



The tale of Morne Brabant.

CI-DESSUS :

LA CROIX DE MÉTAL
RÉCEMMENT PLANTÉE
PAR ALLAN CAMBIER,
PROPRIÉTAIRE DU SITE.

ABOVE :

THE METAL CROSS
REPLACED BY ALLAN
CAMBIER, OWNER OF
THE MORNE ESTATE

The mountain Morne Brabant, symbol of slavery, will soon feature as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Everything about this peninsula at the South Western tip of Mauritius, its shape, its relief, its history and its vegetation is truly unique. At the far South Western part of Mauritius a strange outcrop in the shape of a horizontal T slices through the oval shape of the island. One notices this unusual formation from a first glance at the map. There is no mistake. The small peninsula of only four by three kilometres forms the base of an imposing donjon of volcanic origin (the Morne Brabant). It is a head spinning place, not because of the Morne's height (551 metres) but rather because of the intensity of its significance and its stakes. For Mauritians this is the symbol of the rejection of slavery, a place of history and legend, where fugitive slaves (marrons) lived and died. It is also the only area in the world where the Trochetia plant, Mauritius' national flower, grows. And then of course there is the fact that soon it will be a UNESCO World Heritage Site! The Morne Brabant peninsula is all that and much more. Perfect material for a fascinating novel. The Dutch, the first settlers of Mauritius, named the mountain after Brabant, one of their provinces. Allan Cambrier, 84 years old and his two sisters are the owners of the Morne Estate and he has lived there all his life. « The property has been in our family since 1872. When I was a child there wasn't even a road. One had to use a boat. I know the Morne from top to bottom. I have been all over the mountain. » When the Morne Brabant will be proclaimed a World Heritage site by UNESCO, it will also feature on the « Slave Road » presently being drawn up by UNESCO. Le Morne was the refuge of black fugitive slaves « marrons » until the abolition of slavery on Mauritius in 1835, and it was the scene of a particularly tragic event. When the abolition was announced a detachment of policemen was despatched to announce the news to the slaves living on Morne. The « marrons » misinterpreted their intentions and threw

the Morne into a powerful symbol. Every year on the first of February, remembrance date of the abolition, the village people come to pray at the foot of the mountain. On February the 1st, 2005, Paul Berenger, the Prime Minister, unveiled a small plaque : « to the memory of our ancestors, victims of slavery, who have always had the courage to stand up and fight for their freedom and dignity ». A new museum will be built on this spot. « I am sure that the story is true, says Allan Cambier. My great grandfather planted a wooden cross on the Morne in memory of the slaves. It was struck by lightning and I had it replaced by a metal one. It marks the point beyond which no one can go. Just behind is an impassable gorge. But it wasn't always like that. In 1835 when the policemen tried to pass this gorge they went and fetched a large prison door and threw it across the gorge. This door, that must have measured at least 10 feet, stayed there until 1975. A cyclone swept it away. » One can climb the Morne. The hike ends at the cross, at an altitude of 500m, a few steps away from the impassable gorge. Here grows the Trochetia boutoniana, also called « Ear ring » for its tiny bell shaped red flowers. The slopes of Morne Brabant are the only natural habitat in which this bush survives, albeit in small numbers only. « Trochetia » was re-discovered in 1973. One knew that it existed thanks to French botanists from the eighteenth century but these naturalists only listed it as being found on the Ile de France (Mauritius' name during the French occupation) without specifying where it grew. In 1992 Trochetia became the national flower of Mauritius. Another endemic plant, Hibiscus columnaris, a type of Hibiscus with red flowers, is also unique to Morne. At the cross the panorama is also quite unique and certainly one of the most spectacular in Mauritius. On this specific spot the West and the South coasts meet. The view opens up to both directions. It is the perfect reward for the effort of the climb, even though the gorge stops us from going higher and keeps the summit of Morne Brabant inaccessible