

**Descubes, Alexandre**  
**(1850 – c.1920)**

Land surveyor, cartographer, artist. Born in Mauritius, in July 1850 as indicated by relevant entries in the Blue Books, but on 17 July 1854 according to those in the Office of the Surveyor General of India, Dehra Dun. At 20 he had acquired enough ability as a draughtsman and started surveying: in April 1872 he surveyed and drew up the plan of the Mauritius Dock Co. premises including the wet dock and store-houses; and in December 1873 a plan of the “Red Sea” area of Port Louis. On 23 May 1874 governor Sir Arthur Gordon (*q.v.*) appointed him as Draughtsman in the Public Works Department. From then on his duties led him all over the island, and he made copies of ancient plans; thus on 3 August 1875, at a sitting of the Land Tribunal, he produced his copy of G. G. Reid’s map of river Belle Eau showing the beneficiaries of water rights. On 17 April 1876, together with Michael Connal (*q.v.*), he drew up a map of Grand Port district of which he had copied an 1861 plan of island; also in 1876, he drew up “the surroundings of the Brewery of Forest Side according to a plan by A. Maillard.” His career as a cartographer began in 1877: using Connal’s triangulation work, he prepared, for the needs of the intelligence branch of the Quartermaster General’s Department, a map of Mauritius showing the principal lines of communication. He then produced a first edition of what would become his masterpiece: a complete map of Mauritius (town, villages, mountains, rivers, districts, roads and railways). Those two maps were lithographed by William Crook. In 1878 he drew up a “plan of the District of Plaines Wilhems” lithographed by T. Dardenne; and with A. Vandermeersch and A. Langlois, at Government’s request, a “plan of Curepipe village” lithographed by Crook. Dated January 1879 his plan of Crève Coeur and Calebasses valleys show the boundaries of mountain reserves in the district of Pamplemousses; and in September was published his plan of the district of Rivière du Rempart lithographed by Crook. He had previously copied an 1845 plan by T. Corby of the coastal region of that district from a triangulation based on smoke-stacks of sugar factories. Also in 1879 he produced a map of the districts of Moka and Port Louis (at present kept in the National Library of Australia). In 1880 he completed his “A map of Mauritius showing the District boundaries according to Ordinance No 27 of 1875, the mountain ranges, rivers, streams &c. &c. the main roads under Ordinance No 33 of 1858 and by subsequent proclamations as at present maintained by the Government, the railways, the concessions of land both by the French and British Governments. Compiled from the Government Triangulation, estate plans, title deeds and from many other sources by A. Descubes, Public Works Department, Mauritius, 1880.” This map, engraved by Davies & Co., London, under the superintendence of Edward J. Powell, Chief Draughtsman, Hydrographical Department to the Admiralty, appeared in 1881. It obtained a gold medal at the international Exhibition held in Mauritius on 26 October 1881. Descubes resigned his post in the Public Works in 1885 and was replaced by Evenor Crook. His last official assignments carried out in the island,

dated 1886, are a plan of the Mare aux Vacoas water supply and a plan of the land adjacent to the Railway from Vacoas to Rose Hill, both lithographed by himself. Employed in India at surveying domainal forests as from 18 January 1887, he worked in the post of Extra Assistant Superintendent but also as "O. C. Forest Map Records" in the forest office at Dehra Dun in Himachal Pradesh (S. E. of Simla) from 5 December 1889. In 1904, having reached the grade of Superintendent, he produced a map of Indian forests entitled "India showing the distribution of forest lands under government control up to 30<sup>th</sup> June 1904, compiled by A. Descubes, Supdt. Forest Map Records under the Supervision of P. J. Gordon, Supdt. Forest Surveys." The Surveyor General published this map at Calcutta in 1905. In 1909 Descubes' salary was Rs.450.- Two plans dated in pencil 1912 and 1913 carry a note situating the subject at "Ooty", that is the town of Ootocamund in Tamilnadoo. His latest task is dated 1919. He is the author of a series of 2500 botanical drawings, at present owned by the Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden of Richmond, Virginia, U.S.A. The date and place of Descubes' death remain unknown but it may be surmised that he disappeared during the influenza epidemic which struck India in 1919-1920.

Raymond d'Unienville and Guy Rouillard

### **Bibilography**

- Archives de Maurice, Blue Books 1875-1882.
- Toussaint and H. Adolphe – *Bibliography of Mauritius* (Port-Louis, 1954) E438, 481; F73, 74, 79, 187, 196, 323, 350, 488, 527, 528, 529, 546, 548, 793, 794, 852, 864.
- Edinburgh and Pennsylvania Universities Library catalogues.
- National Library of Australia catalogue.
- Maggie Southwick (Librarian, Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden) – *Research on Alexandre Descubes presented to the Council on Horticultural and Botanical Libraries* (Annual meeting, June 2007).
- Information from the High Commissioner of India, Port-Louis (22 February 2008).