

OLD LETTERS REVEAL ST HELENA'S EARLY MEDICAL HISTORY

by Trevor W. Hearl

Recognition of the contribution being made by stamp collectors and postal historians to other areas of history is surely overdue. Admittedly, at one time there may have been doubts about this. There is a well-attested story that Philip Gosse, the normally genial author of *St Helena 1502-1938* and a dozen other esteemed volumes, once made a blistering attack on a prominent pre-war philatelist who was addressing a literary society. Taking up an envelope, the speaker dramatically extracted the contents and threw them aside with disdain, exclaiming, "It's the cover that's valuable; the letter you can throw away!" This was too much for Gosse, a modest stamp collector himself, and he jumped up protesting at such "historical vandalism". The audience was taken aback by the author's uncharacteristic outburst, but they never forgot his message. Today fortunately, far from throwing them away, philatelists and postal historians are among the most avid collectors of old letters, thereby saving many a valuable epistle from the scrapheap.

I was reminded of this recently by discovering in a postal history catalogue a letter to a surgeon at St Helena in 1678. As the St Helena Medical Service was then only 10 years old and its early history is unknown, it promised to shed fresh light on an important aspect of life in the East India Company's infant South Atlantic outpost. And so it has proved. Written to Surgeon Francis Moore by his father in London, it was confirmed by Mr. Edward Hibbert, author of *The Postal History of St Helena* (1979), as being part of the Island's earliest known private correspondence. With other letters kindly provided by Mr. Hibbert, it was published in "The Secrets of Surgeon Moore" and reprinted in the West Africa Study Circle's *St Helena & Ascension Supplement* No. 14, July 1990.

This publicity encouraged the St Helena Government's Economic Advisor, Mr. Laurence Carter, to search for further medical evidence among the Archives in Jamestown. In this he was aided by the Archivist, Mr. Cecil Maggott, who found the Surgeon's will. The results are now published in a St Helena Link research paper, *A 17th Century Surgeon at St Helena: Francis Moore 1674-1682*. This gives a concise account of a St Helena surgeon's life in the 1670s and 1680s and takes the list of St Helena medical staff back to 1673. The fact that Moore wrote many other letters from St Helena during almost eight years of service encourages the hope that publicity will bring more of them to light.

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