

## Chapter 2

# The Birthplace

Brown-Séquard was born in Mauritius. As this island is far from being a household name, a geographical and historical outline is called for. Few are those who can locate it on a map of the world. It is often confused with Mauritania, a republic of the African mainland, or thought to be somewhere in the Caribbean Sea. Queen Alexandra, the consort of Edward VII, once addressed a letter to “Mauritius, West Indies.”

This island of volcanic origin is not more than a pin-prick, in the middle of the Indian Ocean, on a world map. About the same size as the County of Surrey, it is pear-shaped and occupies an area of 1,865 km<sup>2</sup>. Its greatest length and breadth are 60 and 48 km respectively. It comprises a central plateau, the floor of a large extinct volcano, which gently slopes down to a coastal plain. The island is surrounded by a coral reef which, though broken in many places, provides lagoons and long sandy beaches.

Mauritius lies 20° south of the Equator, slightly north of the Tropic of Capricorn. It is 800 km east of the Democratic Republic of Malagasy, 3,600 km from the Cape of Good Hope at the southern tip of the African mainland, and 4,600 km from Bombay in India. Its nearest land neighbour is La Réunion, its sister island, which lies 220 km to the southeast (Fig. 2.1).

At the turn of the eighteenth century, France was in possession of three islands, forming the Mascarene Archipelago, in the southwest Indian Ocean. These islands were then named the Isle de France (present day Mauritius), the Isle Bourbon (present day La Réunion) and the island of Rodrigues, some 550 km east of Mauritius.

The Isle de France had been known to Arab seafarers as early as the tenth century and had been charted by them as Dina Arobi. It was visited in the early part of the sixteenth century by Portuguese mariners and named Ilha de Cirmé (Island of the Swan) in 1511, by one of their navigators, Domingo Fernandez Pereira. In 1598, Mauritius received its current name after being claimed for Holland by Admiral Wybrandt Van Warwyck and named after its ruler, Maurits Van Nassau. The island was settled by the Dutch in 1638 and abandoned by them in 1710. Five years later, on September 20, 1715, it was annexed by Captain

**Fig. 2.1** Map of Mauritius  
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Guillaume Dufresne d'Arsel, in the name of France and her king, Louis XV, and renamed Isle de France.

Louis XV ceded his rights over the Mascarenes to the Compagnie des Indes orientales. In 1642, France had taken possession of the Isle Bourbon and the first settlers arrived there in 1665. The colonization of the Isle de France began on December 24, 1721 “by 12–15 inhabitants of the Isle Bourbon, a lay priest and a surgeon under the command of Major Duronguët Le Toullec.”<sup>1</sup> In January 1722, arrived the recently appointed Administrator of the Mascarenes, the Chevalier de Nyon. He had left France the previous June with “a Swiss platoon of 210 men with 20 women and 30 children, several officers, engineers, clerks and workmen.”<sup>2</sup> However, during the journey, many of the Swiss soldiers died and “the number landed on the Isle de France, possibly, did not exceed 100.”<sup>3</sup>

By 1735, when Bertrand François Mahé de La Bourdonnais, a Breton sea captain, appointed general administrator of the Mascarenes arrived, there were 850 inhabitants on the Isle de France, of whom 650 slaves, living in a state of anarchy. It was a situation that would not last long. Within five years of his arrival, La Bourdonnais had founded Port Louis on the northwest coast of the island. In the natural harbour there, he built docks equipped with shipyards, warehouses, arsenals and fortifications. Roads were built from Port Louis to the island's interior. Land was cleared for the growing of cotton, indigo plants and sugar cane.

<sup>1</sup> Kucznski RR (1977) Demographic Survey of the British Colonial Empire, vol 2. The Harvester Press, England, p. 748.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 749.

La Bourdonnais left the Mascarenes in 1746 and was succeeded, in turn, by four other administrators of the *Compagnie des Indes orientales*. Over a period of 20 years, they encouraged immigration from the French trading posts along India's coast and from France, while greatly increasing the forced labour population by bringing slaves from India and Madagascar.

The Seven Years War, 1756–1763, had disastrous consequences on the economy of the Mascarenes which, in turn, affected the **Compagnie's** finances by hampering its trade with the East. To add to their difficulties, the Archipelago became a haven for privateers operating—with the consent of the French government—against British shipping as well as that of other nations. In the end, the **Compagnie des Indes orientales** went bankrupt and had to sell the islands to the French Crown, whose control became effective on July 14, 1767.

Under Crown rule, from 1767 to 1788, the Mascarene Archipelago was administered by governors-general who appointed intendants to be responsible for local affairs. Two of the latter, Pierre Poivre and François de Souillac, deserve special mention for their improvements of the harbour facilities of Port Louis. The Archipelago prospered; Port Louis became a major free port attracting traders from Europe and the United States, as it stock-piled an infinite range of goods. Furthermore, it offered repair facilities, rigging and supplies to the French naval forces operating in the Indian Ocean. In addition to all this, during the American War of Independence, 1778–1783, Port Louis was a base for 30 American warships which harassed both the British navy and its commercial fleet. During this 20-years period, the population of the Isle de France doubled. Eighty percent of this number was made up of slaves who were being imported from the east coast of Africa.

In 1789, on the eve of the French Revolution, the Isle de France was the most westernized place, and Port Louis the most fashionable city, east of Africa. By 1794, however, the slave-owners had rebelled against and rejected the authority of the French government, refusing to enforce the Law of February 4, 1794, voted by the National Convention in Paris, declaring the abolition of slavery in all the French colonies. From then on, until 1803, the Mascarenes enjoyed a period of autonomy. However, slavery was re-established by Napoléon on May 19, 1802 and, to restore order in the Archipelago, he appointed one of his generals, Charles Mathieu Isidore Decaen, as governor of the Mascarenes.

It was during the Wars of the French Revolution, 1793–1802, and the Napoleonic Wars, that the Isle de France reached its apogee as a trading centre. Indeed, between 1786 and 1810, nearly 600 American ships, amongst several thousands of those of other nations, called at Port Louis. Privateering, however, was experiencing a similar boom. It was being financed by the local community, since the bounty it brought back attracted American trading ships and many others from neutral powers.

England's subsequent action against the Mascarenes was not solely prompted by the privateers' continual harassment of her commercial fleet; she felt threatened by the growing relationship between the Indian princes and General Decaen who, previously, had served in India. To safeguard her interests in that country, and to be in absolute command of the sea, she had to put an end to the island empire that France had built in the Indian Ocean.

England started a naval blockade of the Mascarenes, immediately after wrestling the Cape of Good Hope from the Dutch, in 1806. The blockade lasted 4 years and eventually proved effective. In 1809, British troops from India gained control of Rodrigues and used it as a stepping stone to launch attacks against the other two islands. On July 7, 1810, a British force captured the Isle Bourbon.

Once in possession of the Isle Bourbon, the British tightened their stranglehold on the Isle de France. In August 1810, sailors from a British naval force occupied the Isle de la Passe, an islet guarding the entrance to the harbour of Grant Port, on the south-east coast of the main island. They managed to entice four French warships inside the harbour by flying the French tricolour over the islet. The two sides battled non-stop for three days and nights. In the end, the British struck their colours. This naval battle was the only French sea victory of the Napoleonic era. Known locally as **La Bataille du Vieux Grand Port**, it is inscribed on the Arc de Triomphe in Paris as **Bataille de l'île de la Passe**.

Four months after this glorious episode, on November 22, 1810, General John Abercrombie, the commander-in-chief of Bombay, left Rodrigues for the conquest of the Isle de France. He landed at Cap Malheureux, the northernmost tip of the island, with a force of 12,000 men and marched on Port Louis. The French were short of equipment and ammunition and, more fatally, they were grossly outnumbered. They fought a rearguard action, while the main portion of their forces protected Port Louis. However, when a second British force landed south of Port Louis, Decaen realised the futility of the situation and capitulated on December 3, 1810.

The terms of surrender were most benevolent. No prisoners of war were taken. The British undertook to safeguard all the rights enjoyed by the islanders; namely their laws, their customs, their language, their religion and their children's education. The Treaty of Paris, signed in 1814, reaffirmed all the conditions of surrender. The Isle Bourbon was returned to France. The treaty, however, extended British jurisdiction not only to the Isle de France, but to all her dependencies: Rodrigues, Seychelles, the Saint Brandon Islands and the Chagos Archipelago. France was thus deprived of naval bases in islands scattered over thousands of kilometres of the Indian Ocean. The name of the Isle de France reverted to Mauritius. "Although the Union Jack waved over Mauritius for 160 years, the island never effectively became British... Mauritius never ceased to be the Isle de France."<sup>4</sup> French culture prevailed during the whole period of British rule, which ended in 1968.

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<sup>4</sup> Tinker H (1977) Between Africa, Asia and Europe: Mauritius: Cultural marginalism and political control. *African Affairs* 76: 304–323.

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