

RESCUING ST HELENA'S INCUNABULA

by Trevor W. Hearl

The news that unique surviving copies of the first books printed on St Helena had been sold to an American dealer by London booksellers Maggs Bros., behind the backs of their St Helena customers in UK, first broke at a meeting of 'The Friends of St Helena' last November. In response to indignant calls for action Charles Frazer appealed to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to intervene but was told that nothing could be done. Trevor Hearl found the purchaser to be a respected antiquarian bookseller, William Reese of New Haven, Connecticut who, when approached, sympathised with the aim of securing this important material for St Helena. But what was at stake?

In 1810, four years after its introduction by Saul Solomon for commercial work, Governor Beatson began to employ the press to promote schemes of economic and social development. For the next three years the first literary productions with a St Helena imprint, periodicals and pamphlets running to hundreds of pages a year, poured from the Jamestown press. It was this material - eight early publications and a complete run of St Helena's first periodical, amounting to some 1,900 pages - that was in danger of passing out of British hands. Of most, there were no other known copies.

St Helena's 'Caxton' seems to have been the hitherto unknown J. Coupland, named with "S. Solomon" on the title page of the earliest work, *The St Helena Monthly Register* of October 1810. It ran until July 1813, and though Beatson sent 12 copies monthly to East India House, until now only two incomplete sets were known. Here at last were all 33 issues, each of 40 or 50 pages. As Maggs commented, "Colonial newspapers of this date are rare enough, an entire run is a miraculous survival".

A bookbinder must also have been working in Jamestown as the colony's first books appeared in 1812. Here were no fewer than eight of them, the earliest being *An Abstract of the Laws and Ordinances relating to lands and tenures; and the moral and agricultural improvement of the Island* [...] 1693 - 18101, a 90-page compilation of material published by the Governor between 1810 and 1812 in the interests of 'open government'. Of the other seven publications, three were by the Governor - on the mutiny of 1811, agricultural improvement, and a 36-page letter to the East India Company's Court of Directors. More controversial were three - *To Masked Assassins, The Libel, and Fear God* [...] - in which the Senior Chaplain gave vent to his views on Island religious life; the fourth was a brief reply, to the Rev. Samuel Jones, by Secretary Thomas H. Brooke. After this it was not long before Solomon's press found itself replaced by the Company's own Government Printing and Bookbinding Department.

The story behind this "miraculous survival" has yet to be uncovered. Signatures and inscriptions on covers show that it originally belonged to Col. E.S. Broughton,

the unfortunate Lieutenant-Governor taken prisoner at Longwood House by the mutineers in 1811. He had good reason for treasuring mementoes of his unusually active service on St Helena under Governor Beatson. The books were neatly bound in one volume of about 500 pages, and the Monthly Register in two matching volumes, which helped preserve them in such good condition that even today the paper is crisp and unfoxed. "A fine set", said Mr. Reese. Needless to say, ephemeral imprints of this rarity do not come cheap. Maggs had catalogued them in London at £5,650; William Reese in New Haven raised this to \$17,000, reflecting market prices in America. After corresponding with Trevor Hearl, on behalf of The St Helena Link, a price of £14,500 was reached.

Institutions in UK willing to invest such sums in St Helena material are not easily found. Phone calls and faxes galore produced sympathy but no solution. The break-through came at the South Atlantic Islands Seminar in Cheltenham, where the case was put to Governor Hoole. He promised, on his return to the Island, to see what the St Helena Government could do. By 22 December - aided perhaps by the spirit of Christmas - he had found the magic formula: the *St Helena Monthly Register* would be acquired by The British Library, and the imprints by the St Helena Government in conjunction with the Heritage Society. In March these were returned to the Island by Andrew Bell who, at the Governor's instigation, had earlier invited Charles Frater and Trevor Hearl to The Travellers' Club to view this exciting acquisition of St Helena incunabula. Meanwhile the two volumes of *the St Helena Monthly Register* had returned to London and can now be read at The British Library's Oriental and India Office Collections (the old India Office Library) at Orbit House, 197 Blackfriar's Rd., London SE1 8NG, a ten-minute walk from Waterloo Station. The Shelf Number is ORB 30/900.

It now remains to justify this rescue operation by exploiting these new sources of material to enrich 'our Island story'. As it is almost sixty years since Geoffrey Kitching wrote on 'St Helena Printing-presses' (Gosse pp 401-6) and complementing Governor Hoole's recent praise of the printing office in Kenneth Bain's *St Helena. The Island, Her People and Their Ship* (1993 p.51), one timely topic would seem to be an account of St Helena printers and printing. 'Friends' to the fore!

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