

# Writing About St Helena: Purposes, Motives and Preparations

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by Alexander Hugo Schulenburg

By and large, those who have written about St Helena have not made any secret of their purposes and motives in doing so. Writing in *The Scotsman* in 1960, Charles Campbell judged that "St Helena is not, and never will be, a popular resort. But if you are threatened with a nervous breakdown, or wish to write a book, or even just to turn your back for a time on the world of to-day, then, take a ship there."<sup>1</sup> That St Helena itself did not necessarily have to be the subject of any such book is acknowledged in local St Helena literature itself, namely in the 1888 short story *A tale of four Christmas Eves, long years ago in St. Helena*, which makes explicit the motives that brought the story's narrator to the island in the first place.

I am about thirty years of age, a women of independent means, and an equally independent spirit. I like to have my own way. Just now I feel very cross, for I cannot have what I had set my heart upon. I have been travelling half over the world trying to find the *Hero*, or *Heroine* of some really romantic love story, being determined when found, to write such thrilling novel that should altogether eclipse any book previously written; but every one seems too matter of fact for Romance, and I feel quite disgusted. When I arrived here a few weeks ago I began to pluck up spirits again. Surely, I thought, St Helena! with its historic associations; its thrilling slave incidents; its marvellous West Lodge Ghost Story, must also have its romantic love history; but no, I cannot hear any out of the common; people seem too prosaic for romance.<sup>2</sup>

Such may well have been the case with many a Victorian lady traveller.<sup>3</sup>

For other writers it may not have been romance, but the principle

remained much the same, namely that St Helena had a lot to offer to those who were open to inspiration, not least where the island's landscape was concerned. As Johnson and Bernard commented in 1805, "this place would certainly be a fine retirement, and give large opportunity to a philosophic mind, in observing and contemplating the works of nature."<sup>4</sup>

Xavier Pionkowski, hero of Val Gielgud's Napoleonic novel *Confident Morning*, appears to have just such a 'philosophic' mind, for it was upon reaching "Hutt's Gate, when the mist was cleared by a rising wind as swiftly as it had fallen, that Xavier could justly appraise the full significance of St. Helena, that 'little island' ... unreality, isolation, and most of the other attributes of the Inferno of Dante. ..."<sup>5</sup>

Such longings for philosophic contemplation are also found in the writings of Lawrence Green who, in 1956, recalled a stay on St Helena explaining that "[o]nce I spent a month on a lonely isle, hoping that someone would tell me the secret of that solitude."<sup>6</sup> Sir Cedric Morris, writing in 1969, "went there to paint and to study the indigenous flora and fauna. Also I was interested in seeing how the ex-slaves were faring."<sup>7</sup> Oswald Blakeston had somewhat similar reasons in 1957.

I was intrigued by a vanishing point on the map. What sort of life happens on St. Helena today? What are the inhabitants? Do they have a culture of their own? What sort of atmosphere does the place itself distil? Is there a European community with petty pomps and feuds? These were some of the questions I wanted to answer.<sup>8</sup>

Such attitudes though are questioned by Meg Hoyte in an article in *Homes & Gardens* in 1966. "What is it like to live on St. Helena, a small, remote island where history lies thick? It sounds idyllic, doesn't it? It's every escapist's dream, but dreams don't have to be lived in."<sup>9</sup>

Although travelling to St Helena, and writing about it, had for many individuals been a case of finding answers to their questions, however philosophical or mundane, for some it was also a case of seeing for real what was already familiar, as in the case of Quentin Keynes, writing in 1950. "Ever since I first read an impelling sentence about St. Helena which my great-grandfather, Charles Darwin, had

written in *The Voyage of H.M.S. "Beagle"* after a week's visit in 1836, I had dreamed of going to that remote island."<sup>10</sup> When Keynes finally came to make the trip in 1949 he "realized my fondest and most romantic dream."<sup>11</sup> Such dream fulfilment was the case not least for those who were fascinated by Napoleon, but for whom the history books alone did not suffice. This was certainly the case for Julia Blackburn, for "always in the background there is the fact of the island itself, the distant steep-sided stage in which this particular drama was enacted. [T]he island is as much part of this story as the man."<sup>12</sup>

And even if Napoleon was not the initial reason for a visit to the island, he was frequently the reason for why travellers' accounts made it into print, especially while he was still alive and in exile on the island. This is shown most perceptively in Vaughan Wilkins' novel *Being Met Together* (1944). "Merely to have seen St. Helena was to secure distinction; to have made the toilsome pilgrimage from Jamestown to the windy upland where was the dwelling of the former master of Europe, was to have earned fame: to have glimpsed, even if only through a spy-glass, a short figure in cocked hat and green hunting coat, was to become an author."<sup>13</sup> Authorship, hence, was simply thrust upon some.<sup>14</sup>

Even for those who set out for St Helena to find answers, the island was always already familiar and known by the time they get there, either in the context of other texts about the island or within that of general literature. For others, like for myself, the discovery of St Helena initially took place at a library.<sup>15</sup> Margaret Stewart Taylor, for example, "started reading about St. Helena before I definitely decided to go there, and, during the intervening months, I studied every book I could find dealing with the island, also Napoleon's captivity, and I familiarized myself with a map, so when I did arrive I knew the background and had some idea of what places I particularly wanted to see."<sup>16</sup>

According to Max Chapman, Oswald Blakeston prepared himself in a similar manner.

Oswell had been deeply engaged in research at the British Museum. Preliminary investigation had persuaded him that, in the manner of travel books about the Island, the 'Bonaparte



ticket' was heavily over-subscribed. *His* book must have wider parameters. And so he had brought his field of research back to the very start of the Island story: to the Age of Discoveries. Here there were rich seams of history to be mined which, for drama, suffered nothing by comparison with the Imperial Exile.<sup>17</sup>

In this case, not only does research prepare the traveller, but it also influences subsequent research and writing. Julia Blackburn provides comparable insights into how in the months prior to her departure she had "been accumulating more and more scattered pieces which all claim to belong to a jigsaw puzzle picture of this place I have never seen."

St Helena is becoming familiar to me, as a dream becomes familiar when you look back at it and watch its sequences as they repeat themselves on the screen of your waking mind. And when I have been there, then there will be two islands, the one that I have imagined and the one that I have seen, and although they will have some features in common, there will be others that have no point of connection or duplication.<sup>18</sup>

After so much preparation, it may hence not be surprising that writers will relate their impressions of the island and of their voyage there before they have even embarked on their respective journeys. This peculiar narrative device, to say the least, is employed by both Margaret Stewart Taylor in 1969 and Julia Blackburn in 1991.

Stewart Taylor, for one, tells her readers that "I should cross the equator [...] and when I got to St. Helena in November the climate would be warm and sunny."<sup>19</sup> Julia Blackburn, likewise, tells how leaving Ascension she "will travel for three days across an unknown sea [...]. Finally I will catch sight of the steep cliffs of St Helena, a fortress of rock with the clouds always banked up above the mountains on the eastern side. As the ship approaches the land I will see the white buildings of the port of Jamestown crammed into the steep valley."<sup>20</sup>

In the face of such foreknowledge, does the 'real' St Helena ever stand a chance of making its own impression? ∞

## Notes and References:

<sup>1</sup> Charles Campbell, 'St Helena: The Strange Appeal of a Remote Island', *The Scotsman*, 1960.

<sup>2</sup> 'A tale of four Christmas Eves, long years ago in St. Helena', Supplement to *The Mosquito*, 22.12.1888.

<sup>3</sup> For a historical account, see Dorothy Middleton, *Victorian Lady Travellers* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965). For a post-colonial critique of such an account, see Sara Mills, *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism* (London: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> James Johnson and J.G. Barnard, *Descriptive Sketches in India and China in H.M.S. Caroline* (London: Richard Phillips, 1806); reprinted in Percival Teale, *Saint Helena: A History of the Development of the Island with Special Reference to Building Civil and Military Engineering Works*, Vol.1 (Natal: 1974), 191.

<sup>5</sup> Val Gielgud, *Confident Morning* (London: Collins, 1943), 200.

<sup>6</sup> Lawrence G. Green, *There's a Secret Hid Away* (Cape Town: Howard Timmins, 1956), 185.

<sup>7</sup> Cedric Morris, 'Foreword' in Margaret Stewart Taylor, *St. Helena: Ocean Roadhouse* (London: Robert Hale, 1969), 11.

<sup>8</sup> Oswald Blakeston, *Isle of St. Helena* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1957), 11.

<sup>9</sup> Meg Hoyte, 'Life on Napoleon's Island', *Homes & Gardens* (October 1966).

<sup>10</sup> Quentin Keynes, 'St. Helena: The Forgotten Island', *The National Geographic Magazine*, Vol.XCVIII, No.2 (1950), 265.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

<sup>12</sup> Julia Blackburn, *The Emperor's Last Island: A Journey to St Helena* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1991), 4.

<sup>13</sup> Vaughan Wilkins, *Being Met Together* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1944), 429.

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of criteria of authorship, see Elizabeth Tonkin, *Narrating Our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 38-41.

<sup>15</sup> See Margaret Stewart Taylor, *St. Helena: Ocean Roadhouse* (London: Robert Hale, 1969), 16.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 67-8.

<sup>17</sup> Max Chapman, 'Oswald Blakeston Visits the Island in 1956', *Wirebird: The Journal of the Friends of St Helena* (Spring 1993), 18.

<sup>18</sup> Julia Blackburn, *The Emperor's Last Island: A Journey to St Helena* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1991), 5-6.

<sup>19</sup> Margaret Stewart Taylor, *St. Helena: Ocean Roadhouse* (London: Robert Hale, 1969), 17.

<sup>20</sup> Julia Blackburn, *The Emperor's Last Island: A Journey to St Helena* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1991), 6-7.