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.

The fertile Indian Ocean island of Mauritius was uninhabited until the seventeenth century. The Cantino map of 1502 suggests that Arab/Swahili navigators were the first to sight the island. They were followed in the early sixteenth century by Portuguese mariners who came to call the island Cirne (the island of the Swan). Portugal, however, did not attempt to settle. In 1598, the Dutch fleet of Admirals van Warwyck and van Neck arrived at the island and renamed it Mauritius, after Maurice of Nassau. The first Dutch attempt at colonisation of Mauritius began in 1638. Four years later the island was used by Abel Tasman as an important base for his historic 1744-97

William Hodges, Dodo and Red Parakeet, c. 1773
Oil on academy board; 23 x 27.5 cm
From the Rex Nan Kivell Collection [NK5827].
From the Pictorial Collection

expedition which discovered Van Diemen’s Land and New Zealand. Because the colony received little external support, the first attempt at settlement was not a success and in 1658 the island was abandoned.

Another colonial experiment was mounted in 1664. Again the colonists were afforded little external support. In 1710 the Dutch left Mauritius for good. Except for a few vague ruins, a number of place names and several introduced species, today there is little evidence of Dutch endeavours on the island.

It was during Dutch rule that the famous dodo became extinct.
Isle de France joined the fray as corsairs. Armed local merchants and commerce-raiding came to be major local industries and enabled the island to survive the revolutionary decade as a semi-independent entity under the tricolour. During the brief Peace of Amiens, two trading expeditions were sent to Port Jackson from the island, but renewed fighting smashed prospects for trade. Eventually, blockading British naval forces tightened their grip. It was during this period that Matthew Flinders was interned for six-and-a-half years on the island.

In December 1810, ten thousand British and Indian troops landed on the Isle de France. With no prospect of support from France, the colony capitulated under terms which respected the laws, customs, religion and property of the settlers. Britain retained control of the island after the Treaty of Paris in 1814 and reverted to the use of the old Dutch name of Mauritius.

During the early years of British rule, the island was integrated into the imperial order. Between 1820 and 1834 Britain even found it convenient to have the Catholic Church in Australia officially administered from Mauritius. These early years of British rule were also characterised by a major expansion of the island's sugar industry. Aside from Britain, Australia soon became an important market for Mauritian sugar. In April 1827, Governor Darling wrote that 'Mauritius...may be considered as almost exclusively supplying the colony [of New South Wales] with sugar'.

Most of the important merchants in Hobart and Launceston also traded with Mauritius. For the greater part of the nineteenth century over two hundred Mauritian convicts were transported to Australia.

The balance of trade between Australia and Mauritius was firmly in Mauritius's favour. Mauritian sugar exports to the Australian colonies, as a whole, peaked at 110,792,752 pounds in 1877-78. This mercantile relationship, which ultimately made Australia Mauritius's most important trading partner during the nineteenth century, also had some implications for immigration. It was on the merchant vessels bringing sugar and other commodities to Australia that over two hundred Mauritian convicts were transported to Australia. Many of these convicts were slaves or former slaves. Later, Mauritian diggers in well-organised companies made their way to the Victorian goldfields on merchant vessels. Dependence on Mauritian sugar also stimulated attempts to develop Australia's own sugar industry. These endeavours, in turn, attracted a small wave of skilled Mauritian sugar planters and chemists who helped pioneer our sugar industry. But aside from these three immigrant waves, the export of Mauritian sugar to Australia brought numerous Mauritian merchants, seamen and their family members to Australian shores. Some stayed in Australia and were among the earliest free Mauritians. They now number over 18,000 and include individuals who have made an important contribution to our cultural life; for example, Odile Le Clezio who played Marie Curie in Yahoo Serious's *Young Einstein*, Henri Wilden who was for many years principal tenor of the Sydney Opera Company and pianist Bernard Marie.
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 retrospective de l'île Maurice. 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 from 1825 to 1841. Such a register can be a great help to a researcher trying to find the date of someone’s death or their 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 Mauritian 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 Bauge d’Aritat, Doruty de Grandpré and the de 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 Nobliaire de l’ancienne île 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 Mauritian 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 Mauritian 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 also 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.

Dr Edward Duiker has written several books on Mauritian and Dutch history in Australia and his book Molly and the Rajah (with Coralie Younger) is being adapted as a feature film. He is currently researching the life of the Swedish naturalist Daniel Solander (1733–82) who accompanied Cook and Banks on the Endeavour.