

# STAMPS AND THE ST HELENA ECONOMY - PHILIP GOSSE 50 YEARS AGO

by Trevor W. Hearl

March of 1987 marks exactly 50 years since Philip Gosse, the historian of St Helena, went out to put the finishing touches to his latest book, *St Helena, 1502-1938*, now an indispensable source of St Helena lore. Having combed records at the India Office, the Colonial Office, and elsewhere, and, as his Preface and Bibliography testify, having consulted almost everything published about St Helena since Linschoten in 1589, he then went, as one critic admiringly observed, to “live with the people”. And surely no finer tribute can be paid to its quality than to record, half a century later, that his work still remains not only the standard history but also, in my experience, the most sought-after book about St Helena. If not a rare volume, it is certainly scarce today and commands its price. Members of the St Helena and Dependencies Philatelic Society may, therefore, like to know what Gosse had to say about stamps in the St Helena story of fifty years ago.

First, briefly, however, who was Philip Gosse? He was neither historian nor philatelist professionally, but a physician, whose medical career had spanned war service and superintendence of the Radium Institute of London. Yet, following family tradition, his greatest interests were in writing and in natural history. His father was Sir Edmund Gosse, poet and critic; his grandfather, was the naturalist, author of *Father and Son* of the classic study of that name. Philip Gosse travelled widely -- at 17 he was the naturalist on an expedition to Aconcagua and became a world authority on, among other things, pirates and piracy. *St Helena* was only one of a dozen or so books that came from his pen. He died at the age of 80 in 1959.

What attracted Philip Gosse to the study of St Helena I have not yet discovered. In *An Apple a Day* (1948), where he calls St Helena “that delectable island”, he admits to having “a weakness for islands”. Clearly, he fell in love with St Helena and kept up a steady correspondence with residents of the island after his visit. In fact, a cover addressed to “Dr Philip Gosse” at his home in Sussex and cancelled at St Helena on October 25, 1938 was the subject of an article entitled “Questions Concerning a St Helena Cover” by George E. Montrose on page 10 of the *St Helena and Dependencies Philatelic Society Newsletter* of July 1979. The addressee was not identified in that article as having published the leading historical study of St Helena earlier in 1938. Gosse had found the colony of St Helena forgotten and impoverished, and he hoped that his book might prove “to be an instrument [...] towards her return to prosperity”. His interest in St Helena’s postage stamps was mainly directed, therefore, towards their influence on the economy of St Helena. The first issue of Ascension Island stamps seems to have produced no such welcome windfall, however.

“The sale of stamps has for years been almost the only steady and profitable industry of the island, and today Mr. G. E. Moss, the Postmaster of St Helena, is in the proud and happy position of being in charge of the one flourishing business of the island. [p. 344]

“In 1904, the dwindling revenue was actually up by some b800, but this was entirely due to the world’s stamp collectors who had bought up the whole of the obsolete St Helena Victorian postage stamps”. [p. 344]

The first issue of Ascension Island stamps seems to have produced no such welcome windfall, however.

“In the year 1923 Governor Peel reported a heavy fall in the revenue due not to drought nor to any failure of the crops, but to the fact that the new issue of Ascension Island postage stamps had not sold as well as had been anticipated, by some two thousand pounds. This the Governor attributed to the abnormally large sales in 1922 of the issue both of St Helena and Ascension Island stamps. This failure on the part of Ascension Island was all the more regrettable since the Eastern Telegraph Company, which leases the island, gave employment to seventy-five St Helenians, and so considerably reduced the unemployment in St Helena. [p. 351] .

In the following year, 1924, the revenue was up by £1,189 14s. 9d., thanks as usual to St Helena’s most profitable source of income, a new issue of postage stamps. This satisfactory state of things, in addition to a grant-in-aid from the Imperial Treasury, made it possible to undertake some much needed and long overdue repairs to Plantation House ... It was decided to purchase some cypress timber, which resists the destructive activities of termites. Unfortunately just when St Helena had the money to buy this timber, none of it was procurable, so that the repairs had again to be postponed”. [p. 352]

Commenting caustically on the Colonial Office’s demand for thrift in 1936, when labourers’ wages were cut from 2/6d. (12½ p) to 2/- (10p) a day while new Customs charges raised the cost of living, Gosse reported:

“The revenue was up by £5,926! Due to the new taxes? No: due to St Helena’s old friends and benefactors, the postage stamp collectors. [The year] 1934 was the hundredth anniversary of the transference of the island from the East India Company to the Crown, and to celebrate the occasion, though what benefit St Helena ever reaped from the change of ownership is by no means clear, a special set of commemorative stamps had been issued. And they sold like hot cakes and brought to the exchequer the tidy sum of £7,876, to which Ascension Island contributed £2,566”. [p. 366]

Finally, Dr Gosse quotes the Governor in a farewell address to the residents of St Helena on 23rd October 1937, welcoming the turn-round in the island's economy, from a deficit of £7,219 in 1932 to a surplus of £25,265 in 1937:

“This very satisfactory position has been brought about solely from adventitious revenue derived from sales of St Helena and Ascension stamps, in particular the Coronation stamps of Their Majesties King George VI and Queen Elizabeth. To some extent also the normal revenue was augmented by proceeds from sales of the St Helena Centenary stamps, which were issued in the year 1934, and from the sales of the Ascension pictorial stamps which were issued in 1935. As the author - and to some extent the designer - of the last mentioned two special issues, the improved financial position is of special satisfaction to me”.

Gosse provides readers with a significant post-script to this, however:

“The stamps issued in 1935 by St Helena and Ascension to commemorate the Silver Jubilee of King George V brought in a sum of about £10,000, though this windfall was appropriated by the Treasury in London, and only a part of it reached St Helena, and then only to replace the usual grant-in-aid”. [pp. 368-9]

Gosse pointed out that it seemed as if “to the world at large St Helena has a double interest - Napoleonic and philatelic”. But he thought it an opportunity missed that no connection was made between the two.

“Numerous pictorial stamps were issued and not one of them recalled Napoleon's connection with St Helena. Such a postage stamp would have been welcomed by the pilgrims to Longwood, both for their stamp albums or as something of local interest to put on their letters to their friends [...]. In two years' time - 1940 - will occur the centenary of the exhumation and removal of Napoleon's remains from St Helena to France. Will this unique opportunity be missed of issuing a small commemorative set of three postage stamps? I suggest a portrait of the Emperor, a view of Longwood, and another of the Tomb”. [pp. 369-370]

On its publication in the summer of 1938, *St Helena, 1502-1938* was acclaimed by the critics. “Mr. Gosse writes like a romantic, a humourist, and a scholar”, enthused Sir John Squire in *The Illustrated London News* (25 June 1938, p. 1154), doubting that he had ever read “a history of a British colony which was so amusing, exciting, and complete”. But as for influencing the mandarins at the Ministry, the hopes of Philip Gosse were extinguished within the year. In 1939, Europe was once again engulfed in war; and, for many Britons, comparisons with Hitler were somewhat too close for philatelic compliments to be paid to Napoleon.

Some years later, in *An Apple a Day* (1948), Philip Gosse recalled finding a somewhat unusual use for postage stamps on St Helena. They papered the dining

room walls of Jamestown jail, “the sort of room a philatelist [...] dreams of”, he imagined.

“After duly admiring the room, I begged for particulars. It appeared that a few years previously the jailer had been put in an embarrassing position by being sent a prisoner condemned to the unheard-of sentence of one year’s imprisonment. At first he was at a loss how to occupy the culprit’s time, until the brilliant idea came to him to have his dining room papered with postage stamps. He already had a good number, but they were only sufficient to cover a few square feet of wall. So he went about the island begging his friends ... to collect stamps for him. The result was that by the time the original sentence expired, the whole job was done to everybody’s satisfaction, and today the jailer’s dining room is one of the principal marvels of Jamestown”.

But no longer, I suspect.

**St Helena and Dependencies Philatelic Society Newsletter, April 1987, Vol. XI, No. 2, pp. 11-14.**

© A.H. Schulenburg. Reproduced with permission.