

A STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL: THE STORY BEHIND ST HELENA'S BOTANIC MIRACLE

by Trevor W. Hearl

The dramatic rediscovery of the St Helena Ebony by Quentin Cronk and George Benjamin over 20 years ago seems to have triggered a welcome revolution in island sentiment toward its natural resources in general and its unique endemic flora and fauna in particular. Whereas hitherto conservation-conscious governors and visiting experts had conspicuously failed to overcome islanders' indifference to the "desertification" of the once "tropical island Eden," today this suicidal scenario is, hopefully, a matter of history and the wastelands are in retreat. In 1993 the islanders formed a Nature Conservation Group to rally informed support for the rehabilitation of their natural environment; other "extinct" endemics have been rescued from beyond the brink; and an adventurous project launched to create a Millennium Forest of ancient woodland.

This "struggle for survival" was first publicized in 1986 in a government booklet celebrating the early successes of its endemic rescue program. It was supplemented by a weekly *Endemic Bulletin* reporting the progress of its bold Sustainable Environmental Development Strategy (SEDS), courting vital public support through the schools and the media. While the SEDS program earned international acclaim in the wake of the Rio Earth Summit, it was the fight to save its "extinct" flora and fauna -- like "Operation Hercules" to find the world's largest surviving earwig -- that fired press and public interest overseas.

Soon, not only naturalists and botanists, but tourists, philatelists and many others with an eye on the South Atlantic found themselves following the island's courageous campaign. For example, the attractive "Endemic Plants" stamp issue on January 17, 1997, celebrating the founding of Diana's Peak National Park, set the scene for collectors of First Day Covers:

St Helena has harboured 45 special plant species for millions of years [...] from prehistoric forests which have long disappeared [...] fragments from the wreck of an ancient world. Our endemic fragments now live on the verge of extinction in real fragments of vegetation from the wreck of St Helena's demolished forest [...] (on) the peaks where tree fern thickets and cabbage tree woodland struggles for survival. [...] (A) programme has been set in place to restore the native habitat.

In *The endemic flora of St Helena*, Dr Cronk now tells the story behind these botanic miracles. Plants inevitably hold centre stage in this ecological drama, but people are not forgotten. Among the pioneers of island endemic rescue, the assiduous J.C. Melliss is shown clutching a copy of what appears to be his magnum opus in 1875, and Norman Kerr receives due recognition for his inspiring and diligent discoveries from the 1950s onwards. But the hero of the story is George Benjamin, St Helena's plant-hunter extraordinary, fittingly photographed here in his search for elu-

sive endemics at the end of a rope, “botanizing the cliffs” where even goats dare not trespass. Saving a species from extinction may depend on propagating from literally the last living specimen, a perilous process in every sense. Readers are taken through the island’s centuries of despoliation by man and his goats, when wood for fuel and timber were taken without thought for the morrow, though, as Dr Cronk explains in one of his interesting sub-themes, islanders selected indigenous woods skilfully enough for housebuilding.

Visitors have always been intrigued by St Helena’s unique plant life, whether from curiosity or the more serious concerns of the natural scientist long before Victorian tourists panted along the paths to the peaks, passengers from the old East Indiamen had been carried up to the “cabbage-tree lands” in tonjons by slaves to admire the endemic flora of the ridges. But islanders, with a few notable exceptions, never held their habitat in such veneration and as imported timber came into general use, the endemics lost all local value. As recently as 1937, within living memory, Philip Gosse was shocked to see how “rapacious flax growers hacked down and grubbed up wild olive, tree ferns, cabbage trees, lobelia and everything else which God planted there.” Today, guided by Dr Cronk’s Oxford protégé, Dr Rebecca Cairns-Wicks, visitors can see the reverse process in action. The invasive flax is being grubbed up to allow nature to re-establish her ancient groves, an act of incarnation which, in former times and other climes, would have been invested with almost religious significance. But this eleventh hour reprieve has left the endemic habitat very fragile, and Dr Cronk suggests that casual visitors “inspect the endemic plants in gardens and arboreta,” though not, I hope, before they, and the many new “St Helena-watchers” caught on the World Wide Web, have first enjoyed exploring the pages of this book.

This is an essential, as well as fascinating, contribution to island literature, both for its authoritative text and its inspiring message of success against the odds, with all the makings of a future folk-legend. It covers botanical exploration and island ecology, followed by a close look at the endemics, enhanced by 25 colourful portraits, meticulously painted from life by Leslie Ninnies during her three-year residence in the 1980s. Experts interested in “remarkable plants and the evolution and conservation of island floras” will find all the data they need, in discreet footnotes, bibliography, index and glossary, including a succinct comparison with Ascension Island where, incidentally, the author’s forebear, Hedley Cronk, wrought a remarkable transformation on Green Mountain during his 26-year stint (1896-1922) at the island’s incredible farm. But this elegant volume, a worthy product from the late specialist South Atlantic publisher, Anthony Nelson, is not only for experts. It should grace the bookshelves of every serious follower of St Helena’s fortunes, for the botanical miracles which it describes will surely emerge as St Helena’s future claim to fame.

Cronk, Q.C.B. *The endemic flora of St Helena* [with colour plates painted by Lesley Ninnies]. (Oswestry, United Kingdom: Anthony Nelson Publishers, 2000). Hardback, 119 pp, with pictorial dust jacket, 25 full-page colour plates, numerous other illustrations. ISBN 0 904614 35 2, £30.

South Atlantic Chronicle, April 2003, Vol. XXVII, No. 2, pp. 14-15.

© A.H. Schulenburg. Reproduced with permission.