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You Frenchman, not a contender with having robbed us of everything we held dear. I've also corrupted our character. The present condition of my country, and my powerlessness to change it, are additional reasons for me to leave a land where I am obliged by duty to praise men whom I ought to by virtue to hate. When I arrive in my country, how am I to act, and what am I to do? When the mother country has ceased to exist, a good citizen should die. If I had to destroy but warn a man in order to deliver my fellow countrymen, I would start that once. I would plunge the avenging dagger up to the hilt in the breast of the tyrant. So that Dominic was Napoleone Buonaparte, writing in 1786 on the very teenage subject of suicide. And Napoleone Buonaparte is, of course, better known as Napoleon Buonaparte. And we are looking at the origins of this titanic figure of French history. But the extraordinary thing is that, of course, he wasn't really French at all, was he? As that brilliant impression has conveyed to the listener. Hello, everybody, if you're still listening. Tom, I think that's one of the most extraordinary impressions you've ever done. Thank you.

I think we'll just gloss over the accent completely because we could be talking for hours. But it's conveying an important point, isn't it?

It is. Well, he starts, you Frenchman, you've robbed us of everything, we held dear, you've corrupted our character, and he talks about my country, and the country he's talking about in that beautiful Italian accent.

Well, it's not Italian, is it? It's Corsican, because the country is Corsica.

Yeah, it's a Ligurian dialect, which I hope the listener's picked up on.

Yeah, Genoese listeners. So Napoleon, as you say, a superhuman historical figure.

I suppose eclipsed in the public mind now by the dictators of the 20th century, but for so long, he was the paradigmatic great man of history, wasn't it, Napoleon?

For Carlisle. The most titanic figure in 19th century history.

Definitely.

Though he's basically off the scene by 1815.

And sort of overshadows all those paintings, all those novels, you know, standards, *L'Épique et Noir*, Tolstoy, *War and Peace*. Napoleon is the cultural figure, par excellence of the 19th century, I suppose.

Which is why Ridley Scott is making a film about him.

Yeah.

And of course, we're not in any way jumping on that bandwagon. We would never do that. Never.

I mean, I think we've been very conscious of the fact that we haven't really done much about Napoleon on the rest of history. We've done an episode on his venture to Egypt, and we've done some episodes on the Battle of Trafalgar, one by his great British counterpart, I suppose, Nelson.

But considering Napoleon's outsize influence on modern Western history, he's in a neglected area. So we're going to try and make amends today,

and we're going to be looking specifically at his origins, aren't we?

Yeah.

So kind of young Napoleon.

Because eventually we'll make our way through all Napoleon's life.

But we'll start this week by just looking at the young Napoleon as we once looked at young Churchill. And I guess actually, Tom, that reading that you started with, which no doubt so many listeners really enjoyed.

I'm sure they did.

The important thing about that is the Corsican-ness. The Corsican-ness, I have to confess, like everybody, I kind of knew he was Corsican, but never really thought about how significant it was.

Now, it never occurred to me until doing the reading for these podcasts, how colossally important it is that he is not French.

Well, there you see, Dominic, I have the advantage of you. I've been to Corsica, and I've visited his family house in Ajaxio.

Right, yeah.

And I've seen for myself, the proud and rugged independence of Corsican people as manifested in the bullet holes that riddled any sign in French on that fair island.

Would it be fair to say, Tom, Corsica, land of contrasts?

It's not really a land of contrasts.

It's just one thing.

It's just one fainting terrifying place.

And the hostility to France is still very much that.

I mean, so my friend Jamie Muir, son of Frank Muir, the great comedian, he has a family house out there that Frank Muir had got, so that's why I went and stayed there.

And he was telling me an extraordinary fact that the French were planning to test their nuclear program, their atom bombs, in the 1950s on Corsica.

Oh, my word.

So, you can kind of understand why there's a certain fredeur.

Yeah, but that's probably not the word.

No, there'd be some Italian word.

Whatever it is in Genoese dialect.

So, let's talk a bit about Corsica first to put Napoleon in context.

So, 18th century Corsica.

It's a mountainous island, isn't it?

Big island, very mountainous.

Poor, but proud.

Poor, but proud.

Very good.

Rugged, independent, poor and proud.

Yes.

That's how we like our islands.

Yes.

And it's kind of pre-feudal, isn't it?

So, most people don't own anything.

They live on kind of chestnuts and cheese.

Acorns.

Yeah.

It's owned by the Republic of Genoa,

but the Genoese only are really based on the coast,

and they don't really go into the interior much.

And most of the people, as you said, speak this kind of Ligurian dialect.

And when Napoleon's father, so his father was called Carlo Maria Buonaparte,

when he was born in 1746, it was still technically Genoese,

but the Corsicans had started rising up and having rebellions and stuff, hadn't they?

They have.

And the guy who is the great laureate of this for the rest of Europe is James Balswell, the biographer of Samuel Johnson, who refers to them as a brave and free people.

And he goes there, and ever after he goes around,

when he goes to balls and things in London, he's always wearing Corsican dress,

and he's known as Corsican Balswell.

What do Corsicans wear?

A proud and rugged and independent and vendetta-loving kind of costume.

Right.

I can imagine a beret of some kind.

Pistol slipped into a sash, perhaps.

Extremely large trousers, I would imagine.

But this is the vibe that's coming off.

It's that for kind of lovers of freedom and liberty and all this kind of stuff in the 18th century, Corsica seems like a place that they can fix aton.

It's kind of a bit like Venezuela for people in labor under Jeremy Corbyn.

It's a place where you project your fantasies and your political ideals onto, I think.

Yeah, it's the Cuba, isn't it?

I suppose it's the parallel.

And there's a guy who's the sort of the Che Guevara or the Fidel Castro, who's called Pasquale Paoli.

Who Balswell loves, and who he gets ultimately sent into exile after the French in exit, goes to London, and Balswell is always taking him off to parties and kind of showing off with him.

I had never realised how much he is a model for Nebulion, because he called himself the general of the nation.

He had a dream of this kind of new modern Corsican state with a constitution, with a university, with all kinds of public institutions.

That's very enlightenment.

It's that combination of kind of nationalism and enlightenment thinking, and the slight hint of the kind of the father of the nation.

That's very Napoleonic, actually, isn't it?

And that's in the sort of 1750s.

I mean, interesting, what isn't Napoleonic is that Pasquale comes to be a great admirer of the British constitution, the kind of the mixed constitution as it's known in the 18th century. And it's a reminder that before the French Revolution, there was this kind of Anglo-Maní, this obsession with the British example of constitutionalism, which of course, the French Revolution and then Napoleon will set themselves very much against. Corsica is a kind of cockpit for that ideological rivalry, which powers the Anglo-French rivalry through the Napoleonic Wars. So anyway, Carlo Buonaparte is a massive fan of this guy, Pasquale Paoli, and he sort of teams up with him at various points. Carlo marries this very beautiful heiress called Letizia Ramolino, who is 14 years old at the time. I think that gives you an indication of the... The proud and rugged approach to romance. Romance, but she's a very impressive woman, and Napoleon always stays absolutely devoted to her, doesn't he? It always says that she is the woman who made him what he was. Absolutely. And she has hundreds of children, doesn't she? There's about how many of them are there? There's about 10 of them or 11 of them. And they all end up kind of kings and whatever. They do, which no one could have predicted at the time. So they are married in the late 1764, actually. They're around 1764. They had their first son, Joseph, in 1768. And in 1768, that's an important year, because that is the year that the Genoese have been trying to impose order on Corsica. They basically give up. They owe France loads of money, and they say to the French, actually, just have Corsica. You have a sick of Corsica, it's a flipping pain. You have Corsica. So the French move in in 1768. Pasquale Paoli is not happy about this. Issues are called to arms. He basically gets kicked out and goes off to England. And one of his supporters is Carlo, and he's sort of charging about Hither and Dither. And it's in the middle of all this turmoil that his wife, who is pregnant with her second son, they almost get swept away by a torrent or something, some very kind of Greek myth style story. It's very Corsican, very. And the 15th of August, 1769, she has this baby, who they christen, Napolioni.

It was a not uncommon name in Corsica.
Sometimes it was spelt Napolioni or Lapulioni.
I think Lapulioni is a terrible name for an early 19th century master of Europe.
Domineering bit master of Europe.
No, you couldn't do that.
But what Carlo does that is really important,
is once the French have come in,
he accommodates himself to the French, doesn't he?
He goes off and gets basically a fake title,
nobility title that allows him to become a lawyer.
But also, of course, Dominic in the long run
will enable his sons to benefit from the kind of education
that only the nobles can have.
Exactly. Actually, I said 11 children.
I've just looked at my notes. It's 13 children.
Wow.
Three of them died young, two in childbirth.
So loads of them.
So he sucks up to the French.
And Napolioni, the second son,
he grows up in this occupied Corsica, effectively.
He doesn't go to school, Tom.
He thought he did.
Well, his mother said later
that she'd sent him to lessons at a girl's school,
and Napolioni obviously was keen to downplay this.
But there's some story at school
that they have to roleplay the Romans and the Carthaginians.
Is that not later in France, though?
Or is that in Corsica?
Oh, is it?
I think that must be later in France.
Oh, OK. Oh, maybe.
Because there are some priests.
No, because it's Joseph who describes and says
it was at their first school in Corsica.
So I don't know.
I mean, clearly there are lots of different stories
that are swirling around.
Depending on which biography you read,
you'll have different credence placed on different anecdotes.
So he refuses to sit under to play the Carthaginian role
because he wants to play the Roman one.
Oh, is that right?

There must be back projection there
because the French will come to identify themselves
with the Romans and they will identify the British
with the Carthaginian.
So probably not a true story.
But I don't know.
And I think it is clear when you read
all the various accounts
that there are multiple, multiple stories,
many of which have kind of mythic qualities.
So what we do know about him
is he's growing up in Ajaccio.
He's one of this part of this huge family.
It's extremely poor.
They're not a particularly poor family.
They have aspirations.
They're an aspirational kind of openly mobile family.
But it is generally a violent kind of scratchy kind of upbringing,
isn't it?
Adam Zamoyak in his book says,
he would have seen French mobile columns burning the countryside,
slaughtering the flocks of rebels.
He would have seen the corpses of rebels
hung on the public highway as a warning
to those who defied the imposition of French rule.
And he himself seems to...
I mean, the one thing that all the accounts
of Napoleon's little boy say
is that he's extremely aggressive and quarrelsome.
And also that he liked reading, Tom.
I think that's the one thing that's kind of attractive about him.
Yes.
He's a massive autodidact, isn't he?
Definitely he is, yeah.
And very obsessed by ancient history.
He loves reading about the Romans and the Greeks.
He's always, always reading about that.
So, in a way, very much like me.
That's that like you, Tom.
You grew up in the Badlands of Wiltshire.
And yet another poor, backward, rural community.
Yeah, poor but proud.
Yeah.
So, Napoleon, we said he was born in 1769.

In 1778, when he is nine years old,
his father, Carlo, decides that he really wants him to go to a military academy.
So, the military academy is an obvious engine for kind of social mobility.
You'll join the army and you'll move upwards.

Yeah.

But also to learn French, which at this point he barely speaks.
And the amazing thing is, is that when he goes away to join this military academy,
I mean, he's then away from Corsica for eight years.

Yeah.

So, in January 1779, his father has got permission for him to go to academy in France.
But he starts off going to a school in Oetang to learn French before he can embark on this
military career.

And despite the fact that he's presumably having this fairly intensive course,
he never, ever learns to speak French particularly well.

I read it from Adam Zamoyski.

His grammar and use of words remain poor.

His accent is always a very strong course.

His handwriting never developed beyond an ugly scroll.

It's a real surprise to me, actually, because the depictions of him that you have are always,
you can imagine him as a Frenchman, and he's always portrayed as a Frenchman.

But the idea of him as an outsider who's actually always speaking to other Frenchmen
in this very thick course of an accent, it sort of changes your view of him, I think, a bit,
doesn't it?

Because the emphasis on him as an outsider is something that's often missing, I would say,
from a counselor Napoleon.

Yeah, well, I think also that, as listeners will see from this episode, that tension between
the Corsican, which focuses the memories of his earliest years, and then this eight-year
period of education, which begins with him having to do a kind of grammar course in French.
This is a struggle that won't ultimately be resolved until the end of episode two.

No, because at this point, he definitely identifies himself as a Corsican.

He goes to a succession of military academies.

I mean, we could be all here for weeks going through military academy after military academy,
but they're all very austere, aren't they?

They're all run on almost slightly monastic lines where you kind of get up and fall.

Well, literally, because the teachers are friars and monks.

And when we call them military academies, that's actually slightly misleading,
because you sort of think they're just studying guns and stuff.

But actually, they're not.

They're spending all their time...

They're studying ancient history.

Yeah.

But also maths, because he turns out to be brilliant at maths, doesn't he?

He is.

He is.

Which never endears people to me, actually, if I'm honest.
But this is important, because a mastery of maths leads you into the artillery,
which is where Napoleon will ultimately go.
To begin with, he wants to join the navy, which is quite something.
Could he have been on the deck of whatever it was?
Instead of Villeneuve, facing Nelson?
I mean, his education is full of kind of ironies like that.
So, Andrew Robertson, his biography has the tremendous detail
that on the very last pages of his school exercise book,
following a long list of British imperial possessions,
he noted Sainte-Elle Petite.
Yeah, I saw that.
Of course, it's that little island of St Helena that Napoleon will end up on.
The list of classical authors that he read is extraordinary.
Caesar, Cicero, Suetonius, Tacitus.
He read Erasmus.
Plutarch was his great favourite.
And Plutarch, of course, is a titanic figure in the 18th century,
because Plutarch writes this idea of great lives,
great people who shape history.
That clearly entered into Napoleon's soul.
But there's a kind of romance to him as well,
because he loves the fake kind of Gaelic poet, Ocean.
Did you see that, Tom?
I did, yeah, of course.
Everyone, everyone did in the 18th century, completely made up.
Fingal, isn't it?
Yes.
Completely made up.
So, he's a blend of kind of proto-romantic,
nationalistic, and obviously enlightenment thinking,
because he's also reading New Voltaires and New Rousses
and all these kinds of things.
So, he goes from one academy to the other.
By 1784, he's at the École Militaire.
Oh, Dominic, we mustn't forget to mention the snowball fight,
which is so...
Not true.
Not true, but important because it feeds massively into the myth.
So, it's one of the key scenes in Abel Gance's great film
about Napoleon, Black and White Film.
And it kind of goes on for about 20 minutes.
And according to the legend,
Napoleon seizes control of the snowball fight.

It goes on for two weeks.

You know, he ranges his snowball fighters

into platoons and divisions,

and they storm hills and things like this.

And obviously, it's completely made up.

But it is a kind of interesting example of the...

Again, of the way in which Napoleon's future career

is back-projected into his education

and the kind of the mythology that grows up around his childhood.

Yeah, I think that's absolutely right.

So much of...

It's hard to discern the true Napoleon in some ways

because so many of the sources are written later.

Yeah.

And as you say,

they're kind of inventing this heroic past of him.

I mean, the one thing we know about him as a boy,

I mean, what does he know?

He's a teenager, 15, 16 or so.

One of his contemporaries said later that he was

uncommunicative, fond of solitude, capricious, arrogant,

and extremely self-centred.

Much of the time, he appeared to be in a world of his own,

pacing up and down, lost in thought,

gesticulating or laughing to himself.

That's very like me as a teenager.

Really?

Maze, I didn't become dictator of Europe.

No, you didn't.

You became...

No.

What did you become?

I took an alternative.

I became a podcaster, Dominic.

One of Britain's leading podcasters, Tom.

That's how I describe you.

Yeah.

One of, anyway, his big cause, though, is Corsica.

He's obsessed with Corsica.

Clearly, this is brought out by being in France.

Yeah.

All his buggers say he's almost certainly bullied at school

by the other boys because of his Corsican accent,

because he's quite short, he's sallow, his skin is darker,

he doesn't speak good French, all of this stuff.

He's a loner by nature and a reader,
and just a difficult, kind of abrasive person.

Spiky.

I mean, I suppose a boy in that situation,
you've got two options, haven't you?

Either you jettison your Corsican heritage completely
and you absolutely erase all the sense of not being French,
or you accentuate your Corsicanness,
you embrace what is making you bullied.

Yeah.

And he obviously goes for the second option.

Yes, he does.

I mean, he's good.

He's a good student, isn't he?

He does well.

He proceeds through the different academies in 1785.

He sits the exam for the artillery, there are 58 candidates
and he comes 42nd, which sounds rubbish,
but actually almost all the other candidates
had done years more preparation than him.

So it's a pretty good result for somebody
who hasn't done as much prep and isn't even French.

And he's posted second lieutenant to a prestigious regiment,
the Regiment of La Faire, which is stationed in Valence,
kind of in the sort of southwest central France.

And actually, for somebody who's so disputatious and difficult,
he's actually got on pretty well.

He's a great reader.

He's very serious.

He's not set for a glittering career,
but he's set for a decent career as long as he stays French,
because there's still a possibility of him being drawn,
sucked into the world of kind of Corsican nationalism.

His father has died and Pasquale Paoli,
who's still hanging around in London talking to Boswell
and sort of drawing up plans for Corsican universities.
Brushing his enormous moustaches.

Exactly.

He's still out there and Napoleon worships him.

One of his biographers says he turns Paoli
into this sort of invented father figure.

And actually his first essay that survives
is a history of Corsica.

He's always writing histories of Corsica, essays about Corsica, gothic novels set in Corsica, all these kind of weird things. I mean, I think to anyone who's been a history-obsessed adolescent boy, he's not an entirely unrecognizable type, very moody, very, very kind of intellectually arrogant. Tom, are you describing yourself or are you describing... No, well, I just kind of, you know, anyone listening who has been an adolescent boy would find perhaps elements of Napoleon not entirely unrecognizable. And that is simply to say that I don't think there's anything particularly about him at this point that marks him out as, you know, a man of destiny or anything. No, no, no, I agree with you about that. If he was around now, he would be putting up earnest conversations on YouTube. You know, he'd be on TikTok, all that kind of stuff. But you know what, Tom? Very moody and... He's all that's worst about teenagers, I think. I mean, I think he is. Thinking about the difference in him and the other great characters that we've done, his youth in great detail, which is Churchill. Churchill was ridiculous as a teenager going around saying, I will save the empire and all that sort of stuff. But Churchill was funny and he was a bullion. And you could imagine he was a great laugh and he was very likable. All Napoleon school contemporaries say of him, he was actually awful. He was really dislikeable. He had no sense of humour. You know, he's always trying to have fights. Oh, leave me alone. Yeah, all of having fights with people and just difficult. Why does no one recognise my genius? Yeah, very much that kind of thing. As a teenager, he started writing gothic novels. Yeah, of course he did. I mean, of course, that's exactly what you'd expect. He wrote a book called Le Conte desix, a book about Andrew Roberts. I couldn't help but think about your vampire novels, Tom, because Andrew Roberts is quite a bit of it.

The fingers of the countess sank into gaping wounds.
Her fingers dripped with blood.
She cried out, hit her face, but looking up, could see nothing.
Terrified, trembling, aghast, cut to the very quick
by these terrible forebodings.
The countess got into a carriage and arrived at the tower.
Let he who has never written a gothic melodrama in his youth
cast the first stone, Dominic.
However, I think I do think we're being a little bit unfair, though,
because, as I say, he's also tremendously good at maths.
That's worse.
No, it isn't, because it gets me as posting in the artillery regiment,
and this is actually quite a big deal.
So, you know, we shouldn't ignore the fact that
he does have the prospect of a pretty glittering career ahead of him.
I mean, it's not kind of astounding,
but relative to what he could have ended up doing,
it's pretty impressive.
Agreed.
So, we should put that on the record.
So, we get to the late 1780s.
France has run into terrible financial trouble,
as we've discussed when we did the podcast about the Seven Years War
and indeed about the American Revolution.
France has exhausted its finances,
both through mismanagement and massive structural problems,
but through a succession of wars, this great competition with Britain
for mastery of the oceans, for mastery of the Americas,
and so on and so forth.
And Napoleon, he's sitting around in his regiment in Valence,
and he is actually, his great dream is to write a history of Corsica,
and that's what he's doing.
While the French political body politic is being kind of
roiled by all these ructions,
Louis XVI recalls the estates general.
France is sort of a stupid comparison,
but France is equivalent to parliament.
It's trying to sort out its financial woes.
Napoleon is delighted at that,
because he thinks a liberalization of the French constitution
will give more autonomy to Corsica.
But also, I think he has decided that he's a Republican already, hasn't he?
Yes, he is, because he's been reading Rousseau,
and he's been reading lots of Enlightenment stuff.

Your comparison with him and modern teenagers on YouTube or TikTok,
he has imbibed, as people do now,
as people do at any point in history,
he has imbibed all the fashionable ideas of the day.
And he's sort of pumped up with all this stuff.
He's always writing these things about liberty and stuff.
But interestingly, he's still, at this point, 1789,
he sees the French as the villains.
So he writes to Pasquale Paoli, who's in London,
and he says, this is 1789,
and he says, I'm very keen to write a history of Corsica.
And in his letter, he says,
I was born as our fatherland was perishing.
My eyes opened to the odious sight of three 30,000 Frenchmen
who had been vomited onto our shores,
drowning the throne of liberty in rivers of blood.
Very kind of teenage prose,
but so interesting that at this late stage,
he still sees the French as the oppressors,
and Corsica as his kind of motherland,
and Corsica as his future.
He does, but at the same time,
when the Bastille is stormed in July 1789,
I mean, he's still engaged in French politics, isn't he?
Because I think he's the only artillery graduate of his year
who actually supports what's going on.
And when lots of his contemporaries in the artillery
start fleeing, he doesn't actually flee.
I mean, he does go back to Corsica,
but he's not going into exile.
So I think there is a sense in which he can feel
the excitement of this incipient revolution
and isn't completely abandoning it, but is seeing it as a way...
I mean, I suppose the idea of liberty and fraternity
is something that he can apply to Corsica.
And so the question I suppose for Napoleon
is, can you square the circle?
Can you be simultaneously a Frenchman who supports the revolution
and a nationalist in Corsica?
And this is the huge issue
that will determine the course of his life
in the long run.
And we should return to that issue, Tom, after the break.
Shall.

Hello. Welcome back to the Restless History.
We're looking at the young Napoleon and Dominic.
In the first half, we were looking at his various kind of teenage boy attitudes,
his occasional feelings of self-pity,
his identification with all kinds of romantic causes,
his growing enthusiasm for the revolution,
his sense of being a Corsican
and whether that might lead him into overt anti-French nationalism.
So a great cauldron, Dominic,
a cauldron of emotions and thoughts.
But of course, teenage boys,
one other thing that very often they are interested in...
Yeah.
...is girls.
Yes.
So what's going on down there, as it were?
All right, down there. Thank you, Tom.
He is not a man for the ladies, actually.
It's fair to say.
So you can well imagine that a lot of the blokes in these military academies
are kind of sneaking out and having assignations and things like that.
Napoleon, everybody says about him,
when they do go to sort of salons and things like that,
he cuts a very unattractive figure.
But he's kind of scrawny and scruffy, isn't he?
He's very scruffy.
His sort of hair is like lank and kind of hanging down.
Yeah.
His olive skinned where they are paler.
He has a thick accent.
And his first encounter,
which I know you greatly enjoyed reading about,
is a very strange and unprepossessing one, isn't it?
1787, I think.
Yeah. So he's in Paris.
He goes to see a play and he comes out
and he describes himself in kind of classic tones.
My soul, agitated by the vigorous sentiments natural to it,
made me bear the cold with indifference.
But when my imagination cooled,
I began to feel the rigors of the season
and made for the arcades.
And arcades is where prostitutes are hanging out.
And he meets with a young girl.

And he's obviously wants to do what a chap wants to do
with a prostitute, I guess.
But also he feels inhibited about it,
partly, I guess, because of nerves,
but also because he has this whole Rousseau attitude,
La Nouvelle Eloise of high-minded.
It's all about emotion and, you know,
the mingling of souls and all this stuff.
So there's a lot of kind of Rousseau-ish type conversation
with this poor girl.
He clearly, you know, doesn't want all this kind of conversation.
And yeah, it's all kind of weird.
And he writes it up in a kind of slightly odd way.
He tells you, writes like an essay about it.
And he admits that basically he's talking to her for ages
and just wittering on about abstract nouns.
And she's basically said, come on, let's crack on.
She does.
She says to him, listen, we could warm ourselves
and you can satisfy your fancy.
And he goes back and in this whole description that he writes,
he doesn't describe at all what happens after they go back.
So there's a kind of, as biographers say,
there was always a kind of prudishness,
priggishness, puritanism to him.
I guess I think it's the kind of 18th century cult
of the sentiment, isn't it?
I suppose so.
Yeah.
James Boswell never had these kinds of problems.
No, he didn't.
But I mean, I imagine there is a kind of awkwardness, a goshness,
that he dresses up in these fine-sounding enlightenment tones.
But again, he's not the kind of commanding,
titanic figure of destiny who you might think at this point.
He's still very shy, very awkward, insecure, I guess you'd say.
Yeah.
Which I mean, we can be lenient, Tom,
given that he is an outsider, he's a teenager,
you don't have to judge him too harshly for all those kinds of things.
Anyway, back to the revolution.
I mean, he doesn't know it's going to be the French Revolution,
I guess, we're only at the Stormy de Bastille.
Lots of his fellow officers, as you say, they scam.

They're horrified.

Yeah, they're mutiny and stuff, even at this early stage.

It's so interesting that his first instinct is to go back to Corsica

and he returns to Ajaccio at the end of September 1789.

And he finds, and this will be a theme throughout this episode,

the rest of this episode, he finds Corsica basically in total and utter chaos.

Because French rule has never been entirely accepted by all the Corsicans, has it?

Yeah.

And some of the Corsicans are sending, there's a man called,

with the unfortunate name of Butafoco.

Yes, I wondered whether you would be mentioning him.

So Matteo Butafoco, he's the representative of the nobility,

and he is sent off to say, to France to say,

can we have a bit more self-rule?

Other people want greater integration into France.

But meanwhile, I mean, that's just the sort of the surface, political stuff,

and underneath it, there's all these different clans and factions

kind of fighting for control of the island.

His brother Joseph, who is on Corsica, has helped set up a patriotic committee,

at which he's the secretary, Napoleon himself, goes around handing out trickler cockades.

You see, which is fascinating, isn't it?

Because that is, of course, revolutionary.

Yeah.

He's not at this point an overt nationalist,

and yet clearly he's doing it for nationalist reasons.

And I think it would be a mistake to kind of impose too much

a sense that he has clear thoughts on this.

Yeah, I think that's right.

I suspect that it's his kind of emotions that are leading him.

I mean, a bit like when he's meeting with the prostitute,

and he's disguising kind of confusion beneath the show of fine language.

I imagine he's doing the same with this, really.

That's absolutely right.

That impulse is controlling him at this point.

The other thing about France is that,

I think he defines France at different times in different ways.

So sometimes he sees France as the colonial power,

the colonial power that is oppressing Corsica,

but other times he obviously thinks that France is almost like a universal idea.

Well, this is the great thing, isn't it, of the revolution,

is that the ideals of the revolution are framed as being universal,

and therefore applicable not just to metropolitan France,

but to Corsica as well.

So it's interesting that as he's giving out these trickler cockades,

you know, the colors, the red, white, and blue are France,
he is also still writing his Corsican history book, Tom,
which he claims that the Corsicans are the heirs of the Romans,
and he also writes this mad thing.
He writes, this is his short story he wrote.
He writes a short story about an old man in Corsica
who it's revealed his mother,
the old man's mother was raped and murdered by French soldiers,
and the old man in a sort of death wish sort of style scenario
takes revenge on every Frenchman he meets and boards a ship
and kills everybody on the French ship, including the cabin boy.
Yeah, we dragged their bodies to our altar and they burned them all.
The new incense seemed to please the deity,
which of course, again, is simultaneously very,
you know, Corsican vendetta, all that kind of stuff,
but is also looking forward to the terror and the idea of blood and violence
as being pleasing to, you know, the goddess of reason or whatever.
So confusing times for a young lad.
The whole thing about Corsica is so chaotic and anarchic.
So by 1790, he's still there.
They've sent a letter.
He has actually composed a letter that ends up being read out
in the French National Assembly,
which is effectively asking for Corsica to be fully integrated into the French nation.
Which it's weird, isn't it?
Because he's writing that at the same time as he's writing his,
you know, genocidal fantasy about Cain Frenchman.
Right. It's so confused and chaotic.
He gets his brother elected to the General Assembly in Corsica,
and they're sort of having gang fights with other Corsicans.
Then this guy, Pasquale Paoli, he makes a triumphant return to Corsica in the summer of 1790.
Napoleon makes sure he's there in Ajaccio to welcome him.
He's in the crowds.
He and his brother Joseph and all their friends and some of the other brothers,
they're part of patriotic clubs in Ajaccio.
They're giving speeches.
He's kind of roistering around the streets, having fights.
He's also engaging in class warfare, isn't he?
Because he writes a letter a butterfucko.
Right. You did that with far too much relish,
and I think that the listeners will see through you.
No, not at all. Not at all.
Butterfucko, of course, is the representative of the nobility.
Yeah.

And by this point in 1790, the revolution in Paris is gaining speed.
And so that element of class warfare is spreading.
To Corsica.
And the Corsicans seem rarely to need any incentive to engage in fractious street fighting.
But now they have a kind of additional motive.
So it really is kind of chaos.
It spends 1791, 1792 endlessly going back to France and back to Corsica here.
Well, because he's still in the army, right?
He's still in the army.
And he can't stay away for too long because basically he'll be at a deserter.
A deserter, and as the pressure rises within France,
especially when the war breaks out with France's neighbours,
he won't just be a deserter, he will be a traitor.
So there's that beginning to hang over him.
Yeah, because all the other officers have literally fled abroad
and are starting to make common cause with France's enemies
in an attempt to restore the monarchy.
Yeah. So June 1791, the key moments in the revolution,
we'll be coming back to the French Revolution,
hopefully the middle of next year, won't we, Tom?
To mark the Paris Olympics.
I think there'd be nothing more fun than doing a whole series
about the worst excesses of the terror.
So this key moment, the king, Louis XVI,
decides he's going to try and flee the country,
get out of France, it's all gone wrong.
And he is intercepted at Varenne near the border
with the Austrian Netherlands, now Belgium, and he is brought back.
And that's a moment when the paranoia of the revolution,
the sense of kind of incipient looming violence really ratchets up.
And at this point, the stakes are getting higher and higher.
So a false move from Napoleon,
if he allies himself with the wrong faction,
things in course can completely spill out of control.
He was no longer just a teenager playing at politics.
He could lose his life if things don't work out.
And actually, after multiple trips,
he's back in Ajaccio in April 1792.
And there are lots of murders going on.
There is fighting.
He ends up in a sort of massive brawl in the streets.
And Pasquale Paoli, who's been very fond of him up to this point,
because he's seen him as a fan, basically,
starts to kind of wash his hands with the Bonapartes

and thinks that whole family are much more trouble than they're worth.
This is what happens, he says,
when inexperienced little boys are placed in command of the National Guards.
So at that point, about 1792, I would say,
Napoleon's position in Corsica, where he had fancied himself
as one of Pasquale Paoli's kind of nationalist coming men,
is actually beginning to slip out of control,
that he's losing traction in Corsica.
But Dominic, isn't there also an additional danger for Napoleon
that the French representative in Corsica
is very unamused by Napoleon's activities
and actually writes to the War Ministry in Paris saying,
essentially, that he's a traitor, that he should be dismissed.
And so this is very alarming for Napoleon.
So when he, in the summer of 1792, goes back to Paris,
he has that kind of hanging over him,
the worry about what people in the War Ministry are going to be making of this.
But fortunately, he arrives in Paris, goes to the War Ministry,
and discovers that it's absolutely chaos there as well,
and that if the letters arrived, certainly no one has read it.
Yeah, because the letter says that whole family,
the family has no merit other than spying treachery,
impudence, and prostitution,
which is a harsh thing to say about someone in his family.
But as you say, yeah, the War Ministry is in chaos
because France is suddenly at war with its neighbors.
And he is actually, on the 20th of June, 1792,
very French behaviors met up with a friend for lunch,
for a long lunch at a local brasserie.
And when they come out,
they see this huge crowd descending on the Tuileries, on the palace.
And this is the moment when the crowd, this mob,
forces the king, who's basically now a prisoner,
under palace arrest, to put on the red cap of liberty.
And Napoleon sees this.
It's really interesting, because you said he was a Republican.
He is a Republican, but he's also always an autocrat.
He's a believer in strong, ruthless government, I think.
Well, he believes in order, doesn't he?
He does believe in order, because he says...
He's a military man.
So, I mean, his whole education has instilled that in him.
And he says to the king, and it's so interesting
that he says this in Italian, not in French, he says,

Che Colione, what a jerk, what a fool,
to be so weak as to be forced by the mob
to put on this kind of red cap.
And then almost two months later, Napoleon, he's at his lodgings,
and he hears the sound of the toxin ringing.
And he comes down to the street,
and he sees this huge mob rampaging down the street
with the head of a man on a pike.
And they're shouting,
and actually what has happened is the mob has attacked
the Tuileries Palace.
They have forced the king and his family to flee
to the assembly for safety,
and they have butchered all the defenders of the palace.
And Napoleon, who despises the king, walks through the palace
afterwards, the gardens, and the gardens are strewn
with dead bodies of the Swiss guards
and the nobles who were trying to defend the king.
And there are still people there, as one of his photographers says,
finishing off the wounded and mutilating their bodies
in obscene ways.
And Napoleon is horrified by this,
but what horrifies him is not so much the violence
as the disorder, isn't it, Tom?
This sort of anarchy which he dreads.
I saw even quite well-dressed women commit
the most extreme indecencies on the bodies of the Swiss guard.
So I think you can imagine what they're doing.
And you're right that this in no way is an expression
of sympathy for the king.
And when the mob corner him and demand that he cries
Vive la Nation, he says, well, I did this very happily.
Of course, I did.
But I think it's, as you say, it's contempt for the mob,
the canine.
He despises it because you have to have order and discipline.
So he's an authoritarian Jacobin.
You know, it's quite a recognizable type.
He's very, very definitely a Robespierreist.
I mean, he is definitely on the far left
of the revolutionary movement.
But at the same time, he's very, very authoritarian
and thinks that there needs to be discipline and structure
and control.

And it's about this point, would you say?

So the Corsicanness is beginning to, it never fades completely.

He's still always Corsican, but he's no longer trumpeting it as he did before because he's perhaps found a new cause.

Do you think that's?

I think he has.

Yeah.

I think he has in the revolution at this point.

Yeah.

Presumably at the back of his mind,

and this will become very evident in the part two

when we look at what happens over the next few years,

he must be aware of the fact that the clearing away of so many aristocrats from the army has opened up a lot of space

for a young man on the make like himself.

Yeah.

And that if only he can prove his value to the French Republic,

you know, there is great scope for very, very rapid promotion

of a kind that there simply wouldn't have been 10 years before.

Well, that seems like the perfect point on which to bring this episode to a close, Tom.

So we have this young man.

What is he?

24, 25?

Not even that.

Who is driven, ambitious, very prickly, spiky.

Pretty humilous.

Very humilous.

I mean, there's no trace of humor whatsoever.

Spence's time writing these gothic vampire novels or whatever it is.

He's writing his history of Corsica.

Tom, the parallels are absolutely extraordinary, aren't they?

Well, man of destiny.

If circumstances have been different, who knows where I might be.

Exactly.

On an island in the Atlantic.

I will say this.

Sometimes I do tease you on this podcast, but you have a very lively sense of humor.

I think it is fair to say you're too kind, Dominic.

As was evidenced by that excellent reading at the beginning of the episode,

which I think a lot of people will want to immediately go back and listen to again.

So I enjoyed it so much.

Well, so we will have another reading in our next episode.

You're spoiling us.

Which will be coming out on Thursday.

But if you want to hear the next reading, which will be done in a different accent.

So making a kind of intriguing biographical point.

You could, if you wanted to join the Restless History Club,
you could hear it straight away.

But if not, we will see you on Thursday for the next installment of our special on Young Napoleon.

So we will see you then.

Bye-bye.

Au revoir.