

A Small Colony of Persons: Tristan English and the Outside World

Stephen Gray

Abstract

Following a visit to Tristan da Cunha, the article comprises of a study of the history and current prevalence of Tristan English.

Keywords: Tristan da Cunha, Tristan da Cunha English, travel article

Tristan da Cunha, a British possession, is an island mountain of volcanic origin in the South Atlantic Ocean. Latitude 37°05'; longitude 12° 16' W. Circular in form. Circumference about 21 miles. Diameter about 7 miles. Height 7 640 feet. Volcano extinct during historic times. Discovered by the Portuguese navigator, admiral Tristo da Cunha, 1506. Occupied by the British, 1816.

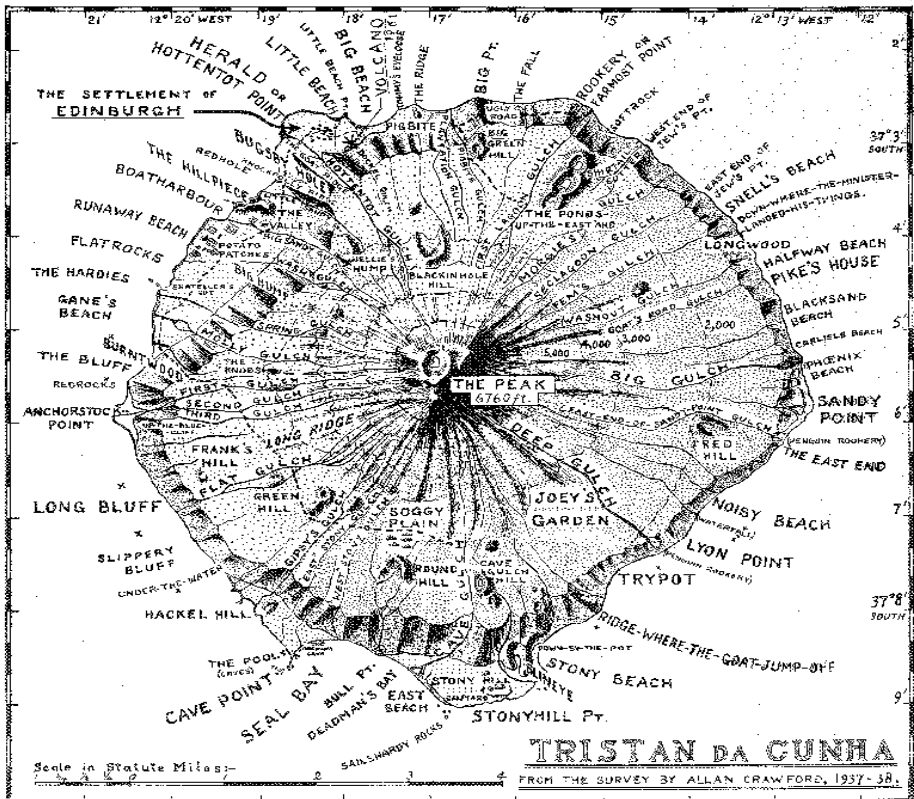
Thus recorded Mrs. K.M. Barrow in 1910, situating the locale of her residency there with her husband and fellow-worker, Rev. Graham Barrow, dispatched by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts. Tristan was an outpost which had had neither clergy nor schoolmarm for all of the previous seventeen years. Before them there had been only two: Rev. William Taylor from 1851 for five years and thereafter Rev. Edwin Dodgson, brother of Lewis Carroll, from 1881.

‘The language spoken is English’, she reported bleakly, ‘but their vocabulary is limited. It was difficult to understand what they said’ (1910:

11). But once she became more acclimatised:

The little girls, most of whom could not write, still wore sun-bonnets called ‘capies’ and, if accused of some irregularity proclaimed the abbreviated ‘I never! I never!’ The people have so intermarried, and there are so many of the same name, that it is difficult to distinguish one person from another.

Yet soon she settled into using their own terms, like ‘stoep’ for veranda, and even ‘crayfish’ rather than ‘crawfish’ for the spiny rock lobster which currently provides the island’s export mainstay.



In the initial numbers of Patrick Cullinan's *The Bloody Horse* (1980).

My wish to visit this ‘remotest inhabited island’, as the tourist brochure has it, dated from seeing a performance of Zinnie Harris’s documentary play of 2000, *Further than the Furthest Thing*. Although portraying the extraordinary so-called Volcano Years (1961-1963), during which the entire population had to be rescued and shipped out to the United Kingdom as the cinder pile upon which they lived became reactive, threatening to bury their very settlement under fresh lava, the play’s strange appeal was in the dialogue, which was written largely in Tristan English. Your speaker of standard English could grasp the twists and turns of faulty grammar, the half poignant, rather mystifying vocabulary, but then be utterly stumped by sequences of language mutually comprehended only by those akin.

When the community’s administrator, Peter Wheeler, wrote an account of his people’s evacuation, he recorded that he would miss their ‘How you is?’ ‘I’s foin’, rather assuming that such language transgressions would be rectified during their enforced stay in the motherland. But as the press of the day made a sensation of, and as Harris’s play depicts, the Tristans were mostly not to be disbanded by the ‘houtside worl’, but rather elected to return as a community to their remote outcrop, maintaining their peculiar speech, broadened but intact.

So it came about that a long generation later, in 2010, during the annual austral spring run of the logistical supply ship, S.A. Agulhas, 1 500 nautical miles over heaving cobalt, I was able to install myself for more than three weeks at a work-station provided by the island’s Tourism Centre and Museum - out of the near Roaring Forties and slashing rains. My trawl through the island’s spick and span archives and library revealed that, despite the fact that Tristan has been abundantly written about, endemic literary production has to date been sparse: there is one much corrected memoir by the island’s only policeman, Conrad Glass, called *Rockhopper Copper*, and the lyrics of a few new songs by the pupils of St Mary’s School.

The first metropolitan literary figure to be drawn to the Tristan story was Jules Verne, with one of his adventure romances translated into English as *The Children of Captain Grant* (in 1868). By 1962 Geoffrey Jenkins could follow with his Cold War mystery, *A Grue of Ice* (also known as *Disappearing Island*), which actually features a Tristan character (called Sailhardy). After the volcano story broke, Hervé Bazin would produce his

Les Bienheureux de la Désolation (1910) rendered in English as *Tristan, a Novel* two years later, while at the same date the Austrian, Erich Wolfgang Skwara, produced *Tristan Island* (in German), again about re-establishing an utopian society there post the apocalypse.

Poetry-wise, apart from some doggerel in various government reports and field guides, there is only Roy Campbell to record, whose lyric about the solitary, defiant isle, ‘Tristan de Cunha’, dates from his *Adamastor* volume of 1930. In the same year J.G. Lockhart produced a fictionalised account called *Blenden Hall* of the party shipwrecked on the neighbouring Inaccessible Island in 1821, based on the real journal of Alexander Greig, kept there before their rescue and written in penguin blood. Likewise Eric Rosenthal (in 1952) devised his *Shelter from the Spray*, derived from the records of the Stoltenhoff brothers, also marooned there and on Nightingale Island in the 1860s. Needless to say, not one of the above authors managed actually to visit their setting, so that none attempt an engagement with the local oral material on the ground.

With a population varying from a few dozen castaways to never more than three hundred, despite several official attempts to have their forbidding territory abandoned, Tristan has since 1938 fallen under St. Helena, 1 200 miles to the north (as does Ascension Island), forming a British Overseas Territory along the Mid-Atlantic Ridge. It is ruled by a governor who lives among the Saints and who, as there is no longer any direct link except by yacht down to the southern archipelago, has yet to visit his dependency. As Ascension in the subtropics has never had a resident population and been open to the touristic public only since 2004, and as St. Helena, although it has twenty times the permanent population of Tristan, has not to date attracted the scrutiny of the sociolinguist intent on annotating brogues, Tristan in its remoteness is the one landfall which has lured the language record-keepers. Its uniquely evolved dialect of Tristan da Cunha English (TDCE), like Pitcairnese, has indeed drawn outsiders – or ‘expatriates’, as they inaccurately call them – for all of the last two centuries: ‘How you is?’ ‘I’s fresh, tank you’. (An echo of ‘Ek is ...’.)

The annual newsletters of the post-war Tristan de Cunha Association contain many apt comments, like the substitute teacher Miss. E. Harvey’s (in May, 1950) on mating rituals among her charges:

The young man goes to the girl's house every evening and sits with the family. If he is not a 'good provider' of 'sop' (soap), 'rop' (rope) and has no 'larning' (learning), he may be warned that he had better not get too fond of the girl, but if the girl likes him and the parents approve, he may take her for a walk on Sunday afternoons before Evensong.

Such is 'coating time' (courting), which is no 'jok' (joke).

In July, 1960, Miss R.M. Downer, the headmistress, contributed:

'Many books well-loved elsewhere hold no attraction, for poetry and literature mean little to those who have never seen trees, heard singing birds or gathered wild flowers'. All her pupils have, she adds, are bluefish eyes with which to play marbles. When in 1957 the current Duke of Edinburgh steered through the baffling waves, avoiding growlers and blinders, not to mention forests of kelp, those marbles intended as a gift to his royal offspring had been eaten by wild cats, since exterminated. Hence also the community's central social venue, the Prince Philip Hall.

An earlier visitor, Douglas Gane in 1884, was the one to sort out the island's foundational mythology, so as to proclaim it as always having been squarely British. According to Gane in *The Empire Review*, the key founder was one William Glass from the Scottish borderlands, who previously had migrated to the newly acquired Cape of Good Hope, rising to be a corporal of artillery. He was dispatched with the garrison under Captain Abraham Josias Cloete in 1816 to occupy Tristan, the plausible and popular reason given being to forestall any derring-do French plan to rescue their emperor-prisoner from St. Helena. Glass disembarked with his eighty-seven drivers, all picked men, skilful in trades, with their cargo of cattle, sheep and poultry. Although fort-building commenced, the first settlement was adjudged to be an unnecessary expense and soon withdrawn. The turning point is that Glass elected to stay on, keeping the flag flying.

If Glass's unnamed troops are further described, they are generically rendered as 'Hottentot', being commemorated as such at the island's deepest gully, 'Hottentot Gulch' – pronounced 'gultch' and indicating an admixture from the New England whalers and sealers of the following decades. By contrast, at St. Helena such a rocky ravine is called a 'gut'. It turns out as well that it was those very independent ex-colonial Americans acting as

privateers during the American War, with their 'infestation of enemy cruisers capturing homeward-bound East Indiamen' (Gane p. 16), which Cloete's regiment had been assigned to ward off. Pillage was to be diverted into profitable trade, longhaulers needing, after all, to call in for fresh water and antiscorbutics, which the growing station was eager to supply.

Equally unstressed by Cane was the provenance of Glass's consort, given merely as 'Cape Creole'. On arrival she already had two infants by him, and was to produce eight boys and eight girls in all as the island's first permanent population. Later researchers have recorded her maiden name - Maria Magdalena Leenders - indicating that her progenitor was probably what is nowadays known as a Boer, with her mother being of non-slave Khoisan origin, converted to Christianity; that is, she was of the same yeomanry class as the members of the Cape Corps, South Africa's oldest regiment. During their lifetimes they had served under Dutch, then British, overlords in succession, twice. Although the term 'Hottentot' has come to be considered offensive, on Tristan the name is still given to various landmarks and fondly remembered. Another souvenir of her compatriots' occupation, before most of them were drowned on their return, is the nickname given to the distinctive and ubiquitous Tristan albatross, chicks clapping their bills at one from every muddy mound: 'gony' they are known as, after Gonna, the name of one of the continental tribes.

But British territory Tristan would have to remain, especially since Robert Gray, the first Anglican bishop of Cape Town, had established it as a missionary outpost of seventy-one souls, incorporated into his diocese (after visiting briefly in 1856). In his pitch to keep Tristan that way, Gane reminded his readers that, although the population, 'originally solely British, has been refreshed by the admixture of American, Dutch, Italian, Cape and St. Helena blood' (p. 7), since its annexation Tristan had always been considered 'to be extremely important strategically to British interests' (p. 13). But still, Gane conceded, 'their system of intermarriage, and their reluctance to express themselves adequately, is only the natural result of a cutting off of any small colony of persons' (p. 11).

The island had been first visited by 'an artist-traveller', the tartan-wearing Britisher, Augustus Earle, marooned for eight months during 1824 with his dog, gun, boat cloak and sketchbook. Later he was to become the draughtsman on H.M.S. Beagle, serving with Charles Darwin. Together with

Mrs. Glass as his hostess was now Peggy, a ‘half-caste’ Portuguese from Bombay. According to Earle, she had been trained as a ‘maid’ by one Mrs. Lock, wife of an English commodore in the Bombay Marine. Transported to the island as a ‘good breeder’ for Stephen White, she had the advantage that her numerous offspring, now that abolition was in the planning, would be born out of slavery there, subject to serve limited apprenticeships only. Later a further six female servants were willing to be supplied from St. Helena with the same expectations, reputedly in exchange for sacks of potatoes, one of them being a ‘Negress’, already widowed and with four children in tow, and the others described as mulattos, all trusting to become respectable married wives. Another accidental settler, Thomas Swain, took as his from among them the only one with a recorded identity, Sarah Jacobs, her surname being the same as that of the Hollander deployed there in 1654 from the Cape to draw the first map for the Dutch East India Company (Commander Jan Jacobsz).

As Earle wrote and published (1832:214):

It cannot be expected that their manners or appearance should partake much of elegance and refinement, or their conversation be such as would be tolerated in polite society, but it is altogether a new scene to me, and I take infinite delight in hearing them relate their different adventures in their own seaman’s phraseology.

Glass praised the indigenes under him particularly for their ‘helter-skelter sort of character, their invariably good humour’ and that is how Earle portrayed Glass’s developing crofters’ hamlet in his portfolio.

‘Their women partake of the mulatto caste’ (1877:153), as another visitor in the 1870s persisted in noting (Wyville Thomson on H.M.S. Challenger), which doubtless was to express the opinion that their sometimes tawny, bushy-haired look was as much thanks to heredity as their partiality to imported Sedgwick’s Original Old Brown (sherry) and Cape Hope (white wine).

When the eighteen-year-old Frank Bullen of *The Cruise of the Cachalot* put in at much the same time and was stood a roast beef dinner, he recorded his sturdy host saying: ‘We kaint grow no corn hyar, and we’m clean run out ov flour; hev ter make out on taters ‘s best we kin’ (1898:91).

The dusky wife meanwhile was apparently tongue-tied at the sight of such a 'greeny'.

The British interest was really clinched in 1867 when Queen Victoria's teenage midshipman son on the man-of-war *Galatea*, created the Duke of Edinburgh two years before, was rowed ashore for another slap-up dinner (conversation unrecorded). Hence, however, the settlement acquiring the name of Edinburgh-of-the-Seven-Seas. (The same Prince Alfred in Cape Town had not only inaugurated the breakwater, but left his name in four African locales, Port Alfred, Alfred County, etc.).

When the already quoted Challenger expedition, pioneering hydrographic surveys in the 1870s, allowed their naturalist Henry Moseley to make a landing there, he wrote:

My guide was a small boy, born and bred on the island. He was peculiarly taciturn and, like all the islanders, extremely curt in his language. Like most of the others he showed a strong Yankee twang in the little I got him to say, and he seemed to have considerable difficulty in understanding what I said to him in ordinary English, and often not to be able to understand at all (1892:97).

Yet this future fellow of Exeter College delights in mentioning the Tristans' habit of calling their stands or grasses 'tussacs' or 'tussocks', and that their Jumping Jack rockhopping 'pinnamins' (penguins) wear unruly yellow 'tozzles' instead of 'plumes'. He also deduces that 'albatross' derives from the Spanish 'alcatraz', while 'molly' (for the ubiquitous yellow-nosed variety) is from the European Dutch 'mallemok'

Putting Tristan on the map, as it were, was to continue in 1923 with the first visit in two years of the Simonstown-based cruiser H.M.S. *Dublin*, with the prolific journalist working for *The Cape Argus*, Lawrence G. Green, being on board. With him was an African Films crew, whose Mr. Sara shot the first motion pictures, as Green would record in several travel works published in the 1960s. Alarminglly he mentioned that several parents had wished for their offspring to be filmed, apparently so that they might be adopted out. Although the team stayed only one day and the settlement was on the verge of starvation, Green popularised knowledge of many Tristan features, like their Appling and Ratting Days and their traditional sailing

longboats or dories, one called Vortrekker (sic.), another Darwin's Express. Green enjoyed describing their thatching bees and the picturesque use of placenames, such as Trypot, Blin'eye (after a feral bullock), Ridge-Where-the-Goat-Jump-Off, Pigbite and Deadman's Bay. But of the latter he missed a few: for example, the Hardies (the offshore columnar stacks) and the Coolers (damp patches or pits), names derived from the South African Dutch 'hardebank' and 'kuil' respectively.

With the Second World War Tristan was at last linked up with the rest of the world as a listening post, thanks to the first radio installations used to alert the Allies of any enemy presence. Drafted there from Simonstown for a year in 1942 came the operator, D.M. Booy, whose *Rock of Exile: A Narrative of Tristan da Cunha* is still the most explicit account. With the other station fellows' in off-hours he established what they called a 'strange classroom':

Most of the girls were content with illiteracy. The biggest obstacle was that the English they were being taught to read and write was so different from the language they spoke, which at its best was vivid and vital. It lent itself to imagery. A person chilled by the cold was 'as blue as dimin'. To someone whose hair had been tousled by the wind a girl might say, 'You' hair is all done root up'. To correct local grammar – [he cites the double and triple negatives, the w for v as in 'willage', the hypercorrect hs as in 'heating, heggs and happles'] – would have been as difficult as it would have been pointless (1957: 103).

One reminder of the signal station is its 'canteen', as the only general dealer and grocery store is still called, where I likewise, out shopping with the daughter of my hosts, was flummoxed by the order for 'flubba' (until I saw the label Sasko Self-raising Flour). We lit on a 'coo' drink (for 'koeldrank' or cold drink) as reward, drinking a toast to the spreading South African influence, which was even extending to Gough Island to the south. There since 1955 its government-leased meteorological facility has provided new names, such as Gonydale and Tafelkop. Then we fell to discussing how the Sunday service's lesson from Isaiah had come to be pronounced 'Hoisoiah'.

Another observer like Booy was Allan Crawford, first there on the Norwegian Scientific Expedition of 1937-1938 as its surveyor. Based early on in the war in Pretoria, in 1941 he produced his *I Went to Tristan*, then returning there in 1943 to edit *The Tristan Times* (price 3 cigarettes or 1d.). With his next three volumes, and together with Jan Brander's *Tristan da Cunha, 1506-1902* of 1940, all that could possibly be revealed about the island fastness had come into print. Indeed, Crawford's Appendix IV of 'Some Tristan Words' (1941: 268), although mostly of British derived names from 'ammunition' (heavy boots) to 'whitecap' (wave) and 'willie' (whirlwind of spray), begins the systematic registering of the people's lexicon.

The first scholar to research the Tristan vocabulary professionally is Daniel Schreier, currently Professor of Linguistics at the University of Zurich and with whom I had the pleasure of travelling back on the S.A. Agulhas. He is the author of *Isolation and Language Change: Contemporary and Sociohistorical Evidence from Tristan da Cunha English* (2003), derived from ethnographic fieldwork first conducted when he stopped on Tristan in 1999. Since then, together with his wife and co-author, Tristan-born Karen Lavarello-Schreier, he has produced the superb, less technical and very accessible *Tristan da Cunha: History, People, Language* which, while plugging the future researcher into all the relevant websites, includes an exhaustive Tristan glossary (2003: 77- 82). In both texts the authors point out that, while by 1851 no other languages were spoken but English by the first generation Tristans, this had picked up certain Creole features from especially the immigrants coming via St. Helena, hence the double modals like 'might could', the multiple negatives and irregular concords ('You know what Tristan rumours is like').

The Schreiers also list many post-war acquisitions from South Africa, entirely owing to the fact that every import on their shelves arrives there from nowhere else: thus 'braai skottle' to mean 'barbecue contraption', on which 'boerewors' (spicy pork sausage) is roasted outdoors; 'lekker' for delicious or even drunk; 'takkies' for plimsolls or running shoes. Much other off-school speech is included, such as the use of 'bioscope' for cinema, until supplanted by the standardising Home influence of BFBS TV, and riding out to the vegetable patches in 'bakkies' (light pick-up trucks).

A predecessor to Schreier to analyse such regular borrowings had been one Roderick Noble, an English professor who visited this research field for a few days off the Earl of Rippon in 1851. He was to become noted back in Cape Town, where he settled, for his editorship especially of the review, *The Cape Monthly Magazine*, in the 1870s. Convinced in those pages that his expanding colony had likewise accumulated a similar, and sufficiently unique wordstock, he proposed that a distinct ‘Cape English’ (CE) be recognised. The wordlist he published shows some overlap with TCDE: there is, for example, ‘kraal’ (from the Portuguese curral, the equivalent of the North American corral), which overtakes sheepfold, and ‘cappie’ (kappie of Cape Dutch), already mentioned, now described as ‘a sun-wind-dust-and-flyscreen all in one’. As Noble noted: ‘It is one of the marks of a living language that it assimilates to itself new and strange words, drawn from many opposite quarters’ (1873:281).

However, there are numerous other examples, hitherto untraced, of other derivatives, particularly from South African Dutch, which for another half century should perhaps not be so loosely labelled as Afrikaans. But in the 1820s it impacted on TCDE in the intermediate form of the emerging CE. Because the conveyors of this speech were primarily domestic women of low status, it is to the kitchen that one should first turn. So we have breadrolls called ‘cakes’ (from ‘koek’) and mutton stew as ‘bradie’ (from ‘bredie’, the Malayo-Portuguese flavoursome term).

Many edible fish types acquire a name from CE: ‘stumpnose’ (from ‘stompneus’, the sea-bream), ‘steambrass’ (from ‘steenbras’), ‘yellowtail’ (translated from ‘geelvis’ for the Cape mackerel) and snoek (the barracuda-like pike) remains snoek. To this day the octopus is called ‘catfish’ (from zeekat, which became seacat in CE), the term which has persisted among coastal dwellers of the South African mainland, while inland it has come to indicate the freshwater barbel. There is also the colour-changing ‘klipfish’ (‘klipvis’) for the unscaled family of blennies, taken in rockpools. The red and orange striped jacobever is flagged as a ‘soldier’ after the battalion’s uniforms of long before.

The Schreiers list ‘bankatina’ or ‘banky’ for bench, remarking that the contribution of Afrikaans to TCDE is marginal at best, even though today every South African schoolchild in class also sits on a ‘bankie’. To ‘kooibietjie’ is to take a little nap, because ‘kooigoed’ once was the label for

'Hottentot bedding', as noted in Oxford's *A Dictionary of South African English on Historical Principles* (1996). The origins of 'okalolie', referring to the men's New Year's Eve dress-up, and 'oukabaadjie' meaning scary folk, are now obscure, although the CE o-/ou- prefix signifies an affectionate ol' (for old) and 'kabaai' was once an Indian term for a banian loose gown, indicating a 'half-caste' wearer, hence bogeyman.

The nursery circle in charge of the women includes the terms 'o' pap' for grandfather (from *oupa*), 'fardi' for father (from *vader*) and 'muddish' for godmother (from *moeder*). Infants who, if they are dusky are called 'piccanin' (from the Portuguese *pequenino*), learn to play games with a 'dolos' or two, that is with sheep's knucklebones as thrown by Xhosa-speaking diviners to read fortunes; nowadays the term has been transferred to the tumble of anchor-shaped concrete castings breaking the 'sarf' (surf) at the harbour arm. Once the New Zealand flax is established as windbreaks, the youths may swat one another with suckies' (from *sak* for pouch or pocket), the seedpods atop long stems: 'You winning me!'

So there, under the orographic cloud mantle, alongside their quiescent upheaval of red tuff and black scoria, running on GMT, lies a community whose hidden story encoded in its unique dialect is as evident of its interlinking history with the Cape of Good Hope, only a week's sailing away, as the imported clumps of pig-lilies (or arums, or callas) which emblazon its byways, alongside its endemic fowl-berries and dorgcatchers tripping their collies. 'You's laffing ...' you say. 'We is ...' they reply, 'but sea's getting bubbly'. Notice our cattle egrets there, migrants all, in the twitty grass.

Back home after my probings I happen to meet up with the broad lady of mixed –race origin who is one of the managers of Cape Town's new Fugard theatre. 'You is back safe!' says she. Immediately we fall into ripe Capey vernacular: all her youth her many male family members were gone for months on end, way out there on the Tristania I, Tristania II, catching up the last of the fish!

But those islanders there, man, they didn' really speak what you call *English*, hey? More like ... klonkietaal, you know ... soos grannie wid her teeth out! Broken English! But you know what? Always they bring back the lekker sweaters, carded themself and spinned, wid all the juicy kreef you can eat to die for, even they have them holding up their flag! Wild Caught Cold

Stephen Gray

Water Lobster Tails, aikona; now it's all Ovenstones, off to Japan for hexport!

An' did you hear what they call a fridge for col' storage? - a cooler, I'm tellin' you! They don' jus know about *chookie* cause they don' have none!

Isn it?

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