

ESCAPING ST HELENA

In 1505, within a few years of St Helena's discovery, Afonso de Albuquerque suggested that degredoes [Portuguese criminals, political or religious prisoners] should be exiled to St Helena¹. Such was the island's isolation that it was regarded as the ideal place to send awkward members of society. Isolated in the middle of the South Atlantic, it was correctly assumed that few would embark on a suicidal escape from the island. Only in the case of Napoleon and the Boer prisoners was it thought necessary to bring in extra troops to guard exiles from escape or rescue.

Only a few prisoners have ever escaped from the island, yet a section of the island's own population showed they were far more than desperate to leave. These included the many men and women who had been brought to St Helena as slaves or who had been born there into slavery. Possibly in ignorance of the hazards they faced, many slaves took to sea in open boats. Few were likely to take much in the way of provisions and it is not surprising that no record exists showing any survived. These number of escapes seems to have peaked in the middle of the 18th century, as well illustrated by Gosse. He described five escapes over the three-year period 1744-1747 when a total of 40 slaves stole away in boats, never to be heard of again.²

Although not enslaved, a proportion of men serving in the St Helena Regiment, especially those forcibly posted to the location by the East India Company, seem to have been equally anxious to leave the island. These men had far greater opportunity than slaves to steal boats loaded with navigational instruments, food and water. Thus, seven soldiers escaped in a boat in 1770 (they supposedly returned to England), five in 1771, six in two boats in 1774, four in 1778, two in 1779, six in 1781, two in 1791 and seven in 1799.³

None of the escapee's stories were ever documented – not until 1801 when John Brown who deserted in 1799 returned to St Helena and gave an account of his escape and experience at sea. I have found accounts published in at least 18 newspapers⁴ and five 19th century seafaring books⁵ yet Brown's story seems to have been missed in all the standard island histories. The following details are therefore provided in the form of a statement by William Brown to a Court of Enquiry at St Helena on 12 December 1801 before Captain Desfontain (presiding), Lieutenant B. Hudson, and Ensign Young:

“In June, 1799, I belonged to the first company of artillery in the service of this garrison, and on the 10th of that month, about half an hour before parade-time, M'Kinnon, gunner, and orderly, of the second company; asked me if I was willing to go with him on board of an American ship, called *The Columbia*, Captain Henry Lelar, the only ship then in the roads.⁶ After some conversation I agreed, and met him, about seven o'clock, at the play-house, where I found one M'Quin, of Major Seale's company, another man called Brighthouse, another called Parr, and the sixth Matthew Conway.”

“Parr was a good seaman and said he would take us to the island of Ascension, or lie off the harbour till *The Columbia* could weigh anchor and come out. We went down about eight o'clock to the West Rock, where the American boat, manned with three seamen, was waiting for us, and took us along-side *The Columbia*. We went on board; Parr went down into the cabin, and we changed our clothes after having been on board half an hour.”

“Brighthouse and Conway proposed to cut a whale boat⁷ out of the harbour to prevent *The Columbia* from being suspected. This they accomplished, taking in her a coil of rope, five oars, and a large stone, by which she was moored. This happened about eleven at night.”

“We observed lanterns passing on the line towards the sea gate, and hearing a noise, thought we were missed and sought for. We immediately embarked in the whale boat, with about twenty five pounds of bread in a bag, and a small, keg of water, supposed to contain about thirteen gallons, one compass, and one quadrant, given to us by the commanding officer of *The Columbia*; but in our hurry the quadrant was either left behind or dropped overboard.”

“We then left the ship, pulling with two oars only to get a-head of her: the boat was half full of water, and we had nothing to bail it out; in this condition we rowed out to sea, and lay off the island at a great distance, in hourly expectation of the American ship.”

“About twelve o’clock, the second day, no ship appearing, by Parr’s advice we bore away, steering N. by W. and then N. N. W. for the island of Ascension, using our handkerchiefs as substitutes for sails.⁸ We met with a gale of wind which continued two days the weather then became very fine, and we supposed we had run about ten miles an hour.⁹ M’Kinnon kept a reckoning with pen, ink, and paper, with which, together with charts and maps, we were supplied by *The Columbia*.”

“We continued our course till about the 18th in the morning, when we saw a number of birds, but no land. About twelve that day Parr said he was sure we must be past the island, accounting it to be eight hundred miles from St Helena. Each of us then took off his shirt, and with them we made a small sprit-sail¹⁰, lacing our jackets and trousers together at the waistband so keep ourselves warm, and then altered our course to W by N thinking to make Rio de Janeiro, on the American coast. Provisions running very short, we allowed ourselves only one ounce of bread and two mouthfuls of water for twenty-four hours.”

“On the 26th all our provisions were expended. On the 27th M’Quin put a piece of bamboo in his mouth to chew, and we all followed his example. On the night of that day it was my turn to steer the boat, and recollecting to have read of persons in our situation eating their shoes, I cut off a piece of one of mine; but being soaked with the salt water, I was obliged to spit it out, and take the inside sole, of which I ate a part, and distributed to the rest; but we found no benefit from it.”

“On the 1st of July Parr caught a dolphin with a gaff that had been left in the boat. We all fell on our knees and thanked God for his goodness to us. We tore up the fish, and hung it to dry; about four we ate part of it, which agreed with us pretty well. On this fish we subsisted till the 4th about eleven o’clock, when finding the whole consumed, bones and all, Parr, Brighthouse, Conway, and myself, proposed to scuttle the boat and let her go down, to put us out of our misery; the other two objected, observing that God, who had made man, always found him something to eat.”

“On the 5th, about eleven, M’Kinnon proposed that it would be better to cast lots for one of us to die, in order to save the rest; to which we consented. William Parr, being seized two days before with the spotted fever, was excluded. He wrote the numbers and put them into a hat; we drew them out blind-folded and put them in our pockets. Parr then asked whose lot it was to die; none of us knowing what number we had in our pocket, and each praying to God that it might be his lot; it was agreed that No. 5 should die, and the lots being unfolded, M’Kinnon’s was No. 5.”

“We had concluded that he, on whom the lot fell, should bleed himself to death; for which purpose we had provided ourselves with sharpened nails, which we got from the boat. With

one of these M'Kinnon cut himself in three places; in his foot, hand, and wrist; and praying God to forgive his sins, he died in about a quarter of an hour."

"Before he was quite cold, Brighthouse, with one of the nails, cut a piece of flesh off his thigh, and hung it up, leaving his body in the boat. About three hours afterwards we all ate of it, but only in very small quantity. This piece lasted us till the 7th. We dipped the body every two hours in the sea to preserve it having found a piece of slate in the bottom of the boat, he sharpened it on the other large stone, and with it cut another piece off the thigh, which lasted us till the 8th, when it being my watch, and observing the water, about break of day, to change colour, I called the rest, thinking we were near shore, but saw no land, it being not quite day-light."

"As soon as day appeared we discovered land right ahead and steered towards it. About eight in the morning we were close to the shore; there being a heavy surf, we endeavoured to turn the boat's head to it, but being very weak we were unable. Soon afterwards the boat upset. Parr, Conway, and myself got on shore; M'Quin and Brighthouse were drowned."

"We discovered a small hut on the beach, in which were an Indian and his mother, who spoke Portuguese, and I, understanding that language, learned that there was a village, about three miles distant, called Belmont. The Indian went to the village, with the information that the French had landed, and in about two hours the governor of the village, a clergyman, with several armed men, took Conway and Parr, tied them by their hands and feet, and slinging them on a bamboo stick, conveyed them in that manner to the village. I, being very weak, remained in the hut some time, but was afterwards taken."

"On our telling them we were English, we were immediately released, and three hammocks provided, in which we were taken to the governor's house, who resigned to us his own bed, and gave us milk and rice to eat; but as we had taken no food for a considerable time we were lock-jawed, and continued so till the 23d. During this time our host wrote to the governor of St Salvador, who sent a small schooner to Porto Seguro to take us to St Salvador. We were conducted on horseback to Porto Seguro, passing through Santa Cruz¹¹, where we remained about ten days; we afterwards embarked, and on our arrival at St Salvador, Parr, on being questioned by the governor, told him, that our ship had foundered at sea, and we had saved ourselves in the boat; that the ship's name was *The Sally*, of Liverpool, that she belonged to his father, and was last from Cape Corfe Castle¹², on the coast of Africa, to touch at Ascension for turtle, and then bound to Jamaica. Parr likewise said that he was the captain."

"We remained at St Salvador about thirteen days, during which time the inhabitants made up a subscription of 2001 each man. We then embarked in *the Maria*, a Portuguese ship, for Lisbon; Parr, as mate; Conway, boatswain's mate, and myself, being sickly, as a passenger. In thirteen days we arrived at Rio de Janeiro. Parr and Conway sailed for Lisbon, and I was left in the hospital"¹³.

"In about three months. Captain Elphinstone, of *The Diomed*, pressed me into his Majesty's service, giving me the choice of remaining on that station, or to proceed to the admiral at the Cape.¹⁴ I chose the latter, and was put, with seven suspected deserters, on board *The Ann*, a Botany Bay ship, in irons, with the convicts.¹⁵ When I arrived at the Cape, I was put on board *The Lancaster* of 64 guns. I never entered; but, at length received my discharge, since which I engaged in *The Duke of Clarence* as a seaman. I was determined to surrender myself the first opportunity, in order to relate my sufferings to the men of this garrison, to deter others from attempting so mad a scheme".

Frustratingly, it is not known what punishment, if any, was meted out to John Brown for desertion. Severe punishment was usually meted out for desertion during the period of the Napoleonic Wars. Perhaps his sentence was mitigated because of the way he had given himself up to the island authorities or because of the hardships he had already suffered. It seems likely that details of Brown's experience was released on the island, not least to demonstrate what horrors awaited anyone who tried anything similar. Escapes were certainly made in later years by boarding visiting ships, for example Chinese itinerant workers on passenger ships¹⁶ and troops on American whalers¹⁷, but after John Brown described his experience in 1801 it is hard to find a single case where anyone else tried to escape the island by rowing a small open boat out into the South Atlantic Ocean.

¹ Afonso de Albuquerque, *Cartas de Afonso de Albuquerque, seguidas de documentos que as elucidam*, vol. 2 (Lisboa, Typ. da Academia real das ciencias de Lisboa, 1884), 307; <https://tinyurl.com/y2355suv>; A. R. Disney, *The Portuguese in India and Other Studies, 1500-1700, Chapter 17: The Portuguese and Saint Helena*, Variorum Collected Studies Series 933 (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 217.

² Philip Gosse, *St Helena 1502-1938* (Oswestry: Anthony Nelson, 1938), 183.

³ Hudson Ralph Janisch, *Extracts from the St Helena Records* (St Helena: Guardian Office, Benjamin Grant, 1885), 198, 200–202, 205.

⁴ For example, *Mirror of the Times*, 6 Feb 1802, 4; *The London Star*, 13 Feb 1802, 4; *London Courier and Evening Gazette*, 13 Feb 1802, 3; *English Chronicle and Whitehall Evening Post*, 13 Feb 1802, 4; *Oracle and the Daily Advertiser*, 15 Feb 1802, 4.

⁵ For example, Duncan, Archibald. *The Mariner's Chronicle: Being a Collection of the Most Interesting Narratives of Shipwrecks, Fires, Famines, and Other Calamities Incident to a Life of Maritime Enterprise. Vol. 2.* James Cundee, 1804, 17, <https://tinyurl.com/2vy97xmh>.

⁶ Alexandria Advertiser and Commercial Intelligencer reports show Henry Lelar captain of Columbia regularly sailed between Batavia (Dutch East Indies) and Philadelphia, [<https://virginiachronicle.com/?a=p&p=home>]

⁷ Typically 25-30 ft boasts with a sleek and narrow design to enhance speed and manoeuvrability, double-ended to allow the boat to move forward or backward quickly, equipped with oars and sail, using a long steering oar instead of a rudder with a small crew of about six men.

⁸ Presumed to be small sails rather than pocket handkerchiefs.

⁹ A speed of ten miles an hour equates to a little under nine knots.

¹⁰ A sprit-sail is usually four-sided supported diagonally by a spar connected to the mast and the upper aft corner of the canvas.

¹¹ "Santa Cruz" was presumably Santa Cruz Cabralia, which is about 15 miles north of Porto Seguro.

¹² "Cape Corfe Castle, on the coast of Africa" perhaps referred to Cabo Corso, Ghana, where Cape Coast Castle was an important location for the slave trade.

¹³ The account implied that Brown met Captain Elphinstone at Rio de Janeiro, but it must have been Cape Town – see next reference. Brown failed to explain what circumstance led him to voyage from Rio de Janeiro to Cape Town.

¹⁴ *HMS Diomed*, a 50-gun fourth-rate ship of the line, launched 17 January 1798, commissioned in March 1798 under Captain Charles Elphinstone, sailed for Cape of Good Hope 6 December 1798. Was still stationed at the Cape when it saved the crew of launch from *USS Essex* on 24 March 1800 [Wikipedia, *HMS Diomed* (1798), [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_Diomed_\(1798\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_Diomed_(1798))].

¹⁵ *The Nostra Senora da Luzet Santa Anna* (10 guns, approx. 400 tons) was captured from the Spanish in 1799 and renamed *The Ann*. It was used once as a transport taking convicts from Cork to New South Wales, 1800-1801 (Wikipedia, *Anne* (1799 ship), [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anne_\(1799_ship\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anne_(1799_ship))).

¹⁶ Barbara B. George, *The Chinese Connection, The History of the Chinese Indentured Labourers on St Helena 1810 - 1836 and Beyond*. (St Helena: Printsetters, 2002), 15, 25, 29, 48–49.

¹⁷ Trevor W. Hearl, *St Helena Britannica: Studies in South Atlantic Island History*, ed. Alexander Schulenburg (London: Society of Friends of St Helena, 2013), 263.