

*One thousand, three* hundred and fifteen nautical miles north of Tristan da Cunha, the ship made its approach to St Helena. In the five days since Tristan we had seen not one ship. But there had been one moment of excitement when we took a detour to inspect a bobbing, tightly waterproofed cylinder – a discarded bit of ship's equipment, said the captain, coughing with embarrassment, because he knew as well as us that inside that cylinder was the kind of ship's equipment that could be chopped up into white lines and would keep the entire Royal Navy partying for a week.

Now, though, we had something to look out for. We were in the Tropics, and dawn was supposed to be breaking, but once more the sky was overcast. Bleary-eyed, I joined the clutch of passengers who were watching a Tristanesque lump of rock emerge from the gloom on the horizon. Two of that clutch of passengers were men from the island who had worked abroad for most of their lives and who now furtively rubbed tears from their eyes at the tall cliffs ahead of us – their first sight of their homeland for forty years.

Beachcombing is not a popular activity on St Helena for the very good reason that there is almost no beach. The one feasible harbour is at the capital, Jamestown. Because the rest of the coastline consists of impregnable cliffs, St Helena made an ideal island prison for its only famous resident, Napoleon Bonaparte, who was incarcerated here from 1815 until his death in 1821. Even better for Napoleon's captors, this Atlantic Alcatraz was also handily situated – 1,150 miles from the Angolan coast, 1,800 miles from Brazil. St Helena's nearest

neighbour is Ascension, 700 miles to the north. Hence its world-record status, to repeat the pub-quiz information of the first chapter, as the bit of land furthest from any other bit of land. Such is St Helena's isolation that the Portuguese managed to keep the island a secret, after they discovered it in 1502, for the best part of the sixteenth century.

St Helena's public profile is not much higher these days, being known, if at all, only as the site of Napoleon's imprisonment. I used to picture him in solitary exile on a rock the size of my bedroom, his uniform tattered, his hat at his feet beside a tea-chest of rations. The lingering influence of that childhood image, in addition to the recent memory of Tristan's Edinburgh, probably explains the shock I felt when I glimpsed a clutch of bungalows atop a cliff. 'Half Tree Hollow,' said a 'Saint' leaning next to me on the ship's rail. Then he said, 'Jamestown,' with an air of proud glee and pointed towards a harbour full of little fishing boats. The ship swung slowly round to reveal a straggle of buildings wedged at the bottom of a V formed by two steep, brown hills.

After a daft bureaucratic rigmarole conducted by four immigration officials who bequeathed me a sheaf of permits and papers and, with no little ceremony, another stamp on my passport, I teetered down the gangway and stepped over to a launch that bobbed across to the harbourfront. I jumped on to the wharf and once again staggered with my sea-legs along a swaying road to join the queue of passengers busy keeping their balance in a long shed. Here an inexplicable army of immigration officials smiled at us pleasantly and advised that we wait for the bus to take us three hundred yards into the heart of Jamestown.

The heart of Jamestown appeared to have suffered a stroke. The main artery, Napoleon Street, was deserted, save for a woman standing outside a hardware store and a group of passengers from the ship. They were walking up the street as if they were on a reconnaissance party from the Starship *Enterprise* checking out a suspiciously abandoned settlement. Jamestown itself looked just like the kind of stringently budgeted filmset that reconnaissance parties from the Starship *Enterprise* often found themselves checking out. There were a few vaguely Georgian buildings, notably the bright-blue Wellington House Hotel – leftovers from a TV adaptation of

*Moll Flanders* that jostled unconvincingly with the verandahed, tin-roofed frontiersville look of the cream post office and the worryingly rickety Consulate Hotel. Some of the vehicles that were parked aslant down the centre of Napoleon Street definitely had no place in this production, having been imported long ago from an early episode of *Z-Cars*. God, I hadn't seen a Ford Consul since I scorned short trousers. And Anglias! Those wee triangular windows with stiff catches!

The time-warp continued in the Consulate Hotel, where I checked into a room in a provincial boarding-house of the early 1950s. I parted the furry cream curtains and appraised the view – the reconnaissance party was still swivelling slowly around on Napoleon Street below, where they had stopped underneath a pair of old trees – the same trees where, in 1827, those five Saint women had waited to be taken to Tristan as spouse material (in exchange for some potatoes). A series of sun-bleached tin roofs led off to the left and ended all of a sudden when they came up hard against a red-brown cliff. A road had been cut into the side but there was another way up to the top – Jacob's Ladder, a laughably horrific set of 699 steep steps. I went out to have a closer look at the construction. Even with my battle-hardened experience on the helicopter winch, I managed to climb ten steps before returning (backwards and with my eyes closed) to ground level. I was told that a Saint called Paul Thomas can make it up to the top in three minutes, but any Saint above the age of five can make the downward descent in a minute less than that, using the locals' traditional sliding technique – lying face-up across the railings which rise on either side of the steps, extending the arms behind one railing, crossing the ankles round the other. Apparently, in bygone days of yore, little boys would do this to carry plates of soup from the cookhouse at the summit to the sentries below, balancing said plates of soup on their stomachs.

With a heavy heart, I had to accept that I wouldn't have the time to slide down Jacob's Ladder. First item on my packed agenda was a tour of the island in a car that made the Anglias and Consuls look like newly minted BMWs. Colin Corker's charabanc was a 1929 Chevrolet powered by an engine that dated from 1945 and sounded very much of that vintage, particularly when it was faced with a sharp

uphill incline. This happened quite a lot because sharp uphill inclines accounted for 50 per cent of the journey, the remaining 50 per cent being sharp downhill inclines. There is one flat patch of land on St Helena that might just serve as an airstrip, given a hefty amount of construction work and should the island ever receive the money or the permission from Britain to acquire one. Games of cricket have been played on one plateau inland, despite the difficulty experienced by fielders on the boundary; during one game, a fellow at long-on flung himself at a high six and off the plateau, the result being recorded in the scorebook as 'Retired, dead'.

First stop on the charabanc tour, a couple of miles inland from Jamestown and, it seemed, the same distance above the town, was the Briars, the house where Napoleon lived for his first six weeks on St Helena. The house was strikingly pretty with a superb view across the hills to the sparkling blue sea, but Longwood, Napoleon's permanent prison, beat it into a cocked hat. A French flag flies outside Longwood, the building is administered with French money by a French consul and the house and garden are in French territory. This spot of St Helena that is forever France is spacious, elegant and pangfully beautiful. You would not have guessed this from the accounts of many French historians, who had Napoleon cooped up in a hovel. But I suppose he was used to grander accommodation than a well-appointed house surrounded by a gorgeous garden and marvellous scenery. The Duke of Wellington appreciated Napoleon's former lifestyle when he chanced to stay at his adversary's old place – just when Napoleon had arrived on St Helena and been quartered in a room in Jamestown where Wellington had stayed himself. The irony was not lost on the good Duke, who made a clumping jest to an aide: 'You may tell Bony that I find his apartments at the *Elisée Bourbon* very convenient and that I hope he likes mine. It is a droll sequel enough to the affairs of Europe that we should change places of residence.' Boom boom.

The ex-Emperor's next residence lies a mile away from Longwood, at the bottom of a damp, wooded hollow. As I squelched towards the empty tomb, I wondered why he had chosen this particular spot. Because it was appropriately sepulchral? One account states that he ended up here, in the Sane Valley, after he expressed a desire to be buried near the Seine, but I stuck to my own theory that he selected this

place because here there is no view of the sea which imprisoned him.

The choice was such an odd one given the wonderful sites Napoleon could have chosen for his grave, because St Helena's landscape is astonishing. Behind the wall-like cliffs lies a countryside as diverse as it is spectacular. When the charabanc had chugged laboriously above the barren slopes that hem in Jamestown, cactus and aloe appeared on the hillsides, then just as abruptly gave way to wild flax, which was suddenly replaced by eucalyptus trees, thorn trees, pines, hibiscus. As the charabanc approached each tight turn, nudging closer and closer to the stone wall that protected it from a long plunge straight down, I could never guess what lay ahead. One moment we'd be in the middle of Arizona, the next in the Dordogne, and a minute later we'd have swung into some part of New Zealand. And in the background would usually be a view of hills and escarpments that could have modelled for what I had always thought until now were completely unrealistic Renaissance paintings.

Dotted around this grand landscape were some country houses that rivalled Napoleon's tasty farmhouse, but best of all was undoubtedly the Governor's residence, Plantation House – a charming two-storey Georgian number done out in bright white walls with bottle-green shutters and with a large lawn that is home to Jonathan, a tortoise estimated to be somewhere between 130 and 260 years old. But most of the houses scattered inland were neat though noticeably unprosperous cottages. There were no third-world shacks, but the prefabs which served as a small primary school and centre for mentally handicapped children at Longwood came close. And the new homes of Half Tree Hollow, an area separated from Jamestown by the cliff adorned by Jacob's Ladder, had the misfortune to be built on a hillside so barren and ill-appointed that the residents were hard pushed to make the area look anything more than the sort of trailer park in American movies where Harry Dean Stanton stars as a forlorn alcoholic.

The charabanc had had to miss out a good deal of St Helena's 47 square miles, but since it would have been trounced in a race by Brian Sheedy's golf buggy or a strolling grandparent, the charabanc still took five hours to complete its tour. So as soon as I was dropped off back at the Consulate, it now being seven of a Saturday evening, I went out on the town to see what was cooking. Things seemed to be

already hotting up at an old pub called the Standard. The one room looked like the kind of saloon bar where you're considered a poof if you've got both ears, but the dozen customers regarded me, if at all, with not a trace of hostility, merely some puzzlement since I hadn't been propping up this bar for the past two decades. Reggae music hammered out of a ghetto-blaster with such force that I ordered a can of Castle lager using only my index finger. The décor was odd. A crayfish in a glass cabinet. An exhibition of unlikely banknotes. A poster for Oxford United's Milk Cup victory in 1986.

I fell into a conversation that was slightly limited in scope, restricted as it had to be to exchanges of smiles and thumbs-ups. The bloke i/c the ghetto-blaster, realising that the volume level was ridiculous, promptly doubled it. Having discreetly checked to see if my ears were bleeding, I swigged the last of my lager, bade my bar pals farewell with a raised palm and escaped to the Consulate Hotel. It was far busier than the Standard but, inevitably, far quieter. Hundreds of Saints and scores of passengers and crew from the ship mingled in the bar and the courtyard. It wasn't difficult to tell who belonged to which group. For one thing, all the visitors were white, whereas the Saints' skin varied in colour from milky coffee to espresso, while their facial features offered an intriguing and often extremely attractive mix – many Saints looked, to my eyes, Burmese, others Malaysian, and several could have passed for Polynesians or even Zulus. (There once was such a thing as a born-and-bred white Saint, but there are no longer any natives of, in the telling local phrase, 'high colour'.) But, more subtly than lack of melanin, it was prosperity that made us visitors conspicuous.

While I sat in that courtyard and drank several cans of South African lager, I puzzled over a variety of questions that had been floating around in my head ever since I had stepped uncertainly on to this island. Why was there so little to buy in the shops? Why were so many of the homes I'd passed by in the charabanc cheaply constructed? Why had I seen so little farmland in such an extraordinarily fertile, if daftly hilly, countryside? Where was the local industry? Why was St Helena so thoroughly, shabbily *poor*?

I was woken the next morning by harsh chirruping and cursed Miss Phoebe Moss, who, in 1885, freed five mynah birds on the island,

which is now overrun by the little bastards. I went out for a walk, down Napoleon Street to the old, stone-built church, looked in at the neighbouring prison, crossed the road to the police station, peered in at the shut museum, noted the floral display in the public gardens, inspected the stairs that led down from the older houses to the basement (the sometime slaves' entrances), idled in front of the hardware store, idled up to the market for a coffee at Dot's café, found the market wasn't open, and, for want of anything else to do, idled back down to the Consulate. Everything was shut. I hadn't seen a soul. Fair enough, it was ten o'clock on a Sunday morning, but there was the big event of a ship being in town – yet Jamestown looked as if it had been hit by a neutron bomb.

I sat down on the steps outside the Consulate and surveyed the surrounding emptiness. Salt Cay had had the same air of having been abandoned, but it had retained a magical quality completely absent here. I gazed across at the post office which, like everywhere else, was shut for the day, although out in the harbour there was a ship full of rich tourists anxious to part with their money for stamps or, come to that, any souvenir other than the plastic plant pots and nylon shirts that seemed to constitute the island's entire stock of consumer goods. And while I gazed, I finally gave in to the depression I'd been fighting. For the first time in my travels throughout Britain's far-flung outposts, I felt miserably homesick. Correction – I yearned to be anywhere but here, stuck in a ghost village on a speck in the middle of the Atlantic, where the only escape-route was a two-day journey by ship to Ascension or a four-day journey by ship back down to Cape Town. Six thousand people live on St Helena and, for the life of me, I could not see how. I began to appreciate Napoleon's strength of character in lasting all of six years on this island.

Appropriately for a country best known as a prison, St Helena's first inhabitant was another penal victim. Fernando Lopez was a disgraced soldier whom the Portuguese punished for desertion in India by cutting off his nose, his ears, his right hand and the thumb on his left hand before dumping him on St Helena in 1513. He survived on his own for ten years, evading many attempts by Portuguese mariners to find him and give him food, until he was joined by a shipwrecked slave boy from Java. Unfortunately, the two castaways

didn't get on. In fact, they hated each other – so much so that, when the next Portuguese ship called in, the boy told the crew where poor Fernando was hiding. He was taken back to Lisbon, a star, and to Rome, where he gave his confession to the Pope, who granted him a wish. Fernando requested that he be taken back to St Helena. He returned to live here for another twenty years, his only companions his pet poultry.

St Helena was annexed by the Dutch in 1633 but they didn't occupy it, thus allowing the British, in the shape of the East India Company, to take control of the place in 1659 and to use it as a supply station for their ships. When Napoleon arrived here, the island had to be leased by the East India Company to the government. St Helena had been visited by celebrities before – Captains Cook and Bligh stopped off here and Edmund Halley had built an observatory here in an ill-starred attempt to observe the transit of Mercury (he was denied by fog) – but the arrival on this remote colony, at a few days' notice, of the most famous man in the world, and his entourage, and a garrison of several thousand troops transformed St Helena into a bustling, significant, talked-about place.

Then Napoleon died. Bereft of glory, St Helena pootled along, cheerily unaware that in one of the future's dark alleyways catastrophe was waiting, patiently tapping a palm with its cudgel. In 1834 control of the island was permanently transferred from the paternalistic and generous East India Company to the British government. The new crown colony became poor overnight. By the time it had begun to recover from that first mugging, St Helena suffered another bad blow in 1869 with the opening of the Suez Canal. The shipping route down the African coast was already in a bit of a decline, but the Canal consigned the island to be a mid-Atlantic anachronism.

Seven thousand people lived on St Helena at that time – British soldiers and officials and the descendants of workers brought in here by the Company from the East Indies, of Chinese labourers and of slaves from the African coast and Madagascar. This racial hotch-potch did find a couple of sources of employment and hope when the island was used as an imperial cable-relay station and then for the growing and processing of flax. Impoverished as it was, St Helena



survived until the mid-1960s, when it received another blow. This time the devastating uppercut was delivered by the British GPO, which in 1966 changed from using flax to synthetic twine for bundling letters. It took one Post Office memo to knock out St Helena's economy.

And, as I could readily appreciate while I walked around a grimly tranquil Jamestown that Sunday morning, St Helena has never recovered from that single swipe. I know that sounds like a glib exaggeration, so I'll quote part of a recent speech given to the island's Legislative Council by the man I was due to meet at noon, Councillor Eric George: pondering the current state of the St Helenian economy, he stated, 'We have no economy.'

Belying his words of doom and gloom, Councillor Eric George turned out to be a tubbily avuncular chap, possessed of a round face that was made to gleam and twinkle. Eric also evidently possessed great qualities of resolve as well as affability; in 1954 he overcame immense problems and official apathy to set up the island's electricity network, and over forty years later, here he was, leading the island's fight for survival.

As Eric handed me document after document and we discussed the island's troubles, it became depressingly apparent that St Helena's bleak present looks set to evolve into a bleaker future. With hardly any private enterprise or indigenous industry, the island is almost entirely dependent on the aid it receives from Britain. This aid amounts at present to £8.5 million, but £5 million of that is spent directly by the British government – subsidising the RMS *St Helena*, for example, funding the ventures of the Overseas Development Administration – and over half of that money re-enters the British economy, so that part of the aid package functions rather like a toff handing out a fiver only to demand a double scotch in return. The Saints get to spend and benefit from the remainder, but that £3.5 million was about to be cut by half a million, and a good slice of the money would have to pay for the growing number of unemployed. There are 3,000 people in the island's labour force but, Eric explained, a thousand of those work in Ascension and the Falklands, usually in menial jobs and on contracts which condemn them to pensionless retirement. Of those who remain on the island, 200 were jobless (with the figure likely to double in the following four

months) and 120 were on a government work scheme, earning £25 for a three-day week. Unemployment benefit was £12.50, £5 if the jobless person could be classed as a dependant. For those who were in work, the average wage was £50. One of the best job opportunities for Saints was on the RMS *St Helena*, which can therefore boast one of the world's most intelligent and multi-talented crews; my cabin steward, for example, was an ex-policeman who had grasped the opportunity to double his earnings – to £5,000 a year.

The British government's cunning solution was to encourage a private sector that didn't exist by introducing cutbacks in public spending. The result was that, in recent months, an eminently peaceful island had seen a protest march by teachers and another demo when, in an unprecedented move, ninety people occupied the Governor's office. Eric had led the protest of the island's elected councillors, seeing his motion condemning the British aid programme passed unanimously. In reply, Baroness Chalker at the ODA had offered the serene reassurance that 'The ODA's aid programme for St Helena gives both St Helena and the UK value for money.'

On both the ship and the island, there were many, many discussions about St Helena's plight, mainly because Saints were sobbingly grateful to have any chance at all to talk to non-Saints about what was going on in their island. Wondrously good-natured as they were, devoted to Britain and proud subjects of a Queen they worshipped, Saints were becoming frightened, rather than merely very worried, and angry, rather than merely completely bewildered, by what the British government was doing to them.

I was to learn more about what British governments have done to St Helena after my meeting with Eric George, when I listened to three prominent islanders over a Sunday lunch hosted by George Stevens, the manager of the Cable and Wireless operation (the only significant private-sector employer, bar a couple of shops). It was an idyllic setting, next door to Napoleon's first gaff at the Briars and with a stunning vista of ravines, cliffs and sea. As we basked in the December heat and George's stereo played Christmas carols in the background, the conversation developed into an equally surreal account of life on the island.

Far from wanting to scrounge, Saints had to rely on British hand-

outs because every initiative the Saints had come up with had been blocked or cocked up by the British administration. Not for want of advice either, for St Helena has been inundated by ODA experts. As one islander said, 'If every consultant that came here planted a tree, we'd have a new forest.' I thought back to the contempt the ODA employees had inspired in the Turks and Caicos, to Jimmy Glass' fierce concern that the Tristanians remain self-sufficient or else the ODA would be called in and dismantle the unique and inspiring economy he and his compatriots managed, to Jimmy pointing in disgust at the ODA's great contribution to Tristan – the extension to the harbour wall, which was worse than useless because the islanders' own expert advice had been ignored.

I later found the reason for one potential moneyspinner for St Helena being stamped on; a plan to set up a 'St Helena' lottery on the Internet (whereby the island would receive 1 per cent of the proceeds merely for lending its name to the scheme) had been vetoed by Whitehall because existing legislation wouldn't allow it. But why didn't St Helena have a bank? Why had it taken the British administration so long (nearly two years) to respond to the Bank of Nova Scotia's proposal to set up in business here that the Canadians got fed up and threw the plan in the bin? Why was a Brit not being allowed to set up a hotel here? Why had a German entrepreneur been prevented from setting up a local brewery? Why had the subsequent venture by the ODA been to set up a brewery which brewed bitter, when market research, consisting of three minutes propping up the bar at the Standard, would have confirmed that Saints drink lager? Why was the land allocated for new housing concentrated on the hostile, arid slopes at Half Tree Hollow, and why had no proper infrastructure been provided there? Most puzzlingly of all, why was a country which had been described by early explorers as 'bountiful', 'an Earthly Paradise', which had once grown all manner of fruit and vegetables and coffee and cotton, now importing 95 per cent of its goods? Fruit trees whose distant relations had once provided South Africa with the start of its citrus crop languished untended, cotton grew wild by the roadside, and all the prime farmland was in the hands of the ODA, which had mucked around for years and years and years and come up with absolutely bugger all.

More shocking still is the fact that Saints can't protest about this state of affairs because Britain presides over a country which does not have a democracy and where there is no free press. Yes, Saints can vote but only for a council which has minimal influence and which is subservient to the non-elected governor and chief secretary who possess, to quote the admission of a high-ranking member of the Foreign Office, 'virtually unlimited power'. As for the local media, that consists of a government-funded newspaper and a government-funded radio station; since it is against civil-service regulations for government employees to criticise the government and since almost every employee on the island is employed by the government, the result is state censorship. To show that this is censorship carried out with great zeal, a Saint told me about the occasion when he gave a television interview under the watchful eye of John Perrott, the Chief Secretary, who on another occasion reminded a radio broadcaster that if he deviated from an approved script he'd be sacked. Terry Richards, the General Manager of the island's Fisheries Corporation, gave me several letters of protest he'd written to the *St Helena News* that had been refused publication; he wasn't a government employee but had been, technically, appointed by the Governor, who dressed him down for his effrontery and threatened to sack him.

Much though I wanted to, I can't cast the present Governor, David Smallman, as a moustache-twirling villain. His is a thankless task, implementing Whitehall's cutbacks, struggling, as all his predecessors have done, against the ignorance and indifference of the Foreign Office. The truth is that no British government has bothered about St Helena since 1815 and they haven't needed to because the Saints can't vote for an MP. Nor do Saints have British citizenship. The church – that rare phenomenon on St Helena, an institution free from government – is leading the campaign to have Britain recognise Saints as full British subjects, as guaranteed by a Royal Charter of Charles II. Instead, the British Nationality Act has granted Saints dependent territories citizenship, which denies them any right of abode in the UK and has, effectively, imprisoned them.

After one of the most amiable and depressing Sunday lunches I have had, George Stevens drove me down to Jamestown. We looked in at the church, where a special seaman's service was being held in

honour of the ship. Afterwards, the congregation shuffled out to watch one of the parades that the Saints love to indulge in. To a thumping drum and a tootling of bugles, down Napoleon Street marched the Scouts, the Guides, the Cubs and the Rainbow Guides. There was Eric George in his Scoutmaster's uniform. And Terry Richards, woggle askew. And George's six-year-old granddaughter April, heart-breakingly pretty and proud in her Rainbow Guide dress. Across the road Governor Smallman and Captain Roberts from the RMS *St Helena* were waiting in immaculate white uniforms. The two dignitaries snapped a salute as, to thumps and tootles, the Saints went marching in, Scouts and Guides and Cubs and Rainbow Guides all faultlessly in step.

For the second chapter in succession, I felt a lump filling my throat and my eyes filling with tears. In St Helena, however, I felt not humbled but humiliated, not privileged but mortified. This sweetest of British ceremonies, enacted by people who knew they were British although Britain wouldn't acknowledge it, whom its colonial power was treating like scum, could only make me feel profoundly ashamed. Nor could I find any comfort in the thought that my feelings echoed those of earlier visitors to St Helena. In 1985, Simon Winchester described the 'poor decisions, ignorance, insouciance, obstruction and unkindness' of Britain's treatment of St Helena. In 1980, the Conservative MP Sir Bernard Braine had produced a damning report which concluded that St Helena was suffering 'enforced dependence'. In 1958, another MP, Cledwyn Hughes, had been scandalised by the state of the colony. Philip Gosse, the eminently nice, optimistic, tactful historian of St Helena, had been driven to outrage by the islanders being denied the right to express their views or own land or be granted a dynamic, go-ahead governor; Gosse expressed his outrage in 1937. All I can do is repeat the fact: what Britain has done with St Helena is a scandal.

I think it is also an instructive scandal. I can find one commendable feature of the policy of successive British governments towards its remaining overseas possessions – the guarantee that it will respect the right to self-determination, that the colonies will be colonies as long as they want to remain so. But that is the one bright exception to an otherwise dismal rule. Six EC countries retain overseas territories and

five of those countries have granted full rights of citizenship to the people born and bred in those territories. In Dutch Aruba, French Guadeloupe, the Danish Faroe Islands, Spanish Ceuta and Portuguese Madeira, the same laws and rights apply as in Amsterdam, Paris, Copenhagen, Madrid and Lisbon, and people possess passports that allow them to travel freely to and from the overseas territory and the parent country. As I write, the only British colonies which have been granted full citizenship are Gibraltar and the Falklands. As it happens, these are Britain's two remaining colonies where all the inhabitants are white. Every other colony is waiting, more in hope than expectation, to see if the appalling British Nationality Act will be amended after the loss of Hongkong.

But the omens are not good. In fact, such is Britain's track-record in its dealings with its colonies that Saints might almost think themselves lucky. They have been denied the two prerequisites of a healthy and prosperous society – a fully functioning democracy and a free press – and they have been trapped, by meaningless passports and poverty, on an island in the middle of nowhere, but they are a damned sight better off than the people who used to live in British Indian Ocean Territory. This straggle of coral islands south-east of the Seychelles was once home to 1,150 people – until, without any consultation far less consent, Britain moved them to Mauritius, where they were flung into a ghetto and on to the dole. The islands were turned into a military base that Britain generously shared with the United States, and the United States generously waived its £7 million bill for the research and development of the Polaris nuclear submarine.

Lest anyone think this a glitch in an otherwise admirable post-imperial policy, some recent examples of decolonisation should also be taken into account. Britain pushed Dominica towards independence in the mid-1970s, without a referendum, and in the knowledge that the country would be in the hands of Patrick John, a corrupt, violent autocrat. Britain made Brunei independent in 1984, without consulting the inhabitants and against the wishes of the ruling Sultan. Britain granted independence to Grenada in 1974, in the certainty that it was consigning the island to the corruption and tyranny of Eric Gairy. There is also the humiliating case of Britain offering £80,000 compensation to the Banabans for having allowed phosphate mining to transform their Pacific island into a lunar wasteland; when the

Banabans took the British government to court, they lost on a technicality, but the High Court judge commented that Britain should still make proper amends because that was clearly its moral duty.

But when was a British government last guided by any principle other than those of not spending money or of staying in power? Britain has a clear moral responsibility to its colonies and St Helena shows how Britain has failed that simple morality test. Successive British governments, under no pressure save that of mere principle, have done as little as they can to fulfil their responsibility and have treated the place with apathy, ignorance or downright hostility.

The morning after the parade, while I packed my bags, checked out of the crumbling Consulate and walked down to the wharf, I reflected that those colonies which have achieved prosperity have done so without or despite British involvement. Tourism and offshore finance have paid for an effectively independent Bermuda. Gibraltar has managed to survive despite Britain's rapid closure of the dockyards, which had been the colony's economic mainstay. Tristan da Cunha has gone it alone and done its very best to preempt any British meddling. It took the disaster of a war for Britain to pay any attention to the Falklands. The Turks and Caicos Islands are a charming shambles. And St Helena is, to quote a previous visitor, 'an imperial slum'.

I had met a lot of people I liked very much on St Helena, but as I stepped on to the launch I could feel my shoulders slump in misery and relief that I was leaving. Then I bowed my head too, as I wondered what kind of future April could expect under British management.

A year after starting out, I was about to finish my imperial tour. What answer would I give to George V's deathbed enquiry: 'How is the empire?'

'Well,' I could say, 'it still stretches far and wide and it contains beautiful, fascinating places full of truly fine people . . .'

But the dots in that reply would beg another question.

'And?'

' . . . To be honest, your Majesty, it's not very big. And it's a disgrace.'