

A METEORIC CAREER: JAMES FRANCIS HOMAGEE, 1846 - 1919

by Trevor W. Hearl

The career of James Francis Homagee endows St Helena history with one of those colourful stories which suggest that "Truth is stranger than fiction". Indeed, so improbable did it seem when I wrote an exploratory article about it in The St Helena News (Vol. 6, 1, 12th July 1991) that I asked readers to tell me if I had "strayed into fiction". Miss Dorothy Evans MBE, kindly responded by checking the Homagee family records in Jamestown with the help of Government Archivist Cecil Maggott - and thereby made a discovery that casts a doubt on a local legend.

The traditional account of Homagee's arrival at St Helena "in the middle of last century" is certainly dramatic. "Old Islanders" told it to South African travel writer, Lawrence Green, in November 1954, as he recounted later in There's a Secret Hid Away (Cape Town 1956 p.219). Their story was that James Francis Homagee had committed "some unspecified crime in India" for which he was to be executed, but was given the choice of the hangman's job on St Helena instead - hardly a difficult decision! He "never had to carry out an execution ... (and) walked round Jamestown with a tin on his head selling fish. Then he became messenger at the Castle" - his first step from 'rags-to-riches'.

Folklore in this case does not fit the facts, however. Records show that James Francis Homagee was born on St Helena in 1846, the eldest of the three children of John Ristaffce Homagee and Jane (née Morphy), married in September 1845, the others being William (born 1848) and Jane Eliza (born 1851). The father's name suggests that he was probably a Parsee convert to Christianity from Madras, though when and why he came to St Helena is a mystery, but as he was then only a teenage labourer he was unlikely to be fitted for the gruesome task of hangman! The question could perhaps be settled from Jamestown's judicial records as a man by the name of Lowry was hanged for the murder of a girl at Fox's Folly in 1850. John Homagee died on 17th March 1857; he was - according to his memorial stone in St. Paul's Churchyard - only 32.

James Francis Homagee was eleven when his father died. What happened to his mother, younger brother and sister I cannot say, but of his own career there is no doubt as it can be traced in the colony's records. At 13 he secured a job at the Castle, possibly as a messenger, and three years later, in April 1862, was appointed Clerk of the Summary Court, exceptional promotion for a lad of 16. He must have spent more time at school, or at least in study, than selling fish around Jamestown! By civil service standards, his subsequent career was meteoric.

His first major post, at the age of 18 in September 1864, was as Manager of the Government's newly-established Savings Bank at a salary of £36.00 p.a. At first Islanders distrusted the Bank, doubting its secrecy and safety (in 1888 the chest was stolen and taken to the Cape!) but Homagee's management impressed the authorities and he remained for 53 years. Other responsibilities were soon thrust upon him. In November 1867, at 21, he became Crown Prosecutor and Clerk of the Peace at £225.00 p.a.; in 1874, at 28, he was a Magistrate and Registrar of the Vice-Admiralty Court; in 1883 he was Collector of Customs. Ability and diligence must have contributed to Homagee's advancement - given his background - but so too did Government policy at a time of retrenchment, it being more economical for existing staff to take on vacancies as they occurred.

Professional progress brought social status and by 1870, still in his early 20's, young Homagee was mixing with the Island elite. Nothing demonstrates this more dramatically than his involvement in 'the sport of kings', when, in 1871, his horse 'Clarus' won the Deadwood Challenge Cup, getting his name engraved thereon with the Colony's top-flight families - Knipe, Alexander, Solomon, Moss ... and Homagee! In 1876 he married Ann Ursula Smith, who bore him seven daughters, one of whom, Eva Hassell, would in 1901 become the wife of leading landowner and businessman, Edwin Thorpe. By 1883 Homagee's home, St. John's Villa in Upper Jamestown, was pointed out to visitors in Grant's guidebook as the "pretty house (of) our respected Clerk of the Peace ... recently improved at a large outlay", his garden stocked with wild olive, orange, almond, fig, dwarf plantains from Madeira, and new, disease-resistant varieties of grape.

Social and professional prestige brought further distinctions. In 1889, with H.B. Morrice and Saul Solomon, he was invited to examine the effects of the Passing Ships Ordinance; and in 1903 Governor Gallwey made him President of a Board studying the fishing industry. When legal or mathematical skills were needed - such as Supervisor of the Census - it seemed axiomatic to send for Homagee. Not that his toll of Government posts had lessened. In 1903 he is recorded as Superintendent of the Receiver General's Department (Customs), Chief Prosecutor and Clerk of the Peace, Clerk of the Summary Court, Magistrate, Manager of the Savings Bank, Registrar of the Vice-Admiralty Court and Judge of the Small Debts Court. Yet there is only one reference to him taking leave - from 30th March to 11th July 1892. In 1906 his remarkable record of service to St Helena was formally recognised when "H.M. The King was graciously pleased to create Mr. Homagee a Companion of the Imperial Service Order". He was 60, but if expected to retire on his laurels he clearly had no such intention.

A country house to match his social and professional position became James Homagee's cherished ambition. In 1899 came the chance to buy one of St Helena's historic houses and he grasped it. Oakbank had been the imposing residence of the

Bishops of St Helena until it had so suffered from the depredation of white ants that in 1878 Bishop Welby moved to Redhill and this once fine estate - proudly nurtured by the Melliss family until 1859 - fell into wrack and ruin, the house uninhabitable. Homagee paid the Diocese £750.00 and began restoration. But if the Church was glad, Governor Sterndale was grieved at its treatment of St Helena's heritage. "For lack of a few hundred pounds this lovely estate, situated in the midst of 30 acres of the most beautiful grounds in the island, is being sold for less than a third of what it cost".

James Homagee deserves credit for saving Oakbank while other historic houses were allowed to decay. With the Island's dearth of materials and skilled labour the new owner faced a formidable task. Then came an unexpected stroke of luck. Between April 1900 and August 1902, St Helena housed some 5,700 Boer prisoners of war, many of whom were allowed out to work. The effect on "the beautiful house and grounds of Oakbank" was described by Emily Jackson in 1903:

"Since the arrival of prisoners of war skilled workmen have been employed in renovating the house with the result that it is, with its spacious verandah and balcony room, all that could be desired. The grounds are extensive and very beautiful, containing valuable trees, Chilian and Norfolk pines, Scotch firs, oaks and eucalyptus. In the valley cedars mingle with bamboos of immense size, the feathery tops of which present a beautiful appearance from the higher ground on which the house stands. A large stream of water flows through the valley, the banks of which are white with arum lilies. When these fail, up springs the delicate Easter lily in their place. This ground is noted too for the variety of ferns which grow in wild profusion." (p.164)

As if to mark its rehabilitation Oakbank became a weather station in 1902 when, a photograph of the restored house - presumably with the Homagee family posing in front - was sent to the Meteorological Office in London.

"Mr., Mrs, and the Misses Homagee" graced St Helena's social occasions during the pre-war years. The grandest was the Duke and Duchess of Connaught's visit in October 1910. HMS Balmoral Castle had scarcely anchored when "two baskets of lovely flowers tastefully arranged and collected by Mrs. Homagee were sent off to the Royal Ladies ... 'From the Ladies of St Helena'. Barely had their Private Secretary penned thanks to Governor Gallwey - "delighted to have the flowers in the form sent and not as bouquets" - when a "charming bouquet" arrived embarrassingly from Mrs. Bovell, wife of the Senior Member of Council, also from 'The Ladies of St Helena'. The Royal Ladies later voiced discreet thanks to the Governor, having in the meantime shaken hands with the Homagees and Bovells at His Excellency's Garden Party. But if Mrs. Homagee had made the first move, Mrs. Bovell had the last word when the Governor asked her to ensure "that all the St Helena Ladies may be informed of Their Royal Highnesses' gracious message" - which she did with relish in the St Helena Guardian.

In September 1917 James Homagee was reported to be "seriously ill", and by December had resigned all his Government posts. At 71 retirement could hardly have been unexpected. Stephen Cullen became Acting Manager of the Savings Bank and to his surprise found it difficult to balance the books. Funds were almost £5,000 short! With unusual alacrity, the Colonial Audit Office sent H.E.C. Merrick from Sierra Leone to investigate. He found that "the late bank manager's ... embezzlements over a period of years" amounted to £4,828.13s., and on 18th February 1919, Homagee, a former Crown Prosecutor and Magistrate, was duly sentenced to penal servitude. The length of sentence was not recorded in the Colony's annual report as by then it had become scarcely relevant. After serving six months James Francis Homagee had died on 26th August 1919.

Obvious questions remain to be answered even to sketch the Homagee story in outline. Among the most interesting - apart from family origins - would be to discover why one of such ability and experience should have abused his position in old age. He had seen enough cases of embezzlement during his career - most notoriously those of Colonial Treasurers, J.R. Torbett's £2,000 from the Savings Bank in 1877, and Bazett N.C. Knipe's £3,000 from public funds in 1884 - to know that discovery and humiliation would surely follow. His ambitious lifestyle at Oakbank must have drained his Government salary of about £400 p.a. and perhaps tempted him into speculations ruined by the War. His daughters' weddings would also have been costly, Island custom demanding ruinously expensive celebrations provided by the bride's parents. And finally what of Oakbank? The Homagees lost their home in 1918 when "the house and 40 acres of land ... changed hands ... at £27.15s. per acre". Again it fell victim to white ant, "a house of ghosts ... empty and forlorn" wrote Margaret Stewart Taylor in 1969 (*St Helena, Ocean Roadhouse*, p.152). Fortunately Oakbank, at least, is a survivor and today this fine old house is enjoying yet another thorough restoration.

SOURCES: Unless otherwise stated, the Colony's Annual Reports (reprinted by Colin Hinchclife, York, 1990), are the main source of information.

RANDOM RECOLLECTIONS - "... the other Briars" by H.F. Driver

Among my recollections of St Helena is one of a conversation I had with a life-time resident there who complained that the island "died" between the wars, and it only knew any prosperity when the troops were stationed there. He spoke from experience as a resident since 1889. It follows that prosperous times were enjoyed during the two great world wars and earlier, whilst the Boer prisoners were there. The sudden arrival of the illustrious prisoner, Napoleon Bonaparte, must have led to a period of much