

## A Jolly Day Out: Colonel Nicolas Pike's account of the Mahébourg Bay and Ile de la Passe: colonial adventures of an American Consul at Mauritius.

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**Abstract:** Pike's descriptions of the Mahébourg bay geology and the military remains on Ile de la Passe are compared with observations in the field and found wanting in certain respects. Structures, graffiti and war graves that he mentioned have been recognized in spite of additional WW2 defensive constructions and modifications. Pike's description of one inscribed grave stone led to its rediscovery and relocation to a museum.

### Introduction

Nicholas Pike's *Subtropical Rambles in the Land of the Aphanapteryx* is undoubtedly the finest natural history of Mauritius penned in the last quarter of the 19th century (Fig. 1), unsurpassed until Anthony Cheke and Julian Hume's *Lost land of the Dodo*.<sup>2</sup> While Pike's book contains a wealth of observations, it was not strictly a work of science, or a natural history, as the subtitle, *Personal experiences, Adventures, & Wanderings in and around the Island of Mauritius*, presages. At the start of chapter 23 we find the only account of Ile de la Passe from the second half of the 19th century. Potentially, therefore, this is of considerable importance for any study of the islet. The aims of this paper are twofold: firstly, to determine what can be gleaned from Pike's account of his visit with regard to natural and cultural heritage and, secondly, to test the astuteness and accuracy of his observations as a way of assessing the credibility of his reputation as a scientist.

Pike (1817-1905) himself was a fascinating, larger than life, character; military man, consul and self-taught naturalist. His official responsibilities as American consul in Mauritius were mostly concerned with the passage of American whalers,<sup>3</sup> but he perhaps wore these duties lightly as he spent much time travelling around the island observing and collecting (Fig. 2), and enjoying hospitality<sup>4</sup>.

Ile de la Passe is the last in a chain of islets on the fringing reef that forms the south-eastern side of the Mahébourg Bay (Figs 3 and 4). Situated on the edge of the pass it is the closest point to the first human settlement on Mauritius, the Dutch Fort Frederik Hendrik,<sup>5</sup> on the ruins of which the first French capital was built before the move to Port Louis in 1735.<sup>6</sup> Today named Vieux Grand Port, it remained the seat of French administration in the south until Decaen made the move to Mahébourg in 1805. Ile de la Passe, as its name implies, controlled entry and egress through the pass. In 1759, or thereabouts, the first defences were constructed on what was essentially a static ship, entirely dependent on the mainland for everything from drinking water to manpower. Famously captured by Captain Nesbit Josiah Willoughby, who became popularly known as 'Willoughby the Immortal',<sup>7</sup> in August 1810, in the prelude to the Battle of Grand Port. Through these

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<sup>1</sup> Fellow of the British Institute at Ankara and Associate, The Oriental Institute, Chicago University. A shorter version of this paper was presented at a conference in Mauritius organised by the Royal Society of Arts and Sciences (RSAS) bicentenary commemorations for Colonel Nicolas Pike on the 13<sup>th</sup> October 2018. I am most grateful to Anthony Cheke for commenting on a draft and assiduous editing.

<sup>2</sup> Pike (1873), Cheke & Hume (2008). Pike's name was spelt with an 'h' ('Nicholas') on the title page of the British edition of his book.

<sup>3</sup> Michel Eric Perrier, Master Mariner, presented a fascinating paper entitled "*Nicolas Pike, Whales and Whaling Ships*" at the RSAS Pike bicentenary event *Sur les Traces de Pike à la Demeure de Saint Antoine*, 20th Oct. 2018.

<sup>4</sup> For background see: <https://rsasmauritius.org/fr/nicolas-pike>. Pike has not yet had the book-length biography that he deserves; for a short account see the laudatory overview by Job Dittberner (2014). Recent overviews of heritage, archaeology and history of Mauritius can be found in Seetah (2018).

<sup>5</sup> Moree 1998; Cheke and Beentje 2018. For a preliminary account of excavations at Fort Hendrik see Floore & Jayasena (2010). There is no in depth account of the standing French period structures.

<sup>6</sup> On the early history of Port Louis see Chelin (2017); and from its time as the capital, Toussaint (1973).

<sup>7</sup> Mason (1969).

SUB-TROPICAL RAMBLES  
IN  
THE LAND OF THE APHANAPTERYX

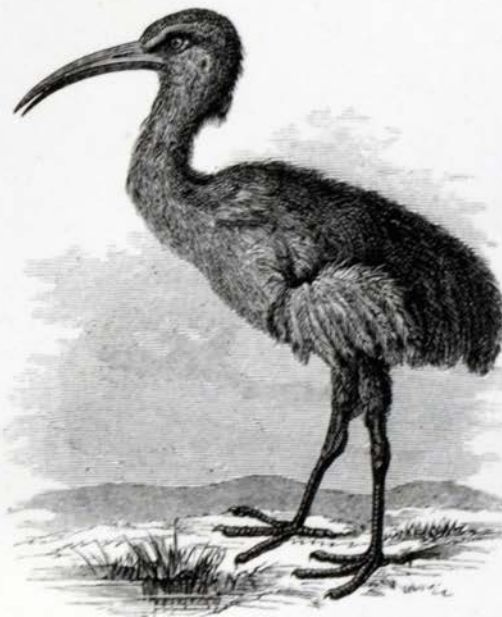
*PERSONAL EXPERIENCES, ADVENTURES, & WANDERINGS*

*IN AND AROUND*

*THE ISLAND OF MAURITIUS*

BY

NICHOLAS PIKE



THE APHANAPTERYX

(From *The Ibis* for July 1869. By ALPHONSE MILNE-EDWARDS)

LONDON  
SAMPSON LOW, MARSTON, LOW, & SEARLE  
CROWN BUILDINGS, 188 FLEET STREET  
1873

Fig. 1. Title page from Pike (1873).



Fig. 2. Frontispiece from Pike (1873).



Fig. 3. Map showing the location of Ile de la Passe with inset placing Mauritius in the Indian Ocean.

events the islet has gained a central place in the colonial history of Mauritius.<sup>8</sup> Between 2000 and 2005, at the instigation of Philippe la Hausse de Lalouvière and under the auspices of the National Heritage Fund the author, together with architect Françoise Summers, made an architectural and archaeological study of Ile de la Passe with the participation of Earthwatch and Mauritian volunteers.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Carter and Hall (2010). The Battle of Grand Port, the only significant Napoleonic naval victory inflicted on the British, was deservedly inscribed on the Arc de Triomphe. It was immortalized by Patrick O'Brian in *The Mauritius Command* (1977, many later editions).

<sup>9</sup> For Ile de la Passe see <http://www.mauritius.metu.edu.tr/mahbay/ipass/index.html>. Also Summers & Summers (2009).

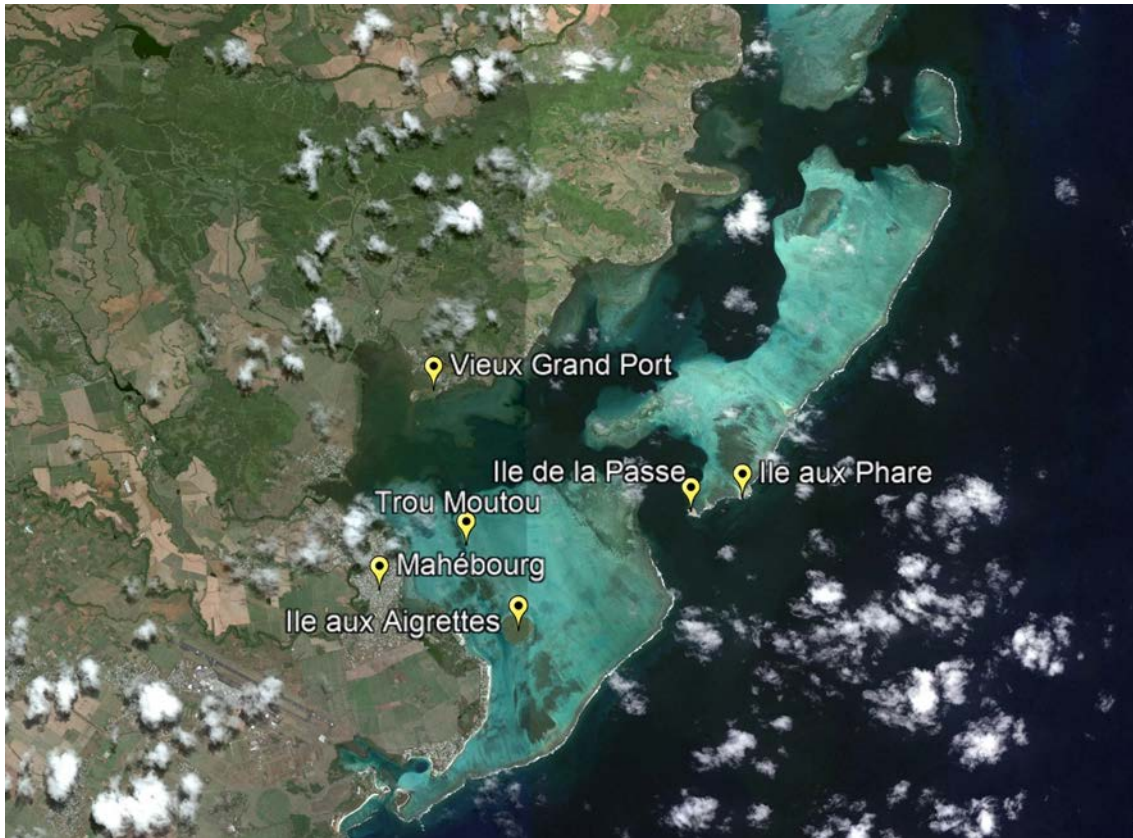


Fig. 4. Google Earth image of the Mahébourg Bay.

#### Geology and Geomorphology

Pike devoted the ninth chapter of his book to the geology of Mauritius and made additional observations elsewhere. Our concern here is his understanding of the Bay of Mahébourg, to this day called Grand Port. This was the deepest natural harbour in Mauritius, formed by a deep horseshoe-shaped channel that breaches the fringing reef. In the days of sail, however, exit through the narrow pass was severely restricted by prevailing wind. Perched on the reef on the eastern side of the channel are a chain of small, uninhabited, islets (Fig. 4). The most prominent and visually striking of these is Ile aux Phare, also known by its earlier name of Ile aux Fouquets (named after the shearwaters, *Puffinus pacificus*, that breed there), which boasts a late nineteenth century lighthouse positioned to warn away from the reef shipping making its way to Port Louis. Ile de la Passe is situated on the very north-eastern edge of the pass. On page 329 of *Sub-Tropical Rambles* Pike wrote of it:

“This island is also of upheaval, and of far more recent formation than Mauritius. It is composed of friable greyish sandstone in easily traced strata, that appear to have been thrown over by a sudden convulsion. The dip of the strata is at an angle of thirty degrees and inclined east and west. This and others of the group were most likely upheaved by the once very active volcano in Grand Port Bay”

And on page 135 he described what he took to be evidence of submerged forests in the form of casts of tree stumps that to his mind indicated that the land had at some distant time been below the ocean, and that it had subsequently been uplifted by volcanic activity.

“These casts abound in the islands near Mahébourg, particularly in the Isle des Aigrettes. I collected specimens, and submitted them to severe chemical tests with acids, but failed to discover anything like fibrous tissue.”

The idea that these casts were evidence for once submerged forests does not seem originally to have been Pike's. In a letter from Sir Henry Barkly to Dr. Hooker, dated February 13, 1869, the governor wrote:

“Is it not allowable to suppose that Round Island therefore is the remnant of a much more ancient Island or Continent which once existed where Mauritius is now situated and of which traces are to be found in the Casts of the stems of Submarine forests found by D<sup>r</sup> Ayres in Gabriel Island & by



**Fig. 5.** Tilted beds of eolianite on the side of the French rockcut ditch on Ile de la Passe with graffiti carved by British troops in the mid nineteenth century.

M<sup>r</sup> Charles in the Islands off Grand Port. If so how many hints in the chain of animal & vegetable existence may not have perished in the Volcanic eruptions which produced the Mascarene groups!"<sup>10</sup>

Pike was correct in his observations that the islets in the Mahébourg Bay comprised sandstone, not coral, and accurately noted the angle of dip in the strata, but his interpretations of their formation have not withstood the test of time. What Pike considered tectonically tilted beds of water-lain sandstone are in fact beds of aeolian sand dunes at their natural angle of rest (Fig. 5). This eolianite, or indurated sandstone,<sup>11</sup> in fact formed at the last glacial maximum, about 20,000 years before present, when the Indian Ocean was more than 100 metres lower than it is today<sup>12</sup>. We should not, perhaps, be over-harsh in our judgements since Pike was writing decades before plate tectonics and Pleistocene/Holocene sea level changes were understood. Pike's observations in the field do not, on the other hand, appear to have been very astute. He failed to notice, for instance, that the sea birds who excavate nest burrows in the seaward cliffs on Ile aux Phares dig into the soft yellow sand of the dune behind the indurated crust. With regard to the casts, Ile aux Aigrettes is situated in the southern portion of the Mahébourg Bay. Now a nature reserve, the restored vegetation covers the ground, but these casts can be seen around the edge of the islet, especially on the southern side (Fig. 6)<sup>13</sup>. These sub-fossil deposits on Ile aux Aigrettes have been dated 15000-5000 BP, and could belong to the same period as the interglacial during which the deposit on Isle aux Phares containing casts of roots and subfossils of terrestrial molluscs that indicate tall semi-humid forest (Fig. 7)<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/letter/?docId=letters/DCP-LETT-6655.xml>

<sup>11</sup> Bird (2005).

<sup>12</sup> Camoin, Montaggioni & Braithwaite (2004), Saddul (2002: 270-271).

<sup>13</sup> For a history of pre-restoration vegetation on Ile aux Aigrettes see Parnell *et al.* (1989); Krieg (2018) provides a recent overview.

<sup>14</sup> I am most grateful to Owen Griffiths for informing me of this dating that has been done in connection with his work on the snails that indicate the forest type, see Griffiths & Florens (2006).



**Fig. 6.** Fossil casts on the edge of Isle aux Aigrettes.



**Fig. 7.** The reddish brown clayey deposit on Ile aux Phare that formed during an interglacial is sandwiched between indurated aeolian dune deposits.



Fig. 8. The Mahébourg Barracks: *Mauritius: As It Was*, 66.

### Pike's Visit to Isle de la Passe

Let us now turn to the cultural remains on Ile de la Passe. When Pike visited, presumably in the late 1860s, the islet was unoccupied. It can be assumed that the military buildings of the French period constructed between 1759 and capitulation to the British in 1810, were in a reasonable state of repair, having been reused by the British garrison until its withdrawal to Mahébourg in 1838.<sup>15</sup> It is not clear if any new buildings were erected by the British, plans to build a Martello Tower having been abandoned.<sup>16</sup> These French period defences included the Upper Battery and an impressive, unfinished, rockcut ditch that was utilized to house generators in WW II.<sup>17</sup> As a prelude to his visit Pike wrote, pp. 323-234:

“The Isle de Passe lies at the entrance of the harbour, and will ever be famous in the naval annals of both England and France. On it there stood a circular fort and a barracks as a defence; but in 1810 it was stormed by Captain Pym, of the 'Sirius frigate,' and taken. It was kept by the British through all the thrilling events which occurred in the deadly conflict which took place in Grand Port Bay on the 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> August, in the same year, when the French gained their bloodiest but last naval victory over the English in the Indian seas. After the capitulation of the Isle de France, the barracks were occupied for some years by a garrison, but they have long been abandoned.”

Scant interest is here shown in the specifics of history, although the events of 1810 are briefly described (pp. 368-69) in the chapter on the history of Mauritius. Characterization of the defences as a “circular fort”, both in the passage quoted above and on p. 368, is over-terse and inaccurate. On the other hand, the American consul's description of his visit to Ile de la Passe can be considered a splendid example of evocative travel writing that has little or nothing to do with scientific pretensions. It bears extensive quotation:

“I had been spending a few days in Mahébourg, where I was most hospitably entertained by the officers of the 86th regiment, when a pic-nic was proposed to the Ile de la Passe. Most of them kept boats and they were all put in readiness for our excursion. Long before dawn on the day fixed, the Creole servants were conveying mysterious-looking boxes and hampers to be stowed away in the boats, filled with everything requisite for a good time. At sunrise the officers made their appearance in the mess-room, dressed in suitable boating costume, but with more regard to ease than elegance.”

<sup>15</sup> la Hausse de Lalouvière (1998: 63).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* p.62.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.mauritius.metu.edu.tr/mahbay/ipass/index.html>. Summers (2008), Summers & Summers (2009).



Fig. 9. The Barklys with soldiers: *Mauritius: As It Was*, 63.

Thus were preparations made for a jolly day out, interestingly in boats that were the property of the officers themselves. Figure 8 shows the barracks at Mahébourg very much as they would have been at the time. Also seemingly at Mahébourg are Governor Sir Henry Barkly, Lady Anna Barkly and Miss Barkly, perhaps with Sir Henry's eldest son and private secretary, Arthur Cecil Stuart Barkly, standing in white, reproduced here as Figure 9. Some of the very same officers probably accompanied Consul Pike on his visit.<sup>18</sup> On the journey across the water Pike was "able to hook up many interesting specimens of algae". The party crossed Trou Moutou, the maximum ten-metre depth of which he greatly exaggerated, arriving at Ile de la Passe after three hours of rowing.

"The place we landed at is rocky, and has been washed by the sea to such an extent there was a danger of the boats being stove in, if the sea proved rough, by getting sucked under the projecting rocks. We all proceeded to a small house that I took to have been the Commandant and soldiers' quarters."

The 'small house' would have been the stone building, recently restored, which was adapted for use as a generator room in WW II. Figure 10 offers a reconstruction of how this building, which is labelled as a storehouse on all French and British period maps and plans, would have looked at the time of Pike's visit. The account, in which this stone-built Store is assumed to have been quarters for officers and men, implies that neither the barracks nor the kitchen were still standing. We are told that extant weaponry comprised no more than two iron mortars and part of a gun carriage, all now very badly corroded but still there to this day, and a 68 pounder, which has long since vanished. Presumably the timber framed barracks building and kitchen were demolished when the rest of the cannons, carriages and platforms were removed at the time when the garrison transferred to Mahébourg, but no relevant records have been found in the archives. Pike's account continues:

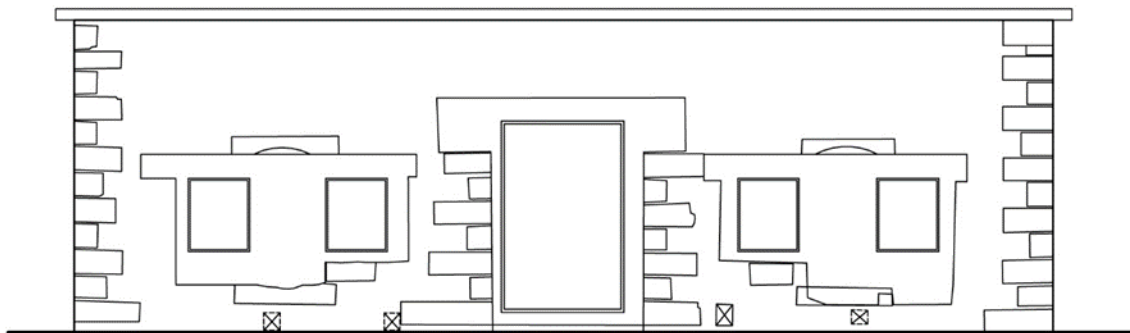
"In close proximity to this house was the magazine, with a strong high wall built around it. The arrangement for heating shot was very curious, and the work spoke of ancient times."

<sup>18</sup> These two photographs are from the collection of Sir Henry Barkly now curated at the Blue Penny Museum, Port Louis, see le Compte (2010).





FRONT ELEVATION WITH PHOTO



FRONT ELEVATION

STRUCTURE 2 - STOREHOUSE



**Fig. 10.** Storehouse on Ile de la Passe as it was in the 1990s and, below, a virtual reconstruction by Françoise Summers of the original French elevation as Pike would have seen it.

These two important buildings, the gunpowder magazine and the hot shot furnace, both French, constitute some of the most important 18th century French military structures preserved in the southern hemisphere (Figs 11-13). As to the elevated upper battery we are told only: “Room was made on the seaward in the rock for guns *en barbette*.” These notes are too brief to be of much utility. It is curious that no mention is made of the cistern, or of the great rock-cut ditch. Pike’s observation that a single explosive shell would have been devastating takes no account of the fact that the defences belong to the time of round shot and, rarely fired from ships, mortars.



Fig. 11. The hot shot furnace and powder magazine on Ile de la Passe.

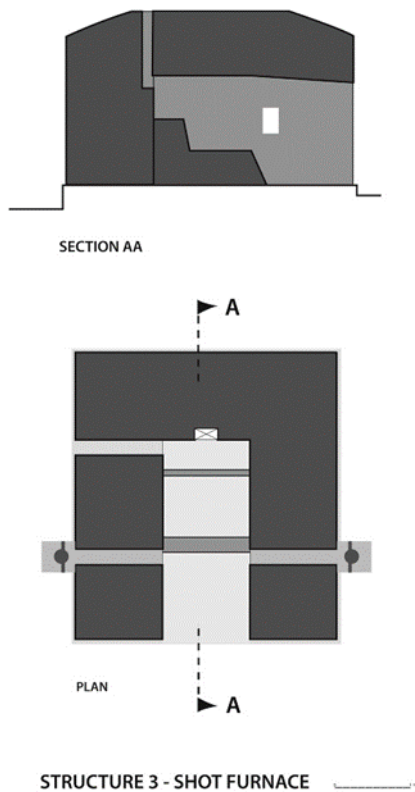
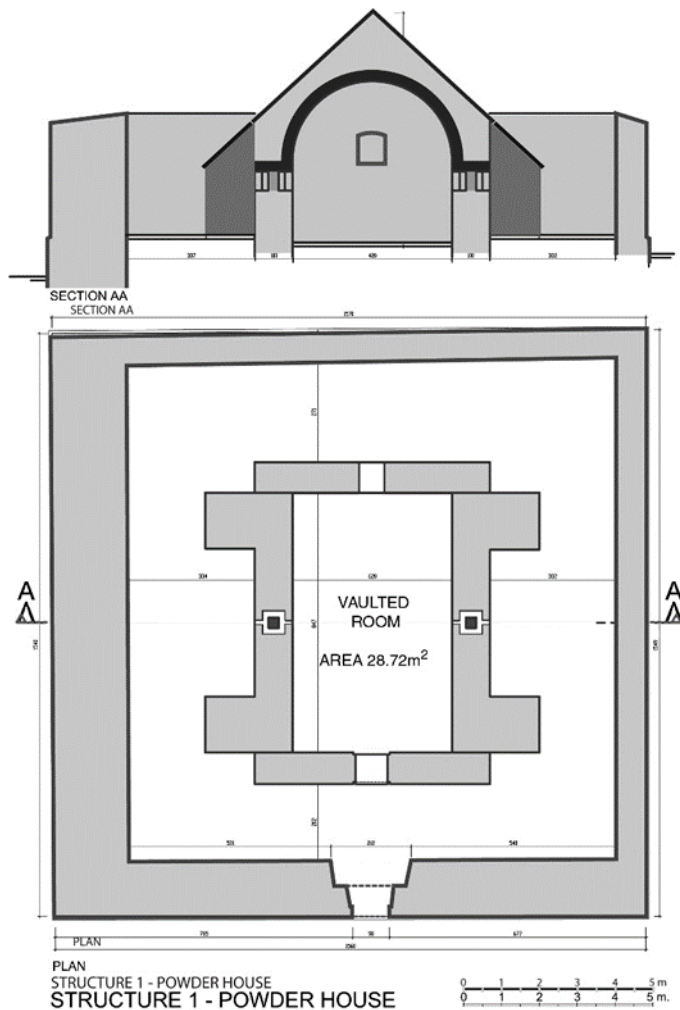


Fig. 12. Plan and elevation of the hot shot furnace.

Development of breech-loading guns that fired shells had, by the middle of the 19th century, rendered all such coastal defences obsolete.

Like any visitor today, Pike was captivated by the many graffiti carved into the soft sandstone and occasionally the harder basalt walling. Most were made between 1840 and the late 1860s, very many by officers



**Fig. 13.** Plan and elevation of the barrel-vaulted powder house.

and men of the Fifth regiment of Foot (VF). These provide names, enlistment numbers and, rarely, a date, together with occasional representation of military crests or other symbols (Fig. 14).

“Soldiers who were quartered there had amused themselves by cutting their names and numbers, and the number of the regiment they were attached to, on the walls. There was scarcely a stone inside or out of the magazine but had one or more names on it.”

One doubts, however, that these graffiti were carved while the islet was permanently garrisoned. This is confirmed by the fact that the earliest inscribed date so far recognized is 1840. Of yet greater interest we read, with reference to those killed in the Battle of Ile de la Passe, August 1810, as a result of subsequent accident, and possibly also in the early action of the Battle of Grand Port that<sup>19</sup>:

“In the middle of the island there were many graves; and I noticed the names some of the brave 86th, who had fought in the desperate engagements previously mentioned. There lay the remains of the poor fellows taking their final earthly rest in the desolate island, never more to start at the sound of the reveille, or the thundering din of battle:

And though no stone may tell  
Their name, their rank, their glory,

<sup>19</sup> It has not been possible to calculate the total number of men who died on Ile de la Passe and may have been buried there. In normal times any deceased soldier or slave would have been taken to the mainland for burial on consecrated ground, there being no chapel on Ile de la Passe. Some indication of the numbers can be found in Carter & Hall (2010).



**Fig. 14.** Graffiti made by Irish soldiers visiting Ile de la Passe 1840s-60s.

They rest in hearts that that loved them well,  
 And they grace Britannia's story  
 Some kind-hearted fellow of the present regiment had placed a new head and foot-stone at one of  
 the graves, and rudely carved on it: 'The 86th Regiment'."

The verse, like other snatches of poetry in the *Rambles*, seems to have been penned by Pike himself. At least one of the graves is still in existence, and the author was immediately able to locate the inscribed head-stone in 2003 (fig. 15). This stone is now on display in the National History Museum at Mahébourg, having been moved there for safekeeping in the wake of disturbance by campers on the islet. Most other graves seem to have been covered by WW II concrete building platforms. Pike mentions additional stones on which he was able to recognize names from 1810. Some slight support for this report of the existence of additional inscribed tomb stones might be gleaned from a romantic novel, *A Maiden of Mauritius*, written by John Gorrie, a judge in Mauritius from 1869 to 1876, but only recently published<sup>20</sup>. In this entirely fictional work descriptive licence has been taken, not least in placing the Ile aux Phare lighthouse on Ile de la Passe. However, in the same paragraph (page 97) Gorrie writes: "The epitaphs on the tombstones were deciphered." There can be little doubt that Gorrie visited Ile de la Passe himself, and it not impossible that his description of youngsters tearing down rafters from buildings to make a bonfire refers to the Store on Ile de la Passe rather than to the lighthouse (on Isle aux Phare) built in 1864 that, apart from a break during the Great War, was operative until 1927<sup>21</sup>. On the other hand, writing in Fiji after his transference thence from Mauritius, it can most probably be assumed that our novelist would have known Pike personally and would doubtless have avidly read his new book. He may equally well have based his fictional reference to engraved tombstones on Pike's account cited above. Furthermore, it might be thought that the roughness of the collective inscription commemorating fallen of troops of the 86<sup>th</sup> Regiment of itself precludes the existence of additional inscribed stones that would have rendered it superfluous. In any event, it is improbable that any further headstones will have survived to this day.

<sup>20</sup> Gorrie (2016).

<sup>21</sup> Abandoned 1927 according to Mauritius Wild Life (2019: 9). For photos of the lighthouse in the early 1900s (and also of Ile de la Passe) see Kerven & Martial (2012); also: <https://www.facebook.com/vintagemauritius/photos/a.374663112619120/1193852334033523/?type=1&theater>



**Fig. 15.** The headstone on Ile de la Passe recorded by Pike and rediscovered in 2003.

And so to lunch! Pike again:

“After having examined everything worth seeing on the island, we returned to the house, where a bountiful repast was spread, and the popping of corks and rattling of dishes gave proof that the advance party had opened action, and in a few minutes the whole column was actively engaged in doing its duty, as English and Yankees know well how. All were in the best of spirits, and it would be hard to find a jollier lot of fellows than the officers of the 86th. After thoroughly discussing all the good things under which our table temporarily groaned, we found a goblet of iced champagne most welcome, as the thermometer had risen ten degrees since morning.”

The way home, after some brief hunting for shells, was marred by bad weather. One and then the other boat stuck on the reef and had to be pushed off, after which some hard pulling on the oars was required.

### Conclusions

How, then, to assess the academic value of Nicholas Pike’s entertaining and evocative sub-tropical ramblings on what was, after all, a jolly day out. *Sub-Tropical Rambles* is most certainly deserving of a place in the history of nineteenth century travel writing, and doubtless possesses much to offer students of colonialism, but neither of those areas of interest concern the present paper. With regard to science, Pike might be forgiven for misunderstanding the geology of the islets. His attempts not only to explain what he observed, but to conduct experiments in order to learn more about the samples that he collected are indeed laudable. Much of his collections of flora and fauna, both terrestrial and marine, survive to this day in the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard<sup>22</sup>. It is unfortunate that the avid collector of seaweed, shells, fish, birds and insects did not make fuller descriptions of the buildings and batteries; and frustrating that his account of the graves with their now lost head-stones is so short on detail. But we do learn that there were graves from the brief British military occupation in August 1810. The one engraved stone that survives would probably not have been rediscovered, nor the extant grave recognized, without their mention in Pike’s account. Furthermore, he informs us, if only by default, that armament and buildings had been removed by the 1860s. I am not competent to judge his broader contributions to natural history, but with regard to cultural heritage it might not be unjust to think that his

<sup>22</sup> <https://mczbase.mcz.harvard.edu/SpecimenSearch.cfm>, I am grateful to Melissa Aja, Museum Projects Coordinator & Interim Managing Editor, Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University.

writings are left wanting. It seems obvious enough that he did not make notes in the field, nor make sketches. Rather, he wrote from memory, and in the case of his visit to Ile de la Passe, perhaps not until some little time had elapsed once he had returned to Port Lois from his excursion around the Island. Sir Henry Barkly, who knew Pike well and was courteous about his description of the geology of Round island, perhaps summed him up most succinctly: “the American Consul Colonel Pike, who like most Yankees knows something of everything”<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> <http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/letter/?docId=letters/DCP-LETT-6655.xml>