

DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE – TALE OF A TESTIMONIAL

by Trevor W. Hearl

The amount and variety of St Helena material appearing in the world's auction rooms, bookshops and print sellers these days never ceases to surprise me. How much can there be in the way of books and artifacts relating to a lonely village in the middle of nowhere? For the collector there are whimsical items like a pair of Napoleon's short black silk socks "worn during his captivity in St Helena" which in 1996 went for 5,670 dollars to a Toronto shoe museum, complete "with the dust removed when the socks were professionally cleaned". For the scholar there is more literary material, such as a file of Napoleon's medical reports, 36 MS items compiled by Barry O'Meara and John Stokoe, expected to realise £10,000 at Sotheby's in New York. Not all, by any means, are Napoleonic relics although it is difficult to convince auctioneers that if it comes from St Helena, it can be anything else. I nearly missed Kempthorne Testimonial recently as Phillips had catalogued it under Napoleonica though clearly dated 1859. Rescuing such items of the Island's heritage, apparently drifting to and fro like so much historical flotsam, inevitably involves a measure of serendipity which adds piquancy to the process. As the Testimonial is the latest example of this, 'Friends' may like to hear of its travels and capture.

The "Venerable Archdeacon Richard Kempthorne" was the Island's first Colonial Chaplain, though not appointed until 1839. He proved a loyal servant, both of the Church and the Island, labouring under difficult conditions for twenty years, earning the gratitude of his memorialists for his "Christian benevolence, pastoral kindness and urbanity of manners". They listed his qualities and achievements:

"[.]Your judicious Counsels - Your liberal support of every object, religious, social or intellectual - Our Churches enlarged and multiplied - Our Clergy increased - Our Poor instructed [..].

All this and more was enshrined in elegant copper-plate on a large (27" x 16") parchment, signed by almost 200 parishioners and decorated with attractive sepia ink sketches of three churches, St James', St Paul's and St John's, though the latter was not half built at the time. After his departure in December 1859 Kempthorne virtually exchanged places with Piers Calveley Cloughton, the first Bishop of St Helena, who had arrived on 30th October from his Huntingdonshire parish which Kempthorne now took over as Rector of Elton until his death at the age of 84 in 1888. Thereafter the Testimonial passed to his family, probably to Philip, the eldest of two sons born on St Helena who became a housemaster at Wellington College, Sandhurst, and it remained with them until offered for auction by Lawrence's of Crewkerne in 1875. With it were other St Helena items, a copy of Philip's Baptis-

mal Certificate “solemnized Longwood Chapel” (a room in Longwood New House) in 1841, a grateful letter of 1849 from the Officer Commanding Troops, Lt. Col. George Brodie Fraser RA, and a leaflet about funding “Our New Country Church” in 1847. Two other items seem to have disappeared, a sepia sketch of St Helena and a letter to his wife, Sophia. They were married in 1840, their first home being in Longwood New House, shared with Lieut. J. H. Lefroy RA and his team of gunners, with the apparatus for the Magnetical and Meteorological Observatory then being built nearby. Sophia was the daughter of Lt. Gen. Ainslie, Governor of Dominica, thus bringing together two distinguished families -Kempthorne’s Devon forebears included a flag-captain to Prince Rupert of the Rhine - and the Testimonial was among a collection of Ainslie-Kempthorne papers to come under the hammer in 1975.

The auction catalogue, thoughtfully sent to me at College in October that year by the well-known antiquarian bookseller, John Ruston of Commin’s Bookshop in Bournemouth, unfortunately did not reach me until the day following the sale. This mishap was disappointing, but it had its silver lining, for it had brought the existence of this hitherto unknown document to light and, at the price paid for these things, at least ensured that it would be in safe hands until finding its way back onto the market again. A few years later matters took a different turn, however. A mutual friend invited me to dinner to meet the then Bishop of St Helena, the Rt. Rev. Edward Cannan, who told me of his plans to write up the story of Christian witness on St Helena. As readers will know this was published on the Island in 1985 as an A4 typescript booklet, *A History of the Diocese of St Helena and its Precursors 1502-1984*, which subsequently became the basis for his enduring ecumenical study, *Churches of the South Atlantic Islands 1502-1991*, launched at the Friends’ meeting at Cheltenham in May 1992 a few weeks before his untimely death. Clearly the evidence from the Kempthorne Testimonial had to be made available to him, and there followed the toilsome task of tracking our quarry to its lair. I learned that it had been bought by Birmingham University Library, which would have provided easy access had they not done so on behalf of their Sociology Department, which in turn had acted for a Dr Ben Davis. Letters to him sent as directed, explaining our need for information, elicited no response. So all Bishop Cannan had to go on for his history was the illustration in Lawrence’s catalogue, from which by dint of a strong magnifying glass and local knowledge, he was able to quote the Islanders’ tribute to their departing priest (pp. 48-9). It was now a question of keeping an eye open for the document itself to re-appear on the open market.

St Helena enquiries seem to attract the most improbable coincidences, and this was no exception. A few years later, while having lunch at the isolated village hostelry of Llanyblodwel on a day out, I heard St Helena mentioned by someone at the bar who, I soon discovered, knew Dr Davis as an avid collector of St Heleniana stemming, he believed, from service on the Island as a Medical Officer briefly during the war. So there was far more than the Kempthorne Testimonial at stake. And thus it proved last November when I was alerted by John Lawson - another of those scholarly antiquarian booksellers to whom St Helena research is so in-

debted for its sources - that Dr Davis had died and his treasure trove had found its way to the auctioneer. Among the St Helena material were all the classic items, Brooke, Barnes, Ballasis, Melliss, Janisch, Jackson, Gosse and so forth, and also I suspect the copy of Beatson's Tracts (1816) for which Francis Edwards were recently asking £550, the one Phillip Gosse bought for 30 shillings pre-war but kept back when selling his library to Quaritch in the early '50's. But where was the Kempthorne Testimonial? It was fortunately spotted, though relegated to a Napoleonic section, by one of the 'Friends', Quentin Keynes, who knew I was on its trail and very considerately arranged for me to acquire it, with its associated papers.

This attractive document would make a fine exhibit in St Helena's new Museum. A copy, with signatures enhanced, would be even better, perhaps leaving the original in the St Helena Archive at Rhodes House Library, Oxford. But the Diocese also has an interest in it, so its future has yet to be decided. What will most intrigue descendants of its 195 signatories, however, is to see the actual signatures of their forebears just as they were neatly penned nearly one and a half centuries ago. How many of them still have family on the Island is impossible to say, though from the scale of emigration after 1859 it will be far fewer than the original subscribers could ever have envisaged. Of currently common surnames - Benjamin, George, Henry, Joshua, Peters and Williams - there are not twenty all told including the one and only Thomas, whereas old settler and Company families - Alexanders, Dovetons, Coles, Knipes, Masons, Pritchards, Sampsons, Scotts and Torbetts - are well to the fore, many with six or more signatures, the Bagleys with no fewer than sixteen! The entire absence of other historic family names, however - Bazett, Beale, De Fountain, Greentree, Harper, Leech, Powell, Wrangham and others - reflects the economic and social turmoils of the post-Napoleonic slump and the loss of Company patronage and trade after 1836 which forced many to forsake their homeland for colonial pastures new. Several 'Friends' will nonetheless be pleased that those of their forebears still in residence in 1859 paid tribute to the Archdeacon's long and loyal service, among them Eleanor Bennett of Maldivia, George Melliss of Oakbank (and his son John), Richard Howes and Felix Houze, George Bruce, George H. H. Broadway, Robert Pooley, and no doubt others I have overlooked.

Readers familiar with 'Victorian St Helena' would recognise some of the other well-known Island personalities of the time. There is Eliza Ross, widow of Governor Sir Patrick Ross; R. C. Pennell, the Government Secretary; Capt. Henry Mapleton RN, Summary Judge, Marshal of the Vice-Admiralty Court, and father, incidentally, of a boy to become one of the most notorious murderers in English criminal history; John Firmin, Registrar of the Supreme Court; Joseph M'Daniel, the Postmaster, and other senior bureaucrats, as well as Kempthorne's Anglican colleagues, "Geo. Bennett BA" and Ludwig Frey, the former Lutheran missionary from India. At the other end of the social scale one finds the names added of "Samuel John" and "Dick", carefully designated as "Liberated Africans"; while James Metcalfe's signature recalls the young carpenter who made Napoleon's coffins, a keen Churchman whose daughter Alice married Canon Hands, St Helena's

longest service cleric (1868-1910). Support also came from merchants - Saul Solomon (jun), Joseph Gideon, Dowling, Carrol, Wearne and others - and from the Freemasons of St Helena Lodge No. 718, but not from the military, only four junior officers of HM St Helena Regiment, and none from the Ordnance Corps, having signed.

So what of those conspicuous by their absence? The most obvious are the Governor, Sir Edward Drummond Hay, and Chief Justice, William Wilde, as well as senior Officers of the garrison. The latter may have been offended by Kempthorne's reluctance to allow full facilities to the Military Chaplain, the aptly-named Rev. Helps, who had given vital assistance in the early years when the Colonial Chaplain was single-handed. The recently formed Baptist community under the Rev. James M'Gregor Bertram, a missionary sent from the Cape as a reaction against the Arch-Deacon's High Church Anglicanism and the "social and spiritual squalor" of Jamestown, accounts for several notable 'absentees', including members of the Janisch family and many tradesmen. However, the fact that the Testimonial met a ready response from some leading merchants, who as a class were the backbone of the Baptists, yet not from the military, who were normally supporters of the Established Church, demonstrates how unwise it would be to draw conclusions too eagerly from such chance signings. I do not know how the signatures were collected, but it was probably by churchwarden Henry Gideon who may have had the parchment available, with pen and ink, at one or more services at St James', and perhaps St Paul's. It cannot have been easy. It was not like soliciting support for a protest! Indeed, to collect nearly 200 signatures in recognition of 'services rendered' is probably an Island record.

Let scholars make of it what they will, another piece of the Island's heritage can now be put to historical use. Histories of St Helena have sometimes been criticised for leaving out 'the people' though, unlike communities with a well-developed Press, there have been few publications recording the actions and achievements of 'ordinary' Islanders. Thus particular importance becomes attached to any source of names which dispels the fog of anonymity, if only momentarily. So, 'Friends' who would welcome a transcript of the Testimonial are invited to write to me for one. I cannot promise a photocopy of signatures as many are too faint to reproduce, but even a name may, for some, provide the missing piece of some ancestral or antiquarian jigsaw.

Wirebird: The Journal of the Friends of St Helena No 20 (Spring 2000): 9-12.

© A.H. Schulenburg. Reproduced with permission.