The Peaks of Lemuria

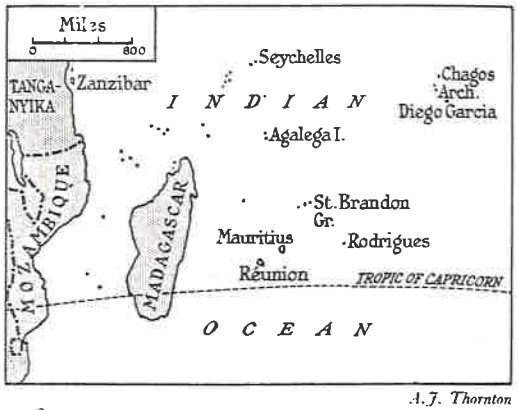
by SIR HILARY BLOOD, G.B.E., K.C.M.G.

Sir Hilary Blood, who recently retired after a long and distinguished career in the Ceylon Civil Service and the Colonial Service, was Governor and Commander-in-Chief of Mauritius in 1949-54

The Island of Mauritius, although itself only the size of the County of Surrey, is the proud owner of many island dependencies. These tiny islets, or groups of islets, lie mostly to the east and north-east: they stretch away from Mauritius in the direction of Ceylon until, some 1400 miles from their mother-country, they nestle warm and sun-baked almost under the equator. It is said that they are the unsubmerged hills of a sunken continent—all that remains above the water-line of the Peaks of Lemuria. Most of them are uninhabited, unexplored and undeveloped, visions of tropical beauty, pocket-handkerchief paradises, protected in their unspoiled loveliness by the sweep of the ocean, known to bird and fish but not to man, inviolate save by sun and storm, existing for the glory of God who cannot but look with pleasure on these gems of his creation.

Even the inhabited islets are vestigial scraps of land and yet they make up the visible world, the world of human relationships and experience, for many people who are born there and grow up and marry, and have families, and die without seeing anything beyond the circle of the South Indian Ocean that encloses the speck of coral reef on which they live.

Until recently communication between Mauritius and its dependencies has been almost entirely by sailing-boat. Even today power-driven craft are slow and inconvenient for the casual visitor, though Her Majesty's Navy has made possible occasional official visits by the Governor of Mauritius and his officers.



A. J. Thornton

There are three main single islands, Rodrigues, Agalega and Diego Garcia; and three main groups of islands, the Cargados Carajos Group, more simply known as St Brandon, the Peros Group and the Salamon Group; the last two being included, with Diego Garcia, in the Chagos Archipelago. The production of copra, fishing and fish-drying, and the collection of phosphatic guano, one or other or all three, are the main occupations in all the islands with the exception of Rodrigues.

Rodrigues is the largest of the dependencies and the most densely populated. More than 15,000 people live in its forty square miles. It has a large and important Cable and Wireless station, a vital transit point between the United Kingdom and the Antipodes: and the island is run as part of Mauritius. It has therefore almost a metropolitan atmosphere. A Magistrate and Commissioner appointed by the Governor of Mauritius presides over the island, and under the roof of his combined office and court-building the general administration is carried on, taxes are collected and justice is dispensed. From the tiny capital, Port Maturin, this official sets out on non-court days by jeep, by pony or on foot, to visit those parts of his ten-miles-by-five domain which require personal attention. Or he may travel by water, if that is convenient, by sailing-boat with outboard motor, through channels dug along, not through, the coral reefs and kept open by hand-labour every year. "In-coral" waterways are a unique feature of the Rodrigues seascape.

It is a lovely island: a ridge of hills running east and west, rising steep from the sea which breaks in a white collar of foam and spray on the all-encircling reefs. The inhabitants vary in complexion from Negro black—they are in fact descendants of the Negro slaves imported in French days—to off-white and white. They are a cheerful, proud, healthy race: strong, sturdy peasants who make their living from terraced small-holdings on the hillsides where they grow indian corn, beans, garlic and the like, from cattle and small-

All photographs by courtesy of the Education Department, Government of Mauritius

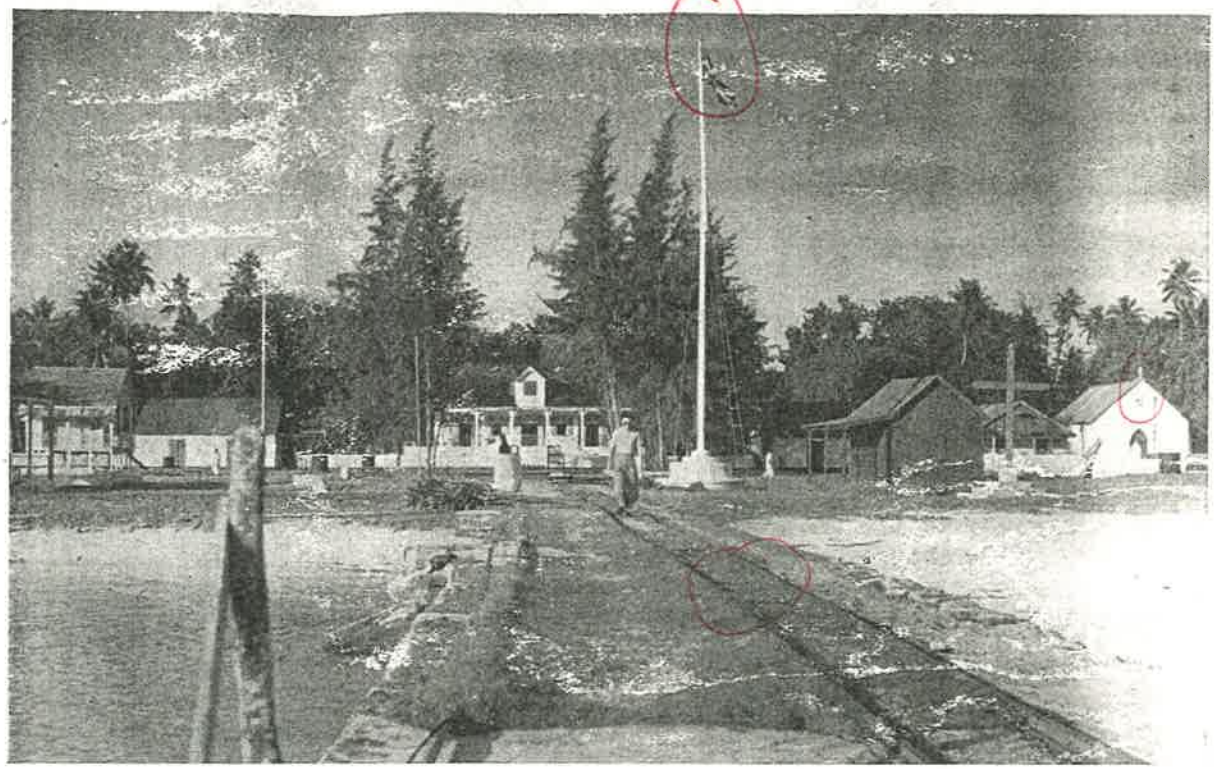
Rodrigues, the largest and most densely populated of the island dependencies, is administered as part of Mauritius; the others are in effect privately owned. The author, when Governor of Mauritius, toured in the dependencies annually. Here he is photographed with schoolchildren on Rodrigues

stock grazed in the "cattle-walk"—a belt of pasture-land running round most of the island—from fishing and the dried-fish trade, and until recently from service in the Royal Pioneer Corps in Egypt and the Near East. A patch of indian corn, a few poorly nourished cattle, some strings of fish hanging up to dry, a goat or two and some pigs and fowls, these are the preoccupations of the Rodrigan, his economic life; and he is so busy looking after these, on land or at sea, that he melts into the landscape and to the casual eye the island seems scantily populated.

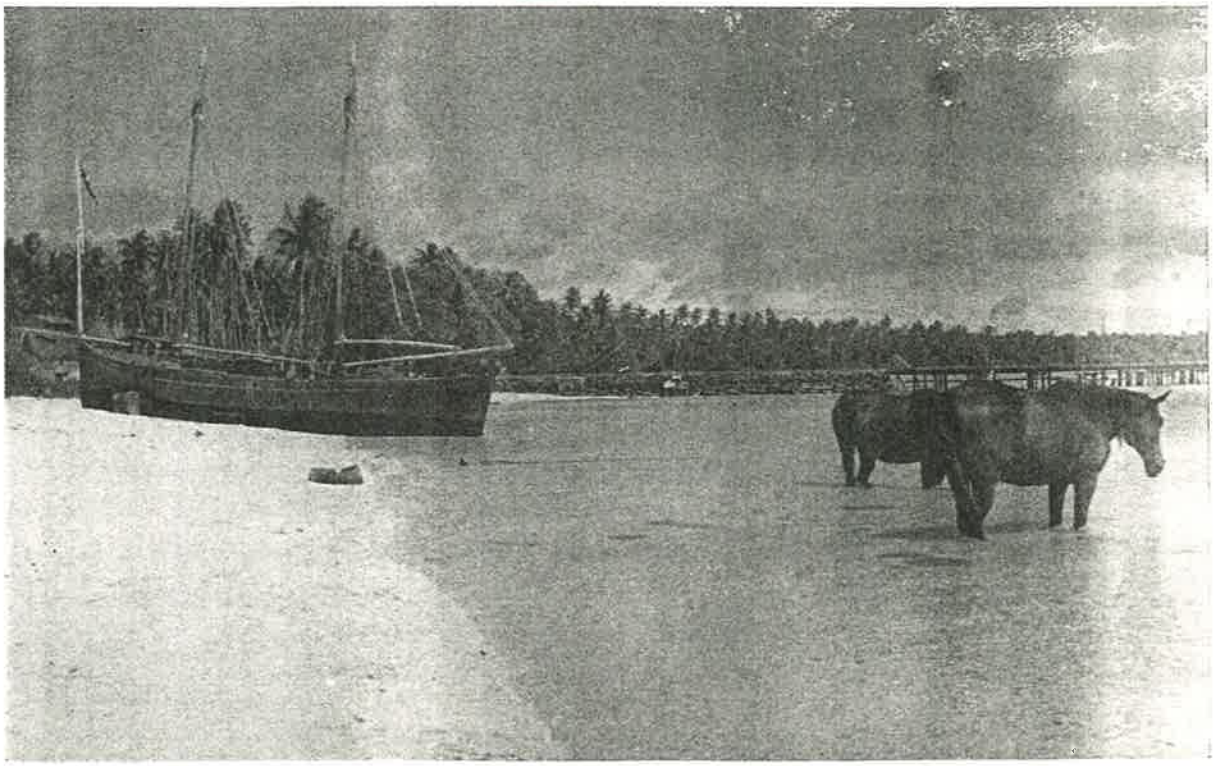
But go to the water-front when the ship which calls here regularly appears in the bay and everyone is coming down with cattle, small-stock and produce to sell for export; when all those expecting letters from Mauritius or from distant friends gather near the Post Office and wait for their names to be called as the Postmaster deals thus simply with the incoming mail. Or go to the Port Maturin jetty when one of Her Majesty's ships has come to show the flag, complete perhaps with visiting Governor and staff. Then all the island is there in its best clothes, wearing the locally made wide straw hat, to welcome the visitors, to peer and pry, to see the local police detachment and the local band, the Scouts, Guides and Youth League on parade. Then indeed the population-pressure is obvious, and one is not surprised to learn that Rodrigues has out-Malthused Malthus and doubled its population in twenty years.

The other two single islands are quite different from Rodrigues. The use of them has been disposed of to private companies registered in Mauritius and, for all practical purposes, they are privately owned. Mauritius legislation is applied as required, and a measure of supervision is exercised by visiting

Agalega, 600 miles north of Mauritius, is one of the 'oil' islands, copra being its chief product.
(Above) *A primitive mule-operated apparatus, used to extract coconut-oil for cooking on the island.*
(Below) *Copra is chopped and dried, then exported to Mauritius for processing by modern machinery*



Diego Garcia, in the Chagos Archipelago yet set apart from the other islands, also depends on copra.
(Above) *The jetty, looking towards the Manager's house, with the Roman Catholic chapel on the right.*
(Below) *One of the inter-island schooners, employed for transporting copra and phosphatic guano*

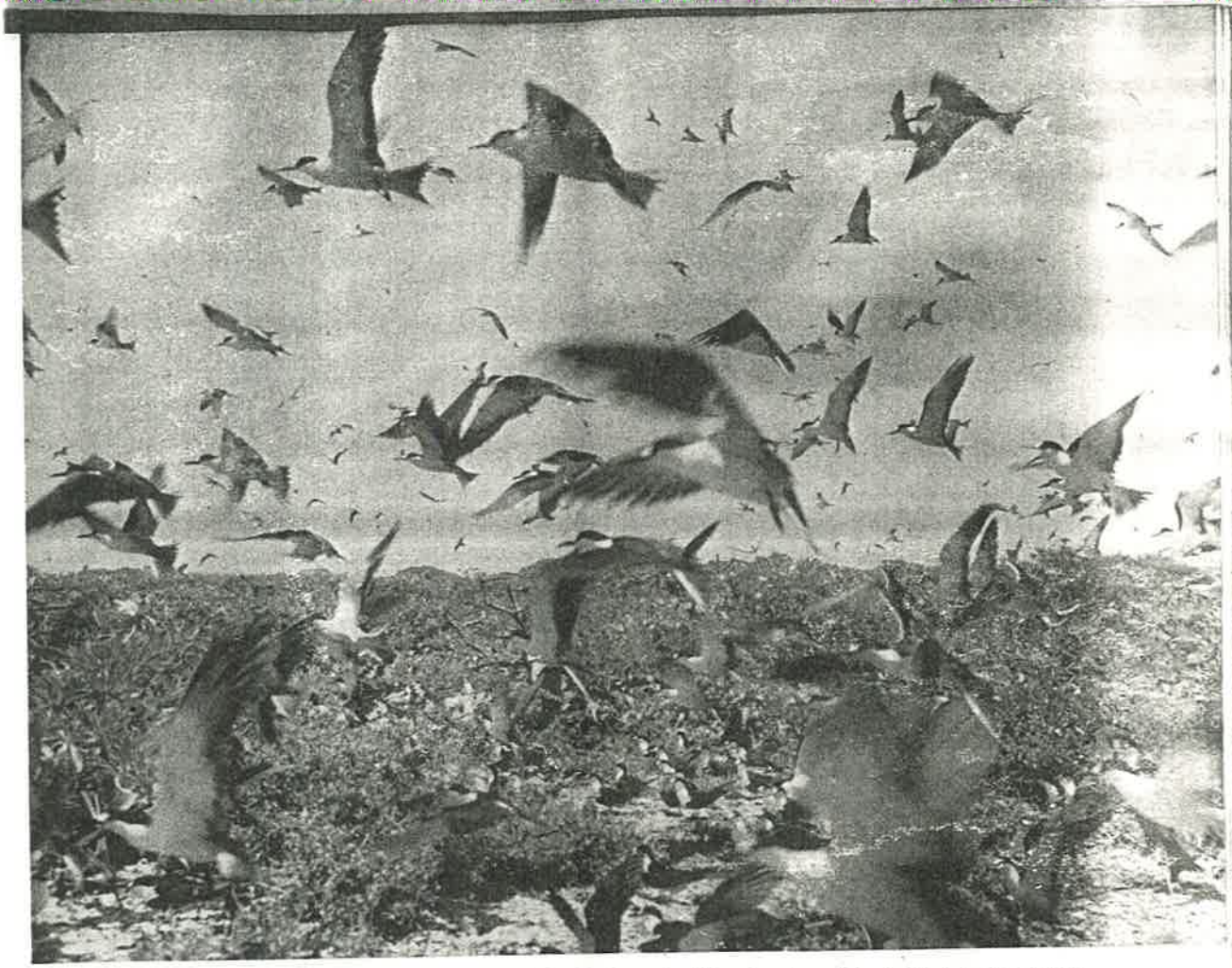


magistrates, health officers, and by the Governor of Mauritius himself. The Managers of the islands are the companies' servants, but in the absence of any resident government official they are also Justices of the Peace with very limited powers. The population is limited to the numbers required to carry out the exploitation of local resources.

In Agalega for example the industry is copra production. In the northern and southern halves of the island, joined by a reef over which the sea floods at high tide, coconut trees cover the land: some naturally regenerated—"*Coco bon Dieu*" they call it, the gift of God like the trees in the garden of Eden—and others, easily identified by regular spacing, planted by the hand of man. A few hundred people, men, women and children, are sufficient to work the plantations; some come from Mauritius, some from the Seychelles, but most are Agalegans born and bred.

The seven miles or so which the Governor has to travel here on his tours of inspection are not easily covered in a few minutes, nor by conventional means. First, a landing has to be effected from the visiting ship. This is usually done in the Manager's boat, through heavy surf perhaps, which rolls up on the beach, carrying vessel, crew and somewhat terrified passengers in welter of sunlit spray, a roar of sea, a hurricane of shouted instructions, orders and laughter. Then, having landed, there is the lorry—not a lorry, *the* lorry. This carries visitors three or four miles along winding paths through the coconut groves to the southern tip of the northern half of the island. When I was there last the effects of the three cyclones of 1951-2 were still very apparent. Twisted, stripped and fallen coconut trees, white-bleached, dead casuarinas, ruined store-houses and a wrecked wharf, were reminders of the remorseless natural violence to which these islands are subjected.

Raphael, the main island of the St Brandon Group which export fish and guano. The fish caught here are gutted, salted and dried by men recruited from Mauritius, Rodrigues or the Seychelles. They serve out their nine-month contract without the solace of wives, children or community life



The millions of birds on the small islands of the St Brandon Group, where frigate birds preponderate, are an important economic asset: guano from vast deposits is used on sugar estates in Mauritius

At the south point there is a change in the method of transport. At low tide a wheeled vehicle can bump its way along the reef to the southern half and this method of progress is at times adopted. But a more pleasant method is at three-quarters or high tide by boat. This is a particularly stout vessel, poled by six stalwart Agalegans who push and labour and drive the craft, at times with great grindings and scrapings on the shallower parts of the reef, until the northern tip of the southern half of the island is reached. This journey of about three-quarters of a mile takes about half an hour. On arrival a change of transport again, an ancient carriole with two mules, is waiting; and in this almost antediluvian vehicle is made the two-mile journey to the south of Agalega. Here are the Manager's house, the church, the copra-drying apparatus, the hospital, the shop, the met-station and the "lines"—the labourers' quarters. A quick journey this; the mules only know two speeds: gallop and stop. This half of the island suffered less from Nature's violence in the last cyclones; and, though the sea was washed up to the steps of the met-station some hundreds of yards inland and a jetty was destroyed, the plantations did not suffer badly and there are few traces of damage.

Before I left on the return journey the Manager asked me if I would like to visit the Casino. I agreed, readily but with some astonishment. I had not connected the simple island life with the more sophisticated forms of entertainment. The casino turned out to be a large shed, roofed and with a concrete floor and open sides. Here the workers and their families gathered after work, not to gamble, but the older ones to talk and the younger ones to dance. And none of your segas and calypsos! No: the Agalegans consider them old-fashioned and prefer a two-step or the Palais Glide danced to modern gramophone records—and all this on a bright sunny afternoon. The beat of bare feet on the concrete, hammering out the Palais Glide, was agony to the European ear: but the sole

of the human foot is very tough in Agalega.

Far away to the north-east lies the third single island of which I have made mention: Diego Garcia. This is a curiously shaped coral excrescence, in outline like the wishbone of a fowl, open to the north with the base elongated and twisted to the west. Although the distance from tip to tip of the wishbone, via the twisted base, is nearly forty miles, and the arms enclose thirty or forty square miles of water, parts of the island are only a few yards wide. Any day the sea, driven by the South-East Trade-winds, may break through and form a series of tiny islets along the now just continuous line of the eastern arm. Here again the industry is copra and the small community is made up as in Agalega.

There is an interesting story about Diego Garcia in World War I. There was no wireless on the island in those days; ships came and went unannounced, and world news filtered through at long intervals. Shortly after the outbreak of war the German Cruiser *Emden* came in. Her Captain did not know whether the Manager had heard of the war, but he was in dire need of a few hours in a sheltered port. He steamed in and as usual the Manager came out by boat to call. The German Captain asked for water and vegetables and enquired if the news of the Pope's death had been received. The Manager said: "No; there has been no ship for many months." The Captain was in luck. He was not recognized as an enemy. He could have water, but not much in the way of vegetables. Would he in return mend the engine of the Manager's motor-boat and take the mail? He would. The engine was mended, and the mail was taken, and did in fact eventually arrive in Mauritius. At dusk the German sailed, and at dawn next day two ships of the Royal Navy arrived in hot pursuit. A few hours earlier and the Manager would have had a front seat on his veranda for a naval battle.

Together with Diego Garcia, as I have said, two of the groups of islands—the Peros Group and the Salamon Group—form part of the Chagos Archipelago. Peros and Salamon are typical coral atolls, roughly circular, made up of a succession of tiny coral islands linked by barely submerged reef. Any island with any depth of soil bears coconuts; but the staff and labourers are concentrated on the main island in each group, where also will be found the church, the hospital, the shop, stables, machinery for copra-drying, workshop and the like.

Although copra is the main industry there are extensive guano deposits to be worked for the Mauritius cane-fields. Inter-island communication is by locally built small ships. These are sloop-rigged, with a curious, quite short, additional mast to which the boom is made fast. The boom itself, made from a local tree, is anything but straight, but this matters little as the mainsail is not continuously attached thereto. Two or three loops of cord, at either end and in the centre, hold the sail sufficiently to go over with the boom when the ship goes about. And if much wind is spilled there is plenty more—at least there was on the day on which I sailed in one of these vessels. We carried a quarter of a ton or so of copra as ballast, and the half-gale which blew from the south-east kept our coaming just not awash. We sailed fast: "*Galopez un peu*", said the dusky, smiling helmsman. We certainly did.

There are no coconuts, or none to speak of, in the St Brandon Group. One island is virtually a mine of guano and the others, widely scattered over several hundred square miles of sea, are fishing centres. Hence comes sun-dried fish for the Mauritius market. Raphael is the headquarter island. The minute size of these places is illustrated by the fact that although Raphael contains the lines, the Manager's house, the shop, the hospital, the wireless station and quarters, the salting tanks and the fish-drying area, the cemetery, the church and the boat-repair yard, you can walk right round the island in less than fifteen minutes.

An uninhabited island next to Raphael has the most astonishing bird-life. The sky is black, literally black, with birds flying with loud cries just overhead and the ground, in the nesting season, is alive with fledglings. You have to walk carefully not to tread on them. No wonder there are vast supplies of guano.

Funny little places! Indeed they are. But how lovely! Coconut palms against the bluest of blue skies, their foliage blown by the wind into a perfect circle; rainbow spray to the windward where the South-East Trades pile the Indian Ocean up on the reefs; in the sheltered bays to leeward the sun strikes through shallow water to the coral, and emerald-green, purple, orange, all the rich colours of the world, follow each other across the warm sea. The Islanders' horizon may be limited in area, but its beauty is infinite.