

## MAURITIUS AND FAMILY HISTORY AT THE NATIONAL LIBRARY

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Like Lloyd Rees and Gary "Angry" Anderson, I have a Mauritian mother. When I began to research my ancestors and the history of Mauritians in Australia, I was amazed at the number of Mauritian genealogical and family history sources held by the National Library. They help demonstrate the extraordinary richness of our national collection.

Family history in Australia has always been much easier for those of English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish descent. But who would think that one could find transcripts of Mauritian parish registers for the period 1722 to 1767 in the National Library in Canberra? They were in fact published in a short-lived journal called the *Revue rétrospective de l'île Maurice* (S969.82005 REV). In 1956, a French journal, the *Revue d'histoire des colonies*, published a list of all the settlers who came to Mauritius from the southern French provinces of Languedoc and Provence. The source for the article was the 1776 census of the island. The National Library not only holds the *Revue d'histoire des colonies*, but in its manuscript collection has a typed alphabetical list of *all* the respondents to the census of 1776! It is an extremely useful source for researchers because it provides details of the respondent's occupation, age, place of birth and date of arrival in the colony. Another surprising document in the manuscript collection is a register of tax payments for the erection of tombs in Port Louis cemetery for the years 1825-1841. Such a register can be a great help to a researcher trying to find the date of someone's death or his/her burial place. The manuscript collection also contains a number of handwritten Mauritian genealogies. These were once part of the collection of a Mauritian bibliophile named André de Chapuiset le Merle which was acquired by the National Library from Le Merle's widow in 1968.

The many printed works of Mauritiana in the De Chapuiset le Merle collection offer Australian scholars precious historical sources for the study of the colonial history of the Indian Ocean. There are numerous works by that great scholar of the region Auguste Toussaint. And nowhere else in Australia, for example, can one find the work of the

Breton archivist Henri Bourde de la Rogerie (1873–1949) on settlers from Brittany in Mauritius and Réunion. The collection also includes rare family histories of the Wiehe, La Bauve d'Arifat, Doruty de Grandpré and the Chazal (one of whose members painted a celebrated portrait of Matthew Flinders during his sojourn on the island). The most beautiful is a work by the Mauritian genealogist René le Juge de Segrais entitled *Nobiliaire de l'ancienne Isle de France* which was published in Port Louis in 1918. The edition was limited to a mere 61 copies and is notable for its hand-drawn and coloured illustrations of forty family coats of arms signed by the author.

The National Library holds other less glamorous works which nevertheless offer important socio-economic and other clues to family history researchers. The *Mauritius Almanac and Commercial Handbook* is a good example. The National Library holds copies for the years 1837, 1851–56, 1858–59, 1862–66, 1868–1941. It is a gold mine of information. Not only does the *Mauritius Almanac* contain a civil list and a list of officers stationed on the island, it also contains details of office-bearers of local societies, lodges and institutions, together with the names of traders, merchants, professionals, artisans and estate owners. The numerous publications of the Mauritius Archives held by the library are also valuable guides to the island's archives, particularly for those conducting research by mail from Australia. Unfortunately the library's set of the *Dictionnaire de biographie mauricienne*, published in regular instalments since the 1940s, is incomplete. Ironically this Mauritian biographical dictionary contains entries on many pioneers in Australia who have been overlooked in our own *Australian Dictionary of Biography*.

Clearly the National Library's holdings on Mauritius are of value to historians other than those tracing their roots. Mauritius figures prominently in Dutch and French exploration of Australia. D'Entrecasteaux was a governor of the island. La Pérouse owned land and met his future wife there. Nicolas Baudin and Saint-Allouarn died there after historic voyages of exploration on Australia's coast. Many British colonial administrators and military men fulfilled duties in Mauritius before and after serving in Australia. Mauritius even has a place in the Aboriginal history of Australia, for in the 1820s several Tasmanian Aboriginal women and their children were taken there by sealers. Despite

the vast span of the Indian Ocean, tiny Mauritius (now a parliamentary republic boasting full employment) and the great continent of Australia are inseparably linked.

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