

NEW BOOKS GIVE 'SAINTS' A VOICE

by Trevor W. Hearl

Two new books awaiting a place on your St Helena bookshelf unusually give 'Saints' a voice. Geoffrey Stamp's *Seasoned Tales* offers fourteen short stories, eight featuring Ascension Island and St Helena; Kenneth Bain's travelogue, *St Helena*, takes readers aboard RMS St Helena from Cardiff to Cape Town via Tenerife, St Helena and Tristan da Cunha. Both are illustrated in colour.

Geoffrey Stamp is a literary craftsman who "seeks to challenge and involve the reader", as well as entertain. He has a sharp eye and ear for the sights and sounds of the places and people in which chance or his teaching career has cast him, honing his style to suit the medium. Discerning readers will welcome this addition to the meagre menu of South Atlantic short stories, and so should Island schools. Present as fiction and "seasoned" by time - about 1980 - the freedom of 'faction' is not used to ridicule the 'outlandish', but to develop character and incident. In 'Two Shoes' Complaint' you join 'Saints' at Ascension Island unhurriedly savouring their yarn; you see "Uncle Kie" in his Half Tree Hollow home gazing across the empty ocean; you meet Horst "The Lone Yachtsman" now ironically with a place in St Helena folklore on other grounds! In an appreciative Foreword, Governor Alan Hoole admires Stamp's versatility, humour and sensitivity in giving readers "a richer knowledge and understanding of places and people far from home". The other six tales relate to the Caribbean, Zimbabwe and Zaire. The text is enhanced by eighteen evocative pastel-shaded pictures by Peter Cox in an attractive production which I hope to see followed by others.

Kenneth Bain brings journalistic flair to bear on St Helena. Subtitled "The Island, Her People and Their Ship", in fact he ranges further claiming to bring "vigorously to life for armchair travellers and visitors alike, the rich but complex daily realities of the two vastly different South Atlantic communities of St Helena and Tristan da Cunha".

Fear not. His chatty style and random recollections offer easy reading to those contemplating, in thought or deed, a voyage "down south". Moreover, he records matters needing to be enshrined in popular print; RMS St Helena's birth pangs, Clive Warren's dogged support at ODA, Dougie Wallace's successful fish-cannery, Mercury's magical tele-links, Eric Benjamin's community service, the Oman Sea One drama, and other topics from the Island's own voyage into the modern world.

Saints appear to take it all for granted - the "cargo cult of Crown Agents", as Bain drily observes - though some recognise the social costs of a dependent culture. So does the author after forty years of colonial service, but wisely lets Islanders (of whom 30 are indexed) voice their fears and grudges on issues created by generations of pauperization. How rarely are Saints given a voice! The novelty is not welcomed

“You come to spy on us?” - yet the vague and vast ‘outside world’, Whitehall, Westminster, ‘Fleet Street’ and the silent reading public, will never comprehend Islanders’ sense of betrayal at losing their centuries-old British Citizenship until their words are recorded on the printed page. Perhaps Stamp had an easier task than Bain in overcoming the tricky problem of reporting Islanders’ conversation without condescension.

“The rare fairy tale of destiny”, describing Alan and Delia Hoole’s return to Plantation House in May 1991, gives a lively insight into the response of each as Governor and First Lady. Uncomfortable realities are turned to good account. Few readers will not be intrigued by this tiny, talented community. Yet even more could have been made of its achievements and products - and its heritage - as Charles Frater’s video has shown, to help others discover what the Island has to offer. Saints give little thought to publicity.

The Tristan chapter is coolly objective and reads well, but even with the help of seaman Swain his efforts to compare it with St Helena do not go far. Fellow passengers may be fair game, but to make visitors the villains of the piece for harmless peccadillos, and then condone hard-rock ghetto-blasting, is to risk warning thoughtful readers off. Not a shy tourist himself, his flashes of self-regard sometimes jar in this context. The chapter on ‘A South Pacific Tristan da Cunha’ is also hard to justify. Right enough, the heroes remain the Saints, the Ship (Andrew Bell and his Curnow team) and the Island, with its incredible landscape and poignant past. The book is well produced with an attractive cover, twenty-three colour plates and numerous drawings, useful appendices (though unforgivably repeating Victorian myths about the Dutch), and an index.

Wirebird: The Journal of the Friends of St Helena No 9 (Spring 1993): 9-11.

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