

OLD FATHER LIVE FOREVER

Emmett W Walsh

The Walker disguised

“Do you not think, sir, as I am unknown ... I might make inquiries, and ascertain the feeling of the people better if I went on foot...?”

“That is a wise thought of yours...But country people are inquisitive; what do you propose to be?”

“Well, sir, ... I could represent myself as an artist; or I could cram my pockets with plants and roots as I went along, and say I was a botanist in search of specimens.”

“Stick to the artist; our country botanists would soon floor you on their own ground - they know more of plants than pencils, I'll warrant.”¹

James Gordon & Old Father cultivation

James Gordon was notorious as a breeder of exceptional proficiency. A renowned nurseryman, plant propagator and seller of seeds, Gordon was well-known to the social elite of the mid 18th century as a gardener of the highest calibre. He burst upon the scene when taking over an established nursery in the small hamlet of Mile End, one of the earliest London suburbs located east of the City. Although comprising just a few hundred homes, Mile End had an extraordinary number of functions. Being ideally located for both the City and the river Thames, it became a centre for shipping merchants and overseas traders, for insurance and financial men.

Having distinguished his name through his uncanny ability to revive the dormant bulbs and seeds that were delivered to him from the corners of the globe, despite the relatively bad soil of the area, Gordon soon extended his business ventures by leasing a shop on Fenchurch street in the city, from which he sold the seed of his endeavour to City merchant collectors. A contemporary of Gordon proffered the exemplary recommendation that ‘he has more knowledge in vegetation than all the gardeners and writers on gardening in England put together; but he is too modest to publish anything. If you send him any thing rare, he will make you a proper return.’²

To increase his yield Gordon took out an insurance policy on the building of several hothouses in 1752, which by that time were increasingly utilised by professional gardenmen. Gordon is credited with being the first individual to successfully germinate both the seeds of the new Rhododendron species being introduced into England from southeastern parts of the United States, and the maidenhair tree or Ginkgo biloba - the China Rose; a native coniferous species of China. Gordon also propagated for the first time the Cape Jasmine introduced to London from South Africa, which was named Gardenia for the Scottish naturalist Dr. Alexander Garden.

The availability of handsome and exotic flowers for the increasing number of gardens kept in London and its surrounding environs was not the only preoccupation of the floral exploration that developed at this time. The mutual cooperation between the rising merchant class and the men of plants in the eighteenth century is one of vital importance when considering the development of large-scale Empire nourishment. The commercial development of British horticulture and nurseries directly fed the successful transplanting and propagation of economically significant plant species; from quinine to coffee, rubber and cotton.

1. *The Manchester man*, Mrs G. Linnaeus Banks; in Anne Secord, *Science in the Pub: Artisan Botanists in Early Nineteenth-century Lancashire*, History of Science, 32:3, Sept. 1994.

2. *Arboretum et fruticetum Britannicum; or, The trees and shrubs of Britain*, John Claudius Loudon, Henry London publisher, 1838.

The infamous voyage of Captain William Bligh aboard the HMS Bounty - in which Bligh's first mate Fletcher Christian instigated a mutiny, setting Bligh adrift on a boat 4,000 miles to Timor, and setting his own course for Pitcairn Island in the south Pacific - had as its primary goal the transplantation of the Breadfruit tree to Jamaica, to produce crops which would provide an inexpensive food source for plantation slaves in the West Indies. I first stumbled across James Gordon while trawling the internet for references to the plant Old Father Live Forever, a pelargonium endemic to St Helena in the south Atlantic, which I intended on photographing whilst on the island. My interest in this plant sprung purely from the curiosity roused by its name, in much the same way as the critically endangered Bastard Gumwood had tempted me. Both plant names suggested a dreadful sadness mixed with an uncertain mystique; both stubborn in their unlikely being.

I came upon a reference to James Gordon rearing an Old Father at his Mile End nursery, most probably having accepted the strange, knobbly roots from a sailor returning along the Eastern trade routes, stopping off at St Helena to take on fresh water and supplies. A further tangent led me to an article written by a retired geophysicist from St Albans named Derek Morris, included in a book he had published a few years previously.³ Derek, who had spent his career travelling the world looking for oil resources, had begun his current investigations when tracing ancestors who had settled in east London during the mid-eighteenth century. Surveying an extensive archive of tax records, insurance policies, wills, title deeds, letters, newspapers and diaries, Derek began his account of the suburb's development with Richard Morris, his great-great-great-great-grandfather, a cordwainer⁴ who in 1746 began to pay the land tax on a small house in Mile End Old Town.

Meeting Derek one sunny Autumn morning at Stepney Green underground station, we spent the better part of four hours walking the old haunts of East India Company directors and the mercantile elite. We saw the site of Captain Cook's former house, which had been torn down in the 1950s to widen an access arch to the brewery placed behind it, set back from the Mile End road. Increasing production of post-War alcohol had obviously been a more pressing matter than the conservation of the areas built heritage at the time. We passed former almshouses for sick sailors; a Jewish cemetery squashed between the developing constructions of a university; and a narrow street paved with iridescent iron ore cobblestones from the North of England. Toward the end of our walk Derek showed me the rough site of Gordon's once extensive gardens, somewhere opposite the Queen Mary University, near the middle section of the Mile End park. I can't quite remember whether there was a car garage or a carpet warehouse now squatting the site, but I was at a loss to mentally picture its once beautiful serenity, and quietly regimented plantations of species both domestic and exotic.

Capturing of Old Father and the flying Lord

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

On St Helena I search out the Old Father. Starting off at Longwood and heading north-east, passing the meteorological station and one of the islands two refuse dumps, we walk down under the shadow of Turk's Cap, looking further up to the Barn - the huge clump of cliff that had so haunted Napoleon during his stay at Longwood House. Phil, a botanist from the UK who is working on a one-year contract to produce a reader-friendly field guide to the endemic species, accompanies me. His receding brow and wrinkle cornered eyes accentuate his calm knowledge and thoroughly British demeanour.

Heading down into a natural amphitheatre of rock and scree - boulders the size of cars lying dormant in a scattered remnant of collision - we spot a number of possible Old Fathers, and Phil takes a binocular check to confirm.

3. *Mile End Old Town, 1740-1780: A social history of an early modern London suburb*, Derek Morris, The East London History Society, 2007.

4. A maker of shoes and worker of leather. To be distinguished from a cobbler, who is traditionally a mender of shoes.

We clamber round the divide beneath a dried-up waterfall, and the scene I had long imagined comes true. The white flowered Old Father on the side of a descending cliff stands out against a blue Atlantic backdrop. The sun comes out as we arrive to stand over it. Phil estimates the plant as upwards of one hundred years old; the finest example he had seen to date. I photograph it greedily, composing the scene with increasing deliberation, knowing that I will not return to see its slow progress. The steady creep of its wind dispersed seed is made apparent with a glance across the valley. The tiny, slender flower buds are red church spires reaching up on branched spindles, standing in contrast to the ancient fleshy knot of branches contorting beneath. It is everything its name promised. Stoic, uncompromising, haggard, and working its way down the arid slope with the single-mindedness of a paraplegic eyeballing a window sill cherry pie.

Realising I am running late for a dinner appointment I hurry back round the bay to our starting point, up over winding paths of rock and shale, the quick exertions jumping my heart through my throat. The millenia are assuredly stacked above me on all sides, and a deathly hush sits on top of the volcanic stillness. I pass cacti passively getting on with their twisting mutations.

Reaching the payphone I look skyward to see the multi-millionaire businessman and Conservative party deputy chairman Lord Ashcroft flying overhead in his private jet, a PR stunt graciously detoured during his passage from Namibia to the Cayman islands. Passing over the refuse dump - which looks down Fisher's Valley towards Prosperous Bay Plain, the aptly named proposed airport site - the craft turns and does another slow loop round, emitting a strangely quiet hum. I enter a small shack-style convenience store run by a friendly old lady, to buy a cold can of Coca Cola. Her husband is sat on the porch listening to a tinny transistor radio, which emits the voice of Lord Ashcroft being interviewed by Mike on Saint FM, via the jets satellite phone. The entrepreneurial Lord assures the listeners that he is a 'friend of St Helena', and will be raising their plight in the House of Lords. I realise how empty the sky has been for the past weeks, and how vacant it remains.

Merv the seaman; the islanders of Wimbledon; frozen Inuit torpedoes

*"The veneer of Britishness is often quite thin. First impressions can be deceptive."*⁵

Some weeks previous to my Old Father excursion, I had a couple of hours to pass before sitting an interview at Saint FM with the opinionated Swede, Mike; an impromptu probe to find out my purpose for being on the island, and my opinions regarding the vilified 'Pause' of the airport project, due to the global economic breakdown of the previous year. I visited the Standard bar - whose yellowed furnishings reiterated the front sign sentiment - after eating lunch and gathering my routinely sparse food shopping. I fell into conversation at the bar with Merv, a retired merchant seaman who has lived in the UK for the past thirty-five years, currently returned to visit family and soak up the atmosphere of his place of birth. We discussed the problem that most Saints face at one time or another, the necessity of leaving family and friends to gain employment overseas, most commonly on the Falkland Islands, the UK, or Ascension Island, the closest neighbour at a mere 700 miles distance. Many Saints remain permanently displaced, and the economic and familial void that negates the usual hierarchy of ages is taking its toll on the island, as the gap between old and young increases with each decades frustration.

Merv tells me about the legal oddity that happened on Ascension up until recently. Any child born on the island would be given a birth certificate stating the place of birth as Wimbledon, in south London. One woman he knew was trying to rectify this bewildering personal limbo. The Saints have never had this problem, due to the status of the islands surface rights never being under doubt as Ascensions has, though Saints do have a three month visa application to visit exotic countries such as France. This is apparently a hangover from the British Nationality Act of the 1980s, when the rights of abode for British Overseas subjects were withdrawn; a frightened Thatcherite backlash from an out-of-date Empire turning in on itself,

5. *Quincentenary: A Story of St Helena 1502-2002*, David Smallman, Patten Press, Cornwall, 2003.

a fear of invasion brought on by China preparing for the return of Hong Kong.

I am propped up at the bar on a wobbly stool, getting rather drunk, as Merv takes his leave. A new drunk comes in from the back-alley entrance, slamming a pile of carefully collected change on the counter. His nose is an incredible brown plum nestled in a rotund face, and he wears a shabby football shirt from the mid 90s. His drinking partner swaggers in next, furnished in orange utility trousers - he is a sanitation worker and full of mouth gab, the kind who talks to heads regardless of whether they are listening or not. He chews my ear as I watch the television.

Some morose slide guitar country is playing on the stereo, and we men act out a new breed of tough Wild West barfly, eyes glued to the muted screen showing a National Geographic documentary on Inuit tribes. Living in the Arctic north of Canada they haul fish through circular holes hacked in the ice; build cosy igloos from rectangular ice blocks; wear polar bear fur trousers and boots, and ride on petrol fuelled snow buggies. The huge salmon they catch quickly freeze into rigid torpedoes before transportation home and the slicing and drying out on racks begins. They seem to be prisoners to the fierce monotony of the environment in which they live, yet they also maintain dignity and a preserve of higher thought, so the voiceover leads us to believe. They use over one hundred words for snow. It is not merely snow, but a feeling, a forewarning, even a sentient organism to be revered and catalogued orally in its infinite intricacy. But it's really just snow. Cold and fluffy, and a potential death from above. An element to be relented to and coaxed along for generations.

Ascension Island; U.S. 99 year lease; land and space projectiles

Speaking in his Colonial Report of 1906 the British army geologist and surveyor J.C. Melliss opined, 'it is clear that St Helena at any cost should be saved and retained for Imperial purposes. The general opinion of those competent to know has always been that it should be made into a permanent naval station in place of the comparatively useless little Island of Ascension.'⁶

The first telegraph cable was landed in 1899, and with this Ascension became an important telecommunications station. In 1942, the United States government, by arrangement with the British government, came to the island to build an airstrip, Wideawake Airfield; so named for the islands flocks of Sooty tern - colloquially known as Wideawakes, due to the incessant noise sent up during roosting. From 1943 until 1945 over 25,000 US planes made a stopover in Ascension on their way to north Africa, the Middle East and Europe. The airfield fell into disuse in 1947, until 1956 when the United States and Great Britain signed a ninety-nine year agreement permitting the use of Ascension as a long-range testing ground for military missiles. In 1957, the US Air Force presence was re-established and the airstrip facilities were enlarged. It is now an ICBM (intercontinental ballistic missile) and space missile tracking station, and the southernmost tracking station of the US Government Eastern Test Range.

The British Airforce made extensive use of Ascension during the 1980s, when ferrying troops en route to the Falkland Islands conflict. In 1967 a NASA tracking station was built but has since been shut down. The Challenger Centre was fully vacated by NASA in the early 1990s and taken over by the Scouts, who made it into an outdoor pursuits centre. A site in which to learn civility, honesty, wholesome character and the skills necessary for hobbling together a shelter from the limbs of trees.

Watering Napoleon

During the last six years of his life, spent in exile on St Helena, Napoleon was a chrysalis waiting for a profound nothing. He spent his time soaking in a copper bathtub, ruminating on the clouds or the colour of a flower for hours on end. Dictating follies of imperial scale to his closest generals, the captive was sunk in a

6. *St Helena - 1906*, J. C. Melliss, Journal of the Royal Colonial Institute, 1906; reprinted in *St Helena*, Robin Castell, Wensley Bown publishers, England, 1975.

gloom that seemed certain to defeat his implacable spirit. St. Denis and Marchand have both left written accounts of the making of the gardens at Longwood, and the way in which the work seemed to wake them from their collective stupor. In the early hours of the morning, wrapped in a white dressing gown and with a red handkerchief around his head, the guns chiming the withdrawal of the sentries, Napoleon would burst onto his new battlefield, ordering and synchronising plants this way and that, like so many pieces of courtly furniture.

Jean-Paul Kaufmann, a former foreign-war correspondent taken hostage for three years in Lebanon in the 1980s, recounts in his elegiac ode to Napoleon's demise: 'Dr. Antommarchi, who has noted the captive's inactivity, encourages him to go out and exercise. He suggests gardening. The young Bonaparte had tended the plot of land allotted to each pupil at Brienne with enormous enthusiasm. Could that memory have made him eager to take up the idea? From October to December 1819, Longwood is the scene of feverish activity. They dig the earth, they plant, they sew, they rake, they plant grass. Ali comments that "Longwood had never been so full of life as it was during this work on the garden." Napoleon designs the beds, plans the various gardens, keeps his workers up to the mark. The moment he likes best is the watering. He feels a childlike joy when he makes the water run along the channels. He loves to hold the pipe and send the jet of water where he wants it. Ali notices that the Emperor has never felt better. Then it gradually becomes apparent that the vegetables are not growing well. Then the drought and the insects play havoc with everything. Then the prisoner begins to lose interest in the work. Longwood falls back into its state of torpor.'⁷

Sunlight, yellow road lines and canaries

I look out through the smoke hazed door of the bar. The sun is pure and hot on the Jamestown high-street. Workers are slowly bustling home; I remember it is half-day Wednesday, a vital mid-week reprieve. Some way down the road three men are re-painting the yellow side markings, alternately doubles and singles. They use square household paintbrushes and large cans of Dulux emulsion, a bright sunflower yellow. For every thirty centimetres of carefully painted line, backsides arching skyward, a thirty second stand-up refrain is allowed. Puffs of smoke conjoin the collective ponderances of this meticulous demonstration. I have watched them slowly creeping their way down Market street for the past few days, the impetus for fast progression neither appearing nor disappearing. These demarkations of stops and starts appear straight from a distance, but contain wobbled deviations up-close. Pebbles of tarmac become monumental obstacles for sticky bristles.

Many chattering birds are working overhead; violent Indian Mynah birds eyeing scraps, dozy Australian turtle doves accidentally plodding into the convenience stores, and bright yellow southern African canaries darting in chaotically fluid forms. All equally unaware of the static human drama below, horizontal boundary lines representing neither sustenance nor play.

7. *The Dark Room at Longwood: A Voyage to St Helena*, Jean-Paul Kauffmann, Harvill Press, London, 1997.