

SURGEON IN BORNEO: PRIEST IN ST HELENA

by Trevor W. Hearl

“Both Borneo and St Helena are exceptionally odd, and for a surgeon to take Holy Orders is very odd indeed [...]. A surgeon-priest is almost as rare as a pregnant archbishop!”

Thus Michael Crook - the Rev. Mr. Michael Crook, FRCS, challenges readers of his autobiography to accept the fact that he thrives on eccentricity. Some will find this an endearing feature of his racy recollections, particularly those intrigued by an unusually frank opening admission that “My paternal grandmother was one of the two nastiest women I have met anywhere in the world”. The title notwithstanding, half of the story is set in Britain, with a running commentary on family background, wartime school days and life as a medical student, before graduating into the main theme, the author’s career as a roving surgeon for the Shell Oil Company in South-East Asia. This provides the attraction, claimed by the publisher, for “readers who enjoy books about doctors in far-away places” while others, with an appetite for unusual locations in travel literature, will find an added bonus in the author’s recent experiences in St Helena. My review is aimed at those attracted by the rare sight of “St Helena” in the title.

Crook’s decision to offer himself as a non-stipendiary priest in St Helena was an outcome of coincidence and circumstance: the death of his mother, his miraculous recovery from a stroke, and Bishop Cannan’s willingness to provide training. Ordained Deacon in September 1985, and Priest a year later, he was only the tenth ordained in the 134-year history of the Diocese. After a period in lodgings, he bought one of the Island’s historic country houses, Farm Lodge, “for less than I would have had to pay for a fishing cottage in Devon”. As a bon viveur - he only travels first class - he appreciates the boon of domestic servants and the house’s “most important” feature, a good wine cellar. His comments on the Island’s “country Chippendale” among its furnishings make one regret that, as a writer with an eye for such things, he has not delved more purposefully into the subject following recent interest in Andrew Darling’s work in “Regency” St Helena (*Apollo*, May 1991, p. 307-311). On religion, “Father Michael” confines himself to personal views on Christianity rather than reflections on the Island’s religious life. Here was an opportunity, sadly missed, to complement Bishop Cannan’s inevitably more formal style of the *Churches of the South Atlantic Islands*, by airing the thoughts of a parish priest on the Church’s difficult task at parochial level. He seems to see his role more as “Mass Priest” than Pastor; “I spend my time quite literally preaching to the converted”, he asserts blandly without a hint at halting the decline in church attendance. With Island Anglicanism “a good deal higher than the dome of St Peter’s”, however, he does give a graphic snapshot of church life at St James’ where “the cloud of incense at the end of Mass [...] is such that one can barely see the

congregation”, when a zealous “incendiary acolyte” burnt holes in his vestments during the service.

As these quotations demonstrate, Michael Crook writes in a jaunty, colourful style - sometimes tongue-in-cheek, one would charitably like to assume. But he is easily tempted to be opinionated rather than informative, even in the face of reality. For instance, it is one thing on St Helena to “have no interest in the fate of a defeated Corsican Brigand”, but quite another to allege that “St Helena is not beloved of the Americans” because it was used to “liberate their kidnapped Africans”. This is a wild surmise, ignoring America’s historic maritime and whaling links with the Island as well as our own *South Atlantic Chronicle*, which promotes St Helena studies when Britain showed no such Interest Michael Crook clearly dislikes Americans on principle and so, annoyed on arrival at Farm Lodge to find “a letter from a mad American” offering to buy it at 40 percent above purchase price, vents his spleen without explaining that it was on behalf of an environmental education trust seeking the site for one of its study centres. And where is his £19 million school (p. 261)? Readers will have to assume that much of the “pre-St Helena” material is no less factually flawed (e.g., Hitler, though an Austrian - p.49 - did order the raid on Bath, but in reprisal for the RAF’s obliteration of medieval Lubeck crowded with Easter confirmees). Ironically, in the Preface he declares that “to the Surgeon everything is either right or wrong [...]”.

How far author or publisher share responsibility for schoolboy howlers I am not sure, but proofreading should have eliminated such solecism as “D’Oyley Cart”, “marshal law”, “nitch” (niche?), “Bosch” (not the firm but the tabloid press insult Boche) and others. Travel readers might reasonably have expected a few evocative photographs to supplement the written word, an index is seldom scorned when there are six empty pages to spare. To sum up for St Helena readers, while there is always something to be gained by reading about the experiences of others where they cross one’s own path, Michael Crook’s reminiscences do not add greatly to our understanding of the Island and appreciation of its people.

Crook, Michael. *Surgeon in Borneo, Priest in St Helena*. Lewes: Book Guild, 1992.

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