

ST HELENA 500

by Trevor W. Hearl

What the Governor's Advisory Committee for the 500th Anniversary Celebrations has in store for the Island in 2002, this auspicious occasion will gain further lustre from the publication of several new St Helena volumes now being prepared for our bookshelves. The first of these has just come out, with the aptly crisp title *St Helena 500*, described by its compilers, Robin Gill and Percy Teale, as *A Chronological History of the Island*, from its discovery in 1502 to 1996.

Anniversaries provide a fine opportunity for pausing to take stock, but the rarity of a quincentenary invites an even more thorough analysis of past achievements and future prospects. Most of the works now in the pipeline therefore seek to fill some of the yawning gaps in our present knowledge and understanding of St Helena's history and natural history. There has been no comprehensive historical coverage, for example, since Gosse in 1938, leaving not only tourists but the most senior Government officials and consultants without any ready reference to its recent background. It was much the same when Gosse was there in 1937, as the then Government Secretary, Geoffrey Kitching, explained:

“When I arrived on St Helena in 1932, I found (myself) under a crippling handicap. There was nobody to tell me, nor was there any book in which one might read, what had really happened during the past hundred years. I had to find out everything for myself.

Kitching obviously did not rely on local lore nor set much store by Emily Jackson's volume on “the historic island” in 1903. Instead, he set about producing his own typescript *Handbook and Gazetteer* for visitors, and *A Short History of the Island under the Crown*, mainly for colleagues. But the Colonial Office refused him permission to publish it, so he later left a copy in Plantation House library “in the hope that the Island Government may find some of the information it gives to be useful to it”. It has since been re-discovered and reveals the need, among other things, to revise Gosse's interpretation of the state of the colony's Victorian economy. But St Helena history is not easily researched for, unless you live in Jamestown, its primary sources of information are difficult and expensive of access, and it lacks the handy reference material usually available to historians and other researchers. Interpreting the evidence is another hazard as things are never what they seem on St Helena. Lord Rosebery came to the conclusion a century ago that there must be something in the air there that blights exact truth, “creating strange and hopeless contradictions”. So perhaps we should pity the poor ‘expert’ sent out to advise the Government what to do!

Searchers after elusive source material, as well as anyone keen to deepen their knowledge of St Helena history, will therefore welcome *St Helena 500*. Some read-

ers will already know Dr Teale's earlier compilations published in Jamestown by W.A. Thorpe & Sons, *St Helena 1502-1659* (1673-1833), originally compiled by Governor Hudson Janisch. Both have long been out of print. Dr Teale, in partnership with his nephew Robin Gill, has now rearranged these handy sources with additional guidelines, covering the period from discovery in 1502 to the closing years of the Company's rule in 1833, to provide the first three parts of the new volume, adding a fourth part, "Absolute Rule by the British Government 1834 to 1996", listing up to a dozen or so events a year, to bring matters all but up to date. Frequent references are made to further reading from readily available sources while, in the earlier parts, lengthy quotations are given from rarer sources, such as Henry's Gargen's *Description* (1661) which includes a nominal roll of the first settlers. The authors even invite readers to write to them for further particulars on some topics. The Island's history is followed year by year throughout, with the entries from 1659 being supplemented by the names of reigning British monarchs and Governors, population and shipping figures (where available), and selections of contemporary events in 'the outside world', setting each year's local affairs into a wider context.

Readers who imagine that, for St Helena-watchers at least, the modern period (1834-1996) is already a matter of general knowledge, are in for some surprises. For example, natural disasters - rockfalls, rollers and epidemics - have been far more frequent than is generally realised, exacting a toll of death and damage over the years which, with the insidious advance of the termite, must have left deep scars on the local folk memory, no less than on the economy. The extent of enforced emigration similarly becomes starkly apparent from its frequent mention, though readers need to bear in mind that only organised emigration is noted, leaving out the unassisted flight of most settlers, tradesmen and Company officials - those who used to be categorised as "of European birth or descent" - whose loss led to further social and economic impoverishment, while contributing the most notable examples of the St Helenian 'diaspora'. throughout the English-speaking world. This imbalance in the evidence on any particular topic exposes one of the weaknesses of compilations of miscellaneous information but will not detract from readers' enjoyment spotting unexpected items of personal interest. In sport, for example, apart from the usual cricket and football leagues, occasional regattas are noted as well as some fifteen seasons of horse-racing at Longwood. Four building societies and commercial banks, though lasting only a few months each between 1861 and 1922, will intrigue economists no less than the melancholy toll of lost investments in fishing and whaling ventures. The Hong Kong businessman, who was refused permission in 1992 to open clothing and shark-fishing factories employing 2000 people, was luckier; he lost nothing but the opportunity. Any inward investor who thinks that at least a brewery could never fail on St Helena will find salutary evidence here under 1847 and 1982. Islanders do not yet need history to remind them of the dramas associated with the enigmatic acronyms FRASHI (1965) and SATIC (1969), but before living memory is exhausted a thorough-going study of these and other defining episodes in recent Island affairs would not come

amiss while first-hand evidence is still available. It's already too late to question some of the leading protagonists.

Popular petitions are always interesting. Demands for military governors to be replaced by civilians are reported on at least two occasions (1885 and 1918), conflicting with frequent assertions that the Island should be financed as a fortress, not a colony. But the most radical request came in 1862 when a public meeting on 7th April voted to change its name from St Helena to "Prince Albert Island", in honour of the late lamented Prince Consort! We are left to guess what flutterings this caused in the dovecotes, told only that the clergy objected. The Islanders' loyal preference for an earthly Prince over the Church's Saint must certainly have put the poor Vicar of Jamestown, the Rev George Bennett, on the spot as he had no one but his brother, Edward, to support him. Bishop Cloughton had left and Bishop Welby had not arrived. But did Governor Drummond Hay have nothing to say? Here surely is scope for some 'friend' of St Helena to investigate.

This, one hopes, will be one of the bonuses of the book, that readers will be prompted by- curiosity and the piquant brevity of entries to turn such seeds as are sown to fruitful account. Those with an eye for the unusual have a wide range of topics to tempt them; a proposal to take Britain's troublesome suffragettes off its hands into exile (1913); the St Helena Amateur Circus Company (1886); 'defalcations' of Government funds by its officials (1878, 1884, 1919) and other sensational robberies (1887, 1888); a visit by the Chinese junk Keying (1848); a medal for St Helena jam from the Royal Horticultural Society (1908); and the attack on the Island by two aircraft carriers, two destroyers and over 30 aircraft in 1948, which has somehow eluded naval historians. Perhaps survivors and battle reports of this curious exercise can tell us who won! Research with more serious intent might be undertaken on the seaplane crash in 1940 and on "the practicability of building an aerodrome" in 1943; or on the mutiny of the 1st West India Regiment during the Boer War (13 January 1901); or on the UN General Assembly's call in 1984 for Britain to bolster "native awareness of the right to become independent". A 'Friend' might even like to record the labours of some of the other "Friends of St Helena" societies, of which five are quoted between 1928 and 1988, not to mention other active "Relief Committees" in London at the turn of the century. These few random examples taken from the 'colonial period' can only hint at the scope of information to be found in this 400-page tome. Compiler's selection of a dozen or so events a year implies omission, of course, as well as inclusion, and it would therefore have been helpful had some indication been given of the criteria and sources employed. Readers cannot assume that the stories behind the 'headlines' will be found in St Helena newspapers or Annual Reports. There are also some puzzling entries, such as a reference in 1515 to an "Expo" in Lisbon "opening next month", and others needing clarification - who were "Prince and Princess Sahn Sahn" en route to imprisonment in Gibraltar in 1915? Two minor factual errors noted concern the rebuilding of High Knoll (1874-94), which was started, not completed, in 1874; and St Helena coffee, which did not win a "first class medal" at the Great Exhibition of 1851, but "honourable mention". A final point about

selection should perhaps be made as it raises one of the dilemmas facing all writers about St Helena who, like Dr Teale - whose attachment to St Helena began as Head of the Public Works Department from 1957 to 1960 - have enjoyed a long and close relationship with Island and its people. While they have like someone writing a family history - a deeper, first-hand appreciation of the subject than anyone coming fresh to the task, they also have an inhibiting closeness which imposes restrictions and responsibilities. This is not without cost to the historian's integrity, however. For example, what will readers make of the entry for 14 April : "Yacht Gemini removed from its anchorage by person(s) unknown"? Certainly not a story of stranded yachties from Natal, intrepid seamanship, a dramatic landfall, and political asylum from an allegedly repressive colonial regime, tyrannised by a racist, written from an Islander's recollections of life and events within living memory than will ever get into print.

St Helena 500 has much to tell us, nevertheless, in words if not in pictures. For illustrations - apart from a few line drawings readers are referred to Robin Castell's *St Helena Illustrated 1502-1902* (Cape Town 1998) whose 172 pages and 340 plates provide as comprehensive a collection of St Helena and St Helena-related pictorial material, mostly in colour, as is ever likely to be assembled within the covers of a single volume. Castell has made no mean contribution to St Helena studies by bringing this source, it should be used critically, however. For example, the "Delightful and Informative Extract from an Anonymous Manuscript", transcribed on the opening pages, is tentatively dated 1801 though it originated in *The Gentleman's Magazine* and others in the 1750's . But it is impossible to get everything right; those bold enough to go into print just do their best.

St Helena 500 is an ambitious project, published in a limited edition of 300 copies, adventurously promising a second edition to coincide with Quincentenary. Whether this will give the compilers opportunity to re-assess style and production I cannot say. Readers expect mundane matters of proof-reading, layout and typography at least to match, and if possible, enhance, the quality of the text, but in this respect, I fear many of them will be disappointed. Fortunately the purpose of the book as "a useful reference to the history of the island" is not lost thereby.

GILL, Robin & TEALE, Percy: *St Helena 500 A Chronological History of the Island* (Epping (Cape) 1999), viii, 292, A4 £30

CASTELL, Robin: *St Helena Illustrated (1502-1902)* (Cape Town 1998), (xviii), 174 £20

Wirebird: The Journal of the Friends of St Helena No 20 (Spring 2000): 23-26.

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