

Touring Mauritius on foot or horse, a brief history of ‘rambles’ in the island

Anthony Cheke

139 Hurst Street, Oxford OX4 1HE, U.K.
anthony.cheke@dodobooks.com

While science may praise his museum collections and fish paintings, Nicholas Pike is best known in Mauritius and elsewhere for his book *Subtropical rambles* (Pike 1873). Much of the book is taken up with Pike’s descriptions of his excursions on foot in and around the island, including a tour more or less around the coast. Such tours have quite a long pedigree, and indeed Pike appears to have borrowed his title from a predecessor in the genre, George Clark’s anonymously published *A ramble round Mauritius* of just over a decade earlier (Clark 1859). ‘Rambles’ were generally undertaken by outsiders, French or English, though there is one example by a returned expatriate Mauritian, Alfred Erny. A ‘ramble’ in English is more-or-less a *balade* in French¹, though Bernardin’s tough journey (below) was certainly no mere *balade*!

The first published tour of Mauritius was by Abbé Nicolas-Louis de la Caille (1758) while mapping the island, but this astronomer-surveyor wrote only a very terse account of where he had been, without any accompanying description, so the first true ‘ramble’, i.e. in this context a descriptive tour, is that of military engineer Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre (1773) in 1769. In Bernardin’s day much of the island was devoid of paths, let alone roads, and even with a supportive slave, he had to work hard to complete the task he had set himself. Starting anti-clockwise from Port Louis, in the south and east he had to ford rivers on the shoulders of his slave, suffer sunstroke, scramble up steep sides of deep gorges (Rivière des Anguilles etc.). By the time he reached the Plaine des Roches he decided to accept a horse to take him back to the capital, as ahead were ‘four leagues of uninhabited country where no water was to be had’ [my translation], and he already knew the coast from Pointe aux Canonnières to Port Louis. Bernardin’s account includes no illustrations.

There are several other descriptions of Mauritius in the later eighteenth century and early nineteenth, including the reports from the Baudin, Freycinet & Duperrey expeditions, and Matthew Flinders’s tale of captivity², but the next ‘ramble’ is from Jacques Milbert (1812). He was an expedition artist who abandoned the Baudin expedition to explore Mauritius instead (e.g. Ly-Tio-Fane 2003); his rambles are not dated, but he was on the island between 1801 and 1804. Mauritian infrastructure had come on a lot since Bernardin’s time, and Milbert could travel partly on horseback, though he had to dismount in coastal areas where the abundant burrows of *tourlouroux*³ (land crabs *Cardisoma* spp.) risked causing the horse to stumble and fall. He made several trips inland on foot, but also more or less repeated Bernardin’s coastal odyssey, adding in a dangerous climb of Le Morne *en route*. More observant of the minutiae of nature and geology than Bernardin, Milbert’s temperament lends his descriptions a certain amount of ‘artistic licence’, and lots of digression into generalities. His illustrations, engraved from his drawings⁴, collected into a separate *atlas* volume, provide important visual testimony to Mauritius in the first years of the 19th century. He was, like Bernardin, generally accompanied by a black slave, though at times also by Franco-Mauritian companions.

Our next Rambler, James Holman (1835, Barnwell 1948) was unusual in that he had been struck blind after a naval career, yet continued very actively to travel around the world. His very comprehensive ramble in 1829-30, the first to complete the entire coastline, was performed, not always on foot, accompanied by sighted companions who described the sights and landscape to him as he travelled; from his writing one would be hard put to guess he couldn’t see the scenes he described. He made ample use of his military contacts and generally stayed with British officers or officials as he travelled round the island. His style is very matter-of-fact, recalling Bernardin, but he had little contact outside the British, apart from a few Franco-Mauritian friends of Charles Telfair. Holman’s is the first ramble to include illustrations in appropriate places in the text, albeit very few in the entire 4-volume opus (and only one of Mauritius), as he presumably had to borrow from others as he saw none of it himself.

The mid 19th century was not short of visitors writing accounts of their stays in Mauritius, but few qualify as ‘rambles’. Frederick Mouat’s (1852) book was the first to illustrate his visit with several evocative in-text engravings, albeit nowhere near as detailed as Pike’s two decades later. There are more statistics than travel in Mouat’s account, and Ida Pfeiffer’s visit (1861) was fairly short, but her acerbic comments on Franco-Mauritian society in 1857 led to Alfred Erny (1863, Lalouette 2006) being commissioned to write a specifically favourable riposte for the French periodical *Le Tour du Monde*, which took the form of a ramble in 1860-61; he did not reveal his means of transport. Erny, later a well-known psychological researcher, was a Mauritian settled in France, who came back specifically for this tour; unfortunately his style is informative but pedestrian, and almost all he sees or meets is nice or attractive. Furthermore, he was not above a little plagiarism here and there – compare for example these two passages with those published the year before his visit by George Clark (1859; see next ramble):

¹ *balade/balader* is closer to ‘stroll’ than ‘ramble’, the latter tending to be longer with more exertion, having no exact equivalent in French

² The published account (Flinders 1814) is not a ‘ramble’, but his manuscript diary including his time in Mauritius, despite the restrictions on his movements, would almost qualify – it has recently been published in facsimile (Brown & Dooley 2008).

³ more often, nowadays, *trouloulou* / *trululu*

⁴ some of his original drawings are reproduced by Ly-Tio-Fane (2003).

[Clark] Proceeding along the coast ... we reach St. Antoine⁵, the estate of Mr Edmond de Chazal, a gentleman whose mansion has not only received the most distinguished strangers who have visited our shores, and charmed them with his princely hospitality, *but has given refuge to many a shipwrecked mariner and passenger, and generously supplied their wants* [my italics]

[Erny] ... Je vis d'abord Saint Antoine, l'habitation de M. de Chazal, qui a souvent donné abri aux naufragés et généreusement subvenu à leurs besoins / ... I first saw Saint-Antoine, the estate of M. de Chazal, *who has often given shelter to those shipwrecked and generously supplied their wants* [my translation & italics]

[Clark] In returning towards Port Louis, by *taking a road to the right of that by which the traveller came from Pamplemousses*, he will be led by a substantial stone building formed by a strong wall. *This establishment, now used a district prison is known by the name of Powder Mills, and a manufactory of gunpowder on a large scale was carried on there, and in 1774 an explosion took place which caused the death of many of the persons employed therein*

[Erny] Une route à droite de celle des Pamplemousses conduit par un pont en pierre à l'établissement appelé les Moulins à Poudre. Ver l'année 1774, il y existait une manufacture de poudre, mais à cette époque une terrible explosion détruisit une partie de l'édifice qui sert maintenant de prison / *A road to the right of the one to/from Pamplemousses leads by a stone bridge to the establishment called the Powder Mills. Around the year 1774 gunpowder was manufactured there, but at that time a terrible explosion destroyed part of the building that nowadays serves as a prison* [my translation & italics; what about the employees ?]

Erny was a competent watercolourist, and his ramble is illustrated by engravings by Karl Girardet from his paintings, which provide a better understanding of ordinary life, buildings and scenery than is seen in the more celebrated but idealised prints of Bradshaw (1832), Thuillier or Kelsey (Pitot & Lenoir 1980). Erny wasn't the only plagiarist, Boyle (1867), in a book more descriptive than rambling, added a chapter on fauna 'borrowed largely' from Clark's *Ramble*, albeit this time with acknowledgement.

The year before Erny arrived, the *Mauritius register* published an un-illustrated 132-page supplement as a sort of preface to its normal statistical compendium, paginated in lower-case Roman numerals, and without fanfare. Although there was no credit on the text, the introduction to the issue noted that 'to Mr. G. Clark the Editors' best thanks are especially due, for the contribution of his "Rambles round Mauritius, &c.'" George Clark (1859) was a schoolmaster in Mahébourg, who not only made and described an extensive tour of the island but also added a very detailed natural history of the island's animals, in many ways not matched since in one document⁶. His *Ramble round Mauritius* has Milbert's eye for detail, Bernardin's sober but engaging style, with the useful addition of historical asides not recorded elsewhere, and remarks comparing the island in the late 1850s with how it had been when he arrived in about 1836. On the downside, his long digression in the context of Pamplemousses gardens on the coco-de-mer palm *Lodoicea maldivica* was uncharacteristically over the top. Curiously Clark never mentioned whether he was walking or on horseback as he travelled the island's roads. This is the only ramble that has never appeared in book form, and as copies of the *Mauritius register* are very rare, and although the text of this little masterpiece is now available on the internet⁷, it would be well worth a Mauritian publisher reprinting it. Clark of course became much better known in 1866 for his discovery of Dodo bones in the Mare aux Songes (e.g. Clark 1866, Hume *et al.* 2014).

Finally we come to Pike himself, whose ramble (1873) is closest in character to Milbert's wanderings - a vivid picture of the island, details seen but not always accurately recorded (e.g. Summers 2020, this issue); scenes and events hyped a bit for effect. Yet as he proceeds he also digresses into the geological features, plants and animals he finds, often using Latin names his likely readers would not know, making some pages heavy going, although valuable to the naturalist. He didn't stint himself, going down caves, taking byways to waterfalls, visiting offshore islets etc. - in all he covered more ground even than Milbert. He always travelled on foot, but with a team of servants using ponies to carry provisions, photographic and camping equipment, and his ever growing collections. Pike was a pioneer in Mauritius as a photographer, and his book is generously embellished throughout with detailed illustrations, engraved on wood by S. Cooper from his photos. In 1871 Pike (1872) also visited the granitic Seychelles, and wrote up his 'ramble' there, this time unfortunately without illustrations.

After a century of 'rambles', Pike's is the last, and possibly the most widely read and most travelled: my copy was formerly in the garrison library in Gibraltar! After Pike the *genre* seems to have died out, bar a half-hearted attempt by Verschuur (1899) - what a different story a modern Rambler would tell.

Acknowledgements

I thank Geoff Summers for discovering Clark's *Ramble* on the internet.

References (NB: many out-of-copyright old books and journals have been digitised and can be read online at archive.org or gallica.bnf.fr, or bought as print-on-demand paper copies)

⁵ Pike (1873) also visited Saint Antoine, and this estate, still in the same family, hosted the Royal Society of Arts & Sciences and participants for the second Saturday of the Pike celebrations in October 2018.

⁶ The nearest equivalent is France Staub's *Fauna of Mauritius and associated flora* (1993).

- Barnwell, P.J. 1948. *Visits and despatches, 1598-1948*. Port Louis: Standard Printing Establishment. 306pp.
- Bernardin de St.Pierre, J-H. 1773. *Voyage à l'Isle de France, à l'Isle de Bourbon, au Cap de Bonne Espérance; &c. par un officier du Roi*. Neuchâtel: Société Typographique [2 parts with separate pagination, bound in one; reprinted 1983 - Paris: Editions la Découverte. 262pp.; English tr., 1800, London: Vernon & Hood; reprinted 1999, New Delhi: Asian Educational Services. Also new tr. & intro. by Jason Wilson as *Journey to Mauritius*, Oxford: Signal Books, 2002, 290pp.]
- Boyle, C.J. 1867. *Far Away. Sketches of scenery and society in Mauritius*. London: Chapman & Hall. 368pp.
- Bradshaw, T. 1832. *Views in the Mauritius or Isle of France, drawn from nature by T.Bradshaw*. London: J.Carpenter. 14pp + 40 plates.
- Brown, A.J. & Dooley, G. eds, 2008. *Matthew Flinders Private Journal 1803–1814*. Adelaide: Friends of the State Library of South Australia [a transcript is also on-line at http://acms.sl.nsw.gov.au/_transcript/2013/D17745/a007.html].
- [Clark, G.] 1859. A ramble round Mauritius with some excursions into the interior of that island; to which is added a familiar description of its fauna and some subjects of its flora. Pp.i-cxxxii in Palmer & Bradshaw, compilers, *The Mauritius Register: Historical, official & commercial, corrected to the 30th June 1859*. Port Louis: L.Channell.
- Clark, G. 1866. Account of the late discovery of Dodo's remains in the island of Mauritius. *Ibis* (2)2: 141-146.
- Erny, A. 1863. Séjour à l'Île Maurice (île de France). *Le Tour du monde* 7: 113-144.
- Flinders, Matthew. 1814. *A voyage to Terra Australis, undertaken for the purpose of completing the discovery of that vast country and prosecuted in the years 1801, 1802 and 1803...* London: G. & W.Nicol. 3vols.
- Holman, J. 1835. *A Voyage Round the World, including travels in Africa, Asia, Australasia, America etc. etc. from MDCCXXVII to MDCCCXXXII*. London: Smith, Elder & Co. 4 Vols. [Mauritius in vol.3]
- Hume, J.P., Cheke, A.S. & McOran-Campbell, A. 2009. How Owen 'stole' the Dodo - academic rivalry and disputed rights to a newly-discovered subfossil deposit in 19th century Mauritius. *Historical Biology* 21: 33-49.
- La Caille, N.L., Abbé de. 1763. *Journal historique du voyage fait au Cap de Bonne Espérance par feu M. l'Abbé de la Caille*. Paris: Guillyn. 380pp.
- Lalouette, O. (ed). 2006. *Séjour à l'Île de Maurice, 1860-1861, par Alfred Erny*. Mauritius: Streak Designs Ltd. [contains an extensive historical & contextual introduction by Annie Lagarde-Fouquet]
- Ly-Tio-Fane, M. 2003. *Le Géographe et Le Naturaliste à l'île de France 1801, 1803. Ultime escale du capitaine Baudin*. Port-Louis, Mauritius: [author]. 169pp.
- Milbert, J.G. 1812. *Voyage pittoresque à l'Île de France, au Cap de Bonne Esperance et à l'Île de Ténériffe*. Paris: A.Nepveu. 2 vols.+ atlas.
- Mouat, F.J. 1852. *Rough notes of a trip to Réunion, Mauritius and Ceylon*. Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co. vi+140pp. [reprinted 1984 & 1997, New Delhi: Asian Educational Services].
- Pfeiffer, I. 1861. *The last travels of Ida Pfeiffer, inclusive of a visit to Madagascar*. London: Routledge, Warne & Routledge. 338pp.
- Pike, N. 1872. A visit to the Seychelles islands. *Trans. Roy. Soc. Arts Sci. Mauritius* NS 6: 83-142 [& *Mauritius Almanac* 1873: 74-98].
- Pike, N. 1873. *Subtropical rambles in the land of Aphanapteryx. Personal experiences, adventures and wanderings in and around the island of Mauritius*. London: Sampson Low, Marston, Low & Searle; New York: Harper & Brothers. 510pp.
- Pitot, R.M. & Lenoir, Philippe. n.d. (c.1980). *Mauritius seen by the artists, 1800-1980*. Port Louis: Éditions de la Table Ovale. 62pp.
- Staub, [J.J.] France. 1993a. *Fauna of Mauritius and associated flora*. Mauritius: [author]. 97pp + unpaginated plates.
- Summers, G.D. 2020. A Jolly Day Out: Pike's account of Ile de la Passe and the Mahebourg Bay. *Phelsuma* 28 : 6-19.
- Verschuur, G. 1899. L'Île Maurice. *Le Tour du monde* NS 5: 445-456.

⁷ <https://ia800301.us.archive.org/6/items/mauritiusregist00clargoog/mauritiusregist00clargoog.pdf>