

ANGLO - MALAGASY SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER No. III

APRIL 1978

A meteorite led the news in the last letter. It was said to have broken in two, one piece making a cavity apparently second only to Arizona. The report was repeated in good faith, sponsored as it was by a reputable news agency and by "the quality press". No sooner was it reported than it became a mystery. There have been various explanations, ranging from some sort of hoax to a fall somewhere in such dense forest that "noone" could get there. A genuine meteorite of such a size would surely have aroused more scientific interest. However, a university visitor to Tananarive said he was sitting in a hotel at the time, saw a very bright flash and after a long interval heard a loud bang. Whatever really did happen, expectant tourists need not after all rush (yet) for a front-line view.

But there is other news from the skies. A map of the flightpath of Cosmos 954, the nuclear satellite which fell in Canada, shows that in its penultimate orbit it passed over or very close to the south-western tip of the island and "could have crashed" there. The European Space Agency's satellite Meteosat I took a picture of the entire African continent which, unlike some books on "Africa", clearly included Madagascar. The rains failed to come in December and January and many families lost the seed they had planted. In one area at least cloud-seeding was tried to break the drought. This was a return to the mid-50's when much was heard of "pluis artificielle a volonte". It sounded then as though it might become a regular technique. However, it might have led to difficulties, for one man's rain could be another's disaster, as when lorries near Tulear, taken by surprise in one experiment, became stuck in unexpected mud. A recent report about locusts, a reminder that they are always a latent menace on the east side of Africa, as in the 40's and 50's. Will motorists again find them bumping against the windscreen? Will there again be locust-control officers in certain areas of the island?

Locusts can redeem their reputation when they become food, though perhaps only up to a point, as someone has remarked that the flavour of Malagasy locusts is only the flavour of what you eat then with. But the Society did very much better than that when the Annual Dinner was held at the House of Lords on 3rd March. Nearly 60 members and friends, including the Malagasy students from Colchester, were present. Lord Winterbottom emphasised the importance of "international get-togethers" and said that "a largish island such as Great Britain" should remain friends with "such a large island as Madagascar". Mr. Mervyn Brown, fresh from his post as High Commissioner in Tanzania and non-resident Ambassador to Madagascar, spoke out of direct knowledge of conditions on the island. He pointed out the significance of the fact that leaders in a particular area are now locally elected, that a more pragmatic policy has been adopted towards nationalisation and that there is now a more stable government. With respect to aid from Britain, he said that co-operation in teaching English has been revived and that in general a very much bigger programme than anything in the past is being planned. The volunteer programme (including the UN Association International Service) is being re-started. (As a footnote, it may be added that Miss Jill Harmsworth of that organisation has just returned after spending five months in Madagascar to try to work out and agree with the Malagasy Government a programme of

small-scale projects adapted to the new style of community life, outside the traditional "educational" field).

All such plans are, of course, of great interest to the Society. A valuable survey of some of the problems involved and of possible openings and methods of work had already been given at the Society's meeting at the Reform Club in November 1977 by Mr. C.T. Gerrard, who led a special mission of the Ministry of Overseas Development. He spoke of the policy of helping "the little people" (ny madinika) and indicated that even such skills as accountancy, which at first sight might not appear to among their most urgent needs, could ultimately benefit them. Among other skills, Britain could offer, for example, banking and management. Government help could be given along two lines: either through such bodies as the European Development Federation, or through bi-lateral agreements. Voluntary organisation could give much aid. One member expressed concern last a disproportionate amount of aid finance should be swallowed up in high salaries and administrative expenses.

The Society must congratulate Mr. Brown on his appointment to the very responsible post of what may be briefly described as Britain's No.2 representative at the United Nations. It is good also to learn that his "highly readable and stimulating" book (referred to in a previous Letter) is to be called "Madagascar Rediscovered" and that plans are going ahead for its publication in November 1978 (Christmas present givers need look no further). There is a special pre-publication price of £3.20. Write to Mr. D. Tunnacliffe, 4, Canonbury Mansions, London N.1. and inform others interested in Madagascar.

There have been various ways of getting to Madagascar. Some past and present members of the Society were there during the war. Mr. Fox (still in his twenties and now living south of the Thames) claims to have a very adventurous life which took him to Madagascar while serving in the Foreign Legion (shortly before French military forces were withdrawn). Those who prefer an ordinary tourist ticket can read with profit the article by Virginia Waite in the Daily Telegraph of 28th January 1978. Twickenham Travel's tour with an ornithological interest was mentioned before. The two main Madagascar tours on their current list (Island tour and Tananarive/Nossi Be) are available for £600-£700. For some, visits or re-visits to Madagascar must for one reason or another remain a distant dream, but distant dreams are known in Madagascar too. For example, the President has spoken of what he admits is probably for a distant future: a railway from Tananarive to Majunga, with a branch running south to Maintirano and another north to Diego. (These things do indeed take time; it is 60 years since a Mission surveyed possible routes). A cooler and more refreshing dream is to be found in the way someone has picked up the recent idea of towing icebergs from the Antarctic and (half-seriously,) suggested that it might solve the problem of water in the extreme south and suggested too that Madagascar should try to gain a place among those who control direct access to the resources of Antarctica.

To turn now to the realities of the present. A main idea in the Independence Day celebrations of 1977 was that of "Mitabe", intended to indicate that "union is strength and based on the common saying which can be colloquially rendered as "cross the river in a rowd and you won't be caught by the crocs". This theme was illustrated by the huge "living pictures" which were produced by individual figures in a packed grandstand holding, it would seem, special "books" and displaying appropriately coloured pages for each pre-arranged esign. Photos in "Madagascar Renouveau" No.3 show, for

example, soldiers, rural workers, cattle and various phrases. The instructors were from North Korea. More significantly, national union in some cases is now implied by the existence of all the institutions required by the Constitution, the last being the special High Court, whose job it is to check the conformity of Government Acts with the Constitution. Hints have been dropped about the possibility of Madagascar becoming a one-party State, but there seems to be no rush to force the issue, despite the playing down of the role of political parties. Some differences of opinion within the nation are recognised by official accusations that certain persons have, for example, been deliberately causing shortages of some goods in order to arouse dissatisfaction. The word commonly used is "sabotage", though sometimes this seems to refer rather to the bad, but not necessarily intended, effects of certain examples of administrative inefficiency (e.g. deterioration of rice stocks). The President has also spoken of there being clear evidence of a plot against the Republic, linked with the activities of ONAL (Organisation Nouvelle de l'Afrique Libre), said to be based on Paris and Madrid) with which, it was claimed, certain unnamed Malagasy had connections. There seems to have been little further clarification of the matter, except that South Africa has also been held to be implicated and that official anger was roused by what is said to be a second unjustified violation of Malagasy air-space by a South African plane.

A 60 Fr. stamp has been issued carrying the theme "The Indian Ocean.. Sone of Peace". A "Conference of Religious" (in the Indian Ocean area) on the same theme was held in Tananarive. It seems, however, not to have been supported by the Christian Churches as such (evidence about Moslem representation is inadequate). The theme is frequently mentioned in public. (Madagascar can be placed within a broader context with the help of a long article in "African Affairs", July 1977). Madagascar's attempts to reconcile the two disputing parties in the Horn of Africa was continued for some; President Siad Barre visited Tananarive. On the other hand, according to a report by Colin Legum, active help has been given to one of the various groups in Rhodesia: 24 Black Rhodesians, it is said, were trained as officers in Madagascar, but were then sent by Bp. Muzorewa for further training in Libya. A North Korean delegation led by the Vice President has been recently in Madagascar. That country has given varied help. Experts spent 17 months in Madagascar advising on the planning of the new "Socialist Co-operatives", which contain many ideas not familiar to the traditional fokonolona (village communities); cash and personnel have been provided for the construction of the large Youth Centre at Tamatave, which it is expected should be completed in July (and which, according to an earlier announcement, should be opened by President Kim). Other gifts have been 100 tractors and 100 ploughs. China is to rebuild the road from Moramanga to Tamatave, though information about the level to which its standard will be raised (with its implications for competition with the railway) is not to hand. Kuwait is helping with the road from Fenerive to Soanierana-Ivongo. Canada is helping with the hydro-electric scheme near the station formerly known as Rogez, for the treatment of Andrianmena chrome. Two Canadian pilot instructors were killed with two Malagasy pupils on a training flight; a funeral service was held at Arivonimamo. Russia seems to be providing help for developing the Mandrare area in the south (of special interest to some members of the Society). Reference has already been made to aid from Britain.

Lemurs (which in the number of published titles now seem to head the list of themes for writings in English on Madagascar) were crowded out of the last Letter and again have failed to find a footing in this. Perhaps next time there will be space for them and for some other topics waiting in

the wings. There must be a final word about books and articles. "Islands of the Indian Ocean", with English and French text, is a very fine collection of photographs in black and white and colour relating to Reunion, Mauritius, Seychelles, Comoros and Madagascar, with a literary text also for each area. The British born free-lance photographer and author, G.S. Cubitt, is now based on Cape Town. (Published by Cassell & Co.). "Under the Indian Ocean", edited by A.J. Venter (Nautical Publishing Company) looks at the islands and what lies between them from a very different angle. Brian Rees contributes a chapter on diving "in Madagascar waters" (west coast islands). Another chapter by the widow of J.L.B. Smith (author of "Old Four Legs") is entitled "In the wake of the Coelacanth". That is perhaps the best known inhabitant of those waters. The layman may be surprised to learn that the Madagascar Comoro Islands variety is one of a large family. Both it and its relatives have been worth a doctorate to Dr. P.M. Zaborski, who says that his thesis (1977) can now be consulted in the library of the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne: "A Devonian Proto-coelacanth Fish with Observations on the Origin of the Group". Far from "prehistoric fishes" is a modern mystery of the air. Some may remember the curious air crash near Saint Denis (Reunion) in 1968, which killed the Chief of Staff of the French Army. Madagascar came (innocently) into the story, which is now discussed by J.S. Saul in "The Birds of Prey" (Macmillan). In French, there were several articles and interviews on Madagascar in Le Monde for 28th December 1977; there are also several in the 1978 Almanach de l'Humanite.

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