

# THE CONSTRUCTION OF ISLANDNESS, A LITERAL EXAMPLE

## St Helena in the Seventeenth Century

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### Introduction

Island identity has become a significant topic within island studies. It looms large within notions of islandness, not least within this third SICRI conference entitled *Culture and the Construction of Islandness*. Usually island identities develop slowly over centuries, predicated upon the characteristics of the root stock of the island inhabitants, including any intermixing between the first groups to arrive onshore and any later migrants, filtered through the available economic opportunities, all affected by the ecumene being an island with everything that implies. On occasion, however, the construction of island identity has been a more precipitate process, particularly where a previously uninhabited island has been caught up in European colonialism. A number of islands and archipelagos were uninhabited when truly discovered by Europeans and where these places were subsequently settled, the process of identity construction might be shortcut by the colonialists importing a population group with an identity already formed or in some cases planned. Then this identity would perhaps be challenged by the exigencies of island life. This process will be explored here with reference to St Helena in its early decades of settlement in the seventeenth century (Royle, 2007).

### St Helena

St Helena is a 122 sq km, mountainous (818m), volcanic island in the south Atlantic Ocean (15.55°S 5.45°W). It was uninhabited upon discovery by Portugal in 1502 and that nation used the island as a way station to refresh its ships returning from the East and as a sanatorium for sick sailors who would be left on the island to recover and be picked up the next year. St Helena was found by other nations and there was contestation over access to its resources: the precious water; opportunities for hunting goats and hogs that had been left on the island and gathering fruit and vegetables. There were skirmishes and a substantial Dutch ship was sunk in 1613, artifacts from it, including a large cannon, now forming the prize possessions of the island's museum (Figure 1). The Dutch claimed St Helena in 1633 but never settled it and the island was free to be annexed by the English East India Company (EIC or John Company) in 1659.

The EIC was one of a number of merchant companies set up in the Age of Discovery when European states including England, France and Holland “effectively vested a group of merchants with semi-sovereign rights abroad and a national monopoly at home” (Chaudhuri, 1981: 48). This was bound up with international trade (gold, spices, cloth, tea etc), early colonialism and even nascent globalisation as the companies and their European nations exploited (plundered?) the other continents for products and profits. St Helena was part of this process, a small but not unimportant cog in a huge trading machine. It had two significant uses for the EIC, firstly as a rendezvous for its ships. Each year the company would have a number of vessels, perhaps ten or twelve, trading in India and other places in

the East. They would return laden with spices and other trade goods, tempting targets for privateers or rival nations during the war-torn seventeenth century. The ships, armed merchantmen, would gather at St Helena, protected by the island from the weather and by its fort from any enemies, and then sail in convoy for mutual protection up through the dangerous waters of the North Atlantic, often further protected by the English navy. St Helena's second purpose was to refresh company ships with water primarily, also food gathered or, increasingly, produced on the island by the agricultural community established there by the EIC. This civilian group, largely of English origin, together with a garrison and also slaves formed the building blocks of St Helena's population, later to be enhanced by other bloodlines as the island's sometimes turbulent colonial story unfolded.



Figure 1: Cannon from *Witte Leuw*, sunk at St Helena in 1613

### Paper Utopia

St Helena was an English settlement with social mores, such as the position of women, transplanted from seventeenth century England. It was also a company settlement and it was the expectation of John Company that those people it sent to St Helena were “embark'd on common interest” (East India Company, 1701: 227), fully seized of company priorities (Figure 2). In addition, other more democratic contexts can be discovered regarding the new venture even if always encompassed within the capitalist imperative of St Helena's practical utility to the company. The mid-seventeenth century was a time of strife throughout Europe, not least in England with the miseries of its civil war and in which regicide had taken place. In fact St Helena was taken in 1659 in the name of Richard Cromwell, Lord Protector. Emanating from these social and political upheavals was much contemporary interest in ways in which society could be better managed.



Figure 2: East India Company arms above the gate leading into Jamestown

The East India Company was conscious of the opportunity it had to develop a decent, mannered society in the new setting of St Helena. It was to describe its attempts as creating “a levelling constitution” (East India Company, 1685: 272)—a direct reference to the Levellers, a protest movement that pressed for social and political reform during the Civil War. There were other social manifestos in circulation during the mid-seventeenth century from writers such as William Walwyn (McMichael and Taft, 1989) and James Harrington (1656), some building on the original *Utopia*, Sir Thomas More’s 1515 conceptualisation of a perfect society, itself set on an island (More, 1551). The word ‘paper’ is attached here to ‘utopia’ in the heading following Margaret Cavendish who used the fragility of paper as a metaphor for that of society. Cavendish herself had just published an essay, *The inventory of judgement’s commonwealth* (1655), a blueprint that looked forward to her better-known utopian work *The Blazing World* of 1666 (Lilley, 1992). The society and identity of St Helena proposed on the pages penned in East India House were crumpled and torn within a few years.

The company's governor on St Helena was always to have ultimate authority; the commission to Captain John Dutton, the first governor, made this clear from before the acquisition:

*we doe hereby require and command all our people whom wee have now appointed or shall hereafter appoint to reside upon the said island that they acknowledge and receive you for their Governour attending to this our commission and render unto you that respect as is due unto you and as becometh them to yield* (East India Company, 1659: 96).

However, there was also to be a council, which for 24 years had civilian representation, and one member of which, not an EIC appointee, was to keep a record of the meetings. The commission of the second governor, Robert Stringer, in 1660 required that six persons were to be members of the council, two to be appointed by himself and four by the civilian freeholders (planters) (East India Company, 1660: 177). In addition to the council, there were occasional mass meetings, General Courts, which would be held in the market house, not at the fort. No minutes of meetings (known as 'consultations') held under this early democracy have survived, the first records of consultations being from 1675 to 1676 in the British Library, whilst the earliest on St Helena date from the arrival of Governor Blackmore in 1678. By this time the composition of the council had been altered to make the civilian councillors a minority. Maybe there are no records because meetings were not held. Captain Richard Coney, third Governor from 1669 until dismissed in 1672, "managed all affairs ... without the assistance of the council appointed to advise him" (Sainsbury, 1932: 123). Coney was not the only St Helena governor dismissed during the seventeenth century and the chaplains were worse: a succession of drunks and rebels, several being mentally unstable, some not bothering to go to church. There was rarely effective leadership or guidance from company officials, it was not easy to get good people to serve on this remote speck, an insular reality that impacted upon the successful development of the island's society. There were other intimations of democracy in the early period. In 1660 when East India House wrote to Robert Stringer, then about 50, to promote him from deputy to governor, for all they knew he would be dead before the orders reached him. In such an event, or if Stringer would not take on the position offered, the freeholders had the power to elect "some able, honest person amongst themselves to bee their governour" (East India Company, 1660: 178). There were occasional elections, never for governor, but for church wardens and overseers of the highways.

Early instructions pleaded that people should "live together in love and amity" (East India Company, 1670: 203), whilst "the best waie for people to live comfortably and go more chearfully about their business" would be for five or six to "joyne . . . together that each may be helpful and an assistant to the other" (East India Company, 1660: 178). The plans were for St Helena to become a democratic, land-holding, tax-paying democracy. Even early slaves were Africans who supposedly would "voluntarily and without compulsion sail in ye ship" (East India Company, 1662: 73). John Company's attitude may be summed up by a homily issued to Governor Field in 1677:

*We recommend unto you the encouragement of the practice of true religion, virtue, justice and all honest and good converse with one another that none may receive wrong. But all just complaints may be afforded not only a hearing but all justice administered unto them that good may be encouraged and Evill persons for their crimes punished that the peace and quietness may be preserved.* (East India Company, 1677: 10).

## Identity and the Common Interest

With regard to identity, there were occasionally disputes even amongst the Company's military officers as to whether they were subject ultimately to the English sovereign or the company, but the company itself had no doubt that all (except the slaves) were, as stated, "embark'd in common

interest". To the company this interest was theirs and they became irritated that company goals were not being achieved by the people living on their island. John Keay has identified the company's changing attitudes, from the island being a "Cromwellian commonwealth of market gardeners" to it becoming "a plantation economy in which the erstwhile smallholders became feudal serfs obliged to work the land and supply recruits for the garrison" (Keay, 1991: 179). One example of a goal not being achieved which involves identity comes intermixed with another insular reality, that of vulnerability to attack. The EIC had made massive investments in fortifications. John Dutton's prime task in 1659 was to secure the island. He built the first fort at Chapel Valley at what became Jamestown, always the principal landing place and settlement (Figure 3). He and his successors also built batteries and smaller fortifications across the other steep valleys on the leeward side of the mountainous island (Figure 4).

However, in 1673 St Helena was lost to the Dutch who landed at a place beyond the fortifications, helped by an islander who obviously did not subscribe to the "common interest". Further, the garrison made little real effort to defend St Helena, being unwilling, it would seem, to die for the East India Company. Nor did the company ships then at the island harass the invaders and St Helena's inhabitants, military and civilian alike, fled in those ships to Brazil. The English navy regained the island a few months later, also landing at an unfortified place and the EIC had to face the humiliation of having to ask the king for their island back. They got it, along with a barbed comment about having to make better arrangements "for securing the island from again falling into the hands of the enemy" (Sainsbury, 1932: 271).

The company then had to repopulate St Helena and their original utopianism quickly faded. And so much for the common interest; in 1680 Governor Blackmore appealed—unsuccessfully—to East India House to be sent the same number of soldiers as he had planters to enable him to keep the planters "in good order" (East India Company, 1680: 123). By 1683 the EIC had decided to remove civilians from positions of power in St Helena (East India Company, 1683: 99), and in April 1684 the planters were dismissively described by the company as "loose and negligent" (East India Company, 1684: 179). The EIC had become particularly irked that there was no progress in producing a cash crop to defray what it had described as early as 1666 as "the great charge in its [St Helena's] keeping" (East India Company, 1666: 24). Company suggestions made during the seventeenth century in the missives sent down from England (in addition to those regarding food crops) were that St Helena should produce aloes, betel nuts, brandy, cinnamon, cloves, cotton, cyprus trees (for masts), goats' wool, gum, indigo, iron, nitre, nutmeg, pepper, physic nuts, roses, rum, salt, saltpetre, sugar cane, tobacco and vines. Nothing worked and the EIC blamed the 'vain, fantastical, licentious' planters (East India Company 1687: 190). A more informed view might have reflected further upon the insular realities of St Helena, such as its scale and isolation.

St Helena was a cog in the large EIC enterprise and to John Company its identity was entirely subsumed within that larger reality. But to the planters, St Helena was their only home and their imperative was to maximize the relatively few opportunities it afforded them. A case in point was in 1681 when planters were forbidden by the governor to trade with a slaver, *Roebuck*, as it was against company interest to supply a rival's ship. To the planters, any opportunity for trade was beneficial so they protested, "tending even to sedition" (East India Company, 1681: 186). Shortly afterwards, in October 1684 the resentment by the planters against the EIC, which had been bubbling for some years, erupted in actual sedition. The catalyst for this was a dispute between a soldier and the deputy governor over identity, whether loyalty should be expressed to the king or the company. Four soldiers led a party of civilians to the fort and Governor Blackmore ordered the garrison to open fire. Three people were killed and 14 wounded. This was followed by the controversial execution of several others after which the EIC was taken before a House of Commons committee (House of Commons, 1688-1693) at the cost to its good name. A few years later its trading monopoly was revoked. After 1684 the paper utopia was torn to shreds. The watchword now regarding St Helena was to be "too

much pity spoils a City” (East India Company, 1685: 273). The planters were now to be kept down, disarmed.

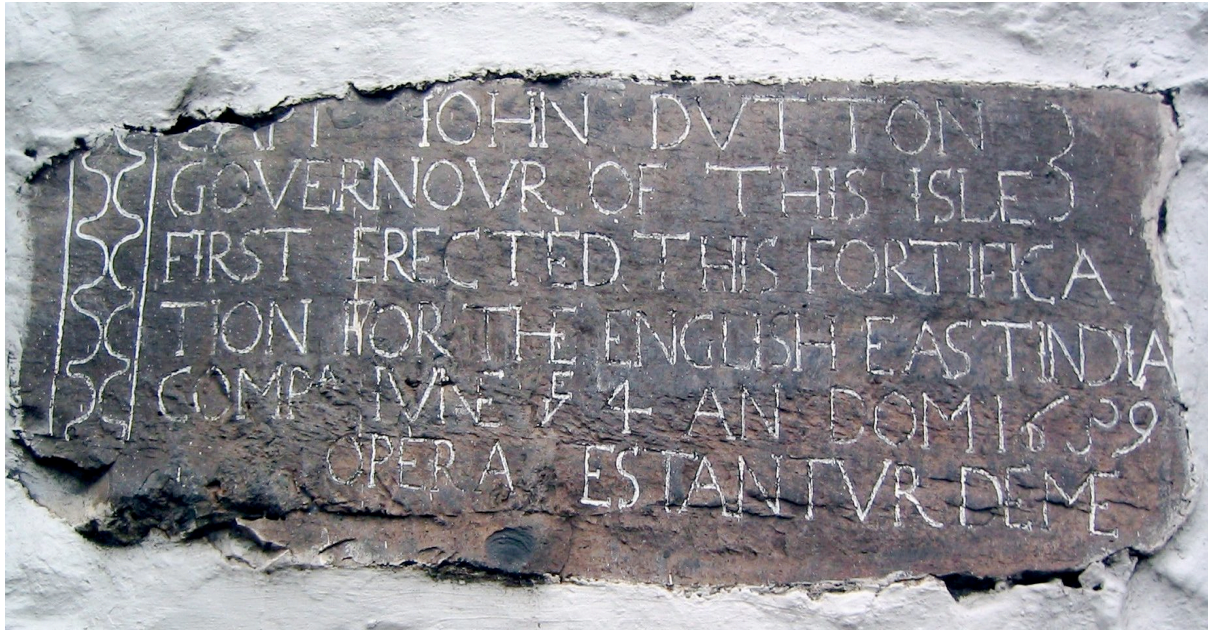


Figure 3: Plaque inserted into the wall of the second, present EIC castle of 1709, taken from the original fort of 1659

The garrison could hardly be disarmed and there was a mutiny in 1693 during which members of the garrison assassinated the Governor, Joshua Johnson. It would seem likely that the assassination had not been planned and that whilst organising a mutiny is the ultimate demonstration of not being signed up to the common interest, the motivation for the mutiny was simple greed. Its leader, Sergeant Henry Jackson, had been treated well by the company and would seem to have had no particular reason for resentment against its officials. The mutiny was successful; Jackson and his gang successfully captured a ship at the island and sailed over the horizon with the company’s treasure chest, never to be heard of again (East India Company, 1693). Two years later the slaves planned a revolt and this was certainly a reaction against their treatment. They were never regarded as stakeholders in the enterprise and were always subject to cruelty and suspicion, although receiving some care and protection under medical, legal and educational systems if only to make them more efficient. Slaves were property, but they were expensive and valuable property. Their revolt failed. The plot was revealed by a slave; there was no unity within the slave population. The ringleaders were executed horribly but other plotters were subject only to corporal punishment “yea even next unto death” in order that they would survive to be able to carry on working (East India Company, 1695: 260).



Figure 4: Fortifications from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries on Munden's Point, which protected the approach to Chapel Valley

## Conclusion

On St Helena in the seventeenth century was the opportunity to construct a new, potentially utopian society within the framework of a company possession. However, this was in a setting where negative aspects of islandness quickly became apparent: the social problems of isolation, with just a dozen ship visits per year and those seasonal; the lack of resources, which saw a desperate company strive mightily but unavailingly to find a cash return from their investment beyond the supply of water and basic foodstuffs; the small scale of the civilian enterprise, which saw the necessity to have slaves imported. A census for 1722 has survived which reveals a population of 924, a little under half of whom (406) were slaves (East India Company, 1722) and there were bitter racial divisions adding to those engendered by the settlers' contestation with their rulers, a commercial company that mistakenly thought that all there were "embark'd in common interest". Despite this, the island remained under EIC control until 1834, its utility to the company presumably outweighing the problems it caused. Numbers increased in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, reaching 6914 in 1851. Since then, times have rarely been good except when the island reprised its famous role as Napoleon's place of incarceration and benefited from being used as a prison again in 1900-1902 during the South African War (Royle, 1998). At that period the population was artificially inflated to almost 10,000. By then, however, St Helena's former principal economic activity of ship refreshment had declined as the age of sail ended and the opening of the Suez Canal reduced traffic in the

Atlantic. The continued inability of St Helena to develop a cash crop (other than flax for a few decades in the twentieth century) has also been a major problem and population in recent times peaked at 5644 in 1987 and presently is declining rapidly. All hope now seems to rest upon the future development of an airport, the island's strategic position of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries having long given way to a frustrating and troublesome inaccessibility.

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