

# ST HELENA'S COLONIAL REPORTS REPRINTED

by Trevor W. Hearl

St Helena watchers will welcome the enterprise of ocean-island enthusiast Colin Hinchcliffe of York, England, for his initiative in producing inexpensive reprints of St Helena's colonial reports. These so-called "Blue Books" are the Governor's annual reports to the Colonial Secretary in London, presented to Parliament and published as the Colony's official record. Copies are virtually unobtainable on the antiquarian book market today and rarely available for reference outside London's leading libraries. Now once again they can be perused by anyone keen to follow the Island's fairly recent past

Those who have needed information about the Island's vital statistics will already appreciate the value of these reports. They provide facts and figures on finance and law, trade and production, health and education, population and crime, weather and communications - including, as philatelists well know, the Postmaster's reports - and anything else the Governor thinks worth reporting. One does not have to be a Sherlock Holmes to realize that such material abounds with clues to what one might call the Island's hidden history.

Take the years of World War I (1914-1919) for example. In 1914, the poverty-stricken Treasury at Jamestown was delighted to get an unexpected windfall of £472 from the collier *Eriphia* when she transferred no less than 3,150 tons of coal and stores at Jamestown to a German naval squadron - including the *Kaiser*, the *Konig Albert* and the *Strassburg* - under "Rear Admiral Von Rebeur Pashvitz" (*sic*), the significance of which became clear on 5th August! Many an untold sea-saga might be traced through these pages, as when in 1920 two unnamed colliers were mentioned putting into Jamestown on fire. But a more harrowing story lies behind the fire aboard the *Indian Monarch* in 1915. When this Glasgow steamship, en route from New York to New Zealand, burnt out 420 miles south-southeast of St Helena, the crew of 35 took to two lifeboats, but only one - with 18 survivors - reached the Island on 18th November. Of the other, nothing more was recorded.

Names are seldom given in these reports, unfortunately, except perhaps when some key official left for war service or sick leave, precipitating a crisis. But I noted three to whom St Helena owed much at this time - Miss HG Girdwood of the Lace School, Mr. Lesley Tucker in education and Dr WJJ Arnold, Colonial Surgeon - though little seems to be known about them today, except Dr Arnold's monument at Jamestown. With no dental service and tooth decay a major source of misery and ill-health, half of Dr Arnold's time was spent doing extractions!

The war brought disaster to millions, but prosperity to St Helena. Despite Britain's crippling losses at sea, shipping was not seriously interrupted, so that exports of flax zoomed from £5,372 in 1913 to £61,136 in 1918. But if flax sold, lace did not, and the struggling Lace School closed in 1916. The fickle fortunes of St Hele-

na's lace and flax industries, yet to be told, can partly be charted through these reports.

Food supplies provoked regular comment during the war. Basic foodstuffs occasionally ran out (not unknown in recent years!) as shopkeepers refused to order more from their suppliers than in peacetime, forcing the Government to hold six months' stock in reserve. Home-grown supplies fell alarmingly as, instead of growing vegetables, smallholders "recklessly" (in the Governor's words) planted more profitable flax, even destroying acres of indigenous flora to do so, to his further dismay. By 1920 the inevitable slump found laborers' wages barely above pre-war, at 2/- (10p) a day, while prices of bread, sugar and tea - on which Island families were said to depend - had soared, bread (7½d. per pound), by 150%; sugar (1s 3d per pound) by 600% and tea (3s 2d per pound) by 100%. Fish, formerly a staple foodstuff, was quite beyond the means of poor families, as fishermen restricted supply to keep prices high and "earn an easy living at a minimum expenditure of labour". Clothing costs, too, had rocketed so that "many people went barefoot who had never done so before".

"It is difficult to understand how the labouring classes exist", declared the war-time Governor Cordeaux in his final report in 1920. "The lot of the St Helenian (is) most unenviable". Governors never tired of exhorting various sections of the population - fishermen, smallholders, shopkeepers - to act for the common good, but they were always ignored. Why the Island Government failed to take steps to encourage a little altruism or to put into practice any of the remedies it advocated, are questions that have to be tackled from other sources, if they exist. For on such issues - apart from ambivalent asides about Island customs - these reports are silent. But they certainly give an insight, reading between the lines, into the conditions that many St Helenians of "three score years and ten" still tell their grandchildren about today.

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