Tropical Island Treasure

THE MAURITIUS COLLECTION

Helen Morgan explores the Library’s rich collection of books, journals and manuscripts from Mauritius, acquired in 1968 after the death of Mauritian collector, André de Chapuiset Le Merle

Mauritius is but a name to most people in England unless they collect stamps. Thus begins a treatise on colonial cooking published in the then British colony in 1954. This book, in ‘English and in French with a glossary in Hindustani’, is one of some 4500 items that make up the National Library of Australia’s Mauritius Collection—an outstanding resource revealing the Indian Ocean island to be much more than the sum of the philatelic, tropical and ornithological parts on which its fame rests.

The collection was formed in Mauritius by collector André de Chapuiset Le Merle (1898–1966) and was so greatly valued by him that it received special attention in his will. He wished the collection—books, maps, manuscripts, stamps, coins and bank notes—to remain intact and, mindful of the problems of humidity which plagued parts of Mauritius, to be kept somewhere warm and dry. He hoped too that the task of collecting new publications concerning Mauritius (and ‘old publications which have not yet been found’) would be continued. Should the collection be sold, his preference was for it to go in its entirety to either a family member dedicated to maintaining its integrity, the Royal Society of Arts and Sciences of Mauritius, or the Mauritius Archives. In spite of this, after de Chapuiset Le Merle’s death the collection was offered to the fledgling University of Mauritius, which did not take up the offer, possibly because it could not afford it or, perhaps, see the value in it. In 1968, the collection (books, journals and manuscripts only) was purchased by the National Library of Australia through a British book dealer.

It was a landmark year for Mauritius. The island, uninhabited before the arrival of the Dutch in 1598, was subsequently settled by the French in 1715 before becoming a colonial possession of the British in 1810. On 12 March 1968, the country finally gained its independence from Britain, an event which saw a rise in emigration and many Mauritians move to Australia, as did de Chapuiset Le Merle’s fabulous collection. Indeed, the mass exodus of Mauritians to Australia at this time (along with Australia’s
links to Mauritius through travel and exploration) was a key factor in the Library’s decision to acquire the collection.

A national library was established in Mauritius in 1999. Its Director, Yves Chan Kam Lon, visited the National Library of Australia in 2005 and examined the Mauritius Collection, declaring it priceless. Comparative investigations between the holdings in the two national institutions have revealed that up to 20 per cent of de Chapuiset Le Merle’s collection now in Australia is missing from its Mauritian counterpart.

The focus of the National Library of Australia’s collection is material about Mauritius or published in Mauritius. Imprints range in date from the mid-1600s to the 1960s—the earliest text is Sir Thomas Herbert’s A Relation of Some Yeares Travaile, Begunne Anno 1626. Into Afrique and the Greater Asia (London, 1634). André de Chapuiset Le Merle was passionate about the history of the Mascarene Islands and Mauritius in particular, writing Précis d’histoire de l’île Maurice (XVe au XVIIIe siècle) in 1950. At around this time, another Mauritian historian, Auguste Toussaint (1911–1987), was undertaking his monumental researches (with Harold Adolphe) into the bibliographical history of the island, which resulted in their Bibliography of Mauritius 1502–1954: Covering the Printed Record, Manuscripts, Archivalia and Cartographic Material, published in 1956. (Signed copies of both de Chapuiset Le Merle’s and Toussaint’s works are in the Mauritius Collection.)

Toussaint hoped that the bibliography would guard against inaccuracies in the island’s historical literature. In part, de Chapuiset Le Merle’s collecting may be understood in this context, explaining the abundance of government reports and statistical publications on topics ranging from geography, flora, fauna, hygiene and medicine to the sugar industry. Issues of sanitation and the water supply, no less relevant or critical today, are outlined in numerous reports from the 1890s. Facsimiles of two of the original records, Acte de prise de possession de l’île-de-France du 20 septembre 1715 and the Original Agreement for the Surrender of Mauritius to the British, Dated 3rd December, 1810, document pivotal moments in the island’s government and are important additions to the collection.

Most of the material is in French or English, reflecting France’s and Britain’s long periods of sovereignty over Mauritius from 1715 to 1968. When the British took possession of the island in 1810, they agreed to respect the culture, language, legal system and religion of the incumbent French, and for many years afterwards French remained the dominant means of communication. English eventually replaced French as the language spoken in government and the courts (and is today the country’s official language), but it never escaped the confines of its ‘official’ status—a tension evident in the titles of certain twentieth-century pamphlets in the collection, including Règlements de la Mauritius Turf Club. French remains
Mauritian Creole, a rare second edition (1831) of François Chrestien’s *Les essais d’un bobre africain*, a book of fables and poems by the seventeenth-century French writer Jean de La Fontaine, presented in both Creole and French.

The apparent dryness of some of the titles belies the occasional quirky nature of their contents. *Itinerary of Roads in Mauritius*, written in 1925 by the Assistant Director of Public Works and Surveys, sets out various routes around the island, giving the mileage between villages and landmarks, along with explanations of how places and roads came to be named and other points of historical interest. At Pointe d’Esny in the southeast of the island, we are told, it was still possible until ‘quite recently’ to see the tomb of the famed racehorse Faughaballan, whose owner ‘shot this brilliant animal dead in 1848 because he did not want him to belong to a careless owner’. The entry on the Camp Fouqueraux branch road in the Plaines Wilhems district relates that Caromi Fouqueraux, whose name the road bears, was once called ‘Le Prince Charmant’ and was famous for giving balls and fetes, citing these occasions in an 1861 account titled *Guêpes mauriciennes*. Fortunately for those interested in accounts of nineteenth-century entertaining in Mauritius, this book is also part of the Mauritius Collection.

More poignantly, ‘Le crime de la citadelle’, a scrapbook of newsclippings about the murder of two siblings aged five and eight who disappeared on their way to school in Port Louis in October 1951, follows the subsequent trial and hanging of the three men convicted of the crime.

De Chapuiset Le Merle had an eye for a worthy signature. A copy of H.E. Strickland and A.G. Melville’s famous 1848 text *The Dodo and Its Kindred* is inscribed by the authors to zoologist, polymath and British Museum curator John Edward Gray (1800–1875)—an appropriate communion of personalities.

One of the strengths of the Mauritius Collection is the number of nineteenth-century histories and travel narratives in French, complementing those in English in state and university libraries.
in Australia. Nor is more modern tourism overlooked, with a number of government-sponsored booklets from the 1930s to the 1960s containing marvellous black and white photography that documents the changing face of the island.

Two of Mauritius’ best known writers and poets, Robert-Edward Hart (1891–1954) and Malcolm de Chazal (1902–1981), are represented by more than fifty works, most in their native French, with a few of Hart’s translated into English. Marc Serge Rivière referred to the Library’s copies of de Chazal’s *lésou* (1950) and *Judas* (1953) and reproduced illustrations from the Mauritius Collection when producing an edition of de Chazal’s work (*Théâtre de Malcolm de Chazal, Best Graphics*, 2006).

In addition to these and the rare edition of Chrestien’s early text in Mauritian Creole is another important sliver of the island’s literary heritage—an original manuscript of poetry and a mock epic, ‘La Ruspaïade’, by Barthélemy Huet de Froiberville (1761–1835). Journalist, historian, scientist, poet and philosopher, de Froiberville was important in the literary and scientific circles of his day in Mauritius, spanning the rule of both the French and the British. The manuscript that de Chapuiset Le Merle probably managed to acquire from the de Froiberville family, who still possess most of the writer’s archives, is believed to be the earliest poetry in French that is extant from the Indian Ocean region. It was rediscovered in the National Library of Australia’s collection by Mauritian academics, the late Gérard Fanchin and Marc Serge Rivière, who transcribed and edited the text, and had it published as *Les orage de mars* (Préciygraph, 2005).

One item held by the Library, but not acquired as part of the Mauritius Collection, is a bound copy of the English language newspaper, the *Mauritius Times*. It covers the period from the paper’s inception in July 1848 to May 1849 when Governor Sir William Gomm left the island for a new posting in India. This was not long after September 1847 when postage stamps were issued for the first time in Mauritius. Lady Gomm was one of the first users of the new postage stamps, including them on the entree cards for a ball she held. (Mauritius is famous for its stamps as it was one of the first countries in the world to produce them, endearing the country to generations of stamp collectors. The extremely rare first issue is among the world’s most expensive philatelic items, worth millions of dollars today.) A green leather bookplate inside the bound volume of the newspaper indicates that this was Lady Gomm’s personal copy, possibly a presentation gift on leaving the colony.

The quality and quantity of de Chapuiset Le Merle’s collection provide great scope to study French and British colonial publishing traditions from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries and, as Auguste Toussaint wrote, prove that in light of ‘the remoteness of the island from all centres of learning and the difficulties of book-production … the output of the *intelligentsia* … was something of an achievement’. According to the 2001 Australian census data, 80 per cent of the nearly 17 000-strong Mauritius-born community of Australia live in Victoria and New South Wales. The National Library of Australia is well placed to support this community, holding in trust an increasingly important and valuable slice of Mauritius’ cultural heritage.

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