

ALL AT SEA

by Trevor W. Hearl

St Helena's well-nigh 500-year-old maritime history divides itself crudely into two unequal periods. In the first, ships rely on the Island; in the second, the Island relies on ships. With the age of steam St Helena's survival becomes linked to 'the Cape run', and since 1977 dependent on its own RMS St Helena I and II St Helena Lifeline, featuring both ships on its colourful cover, is mainly concerned with these last seventeen years, but inevitably its "account of courage, enterprise and initiative" opens long ago at the Cape.

From the arrival of the first scheduled steamer at Table Bay in 1851 to the final voyage of the Southampton Castle in 1977, Eriksen outlines the South Africa services of various shipping lines, British and foreign - Dutch, Portuguese, German, Italian and American. But where is St Helena? Relegated to a few asides, with no record even of which ships served its needs. Not a lifeline in sight! To omit the inter-war New York Cape Town service via Jamestown, may be justified; but not, given the title, the role of subsidised shipping monopolies in the Island's economic and social life as transporters and purchasers of its produce and purveyors of services (e.g. hairdressing). Of tensions between 'bad ships' and the Island, between shipping and government interest, straining the 'life-line' to near breaking-point, we learn nothing. Who would realise that, as Philip Gosse wrote in 1938, "the arrival of these bi-monthly ships (was) the one great event in the quiet life of the islanders"? But as Eriksen did not read Gosse, St Helena itself cannot have been of much consequence to him.

The second part of the book covers 'Curnows of Cornwall', a useful summary of that Company's origins, structure and operations, and the careers in words and pictures (25 pages of photographs, 16 in colour) of the two RMS *St Helena's* with the various mishaps that befell them, not omitting Falkland War service and their stand-ins, *Centaur* (1982-3) and *Lowland Lancer* (1991). "Southbound for the Islands" outlines a typical voyage, or rather its ports of call - Cardiff, Tenerife, Ascension, St Helena and Tristan da Cunha - of which he makes Tenerife sound the most appealing. Taking my cue from the title, however, I shall focus on the main destination and object of the operation - St Helena. Passing over jarring proof-reading lapses from page 115 though coining "populance" for residents of Ascension and St Helena might start a vogue for novel Atlanticisms - my first duty must be to correct some misleading points of Island heritage in his 9-page sketch.

St James' Church was not "built when the East India Company annexed the island more than three centuries ago", but in 1772. The Solomon family no longer "dominates the island economy"; the last left in 1959. 'Cockneys' did not sail for St Helena "in considerable numbers" after 1666; some thirty arrived in the *Charles* and far from creating "an agricultural community of some significance",

were poor crofters and planters. Nor was it “following the death of the French Emperor (that) a number of soldiers and marines elected to remain on St Helena forming the basis of settlement”; can he mean Tristan? Readers must resist the notion that “Jonathan was in residence at the time of Napoleon’s exile”; or that Longwood was “donated to the French nation in a gesture of goodwill”; or quinine “successfully exported”; or “seven flax mills” built by 1894 exporting “sisal”; or that when “the flax industry collapsed” (as “the Post Office switched to man-made fibres”) “the island’s role as a coaling station (also) ended as the Navy switched to oil fuel”. Nick Thorpe may be alarmed to find his home at Woodlands described as a “small country inn”, confused with the former ‘Oaklands’, and the Bishop no less surprised to read that Tristan is in his Diocese and “until recent years” his predecessors lived in Cape Town, visiting the Island annually “by courtesy of the Royal Navy”! Et cetera ...

Nevertheless, “St Helenans” (as he calls them) may be comforted by Eriksen’s concern for their material poverty and loss of British citizenship. Whitehall and Westminster get short shrift. “Poor decisions, lack of interest and in particular a restricted Budget have characterised British rule”; the Foreign and Commonwealth Office shows “lethargy”, “singular lack of concern” and “neglect for the welfare of the island populace”. He even blames FCO for its failure to encourage “the proud and friendly islanders” to emulate the self-sufficiency recently shown by ‘ex-pats’ Joyce and Cyril Allwood at Oaklands.

As a story of maritime endeavour, the theme of serving a community, stranded in midocean on an unproductive island, entirely dependent for its survival, through peace and war, on the goodwill of a subsidised shipping service, has, in the case of St Helena, all the ingredients of ‘human interest’ that any writer could wish for. May *St Helena Lifeline* spur one to accept the challenge. Meanwhile readers interested in the old South Africa line service might turn to W.H. Mitchell and L.A. Sawyer; *The Cape Run* (1987); or for ship portraits to Alan S. Mallett: *The Union-Castle Line* (1990) and Duncan Haws: *Merchant Fleets No. 18* (1990); and for a ‘cruise’ on the RMS to the Islands, to Kenneth Bain: *St Helena, The Island, Her People and Their Ship* (1993); and for the Island’s classic history, Philip Gosse: *St Helena 1502-1938* (2nd edition 1990).

P.S. Visitors to St Helena are not the only ones confused about Jonathan. The announcer on Radio St Helena Day (14th October 1994) told an enquirer that the giant tortoise was brought there by Captain Cook. Unlikely; but who knows?

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