

'COLONEL' PAUL GASHERIE
AN ADVENTURER ON ST HELENA

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St. Helena was formally occupied by the East India Company in 1659, and the island quickly became an important link in the Indian and Far Eastern trade. Ships making the homeward voyage normally waited there for each other before forming convoy for the last, and often most hazardous, stage of the journey. This system had been interrupted in 1672-73 by a successful Dutch attack on the island, and whenever there was war in Europe the Company reawakened to a similar threat. The St. Helena coastline is mainly inaccessible cliff, and the defences which gradually evolved consisted of fixed batteries commanding the possible landing-places, a fort with a regular garrison of Company's soldiers at Jamestown, the main settlement, and a militia drawn from the inhabitants.

In 1733 an Anglo-French war over the Polish Succession appeared dangerously near, and the Company began to think about strengthening the island against a possible French attack on the South Atlantic trade route. The story of one of its efforts appears in the copy minutes, or "consultations," returned to London by the Governor and Council of St. Helena, and now to be found among the *Factory Records* series of the India Office Records.

Paul Gasherie, a French exile claiming a wide experience of military engineering, chose this opportune time to petition the Court of Directors of the East India Company, ". . . offering his Service in securing the Company's several settlements in India . . ." ¹ On 16th November, 1733, it was ordered that ". . . Lieutenant-Colonel Powell Gasherie be entertained Surveyour of the Fortifications of St. Helena at the pay of £10 per Month, to commence on his arrival there, to have the liberty of the Company's General Table, to have a proper apartment in the Fort, or in some other Convenient Place, and to be allowed £20 towards his Provisions outward . . ." ² Unfortunately, in their haste, the Company dispensed with a check on his credentials.

The appointment was notified to St. Helena in a letter forwarded on the ship *Lyell*, which reached the island 24th April, 1734. ³ Gasherie presumably travelled on the same ship, for on 4th June he made his first report to the Governor, Isaac Pyke, and his three-man Council, John Alexander, John Goodwin and Duke Crispe. After an inspection of the

¹ IOR : B/62, p. 492, Court Minutes 1732-34.

² *Ibid.*, p. 498.

³ IOR : E/3/99, p. 86, Letter Book 1733-36, and L/MAR/C/646D "Lyell" Log 1733-35.

existing fortifications, Gasherie recommended an extensive programme of rebuilding and repair and the provision of additional guns.⁴

On 7th June, answering questions arising from his report, he estimated that his scheme required twenty-nine extra guns manned by 115 men, and that the necessary work would take several months.⁵ The Governor and Council made no comment at this stage, merely asking him to inspect the guns at the Fort with the gunner, John French, and to report upon their condition. Three days later he "... brought in his Plans, desiring they might be sent to England, but upon Examining of them they were found very false and erroneously done, & therefore sent for him & told him of the mistakes and acquainted him that it looked as if he designed to impose upon the Honourable Company, & that wee could not think it proper to send any thing to them that had such an Appearance & was so incorrectly done, & returned him his Plans again . . ."⁶ On 11th June, Gunner French reported that Gasherie had refused to examine the guns at the Fort until they were all unloaded and placed together, and added the opinion that "... he is either very careless or else not a Man of that skill & Judgement he pretends to . . ." The Governor then ordered French to make the examination himself, stating that the guns should be kept loaded at all times "... the more necessary to be done now because wee are under Apprehensions of a speedy War . . ."⁷

The following week, Gasherie sent in a letter saying "... I have been to Ruperts Valley and Examined the Foundation of the Fortifications there standing & find they are built without any, the stones being all placed upon the surface or superficies of the Earth, and therefore I am of Opinion it will be improper to build anything thereon, but think it necessary to make two little Tenailles* nearer the sea, of twelve Fathom long each, upon a good Foundation, & each sufficient for four guns of 9lb Ball . . ."⁸ Governor Pyke held his temper, simply ordering that the undergrowth in Rupert's Valley should be cleared away before an official inspection. On 25th June, Gasherie laid an even more elaborate general scheme before the Council, calling for nineteen four-pounders and fifteen nine-pounders. His observation that the Rupert's Valley fortifications lacked foundations was confirmed, but Pyke pointed out that they had nevertheless cost the Company a great deal of money. It was proving difficult to persuade the planters on the island to offer their slaves as

⁴ IOR : G/32/9, ff. 164v-165, St. Helena Consultations 1732-36.

⁵ *Ibid.*, ff. 166-166v.

⁶ *Ibid.*, ff. 166v.

⁷ *Ibid.*, ff. 167-167v.

* A low work consisting of one or two re-entering angles placed before a curtain between two bastions.

⁸ IOR : G/32/9, ff. 168-168v.

hired labourers, and the garrison would have to be used ; therefore, there could be no question of rebuilding.*

Governor Pyke was in his second term of office (1714-19 and 1731-37), and he had a reputation for autocratic behaviour. It is hardly surprising that a personal quarrel developed between him and Gasherie, whom he considered to be incompetent, a rival for authority, a possible focal point for the planters' permanent discontent and, even worse, a pretentious foreigner. The first rumblings were heard on 2nd July, when ". . . Monsieur Gasherie was this morning sent for into Council, & being come, the Governour desired him to sit, & he sat down with the Council, next to Captain Alexander, & was then asked in what forwardness the Works at Ruperts were, and he Answered he did not know, he having been there but once since the People were there, which is now three Weeks ago, & that he did not know what they had to do there, & added that as he was at any time wanted to go, he would fly if the Governor would give him an order in Writing. To which Answer was made that an order in Council was allways sufficient for everybody, & that as many men as could be spared were already placed under his Care & had been so for some time past, & that it was expected that he & everybody else should do their Duty. Upon this, he desired to know where he was to sit, & said that he was to sit & Command next the Governour. To this the Governour Replied that in all Affairs relating to the Fortifications, & in what else the Governour thought he was able to understand, he would ask his Advice, & that he was not to sit or take Place above any of the Council. At this he was very Angry, & said he thought to be in all places & at all times next the Governour, & dropt Expressions as if he thought himself taken for a Suspected Person, & that he would resent it in some other Place, but not here, & said he ought to Command all the People upon the Line. But the Governor told him that Captain Cason was an old Experienced Officer & a Person fit to be entirely trusted & relyed upon, having been employed & Confided in by the seven last Governours as chief Military Officer, & farther told him that Captain Cason was an Englishman, & so deserving a man that he ought not to put anybody over his head, with which Monsieur Gasherie was highly offended. He was likewise told that he ought to look after the Buseyness of the Fortifications, & to take care that the People under him did their Duty, for which he had a large Allowance & great Encouragement, & at length he promised to go to Ruperts tomorrow. He also said that he expected to be sent for upon all Firing of Guns, & the Governour acquainted him that he had lately sent for him to search & examine in what Condition the Guns were, but he refused to come. To this, he Answered evasively that he thought the Gunner had sent for him. This claim seems to us

* *Ibid.*, ff. 169-174.

very extraordinary because he has been here ten Weeks & never made any such Pretensions before, & other Engineers, as able men as he, never disputed verbal orders, even out of Council ; & as to Place, wee Searched our Books & find by several Regulations, particularly one made by Governour Roberts, that the Engineer is placed next below the Chaplain."¹⁰

Despite his promise to visit Rupert's Valley, Gasherie still did not go, writing instead a letter to the Governor on 3rd July, repeating his observation that the fortifications there lacked foundations, and requesting a written order ". . . to clear myself of all Inconvenience that may happen." Pyke then definitely stated his own position¹¹. ". . . As to this Line of Ruperts, it was contrived by Commodore Richards who commanded a Man of War & was convoy to the homeward-bound fleet. But as to its having no Foundation, that may be called a Fault, but wee are informed it was done on such a sudden that they had not time to make a Foundation. They were three years building it with all hands, as well Planters as others that would work for hire, at 5s per day Stonelayers & Masons, & Diet besides to all the chief of them, & 2s per day for labouring blacks, & the Charge thereof was severall thousand Pounds. Wee are now in as much hast & find it needfull to repair this Work, which wee have therefore resolved on, & will not build a new Work of such great Expencc without direct & positive Orders from the Honourable Company, for wee are not afraid of any Seige or long Bombardment, but expect some sudden Attack, & when this Line is repaired wee doubt not but 'twill be sufficient for that. And had wee agreed to give Monsieur Gasherie Fifteen hundred Pounds to repair this Work, as he desired, then he would have found no Fault that it wanted Foundation, but have made such repair as wee now intend. As to his station, 'tis to be Surveyour &, if he pleased, Engineer, but he is to have no other Rank or Employment that shall take him off from the Buseyness that he comes about. As to his Advice, wee do not think him, or any other Man who does not know the Country & does not actually go upon the spot, capable of advising us to any good Effect. However, because he has talked as if he had great skill in Exercising, & intended to make some alteration in the Exercise, wee intend to see what fault he can find with Captain Cason's Exercise, who does Exercise all the People according to Colonel Bland's Method,* who is Colonel of the King's Guards ; & wee are told by all People that go home, that no soldiers in India Exercise so well as our Men here, & they are most of them so much our Superiours that there is no room to think they flatter us."

¹⁰ IOR : G/32/9, ff. 176-176v.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, ff. 176v-178v.

* Colonel Humphrey Bland (c. 1686-1763), author of *A Treatise on Discipline*, 1727.

Pyke waited for three hours at the militia parade, or "exercise," but Gasherie did not appear. He sent instead a further letter raising the question of his status on the island, and claiming that the garrison and militia ". . . must absolutely obey me for the good & service of the Honourable Company, with which submission Your Worship as Governour must needs know as well as myself." In reply Pyke rehearsed the experience of the Captain and the gunner, stressing that they were Englishmen, and concluding that ". . . after mature Consideration of this whole Affair, wee find that he, Monsieur Gasherie, has loitered & trifled away too much time . . . & that if he do not speedily go on with the Works he came for, that then wee will undertake it ourselves."

The Governor proceeded to carry out his threat, and Gasherie's name does not reappear in the minutes until 12th November, 1734. He had obviously been making a nuisance of himself in the intervening months, for Pyke then announced to the Council ". . . that he is at a loss what to think of Monsieur Gasherie's unaccountable & indiscreet Behaviour. He has pretended to a great deale of Deserte but shews none. His whole Management since his Arrival here has been with much Arrogance & ill Temper, using no sort of Application to any kind of study or buseyness, but continual Idleness with vain Encomium upon his own parts, & seems allways Dissatisfied when he thinks wee have not so good an Opinion of him as he publishes of himself. He came here to be Surveyour of the Works, of which he takes no manner of Notice, nor has done anything towards them notwithstanding the large Pay he was to be allowed for it. He left the Honourable Companies Table without the least manner of Notice, but goes about privately, caballing with some of the people as a Malecontent. He keeps his house most part of the day, but at Night goes out constantly. He cut both his Shoes when he first came here, pretending his Legs & feet failed him, & went lamely, but whenever he is seen to walk alone, he walks as well as anybody, though he still keeps his shoes cut, as if he intended by that Excuse to have his going to any Place upon the Honourable Companies buseyness dispenced with. He pretends not to like the Country, but has lately from one of his Confederates, whose father was a French Man, had Horses and Guides sent him, by which he went through the Country to see our Fortifications lately made at Turks Cap Valley, where he spent about Twelve hours in the Journey, which looks so like the Behaviour of a Spy that, though the rest of his Conduct had not been Suspicious even, this private Transaction from a morose Frenchman I take to be sufficient cause to enquire what, & who, he is, & how he came to be Recommended to the Honourable Company in the manner he has been, of which, for what appears to me, he seems to be most unfit." The Governor farther added, "Gentlemen, you all know how honourably & how kindly he has been treated by me especially, & you all know his Churlish & rude Behaviour & other his indiscreet

Management. I desire, therefore, that each of you will give me your Judgement what notice is proper to be taken of a Man that behaves himself so ill. And that I may have some light who, & what, he is, that you will each of you, against Tuesday next, give me a Repetition of so much of his Character as you have heard from himself . . ."¹²

The Council carried out their instructions, and on 3rd December they presented an extremely interesting report. "It appears that his Title of Colonel is all Imposture, for wee heard even from himself that he never was a Colonel, only that once he had been in a station that was of as high a Rank, as he pretends, as a Lieutenant Colonel, & that was in Courland. At this first setting out in the World, he was in the French sea service for Eleven years, & he has been in the service of the late King James at La Hague Bay. He has been in Scotland too, wee suppose in the late Rebellion because wee don't Remember he mentioned his particular Employment there, which he never fails doing when he thinks it will turn to his Credit. When he left the sea service he commenced soldier & was for a long time, & till very lately, a Lieutenant of Dragoons, & has been in the service of most of the European Princes, & sometimes in Secret Employments, which wee take to be a spy, though according to what wee find of him, such a Man could not be very fit for it. However, if he had behaved well in any of those services, it seems strange to us that when a general War was apprehended to break out, that none of them in whose service he had formerly been would employ him again.

"Sir Charles Wager,* wee believe, took him for such a Man, because he says himself that Sir Charles would have had him go to Brest & Toulon for that purpose, but he did not care to go to France on such an Affair, because he thought that would look like a Rogue to be a Spy upon his own Country. But he has said at other times, that because of a Quarrel with the Governour of Brest, he fled from there & is outlawed, so that he cannot return there without the King of France's Pardon, & if so, wee do not wonder that he did not accept of Sir Charles Wager's Proposal of going there for an Intelligencer. He has served the King of Portugal, but there he was a suspected Man, & therefore, as he says himself, he was kept four months in Prison. He has served the Emperour, the King of Spain, the Czarina, the King of Poland & the States of Holland, but to shew how well they approved of his Behaviour, none of them would let him have his Bread among them.

"His highest Preferment was under the Count of Saxony, the natural son of Augustus the late King of Poland, who Employed him for an Engineer to Fortify a Place in Courland, & Count Sax promised to make him a Captain of Horse if he succeeded. But the Muscovites came soon

¹² IOR : G/32/9, ff. 200-200v.

* Sir Charles Wager (1666-1743), First Lord of the Admiralty, 1733-42.

after he had finished his Works & took him out of them, & then Demolished the Place, keeping him Prisoner ; where he was in danger of being put to Death, but had the good luck to break out of Prison & Escape to Poland, where he Petitioned for some Recompence for his sufferings, & one of the King's Mistresses got him six hundred Dollars, with which he came to England.

"In England, he found a Kinsman of his, who is a servant to Sir Charles Wager, & is employed by Sir Charles to transcribe his French Papers for him, & going to a Coffee House often to see this Kinsman, he became acquainted with a Gentleman that speaks good French & Dutch, & has a great Interest with the English East India Company. To whom Monsieur Gasherie's Kinsman made Application in his behalf, & that being backed by Sir Charles Wager's Interest, thus procured, the said East India Company employed him to be Surveyour of their Works & Military Fortifications on the Island of St. Helena, which he does not appear to us to understand, or else he has some secret Design of evil Consequence which is his main Intention. When wee have Reason every day to expect an Enemy at our Gates (we) ought not . . . to please a Man wee are not sure is entirely in the Interest of our Honourable Masters, the East India Company. Especially one who, immediately after he had agreed with the Company to come here in their service, waited upon the French Ambassadour, as he himself says, to offer him his service, & as he hath Acknowledged this, wee are the more cautious of him.

"Since he has been among us he has behaved himself more like a spy than a Friend. His personal Behaviour to the Governour has been so excessively rude & Insolent that wee wonder he has had Patience with him so long. But it is not for his private Behaviour only, but for his publick behaviour also, that wee think renders him wholly unfit for the Post he was recommended to, though the other Incivilities, with his morose & arrogant Carriage at the publick Table, are so like the Insolence of a French Dragoon that wee think no Englishman ought to bear it. . . . He has been among the People to intimidate them & make them believe they are in no Security, & that the Fortifications are not Defencible, & whatever he may think of it, it's a bold & impudent thing, & not fit to be allowed, though wee are convinced they do not look upon him as a Man of Sufficient Judgement in what he pretends to, nor can he terrifie them, which wee conclude is what he Aims at, & though wee think he ought not to be feared, yet wee think he ought (not) to be trusted, nor suffered to proceed in such Insolence & Presumption."¹³

Two days later this report was read to Gasherie, and the Governor informed him that he was ". . . entirely dismiss & discharged from the Honourable Companies Service. . . . And I . . . give you Strict Charge

¹³ IOR : G/32/9, ff. 202-203v.

not to Intermeddle with any of Our Affairs here . . . as you will Answer the contrary to your utmost Peril . . ." Gasherie said that ". . . these papers were all false & insisted that wee had no Power to dismiss him . . . and whilst these Papers were reading, in which he is called Mr Powell Gasherie, he frequently interrupted us, saying, 'but I have a Title, haven't I a Title? what! do you take my Title away?' . . . and is as fond of a Title as a Child of a Rattle, though as far as wee can find he never had any higher Preferment than a Lieutenantship of Dragoons."¹⁴

There is no further mention of Gasherie in the St. Helena records. He was back in London by 19th August, 1735, and the Court of Directors endorsed Governor Pyke's action without commenting on his implied criticism of their judgment.¹⁵

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, f. 204v.

¹⁵ IOR : B/63, pp. 410, 438, 474, Court Minutes 1734-36.