

**Arthur MacGregor. *St. Helena: An Island Biography*. Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer, [www.boydellandbrewer.com](http://www.boydellandbrewer.com), 2024. GBP80.00, USD\$110.00, hardcover, ISBN 978-1-83765-088-0.**

This biography of the remote island of St. Helena in the South Atlantic appears as promising as the 2,700-foot-high Diana's Peak on the 47-square-mile craggy and impervious island. The 500-year history of this foreboding and often neglected British protectorate, which can be seen by shipping at 20 leagues distance, delivers much of what it promises. It covers even more than we might expect about St. Helena's biodiversity and the challenges always faced by inhabitants on an island that is 1,200 miles west of Africa and 1,800 miles east of South America. Its nearest neighbor is Ascension, 807 miles to the northwest.

The cover shows ships sailing past St. Helena's settlement of Jamestown, which clings to the base of red-brown hills, and glorious fortresses crowning the heights like an Aden.

Today, almost exactly 202 years after Napoleon arrived, the airport is opened to civilians. Less frequently, freighter ships call there and the Cape Town-to-Rio de Janeiro yacht races past. If forced to divert to St. Helena, you will want to have read this book. The island has been visited by many scientists and explorers, among them Joseph Banks, Charles Darwin, James Cook, astronomer Edmund Halley, William Bligh, William Dampier, and Frederick Marryat, the author and illustrator. Many of these were navy men.

This island has been forced to play host to enslaved persons from Africa, Burma, India, Java, France, the Maldives, Portugal, and Madagascar. There were also prisoners of war, including from Zulu chiefs and Boers, some as young as 14. Some of these were put to work in the malodorous rendering of whale blubber. Japanese sailors visited as early as the 1700s, and other prisoners include Bahrainis. Plans for Irish revolutionaries to be imprisoned on St. Helena were deemed too expensive and abandoned.

Islanders themselves were faced with the problems of feeding, watering, and exercising the existing population. Water was variously described as plentiful and flowing in brooks and brackish. Morale, even among those in power seems to have been low, with the reputation of St. Helena Infantry "perpetually blighted by discontent and indiscipline in the ranks, periodically boiling over into mutiny." In 1787, "a full-scale fire fight [erupted] in which 103 mutineers were eventually taken prisoner and 99 of them sentenced to death" (72). Other engaging topics are garrisons, troops, and, of course, Napoleon Bonaparte, without doubt the most notorious "visitor" to the island. He was exiled there after his 1814 banishment to Elba Island, his escape, then his surrender to the British in the French Bay of Biscay in mid-1815. He was shipped to St. Helena, a 67-day voyage that even his French surgeon refused

to undertake. MacGregor's writing is formal, yet also wry and humorous, as evinced in this passage: "Fearing that the vanquished emperor would become 'the object of curiosity' and 'possibly a focus for continuing ferment in France' – the government ...concluded that St. Helena would be 'the best place in the world ...for the confinement of such a person.'" Their reasoning included that St. Helena was "particularly healthy [with] only one place where ships can anchor, and .... the power of excluding neutral ships altogether.... Intrigue will be impossible and, being so far from the European world [Napoleon] will soon be forgotten." MacGregor adds sardonically that, "Few prophecies can ever have been so comprehensively unfulfilled" (151). He substantiates this with 15 pages of readable narrative showing how an Austrian botanist from the Viennese royal court smuggled messages from a mother to her servant son on St. Helena, and how the governor in charge, named Lowe, cut Napoleon and his retinue's rations of wine and food so steeply that they were forced to sell embossed silver to obtain wine and food. Predictably, the emperor fell badly ill and died – the intrigue regarding retrieval of his remains dragged on for years.

St. Helena was never classified a Royal Navy "stone frigate" or depot ship, like *Ascension*; nor did it play significant roles in World War II or the Falklands War of 1982. The book draws its strength from its organization and highly detailed research, covering initial contact with Portuguese and Dutch, defense, culture, danger, survival, and ironies such the sinking of a British transport tanker during World War II in James Bay by the German submarine *U-68*, which for 75 years seeped oil into the island it was meant to protect. The author seems happiest conveying observations of the island's natural offerings; with the most page citations falling under "animals, birds, fish, invertebrates," and "plants."

Readers will marvel at the author's photos taken hiking on the island and extraordinary charts showing shipping traffic past St. Helena over the centuries. An initial primer – in very simple and clear maps and terms – would have been helpful about where the islands are, how many have lived there, and why they matter, placing St. Helena in a global context. To some readers, footnotes clutter or push out the core information, while to other readers, footnotes provide needed information clearly and easily: this book is of the former footnote variety, with half a page or more devoted to them in some cases. Many readers will be drawn to this book and St. Helena because the subject matter is so obtuse. After enjoying this richly illustrated and informative text, readers will know a great deal more about St. Helena, and may be inclined to learn more and perhaps to attempt field research of their own on one of the most remote islands on our planet.

Eric Troels Wiberg  
Boston, MA