

SHORTER CONTRIBUTION

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THE FIRST METEOROLOGICAL SOCIETY OF THE SOUTHERN HEMISPHERE

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Among the Meteorological Societies of the world the "Meteorological Society of Mauritius" is one of the oldest. It was founded only one year after the "British Meteorological Society", now the "Royal Meteorological Society", the oldest still existing meteorological society. The driving spirit in its establishment was Mr. Charles Meldrum, M.A. He later received the Hon. LL. D. of the University of Aberdeen and in 1876 became a Fellow of the Royal Society of London. Born in 1821 in Scotland, he had been appointed in 1848 Professor of Mathematics at the Royal College of Mauritius. It was customary at that time to combine the subjects of Physics, Mathematics and Magnetism of the Earth. During the first years of Meldrum's stay at Mauritius which lasted till 1896, Maury, as Superintendent of the U.S. Naval Observatory, had started to organise the collection and evaluation of meteorological observations on the oceans and on isolated islands. Maury had, for instance, warmly advocated the establishment of a meteorological station on Heard Island, which he considered a key point for the understanding of the conditions in the higher latitudes of the Indian Ocean, a wish that has been only temporarily realised. Mauritius formed a very important part of such a network.

Some meteorological observations had been taken on and off for some time on the Island. A meeting of citizens called at the suggestion of Meldrum decided on 1st August 1851 to found the "Meteorological Society of Mauritius". Meldrum became one of the secretaries; he held this position, with one interruption, for over 40 years. At first the society made good progress. In 1859 it had 40 members, in 1862 80 members and in 1901 50 members who paid a fee of £1 (Sterling), at that time a considerable sum. It received in addition some contribution from the Colonial Government. The purposes of the society were to establish and supervise a meteorological network on Mauritius and the other islands of the southwestern Indian Ocean and to organise and collect observations from ships. At that time the great majority of the ships were sailing vessels, their observations covered the whole of the ocean incomparably better than today when almost all traffic of engine-driven

ships is compressed into a few narrow shipping lanes. The setting-up of the "Meteorological Observatory" went through many vicissitudes, and it took not less than twenty years before finally a first order station, the Royal Alfred Observatory, was in full operation at its present site, Pamplemousses, seven miles from St. Louis, the capital of Mauritius.

For the other main activity of the Meteorological Society, the collection of observations from ships, Mauritius was in a particularly favourable position because of its central situation for the traffic between Europe, India and the Far East. It is hard to realise today that around 1860 no less than 100 ships entered the harbour of St. Louis each month. In the year 1859/60 the Society collected 20,000 observations from ships. For months with interesting weather situations, particularly during the seasons of tropical hurricanes, Meldrum compiled for the society daily weather maps which were based apart from some shore observations upon those of not less than 60 to 70 ships. These charts were probably the first for an extensive part of the southern hemisphere and are among the first extensive sets of daily charts anywhere. It had been planned to print these charts; I have not been able to find out whether this plan of 1860 had been realised before 1891. (Met. Soc. Mauritius, Synoptic Weather Charts of the Indian Ocean).

The Meteorological Society of Mauritius held monthly meetings and published in its first years to 1864 comprehensive volumes of Proceedings and Transactions and later Monthly Notices with reports of the meetings. They contain reports of the tropical cyclones in the southern Indian Ocean, the meteorological observations of the station at St. Louis and at some outstations, and the texts of some lectures given at the meetings. After 1864 only Monthly Notices were issued until 1900 when the only volume of a "New Series" of Proceedings and Transactions appeared. From this time the meteorological work was taken over by the government and the society seems to have ceased to operate some years after Dr. Meldrum had left the island to die a few years later in 1901.