

# THE FIRST OF NEW BOOKS TO CELEBRATE ST HELENA ANNIVERSARY RELEASED

by Trevor W. Hearl

The first of several new books being planned to celebrate the 500th anniversary of St Helena's discovery in 2002 has come from the press. With the aptly crisp title *St Helena 500*, its compilers, Robin Gill and Percy Teale, describe it as "A Chronological History of the Island, from its discovery in 1502 to 1996". Some readers will already know Dr Teale's earlier compilations published in Jamestown by W.A. Thorpe & Sons, *St Helena 1502-1659* in 1978 and Governor Janisch's *Extracts from the St Helena Records (1673-1833)* in 1981. Long out of print, he has now, with his nephew Robin Gill, rearranged these handy sources with additional guidelines, covering the period from 1502 to 1833, adding a new part, listing some dozen or so events a year to cover the modern period, "Absolute rule by the British Government 1834 to 1996". The earlier parts give extracts from rare sources, such as Henry Gargen's Description in 1661 with its nominal roll of the first settlers, offering references to further reading and even invitations to write in for details on some topics.

The events of each year from 1659 are supported by the names of reigning monarchs and governors, population and shipping figures, and contemporary events in the "outside world", setting local affairs into a wider context. Readers will find plenty to interest, and even surprise, them. For example, natural disasters -- rockfalls, rollers and epidemics -- have been far more frequent than is usually recognized; the extent of enforced emigration similarly becomes starkly apparent by its frequent mention, though confined to government assisted schemes. The unassisted flight of settlers, tradesmen and Company officials "of European birth or descent" went on silently and continuously, of course, adding to social and economic decline, as well as the St Helenian "diaspore" throughout the English-speaking world. And who would believe that, if the people had had their way in 1862, St Helena would now be called "Prince Albert Island" in honour of the lamented Prince Consort?

Readers will naturally enjoy meeting the unexpected in areas of their own particular interest. In sport, for instance, apart from cricket and football leagues, occasional regattas are noted as well as some 15 seasons of horse-racing at Longwood. Economists will be intrigued to discover no fewer than four building societies and banks being founded (and foundering) between 1861 and 1922, joining a toll of lost investments in fishing and whaling. The optimistic Hong Kong businessman who was refused permission in 1992 to open clothing and shark fishing factories lost nothing but the opportunity! Investors who think that at least a brewery could not fail will find salutary evidence in 1847-64 and 1982-6. Islanders do not yet need reminding of the sagas attached to the enigmatic acronyms FRASHI (1965) and SATIC (1969), but before living memory is

exhausted, a thorough ongoing study of these defining episodes in Island affairs is urgently needed.

There is no shortage of topics to tempt readers to indulge in some historical sleuthing. Among headline-grabbing instances are the “defalcations” of funds by Government officials (1878, 1884, 1919) and other robberies (1887, 1888); the offer to take militant suffragettes into exile (1913); the visit of the Chinese junk Keying (1848); the mutiny of the West India Regiment in 1901; the “secret” attack by two aircraft carriers, two destroyers and 30 planes in 1948; and on the airport theme, the various studies since the seaplane crash in 1940 by South Africa (1943), Britain (1974), St Helena Airways (1986) -- and now again in 2000!

Scanning this 400-page tome provokes the question, can there be another village of its size in the world with such a rich history? And here we have only the compilers’ selection of topics. A more subtle dilemma than selection faces writers like Dr Teale, however, for whom, like someone writing a family history, the closeness of the relationship can be inhibiting. For example, what will readers make of “14 April 1971: Yacht Gemini removed from its anchorage by person(s) unknown?” Probably not a story of stranded, desperate yachties from Natal, of intrepid trans-ocean seamanship by Islanders, a dramatic landfall and claims for political asylum from an allegedly repressive colonial regime tyrannized by racist police! Is a bona fide history of St Helena possible, I sometimes ask?

*St Helena 500* is an ambitious project, published in a limited issue of 300 copies, promising a second edition in 2002. Whether this will give the compilers opportunity to reassess style and production, I cannot say, but proofreading, layout and typography do not enhance the text. As a “useful reference to the history of the island” it has much to tell us, however, in words, if not in pictures. For illustrations readers are referred to Robin Castell’s *St Helena Illustrated 1502-1902* (Cape Town 1998), whose 172 pages and 340 plates provide as comprehensive a collection of St Helena pictorial material, mostly in colour, as is likely ever to be assembled in a single volume. Like all secondary sources, it should be used critically; however, where you have a doubt, you are probably right to check.

Publication information:

Gill, Robin, and Teale, Percy, *St Helena 500, A Chronological History of the Island*. (Cape Town: Epping, 1991), (viii), 292. A4 hardback, £30.

Castell, Robin. *St Helena Illustrated (1502-1902)* (Cape Town: 1998) (xviii), 174. A4 hardback, dust wrapper, £20.

**South Atlantic Chronicle, July 2000, Vol. XXIV, No. 3, p, 16.**

© A.H. Schulenburg. Reproduced with permission.