

TELEVISION FINALLY MAKES ITS PRESENCE KNOWN ON TINY ST HELENA

by Trevor W. Hearl

The media are interested in the media. Hence, as the last outpost falls to the blandishments of 'The Box', the world's press scrambles to report how this isolated island society will react to its loss of innocence. Sadly their questioning is spurred less by the benefits of television, opening a window on the wider world, than by the assumption that the small screen will somehow corrupt a "crime-free" community, hypnotizing "Saints" into becoming sinners.

These fears are as old as the written word. Parents once forbade daughters to read novels lest they became "pert, vain and troublesome". Newspapers, wireless, the cinema, and finally (once the BBC began beaming pictures into London homes 63 years ago) television, have each been blamed for fanning the embers of lawlessness. In the United Kingdom it was the onset of mass TV in the mid-1950's; in St Helena, videos have already been linked by the police to an unusual spate of violence and burglaries.

Is incitement by television likely to make matters worse? As it depends on the way viewers use their electronic Aladdin's lamp, only time will tell. Whether or not TV is blamed for future lapses of St Helenian rectitude, it must be asked how far the media is justified in calling St Helena a crime-free community? To the extent, I believe, that local skulduggery gives people no fear of crime or criminals; everyone goes about their lawful occasions unworried, night and day, in peace and freedom. The social cohesion created by a self-contained village of some 5,644 souls is to be cherished.

The policy of 'preventive policing,' probably inherited from Jamestown's former role as a colonial seaport, should not be underestimated either. It surprised a visiting BBC correspondent, but its effect can be judged from the small range of misdemeanours coming to court. For example, last year (April 1993 - April 1994) saw 95 convictions (91 men, four women, no juveniles); over one third (37) were for motoring offenses (14 related to drinking alcoholic beverages); another one-third (33) for assaults, 19 causing bodily harm; the remaining 25 for theft, nine for unlawful sex, and 10 for drunken and other behaviour causing "annoyance". There were also 11 recorded traffic accidents, many trivial. The Supreme Court heard four cases of indecent assault, two of perjury and two relating to drugs. A police spokesman told the BBC of worrying trends in unlawful sex and assaults on officers, but these figures suggest that alcohol abuse is a more corrosive cause of social mischief. Whether public-spirited campaigns against litter and vandalism (victims include picnic places, signposts, toilets and unique treasures like a Chinese gravestone and the Bellstone) have resulted in perpetrators being brought to court I cannot say as details of offenses are not reported in the St Helena News.

Figures cannot tell the whole story and if cases went unreported in the News last year, my estimates will be low. Even so, the trend gives cause for optimism rather than alarm. Official statistics show that, in 1988 for example, there were many more convictions (134) and traffic accidents (171, 31 resulting in injury), the annual average 1985-90 being 110. A generation earlier, 1967-73, with few traffic offenses but theft and assault predominating, the annual average was 101. This was St Helena's "crimewave", if it can be so called, as seen from the previous generation, before Ascension employment and development projects brought increased affluence. Then, during the post-war years four decades ago (1947-53), there were, on average, a mere 36 court cases a year. It needs a social historian to analyse these trends, but though cynics may say that criminal statistics reveal more about the vigilance of the police than the level of crime, the latest figures certainly do not suggest any recent increase in lawlessness. A lawless element may be getting 'machomania' from a diet of vicious videos, but St Helena society as a whole seems to be getting back into its normal law-abiding self. St Helena Television will inevitably be on trial after the big "switch-on". If the magistrates have less to do in 1995, that will confound the pessimistic pundits!

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