

Lettre de Popham à Marsden¹

25 August 1806

Les 11 et 12 août 1806, les forces espagnoles, conduites par Jacques de LINIERS, reprennent la ville de Buenos Aires défendue par le général britannique William Carr BERESFORD. Ce dernier, contraint de se rendre, est retenu prisonnier avec l'ensemble de ses troupes.

Le commodore sir HOME POPHAM, instigateur et commandant l'expédition, a quant à lui été contraint de reprendre la mer à bord du *Diadem*, vaisseau de 64 canons portant son pavillon. Le 25 août, il rédige une lettre au Premier secrétaire de l'amirauté pour lui rendre compte de ce revers de fortune². Sa situation n'est guère reluisante car, au-delà de la perte de la totalité de ses forces terrestres, il ne dispose plus d'aucun port ni refuge sur les côtes espagnoles pour ravitailler et abriter sa flotte.



Cette lettre ne partira en réalité que le 1^{er} novembre, POPHAM ayant sans arrêt ajourné le départ des dépêches vers l'Angleterre. Il justifiera ses reports successifs dans différentes correspondances, dont une dizaine adressées à MARSDEN. La dernière de ces lettres au premier secrétaire de l'amirauté est datée du 30 octobre. Elle annonce la prise de Maldonado et de l'île de Goritti par des renforts envoyés du Cap de Bonne Espérance. Enfin une nouvelle positive ! POPHAM peut dès lors laisser partir le transport *Willington*, avec à son bord le capitaine EDMONDS, commandant du *Diomède*, porteur de ses dépêches.

¹ William MARSDEN (1754-1836) : Premier secrétaire de l'amirauté en 1806.

² Le 6 septembre suivant, POPHAM écrira également une dépêche au duc d'YORK, à laquelle il joindra une copie de cette lettre du 25 août.

Le 26 janvier 1807, cette lettre est intégralement reproduite dans les colonnes du *Times*. L'Angleterre apprend alors avec stupeur ce cuisant revers des armes de la Couronne en Amérique du Sud. POPHAM est immédiatement rappelé à Londres et traduit devant une Cour martiale en mars 1807. Ce procès, très médiatisé, durera cinq jours et se conclura par une simple « réprimande » à l'imprudent commodore pour sa conduite « hautement répréhensible »³. A sa descente du *Gladiator*, le navire sur lequel s'est tenu le procès, POPHAM est ovationné.

Trois mois plus tard, Jacques de LINIERS se préparera à recevoir le choc d'une nouvelle expédition britannique rassemblée à Montevideo, prise d'assaut le 3 février 1807. Ayant lu la lettre de POPHAM à MARSDEN, probablement dans les colonnes des gazettes anglaises, il s'attachera à réfuter point par point les allégations de son adversaire dans un long mémoire daté de Buenos Ayres le 30 juin 1807.

³ "The court has agreed that the charges have been proved against the said Captain Sir Home POPHAM. That the withdrawing, without orders so to do, the whole of any naval force from the place where it is directed to be employed, and the employing it in distant operations against the enemy, more especially if the success of such operations should be likely to prevent its speedy return, may be attended with the most serious inconvenience to the public service, as the success of any plan formed by his majesty's ministers for operations against the enemy, in which such naval force might be included, may by such removal be entirely prevented. And the court has further agreed, that the conduct of the said Captain Sir Home POPHAM, in the withdrawing the whole of the naval force under his command from the Cape of Good Hope, and the proceeding with it to Rio de la Plata, is highly censurable; but, in consideration of circumstances, did adjudge him to be only SEVERELY REPRIMANDED, and he is hereby severely reprimanded accordingly." (Londres, le 11 mars 1806)

“Diadem, Rio de la Plata, 25 August 1806

“When the events of war cease to be favourable to any armament, I consider it the duty of commanding officers to state all the circumstances under their knowledge or information with clearness and perspicacity, which either progressively or suddenly led to a reversal of fortune.

“In pursuing this course I feel confident I shall be able to satisfy the lord commissioners of the Admiralty that the liberal and beneficent principles upon which the government of General BERESFORD was conducted do more honour to His Majesty’s arms and the character of Great Britain, than if he had resorted to expedients completely within his power which would have effectually annihilated all the effects of the enemy and wrested probably for ever these countries from the crown of Spain.

“On the other hand the repossession of Buenos Ayres has been stained with such deliberate acts of treachery and perfidy as are not to be instanced in the annals of history and which will I hope in future be an evidence to every British officer how little dependence there is to be placed in the most sacred treaty made with a Spaniard.

“The terms of the convention which was signed on the 2nd July⁴ after being minutely discussed in the Cabildo by the late commander in chief of His Majesty’s forces, by all the law officers, by the ecclesiastical delegates and by the representatives of the people, were received, when promulgated by the strongest apparent demonstrations of joy and no persons more conspicuously marked their gratitude than the men who in violation of their faith were the principal conspirators in betraying a government they had so lately assisted to establish and confirm.

“The object of this expedition was considered by the natives to apply principally to their independence, by the blacks to their total liberation, and if General BERESFORD had felt himself authorised or justified in confirming either of these propositions no exertions whatever would have been made to dispossess him of his conquest.

“The latter idea created a very serious alarm, and PUERIDON⁵, who appears to have been the greatest organ of the revolution, and was certainly the most prominent in framing the convention called my particular interest to the desperate situation of the country if some steps were not immediately taken to suppress the delusion of the slaves, he had personally felt the evil consequences of the prevailing opinions, and dreaded how much they would be increased by the most trifling delay.

“On this representation General BERESFORD lost no time in issuing a proclamation which by its effect completely quieted the apprehension of the town.

⁴ Il s’agit de la version définitive de la reddition de Buenos Aires (ndla)

⁵ Juan Martin de PUERIDON (PUEYRREDON), grand propriétaire, est le fils d’un Béarnais qui a servi dans les armées du roi d’Espagne. En 1763, son père s’installe à Buenos Aires et se consacre à l’exportation des produits du pays. Les PUEYRREDON paraissent avoir, dès cette époque, disposé de ressources considérables ; en 1806, ils équipent à leurs frais un corps de cavalerie, les « Hussards de PUEYRREDON », d’un effectif de plus de 200 cavaliers. Cette famille, qui a envoyé ses fils étudier en France, est d’ailleurs animée d’un patriotisme américain indiscutable. J.-M. de PUEYRREDON avait tenté une action armée contre les Anglais dès avant la reconquête de Liniers, et quand celui-ci arrive de Montevideo pour libérer la ville, PUEYRREDON lui fournit le personnel, le matériel et les animaux nécessaires pour débarquer la troupe en une heure de temps. Il assure en outre le transport et l’approvisionnement et même la solde, d’une troupe d’environ 700 cavaliers avec montures de rechange. Après la *Reconquista*, il est envoyé à Madrid pour exposer la situation nouvelle, tandis que LINIERS organise des milices (ndla).

“It being now evident that the independence of America could not be declared, that the inhabitants might command the protection of His Majesty’s government, against the insults of their slaves which no doubt they profited in various ways to our prejudice and that the military principles of the general were too high to enter into any negotiation with the Indians, who must traditionally remember the extreme enmity of their first invader. PUERIDON applied himself with great art and address in preparing the people for a general insurrection.

“The arms in the town were secreted ready for the moment of action, the discontented assembled every night, and attended to his instructions and he raised all the rabble of the country, by the example supplied of money with which he was furnished.

“On the north side of the river Colonel LINIERS, a French officer in the Spanish service, and on his parole, successfully employed himself in collecting people at Colonia.

“This person, previous to the violation of his honour, frequently called on me to excite my commiseration for a large and indigent family inveighing in the most bitter terms against the treatment he had received from the Spanish government, renouncing all intention to serve again and soliciting my protection to him as a merchant which he considered to be the only line that promised him a livelihood for his children.

“To this instance of a breach of faith, I might add almost every Spanish officer who had signed his parole, and one had so little sense of shame that he was the first to com on board the *Diadem* with the account of his infamous and perfidious transaction, although he knew I was in possession of his specified signature to all the engagements as a prisoner of war.

“The church was not less forward in its countenance, aid, correspondence, and I believe practical assistance. In short, sir, there was an atrocious and perfidious violation of that faith which the law of nations declares to be sacred.

“Terror was established and every person who refused to contribute his assistance to this conspiracy was threatened with immediate death.

“I have traced this from very unquestionable authority, and so rapid was the progress of the revolution when it first showed itself that it was not till the 31st July that I learnt by a despatch from the general which reached me at Ensenada on my return from Monte Video, that he was apprehensive from the information he received an insurrection would shortly be made.

“I heard at the same time from Captain THOMPSON⁶ that seventeen of the enemy’s vessels had just arrived at Colonia and as it was reported that force was still to be considerably increased from Mont Video, I sent orders for the *Diomede* to be brought to Ensenada and for Captain KING⁷ of the *Diadem* to come up with the remaining few marines, the two companies of blues, and as many other men as could in any degree be spared from the ship, for the purpose of arming some vessels to attack the enemy at Colonia as it was impossible to prevent his crossing from some part of the north shore whenever the wind was fair.

“On the first of August in the afternoon the *Leda* anchored off Buenos Ayres about 12 miles distance, and on my landing on the 2nd, which I did as soon as the weather would admit of a boat getting on shore, I found the general had just made a very successful attack on about fifteen hundred Spaniards under PUERIDON five leagues from the town with five hundred men in which he took all the enemy’s cannon, I think nine pieces, and several prisoners.

⁶ John THOMPSON (1776-1864), commission lieutenant 3 July 1793 and commander 24 December 1805 ; il était capitaine de port après la prise de Buenos Ayres, venant de la *Leda* (ndla).

⁷ William KING, commissioned lieutenant 3 November 1790 and commander 22 January 1806; one of POPHAM’s captain 18 October 1807 (ndla).

“On the 3rd I attempted to return to the *Leda* in the *Encounter*, which Captain HONEYMAN⁸ brought within a few miles of the shore for this purpose, as it blew very strong, but the wind increased so much from the eastward that we could not get to windward.

“On the 4th in the morning it was very thick weather and the gale freshened so considerably that it was impossible to weigh.

“About noon Captain KING arrived in a galivat with one hundred and fifty men from the *Diadem* for the purpose of arming and commanding the four small vessels we had collected in the harbour, but he was not able to get there till the following day.

“On the 5th in the morning it moderated, and I reached the *Leda*, when I received a report from Captain THOMPSON that in the gale of the preceding day the enemy had crossed over from Colonia totally unobserved by many of our ships, except the schooner under the command of lieutenant HERRICK⁹, who was lying in the narrow gut leading to Conchas and St Isidro, but the easterly wind had thrown so much water in the river that the enemy’s vessels were enabled to cross over any part of the Palmas bank, without the necessity of making a greater detour by going higher up the river.

“On the 6th and the 7th it blew a hurricane, the *Leda* was lying in four fathoms with two anchors down and the yards and topmasts struck.

“On the 8th I heard from Captain KING (whose report of his transactions between the 5th and the 12th I have the honour to enclose¹⁰) that five of our gun boats had foundered at their anchors, that the *Walker* had lost her rudder, and that the launches and large cutters of the *Diadem* and *Leda* were lost.

“The torrents of rain that fell during the 6th, 7th and 8th had rendered the roads totally impracticable for anything but cavalry and consequently General BERESFORD was most seriously disappointed in his determination to attack the enemy at a distance from the town, in which had it taken place I entertain no doubt that his army would have added another trait of its invincible [...] under his dispositions.

“The enemy however by his inexhaustible supply of horse suffered little inconvenience from the state of the roads, and he was therefore enabled to approach the town by several directions, without giving the British army any opportunity to attack him.

“On the 10th in the evening the castle was summoned, and on the following day I landed while our remaining vessels were firing on the Spanish posts, and I learnt that exclusive of the Spanish army which was divided into many columns occupying the various avenues of the town, the inhabitants were all armed and sheltered on the tops of the houses and churches with the design of carrying on a war of ambush.

“Under these circumstances and the manifest disposition of the enemy to prevent an engagement it was determined to embark the wounded that night and cross the Rio Chuela for the purpose of moving towards Ensenada, but this measure was in a great degree frustrated by the weather, which became very violent during the night and consequently retarded the progress of embarkation, though the enemy added a considerable number of men to the houses and churches near the castle and advanced by all the streets not under the influence of its fire. In short, his object was to avoid by every means a general action and to place his men

⁸ Robert HONEYMAN, Captain of *Leda* from 1803 (ndla).

⁹ William Henry HERRICK, commissioned lieutenant in 1806 (ndla).

¹⁰ Il s’agit d’un rapport de KING à POPHAM, daté de l’*Encounter*, au large de Buenos Ayres, le 12 août 1806 (ndla)

¹¹ Illisible dans l’original

in such a situation that they could fire at our troops, while they remained in perfect security themselves.

“On the 12th at daylight I understand a smart fire began from the enemy’s advanced posts but was soon returned with great effect by our artillery, which was planted towards the principal streets leading to the great square, and for a short time the enemy by his immense numbers showed a greater degree of firmness than on any other occasion and pushed forward with three pieces of artillery, which Colonel PACK of the 71st soon charged and took from him. During this time however reinforcements crowded the tops of all the houses commanding the great square from the back streets and our troops were soon considerably annoyed by people they could not get at. The enemy commanded the castle in the same way with the additional advantage of a gun on the top of one of the churches which I consider an indelible stigma against the character of the bishop, not only from his situation but the professions he made.

“I can easily consider how the General BERESFORD must at this moment have been on the rack, disappointed in his last efforts to induce the enemy to a general engagement in the great square, his gallant little army falling fast by shots from invisible persons, and the only alternative which could present itself to save the useless effusion of so much valuable blood was a flag of truce, which was hoisted at the castle about one o’clock.

“In an instant there were near ten thousand men in the great square, pressing forward in the most outrageous manner to get into the fort, and even firing at our men on the ramparts, so much so that it was with extreme difficulty the British troops were prevented revenging this insult. Indeed the general was obliged to tell the Spanish officers; if these men did not retire in the course of one minute he must as the only means of safety haul down the flag of truce and recommence hostilities. This firmness had the desired effect and he then sent his conditions to the Spanish general and they were instantly acceded to.

“I enclose a copy of the capitulation and I trust the high and independent language in which it is couched and the terms dictated by General BERESFORD to an officer at the head of myriads of people will do him infinite honour in England, and obtain from him His Majesty’s most gracious approbation of his conduct.

“I have received and annex a return of the killed, wounded and missing by which it appears that there are two officers, two sergeants, one drummer, forty-three rank and file killed, eight officers, seven sergeants, ninety-two rank and file wounded and nine missing, making a total of one hundred and sixty-five¹², and scarce any of these misfortunes were occasioned except from the inhabitants on the tops of the houses and the churches.

“The enemy confessed to have lost about seven hundred killed and wounded in the short conflict in the streets and if it had not been for the inhabitants I have little doubt that the Spanish troops would have been completely defeated although seven times the number of the British forces.

“Nothing is more difficult than to give their lordships an idea of the number of men in arms: but from the best accounts we can obtain it is thought PUERIDON and the other principal people engaged in this plot had collected from eight to ten thousand men in the country, that LINIERS may have brought over from eight hundred to a thousand and that the town furnished, though armed in various ways, about ten thousand under the secret arrangement of the magistrates.

¹² Actually 164: POPHAM’s addition is wrong; the return he mentions is not present, either in the Admiralty file in the PRO or with the copy he sent to BAIRD: BAIRD C, 119 (ndlr).

“When every vessel that could escape from Buenos Ayres had joined I proceeded towards Ensenada to retire the detachment of men. Lieutenant GROVES¹³ of the *Diadem* was obliged to quit the *Belem* schooner as she could not work out. One gun boat and a settee a prize were also left in the harbour with the *Justina*, a small English merchant ship that had followed the expedition from St Helena. Captain THOMPSON of the *Neptune* who was in the castle was made a prisoner, and lieutenant BURGH of the *Raisnable* with Mr RAMSEY¹⁴, a midshipman, and seven men who were in the settee as her boats could not hold them. Lieutenant HERRICK in the *Dolores*, the other armed schooner, worked out in a manner which, coupled with his conduct on the whole of this business, does him great credit.

“On the 13^d in the morning the detachment of marines under the command of Lieutenant SWAILE¹⁵ was embarked from Ensenada, and his two field pieces spiked and thrown in the river.

“On the 14th I sailed for the anchorage where I arrived the following day, and immediately addressed the governor of Monte Video on the subject of our troops.

“On the 16th, in consequence of receiving by Colonel’s LINIERS aide de camp a letter from General BERESFORD, I despatched two of the transports to Buenos Ayres, where we arrived on the 17th but from the prevarication of the governor of Monte Video in the first instance and his subsequent dishonourable conduct no troops have yet been embarked.

“I fear my correspondence with the governor which is not yet closed will be of too great a length to annex to this report, and I shall therefore make it the subject of another despatch¹⁶.

“I now hope their lordships will allow me to observe, however disappointed we may have been in the present result of this expedition, that the conquest of Buenos Ayres was acquired in a manner highly honourable to the talents and military character of General BERESFORD, and the well-earned fame of his army was materially increased by its gallant conduct in the defence of the place, while the reflection of the faithless Spaniard must shortly satisfy him that his advantage had been obtained by a loss of his honour by an infraction of every national pledge and by a violation of every tie which even the sophistry or example of the bishop never can justify.

“No opportunity has been lost during the short time we have been in possession of this place to procure such information of all the productions and resources as may be of infinite use hereafter and I am satisfied that the check which the expedition has given to the enemy’s trade must be severely felt in the mother country, and the consequences likely to result from the duplicity and treachery of her own officers will if my information is correct be still more serious in this application to her future interest in these colonies. They armed the inhabitants indiscriminately to overpower the British troops and now the mob has refused the viceroy admittance to the town, and although he has collected a considerable number of partisans they are determined to oppose the re-establishment of the Spanish government.

“While I had the honour of being on board the *Leda*, I had every reason to be satisfied with the zealous attention of Captain HONEYMAN, his officers, and ship’s company and I cannot but express my extreme approbation of the conduct of all the officers and seamen who were

¹³ James GROVES, commissioned lieutenant 1 January 1802 (ndla).

¹⁴ Joseph RAMSEY, commissioned lieutenant 21 December 1808 (ndla).

¹⁵ Richard SWAILE, first lieutenant, Royal Marines, from 1805 (ndla).

¹⁶ En réalité, POPHAM avait adressé le 15 août, soit dix jours plus tôt que cette lettre à MARSDEN, deux correspondances au gouverneur de Montevideo lui demandant avec insistance de restituer les prisonniers anglais (ndla).

constantly employed in the small vessels and boats under almost every privation in the very severe and trying weather which we experienced the last ten days.

“I most sincerely regret however that my situation has imposed on me the painful duty of making this report to their lordships, especially as it is done principally by materials collected from different people, which they probably in many instances deduced from vague and uncertain conclusions. If however it should hereafter appear that I have failed in any instance to do ample justice to the conduct, energy, and prowess of General BERESFORD and the officers and soldiers under his command it has been owing to the limited scale of my communications since the 12th from the extreme jealousy of the enemy and not from any indisposition to appreciate their merits in the most liberal manner, a sentiment which I had held on every occasion and publicly marked it in all my former despatches.

The Royal navy in the River plate (1806-1807)

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