

REVIEW

MADELEINE LY-TIO-FANE, Mauritius and the Spice Trade II, The triumph of Jean Nicolas Céré and his Isle Bourbon collaborators. — Mouton & Co, Paris/The Hague, 1970, pp. 302 (in the 2nd series of *Le Monde d'outre-Mer passé et présent, Documents XIII*) — Paper cover, Fl. 35,— Fr. 54,—.

Mademoiselle Ly-Tio-Fane, intrigued by the history of the spice trade, not to say spice war, when the French and later the English tried to break the monopoly of the Dutch in the Moluccas, has written a new and valuable contribution on the man suggested by Pierre Poivre to continue his efforts to establish the spice culture in the Mascarenes in the second half of the 18th century. The book consists of reproduced or abstracted documents studied by the author in libraries and archives, preceded by an Introduction of 82 pages giving a clear summary of Poivre's attempts, and of the difficulties encountered by Céré and French colonists in Isle de France (Mauritius) and Bourbon (Réunion). It relates of the animosities amongst the French, the doubted genuineness of the plant material imported from the Moluccas, on which not only Commerson but also a board of members of the Académie des Sciences in Paris had to testify. The supposed economic importance induced a sphere of hostility and intrigue. Although the original plan was to concentrate the cultivation of spice plants at Isle de France, the Minister of Marine decided that plants should be sent also to Cayenne, and Poivre's successor as Intendant of the islands even wished to suppress the cultivation in the Mascarenes and to allow Cayenne to enjoy the spice monopoly.

Poivre had established well-managed nurseries in his private estate 'Mon Plaisir', Pamplemousses, Isle de France. When he repatriated to France in 1773, the estate was sold to the King, and Poivre intended to have Céré for the supervision of the garden, and especially of the spice nurseries. The new intendant, however, instructed one of his subalterns to look after the nurseries, and the latter in his turn delegated the job to somebody else. In a few years time the loss of plants was severe. It took Poivre and his protectors in Paris a paper war of about three years to get Céré appointed in 1775.

Céré, in due time, with the advice of devoted friends and the help of colonists found out the best methods of cultivation and multiplying of the plants, of picking and preserving the fruit. He was in close contact with planters in Isle de France, to whom he generously distributed young plants. When, in 1779, the Comte de Souillac assumed the duties of Governor General at Isle de France, and a friend of Céré became acting governor at Bourbon, a golden period began and Bourbon colonists also got an ample share of spice plants and other useful plants. Recognition from Paris followed about 1785, but there still hovered the threat of Cayenne and the other French colonies of the West Indies. Besides, economy measures threatened the Jardin du Roi. Céré's diplomatic qualities and his influential patrons prevented the closing down of the garden.

Results in Isle de France were disappointing when compared with Bourbon, and in general the spices never yielded the revenues which originally were supposed to enable France to expand in Asia, but it remained a reliable source of revenue.

Every time one is enabled to have a look behind the scenes, one is impressed by what individuals with vision and perseverance, often obstructed by their own government, can achieve. One would wish lively written and well-documented books like this in the hands of many, also of people in the tropics, to impress them with the fact that it is by trial and error and by hard work only that profit is to be gained.

M. J. VAN STEENIS—KRUSEMAN