Slaves, Freedmen, and Indentured Laborers in Colonial Mauritius

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Contents

Maps

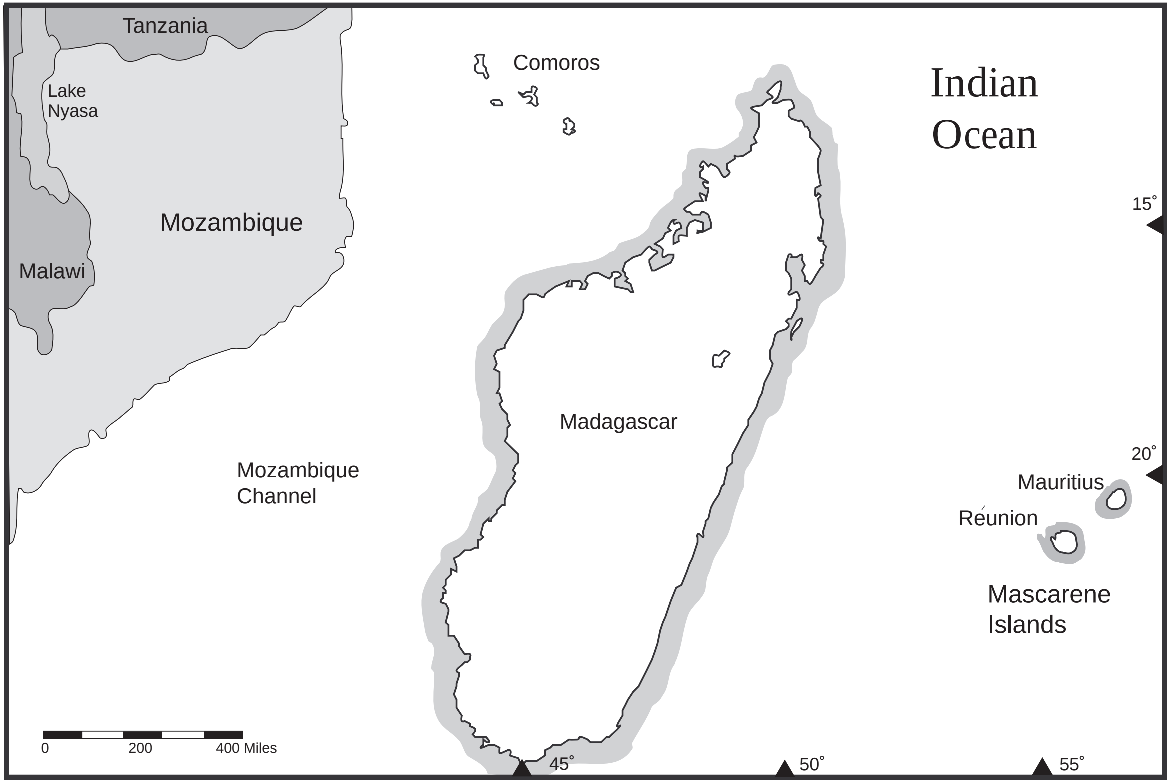
Tables

1 Creating a garden of sugar: land, labor, and capital, 1721–1936

> Cette ville [Port Louis] est très considérable, point fortifiée, les maisons presque toutes batie en bois, les rues tirées au cordeau, celle du rempart est la plus belle, c'est la résidence de tout ce qu'il y a de mieux dans cette ville, elle est peuplées de beaucoup de négoçiants qui ont des vaisseaux, et qui font un commerce très considerable aux indes, en chine, au cap de bonne ésperance, vont jusqu'au Suratte, Mascatte, Bassora, et moka ce qui enrichie considerablement cette isle, d'ailleurs Ses productions qui est le Sucre, l'araque, le caffée, le coton, ses mines de fer et de cuivres luy donne beaucoup d'influence dans le commerce.
>
> Maximillien Wiklinsky, *circa* 1770[1]

When Vasco da Gama rounded the Cape of Good Hope late in 1497 and sailed into the Indian Ocean, Mauritius and its sister Mascarene Islands of Réunion and Rodrigues were unknown to the world at large. Mauritius and Réunion were probably visited by Arab or Swahili sailors before 1500, but their permanent entry onto the historical stage dates to the Portuguese explorations of the early sixteenth century.[2] The islands remained uninhabited, however, until the early seventeenth century when the Dutch East India Company (VOC) began to take a serious interest in the Southwestern Indian Ocean. In 1638, the Dutch made the first of several attempts to colonize the island they named Mauritius in honor of Maurice of Nassau, the *stadthouder* of Holland. The VOC's interest in Mauritius was spurred largely by the desire to establish a refreshment station for its ships plying between Europe and East Asia, although exploitation of the island's forests of ebony also figured in these early attempts at colonization.[3] Despite the island's strategic location astride important trade routes in the Western Indian Ocean, Dutch interest in Mauritius remained lukewarm. Concerns elsewhere in Europe and the East Indies, coupled with the problems of maintaining the small and troublesome settlements on the island, finally led to the colony's abandonment in 1710.

Dusfresne d'Arsel claimed the island for France in 1715, but six years passed before a small party from the neighboring Ile de Bourbon



Map 1. The Southwestern Indian Ocean

(Réunion), colonized by the French Compagnie des Indes in 1670, settled on the island, now known as the Ile de France, in December, 1721. The fledgling colony struggled to survive during the 1720s and early 1730s, and it was not until the arrival of Bertrand François Mahé de La Bourdonnais that the French presence on the Ile de France was secured.[4] La Bourdonnais, governor from 1735 to 1746, envisioned the Mascarenes as a base from which French interests in India could be supported, and devoted most of his tenure in office to translating his vision into reality. As a result of his endeavors, the Ile de France soon became an important base from which French fleets attacked British possessions in India and French privateers preyed upon Anglo-Indian and allied shipping in the Indian Ocean during the War of Austrian Succession, the Seven Years War, the War of American Independence, and the revolutionary and Napoleonic eras. The island's strategic importance finally forced the British to muster an expeditionary force in 1810 to capture the Iles de France et de Bourbon. Concerned about the consequences of returning "the star and the key of the Indian Ocean" to her nemesis, Britain demanded permanent possession of Mauritius and its dependencies, a demand met by the Treaty of Paris in 1814. The Ile de Bourbon, bereft of good harbors, was restored to French control.

Inclusion in the British empire reset the stage for a series of profound transformations in Mauritian society and economy during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Before 1810, Mascarene economic development had been governed by the strategic considerations enunciated by La Bourdonnais, with an emphasis upon producing the foodstuffs and naval stores needed to maintain French expeditionary forces in the Indian Ocean. In 1767, control of the Iles de France et de Bourbon passed from the bankrupt Compagnie des Indes to the French crown. The arrival of Pierre Poivre as the colony's first royal comptroller (1767–72) heralded a serious attempt to encourage the large-scale production of tropical commodities such as cotton, indigo, and spices.[5] These attempts to turn the island into a plantation colony failed. Competition from established producers of these commodities, periodic natural disasters which destroyed crops, and the lure of much more profitable maritime activities combined to undercut the island's potential development as a bastion of plantation agriculture.

The abrogation of the Compagnie's monopoly on France's Asian trade in 1769 and the subsequent ability of all French nationals to trade at Port Louis inaugurated a period of some four decades during which the island served as an increasingly important commercial entrepôt for the Western Indian Ocean. The grant of limited trading rights to American merchants in 1784 and Port Louis's designation as a free port open to all foreign nationals three years later accelerated this process, and the island was soon attracting shipping from as far away as northern Europe and the United States.[6] Port Louis's status as a free port, coupled with the island's tradition of privateering during the Anglo-French conflicts of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, created ideal conditions for the growth of local merchant capital. The number of merchants and traders residing in Port Louis, for example, soared from 103 in 1776 to 365 in 1808, while the number of vessels calling at the port each year rose from 78 in 1769 to a record high of 347 in 1803.[7] The scale of this activity and its impact upon the colonial economy is suggested by the fact that between 1793 and 1810, Mauritian privateers and French naval squadrons operating from the island captured more than 500 British and allied prizes estimated to be worth at least 80,000,000 gold francs.[8]

Mauritius' formal incorporation into the British empire brought an end to the island's role as an important regional entrepôt. The colony's subjection to the Navigation Acts in 1815, coupled with the rivalry of the British controlled Cape of Good Hope, undermined the local economy's commercial foundations. Left with few other viable options, Mauritian colonists turned to the production of agricultural commodities, especially sugar, for the imperial market. Sugar cane, first introduced by the Dutch during the seventeenth century, had been reintroduced following the French occupation in 1721.[9] However, despite the active encouragement of La Bourdonnais and his immediate successors, the cultivation of cane soon languished to the point where the industry was unable even to satisfy the local demand for sugar. A growing demand for the arrack needed by French naval expeditions spurred a modest increase in production late in the century.[10] The loss of St. Domingue in 1804 as France's principal source of sugar gave additional encouragement to the colony's fledgling sugar industry, and by 1810 the island had 9,000–10,000 arpents planted in cane. The arpentage devoted to cane continued to increase during the first years of British rule, but it was not until the late 1820s that sugar began to dominate the island's economy. The repeal in 1825 of the preferential tariff on West Indian sugar entering Britain revolutionized Mauritian agriculture. In only five years, the area planted in cane more than doubled, from 24,000 to 51,000 arpents, and the island's metamorphosis into a sugar colony was under way. By the mid-1850s, production exceeded 100,000 tons a year and Mauritius' fortunes were linked irrevocably to those of sugar.

As in other plantation colonies of the day, land, labor, and capital were the principal factors which shaped the Mauritian experience with sugar.

Throughout much of the period under consideration, land was the least problematic of these variables. Soon after colonizing the island, the Compagnie des Indes inaugurated a policy of making substantial land grants to attract settlers to the island and to encourage the production of the foodstuffs and other stores needed to maintain the French presence in the Indian Ocean. The royal government continued this policy after 1767. After the fall of the *ancien régime* in 1789, the colonial government ceased making such grants, opting instead to sell public lands at very reasonable prices. The properties granted or sold to colonists during the eighteenth century constituted the nucleus around which many nineteenth-century sugar estates would be built.

If the government's decision to sell rather than to give away public land kept colonial residents from acquiring property at little or no cost to themselves, the Mauritian agricultural frontier nevertheless remained open for the better part of another century. Large tracts of privately owned land remained uncleared or undeveloped well into the mid-nineteenth century and, as the notarial record reveals, these properties (or portions thereof) were frequently available for sale to anyone with the purchase price in hand. The relative stability of land prices until the latter part of the century is additional evidence that the Mauritian agricultural frontier did not begin to close until the mid-1870s.

While access to land was not a serious impediment to agricultural development during much of the period under consideration, the same cannot be said of labor, especially after the sugar revolution took firm hold during the 1820s. Slaves had accompanied the first French settlers to the island in 1721, and the local slave population grew steadily in size during the eighteenth century, from 648 individuals in 1735, to 2,533 in 1746, to some 8,000 during the mid-1750s, to 15,027 in 1767, to 25,154 in 1777, to 33,832 in 1787, and to 49,080 in 1797. The first decade of the nineteenth century witnessed a continuation of this trend as the number of slaves on the island reached 60,646 in 1806 and 63,281 on the eve of the British conquest four years later.

Although slaves accounted for at least 75, and sometimes as much as 85, percent of the island's population between the 1730s and the 1820s, information about most aspects of slave life remains sketchy, especially during the eighteenth century. Bondsmen worked in various capacities – as artisans, fishermen, harbor- and shipyard-workers, household servants, and sailors – but the great majority were used as laborers to produce foodstuffs, small quantities of export commodities, and naval stores.[11] Some slaves had access to provision grounds, while others were permitted to engage in petty trade.[12] The local slave regime was, by many accounts, a rigorous one marked by high rates of mortality; it was also a regime which apparently became even more oppressive as the cultivation of sugar spread. Governor Sir Lowry Cole, for one, reported in 1825 that the only object of Mauritian and Seychellois masters was "to extract from the slave the utmost possible amount of labor."[13] Cole also noted that male fieldhands usually wore only a piece of blue dungaree tied around their loins with a piece of string and that the daily ration of food for many slaves consisted of no more than 1.25 lb of maize or 3 lb of manioc.

The local demand for servile labor was not only a major factor in the dramatic expansion of the Malagasy and East African slave trades during the late eighteenth century,[14] but would also be the source of considerable friction between Mauritian colonists and the British government between 1811 and the formal abolition of slavery in 1835. Although slaves arriving in the Mascarenes came from as far away as Guinea, Malaya, and Indonesia, the great majority were imported from Madagascar and the comptoirs along the Mozambican and Swahili coasts. J.-M. Filliot estimates that 160,000 slaves reached Mauritius and Réunion between 1670 and 1810, with 45 percent of these bondsmen coming from Madagascar, 40 percent from Mozambique and East Africa, 13 percent from India, and 2 percent from West Africa.[15] The Compagnie des Indes oversaw the importation of some 45,000 slaves into the islands before 1769. Colonists and local merchants participated actively in the trade after Port Louis became a free port in 1769, and between 1769 and 1793 another 80,000 slaves reached the islands at an average rate of 3,000 a year, except for 1791–93 when imports climbed to 5,000 a year. The National Assembly's 1793 decree abolishing slavery throughout the French colonial empire was ignored in the Mascarenes and the slave trade continued unabated. Despite the disruptions caused by the almost continuous warfare between Britain and France after 1793, another 35,000 slaves were probably landed in the islands before British occupation brought an end to the legal slave trade in 1810.[16]

The abolition of the legal traffic in slaves did not, however, bring an end to slave-trading. The importance of servile labor to the island's economy, as well as the desire to placate a restive white population after the colony's capitulation, led Sir Robert Farquhar, the first British governor, to recommend that Mauritius be exempted from the 1807 ban on British subjects participating in the slave trade, a request which the Secretary of State for the Colonies promptly denied. Within months of the Colonial Secretary's decision, the island and its dependencies became notorious as the center of an illicit trade in slaves that lasted into the mid-1820s.

The number of slaves imported illegally into Mauritius and the

Seychelles after 1811 remains a subject of informed speculation. Various contemporary observers estimated that at least 30,000 slaves had been introduced surreptitiously into the colony by the early 1820s, despite governmental attempts to suppress the trade.[17] Census data from this era, although problematic, indicate that these estimates are not unreasonable and that the number of slaves who reached the island and its dependencies during these years was probably substantially higher. The magnitude of this clandestine trade soon led English abolitionists to charge that local officials had actively thwarted attempts to suppress it, charges that culminated in the appointment of the Commission of Eastern Inquiry to investigate the trade and other aspects of Mauritian social, economic, and political life.[18] The Commissioners would conclude in their report of March 12, 1828, that "nothing but a general disposition in the inhabitants in favor of the slave trade, and the negligence or connivance of the civil authorities in the districts, and great inefficiency, if not culpability in the police department, could have enabled bands of negroes to be landed and carried through so small an island and disposed of without detection . . ."[19]

Despite the clandestine importation of tens of thousands of slaves during the first years of British rule, it became increasingly apparent during the 1820s that the local slave population was inadequate to meet the labor needs of the colony's rapidly expanding sugar industry. As in other plantation colonies, this problem was not completely unexpected; the mortality rate among Mauritian slaves regularly exceeded the birth rate by a substantial margin, while the death of additional thousands of slaves during a severe cholera epidemic in late 1819 and early 1820 placed added strain on the colony's agricultural work force. Changes in the demographic structure of this population further compounded the problem, as the percentage of adult males capable of heavy field work declined during the 1820s and early 1830s. The impact of these trends is apparent from the limited information on slave occupations at our disposal. Whereas an 1823 census of 7,629 slaves on 206 estates described 58 percent of these bondsmen as field laborers, fieldhands accounted for only 45 percent of the 66,613 slaves for whom compensation was paid twelve years later.[20]

The labor crisis facing Mauritian planters by the early 1830s was exacerbated by other factors far beyond their immediate control. The Act of Abolition promised slave-owners continued access to the services of their former bondsmen, now transformed into "apprentices," but only for a maximum period of six years. The long-term viability of this work force was quickly brought into question, however, as many apprentices sought to emancipate themselves before the apprenticeship period came to an end. According to one local magistrate, some 9,000 apprentices purchased their liberty before the apprenticeship system in the colony collapsed on March 31, 1839, "amongst whom there has been no instance of a single individual having returned to the cultivation of the land."[21] Emancipation was followed, in turn, by the almost total withdrawal of the ex-apprentice population from the estates, a development which gave additional impetus to the importation of indentured labor from India.

The search for additional sources of labor had begun well before the abolition of slavery. As early as 1816, the colonial government decided to experiment with the use of Indian convict labor, and the following year some 500 convicts were being used to repair roads. By 1828, the number of convicts who had reached the island had climbed to at least 1,018.[22] At the same time, Mauritian planters dispatched their agents as far afield as China, Singapore, Ethiopia, and Madagascar in their search for additional sources of inexpensive agricultural labor. Their gaze returned inevitably, however, to the seemingly inexhaustible manpower of India.

Indian indentured labor was attractive to Mauritian planters and authorities for reasons other than just its proximity and apparent inexhaustibility. In the first instance, colonists already had extensive experience with Indian laborers. Perhaps 20,000 of the slaves imported into the Mascarenes prior to 1810 were of Indian origin, and the Ile de France had also become the home of a sizable population of free Indian craftsmen and artisans during the late eighteenth century.[23] Secondly, attempts to recruit indentured laborers in Madagascar or along the East African coast could easily leave colonists open to the charge that they were reviving the slave trade, a charge which, given their support of the illegal slave trade and opposition to the abolition of slavery,[24] could provoke additional unwanted Imperial intervention in the colony's affairs. The recruitment of free labor within the Empire carried fewer such risks. Recruitment from within the Empire likewise minimized the problems which dealing with foreign powers could entail. China, for example, either prohibited or severely restricted the emigration of its subjects to work as agricultural laborers during the first half of the nineteenth century. Finally, India's attractiveness was enhanced further by the existence of a British administration that regarded emigration as a means of relieving the country's overpopulation and allowing its inhabitants an opportunity to improve the quality of their lives.[25]

The 75 indentured laborers who arrived in Mauritius in 1834 proved to be the vanguard of more than 451,000 men, women, and children who reached the island before Indian immigration came formally to an end in 1910. More than 294,000 of these immigrants remained permanently on the island where their presence rapidly transformed the colony's social and economic landscape. By 1846, Indian immigrants comprised more than 35 percent of the colony's total population. The 1850s witnessed explosive growth in the size of the immigrant population, which soared from 77,996 in 1851 to 192,634 in 1861, or 62 percent of the colony's residents. Although the number of Indian immigrants reaching the island's shores began to decline during the 1860s, by 1871 they and their Indo-Mauritian descendants accounted for two-thirds of the island's population, a percentage which has remained relatively constant to the present day.

The process of capital formation is the most poorly understood of the factors which shaped the Mauritian experience with sugar. Among Mauritian historians, only Roland Lamusse has attempted to describe the colony's sources of capital and the local system of crop finance in a systematic, if somewhat limited, manner.[26] This reluctance to explore the history of Mauritian capital formation may be traced in part to the relative paucity of relevant data. Information on topics as straightforward as the volume and value of the colony's trade during the French period is scarce, even in official sources. While figures on trade, specie flows, and other pertinent topics become more readily available during the nineteenth century, and especially after 1850, these data remain only general indicators of capital formation in the colony, and often problematic ones at that. Even the royal commissions of inquiry appointed to investigate the colony's condition during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries tended to be reticent about colonial finances. However, despite these difficulties, the history of Mauritian capital can be reconstructed by a careful reading of the existing documentation.

Information on the local economy's condition during the Compagnie's tenure is sparse. Modern assessments of the Compagnie's agricultural policies echo those made during the eighteenth century that these policies had been "diametrically opposed to all kind of public prosperity."[27] Contemporary reports suggest that although individual colonists may have prospered, the colonial economy as a whole did not flourish under Compagnie rule. In 1756, for example, C.F. Noble reported that while many of the colony's planters had become rich because of the "great price given for all the productions of their plantations, many of which are become very extensive & valuable," the island could not feed itself and relied upon provisions from the Ile de Bourbon, Madagascar, and India to survive.[28] A 1766 census confirms that the colony's agricultural sector remained much less developed than it might otherwise have been. Fewer than 200,000 of 400,000 cultivable arpents had been distributed to colonists, and less than one-fourth of all granted land had been brought into production. Comments in the census reveal that colonial authorities were aware that the island's full agricultural potential remained untapped. According to one such notation, the Ile de France was deemed capable of supporting 60,000 slaves and 30,000 head of livestock, numbers far in excess of what the island actually housed at the time.[29]

The advent of royal administration did not bring about any immediate improvement in local agriculture. In 1772, the English naval lieutenant John Colpoys reported that the colony was still unable to feed itself, and that "were it not for the assistance which it gets from the Cape of Good Hope and Madagascar, I am sure the number of souls thats [*sic*] now in it would be sufficient to breed a famine."[30] Six years later, an anonymous memorandum asserted that many estate-owners were abandoning cultivation of their land or foregoing the establishment of new plantations because of the local administration's fiscal woes and its attendant refusal to purchase locally grown grain.[31] Little had changed by late 1780, when John Buncle reported that "The Oppression of a Military Government, the natural indolence of the Inhabitants & their poverty, are the real reasons that so small a part of the Island is cultivated."[32]

Buncle's observation underscores the extent to which government policy contributed to the weakness of the colony's agricultural sector throughout the eighteenth century. As in other colonies, especially those far removed from close metropolitan supervision, the consequences of these policies and practices were compounded by official venality. Buncle, for one, reported that local officials did not encourage the cultivation of maize despite the consequences of the colony's continuing inability to feed itself, especially in times of war. The reason for their refusal to do so was, he noted, simple and straightforward: they made much more money for themselves when maize had to be imported.[33]

Despite these problems, government demand for foodstuffs and naval supplies nevertheless helped to keep the colony's agricultural sector alive during the eighteenth century, albeit often anemically so. The survival of large numbers of contracts to supply royal warehouses, as well as the records of the goods received in those storehouses, indicate that governmental spending was an important source of income for many colonists throughout the French period. Various sources indicate that the purchase of local grain and manufactures often accounted for at least 30 to 40 percent of colonial government expenditure during the 1780s and 1790s.[34] The extent to which other governmental monies in the form of salaries, troop wages, etc., filtered into the island's economy cannot be determined, but it is not unreasonable to assume that many of the Ile de France's residents depended, at least indirectly, upon the public purse for their livelihood.

If Mauritian agriculture had to struggle to hold its own during the latter part of the eighteenth century, the same cannot be said of the colony's commercial sector. The consequences of Port Louis's designation in 1769 as a port open to trade by all French nationals have already been noted. Contemporary observers appreciated the importance of this decision. In 1770, a British colonel, John Call, wrote that the Ile de France was a decided "national advantage" to France because of its capacity "To serve as a reposit or magazine for collecting the Merchandize of the several parts of India, and from thence shipping them to Europe, or as a place proper to fit out an Armament against our Settlements in another War, or to equip Vessels to cruize against our Trade in India and as far as S$^{t.}$ Helena . . ."[35] The wars which France and England were to fight during the coming decades would confirm the probity of his observations.

The incentives to engage in commerce and trade rather than agriculture were substantial. During the early 1790s, according to one report, the manipulation of bills of exchange returned profits of 25 to 33 percent compared to the 5 or 6 percent realized by successful planters.[36] The low level of commodity production at this time underscores the colonial propensity to pursue commercial and maritime rather than agricultural interests. According to William Milburn, the annual produce of the Ile de France (probably during the 1790s or early 1800s) amounted to no more than 6,000 bags of coffee, 2,000 bales of cotton, 300,000 lb of indigo in a good year, 20,000 lb of cloves, 5 million lb of raw sugar, and an undetermined quantity of several kinds of woods.[37] The value of these items is difficult to ascertain, but there can be no doubt that it was small compared to the value of the trade in manufactured goods from Asia. Between 1771 and 1778, for example, the value of the goods arriving at Lorient from the Mascarenes averaged 882,747 livres each year, while those imported from the East Indies and China each year were valued at 10,763,956 and 7,012,370 livres respectively.[38]

If the Mascarenes were not a place where merchants went looking for merchandise to sell in Europe or Asia during the late eighteenth century, the islands were a potentially lucrative market for goods imported from elsewhere. The Abbé Raynal reported that the Compagnie des Indes realized a 100 percent return on the goods it imported into the islands from Europe, and a 50 percent return on goods it imported from India.[39] Maximillien Wiklinsky claimed *circa* 1770 that merchants could expect a 400–500 percent return on the imported goods they sold locally.[40] The colony's trade with Africa and India was also profitable, so much so that local investors were often guaranteed a 25 to 35 percent return on their investment. Such was the case in January, 1781, when the Port Louis firm of Pitot Frères et C^{ie} guaranteed M. de Courcy a 35 percent return on his investment in the snow *La Baptistine* which was about to sail to the African coast and the Cape of Good Hope before returning to the colony.[41] Several months later, the firm informed M. de Maurville that his 15,000 livres investment in five ships, guaranteed variously at 25, 30, and 35 percent, had yielded a net profit of 31 percent.[42] A report which probably dates from the early 1790s indicates that returns of 25 to 30 percent were also common in the colony's trade with India.[43]

While the profits from local and regional trade were an important inducement for merchants to establish themselves on the Ile de France, the greatest spur to commercial activity came from the island's status as a base from which corsairs preyed upon British and allied shipping in times of war. The fact that one merchant from Nantes had realized a net profit of 1,300,000 livres on his investment in four Mascarene-based privateers at the end of the War of Austrian Succession demonstrated how lucrative such ventures could be.[44] Privateering during the War of American Independence proved to be equally remunerative. On March 26, 1781, for example, Pitot Frères informed the Comte de St. Maurice that his 2,400-livres investment in the privateer *La Philippine* had yielded a return of more than 440 percent.[45] Five months later, after the sale of three English prizes taken by *La Philippine*, the firm reported that a share in the privateer was now worth 7,481 livres, or 523 percent more than the original purchase price of 1,200 livres.[46]

The total value of the prizes taken by corsairs operating from the Mascarenes is difficult to determine. In September, 1781, the Pitots reported that the prizes taken by local privateers since 1778 had sold for 12,000,000 livres.[47] The firm also noted that losses to the enemy were actually double this figure because of the unreported depredations committed on board ships at the time of their capture. Following the resumption of hostilities between Britain and France in 1793, privateers based in the Mascarenes once again inflicted heavy losses upon enemy commerce. One contemporary estimate put the value of the shipping captured by these privateers between 1793 and mid-1804 at £2,500,000.[48] Auguste Toussaint estimated the value of some 200 prizes taken by Mauritian corsairs between 1793 and 1802 at 30 to 40 million francs, and perhaps more. He put the value of corsair prizes between 1803 and 1810 at approximately 17,700,000 francs, and concluded that French frigates operating in the Indian Ocean during the same period captured additional prizes worth approximately 32 million francs.[49]

It is impossible to ascertain how much of the proceeds from this activity and the trade associated with it remained in the Mascarenes. While some privateers returned to France with fortunes,[50] substantial amounts of prize money and other merchant capital also remained in the colony. Partnership agreements from the early 1780s reveal that local merchants could mobilize significant financial resources. Fulerand Dejean and Emmanuel Touche du Poujol, for instance, each contributed 100,000 livres to capitalize the commercial house they established in Port Louis on October 12, 1780.[51] Two years later Louis Joseph Pigeot de Carey, his brother Isidore Pigeot de St. Vallery, and Paul Trebillard de la Relandière contributed 200,000, 120,000, and 80,000 livres respectively toward the capitalization of a partnership they were establishing for three years.[52] Amounts such as these pale in comparison, however, to those at the command of Paul de la Bauve d'Arifat, who declared on July 31, 1780 before two notaries that he had cash assets totaling 1,000,000 livres.[53] Among d'Arifat's other assets were the 400 slaves, worth at least 660,000 livres, that he put at the king's service during the War of American Independence.[54]

The extent to which this merchant capital found its way into the colony's agricultural sector during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries cannot be determined with any degree of precision. It is clear nevertheless that some merchants and seamen invested directly in landed property and that increasing numbers of them did so over time. Evidence of this trend comes from Savanne where, in 1788, at least four of the district's thirteen landed proprietors had a commercial or maritime background. By 1795, the number of such persons had increased to five, four of whom were new landowners who had acquired their estates between 1788 and 1795. Twenty years later, the district's fifty-three proprietors included four merchants, three ship's lieutenants, a commercial agent, and two seamen.[55] There can also be no doubt that merchant capital flowed into the colony's agricultural sector in other less visible ways. Many of the merchants who established themselves on the island married local women,[56] and it is reasonable to assume that significant sums of merchant capital subsequently found its way into the colony's agricultural sector via familial connections. The growing demand for the provisions needed by the navy from the 1780s onward provided additional incentives for persons with mercantile or maritime interests to invest some of their money in landed property.

The blockade inaugurated by the British in 1806 spelled the beginning of the end of the Ile de France's prominence as a commercial entrepôt. Following the island's capture in December, 1810, some of its wealthier inhabitants returned to France, one consequence of which was "an unusual scarcity of bullion" in the colony.[57] The island's formal cession to Britain in 1814 and its subjection to the Navigation Acts in 1815 caused considerable economic hardship and further eroded the commercial foundations upon which local social and economic life had rested. With few other viable alternatives open to them, colonists turned their attention to the development of the island's fledgling sugar industry.

As was noted earlier, the origins of this industry date to the early 1740s when La Bourdonnais actively encouraged the cultivation of sugar cane. Despite this encouragement, the industry languished during much of the eighteenth century. In 1789, only 1,000 arpents were planted in cane and the colony contained from just eight to ten sugar mills, which produced a mere 300 tons of sugar a year. The growing demand for arrack and the interruption in sugar supplies caused by the Haitian revolution encouraged planters on the Ile de France to expand their production. By 1806–10, some 9,000–10,000 arpents were planted in cane, and sugar production had climbed to 3,000–4,000 tons a year.[58] Access to the London market, which came with inclusion in the British Empire, together with the high price of sugar near the end of the Napoleonic wars (see table 1), encouraged estate-owners to expand their arpentage in sugar even further.

The industry's development during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was shaped in no small measure by its organizational structure and the local system of crop finance. Throughout the nineteenth century the sugar industry was composed largely of individually or family owned and managed estates, and its structure remained highly personalized even after more advanced forms of industrial organization such as limited liability companies began to be introduced during the 1880s.[59] This reliance upon personalized forms of industrial organization limited the capital resources available to planters and made many dependent upon short-term credit for their operating expenses, even in boom times. The fragility of estate finances would be a source of constant concern to the Mauritius Chamber of Agriculture, founded in 1853 by the colony's more prominent planters in the midst of a period of relative prosperity. As early as 1856, the Chamber was studying the possibilities of creating mortgage loan societies to provide planters with much-needed long-term capital at moderate rates of interest.[60] Three such societies came into existence in 1864, but proved to be inadequate to the industry's needs, especially in the wake of a financial crisis in 1865 and the natural disasters of 1866–68. As a result, by 1868 the Chamber was expressing its interest in the establishment of an agricultural bank.[61] The passage of time did little, however, to alleviate this problem. In 1902, the Chamber's annual report noted the serious threat which a lack of operating capital posed to the colony's future.[62] Seven years later, Governor Sir Cavendish Boyle reported that "for some considerable time the lack of capital and the want of money obtainable at reasonable rates" had left their mark on

Table 1. *Mauritian sugar and the world market, 1812–1934*

Period	Annual average per quinquenium: Exports (tons)	% World cane production	% Total world production	Average price (£/ton)[a]
1812–14	426	—	—	61.3
1815–19	3,097	—	—	52.8
1820–24	11,107	—	—	32.5
1825–29	20,407	—	—	33.6
1830–34	33,784	—	—	27.0
1835–39	32,502	—	—	37.4
1840–44	34,707	4.0	3.8	39.2
1845–49	56,069	5.4	5.0	28.2
1850–54	71,388	6.0	5.2	21.6
1855–59	111,522	8.6	6.8	26.6
1860–64	123,609	9.0	6.8	22.6
1865–69	113,311	7.0	4.9	22.2
1870–74	111,445	6.3	3.9	23.6
1875–79	115,844	6.3	3.6	21.0
1880–84	116,019	5.7	2.8	18.8
1885–89	119,815	5.1	2.3	13.2
1890–94	113,219	3.5	1.6	13.1
1895–99	143,641	5.0	1.9	10.0
1900–04	167,380	2.9	1.4	9.3
1905–09	181,636	2.5	1.3	9.8
1910–14	223,746	2.5	1.3	11.0
1915–19	223,139	2.0	1.4	28.3
1920–24	218,682	1.7	1.1	27.8
1925–29	216,359	1.3	0.9	11.9
1930–34	191,820	1.2	0.8	5.7

Note: [a] In London (cost, insurance, and freight).
Sources: BB 1840–42, 1845–48, 1850.
Deerr 1949–50, vol. II, pp. 490–91, 531.
Mauritius Almanac for 1889, p. 70.
MCA 1859, attached appendix.
PP 1826–27 XVIII [283]; 1835 XLIX [53]; 1836 XLVI [55]; 1837 XLIX [100]; 1837–38 XLVII [151]; 1839 XLV [213]; 1840 XLIII [281]; 1865 LV [3508]; 1866 LXXIII [3709]; 1878 LXVIII [C. 2093]; 1886 LXVIII [C. 4825]; 1890 LXXVIII [C. 6160]; 1899 CIV [C. 9459]; 1900 C [Cd. 307]; 1910 CVI [Cd. 4984]; 1914–16 LXXIX [Cd. 7786]; 1924 XXIV [Cmd. 2247]; 1929–30 XXX [Cmd. 3434]; 1937–38 XXVIII [Cmd. 5582)].

the colony.[63] That same year, the Mauritius Royal Commission likewise noted that "the great majority of owners have practically no working capital and run their estates on borrowed money."[64]

The Chamber of Agriculture's call for the establishment of financial institutions capable of making low-interest loans to planters reflected the weaknesses inherent in the local system of crop finance which rested upon individuals known as *bailleurs de fonds*. Like the Caribbean agent or *commissionnaire* and the Brazilian *correspondente*, *bailleurs de fonds* were usually local merchants or produce-brokers who possessed substantial liquid capital resources of their own as well as good credit with local banks. Their activities focused upon providing planters with the short-term operating capital they did not have or could not raise elsewhere. The financial relationship between a planter and a *bailleur de fonds* often led to the latter functioning as an estate's business manager with responsibility for providing the plantation with needed supplies and money, as well as selling the annual crop.[65]

The legacy of this personalized system of crop finance was to foster a "special psychology of credit" among planters who took advantage of periods of relative prosperity to borrow large sums to pay off their creditors and to finance capital improvements.[66] However, the steady decline in the world market price of sugar that began during the 1860s, together with the fluctuation of these prices from year to year, and sometimes even from month to month, made large-scale borrowing a risky undertaking which resulted in many estates accumulating ever larger amounts of debt. In 1902, according to the Chamber of Agriculture, the cost of financing capital improvements and paying mortgage interest charges was approximately 25,000,000 rupees.[67] By 1909, only eleven of the sixty-six estates with factories were reported to be free of encumbrances; the other fifty-five estates carried debts estimated at Rs. 12,000,000.[68] By the early 1930s, the consequences of the industry's dependence upon domestic capital in an era of declining sugar prices were apparent even to uninformed observers of colonial life. *Bailleurs de fonds* had become caught up in a vicious cycle of refinancing ever larger estate debts, which were also their own personal debts, in a desperate effort to stave off financial ruin. According to the commissioners who investigated the state of colonial finances in 1931, this situation had developed because nothing – neither high interest rates nor insufficient security – limited further borrowing by planters:

> So far from being harsh and unconscionable the traditional policy of the *bailleurs de fonds* towards their clients' difficulties is that of forbearance carried beyond the extreme limit of prudence. In the small white community of Mauritius, closely bound together by the ties of inter-marriage and of long-standing family relationships, the influence of public opinion makes for lenient and sympathetic treatment of debtors, whose insolvency is concealed and assisted by further credit often beyond the creditor's own capacity to allow without endangering his own security. As a result of this tendency and of the weakness of the *bailleur de fonds*' own position under an arrangement which makes him personally liable for his client's default, arrears in indebtedness have been allowed to accumulate on

many estates to an extent which in some cases exceeds the whole amount of the realizable assets, including the land itself.[69]

The commissioners noted that a "very considerable" number of estates were reported to be in just such a condition.

The best way to alleviate this growing financial distress remained a subject of vigorous debate. The colony's chambers of agriculture and commerce, keenly aware that local financial institutions lacked the resources to effect a long-term solution, saw government loans as the only viable alternative, and regularly pressed a reluctant administration to make loans to the sugar industry. There were precedents for doing so. In 1816, the colonial government had extended a $100,000 line of credit to the Mauritius Bank in the wake of a fire which devastated Port Louis's commercial district, while in 1829 and again in 1830 the government had advanced sums totalling $500,000 "in aid of the agricultural and commercial interests of the Colony, suffering under the pressure of great and unexpected embarrassment."[70] Additional loans, however, came only in the wake of the devastating cyclone of 1892, when the government advanced Rs. 5,868,450 to planters. Other government loans were subsequently made in 1898 (for Rs. 1,491,000) and in 1903 (for £382,917) to finance capital improvements and underwrite the costs of cultivation. The Royal Commission of 1909 reported that these loans had been or were being repaid on schedule, and concluded that there was little risk that the colonial government would lose any appreciable portion of the monies lent. The Commissioners even recommended the advance of another £115,000 to the colony's planters for additional capital improvements.[71]

Within several decades, however, the colony's financial situation had deteriorated to the point where the Financial Commission of 1931 vigorously opposed any additional government loans to the sugar industry on the grounds that the "history of such loans in recent years has been a singularly unfortunate one . . ."[72] In addition to its enormous indebtedness to mortgagees and *bailleurs de fonds*, the Commissioners noted that the industry was carrying five successive government loans totaling some Rs. 20,000,000 on which it was unable to pay either interest or principal. This mountain of debt convinced the Commission that the colony's estates could be restored to profitable cultivation only by an increase in the export price of sugar, either as a result of the operation of market forces or through an increase in the imperial subsidy.

The repeated calls for government loans during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries attest to the increasing inability of local financial institutions to meet the demand for operating capital. The colony housed only two banks in 1909 and while one of these banks was financed by British capital, both it and its locally owned and managed rival possessed only limited resources. The 1909 Royal Commissioners appreciated this fact, and noted that what the colony really needed was a branch office of a large banking company capable of adapting to local exigencies and weathering periods of depression.[73] The colony continued to be dependent upon domestic capital, however, for the simple reason that it failed to attract and keep significant metropolitan investment after 1848.

Mauritius remained of little long-term interest to British or other foreign investors for several reasons. Prior to 1825, Mauritian sugar was subject to a substantially higher tariff than was West Indian sugar entering Britain, an economic fact of life that discouraged potential British investment in the colony. The abolition in 1825 of the preferential West Indian tariff was accordingly an event of major consequence to Mauritian planters. The industry's dramatic expansion after 1825, coupled with the higher prices that Mauritian sugar now fetched on the London market, encouraged English speculators to invest.[74] The resulting boom was short-lived, however, and collapsed in response to the termination of the apprenticeship system and the suspension of Indian immigration in 1839.

British investors returned to the colony following the resumption of Indian immigration late in 1842, drawn by the expectation of high rates of return on their investment. In February, 1848, Edward Chapman, a co-owner of seven estates and the commercial agent for ten to twelve other estates, estimated the value of this investment since 1843 at £500,000.[75] The collapse that same year of four of the five London commercial houses that had financed a substantial portion of the Mauritian crop sent the colony's economy into what Governor Sir G.W. Anderson readily characterized as a "considerable depression."[76] Hopes during the early 1850s that a reviving economy would attract new British capital remained unfulfilled, and for the rest of the century the colony was not the object of significant metropolitan investment. In 1909, only 19 of the colony's 145 sugar estates were reported to be foreign owned: 13 by three companies based in London, 4 by French interests, and 1 each by interests based in Bombay and Pondichéry.[77] The Financial Commission of 1931 subsequently observed that the falling price of sugar continued to discourage metropolitan investment in a colony where "the existence of a foreign [i.e., French] and in some respects antiquated system of law and procedure in matters relating to property and business naturally tend to deter English businessmen from interesting themselves in its affairs."[78]

Under such circumstances, the sugar industry's fortunes, as well as those of the colony as a whole, rose and fell upon the ability of local capital to meet the demands being made upon it. Two principal factors governed domestic capital formation in Mauritius after 1810: the world market price for sugar and the industry's profitability. Despite the colony's importance as a producer during the mid-nineteenth century, Mauritian planters exercised no control over the market price of sugar, and the colony was accordingly forced to cope with repeated cycles of economic boom and bust as the price of sugar rose and fell from year to year, sometimes dramatically so. The impact of these price fluctuations was compounded by the fact that while local sugar production increased during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it did so in fits and starts with production levels remaining relatively constant over extended periods of time (see table 1, p. 23).

The quality of estate management, the availability and cost of labor, and the willingness to adopt new agricultural and manufacturing techniques to increase cane production and factory efficiency also influenced profit margins. The cost of labor was the most important of these variables. Edward Chapman reported that labor regularly accounted for 50 percent of production costs during the 1840s.[79] Projections based upon the size of the contractual work force and average monthly wages suggest that labor costs continued to account for approximately one-half of direct operating expenses throughout the mid-nineteenth century. During the 1860s, for example, the minimum wage bill for estate-owners was probably £625,000–670,000 a year, a sum equal to 28 to 31 percent of the sugar crop's export value. It should be noted that this estimate covers only wages, and does not include the cost of the rations, clothing, housing, and medical care planters were legally required to provide for their workers.

The profitability of Mauritian sugar estates, like that of Caribbean plantations, is a problematic topic.[80] Reports of rates of return are scarce, and even the various commissions charged with investigating conditions in the colony were often reticent about the industry's profitability or lack thereof. The earliest available information on this topic dates to 1828 when the Commission of Eastern Enquiry was informed that the average net profit from an arpent of cane on the best estates ranged from \$28 to about \$100.[81] Twenty years later, Sir George Larpent, Bart., who had 1,500 of his 3,787 acres planted in cane, declared that he had lost £95,000 between 1834 and 1844–45.[82] Edward Chapman claimed in turn that local planters lost £195,000 on the 1847–48 crop, a figure which climbed to £480,000 if interest charges were included in the calculations.[83] The extent to which these two reports accurately represent local conditions, however, must remain open to question. Sir George, for one, implied that some of his losses since 1844–45 (and probably before 1844 as well) were the result of declining property values rather than unprofitable sugar crops *per se*.[84]

More precise data about the industry's profitability are available for only three years between 1812 and 1936. Figures reported by A. Walter and Noël Deerr indicate that the market price of Mauritian sugar exceeded production costs by 12.3 percent in 1853 and by 20.4 percent in 1893, while costs exceeded income by 9.7 percent in 1906.[85] These figures must be viewed with some care, since it is unclear whether the reported production costs included all relevant charges. The Royal Commission of 1909 revealed that four unnamed estates showed a profit on twelve of fifteen sugar crops between 1893 and 1907, with an average return of 16 percent over costs.[86] Profits ranged from 17 cents to Rs. 3.50 for 50 kilograms of sugar produced, while losses varied from 5 to 89 cents for 50 kilograms. Unfortunately, the Commissioners made no attempt to indicate the extent to which these rates of return were representative of the industry as a whole.[87]

Although many features of its financial condition remain hidden from view, a sense of the Mauritian sugar industry's financial condition may be gauged by reviewing the general state of the colony's economy between the 1810s and the mid-1930s. Sugar accounted for 85 percent of the value of Mauritian exports as early as 1833–34, and over the next 100 years at least 85, and often 90, percent or more of local export earnings came from sugar. Because the island's economic fortunes were bound so inextricably with those of the sugar industry, reports on the value of sugar exports, the colony's balance of trade, the movement of specie to and from the island, and other indices of economic activity afford an opportunity to chart the industry's fortunes in some detail.

The first decades of British rule were clearly ones of diminished prosperity for the island. Colonists had complained bitterly about the economic hardships they had to endure after the island's capture, complaints which the negative balance of trade between 1812 and 1814 reveals were not unfounded (see table 2). The colony's continuing inability to cover the cost of its imports before the mid-1840s, despite the sugar industry's explosive growth between 1825 and 1830, underscores the extent of the economic difficulties which many planters had to face in the wake of the abolition of slavery, emancipation of the apprentices, and the suspension of Indian immigration.

The 1850s and early 1860s have commonly been regarded as the heyday of the Mauritian sugar industry, and the increasing value of sugar exports and incoming specie flows, as well as the increasingly favorable balance of trade, confirm that this era was one of considerable

Table 2. *Condition of the Mauritian economy, 1812–1934*

	Annual average per quinquenium (£ sterling)			
Period	Value of sugar exported	Net balance of trade[a]	Net specie flow	Per capita value of imports[b]
1812–14	(19,586)[c]	−206,529[d]	—	8.22[d]
1815–19	(122,642)[c]	—	—	—
1820–24	(270,734)[c,e]	−98,835[f]	—	6.47[f]
1825–29	(514,256)[c,g]	−188,561[b]	—	7.63
1830–34	(684,126)[c,h]	+5,915[b]	—	6.68
1835–39	(911,681)[c]	−129,948[b]	—	9.00
1840–44	(1,020,386)[c]	+5,634	+143,662	7.09
1845–49	(1,185,860)[c]	+363,069	+191,258	6.70
1850–54	1,110,164	+195,313	+203,544	6.08
1855–59	1,929,847	+378,543	+454,921	8.84
1860–64	2,147,047	+132,504	+385,953	7.93
1865–69	2,234,454	+528,588	+150,845	6.02
1870–74	2,550,997	+686,294	+85,223	7.26
1875–79	2,923,108	+1,240,030	+125,247	6.60
1880–84	3,369,634	+1,223,215	+81,326	7.40
1885–89	2,832,363	+786,436	+62,388	6.91
1890–94	1,913,630	−397,159	+72,763	7.54
1895–99	1,517,848	+256	+50,432	4.99
1900–04	2,064,593	+107,767	+18,479	6.06
1905–09	2,315,990	+506,061	+23,038	5.33
1910–14	2,630,593	+378,757	+41,623	6.59
1915–19	5,596,360	+2,466,624	+18,923	9.30
1920–24	7,380,983	+1,147,676	+181,941	17.78
1925–29	3,403,079	−504,023	−81,908	10.18
1930–34	1,931,400	−436,600	−50,600	6.23

Notes: [a] Exclusive of specie unless otherwise indicated. [b] Inclusive of specie.
[c] Official figures either do not exist or exist for only some years of the quinquenium in question. This figure has been calculated using the average price of raw sugar (cost plus insurance and freight) in London by Deerr 1949–50, vol. II, p. 531, minus 25 percent for freight and other charges. N.B. Deerr reports a sometimes substantial range of prices within any given year between 1814 and 1838. These figures should therefore be regarded only as a relative indication of export values, especially when they are compared with the few official figures that are available (see below).
[d] For the period 1812–16.
[e] The official value of the sugar exported in 1824 was £170,342.
[f] For 1822–24 only.
[g] Official figures put the average annual value of sugar exports between 1825 and 1828 at £368,743.
[h] Official figures put the average annual value of sugar exports between 1833 and 1834 at £558,134.
Sources: See table 1.

economic growth. However, if these data point to the relative strength of the Mauritian economy at this time, the sometimes substantial fluctuations in the balance of trade and the per capita value of imports indicate that this economy remained vulnerable to forces far beyond its control. Between 1845 and 1849 and 1850 and 1854, for example, the average price of sugar declined by 23.4 percent, only to rebound to earlier levels again during the second half of the 1850s.

While the increasing value of sugar exports underwrote a steady expansion of the local economy during the mid-nineteenth century, signs of long-term difficulties began to manifest themselves during the second half of the 1860s when the amount of specie entering the colony declined precipitously, a development which heralded the beginnings of a growing capital liquidity problem. By the mid-1880s, patterns of decline are discernible in other indices of economic well-being, such as the value of sugar exports and the balance of trade. These difficulties were mirrored by trends within the sugar industry itself. Between 1860 and 1885, the number of sugar factories declined by more than 40 percent as the manufacturing process became increasingly centralized; by 1900, the number of factories would be reduced by an additional 37 percent.[88] The subdivision of large properties that began *circa* 1875 likewise became more pronounced as the 1880s came to an end. The growing weakness of the colonial economy would become readily apparent during the 1890s, a decade which proved to be another watershed period in the island's social and economic history.

While the advent of the twentieth century witnessed a recovery from the various natural and economic disasters of the 1890s, the problems facing the Mauritian economy remained fundamentally unchanged. The outbreak of World War I in 1914 spurred a short-lived recovery in sugar prices which soared to astronomical levels by 1920 before beginning an equally precipitous decline to pre-war levels by 1925. The impact of this price decline was such that in March, 1928, the Chamber of Agriculture called for a new government loan in the amount of £1,500,000 on the grounds that the sugar industry had operated at a loss over the preceding four years.[89] The global depression that began in late 1929 delivered another punishing blow to the industry as the price of sugar plummeted still further. By 1933, the Chamber of Agriculture was reporting that "The resources in locally-owned liquid capital, on which the industry is dependent for financing its working requirements, have been severely contracted in consequence of a success of adverse trade years from 1923–31..." Only a series of profitable harvests, the Chamber continued, would ensure the "possibility of reconstructing an adequacy of working capital."[90]

The Great Depression revealed that neither the colonial nor the imperial government could cope with the conditions created by Mauritius' dependence upon a monocultural economy, a fickle world market, and the resources of domestic capital. The social and economic distress created by this reliance helped to light the fuse of widespread political protest which contributed to the rise in 1936 of the Mauritius Labor Party, the first political organization devoted to representing the interests of the colony's agricultural workers. Within a year, the colony's small planters were also being drawn into the political arena as they too sought to redress grievances and secure relief from the disabilities under which they had to live and work.[91] The forces unleashed at this time would help to set the stage for the movement toward independence which came on March 12, 1968. However, even as they moved along the path toward self-government, Mauritians would find themselves still bound by the slender, sweet thread that their fathers and grandfathers had known so well.