

'Alexander the Rat':

**F. W. ALEXANDER, Chief Censor,
*Deadwood Camp, St Helena***

by DR. STEPHEN ROYLE

of the School of Geosciences, Queen's University of Belfast

This article is based on material in the Stopford Green Papers in the National Library of Ireland which records the visit to the St Helena prisoner of war camps in 1900 of Irish woman Alice Stopford Green. Information revealed therein about the life and character of F. W. Alexander, the Chief Censor, may be of interest to readers. Alexander is not shown to have been a pleasant character.

I have been interested in St Helena for a number of years and recently explained in this journal how I became involved in a study of the island's early twentieth century history. To this end I purchased a copy of Bernard Mabbett's book on the philately of the St Helena Boer prisoner of war camps. From this I learned a good deal, including the fact that the Chief Censor and later Staff Interpreter at Deadwood Camp was Mr. F. W. Alexander, who was active on the island from April 1900 to March 1902, as evidenced from his initials on the envelopes of censored letters. He was on the staff of the Camp Commandant who had a Sergeant Major, orderly room clerk, two MPs, orderlies, quartermaster, quartermaster sergeant and POW helpers as well as three censors. the role of Alexander and the other censors is found within this proclamation to the POW's.

Rules Regulating the Correspondence of Prisoners of War

1. No prisoner of war may write more than two letters per month. Such prisoners who have fathers, sons and brothers in the various camps abroad will be permitted to correspond with them once a month.
2. No letter may contain more than 500 words.

3. No POW may write about any of the following subjects:- the political situation, the British Government or troops, occurrences in the camps, complaints about the food, or anything of a kindred kind.
4. All letters dealing with anything contrary to the regulations, whether registered or not, will be destroyed with the envelopes. No notices of such destruction will be given.
5. All photographs shewing the coats of arms of the late republics, pictures of the leader, and any article whatsoever with the coats of arms aforementioned will be confiscated.
6. All letters addressed to Z.A.R. or O.F.S. will be destroyed as these places no longer exist.
7. Letters may be posted daily between the hours of 10 a.m. and 12 noon, but must be handed personally to the staff interpreter, who will attend at the office during these hours for the purpose of receiving them.
8. No POW is allowed inside the staff interpreter's office for any reason whatsoever.
9. Parcels and packages must be packed in the presence of the staff interpreter.
10. With reference to the envelopes retained in the censor's office, the unused stamps will be sold to the POWs and the proceeds given to the widows and orphans of Boer prisoners.

A. J. Price, Colonel Officer Commanding Troops

My researches into a hitherto little used archive of St Helena history can identify something of the man responsible for putting into operation this proclamation, F. W. Alexander, whose initials are to be found on so many postal items from the St Helena camps. What I have uncovered may thus be of interest to readers of the Anglo-Boer War Philatelist.

The archive I used was the Stopford Green papers held in the National Library of Ireland in Dublin. These relate to Mrs. Alice Green, nee Stopford, widow of historian J. R. Green. She was a noted historian herself as well as being a political campaigner. Mrs Green (1847-1929) was an Irish nationalist and became a senator in the Irish parliament when the Irish Free State gained its independence. Born into

the family of a Church of Ireland Archdeacon in rural County Meath, she spent much of her adult life in London where she was active in women's issues and was a friend of Emily Hobhouse and Mary Kingsley. Another cause close to her heart was Africa and she was a founder member, vice-president and journal editor of the African Society.

The Boer War took her interest because it was in Africa and also because it was a stick with which she could beat the British. Her friends went to South Africa in the cause of the Boers: Emily Hobhouse to write a report on the state of the concentration camps; Mary Kingsley to nurse Boer prisoners, an activity that led to her own death from enteric fever. Green, instead, went to St Helena to report on the state and conditions of the Boers held in camps there, a resourceful journey nearly a century ago for an unaccompanied widow in her fifties at a time of war. This was in September 1900 and from that time she maintained her interest in the camps and the Boer POW cause, frequently writing to the press and badgering establishment figures including Joseph Chamberlain, Secretary of State for the Colonies with whom she had a number of meetings. The papers she left of her work, which includes a journal of her visit to St Helena, have formed the basis of my on-going researches. Readers might like to know that many of the documents are letters from St Helena, some in their original envelopes with stamps and postal marks. In the archive is some mention of F. W. Alexander, which forms the raw material for this article.

Before writing about the censor, I should re-emphasize that Alice Green was an Irish nationalist and was antipathetic towards the British establishment. Historians must use her papers with caution, for fear of accepting her bias. The detail of her visit seems accurate and to balance her own views her papers contain also material from people with opposing ideas with whom she corresponded. Opposing views also appeared in print, see for example the article from one of her correspondents, Colonel Paget ('Some experiences of a Commandant, Prisoners of War, at Deadwood Camp, St Helena 1900-1901'), and compare it to her own published work, ('A visit to the Boer prisoners at St Helena'). However, I have come across no other source that details the life and character of F. W. Alexander and so have only Green's account to report. Let the reader beware, though, she did not like either the man or what he stood for and routinely referred to him as 'Alexander the Rat'!

There seems little reason to doubt the facts she details of Alexander's life. It seems that he had been 47 years in South Africa where he had had a kitchen garden and vegetable shop. This is mentioned twice but with different locations, once in Cape Town, the second time in Johannesburg. The latter seems more likely as he had abandoned his livelihood rather than turn against the British as he did not want to be on the 'wrong side' which would presumably not have been a problem if he were at the Cape. His role on St Helena also required a good knowledge of Afrikaans which he would have needed in Johannesburg.

He had lost a son in the war and 'the whole camp of Boers was nothing to his son'. His antipathy towards his charges showed itself, it seems, in his refusal to pass on requests for parole and in comments he made about the Boers. At lunch with senior officers and Alexander on 22 September 1900 Green recorded in her journal that 'Alexander the rat in his genial way took most of the conversation: "Boers-Liars-No truth in them and no gratitude. . . . You've got to grind them down now – to g.g.r.r.ind them (hardening the edge of his knife against the table with all his strength) so that they can't stir". On another occasion Alexander told Green that the Boers should be exterminated or 'brought to a right mind'. He regarded them as liars and would have no truck with parole for the Cape.

Green, in return, had no truck with Alexander obviously hating him and this is why one must beware of bias in her reportage. "Up came Alexander, rat like, and monopolised the conversation' was one comment in her journal. She told the War Office on 3 December 1900 that Alexander was a 'very coarse and ignorant man'; the same month she reported to Chamberlain that the Head Censor and the other two 'are low and inferior men' chosen, presumably, just because they speak Dutch.

Despite Alexander's characteristics, Green found that he had insinuated himself with the officers, thus his presence at her lunch with the two senior officers; she claimed that the officers hardly ever enter the camp and do not speak to the men, except for a few favourites and listened only to Alexander's tales. As a result she found the officers to be ignorant of camp affairs. By contrast, the Boers, she reported, spoke well of the officers but hated the censors, especially Alexander, though Alexander himself seemed to be unaware of this. Another censor, E. Walton, was described a 'gaol bird' by one. A third, called Brown, was known to be 'a common drunkard' (but note that no censor called Brown features in Mabbett's book).

One reason for the Boers' hatred of Alexander forms perhaps the most serious charge against the man to be uncovered in the Stopford Green archive. It is that Alexander (and Brown) did not confine themselves to their official duties but also dealt with the prisoners in illegal commercial transactions by supplying them with illicit whiskey (note the spelling, Green was Irish) at huge profits. They were not the only traders. In her journal on 15 October 1900 Green noted that 'the liquor question' in Camp (there was only the one camp then) 'seems to have been pretty bad among the Johannesburg men. Tommy (i.e. British soldiers) would roll in bottles under the wire and the Boers brought some in in aloe sticks. Alexander and Brown did a little business with their black bags'. The Boers would not set up a vigilance committee to help stamp out the trade and so the Colonel punished the whole camp until Boer leader, Commandant Wolmorans, told him where to search for alcohol. In a paper sent by Green to the War office, she was keen to point out that the Boers themselves had put a stop to Alexander's whiskey selling. Further, in material sent to Chamberlain in December 1900, she complained that the Head Censor and another secretly sell spirits at a profit of two

shillings to two shillings and sixpence a bottle, carried in little black bags. She advised the removal of the censors but this was not done.

All in all the Stopford Green papers if taken at their face value, and the possibility of bias has been mentioned, reveal many unpleasant features about F. W. Alexander, the St Helena Chief Censor. He comes across as an embittered, poorly educated man with few skills who, though he had insinuated himself with the officer, was hated by the POWs themselves not just because of the unwelcome, but necessary, job of censor, but because of his dealings in illicit spirits. They doubtless valued his trade but were bitter at the inflated prices he charged. In his turn, Alexander hated the Boers, not least because of the death of his son. This new evidence of the state of relations between the censor and the censored and the type of man who was the censor might help readers understand more clearly the operation of censorship on St Helena.

St Helena

Description

from an official publication, 1927

ST HELENA lies in lat. 15. 55.S. and long. 5. 42W. It is about 950 miles due south of the Equator, 4000 miles from England, and 1700 miles from Capetown. The voyage from England occupies 17 days and from Capetown 6 days.

The area of the Island is 47 square miles; there are about 60 miles of road.

The aspect of St Helena from the sea is forbidding. It rises abruptly in bare cliffs, which vary in height from 450 to 2400 ft. The face of this wall of rock is cut by deep narrow gorges.

Above the cliffs the ground rises in a fairly regular slope, but with numerous valleys, to a ridge lying across the middle of Island. This ridge is serrated in form; its general altitude is about 2000 ft. but two of its peaks, easily accessible and affording magnificent views, rise to 2700 ft.

The Island has been divided into three zones. "Coast", "Middle" and "Central".