# THESIS/DISSERTATION NON-EXCLUSIVE LICENSE

| Family Name: Jennings | Given Name, Middle Name (if applicable): Owen |
|---|---|
| Full Name of University: University of Prince Edward Island | |
| Faculty, Department, School: Arts, Island Studies | |
| Degree for which thesis/dissertation was presented: Master of Arts | Date Degree Awarded: May, 2019 |
| Thesis/dissertation Title: Becoming connected: Remoteness and identity on Saint Helena | |
| Date of Birth. It is **optional** to supply your date of birth. If you choose to do so please note that the information will be included in the bibliographic record for your thesis/dissertation. | |

In consideration of my University making my thesis/dissertation available to interested persons, I,
Owen Jennings

hereby grant a non-exclusive, for the full term of copyright protection, license to my University,
University of Prince Edward Island:

(a) to archive, preserve, produce, reproduce, publish, communicate, convert into any format, and to make available in print or online by telecommunication to the public for non-commercial purposes;

(b) to sub-license to Library and Archives Canada any of the acts mentioned in paragraph (a).

I undertake to submit my thesis/dissertation, through my University, to Library and Archives Canada. Any abstract submitted with the thesis/dissertation will be considered to form part of the thesis/dissertation.

I represent that my thesis/dissertation is my original work, does not infringe any rights of others, including privacy rights, and that I have the right to make the grant conferred by this non-exclusive license.

If third party copyrighted material was included in my thesis/dissertation for which, under the terms of the *Copyright Act*, written permission from the copyright owners is required I have obtained such permission from the copyright owners to do the acts mentioned in paragraph (a) above for the full term of copyright protection

I retain copyright ownership and moral rights in my thesis/dissertation, and may deal with the copyright in my thesis/dissertation, in any way consistent with rights granted by me to my University in this non-exclusive license.

I further promise to inform any person to whom I may hereafter assign or license my copyright in my thesis/dissertation of the rights granted by me to my University in this non-exclusive license.

| **Signature** | **Date** |
|---|---|
| | August 22, 2018 |

**Effective date for use of this form: 2015-04-01**

**University of Prince Edward Island**

**Faculty of Arts**

**Charlottetown**

**CERTIFICATION OF THESIS WORK**

We, the undersigned, certify that Owen Jennings, candidate for the degree of Master of Arts (Island Studies) at the University of Prince Edward Island, Canada, has presented a thesis, in partial fulfillment of the degree requirements, with the following title: *Becoming connected: Remoteness and identity on Saint Helena*; that the thesis is acceptable in form and content, and that a satisfactory knowledge of the field covered by the thesis was demonstrated by the candidate through an oral examination held on August 7th, 2018.

**Examiners**

Supervisor _____
Dr. Godfrey Baldacchino

Committee member _____
Dr. Michael Fox

Committee member _____
Dr. James Randall

External examiner _____
Dr. Stephen Royle

**Date** August 7th, 2018

UNIVERSITY OF PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

# BECOMING CONNECTED: REMOTENESS AND IDENTITY ON SAINT HELENA

by

OWEN ALEXANDER JENNINGS

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF ARTS, IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTERS OF ARTS IN ISLAND STUDIES

CHARLOTTETOWN, PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

JULY, 2018

## Abstract

More than 500 after its discovery, the South Atlantic island of Saint Helena finally has an airport. I visited the island in 2016, between the construction of the airport and the first commercial passenger service, and interviewed Saint Helenians (Saints) on how this shift in access has already changed their island, and their hopes and fears about changes that might come with commercial air service. I used an inductive grounded theory approach. The location of Saint Helena and its history relating to connection is considered, introducing an exploration of the importance of connections to islands and the loss of distance in many cases. Saints are asked about the contributory factors to their identity, and uniqueness, friendliness, and aspects of isolation are prominent. The airport has been a point of consideration for decades, and Saints have pinned their economic future into a shift to a tourist economy, but also have concerns considering how that might change their island. Other aspects like the presence of satellite internet, and prospect of a faster connection play a similar role to the airport, presenting clear economic benefits while diminishing the island's distance from the outside world. Saint Helena has been set a high goal in benefiting from the airport, and the island's position as one of the few remaining aid-dependent United Kingdom overseas territories presses the case for greater economic sustainability, even if such a position may be a decade or more away. Saint Helena is a small island undergoing substantial change, and that smallness is unavoidable. Saint Helena will always be a remote island, but finally, after decades of economic stagnation, change is in the air.

## Table of Contents

## List of Figures

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

Saint Helena now has an airport. Air travel, the default mode of travel for travel across oceans, has, for passengers at least, supplanted ocean travel, changing how one of the world's most remote inhabited islands is connected to the world, allowing tourists a relatively quick and easy trip, and locals the chance to come and go without so much time spent on a ship, and ideally for a lower cost. For its entire history, Saint Helena has been connected to the world over the ocean, first as an important node in the East India Company's network, then as just another component of the British Empire, getting along both in economic terms but also its connections to the UK and South Africa, and finally, for the past 50 years, as an economically struggling territory with only its own small ship to regularly connect it to the rest of the world. Living Saints, as Saint Helenians call themselves, have experienced most if not all of their lives in this last state, making the construction of an airport not just a shift away from that long history of oceanic connection, but also an attempted move towards economic sustainability and maybe even growth, both at the island and personal level. Saint Helena's identity, linked to their islandness, isolation, and uniqueness, is likely to change, and islanders hopes and fears surrounding the airport, built up over a decade and a half of anticipation, are about to either be realised or forgotten. What does the opening of this new airport mean for Saint Helena, and what do Saints see in the future of their newly accessible island?

In October of 2016 I travelled to Saint Helena and spent a month there to explore these questions using interviews, relevant documents, and observation.

Saint Helena, is the most populated island in “Saint Helena, Ascension, and Tristan da Cunha” which is one of 14 British Overseas Territories. It is a remote island in the South Atlantic, and it finally has a functioning airport. The roughly 4500 current inhabitants have relied on ships and boats to travel to the outside world, and have travellers visit their island, and this has been the case since the island's first settlement. Since the first calibration flight[1] in 2015, the island has finally been reachable by air, and a number of medical evacuations in 2016 and beyond have demonstrated its lifesaving capability. In early 2016 the first test flight with Comair, the first airline to win the bidding process, was a success, but revealed unsafe levels of wind shear, leading to a delay to commercial service, and eventually another bidding process with different technical parameters. After a year and a half delay, another airline, Airlink, with smaller aircraft has finally started to operate weekly flights into Saint Helena's new airport. It was in this long delay, between the two bidding processes, when there was little public knowledge as to the future of the airport, that I visited the island to conduct my research.

For most travellers, Saint Helena is somewhere one does not just travel through. Saint Helena is somewhere one arrives at through purposefully going out of one's way, thousands of miles into the ocean. And by and large, cruise ships and their usually coast

1 This was the first flight to land on the island. Its role was to help calibrate airport systems such as navigation and landing aids.

or island hugging routes aside, we do not travel very far by ocean any more. For most of those who do travel the sea for work, Saint Helena might as well not exist, aside perhaps in an emergency. If, like ships of old, you have to stop at Saint Helena to re-provision, then something has gone horribly wrong. That leaves those with yachts, or yachties as Saint Helenians called them, as the primary group for whom an oceanic island as remote as Saint Helena is somewhere one could and probably would consider passing through, along with those taking a leisurely voyage up to Ascension on the Royal Mail Ship. But for most people, Saint Helena has been at the end of a very long line.

The airport does not fundamentally change this. Much like yachties stopping over, those with private jets suddenly have a possible stop-over point in the middle of the South Atlantic. The flight, aside from the occasional one continuing to Ascension Island, still positions Saint Helena as the end of the line. But that line is a lot shorter. Saint Helena may be peripheral, but on the right day, it is a matter of hours away from the continent, not days. A small plane once a week is just a start, and a lot better than a long voyage by ship every three weeks.

Go back 200 years, however, and the situation was very different. This small island in the South Atlantic was somewhere where many people did find themselves between places. This island, while not a hub as such, was a node on a large network. African, European, and Asian trade came through this island. Famous scientists like Charles Darwin passed through, and others like Edmond Halley sought such a location out. Before even that, the Portuguese used the island as somewhere they could reliably re-

provision their ships, but not settle, very much as a point on a line rather than ever being its end. These days are most likely gone, but the airport ensures the island can be somewhere to stumble upon without quite so much intention and numbers of days on a small ship.

Media attention focusing on Saint Helena's airport piqued my interest in the island and the changes that were about to occur. While the Saint Helena airport was being planned and constructed, there was still little media attention to this significant infrastructure project  on the island outside of Saint Helena. While I remember the construction being given a segment of the BBC Radio 4 news at some point, it certainly was not evident in wider circulation newspapers. As soon as there were signs that all was not going according to plan, Saint Helena became the island of “The World's Most Useless Airport”. The CBC in Canada headline read “Remote island builds airport, discovers it's too windy for planes to land” (“Remote island builds airport”, 2016). The British press focused on the cost to the British government, with traditionally broadsheet newspapers going with headlines including “St Helena airport costing £285m of UK money is delayed over safety concerns” (Syal, 2016) from the Guardian and “UK government spends £285 million on airport that’s 'unsafe' for most planes” (Plush, 2016) from the Telegraph. Tabloid headlines were a little more blunt, with the Daily Express stating “ UK aid spent on 'useless £285MILLION airport' in South Atlantic, damning report reveals” (Walker, 2016), and The Mail on Sunday leading with “Plane crazy: Inside the gleaming £300 million airport YOU paid for where jets can't land” (Cahalan, 2016). It was not just a non-functional airport, and an embarrassment for the Department for

International Development (DFID), it was 'a waste of your money', and a lot of it at that. Saint Helena went from an island that most British people had never heard of, to a key example in the case against overspending in DFID. Suddenly, Saint Helena was the island with the airport that did not work.

I arrived in a period of uncertainty after a test flight by South African airline Comair suffered difficulties landing as the result of wind-shear on the threshold of the runway. This was enough of a safety concern for the process of commencing commercial service to be halted until more testing was carried out, and eventually more suitable aircraft found. The first regularly scheduled flight, by another South Africa airline, Airlink, did eventually land, but a full year after my month spent on the island in October of 2016.

**Island Tropes and Preconceptions**

Islands have often been used as tools in literature and other media as a method of isolating a story into a distinct space, or to experiment with new ideas on a smaller scale. We have come to see islands as reflections of what we see in various media, including colonial notions and somewhat idealised paradisal ones. I will consider the utopian and paradisal depictions, and then the contrast between the rejection of some preconceptions in Hau'ofa's notion of the 'Sea of Islands' in the  Pacific, and the relatively empty South Atlantic including Saint Helena. What comes to mind when first thinking of islands? As Baldacchino surmised from asking people to draw islands on a sheet of paper, a small, clearly bounded, often round island comes to mind (Baldacchino, 2005). For many,

islands are strongly associated with the tropics, or at the very least are 'warm water' islands. Island tourism in particular has emphasised the tropical island, and the 'desert island' is a powerful concept in Western culture (Baldacchino, 2008, p. 40). And although archipelagos have their own allure, the 'desert island' trope reflects the notion of islands as being reasonably solitary, and decidedly not near the coast of a continent. They are also relatively rural and disconnected.

These tropes are just that, tropes. Most islands are not in the tropics (Baldacchino, 2008, p. 40), with a good many being in Arctic or sub-Arctic regions. While most islands are indeed small, many of the most populated ones (such as Great Britain and Honshu) are, logically, not so small. And the highly populated small islands are urban and often well connected (such as Singapore and Hong Kong). And even among small islands, most are either continental or clearly archipelagic. There is a highly idealised, imagined island that for the most part is not strongly reflected in most islands and the experiences of islanders. I am not going to argue that Saint Helena fulfils this criteria to the point, but in the discipline of island studies where there is a strong emphasis on the diversity of island experiences largely not conforming to these expectations, Saint Helena meets a lot of them. By being an isolated volcanic island in the tropics, Saint Helena is a statistical anomaly. It is no desert island with paradisiacal sandy beaches and swaying palm trees, but its isolation affords it a closer position to our initial impression of islands than most islands do. Stephen Royle calls Saint Helena “the 'ultimate island'”, not necessarily a typical one, but “a place where insularity massively affects every aspect of the history, environment, society and economy” (Royle, 2001, p. 210). While Saint Helena, for that

very reason, might not necessarily be a particularly good guide for islands that for the most part experience vastly less isolation than Saint Helena, it is perhaps useful in identifying the traits of extremes of isolation on inhabited islands. And, with the airport finally built, will “the ‘ultimate island’” status of Saint Helena be threatened?

> “The island has seemed the perfect form in the English cultural imagining, as the city was to the Greeks” (Beer, 2013, p. 269)

Much has also been said about the imaginary island. As Beer states above, the island is a tempting form at least in English culture. Obvious examples include Thomas More’s Utopia and the islands of Gulliver's Travels. The islandness of Great Britain and the remnants of its empire likely help perpetuate this.

Islands depicted specifically as paradise or utopia are common. More's Utopia was divided from the rest of the world in such a way that entry (and presumably exit) could be easily controlled (More, 2010, p. 58). Aldous Huxley's *Island* uses this same technique, separating a supposedly utopian vision from the rest of the world, although this example fails as it ends in invasion with the boundary of the island not withstanding the homogenising force of the outside world (Huxley, 2005). Previously uninhabited islands like Saint Helena or Tristan da Cunha likewise offered the opportunity for settlers to start with a blank slate with some control over the boundary.

Saint Helena has been described as both paradise and utopia, albeit with much evidence to the contrary. Royle states that early descriptions of Saint Helena as a paradise were written, but subsequent visitors dismissed such a view (Royle, 2007a, p. 23). It certainly was no paradise to Napoleon, who is quoted as asking “Has England no other colonies to send me to?” (Martineau, 1969, p. 106). Similarly, Royle suggests that Saint Helena was a “paper utopia”, where it was seen as a social experiment of sorts, but practicalities intervened to ensure that such plans remained 'on paper'. (Royle, 2007a, p. 37).

The anthropologist Epeli Hau'ofa sought to re-frame the islands of his Pacific home from the European colonial view of Oceania as “islands in a far sea” to an indigenous view of “a sea of islands”. This reflects a desire to consider islands not only as land but in the context of the connections between them and the sea around them, and also a much greater focus on the inhabitants of these islands, in all their similarities and differences. Hau'ofa tries to consider Oceania not as a small and powerless collection of tiny states, but suggests at the very least a potential for the inhabitants of these small islands to look beyond the divisions imposed by a hegemony that keeps Oceanians apart (Hau'ofa, 1994).

How does this optimistic view of Oceania relate to Saint Helena? The reason I consider Hau'ofa's view of an island society is that it is about as far away from Saint Helena as one can get. For many, if not most islands with at least some division from the mainland, some modified form of “a sea of islands” view of their islandness could apply. Similar forms of colonialism to the Pacific Ocean have been carried out across much of the

world, and a similar response by islanders is possible, albeit in many cases without an indigenous population or quite the abundance of islands present in Oceania.

For Saint Helena, even the notion of “a sea of islands”, seems distant. Saint Helena, and its fellow islands in the overseas territory, Ascension and Tristan da Cunha, are decidedly alone. While Hau'ofa attempts to look beyond the physicality of dry land poking above the water, the lack of islands within even one thousand kilometres of Saint Helena, is difficult to ignore. And Ascension, that nearest point of land, is largely a military island lacking what could clearly be called permanent inhabitation. At a stretch, one could suggest that Saint Helena is near both Tristan da Cunha to the south and Annobón as well as São Tomé and Príncipe to the north, but Saint Helena is closer to mainland Angola than to either. Quite bluntly, there are no islands in this sea, except of course for Saint Helena itself. There is a case to be made that the inhabited British overseas territories in the Atlantic have an affinity for each other; Saint Helena, Ascension, and Tristan da Cunha, alongside the Falkland Islands. Indeed, many Saints move to Ascension and the Falkland Islands for work. This comes to the second part of the inapplicability of Hau'ofa's “sea of islands”, the singular colonial power with no indigenous population. Saint Helena lies alone in an empty ocean, with links to the outside world forged more by utility than location alone. While many Saints have strong links to Cape Town or to a smattering of towns across the UK, their being in the South Atlantic, and indeed their being African by most accounts, sometimes seems inconsequential for Saints for whom Saint Helena and the outside world might as well be a binary, with the use of phrases like “outside world” used by them in my interviews.

Saint Helena does not feel like one of many islands, but *the* island. It's not part of a meaningful archipelago, although it does have a few very small uninhabited islands off of its rocky coast. It's not just an extension of Angola or Namibia, as more continental islands might tend to be. In my experience, even listening to the African edition of the BBC World Service seemed at odds with life on the island. While Saint Helena's location clearly determined its history, including most famously as a prison, it almost seems locationless, separated from Africa by five long days of sailing in an empty ocean. If Hau'ofa's work, as some have suggested, refutes the notion that islands are “isolated outcrops of meaning in an immense oceanic void” (Edmond & Smith, 2003, p. 2), then Saint Helena plays the role of the “isolated outcrop”, and the South Atlantic the “oceanic void”, even if that view is simplistic and ahistorical. As Bain began his book on Saint Helena with, “There are islands, and there are islands” (Bain, 1993, p. 1), and Saint Helena belongs among the emphasised second “islands”.

**Structure of the Thesis**

To begin I outline my methods, including the challenges I faced and possible disadvantages of the methods I used.

In an introduction to Saint Helena, I briefly cover major events and trends in the island's history. As the Royal Mail Ship (RMS) St Helena is the other half of the story of the construction of the airport, the history of the RMS, as well as the ocean liners that came before it are considered. I outline other aspects of Saint Helena's history that relate to its

current state, including its importance in terms of the trend of islands as laboratories and areas of conservation, its history of use as a prison island and the importance of isolation in that role, and the more recent history of flax production, linking the island to the rest of the British Empire, commonwealth, and world. This provides context for how the airport might impact islanders' experiences of the new airport, and their hopes and fears regarding the future of their island.

The next chapter explains the importance of points of connection to islands so often defined by their isolation and boundary. Saint Helena has, until these past few years, exclusively been connected by sea, a military helicopter or two aside. Suddenly the most prominent point of connection, the one most Saints and tourists alike will arrive and leave by, will be an airport. I consider how the RMS is perceived by Saints, as the familiar experience of that five day voyage to Cape Town on board a ship with a unique role will be lost. Other forms of connection, including through the satellite link that provides internet, phone, and television, are described, including their limitations. Migration, a much deeper form of connection, with large numbers of Saints living in the UK and South Africa, is an important part of Saint Helena's connections. And finally, a comparison is made between Saint Helena's airport and Canada's Confederation Bridge, suggesting that there is room for comparison between this relatively extreme example of a change in connection and more common examples of islands experiencing changes in connection.

Shifting slightly, the following chapter concerns the broader role of airports as 'non-places', and the notion of the 'death of distance', as both discussions are relevant to Saint Helena's airport. While effort was made to make the airport fit in to the rest of Saint Helena, it stands out as alien in an island with what look like small British country roads, and, for instance, a distinct lack of elevators. Arrival at the airport would contrast with the experience of arriving on the RMS, a distinct arrival defined by days of isolation. Speed, and the expectation of instantaneous communication in the modern world is considered with a look at Saint Helena's internet infrastructure, suggesting that Saint Helena is very much an exception to these expectations in a way that puts the island at a disadvantage for most business prospects.

The next two chapters focus primarily on interview material, first considering what it means to be a 'Saint' (Saint Helenian). The two most prominent themes, a sense of uniqueness and friendliness, emerged again and again in the interviews. Other themes explored include the very isolation of Saint Helena itself, the island's distinctive landscape, and a notion of Britishness being difficult to separate from the Saint Helenian identity. A sense of being distinct, with uniqueness being so prominent, was unavoidable in seeking some sense of the Saint identity.

The next chapter considers Saints' hopes and fears surrounding the airport project, and their response to the delay. It begins with the island in the state in which I visited it, one of waiting, frustration, and a lack of information leaving Saints in a state of limbo, with a built airport but no commercial service. A variety of hopes and fears are then outlined,

with both largely dependent upon a large change in the scale of tourism to the island. An assessment of the planned move to a tourist economy follows, along with a consideration of the increasing reliance on tourism for small islands around the world. And finally, the impact that the internet already has had on the island prompts a consideration of both how the island has already changed through connectivity. A proposed fibre optic cable delivering fast and inexpensive internet connection will make these questions even more prominent, bringing the island from expensive slow satellite internet to a very fast connection.

Finally, the governance of Saint Helena is examined, including the planning of the airport project and the goals concerning moving towards a tourism-based economy. Other aspects of island governance include the informality and accessibility of government. I detail the debate over the benefits and downsides of small island government, and in a Saint Helenian context, the push for less government intervention and privatisation of the economy that was brought in alongside the airport proposal. I then return to the interviews, considering the commonly stated opinion that Saint Helena is not ready for a tourist boom, that further preparation is needed.

Curious people often ask me 'why did you choose to study this topic?', or are curious how I settled on such a distinct and unlikely setting. To put it simply, in considering islands, and subsequently isolation, such a large shift in access for a remote place is unusual, and I was well positioned to conduct my research at the time between two very different methods of transport. In the context of islands being connected, putting aside

the construction of roads across vast landmasses or mountains, this was an opportunity to see one of the most remote islands in the world become as accessible (on the right day, with sufficient money) in a few hours from Johannesburg or Cape Town as any other large city in Sub-Saharan Africa. There are not many inhabited islands left that are so remote in the ways Saint Helena has been, and only rare opportunities to see those islands become so dramatically connected. How did Saints perceive this long awaited change coming just over the horizon, with the benefits and shortcomings of their community and island being newly accessible to the world, and the world to them?

# Chapter 2

# Methodology

In approaching the questions of the impact of the construction of an airport on Saint Helena, I decided to use a 'grounded theory' approach, attempting to induce a theme from my time on the island and interviews with Saints, rather than an approach in which I would determine the themes from the outset. Grounded theory attempts “discovery of theory from data”, rather than testing theory with data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 1). This research would be qualitative and not intended for a direct comparative use. This was to be a single case study approach.

I travelled to the island in late September of 2016, flying to Cape Town first, before boarding the RMS St Helena for a five day voyage across the South Atlantic to Saint Helena. I stayed on the island for 31 days before returning on the RMS St Helena for another five day voyage back to Cape Town in early November before flying back to North America. Originally I had intended to try both the ocean voyage and the new flight, trying to combine the last scheduled voyage and the new air service, in order to experience both modes of travel, but the special voyage down from the UK was already fully booked, and even then, the air service could not start due to safety concerns around wind shear near the runway. I would have had to wait roughly another year for that combination of travel arrangements to be possible.

My principal method was semi-structured interviews. I had initially considered unstructured interviews, but to meet ethics requirements, specifically in needing to provide detail as to what questions I would be presenting, I decided upon three core questions that I would ask each participant, and in that process, a number of other themes that I might consider in an interview. That said, I was treating these themes as aids rather than guidelines, as I was aiming to induce questions from the conversation rather than have all my questions prepared from the outset. Semi-structured interviews, as opposed to unstructured or structured ones, claim the middle ground between a strict list of questions, and, in its ideal form, no questions at all (Longhurst, 2003, p. 145). Others would suggest all interviews are actually structured, making the distinction less helpful (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 78). In my case, it allowed for a set of core questions with answers from all of the participants, and the ability to ask specific questions around topics that came up in the answers, and to maintain more of a conversational tone. Alternatives such as focus groups would have been more difficult to arrange in an unfamiliar place, and surveys and other written forms of research might have lessened my ability to maintain a less structured form of question or discussion. My inclusion criteria were that the participant had to identify as a 'Saint' or Saint Helenian and were at least 18 years of age. The 'Saint' criteria would have a significant impact on who I was able to interview, excluding foreign workers and some long-time residents from abroad, but was chosen to narrow the focus of my research to those who identified as islanders, rather than those who considered themselves outsiders, whatever that may have meant for the individual participants. The age criteria was primarily to simplify the ethics process, with complications like parental consent potentially becoming factors. All

interviews were recorded with an audio recorder for transcription once I returned from Saint Helena. During my month on the island, I conducted 13 interviews. These were not intended to be representative of the Saint Helenian population as as a whole, but as a window into Saints' discussions concerning the airport, and as a way to develop better understanding of the issues at hand. These took place in locations both myself and the participant agreed upon, usually either a public place, café, or the participant's home, although due to my not having easy access to a car, this was always within walking distance of Jamestown.

The core questions of the interview were as follows:

1. What does being a 'Saint' (or 'Saint Helenian') mean to you?

2. Have there been any immediate impacts of the airport on either your life or changes to Saint Helena in general?

3. What are your hopes and concerns about the future with the airport in operation?

I reacted to participants' answers and asked related questions, as well as questions around additional themes I had written down in my notebook, with examples being the impact of internet access and issues and the role of both the Saint Helenian and British governments in the airport project.

Recruitment for the interviews consisted of a combination of posters put up in local businesses and public places, and approaching Saints individually, for example down by the waterfront when the RMS St. Helena was arriving or departing. I made an effort to place recruitment posters in a couple of locations outside of Jamestown as well. In being on the island, I was also interviewed on both the local radio stations, with mentions in their respective newspapers, giving my project a high profile while I was there. Having spent five days on the RMS travelling to the island, other passengers were aware of my intention to interview Saints. As well as geographic diversity, with participants from a number of different communities on the island, there was gender diversity with eight male and five female participants. While I did not ask participants to state their age, there was a good apparent range.

Additionally I attended and recorded two public events, a press conference at the airport with the organisers of a test flight, and a less formal presentation at a local hotel bar. This was not planned before I arrived, but as these were public events, I decided the content would be helpful in considering the public debate around the airport. Other documents I used in my research, having returned from Saint Helena, were government or government funded reports, be they economic reports outlining the island's budgetary situation or feasibility studies relating to the airport project. The Saint Helena Government publishes a large selection of these documents on its website.

I also kept a research diary, documenting my experience travelling to and from the island, living on the island, and the challenges in my research process. This was largely

for my own benefit, but also to recollect the research process and my perceptions of the island. Being on the island for one month, and also the ship for 10 days total allowed for lots of observational notes, be it the Englishness of some of the countryside on Saint Helena, or quite how long 5 days seems when contemplating the voyage on the first day on board the RMS St Helena. Earlier writers considering the use of research diaries in ethnographic work, such as Burgess, suggest using them methodically, recording, in his words, “A substantive account of events … a methodological account that involves autobiographical details … [and] an analytic account that raises questions that were posed in the course of conducting research” (Burgess, 1981, p. 76). Later writers reflect more on the use of a research diary as a tool for reflection and learning by the researcher. Browne described Burgess’s method, among others, as a logbook approach, whereas he suggested that diaries can be useful in considering the “practicalities of conducting research” (Browne, 2013, p. 424), including aspects of the fieldwork experience like moments of frustration or experiencing loneliness. My research diary more closely resembles this second model, with a record of the human experience of conducting research, but also includes, for instance, some analytical elements where I note down themes or ideas relating to my research that were useful when it came to coding the data.

I had considered interviewing government and airport related officials to provide a ‘stakeholder’ perspective. It would likely not have been difficult to interview members of the Saint Helenian government. However, in the writing of my proposal for ethics review, I had decided to keep the project simple, with one approach, interviewing Saints through a sampling method that did not allow for such stakeholder interviews to occur,

in order to complete the ethics process in a timely manner. In retrospect, it would have been to the benefit of my project to conduct such interviews, but much of the official stance has also been outlined in publicly available documents.

Once I had returned from Saint Helena, I transcribed all my recordings. After that was complete, I began coding the data, working through it multiple times to pick out recurring themes.

Most of the difficulties in this process concerned the process of recruitment for interviews. Talking to Saints informally about the airport and the reason for my being on the island was easy if not inevitable. This did aid in becoming familiar with the island, accents, and many of the issues that would come up in interviews. Having Saints agree to sign a consent form and sit down to be recorded in a formal interview was a substantial barrier. Additionally, as the island had recently been receiving negative press attention in the UK, there was a reluctance to speak to 'investigative' outsiders, even if I was offering not to use the participants' name or quote them directly. I had many of the conversations that I was looking for without explicitly trying to, as changes concerning the airport were at the top of many people's minds, but I was not able to get many Saints to go through the formal process to document such material as interviews. Another comparatively minor difficulty was that of understanding the Saint dialect and accent, both in conducting some of the interviews and in transcribing them afterwards. It was perhaps telling that the Saints I did interview did not have particularly strong accents that posed much difficulty in understanding.

Throughout the ethics process I was worried about the difficulty of confidentiality on a small island. Firstly, it could be difficult for myself, as a newcomer, to speak to anyone in a way that would not be noticed. Secondly, in trying to use interview material in this thesis, it would be difficult for expressed opinions and stories not to be traceable to a participant. In such a small population, where some participants explicitly highlighted the fact that Saints know the details of each other's lives without necessarily even speaking, the usual assurances of anonymity might be difficult to fulfil. Small communities, be they geographical or not, can increase a risk of participants' identities being disclosed unintentionally (Damianakis & Woodford, 2012, p. 709). Similarly, I decided not to conduct interviews on the RMS for these reasons, as there was a much smaller group of people, and because it would be difficult for potential participants to refuse an interview without constantly encountering me over the next few days. In truth, the same was somewhat true on the island, with encounters with previous participants being relatively common while on the island. Most participants did allow me to use their name if I wished, so the issue is more theoretical than actual in this case.

Additionally, as Saint Helena is a British Overseas Territory, and its settlement having been a distinctly a colonial endeavour (albeit without an indigenous population), I was aware of my position as a White British citizen, thus my methodology was planned with this in mind. Specifically, the grounded theory approach meant that to some degree, I was attempting to not bring in any narrative as to what I expected Saints to respond with in my interviews. As such, I was not familiar with much of the literature and theories I consider on in the following chapters before I had conducted this research. These themes

were found through coding and analysis of the interview data, followed up by a literature search along those themes. The approach also meant that I did not go in to interviews with the theory already in my thoughts, thus helping me avoid leading participants in those directions. In its formulation, grounded theory did not consider the race, gender, class, or other positional differences between the researcher and those being researched (Lempert, 2010, p. 247), but it does at least attempt to remove some preconceptions, however impossible that may be in many cases. Additionally, in retrospect I realise that participants were likely to be educated and well travelled, and Saints I spoke to who were not willing to be interviewed might have thought that they did not have anything to contribute. For instance, every participant I spoke to had left the island, which, without knowing its prevalence, still indicates a trend towards those with more money and connections overseas.

# Chapter 3

## An Introduction to Saint Helena

This chapter introduces some of the history of Saint Helena, both looking at the island's most notable functions, like that of provisioning ships and as a prison, as well as with a focus on its connections to the outside world, such as the history of the RMS St Helena or that of the flax industry. This gives a context for further discussion of the role of Saint Helena's airport in changing the island's connection to the world.

It would be difficult to tell purely from spending time in modern-day Saint Helena that its first inhabitants were not the British, whose influence is clear to see, but were Portuguese. While the Portuguese appeared not to have permanently settled the island, as the first human inhabitants, much of what was written about the landscape of early Saint Helena is attributable to the Portuguese use of the island as a provisioning stop, albeit without the settlement the British later created. Schulenburg suggests that the credit for the transformation of the landscape might go to Fernão Lopes (Schulenburg, 2003, p. 540), a man with a story that sets the scene for Saint Helena's role in the world after him. The history of Lopes's time on the island is somewhat muddled and rarely spoken of. Brooke, writing in the early 19th century, describes the story of Lopes, a deserter from the Portuguese in Goa being brought back to Portugal after having been maimed in punishment for his desertion. Instead of returning to Portugal, he went into a self imposed exile for a number of years on Saint Helena, and although this might contradict

other accounts, survived on the island with a few slaves (Brooke, 1824, p.49). It is agreed, however that other travellers left fruits and animals on the island for Lopes, who made the landscape increasingly habitable. It has been claimed that Lopes was even an inspiration for Robinson Crusoe (Schulenburg, 2003, p. 552), and it is easy to see why given the unlikely odds of surviving on the island, let alone thriving as must accounts of Lopes seem to suggest. All this happened before the British or anyone else discovered the island and eventually settled. The same elements, the smallness, isolation, and rough terrain, that made the island an ideal place for Lopes to hide from an inevitable return home, also made it a good prison, a good company colony, and a difficult place to reach even in the early 21st century. As Saint Helena gets an airport, it will leave behind some of these distinguishing features, being a world away from Lopes's island.

*Figure 1: Location of Saint Helena, OpenStreetMap contributors, (2015) retrieved 17th January, 2017 from https://www.openstreetmap.org/*

Saint Helena itself is a small island, a little under 17 km wide at the widest point. It is of volcanic origin, and whilst it does have some smaller islands around its coast, such as Egg Island, it is solitary, at least in considering other islands of more than a few hundred meters in width, or even with human inhabitants. The nearest other land, Ascension Island, a fellow island in the same territory, is over 1,200 km away to the northwest, and Ascension is largely a military outpost, with a non-permanent population. The next nearest point of land, the Angolan 'ghost island' Tigres Island, is nearly 1,900 km away, with mainland Angola and Namibia just a few kilometers further to the east. To the west, past Ascension, the costal city of Recife in Brazil is roughly 3,300 km away. And to the south, almost 2,500 km away, is the final island and associated archipelago in the territory, Tristan da Cunha. While Saint Helena is on the African side of the South Atlantic, it is decidedly in the middle of the ocean, and the whole territory including Ascension and Tristan da Cunha has a 200 mile radius of Exclusive Economic Zone around each island, covering a vast swathe of the South Atlantic despite the relatively small landmasses of the islands themselves. And aside from non-scheduled visits, the two points of contact for the entire territory are to South Africa and to the Falkland Islands and the United Kingdom from Ascension Island via scheduled military flights.

Saint Helena, from its discovery, has been a product of colonial rule. Most obviously, much like many other small remote islands, there was no indigenous population when it was first discovered by the Portuguese explorer João da Nova (Schulenburg, 2003, p. 538). There is no history of Saint Helena that is not a history of British (and Portuguese, and even Dutch) rule. Furthermore, Saint Helena has been woven into both the local

history of slavery in West Africa, and European wars, in a way that ties it to British military history. Everything from the origins of the groups that make up the Saint ethnicity, to the fortifications all over the island's coastline can be traced to the island's role in the British (or East India Company's) interests.

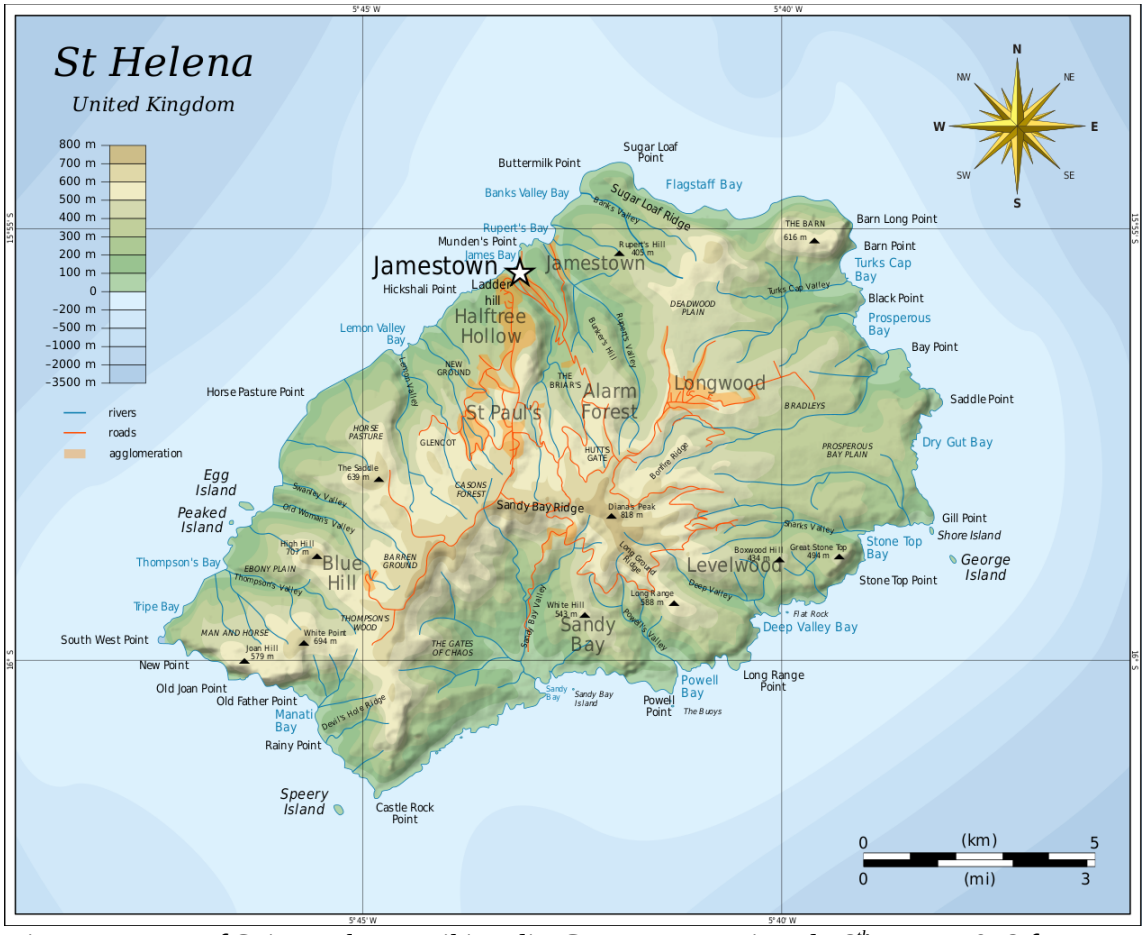


*Figure 2: Map of Saint Helena. Wikimedia Commons, retrieved 18th June, 2018 from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Topographic_map_of_Saint_Helena-en.svg*

For most of its history, Saint Helena has served two distinct roles. The first, evident as soon as it was discovered by the Portuguese, was as a stop for provisioning, allowing ships to take on fresh food and water and other services before heading on to Asia or Europe. This is why the East India Company had any interest in colonising the island at

all. This was why the island was first settled in 1659 (Foster, 1919). Without the Suez Canal to avoid sailing around Africa, many ships sailing too and from Asia had to sail in the vicinity of the island, so why not use its fertile meadows and relative abundance of water for safe and reliable provisioning?

This view of Saint Helena, as a simple provisioning stop, solving logistical challenges the East India Company faced on the return voyages from Asia, is, Stern suggests, about as far as most scholars of the East India company go in to exploring its role in settling the island (Stern, 2007, p. 2). And it is not incorrect to say this was the primary reason for its settlement and its main role for almost two centuries. It was not, at its core, a utopian social experiment, more accurately labelled, as Royle suggests, a ‘paper utopia’. It was not the “flourishing colonial plantation” (Stern, 2007, p. 2) that the East India Company tried to fashion the island in to. It was, for the most part, a safe and defensible place to provision ships. But there were always more interesting features of the East India Company’s role in settling the island. It was more than just a provisioning station, but not the quasi-utopian society or thriving plantation that the Company sometimes wished it could be.

Saint Helena was known as “the Company’s Island” by the 1680s (McAleer, 2016, p. 81) demonstrating both the prominence of the island to the Company, and the Company to the island. It was settled by the company, both through voluntary migration from Britain, and through early Company “slaving expedition[s]” and indentured labour (McAleer, 2016, p. 81). The island belonged to this vast trading corporation that was not

traditionally in the business of running states, nor did the early East India Company utilise traditional colonisation in its early years (Foster, 1919, p. 282), with Saint Helena being an exception. This odd position of Saint Helena being an Atlantic colony, with plantation aspirations, run by a trading company whose jurisdiction was clearly Asia, was noted by Stern, suggesting that the island sat at this intersection between two modes of colonial power (Stern, 2007, p. 16).

Three distinct features of the East India Company's role in governing Saint Helena stand out. The first was that jurisdictional oddity, with the Company's running of the territory being *de facto*, not as clearly the territory of the Company as their settlements in India. Stern states that the Company governed the island in "*loco regis*", with issues like the need for Company ships to change ensign from their own to the English one as they pass the island demonstrating the common understanding of the island's role as their final territory before ships enter the region of Britain itself (Stern, 2007, pp. 8-9). The second feature was that the its usefulness soon became a question of military use and British overseas power, with McAleer quoting one anonymous writer in 1805 who disparaged the island for being a "barren and rocky isle … [that] seems to have abandoned to a state of hopeless destitution in the solitude of the ocean", having later written of the island that "it abounds with excellent wanter; affords a convenient place of refreshment to fleets, and may, in time of war, be converted into a military station of great strength and importance" (quoted in McAleer, 2016, pp. 82-85). This foreshadowed the arrival of Napoleon shortly afterwards, and the worries of rescue that came with that. The final feature was the degree to which the Company did not just command the islanders, but

settled and governed it as a pseudo-state, with an island council with interests in social welfare such as the care of orphans, poverty relief, and food subsidy in difficult times (Stern, 2007, p. 11). The plantation economy aspirations were built on then modern concepts of what Stern describes as “effective and just management of population and resources”, with demographic record keeping and property rights (Stern, 2007, p. 6). The Company could conceivably have tried to run a simple operation for provisioning, but it wanted Saint Helena to also be a viable plantation economy, and viable if not ideal society.

The second use, and certainly its most famous, was as a prison. Notably, however, both these functions are nowhere to be seen in the modern role Saint Helena plays in the scattered selection of British Overseas Territories.

'It is not an attractive place,' Napoleon muttered (Martineau, 1969, p. 1)

Saint Helena's most famous role, as a prison of sorts for the exile of Napoleon Bonaparte and others, is a common function of small islands. Saint Helena was specifically a prison, Napoleon aside, for the Zulu king Dinuzulu, the Sultan of Zanzibar Khalid bin Barghash Al-Busaid, and finally thousands of Boer soldiers during the 1899-1902 Boer War in South Africa. Royle identified “islands as prisons” in a list of island typologies, connecting it with “island of dreams” (Royle, 2007b, p. 50). Two small islands on which the prison was the primary function of the island, Alcatraz in California, and Robben Island in South Africa, are among the most famous prisons, let alone prison islands.

There is even, somewhat confusingly, a prison island in Moreton Bay just off of Brisbane in Australia also named Saint Helena. The magical prison in the Harry Potter series of children's books, Azkaban, is a good fictional example of a small single-use prison island (Rowling, 1999). Saint Helena does not fall into that model however. Its role as a prison for Napoleon may have caught the imagination of islanders at the time, but the island still had to fulfil its other roles while the additional responsibility of being a prison was added to them. Other islands fulfil a role more similar to Saint Helena's. Isla de la Juventud (previously Isle of the Pines) in Cuba and Tasmania in Australia were prison islands, somewhat separated from their respective mainlands and used as sites for prisons alongside other uses. Saint Helena is still distinct in how, for the most part, it was a prison for individuals (Napoleon and Dinuzulu), and also because of its extreme distance from other land. Kemble notes about Napoleon's imprisonment that “It promised security from escape by virtue of its very isolation” (Kemble, 1969, p. 7). Saint Helena was and is very far away from the nearest other land. Astoundingly, in the 1990s, a Dutch man (Willem Merk) who was imprisoned on the island after his yacht was found to contain a large quantity of cannabis (Devine, 1996) managed to escape the local prison and sail to Brazil (O'bay, 2004). One of the Boer prisoners of war also made it to Ascension before being captured. So the island is not without successful escapes, but the distances from other land and the fact that escaping to Ascension wouldn't be all that helpful, makes it a formidable prison from which to escape. Ascension itself, while not a prison island but a military island, is somewhat close in function to the prison that Saint Helena used to be, serving a distinct role for the British (and US) military because of its island geography, providing an air force base with reach into Africa, and crucially

in its past, down to the Falkland Islands. Saint Helena's role as a prison island is for the most part historical, but it constitutes a considerable part of the island's early role, as well as explaining some of the historical attraction for tourism.

The flax industry provides a token third role, ensuring that for a brief while, Saint Helena acted much like other small colonies in providing one reliable resource to the metropole, but this was but a relative blip. The flax industry played a symbolic role for Saint Helena, starting in the early 20th century and ending in the 1960s. While the island did not thrive economically, only just sustaining itself on the flax trade, it was a steady (though subsidised) income. But while other colonies' plantation economies may have provided sugar or bananas, flax was arguably far more ubiquitous in its distribution. One of the primary uses for flax was making string, and one of the primary customers was the British Post Office, whose eventual transition to synthetic fibres in 1966 was a death knell for the industry on Saint Helena (Royle, 2001, p. 215). For a short while at least, Saint Helenian flax was making its way across Britain and across the world, contributing to a network having perhaps the same or greater reach than the East India Company itself, albeit with a much smaller contribution from the island itself. While the island was becoming increasingly disconnected after the Suez Canal opened, its flax would have been distributed widely. And although the flax industry may have vanished, the flax itself has not, covering large portions of Saint Helena's green mountainous interior, becoming an environmental threat rather than an economic opportunity, and a reminder of the island's final major industry.

It would not be too much of a stretch to suggest that for the last few decades, or even since the collapse of the flax industry, Saint Helena has, from an economic perspective at least, been little to the British government but a burden, or more optimistically perhaps an extension of the militarily useful Ascension Island. According to Cohen, mass emigration was at one point considered as a solution by the British government to negate the burden of the island as an economically dependent territory (Cohen, 1983, pp. 129-130). This bold threat is the backdrop on which the effort to increase the island's economic sustainability is presented.

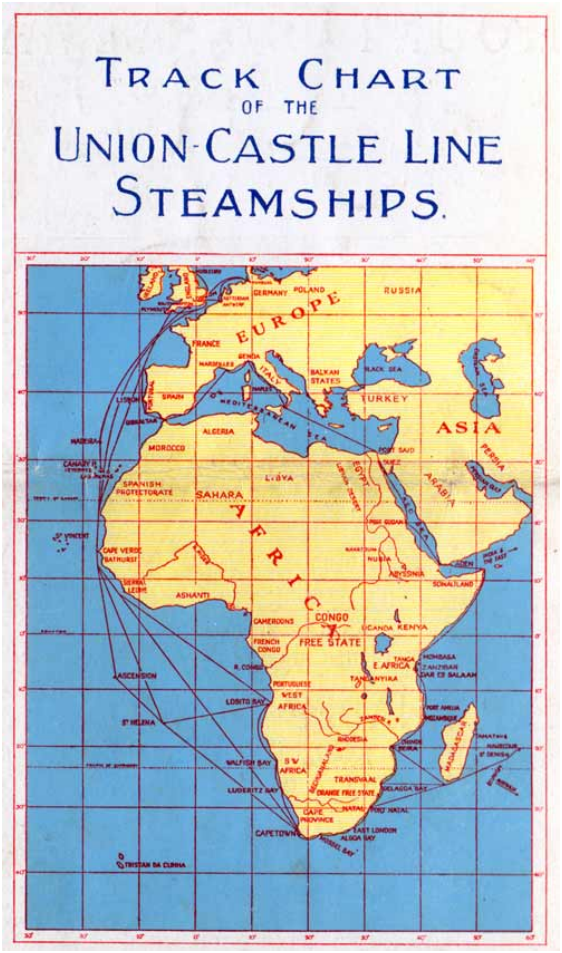


*Figure 3.* Track Chart of the Union-Castle Line Steamships. Gjenvick-Gjønvik Archives, retrieved 11th June, 2018 from https://www.gjenvick.com/SteamshipLines/Union-Castle/1929-Services-Outward-Homeward-Coastwise.html

Stephen Royle described the airport project as “the airport St. Helena so desperately needs” (Royle, 2001, p. 212). This relates to an economy that, while predictable and steady, has not seen much improvement in decades. A mean income of £7,280 in 2014/15 ( *Analysis of income from employment 2011/12 to 2014/15*, 2016), alongside the significant cost of imported food, other goods, and travel, demonstrates the island's economic stagnation. Since the collapse of the island's flax industry, an industry the island had become all too

dependent on (Royle, 2001, p. 215), in 1966, there was very little export economy left. There is a small fishing fleet, with some export business. Saint Helena coffee, a very expensive luxury product, is sold for almost $150 per pound (lb) by Starbucks amongst others (Starbucks Corporation, 2016). For the most part, however, the RMS St Helena arrives with full containers, and returns with empty ones. In a modern developed economy, economic goods are often less tangible. Tourism is a component of the contemporary Saint Helena economy, but a limited one. Other possibilities are limited by a slow and expensive internet connection. If the economy moves towards a tourist-driven one as proposed, it may still be the case that the cargo ship returns empty, as tourists and their money fly to the island itself.

Despite that gloomy outlook, economic utility is not everything. While Saint Helena may not have developed any substantial exports since the end of the flax industry in the 1960s, in the fifty years since then the island has changed and developed in many other ways. Be it something as obvious as the abundance of cars that replaced donkeys as the primary mode of transport, the introduction of mains electricity across the island, or the availability of home video and eventually broadcast TV, Saint Helena has not just stopped in the 1960s, as its economy might have suggested. While little has changed in the fundamental economic situation of the island in that time, the standard of living experienced by Saints has changed considerably.

**The RMS St Helena**

The history of access to Saint Helena is a maritime one. Its British history was, for a substantial amount of time, one of being controlled by the East India Company, a large and powerful trading corporation. It took quite a leap from that situation to get to the point that we are at now, with one small dedicated ship serving Saint Helena (and Ascension) alone. As far as my interviews were concerned, the furthest memories of passenger sailings to Saint Helena were of the Union-Castle line, whose service between the UK and South Africa, an ideal route to add Saint Helena to, halted in 1977 (McCracken & Teer-Tomaselli, 2013, p. 430). Before this point, Saint Helena was a part of a larger network of shipping. There was enough passenger traffic between the UK and South Africa for Saint Helena to just be another node on a shipping line's route map. This was ironically made impractical by the rise of passenger aviation, and the subsequent demise of ocean liners for mass transportation. Beer suggests that the British empire itself was fragmented as the “threads linking imperial England to its possessions overseas”, in other words, ocean liners and naval vessels, were replaced by the aeroplane that “must overfly the territories of other nations” (Beer, 2013, p. 272). Saint Helena, as one of the last fragments of that empire, has still suitably been connected by ship, albeit its own little vessel.

After 1977, the UK government had to consider how Saint Helena would be accessed. A combination passenger and cargo ship was obtained from the shipping routes on the west coast of Canada and Alaska. Within a year of the Union-Castle line service ending, the

ship was newly named the RMS St Helena and commenced service. In her short time in service to the island, she was borrowed by the British Navy for use in the Falklands War. As it became apparent that the 1963 built ship was too old and small for the island's needs, the UK government looked to build a dedicated ship to serve Saint Helena, and this was to be the modern day RMS St Helena.

*Figure 4.* Photo of the Two RMS St Helenas, Together in Cardiff, 1990. From Saint Helena Island Info, retrieved 11th June, 2018 fromhttp://sainthelenaisland.info/rms.htm

The two ships share a striking resemblance, with both having the unusual configuration of a substantial cargo area up front, and substantial passenger accommodation at the rear. Both also have cranes on-board, which is necessary to unload cargo in Jamestown where there was no dock for the ships to moor alongside. They both have managed to single-handedly serve the needs of Saint Helena, due to their versatile dual-purpose design. The new RMS St Helena was built by Hall, Russell & Company (finished by A&P Appledore), and was the last ship to leave their Aberdeen shipyard before they closed, making the RMS St Helena the last ship of the last Aberdeen ship builder. In this sense, the new RMS is also unintentionally meaningful in the history of Aberdeen shipbuilding.

The new RMS quickly fell into a route, for the most part travelling between Cape Town, Saint Helena itself, and Ascension Island. Occasionally the ship travels north to the UK via the Canary Islands, south to Tristan da Cunha, and also along the west coast of Africa via Walvis Bay, Namibia. But for the most part, the RMS St Helena is, rather appropriately given her name, serving as a lifeline for Saint Helena itself. The RMS set out on her last voyage from Saint Helena to Cape Town in February of 2018, after having to continue running as the airport opening was delayed.

**Saint Helena as a 'Laboratory'**

Saint Helena, like most remote islands, has a history of scientific enquiry, primarily in terms of its high number of endemic species and the conservation challenges that poses. Beyond military and trading roles for the British, the island's use for scientific discovery is a key feature of its history. That said, the most famous visit, that of Charles Darwin during his voyage on-board the *HMS Beagle*, resulted more in an account of environmental destruction and “the English, or rather Welsh character of the scenery” (Darwin, 1955, p. 468) that resulted from those changes. The next most notable figure to spend time on Saint Helena was the astronomer Edmund Halley, whose use of the island for observations is simply ascribed to it being a British territory in the southern hemisphere in 1677 (Brandt, 2010), although, much like Darwin's disappointment, the weather was less than ideal for his task of cataloguing the southern stars. Other astronomers such as the former British Astronomer Royal, Nevil Maskelyne, as well as Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon (of Mason-Dixon line fame) also visited the island,

in their cases to observe the transit of Venus (Tatham & Harwood, 1974, p. 502). Other, more obscure uses of the island include a magnetic observatory to study the earth's magnetism (Tatham & Harwood, 1974, p. 505). Saint Helena was certainly used as a laboratory of sorts for a number of different fields, but the remaining scientific work is for the most part limited to conservation work.

With the changes in available transport from the RMS St Helena alone to a combination of aviation and a new cargo ship, there will also be changes to the conservation challenges facing the island. For one thing, the five day journey offers at least the semblance of a barrier between animals on the continent and arriving at the island. Furthermore, the RMS does not come into contact with the island; passengers and goods are unloaded by boat and crane. A new cargo ship, taking over the cargo role of the RMS, will be docking at the recently constructed pier, posing greater risks of invasive species making it from the ship to the island. As many conservationists as there are on the island, it does not take much to tip the balance when the population numbers of endemic species are only in the hundreds, and in the case of some species barely that. In both its use for scientific purposes, and the importance of its biology as and plentiful endemic species, Saint Helena's uniqueness has long been appreciated, but the story is also of a lost paradise.

## Conclusion

Saint Helena's previous flax industry is indicative of the struggles Saint Helena's colonisers have gone through to try and make something economically successful out of the island. The RMS St Helena was a quite remarkable ship in its single purpose long distance role as the island's lifeline. Its existence was a reaction to the world as it moved towards passenger aviation, and it has outlasted its expected lifetime. Saint Helena, because of its unique location, does pose some geopolitical and economic advantages, occupying a special position in British conservation efforts and historical observations. The island's use as a prison, successful in its time, and benefiting from those very same things that make Saint Helena unique, is no longer particularly viable as the world has moved on. After its flax was no longer twisted with others in the machine of the British postal service into string that travelled the world, Saint Helena has, in some ways at least, been waiting for an airport to move the island to the next step in finding its niche.

The airport represents another chapter for an island whose history is very explicitly defined through connection (in the East India Company, the RMS, and the flax industry) and disconnection (its use as a prison and its scientific consideration related to its isolation). The limited and distinct nature of the connections, and the symbolically hostile coastal topography forcing these limited connections both makes an airport a bold disconnection from those past restraints, and a step back towards the expectations of connection in the contemporary world.

# Chapter 4

## Islands and Their Connections

Islands, spaces defined by their being bound by water, face a distinct technological challenge in being connected to other places, unless the gap between land is easily swimmable. If you'll excuse the metaphor, no island is an island. Contemporary Saint Helena, despite being very isolated in comparison to most other remote inhabited islands, is indeed connected to the rest of the world, by its harbour, and now its airport. And for an island whose history is heavy with the metaphor of the 'prison island', these points of connection, be they political or physical, are important in seeing the boundary and connection to the island beyond just the physical outline of the coast. Bain rather harshly characterised the potential connections to the island as “escape routes” (Bain, 1993), but as tourism and possible return of the diaspora becomes more likely, these points of connection might become points of opportunity for Saints still living on the island. The cliffs of Saint Helena's coastline tower over the ocean menacingly, but this island has been a sanctuary for modern day yachts and historical vessels since its discovery. And presumably, it will now be a sanctuary for smaller planes in emergencies over the South Atlantic. These points of access make Saint Helena more than an inhospitable rock in an ocean, or a hard to access volcano like Tristan da Cunha, but increasingly a reliably connected island albeit thousands of kilometres away from other land. Although these points of connection might be an 'escape' from the island, they are also escapes from the surrounding ocean. The airport being built in Saint Helena will

change how the island is shaped around still infrequent links to the continent. These links to the outside world are being moved from a place with centuries history of maritime connection, Jamestown's harbour, to an airport on a peripheral windswept plain. Meanwhile Saint Helena has already been increasingly connected, with the internet, and before that phone and fax, offering instant communication albeit at considerable cost.


*Figure 5: Photo of the RMS St Helena. 5$^{Th}$ October, 2016*

**From the Harbour to the Airport**

A few times every month, Jamestown experienced 'Ship Day', the time when the RMS St Helena arrived at or departed from the island. I also experienced what I can only guess would be called 'cruise ship days', but that's another experience altogether. Ship days

were, at least in Jamestown, a visible sign of the island's isolation, or more specifically, its limited public access. Firstly, assuming one was in Jamestown or its environs, arrival and departure were signalled with loud blasts of the ship's horn. After or before that point (depending on arrival or departure), the waterfront became increasingly busy and the main street of Jamestown a little overcrowded with people and goods moving to or from other parts of the island. People came down to the waterfront simply to observe the proceedings, and spot returning friends or new faces. It is not just new people that brought the town to life; on that day and over the next few, the small shops along the main street in Jamestown suddenly had new vegetables, fruit, dairy, and much more. The RMS was the only regular source of all goods on the island, and the only scheduled passenger transport. A television screen in 'The Star', one of the largest grocery stores, advertised newly available goods. This is in stark contrast to the increasingly empty store shelves as the island waited for the next RMS voyage from Cape Town to arrive.

The airport changes these routines substantially. Firstly, it decouples the bulk of cargo delivery from passenger service. No longer does 'Ship Day' bring that chaotic jumble of new people and goods into a narrow valley in Jamestown. Instead, most people arrive through the airport, one assumes with a limited amount of cargo. And most of the cargo arrives on the MV Helena, the newly purchased cargo ship, into the adjacent Rupert's valley, with, perhaps, a handful of passengers. Neither of these instances necessarily involve the narrow streets of Jamestown, nor do they regularly occur at the same time. Secondly, the airport in particular is remote, in as much as one can be remote on Saint Helena. There is very little settlement near it, and even as you approach it, it is hidden by

a hill. The RMS St Helena arriving into Jamestown is a very visible (and audible) part of many Saints' lives, as they live or work around Jamestown. The aeroplane arriving or departing is essentially invisible to Saints on much of the island. One Saint suggested they would never even know when people arrived (Participant 6). I certainly didn't hear or see the plane taking off to fly back to Ascension from where I was staying in Jamestown.

Until recently, to leave the island, Saint Helena has had one scheduled option. Looking at an island I am more familiar with, Prince Edward Island, Canada, this islandness through connection or even just awareness of the sea is visible considering the various methods of arrival or departure. Out of the three modes of transport available, the ferry gives travellers a distinct notion of the boundary, or more importantly, the space between the borders: the water. The bridge, surprisingly, still gives one some notion of distance, with dramatic views of often ice-covered waters making it clear that the road one travels is no ordinary highway. Notably it is the plane that strips away any semblance of islandness. One has to both be sitting by a window, and intentionally looking out for the Northumberland Strait, to have any sense of leaving or arriving on an island. And a few clouds can obscure that entirely. On Saint Helena, it won't be so easy to avoid spotting the vast South Atlantic, but sitting in an aisle seat, reading a book or working on a laptop, one could conceivably leave continental Africa and arrive on Saint Helena without ever having seen the ocean. Beer writes of Virginia Woolf seeing these “old geometries of the island giving way”, recording the “dislimning” of the island (Great Britain) in her writing (Beer, 2013, p. 287). For an island like Saint Helena, that

bypassing of the boundary between land and water might begin to erode the meanings ascribed to it, and Saint Helena might become 'dislimned'.

**The Saints' Ship**

The Saints have a complicated relationship with the RMS St Helena. On one hand, many of the friendly faces working on the ship were Saints themselves, and the ship is a source of many shared memories. After all, it has, for most Saints, been the only way off the island, and Saints leaving might be doing so for a long-deserved vacation, or because of a medical emergency. On the other hand, the ship, or more specifically the lack of an airport, has been the source of many of Saint Helena's problems, perceived or otherwise. And then for those who use it often, it slowly became a “glorified ferry”.

The ship plays a few distinct roles for Saints, from supplying all the goods to the island, to being a symbol of Saint Helena sailing thousands of kilometres away from home. To start with the latter, one Saint described it as “a little bit of Saint Helena that goes out into the big world to bring people home” (Participant 8). This would be very much from the perspective of a Saint travelling on it. For others, it helped outsiders “get a little sense of, um, that disconnect from the pace of the bigger world before they step ashore” (Participant 11), introducing visitors to the atmosphere of the island, be it a slower pace or just Saint Helenian accents and conversation, well before they step ashore. As for the ship as the source of all the island's goods, this is obvious enough from the state of the emptying grocery store shelves, leaving mostly locally grown produce, by the time the

next RMS voyage from Cape Town was due. Also, anything that physically needs to come from or go to the outside world involved a latency of days. In terms of ordering anything through the postal service, one had to add the journey from Cape Town or Ascension to the shipping time. Until recently, everything imported, with the notable exception of goods brought on yachts, arrived on the RMS. There is an emotional connection to the RMS, with one Saint comparing the RMS being away from the island on a voyage to a pet that hasn't returned home to be fed (Participant 8).

There was agreement among Saints interviewed that the RMS would be missed. One participant said of the ship that once you get on board, you have “no worries” for the duration of the voyage (Participant 5). Some commented that ideally the island would get its new airport and retain the RMS, and there was some resentment that a choice between the two was forced. Schivelbusch noted that older forms of technology, seen as “having more 'soul'”, bring forth a certain nostalgia (Schivelbusch, 2014, p. 13), and this will more than likely be the case for Saints after the airport becomes the primary mode of travel off of the island, and the RMS gradually becomes as distant a memory as the old ocean liners are now.

**Connections to the outside world**

It goes without saying that Saint Helena is isolated. A brief glance at it on a map will make it abundantly clear that it is a long way from other land, and a very long way from the European countries that have determined its history. But that would not show you

how the island is connected to the outside world, and how those connections matter. The first and most obvious connection is the new airport. For the most part, this does not feature heavily in the equation, as there is was no commercial passenger service at the time of my research. Nevertheless, the airport finally allows both islanders to leave in medical emergencies, and, in a few cases, rich tourists or visitors with private jets to land. During the month I was on the island, a test flight arrived, with a newly proposed airline, Atlantic Star, testing a new aircraft for use on the island. This was the first flight ever from Ascension Island to Saint Helena. Additionally, Magni Arge, a Faroese member of the Danish Parliament and previous managing director of Faroese airline Atlantic Airways arrived on the test flight, demonstrating the degree to which the airport gained international interest. The RMS St Helena was the main link for passengers and cargo, plying the route between Cape Town, Saint Helena and Ascension, leading to a frequency of access to either Ascension or Cape Town of roughly one voyage to each destination every three or four weeks. It was the only regular method for islanders to leave Saint Helena, and at most it could accommodate 156 passengers on each sailing.

Beyond the airport and the RMS, the methods of arriving or leaving get much more exclusive. Cruise ships are not an uncommon sight in Jamestown harbour, but they do not stay for long, and offer no passage for islanders. They arrive, unload some of their passengers to spend money on the island, before departing. Sometimes the ocean is too rough, and the ocean liners are unable to land passengers for day trips, just sailing by. And at best, tourists buy local goods, hire a tour guide around the island, but do not stay overnight in local hotels. Similarly, there are a substantial number of yachts that stop in

Saint Helena on their voyages across the South Atlantic, but much like the cruise ships, for the most part these are passing tourists, and not connections for the travel use of Saints themselves.

All other communications, aside from perhaps maritime and amateur radio operators, are through one large satellite dish. Through this the island has access to overseas phone calls, at 86 pence per minute to the UK, a selection of TV channels, the BBC World Service radio broadcast over local FM radio, and a slow (a 20Mb/s downlink shared between all users) and costly internet connection. Much like the move from the RMS to the airport, the internet connection has its own revolutionary proposal, with a Memorandum of Understanding signed, and funding likely to connect Saint Helena to Africa and to South America through an undersea fibre optic cable being constructed “by early 2020” (“St Helena signs MoU”, 2017). But as of now, all of that data goes through that one satellite connection. In much the same way that fax was once a break in the isolation of the island, (Bain, 1993, p. 79) the satellite offers a taste of instantaneous communication.

**Migration**

To discuss Saints and their connections to the outside world, one has to consider the history of where the Saints originated. The island had no indigenous population, and although Saints are no longer distinguished by original ethnicity for the most part, their origins are varied. One key group were the British settlers associated with the East India

Company and later British rule. Later, African slaves were brought and kept in slavery on the island, some from as far away as Madagascar (Royle, 2007a, p. 49). Some freed slaves from the West African Squadron's anti-slavery effort in the mid 19th century also stayed on the island (Schulenburg, 2003, p. 537). Finally, Chinese indentured labourers were brought to the island in the early 19th century (Allen, 2017), some of whom stayed. Aside from the British immigrants, the other ethnic groups that make up Saints today were brought to the island, sometimes against their will, probably without much understanding of where they were going. It was a disparate group of people from all over the globe. Furthermore, some on the island trace their ancestry back not only to those groups, but to smaller groups like the Boer prisoners. Nonetheless, the fact that they are all Saints now, with little distinction, is a point of pride among some islanders.

The history of migration in Saint Helena is not just one of immigration, but of emigration as well. There is a Saint diaspora, for the most part living in South Africa and in the UK, the two places with histories of reasonably direct connections to the island. There are also often temporary labour opportunities in Ascension and Falkland Islands, although the former is currently less attractive according to one participant due to decreasing wages (Participant 2). Considering these links, the dual problems of apartheid rule in South Africa leading to racial discrimination against Saints, and the 1981 British Nationality Act which restricted the ability of Saints to live and work in the UK, led one writer to suggest that “Escape routes to the United Kingdom and South Africa are closed” (Bain, 1993, p. 44). The restoration of British citizenship to Saints in 2002 once again opened up the UK to Saints (British overseas territories act 2002), meaning that

the “escape route” is now open again. As such, connections between Saint Helena and its diaspora are strong, and remittances have been a considerable component of household income, with Cohen estimating in the 1980s that it made up between 30 and 50 percent of income for some households (Cohen, 1983, p. 220). Everybody I interviewed had relatives abroad, often in the UK. One estimate puts the number of Saints in the UK at 10,000 (*Saint Helena access feasibility study, 2*005, p. 25). By this account there are more than double the number of Saints in the UK alone than on the island of Saint Helena itself. While the distant African, Asian, and European origins of most Saints appear to have faded out of view, connections with family abroad are visible and important components in how Saints relate to the world beyond their island. Olwig suggests that “Islanders travel widely … without losing their intractable sense of identity, precisely because they have an island to anchor their journeys” (Olwig, 2007, p. 178). While one could argue most Saints travel out of necessity or opportunity, there is a strong 'anchoring', with Saints returning to Saint Helena after spending time working abroad. One of the participants said that her niece, who was not born on, nor lived on, the island, but had visited it often as an adult, identified as Saint Helenian.

**Comparison to the Confederation Bridge**

Having returned from Saint Helena, as I began to explain my research to interested people in Prince Edward Island, a new comparative perspective emerged. I had already considered and expressed the comparison between the Saint Helena airport and the Confederation Bridge a few times while on Saint Helena, but it became valuable in

explaining my research and the importance of the Saint Helena project to Prince Edward Islanders. While the two projects do not share the same scale in terms of their potential change to their respective islands, in many ways they are an apt comparison.

The Confederation Bridge connects Prince Edward Island to mainland Canada by road. The bridge was the first fixed link to the island, with previous transport options being predominantly ferry, with additional connections by air. It was opened in 1997 after four years of construction, and cost roughly one billion (Canadian) dollars to build. Similarities between this project and the Saint Helena airport are abundant. To begin with the obvious, both projects were set to dramatically change the primary mode of access to their respective islands, from a maritime connection to aviation or road. Both projects had very high costs in relation to the small population of the islands, with Prince Edward Island being Canada's least populated province. Both islands are subnational island jurisdictions (SNIJs) with a degree of leverage afforded by their status above other islands without such status. And within the context of similar SNIJs within their respective groups (provinces and British Overseas Territories), both islands are unusually financially dependent on payments from their respective states. Both projects came with hopes of economic benefits, particularly through increased tourism. And finally, with both islands there was some sense that the introduction of the bridge or airport might change the sense of islandness.

This is a surprisingly effective comparison to quickly explain the topic of study to those familiar with Prince Edward Island, and perhaps it hints at the potential for other

comparisons for islands, with the Saint Helena example being an extreme example of smaller changes that islands are going through, even considering densely populated urban examples such as proposed fixed links in Hong Kong, where there are similar questions being asked about distinct islandness and changing cultures (Leung, 2017, p. 62). Pitcairn, another remote volcanic island that is arguably less accessible than Saint Helena, has constructed a new harbour with funds from the European Development Fund, making potential travel, tourism, and perhaps re-population easier ("Pitcairn islands 2013 OCTA - EU intervention", 2013). The opening of a bridge connecting the Isle of Skye in Scotland to the mainland in 1995 brought benefits, but also an increased focus on cost, and the justification of an expensive toll (McQuaid & Greig, 2007). For islands and remote and island-like mainland places alike, changes such as a new road, a faster internet connection, a more functional harbour, and indeed, a new airport or new flights, can all present similar opportunities and challenges to the communities they impact. And that is just the infrastructure; longer term changes in how such infrastructure is used to connect these places and people poses larger questions such as how rural areas benefit and are harmed by inexpensive delivery networks, or how internet connection can either bring together rural communities or pull constituent parts to their own niches in the wider world.

## Conclusion

Islands are so often created metaphorically by their limited connection to the outside world. What does a shoreline mean to, say, a commuter ferry, tens of scheduled flights

per day, a railway bridge or tunnel, or even a road bridge or tunnel? Some would say the latter threaten an island's claim to be an island entirely (Royle, Robinson, & Smyth, 1990, p. 117). Vannini talks of rhythm, and the role ferries play in shaping what “island time” is experienced by their riders (Vannini, 2012, pp. 103-104), and Saint Helena is no exception; the difference lies in quite how infrequent the RMS St Helena has been. The island has moulded itself around this ship's arrival and departure for decades, and maritime connections to the rest of the world for centuries. The air service, while still infrequent by most standards, will change this rhythm, and the airport's location and that of the new cargo dock will change how islanders see their physical link to the outside world. Family will more easily be able to visit for holidays, and maybe the act of visiting or leaving Saint Helena will become less of a burden, albeit at the loss of a beloved ship and the rituals surrounding her. Saint Helena's human story is a long way from its Portuguese beginnings, and a solitary man moulding the landscape to suit himself. Although things seem to take their time on the island, Saint Helena is finally changing.

The distance that has for so long defined Saint Helena is diminished, and RMS experience that was unusual to tourists and familiar to Saints, has been replaced by an airport that seems alien to Saint Helena, but familiar as an airport to visitors used to air travel. Saint Helena is a remarkable outlier in considering the diminishing of distance across the world, with expensive internet access and, until recently, a long, infrequent, and expensive voyage as the only regular option to travel to and from the island. The world been held at a distance, and a new airport has brought the outside world days closer.

# Chapter 5

## Losing Distance

Saint Helena's most remarkable feature, when I first bring it up, is arguably its distance from everything else. On Google Maps, a mapping service that constitutes many people's perception of what the world looks like, the island is almost hidden. It's only visible on a smartphone as one zooms in past the point where the coasts of the African continent are visible. One has to know where it is to find it in that manner. Distance, in many ways, supposedly means less and less in the modern world (Cairncross, 1997). In that process, 'placeless' places are said to have proliferated. Countries continents away from one another are quick to reach from one another, and, when one steps off of the plane in the airport, sometimes nearly indistinguishable from one another. The internet, when available, can in some ways negate where one is entirely, acting as a level playing field assuming the location has the infrastructure needed. And Saint Helena, an island that is not far off being the most remote inhabited island, is about to experience the most quintessential non-place, the airport. It remains to be seen how the airport will integrate into the rest of the island, being so far away from the traditional point of entry and exit, Jamestown. As it stands, this will be the first time in the island's history that its connections to the outside world will no longer be across the ocean.

This chapter considers the ways in which Saint Helena was and now is connected to the world, from the relative placelessness of the airport, so alien to the island, to the quirky

bubble of the RMS with its aesthetic and function lying somewhere between a “glorified ferry” and an ocean liner. And finally, this chapter considers the notion of the “death of distance” as it relates to Saint Helena, a place where distance is still very apparent in many important ways.

**Non-Places**

With Saint Helena so focused on the new airport, it is worth considering the rich literature on the idea of airports as placeless or as non-places. Augé used airports as a key example in his influential book on non-places, alongside the likes of supermarkets and highways (Augé, 1995). Islands are often considered, rightly or wrongly, to be special distinct places (Péron, 2004 328). If this notion holds merit, then Saint Helena, by virtue of its isolation, would be a very distinct place. There's a definite contrast between the perceived placelessness of an airport that by looks alone could be in any small European city, and the rest of an island. When I was on the island, this was immediately visible in the contrast between the end of “Haul Road”, the new airport road, and the largely single lane country lanes that come to meet it. In context, the 'placelessness' of the airport and road are remarkable, and tend towards the alien. While the gift shop and café in the airport will be operated by local businesses, and there will not be a British or South African chain convenience store or fast food restaurant in sight, the airport is still recognisably an airport, with its sliding doors, security queue, and even a business class lounge. Even the lift (elevator) in the airport, an unremarkable mechanism in much of the world, has much of its early twentieth century allure “as an

emblem of modern life" (Beer, 2013, p. 278) to the Saint Helenians, to whom it is still a novelty on their island. Paradoxically, as Augé suggests, for those of us used to international travel, this supposed non-place can be, and indeed was, familiar and almost homely (Augé, 1995, p. 106). As many "global professionals … move within their own circles" (Larsen & Urry, 2016, p. 22), airports reinforce that bubble. Saint Helena will no longer break that metaphorical bubble. And, despite its appearance, it is not as if this airport has sprung out of nowhere. The long history of its development including political arguments and a referendum grounds it, despite its alien aesthetics in the recent history of Saint Helena. Adey highlights many airports as "places of distinct feeling and emotion and they have long and complex histories" (Adey, 2006, p. 360), and Saint Helena's new airport is finally a definite outcome of a long debate on the island.

The 'old' way of arriving in Saint Helena also carries a historical resonance. Up until 2015, arriving by ship was the only way people arrived on Saint Helena. All of the prisoners and traders arrived and departed the island through James Valley, the site of Jamestown. In Longwood house, the house in which Napoleon was exiled, there is a distinctive painting of Napoleon's body leaving Jamestown back to France, and the scene looks familiar to anybody who has spent time in modern day Jamestown. The airport, and to some degree the new dock at Rupert's, bypass this shared experience. There is certainly an attempt with the airport for the building to reflect the style of Saint Helenian construction, with stone façades, but these are minor and cosmetic, especially in contrast to the huge change in the landscape necessary to construct a straight and level runway.

Ideas considering a ‘sense of place’, or just theories of place itself, are the backdrop to which the discussion of non-places is held. Most simply, place can be seen as a combination of location and meaning, similar to how Relph describes the home as not just a house but an “irreplaceable centre of significance” (Relph, 1976, p. 39), not just a house. Homes are very significant places, as Relph suggests, and not typical of places, but the example demonstrates the meaning imbued in the place. Tuan argues that place is made by the experiences of the people who occupy it, and that it is “a reality to be clarified and understood from the perspectives of the people who have given it meaning” (Tuan, 1979, p. 387). Small islands exemplify this. They are places where the inhabitants can and often do develop an intimate knowledge of the land, Hay quotes Shields in a articulating the connection between islanders and islands, writing “Children born on [small] islands differ from Elsewhere children in that they are knowing of each rock and fencepost of their homeplace, of every field-corner and doorway, every spit of sand and beach pebble” (as cited in Hay, 2006, p. 31). While this may be an an unrealistic depiction, it hints at one aspect of islandness that is tied in to concepts of place. Relph’s seminal writing on place also suggests that “places of childhood constitute vital reference points for many individuals” (Relph, 1976, p. 37), and also focuses on rootedness throughout. And finally, there is a link to time, with Tuan describing how distance and time are linked, with the far away being perceived as in the past, as well as distance being perceived in terms of time travelled (Tuan, 1979, p. 390). The airport, and its promise of a brighter future, is even more starkly a potential non-place, set against an island held at a distance from the world for so long; many of the meanings ascribed to the island, some of its sense of place, developed through decades of relative

disconnection. Roots were made, children tested the boundaries of the island, and suddenly those boundaries shifted as the stone façade of the airport attempts to camouflage the outside world.

Airports have been portrayed as places without history. Iyer describes Los Angeles International Airport as an “abolition of history” (Iyer, 2000, p. 66) in its setting aside of the centuries of animosity between the nationalities moving through it. In Saint Helena's case, the shift in mode of travel is a break from centuries of maritime connections. Hay warns that “air travel *directly* undercuts the intrinsicality of the sea to the island condition” (Hay, 2013, p. 229), with that threat to the link to the sea being a more significant threat to islands than modern electronic communication.

This attempt at using the structure of the airport to combine two worlds, that of Saint Helena and the standards of international air travel, is reminiscent of how 19th century railway stations connected the two realms of “city space and railway space” (Schivelbusch, 2014, p. 175), a boundary and point of connection between the civil and the industrial (Tomlinson, 2007, pp. 103-104), at least partly through their architecture. But there is certainly a question as to how much that thin veneer of a façade will actually help connect the two worlds in question. Similarly, railway stations were often built on industrial peripheries of cities, excluded from the centres of trade. Eventually the city came to surround the railway stations. While it seems unlikely that the same would happen in the airport's bleak location in Prosperous Bay Plain, it is possible that the airport will stop being quite so alien and hidden from the rest of the island.


*Figure 6: Photo of Saints Driving Down the New Road to View the Test Flight by South African Airline Comair. Henry, P. 22nd October 2016. British Airways 737-800 First Landing On St Helena. Retrieved 18th June, 2018, from https://www.themontserratreporter.com/british-airways-737-800-first-landing-on-st-helena/*

The airport has also made some attempt at being a communal area, despite its relative remoteness. Initially, many Saints lined the sides of the new desolate road to watch the first few planes come in to land. Over time, that will likely diminish, but the airport has a public viewing gallery and café which may continue the tradition of watching people arrive, albeit far away from where Saints actually live. Despite the perceived sterility of the airport environment in general, they are meaningful places of emotional greeting and parting (Adey, Budd, & Hubbard, 2007, p. 779; Iyer, 2000, p. 44), and as passengers including Saints begin to use the airport, this occurrence will shift from the waterfront in

Jamestown to the communal areas of the new airport. In my interviews, although there was  a clear acknowledgement of the change that will take place as the main gateway to the island shifts away from Jamestown, there was still optimism that the airport could be an integrated part of Saint Helenian life. Now that Saint Helena has achieved its promised commercial service, the island will enter a world of *aeromobility*, becoming part of what Adey, Budd, and Hubbard describe as “an increasingly thick skein of flows that envelops the earth's surface” (Adey et al., 2007, p. 773), albeit a thin infrequent link to a small island in an empty ocean.

**The RMS Experience**

With Saint Helena being so far away, in time travelled as well as distance covered, from other land, the idea that the island was a time-capsule of sorts was prominent. From the lack of card payment systems to the recognisably British colonial main street in Jamestown, Saint Helena appears decades behind much of the world. Even from the brief glance of a cruise ship


*Figure 7*. Ocean Mail: Voyage 246

tourist, the jump from the modern ship to the island would seem like a jump back in time. The RMS St Helena, however, brought that dissonance in time all the way to the cruise terminal in Cape Town. While the ship's interior was well maintained, there was no escaping the more than 20 years that had passed since she was built. Other small points, like the serving of beef tea in the mornings, made the experience seem rather dated. Little details like the design of the daily schedule and newsletter, an example page of which is in Figure 7, seem lacking in the polish and modern visual design one might expect from a 'cruise' experience. The RMS was a working ship, not only in its cargo carrying capacity, but also in how it functioned as a means of transport more than a leisure cruise. This was evident in the presence of a deck with a shared bathroom and shower room, and the sharing of cabins with strangers where necessary. The RMS St Helena can either be selectively described in a way that echoes ocean lines of the past, with its library, lounges, shuffle-board and skittles tournaments on deck, and an elegant dining experience, or described in a way that reflects, to quote one of the participants, a “glorified ferry” (Participant 7). And if one just walked on to the ship and had a brief look around it, the overwhelming impression would be the latter.

Cruise ships and the RMS do nominally share the multiple-day voyage to Saint Helena with very little to see, although cruise ships may head to Namibia, which lessens this effect. But in practice, the five days on board the RMS were not filled with entertainment options like a cruise would offer. Five days seemed like forever. Furthermore, for most people those five days went by without any kind of communication with the outside world aside from a daily leaflet of news printed out and

placed in the lounges. Satellite phone was available at a reasonable 40 pence per minute, and internet at $1.60 per megabyte. While the phone cost certainly was not prohibitive, or all that different from the cost of operating a cell phone in Saint Helena itself, the internet cost certainly would have been prohibitive for anything more than a few e-mails. As far as I was concerned, aside from the daily news in the lounges, I was completely disconnected from the 'connected world' that I am used to being a part of. This was not entirely different from the experience of flying on a commercial airline, but the five-day span was the distinguishing factor. Another factor is that for the most part, one doesn't see any other ships unless approaching Saint Helena or Cape Town, and the one ship that we did pass caused quite a stir on-board. The RMS was like a bubble, with a few limited and largely unavailable means of leaving it.

**Distance and its Supposed Death**

> All distances in time and space are shrinking. Man now reaches overnight, by plane, places which formerly took weeks and months of travel. He now receives instant information, by radio, of events which he formerly learned about only years later, if at all. (Martin, 1971, p. 163)

The quote above, written in 1971, reflects a sentiment almost too obvious to need stating in contemporary Western life. Similar sentiments abound. The term 'death of distance' (Cairncross, 1997) boldly suggests that if it is not gone already, distance is in terminal decline. And Cairncross's own writing, with a strong focus on communication

technology in the 1990s, already seems antiquated compared to the modern internet, not to mention improved satellite and wireless technologies. Many of us live in a situation where instantaneous two-way communication is not only available, but available on our person and in many cases, expected of us. The presence of, and backlash against, Syrian refugees in Europe still possessing smartphones after escaping a war zone suggests that we have not caught up with the pace of change in expectations of such communication, with such phones no longer necessarily being a luxury. Mobile phone systems have bypassed the usual fixed infrastructure in war-torn countries like Somalia (Feldman, 2007). Even in places where humans have never set foot, let alone remote islands like Saint Helena, instant two-way communication is available thanks to satellite communication.

Likewise, scheduled aviation has made places from small islands and cities, through 'megacities' like New York or Istanbul, to politically complicated places like Mogadishu or Pyongyang, all accessible with in most cases a few tickets on reputable international airlines, in a reliable level of (dis)comfort. And unlike in the 1970s, travellers can book these tickets directly from the airline from the comfort of their own home, without talking to a single person. For those in European or North American countries with an abundance of visa free travel options, visa requirements already feel outdated, although systems like the USA's Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA) are modernising even this. For most of the developed world, in attending, say, a funeral of a family member in another country or continent, one expects to be able to fly thousands of kilometres at short notice, albeit at considerable cost. Even with high prices, such

“necessary travel” *(*Larsen & Urry, 2016, p. 110*)* is still undertaken if possible. In Saint Helena, in cases of such necessary travel, the distance and time were prohibitive, and the participants complained accordingly. Even with the required money, one simply couldn't leave the island on short notice. One participant delighted in the possibility of phoning home to say “I'll be home soon”, and being there in the time it would take to cook a meal (Participant 11). This is not particularly remarkable for most developed countries, but in Saint Helena it is novel.

Distance is not diminishing equally, and this applies not just to outlying places like Saint Helena. In Europe, as a result of cheap flights and budget airlines, cities have become a “network of cheap and accessible playgrounds” *(*Larsen & Urry, 2016, p. 101*)*, accessible not only in theory, but in practice. Small remote places like Saint Helena, without abundant sandy beaches, should be safe from such a fate. The economics of the airport, limited after construction to smaller planes, makes the economics of such a trip incompatible with this form of tourism. At most, Saint Helena could be an exotic destination for a short vacation from Johannesburg or Cape Town. Beyond that it is still a considerable endeavour to plan a visit, with infrequent and expensive flights.

On a remote island, this notion of the death of distance seems both more acute in the changes it brings and exasperatingly slow simultaneously. Satellite connection, being about as location agnostic as it's possible for a communication technology to be, allows islands that have not had even a telegraph cable to receive live television and radio, make and receive phone calls to the outside world, and even access the internet, albeit at

slow speeds. These are expensive connections, but are suddenly not just possible but likely. On Saint Helena, all of those functions are delivered through one large satellite dish. At certain times of the year, this is made abundantly clear as solar interference overwhelms the satellite connection. And for many islands, aviation has changed access drastically, at least for those who can afford it. Islands like Montserrat that lost their airport have felt it acutely, and a new airport's construction is a priority. In contrast, islands are defined by their boundary, by their separateness. The very thing that makes them different from the mainland, or even exclusive as in the case of luxury private islands, involves a delay, a distance, even if it is a short one. In some cases that need for a ferry or a flight has resulted in depopulation. In a world where distance is supposed to be dying, islands might even be casualties. And despite connections to the internet, islands often are left well behind the mainland in the speed and cost of their connections. In Saint Helena, the flourishing DVD rental stores are a telling symptom, demonstrating that video streaming, a now ubiquitous technology in much of the world, probably will not be practical any time soon. Other internet technologies that could be useful for local businesses or educational purposes will also be difficult and expensive to access.

Some islands like Saint Helena even appear to have lost physical connections compared to recent history. Before viable transoceanic commercial aviation, remote islands could be connected to the rest of the world by ocean liner and by trading vessels. Islands that were once focal points for much more significant maritime connections are no longer as central, even if they are now a peripheral node on a much faster aviation network. 'Distance' justified islands' connection, in a similar fashion to how small airports like

Gander, Newfoundland, were made substantially more important than their populations would suggest due to the limited range of aircraft crossing the ocean, and thus the requirement for remote refuelling stations. At least in relative terms, these islands have become more peripheral, even if their access is now faster and cheaper. Saint Helena, meanwhile, did not even have the advantage of these faster or cheaper travel options, although once a traveller had made it from the island to Ascension or Africa, those advantages become apparent, with Cape Town in particular affording travellers access to many intercontinental flights.

Speed plays an important role in contemporary life. While speed is not evenly accessible, it appears to be more accessible than ever. Tomlinson suggests that speed is sometimes seen as a “prime mark of social progress”, and that against the desire for it to be exclusive, has by and large been democratised (Tomlinson, 2007, pp. 20-24). Islands, in their separateness,

can still play a role

in making speed

exclusive, when

private jets or

helicopters bypass a



*Figure 8: Advertisement for New Debit Cards on Bank of Saint Helena Website. 21st December 2017. https://web.archive.org/web/20171221012157/http://www.sainthelenabank.com/*

public ferry, but for the most part, speed that had for a long time been the exclusive preserve of the rich in the developed world is steadily being democratised.

Saint Helena has in some ways, unlike private but otherwise difficult to reach islands, negated the common expression “time is money” that is seemingly a truism in a market driven economy. Regardless of how much money one has, with a few extreme exceptions, it still took days to reach the island. While the yachts that stop by on their way across the Atlantic are exclusive, the uncomfortable journey in a small boat was shared by all, or the discomfort was somewhat mitigated by those travelling on the less exclusive RMS. While that all changed with the airport making the island exclusively accessible by air to small private jets, until then money could not buy one speed in reaching Saint Helena. That said, in looking at other forms of instantaneous communication, money very much could buy time. One participant expressed frustration at the inability to casually use the internet to look things up (Participant 11). It's not that one can not do so, just that it would be expensive, and internet use late at night would be cheaper. The same applies with phone calls. The technology is in place, but at a high cost. Saint Helena has defied the expansion of instantaneous technology, with, for example, the plastic bank card with its “aura of lightness and effortlessness” (Tomlinson, 2007, pp. 133-134) having only arrived in Saint Helena in late 2016. The Bank of Saint Helena advertises to “Pay the Easy Way” in promoting its first debit card system (“Bank of St. Helena Ltd.”, 2017). Even the new system, in its trial phase, is seemingly incompatible with familiar standards in much of the rest of the world. Nonetheless, until recently, travelling to Saint Helena meant going back to an almost entirely cash economy, one with its own distinct currency. In this way, time and money are literally linked.

## Conclusion

‘Global cities’ with their quick, easy, and cheap travel to much of the rest of the world, abundant labour, and easy access to goods and services, are the most obviously examples of the effects of increased connections, an increased speed and instantaneity, and the notion of the 'death of distance'. These are also the places where these kinds of connection have been present in one way or another for decades if not centuries. If looking for changes in these aspects of connection, the 'death of distance' as it applies not to most people, but most places, remote islands and rural areas would be more telling. Saint Helena in particular, with the retirement of its old Royal Mail Ship, thousands of kilometres off the coast of Angola, will begin to see some of the alleged placelessness of the outside world filter in as the experience of arriving on the island changes towards something more generic, and its isolation is in one aspect reduced to a few hours of flying on an airline in place of the isolating experience of the RMS.

To be Saint Helenian is connected to the island's isolation, to its uniqueness, and to the friendliness that comes from a small community, on a small island, thousands of kilometres from other land. In losing their ship, and their distance, what it means to be Saint Helenian will change, but as an identity partly built on hybridity in the first place, this is nothing new for Saints.

# Chapter 6

# Defining Saintness

I was not sure how to ask the question, but in conducting my interviews in Saint Helena, I was interested in getting a sense of what it meant for Saints to be just that, Saints. I sought to discover some Saints' idea of what makes them Saints, be it history, geography, language, or some mixture of the three aspects. Two aspects became immediately apparent, both in response to that explicit question and at other points in the interview, and they were their sense of the island and islanders' uniqueness, and a friendliness both among each other and towards outsiders. Other aspects of the Saint Helenian identity that were apparent in the interviews included a focus on the island's isolation and its distinct landscape. And finally, the question of the island's colonial past and the Britishness of the island is considered. Uniqueness and isolation stand in contrast with a history of connectedness and transience in much of Saint Helena's history, but in step with the island's isolation and remarkable distance over the past 50 years or more.

## Uniqueness

> Is not the inherent, intrinsic uniqueness of any island, even the smallest, especially the smallest, a veritable bastion of hope, however slim, that locality thrives and survives? (Baldacchino, 2004)

It seems odd to focus on uniqueness. After all, everywhere is unique in some way, even with various forms of increasing homogenisation. But uniqueness is scattered throughout writing concerning islands and islandness. From an emphasis on the unique challenges and attractions of island for tourism (Butler, 2012), to unique forms of sovereignty and governance often attained by island jurisdictions (Hepburn, 2012), islands often defy expectations. From the islands and their distinct challenges in the *Odyssey*, to C. S. Lewis's *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* and its similar use of islands as distinct settings, islands have been used in literature as distinct environments separated from the mainland and one another. Even biological evolution treats us with 'unique' endemic species, as islands insulate animals from the predators or competitors of the outside world. Uniqueness has been used to define islands, in one typical example, alongside isolation and boundedness (Fitzpatrick, 2007). Hay argues that the very particularity of individual islands puts the idea of islandness as having a transcendent similarity between islands into considerable doubt (Hay, 2013, p. 209). The boundedness of islands, while perhaps superficial, ensures islands are often seen as unique, and even in a well-connected archipelago, a tourist guide, for example, would almost always emphasise the unique attributes of the islands.  While islands and islanders might share characteristics among themselves, and aspects of islandness transcend differences as Conkling strongly argues (Conkling, 2007), islands often revel in their differences and uniqueness.

Saints, however, are not only observed as being unique, but appear to base their identity at least partially on their own uniqueness. When asked what being a Saint means to one participant, they answered “I think it's the uniqueness, knowing that we're part of mixed

cultures” (Participant 5). This perspective of uniqueness is formed of a hybridity, albeit a rather old one, rather than as a static homogeneous identity. Another simply said “Unique” (Participant 10), then focusing on isolation and an unspecified distinct way of life. At other points in the interviews, Saints consistently came back to uniqueness, specialness, and distinctiveness of their island, culture, ethnicity, and way of life. Cohen quoted one Saint in the 1980s saying “we are a selection of liquorice all sorts” (Cohen, 1983, p. 125), hinting at the pride at the diversity of origins and appearances among the group of Saints. While this diversity is by no means unique to Saint Helena, it is a function of the island’s remoteness, and a part of the island identity. That uniqueness is also recognised as an attraction to tourists. And in considering the new airport, there's a worry that Saint Helena is “going to be very similar to other islands” (Participant 1). It is not only that Saint Helena is seen as unique as an island, but unique among them also. In a world of islands that are for the most part in clear archipelagos or dotted along a coast, where said islands often distinguish themselves against their neighbours, Saint Helena distinguishes itself against the world, and its uniqueness has, at least in the past few decades of its existence, been difficult to dispute. Hay highlights “genuinely 'oceanic' islands” as small in number and their characteristics distinct from the masses of other islands (Hay, 2013, p. 210), and Saint Helena exemplifies that notion. The Saints I interviewed were well-travelled enough to recognise their home island as special, but perhaps the collective notion that their island is unique stems from generations of Saints coming to this same realisation.

**Friendliness**

Another common theme in identifying what it means to be a Saint was friendliness. One participant, after identifying uniqueness, went to friendliness, suggesting that the name "Saint" might be somewhat appropriate, even if that is an unattainable label (Participant 10). While this theme appears clichéd, especially in the context of small isolated communities, paired with outsiders complaining about the difficulty of being accepted, it was nonetheless apparent on Saint Helena, with surprisingly little of the more negative associations. A participant, in identifying its loss as a possible consequence of the airport, called it a "cultural friendliness" (Participant 8). Within this broad category, the primary theme that emerged was the closeness of the community. In very practical terms, there are the ways that the community has helped each other, from sharing a cabbage with somebody in need, to providing a rudimentary support network before the government could do so. Those examples are largely historical. Another feature of friendliness outlined by participants was that "everybody practically knows everybody else" (Participant 1), but not just know of them, but as another participant put it:

> I can see somebody walking down the street, I, I know, I know their, their marriage, their children, their travel history, where they live, I know so much about them. Um, I know people that have been through so much pain, so we can, we can meet up, we can interact on a level where there's that mutual understanding without having to exchange words. (Participant 11)

While this, again, might appear sinister from the common perspective of rural communities being unwelcoming and intrusive, this was presented as a positive and important part of Saint Helenian life by the Saints themselves.

And finally, a general kindness and tolerance was noted, including to outsiders. One often noted form of this was the practice of drivers or even pedestrians waving to each other as they passed. Another specific form of kindness was the high number of charitable organisations on the island for its population. One Saint suggested that Saints are too tolerant, reluctant to give offence to the point of fault (Participant 13). Bain noted that in 1992, in his opinion “many Saints still display trusting naïvety, which is at first disarming and thereafter sort of worrying” (Bain, 1993, p. 17). In my own time on the island, it was remarkable how little suspicion or distrust of an unknown outsider there was. While there was resentment at certain aspects of the temporary non-Saint community on the island, this did not make itself apparent at the surface level, at least in my own experience conducting my research. Saints, or at least those who have travelled, seem well aware of their island's more friendly attitude to outsiders and insiders alike.

**Isolation and Remoteness**

For an island as remote as Saint Helena, isolation makes itself very apparent. To some extent the uniqueness mentioned above is as a result of the distinction of the island itself

against the ocean that surrounds it. Like many remote communities, remoteness is often one of the first observations of outside observers. Hussain says of a community in rural Pakistan that they “are defined by their remoteness … they engage productively with the discourse of outsiders who represent them as remote”, while at the same time, that same remote community was more cosmopolitan than one might first consider, with its important location for parts of the 'Silk Road' (Hussain, 2015, pp. 2-6). Saint Helena has both the distinction of being one of the world's most remote islands, but also having a history of connection. That all the participants had travelled off the island at some point and had family abroad, and the Saint Helena Government estimates that 80% of the resident population had left Saint Helena at some point (*St Helena's sustainable economic development plan: 2018-2028, 2*018, p. 8), suggesting that while Saint Helena is still being defined by its remoteness, it still retains some of its former position as a node in a large trading empire.

The uniqueness of Saint Helena is in part attributed to its isolation, sometimes explicitly by participants. But a sense of isolation was very dependent on what the points of comparison would be. Those that had considered the isolation in a historical context often considered modern pre-airport Saint Helena to be relatively connected. International phone calls and the internet, as well as increased visits by cruise ships and yachts, have diminished the degree of isolation experienced by Saints. Regardless, there is still a recognition that a substantial part of the attraction of Saint Helena is its isolation. And as one Saint suggested, it is at times “when you want to go see something in the outside world and you want to be part of it and you can't” (Participant 8) that they

felt most isolated. The number of instances when Saints said they missed weddings, funerals, and other important family events due to the time it would take suggests this realisation occurs fairly often.

With the airport opening in sight, one participant identified a change in the perception of isolation on the island. They suggested that the isolation experienced by Saints was magnified by the delay of the airport operation. The planned airport operation inspired hope, and in some cases plans to visit relatives. This participant gave the example of planning to attend a wedding in Namibia. But these plans were put on hold or rendered impossible as the airport experienced safety issues. That dashed hope increased the perception of isolation, as it provided a glimpse of a more connected future. (Participant 10)

**Landscape**

Returning as Saints often do to the theme of uniqueness, a couple of Saints remarked upon the landscape, either with tourists commenting on it, or their own comparison with travel abroad. One Saint stated, for instance, that their scenic trip in Hawaii did not seem all that more impressive than the landscape back home in Saint Helena. They also said “you don’t actually appreciate the what you have” (Participant 5), suggesting this realisation was aided by travelling off of the island for points of comparison. Bain similarly wrote that Saints took their impressive landscape for granted (Bain, 1993, p. 67). Perhaps as Saints have moved abroad, their appreciation for the uniqueness and

beauty of their own landscape has increased. As mentioned previously, Saint Helena has been described at times as a paradise, and at other times as a very British setting. As a volcanic island in the middle of the South Atlantic, as an island with many endemic species, and as an island whose landscape is littered with cannons and defences that hint at a more hostile history, Saint Helena's landscape is remarkable. Tourists seem surprised to find, in the middle of a barren looking and formidable island, a green and even cloudy-covered middle, giving away the island as genuinely tropical. For locals, one participant suggested that her family house was her “heart-throb” with a particular focus on the landscape surrounding it (Participant 1). There is a sense that Saint Helena's landscape is not replicated among the few other oceanic volcanic islands, and that aspect contributes to make the island unique.

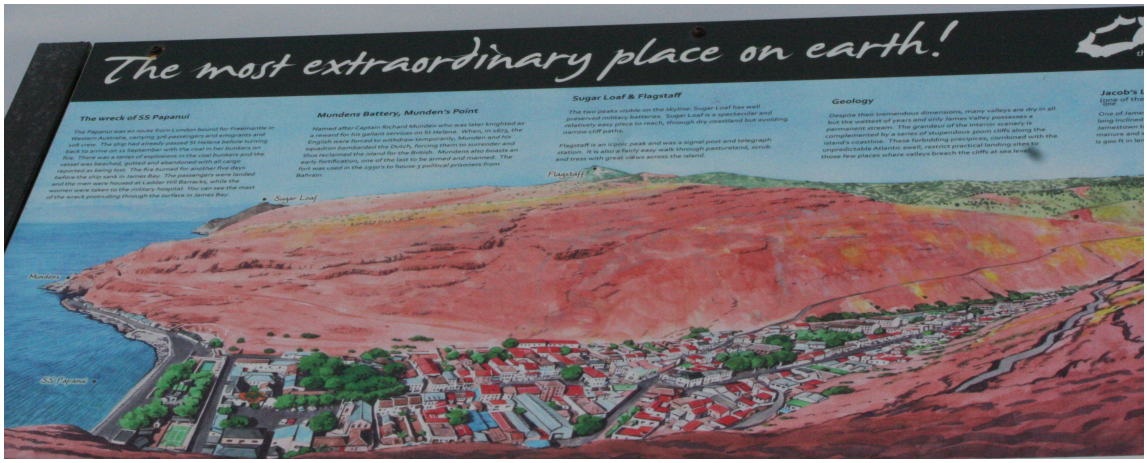


*Figure 9: Photo of Tourist Information Board with the Slogan "The most extraordinary place on earth!". 5$^{Th}$ October, 2016*

**Britishness**

Aside from a strong local identity, previous writers on Saint Helena have identified a certain Britishness on the island. It almost goes without saying that as a British Overseas Territory that uses a currency pegged to the British pound, and is so far removed from much of its nearest continental landmass, would retain a British sense of identity. Hogenstijn and Van Middelkoop identified Britishness as a theme of Saint Helena's identity, quoting the Bishop on the island as saying “This island is still very British, but old-fashionedly British”, with the writers stating that that “Britishness is an integral part of 'being a Saint'” (Hogenstijn & Van Middelkoop, 2005, pp. 101-102). The journalist Simon Winchester noted in the 1980s that almost every house had a portrait of the Queen displayed, and that “people eat marmalade, and fishcakes, and stop in mid-afternoon for tea” (Winchester, 2004, p. 159). These may be superficial observations, but having arrived from South Africa, there was a striking aesthetic similarity between Jamestown and some British towns, let alone the strikingly similar countryside in parts of the interior. And much like Winchester's observation regarding marmalade, there was enough Marmite in one of the grocery stores to know with good confidence that the island was somewhat British. The British flag was ubiquitous, while the Saint Helenian one was sometimes hard to find. That said, aside from some writing on walls welcoming royalty, I did not see pictures of the Queen in houses, although that may have been a failure of observation on my part. One recipient did suggest that the dismissal of the Saint dialect as 'bad English' (Participant 3) was infuriating, but perhaps that indicates the pervasiveness of a British standard to which it is compared.


*Figure 10.* Plaque with Details of the Royal Charter of 1673. 27th October, 2016.

The historical challenge to the British identity was the opposition to the 1981 British Nationality Act that stripped Saints of British citizenship between 1981 and the restoration of citizenship in 2002. Moore, writing about the British Nationality Act, suggests as others do that the issue of the return of Hong Kong to Chinese rule prompted the Nationality Act, and that with the exception of the Falkland Islanders after the war, the British citizenship of Saints was ignored until a time suitably after the point at which Hong Kong ceased being a British territory. One MP specifically said in a debate that nothing could be done regarding the Saint Helenian citizenship matter until "the Hong Kong issue is out of the way" (Moore, 2000, p. 12). And tellingly, Saints regained their British citizenship not long after Hong Kong was returned to China. Woven into that debate is a notion of Britishness as essential to the Saint identity. The loss of citizenship was most obviously an economic challenge, as Saints would no longer be allowed to freely live and work in the UK. But secondly, the loss of citizenship was, as Moore states, "a symbolic rejection by the mainland of people who felt themselves to be essentially English", not seeing themselves so much as a colony, but as a part of England or Britain (Moore, 2000, pp. 10-11). The Royal Charter in figure 10, guaranteeing Saints

“capacities and abilities … as if they had beene abideing and borne within this Our Kingdome of England”, justified in a legal manner, a sense of betrayal for being treated as just another colony. The Saints' sense of Britishness exacerbated what was already a divisive decision. Relations have healed, and the Saints have their British citizenship back. As migration rights returned, Saints have benefited. One participant had worked in the Isle of Man, Jersey, the Falkland Islands, and Yorkshire and Dorset in the United Kingdom (Participant 10); this suggests a strong attachment economically to the UK and its territories. The airport spending signals a new relationship between the UK government and one of its most remote territories.

**Conclusion**

Saints did struggle to outline specifics in some of the interviews. Uniqueness on its own, while it came up, was not always pinned down to a specific set of unique features. The notion of hybridity in the origin of their unique culture appears alongside a focus on the distinctiveness of their culture. Friendliness almost seems overly broad and ill defined, but was a consistent theme. Even their distinct landscape was described without detail as to what was distinct, it just was. Many of these things can, however, be linked to the island's isolation, both physically, in the singular nature of Saint Helena as a lone volcanic island in the South Atlantic, but also in terms of accessibility. Their sense of place, the meanings imbued in the island by Saints, has been honed by decades of life on an island with thousands of kilometers of ocean around, as much of the rest of the world flies overhead. The links it does have, to Britain and South Africa, also shape their

identity. As the airport project might begin to alter that latter kind of isolation, Saints have a number of hopes and fears as to how 'Sainthood' might change in the coming decades. The airport project has been more than a decade in the making, and a point of discussion for much longer than that. Years have been spent hypothesising the results of such a change, and years spent watching an enormous engineering project take shape. And then, as I was on the island, a pause as authorities considered the next step after the runway was deemed unsafe for the larger planes the airport was planned for. On top of those hopes and fears surrounding the airport for years, there was a frustration as the future was unclear. The plan, however, to transition to a tourism economy, was still the future, taking Saint Helena down a path that many islands have followed.

# Chapter 7

## An Island Transformed?

> “People were divided in their response to flying; some hailed it as another great technological liberation and some foresaw its destructive potential” (Beer, 2013, p. 273)

The lack of an airport, or even airstrip, has been noted in many an introduction to the island. A line like “There is no airfield” (Moore, 2000, p. 9) in introducing the island serves to highlight quite how isolated the island is, a fact that is almost always pertinent in a discussion of Saint Helena. Others go further, highlighting a potential airport as, in some ways at least, the island's only hope. Royle states “an airport remains the only way St Helena's life and economy could be transformed” (Royle, 2001, p. 222). And since the airport construction began, focus on the future direction of the island is seen to be held waiting for the airport project and delays to be resolved. (Harmer, Gaskarth, & Gibb, 2015). Before the airport opened, there were impacts from the construction and promised opening. A workforce of outsiders were living on the island for a number of years, and some roads were improved. A new ship, not the RMS St Helena, supplied the construction project from nearby Namibia. There was a change. But for the most part, the day to day life of Saints was unaffected. It was in their aspirations, and maybe even plans, that the airport project loomed heavily. Even as the airport was built, the hope embodied in the notion that the airport was the key to the survival of the island economy

and population led to a frustrating wait to the 'finish line' of the first commercial flight. Once flights started, the economic sustainability of the island could be achieved, but Saint Helena will follow many islands towards an increasingly tourism dominated economy, a transformation that has already, perhaps prematurely, begun. And looking beyond the airport project, the promise of faster internet connection after the connection of an undersea fibre optic cable could erase some more of the limiting factors keeping Saint Helena so separate from the outside world, both in social terms, and in economic opportunities.

**Indifference and Patience, Frustration and Excitement**

Saints had a wide range of reactions to the new airport and to the state of limbo the island was in at the time regarding its operation. To begin, there was a distinct sense of scale to the delay, with one participant suggesting that, as long as the other ways of getting to the island remain active, the delays to the airport “doesn't really matter” (Participant 6). Otherwise, there was a more general sense that the island has lasted this long without an airport, so what's another few years of delay if the airport is eventually operational? Another participant praised Saints for being very patient and understanding of the challenges the airport poses (Participant 12). That said, there was also an abundance of frustration, from specific economic projections being far from met, to an increased hopeless frustration at not knowing what is going to happen. And although somebody said Saints are patient in relation to the airport's delays, another participant

suggested that some Saints have been quite negative and ready “to make holes in” the project as soon as something goes wrong (Participant 10). There was also a degree of excitement about the potential of the airport. From projections of luxury hotels bringing in high-spending tourists, to family being able to visit the island, the airport still retains a hopeful sheen. And then, as one might expect, that excitement is tinged with curiosity. When I was viewing a test flight coming in to land, Saints lined the new road to the airport, seeking a good vantage point before the police roadblock, to view the landing of what was by no means the first flight to the island. The following meeting with the airline staff in the hotel bar in Jamestown was reasonable celebratory, not as frustrated as one might expect.

“Everyone was geared up” for the airport, said my first participant. And this was a running theme, especially from those with a financial interest in the success of the airport and the associated predicted tourism boom. Waiting was perhaps the strongest theme, perhaps softened by putting the problem in a historical context. One participant said, at the moment, “people sit and watch tumbleweeds pass by their door” (participant 7), leading to some frustration. From having to put business plans on hold, to family having to cancel their plans (and in some cases tickets) to travel, there is a distinct irritation with the situation. This is partly due to a feeling that the process is far from transparent, with Saints complaining of a lack of meaningful information. As one Saint complained, “without information you can't make decisions” (Participant 7). There's a sense that locals felt stripped of agency, as the airport's primary purpose, to replace the RMS as the passenger link off of the island, failed to materialise after the airport's

opening was delayed, leaving the island and its inhabitants in a state of limbo. In 2005, before the airport project was finalised, a report cited “a feeling of being on hold” relating to delays to the air access decision as a potential problem (*Saint Helena access feasibility study,* 2005, p. 30). In the same report, there was also an acknowledgement that indecision was having a negative effect on morale on the island (*Saint Helena access feasibility study,* 2005, p. 133). More than a decade later and with an airport constructed, similar sentiments were still dominant. While the construction of the airport is a very real material impact of UK government spending, the impacts that were proposed to follow it were out of reach. Even with the airport operating, it remained to be seen if development would remain an “abstraction” as Cohen put it in the 1980s (Cohen, 1983, p. 143), or if the real tangible benefits proposed would come to fruition. As Royle somewhat sarcastically puts it, “Saint Helena wins again” (Royle, 2001), although this time 'winning' seemed closer than ever.

Saint Helena airport has been the 'talk of the town' (or indeed island) to varying degrees for the past decade. The interviews hopefully collected the themes that came up in that talk, along with the suspense and anticipation of the final year or so, as commercial service was tested before being disappointingly cancelled due to safety concerns. I felt somewhat guilty even asking about the airport, as for Saints it might well be the reason anybody researching the island in recent years has visited. Much like any technological innovation, early aviation was seen as both a liberation and a threat (Beer, 2013, p. 273), and Saints have gone through those same arguments, but with over a century of experience of powered flight to consider. From other remote islands to the impact of

European discount airlines, Saints, who for the most part are well travelled, have plenty of reference points with which to consider their aeronautical future.

**Hopes**

> People possibly pictured the airport opening and instantaneously there would be this flood of people sort of throwing twenty pound notes around and everything's going to be booming (Participant 7)

The overwhelmingly positive story surrounding the airport remains a controversial one. Tourism, and all the economic opportunities that it brings, beckon, alongside some smaller economic benefits. On one hand, there have been promises of luxury development, and an emphasis on high-spending tourists, on the other are Saints just hoping for a bit more business, be it running a taxi service, or trying to keep a hotel profitable.

Even in my very first interview, with somebody who was sceptical of the airport project, “big five star hotels”, golf courses, and “little chalets” were mentioned among other projects by developers that may have got ahead of themselves with the imminent arrival of the airport. The Saint Helena Government explicitly focused on higher spending tourists, as flight costs would still be high (Saint Helena Government, 2012/13), leading to some extravagant visions of luxury developments. Even the remaining small four-star hotel being developed, a shadow of some of the initial plans, was described by a

participant as “groundbreaking. It's never been done before” (Participant 7). There's a sense that despite Saint Helena having had a small tourism sector for a while, the scale of the possibilities brought by air travel will offer tourism at a completely different scale and standard. Tourism provides by far the most clear economic path for the island's future, and reaches towards notions of economic sustainability. The island's history, ecology, and landscape all have tourism potential. This hope underpins the case for the airport, but even one of the more optimistic participants suggested that economic sustainability is not likely within the next fifty years. While hopeful, Saints see this development as a long-term benefit.

The airport offers some other economic hopes, such as a local business being able to import computer parts and accessories for urgent repairs, or the ability of the local fishers to export tuna to the international market in good time. Also, there's a notion, as stated by one participant, that “having easier access to the island can't be a bad thing in terms of … getting foreign money into the island … having that easier access will hopefully mean that more money can come in”. Although this might just be through tourism, there's a hope that having an airport will make Saint Helena somewhat more economically competitive, as the 'unique' access situation presented by the RMS was also 'uniquely' disadvantageous for trade and business. One Saint despaired that businesses “can't keep pushing around the small amount of money that's on the island” (Participant 7), which alludes to the hope of economic change that might occur.

Another significant hope, one that was especially exciting for Saints, was the reduction in travel barriers, most notably time, but also frequency and cost. To quote one participant**,** to "just be able to see somewhere else, even for a week or two, is very enticing" (Participant 8). At the moment, because of the time taken, one Saint estimated that if travelling to England, Saints might currently take about 12 weeks to do so (Participant 13). With a flight, this time away can be reduced without the travelling being such a high proportion of the total time away. Travelling for family events like marriages may be more feasible. Others were excited to possibly be able to go and see a sport game or a concert without 10 days of travelling. Also Saints appreciate not necessarily having to plan quite so far in advance, as is sometimes necessary with the infrequent RMS sailings. Increased frequency, with flights currently planned once a week, help with short term trip planning as well.

Medical Evacuation (medevac) is another, and perhaps more clearly positive goal and unlike the other hopes, immediate success of the airport. The ability to perform a medical evacuation (medevac) during medical emergencies is a low bar for most inhabited islands. Either islands are close to land, other centres of population, and thus within helicopter range, allowing access to island without the infrastructure for regular air travel. Or, remote inhabited island that are too far for a helicopter to viably travel would generally have some form of air access. Until the construction of the airport, Saint Helena was without either option. Medical evacuations took as long as it took a ship to arrive to the island and then depart to continental Africa or occasionally Ascension. When the RMS was not nearby, as would often be the case, the island has had to put out

an emergency call for local ships to respond. In 2015, a young girl was evacuated by a Dutch ship responding to such a call, and taken to Ascension, and then from there she was flown to Britain (Du Plessis, 2015). While this was a success story, it easily could have taken longer, and as it was, the journey to Ascension still took a couple of days by ship, despite it being the closest other land.

Unsurprisingly, among participants, there was unanimity that the construction of the airport allowing for medevac was an advantage. Participants who were otherwise opposed to the airport were pleased to see its medical function fulfilled, although one wanted a simpler airport for that purpose alone.

**Fears**

Concerns regarding the airport can largely be divided into two categories, fears of tangible loss or damage, and fears of intangible changes in culture and way of life.

To begin with tangible concerns, one risk raised was the risk of diseases (with HIV being specifically mentioned) making their way to the islands as more visitors arrive. With the connection to the outside world largely consisting of just over 100 people a few times a month on the RMS, an increase in people and frequency of visits could hasten the spread of disease to the island. Another concern is that there might be an increase in crime. Saints were keen to emphasise the lack of much serious crime on the island, and a

government report stated that “crime is extremely low”, with a total of 153 crimes recorded in a recent year (*St Helena's sustainable economic development plan: 2018-2028,* 2018, p. 8). One Saint was concerned that “once the airport is operational, that we’re going to be able to, from a security point of view, make sure that we don’t have the elements come into the island that we have not had”, going on to identify the ability to leave one’s door unlocked as under risk (Participant 12). An increase in drug use was mentioned, but most of this fear didn't specify the crime, just that it may increase. Crime and disease have long been associated with new forms of transport, such as anxiety surrounding the introduction of the railway in Europe (Harrington, 2000). And finally, there were worries that the cost of living would increase, mostly as a result of the subsidy of the RMS St Helena stopping, and the new cargo ship running at cost, resulting in an increased cost of imported goods. One Saint thinking through this changed, asked me “Everything is going to shoot up in price, isn’t it?” (Participant 1)

As for the intangible changes, to begin, there's a sense that Saint Helena will lose something, be it “its individuality” (Participant 4), friendliness, or its uniqueness or specialness. There was a specific fear that the island would become like other places. In terms of tourism, one Saint said that, at the moment, “if you come to Saint Helena, it must be because you really, really want to see it”, going on to worry that “the kind of tourists we'll get now would be a bit more aloof to the whole concept of the island” (Participant 8). Another recipient put it bluntly that Saint Helena is “going to be very similar to other islands” (Participant 1). While tourism is a key motivation behind the construction of the airport, some participants noted that isolation was a major attraction

to tourists, and that that will be diminished as travel is no longer so laborious or special. Indeed, even with the airport, one of the key identified marketable features of the island for tourism in the airport feasibility study was the island's remoteness (*Saint Helena access feasibility study,* 2005, p. 54). While this does not spell out what Saint Helena risks losing, it does state what it risks becoming: like everywhere else.

Some Saints did spell out the possible changes more specifically. One theme is that a different economic mind-set might become prevalent. One Saint described it as “a different model that don't fit” (Participant 3), worrying that the model of governance the island has evolved will be swamped by one imposed with the money coming in for the airport project. Another Saint highlighted the change, and possibly future change towards “the rat race” (Participant 5), with some locals already showing signs of wealth and flaunting their success and status in ways that weren't common previously. “If you look around the island there's, like, houses that's great big mansions whereas before they were just like normal”, elaborated that participant, suggesting one form of these changes, although not specifically considering it a negative change. Another perhaps put it very simply, with a worry that Saint Helena will become “more twenty-first century” (Participant 8), and that in some ways, that's a bad thing. One way that this has been stated by the government is as a change to the economy where the government is no longer the “'only provider of services or solutions' to issues” (Saint Helena Government, 2012/13,, p. 14), a large change that goes hand-in-hand with the arrival of the airport. And finally, another concern is the loss of friendliness. That two of the concerns, loss of uniqueness and friendliness, are shared with what Saints identified as factors in the Saint

identity, suggests that there is at least some worry that the airport may threaten Saint Helenian identity in these ways.

**Tourism**

> The island was too far off the beaten track to sustain a large tourist trade and technical difficulties, as well as the low volume of anticipated traffic, mitigated against the construction of an airfield. (Cohen, 1983, p. 124)

Despite Cohen's observation in the 1980s, the airport project overcame the obstacles in its path, and Saint Helena is no longer quite so 'off the beaten track' as it has been for so long. What is the economic future for Saint Helena? By most accounts the answer is unequivocally tourism. The only economic prospects other than tourism offered by the airport were a brief mention of exporting fresh fish to Europe by plane. Even with an airport, Saint Helena will still suffer from the competitive disadvantages many islands face from increased travel cost. A further hope lies in the possibility of a fibre optic internet connection, but until that point, increased access opens up the island to the possibility of substantially increased tourism.

The Saint Helena Government highlighted that "Tourism is also an export – *it is the export market that comes to you* " in its Sustainable Economic Development Plan, a document with a strong focus on a future tourism economy (Saint Helena Government, 2012/13, p. 5). For an island pinning its hopes on tourism, the rate of tourism at the

moment is extremely limited. I was struck by the complete lack of any tourists on my voyage to the island besides a few that stayed on the ship before continuing on to Ascension Island. The statistics tell a slightly more hopeful story, with an average of 677 tourism visitors arriving on the RMS each year over the past eight years. But still, in 2012, the number of yacht arrivals, for whom Saint Helena is an oasis of sorts on a journey across the South Atlantic, was greater than the number of tourists arriving on the RMS itself. The numbers from the RMS marked in the data as being a “pure tourist” (staying eight nights or more) are roughly half of that total, usually somewhere between 200 and 300 a year. This makes the current rate of tourism often less than one percent of the “relatively modest” goal of 30,000 visitors suggested in justification of the airport, and as a goal for financial self-sustainability (Saint Helena Government, 2012/13). That said, if you include cruise ship tourist numbers, and those that do not stay for a minimum of eight nights, the numbers are a little better.

*Figure 11: Photo of "Post Box Walk" to Heart Shaped Waterfall. October 14th 2016*

It was apparent when on Saint Helena quite how much the economy had already been geared towards tourism. The tourist office and adjacent craft store occupy a prominent position in Jamestown's main street. Before I had even arrived on the island, I was receiving Saint Helena Tourism advertisements on Facebook, and the branding of the tourism office was ubiquitous and surprisingly consistent. There was an abundance of hotels, guest-houses, and other accommodation. The 'Post Box walks', a series of trails across the island, were well maintained and marked, (see example in Figure 11) beyond what one might expect for a small local population. And many businesses from taxi companies to tour boat operators were waiting for the promised tourist boom, operational but without many customers. Indeed, I soon realised I was, along with the

mostly British expat workers, a sort of placeholder tourist, taking advantage of the preparations for a much larger influx of outsiders that was yet to materialise.

In most discussions of island economies, tourism is present, and more often than not, dominant. For warm-water islands, this is very much the case, but even for cold-water islands this is increasingly common. Baldacchino identifies tourism as, in certain circumstances, being able to break islands free from an aid and remittance heavy economy to a more sustainable one, but also that it is a “fickle and vulnerable” industry, giving little “jurisdictional muscle to the provider” (Baldacchino, 2006, p. 56). While islands often suffer from competitive disadvantages in other industries, for tourism they may have competitive advantages, making tourism a more important factor for island economies than might be the case for mainland counterparts (Seetanah, 2011, pp. 303-304). As commodity prices make agricultural economies on islands unsustainable, as happened to flax in the 1960s in Saint Helena, tourism, a sector where the very place itself can be marketed through history, landscape, culture, becomes a sector where the islands have the advantage. But as Scheyvens and Momsen identify, this does hand the island's economy over from industries with greater local control, to a dependency on external factors, as well as, in more developed tourist economies, even outside ownership of services, like airlines and hotels, and this they argue is particularly the case with 'luxury' or high-end tourism (Scheyvens & Momsen, 2008, pp. 28-29). Saint Helena is a long way from many island economies where annual numbers of tourists visiting outnumber the population. For a brief moment early in the airport project, international resort companies were considering operation in Saint Helena. This understandably did

bring forth some worries about the new scale of tourism on the island. The worries did lead to the establishment of a cap on the number of beds for tourists (Saint Helena Government, 2012/13, p. 1). Saint Helena, by its lack of sandy beaches and its remoteness even with the airport, is likely to always appeal to the niche tourist, with little mass-market appeal, but it is seeking to join the many other islands down the familiar path to a tourism economy.

**Impact of the Internet**

Looking beyond the airport project, another form of faster and cheaper connection comes in the form of a proposed fibre optic internet cable to Africa and South America, and consequentially, to the rest of the world. Much like the RMS to airport transition, there is already internet access on the island, it is just slow and expensive. The prospect of fast inexpensive internet not only allows simple access to services one might expect elsewhere, but more broadly some equity with the world in delivering services from Saint Helena, in as much as services on the internet are location agnostic.

Despite the cost and slow speed of the satellite internet the island uses at the moment, many Saints see it as having already changed the island in similar ways to the supposed impact of the airport. On the distinctly positive side, despite the restrictive internet, free Voice over IP (VoIP) services like Skype have not only cut the cost of communication with family abroad, but also allows video calls. Much like education systems on other small islands, the education system can use various distance learning technologies to

collaborate with schools thousands of kilometres away. Other effects include the introduction of global cultural trends to the island, especially among young people. More generally, although the internet is clearly a part of this trend, participants mentioned how much of the time young people are on their smartphones, which is a familiar complaint seemingly anywhere in the developed world. This is all the case despite the very limited and expensive access to internet. One participant suggested that because of the internet, “we're not isolated any more, not in that way” (Participant 13). In some ways, there is a “virtual travel” enabled by technologies like television, and especially the internet with its interactive nature (Tomlinson, 2007, p. 103). The internet has already changed Saint Helena's connection to the outside world in a substantial way.

One participant in particular, whose business involves writing a photography-heavy blog from Saint Helena, documented how limiting the internet access was. There is currently unmetred internet access in the early morning, meaning he is required to schedule every blog post to upload during that time. He mentioned how he'd have to make notes of all the little things he wanted to verify or search on the internet to do so later when the access was not restricted. To simply use a search engine to quickly look up some details could, if done habitually, end up being a costly endeavour. Similarly, checking email used enough data to be an inconvenience, making replying to emails in a timely fashion difficult (Participant 11).For such professionals, Saint Helena's current internet is extremely limiting, especially when outsiders expect instant communication.

My own experience, as an outsider, was perhaps more acute. While in one sense having the BBC World Service as my primary link to current events was a delight, in others the nearness of reasonably instant internet communication behind a substantial barrier of cost was infuriating. Much like being on the RMS, it occurred to me that Saint Helena's island experience could be sold as a digital detox of sorts. Saint Vincent and the Grenadines government, for example, advertises a digital detox programme on its tourism website, suggesting that “ Our islands are the perfect place for slowing down, recharging batteries and re-discovering the simple pleasures in life ” (“Digital detox in SVG”, 2012). While they still have to take tourists' phones off them, one would not even have to in Saint Helena. One notable feature of my experience was that the most cost effective use of internet was to pay by the half hour in a number of local cafés. This made these instances of my internet use a social experience of sorts, making me a regular of a couple of cafés. It was also interesting to see the shock on the faces of cruise ship tourists, hoping to come to the island for a quick hour or so of internet use, only to face a considerable cost to do so. Also, in a world where software developers assume customers have a reliable high speed internet connection, things like auto-updating operating systems wreak havoc on Saints' internet allowances, and if they were unlucky, their wallets. To keep its use affordable, every time the internet is used on the island should be considered and deliberate, which goes against expectations of instant access elsewhere.

The planned connection of the island to a fibre optic cable by 2020 (“St Helena signs MoU”, 2017) could change this state of technological limbo, moving from an internet

connection for the whole island that would not count as broadband for a single user in the US, to a fast and presumably much less expensive connection. One participant said “we are desperate for [the cable]” (Participant 11), and others expressed hope that a cable, if built, would allow much greater freedom in using the internet, or allow, say, the education system on the island to benefit more from online resources. Another British island territory, Alderney, a part of the Bailiwick of Guernsey (a Crown Dependency), an island that was already successful as a host for online gambling, planned to mint its own Bitcoins, a popular digital currency, demonstrating that islands with internet resources can begin to innovate in ways that “have no tangible link to local human and physical resources” (Connell, 2014, p. 76). These plans were halted, supposedly due to possible harm to the financial reputation of Guernsey and Alderney (“Alderney plans for gold bitcoin shelved”, 2014), perhaps showing that the lack of a tangible link to the island is not still without risk. Another proposal, outlined by the government, would be to use the island's political stability and remote location for the benefit of a satellite ground station (*St Helena's sustainable economic development plan: 2018-2028*, 2018, p. 27). This mirrors successes on other remote islands like Svalbard, who despite their remote location, have benefited from the cable link justified by satellite connections. Much as Saint Helena's airport, in theory, opens the island up to travellers who would not consider 10 days on a small ship, a faster internet connection might open Saint Helena up to the crowded but potentially fruitful landscape of inexpensive instantaneous communication offered by the internet.

## Conclusion

Whether chalets are built across the hills of Saint Helena as a luxury tourist boom changes the island, Saints just being able to fly to the city for a week long break, or family being able to visit without planning a whole month or more to do so, there was a lot of excitement about the airport finally having been built and commercial flights being on the horizon. Tourism dominates the discussion of the airport. While the very real benefit of medical evacuations justifies 'an' airport for most, with the expense spent on the airport, and the projections of economic growth and a tourist boom, there was considerable anticipation for the airport to begin to deliver on those promises. Meanwhile, there was frustration, as Saints grappled with a lack of information as to the state of the airport that had been such a focus of the island's politics and future for the past decade. With this anticipation came fears, although these were a lot less tangible. As Saints' identity seemed to rest heavily on their isolation, there were worries about some of the ways the airport might change those aspects of Saint Helena. And the airport is not a final step in connecting to the rest of the world. The prospect of a fast internet connection is approaching, and with that, perhaps, other economic opportunities among other numerous benefits. After decades of economic stagnation, Saint Helena is finally undergoing some substantial changes.

The island is, however, still in need of further preparation. From the small single-lane roads to plans for resorts that have not yet come to pass, the transition to a tourist economy will take years yet. Plans that were dependent on larger planes and ideally

more frequent flights, will have to wait. Saint Helena's government is still dependent on the UK for most of their budget, and the UK is keen to see Saint Helena become financially independent. Building an airport made clear the differences in scale between life on Saint Helena, and that of the outside world, with Saint Helena's small government having many of the same benefits and downsides as other small islands. Saint Helena has been set a very high goal for change, one that will, if it goes as planned, take decades to materialise, and will likely take a lot longer.

# Chapter 8

## Governing Saint Helena and Preparing for the Future

Saint Helena is a small, self-governing territory, and the role of that government, and the government of the UK, in planning and justifying the airport is foundational in the consideration of this topic. The hopes and fears arising from the projection of 30,000 tourists, for instance, did not grow organically out of the collective imagination of Saints, but out of government reports justifying the construction of the airport. As one Saint said quite bluntly of the airport: “it isn't doing what it was designed to do. … it was designed to bring visitors here, and to grow the economy” (Participant 7). The delay in action, the frustration surrounding the lack of information about its delayed operation, and the shift towards a tourism-driven economy all revolve around these two governments, their interactions, and the relationship between them and the residents of Saint Helena. The airport itself, startlingly alien in the landscape, could be seen as a metaphor for the operations of the UK government in a system that is, like many islands, small, familiar, and while Saints may claim its incompetence in some regards, friendly.

### Jurisdiction and Smallness

Saint Helena has been granted a special significance, as between 2002 and 2009 it was the primary island in the territory of “Saint Helena and Dependencies”, with the dependencies being Ascension Island and Tristan da Cunha. In 2009, the islands became

constitutional equals of sorts, but the governor of all three islands is still that of Saint Helena, with the other two islands getting appointed administrators under said governor. The territory itself is one of only 14 British Overseas Territories, with some of the others being primarily military territories like Akrotiri and Dhekelia in Cyprus and the British Indian Ocean Territory, as well as the uninhabited British Antarctic Territory, and South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands. As such, it is one of a small number of British Overseas Territories, and one of the few remaining colonial burdens on the UK government. Other overseas territories, like the Cayman Islands or Bermuda are, for the most part, economically sustainable, able to leverage their odd jurisdictional situation for financial gain. Saint Helena has not had such luck. That being said, Saint Helena, Ascension, and Tristan da Cunha does grant the UK substantial benefits. Firstly, Ascension Island has been a key military asset, and the air force base was helpful in effectively reaching the Falkland Islands during the war between the UK and Argentina in the 1980s. More amorphously, the three islands (or archipelagos in the case of Tristan da Cunha) each have 200 mile Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) surrounding them, giving the UK a substantial claim to much of the South Atlantic despite the small size of the islands.

The small size of Saint Helena was also a feature of identifying as a Saint, with one participant suggesting that the “forty-seven square miles … in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean” (Participant 5) was one component of what being a Saint means. More commonly, people focused on the small population, with one participant suggesting that “Saint Helena is not the airport, or the effects of the airport, it is 4,500 people”

(Participant 3). There was a distinct notion that whatever happens in Saint Helena politically, the low population will always emerge as a barrier to change, and to take a leap of logic, a barrier to that ever-desired self-sufficiency. Furthermore, there's some suggestion that the increased expectations from the UK towards greater self-governance might place too much of a burden on the very system that the UK is trying to support.

**System of Government**

As a self-governing territory, Saint Helena has a system of government not entirely dissimilar to those of other British territories, although, presumably due to scale, with one legislative chamber and relatively few representatives. The Legislative Council (known as LegCo) consists of 12 elected members and three non-elected members, namely the Chief Secretary, the Financial Secretary, and the Attorney General, acting much like a parliament. This gives a rough number of 375 constituents per legislator. From this council, five members are further elected to serve on the Executive Council (known an ExCo) alongside the same non-elected members as LegCo. ExCo advises the Governor, who presides over meetings, and the Governor is, with exceptions, expected to act in line with such advice. The Governor is the representative of the British monarchy, appointed on the advice of the UK government, and has recently been a figure from outside the island with diplomatic experience. Similarly the final court of appeal for the local judiciary is the Privy Council of the United Kingdom. While the British government has plenty of sway in Saint Helena's governing options, and DFID, through its funds and the airport project, has had a large footprint on the island, most day

to day interactions between Saint Helenians and a government, in areas like education or healthcare, are with the Saint Helenian government.

**Aid Reliance**

Saint Helena stands out from other British Overseas Territories in its reliance on budgetary aid from the UK government. Recently Saint Helena was the only Overseas Territory to receive such aid (Royle, 1992, p. 37), although other territories sometimes need such aid after economic changes or natural disasters. Currently, Saint Helena (including Ascension and Tristan da Cunha), Montserrat, and Pitcairn are the three Overseas Territories receiving “Official Development Assistance” (*DFID overseas territories: Country profile 2017*, 2017). Pitcairn is extremely vulnerable by virtue of having fewer that 100 inhabitants. And Montserrat was devastated by a volcanic eruption that it is still recovering from. Saint Helena, meanwhile, has required long term support, and requires planned spending of  28.7 million pounds as financial aid from DFID, and that is ignoring the extra 16.1 million pounds DFID has planned for additional airport spending (*DFID overseas territories: Country profile 2017*, 2017).

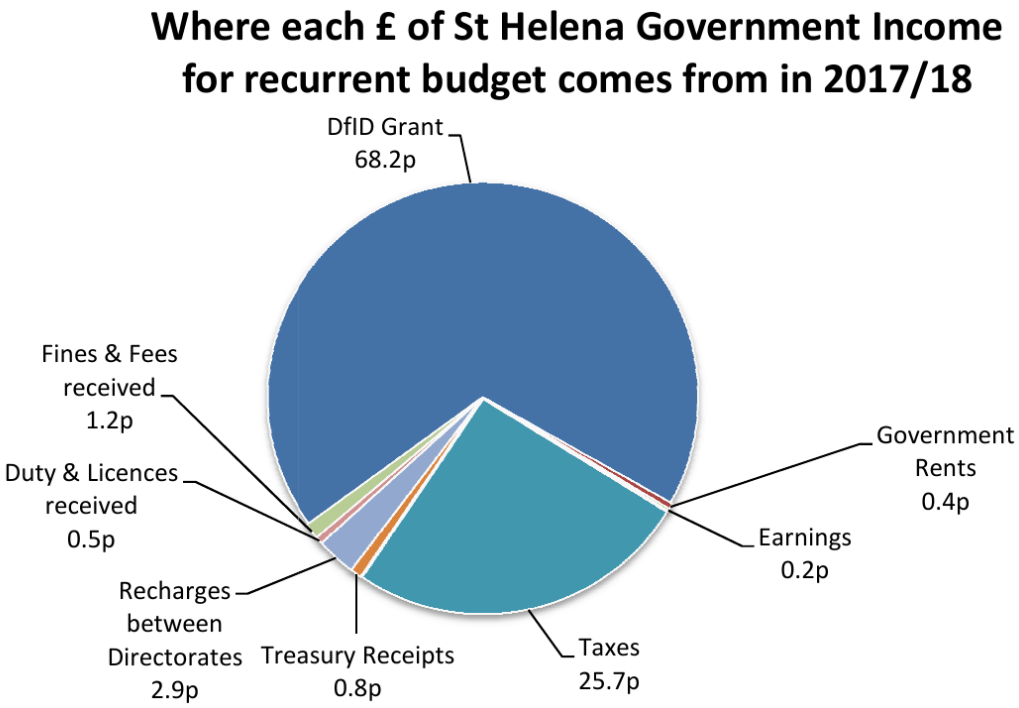


*Figure 12: Pie Chart of St Helena Government Income (Estimates of recurrent revenue, expenditure and capital expenditure: 2017/18, 2017)*

Figure 12 outlines the sources of revenue for the Saint Helena Government's budget. As is plainly visible, the government is highly dependent on DFID aid, constituting 68.2 percent of the budget. This aid dependency is the backdrop for the airport project, and the hopes of economic sustainability that it brings.

**The Airport Plan**

Back in 2002, the airport project that culminated in the airport that exists today got a significant boost as the Saint Helenian public voted 72 percent to 28 percent in favour of building an airport. Specifically, the exact text of the referendum read:

> I would like to have an airport on St Helena, with alternative arrangements being made for shipping
>
> Or
>
> I would not like to have an airport but would like to have a replacement RMS St Helena (*St Helena airport environmental statement – volume 2*, 2017)

Saints later suggested in interviews that the wording was unfair, forcing, as one can see, Saints who wanted to retain the RMS St Helena to declare “I would not like to have an airport” in their vote, even if retaining the RMS alongside the airport was not a financially viable option. It took 15 years from that referendum to have an airport that was, for the most part, functioning as intended. Reports and plans were drawn up after the referendum was concluded, and even in 2005, one report was considering retaining and eventually replacing the RMS, and the benefits of airports with two different lengths of runway. The matter was not easily resolved, and a smaller runway for the use of business jets as the island's primary transport was being considered (*Saint Helena access feasibility study,* 2005, pp. 73-80). This feasibility study considered some of the economic benefits of an airport, and, much as would be expected, air access was a stated requirement of most tour companies that in considering offering tours to the island (*Saint Helena access feasibility study,* 2005, p. 58). Many of the themes in this document and others mirror comments of participants, suggesting that the arguments surrounding the airport and the official studies had made their way into more casual discussions. These included the specifics of 737 size aircraft, the type initially tested by a South

African airline before the delay over wind shear occurred, for the intended scale of tourism and lower cost (*Saint Helena access feasibility study,* 2005, pp. 107-108) which was mentioned in both the report and an interview. The desire for the airport to attract the diaspora of Saints back to the island (*Saint Helena access feasibility study,* 2005, p. 30) was mentioned in both. The notion that there would have to be a large transformation of the economy, including privatisation of many government services (*Saint Helena access feasibility study, 2*005, pp. 32-33), aligns with some concerns of participants. Tourism was the focus of the case for the airport, with brief mentions of alternative uses such as the ability of Saints to travel or medical evacuations. And despite the obvious tourist attraction being the Napoleonic history that many people immediately associate with the island, one report suggested that such a market was actually rather small, and that a focus on nature and cultural tourism more generally would be more successful (*Saint Helena access feasibility study, 2*005, pp. 54-61). Preparation for such a shift towards a tourism dominated economy involves suggested infrastructure improvement, and at the very minimum, a considerable increase in available beds for tourists, with a report strongly suggesting that the construction of at least one large scale hotel with roughly 350 beds, with this being crucial in comparison with a number of smaller establishments (Saint Helena Government, 2012/13, p. 7) and anticipated to be open as the airport operation starts. A few months in to the airport's operation, the only prominent new hotel, run by the South African hotel group Mantis, has only 30 rooms. Fifteen years after the referendum, the airport was built and an airline and aeroplane were found to commence service, albeit a much smaller plane than was originally envisioned. Tourism is no longer limited to those willing to spend days at

sea, and although growth in accommodation is slow, a new international hotel is nonetheless a big step for an island like Saint Helena.

**High Goal**

> Yeah. Thirty thousand [laughs] (Participant 13)

> The thirty thousand, you can forget about the thirty thousand (Participant 3)

> I can say that straight. It's—we're not going to get thirty-thousand people a year. (Participant 9)

> Saint Helena is not ready for that. Um, I don't think it will be that many. (Participant 6)

It was difficult to escape that figure. The above quotes from interviews represent the reaction Saints had to the suggested number of tourists for 10 years after the airport is operational. This is the number suggested to make the island financially self-sufficient (Saint Helena Government, 2012/13, p. 1), and a goal to support the construction of the airport. For reference the current number of tourists is estimated to be 6,300 (Saint Helena Government, 2012/13, p. 12), and that presumably includes all the yacht and cruise ship traffic that won't for the most part, be affected by the airport. The goal for self-sufficiency, 10 years from the airport, was largely dismissed. One participant

suggested not that it was impossible, but that the time-frame for such a transformation would be over 50 years (Participant 7). Others suggested that Saint Helena would probably always be somewhat dependent on the UK. Other high goals set out in official publications include a ticket price of under 600 pounds in order to make tourism viable (*Saint Helena access feasibility study, 2*005, p. 67) (the current price of a return ticket from Johannesburg is over 800 pounds, roughly the same cost as a berth in one of the cheaper RMS cabins**)**. There was even a consideration of the benefits of daily flights (Saint Helena Government, 2012/13, p. 8), which combined with the continued expectation of a 737 size aircraft with upwards of 150 seats, stands in contrast with the current service of an Embraer E190 with under 100 available seats, flying once a week to Johannesburg. It is key to note that these are early days, and that projections were conservative in the first few years of operation.

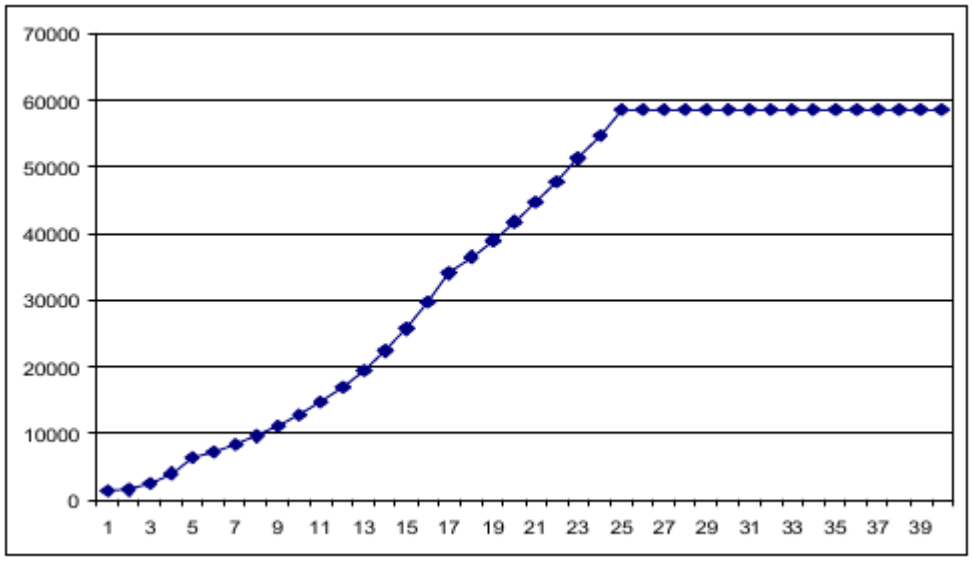


*Figure 13: Annual Tourism Demand Projections with a Long Runway, (Saint Helena access feasibility study, 2005)*

Figure 13 is a different time-frame and goal to other reports, notably a higher total projection than the 30,000 tourist goal, but on a significantly slower time-frame, but nonetheless it illustrates the relative lack of change in the first few years. And while the scale of change is large, one participant suggested that while Saint Helena had not experienced such numbers in many years, as an island built on the coming and going of maritime traffic, it had in its past dealt with much larger numbers, and that the island's population itself is much smaller than had previously been the case (Participant 11). For an island threatened in a broader sense with the challenges of dwindling population, there is no lack of space or accommodation on the island for the moment.

**Scale Differences**

The airport construction itself brought a very large sum of money, alongside an abundance of outside labour and expertise, to Saint Helena. The island had been a predictable cost to the UK government, and the island had previously experienced little financial change since the collapse of the flax industry. The scale of the spending and activity surrounding the airport seems out of scale to the small number of people living on the island, and the relatively low average income. The cost of the airport per resident is roughly £60,000. In 2015, the median income on the island was £7,100 (*State of the island 2015,* 2015, p. 9). For most Saints, the money spent per person would be many years of their income, and for some, a whole decade. While long term budgetary assistance and the subsidy of the RMS amount to plenty of money, the airport is a very

visible sign of the money being spent so out of scale to the rest of contemporary island life. Similarly, the suggested effect of the airport, a flourishing tourism industry, seems a long way off from the pre-airport levels of tourism. The target is 30,000 tourists annually, a number dismissed by participants, within 10 years. The Economic Development Plan puts these numbers in the context of other Southern African nations, specifically South Africa and Namibia (Saint Helena Government, 2012/13, p. 8), to suggest that the 30,000 goal is modest, but looking at the tourist to resident ratio of Namibia, a relatively sparsely populated country, there are still roughly 9 residents per tourist annually, as opposed to the 0.16 ratio for Saint Helena. These comparisons might even make Saint Helena's tourist potential look more difficult than it was intended to. The access feasibility study identified the much more appropriate comparison of Easter Island (S*aint Helena access feasibility study,* 2005, p. 52), with similar remoteness, population, and some cultural attractions. Nevertheless, aiming to match one of the most popular small remote islands in terms of tourism visitors, one with issues of its own regarding the impact of so many tourists, is a large reach for Saint Helena. Napoleonic tourism, arguably the most Easter Island-like attraction Saint Helena can offer, seems unlikely to provide adequate attraction, as the report itself admits (*Saint Helena access feasibility study,* 2005, p. 58).

**Accessibility of Power**

Throughout my time in Saint Helena, there was a clear difference in the accessibility of power. The layers of bureaucracy that would usually separate a visitor like myself and

the various forms of power on the island barely existed. How much of this is the case for Saints is difficult to determine, but a number of the interviews suggested that government in particular was accessible to the everyday Saint. As for my own experience, it began on the RMS St Helena, with many of my fellow passengers whom I got to know being in positions of power on the island. Once on the island, after meeting a councillor in the grocery store, I was invited to an informal session with the legislative council, I was invited past a police checkpoint to the airport to view a test flight land, and was promptly invited by the two local radio stations for interviews. Aside from perhaps matters concerning the construction of the airport, for which the British government have already been embarrassed, there were not many barriers between me and people in positions of power.

In interviews, a couple of participants mentioned the possibility of meeting the governor, implying that doing so is not difficult. One participant suggested that they could talk to the governor to solve personal issues involving a lack of employment opportunities (Participant 2). Another participant had stated that she'd invited the governor “to come out and see me” (Participant 1) over concerns this participant had over her friendly and less formal governing style. In both cases, the governor  was seen as a friendly approachable figure, despite being the representative of the British monarchy and arguably the most powerful person on the island. On an island where all the locals know each other, even British government appointees like the governor quickly become part of the social landscape.

**Lower Standards**

Alongside the notion that airport contractors brought in new skills and competence is the notion that Saints are lacking in skills or in some cases are incompetent. And then, underlying that, is the suggestion that the Saint Helena education system is lacking, and that those who succeed are given no incentive to return to the island after further education. In terms of lack of skills, specifics include the lack of foreign language skills necessary to communicate with European (when I was there, German) tourists that arrive on cruise ships. Education lacks elements like foreign language teaching, but also there was a sense that Saints have long lagged behind UK education standards, with at least a perception that fewer Saints are making it to university. And for the few that make it to university in the UK, the two pay scales, one from the Saint Helenian government, and the other for DFID, for Saints and non-Saints working on the island, means that any Saints coming to the island to work with professional qualifications will find they'll be paid substantially less than the likely foreign worker that was in that position before them. There was even some excitement when I was on the island that a senior position in the government was occupied by a Saint. In one report, the island's dependency was explicitly framed as not just financial, but also one of expertise, with a high reliance on foreign expert in services like healthcare (*Saint Helena access feasibility study, 2*005, p. 29).

Looking at the Saint Helena government, there were plenty of comments as to their ability or perspectives as to their effectiveness expressed in interviews. One participant

suggested both that the local government might not have the expertise to deal with the implications of the airport's delay, and that the local government was actually resistant to the idea of an airport in the first place, stating that back in the 1990s the government campaigned against such an idea, although evidence of such campaigning would be difficult to come by now. Most of the frustration apparent in the interviews skewed towards the lack of transparency and time taken by the government to deal with the delay to air service, and it was more broadly applied to both the local and UK governments. Another participant suggested that lots of Saints blame the local government for issues as they don't see what work they are doing, or that the local government might not have all the information that DFID would have. But even in that tentative defence of the Saint Helena government, he acknowledged that the criticism has been placed primarily on the shoulders of local government at this point in the airport's delay.

**Small is Beautiful?**

There is a healthy debate over the notion that, when it comes to governance of states, small is beautiful, and more specifically, small islands present more democratic norms and are more stable in their democracies. These islands are seen as friendly, personal, and feature consensus-led politics, not needless antagonism. The counter argument is that behind the veil of democratic institutions and apparent norms, lie nepotism, political 'strong men', the social ostracism of opposition, and a system where consensus is not a wonderful ideal but a consequence of the smallness and familiarity of a state preventing

a healthy opposition from taking shape. The details of this argument do not necessarily apply to Saint Helena specifically, but the discussion over the difference smallness makes in self-governance is a relevant discussion topic.

There are competing models for democratic ideals that both privilege and exclude small island communities in the eyes of observers. Some have identified political philosophy going back to Aristotle's ideal of a small *polis* emphasising the benefits of smallness for democratic government (Baldacchino, 2012, pp. 106-107). On the other hand, another strand of political philosophy considers the Weberian state, with some emphasis on the role of bureaucracy and the law as an interface between government as people, as a model that small states and islands might fail entirely, with the politics being much more personal on small islands, and with families sometimes having more political clout than any political parties that might exist (Corbett, 2015).

Baldacchino posits that “getting along” in small island politics “needs to be more seriously questioned and more deeply critiqued”, suggesting that small island politics might be wonderful for those that conform, but that those that deviate may be ostracised (Baldacchino, 2012, pp. 109-115). Small populations represented by each legislator might lead to systems of political patronage, rather than actual representation. And, as Baldacchino also highlights, small islands often lack political parties, certainly one possible criteria for evaluating the health of a democracy (Baldacchino, 2012, p. 114). Others, like Ahlbom, dispute some of the harms of these features of small island politics. Ahlbom suggests that vulnerability makes consensual rather than adversarial models of

democracy more desirable, and also that the ideologies present in the formation of political parties are a form of reducing information costs for citizens, and that smallness enables “citizens to know their government and the governments' actions; it also enables the government to know its citizens' needs and preferences” (Ahlbom, 2014, pp. 128-132). Corbett even defends patronage in part, suggesting that on some small islands, it has a redistributive effect (Corbett, 2015). Small islands do seem to have distinctly more personal politics than larger jurisdictions, with a healthy debate as to the merits or downsides to such models of government.

Saint Helena, meanwhile, does exhibit some of these features. Family politics appears to exist. There are no political parties, although there were in the past. And as has been mentioned, politicians are seen by Saints as relatively accessible. That said, the interaction between the Saint Helena government and the UK government through DFID is a considerable difference in scale, with the small, more personal and consensus driven politics meeting that Weberian ideal. And the governor, a keystone in the Saint Helenian system of government, comes from the UK government's recommendation, a world away from Saint Helena however much the governor does indeed become part of Saint Helenian life.

Much like other small islands, the government is ubiquitous on Saint Helena. From grocery stores to a local radio station, there is state involvement, funding, or partial ownership of many of the larger businesses on the island. Prioritisation and disengagement of the state in areas of the economy may be a stated goal of reports

concerning the airport and necessary changes accompanying it, but as a participant highlighted, two of the changes happening on the island with a view to increased tourism, the construction of the new Mantis hotel in Jamestown and the opening of the historic Bertrand's Cottage as a restaurant, both required government support. There clearly is not a shock change in the role of government, although if the reports are to be followed, one might suppose that the role of the government in supporting the baby steps of a larger tourism industry might fall away as a tourism-centred economy becomes a reality.

**In Need of Further Preparation**

A lack of preparation for larger scale tourism was evident in interviews, with Saints concerned both that tourists would not have anywhere to stay, and with less obvious factors such as the closed stores and restaurants on Sunday leaving tourists with few choices. In 2012, one of the reports specifically highlighted the “chicken and egg” situation of limited accommodation leading to limited flights, in turn leading to no investment in further tourist accommodation (Saint Helena Government, 2012/13, p. 1). As previously mentioned, the large hotel seen as being so crucial to increasing tourism numbers has been built to meet the new flights. Saints suggested that the roads were not in a good condition, suggesting a lack of preparedness for that number of tourists. Electronic payment or even the presence of ATMs, suggested in the feasibility study as a precondition for the benefits of the airport to be realised (*Saint Helena access feasibility study, 2*005, pp. 38-39), are very limited, with the island still very much being a cash

economy, and the local bank only just offering limited debit card services to Saint Helena residents. Other factors like the expensive cost of electricity, very limited water supply, and the expensive and slow internet connection would benefit from some remedies before the projected tourism boom begins to occur. That said, the island is back in the 'chicken and egg' situation, with small planes and weekly flights severely limiting the prospects for growth, and therefore the prospects of greater frequency, let alone larger planes which due to the wind shear issues, might not even be possible.

**Conclusion**

One detail in the airport feasibility report stood out as a historically significant example of the role of government in suggesting that a tourism boom might be on its way. This detail does not even concern the airport, but suggests an optimistic view towards Saint Helena's future, and it remains to be seen if it will be realised. The report highlights that as cruise operators become less willing to use the Suez Canal, presumably due to safety concerns surrounding piracy or political instability, more will pass around South Africa, and thus increase the potential for a stop in Saint Helena. They suggest this might be a marketing opportunity, as well as extra income, as word-of-mouth recommendation is valuable in higher spend, more niche tourism (*Saint Helena access feasibility study, 2*005, p. 69). It seems significant that troubles with the Suez Canal, a canal whose opening led to the destruction of Saint Helena's primary industry at its settlement, would be identified as a benefit so many years later, making the routes ships take through the ocean and Saint Helena's mid-Atlantic location relevant again. It is a small point in the

report, but a poignant one. The airport is a step towards the long task of trying to bring Saint Helena back towards the point it was at when it lost most of its maritime traffic, and much like the flax industry, it might reach some level of financial self-sufficiency if the projections are correct. The plan for Saint Helena involves much greater change, with the government stepping out of its current omnipresent role in the economy and services, although how viable that is remains to be seen. Saint Helena's and the UK's government have managed, although not without substantial difficulty, to organise the construction of an airport on a small mountainous windswept island, and it has finally opened. That part of the project is essentially complete. Now Saints will be looking eagerly for all of the projected benefits to come to fruition.

# Chapter 9

# Conclusion

Just over a year after I had arrived on Saint Helena after a 5 day voyage on the RMS St. Helena, the first regular scheduled commercial flight landed on the island. More than two years after the first plane landed on the newly built runway, the airport's intended purpose of replacing the RMS for passenger service has been fulfilled. And finally, the RMS was retired, leaving the air service as the primary lifeline for the people of Saint Helena. Possible one-off flights to Britain have also been proposed, and over the busy Summer including Christmas, there will be two flights a week. This step marks the first real change in how Saint Helena is connected to the world on a regular basis, and makes possible the vision Saints have of a faster, more affordable method of transport, and ultimately maybe a path out of the economic dependency on the UK that has been Saint Helena's status quo for the past half century. Slow progress, punctuated by delays and coloured by pessimism and doubt, is nonetheless progress.

£300m runway but island tourism doesn't take off

IT HAS cost British taxpayers almost £300 million and was built to usher in a lucrative new era of tourism for one of the world's most isolated locations.

But weeks after a new runway funded by UK foreign aid opened on St Helena, there's little sign of holidaymakers flocking to the tiny mid-Atlantic island. According to local sources, flights to St Helena have since been arriving with dozens of empty seats.

Last month, the British territory

By Ned Donovan

in the South Atlantic welcomed its first commercial flight as part of a project to phase out the island's dependence on government support. It followed more than a decade of drama, delays and over-running costs, with the £285 million bill picked up by the Department for International Development.

The inaugural flight sold out

Touchdown on the £300m mini-break you paid for!

OPEN FOR BUSINESS: Our report on St Helena's new runway last month

with all 78 seats booked, but The Mail on Sunday understands that the second, just a week later, had almost 30 unsold tickets.

And islanders have said flights in recent weeks have been operating with fewer than half of the available seats occupied,

despite promises from the Government that thousands of tourists each year would want to visit St Helena.

Last year, the National Audit Office issued a scathing report on the airport.

It stated that the project was built on the assumption that there would eventually be several flights a week, and tens of thousands of visitors each year.

However, current projections show a much lower figure.

*Figure 14: Photo of New Story, "£300m runway but island tourism doesn't take off". (Donovan, 2017), Photo retrieved from Twitter, https://twitter.com/sthelenafocus/status/929712228919595008*

Once again Saint Helena made its way in to international news. Even outside of the UK, there has been an association of Saint Helena with its new airport, and not a failure this time. Tourist publications suggest that the island has “huge tourism potential” (Phillips, 2017). The much used quote “world's most useless airport” appeared in most headlines, albeit finally in a positive light. And the newspapers that had bemoaned the failure of the airport attempted to bemoan its success (Gallagher). In newspapers from all over the world, from Namibia and the UK, to Thailand and Canada, Saint Helena made its way all around the world, and this time for a success rather than a drawn-out failure. Once again, as I mention Saint Helena in conversation, the news about the airport is brought up, with the airport having been reported on in the newspaper or on the radio. At least for a brief moment in a history dominated by Napoleon, Saint Helena is the island with the new airport.

This study was limited in its scope. Ideally I could have spent more time on the island, or better still, been able to return after air service had commenced in order to make a comparison. Also, if I had more effectively recruited participants, the month I spent on the island may have been plenty of time. I also wish I had made more observations on the experience of travelling on the RMS, as now that it has been sold for another purpose, it is no longer possible to repeat. As I was on the island, I realised it would have been easier to construct a project around the experiences of the expat workers who may have been more willing to take part in formal interviews, although such research would have had a very different topic as a result.

It also would have been ideal to have made comparisons with other islands and remote communities. There is a potential to consider places that, be it through roads, airports, internet, or loosening of political restrains, have become more connected to the world in distinct but significant ways. Infrastructure projects in the Global South sponsored by large states like China and the US link small villages to international trade networks. Fibre optic internet lines connect up small towns in Alaska, much like Saint Helena, lifting them from expensive satellite connection to abundant practically unlimited connections. Even somewhere as remote as Easter Island has been home to a booming tourism economy, one assumes because of the ease of air access. Meanwhile other places are at risk of disconnection, with many islands facing depopulation, and other places, like Goose Bay, Newfoundland, losing their stop-over like status as aviation advances. Saint Helena's experience may be, at least by Saints' accounts, unique, but processes of connection are happening around the world in ways that are not entirely dissimilar. There is potential for further research in considering the implications of these changes.

Saints are not far off the truth when they focus on their island's uniqueness. It is one of a small group of inhabited oceanic (volcanic) islands, and of a smaller group that are not in reasonably close proximity to other volcanic islands. Other islands like Tristan da Cunha may be more remote, but not so populated. Easter Island comes to mind, as does Pitcairn, but they are not quite the anomaly in their oceans, as distant as they are, as Saint Helena appears in the South Atlantic. Indeed, I have mentioned its location as the South Atlantic, and people have commented that they did not know there were any islands in it. As the only island for thousands of kilometres around, and conveniently off

the coast of Africa, its history developed in tune with its location, be it the imprisonment of Napoleon, or the freeing of slaves. And its location left it stranded, as first the Suez Canal opened, and then air travel replaced ocean liners. Saint Helena's connections were eroded, and with the collapse of the flax industry, left in need of a revival. Finally the airport offers a chance to be connected once again.

The airport seems somewhat alien to the urban landscape of Saint Helena. It is both far away from most settlement, on a bleak windswept plain, and the building and its access road do not resemble any other structure or road on the island, appearing perfectly normal in much of the world, but at odds with the small country roads and small historic buildings that one might find in Jamestown or simple structures in Half Tree Hollow or Longwood. More notably, the connections between Saint Helena and the rest of the world, including the large Saint Helenian diaspora, will no longer be mediated through the much loved RMS and the ocean, but by a foreign airline through the air.

The airport's similarity to many in the world falls into the notion of the non-place, something seemingly at odds with the rest of Saint Helena. The RMS experience was a very distinctive one; one might say unique. Saint Helena is somewhere who's distance has been maintained, while many claimed distance is dying elsewhere. The internet, however, has already eroded some of the separation, but progress has been slow, and the airport represents a huge shift towards a model much more familiar to the rest of the world. Saint Helena may have been an exception to some global trends, but the airport wears away at that exceptionalism.

Saints found it hard, as most people would when asked about their identities, to pin down aspects of what it meant to be a Saint. Rather than specifics, I was given some very broad themes. The first and most striking theme was uniqueness, with Saints seeing their island and their culture as distinct from others, sometimes without an explanation as to what factors distinguish them. A notion of friendliness followed, with everything from waving hello in the streets to helping each other in times of need. The island's isolation itself was considered a part of Saint identity, it being a large part of the distinctiveness of the island. And finally, I considered the aspect of 'Britishness' that is prevalent on the island, even if it was not stated explicitly in the interviews.

The airport project has been prominent in Saints' minds for a decade or more, and as its operation was tantalisingly close, there was a sense of frustration, with many Saints waiting for the airport to finally open. Hopes and fears were built upon the expectation of a large shift towards tourism, with hopes about economic prosperity and increased exposure to the outside world, and fears about changing culture, losing that sense of friendliness, and the importation of a new economic model. As so much of the future of the island is based on tourism, I considered the prominence of this model among other islands, and the risks it brings. Finally, the internet creeps into a discussion of connection, and is already changing Saint Helena, and the prospect of much faster and affordable internet in the near future might have a dramatic effect on the island.

I outlined the Saint Helena's system of government and jurisdictional situation, as well

as outlining quite how reliant on budgetary aid the island government has been. The airport plan set high goals, possibly in support of its construction, with expectations of tourism numbers that were dismissed by those I interviewed. There is a huge difference in scale between Saint Helena as it currently operates, and the planned increase in visitors and connection. Political power in Saint Helena is accessible, and Saints felt comfortable approaching even the governor with issues. That said, there was also a notion both  that local schooling was insufficient and limiting, and that workers from overseas might have been incompetent at times. I consider the debate as to whether smaller governments are better or worse off for being more friendly, a debate that is prominent in the study of islands and small states. The airport plan suggests a change in the role of the state, with an emphasis on an increased role for the private sector, making the big small government a small small government. And finally, I consider that many Saints felt somewhat under-prepared, be it the roads and infrastructure, or even the level of language education. The airport may now be open, but large scale tourism is a long way off.

Things are moving again. In less than a year's time, Saint Helena has gone from being connected by the RMS St Helena and an additional assortment of private jets, to the RMS having been sold, a South African airline running one flight a week from Johannesburg and occasionally on to Ascension, and a new cargo ship, the MV Helena having taken over the cargo role of the RMS, even being able to dock at the new pier in the valley over from Jamestown. Ship day is no more, and the transportation of goods and people have been divided into two separate services, in two places that are no longer

Jamestown. Saints can leave for a week in South Africa or a fortnight in the UK, assuming they can afford the ticket price, without worrying about spending 10 days on board a small ship. A hypothetical person conducting business can only spend a week instead of more than two weeks in travelling to Saint Helena. More realistically, tourists can plan to visit for a week or two, with travel being a familiar routine of modern tourism, not the charming but lengthy voyage that has been necessary until now. Saints can go away for a week, and tourists can visit, all for a little bit less money than the RMS used to cost. And that is the immediate difference. In a decade's time, perhaps, it would be inconceivable to many that there was not an airport for so long. For now Saints can breathe a sigh of relief as the airport they were promised is finally delivering. The tumbleweed is gone, a new 'boutique' hotel opened, and hopefully tourists are becoming a somewhat more common sight.

References

Adey, P. (2006). Airports and air-mindedness: Spacing, timing and using the Liverpool airport, 1929–1939. *Social & Cultural Geography, 7*(3), 343-363. doi:10.1080/14649360600714998

Adey, P., Budd, L., & Hubbard, P. (2007). Flying lessons: Exploring the social and cultural geographies of global air travel. *Progress in Human Geography, 31*(6), 773-791. doi:10.1177/0309132507083508

Ahlbom, T. (2014). On the rationality of Manx crabs. *Island Studies Journal, 9*(1), 123-134.

Alderney plans for gold bitcoin shelved. (2014). Retrieved from http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-guernsey-27308434

Allen, R. B. (2017). *Asian indentured labor in the 19th and early 20th century colonial plantation world*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. doi:10.1093/acrefore/9780190277727.013.33

*Analysis of income from employment 2011/12 to 2014/15.* (2016).St Helena Statistics Office;. Retrieved from http://www.sainthelena.gov.sh/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Analysis-of-Income-from-Employment-2011-to-2015.pdf

Augé, M. (1995). *Non-places: Introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity* (J. Howe Trans.). London, UK: Verso.

Bain, K. (1993). *St Helena: The island, her people and their ship*. York, UK: Wilton.

Baldacchino, G. (2004). The coming of age of island studies. *Tijdschrift Voor Economische En Sociale Geografie, 95*(3), 272-283. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9663.2004.00307.x

Baldacchino, G. (2005). Editorial: Islands—objects of representation. *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography, 87*(4), 247-251. doi:10.1111/j.0435-3684.2005.00196.x

Baldacchino, G. (2006). Managing the hinterland beyond: Two ideal-type strategies of economic development for small island territories. *Asia Pacific Viewpoint, 47*(1), 45-60. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8373.2006.00295.x

Baldacchino, G. (2008). Studying islands: On whose terms? some epistemological and methodological challenges to the pursuit of island studies. *Island Studies Journal, 3*(1), 37-56.

Baldacchino, G. (2012). Islands and despots. *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics, 50*(1), 103-120. doi:10.1080/14662043.2012.642119

Bank of St. Helena Ltd. (2017). Retrieved from https://web.archive.org/web/20171221012157/http://www.sainthelenabank.com/

Beer, G. (2013). The island and the aeroplane. In H. K. Bhabha (Ed.), *Nation and narration* (pp. 265-290). Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

Brandt, J. C. (2010). St. Helena, Edmond Halley, the discovery of stellar proper motion, and the mystery of Aldebaran. *Journal of Astronomical History and Heritage, 13*(2), 149-158.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2013). *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

British overseas territories act 2002, Retrieved from http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2002/8

Brooke, T. H. (1824). *History of the island of St. Helena*. London: Kingsbury, Parbury, and Allen.

Burgess, R. G. (1981). Keeping a research diary. *Cambridge Journal of Education, 11*(1), 75-83. doi:10.1080/0305764810110106

Butler, R. (2012). Islandness: It's all in the mind. *Tourism Recreation Research, 37*(2), 173-176. doi:10.1080/02508281.2012.11081702

Cahalan, P. (2016/06/11). Plane crazy: Inside the gleaming £300million airport YOU paid for where jets can't land. *The Mail on Sunday* Retrieved from http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3637070/Plane-crazy-Inside-gleaming-300million-airport-paid-jets-t-land.html

Cairncross, F. (1997). *The death of distance: How the communications revolution will change our lives*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

Cohen, R. (1983). St. Helena: Welfare colonialism in practice. In R. Cohen (Ed.), *African islands and enclaves* (pp. 119-144). Beverly Hills, CA: SAGE Publications.

Conkling, P. (2007). On islanders and islandness. *Geographical Review, 97*(2), 191-201.

Connell, J. (2014). Alderney: Gambling, bitcoin and the art of unorthodoxy. *Island Studies Journal, 9*(1), 69-78.

Corbett, J. (2015). “Everybody knows everybody”: Practising politics in the Pacific islands. *Democratization, 22*(1), 51-72. doi:10.1080/13510347.2013.811233

Damianakis, T., & Woodford, M. R. (2012). Qualitative research with small connected communities: Generating new knowledge while upholding research ethics. *Qualitative Health Research, 22*(5), 708-718. doi:10.1177/1049732311431444

Darwin, C. (1955). *The voyage of the Beagle*. London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd.

Devine, D. (1996). Ships in distress—a judicial contribution from the South Atlantic. *Marine Policy, 20*(3), 229-234. doi:10.1016/0308-597X(94)00000-I

*DFID overseas territories: Country profile 2017.* (2017). Department for International Development. Retrieved from https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/636551/Overseas-Territories1.pdf

Digital detox in SVG. (2012). Retrieved from http://discoversvg.com/index.php/fr/home/latest-news/565-digital-detox-in-svg

Donovan, N. (2017/11/11). British taxpayers paid for a £300m runway... but island tourism doesn't take off. *The Mail on Sunday* Retrieved from http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4981226/Ian-Gallagher-joins-maiden-flight-isle-St-Helena.html;

Du Plessis, H. (2015/03/13). Remote islanders complain about poor health facilities. *Cape Argus* Retrieved from http://www.pressreader.com/south-africa/cape-argus/20150313/281698318222220/

Edmond, R., & Smith, V. (2003). Editor's introduction. In R. Edmond, & V. Smith (Eds.), *Islands in history and representation* (pp. 1-18). Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

*Estimates of recurrent revenue, expenditure and captial expenditure: 2017/18.* (2017). Government of St Helena. Retrieved from http://www.sainthelena.gov.sh/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/St-Helena-Government-Budget-Book-201718.pdf

Feldman, B. (2007). Somalia: Amidst the rubble, a vibrant telecommunications infrastructure. *Review of African Political Economy, 34*(113), 565-572.

Fitzpatrick, S. M. (2007). Archaeology’s contribution to island studies. *Island Studies Journal, 2*(1), 77-100.

Foster, W. (1919). The acquisition of St. Helena. *The English Historical Review, 34*(135), 281-289. doi:10.1093/ehr/XXXIV.CXXXV.281

Gallagher, I. (2017/10/14). Touchdown on the £300m mini-break YOU paid for! Our nervous passenger Ian Gallagher joins first commercial flight to runway buffeted by foreign aid storm. *The Daily Mail* Retrieved from http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4981226/Ian-Gallagher-joins-maiden-flight-isle-St-Helena.html

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *Discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

Grove, R. H. (1996). *Green imperialism: Colonial expansion, tropical island Edens and the origins of environmentalism, 1600-1860*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Harmer, N., Gaskarth, J., & Gibb, R. (2015). Distant relations: Identity and materiality in elite discourse on Britain's overseas territories. *Global Society: Journal of Interdisciplinary International Relations, 29*(4), 510-529. doi:10.1080/13600826.2015.1012487

Harrington, R. (2000). The railway journey and the neuroses of modernity. In R. Wrigley, & G. Revill (Eds.), *Pathologies of travel* (pp. 229-259). Amsterdam, Netherlands: Rodopi.

Hau'ofa, E. (1994). Our sea of islands. *The Contemporary Pacific, 6*(1), 148-161.

Hay, P. (2006). A phenomenology of islands. *Island Studies Journal, 1*(1), 19-42.

Hay, P. (2013). What the sea portends: A reconsideration of contested island tropes. *Island Studies Journal, 8*(2), 209-232.

Hepburn, E. (2012). Recrafting sovereignty: Lessons from small island autonomies? In M. Keating, & A. Gagnon (Eds.), *Political autonomy and divided societies: Imagining democratic alternatives in complex settings* (pp. 118-133). London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Hogenstijn, M., & Van Middelkoop, D. (2005). Saint Helena: Citizenship and spatial identities on a remote island. *Tijdschrift Voor Economische En Sociale Geografie (Journal of Economic & Social Geography), 96*(1), 96. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9663.2005.00441.x

Hussain, S. (2015). *Remoteness and modernity: Transformation and continuity in northern Pakistan*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Huxley, A. (2005). *Island*. London: Vintage.

Iyer, P. (2000). *The global soul: Jet lag, shopping malls, and the search for home*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf.

Kemble, J. (1969). *St Helena: During Napoleon's exile: Gorrequer's diary*. London, UK: William Heinemann Ltd.

Larsen, J., & Urry, J. (2016). *Mobilities, networks, geographies*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

Lempert, L. B. (2010). Asking questions of the data: Memo writing in the grounded Theory Tradition. In K. Charmaz, & A. Bryant (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of grounded theory: Paperback edition* (pp. 245-264). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Leung, A. (2017). Bridges, tunnels, and ferries: Connectivity, transport, and the future of Hong Kong's outlying islands. *Island Studies Journal*, *12*(2), 61-82. doi:10.24043/isj.24

Longhurst, R. (2003). Semi-structured interviews and focus groups. In N. Clifford, M. Cope, T. Gillespie & S. French (Eds.), *Key methods in geography* (Third Edition ed.,, pp. 117-132). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Martin, H. (1971). *Poetry, language, thought* (A. Hofstadter Trans.). New York, NY: HarperCollins.

Martineau, G. (1969). *Napoleon's St. Helena* (F. Partridge Trans.). Skokie, IL: Rand McNally.

McAleer, J. (2016). Looking east: St Helena, the South Atlantic and Britain's Indian Ocean world. *Atlantic Studies, 13*(1), 78-98. doi:10.1080/14788810.2015.1101643

McCracken, D. P., & Teer-Tomaselli, R. E. (2013). Communication in colonial and post-colonial southern Africa. In Simonson, Peter & Peck, Janice (Ed.), *The handbook of communication history* (pp. 424-439). Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

McQuaid, R. W., & Greig, M. (2007). The bridge to Skye, Scotland. In G. Baldacchino (Ed.), *Bridging islands: The impact of fixed links* (pp. 189-206). Charlottetown, Canada: Acorn Press.

Moore, R. (2000). The debris of empire: The 1981 nationality act and the oceanic dependent territories. *Immigrants & Minorities*, *19*(1), 1-24. doi:10.1080/02619288.2000.9974981

More, T. (2010). *Utopia*. Peterborough, Canada: Broadview Press.

O'bay, S. (2004). Saint Helena - prison island. Retrieved from https://www.napoleon.org/en/history-of-the-two-empires/articles/saint-helena-prison-island/

Olwig, K. R. (2007). Are islanders insular? A personal view. *Geographical Review, 97*(2), 175-190. doi:10.1111/j.1931-0846.2007.tb00397.x

Péron, F. (2004). The contemporary lure of the island. *Tijdschrift Voor Economische En Sociale Geografie, 95*(3), 326-339. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9663.2004.00311.x

Phillips, M. (2017). St Helena to be reunited with the rest of the world with first

commercial flight. Retrieved from https://www.lonelyplanet.com/news/2017/10/12/first-commercial-flight-st-helena/

Pitcairn Islands 2013 OCTA - EU intervention. (2013). Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/sites/devco/files/20.%20statement-pitcairn-05122013_en.pdf

Plush, H. (2016/06/21). UK government spends £285 million on airport that's 'unsafe' for most planes. *The Daily Telegraph* Retrieved from http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/news/st-helena-285million-airport-unsafe-for-most-passenger-planes/

Relph, E. (1976). *Place and placelessness*. London: Pion.

Remote island builds airport, discovers it's too windy for planes to land. (2016). Retrieved from http://www.cbc.ca/radio/asithappens/as-it-happens-thursday-edition-1.3774309/remote-island-builds-airport-discovers-it-s-too-windy-for-planes-to-land-1.3774315

Rowling, J. K. (1999). *Harry Potter and the prisoner of Azkaban*. London: Bloomsbury.

Royle, S. A. (1992). Attitudes and aspirations on St Helena in the face of continued economic dependency. *The Geographical Journal*, *158*(1), 31-39. doi:10.2307/3060014

Royle, S. A. (2001). *A geography of islands: Small island insularity*. Abingdon, UK:

Routledge.

Royle, S. A. (2007a). *The Company's island: St Helena, company colonies and the colonial endeavour*. London, UK: IB Tauris.

Royle, S. A. (2007b). Definitions & typologies. In G. Baldacchino (Ed.), *A world of islands* (pp. 33-56). Luqa, Malta: Agenda Academic.

Royle, S. A., Robinson, J., & Smyth, B. L. (1990). Fixed links in the Western Isles: The Barra-Vatersay causeway. *Scottish Geographical Magazine, 106*(2), 117-120. doi:10.1080/00369229018736785

*Saint Helena access feasibility study.* (2005).Atkins Management Consultants. Retrieved from http://www.sainthelena.gov.sh/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Main-Report.pdf

Saint Helena Government. (2012/13). *Sustainable economic development plan*. Saint Helena: Retrieved from http://www.sainthelena.gov.sh/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/EDP.pdf

Scheyvens, R., & Momsen, J. H. (2008). Tourism and poverty reduction: Issues for small island states. *Tourism Geographies*, *10*(1), 22-41. doi:10.1080/14616680701825115

Schivelbusch, W. (2014). *The railway journey: The industrialization of time and space in the nineteenth century*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

Schulenburg, A. H. (2003). ‘Island of the blessed’: Eden, Arcadia and the picturesque in

the textualizing of St Helena. *Journal of Historical Geography, 29*(4), 535-553. doi:10.1006/jhge.2002.0409

Seetanah, B. (2011). Assessing the dynamic economic impact of tourism for island economies. *Annals of Tourism Research, 38*(1), 291-308. doi:10.1016/j.annals.2010.08.009

Stern, P. J. (2007). Politics and ideology in the early East India Company-state: The case of St Helena, 1673–1709. *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History, 35*(1), 1-23. doi:10.1080/03086530601143362

*St Helena airport environmental statement – volume 2.* (2017). Retrieved from http://www.sainthelena.gov.sh/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Chapter-3-EIA-Process.pdf

St Helena Government. (2014). St Helena tops wildlife survey. Retrieved from http://www.sainthelena.gov.sh/st-helena-tops-wildlife-survey/

St Helena signs MoU for link to South Atlantic express cable, set to receive submarine cable by early 2020. (2017). Retrieved from http://www.connectsthelena.org/news/St-Helena-signs-MoU-for-link-to-South-Atlantic-Express-cable-set-to-receive-submarine-cable-by-early-2020-22

*St Helena's sustainable economic development plan: 2018-2028.* (2018).St Helena Government. Retrieved from http://www.sainthelena.gov.sh/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/SEDP-Final-April-01052018.pdf

Starbucks Corporation. (2016). Starbucks offers rare coffee with St. Helena reserve. Retrieved from https://news.starbucks.com/news/starbucks-st-helena-reserve-coffee

*State of the island 2015.* (2015). Jamestown, St Helena: Statistics Office, Corporate Policy and Planning Unit. Retrieved from http://www.sainthelena.gov.sh/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/State-of-the-Island-2015.pdf

Syal, R. (2016/06/08). St Helena airport costing £285m of UK money is delayed over safety concerns. *The Guardian* Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/jun/09/planes-unable-to-land-at-285m-cliff-top-airport-on-island-of-st-helena

Tatham, W., & Harwood, K. (1974). Astronomers and other scientists on St. Helena. *Annals of Science, 31*(6), 489-510. doi:10.1080/00033797400200421

Tomlinson, J. (2007). *The culture of speed: The coming of immediacy*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Tuan, Y. (1979). Space and place: Humanistic perspective. In S. Gale, & G. Olsson (Eds.), *Philosophy in geography* (pp. 387-427). Dordrecht, Nethelands: D. Reidel.

Vannini, P. (2012). *Ferry tales: Mobility, place, and time on Canada's west coast*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

Walker, H. (2016/12/14). UK aid spent on 'useless £285 MILLION airport' in South Atlantic, damning report reveals. *The Daily Express* Retrieved from https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/743242/UK-wasted-285-MILLION-on-ST-HELENA-AIRPORT-damning-Commons-report-reveals

Winchester, S. (2004). *Outposts: Journeys to the surviving relics of the British Empire*. New York, NY: Perennial.