

QUENTIN KEYNES AND THE ST HELENA LIBRARY MYSTERY

by Trevor W. Hearl

Few collectors who followed Christie's sale of Quentin Keynes' "important travel books" in April 2004 could have been aware of the enigmatic traveller's tale that lay behind the rich, if hardly comprehensive, selection of St Helenaiana on offer that day. The story starts with Quentin's "lucky break", as he described it to me some years ago.

When we first met - I believe it was at the St Helena Natural Treasury symposium at the Zoo in 1988 - I was planning the republication of Philip Gosse's *St Helena 1502-1938* and trying to discover the fate of his St Helena library. From his correspondence, I knew that it had been catalogued for sale in October 1950 by Bernard Quaritch Ltd., the long-established London bookseller, but enquiries there had drawn a blank as they could find no record of either its purchase, sale or catalogue. As Gosse had been a friend of Quentin's father, Sir Geoffrey Keynes, (they were both Bart's men, bibliophiles and leading figures in the literary circles of London and Cambridge) I told him that I was hunting Gosse's St Helena collection, but that it seemed to have melted into thin air.

"I have it", he replied, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. "Philip was clearing out his books - I think he was moving house - when my little piece on St Helena came out in *The National Geographic Magazine* (that was in August 1950) and he promised to let me have the St Helena ones if I wanted them. But then he forgot, and when I reminded him a few weeks later, they had been sent to Quaritch. 'You'd better step round there sharply before they're sold,' he said. And so I did, and I paid them £90 for the lot".

Confirmation of Quentin's story came out of the blue by a remarkable coincidence some weeks after from the very compiler of that evanescent "catalogue" nearly 40 years earlier, Edward Dring, by now a nonagenarian director of Bernard Quaritch Ltd. He still came in to work once a week and had just come across my letter of April 1987 in a file and wrote most apologetically in January 1989 to give me his recollections of the transaction. "I recall that we did buy Philip Gosse's St Helena books [...] At that time books on St Helena were of but minor value, and my recollection is that although we intended to do a catalogue containing them, it never got off the stocks because another customer of ours, who was also interested in St Helena, came and bought the lot. This customer is still alive, so I cannot divulge his name".

When I replied relating Quentin's account of the event, he agreed that "Q.K. was of course the gentleman [...] somewhat of a globetrotter [...]". but he was still perturbed about the lack of evidence of the transaction. "We boast about our records, and indeed in 1950 were particularly careful about such things".

Meanwhile, by an even more curious coincidence, I had actually acquired, from the meticulous filing system of another antiquarian bookseller, John Lawson, a,

copy of Dring's 16-page typescript draft for Quaritch's aborted St Helena catalogue! The contents were divided into two parts, the first listing Philip Gosse's collection, the second including material on the other South Atlantic islands from elsewhere. The Gosse auction was composed of 78 entries of books, prints, maps, periodicals and miscellanea, some with as many as 20 separate items. I was able to identify several entries in the second section which also came from Gosse, including, most notably, the 1690 broadside relating *The Case of Katherine Taylor*, whose petition to Parliament for redress after her husband had been hanged on St Helena for allegedly abusing the governor, nearly cost the East India Company its Charter.

The evidence from the Quaritch list raises some unexpected queries about St Helena items in Christie's sale. In a preamble, Dring, who was a scholarly bibliophile, noted: "The items described on the first nine pages are all from the Library of the most celebrated of St Helena collectors, PHILIP GOSSE, *and either bear his neat book label or his signature*". (my italics)

Yet of 22 lots in Christie's catalogue which could once have come from Gosse's shelves, I can find only three (in lots 79, 89 and 91) credited with evidence of his erstwhile ownership, in the form of his "Weppons" book label, referring to the name of his rural retreat near Steyning in West Sussex, circa 1930/1940. This Christie catalogue represents only a proportion of the collection listed by Dring and presumably bought by Quentin. It almost looks as if much of Gosse's St Helena library has disappeared again! But there exists other, more authoritative evidence than even Dring's list recording what that library once contained - Gosse's own St Helena card index.

This most impeccable of sources was given by Gosse to Quentin in 1950. It was then mislaid for some years at the latter's Regent's Park home until rediscovered after his removal in 1991 to Erskine Road NW3. Confined to his new home after a horrendous car accident near Cheltenham that October - in which he lost a sports saloon of a very rare marque - he spent some weeks rearranging his great store of books, which brought it to light. The following year he gave it to me to go with the Gosse St Helena archive. It contained 151 cards, hand-written, many with price and place of purchase, in the original box with "Weppons" book label. From this it seems clear that Gosse did not dispatch all his St Helenaiana to Quaritch in 1950. For example, Dring did not list the *Bye-Laws of St Helena* (1828) which had once belonged to the unfortunate "Geo. B. Waddell, M.D.", thrown overboard when pirates captured the Company's packet-schooner *St Helena* in 1830, for which Gosse had paid Francis Edwards 20/- (£1.00), and which must subsequently have made its way to Quentin for it was included in Christie's Lot 79. Similarly he kept "Lord Bathurst's Letter to Sir Hudson Lowe, K.C.B. about the death of Napoleon, Downing Street, London, 10 July 1921. Given me by Frank Maggs". Maggs was another of the London booksellers who helped swell his stock of St Helenaiana, and whose descendants are still St Helena specialists. Quentin had pencilled "Kept by Gosse" on some cards, most recording books of more general interest, such as Ovington's *A Voyage to Suratt* (1689) and John Seller's *Atlas Maritimus* (1682), but also including *Beatson's Tracts* (1816), which had cost Gosse "30/-" (£1.50) at Quaritch.

Collectors are naturally curious about prices, but it is well to remember that the price, as distinct from the value, of a secondhand book is determined by “the market” created by collectors themselves. As Dring recalled, there was little demand for St Helena titles post-war, when there were bargains to be had. I have seen a copy of *Beatson’s Tracts*, which when disbound, had been marked “3d”. in pencil, probably at a jumble sale. Copies of Emily Jackson’s *St Helena the historic island* (1903) could be had for £1 thirty years ago, even at Blackwell’s in Oxford. The subsequent demand for St Helena books worldwide, as well as the slump in the value of Sterling, has since had an extraordinary impact on the price of the rarer and more sought-after material. This trend was, of course, reflected in the prices realized at Christie’s recent sale.

Though it is hardly relevant to compare today’s prices with those paid by Gosse during the interwar years, when a family was well off on £10 a week, readers may like to have a few tantalizing examples. Volumes of “*Views of St Helena*” are always relatively expensive and it is interesting to observe that John Kerr’s *six Views* (circa 1822?), dedicated to Lady Lowe, made top price then, as now, reaching £4200 at auction, whereas Gosse paid six guineas (£6.30), representing two weeks’ wages for an artisan 70 years ago. He also paid £4 each for *Pocock’s Five Views* (1815), and Bellasis’ (six) *Views of St Helena* (1815), though at Christie’s the former, with its fine panorama, was the more valued, making £2200, against the latter’s £1700. Probably the rarest item, the “Katherine Taylor” broadside of 1690, for which Gosse had paid Maggs £2/10/0 (£2.50), went for £1300. Among Gosse’s pre-war bargains were Seale’s *Geognosy* (1834) at 25/- (£1.25), now £1500; G.W. Melliss’s *Views* (1857) at £2, and J.C. Melliss’s magnum opus, *St Helena* (1875) at a paltry £1! The two Mellisses were auctioned in one lot (92) at Christie’s for £13000. But presentation copies also accounted for several important items in Gosse’s collection, including some scarce biographies. Among them were those of the 18th century Governor Isaac Pyke, the St Helena family of Findlay Anderson, the family of Governor Robert Patton, the Bazett family, and (from Dr Arnold Chaplin), the St Helena Medical Officer, Dr Thomas Shortt and other medical men associated with Napoleon on the island.

Thus, the evidence provided by Dring’s list and Gosse’s card index, detailing the least extent of Quentin Keynes’ St Helena collection, poses some intriguing questions about the sale of his St Helenaiana. Somewhere there must be literally scores of historic items with Gosse’s “neat book label or his signature”, either awaiting the fall of the auctioneer’s hammer, or already gracing the shelves of someone’s library. As Quentin was an avid collector himself, building on “the library of the most celebrated of St Helena collectors”, there is certainly much at stake, in terms of St Helena’s restricted literary resources, in the dispersal of his collection.

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