

MAURITIANS ON THE GOLD FIELDS: A RÉSUMÉ

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Mauritians were one of the smaller ethnic groups who tried their luck on the Australian gold fields, but their numbers were certainly much larger than many other groups which we now readily recognize as core groups in Australia's family of nations. The most important reason why so many people from such a small island came to the gold fields, aside from the prospect of a quick fortune, was that the diggings were so accessible to them. Though Mauritius is some 10,000 kilometres from Melbourne, with Mauritian sugar exports to Australia booming, there was no shortage of ships to the diggings. (In the ten years after 1851, Mauritian shipping figures trebled in comparison with the previous ten years.)

Mauritius was one of the first places in the world to receive news of important discoveries of gold in eastern Australia. Soon, glowing accounts of the gold fields found their way into the Mauritian press. Considerable interest was also generated by the arrival of ships in Port Louis which bore successful diggers. The Mauritians were better organized than members of many other ethnic and national groups who came to Australia in the early days of the "Gold Rush" for they formed themselves into companies on formal lines. In early December 1852, *Le Courrier du Port Louis* reported that these "Australian companies" were inundated with requests by prospective shareholders. In one case at least, shareholders became part-owners of the 180 ton barque *Walter Scott* which actually took them to Australia. On 9 January, 1853, the *Walter Scott* set sail with about seventy passengers bound for the diggings. *The Commercial Gazette* reported that they included "several young men from the most respectable families in the colony and about 30 steerage passengers comprising masons, carpenters and blacksmiths and other tradesmen". The barque also carried a large cargo of rice, American flour and over 50,000 lbs of Mauritian sugar for the diggings.

The *Walter Scott* arrived in Melbourne's crowded Hobson's Bay on 22 March 1853. Eight days later, one of the Mauritian diggers on board, Eugène Fadhuile (born, Port Louis, 1830) wrote home to his foster father, Henri Adam, giving news that the "*Compagnie Mauricienne*", the "*Compagnie des Indépendants*" the "*Compagnie des Mavouzous*" were making for Bendigo. Among these Mauritian diggers were Théophile Lionnet (1819-1881), his brother Frederick Lionnet, and Léon Burguez (1830-1887).

We have very little knowledge of the activities of these Mauritian companies after they presumably reached Bendigo. Despite initial enthusiasm, many were quickly disillusioned in not finding their fortune. Some 53 Mauritians returned home on the *Walter Scott* in late October 1853. A number

of them must have been in desperate circumstances, for the *Commercial Gazette* congratulated the ship's owner, Monsieur Martin, for having "of-fered to bring them back to Mauritius, in very liberal fashion, taking only the verbal promise of those who could not afford to pay their return fare." Twenty-one left Melbourne, on 16 May 1854 on the *Australia*. One of them was Louis Gustave Adam (1832-1894) who had come to Melbourne in late 1853 on the *Alexandre* as the representative of his father's (Joachim Henri Adam's (1793-1856)) trading firm. While his compatriots strode off to the excitement of the diggings, Adam languished in Melbourne mainly negoti-ating the sale of Mauritian sugar. Gustave Adam, Frederick Lionnet and the other Mauritians who sailed home on the *Australia* arrived back on 24 July 1854.

Throughout 1853 and 1854, small groups of Mauritian diggers made their way home on available ships. Most returned disappointed. However, there were exceptions. One of these was Cyrus Etienne Autard de Bragard (born, Port Louis, 1812). Autard had luck on his side on the Ballarat diggings. He left Melbourne with \$2,500, on the *Favourite*, in December 1853.

Individuals aside, at least ten groups of Mauritian diggers left Melbourne between June 1853 and mid-May 1854. By the end of 1854, we can estimate that some one hundred and fifty had returned home. Most of these young men were privileged Franco-Mauritians accustomed to servants, a close family life and the comforts of Mauritian colonial life. Most were not used to physical labour. These Mauritian adventurers were not necessarily effete, but generally they were not tough and independent.

Some Mauritians continued to be lured to the gold fields, despite the experiences of many of their compatriots, but the days when shiploads at a time departed, were over. Among those who stayed on for the time being at least and assumed new occupations (or went back to old ones) were Aristide Regnard (1828-1903), Théophile Lionnet, Léon Burguez and Aristide Hivon. Regnard, after an unsuccessful period on the Ballarat fields, estab-lished, with James Bell, the firm of Bell, Regnard and Co which (until its liquidation in 1855) imported Mauritian sugar for the Australian market. Lionnet also turned to mercantile activities and Burguez tried his hand at farming. Both Lionnet and Burguez spent a considerable period of time in the Bendigo area where they married two Cornish sisters: Jane and Elizabeth Bone. Lionnet, his young wife and infant daughter Angèle left Melbourne for Mauritius on the French barque *Cora* on 11 September 1857. Regnard left Australia for Mauritius on 12 January 1857. Although Reg-nard did not visit Australia again, he was Commissioner for the committee which organized the Mauritian delegation to the International Exhibition in Melbourne (1880-81). Léon Burguez returned to Mauritius with his wife

after the birth of their first daughter in January 1859. They remained in Mauritius until 1878 and then decided to come back to Australia, where Burguez became involved in the Queensland sugar industry; he is credited with naming the Trebonne district near Ingham (from the French "Très Bonne"). His grandson is the important Australian landscape painter Lloyd Rees. Burguez's great great grandson, David Rees, was a member of the *Australia II* team which won the America's Cup in 1983.

Unfortunately, we have no published accounts by Mauritians who came to Australia during the "Gold Rush". Mauritius cannot claim a counterpart to the Italian Rafaello Carboni or the Frenchman Antoine Fauchery. Ironically, the only contemporary published mention of Mauritians in Australia during the "Gold Rush" (other than in newspapers) is by Fauchery in his *Lettres d'un Mineur en Australie*. Fauchery mentions them having attended his *Café Estaminet* in Melbourne. While most diggers and non-French speaking foreigners would probably have identified Mauritians as French, it is perhaps not surprising that a Frenchman such as Fauchery should have acknowledged their separate identity.

Ultimately, because of the paucity of published Mauritian accounts of the "Gold Rush", we know little of Mauritian experiences in Melbourne and Victoria. For this reason, the letters of Louis Gustave Adam and Eugène Fadhuile (which have been fortuitously preserved in the Archives of the Mauritian firm of Pipon-Adam) are rare documents of an adventurous episode in the lives of several hundred young Mauritian men.

By and large, for the Mauritians, the Gold Rush was a temporary diversion. Most returned quickly to Mauritius when they found no gold, some, however, tried their hands at other occupations and sought to adapt to a new environment. By 1861, despite the large percentage of Mauritian diggers who had returned to Mauritius, there were some five hundred Mauritians resident in Australia (according to Charles Price and others' analysis of colonial censuses). Thus, at that time, there were more Mauritians in Australia than there were, for example, Greeks, Dutch, Lebanese, Turks or Maltese.

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