

THE RE-DISCOVERY OF ST HELENA A LITERARY ODYSSEY

by Trevor W. Hearl

The 500th anniversary of St Helena's discovery is still ten years hence - on 21st May 2002 to be precise - but in one respect celebrations have already begun. For this tiny British Colony of some 6,000 souls is enjoying a publishing boom unprecedented in its history having no fewer than ten new titles in print (or about to appear), and an entry in the *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Commonwealth Literature*. A literary odyssey seems under way to re-discover this little-known mid-ocean oasis that was once the East India Company's vital South Atlantic outpost enabling Britain to trade - and thus gain an empire - in the East.

St Helena's ten books may scarcely raise a ripple on an ocean of over 60,000 new titles a year, but wider issues than book-trade economics are involved. A gap in world knowledge has to be filled as, beyond our Eurocentric horizons, Britain's distant communities on St Helena and its far-flung Dependencies of Ascension Island and Tristan da Cunha spanning the vast South Atlantic, have faded into the unknown. It is vital that they are re-discovered. There are implications also for publishing, both for those with other rescues in mind and for those concerned about the values implicit in Fred Warburg's classic phrase, 'An Occupation for Gentlemen'. One of the ten new titles has a Seeker & Warburg imprint and, unlike the other nine, has already been handsomely reviewed, so let us tackle the known before the unknown.

The Emperor's Last Island [£16.99] by Julia Blackburn, describes her visit to St Helena in 1990 to descant on a well-worn theme. Books on Napoleon's exile abound; most plough familiar ground leaving more fertile fields fallow. So Miss Blackburn proposed, not the Emperor, but the Island, as the hero - or villain - of the piece. Inspiration came, she says, from hearing of Napoleon's "pickled testicles" in a museum "somewhere in the South of France," and admits putting St Helena "in the Mediterranean". St Helenians know how such qualifications for writing about them appeal in England, where also, as *The Sun* recognised [24 & 25 May 1990], "what happened to Napoleon's not-so-Boney parte" seems a matter of public concern. Sensing a winner, what publisher would guide a talented pen elsewhere? The work was commissioned, the Society of Authors gave "a generous grant" to go to St Helena to "accumulate a few floating impressions" and now, judgements apparently vindicated, its "dreamlike quality" captivates reviewers.

What insights has this literary odyssey to offer? Mainly, it seems, that St Helena always was, and still is, a place best avoided. The book's mood is the message, created by affecting a child-like innocence, weaving unrelated biographical asides into a recital of hearsay and rueful experience to produce an almost hallucinatory atmosphere. Such skilful literary legerdemain to evoke essentially personal responses

makes it feel impertinent to pry into the text to unravel fact from fancy, decry error, or doubt the wry portrait that emerges. Did Ascension Island's British, American and St Helenian contract workers scatter "like sheep" as the author approached? Is St Helena haunted by "poisonous spiders as big as a clenched fist"? Did she, after preparing so long, really pass Longwood House without knowing it? Such incongruities might be a form of subliminal wordplay, but I prefer to view her frequent quotations from Lewis Carroll as hints not to take it too seriously. As for errors, we all make mistakes, though to say with Tim Blanning in *The Independent* (19/12/91) "there is no point in getting cross about such slips", seems unduly lenient. Is there no limit? Or are we to accept tabloid press practice and rely on readers' ignorance with little understanding of the victim's susceptibilities?

St Helena sadly disappointed Miss Blackburn: "I hear myself ranting with indignation", apparently against the colonial system, personal rebuffs and the alleged "gypsy-brash modernity" of St Helena society. A lone reference to the kindness of poor neighbours excepted, she paints a drear picture of a litter-strewn landscape, of shops without stock, markets without fresh fruit and museums without guides. Officials are surly and St Helenians "permeated with despair". When asked about Napoleon or Fernando Lopez "no-one seemed to know anything ... everyone gave some garbled accounts". Yet live interviews by Rosemary Laurent and Charles Frater on radio and film have shown that a rich vein of local lore is there waiting to be tapped. St Helenians talk to those who listen but resent the glib judgements of passing writers. Is it surprising? Figs may not grow upon thorns, but as *The Emperor's Last Island*, commercially promoted, will reach far more readers than the books that follow, let us hope that some will be intrigued enough to read further. They will be rewarded by finding a veritable treasure trove awaiting discovery.

The other nine new titles under review are also the outcome of journeys to St Helena, though for these voyagers it was a stimulating experience which inspired them into print. Their books are welcome additions to South Atlantic literature for the best reasons: they meet local community needs; they are written and illustrated with care by acknowledged experts for the general, as well as specialist, reader, and they help fill major gaps in our knowledge of a sizeable segment of the globe. The impetus for this publishing initiative comes mainly from St Helena itself where education and commerce both require local literature. Teachers and pupils need it to develop a relevant curriculum in upgrading Island education at its well-equipped schools; commerce and government need it to publicise St Helena's wares - including fine fish and connoisseur coffee - and to anticipate visitors' needs when plans for increased passenger and hotel accommodation come to fruition. Publicity is the lifeblood of trade and tourism, the main means by which islands can earn a living today. And no British Commonwealth community needs to develop an income more urgently than St Helena. So briefly, what has been achieved to date?

Dr Alasdair Edwards of Newcastle University's Centre for Tropical Coastal Management Studies has provided the first comprehensive reference book on the *Fish and Fisheries of Saint Helena Island* [£15], lavishly illustrated to inform the general public and support careful exploitation of the Island's most prolific resource, not

omitting the tourist attractions of game-fishing and dolphin-watching. Another to extend recreational horizons is *Exploring St Helena: A Walker's Guide*, an illustrated, 80-page paperback by Ian Mathieson and Laurence Carter, a practical pocketbook with maps and sketches to help residents and visitors make the most of coast and country sight-seeing. Britain's scattered South Atlantic communities may have more centres of worship per head of population than anyone else in the world, and at last the colourful history of the *Churches of the South Atlantic 1502-1990* [£14.95/£201, dating from one of the earliest Christian sites south of the Equator, has been expertly chronicled by a former Bishop of St Helena, the Rt. Rev. Edward Cannan, in an attractive volume which includes the Falkland Islands. Archivist Anne Kotze was involved in a related pioneering project to microfilm the historic Diocesan registers in Jamestown, an unconventional assignment narrated with sensitivity and humour in *St Helena Journal* [£6], a gem of library literature issued in a limited edition of 300. For centuries St Helena's dramatic and varied landscape has astonished and puzzled inquisitive visitors - Charles Darwin claimed his solution of its creation among his life's great achievements - but no longer need anyone be baffled by what early navigators hailed as a "miracle wrought by God," for an excellent, inexpensive, up-to-date *Guide to the Geology of St Helena* [£2.50], in mercifully simple words and sketches, has now been produced by Dr Barry Weaver of Oklahoma University. And finally, the basic book for everyone with an interest in the Colony, Philip Gosse's island classic, *St Helena 1502 - 1938* [£16.50], has been re-printed with an Introduction by Trevor Hearl, already stimulating fresh research and re-evaluation of some long-accepted opinions, proving the urgent need to exploit the Island's rich, but virtually untapped archives, before attempting to update, let alone to replace, Gosse's lovingly crafted text.

Among titles in preparation, three are scheduled for early publication. The astonishing story of *The Endemic Flora of St Helena* [c.£20], now being rescued from virtual extinction with the help of Kew Gardens, is told by Dr Quentin Cronk and illustrated from Lesley Ninnes's splendid watercolours, to explain the Island's vital role in botanic history, its unique plant life and current conservation. An absorbing account of how education has been meeting the social and practical needs of Britain's South Atlantic communities for the past 300 years has been written by Miss Dorothy Evans MBE, from local records, extensive interviews, and personal experience as education adviser to the St Helena Government, to give a rare glimpse of a system which has ranged from slave schools to the latest community High School, involving the East India Company, Army schools and the Colonial Office on the way - an untold story of English Educational endeavour. Recipe books are always popular, and the promise of *A St Helena Cookbook* has already provoked lively interest, especially one compiled by a St Helenian author as experienced as Miss Pamela Lawrence, honours graduate and head of Domestic Economy at the Prince Andrew School.

Much of this achievement can be credited to St Helena's Education Officer, Mr. Basil George. He harnessed the support of authors who then sought publishers susceptible to their enthusiasm. In three cases these were universities. Others

turned to a small publisher in Oswestry, Mr. Anthony Nelson, collaborating with The St Helena Link, the colony's UK-based educational agency. His zeal for South Atlantic literature was fired many years ago as a peripatetic teacher on the Falkland Islands, visiting its scattered settlements on horseback!

South Atlantic Library titles are launched on more than goodwill, however. With print-runs restricted to between one and two thousand copies, subsidy is inevitable if quality products are to be offered at reasonable prices. Although the Colony's needs are numerically small and tourists still few, the St Helena Government has an enlightened policy of pump-priming approved publications in its drive to upgrade Island education, forge overseas links and foster the economy. This 333-year-old British community is to be congratulated for giving readers the chance to make their own armchair odysseys to the South Atlantic. Nine out of ten of them, it seems, will enjoy the voyage of a lifetime.

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