

PHOTOGRAPHERS NOW FOCUS ON THE WILD BEAUTY OF REMOTE ST HELENA

by Trevor W. Hearl

For its size and mid-ocean location, the tiny, isolated community of St Helena has been remarkably well served by photographers, even a Royal photographer. Though Prince Philip regretted having “no opportunity to take photographs” during his visit in 1957, suspecting that “even the best photographs cannot do justice to its charm and beauty”, Prince Andrew had “a little more time” in 1984 and published several of his island views the following year: “St Helena [...] was enchanting and strangely beautiful. Once seen, never forgotten [...] an island full of mystique and one with which I, for one, fell in love”.

Yet so little was known even then about St Helena photography that Don McCullin could claim in the Commonwealth Institute’s 1984 catalogue *Lives of the Saints* that it was an island “where few photographers have ever been, and where no serious photographic survey had ever been attempted”. In fact, though typically neglected, high-quality comprehensive coverage has been available for the past 135 years in collections of photoprints, postcards and large format volumes, from which no doubt someday someone will provide a popular pictorial history of “St Helena in Old Photographs”.

Among the most prolific to have published are John Isaac Lilley (1862); Thomas Jackson and A.L. Innes (1890-1910); Philip Gosse (1937); J. Allan Cash (1952); Robin Castell (1977/1979); Rory Coonan (1984); and Simon Bannister (1995); the last two mounting acclaimed exhibitions in London.

Helmut and Alexander Schulenburg (1997) now join this illustrious band with an outstanding contribution to the island’s photographic fortunes. Although it modestly claims only to “reflect a little” of the island’s “rich heritage and culture”, it is difficult to imagine that their St Helena, South Atlantic Ocean will have a competitor in this generation.

Whether to satisfy the pangs of nostalgia or the demands of research, every St Helena resident and visitor will find material of value and interest in this sumptuous volume of some 280 plates, including several prints from the past. Encompassing most areas and aspects of island countryside and culture, its evocative images, ranging from double-page panoramas to close-ups of memorials, will provide a splendid souvenir both for the “Saint” far from home and the tourist anxious to retain the essence of a memorable visit. It celebrates not only the picturesque mist-shrouded Peaks, incredible fortifications, churches and country houses, Napoleonic Longwood and the Tomb, but reminds us that St Helena also has modern housing and flats, satellite dishes, and an industrial complex bringing it to the threshold of the 21st century. By capturing the surviving evidence of the island’s unique heritage and, as it were, the thundering machinery of the power station, it

shows a discerning eye for what is significant about St Helena today and open readers' eyes to many an undervalued treasure. Vistas that may pass unnoticed (Seale's Bridge and elegant stairways). or ones rarely seen, from caves to the summits of Sugar Loaf and Munden's - show a diligent exploitation of what the island has to offer, often in impressive detail, though St Helena's sporting and social highlights, with the exception of Remembrance Day, seem more weakly represented than their importance in island culture warrants.

There is a lively and informative introduction, and the pictures are well served by clear, brief captions, though a few may perplex without some local knowledge. Eagle-eyed readers may spot a couple of typographical slips, but the only real blemish in an otherwise outstanding production is the lack of an index, condemning those using it as a source of reference to chase back and forth in search, which a loose-leaf list could have saved.

The portrait of St Helena which emerges is one of which the island can be proud. Everything in town and country is spic and span; sportsmen, from greying cricketers to young space suited motocross riders, are smart and sporting; workers are purposeful and serious; leisure is relaxed and cheerful; even ruins retain a decayed elegance echoing the best of the past Is this where "the world we have lost" is still to be found? For those who would have it so, the evidence is here. Helmut Schulenburg and his German publishers are masters at producing classic black and white studies of photogenic places (this is their tenth publication) and in St Helena, South Atlantic Ocean they have provided the island's embryonic "low-volume, high quality" tourist industry with its showcase.

ENDNOTES

- Helmut and Alexander Schulenburg: *St Helena, South Atlantic Ocean*. Jacob-Gilardi-Verlag, Allersberg, 1997. ISBN 3-929332-10-8. £39.
- Also quoted: HRH The Prince Andrew: *Photographs*. Hamish Hamilton, 1985, p.86-91
- HRH The Duke of Edinburgh: *Birds from Britannia*. Longmans, 1962, p.23
- Robin Castell: *St Helena [...] island fortress* (1977)
- Rory Coonan and Stuart Mackay: *Lives of the Saints*. The Commonwealth Institute, 1984
- Trevor Hearl: "John Isaac Lilley, St Helena's photo pioneer", *The Photographic Journal*, December 1990, p. 517-519

South Atlantic Chronicle, July 1998, Vol. XXII, No. 3, p. 11.

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