

“ONE TURTLE KNOWS SEVERAL NAPOLEONS.”



Courtesy of Monsieur V. Forbin

The only creature now alive that looked upon Napoleon

In 1856 Henry Thoreau commented aphoristically in his journal “One turtle knows several Napoleons.” Here we examine whether Thoreau was making reference to the current internet legend about Jonathan, giant tortoise of St. Helena, “the only pair of eyes still alive that had viewed Napoleon Bonaparte in the flesh.”

The conclusion we come to is No, No, and No: 1.) Napoleon was dead and his corpse had returned to Paris before Jonathan hatched from his egg on an island in the Indian Ocean; 2.) Jonathan is no longer among the living; 3.) We do not have evidence that the internet legend of Jonathan, or any precursor to it, was already in existence as of this 1856 journal entry. Thoreau knew the difference between a turtle and a tortoise and had he meant tortoise, he would not have written turtle. In all probability, in conclusion, Thoreau merely meant to indicate that turtles tend to live considerably longer lives than humans. Don't believe everything you find on the internet. 'Nuff said.



ST. HELENA

JONATHAN TORTOISE



Aug. 28 [1856], First watermelon.

P.M. — To tortoise eggs, Marlborough road.... June, July, and August, the tortoise eggs are hatching a few, inches beneath the surface in sandy fields. You tell of active labors, of works of art, and wars the past summer; meanwhile the tortoise eggs underlie this turmoil. What events have transpired on the lit and airy surface three inches above them! Summer knocked down; Kansas living an age of suspense. Think what is a summer to them! How many worthy men have died and had their funeral sermons preached since I saw the mother turtle bury her eggs here! They contained an undeveloped liquid then, they are now turtles. June, July, and August, — the livelong summer, — what are they with their heats and fevers but sufficient to hatch a tortoise in. Be not in haste; mind your private affairs. Consider the turtle. A whole summer June, July, and August — is not too good nor too much to hatch a turtle in. Perchance you have worried, yourself, despaired of the world, meditated the end of life, and all things seemed rushing to destruction; but nature has steadily and serenely advanced with a turtle's pace. The young turtle spends its infancy within its shell. It gets experience and learns the ways of the world through that wall. While it rests warily on the edge of its hole, rash schemes are undertaken by men and fail. Has not the tortoise also learned the true value of time? You go to India and back, and the turtle eggs in your field are still unhatched. French empires rise or fall, but the turtle is developed only so fast. What's a summer? Time for a turtle's eggs to hatch. So is the turtle developed, fitted to endure, for he outlives twenty French dynasties. One turtle knows several [Napoleons](#). They have seen no berries, had no cares, yet has not the great world existed for them as much as for you?

**“NARRATIVE HISTORY” AMOUNTS TO FABULATION,
THE REAL STUFF BEING MERE CHRONOLOGY**



ST. HELENA

JONATHAN TORTOISE

1775

May 16, Tuesday: The Reverend [Asa Dunbar](#) recorded in his journal: “*Went to Prince Town with cattle to pasture.*”

[Captain James Cook](#) paid a return visit to [St. Helena](#) and this time his *Resolution* was greeted with a polite 13-gun salute from the Castle. A pleasant legend would eventuate that “Captain Cook is credited with having brought the [tortoise Jonathan](#),” although in fact that giant tortoise would not hatch from its egg on an island in the East Indian Ocean for perhaps another half century. The Captain enjoyed the local beef but not much else, and would record that:

Whoever views St Helena in its present state and can but conceive what it must have been originally, will not hastily charge the inhabitants with want of industry. Though, perhaps, they might apply it to more advantage, were more land appropriated to planting, corn, vegetables, roots, etc., instead of being laid out in pasture, which is the present mode.

ST. HELENA THE HISTORIC

NOBODY COULD GUESS WHAT WOULD HAPPEN NEXT





ST. HELENA

JONATHAN TORTOISE

1795

The report of the gardener at Longwood on [St. Helena](#) described “total neglect” of deforested areas and foresaw that his generation of caretakers would, by the generations to follow, be condemned for neglect.

ST. HELENA RECORDS

He made no mention of [giant tortoises](#) on the lawn.

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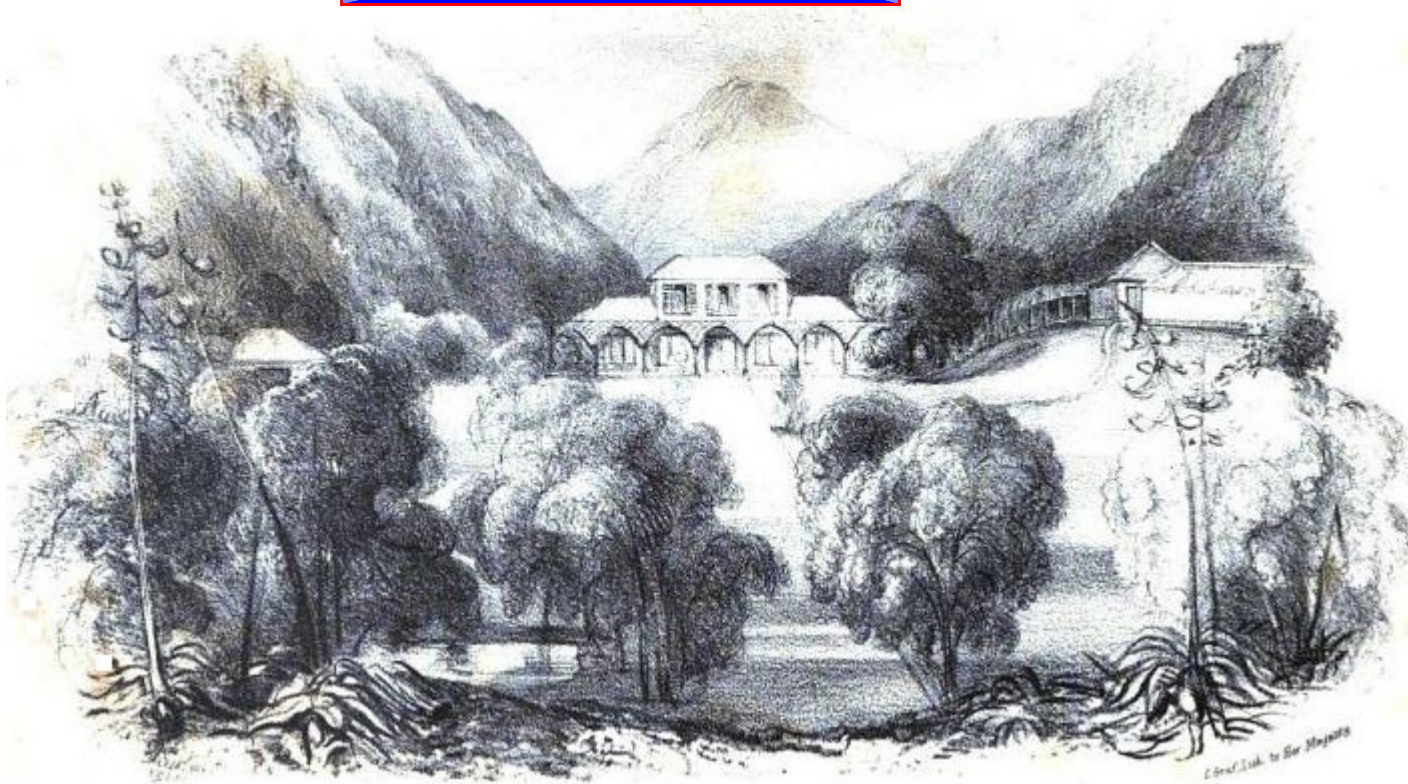
ST. HELENA

JONATHAN TORTOISE

1805

June 20, Thursday: Major General Sir Arthur Wellesley stopped by [St. Helena](#) aboard the *Trident* after his victory at Assaye, [India](#). The conqueror commented favorably on the climate of the island. (This is a small island with few amenities: the [Duke of Wellington](#) occupied the same small pavilion in the garden of “The Briars,” home of the Balcombe family, that [Napoléon Bonaparte](#) would use until he relocated to “Longwood.”)

ST. HELENA THE HISTORIC



“THE BRIARS” OF ST. HELENA

**LIFE IS LIVED FORWARD BUT UNDERSTOOD BACKWARD?
— NO, THAT’S GIVING TOO MUCH TO THE HISTORIAN’S STORIES.
LIFE ISN’T TO BE UNDERSTOOD EITHER FORWARD OR BACKWARD.**



ST. HELENA

JONATHAN TORTOISE

1815

→ October 17, Tuesday: [Napoléon Bonaparte](#), a British prisoner after his defeat at Waterloo, stepped ashore at the island of [St. Helena](#) from HMS *Northumberland*. In order to prevent any escape the military presence would be increased, and the local population doubled in size.



ST. HELENA RECORDS

In the Caribbean, a 3-day hurricane struck the island of Jamaica, stranding vessels and causing loss of life.

THE FUTURE IS MOST READILY PREDICTED IN RETROSPECT



→ Winter: [Napoléon](#), safely quarantined from the world on [St. Helena](#) in the remote Atlantic, was one evening



glancing through the fake biography of himself which had been issued anonymously in 1815, and was finding himself heartily amused. The bio had been entitled:

AMOURS SECRETTES
DE
NAPOLEON BUONAPARTE

Not one to kiss and tell, he insisted he had sexually “known” none of the women mentioned:

They make a Hercules of me!





ST. HELENA

JONATHAN TORTOISE


(This might be the point at which to mention that none of the literature authored by various of Napoleon's captors make any mention whatever of [giant tortoises](#), and I have inspected a very great many period illustrations, including line drawings of him laboring in his St. Helena garden, and have been unable to find any one of them that depicts him as in the presence of any giant tortoise or other such lawn ornament. I have no assurance that there were as yet any of these giant tortoises from the islands of the Indian Ocean present on St. Helena at any point during the famous man's captivity there. The original tortoises on this lawn most certainly did not include Jonathan, the famous one, and there does not seem to be any record as to in what year these original tortoises were brought onto this isolated island.)



ST. HELENA

JONATHAN TORTOISE

1820

 September: New iron railings were erected “at considerable expense” at Government Garden on [St. Helena](#) (no mention is made of the presence of [giant tortoises](#) on this greensward at this time). It was forbidden to leave carts, or set up stalls to sell goods, at this fence.

The Middlesex Cattle Show, which [Henry Thoreau](#) usually would visit (and in 1860 he would be its principal speaker, with his “SUCCESSION OF FOREST TREES”).

WALDEN: Bankruptcy and repudiation are the spring-boards from which much of our civilization vaults and turns its somersets, but the savage stands on the unelastic plank of famine. Yet the Middlesex Cattle Show goes off here with *éclat* annually, as if all the joints of the agricultural machine were suent.

The farmer is endeavoring to solve the problem of a livelihood by a formula more complicated than the problem itself. To get his shoestrings he speculates in herds of cattle. With consummate skill he has set his trap with a hair spring to catch comfort and independence, and then, as he turned away, got his own leg into it. This is the reason he is poor; and for a similar reason we are all poor in respect to a thousand savage comforts, though surrounded by luxuries.

WALDEN: Ancient poetry and mythology suggest, at least, that husbandry was once a sacred art; but it is pursued with irreverent haste and heedlessness by us, our object being to have large farms and large crops merely. We have no festival, nor procession, nor ceremony, not excepting our Cattle-shows and so called Thanksgivings, by which the farmer expresses a sense of the sacredness of his calling, or is reminded of its sacred origin. It is the premium and the feast which tempt him. He sacrifices not to Ceres and the Terrestrial Jove, but to the infernal Plutus rather. By avarice and selfishness, and a grovelling habit, from which none of us is free, of regarding the soil as property, or the means of acquiring property chiefly, the landscape is deformed, husbandry is degraded with us, and the farmer leads the meanest of lives.



A WEEK: As I pass along the streets of our village of Concord on the day of our annual Cattle-Show, when it usually happens that the leaves of the elms and buttonwoods begin first to strew the ground under the breath of the October wind, the lively spirits in their sap seem to mount as high as any plough-boy's let loose that day; and they lead my thoughts away to the rustling woods, where the trees are preparing for their winter campaign. This autumnal festival, when men are gathered in crowds in the streets as regularly and by as natural a law as the leaves cluster and rustle by the wayside, is naturally associated in my mind with the fall of the year. The low of cattle in the streets sounds like a hoarse symphony or running bass to the rustling of the leaves. The wind goes hurrying down the country, gleaning every loose straw that is left in the fields, while every farmer lad too appears to scud before it, - having donned his best pea-jacket and pepper-and-salt waistcoat, his unbent trousers, outstanding rigging of duck or kerseymere or corduroy, and his furry hat withal, - to country fairs and cattle-shows, to that Rome among the villages where the treasures of the year are gathered. All the land over they go leaping the fences with their tough, idle palms, which have never learned to hang by their sides, amid the low of calves and the bleating of sheep, - Amos, Abner, Elnathan, Elbridge, -

“From steep pine-bearing mountains to the plain.”

I love these sons of earth every mother's son of them, with their great hearty hearts rushing tumultuously in herds from spectacle to spectacle, as if fearful lest there should not be time between sun and sun to see them all, and the sun does not wait more than in haying-time.

“Wise Nature's darlings, they live in the world
Perplexing not themselves how it is hurled.”

Running hither and thither with appetite for the coarse pastimes of the day, now with boisterous speed at the heels of the inspired negro from whose larynx the melodies of all Congo and Guinea Coast have broke loose into our streets; now to see the procession of a hundred yoke of oxen, all as august and grave as Osiris, or the droves of neat cattle and milch cows as unspotted as Isis or Io. Such as had no love for Nature

“at all,
Came lovers home from this great festival.”

They may bring their fattest cattle and richest fruits to the fair, but they are all eclipsed by the show of men. These are stirring autumn days, when men sweep by in crowds, amid the rustle of leaves, like migrating finches; this is the true harvest of the year, when the air is but the breath of men, and the rustling of leaves is as the trampling of the crowd. We read now-a-days of the ancient festivals, games, and processions of the Greeks and Etruscans, with a little incredulity, or at least with little sympathy; but how natural and irrepressible in every people is some hearty and palpable greeting of Nature. The Corybantes, the Bacchantes, the rude primitive tragedians with their procession and goat-song, and the whole paraphernalia of the Panathenaea, which appear so antiquated and peculiar, have their parallel now. The husbandman is always a better



ST. HELENA

JONATHAN TORTOISE

Greek than the scholar is prepared to appreciate, and the old custom still survives, while antiquarians and scholars grow gray in commemorating it. The farmers crowd to the fair to-day in obedience to the same ancient law, which Solon or Lycurgus did not enact, as naturally as bees swarm and follow their queen.

It is worth the while to see the country's people, how they pour into the town, the sober farmer folk, now all agog, their very shirt and coat-collars pointing forward, – collars so broad as if they had put their shirts on wrong end upward, for the fashions always tend to superfluity, – and with an unusual springiness in their gait, jabbering earnestly to one another. The more supple vagabond, too, is sure to appear on the least rumor of such a gathering, and the next day to disappear, and go into his hole like the seventeen-year locust, in an ever-shabby coat, though finer than the farmer's best, yet never dressed; come to see the sport, and have a hand in what is going, – to know "what's the row," if there is any; to be where some men are drunk, some horses race, some cockerels fight; anxious to be shaking props under a table, and above all to see the "striped pig." He especially is the creature of the occasion. He empties both his pockets and his character into the stream, and swims in such a day. He dearly loves the social slush. There is no reserve of soberness in him.

I love to see the herd of men feeding heartily on coarse and succulent pleasures, as cattle on the husks and stalks of vegetables. Though there are many crooked and crabbled specimens of humanity among them, run all to thorn and rind, and crowded out of shape by adverse circumstances, like the third chestnut in the burr, so that you wonder to see some heads wear a whole hat, yet fear not that the race will fail or waver in them; like the crabs which grow in hedges, they furnish the stocks of sweet and thrifty fruits still. Thus is nature recruited from age to age, while the fair and palatable varieties die out, and have their period. This is that mankind. How cheap must be the material of which so many men are made.

DO I HAVE YOUR ATTENTION? GOOD.

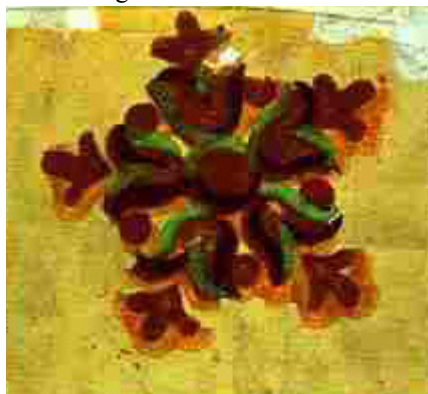
1821

➡ May 5, Saturday: The Journal des débats announced that Luigi Cherubini and Adrien Boieldieu, among others, had been named Chevaliers in the Order of St. Michael.

At Longwood on remote [St. Helena](#) in the billows of the Atlantic Ocean, after years and years, the emeritus emperor and troublemaker [Napoléon Bonaparte](#) finally kicked the bucket, due to gastric cancer. (This was a great relief for one of his Brit guards, a Captain Marryat, because under the enforced idleness of this long-term guard duty the officer had been fantasizing a plot by the boys in Brazil to rescue his prisoner by submarine, and embarrass him the way the British Commissioner Sir Neil Campbell had been embarrassed in 1815 on Elba in the Mediterranean.)¹



If you look carefully at the back of this depiction, you will see that the wallpaper has a star pattern. Here is a surviving sample of this very wallpaper. It has tested extremely high in arsenic. It would now appear that the health of everyone living in that house had been being challenged by flakes of arsenic falling off the old wallpaper. A sample of Napoleon’s hair, for instance, has tested high for arsenic. –But, you see, this is not evidence that anyone was attempting to poison him, as in that period this sort of wallpaper had been rather common, and anyway, he had been taking a medication that included arsenic as one of its ingredients.



1. So no, Napoleon had not been poisoned by his British captors. The only real mystery of his life is why it was that such a capable man could not have lived a life that amounted to something. When Charles-Maurice Talleyrand would hear of this death, for instance, his comment would be “Not an event, more a news-item.”

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ST. HELENA

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With the former emperor of the French no longer a target for their attentions, most of the Brit troops were sent away and Hudson Lowe was free to sail back home to jolly old England.



ST. HELENA RECORDS

CHANGE IS ETERNITY, STASIS A FIGMENT



May 6, Sunday: There are tourist guidebooks that will tell you that on this day, the day after the death of [Napoléon Bonaparte](#) on [St. Helena](#), [Jonathan the giant tortoise](#) was born. Don't believe this! For instance, on page 66 of Lia Ditton's 50 WATER ADVENTURES TO DO BEFORE YOU DIE (A&C Black, 2015), we notice the following material:

A visit to Longwood House, where the French Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte spent his final years in exile in the early 19th century, will leave you debating whether Napoleon could really have died from the arsenic in the wallpaper. Visit the tombstone that marks the spot where he was buried until his body was exhumed, and say hello to Jonathan, the giant waist-high tortoise who was born in 1821, on the day after Napoleon died. Considered one of the oldest, if not the oldest living reptile on earth, you may be surprised to discover that Jonathan is still pretty active particularly with the three other Seychelles

tortoises half his age!



Friend [Stephen Wanton Gould](#) wrote in his journal:

1st day 6th of 5 M / Our Meetings were both Silent, to me seasons of some exercise, some favor & some leanness. -

1836

→ July 8, Friday: The HMS *Beagle* and [Charles Darwin](#) reached the island of [St. Helena](#). They would remain at anchor for six days and he would examine 746 plant species, 52 of them indigenous (copies of *A NATURALIST'S VOYAGE ROUND THE WORLD*, presented to the Governor in commemoration of his visit, are preserved at the Castle). He was unable to sight the [wire-bird plover](#) *Charadrius sanctaehelena*, official bird of the island. He found the terrain to be reminiscent of Wales and commented on the abject poverty of the working people and emancipated slaves there, who were able to afford only rice with a small bit of salt meat.



(It is to be noticed that Darwin makes no mention of meeting [Jonathan the giant tortoise](#) on this island in the Atlantic, or any giant tortoises similar to the ones he would be studying later while on his extended visit to the Galápagos group of islands in the Pacific. However, it seems to me to be very likely that had these giant lawn ornaments been present during the period of Bonaparte, they would have still been present during the time of Darwin, and it seems to me to be very likely that Darwin, who resided near the Bonaparte tomb and paid visits to Longwood, would have observed them and described them and commented upon them! –The conclusion I draw is an easy one: they hadn't yet been brought there.)

WHAT I'M WRITING IS TRUE BUT NEVER MIND
YOU CAN ALWAYS LIE TO YOURSELF

1840

February: [Sir John Henry Lefroy](#) created an observatory at Longwood on [St. Helena](#) for magnetic observations.



If there were any [giant tortoises](#) present on the lawn of that residence at that time, left over from the Bonaparte durée, Sir John made no mention of them (not that he would, and as we all are painfully aware, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, but still it's hard not to mention a giant tortoise or two ...).



Three [negreros](#) flying the Portuguese flag and one flying the Spanish flag brought new settlers to the New World during this month. The *Dois Irmaos*, master F.F. de Abreu, on one of its four known Middle Passage voyages, had sailed out of Quelimane during December 1839 with a cargo of 580, and was arriving at the port of Rio De Janeiro, Brazil. The *Esperanca*, master F.J. de Mendonca, on one of its ten-count-'em-ten known Middle Passage voyages, had sailed out of Angola with a cargo of 375, and was also off-loading them into the [barracoon](#) at Rio de Janeiro. The *Maria Rita*, master unknown, on the second of its two known Middle Passages, had sailed out of an unknown area of Africa with a cargo of 350, and was arriving at the Brazilian port of Camarivea. The Spanish *negrero*, the *Iberia*, master unknown, on its one and only known Middle Passage, was delivering a cargo of 320 [enslaved](#) persons obtained somewhere along the coast of Africa, to the



slave plantations of the Caribbean island of Puerto Rico.²

THE MIDDLE PASSAGE



INTERNATIONAL SLAVE TRADE

2. Typically, a person might be able to last through about seven growing seasons at slave labor in the cane fields on these Caribbean plantations. Constant resupply was therefore a necessity of the situation.



ST. HELENA

JONATHAN TORTOISE

1844

On Albemarle Street in London, the firm of John Murray published a couple of vastly intriguing books about the rural experience. There was [Edward Jesse](#)'s SCENES AND TALES OF COUNTRY LIFE, WITH RECOLLECTIONS OF NATURAL HISTORY:



SCENES AND TALES OF ...

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Also, there was Lucia Elizabeth Balcombe Abell's RECOLLECTIONS OF³ THE [EMPEROR NAPOLEON](#): DURING THE FIRST THREE YEARS OF HIS CAPTIVITY ON THE ISLAND OF [ST. HELENA](#): INCLUDING THE TIME OF HIS RESIDENCE AT HER FATHER'S HOUSE, "THE BRIARS," BY MRS. ABELL (LATE MISS ELIZABETH BALCOMBE.).



"THE BRIARS" OF ST. HELENA

(You will note that this author makes no mention of any [giant tortoises](#) making themselves useful as lawn ornaments.)

3. Miss Lizzie may have been channeling the geist of Bill Clinton: the artistic license of "of" in this title might signify "by" but does signify "about."



ST. HELENA

JONATHAN TORTOISE

1851

[Coffee](#) grown on the Bamboo Hedge Estate at Sandy Bay on [St. Helena](#) won a premier award at the Great Exhibition in the Crystal Palace.

ST. HELENA THE HISTORIC

Joseph Lockwood's [GUIDE TO ST. HELENA](#), DESCRIPTIVE AND HISTORICAL, WITH A VISIT TO LONGWOOD, AND NAPOLEON'S TOMB (St. Helena: Printed and published by Geo. Gibb).

GUIDE TO ST. HELENA

(You will note that this author makes no mention of any [giant tortoises](#) being used as lawn ornaments.)

THE FUTURE CAN BE EASILY PREDICTED IN RETROSPECT





ST. HELENA

JONATHAN TORTOISE

1852

The Reverend Edwin F. Hatfield, D.D., pastor of the Seventh Presbyterian Church in the city of New York, prepared [ST. HELENA](#) AND THE CAPE OF GOOD HOPE: OR, INCIDENTS IN THE MISSIONARY LIFE OF THE REV. JAMES M^cGREGOR BERTRAM, OF ST. HELENA, with an introduction by the Reverend George B. Cheever, D.D., pastor of the Church of the Puritans, New York (New York: Published by Edward H. Fletcher, 141 Nassau Street).

THE MISSIONARY LIFE

(You will note that this missionary makes no mention of having tripped over any [giant tortoises](#) making themselves useful as lawn ornaments.)

1856


August 28, Thursday: [Henry Thoreau](#) commented in his journal in a manner that might indicate that he had heard an account that there was a turtle still on the island of [St. Helena](#) who had met [Napoléon](#). (Be aware that Henry knew that a turtle is not a tortoise, and be aware that in any event this is not the giant tortoise *Dipsochelys hololissa* (nicknamed by Sir Stewart Spencer Davis in the 1930s [Jonathan](#)), who has since lived on the island, for that creature was born in 1832 well after the death of the former emperor and anyway was not brought there from the Seychelles until 1882. In all likelihood Thoreau had never heard this urban legend about this [giant tortoise](#), and all he meant by this “One turtle knows several Napoleons” aphorism was that turtles tend to live considerably longer lives than humans.)



Aug. 28, First watermelon.

P.M. — To tortoise eggs, Marlborough road.

Potentilla Norvegica again. I go over linnæa sproutlands. The panicked cornel berries are whitening, but already mostly fallen. As usual the leaves of this shrub, though it is so wet, are rolled like corn, showing the paler under sides. At this season it would seem that rain, frost, and drought all produce similar effects. Now the black cherries in sprout-lands are in their prime, and the black choke-berries just after huckleberries and blueberries. They are both very abundant this year. The branches droop with cherries. Those on some trees are very superior to others. The bushes are weighed down with choke-berries, which no creature appears to gather. This crop is as abundant as the huckleberries have been. They have a sweet and pleasant taste enough, but leave a mass of dry pulp in the mouth. But it is worth the while to see their profusion, if only to know what nature can do. Huckleberries are about given up, low blueberries more or less shrivelled, low blackberries done, high blackberries still to be had. *Viburnum nudum* berries are beginning; I already see a few shrivelled purple ones amid the light green. Poke berries also begun.

A goldfinch [[American Goldfinch](#)  *Carduleis tristis*] twitters away from every thistle now and soon returns to it when I am past. I see the ground strewn with the thistle-down they have scattered on every side.

At Tarbell's andromeda swamp. A probable *Bidens connata* or small *chrysanthemoides*.

I open the painted tortoise nest of June 10th, and find a young turtle partly out of his shell. He is roundish and the sternum clear uniform pink. The marks on the sides are pink. The upper shell is fifteen sixteenths of an inch plus by thirteen sixteenths. He is already wonderfully strong and precocious. Though those eyes never saw the light before, he watches me very warily, even at a distance. With what vigor he crawls out of the hole I have made, over opposing weeds! He struggles in my fingers with great strength; has none of the tenderness of infancy. His whole snout is convex, and curved like a beak. Having attained the surface, he pauses and warily watches me. In the meanwhile another has put his head out of his shell, but I bury the latter up and leave them. Meanwhile a striped squirrel sits on the wall across the road under a pine, eyeing me, with his check-pouches stuffed with nuts and puffed out ludicrously, as if he had the mumps, while the wall is strewn with the dry brown husks of hazelnuts he has stripped. A bird, perhaps a thrasher, in the pine close above him is hopping restlessly and scolding at him.

June, July, and August, the tortoise eggs are hatching a few, inches beneath the surface in sandy fields. You tell of active labors, of works of art, and wars the past summer; meanwhile the tortoise eggs underlie this turmoil. What events have transpired on the lit and airy surface three inches above them! Sumner knocked down; Kansas living an age of suspense. Think what is a summer to them! How many worthy men have died and had their funeral sermons preached since I saw the mother turtle bury her eggs here! They contained an undeveloped liquid then, they are now turtles. June, July, and August, — the livelong summer, — what are they with their heats and fevers but sufficient to hatch a tortoise in. Be not in haste; mind your private affairs. Consider the turtle. A whole summer June, July, and August — is not too good nor too much to hatch a turtle in. Perchance you have worried, yourself, despaired of the world, meditated the end of life, and all things seemed rushing to destruction; but nature has steadily and serenely advanced with a turtle's pace. The young turtle spends its infancy within its shell. It gets experience and learns the ways of the world through that wall. While it rests warily on the edge of its hole, rash schemes are undertaken by men and fail. Has not the tortoise also learned the true value of time? You go to India and back, and the turtle eggs in your field are still unhatched. French empires rise or fall, but the turtle is developed only so fast. What's a summer? Time for a turtle's eggs to hatch. So is the turtle developed, fitted to endure, for he outlives twenty French dynasties. One turtle knows several [Napoleons](#). They have seen no berries, had no cares, yet has not the great world existed for them as much as for you?



ST. HELENA

JONATHAN TORTOISE

Euphorbia hypericifolia, how long? It has pretty little white and also rose-colored petals, or, as they are now called, involucre. Stands six inches high, regularly curving,



with large leaves prettily arranged at an angle with both a horizontal and perpendicular line. See the great oval masses of scarlet berries of the arum now in the meadows. Trillium fruit, long time.

The river being thus high, for ten days or more I have seen little parcels of shells left by the muskrats. So they eat them thus early. Peppermint, how long? Maybe earlier than I have thought, for the mowers clip it. The bright china-colored blue berries of the *Cornus sericea* begin to show themselves along the river, amid their red-brown leaves, — the *kinnikinnic* of the Indians.

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ST. HELENA

JONATHAN TORTOISE

1858

[Queen Victoria](#) granted the right to purchase and hold Longwood House and the Tomb on [St. Helena](#) to [Napoléon III](#) of France and his heirs in perpetuity (the Tricolor yet flies over these two small patches of “French Territory”).



(There was no mention of title in regard to so many head of [giant tortoises](#) in use as lawn ornaments.)



ST. HELENA

JONATHAN TORTOISE

1860

September: The HMS *Eurylaus* arrived at [St. Helena](#) with Prince Alfred, one of Queen Victoria's sons (along with a bunch of ordinary blokes).

(Did a [giant tortoise](#) or two sight Prince Alfred? The record does not indicate this.)



ST. HELENA

JONATHAN TORTOISE

1873

[Theodore Sedgwick Fay](#)'s FIRST STEPS IN GEOGRAPHY.

Hudson Ralph Janisch became the sole [St. Helenian](#) to serve as governor since the island came under the Crown in 1834 (this offers you an insight into how geostrategically important the island had become to Britain, upon the opening of the Suez Canal). It would be during this guy's period of office (until 1884) that [Jonathan](#) the [giant tortoise](#) would be brought ashore.



ST. HELENA

JONATHAN TORTOISE

1875

May: John Charles Melliss, A.I.C.E., F.G.S., F.L.S., late Commissioner of Crown Property, Surveyor and Engineer of the Colony, produced [St. HELENA](#): A PHYSICAL, HISTORICAL, AND TOPOGRAPHICAL DESCRIPTION OF THE ISLAND, INCLUDING ITS GEOLOGY, FAUNA, FLORA, AND METEOROLOGY, with botanical plates from original drawings by Mrs. J.C. Melliss (London: L. Reeve & Co., 5, Henrietta Street, Covent Garden).

GEOLOGY, FAUNA, FLORA ...

This record of local fauna reported that “Turtle are taken at St. Helena, generally on the surface of the water, near the leeward coast; about six or eight of a very large size are caught and brought to market during the year.” –But a turtle is not a tortoise, and a native species is not an intrusive species. This record of local fauna also reported that “Occasionally a small imported species of Tortoise is seen in the Island, but they do not appear to live long.” There’s nothing here about [Jonathan the giant tortoise](#), lawn ornament of the Governor’s house.



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1877

Of two specimens of [Aldabra giant tortoise](#) on the lawn at Plantation House on [St. Helena](#) –acquired during what era no-one knows– one died.⁴

What has come to be termed the “[Bone War](#)” between [Edward Drinker Cope](#) and [Othniel Charles Marsh](#) war intensified, with the discovery of major dinosaur localities at Canon City, Morrison, and Como Bluff.

Comparative anatomy professor François Louis Paul Gervais undertook thin-section microscopy studies of fossil eggs (his work would largely be forgotten until Roy Chapman Andrews would discover dinosaur eggs in Mongolia during the 1920s).

A new *Archaeopteryx* fossil was discovered in Solnhofen, complete with a toothy jaw. This well-preserved fossil, which will become known as the Berlin *Archaeopteryx*, supported Thomas Henry Huxley’s previous observations about its reptilian affinities.

PALEONTOLOGY

[Karl August Möbius](#) used the term [biocoenosis](#) to point up the fact that living beings do not live independently, but group themselves into plant and animal communities.

THE SCIENCE OF 1877

ECOLOGY

4. Please note that it would never have been any big deal, to acquire some of these giant tortoises as curios and lawn ornaments for one’s greensward on an ocean island estate, for sailors of that era were in the habit of catching the giants on islands in the Indian Ocean and storing them aboard their vessels upside down, to be killed and cooked as the occasion arose. No special coordination would have been necessary! Anyone who wanted to make a pet of one of these awesomely ugly animals would need only to trot down to the port with a cow on halter, and trade the cow for one or another giant lying upside-down under a canvas upon the deck of some barque that happened to be in port that day.



ST. HELENA

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1880

July: Continuation of serial publication of [Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevski](#)'s THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV in The Russian Herald: Book XI, 1-5 (Ivan drawn to Smerdiakov.)

The Empress Eugene, widow of [Napoléon III](#), paid a visit to [St. Helena](#). (On the lawn at Plantation House, was she glimpsed by the [antique tortoise](#) who had glimpsed her in-law the exiled emperor [Napoléon](#)? — Inquiring minds need to know.)



ST. HELENA

JONATHAN TORTOISE

1881

October: The other [giant tortoise](#) died on the lawn at Plantation House. This creature can be accurately attested to more or less have met a [Napoléon](#) (whether or not it was old enough to have met the former emperor before his death on [St. Helena](#)) for it most likely did sight the Empress Eugene, widow of [Napoléon III](#), who had visited the island during the previous year and assuredly would have been served tea by the governor's wife.

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ST. HELENA

JONATHAN TORTOISE

1882

A [giant tortoise](#) nicknamed [Jonathan](#), allegedly born in about 1832, was brought from the Seychelles to [St. Helena](#) to replace an ancient tortoise that had died in the previous year at Plantation House. Note carefully that this particular animal had not met any [Napoléon](#), or for that matter any Darwin.



Edward Godfrey, a guidebook author, sensing the desperation of a neglected [Nantucket Island](#), pled with his fellow islanders: “Make [Nantucket] a watering-place, make her a manufacturing town, make her an agricultural town, make her all three, but in heaven’s name make her something!”

[TOURISM](#)



ST. HELENA

JONATHAN TORTOISE

1885

April: Benjamin Grant's [ST. HELENA](#) RECORDS: HISTORY OF ST. HELENA FROM 1673 TO 1835.

ST. HELENA RECORDS

(The record includes Turtle Doves, but not [Tortoises](#).)

Islanders dispatched a petition to the Secretary of State for the Colonies at London, respectfully requesting that their military governor be replaced by a civil appointment.



ST. HELENA

JONATHAN TORTOISE

1889

[Francis Galton](#)'s NATURAL INHERITANCE.

[NAPOLEON](#) AT [ST. HELENA](#) BY BARRY EDWARD O'MEARA HIS LATE SURGEON (New York: Scribner and Welford): "December 25, 1816. — Napoleon in very good spirits. Asked many questions in English, which he pronounced as he would have done French; yet the words were correct, and applied in their proper sense."⁵

There is no mention of [giant tortoises](#).

5. This surgeon's account had originally been published in 1822 as VOICE FROM ST. HELENA by Simpkin, Marshall, and Co.



ST. HELENA

JONATHAN TORTOISE

1918

To Senator Warren G. Harding belongs the credit for 1st use of the alliteration “Founding Fathers.”

A [giant tortoise](#) from Mauritius in the Indian Ocean had died on [St. Helena](#) in 1877, the carapace of which remains to be viewed in the Natural History Museum in London. At this point another of these giant tortoises died in tumbling over a cliff, because it broke its shell.



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1922

W.J. Robbins initiated plant tissue culture studies.

THE SCIENCE OF 1922

Knudson published his asymbiotic method of seed germination; “Nonsymbiotic Germination of Orchid Seeds” in [Botanical Gazette](#). This would revolutionize the propagation of orchids, both sexually and vegetatively, and lead to techniques of mericloneing and meristemming that are used widely today for production of many crop species.

From this point into 1924, Guy Brunton and Flinders Petrie would be discovering caches of fossil bones, in shrines and tombs dating to the 13th Century BCE at Qau and Matmar, devoted to the Egyptian deity Set.

PALEONTOLOGY

Roy Chapman Andrews of the American Museum of Natural History began a series of excavations in central Mongolia, hoping to find human fossils (they found, instead, dinosaur fossils).

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ST. HELENA

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This photograph, allegedly of a [giant tortoise](#) who had been introduced to, or met, or at least sighted, [Napoléon](#) on [St. Helena](#), appeared in Volume 22 of NATURAL HISTORY, a publication of the American Museum of Natural History. No provenance or justification whatever for the caption was provided by that scholarly source.



Here, with poetic license, is a poem by Michael McNeilley, © 1997, riffing yet further upon this urban legend:

The turtle who looked at Napoleon

Exiled to Saint Helena
in the South Atlantic, in 1815 Napoleon turned
to gardening, turning the soil with the
simple implements at hand, spacing the tiny seeds
in straight long rows with military precision.

Napoleon's jailer, Sir Hudson Lowe found
himself as bothered by rows of the Corsican Guard disguised
as radishes, ranked across the earth outside
his office window, as by Napoleon's contentment.
In a singular act of creative malevolence,

Lowe sent off to the Galapagos
for two giant land turtles.

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The frigate bearing them arrived,
Lowe named the turtles Jonathan and Josephine
and set them loose in the garden of Napoleon.

Bulldozers by nature,
the giant tortoises nosed up and
swallowed down the radishes, tomatoes,
turnips, carrots and onions, smearing
Napoleon's careful rows into the dust.

Over morning coffee, through office window bars
Sir Hudson sat smiling at Napoleon's eaten and
uprooted, flattened garden.
One day as he watched, Napoleon himself
rounded the corner, moving slowly, contemplating the sea.

Dressed in gardener's tunic, head towel-draped
against the heat of the South Atlantic sun,
Napoleon bumped along, crouched on the back of
Jonathan, eyes straining past the breakers, as if
to spot Nelson's flagship.

Lowe watched, somewhat dismayed
as Napoleon surveyed
the sea from his rolling helm,
squinting into the noon sun for the
mirage of his emancipation.

But Napoleon died in 1821, his power drained,
unable to adapt to turtle life:
powerless to attain contentment
in slow uncoverings, green vegetation
and long waiting.

Wild goats pulled up the grass of the Galapagos,
and the big land turtles suffered starvation, their
ancient ranks further thinned by sailors
who found them excellent for soup and shell.
But fine grass grew on the grave of Napoleon, and

on the grave of Jonathan's mate, who died soon after
of some turtle disease.
A turtle grieves long,
but Saint Helena offers
food and good weather,

and Jonathan remains there today, lifting his old head
among the flies, "Bonaparte," still barely legible,
carved low near the rim of his giant shell.
Jonathan opens a red-rimmed, baleful eye
to the morning,

an eye that gazed upon Napoleon,
the eye of a turtle of destiny, who thought
no more of the little man long ago riding
than he thinks of today's flies.
But Jonathan still

considers the radishes, as they
arrive each day at sunset,
compliments of the British government,
a longtime legacy of Sir Hudson Lowe,
and Jonathan is often content.

In 1840 Napoleon's remains



ST. HELENA

JONATHAN TORTOISE

were shipped to Paris; In the compound in Saint Helena
little of Napoleon but his death mask now remains.
Not even a tree grows there still, that gave Napoleon shade.
But Jonathan moves slowly on

across the volcanic surface,
through what once was a garden, resolute,
his three-chambered heart slowly beating,
eye upon a nearby clump of grass, as green
and new as once upon Galapagos.



ST. HELENA

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1932

October 13, Thursday: Sir Stewart Spencer Davis, who would be credited with naming [Jonathan](#) the [giant tortoise](#), took over as governor of [St. Helena](#).



ST. HELENA

JONATHAN TORTOISE

1937

October 25, Monday: Sir Stewart Spencer Davis, who has been credited with naming [Jonathan](#) the [giant tortoise](#), and who had been instrumental in setting up a cricket club on [St. Helena](#), left the office of governor.



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JONATHAN TORTOISE

1938

October 29, Saturday: The following piece of newspaper truth appeared on page 21 of the Sydney Morning Herald (New South Wales, Australia, published between 1842 and 1954):

NAPOLEON'S PET TORTOISE STILL ALIVE.

On the tiny Island of St. Helena, in the South Atlantic, where Napoleon died in exile, there is a tortoise that enjoys the distinction of being the only known creature now alive to have seen the famous man in the flesh.

The tortoise was taken to St Helena from the little island of Aldabra situated in the Indian Ocean on the other side of Africa, before the "Little Corporal" began his exile. How old it was then is not known.

Venerable as Napoleon's pet must be it probably is much younger than another historical tortoise now living on the Island of Mauritius. This reptile became a national possession and in 1810 it was specifically mentioned in the treaty by which the French ceded Mauritius to England. For seventy years before that, it was said to have lived on the island. If that figure is correct, the tortoise would now be about 200 years old.

—C.G.C.C.



ST. HELENA

JONATHAN TORTOISE

1945

“The Hundred Men” left the island of [St. Helena](#) for the United Kingdom as agricultural laborers.

Admiral Sir James Eberle GCB notes, on page 198 his *LIFE ON THE OCEAN WAVE* (Roundtuit Publishing, 2007), that “We returned for tea at Plantation House which was not only the home of the Governor and his family — but also of [Jonathan, a giant tortoise](#) (*Testudo Gigantica*),⁶ who was then reputed to be over a hundred years old. After tea, as we played croquet on the lawn, Jonathan joined in enthusiastically — only, he would place his very large and heavy frame on top of any croquet ball that came his way! In view of his age, and the belief that whilst there was such a tortoise at Plantation House, [St Helena](#) would always be British, I was glad to be able to arrange for him to be given a successor, who was in due course delivered to the island by a ship of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary.”

WORLD WAR II

6. There has been a lack of scientific agreement as to the Linnaean naming of this species of tortoise. It all sounds very scientific-like, but in fact different papers on the species suggest entirely different Latin genus and species names, such as *Dipsochelys Hololissa*. In addition, it is possible that there were three different species of giant tortoise in the Seychelles.

ST. HELENA

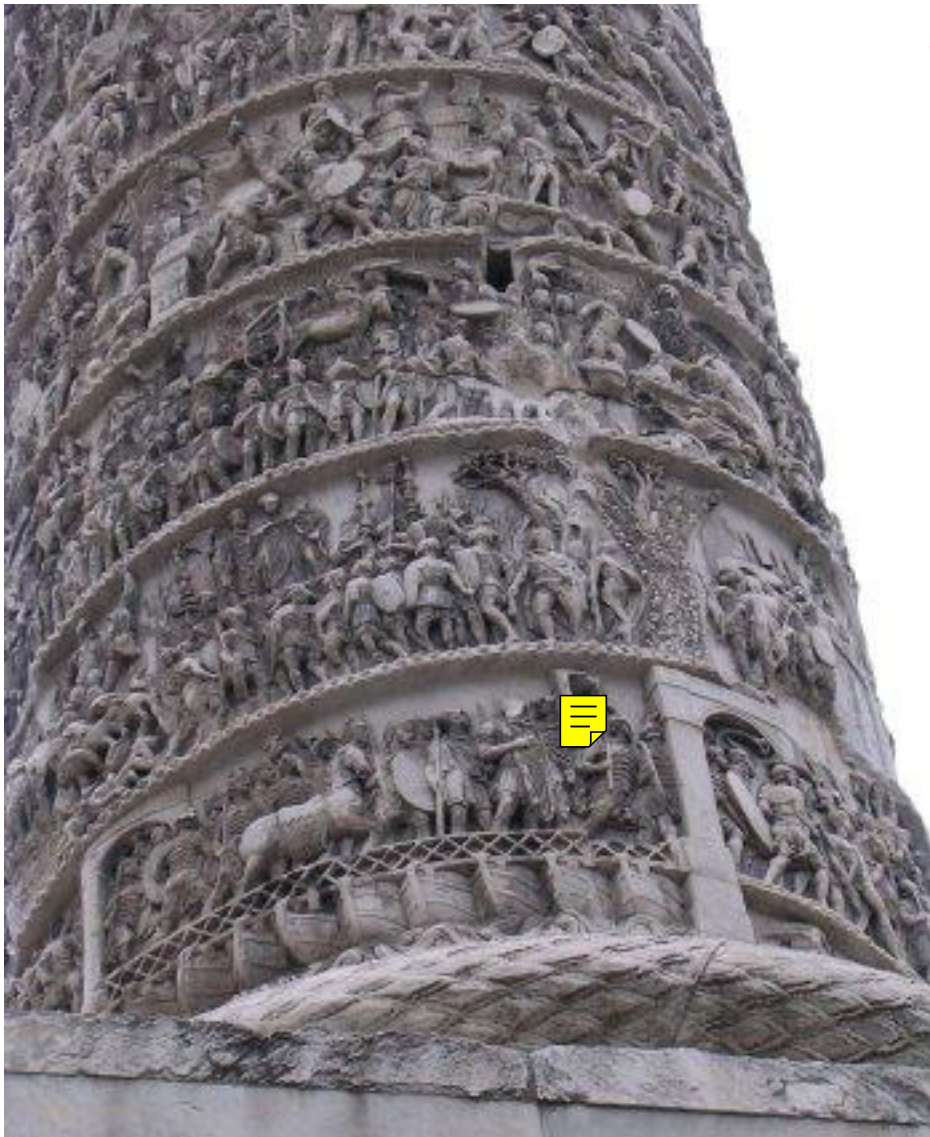
JONATHAN TORTOISE

1964

March: In the magazine Pacific Islands Monthly (Volume 35, page 115), under the rubric "Pleasant Legends," it was written that "Captain Cook is credited with having brought [the tortoise Jonathan](#) to [St. Helena](#) [in 1775 aboard the *Resolution*], but in three years residence here, I have never heard of any connection between the two."

The US was supporting bombing raids against the Ho Chi Minh trail inside Laos, but this was being done by mercenaries flying old American fighter planes, with the US backing for this held as some sort of deep dark secret that only we and the enemy were supposed to know about.

VIETNAM



What
goes
around
keeps
coming
around
and
around
and
around...





ST. HELENA

JONATHAN TORTOISE

1971

May 1, Saturday: The short articles at the front of The New Yorker are typically unsigned. This week's issue (Volume 47, Part 2, Page 31) offered to inform us about a rascally idea [Sir Hudson Lowe](#), Governor of [St. Helena](#), had, to bring [a pair of giant tortoises](#) from the Aldabra Islands to irritate the captive emperor [Napoléon](#), by destroying his carefully tended garden: "The tortoise is nature's bulldozer, and soon there wasn't much left of that lovely French garden. One of those tortoises met an accidental death some years ago — a truck pushed it into an abyss. The other tortoise, whose name is Jonathan, is still vibrantly alive. Last year was the bicentenary of Napoleon's birth, and a group of French writers went to St. Helena. I tried to talk them into paying my way there, claiming I could talk to Jonathan in chelonian — tortoise language. Just think — Jonathan is the only living creature to have seen Napoleon. I didn't get to go to St. Helena, but the late French poet Jean Follain, who was a friend of mine, sent me some fine photos of Jonathan last fall."

June 11, Friday: On page 40 of LIFE Magazine an advertisement by the makers of the "Canadian Club" brand of cheap blended whiskey advised us to "Be sure to visit Plantation House, built for officials of the East India Company. Don't miss the only living witness of [Napoleon](#)'s imprisonment on the island [[St. Helena](#)]: [a land tortoise](#) that's over 195 years old."

"MAGISTERIAL HISTORY" IS FANTASIZING: HISTORY IS CHRONOLOGY



ST. HELENA

JONATHAN TORTOISE



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"It's all now you see. Yesterday won't be over until tomorrow and tomorrow began ten thousand years ago."

- Remark by character "Garin Stevens"
in William Faulkner's INTRUDER IN THE DUST



Prepared: November 29, 2014



ST. HELENA

JONATHAN TORTOISE

ARRGH AUTOMATED RESEARCH REPORT

GENERATION HOTLINE



This stuff presumably looks to you as if it were generated by a human. Such is not the case. Instead, someone has requested that we pull it out of the hat of a pirate who has grown out of the shoulder of our pet parrot "Laura" (as above). What these chronological lists are: they are research reports compiled by ARRGH algorithms out of a database of modules which we term the Kouroo Contexture (this is data mining). To respond to such a request for information we merely push a button.



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Commonly, the first output of the algorithm has obvious deficiencies and we need to go back into the modules stored in the contexture and do a minor amount of tweaking, and then we need to punch that button again and recompile the chronology – but there is nothing here that remotely resembles the ordinary “writerly” process you know and love. As the contents of this originating contexture improve, and as the programming improves, and as funding becomes available (to date no funding whatever has been needed in the creation of this facility, the entire operation being run out of pocket change) we expect a diminished need to do such tweaking and recompiling, and we fully expect to achieve a simulation of a generous and untiring robotic research librarian. Onward and upward in this brave new world.

First come first serve. There is no charge.
Place requests with <Kouroo@kouroo.info>. Arrgh.