NAPOLEON AND POZZO DI BORGO IN CORSICA AND AFTER, 1764-1821: NOT ...
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possible to achieve the same ends by exactly opposite means. Knowing this, Crisp can flaunt his weaknesses and turn them into perverse strengths, just as his habitual parasitism — his willingness to accept every invitation, to go anywhere so long as his fare is paid — ends up as a version of independence.

Crisp has consistently claimed to prefer the movies to real life, and to be mystified that women should wish to abjure the mystique of the screen and become mere people (an oppressive attitude which doesn't preclude moments of accidental feminism). He has been a brilliant film reviewer — and recapitulates some of his opinions in these diaries — despite the apparent handicap of trying always to find nice things to say. If the only thing to admire about the preview of a film is the immaculateness of the lavatories, he will settle for that.

His praise, moreover, can be sly. Asked his opinion of the cult of physical development, Crisp responds:

> I think everyone should spend hours daily in a gymnasium and I have often explained that a man cannot be considered handsome unless his neck is thicker than his head (think of Mr Tyson).

This endorsement of gym culture is more withering than any mere disparagement.

Crisp claims to have been 'born with Alzheimer's disease', but there is only one, rather baffling lapse, where in a discussion of the Marilyn Monroe/Kim Novak generation of stars, he maintains that 'until the Fifties . . . no American actress had serious breasts'. Cries of 'Shame'. Do the names Jane Russell and Lana Turner mean nothing to him?

Otherwise his faculties are better than intact. He enjoys life, without being altogether impressed by it. Back when he was 'only English', he used to say that he could imagine no greater compliment than being murdered — imagine meaning that much to someone! Nowadays he arranges to meet strangers at a diner in his neighbourhood, to avoid just this possibility. Either Quentin Crisp has acquired a stronger desire to survive, in his long Indian summer of celebrity, or else America has taught him that murder need not be an act of attention.

Two gentlemen of Corsica

Philip Mansel

NAPOLEON AND POZZO DI BORGO IN CORSICA AND AFTER, 1764-1821: NOT QUITE A VENDETTA
by John M. P. McErlean
Edwin Mellen Press, Lampeter, Dyfed, Wales, SA48 7DY, £49.50, pp. 306

Napoleon and his followers have mesmerised posterity so successfully that their conquerors have attracted comparatively little attention. With the exception of Wellington, the great generals who defeated Napoleonic armies, Kutusov, Schwarzenberg, Neipperg, Blücher, are little known. Nor are the monarchs and statesmen who animated the anti-Napoleonic coalitions, or the paintings and monuments commemorating them. However, as Europe becomes a mental and physical reality, those opponents of Napoleon who thought and acted as Europeans seem more relevant than the sterile tyrant thinking only of his 'star' and his son. Of the giants of the European crusade against Napoleon, few were more celebrated in their time than Charles-André Pozzo di Borgo, a boyhood friend of Napoleon, who became his most determined enemy. The book under review is the first major study of Pozzo di Borgo in English or French.

His career is a case study in the pre-eminence of personalities over impersonal forces, and of patronage over ideology. Bonaparte and Pozzo di Borgo came from the same background, the ancient, if impoverished nobility of Corsica. Both supported the revolution and the first months of the French Republic. The young barrister and the young officer even enjoyed good personal relations. Pozzo di Borgo conducted the Bonaparte family's sordid little law-suits about such matters as tenants' right to graze goats rather than cows on their pasture.

However, in May 1793 Pozzo di Borgo, five years older than Bonaparte and, at that stage, a more successful politician, secured the patronage of the hero of Corsica, the famous national leader Pasquale Paoli. Paoli, the idol of Boswell (whose *Account of Corsica* concludes with *Memoirs of Pasquale Paoli*), despised and disliked Bonaparte. In disgust at his rejection, Bonaparte, hitherto more Corsican than French, decided: *questo paese non e per noi,* this country is not for us. In France, encouraged by Lucien Bonaparte, the Convention decreed the arrest of Paoli and Pozzo di Borgo. In Corsica, describing the French Republic as 'an endless succession of destruction and ruin', Paoli and Pozzo had the Bonapartes condemned 'to eternal execration and to infamy', and turned to Britain.

Between 1794 and 1796 Corsica was George III's fourth kingdom. Pozzo drew up a liberal constitution, a mixture of English and Corsican customs which realised many of the Corsican nobility's demands made in 1789. He became President of the Council of State, eased out Paoli and captivated the British Viceroy Sir Gilbert Eliot, later first Earl of Minto. Eliot fired off a volley of superlatives about 'my great resource', Pozzo:

> It would be difficult to laud too highly the merits and remarkable qualities of this gentleman . . . one of the most faithful, most devoted, most honourable, most capable of His Majesty's servants.

Paoli, and others, complained that Eliot had been bewitched.

After the undignified British abandonment of the island to French forces in 1796, Pozzo di Borgo served Britain (from whom he received a pension of £400 a year), and after 1804 Russia, in their struggles against the French Republic and the Napoleonic empire. In the centres of counter-revolutionary Europe, London, Vienna and St Petersburg, watched and feared by French diplomats, Pozzo helped create and animate coalitions against Napoleon.

McErlean sees the importance of the rivalries and 'impenetrable reticences' between the Bonapartes and the Pozzo di Borgos — and other Corsican clans and politicians. In 1810, particularly sensitive over such matters owing to his marriage to the Archduchess Marie Louise, Napoleon explained at length to Metternich 'how the Bonapartes were of good family, how their

'Oi! Did you spill my sherry?'

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family counted among the oldest in the island and was certainly the equal of that of the Pozzos.' In 1813, as a Major-General in Russian service, Pozzo di Borgo pushed Bernadotte to attack his former ally Napoleon. At allied headquarters from January to June 1814, as aide de camp of the Tsar, Pozzo urged Alexander I to march on Paris and insisted on Napoleon's abdication. He is said to have exclaimed in joy: 'It is not I who has killed Bonaparte but I have thrown the last spade of earth on his head'. It may have been Pozzo who suggested Elba, an island he knew well, as Napoleon's compensation. After Waterloo, which he witnessed as Russian representative on Wellington's staff, he was the first to inform Louis XVIII that Wellington had won 'perhaps the most glorious and the most important battle in history', and to urge the King's speedy return to Paris.

As Russian ambassador in Paris from 1814 until 1834, Pozzo was so influential that some said that a second Corsican governed France; McErlean calls him 'a force in Europe in his own right'. Indeed Pozzo manipulated events in Europe for longer than Napoleon himself. In 1830, for example, he helped ensure the speedy recognition of Louis-Philippe by other European governments. Surely one of his most satisfying tasks was his role at the congress of Aix in 1818 in ensuring stricter conditions of confinement for the prisoner of Saint Helena. 'He had been, so to speak, the theme of my whole life', he wrote after Napoleon's death in 1821 to the island's Governor, Sir Hudson Lowe, an acquaintance since they had both served in Corsica in the 1790's. If the contest between Pozzo di Borgo and Napoleon is not a vendetta 'in the true sense', as McErlean claims, what is? Indeed the rivalry went so deep, and lasted so long, that a later Pozzo di Borgo bought a section of the Tuileries palace after the fall of Napoleon III and re-erected it on the Pozzo di Borgo mountain above Ajaccio, where it still is.

McErlean has an unrivalled knowledge not only of Pozzo di Borgo's papers and unpublished memoirs, but also of the customs and secrets of Corsica itself, the island at the heart of the story. It is an indication of the need for predictability among readers and publishers of today, that the present work, original, convincing and elegant, if slightly dense, is published by a small press (like Robert Franklin's excellent biography of another anti-Napoleonic diplomat, *Lord Stuart de Rothesay*, published by Images, Upton-upon-Severn, Worcestershire, 1993). Readers prefer variations on the familiar themes of the Emperor's loves or victories, rather than the challenge of a new personality, or a glimpse of the other side of the story. For some readers, however, this account of Pozzo di Borgo's early life will make the wait for the full, fat biography which McErlean promises seem intolerable.

Thoughts on a dry brain in a dry season

Anita Brookner

Penelope Fitzgerald was last week awarded the 1996 Heywood Hill Literary Prize for 'a lifetime's contribution to the enjoyment of books'.

There are wet and dry novelists, just as there are wet and dry politicians. Penelope Fitzgerald is dry, very dry: that is to say, cool, imperturbably, *sui generis*. In her utterly unobtrusive way she has an enormous range and is apparently at home in any historical period and in any geographical location. Few contemporary novelists have met with more critical acclaim, and it is well deserved. Her approach is logical and authoritative, and yet she can be relied upon to take an unexpected turn: nothing is resolved without a bit of unforeseen or supernatural help, like the mysteriously open door in *The Gate of Angels* or the odd forest interlude in *The Beginning of Spring*.

These departures from the norm are compensated by her faultless way with the defining detail. Consider this:

> She undressed, hung up her skirt, and washed under the cold tap on the landing. The basin was surrounded with sage-green tiles, representing the story of Pelléas and Mélisande.

Or this:

> Barney's grandmother never knocked on young people's doors, because it might look as if she didn't trust them. She preferred to make some little remark, quite lightly. The door-handle turned and she came in, wearing a soft knitted suit with a Jaeger scarf signed Jaeger and a Hermès scarf tucked through the belt and signed Hermès. This gave her an air of authenticity, but her expression was uncertain and discontented.

Critics and publicists eager to make comparisons with Jane Austen need surely look no further.

But Jane Austen would not have been at home, as Penelope Fitzgerald is, in Tuscany in 1955, in Cambridge in 1912, in Moscow in 1913, or in Thuringia in the last years of the 18th century. In all these areas the author is both mild and sure-footed, apparently unable to get anything wrong, as may be judged from her description of the panoply of an Edwardian don's wife's dining room in *The Gate of Angels*, or the ceremony of washday in *The Blue Flower*. *Innocence*, that lovely novel, finds her equally at home with a run-down Tuscan estate, so much so that it reads like an Italian chronicle. She is not a crowd pleaser, and this quality has earned her respect from a notoriously grudging confraternity of reviewers. From her first novel, *The Golden Child*, recently reissued, to her latest, *The Blue Flower*, she has quietly, and without undue display, given expression to a wide range of interests, which have been enriched by considerable research. Yet this research is never obtrusive, because the authorial voice is so unassuming. At the same time she reserves the right to discompose the reader, who never quite recovers from her digressions. In this way she delivers a strong jolt to expectations, although her conclusions are usually merciful — just. When the jittery husband fails to shoot himself on the last page of *Innocence*, or the lovers come together in the last sentence of *The Gate of Angels*, one is left with the impression that in both cases it was an extremely close run thing.

Her method, if that is not too weary a word, can be seen in its entirety in *The Blue Flower*, which unaccountably did not win last year's Booker prize. Perhaps method is not an inapt term, since for this story of the youthful Novalis she was reliant on the five volumes of Novalis' writings published by W. Kohlammer Verlag between 1960 and 1988. She was thus inspired to write it by recent study, and *The Blue Flower* does in many ways reflect an enthusiasm that is almost impressionistic. It is the strangest of her novels, to which the key is perhaps one of Novalis' most gnomic observations:

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