record of Freemasons, which shows twenty-four English members of various French Lodges – not quite the 100 or even seventy claimed by Wirion. Of those twenty-four, six applied for the return of their certificates on 20 March 1807, and one of whom, Joseph William, died in December that same year with no certificate. Edmond Temple absconded without his. Yves Hurry, according to 'O.K.', asked for his certificate, which, if correct, means, as Wirion asserts, he was a Master Mason when he escaped and successfully returned to England, becoming a joining member of Moira Lodge No. 143 (now No. 92) on 7 December 1812. Two interesting things emerge which cast doubt on the veracity of Grasilier's account of events. First, it seems that Wirion's predecessor, General Roussel, was a member of *La Franche Amitié*, but the name of Le Maire, who supposedly helped Yves Hurry to escape, does not appear in the list of Verdun Masons. But, if my supposition is correct, it would not.

Grasilier is a very clever writer who attempts to lull the reader into suspending his disbelief: for example he overlooks the 1803 decree already mentioned and tells us that nothing can equal the horrors of the hulks in England. But the primary sources I have referred to, written as it happened, like Lord Blayney's book, about which he is scathing, tell a very different story of unprecedented cruelty and pointless killing. After presenting the letters from the National Archive showing Wirion's obsession with denouncing Freemasons, and the inability of anyone in authority to return Masonic certificates, he produces a cute tale of Antonio and William escaping and then tells of soldiers leaving

[33] Edmond Temple escaped to Vienna in 1807 from where extradition was refused.

the battlefield and helping their Masonic enemies to escape. Grasilier does not like Freemasons. Why Grasilier should have decided to air this century old matter in 1913 we do not know, but it may simply be a war of words between a Mason and a non-Mason, or even, as has been suggested, a conflict between Catholic and Protestant or Royalist and Republican.

There are also other things we do not know. I had hoped, when I set out to look at English Masons in France during Napoleon's reign, that there would be at least a few English lodges formed by prisoners. I had hoped that I should learn something of their relations with French lodges just as Thorp had enabled us to see happening in England at that time. I had hoped that friendships which were forged during the conflict might be continued afterwards as happened in England. And above all, I had hoped for the Minutes of some French lodges which initiated English members. However, just occasionally there are indications that relations between English prisoners and ordinary French people were better than we might suppose, and that pain and emotions can be shared. I mentioned the death of Joseph Williams. He died in captivity in December 1807 and his dying wish was that he might have a Masonic funeral. The French authorities agreed that he should and the route taken by the cortege was lined by English prisoners. Then the cortege was followed by a military band playing a fanfare and a considerable number of French Freemasons and local French citizens. I am sure that there are more records of events like this funeral, and better records than those I have consulted somewhere in France – or England – and my hope is that one day they might be discovered and cast some light on happier things than the terrible cruelty and suffering I have recorded.

In 1814, a few days after Napoleon abdicated as Emperor of France, the British artist Benjamin Robert Haydon[34] stopped his coach in Paris to offer a lift to a battle-weary French grenadier. 'If Bonaparte had reigned longer,' the young soldier told him, 'he would have murdered all the world, then made war on the animals.'

[34]Benjamin Robert Haydon was a very unsuccessful painter but is considered one of the best prose writers of the 19th century.