

ST HELENA IN PRINT

by Trevor W. Hearl

Perhaps it is a spin-off from the Falklands War or Prince Andrew's visit, but St Helena seems at last to have been rediscovered by the politicians and the media. St Helena watchers will recall the words reported of the Island's previous Governor, John Massingham, that the British Government "hardly even know where it is". They clearly do now; they are spending £3.5 millions on a new secondary school, for example. Moreover, St Helena is actually getting into print.

In April 1983, Sir Bernard Braine, M. P., saw to it that the Island's problems were extensively aired in a debate in the House of Commons (*Hansard*, Vol. 40, No. 96), having published his own paper on the subject - *St Helena, A Case of Enforced Dependence* - following a visit in 1980. In October 1984, two visiting MP's, John Marek and Jonathan Sayeed, published a further report, *St Helena, The Isolated Island*, followed by a lengthy statement in the Commons (*Hansard*, 9 November 1984, cols. 362-268). Less than a month later, the House of Lords was hearing about the island (*Hansard*, Vol. 457, No. 14) from Lord Buxton - whose Anglia TV Company's influential film "St Helena, Island in Exile" was reviewed in the *St Helena and Dependencies Philatelic Society Newsletter*, Vol. IX, No. 2 - and from Lord Cledwyn, author of a major enquiry into St Helena conditions as long ago as 1958, who had rather unfairly suggested that little had changed since. Even the United Nations glanced at St Helena's fortunes, publishing a 21-page "working paper" entitled "*St Helena*" on 16 May 1984 (UN Secretariat, A/AC.109/775) for the "Special Committee [...] on the granting of Independence to Colonial Countries," after which the UN decided, by an overwhelming majority, that the three subject territories - St Helena, Tristan da Cunha, and Ascension Island - should be given their independence. No rejoicing in the streets of Jamestown on St Helena on that account!

Conservation projects have resulted in research reports being written for the National Geographic Society by Dr W. F. Perrin of the US Marine Fisheries Service on dolphins and whales in St Helena waters, and for the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew by Simon Goodenough - *Conservation of the Endemic Flora of St Helena*. This has been followed by brief reports on BBC radio and World Wildlife News (Winter, 1984/1985, pp. 7-9), reporting the propagating of endangered species and the training of St Helenian staff at Kew. Prospects for St Helena's fishing industry have been optimistically examined in Fishing News International in June 1980 and September 1984.

Finally, during 1985, journalists Gavin Young and Simon Winchester are putting their experiences of the islands between hard covers. Even before *Slow Boats Home* (Hutchinson) was on the bookstalls, *The Observer* (June, 1985) devoted a full-page spread to Hutchinson's chapter on St Helena. Island-hopping across the Pacific

and Atlantic, Hutchinson makes some astute asides on his brief stay at St Helena and Ascension Island (pp. 394-421), with unstinting praise for the St Helena Shipping Company and its managing director, "Saint" Andrew Bell. In his forthcoming volume *Outposts* (Hodder and Stroughton, 1985), Simon Winchester reflects on Britain's remaining colonies; he tells me that "our" three islands "make up quite a substantial portion of the book. I have found them all quite fascinating places".

Far-flung outposts of the old British Empire have long fascinated philatelists and armchair travellers, but the extent of interest since the Falklands War has grown far wider. Two globe-trotting journalists, Gavin Young and Simon Winchester, were variously trapped by that conflict as each sought to round Cape Horn, pursuing his own island-hopping odyssey. Young reached Rio; Winchester spent three uneasy months in a Patagonian prison. Both eventually found their way to St Helena and its isolated dependencies. Now, their snapshot impressions are preserved in two best-selling travellers' tales.

Young's *Slow Beats Home* (Hutchinson, E12.95) has already proved its appeal by reaching the top three, out of 158 titles, among 1985's Thomas Cook Travel Book selection. He coaxes his readers from the China Seas (where he last left them in *Slow Boats in China*) via Pacific "isles of illusion" and Cape storms, into the magical Peter Pan port of Jamestown, St Helena: "Had I discovered at last a place where everyone was content?" The travel-weary author doesn't say but sketches a reporter's view of St Helenians in their island home, taken perhaps too glibly from bar counters on ship and shore. At Plantation House, the Governor of St Helena, ostentatiously "unstuffy" - "I give old islanders lifts" - regaled him with an unseemly story of the French consul posting his deceased mother's body home in a barrel of brandy - "Good brandy, too" - before Young drove to Longwood for lunch, where he found M. Martineau a charming host, author of 18 books and "not much of a chauvinist". Then, off to Ascension, "the big clinker [...] an odd and unappealing place", towards which he was able to give a cursory glance for a couple of days. Young's style makes his book easy and entertaining reading - like a Sunday supplement.

Simon Winchester's *Outposts* (Hodder and Stoughton, £12.95) is not such a rosy travelogue. The author took the trail with a purpose, as well as a sharp eye, ranging from Gibraltar to South Georgia, from Pitcairn to Diego Garcia, aiming to "record the last moments and the last peoples of what undoubtedly was the greatest Empire in the history of the world". A tall order, it proved more hazardous than he was prepared for.

One hazard was reaching his ocean oases, Tristan da Cunha, for instance. Reading Derrick Booy's *Rock of Exile* (1957) - "the most sensitive of all the few accounts of Tristan da Cunha" - instead of the vastly experienced Allan Crawford's *Tristan da Cunha and the Roaring Forties* (Edinburgh and Cape Town, 1982), he first tried yachting there in December. His next attempt, aboard RMS St Helena, revealed another hazard - forbidden to land! Protecting Booy's shy heroine were her husband and the island policeman: "No nonsense. We won't forget you, you knows," he warned before at last letting the dismayed journalist briefly ashore. Yet Win-

chester left Tristan da Cunha full of admiration for a people who could thrive on such a barren plot, making a profit and a very handsome one indeed”.

Ascension Island, too, taught him “what the Empire really could do when tried”. Unlike Gavin Young, he explored beyond the clinker to the Residency, “a granite testament to the amazing energies of the Victorian sailors and marines,” to find Green Mountain “of all the forgotten corners of the Empire ... the most lovely and the most strange.”

Yet of all “outposts” it was not “idyllic’ Bermuda or battle-scarred Falklands, but lovely St Helena that evoked most affection and sympathy:

[..] a tragedy of decay and isolation, poverty and ruin, and all played by a principal cast of proud and enchanting islanders, and in their homes of magical beauty”.

His thoughts return there time and time again. “One cannot come away from St Helena without shaking one’s head and muttering that something must be done,” he muses. But his charge that “nothing will ever be done under the suzerainty of Britain, at least” reads oddly, even unjustly, beside an embarrassing record as the world’s most heavily subsidised community. Winchester writes sensitively, but fine sentiments do not solve baffling problems. And, regrettably, his righteous indignation and lofty aims seem - if the scanty advice on “further reading” is any guide - to grow from shallow roots. It is hardly reassuring, for example, to find St Helena’s leading Edwardian author and activist, Emily Louise Jackson, called “Mr Jackson” - twice.

The few illustrations are welcome, but not remarkable. From the author’s recurring reference to the “stunningly pretty” Mrs Hoole, readers might wish that her portrait, rather than that of an ex-patriate policeman, were chosen to represent St Helenians. Mrs Hoole was, after all - although Winchester does not tell us so - in 1982 the first St Helenian in living memory to have been accorded the precedence of First Lady of the colony, resident at Plantation House, as wife of the Acting Governor.

All serious St Helena enthusiasts/watchers should put *Outposts* high on their reading lists.

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