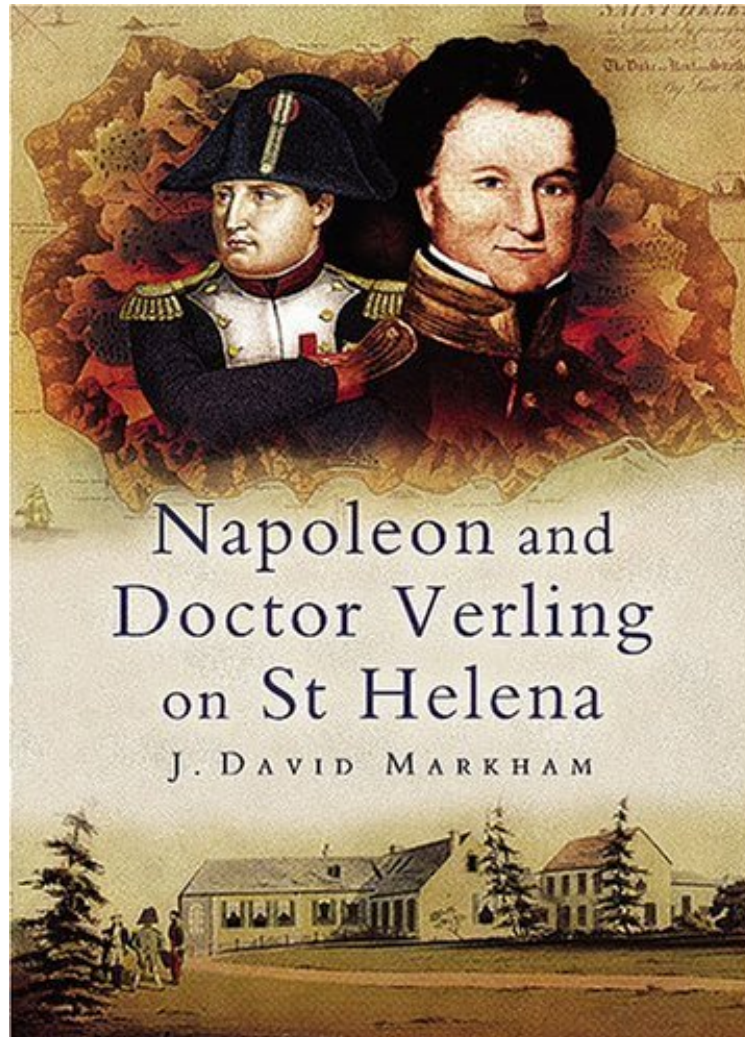


(Free) Napoleon and Doctor Verling on ST Helena

## Napoleon and Doctor Verling on ST Helena

*J. David Markham*

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**J. David Markham : Napoleon and Doctor Verling on ST Helena** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Napoleon and Doctor Verling on ST Helena:

6 of 7 people found the following review helpful. Dr. Verling, or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love NapoleonBy Tom HolmbergHaving sent the fallen Emperor Napoleon into exile on the isolated, wind-swept rock of St, Helena, the British needed to provide Napoleon with a doctor who could attend to the exile's medical needs, as well as provide testimony to Napoleon's good care and healthful situation and, preferably, serve as a source of information on what occurred in Napoleon's household. There was good reason to be concerned that Napoleon was treated well. Journalist and reformer William Cobbett announced that sending Napoleon into exile at St. Helena "would stink in the nostrils of the world for ages to come." Another critic saw Napoleon's exile as "a death sufficiently slow to be

apparently natural."Napoleon's first doctor in exile was the Irish naval surgeon Barry Edward O'Meara. Sir Hudson Lowe, the British governor of St. Helena and Napoleon's gaoler, had O'Meara removed from his position in 1818 for essentially becoming in his eyes an *homme de l'Empereur* and specifically for repeating conversations he was privy to among the British to Napoleon and his party. Dr. James Roche Verling, born in 1787 in Ireland and graduated from Edinburgh University, had served as a surgeon with the army during the Peninsular War and was sent aboard the *Northumberland*, the ship that transported Napoleon to St. Helena, as surgeon to the Ordnance. It was on this long voyage that Verling first made the acquaintance of members of Napoleon's party. Verling was picked by Lowe to replace O'Meara. Napoleon refused to see any doctor sent by Lowe who would not agree to certain stipulations, which included, within the limits of the doctor's honor (by which Napoleon specifically meant his physician was free to report any talk of an attempted escape by Napoleon, but was to keep other conversations confidential), not to act as a spy for the governor. Count Montholon, in making proposals to Verling explicitly stated that Verling "would not be required to do anything which might compromise [Verling] before any tribunal." Verling for his part felt that "the only mode I know of obtaining [Napoleon's acceptance], and of which the governor was aware, seem now to throw a shade of suspicion upon my character." Dr. John Stokoe, another naval surgeon, was chosen instead. Gov. Lowe instructed Verling to accompany Stokoe on his visits to Napoleon, a situation, which would undoubtedly further raise Napoleon's suspicions of Verling as a creature of the Governor. Stokoe, agreeing to Napoleon's stipulations, quickly fell afoul of the governor, was court-martialed and forced to leave the service. Interest turned again to Verling to serve as Napoleon's physician. Verling had continued to serve as doctor to the Bertrands and Montholons. Verling could not have been too pleased to be tapped for such a sensitive and apparently dangerous position. Obviously no good could come from taking a position that would put him between the rock and the hard place of the Governor and Napoleon. In the end Dr. Verling never did serve as Napoleon's physician though he did continue to serve those around the former Emperor. Eventually Dr. Francesco Antommarchi, a Corsican anatomist selected by Napoleon's mother and uncle, was sent to St. Helena to serve as physician to Napoleon, freeing Verling from an untenable position. Of Antommarchi, Napoleon opined, "I would give him my horse to dissect, but I would not trust him with the cure of my own foot." With Antommarchi's arrival however, Verling was able to quit St. Helena and return to Britain, continuing his medical career. The original journal had passed down in the Verling family until it came into the possession of a nephew who was a naval surgeon. This nephew left the journal on board a ship shortly before he died. The journal was later presented to Napoleon III. In 1915 a transcript of the journal was made and a copy deposited in the Bodleian Library, where J. David Markham first read it. According to Markham, Verling's journal is the last major document concerning Napoleon's exile on St. Helena that remained unpublished. Dr. Verling's journal reads more as an *aide-mémoire* against the possibility of some future legal proceeding that might arise in consequence of his duties than as a record of his inner thoughts. One gets the distinct feeling that Verling would rather not have been placed in this circumstance at all. Verling doesn't record much of his own feelings or impressions but records instead what was said or written to him by those in the British administration on the island and by the French at Longwood. Verling was painfully aware that being physician to Napoleon held "more prospects of ultimate injury than benefit." The journal doesn't include any great revelations, but gives the reader another impression of Napoleon's final days. Verling was obviously reluctant to place himself in any situation where he could be accused of favoring the Emperor's party or acting in their interest. Verling knew it was in his interest to avoid both sin and the near occasion of sin. At one point he sends back to Madame Bertrand a tea service she had given him, going at once to Gov. Lowe to inform him of the gift and that he had returned it. Verling would not accept a blanket pass from Lowe to attend to the inhabitants at Longwood, requesting from the Governor specific orders to attend his patients. Whatever Lowe's opinion of Verling, which at times seemed strained and at other times formally correct, he at one point was writing to Lord Bathurst, the British official responsible for Napoleon's captivity, of his concerns that Verling was Irish and Catholic. Lowe described Verling as not only "fully competent" as a physician, but "activated by right principles." Lowe praised particularly "the resistance [Verling] has shown to all design on the part of the persons at Longwood." While Verling did not quite act the spy, he made sure to keep Lowe informed of any relations he had with the French. Verling's intentions seem to be to protect himself and he was quick to report all matter of things he heard while treating the Montholons and the Bertrands. Verling apparently had the expectation of returning to Europe after three years serving with the Ordnance and by March 1819 that period was almost at an end. This light at the end of the tunnel might well have been a deciding factor in his reluctance at that point to become Napoleon's physician. Markham includes with the journal a number of letters concerning Verling on St. Helena from British archives. Some of these letters are versions of letters Verling transcribed in his journal. Frequently there will be differences between the letters themselves and the versions given by Verling, which makes for interesting comparison. To the journal and letters Markham has added an introduction discussing Napoleon's last days in France, his journey to St. Helena and information on his doctors on the island. Also included are capsule sketches of the chief individuals mentioned in the text, as well as the principal locations on the island. Illustrations of many of the principals, as well as scenes of St. Helena are included.

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. A Must Read! By Karen Ely  
Noted historian J. David Markham has made a significant contribution to our understanding of Napoleon's time in exile on the South Atlantic island of St Helena.

Published in its entirety in English for the first time, Verling's journal offers fresh insight into the theater of the absurd that was life on St Helena. Add to that Markham's insightful commentary and a collection of important letters involving Verling, and you have a book that should be read by anyone interested in the subject.

Many books have been written about St Helena and its most famous resident, the exiled Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte. The episode has been so intensively researched that it is rare for a fresh, unpublished account to come to light. Yet Dr James Verling's St Helena journal is just such a source. Verling was based on St Helena during Napoleon's imprisonment and he was even appointed as Napoleon's official physician. Throughout his stay, this young doctor kept a vivid diary of his experiences. Through Verling's eyes we get a fresh view of daily life on the island and of the suspicion-filled society that grew up around Napoleon during his last years.

About the Author J. David Markham is a distinguished Napoleonic scholar and biographer. Among his many publications are *Napoleon's Road to Glory: Triumphs, Defeats and Immortality* and *Imperial Glory: The Bulletins of Napoleon's Army, 1805-1814*. He has written widely on Napoleonic topics for history magazines, journals and encyclopedias, and has appeared on the History, Discovery and Learning channels. He is president of the Napoleonic Alliance and executive vice-president and editor-in-chief of the International Napoleonic Society.