

12 RÉUNION AND RELATED MATTERS

Réunion is a tropical volcanic island at the southern end of the Mascarene Ridge in the Indian Ocean. Slightly larger than neighbouring Mauritius, 100 miles farther east, it is oval in shape and around 30 miles from NE to SW, 45 miles from NW to SE. The island is situated at about 21°S, and its therefore at the same latitude as south central Madagascar, 400 miles to its west.

As befits its comparatively recent volcanic origin, much of the topography is precipitous, notably in the north central parts, where there are three large calderas formed when the volcano three times blew its top in what must have been spectacular explosions producing global effects. Three peaks around the edges of the calderas exceed 9,000ft, of which the Piton des Neiges (10,069ft) is the highest. Volcanic activity in recent years has been confined to occasional lava flows, the most recent to my knowledge being in 1986.

The island, previously uninhabited, was discovered by the Portuguese (it is believed by Pedro de Mascarenhas) in the early 16th Century, claimed by France in 1638, and the first small colony set up in 1665 by the French East India Company. The motivation for colonization of what was originally called the Ile de Bourbon was initially to grow coffee - and then sugar cane - by the use of East African slave labour. After the abolition of slavery in 1848, indentured labourers were brought in from countries all round the Indian Ocean. In 1946 Réunion ceased to be a colony and became an overseas department of France.

The multi-racial population near the end of the Twentieth Century comprises well over 500,000 people who all call themselves créoles but still tend to stick together in the broad ethnic groupings of Créoles Blancs, Cafres, Malabars, Zarabs and Chinois. After more than 300 years, though, it is not surprising that these groupings are somewhat frayed at the edges. Créole, a very chewed up version of French, is the universal language, although French is also widely spoken.

Judging by the local telephone directory, by far the largest family in Réunion is that with the surname Hoarau, and I take this to indicate that the Hoaraus were probably one of the earliest French families to establish themselves on the island. In 1856 was born Hermence Hoarau, the grandmother of Lucette. She was an attractive looking young lady (we have a photograph) who unfortunately was to live only to the age of 37. In her short life she had time, however, to marry a Claude Marie Perciot, born in 1847 (believed to be a customs official) and to produce eight children. Unlike his wife, Claude Marie Perciot must have been a 1st generation Réunionnais, since in his case the only Perciots in the telephone directory are two of his known descendents.

Amelie Florencia Perciot (the mother of Lucette), the youngest of the eight children, was born in St Pierre, on the west coast of Réunion, on 7th January 1890. In 1893 the Perciot family moved to Diego Suarez as part of the French colonization of Madagascar which was occurring at that time – most of the Madagascar French créoles originated from Réunion (and many have now returned there). At the age of 3 Amelie Florencia lost her mother, and at the age of 13 she lost her father also. He was killed in falling from a horse in Diego Suarez. At the age of 13, that is to say in 1903,

Amelie Florencia therefore went to work as a waitress in a restaurant in the town run by Nini, her eldest sister.

This was the start of a fairly tough life for Amelie Florencia, but despite a succession of problems (including the death of her husband, M. Brun) and a clear lack of arithmetical (read financial) ability, Mme Brun remained doggedly determined, bringing six children up to adulthood largely on her own, and also rescuing an undefined number of small children belonging to relatives. She was short of stature. In later life she was rather stout and moved with difficulty. She rarely, if ever, smiled and did not talk a great deal, but was one of those solid reliable characters who without complaining gets on with life through thick and thin, and always does their best for those who look to them.

When Hitler's war caused me to come to Madagascar in early 1944, Mme Brun was living in Joffreville, a hill village about 18 to 20 miles south of Diego. She had what can best be described as a small holding involving zebus (local hump-backed cattle), pigs and chicken, also a garden with bananas, lychees and other tropical fruits. In addition she ran the village bakery. There were several Malgache workers of both sexes living happily in low huts made of branches and palm leaves at the back of the house.

Lucette was doing her mother's arithmetic, but was also spending a good deal of time with sister Suzanne and her husband Raymond in Diego Suarez, where the latter was well placed as Director of the local office of the CMAO (Compagnie Maritime de l'Afrique Orientale). The town of Diego Suarez is located on the south side of one of the world's best harbours, although unfortunately, in economic terms, without much of a hinterland. In addition to Lucette, Mme Brun's household included, whilst I was there, a variable number of children who were miscellaneous semi-abandoned nieces and nephews, the core group comprising Luluce, Dédé and Guy.

In the Madagascar chapter I have gone into some detail about the French society to which I was introduced very soon after arriving in Diego Suarez in 1944. This was essentially a mixture of metropolitan French, centred round Raymond, and Réunion French, centred round Suzanne. Suzanne was, however, far from being a "Pip d'Anamakia", which was the somewhat derisory name applied to the local Réunion créole peasant farmers. She was, for example, at the time applying herself resolutely to self-education by spending something like four hours a day neatly writing out lessons in English grammar from a book she had managed to obtain. Nevertheless I did, with Lucette, visit a number of these créole farmers who were friends or relatives. They invariably had large families with many children, living in makeshift farms worked with the aid of Malgache workers who were not much in evidence, except that there was usually a Malgache maid to help with the kids.

The connection between this society and the headquarters officers of the 15th (EA) Heavy Anti-Aircraft Regiment, to which I was attached, was initiated by a Lieut Ange some time before I came on the scene. One day he was walking past the house of Mme Brun in Joffreville and attempted to chat up Lucette, who happened to be in the garden. He told her she reminded him of his wife. Lieut Ange got very little encouragement from Lucette, her standard response, employing her limited supply of English, apparently being - "You go bed, Monsieur Ange."

However, a sale of eggs took place and this established a relationship in which the Leclerts – frequent visitors to Mme Brun – became involved. Raymond was strongly pro-General de Gaul, and hence strongly pro-British. It was not long before the Leclerts invited Lieut Ange to visit them in Diego and to bring some of his friends. This contact rapidly grew into a full blown social arrangement, with a busy round of dinners and visits to dances, cinemas, homes and officers' messes. The Brits were far from home and keen on sympathetic civilian company; the French were glad to have contact with people who had an educated (or at least semi-educated) background.

My first sight of Réunion itself was from the top of Signal Mountain in Mauritius in late July 1945, and I also glimpsed it from the plane as I returned from Mauritius to Diego en route to Mombasa. At 100 or so miles away it appeared distinctly hazy. Also it appeared very steep sided, no doubt due to only the tops of the volcanic complex being above the horizon.

For a long time that was as near as I was to get to the island, but we frequently heard of it. When Madagascar obtained its independence from France in the sixties most of the créoles departed, either back to Réunion, or more often to France. In either case, since the new government of Madagascar was both unfriendly and shambolic, these créoles came to regard Réunion rather than Madagascar as their country of origin, even though there had been time for a generation of them to have been born in Madagascar.

Raymond and Suzanne did, though, stay on in Madagascar for business reasons for quite a few years after Lucette and I had left, and Suzanne also established a small business importing Réunion lacework. This involved her in occasional visits to her suppliers in Réunion. Lacework was a traditional product of young white Réunion females – perhaps because very little else by way of a career was open to them. Lucette was herself quite a dab hand at lacework when I first knew her, and in fact she presented some of her work to my mother as a peace offering prior to coming to England.

On one of Suzanne's visits she attempted to reclaim possession of some land in Réunion which had belonged to Grandfather Perciot when he left in 1893. She discovered, however, that the lapse of time had put it out of the legal reach of the Perciot heirs.

As from 1946, however, my personal interest in the Réunion connection – in the form of Lucette – was transferred to the UK, and like everybody else we began the task of reorganizing ourselves after the major disruption which Homo sapiens had, no doubt for adequate reasons, inflicted upon himself.

In the immediate aftermath of the war housing was in short supply, and it was convenient for us to live with my parents during the winters (at 17 The Valley Green, Welwyn Garden City), when I was working at the Geological Survey office in London; in the 'summer' months (usually Easter to mid-November) we migrated to rented houses in my field mapping area in the East Midlands. This arrangement worked well. Lucette got on excellently with my mother - who applied herself to teaching her English - and generally getting used to the Anglo-Saxon way of life. My parents ceded a bedroom and their dining room to us so that we could live as separate

a life as possible. We purchased our own “utility” furniture, and to formalize the arrangement we paid a reasonable commercial rental for the rooms.

At that time, if one wished to build a house, as we did, one put one’s name on a waiting list for a licence, and one waited. It was not a question of first come first served, but of how deserving one was judged to be. Points were allocated depending on length of war service, numbers of children, whether one was local or not, and so on. The more points, the sooner one came to the top of the list. We came to the top in 1951, and duly commissioned an architect and a builder to construct our first house at 51 Sherrardspark Road, WGC.

The Réunion thread, in the form of Lucette, continued throughout the Geological survey years and the times beyond. Perhaps it culminated in a visit to the island itself, the fabled motherland, in November 1988, with Lucette, Suzanne and Bernard Leclert, and Marcelle.. We rented a car and a logis in the hills behind St Pierre. I kept a detailed diary of our doings, took many photographs and Bernard compiled a video record.

How, though, should I formulate a summation of this, well, colourful, and indeed to me important, place?

The island is an ordinary enough mid-ocean volcanic complex, but that means it is almost everywhere possessed of spectacular views from rising ground, with interior scenery dominated by the near-vertical flanks of its great explosion calderas. The blue of the ocean and the varied greens of the land are its dominant colours, sometimes swamped by the crimsons and yellows of sunset flooding in from the direction of Africa. In a natural condition, the slopes are smothered with dense vegetation ranging from rampant tropical jungle merging upwards to rampant temperate forest – every tree dripping with tangles of silvery grey lichen.

Although uninhabited when discovered in the Sixteenth Century, the island must now count as heavily populated, if not over-populated. The average is something like 500 persons per square mile, but the inhabitants are in fact concentrated on the lower slopes, since much of the interior is steep and/or difficult of access. In 1988 some of these internal areas were still being opened up by road construction.

As agriculture is the basis of the economy the flatter ground is almost everywhere cultivated, the natural vegetation being spared only on steep slopes and the recent lava fields to the south. The weathered volcanic soil gives every impression of high fertility, and as befits the range of altitude-dependent climatic zones, the variety of produce is huge. Sugar cane dominates the agriculture of the tropical areas. In its production there is demonstrably room both for black creoles using the local zebus (humped cattle) as their motive force, and for large mechanized operations. Covered markets in the principal towns contain a wide range of plump and colourful fruits and vegetables, together with live rabbits, chicken and ducks in stacked cages. In conformity with the unfortunate French custom, the fate of the animals once sold is to

have their legs tied together to facilitate transport to the pot in an upside down condition

It is the masses of brilliant flowers, though, which dominate the markets, and a love of flowers is everywhere apparent, many houses being festooned with geraniums, bougainvillia, hibiscus and orchids in arrays of pots and troughs. On the higher lands, scented geraniums form an important crop, where they are gathered and distilled in crude stills in the fields. The product is geranium oil, apparently used as a base for perfumes. Strawberries were much in evidence in the fields opposite our logis; in November lychees were just coming into season at lower levels.

So, a well endowed fertile island where humans have, as in many other well endowed fertile lands, flourished a bit too much for their own good. In this case it has been saved from becoming just another third world pauper-state by having been made a Department of metropolitan France. Réunion is therefore a far outlying part of the European Union, and generous French social security applies. French educational standards also apply. It follows that there is a European – indeed French - standard of living. 100,000 cars are reputed to circulate on the island, working out at about one per family, and the roads – if often twisty - are of good quality. Housing is traditional French colonial.

The people of all colours are well fed in a French kind of way, well clothed, and seemingly well content. There are flowers and there is the cheerful créole music, to which one can but dance. Good, n'est ce pas?

There is a downside though. The cost of living is high. Destructive tropical cyclones occur from time to time. More seriously for me, as a semi-aquatic human, the island is ringed, not by coral reefs enclosing tranquil lagoons full of exotic marine life, but for the most part by a ferocious sea hammering at black basalt cliffs. Why the corals have not done their thing as in Fiji, or indeed as in neighbouring Mauritius, I do not know. There seems to be only one half-decent beach, south of St Giles les Bains on the west coast, but the lagoon is shallow and the fauna impoverished.

A hugely important element of our visit to the island was the presence of local relatives. At the airport we met up with Luluce Perciot, married to Michelle, residents in France and travelling independently but by design visiting Réunion at the same time as ourselves. Luluce is a son of Lucette's Tonton Lolo, brother of Memere Cecilia, and was one of the small semi-abandoned children in her household when I was in Diego. Luluce is therefore first cousin of Lucette, Suzanne and Marcelle.

With Luluce at the airport was Roger Lauret, grandson of Tante Marie (sister of Memere Cecilia, and another of the children of her household whilst I was there – aged 5 at that time). Roger is married to Yvette (créole from Joffreville), lives in Tampon, Réunion, and was our principal local contact. Roger and Yvette have five children – Claudine (absent due to being married and away in France), Patricia (23, distinctly decorative but unmarried, helps in house, does the family letter writing), Isabelle (19, studious, plump, pleasant), Michael (about 15, trying to study when surrounded by convivial folk), Lauren Lauret (about 3, bumbling sweetly). All of these are third cousins.

We also twice met Yolande, daughter of Yvonne Paris and granddaughter of Tante Nini. Tante Nini was the oldest sister of Memere Cecilia, and the person in whose restaurant Memere Cecilia worked at age 13 when her father died. Yolande lives in St

Joseph, Réunion. Aged about 60, she has a distinct resemblance to Lucette, but with fluttering hands – three daughters, all decorative if one goes by their photos.

Also in Réunion, but not judged suitable for visits on account of lack of recent contact, were Antoine Perciot of Bèrive (70-year old eldest son of Tonton Joseph); and also another Perciot, son of Dédé and grandson of Tonton Julien. Dédé was a ten year old girl – yet one more member of Memere Cecilia's salvaged brood, when I was in Diego.

Nobody, though, could have been more welcoming than all the "Perciots" with whom we actually met up. Quadruple kisses of joy all round were the order of the day, and despite their limited resources the family of Roger entertained us to several meals best described as feasts. On the basis of this slender sample, supplementing my experiences in Europe, the strength of family links through the generations seems to be a defining characteristic of the people of Réunion. Anyhow, that remains one of the strongest of my perceptions.

Then there was that haunting créole song, popular in the island at the time:

P'tite fleur fanée
P'tite fleur aimée
Dis à moi toujours
Quoiq'ce' l'amour