

Christmas Island and Father Rougier

History is made of truth (?) and untruth and these change with the writers, media influences, ambiance of the moment and a lot of factors that make it often necessary to take up the pen to rewrite differently of what one was convinced before!

I discovered Father Emmanuel Rougier through philately and the personality of the man was so overwhelming me that I had ventured into narrating his history by crossing various documents which had all seemed to me more credible one or the other. Many of my articles are being brought to the knowledge found in persons also interested, near or far, to the great Sir, have allowed me to have new and fruitful contacts in particular with a member of Rougier family, and personal contributions of the latter have so upset the veracity of my writings that I feel obliged to bring some clarifications (or denials) to the article in the SEO Newsletter No. 229 of December 1984.

Father Emmanuel Rougier was born August 26, 1864 in a large farm in the Auvergne. His father, Benedict Rougier, later bought a grand-property, the "domaine des Iles" near La Chomette Haute Loire, which property was saved thanks to the fortune bequeathed to E. Rougier by ex-convict Cécille, which will besides that had the opportunity to stay there with his wife Katarina (companion that Father imposed upon him to try to stabilize him after a horribly tormented life).

By seizing the matter, legend had somewhat obscured the origin and history of the above mentioned Cécille of which one was recently able to find traces in the Overseas Archives in Aix en Provence and one can therefore read in the " The Registry of the condemned " and that of "liberated" (H series) the following:

Athanasius Gustave Cécille

"Born in Rouen on November 8, 1844 and died February 8, 1913 in Maromme. Voluntarily committed to military in 1865 for 7 years - Corporal 2nd class in 1868 - expelled and degraded in 1869 for desertion and placed in the reserve.

Sentenced to 5 years of public works in Algeria in 1871 for desertion in wartime. - Sentenced to hard labor in Algiers in 1871 for emission of counterfeit money"

Our man arrived at the prison at Toulon in 1872 (No. 23795). He was detached from the chain and embarked on the *Loire* on April 19, 1873 for New Caledonia where he arrived on 23 July following (registration number 4776). Releasable in January 1877, he increased his sentence by insulting a supervisor. Released from prison in January 1878, he was forced to residency in New Caledonia until January 11, 1881. Then he collected scores of fines for drunkenness.

And so he was a man already fully worn which the abbot Rougier picked up; he occupied him nevertheless for different bricklayer jobs, especially at the construction of "his" cathedral Naililili on the Fiji islands.

The fortune bequeathed by Cécille's parents amounted to 900,000 francs "gold" (about 180 million current FF) and thus allowed the abbot Rougier to buy not only the Fanning Islands and Washington but also to replenish family goods and avoid bankruptcy of his banker brother, Stanislas.

It seems that, contrary to what most of the writings suggest, Father Rougier knew perfectly to bring in line his status as a businessman and that of a missionary, that, far from being discredited by its superiors, he had during all his life their esteem and had even been nominated in 1899 to become the bishop of the New Hebrides. According to the archdiocesan archives of Suva, he was, however, removed from the Society of Mary in 1909 as he left his vicariate without permission.

It is interesting to know that one of his brothers, Felix Rougier, also in Order, founded in Mexico the Congregation of the Missionaries of the Holy Spirit and devoted his life to the service of the poor (his case was by the way introduced in Rome for a future beatification). He had a great influence on Emmanuel although a totally opposite view with regard to the goods of this world!

Very attached to his family, Emmanuel always kept very close contact with it, and never hesitated to make use of the benefits of its successful business. Its large size and strength did not make of him, as some people make us believe, a donor of "punches", but he had rather the reputation of being a calm and balanced man.

It is before a notary that the ex-convict Cécille entrusted his fortune to the Father in Suva on December 4, 1906 with the only condition to receive a pension for life and also for his widow once he vanished (provided she did not remarry!). This money then allowed Emmanuel to purchase the Fanning Islands, and Washington (then in liquidation) at a public auction at Suva court on November 30 1907. He entrusted the administration to W. Greig and sold them in 1911 complying with legal requirements to the Armstrong Kelly & Company in London.

He bought Christmas Island on December 17, 1913 with a 99-year lease to *Livers Pacific Plantation Limited* (Sydney) with which he was in talks since 1909. The real operation began only in 1916, after buying a two-masted schooner, l'*Ysabel May* in Victoria (Canada), which came to anchor in San Francisco on May 21, 1916. There he embarked everything what seemed necessary for life on the island, including two Ford cars. For the plantation he recruited workers of different origin, he said to, "create some rivalry" of Gilbertese, Annamites, Tahitians, etc. The cook was Swedish and the manager, governor of the island, a former soldier, who arrived in New Caledonia in 1913 to work at the Society for Makatea phosphates, Charles Malinowski (which will be convened soon after in Papeete for the review board and locally engaged as Acting Police Commissioner!)

There was also among the recruited an American, Alich Anderson, a former policeman in Hawaii (which caused many disorders, which brought the intervention of the justice of EFO [Établissements français d'Océanie] on the island). Yet managers were well paid and often walked away pockets full after a few years of enough hard work. Staff comprised at the start twenty Chinese and 23 Tahitians of both sexes whose names were not passed on. Chance, however, sometimes reveals a surname, like that of C. Pugeault, discovered during a recent philatelic sales (with employment contract in 1919 and a "Christmas" stamp as a tax stamp!). This is actually the brother of the lady of the company of the Rougier family to which we owe many details regarding the life of the said family. We also know the names of W. Marshall and Joe Bannister, employed as manager's aid.

It is thanks to the travel notes of Marguerite Rougier, the eldest of Emmanuel's nieces who was part of the first landing on Christmas, that we can now reconstruct in detail much of countless activities up to 1925, when the Father, who already had heart trouble, entrusted the administration of the island to his nephew "Paul-Emmanuel Rougier." Business was very successful and very diverse: copra, fish, pearl, sea cucumber, etc.

Furthermore, the Father, who actively participated in the creation and life of S.E.O [Société des Études Océaniques] in Tahiti was a man of culture and enthusiasm who could not help but observe, note and write. In addition to articles he composed for our newsletter, we owe him several other works partly in English (which he mastered perfectly) partly in French. Archaeology was also part of his hobbies and the beaches of Christmas Island located at the meeting point of different sea currents, carrying very many traces of shipwrecks carefully noted on a chart compiled by him and each remarkable point had a name.

We can read about this in the travel diary of Marguerite Rougier the following remarks:



L'Ysabel May 1ère sortie (San Francisco 1916)

"- March 7, 1917: Since yesterday Joe and his men are at the "AEON" with the two auto-trucks to pick up the copper along the bay of wrecks and also do some timber shipments. They were all excited to go there, especially in the car, but might be less after several days spent in this arid and hot region.

- March 11: Yesterday my uncle was seeing Joe. Wood and copper loadings are continued very well. Workers make 10-20 kilometers per day and Tuesday they finish picking copper. "

So everything was sold and business continued to grow in all areas, even under the direction of Paul-Emmanuel Rougier after the death of his uncle in Tahiti in 1932. The coconut grove grew from 300.000 to 800.000 trees and would without doubt continue to grow if Paul-Emmanuel had not been recalled to France because of mobilisation in 1939. It seems he had pretty serious trouble during and after the war and could not go back to Christmas before 1949. Not having been able during this time to pay 100 pounds a year required by the UK government on the purchase of Christmas, Paul-Emmanuel had serious trouble with the British administration which, wishing to join the island to the brand new Republic of Kiribati, expelled him cleanly and simply with an allowance of some forty million old francs!

Father Rougier, who was a leading man in the 30's in Tahiti, had an office in Avenue Bruat and lived in a splendid estate of 30 ha in one piece at Taaone. He also owned 7 ha in Bora Bora, 13,000 ha in the Papenoo Valley (which he first shared with Constant Deflesselle, then president of the Chamber of Agriculture) and many other domains in Tahiti (in total about 1/8th of the island.). It was Yvonne Courtin, a niece of the abbot who inherited the valley of Papenoo and it would be at least "fun" if this had not been legally sold as potential heirs come today claiming their property!

A letter from Martha Pugeault, keeper of the house at Taaone, gives us some details about this property: "The house is not build on piles but of true masonry. All the bottom part are cellars and storerooms. The entresol which is reached by beautiful mountain side stone stairs or other means on the sea side provides access to the Father's office and one welcomed in the lounge that holds the middle of the floor and where one has the best view of Tahiti. On the other side, correspondent to the living room, is the dining room. On the west side, ie to Papeete, is a huge enclosed porch which is a more intimate lounge for the evening and for music. The kitchen is below and above is a garret for coffee drying because we have a beautiful coffee plantation at Taaone." (This beautiful building is it not evocative of the current seat of the bishop?).

In this same letter to Marguerite Rougier in 1927, Martha also provides guidance on the development of facilities on Christmas Island, "If you return to Christmas, you don't recognize it anymore. London is a beautiful and big village with sandy streets lined with coral, squares, avenues, elegant villas, department stores, huge copra dryers on rail trolleys. There is a whole flotilla of boats with sails and engines, trucks, tractors and cars.

In Paris, the village is smaller but equally beautiful. Indigenous houses are on top of the beach. There are no more dwelling on the small lake where you killed your first kiwis.

Another village is located close to "Poland", on a place called "Rapa". There is a plantation that Joe made after your departure in 1917. It was barren and now is so beautiful that it forces the admiration of all visitors. From Poland to Tahiti, the different plantations of different age follow one another to form an immense area. On the other side, the plantation is uninterrupted for 22 kilometers. "

As for the famous "stamp of Father Rougier" of which we have already spoken in detail: it was designed and printed by a printing Co. in San Francisco in March 1916. It shows *Ysabel May*, the best boat of the company, it's crew was made up of 8 men (Balcom commander) and was arrested several times by the British navy for control ... of the mail; it is likely that the minutes had to be prepared for "illegal use of postal vignettes which are not recognized by the Universal Postal Union".

Yet there exists an important letter prepaid with these stamps; the four issues of these were spread from 1918 to 1938 and, although unofficial, envelopes adorned with such stamps are actively sought after by philatelists. An infinity of mixed postage and combinations of all kinds were generated not only by the "Rougiers" themselves, but also by many enthusiasts (like the famous Leralle) which ultimately gave legal status to this adventure mail none of which catalogs dared to list.

Christian Beslu

* The vast majority of the information that confirms or completes my first writings (read anyway!), was communicated to me by Paul Boulagnon, nephew of Emmanuel Rougier, to whom I extend my warmest thanks.