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978-1-108-07642-5 - A Narrative of a Visit to the Mauritius and South Africa

James Backhouse

Excerpt

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# NARRATIVE.

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## CHAPTER I.

Voyage to the Mauritius.—Accommodation.—Reef.—Heavy Seas.—Rodrigue.—Seamen.—Mauritius.—Pilot.—Port Louis.—Population.—Hotel.—Slavery.—Colonial Secretary.—Citadel.—Plaines Wilhems.—Trees.—Roads.—Rocks.—Worship.—Grande Rivière.—Maroons.—Governor.—Christian Visits.—Signal Mountain.—Tamarind Tree.—Plants.—State of Religion.—Animals.—Shrubs.—Sabbath.—Canteens.—Cemetery.—Chinese.—Creoles.—Missionaries.—Schools, &c.—Pamplemousses.—Paul and Virginia.—Sugar Plantations.—Country.—Mapou.—School.—Congregation.

HAVING concluded a visit to the Australian Colonies, in which I was accompanied by my friend George Washington Walker, who also continued with me in the Mauritius and Southern Africa, we sailed from Freemantle in Western Australia, on the 12th of the 2nd month, 1838, on board the *Abercromby*, a brigantine of a hundred and forty tons, J. B. Butcher, master. The cabin passengers were seven in number, two of whom were females; for their accommodation, we gave up our cabin berths, the captain agreeing to fit up others in the midships, which, as the vessel was in ballast, was also converted into a dining room; a large, temporary table, of fixed deals, occupied the centre.

The wind was fair during most of the voyage. On the 14th, we passed a reef, not laid down on our chart, about latitude  $28^{\circ} 30'$  south, longitude  $110^{\circ} 38'$  east. On the 18th, we entered the Torrid Zone, having a steady, south-east trade-wind. From the 1st to the 3rd of 3rd month, we

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sometimes had heavy cross-seas, supposed to be set up by a hurricane to the south. One of them came suddenly upon us, and broke on board, when the cabin sky-light was off, greatly to the alarm of our female passengers. They were sitting at their work below, when the water poured upon them in a torrent. One of our fellow-passengers narrowly escaped being precipitated into the sea. G. W. Walker was thrown down the companion by a sea breaking on board, but happily received no serious injury, and I was twice taken off my feet, while holding to a rope, on the quarter-deck, by the quantity of water that rushed past me. It became necessary to batten down the hatch of our midship-cabin, in which we took our meals; we were therefore under the necessity of taking them by lamp-light, in such places as afforded the best opportunity of avoiding being thrown down, by the reeling of the vessel under the heavy strokes of the sea. We were, however, mercifully preserved from injury by the tender compassion of Him "who commandeth the wind and the sea, and they obey him."

On the 3rd we passed to the northward of the island of Rodrigue, but the prevalence of clouds and rain prevented our seeing it distinctly. There were a few Man-of-war-birds, Sooty Petrels, and Tropic-birds in its vicinity. Few birds had been seen on this voyage. On the 4th, we assembled on the quarter-deck, and had some religious service. This practice had been kept up, on the first day of the week, during the voyage. The seamen were invited, but they shewed little inclination to be present. Most of them were very profligate, and willingly ignorant of those things with which it is the duty of every man to be acquainted.

7th. At dawn of day, Ile Rond, or Round Island, was descried at five or six leagues distance, and soon after, the rugged mountains of the Mauritius, or Isle of France. A current had set us so far to the northward as to render it necessary to pass outside of all the small islands that lie to the northward of the main island; the low land on the northern extremity of which looked green and pleasant. The view of its sugar plantations, and of the houses of the proprietors, and huts of their labourers, &c. was interesting.

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Cocoa and Cabbage Palms were distinguishable among the trees, and the towering, grotesque, mountain ranges in the back ground, among which the celebrated Peter Bot was conspicuous, gave the whole a very picturesque appearance. The number of vessels lying in the harbour of Port Louis was considerable. The boats plying about, manned by Coolies, Lascars, Negroes, and other men of colour, presented a very foreign appearance to an English eye.

After the usual visit from the colonial surgeon, we went on shore, to endeavour to obtain lodgings, but returned on board without success. While in the town, I purchased a glass for my watch, for four shillings. The former one, which was very thick, had its margin bitten off by the expansion of the metal, when we came into an intertropical climate. The pilot who brought us into port, remained on board all night, for the purpose of mooring the vessel: he talked about his religion, being nominally a Roman Catholic; but cursed and took the name of God in vain; he also exhibited great contempt for the coloured population, and said he would not sit at table with one of them, though he acknowledged having a mulatto son; he also said he should be glad to see another war! So great is the inconsistency of man, and so blind are the servants of Satan! Some even fancy themselves Christians and servants of the living God, while living in open sin!

The town of Port Louis is beautifully situated on the west side of the Mauritius, in a cove formed by a series of basaltic hills, portions of which are woody: they vary in height from 1,058 to 2,639 feet. The Pouce, *Thumb*, which lies directly behind the town, is the highest point. The lower portion of many of the houses is of hewn basalt, and the upper portion of wood; others are entirely of wood, painted. The streets are rather narrow; they are laid out at right angles, have foot paths with basaltic curbstones, and are macadamized. Many of the houses have little courts in front, well stocked with fine trees and shrubs, and beautiful Date and Cocoa-nut Palms. There are magnificent Acacias, with large, yellow flowers, as well as Tamarinds and other trees, in some of the streets; and Bananas, Caladiums, Marvels of Peru,

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and many other striking plants, on the border of a stream from the mountains, that runs through the town. An open space, like a race-course, lies behind the town; it is called le Champ de Mars, and is bordered by several large villas, built in a style of neatness and elegance, like those in the neighbourhood of cities on the continent of Europe.

The population of Port Louis in 1836, was 27,645, of whom 6,679 males and 6,664 females were free, and 8,247 males and 6,055 females were apprentices. Most of the latter and some of the former were persons of colour.— French is the language universally spoken.

8th. We took up our abode at Massey's Hotel, the only decent inn in Port Louis. It is three stories high, and has the hall and lower rooms floored with marble. The walls are covered with paper exhibiting large landscapes. The stairs and floors of the upper rooms are painted red, as is common here, and rubbed bright. The beds are covered with muslin curtains to keep off moschettos, these insects being numerous, and the heat rendering it necessary to have the windows open at night. Here, for four dollars, (*twelve shillings*) a-day each, we had small bed-rooms, with breakfast at nine o'clock, and dinner at half-past five, at the Table d'hôte. The latter was in French style, consisting of a great variety of small dishes, and succeeded immediately by coffee. Burgundy wine diluted with water was the common beverage at dinner; but though considered as adapted to the climate, and probably it is the most so of any fermented liquor, yet persons who, for the purpose of discouraging drinking customs, have taken water only, have found themselves better rather than worse for discontinuing the use of the Burgundy wine.

The day was spent in getting our luggage on shore, and passing it at the Custom House. I felt great reluctance at paying the owner of the Coolies who carried our large boxes, for their work. The very idea of withholding from the slave, the reward due for his toil, and of giving it to his master, who only valued and fed him on the principles on which he valued and fed his horse, was revolting; and the circumstance of the slavery being commuted in name into

apprenticeship, afforded little relief to this feeling. One of the poor fellows begged a piece of canvass that had been wrapped about a box, to put round his loins, and accepted it thankfully. Many of them wear only such a garment.

9th. We were introduced by a respectable merchant to Captain George F. Dick, the Colonial Secretary, who received us politely and offered to arrange for our seeing the Governor. The day was very warm, with heavy showers. The evening delightful.

10th. In the morning, I accompanied two of our fellow-passengers and an intelligent person of their acquaintance, to the Citadel, a strong fortification overlooking the town, at which a number of prisoners are employed. From this point, there is a fine view of Port Louis and the adjacent country, bounded on one side by the sea, and on the other by irregular, basaltic hills, covered with grass and wood, and in many places, topped by projecting rocks. On the top of the mountain, opposite to the Citadel, is the signal station, connected with the shipping, and at its foot, an extensive settlement of small, detached cottages, inhabited by free Creoles and Blacks of the lower class.—In the evening, we accompanied a gentleman, who had resided a considerable time in the Colony, to his residence on Plaines Wilhems, seven miles from Port Louis, across the Grande Rivière, *Great River*, and behind the mountains. Many persons of opulence reside in this district, which, being several hundred feet above the level of the sea, is much cooler than the town. The road was crowded with people, Hindoos, and Malabars, as well as Blacks and Creoles, just emerging from slavery. Many of them were returning from washing in the Grande Rivière, and were carrying large bundles of clothes.—Some parts of the country were not cultivated, but covered with trees, shrubs, and stones. Other parts were occupied with houses of the colonists, huts of the coloured population, and fields of Manioc, *Janipha Manihot*, cultivated for the sake of its esculent root, and of Sugar-cane, *Saccharum officinarum*. Some of the fields were bordered with *Vacoua*, a Screw-pine, *Pandanus utilis*, the leaves of which are used for making sugar-bags, and with *Agave americana*, and *Fourcroea*

*gigantea*, large plants with aloe-like foliage, that have been used for fences, but have become naturalized, as has also the Indian-fig, *Opuntia Ficus Indica*, under the same circumstances. The ravine of the Grande Rivière is very beautiful, being deep, and thickly clothed with trees and shrubs, from among which the rocks emerge. Tamarind and other fine trees border this road, which, as well as many others in this island, is macadamized with Basalt. The Mauritius is a volcanic island, having several extinct craters. Its rocks and mountains are universally basaltic. Limestone is only found along its coasts, forming the basis of the Coral reefs.

11th. When the family with whom we were sojourning, were assembled for devotional purposes, I was enabled to direct their attention to the spiritual nature of religion, in commenting on the passage of scripture, "The life is more than meat, and the body than raiment;" showing that this is true with regard to the soul as well as to the body, and that expression in devotional exercises, unless arising from feeling, cannot help the life of the soul, or constitute any part of that worship which is in spirit and in truth; the only worship which the Father of spirits will accept.

In the evening, we took a walk along the margin of the remarkable ravine of the Grande Rivière, which has several branches, also running in deep chasms, with precipitous sides. They present a fine mixture of wood and rock scenery, and have numerous cascades in their course. In some of these ravines, parties of Maroons are occasionally found, inhabiting caves, in which they have eluded the vigilance of the police for many years. These people live on the wild produce of the country, or by depredation on the crops and herds of the colonists. Many of them are persons who have escaped from slavery; they are not dreaded as assassins. On the opposite side of the ravine of the Grande Rivière there are several houses, one of which, called Reduite, is the country residence of the Governor.

12th. We returned to Port Louis, and according to previous appointment, called upon the Colonial Secretary, who introduced us to Sir William Nicolay, the Governor of the Mauritius and the numerous little islands which are its

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dependencies, some of which are nearly 1,500 miles distant. See APPENDIX A.

The Governor received us courteously, and read my certificate from the Yearly Meeting of Ministers and Elders of our Society, in London. We presented to him a petition, to be allowed to land our books, &c. free of duty.—We took tea with a little company of Christians, of various denominations, varying also in the measure of light and experience to which each had attained, and spent a pleasant evening with them. The visit was closed by one of them reading a chapter of Isaiah, and by a devout prayer uttered by another. I also addressed them, acknowledging the sense of the divine presence, and extending encouragement to them, in connexion with the revival of the passage, “Fear not, little flock, it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”

13th. We breakfasted with two young officers, of the Royal Engineers, who, though awakened to a sense of the importance of a religious life, and brought to feel the saving virtue of faith in Christ, had not had the eyes of their understanding sufficiently enlightened, to see the inconsistency of a military profession with the character of a disciple of the Prince of Peace.—John le Brun, a valuable dissenting minister, called upon us, and invited us to join a company at tea at his house, consisting of most of the pious, British protestants in the Island; the number of whom is very small. The evening was crowned, like that of the previous day, by the display of the loving kindness of the Lord, in a religious opportunity.

14th. Early in the morning, we ascended the Signal Mountain, the elevation of which is 1,058 feet. It commands a fine view of the town, with a considerable extent of low country, several mountains, and a large expanse of ocean. The signal-house is firmly built of stone. It is said that one of wood, was carried from this spot, with its occupants, in one of those dreadful hurricanes with which this island is sometimes visited; and that some of its fragments were washed up, on the island of Bourbon, distant about 100 miles. The soil of this narrow, basaltic ridge is good, and produces grass and bushes, with many beautiful plants, some of which

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have originally belonged to other countries, but have become naturalized. Here we gathered an elegant fern, *Adiantum rhizophorum*, growing in the crevices of the rocks. The facility with which plants establish themselves in such a climate and soil, renders it difficult to distinguish between those originally native and those introduced. Among the latter is *Omocarpum sennoides*, the plant producing the little, scarlet, bead-like peas with black ends, often seen in cabinets in England: it is a trailing bush, with spikes of small, pink pea-flowers, and rather dirty-looking pods.

15th. Before breakfast, I walked to the ascent of the hills behind Port Louis. The trees in this part are not lofty. The Tamarind, *Tamarindus indicus*, is about as large as the Ash: its branches are slender, and its leaf small: its fruit was nearly over; most of the pods had become dry, and were perforated by insects. Before ripening, they are powerfully acid, but in this state they are used in curries, and are eaten with salt, which is also used in this country to moderate the acid of sour oranges, &c. The fragrant Mauritian Jasmine, *Jasminum mauritianum*, with eight-cleft flowers and trifoliate leaves, and numerous other shrubs were growing thickly in various places, and great numbers of a beautiful butterfly were feasting on the nectar of *Tiaridium indicum*, a plant resembling Heliotrope, and called in this country Herbe aux Papillons or Butterfly's Plant. Rain began to fall before I reached the hotel, and continued through the day, with violent squalls and heavy showers. The shipping in the harbour was put into snug trim, by striking their topmasts, sending down their yards, &c. lest the issue should be a hurricane; but the weather became suddenly settled in the night, by a discharge of electric fluid, accompanied by loud thunder.

In the course of the day, I accompanied a pious man in a visit to a sick native of Malabar, residing in Malabar Town, which is closely contiguous to Port Louis, and to which, as a residence, persons of colour were formerly restricted. This individual spoke English, and professed Christianity, but had taken cold when out shooting on First-day! The precept, "He that regardeth a day regardeth it unto the Lord," is little



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observed in this Island, in which an infidel wreck of popery is often mistaken for Christianity, and is that which, in the place of religion, pervades a large majority of the population. This wreck, if left to itself, would probably waste away, and give place to something having more of the life of the Gospel in it; but by the help of government salaries and patronage, the priests, who are generally despised by the people, are enabled to make great efforts to embue them with superstition and prejudice, in the place of true religion. I am no friend to the abridgment of civil liberties on account of difference of religious principle; but I see a material distinction between the abridgment of privileges by the Government, and the extension of aid to support an exclusive system of religion; and I am fully persuaded, that true religion would thrive much better than it does now, if Governments were to abstain from all such interference. The support of the Government enables those, whose motives are mixed, if not mercenary, to carry on their traffic, when, if left to their own means, or to the voluntary support of the people, these dealers in the souls of men would soon become bankrupts. Those who labour in the Gospel from the love of Christ constraining them, would not only be enabled to keep in the field of labour, without government stipends, but their way among the people would be left far more open than is now the case. Papists have, no doubt, the same claims to the exercise of their religion as other people. A few days ago, I expressed my opinion to an officer of the Government, that to allow them to import their religious books free of duty, when this privilege was granted to other communities of professing Christians, was very proper, and only common justice. I see however no propriety in the British Government exercising itself to foster Popery, as I suppose it has done inadvertently, here, as well as in some other places. The Papal religion, after having had this island under its pretended fostering care for more than a hundred years, has left it in a dreadfully ignorant and immoral condition. Now that government salaries and grants are to be had by the priests, and the slaves are becoming free, and will have something with which to pay confessors, the priests who were formerly

idle, are becoming very busy. Were government stipends withdrawn from religious teachers of every denomination, persons who were desirous to promote religion from pure motives, would be left to the pious exertions of individual zeal, and the support of voluntary societies; and the incubus of temporal motives being thus removed, pure religion would flourish, under the divine blessing, in its own native strength, and spread among mankind, to the glory of God.

17th. I set out before daylight to avoid the heat, and ascended a mountain about 2,550 feet high, which is separated from the Pouce by a deep cleft. Much of the ascent was grassy, but mixed with loose stones, and interspersed with patches of low trees and shrubs. The summit is scarcely five yards across. In some places the basalt is decomposed, and resembles Terra-sienna, in powder. The further side is precipitous for, perhaps, three hundred feet. Between this and the next range of grotesque hills, is the cultivated valley of Moka, with its numerous cottages. From this valley the bazaar or market of Port Louis is chiefly supplied with fruit and vegetables. Goats and monkeys inhabit these hills. I saw one of the former at the top, and in descending, heard the chattering of some of the latter. A monkey, alarmed by my approach, precipitately escaped from a tree, and made off in such haste as scarcely to allow me time to see him. Two species are met with in this Island. Large snails, with elongated, mottled shells, also abound in these mountains, and a species of starling, *Pastor tristis* or *crisatellus*, called in the colony, the Martin, which was originally introduced for the purpose of destroying locusts, a service that it has successfully performed, is also abundant here. Possibly this bird may be the cause of insects of the larger kinds being universally few in the Mauritius. Among the many beautiful shrubs on these mountains are *Andromeda salicifolia*, and two species of Coffee, *Coffea mauritiana* and *macrocarpa*.

18th. At half-past eight o'clock in the morning, we went to John le Brun's little chapel, where there was a service in French. The congregation was chiefly creole; many of them nominally Roman Catholic. At the conclusion, I