

# **DARWIN'S ISLAND**

**by Trevor W. Hearl**



Charles Darwin as a young man, drawn by George Richmond in 1840.

"What is to become of the little state of St Helena?" wondered Charles Darwin in 1840 while writing up his Journal of Researches ... during the Voyage of HMS Beagle. He had greatly enjoyed his six-day exploration of the Island in July 1836, but his visit had coincided with an economic slump and he was concerned for the colony's welfare.

St Helena was at a critical point in its history. In 1832 the East India Company had purchased the freedom of its slaves, but two years later the Island was taken over by the Crown, the first colonial Governor, Maj.-Gen. Middlemore, arriving in February, 1836. Already Government economies were causing hardship. Sacked Company officials emigrated, while freed slaves sought forlornly for work. Their birthrate was rising and, being accustomed to the Company's cheap, imported food - mostly rice and salt meat - so too was their cost of living. Moreover, to their "great injury" and Darwin's dismay, the Government had ended the Company's ban on spirits. It also forbade them making soda from a plant used by nesting partridges and other game-birds, "a more unjust sacrifice (to game laws) than I ever heard of even in England", exclaimed Darwin, adding "The poor appear very poor." So much for his summary of the social situation.

HMS Beagle arrived at Jamestown on Friday morning, 8th July 1836. Darwin was soon ashore striding up Ladder Hill road - not via the Ladder - to High Knoll, "very picturesque ... like an old Welsh castle". He admired the "fine scenery" with its "deep valleys and naked pinnacles, ... every patch of ground cultivated, little white houses placed in most marvellous positions". Next day he took lodgings "within a stone's throw of Napoleon's tomb", though not without some difficulty, for he complained of "bombast and nonsense". Perhaps this is why the house has never been identified. Of course he was not yet a world-famous naturalist, so his visit passed unnoticed, unlike that of his friend Joseph Hooker in 1840, mentioned in George Brooks Bennett's St Helena Reminiscences (1816-1851). His lodging proved a "capital central situation", however, from which he made "excursions in every direction", wandering over the Island "from morning to night" to unravel the origins of a place "so remote from any continent, in the midst of a great ocean, and possessing a unique Flora".

These "excursions" can be followed in his writings and Notebooks. On Sunday he visited Longwood and walked across the racecourse to Flagstaff and "the great black Barn". On Monday he went down to Prosperous Bay, passing guard and telegraph houses, across a "very pretty valley, with fir woods, yellow flowering gorse, willow trees and little brooks", and met extraordinary wind-currents at a cliff-face, an experience he often related to family and friends in later years. Tuesday and Wednesday found him high up on the Ridges and far down in Sandy Bay noting the Island's unique endemic flora, and puzzling over its volcanic origins. The weather was unkind, however; "cold and boisterous, with constant showers of rain, and every now and then the whole scene was veiled in thick

clouds". Darwin was surprised to discover that many of the Island's 742 species came from England confining the 52 indigenous ones to the ridges. The dramatic view across Sandy Bay Valley was one of many scenes that entranced this round-the-world traveller. There were other surprises, too:

"The first circumstance which strikes one, is the number of roads and forts; the labour bestowed on the public works, if one forgets its character as a prison, seems out of all proportion to its extent or value. There is so little level or useful land that it seems surprising how so many people, about 5,000, can subsist here." Two Island guides earned Darwin's gratitude during his hectic days ashore. One was a 55 year old former goat herder who, with "feet like iron ... knew every step among the rocks" and conducted him safely along hazardous paths. "He was a very civil, quiet old man", wrote Darwin later. "He carried our dinners and a horn of water (the water in the lower valleys being saline). It was strange to hear a man, nearly white and respectably dressed, talking with indifference of the times when he was a slave. He had £40.00 to pay for his freedom." What a pity his name is not part of 'our Island story'.

Darwin's second guide is well known, however. He was the local amateur geologist, Robert Seale, whose remarkable study, The Geognosy of St Helena, had been published at the Company's expense in 1834. He had also build "a gigantic model" of St Helena which Darwin advised his readers was "well worth seeing" at Addiscombe Military College, Croydon. (The sad story of this model is told by Gosse, pp. 305-7). Seale gave him "a large collection" of the Island's extinct land-shells, "a monstrous mistake" which Darwin spotted at once. Indeed much that was written about the Island Darwin found misleading. But a local work on which he did place reliance was Governor Beatson's Tracts relative to the Island of St Helena (1816). It had been based on such thorough research into Island resources that Wellington is said to have joked that he did not think so much could have been written about the Garden of Eden!

"St Helena ... excites our curiosity," declared Darwin. The St Helena chapter of his Geological Observations on Volcanic Islands is studded with superlatives - "remarkable", "quite extraordinary", "so grand a scale", "extremely rare", "I never saw equalled anywhere else", "entirely unique" - betraying his excitement at discovering so rich a natural treasury. Readers who have hiked across the Island's mountainous terrain will perhaps best appreciate the remarkable extent of his brief exploration. Modern research may have modified his conclusions, but his collection of data, perceptive observations and methodical deductions from the confusing evidence of the Island's tortured volcanic landscape is a model of investigation. Almost a century later, Harvard Professor R.A. Daly, who found "few deep-sea islands more intriguing than St Helena", praised Darwin's St Helena reports as "amazingly full and true".

HMS Beagle's round-the-world voyage of surveying and scientific exploration had already lasted almost five years when it reached Jamestown. Darwin was "utterly homesick", yet he declared, "I so much enjoyed my rambles among the rocks and mountains of St Helena that I felt almost sorry on the morning of the 14th to descend to the town". As the Beagle was swept swiftly on the Trade Winds towards Ascension Island, he confided in a letter to his sister, Caroline, "enjoyed these rambles more than I have done anything for a long time past."

In old age, Darwin still recalled his visit to St Helena with pleasure, even with pride. Now famous throughout the world for his theory of evolution - known popularly as "the survival of the fittest" - he had good cause to reflect in his Autobiography "with high satisfaction" on his scientific achievements. But what, among so many, gave him the greatest pleasure? "Solving the problem of coral islands, for instance, St Helena." Today in the popular mind Darwin's name is tied to the Galapagos Islands - as in the B.B.C. T.V. film The Voyage of Charles Darwin (1978) - but if he could be asked which Island he would like to explore again, what do you think his choice would be? St Helena?

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## **MY FOURTH VISIT TO THE ISLAND**

***"Some people have all the luck!"***

**by Dorothy Evans**

For my recent visit to St Helena I had planned to be there for three months, from July to October, 1992. But, happily for me, a number of tasks within the education department arose, and it fell to my lot to extend my visit for two months. As you may guess, I needed no persuasion to do so, although without doubt life became hectic trying to fit in all the things to be done. These included helping to teach on the Diploma Course in Professional Studies for a group of experienced teachers; participating in the initial teacher education programme, and also taking a class on Heritage Studies at the Prince Andrew School. All very stimulating and highly enjoyable. And of course, I also had a very good time participating in social activities.

I am able to report that St Helena is in good heart although, like many other places in the world, it faces many challenges. Probably foremost in the minds of many