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Col. Nicolas Pike: homme extraordinaire

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It is a pleasure to join this group celebrating the bicentennial of the birth of Colonel Nicolas Pike. Before delving into the delicious details of his life, I would like you to entertain a few thoughts by way of a preface.

Homme Extraordinaire: Several other titles suggested themselves for these remarks: consul extraordinaire, diplomat extraordinaire, natural scientist extraordinaire. I chose this one, homme extraordinaire, because it includes all the others. Nicolas Pike was indeed an extraordinary man. He embodies the traditional Western ideal of an educated, cultivated, sophisticated, well-rounded person – in short, a Renaissance man. I trust you will reach the same conclusion after these remarks. End of Preface. Now, let's go.

Here he is: Col. Nicolas Pike in a drawing familiar to Mauritians from the famous book he wrote, *Sub-Tropical Rambles*[1]. He is in his early 50s, surrounded by "his collection" of plants, one bird, his dog Quilp, a couple of corals, and a shell. He looks very dignified and stately, especially with his furrowed brow. There's a lot of gravitas here. A single drawing can never capture the full spectrum of a personality, of course, and the jaunty angle of his hat does suggest another aspect.

The collection of plants in this drawing reminds us of a passage in the preface of *Sub-Tropical Rambles:* "In a second volume, nearly completed, I propose treating more fully the Fauna and Flora of Mauritius." Alas, many have searched in vain for this volume. It has been lost, as have been almost all his letters to family and friends -- and he was a prodigious correspondent -- and much of his correspondence to other natural scientists around the world over several decades. What we know about Pike comes primarily from his book and articles he has written, a few letters to him from Louis Agassiz, the founder of the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard and an eminence grise among American naturalists, and a local Brooklyn New York newspaper that followed him closely for more than 50 years[2].

[1] Pike, N. 1873. *Sub-tropical rambles in the land of Aphanapteryx. Personal experiences, adventures & wanderings in and around the island of Mauritius.* London: Sampson Low, Marston, Low & Searle, & New York: Harper Brothers. 511pp. NB: footnotes throughout added by Anthony Cheke.

[2] The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (henceforth 'BDE') during 1846-1895 – see Dittberner, J.L. 2014. Nicolas Pike – natural scientist extraordinaire. *Proc. Roy. Soc. Arts Sci. Mauritius* 8: 117-139.

Pike is a great American naturalist, but it must be recognized that he is not well known now in the United States. He was much better known in the United States and internationally in the 19th century, especially in the East and in New York in particular.

I would not have known him at all were it not for a brief article in the Mauritian periodical *Prosi* in 1990 by Maurice Paturau[3]. My wife Ghislaine Dalais found an article about the 19th century US Consul to Mauritius Nicolas Pike and his collection of Indian Ocean fish paintings[4]. She and I subsequently visited the American Museum of Natural History in New York City to view the collection. We were simply astonished by the beauty of the watercolors. With support from the museum's Director of Special Collections, we concocted big plans to publish a book. What with raising children and other activities, those plans wilted and died, but we never forgot the astonishing collection and the beauty of the paintings. The scope of our interests later grew to fit the fish paintings into Pike's broader life, and it was there I discovered that it was his friend (and later wife) Maria Louisa Hadley[5] who painted the fish, not Pike himself, though it remains known as the Pike collection. But we will get into that later in more detail later.

It was with delight and enthusiasm we were asked to return to the American Museum of Natural History in New York City and select 35 paintings of 468 in the Pike collection for the Blue Penny Museum's bicentennial exhibit in Mauritius. The museum staff welcomed us warmly and facilitated the exhibit at the Blue Penny by gratuitously providing high-definition photographs. Upon our request, they also contacted the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology to see if the museum still possessed the preserved *pikei*[6] fish we had identified in a painting folio. Indeed, it still had that *pikei* fish in alcohol sent by Pike to Louis Agassiz[7]. It was there we also found a few important letters from Agassiz to Pike. The generosity and courtesy of the American Museum of Natural History have been very helpful for this exhibit and celebration.

Nicolas Pike is a man of so many major achievements I feel I have a tiger by the tail in trying to tell part of his story. First, there are no indications and no evidence anywhere that Pike studied painting, drawing or design or that he took classes or had formal training of any kind in the natural sciences. He was self-taught, must have read a great deal, and learned from discussing with other members of the natural history organizations that he so deeply enjoyed.

Born on January 26, 1818[8], the fifth of 11 children, to a prominent New England family, he apparently showed a proclivity and delight for nature even very young, and rather than go to Harvard or join the military as others in his family had done and urged him to do so, he struck off on his own and headed for Brooklyn, New York in 1839, when he was 21. He found work variously described as an employee of a paper business. He married sometime during these early years, but all we know is that his wife died in 1845. He remarried into a prosperous Brooklyn family in 1846, and had four children in the next several years. He seemed to be quite gregarious. He joined the Mendelsohn Society and was known for a good voice, which he shared publicly with others, and was active in the local military reserve unit, reflecting a long family tradition.

It is remarkable that his naturalist dedication to study and collection emerges immediately. He threw himself into such activities with great energy. As early as 1842 – he's been in Brooklyn now for 3 years and is 24 years old -- he gave a collection of birds to the Brooklyn Natural History Society and began his collection and study of the algae of Long Island (finally finished as a collection and published in 1885). His intelligence and activism soon gained public recognition., and the list of his achievements in the next several years is impressive. He became interested in the new technology of the daguerrotype and soon was elected Vice President of the New York Photographic Society. In 1849 he was elected President of the Microscopical Society and Vice President of the Scientific Club of New York. He was a key person on the introduction of 'English' sparrows *Passer domesticus* to the United States to counteract the depredation of inch-worms

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[3] Paturau. M. 1990. Consul extraordinaire. *Prosi* 256: 16-17

[4] Gudger, E.W. 1929. Nicolas Pike and his unpublished paintings of the fishes of Mauritius, western Indian Ocean, with an index to the fishes. *Bull. Am. Mus. Nat. Hist.* 58: 489-530.

[5] Pike dedicated his book to 'M.L.L' "for the valuable assistance rendered me whilst writing its pages; also for the kind care and attention bestowed upon me when stricken down with fever alone in a strange land..."[in 1867]. Paturau (*loc.cit.*) named Pike's friend as Madame Léa Lubbock, a currently untraceable 'modiste' running a shop in Port Louis and who was said to have contributed significantly to the illustrations in the book, which Paturau disbelieved, citing the publisher's prospectus (not seen by me) as saying that the illustrations were from 'the author's own sketches', in fact his photographs. As we know Marie Hadley painted the fishes for Pike, Paturau (or his source) may have conflated stories of two different women.

[6] Blacklip damselfish (*Pomacentrus pikei*)

[7] This was formally described from Pike's specimen by Richard Bliss in 1883: Descriptions of new species of Mauritian fishes. *Trans. Roy. Soc. Arts Sci. Mauritius* NS 13: 45-63.

[8] see also: Dittberner 2014, Gudger 1929 *locs. cit.* & Barnwell, P.J. 1945. Pike, Nicholas [sic]. *Dictionary of Mauritian Biography:* 151-2.

Euonomos subsignarius devastating the trees[9]. He was elected President of the Natural History Society in 1849 and in 1850 Director of the Brooklyn Institute, an important and thriving intellectual scientific center. The same year, 1850, he was elected a corresponding member of the Zoological Society of London and Vice President of the *Société Universelle pour l'Encouragement des Arts et de L'Industrie.*

This is a dizzying accumulation of titles and honors for a person in his early 30s. I have never had the impression that the titles and honors were the results of self-promotion or a matter of Pike's personal ambitions. Rather, it seems they are indicative and public recognition of a person of exceptional quality, intelligence, and uncommon commitment.

There is, moreover, the matter of his uncommon, seemingly boundless energy. Following Pike's life and activities sometimes feels exhausting. He never tires. (Perhaps once, visiting Round Island.) His curiosity and his need to collect, categorize and understand are without limit. You may recall he became so restless waiting at the hunt for the deer to arrive that he left the stand to examine the flora. As he said, "I only regretted I was not at the *chasse aux plantes* instead of *aux cerfs*." He is simply passionate about understanding the natural world. If the contemporary advice to the young seeking what to do with their life is "Follow your passion," Pike is a splendid exemplar. He followed his passion.

If indeed he was so passionate about studying nature, why did his life work take a major turn in 1852 when at the age of 34 accepted the post of US General Counsel to Portugal? We do not have even a clue. He served there as a diplomat for six years, by all accounts conscientiously completing his diplomatic responsibilities without abandoning his curiosity and his commitment to studying nature. In fact, his greatest achievement in his Portuguese diplomatic years derives from this passion. A disease was devastating Portuguese vineyards and "threatening all the valuable wine districts of Europe." Pike was asked by the Portuguese government to study the problem. He produced a thorough report with drawings showing the various stages of the disease and suggested, with some trepidation, a solution. The solution was tried, proved successful, and the report was widely circulated to the governments of France and Portugal, read in London, and published by the United States[10].

Returning to the US in 1860, Pike plunged into activities of several scientific organizations in the following years, lecturing on a variety of topics, e.g., the pork worm and the effect of colored light on plant growth[11]. When the American civil war broke out in 1861, he was commissioned as a lieutenant colonel, served as a recruiting agent for the armed forces of the North, and emphasized in lectures photography as a front-line form of battlefield information and intelligence for the armies of the North.

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[9] This was Pike's most far-reaching legacy, introducing a bird, soon unwelcome, that now numbers many tens of millions in the Americas:

> The English Sparrow was first brought to this country, so far as authentic information has reached the Department, in the fall of 1850, when the Hon. Nicolas Pike and other directors of the Brooklyn Institute imported eight pairs into Brooklyn, N. Y.
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> As this first importation of Sparrows is of much interest, we give in full Mr. Pike's account of it and of the following importation a year or two later. He says :
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> "It was not till 1850 that the first eight pairs were brought from England to the Brooklyn Institute, of which I was then a director. We built a large cage for thorn, and cared for them during the winter months. Early in the spring of 1851 they were liberated, but they did not thrive. In 1852 a committee of members of the Institute was chosen for the re-introduction of these birds, of which I was chairman. Over $200 was subscribed for expenses. I went to England in 1852, on my way to the consul-generalship of Portugal. On my arrival in Liverpool I gave the order for a large lot of Sparrows and song birds to be purchased at once. They were shipped on board the steam-ship *Europa*, if I am not mistaken, in charge of an officer of the ship. Fifty Sparrows were let loose at the Narrows, according to instructions, and the rest on arrival were placed in the tower of Greenwood Cemetery chapel. They did not do well, so were removed to the house of Mr. John Hooper, one of the committee, who offered to take care of them during the winter. In the spring of 1853 they were all let loose in the grounds of Greenwood Cemetery, and a man hired to watch them. They did well and multiplied, and I have original notes taken from time to time of their increase and colonization over our great country."- from Barrows, W.B. 1889. *The English Sparrow in North America.* Washington: Government Printing Office.

[10] The disease was a fungus, powdery mildew, originally called *Oidium tuckeri* (it is still known as 'oidium' in Portugal), now known as *Uncinula necator* (or *Erysiphe necator*), which spread rapidly after first appearing in Europe in England in 1845. Pike must have been alert to trials elsewhere and recommended sulphur fumigation, which saved Portuguese vineyards temporarily until overwhelmed by *Phylloxera* aphid infestation a decade later. Although the oidium outbreak is still mentioned in discussions of Portuguese wine history, the devastation by *Phylloxera* was so much worse, that Pike's successful and locally lauded intervention (see Gudger, *loc.cit.*) has faded from contemporary histories (e.g. Morrow**,** D.W**.** 1973. *Phylloxera* in Portugal**.** *Agricultural History* 47: 235-247).

[11] Reported in the BDE, see Dittberner 2014, loc. cit.)

In 1866 he was offered a diplomatic post in China. He declined, perhaps because of the lingering effects of his second wife's death in 1865. Later in 1866 he accepted the appointment as Consul to Mauritius. As they say, the rest is history.

He arrived after an adventurous four-and-a-half month journey along the East coast of South America, including a strong hurricane which, of course, he analyzed in minute detail[12]. He arrived on January 12, 1867, amid the fierce malaria epidemic of 1867-1868, which took tens of thousands of lives, sometimes as many as 240 a day in Port Louis at its peak. As he recounts in *Sub-Tropical Rambles*, the epidemic took him down for four months, almost, he says, to the edge of the grave[13].

In the first months he reported regularly to the Secretary of State on the devastating impact of the epidemic on Mauritians and Americans[14]. Of the 25 Americans then in Mauritius, 7 died of malaria and many crews of incoming ships came down. He had to report on the deceased Americans and take care of their personal belonging. He himself ministered to the sick on ship when the hospitals were full and, as he recounts in his book, he ministered to others in their homes. He advised the US government to warn ships en route to China to avoid Mauritius. At one point he reported to the Secretary of State that he had two seamen on his hands, one insane, one blind. With the passing of the epidemic and return of his health, his reports to the State department began to reflect the normal work of the consulate.

The position as Consul was no sinecure. The staff was small: he had an Englishman as secretary, two Indian-origin helpers, and an American "outdoor clerk". US interests in Mauritius at this time were overwhelmingly trade and commercial, focusing particularly on whaling[15]. Much reporting to the State Department was bureaucratic in nature, including import-export statistics, vexing maritime problems with abusive captains and crew members, mutinies, deserters, port rates for whalers, the cost of ship repairs, ship arrivals and departures as well as the nature and value of their cargoes, postage costs, etc.

He was able to fulfill his diplomatic duties and still have time to pursue the passion of his life as a natural scientist. He was immensely energetic and productive in this pursuit. Mauritius was the equivalent of Eden for a naturalist, and as he says in *Sub-Tropical Rambles*, he was "bewildered with the beauty of the place." It is no easy task to indicate even summarily the extent of his activities. There is, first of all, the book, *Sub-tropical Rambles***,** a comprehensive look at Mauritius, its history. customs, traditions, and populations, illustrated with 47 engravings of Mauritian places and people. In addition he published several articles, which were carried in the annual *Transactions of the Royal Society of Arts & Sciences*, and he was the first foreigner to become a Vice President of the Royal Society. Pike said he considered this one of the highest compliments ever paid him. He traveled all over Mauritius, its nearby islands, and the Seychelles, observing and collecting specimens of flora and fauna, aiming at that second book.[16]

He became deeply interested in the fish of the Indian Ocean and learned a great deal more, some, no doubt, from Louis Agassiz, the founder of the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard and, as I mentioned earlier, an eminence grise in the world of natural scientists. Evidently Pike contacted Agassiz sometime in 1870. My wife Ghislaine found and carefully read the few extant letters from Agassiz to Pike. In letters responding to Pike in November and December 1870

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[12] Pike's storm analysis was explored at the symposium in a talk entitled *Pike et la "Cyclonomie"* by Jacques Pougnet. See also: Pike, N. 1868. An account of a cyclone, January 6 and 7, 1867, encountered by the United States steamer *Monocacy* while on her passage from Simon's Bay to Mauritius, in the Indian Ocean. *Annual report of the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian Institution ... for the year ended 1867:* 477-481. There are some interesting differences in this account from that given in his book. In the book Pike also commented in detail on a cyclone at Mauritius in 1868.

[13] This personal comment does not in fact appear to be from the book - ASC

[14] Dispatches from US consuls in Port Louis, 1817-1906 (record Group 59), US National Archives (see Ditttberner 2014, loc.cit)

[15] In a talk addressing *Nicolas Pike – Consuls and Whaleships* for the bicentennial, Michael Eric Perrier laid out the legal powers and responsibilities of American Consuls over whaleships, Masters, and whalemen in disputes. "No consul," he argues, could avoid problems arising from the discharge of his duties." The 1872 case study of Pike and Master John Pierce of the whaler *Annie Ann* is particularly enlightening. See also: Busch, B.C. 1994. *Whaling will never do for me - The American whaleman in the Nineteenth Century.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky. 265pp.

[16] In his bicentennial conference paper "The Maverick and the Bureaucrat: the tension between Nicolas Pike and Edward Newton in documenting Mauritian natural history in the 1860a and 1870s" (this issue), Anthony Cheke examines the contrast and differences between the two naturalists exploring Mauritius during the same years, both members of the Royal Society. A "clash of key personalities" occurred – in their writings, not in public. Pike hardly acknowledges even the existence of Newton. Newton is seriously critical of Pike's professional knowledge, especially related to birds, assessing him on one occasion as "an awful liar and humbug", and speaking of his book as "full of gross lies". Cheke notes that Newton never substantiated the claim that Pike lied.

Agassiz expressed his elation that Pike was willing to collaborate on the matter of Indian Ocean fish since he had no other partner in that region. He was eager to give his advice. He advised Pike to send the fish preserved in pickle jars filled with alcohol to preserve the color and even specified that the size of the pickle jar openings should vary so larger fish and other matter easily could be inserted. Pike eventually sent hundreds of fish specimens preserved in alcohol to European and American institutes, in particular, to Louis Agassiz. Pike later boasted "My list of the fish is more than double that of any other collector. It numbers 871 species, of which there were 27 new species and one new genus…"

Many of these fish were painted, and there are now 468 drawings and paintings in seven (or eight) folio volumes found in the New York American Museum of Natural History. According to Nicolas Pike, the painter of the watercolors was Maria Louisa Hadley, the daughter of an English commissioner in South Africa known for her drawing and designs and who moved to Mauritius in 1870. (She later became Mrs. Pike.) Pike later publicly credited her on several occasions for the paintings[17]. He may have guided and probably played some role in their production, but he gave her all the credit. The water color paintings of the fish are masterpieces and magnificent[18] Agassiz also suggested Pike collect corals, shells, and algae and use a dredging method to do so. Pike collected great quantities of these. Some – we do not know how many – went to Agassiz and the Harvard museum where they are today. Others went to museums and organizations around the world. So many went to the Brooklyn Historical Society that it ran out of storage space and pleaded with him to send no more. One meeting of another organization noted: Pike's donations comprise "about 1000 species of shells, 100 species of ferns, 300 species of algae mounted; of all these there are great numbers of duplicates for exchange."

Pike's diplomatic duties and naturalist activities certainly did not exclude a vigorous social life. We know little about this aspect of his life here except from *Sub-Tropical Rambles.* His excursions and explorations usually had a social dimension to judge by his accounts. He gets along well with his companions on his visits around the island and to the outlying islands and describes their series of adventures with pleasure. Hospitality and friendliness, he says in *Sub-Tropical Rambles*, are universal. I suspect he was a welcome dinner guest. Toward the end of his time in Mauritius a small number of critics tried to impugn his reputation. To no avail. Pike forcefully refuted their allegations, and dozens of the leading citizens and businessmen in Mauritius, the United States, and Europe vouched for his reputation and rallied to his support. Hearing the allegations, Louis Agassiz even wrote to President Grant vouching for Pike's integrity.

In early 1873 after 6 years in Mauritius, Pike requested return to the United States for reasons of health[19], apparently a recurrence of dengue fever and malaria. The request was granted, and he left Mauritius in autumn 1873.

Now 55 years old, Nicolas Pike returned to Brooklyn in 1874 and lived for 32 more years, as active as he had been in Mauritius. He and Maria Louisa Hadley married in 1875 and continued their collaboration, often in the context of the same scientific institutions as earlier. The honors continued to accumulate. Again his research, collection, and various activities were too extensive even to summarize. For example, a newspaper report from 1887 mentions thousands of spiders in glass bottles classified in 350 distinct classes by the number and position of their eyes[20]. Many spiders, it says, were drawn by his wife. He kept connections with Mauritius and was later appointed as the principal representative of Mauritius to the 1882 science congress in Boston.

He was almost unstoppable. Almost. His wife died in 1892, her obituary[21] noting that "Her pictures of the fishes of the Indian Ocean, drawn and colored from life" are "among the remarkable instances of her talent and industry."

It was apparently because he fell on hard times in the early years of 1900 that he approached the financier and great collector J P Morgan with the offer to purchase his folios of painted fish. Happily, J P Morgan bought them, then contributed them to the New York American Museum of Natural History, where they rest today, carefully guarded[22]. Nicholas Pike died shortly thereafter in 1905 at the age of 87.

What can we say about the legacy of this great American natural scientist and diplomat? I suggest that his legacy is at least four-fold. First, he represented and advanced American interests in a way that won the respect and even affection of Mauritians. Secondly is the picture of the complexity, variety, and richness of Mauritian people and life he depicted in *Sub-Tropical Rambles*. Thirdly, the collection of Indian Ocean/Mauritian fish his wife painted must be included as a Mauritian treasure. Fourthly and finally is the enormous quantity of fish, corals, shells, and algae now found at the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology – still in need of further examination.

At the end of the well-known monograph he prepared on the Pike fish folios for the American Museum of Natural History, E W Gudger wrote, "To rescue from oblivion the name of this man, to make known his work and particularly his drawings of fishes…these are the purposes of this article." More broadly, they are certainly the purposes of this bicentennial event. Nicolas Pike: *vraiment homme extraordinaire* [truly an extraordinary man].

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[17] see Dittberner (2014) for further details

[18] Emmanuel Richon framed the high-definition photographs provided by the American Museum of Natural History and displayed them well at the Blue Penny Museum

[19] See Cheke *The maverick and the bureaucrat*, this issue, for alternative possible reasons for his leaving Mauritius

[20] BDE 31 July 1887

[21] BDE 25 March 1892

[22] Gudger 1929, *loc. cit.*