

ETIENNE DE FLACOURT, *L'HISTOIRE DE LE GRAND ÎLE
DE MADAGASCAR* (1658)

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Hidden within the cabinets of Kew's most precious books, the Pre-Linnean collection, can be found a rather small, plain volume that sits between the gold-tooled spines of its neighbours. This dull-looking book, however, holds many surprises within its pages, for it is the first detailed account of the natural history of that great island, Madagascar. In it, we are afforded a view of Madagascar through the eyes of the seventeenth century Frenchman, Etienne Flacourt. His book is all the more remarkable for the fact that it could so easily never have been written, for it was produced, during a period of brief respite, at a time of great hardship and trouble for the author. It is a book born of frustration, for Etienne had made the journey to Madagascar not as a scientist but as Governor of the Island, a position in which he found little success.

In the rush to secure new and fertile lands for exploitation, the French were keen to establish a foothold in Madagascar, from where trade and further travel into the East Indies could be pursued. The Company initially chose Jacques Pronis to act as Governor, with the intention of founding 'colonies and commerce in Madagascar and to take possession of it in the name of His Most Christian Majesty'. European visitors were no strangers to the indigenous Malagasy people at that point: ships stopped to trade beads for provisions, and Portuguese sailors were frequently disgorged onto the island shores, as reefs wrecked their ships and storms left them stranded while en route to India. The English and Dutch too rested there, the latter suffering terrible losses through sickness, leading to the island's alternative label of *Coemiterium Bataavorum* – 'the Graveyard of the Dutch' (Brown, 1995).

Heavy losses of both crew and shipping were not uncommon during the early explorations of British, French and Dutch merchants and companies. Brown (1995) records only one of three English ships limping home after an ill-fated trip to the Indies. 'These casualties were slight compared with those of a Dutch fleet of five ships... They had left behind an inscription on a stone [in

Madagascar] recording the deaths of nearly two hundred sailors during their stay'. Indeed hardship and scientific fieldwork have gone hand in hand for centuries. History is littered with botanists and plant collectors that endured horrendous conditions during their search for new species. One of Kew's own plant collectors, Francis Masson (1741–1805), was shot at by pirates, imprisoned by the French and subjected to storm and sunburn on many an occasion. Far less fortunate was the American botanist Palisot de Beauvois (1752–1820), who joined a party of 300 on the Gulf of Guinea, of whom 250 died of fever. His house and collections were burned to the ground in 1793, and yet further collections he gathered lost in a shipwreck. He was later captured by Haitian insurgents, narrowly avoided execution, only to be deprived of all of his belongings by the British in 1793.

However, until Pronis hoisted his fleur de lys at Sainte Luce in September 1642, the Malagasy people had managed to avoid the ignominy of a European takeover. Affronted by his arrival, the local inhabitants were somewhat hostile, and Pronis left Sainte Luce, travelled to the southeast coast, and constructed the military stronghold of Fort Dauphin in 1643 (named in honour of the Dauphin, crowned Louis XIV, also in 1643). Initially the new camp was a success: the environment was less oppressive than that of Sainte Luce, and relations with the local Antanosy population started off well. Unfortunately, by the third year of occupation, Pronis had not only managed to alienate the local inhabitants through his lack of tact and diplomacy, but relations with his own troops had deteriorated to the point of mutiny, resulting in his own imprisonment for six months.

Officials in Paris, concerned at the deterioration of the camp at Fort Dauphin, needed someone to resolve the mutiny and restore diplomacy between the French and the natives. The man they chose was Etienne Flacourt. Born in Orléans in 1607, Flacourt was appointed Governor of Madagascar in 1648, under the auspices of the French East India Company. On arrival he replaced Pronis, and managed to restore some modicum of order among the French; unfortunately his ambition to pacify the local inhabitants of the island was less successful. Failing to negotiate a peaceful takeover, Flacourt believed the only option left for the Europeans was military might, and requested armed reinforcements from France.

The reinforcements never arrived; indeed nothing was heard at all from the homeland for six years. Fort Dauphin and its inhabitants were isolated, possibly even forgotten by the French. Without local trade to supply food for settlers, Flacourt organised raiding parties, and stole. The violence escalated on both sides, to the point that Flacourt had to defend the fort with cannon fire against the massed opposition. Flacourt resigned himself to the fact that he would never be able to impose the will of the French upon the people of Madagascar, who by their very nature, were strongly independent, well organized, and far better adapted for life in the tropics. The French were harassed and harried for the remainder of their stay, adding to the stresses of cyclones and sickness. Faced with the failure of both the camp and the trade with locals, Flacourt turned to the environment around him and sank into his studies of the island's vast natural wealth. Here, finally, Flacourt was able to apply himself to the subject that he knew best, science, and in particular, botany.

In 1654 relief appeared in the form of Duc de la Meilleraye's ship, sent after hearing of the Company's location. Flacourt was given the option of remaining in Madagascar or returning to Paris; not surprisingly he was sailing back to France by February 1655. In the comfort of the French capital, Flacourt began to compile the studies he had laboured over while Governor, recording all he had discovered about the people, the places and the plants and animals of that vast island. By 1658 his efforts appeared in print as the *L'Histoire de la Grande Isle de Madagascar*, the second edition appearing in 1661.

The book is remarkable for many reasons. Few people had seen Madagascar, even fewer had returned to talk about it, but Flacourt provided details of both the natural history, and the culture and history of the southern populations with great authority. As a result, many of his descriptions were of entirely new species.

The book itself was dedicated to Nicolas Fouquet (1615–1680), the flamboyant Minister of Finance to Louis XIV who amassed great wealth and political clout (although later imprisoned for life for embezzlement, after making the fatal error of building Vaux-le-Vicente and its gardens, with as much extravagance as Louis himself soon displayed at Versailles). Several plates of line illustrations appear throughout the text, although due to the delicate nature of the book, it is only the fold-out illustrations that can be

photographically reproduced here (fortunately these are the only two plates that feature illustrations of the natural history of the island). There are nine plates in total, with six maps, including one of Fort Dauphin, complete with cemetery and plantations. The Fort itself was particularly well situated for someone wishing to study the botany of Madagascar. Within reach were high, cool mountains and rocky outcrops, tropical forests, swamps, littoral woodlands, sandy beaches, cliffs and coral reefs.

Not surprisingly food featured highly in Flacourt's notes, and he records his attempts to grow the common tropical fruits such as the pineapple, sugar cane, and the banana. Flacourt mentions that the locals manufactured loincloths from its fibres, and would even turn to eating the root of the tree during times of famine. He concluded that there was good nutrition to be had in the fruit "... car il y a bien des gens qui ne vivent que de Bananes & de lait".

Of course the plants and animals that are of greatest interest to the traveller are those that are endemic to the Island. Squeezed into the box adjacent to the banana, numbered '43' can be seen the spiralling form of a carnivorous plant. This is the first record of a *Nepenthes* labelled 'Anramitaco' by Flacourt, more recently described as *Nepenthes madagascariensis*. The swamps that surround Fort Dauphin today still harbour this peculiar species in good numbers. Flacourt remarked that the pitchers occurred in both red and yellow (yellow being the largest) and would hold a good half-glass of water after a downpour. One of the most newsworthy plants in recent years for its role in treating leukaemia, the Madagascar rose periwinkle (*Catharanthus roseus*), also received its first mention in the *Histoire*.

There is also an intriguing chapter headed '*Oiseaux qui hantent les bois*', which translates '[T]his is a large bird which haunts the Ampatre, it lays eggs like those of an ostrich, the people of these regions cannot catch it, as it seeks out the most deserted place'. Perhaps this bird or 'Vouron patra' (*Aepyornis maximus*), was the inspiration for the great Roc bird of legend, we will never know. Flacourt's is one of the few contemporary accounts of this extinct creature, also documented in his *Histoire* are other animals that have since been lost. His book contains a second chart of illustrations like those that accompany his botanical findings. Among this mixture of birds, fish and mammals appears the squat form of the 'Hypopotame' one of the Madagascan Pygmy Hippos

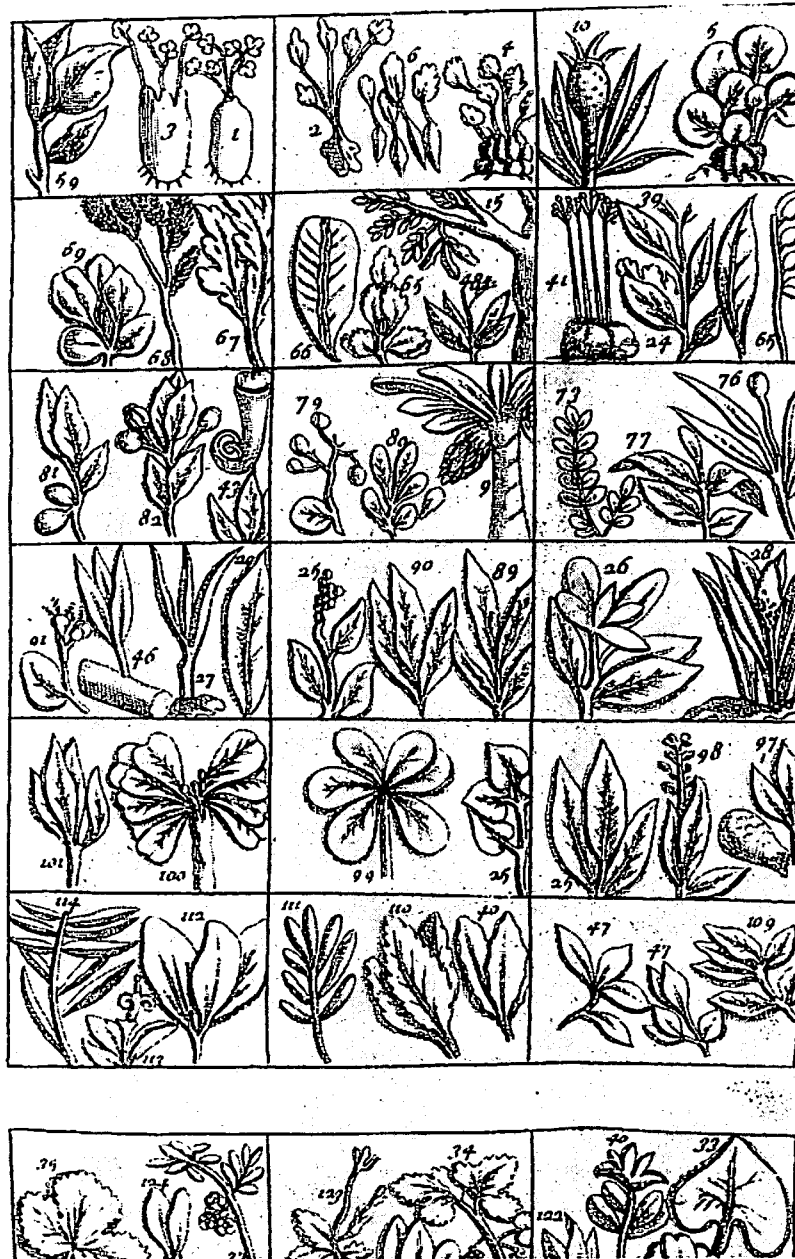


Fig. 1. Engraving from Etienne de Flacourt, *L'Histoire de la Grand Île de Madagascar* (1658), showing plants, including the first illustration of *Nepenthes madagascariensis*, no. 43 on the plate.

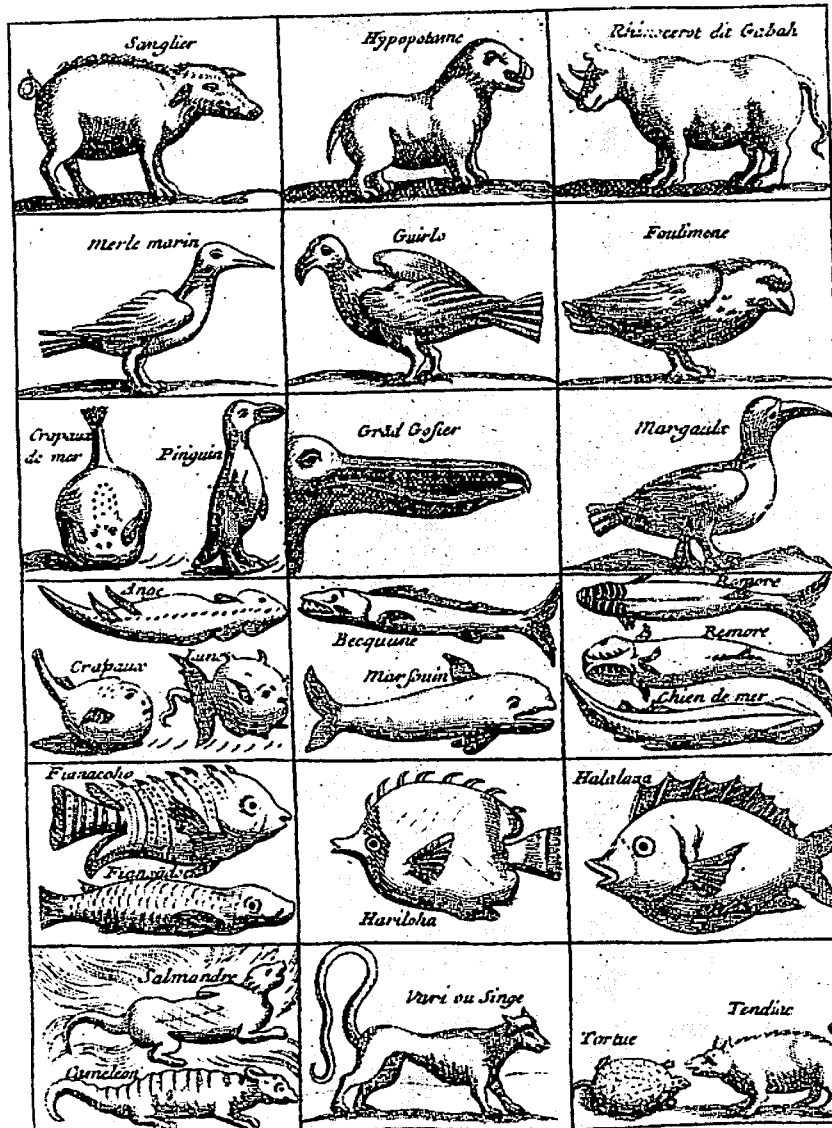


Fig. 2. Engraving from Etienne de Flacourt, *L'Histoire de la Grand Île de Madagascar* (1658), showing animals including the Madagascan Pygmy Hippo now thought to be extinct.

(*Hippopotamus madagascariensis* and *H. lemerlei*) of which the two and only species are thought to be extinct. Also vanished is the bizarre Giant Lemur (*Megaladapis edwardsi*), a forest animal dubbed the

'tretretre' by the Malagasy people. Flacourt remarked 'The tretretre is a large animal, like a calf of two years, with an oval head and the face of a man. The forefeet are like those of an ape, as are the hindfeet. It has curly hair, a short tail and ears like a man's'. This creature cuts rather a sad figure in retrospect, Flacourt noted that it was solitary, and feared by the Malagasy people (perhaps due to its anthropomorphic qualities), but in turn the animal would flee itself upon seeing humans.

Today Flacourt's illustrations of fish and fowl resemble characters from *Alice in Wonderland*, which is perhaps appropriate. Madagascar is an island of such stunning originality and curious beauty that it is shocking to realise just how much has been lost since Flacourt's troubled exploits three hundred and fifty years ago.

As for Flacourt, unperturbed by previous experiences he decided to return to Madagascar, and embarked in May 1660 for the Island – he never arrived. Madagascar was rife with pirate ships, keen to exploit the company vessels that clung to its coast, and it was one such ship of corsairs that attacked Flacourt's transport. The vessel was destroyed taking most of the crew and Etienne himself to the bottom of the sea. Pronis, who had returned to the temporary position of Governor in Flacourt's absence, had died of fever in 1655. Fort Dauphin too was destroyed, and after further squabbles and bloodshed, the camp was eventually abandoned in 1674. The *Histoire de la Grand Île de Madagascar*, an almost incidental product of 30 years of failed attempts by the French to colonise Madagascar, remains an irreplaceable record of the island's painful introduction to Western society. It remains to be seen how many more of the endemic species that Flacourt recorded and published will become mere illustrations in books, like the mysterious Elephant Bird and the curious Giant Lemur.

REFERENCES

- Brown, M. (1995) *A History of Madagascar*. London, Damien Tunnacliffe.
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