

# THERE IS A SENSE OF *DÉJÀ VU* IN RECENT ST HELENA REPORTS

by Trevor W. Hearl

St Helena's recent Strategic Reviews and Development Reports will have given many readers an uneasy sense of *déjà vu*. It does not need a deep knowledge of the last 150 years of island history to recognize its ever-recurring problems of communications, skill shortages, low productivity and loss of purpose. Whatever the subject, every report - and St Helena, if perennially poor, is unfailingly rich in reports - has to face these fundamental weaknesses.

Hope springs eternal, however, and as each writer rehearses the same disappointments, so they repeat the same hopes for the future. Take Robert Sterndale's historic essay *Sancta Helena: an island 'in extremis,'* first published in 1891, as an example. There you will find all, or most, of today's fears and frustrations being voiced over a century ago, and if history is repeating itself, perhaps it offers lessons that can be learned with the valuable advantage of hindsight. To benefit from Sterndale's experience would also be a fitting way, in 2002, of honouring the memory of this courtly and gentle philanthropist on the centenary of his death in office as the last Victorian governor.

Robert Armitage Sterndale is best known in St Helena history as the governor whose conciliatory policies helped to pacify the Boer prisoners of war sent to the island in their thousands in 1900 and 1901. But his main career had been spent in the Indian Civil Service - he was a Mutiny veteran in 1857 - and he had a justifiable reputation as an authority on the fauna of India and Ceylon, with several highly regarded works to his credit of which he was both author and artist.

Sterndale's interest in St Helena was equally long-standing. It had been aroused by a visit in 1855, when he wrote an article about Longwood Old House which was published by James Elliott of Market Street. Ten years later, after a second visit, he wrote an affectionate and informative account of the island in a 92-page booklet published in London under the pseudonym *A Bird of Passage*. A further six St Helena papers came from his pen during the 1890s, either as booklets or articles in the *Imperial & Asiatic Quarterly Review*. "An island in extremis" was one of these, written in 1891 in support of the St Helena Relief Fisheries Fund. This had been launched by a group of benefactors who were planning to give the island a viable fishing industry by training and equipping fishermen and fish-curiers - salt fish was actually being imported at the time - so that the harvest of the seas could employ and feed local people as well as boost the economy.

Today's Strategic Review is still pleading that "far greater use should be made of the resources of the sea", though the economics of export are less favourable now. In 1891 their plans were well founded. Committee members knew their island; in addition to Sterndale they included John Charles Melliss (author of *St Helena*) [1875], Major-General Blunt (a former governor), Admiral Field, Sir James Mackenzie and Sir Robert Herbert - while their scheme of training and equipping a

community-based fishing industry had already been tried successfully elsewhere. So, with high hopes they lobbied likely sources of support, distributing no fewer than 5,000 circulars, while Sterndale wrote personally to 80 firms having business contacts with the island. It was all to no avail; only the committee members and two or three friends contributed. Not to be beaten, in 1895 a Company was setup, The St Helena Industries Ltd., to raise £10,000 capital in £1 shares, in the belief that it only needed some capital to kick-start an industry based on the island's own resources. But St Helena's track record was already too well known for shareholders to risk their own resources. After Sterndale's death, another St Helena Committee was set up in London in 1906 to no avail, and in 1909 a wealthy businessman, Alfred Moseley, who probably scorned committees, philanthropically financed the original Fisheries Fund scheme - and lost a small fortune. But that is another story.

When, in 1895, Sterndale became Acting-Governor, he reported optimistically that "the inhabitants are responding to the efforts being made for their amelioration". He saw "signs of increasing prosperity" not only in the formation of a Church Lads Brigade and Thomas Jackson's installation of electric light at the Pharmacy, but in more fundamental initiatives. They were, in fact, Sterndale's own initiatives, including revival of the defunct Agri-Horticultural Society, funding embryonic fish curing and fibre companies, financing a tea-planting project employing a "native" planter from his brother's estate in Assam, and furthering plans to encourage coffee and banana production, increase water storage and foster cottage industries.

Yet of these and other schemes - he wanted to light "Ladder Hill and the town by electric light worked by windmills", a century ahead of today's wind farms - only one survived him for a few years, and that was the Museum in the Garden House, set up with help from his friend, the famous big-game hunter turned taxidermist, Rowland Ward.

Sterndale did not expect success to come easily, "by a wave of the magician's hand", as he put it. It would all depend on creating "habits of thrift and industry", and that would take time. "But whilst we are thinking and talking", time, he feared, was fast running out for St Helena. Increasing isolation was one threat to the economy. The ships on which, with the garrison, so much depended no longer called - 450 ships in 1885 down to 211 in 1890 - due, the Harbour Master told him, to the lack of a telegraph cable. The cable came in 1899, but not the ships. The resulting unemployment led to the loss of "the young and able-bodied, seeking their fortunes in other lands [...] and the population dwindling [...] the strong and able departing, leaving the weak and aged and women behind, a pauper residuum". All this and the chronic neglect of water, wood and horticulture weakened Britain's "Gibraltar of the South Atlantic" and threatened the very future of the community itself. At the root of the problem Sterndale diagnosed "the insouciance of the Saint Helenian", as he politely expressed it. His Annual Reports to the Colonial Secretary in London frequently stressed the need to bring in British expertise and entrepreneurs, as it was "hopeless" to wait for "local agencies" to do anything. Yet outsiders are venturing into the unknown when they seek to blame the people for an instinctive reluctance energetically to adopt government plans for their betterment -

governors today complain that councillors fail to “own” government policies that they have agreed - rarely recognizing the implications of a life confined to a small, mostly barren and unproductive island. Admittedly fewer today are so confined, and yet no “incomer”, however sympathetic, can feel the pressures that force islanders to balance the conflicting expectations of their colonial masters with those of their own close-knit community. Being thus ground between the upper and nether millstones of island society certainly does not encourage personal initiative! Those who want to get on, must get out. While Sterndale regretted islanders’ lack of “drive” - he put this down to their East Indian origins and legacy of slavery - he appreciated other characteristics for which St Helenians have maintained a reputation:

They are to be favourably compared with the English agricultural population; with few exceptions all can read and write, and the language is spoken with greater purity than in many of our home districts[.]. In many of their cottages [.] are to be found neatness and a love of art in the way of pictures, and nearly all are musical. [.] They are a happy and contented people with little crime among them and much kindness in helping each other. Strangers are greatly impressed with the general civility shown to them by old and young. (Annual Report for 1898, p. 17.)

Yet this apparent contentment with their lot is perhaps a source of much of the misunderstanding. Philip Gosse, author of *St Helena 1502-1938*, provides a striking example of this. He was an experienced explorer of islands and sought the islanders’ point of view in finding a way out of their crippling economic depression in 1937. He found them “a happy, smiling people [.] a brave people [.] highly intelligent (whose) wants are few”, and his heart went out to them. He concluded: “Given just a little help [.] a fair share of their own land to cultivate and a voice in the government of their native island [.] (they) would be the happiest and most contented race in the world”.

Were it that simple, we should have found utopia. But inevitably Gosse read the situation as an outsider. He saw a “fair tropical isle [.] where peace and quiet reigned”, and therefore, “a delectable land in which he could retire (from) this world gone mad”. He added, “no newspapers, no loud-speakers, no income-tax, no lidos, no by-pass roads, no noisy crowds, no glaring posters on hoardings, no dog-races, no cinemas[.]”. Islanders must have smiled at his naivety, as they waited hopefully for some of these “benefits” of civilization to reach them and shatter their tedious silence. The grass is always greener over there!

Visitors today likewise see only one friendly family of polite and smiling “Saints”. Inevitable frustrations and divisions do occasionally break the surface to outsiders’ surprise, however, of which the Citizenship campaign is a current, if untypical, example. Islanders sometimes blame their quiescence for being ignored, yet most find it just as well to take things as they come with a patient shrug. After all, they have nowhere to retreat into anonymity - researchers are told that is what keeps their children so well-behaved - while extensive car ownership has shrunk

their island to a few minutes' drive from shore to shore, with nowhere else in their little world to explore. By U.N. standards, they now enjoy an affluent lifestyle with television, the Internet and higher education on tap - to say nothing of "newspapers, loudspeakers, income-tax, lids" and facilities undreamed of by Gosse in his "world gone mad" - yet current Government reports still predict the same future for them as envisaged by Sterndale a century ago, now doomed to become "an island of the old, poor and unemployable".

What is to be learned from this chronic dilemma? The most obvious lesson is that, for all its benevolence, British colonial rule has not been a success at St Helena. Nor can it be while islanders are encouraged to look to London, rather than their own resources, for salvation. Constitutional reform is presently in the air and "Saints" are asked for their opinions - and then told that their ideas "are not among the options on offer". Probably not. But everyone knows, and has always known, that St Helena's survival depends on making a virtue of its unique location and evolving a sustainable, self-sufficient economy. And that is not a political game, but a serious management issue. Until that is tackled, the ghost of our benevolent old Governor will still haunt The Castle muttering, "Plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose!"

### **R.A. Sterndale's St Helena Publications, Chronologically**

- 1855 *Longwood Old House*. Published by James Elliott, Market Street, Jamestown, St Helena.
- 1865 St Helena, *By a Bird of Passage*. London, Houlston and Wright, 66 Paternoster Row.
- 1891 *St Helena or nature's neglected citadel* (incorporated in *Sancta Helena*, 1894).
- 1894 *Sancta Helena: an island in extremis. By one who knew her in her prosperity*. London: W. Thacker & Co.
- 1895 *St Helena: the Gibraltar of the South Atlantic*. Reprinted from *Asiatic Quarterly Review* (London). New Series Vol. 9, No. 17 (January 1895), pp. 99-116.
- 1895 *Notes on the fisheries and other industries capable of being profitably developed*.
- 1895 *St Helena. Annual Report*.
- 1897-1901 *St Helena. Annual Reports*.
- 1899 "St Helena in ye Olden Tyme". *The Imperial and Asiatic Quarterly Review* (London), Third Series, VII, April 1899, pp.345-352.
- 1900 "St Helena in the Present Time". *The Imperial and Asiatic Quarterly Review* (London), Third Series, IX, No. 17 (January 1900), pp. 98-107.

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