

# A RÉUNION JOURNALIST IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AUSTRALIA

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The very early attempt to establish trade between Mauritius and Australia, as described by Dr Edward Duyker in "Coutance and the voyage of the *Adèle*" (*Explorations*, n° 4, pp. 21-25), was to have a faint echo in written form over sixty years later from the island of Réunion, which for so long was closely connected with the smaller island but after 1815 was to become a French colony again (now a DOM), while Mauritius continued as a British one from 1810 and is now an independent nation within the Commonwealth.

An attempt to explore and propose trade possibilities between Réunion and Australia provided the motivation for Thomy Lahuppe's *Notes sur l'Australie*<sup>1</sup>, but the book does not seem to have achieved anything in this regard, while its more basic contemporary message was perceptibly wrong-headed, and its present-day interest lies elsewhere again.

Lahuppe's work is unique in originating from a French colony, and with its flowery, highly literate style is quite unlike the naive personal accounts by Canadian "Patriote" prisoners,<sup>2</sup> which, from an earlier period and different circumstances, present a very different version of experience in Australia. It is noteworthy in being among the first accounts by short-term travellers to Australia, and unique again in that Lahuppe is the first Francophone traveller to arrive on a journalistic fact-finding mission. While he obviously consulted various references and gathered documentaion when in Australia, in particular with the help of M. Jules Joubert, he does not seem to have read earlier works in French, so that his book is very much his own product, with all the spontaneity and limitations which that involved. It reflects above all a typical nineteenth-century optimism, firstly about the century itself, and then about the role of European peoples in newly discovered lands, which he sees as exemplified in the best way possible by British settlement. His picture of a sedate, progressive and prosperous country may be contrasted with that offered just a year earlier by Russell-Killough who, having visited Melbourne, the Victorian gold-fields and Sydney, stressed

the lawlessness, drunkenness, immorality, and harsh treatment of the Chinese which he witnessed, while conceding the existence of some intellectual life in Melbourne, along with republican leanings.<sup>3</sup>

Lahuppe claims in a holograph letter, presumably a duplicate of the original, to "le Président de la Société des Sciences et Arts de Saint-Denis", dated 15 May 1867 and pasted in the front of the copy at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, that his book really consists of two "opuscules" read out to sessions of "notre petite société académique" but not published in their Bulletin, presumably owing to their size, which is why he has had them printed. He stresses that, as his title indicates, his work is simply a series of "notes écrites au jour le jour" rather than a book, which he hopes to complete one day with material on New South Wales and Victoria.

In fact, as his introductory chapter makes clear, he was sent by *Le Moniteur de la Réunion* on an investigatory mission, and there are indications that some of the subsequent chapters, at least, closely resemble material published in this newspaper, although in a three-page foreword he claims, somewhat inconsistently with the letter, that the book was "un ensemble de souvenirs" written during the long voyage home. Only a comparison with the files of *Le Moniteur de la Réunion* could help resolve questions of precedence and evolution between the articles and the book.

Lahuppe announces his intention to study "les institutions fécondes" (p. I) which have carried these new lands to such heights in such a short time, thus contrasting Australian success with the situation in Réunion, and, more generally, "les éblouissantes colonies de l'empire britannique" with "nos possessions maldives" (p. II). In other words, his perspective is definitely that of a Frenchman for whom colonialism, seen as a means of extending the white races' power and wealth thanks to their superior civilization, is part of the natural order of things.

He is thus completely dismissive of the Aborigines, "races misérables", who have not developed the wealth at their feet and seem to realize that Providence has decreed their disappearance in the face of civilization, from which they have adopted only "ses vices les plus hideux", being incapable of any change to rise from their "déchéance" (p. 48). Thus, Australia is for Lahuppe a virtual "terra nullius". By contrast, Réunion was a genuine "terra nullius", being uninhabited before the arrival of white men and the taking of possession by the French, who

proceeded to establish a slave-based economy, just as Australia's economy was initially convict-based. However, Lahuppe passes rapidly over the convict period, in fact seeing the convicts as mere instruments of the foundation by "pionniers de l'Angleterre" (p. 26) of a colony based on a spirit of liberty. This points up the difference between the extraordinary prosperity of England's colonies and the restrictive torpor of France's, which casts a pall even over the fertility of the soil and men's energy. All the differences between the two colonial systems are thereby reduced to that between centralized control and the fostering of local self-government. It should be remembered too that having spent most of his time in South Australia, which not only never received convicts but originated in a rather self-conscious attempt to create a new society, Lahuppe tends to maximize Australian liberalism and political idealism, but always within the indispensable context of colonialism.

However, there was more than sterile institutions to explain the slump which Réunion was passing through at the time and which sent Lahuppe on his mission. After the flight of emancipated slaves from the sugar plantations in 1848, the planters had been able to recruit thousands of contract labourers, mainly from India, but also from China, Madagascar and the African coast. By 1860 sugar production had more than doubled from the last years of the slave system and the economy was booming, but in 1863 prices for sugar fell dramatically, while the plantations were ravaged by disease, and the population by epidemics of cholera and malaria.<sup>4</sup> None of this could clearly be blamed on the French colonial style, while paradoxically the sugar price would have been undercut by French production of sugar from beet, a technique initially evolved to cope with France's being cut off from the products of her colonies as part of Britain's riposte to the Continental Blockade.

That Lahuppe was aware, despite his anti-centralist rhetoric, of the precise economic reasons for Réunion's decline is evidenced by his publication in the same year as his book on Australia of a small work entitled *La Question des sucres au point de vue colonial: l'industrie betteravière et l'industrie coloniale comparées*.<sup>5</sup>

Wrong-headed though he was in attributing all of Réunion's woes to one system of colonial administration, he was perceptive, despite his exaggerations, in stressing the virtues of another, and in this was the first of many Francophone travellers<sup>6</sup> to comment on the way British political institutions had fostered the emergence in Australia of a new, more

progressive and egalitarian society—a topic to be developed in a systematic way just after the turn of the century by Métin and Vigouroux.<sup>7</sup>

While nothing came of his suggestions that Australia buy various products of Réunion, which could import Australian wine, that it settle the island's surplus creoles in the Northern Territory, and that it establish a silkworm industry, his book retains some genuine historical interest firstly for its lively description of the rigours of Australian Sabbatarianism, in contrast to which he regards a somewhat idealized version of the practice of Catholic France as the norm, but above all for his understandably detailed and sympathetic description of the Australian press.

Finally, there is a puzzle for bibliographers in the two copies of the work consulted. The printed *Catalogue de la Bibliothèque Nationale* states for its copy: "Incomplet; pages 1–244 seulement" and mentions the presence of the holograph letter. In fact, "244" should read "224", with this last page of ch. XIII ending half-way through a sentence and even half-way through a word, which on the face of it indicates a defective copy. The copy at the Mitchell Library has only 218 pages, of which the last completes ch. XII and ends with a completed sentence, below which is a small graphic to signify the end of the book. Otherwise the pagination of the two copies is identical, including the lack in both, without a break in pagination, of a ch. IX. It would therefore appear that between 1865 and 1867 Lahuppe must have added ch. XIII while maintaining the original publication date, which makes one wonder whether the abrupt ending of the BN copy is a ploy to bear out the incompleteness of his modest offering as stressed in his covering letter, or whether it is just another example of negligent composing work like the jump in chapter numbering.

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## Notes

1. Saint-Denis, Ile de la Réunion, Typographie de Gabriel Lahuppe, 1865.
2. See Léon (Léandre) Ducharme, *Journal d'un exilé politique aux terres australes*, Montreal, F. Cinq-Mars, 1845; François-Xavier Prieur, *Notes d'un condamné politique de 1838*, Quebec, Brousseau Frères, 1864; François-Maurice Lepailleur, *Journal d'exil: la vie d'un patriote de 1838 déporté en Australie*. Présenté par Robert-Lionel Seguin, Montreal, Editions du Jour, 1972; François-Maurice Lepailleur, tr. P. Murray Greenwood, *Land of a thousand sorrows: the Australian prison journal, 1840-1842, of the exiled Canadian patriote François-Maurice Lepailleur*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1980.
3. Henry Russell-Killough, *Seize mille lieues à travers l'Asie et l'Océanie*, Paris, Hachette, 1864, 2 volumes.
4. See Robert Aldrich and John Connell, *France's Overseas Frontier: Départements et Territoires d'Outre-Mer*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 56-57, 98-99.
5. Saint-Denis, Ile de la Réunion, Imprimerie de G. Lahuppe, 1865, 8°, 87 pp.
6. Notably Achille Ballière, *Voyage de circumnavigation: histoire de la déportation par un des évadés de Nouméa*, London, Henry King, 1875; Henri Rochefort, *Retour de la Nouvelle-Calédonie. De Nouméa en Europe*, Paris, Ancienne Librairie Martinon, 1876; M. le baron de Michel, *L'Australie telle qu'elle est*, Lille, Imprimerie L. Danel, 1887; Ernest Michel, *A travers l'hémisphère sud*, Paris, V. Palme, 1888-1890, 3 volumes.
7. See Albert Métin, *Législation ouvrière et sociale en Australie et Nouvelle Zélande*, Paris, Imprimerie Nationale, 1901, and Louis Vigouroux, *L'Evolution sociale en Australasie*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1902.