

Napoleon and the Crown in the Gutter

Tracing the Primary Sources of a Famous Quotation

1. The Earliest Source: William Warden (1816)

The earliest known source for Napoleon's remark about finding a crown in the gutter is William Warden's *Letters Written on Board His Majesty's Ship the Northumberland, and at Saint Helena*, published in London in 1816. Warden was a British naval surgeon aboard the ship that transported Napoleon into exile on St. Helena. Writing in English, he quoted Napoleon as follows:

"I found a crown in the kennel; I cleansed it from its filth, and placed it on my head."

Note: "kennel" in early 19th-century English meant a gutter or drainage channel in the street, not a dog enclosure.

The context is crucial and often lost in later retellings. Napoleon was not boasting. He was defending himself to Warden over the abduction and execution of the Duc d'Enghien, a Bourbon prince who had conspired against him—widely considered one of Napoleon's worst crimes at the time. Napoleon insisted he was no usurper but the people's choice, contrasting himself with Cromwell and Richard III. The remark was defensive, not triumphal.

However, Warden's reliability is questionable. He spoke little French and relied on a translator whose trustworthiness was disputed. Napoleon himself later disavowed much of the book's content. The work was criticized by both pro- and anti-Napoleonic factions, and Warden was ultimately disciplined by the Admiralty and removed from its list of surgeons.

2. Stendhal's *Vie de Napoléon* (c. 1817–1818)

Stendhal (Henri-Marie Beyle) included the quote in his *Vie de Napoléon*, written around 1817–1818 but not published in his lifetime. Crucially, Stendhal explicitly attributes the passage to Warden, citing "le chirurgien Warden" (the surgeon Warden) as his source. He was retranslating Warden's English back into French:

"Je trouvai une couronne dans le ruisseau, j'essuyai la boue qui la couvrait et la mis sur ma tête."

Translation: "I found a crown in the gutter, I wiped off the mud that covered it and placed it on my head."

Stendhal is therefore a secondary source, not an independent one. His French wording became the basis for many subsequent French-language citations, but it originates in Warden's English text, not in a direct record of Napoleon's spoken French.

3. The *Mémorial de Sainte-Hélène* by Las Cases (1823)

Emmanuel de Las Cases's *Mémorial de Sainte-Hélène*, published in 1823 and based on conversations during Napoleon's exile, contains a related but distinctly different version. In this account, Napoleon is furiously reprimanding an official over a publication by Chateaubriand that implied he was a usurper:

"Je n'ai détrôné personne, Monsieur; j'ai trouvé, j'ai relevé la couronne dans le ruisseau, et le peuple l'a mise sur ma tête: qu'on respecte ses actes!"

Translation: "I dethroned no one, Sir; I found, I raised up the crown from the gutter, and the people placed it on my head: let his acts be respected!"

The differences from the Warden version are significant. Here, the *people* place the crown on Napoleon's head, rather than Napoleon placing it himself. He says he "found and raised up" (*trouvé* and *relevé*) the crown, rather than cleaning off the mud. And the context is entirely different—not a private conversation with a British surgeon, but an angry confrontation with a subordinate about press freedom and legitimacy.

4. Other Variants

A further variant circulates in collections of Napoleonic sayings, probably drawn from other St. Helena memoir literature:

"Je n'ai point usurpé la couronne; je l'ai relevée dans le ruisseau. Le peuple me l'a mise sur la tête."

Translation: "I did not usurp the crown; I raised it up from the gutter. The people placed it on my head."

The Ridley Scott film *Napoleon* (2023) used yet another embellished version, placing it at the coronation scene: "I found the crown of France in the gutter. I picked it up with the tip of my sword, and cleaned it, and placed it atop my own head." The sword is an addition found in no primary source. The historian David Bell has noted that the screenwriter likely found a version of the quote in a biography, stripped of context, and dramatized it further.

5. Conclusion: What Did Napoleon Actually Say?

Napoleon almost certainly expressed the *idea*—that he found France in disorder and restored it, rather than seizing power by usurpation—on multiple occasions. The image of a crown lying in the gutter appears in sources recording different settings and different dates, which suggests it was a favored rhetorical figure he returned to, not a single memorable utterance.

However, the specific pithy one-liner that circulates today is a composite, polished across multiple retellings and retranslations between English and French. The transmission chain runs:

Warden (1816, English, via dubious interpreter) → Stendhal (c. 1817–18, retranslating Warden into French) → Las Cases (1823, a different version in a different context) → decades of biographies mixing and matching these versions into the clean one-liner known today.

No verbatim transcript of Napoleon's spoken words exists for any version of this remark. Every source is mediated—through interpreters, memoirists writing from memory, or retranslation—and each carries its own agenda, whether Napoleon's self-mythologizing, Warden's desire for a bestseller, or Las Cases's devotion to the imperial legend.

PRIMARY SOURCES CITED

William Warden, *Letters Written on Board His Majesty's Ship the Northumberland, and at Saint Helena* (London: R. Ackermann, 1816).

Stendhal (Henri-Marie Beyle), *Vie de Napoléon* (written c. 1817–1818; published posthumously).

Emmanuel de Las Cases, *Mémoires de Sainte-Hélène* (Paris, 1823; 1842 edition, Tome 1, Chapitre 12).

David A. Bell, "Quoting Napoleon," *French Reflections* (Substack), October 14, 2023.