

CROMWELL'S CASTLE, TRESCO

The Isles of Scilly Their Story their Folk & their Flowers

Painted & Described by Jessie Mothersole

SECOND EDITION

**London The Religious Tract Society 4 Bouverie Street & St.
Paul's Churchyard EG**

PREFATORY NOTE TO FIRST EDITION

IT has been said that all writers may be divided into two classes: those who know enough to write a book, and those who do not know enough *not* to write one!

In collecting material for these notes on Scilly, I have endeavoured to prepare myself more or less to qualify for the former class; but now that they are complete it is with diffidence that I present them. They are but the impressions of an artist, recorded in colour and in ink, together with so much of the history of the islands and of general description as is necessary to comply with the unwritten law of colour-books.

For my historical facts I am indebted to many writers, ancient and modern. A list of the chief of these appears at the end of the book, so that my readers may refer, if they wish, to the original authorities.

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My best thanks are due to Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, for permission to quote his description of the kelping, and for other help he has kindly given me; to my friend Miss Emma Gollancz, for seeing my proofs through the press; and also to the many friends in Scilly from whom I have received assistance and information.

October, 1910.

NOTE TO SECOND EDITION

This second edition of "The Isles of Scilly" is issued in response to many requests that the book should appear in a cheaper form, the original edition having completely sold out.

A few slight alterations in the letterpress have been necessary, to correspond with changes that have taken place in the islands; but otherwise the contents are identical with those of the original issue.

Pilgrim's Place House, Hampstead.

March, 1914.

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MAP OF THE SCILLY ISLES *George Philip & Son L^{td}*

I INTRODUCTORY

A “**COLOUR-BOOK**” on Scilly needs no apology, so far as the subject is concerned, for there is no corner of Great Britain which more demands or deserves a tribute to its colour than do these little islands, scattered about in the Atlantic twenty-eight miles from the Land’s End.

For they are all colour; they gleam and glow with it; they shimmer like jewels “set in the silver sea.” No smoke from city, factory, or railway contaminates their pure air, or dims the brilliancy of their sunshine. They are virgin-isles, still unspoiled and inviolate in this prosaic age, when beauty and charm are apt to flee before the path of progress.

And though their compass is but small, the same cannot be said of their attraction, which seems to be almost in inverse proportion to their size. Scilly exerts a spell over her lovers which brings them back and back, again and yet again, across that stretch of the “vasty deep” which separates

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her from Cornwall. In this case it might almost better be called the “nasty deep,” for very nasty this particular stretch can be, as all Scillonians know!

Nor do the islands lack variety. There are downs covered with the golden glory of the gorse, with the pink of the sea-thrift, with the purple of the heather; there are hills clothed with bracken breast-high in summer, and changing from green-gold to red-gold as the year advances; there are barren rocks on which the sea-birds love to gather; there are lovely beaches of white sand, strewn with many-coloured shells and seaweed; there are clusters of palm-trees growing with Oriental luxuriance, next to fields and pastures where the sheep and cattle feed; there are bare and dreary-looking moors, “the sad sea-sounding wastes of Lyonesse”; there are stretches of loose sand, some planted with long grass to keep the wind from lifting it, some with a mantle of mesembryanthemum, which here grows wild like a weed;—and all of them seen against a background of that wonderful and ever-changing sea, which is sometimes the pale blue of the turquoise, sometimes the deepest ultramarine, sometimes again shimmering silver or radiant gold. And then in spring there are the famous flower-fields. Let us visit the islands on an April day, and see for ourselves

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this harvest of gold and silver. For once we will be day-trippers in fancy though we would scorn to be in fact.

Here in Scilly we find land and sea flooded with spring sunshine, while on the “adjacent island” which we have just left every one is lamenting the cold and the rain. The flower-harvest is nearly over, yet still there are wide fields of dazzling white and yellow, and many hundreds of boxes will yet leave the quay for the mainland. The sweet-smelling *Ornatus narcissus* is now at its best, and its perfume fills the air. Arum-blossoms, thousands of them in a single field, stand stiffly waiting to be cut, while in the more exposed places late daffodils linger, nodding their yellow heads in the breeze that comes in from the sea. Everywhere there are flowers, flowers, flowers—such a wealth of flowers as one never saw before; and every one is either picking flowers, tying flowers,

packing flowers, selling flowers, buying flowers, or talking of flowers. Even the tiny children can tell you the difference between a “natus” and a “Pheasant Eye”; and will talk wisely in a way to awe the less enlightened visitor of “Cynosures,” “Sir Watkins,” and “Peerless Primroses.”

It is barely thirty years since these sweet flower-fields first began to cover the islands. The “oldest

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inhabitant,” a great-grandmother of ninety-six (she died in 1913), would call to mind the kelp-making industry which occupied the people in her young days. “Eh,” she would say, “it was not a nice employ; things are better as they are.” And we can easily believe that she was right; for instead of the fragrance of the flowers the air was then filled with the thick and acrid smoke of the burning seaweed; and it was but a poor living at the best that could be made out of it.

There is now hardly a boatman in the islands who does not add to his income by having a patch of ground planted with the “lilies,” as they call them, and sending his boxes of blooms to market during the season.

But flower-growing is not the only industry of the islands. If you ask your boatman to name others as they affect himself, he will probably answer naïvely, “Fishing and visitors”; and he may also add that sometimes he is employed as a “potter.” Although the dictionary allows no other meaning to this word than “a maker of earthen vessels,” let not your imagination be betrayed into picturing a lump of wet clay and a flying wheel! It is crab and lobster pots that are in question, and quantities of these crustaceans are caught round the islands and sold to French merchants.

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THE OLDEST INHABITANT

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Then there is the mackerel fishery, which is at its height in May and June, when St. Mary's Pool is full of the picturesque, brown-sailed fishing-boats from Mount's Bay.

The other "industry" mentioned by the boatmen, that is to say "visitors," is carried on intermittently all through the year, but is naturally most active during the spring and summer months.

In the summer there are cheap day-excursions from the mainland, and crowds of trippers arrive at St. Mary's by steamer to spend a few hours on the islands. Some of them land in such a woebegone condition that they are fit for nothing but to lie about on the benches in the "Park" until the hoot of the steamer rouses them to crawl back to the quay. Others, more courageous in spite of having had a "sick transit," will only stop to snatch a morsel of food before rushing off to the steam-launch for Tresco, where they will make the round of the famous gardens, walk perhaps to Cromwell's Castle, and return to St. Mary's dead-beat, just in time to go on board for the homeward journey. And they call that a day's holiday! But these are not the visitors to bring grist to the boatman's mill. The kind he wants are those who come to stay, those who come again year after year, and who delight in sailing about amongst the islands

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and learning to know and love them well. They do not come looking for "Entertainments," with a capital E. They are quite content with the magical music of the wind and the waves, and with the natural beauties that surround them on every side.

These visitors are neither so many nor of such a kind as to take away from the peaceful charm of the place. You can always get

peace and quiet in Scilly, even in the most “tripperish” season, for the trippers follow a beaten track which it is easy enough to avoid. And the islands are, fortunately, quite unspoilt by any efforts to cater for their supposed wants. Not a single penny-in-the-slot machine flaunts its vermilion and yellow in your face; there are no niggers on the beach, nor brass bands, nor cinematographs; no dancing on the pier; no “marine parades” or “esplanades”; above all, here are no artificial “natural attractions” (most hateful of paradoxes), no manufactured show-places to pander to perverted taste. If you come hoping for these things, you will go away (and the sooner the better for all concerned) disappointed. You would only be an alien in this little Paradise.

There are many who will sympathise with this description of the islands taken from a visitor’s book: “A Paradise surpassing Dante’s ideal, but alas! only to be attained by passing through three and a half hours of Purgatory.” For the voyage from Penzance to Scilly is not one to be treated lightly. Looked upon as a pleasure trip, it may be enjoyable or the reverse, according to the weather and the constitution of the passenger; but considered in the light of a test of “good-sailor”-ship it is, I think, without a rival. Do not be set up because you have travelled unscathed to Australia and back, or crossed to America without turning a hair. This little bit of the Atlantic may yet humble you! There seems to be something in the cross-currents between Scilly and the Land’s End which tries the endurance of even the most hardened sailors. How often does one hear it said in Scilly, “I used to think I was a good sailor, but——”; and that “but” speaks volumes! Even sea-captains, regular old sea-dogs who have spent a lifetime afloat, have been known, to their shame and disgust, to fall victims to Neptune on the Scilly passage. I never made a voyage in which less (or should I say more?) was expected of you. The steward gives you a friendly peep at intervals. “Feeling all right, I hope?” You never felt better in your life, and say so. “Well, please hold out as long as you can; my supply is limited.” And you almost feel that it would be

ungenerous to disappoint his evident expectations by “holding out” to the end!

But what matters three and a half hours of Purgatory when once one has attained to Paradise? And the passage weighs as nothing in the scale against the charms of Scilly.

In the “good old days” things were very different from what they are now. You could not then make a return journey in the same day. Sailings were few and far between, and people prepared for going to Scilly as for a long voyage.

In Lieutenant Heath’s time (1744) the passage was seldom made more often than once a month or six weeks in summer, and not so often in winter; and he says that as it was made “in small open fisher-boats amidst the running of several cross-tides, the passengers are forced to venture at the extreme hazard of their lives when necessity or duty calls them.” And these passengers “should be qualified,” he continues, “to endure wetting or the weather like so many Ducks; however, the Boatman undertakes to empty the water with his Hat or what comes to Hand without the least Concern.” Half a century later Troutbeck writes that the inhabitants “want a constant, regular, and even monthly communication with England,” chiefly for the sake of getting food. A strong proof of

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the uncertainty that attended the journey in those days is that in 1793 the “Prudence and Jane,” coming from Penzance to Scilly with necessaries, was driven by a contrary wind to Cherbourg in France! Nowadays it may happen in very exceptionally stormy or foggy weather that a Scillonian’s Sunday dinner does not arrive till Monday, but at least it never goes to France!

When Woodley wrote in 1822, the crossing was made every week, but even then a “good passage” took eight or nine hours, and

sometimes the vessel was delayed at sea for thirty-six to forty-eight hours, without any provision of food for the passengers. There is an old lady now living on St. Mary's who told us that the first time she visited the mainland the crossing took twenty-four hours, and then they were landed at the Mousehole and had to walk the three miles into Penzance.

It was not until 1859 that the sailing-vessels were replaced by a small steamer.

Now the Royal Mail Steamer "Lyonnesse" makes the return journey every day in the summer; and although she may not be perfection, she is reckoned absolutely safe. The distance from Penzance is generally covered in about three and a half hours; but the proprietors reserve to themselves the right to "tow vessels in distress to any other port or

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place without being chargeable with any deviation of the voyage, or being liable to make compensation to any Passenger"; so if under these circumstances you were taken to Kamschatka you would have no right to complain!

I know of one passenger who was taken out nearly to the Bishop Lighthouse on account of a vessel in distress. Far from complaining, she enjoyed the excitement of the adventure; but such happenings are rare and need hardly be taken into account.

The notice posted on the quarter-deck of the "Lyonnesse" leaves one in a happy state of doubt as to whether passengers or merchandise are the least acceptable: "This Quarter Deck contains 1,014 square feet and is certified for 112 passengers when not occupied by cattle, animals, cargo, or other encumbrance."

But that passenger would be churlish indeed who had any fault to find with the way in which he was treated by the officials, whether

on sea or land. From the highest to the lowest they are as courteous as one could wish—unless, of course, they are provoked to turn, like the proverbial worm.

There is a stoker on the “Lyonnesse” with a portly and majestic figure; but woe to the ill-bred passenger who tries to raise a laugh at his expense!

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Once such a passenger saw the stoker looming across his field of vision, and, in spite of being curled up and woebegone with seasickness, he aimed at him a feeble joke.

ST. MARY’S POOL

“You’d make a splendid advertisement for Mellin’s Food.”

The stoker stopped, and let his eye travel slowly over the speaker. Then came his retort, with withering scorn.

“Well, and you’d make a first-rate advertisement for Keating’s Powder; for anything more like a *dying insect* I never did see in all my life.”

Whereupon the “dying insect” looked his part more than ever, and was silent.

The Great Western Railway Company once offered to run a fast service of steamers in connection with their trains on condition that they might build a luxurious hotel on St. Mary’s; but the Governor was too wise to consent. Scilly does not need to be revolutionised and popularised and advertised. She is so very charming as she is.

So blessed be the “Lyonnesse,” and long may she continue to reign supreme over that part of the Atlantic—perhaps until the time

when we shall be flying across from Penzance, and looking back with horror on the days of sea-passages, even as we now look back to the days of the sailing-vessels.

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II HISTORICAL

A **WELL-KNOWN** writer has spoken of the Scilly Isles as “patches of rock, dignified by historical and political associations”; and one is surprised to find, considering their small size and their isolated situation, how very frequently they do figure in the pages of history.

They were included with the mainland when the Romans took possession of Britain, and possibly their conquerors introduced Christianity here as elsewhere after they themselves had been converted. This is only guesswork. Strangely enough the first Christians whom we actually know by historical records to have landed in Scilly were heretics, sent there into exile by the Emperor Maximus for their unorthodox opinions. These were Bishops Instantius and Tiberianus, who were convicted of the Priscilline heresy in a.d. 384 and sent to “insula Sylina, quæ ultra Britannias est,” as we learn from Sulpicius Severus, who wrote only twenty years after the event.

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After the Romans had left Britain (a.d. 410) the islands probably remained, like West Cornwall, independent of the Saxons; and when four centuries later the Northmen came to harry the country, they were joined by Welsh and Cornish Celts, glad of the chance of a blow at their common foe the Saxon. Scilly was then used by

the Northmen as a sort of “naval base,” from which expeditions were made against the mainland. King Athelstan sent a fleet to oust them in 927, and left a garrison on the largest island; afterwards, in fulfilment of a vow, he founded a collegiate church at St. Buryan in Cornwall to commemorate his conquest.

It is uncertain at what date the Benedictine monks first came to Scilly. Some say it was in 938.

According to the Saga of King Olaf Tryggwason there was on Tresco in his time “a famous abbot, the head of a great cloister.” The story goes that the young Viking, in about the year 993, came harrying the coasts of England with a fleet of ninety-three ships, and was driven by contrary winds to the Isles of Scilly. Here he heard of a wonderful Christian hermit, who lived in a cell among the granite rocks and was said to possess the power of prophecy.

Olaf was then in the position of a seeker after

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truth. He was inclined towards the religion of the Christians, but he had never acknowledged himself as one of their number.

He was seized with curiosity to test the powers of the hermit, so he dressed up one of his tallest and handsomest followers in his own armour and bade him go to the cell and pretend he was the King. The disguise was quite useless. “You are no king,” said the hermit, “and I advise you to be faithful to your King.”

On the strength of this proof, Olaf went himself to the cell to make inquiries concerning his own future. The hermit foretold that he should not only become a renowned king and perform many famous deeds, but that (far greater honour!) he should lead many into the true Christian faith. And for a sign he told him that on returning to his fleet he would meet with foes, a battle would be fought, he would be wounded severely and be carried on a shield

to his ship, but would recover after seven nights and would soon after be baptized.

Events happened just as had been predicted, and Olaf was so much impressed that as soon as he had recovered from his wound he put himself under the hermit's instruction, and enrolled himself as a servant of the God of the Christians.

Afterwards he went to Tresco, where was "a

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famous abbot, the head of a great cloister," who with his brethren came down to the shore to meet the King and welcome him with all honour. They gave him further instruction in the Christian faith, and finally he and all his company were baptized.

He appears to have spent several years in Scilly; and when he returned to Scandinavia, it was to devote his energies to preaching, in his native land and in Iceland, the Gospel which he had learnt to love in these remote islands.

Such is the story as told by Snorri Sturluson, the Icelandic historian, in 1222. We must not rely on the accuracy of his details; for example, the "great cloister" to which he refers was probably only a cell of two Benedictine monks. But there is little doubt that he followed a trustworthy Scandinavian tradition in placing the conversion of their hero Olaf in such an out-of-the-way and little-known spot as Scilly.

So in these little islands there was lighted a torch which kindled the flame of Christianity in far-distant lands.

The Abbey on the island of Tresco was appropriately dedicated to St. Nicholas, the patron-saint of mariners. By the reign of Edward the Confessor (1042-1066) the monks had acquired the tithes of all the islands, and the exclusive ownership of St.

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Elid's (St. Helen's), St. Sampson, St. Teon (Tean), Reutmen, and Nurcho, the two last of which cannot be identified.

Scilly is not mentioned in Domesday Book; but we find King Henry I. granting to the Abbot of Tavistock "all the churches of Sully with their appurtenances." Later, Reginald Earl of Cornwall confirms this grant, with all wrecks "except whale and a whole ship."

In another grant all the tithes of Scilly (and particularly of rabbits!) are given to the monks by Richard De Wich "for his soul, and the souls of his parents, and of Reginald Earl of Cornwall his lord." There is something pitifully ludicrous in this special inclusion of tithes of *rabbits* in the price paid for the salvation of human souls.

The right of the Abbots of Tavistock to the shipwrecks was challenged by King Edward I. in 1302, and upon inquiry the jury found that the Abbot and all his predecessors had "enjoyed" from time immemorial all the wrecks that happened in Scilly, except gold, whale, scarlet cloth, and fir or masts, which were reserved to the King.

An author of the last century says, with a cheerful belief in human nature: "Perhaps the right of wreck was given to the convent for the purpose of attaching an increased degree of merit

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to their prayers in favour of ships likely to be dashed against those rocks." But surely, from another point of view, it was putting rather an unnecessary strain upon their virtue!

Of the secular government of Scilly, there are from time to time fragmentary records.

In 1248 Henry III. sent a Governor, Drew de Barrentine, with

command to deliver every year seven quarters of wheat to the King or his agent.

King Edward I. in 1306 granted the Castle of Ennor in Scilly to Ranulph de Blankminster, in return for his finding and maintaining twelve armed men at all times for keeping the peace in those parts. This Castle of Ennor is identified with Old Town Castle on St. Mary's, of which only the smallest vestiges remain.

Ranulph de Blankminster also held the islands for the King, paying yearly at Michaelmas three hundred puffins, or six shillings and eightpence. Puffins must have been cheap in those days! In 1440 we find the rent is still six and eightpence, but fifty instead of three hundred puffins are reckoned the equivalent. Poor puffins! had their numbers really dwindled so much in 134 years by their constant contribution to the rent-roll that they were six times more difficult to obtain? I hope it was only that they had become more wary

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and expert in the art of being "not at home" when the rent-collector called.

In this same reign, Edward I., the monks of Tresco Priory made an appeal to the King representing their need of proper defence from the attacks of foes. The King granted them letters of protection, which were particularly addressed to "the Constable of the Castle in the isle of Ennor," who seems, therefore, to have been the chief secular authority in the islands at the time.

Ranulph de Blankminster appears to have fulfilled but ill his half of the compact with the King, for only two years after it was made we find William Le Peor, Coroner of St. Mary's, making complaint of him that instead of keeping the peace he entertained rogues, thieves, and felons, and with their help committed many abuses. The King appointed a commission to inquire into the

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