

# The Trevor Hearl Collection at Rhodes House Library, Oxford <sup>1</sup>

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By John Pinfold

Trevor Hearl probably needs little or no introduction to readers of *Wirebird*. For many years a lecturer in history at St Paul's College, Cheltenham, in 1969 he was responsible for establishing the Cheltenham-St Helena Link, which provided educational services to the island. He became widely known as a 'walking encyclopaedia' on the history of St Helena, and in the course of over thirty years' research he built up what was generally recognised as one of the finest collections of books and other materials relating to the island's history in private hands.

At the same time, what is now known as the Bodleian Library of Commonwealth and African Studies at Rhodes House in Oxford, was itself building up a substantial collection of both printed books and manuscripts on the island's history, a process which gained added impetus when Rhodes House acquired a quasi-national responsibility for collecting on St Helena under the SCOLMA Area Specialisation Scheme. <sup>2</sup> In addition to a substantial book collection, the Library also holds long runs of government publications and important archival collections, including the papers of Sir John Field (Governor, 1962-1968) and of Lady Field, letters of the Zulu king Dinizulu from when he was a prisoner on the island, and two albums of photographs and ephemera collected by J. Northout, a Boer prisoner of war on the island during the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902. And held on deposit is the extensive archive of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG), which contains long runs of reports and correspondence from the ministers it maintained on St Helena and the other South Atlantic islands including Tristan da Cunha (where Lewis Carroll's brother was an SPG missionary for a time).

The collections at Rhodes House were, of course, well-known to Trevor. Successive librarians became accustomed to receiving long

telephone calls from him relating to all matters St Helenian, and over the years he made a number of important donations to the Library. These included sets of the island's principal newspapers and his collection of videos. However, perhaps the single most significant gift which he made during his lifetime was a series of drawings made by Captain Guy Rotten in 1821, which include a sketch of Napoleon on his death bed. Given this history, it was no surprise, therefore, that he bequeathed the bulk of his St Helena collection to Rhodes House, and this was transferred to the Library shortly after his death in 2007.



From Trevor's collection of books, the Library selected over one hundred titles, many of them extremely rare. This does not, of course, reflect the full extent of his library as it is not the Library's policy, except in exceptional circumstances, to hold duplicate titles, so these were all items not previously in the collections at Rhodes House. Nor are all of them concerned with St Helena, as both Ascension and Tristan are also strongly represented, but it is probably a fair estimate to say that over three quarters of them contain material of relevance to St Helena. The earliest dates from 1700 and has the lengthy title of *The English acquisitions in Guinea and East India: containing first the several forts and castles of the Royal African Company from Sally in South Barbary to the Cape of Good Hope in Africa: viz James Fort in the River of Gambo... Accra. Secondly, the forts and factories of the Honourable East-India Company in Persia, India, China, &c. Viz Spawhann and Gambroon ... With an account of the inhabitants of all these countries: their religion, government, trade, marriages, funerals, strange customs, &c. Also the birds, beasts, serpents, monsters, and other strange creatures found there. Intermixt with divers accidents and notable remarks. With pictures. Likenise a description of the isle of St Helena, where the English usually refresh in their Indian voyages;* whilst the most recent from 2005, by Glennis Snell, has the altogether snappier, but equally informative, title of *The Knipe Family of Saint Helena Island*.

In between are many scarce items. These include a set of the *St. Helena Monthly Register*, 1810-1813, the 1857, 1862, 1874 and 1877 editions of the *St. Helena Almanac and Annual Register* (which, despite its name, only

came out occasionally rather than annually), Ehrmann's *Beschreibung der Insel St Helena* (Weimar, 1807), Alexander Beatson's *Flora Sta. Helena* (St. Helena, 1825), and Seale's *The Geognosy of the Island of St. Helena* (London, 1834).

Among the more recent books are many titles self-published or from small independent publishers, covering a wide range of topics from biodiversity through to questions of citizenship or family history. Trevor was also assiduous at collecting government documents (population censuses, for example) and the relevant publications and papers of international organisations and NGOs. It should be added that many of the books contain extensive annotations in Trevor's hand, an activity generally deplored by librarians and archivists, although it has to be admitted that in this case these annotations add considerably to the research value of the publications.

All of these books have now been catalogued and they are shelved together as a special collection with a shelfmark beginning 'Hearl'. The majority have also been boxed in individually made acid-free archival boxes to preserve them for the future. They can all be found on Oxford University's online catalogue, known as SOLO: <http://solo.bodleian.ox.ac.uk>.

Quite apart from the many fine prints to be found in some of the older printed books, the collection is especially strong on illustrative material. There are dozens of nineteenth century prints and lithographs, a small but important collection of maps (including a unique early nineteenth century model of the island in relief), a large collection of postcards dating from the late nineteenth century onwards, and above all many hundreds of photographs. These include a set of contemporary prints of the photographs taken by Lilly (the earliest photographs of the island), together with the important sets of photographs taken by Gosse in 1937 and Charles Frater in 1962, as well as all the photographs taken by Trevor himself on his visits to the island.

Perhaps, however, the most significant part of the collection comprises the files of papers and research notes created by Trevor himself. These are arranged by subject and cover an extraordinarily wide range of topics. Just to give a flavour, they include files on East Indiamen, the Boer War and the Boer prisoners on St Helena, Huguenots, White Ants,

U.S. Consuls, Anti-Slavery Patrols, Missionaries, Fisheries, Friendly Societies, Development Projects, Flax Growing, Law and Order, Citizenship, Music, Armaments, Philately, the St Helena Flag, Observatory and Horse Racing. Indeed, nothing on the island seems to have escaped his eye at one time or another.

It should, however, be noted that these files are not always easy to work with, and that although some of them certainly include drafts of articles he wrote on St Helena, many, indeed the majority, are made up principally of photocopies of newspaper or journal articles, correspondence with researchers who were seeking his help on a particular topic and random jottings or lists of data, sometimes in not a very logical order. They are by and large his research notes, representing work in progress rather than neat and easily comprehensible summaries of each topic; making sense of each file can therefore take time, and this to some extent explains why cataloguing them is taking longer than was first anticipated.

By way of illustration, the Library recently received an enquiry from a researcher seeking to know whether a particular willow tree in Cheshire had been grown from a cutting taken from one of the willow trees growing at the site of Napoleon's tomb. Examination of the file marked 'Napoleon's Willows' showed that Trevor had collected a number of newspaper cuttings on several trees, both in Britain and elsewhere, which at one time or another had been thought to have had a connection with the willows at the grave site. The file also contained correspondence with a number of people who had researched some of the claims, including with the researcher who had approached the library, thus bringing the enquiry full circle! The most we could offer was therefore a sense of the probability of the claim being true, and details of other trees with which it might be related.

Eventually it is intended that the catalogue of this material, like the book catalogue, will be available on-line, but until the cataloguing is completed researchers should approach the Archivist at Rhodes House who can search the interim list and make the boxes available in the reading room.

As mentioned above Trevor was often referred to as a 'walking encyclopaedia' on St. Helena. His generous bequest to Rhodes House Library has ensured that the vast store of knowledge he acquired will

continue to be available to the scholars of the future, with the entire collection accessible to anyone holding a Bodleian Library reader's ticket. It is strongly advised that anyone wanting to use the collection should contact the Library in advance, by letter, e-mail or telephone, and the contact details are as follows:

The Archivist

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1. This is a revised and extended version of an article which first appeared in *The Bodleian Library Record*, XX, 1/2 (April/October 2007), pp.140-141.
2. SCOLMA (Standing Conference on Library Materials on Africa) is the UK Libraries and Archives Group on Africa.