

# LIVES OF THE SAINTS

by Trevor W. Hearl

To mark St Helena's 150th anniversary in 1984 as a Crown Colony, a photographic exhibition, "Lives of the Saints", was opened by Prince Andrew on 3rd May at the Commonwealth Institute in London. An excellent 8-page booklet (A4 format), published by the Institute, is still available (details below), sensitively explaining the aims and problems of a project "to get beneath the myths surrounding St Helena - (and) reveal the lives of the Saints in 1984". If its six photographs do not represent the cream of the collection, they still indicate the outstanding quality of the work presented by its authors, Rory Coonan and Stuart Mackay, whose visit to St Helena last October was sponsored by those acknowledged in the booklet.

The strength of the exhibition lay, technically, in the superb craftsmanship and artistry of the photographs themselves, and thematically, in its emphasis on people, rather than places, a theme amateur photographers find it difficult to pursue without giving offence. Thus, St Helenians in Britain have been given the rare nostalgic treat of meeting many of those they have known but hardly expected to see again on their home ground. And even we outsiders found ourselves transported back in years across the ocean, beholding, for example, Eva still behind the till of her Main Street store, guarding her treasury of tins piled from floor to lofty ceiling; and then watching Dot back-chatting with her cafe clientele, providing studies no "ex-pat" could fail to admire.

Taking the authors' criteria of content, however, the balance of the exhibition - the distillation of some hundred items from a stock of over 4,000 - could hardly satisfy all expectations. But if one sought a full-length portrait of the "Saints" on their Island, it must be asked, for example, where were represented the schoolchildren, the youth - employed and otherwise - the Saturday stompers, the Sunday games-players, the gaily dressed worshippers, and indeed all those whose regular rounds of activity weave so bold a pattern in the fabric of St Helenian society? And has butchering become so prominent an activity as to deserve six views, while clerking is unseen in the world's most bureaucratised community? Nevertheless, it is a measure of the authors' frank approach to their task that an old lady's request, "Don't go about just taking pictures of the ugly things, luvvy" - reflecting the Islanders' bitter experience of British journalism - provides the introduction to their booklet's discussion of the selection problem.

The exhibition at the Institute closed on 31st May, but until a much-needed book is made out of the material, the present booklet can be recommended to all St Helena-watchers. The booklet is available only from the author, Rory Coonan, 4 Morpeth Mansions, Morpeth Terrace, London, England, SW1P 1ER, at £1.50 (U.K.), £2.50 (overseas), including postage.

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