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# THE MARINES TAKE OVER

1817-28

No order for the permanent occupation of Ascension has survived. Perhaps none was given. It seems likely that one commandant after another simply pressed ahead with the formidable task of trying to make the island habitable, without any clear idea of how long the Navy might remain there.

For the members of the garrison – or ‘people’, as the ship’s company was called – this meant continuous hard labour: on the buildings, the defence batteries, the roads, the water supply, and the garden up the Mountain. An island log-book shows that stone buildings were already under construction by the autumn of 1817, and the daily entries give an impression of non-stop industry:

Saturday 6th September AM moderate and cloudy. People employed at the garden and assisting the masons cutting stones. *Julia’s* party at the battery, sawyers sawing plank, carpenter at the house at the garden. Arrived and sailed again the *Mary* merchant ship from Bombay bound to Cork.

PM ditto. Scrubbed hammocks, washed clothes. Rd. 68 gallons of water from cart.

On Sundays the garrison was mustered for divine service, and the articles of war were read; but after this brief respite the men carried on with what official reports always described as ‘the works’ or ‘the public works’. A surprising number of ships either called or sailed past. British and American vessels came in for water, but a fierce welcome greeted anyone suspicious. Ships that could not be positively identified were assumed to be ‘piratical’, and were either

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shot at or pursued. 'At 5.30 saw a Brig passing to leeward,' says the log for 29 September 1817. 'Fired two guns shotted [loaded with small shot] to bring her to, without effect.' On 23 October the islanders fired six guns shotted at another strange brig and drove her off.

So numerous were the distractions, and so persistent the shortage of labour and materials, that progress with the buildings was extremely slow. A report by a naval officer, Captain Thomas Brown, who inspected the island on behalf of his Admiral in November 1821, shows that even after five years' occupation the settlement was in a thoroughly decrepit state.

A plan of the garrison shows nine buildings spread round 'Regent Square', the flat space a few yards inland from Fort Cockburn and the landing place. There was a Marine barracks, a forge, a carpenter's shed, a cookhouse and various stores, but the report said that the stone walls were all badly built 'by someone who had not grasped the principles of masonry', and that the roofs were made of tarpaulins nailed on rafters 'at a very great distance apart'. The galley in the cookhouse was 'an old Frigate's, entirely useless'. One defence battery was mounted on a stone platform but was completely unprotected; the other was on a mound of cinders and 'did not appear capable of being worked'.

Two houses up in the Mountain Settlement were also in bad repair, and parts of the gardens had been overrun by weeds and shrubs. The livestock included five serviceable mules, which lived at the Springs, and two unserviceable ones, which had been turned loose. The number of wild goats was unknown, but certainly over 150, and there were eight or nine oxen wild on the mountain.

The garrison was clearly too small to run the island efficiently. It consisted of only thirty-one officers and men of the Royal Navy and Marines, two gardeners, a smith, a carpenter, a cooper, six Negroes, ten women and thirteen children. The women must have been tough, for some of them were sharing their husbands' troglodytic existence in the black cinder-caves at the Springs.

Captain Brown, author of the 1821 report, recommended that 'in the event of relieving these men [the garrison], care should be

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taken in selecting mechanics – viz., carpenters, masons, smiths and a cooper, for the purpose of keeping the buildings, drays, casks etc. in constant repair'. His advice was both sensible and prophetic: from then on most of the men who served on Ascension were chosen for their professional skills, and they spent the majority of their time exercising civilian talents rather than indulging in military pursuits.

That same year, 1821, Napoleon died, and so removed the original reason for the British occupation of Ascension. But by then the island had taken on another role, which increased in importance over the next twenty years – that of providing a sanatorium and victualling base for the ships engaged in suppressing the slave trade on the west coast of Africa.

From the first the Admiralty had realised that Ascension's climate was exceptionally healthy. In the steady, dry heat, moderated by the constant trade winds, and in what the *Africa Pilot* called the 'peculiar buoyancy and elasticity of the air', wounds healed well and men recovered quickly from the epidemics that frequently decimated ships' crews. There was a tremendous contrast between Ascension and the humid, fever-ridden coasts of Africa, where the British hunted the slavers both at sea and among the creeks and rivers that wound into the steaming jungle.

The brief of the West Africa Naval Squadron – established in 1819 and commanded by Commodore Sir George Collier – was to patrol the whole of the African Coast from Cape Verde in the north to Benguela in the south; but in fact it concentrated its efforts on the 2,000-mile stretch in the middle, from Conakry, in the modern republic of Guinea, to the island of San Thomé, off the mouth of the Gaboon river. The southern half of this sector – the Bights of Benin and Biafra, right in the crook of Africa – was the busiest theatre of all, and opposite it, some eight or ten days' sail out, lay the safe and salubrious refuge of Ascension.

Of the many ships that arrived at the island in distress, none did more damage than HMS *Bann*, a twenty-gun sloop with a crew of 135, which came in during April 1823 with a virulent fever on

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board. Men were dying even before she reached Ascension: the stark phrase 'Departed this life' dots the pages of the log-book during her run from the coast. So common was death that it was recorded without comment, among the other events of the day: 'Departed this life Henry Brown. Washed the lower deck.'

On 25 April the *Bann* anchored in the bay opposite Cross Hill and sent her sick on shore. One man died that day, another the next, two on the 27th, two on the 28th, and four on the 29th. Even worse, the plague spread to the garrison and took such a hold that it killed more than fifty of its members. For nearly six weeks the stricken ship rode at anchor, and even when she sailed again, on 2 June, she left the surgeon and the Master's mate behind to look after the invalids. Today a tomb on the beach, surmounted by a simple cross, records the disaster, the inscription ending: 'This tomb is said to contain the remains of 26 officers and men.'

After this tragedy, ships with fever on board were not allowed to come near the settlement, but were sent to a small, sheltered bay a mile and a half to the north. At first this was known as Sydney Cove; later it was called Comfort Cove, but as the irony of the name became intolerable it was changed again to Comfortless Cove. There, on a tiny beach hemmed in by some of the most terrifying lava on the island, the sufferers were put ashore. There was no question of any nursing; nor was there even any shelter, except what the sick themselves could arrange. Members of the garrison simply brought food and water overland and laid them on a rock or in a boat at a safe distance, firing a shot as a signal before retiring again.

The men who died on land were buried by their shipmates. Somehow they managed to scratch out graves in the ashy floors of the few narrow little gullies that can be found among the mountains of piled-up volcanic boulders. Today Comfortless Cove has a strange and somehow oppressive air. Being one of the few safe bathing places on the island, it is heavily frequented: the sand is fine and clean, the sea warm, clear, and shark-free. But turn inland, and you are confronted by the menacing black lava, which has a sullen and brooding air even under the blaze of the midday sun, and seems,

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