

# EVERYONE KNOWS JOAO DA NOVA CASTELLA DISCOVERED ST HELENA - *OR DID HE?*

by Trevor W. Hearl

If there's one thing more than another that every "Saint" and "friend" of St Helena, knows for sure it is that the island was discovered on 21 May 1502 by Joao da Nova Castella. That was, until St Helena Day 1997! But two days later, "upon instructions from H.E. Governor Smallman", the St Helena News announced that the discoverer was "not Joao da Nova Castella as stated in the history books" and I was named as the perpetrator of this apparent heresy. So perhaps I should explain how it came about.

My bluff was first called a few years ago by an indefatigable investigator into early St Helena history, Mrs. Yvonne Stadler of Tasmania, who challenged me to prove da Nova Castella's existence. What could I say except that every St Helena historian accepted the fact? Perhaps, she replied, but no Portuguese historian has ever heard of him Dr Quentin Cronk said the same. They knew J. da Nova, but not da Nova Castella. The American Encyclopaedia Britannica likewise claimed that "Joao da Nova discovered Ascension (1501) and St Helena (1502)". And true enough, I could find no "da Nova Castella" anywhere - except in books about St Helena!

So when a few weeks ago the Crown Agents Stamp Bureau telephoned with a query about a new issue commemorating "Joao da Nova Castella's discovery", I blurted out, "It wasn't da Nova Castella". It must have been like telling the Bank of England that it isn't Stephenson's Rocket on the £5 note! I apologized for my indiscretion. "No, tell me more", they said. And I promised to check how, or where, "Castella" had crept into our island story to prove that it could safely be eliminated.

Backtracking through the classics of St Helena literature was not reassuring. The most meticulous researchers accepted "Castella" without question, Roland Svensson's Swedish study (1968), Ian Shine's Serendipity (1970) and Arnold Chaplin's St Helena Who's Who (1919), no less than the works of Cross (1980), Jackson (1903), Melliss (1875) and Gosse (1938) who even listed a 1752 translation of Fonseca's Narrative of the Voyage of Joao da Nova in 1502 in his bibliography. Island publications such as Grant's Guide (1883), The St Helena Almanac (1843-83) and Calendar & Directory (1826-42) all confirmed "Castella" to be their man.

The first hint of doubt I found in Thomas Brooke's History of St Helena where, in the second edition (1824), he gave it as the "general opinion" that the island had been discovered in 1502 "by John de Nova, or Juan de Nova Castella" (p. 46). But it then emerged that in his first edition of 1808 he had named only plain "John de Nova". As no other writer identified a "discoverer" of St Helena, this was a revelation in itself, duly copied in James Wathen's Series of Views (1821) as "John

de Nova [...] on May the 21st 1500-1”, and as “Johann von Nova [...] in 1502” in a German version (Leipzig, 1815) by a Captain C.C. Best. But most publications, if they mentioned the matter at all, were content just to credit “the Portuguese”, as authors had done since Jan van Linschoten published the first account of the island over two hundred years earlier. Now they included the first book about the island, Francis Duncan’s *Description* (1805), and other pre-Napoleonic sources such as Johnson’s *Oriental Voyager* (1807) and Beatson’s *Tracts 1808-13* (1816), as well as those rushed out in 1815 to satisfy the unforeseen interest in St Helena, from the many editions of the pocket-sized *Geographical and Historical Account* and even more popular broadsides (“Eight Pence Plain, One Shilling Coloured”), to the lavish sets of aquatint *Views of St Helena* by Bellasis and Pocock. Clearly at the turn of the 19th century knowledge of the island’s discovery was scanty and confused - Duncan had even dated it 1508.

“Castella”, it was now clear, must have infiltrated St Helena literature with Napoleon! In fact Brooke was not the first to feel obliged to quibble over the navigator’s name. James Prior of HMS *Nisus*, who visited the island in 1813 and published *A Voyage [...] to St Helena* in 1819, was unsure whether to call the discoverer “Don Juan de Caleca, or de Nova” (p.84), as if he had heard a garbled version of “Castella” there. At least he could not have been the culprit.

Another book remained to be examined, however, *A Tour through [...] St Helena* published in London in 1817, but written on the island by Capt. John Barnes, “Town Major, and Civil and Military Surveyor in the Hon. Company’s Service”. “According to the most accurate account”, he declared, apparently taking a “dig” at Brooke, “this island was first discovered by Juan de Nova Castella..”. (p. 2). Could Brooke only have challenged it! But sadly Barnes died before copies of his book ever reached the island, and his Preface, signed on 5 September 1816, left few clues. He claimed to have used “sources of unquestionable authenticity”, but only identified Duncan’s *Description* (1805) and certainly did not find “Castella” there. So is a piece still missing from this literary jigsaw?

There must be a lesson somewhere in this cautionary tale. But from now on, all doubts dispelled, come what may, “Joao da Nova is the name that is accepted by the St Helena Government as being correct”. (*St Helena News*, 23 May 1997). Less reassuring is the explanation quoted from Crown Agents Stamp Bureau: “Castella was someone else entirely, and a writer in the 18th century had used this name in a case of mistaken identity”. Verily may he rest in peace!

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