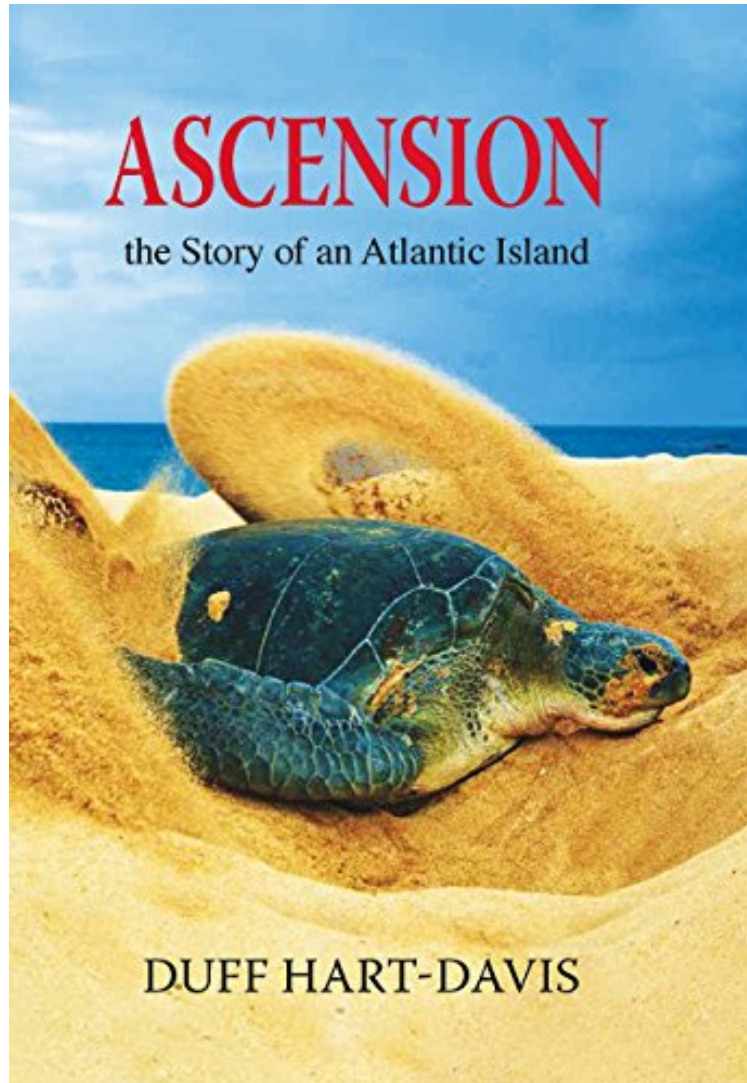


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Ascension: The Story of a South Atlantic Island

Duff Hart-Davis

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Duff Hart-Davis : Ascension: The Story of a South Atlantic Island before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Ascension: The Story of a South Atlantic Island:

The bleak, volcanic island of Ascension, 800 miles from its nearest neighbour St Helena, was described by a Victorian naval officer as one of the strangest places on the face of the earth. It is still exceedingly odd. Uninhabited when it was taken over by the British in 1815, it was an almost perfect natural vacuum a triangular heap of lava and ash. When the Royal Marines brought in plants and animals, some flourished, others died. Tropical forest now clothes the peak of

Green Mountain, and feral donkeys haunt the plains. As sea birds swarm around the coast, radar stations monitor space from the tops of rust-red cinder cones, and primeval, giant green turtles lumber up the beaches to nest. The islands history is short but extraordinary.

About the Author Duff Hart-Davis is a distinguished biographer, naturalist and journalist. He is author of 17 non-fiction books on subjects ranging from Hitler's Olympics, the adventurer Peter Fleming, to a history of deer stalking. He has also had 8 novels published. He lives in Gloucestershire. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. Until November 1941 Ascension depended on this still-tenuous protection. But then there arrived a message which precipitated the greatest invasion the island had ever known a secret cable from the Governor of St Helena asking Cardwell to make a survey of two possible sites for an airfield that the American Government was planning to build. One, on Ash Plain, inland behind Georgetown, was quickly eliminated as being unsuitable; apart from the unevenness of the ground, there was a major impediment in the form of the British naval wireless station. But the other site, on South West Plain, seemed to have everything in its favour. Pacing out the level area, Cardwell found that it was at least 1,000 yards long and nearly 700 yards wide, and that the surface was not dusty, as the Africa Pilot described it, so much as hard-packed. A further advantage was the exceptional constancy of the wind: on almost every day of the year, there was a fresh, steady breeze from the south east, the very direction in which the strip of flat ground lay. The greatest potential snag, of which the Americans were already aware, was the presence of several thousand wideawake terns. Since time immemorial they had nested on the bare, stony ground in that corner of the island, and their dense flocks could, it seemed, prove a serious hazard to aircraft taking off and landing. Neither the feral cats nor the egg-hungry naval garrison had seriously depleted their numbers, and for several months of the year they were present in an immense, vociferous colony. Cardwell, however, was able to report that the wideawakes main fair, or nesting ground, was no longer in the place marked on the Admiralty chart, but further to the south. It is now the height of their season, he wrote, and the birds are as numerous as ever. As during previous seasons within my experience, the birds are laying their eggs only on the triangular area bounded by Mars Bay, Dark Slope Crater and Pillar Bay. Although countless eggs are being deposited in this area, not a single egg is laid on S.W. Plain itself. This does not mean to say that there are no birds flying in the air over the Plain. There were a few flying close over my head, and they seem a bit inquisitive. Cardwell sent off his report, and was waiting for a response when, on 9 December, a German submarine, U-124, surfaced opposite Georgetown, with apparently hostile intent.