

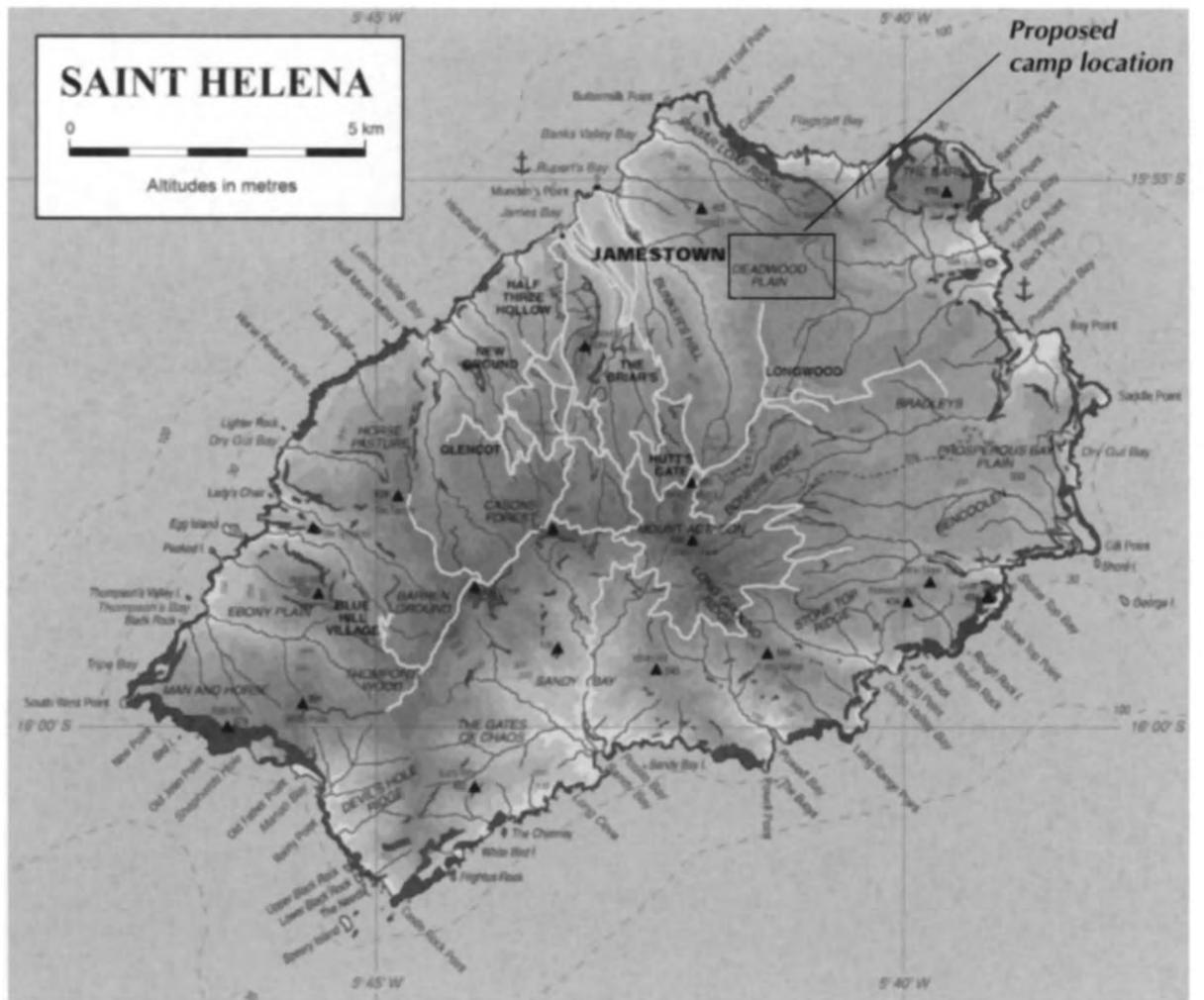
'On Saint Helena's Bleak Shore'

Free State plans to intern Republican prisoners

by Paul Murray

As the anti-Treaty military effort collapsed towards the end of 1922, thousands of prisoners fell into Free State hands, reaching 12,000 by early 1923. Such numbers placed a massive strain on the meagre resources of the new state. At a meeting of the Executive Council on 19 September 1922, it was agreed that the British government would be requested to make the island of St Helena available for the internment of captured republicans. It was on this island, discovered in 1502 by the Portuguese navigator Joao de Nova Castella, a crown colony in the South Atlantic over a thousand miles from the nearest land mass, that Napoleon ended his days in captivity. It had also been the prison home of the Zulu prince Dinizulu from 1879 until his return home to South Africa in 1898.

Minister for External Affairs Desmond FitzGerald would undertake the necessary preliminary negotiations with Alfred Cope at the British Colonial Office and report back as soon as possible. Cope, Assistant Under-Secretary for Ireland before the truce of 1921, had been instrumental in keeping channels of communication open between Sinn Féin leaders and Lloyd George. During the early post-Treaty period he enjoyed the friendship and confidence of FitzGerald and other members of the Provisional Government. As Secretary of State for the Colonies he was responsible for relations with the Irish Provisional Government, and especially for the implementation of the Treaty. Another former under-secretary in the Dublin Castle administration, Mark Sturgis, who worked at the Irish Office in 1922, took charge of the St Helena negotiations on the British side.



The governor of St Helena believed that from 2000 to 4000 prisoners might be accommodated in Deadwood in the north-east of the island.

The Provisional Government pursued the St Helena project with enthusiasm. On 20 November 1922 FitzGerald visited Sturgis at the Irish Office. Within two days Sturgis, having made detailed enquiries, was able to provide FitzGerald with the broad outlines of a possible scheme, incorporating suggestions for the provision of hutments and transport. A complete hutted camp at Brockton in Derbyshire could be dismantled and conveyed to Liverpool at a cost of £2–3000. Its re-erection in St Helena would be a matter for the Irish authorities. Sturgis had in mind a more convenient but more expensive option: the placing of an order with a contractor normally used by the War Office for the erection of a camp for a specified number of men, complete with water supply, drainage and lighting. When FitzGerald conveyed these recommendations to the Executive Council on 23 November, he was directed to obtain inclusive estimates for the work from the firm acting for the War Office.

By 7 December Sturgis was able to tell FitzGerald that he had been able to arrange with Lt. Col. P.N. Nissen DSO, head of the firm of contractors, to discuss the possibilities of the St Helena scheme with a representative of the Executive Council. FitzGerald sent

M.J. Burke, an official of the Board of Works responsible for the construction of internment camps in the Free State, to meet British officials in London on 18 December. Burke's lengthy report, completed in just over a week, was generally optimistic about the feasibility of the project, and offers an interesting account of the conditions Irish republican prisoners could expect to experience during their period of incarceration on the island.

According to Burke, St Helena would be a pleasanter place of detention than Mountjoy, Limerick, Arbour Hill or the internment camps elsewhere in Ireland. Climatic conditions were ideal for most of the year, with little variation between summer and winter temperatures. Even on the colder heights where a camp could most fittingly be located, the lowest winter temperature would seldom fall below 50 degrees Fahrenheit, making the provision of heating virtually unnecessary.

Burke had every confidence in the judgement of Nissen, who was uniquely qualified to offer advice on the housing of internees, having had extensive experience as a prisoner and later as an engineer entrusted with the construction of prisoner-of-war camps on a large scale. He invented the hut that

bears his name, which had evolved in the later stages of the Great War. Nissen, with Burke's approval, devised an elaborate scheme for the construction of a camp for every 500 men, with sleeping accommodation of sixty square feet per prisoner, and two dining huts, each with an area of 4000 square feet. Provision was also made for recreation huts, a small hospital staffed by resident surgeons, sanitary facilities, coal stoves for heating and paraffin lamps for lighting.

Burke and his British advisers gave a good deal of consideration to the question of how large a number of prisoners could be held on St Helena in circumstances most conducive to what Burke described as 'an orderly and comparatively contented residence'. At the same time, prisoners had to be prevented from interfering with the amenities of the island. At first Burke was hopeful that it might be possible to avail of some of the natural features of St Helena to confine the prisoners to an isolated part of the island within which they would have full liberty but beyond which they could not wander. Thus prisoners might enjoy a relatively benign and congenial period of imprisonment, during which 'a healthy existence with opportunities for occupation in cultivating land and perhaps rearing stock and other occupations of a beneficial character could be afforded'. On further investigation Burke found that geographical barriers would not facilitate the isolation of any area on the island: an enclosed and guarded camp would have to be created.

On 3 January 1923 the Free State authorities were in possession of enough information to decide on the practicality of the St Helena project. Nissen's firm had submitted an estimate of £77,000 for a camp catering for 500 prisoners and 500 guards. The Board of Works had also commissioned two reports, one from the governor of St Helena on the topography of the island and its resources. He believed that from 2000 to 4000 prisoners might be accommodated in Deadwood in the north-east of the island. From 1900 to 1902, 2000 Boer prisoners were interned there. A confidential memorandum from a private source made it clear that the natural resources of St Helena would sustain



Lt. Col. P.N. Nissen, inventor of the famous hut (above), headed the firm of contractors considered for the job of constructing the internment camp.

the large numbers of prisoners the governor had in mind.

When FitzGerald first broached the St Helena proposal with British officials, Lloyd George's Liberal-Conservative coalition cabinet, which had negotiated the Anglo-Irish Treaty, was still in power. In October 1922 Bonar Law's Conservative administration replaced it. In January 1923 the Free State government learned that even if agreement in principle was reached between the two governments, republican prisoners could not be dispatched to St Helena until three months after such an agreement. One month would be required for collecting the material for the camp prior to shipment, and two months for its installation. The available documents suggest that the close relationship between the Irish Minister for External Affairs and officials at the Colonial Office in London did not long survive the change of British government. The new administration did not seem fully informed on what the Irish government had in mind. The Colonial Office, the British authorities pointed out, would have to maintain a strong military guard, at an estimated cost of £200,000 per annum, to be met from the impoverished Free State exchequer. Irish officials, conscious of the impossibility of meeting such

demands, explained that the Free State government wanted the prisoners enclosed in camps inside barbed wire entanglements, with only a token garrison.

The St Helena project remained a live possibility until early 1923, although it never reached the stage at which sanction at government level became an issue. After this the Free State authorities seem to have lost their earlier enthusiasm for it. There can be little doubt, however, that in the later part of 1922 the project was pursued with vigour on the Irish government side. At a time when Republicans were profiting, in propaganda terms, both in Ireland and abroad from the Free State policy of illegal executions of untried prisoners, particularly in November and December 1922, it is difficult to understand the motivation for the St Helena scheme, and the enthusiasm of the government in persisting with it for as long as it did. It is easy to imagine what its political opponents would have made of the imprisonment by an Irish government of thousands of Irish Republican prisoners, guarded by British troops and housed by a British contractor, on a remote British island to which they had been conveyed by British ships.

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