

Bastard Gum: A Natural Monologue

Emmett W Walsh

A script for a male voice, accompanied by Mynah birds

(a single clap of the hands)

The veneer of Britishness is often quite thin. First impressions can be deceptive.

(pause)

(cough)

(pause)

If you send him any thing rare, he will make you a proper return.

(pause)

(cough)

A blank cheque for all sorts of dubious chancers.

(pause)

A tree is best measured when it's down!

(pause)

I'm sorry, but I just can't shed any light on this.

(pause)

I'm sorry, but I just can't shed any light on this.

(pause)

In 1982 the craggy little bastard gumwood - a species endemic to St Helena - was believed to have been extinct for over 150 years. A local botanist and conservationist named Stedson Stroud was out walking one day on Horse Pasture, when a swarm of bees attracted his

attention. They led him straight to a single tree. Stedson and some other botanists of the day managed to gather seed from the tree and propagate sixteen young plants, before the tree was blown away in a gale in 1986. Of those cultivated specimens, there is now only one left in the world.

I visited this island for six weeks, to meet the lonesome tree stranded and hobbled between a minor residential track road, a primary school, a radio station and a car garage. By an uncanny trick of fate I managed to be present when the bastard gum was flowering, which happens only once a year. The bastard gum maintains a self-incompatibility mechanism, which is important for keeping the gene-pool strong and unaffected by inbreeding depression. However, this obviously causes a problem for the successful cultivation of the tree when there is only one.

In the last week of my stay I went looking for a new bastard gum with three botanists. An attempt to find a hypothetical needle in a landscape of cacti and rocks. After a day of fruitless binocular searching in Horse Pasture, we followed a hunch that had been put to the back of a horticulturalist's mind for the past year. As the sun was going down that evening, we stumbled across a bastard gumwood hanging out of a cliff on the opposite side of the island. This elusive tree had the last laugh, as I realised that I had left my camera at the top of the cliff in the car. I decided not to return for a photograph in my last days on the island; a part of me did not wish to break the spell.

Instead, I visited Bertrand's Cottage - named after one of Napoleon's closest generals who had resided there, opposite Longwood House, the site of the vanquished Emperor's final lethargic battle. In the garden of Bertrand's Cottage that day, some islanders were searching through the chainsawed cavity of a tree, excavating a beehive in order to relocate the industrious little flyers for purposes of small scale honey manufacturing.

(pause)

(cough)

(pause)

For appearances feign a presence.

(pause)

If you send him any thing rare, he will make you a proper return.

(pause)

During his six year stasis on the island of St Helena, Napoleon often sought entertainment until late into the night. 'Come,' he would say, 'ladies and gentlemen, let us go to the theatre,' and standing in front of the makeshift bookcase he would select a volume of some classical play, and begin to read from it in a steady and monotonous voice: 'He had no ear for rhythm and would often add one or two syllables to a line, not realising what he was doing. During

such readings the ladies would stifle their yawns, but let him notice one and out of spite he would hand the volume to the culprit begging her to continue. He himself would then promptly fall asleep.'

(pause)

(cough)

(pause)

I'm sorry, but I just can't shed any light on this.

(pause)

I'm sorry, but I just can't shed any light on this, no... I'm sorry, but I just can't shed any light on this.

END