

ST HELENA - ISLAND IN EXILE

by Trevor W. Hearl

St Helena has become a prison for her own people” and now the island finds itself, like Napoleon, “in exile”. somewhat dramatic view, resulting from the latest nationality laws excluding St Helenians from British citizenship, has received wide publicity in Britain through a sympathetic, if bitter-sweet documentary film of St Helena today made by Anglia TV last October and shown recently on British television. And if one felt a sense of Déjà Vu watching the island’s perennial problems being unfolded on the screen, this film was a warning that fresh squalls now ruffle the calm of the old colony. For it showed a people outwardly happy, but inwardly frustrated and increasingly bitter; an island of great charm, impatient at being pauperised by lack of employment and effective investment; and a Whitehall administration fumbling over the economy and immigration policy by applying cold logic rather than warm understanding towards a lonely old friend.

When much else is forgotten about the film - even its ever hopeful suggestions for exploiting fishing, coffee, handicrafts, husbandry and the island’s isolation as a strategic “listening post” between two increasingly unstable continents - a defence expert thought the expanding Russian Navy would welcome it as an oceanic “intelligence base” - most viewers will recall unhappily the sight of untypically angry islanders and of an uneasily defensive government minister entangled in the snares of immigration policies. Clearly the film makers intended that “Island in Exile” should prick the nation’s conscience.

For this was unashamedly a film with a purpose, probing official and unofficial attitudes in Britain, as well as in the South Atlantic. In London, the Minister, the Rt. Hon. Timothy Raison, was shown rejecting the modest claims of British citizenship for St Helena’s stranded five thousand, on the principle that the same status could not be granted to Hong Kong’s five millions. Although this was not the only issue to be aired, it remained the dominant concern of interviewees. The case for more positive policies to for more positive policies to rescue islanders from “imprisonment” and poverty was put strongly by the Essex M. P., Sir Bernard Braine, and by the former island Governor and Treasurer John Massingham and Simon Gillett. In Jamestown, local opinion was ably presented by prominent island advocates, notably Executive Council member, the Hon. Eric Benjamin, Legislative Council member John Musk, headmaster Stedson George, and cafe owner Dot Leo, who scornfully slapped down her British passport to show its citizenship rights neatly crossed out.

Criticism of such a film is inevitable. Some will say that it is too “political”. Others will say that the film showed too little of the charm of St Helena. Even taking the film at its own merits, however, raises some reservations. For example, why voices from the island’s small business community - who might be expected to

prime the island's economic pump with a little capital and a few ideas - were conspicuously silent. And why should the government's most dynamic agency, the Education Department, be portrayed as dysfunctional by raising pupils' educational standards and expectations above the colony's present demands? Prince Andrew's naming of the new Central School, thanks to the foresight of Sir Neil Marten, was reported as a "popular announcement, but", added the commentator, "it will bring no development to the island". Who, then, should lead the way? The financial benefits of the island's stamp and coinage policy were overlooked, though not the locally popular idea of charging rent for the American (and other) users' facilities on Ascension Island.

Nevertheless, if the film was controversial, the professional integrity of its authors remains in no doubt, for clearly, they gained the confidence of the islanders - no small feat in the wake of recent experiences of British journalism - and that confidence was not betrayed. As pure reportage and given the inevitable restraints of television in presenting complex issues, the prickly problems of the colony's economic dilemma - the balance between investment and production - was skilfully handled. There is always a crock of gold at the end of a Rupert's Valley rainbow - bountiful resources of crab meat were cited in this case - but the harsher - realities of St Helenian experience were starkly shown such as the salt fish enterprise debacle, the burdensome legacy of the flax fibre industry (highlighted in a lively musical, "Fibre", written and staged by school children for Prince Andrew's visit), the depressing effects of unskilled labour-intensive projects (20 labourers were shown doing the work of four men on road maintenance), the dramatic comparison with the men's experience of skilled machine-powered and capital-intensive labour on Ascension Island, and the grip of bureaucracy on every aspect of life and work which leaves only perhaps as little as ten per cent of job opportunities outside of the hands of government. Yet, with political action denied all government employees, many able islanders are excluded from - and even suspicious of - the legislature, weakening the youthful growth of democratic local government.

This catalogue of seemingly intractable problems led the commentator to glance at the island's balance sheet: credit, not given; debit, several millions annually (£2m a year shipping subsidy alone). This was a topic of little appeal to the islanders, some of whom tend to dismiss it as the price of mismanagement by "a bunch of parasites", as one tearful islander bitterly observed from Britain. St Helenians are understandably ambivalent about living on British taxpayers' charity, for they see little enough of it, with an average wage of only £30 per week and prices so high that three quarters of this must go on food, while children depend on vitamin and iron tablets from the medical officer to maintain health. Budgetary aid has failed to make the island productive, despite the optimistic plans of a constant stream of "experts", of whom the islanders used to mutter wearily as they crowded silently on the Wharf as the boat came in "Bad goes; worse comes!"

Anglia TV's short film report deployed the case for St Helena more powerfully than anyone has previously attempted. It was disappointing that the charms of St Helena - its pretty girls and its breath-taking scenery - were not used to heighten

the inherent drama of the situation. For the island needs to be known and shown “in the round” if it is to survive as a healthy community in its mid- ocean fastness. One despairs of the fact that the authorities in London and in Jamestown care so little for this that neither produces any practical publicity not even a periodical report since 1973! - so that for all intents and purposes (apart from a few officials and islanders’ relatives in the U. K.), the island of St Helena has ceased to exist, for Britons know nothing of it, not even that it is British. As the only publication devoted to St Helena interests is the quarterly News Letter of the St Helena and Dependencies Philatelic Society - published in the USA - “Island in Exile” came as a revelation to British viewers and Whitehall has been deluged with messages of indignation and dismay.

For bringing St Helena to public notice candidly and, on the whole, equitably, congratulations, therefore, to the TV team led by Graham Creelman and Daniel Brittain. Nor should the skill of John Twining’s camera crew go unremarked for some memorable shots, none perhaps more poignant than the final lingering portrait of the young girl at the window. “Worthy of Murillo”, exclaimed one enchanted viewer.

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