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Stephen Royle, *The Company's Island: St Helena, Company Colonies and the Colonial Endeavour*. I. B. Tauris, 2007. 227 pp. maps, tables, illustrations.

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Since the dawn of sea based empires long distance trade, and the protection of that trade from pirates, commercial and national rivals has obliged maritime powers to acquire and maintain strategic bases, way stations and simple refreshment stops. Their nature has changed across time, depending on technology, key trade routes and the nature of the threat. That said, human physiology and techniques of food preservation forced naval and commercial shipping to stop for food, water, fuel and rest. At the very least oceanic enterprise demanded a series of freeway service stations, preferably under friendly control.

Queen's University Belfast geographer Stephen Royle has focussed on the isolated South Atlantic rendezvous of St. Helena, best known as Napoleon's final prison. He is concerned with the initial occupation, settlement and administration of the Island by the British East India Company (EIC) between 1658 and 1720. The voyage from England to India took sailing ship crews to the limit of endurance, the voyage back took longer, and combined the age old threat of scurvy with piracy, and even full scale war between England and Holland, wars waged by the heavily armed ships of the competing East India Companies. In stark contrast to the strategic bases of nineteenth and twentieth century Great Powers, which were retained despite their cost, because they provided irreplaceable added value the EIC, as a commercial company, was anxious to make the Island self-sufficient, or even profitable, as well as acting as a vital refreshment stop and the assembly point for valuable convoys. London seemed more interested in balancing the books that serving the imperative needs of scorbutic ships. The resulting culture clash between the policy aims of company administrators in London and the planters, settlers and slaves who lived and worked on St Helena provides a large part of Royle's story. The Company's rule was documented in considerable detail, and the records of the EIC remain a key resource for historians of British imperial power.

Not that the best efforts of the Company ever produced a profit, surly planters, rebellious slaves, the odd mutiny, and a Dutch invasion left the colony in deficit year after year. At the heart of the problem lay the Company's concern to secure supplies for their own ships. They banned unauthorised trading with other ships, and imposed fixed

prices on crops and resources purchased from the planters. The planters resented the loss of profit, although they and their wives proved adept at servicing the all too human needs of passing ships. Tiny Jamestown, like any port, attracted loose women and disreputable dealers. Company attempts to control local morals proved no more effective than their desire for profits.

Briefly captured by the Dutch in 1672-3 during the Third Anglo-Dutch War, the Company was obliged to fortify the island, importing slaves from East and West Africa to carry out the heavy work of defence engineering in local stone. The slaves also provided labour for the planters, forming a significant proportion of the population, a population rendered fractious by a profound sense of isolation. Encouraged to settle by free passages, land grants and cows the planters soon demanded a greater share in the island decision-making process, with persistent complaints about taxes and the abuse of authority by successive Governors sent home to England. As the administrative power and the main beneficiary of the project the EIC had to deal with a variety of major challenges, a servile revolt, an uprising by the colonists and the odd mutiny, along with more mundane criminal actions of the settlers. The divergent demands of serving company, government and settlers proved impossible to reconcile, especially shut up on a tiny island a thousand miles from anywhere. The company displayed remarkably little trust in its own Governors and other servants. Not that many of them demonstrated themselves worthy of any more. In 1700 the French born governor accorded a visiting French party the opportunity to inspect the island: in 1706 a French squadron arrived, capturing two rich Indiamen in the roads. Company soldiers and the settler militia were powerless, decayed powder meant their cannon could not reach the French ships.

The garrison's futile cannonade in 1706 provides an apt metaphor for the history of all such distant outposts of Empire. In 1672 the island was captured, in 1706 it could not defend the very shipping that justified its existence. That a Royal Navy Squadron recaptured the Island in 1673 only emphasised the point: the loss of local sea control was enough to doom such posts, they could never be made secure. The high cost of defence, the limited scale of any practical garrison and the profit motive of the EIC left St Helena exposed, but only if the English lost control of the adjacent sea area. It survived because between 1658 and 1720 this was a rare, indeed fleeting occurrence, and as such the Company's level of investment was based on a reasonable assessment of risk. Later in the eighteenth century the island's defences were heavily upgraded, and remained armed and dangerous until 1945, but it was British naval power, not masonry and artillery that secured the Island. Local defences, however strong, could do no more than hamper a determined enemy. An impregnable St Helena would have been a costly nonsense for a sea empire; it lived and died with oceanic dominance, as a service station, not a fortress.

Reflecting on the experience of St Helena Royle concludes that such Company Colonies always failed, because national, commercial and individual interests were always in conflict. The EIC obsession with profit missed the key point, St Helena was vital for an oceanic trading company depending on the safe arrival of ships and cargoes from India. When the Company's trading functions were wound up in 1834 the island became a Crown Colony; the EIC no longer needed a service station, but the British

Empire did. Between 1834 and 1859 the EIC ran a far larger colony, India. When Royle concludes that London always 'knew best' he means to be critical, but the reality is that the Grand Strategy of a uniquely British Empire of trade, markets and naval might proved singularly effective across 300 years, and St Helena, whether it belonged to the EIC or the Imperial Government, remained a very useful cog in that vast machine. This impressive contribution to the history of colonialism, sea empires and strategy should remind naval historian that there is much good work going on in cognate disciplines, where questions and concepts may differ.



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