

THE SUGAR FARMER'S SON: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF GERARD DE RAUVILLE

by GREG ARDÉ

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THIS biography was commissioned by Gerard de Rauville, a French Mauritian who moved to South Africa in the early twentieth century seeking a brighter economic future. The author is Greg Ardé, a seasoned journalist with a passion for politics, business and the evolution of cities. Also of French-Mauritian extraction, Ardé was an excellent choice as biographer of De Rauville, a chartered accountant who, as a very successful businessman and property developer, left a remarkable legacy in Durban in the form of hundreds of noticeable landmark buildings: blocks of flats, business malls and filling stations, warehouses and multi-storey parking garages, to name but a few. Many of these sites and buildings are probably known to Durbanites, holiday and business people visiting Durban, but not the story behind them.

French-speaking people have been part of the South African landscape since 1688, when Huguenots settled on farms in the Cape to escape religious persecution. French surnames and the wine and wheat industry are today evidence of their earlier arrival and success.

During the twentieth century, another prominent group of French speakers arrived in South Africa and settled on the Natal North Coast. These were French Mauritians, involved mainly in the sugar industry. Today, they are a prominent group of people who largely retain their identity, and carry surnames such as De

Charmoy, Singery, Thévenau, Robert, Maittree, and also De Rauville.

Together with the Natal colonial farmers, indentured Indian labour and seasonal workers from the Eastern Cape, the French Mauritians played an important role in transforming the North Coast landscape from forest and grassland to intensive sugar farming. Their contribution to the economy through dedication and hard work is generally acknowledged. Ardé's biography of Gerard de Rauville gives some insight into the history of this community. The value of Ardé's publication is enhanced by the fact that there is little published on this topic.

De Rauville's life is narrated in journalistic style in forty short chapters; an absence of foot- and endnotes contributes to the informal character. The contents are preceded by an author's note in which the background to the book is explained. In short, De Rauville suffered a stroke in 2016 and wanted the story of his life to be pinned down by a professional writer. Ardé was 'primed for the project' after 27 years in journalism. Although De Rauville said from the outset that he expected only five people to read this book (his wife Norma and their four daughters), one has to agree with the author when he states that he expects it to have a wider appeal.

De Rauville was born in 1941. However, the book covers an extensive period prior to that when the notorious De Charmoy twins Thomý and Charlie (born 1886) sailed from Mauritius to

South Africa in 1911 and settled on two neighbouring North Coast farms ('Unity' and 'Unité') near Shaka's Kraal/Umhlahi. Having established themselves as successful sugar cane farmers, Thomý offered a farm management job to Gerard's father Philippe de Rauville, who at that stage was still farming in Mauritius. At £20 per month, he accepted the offer and arrived with his wife Eva. After two years on Thomý's farm and following accusations of 'abuse' by Thomý, Philippe resigned to take up a job as farmer manager at 'Mon Espere', where the last two of his six children were born: Hervé, Gerard, Michelle, Elaine, and twins Jacques and Jacqueline.

The author then takes us through Gerard's childhood and his time at the Catholic Boys School in Pietermaritzburg, where he became politically conscious. Gerard was Progressive all his life. His father Philippe was a Nationalist: his hate for the British was due to his experience of English administration when living in Mauritius, a British colony since 1810. Gerard was appointed as an apprentice at the firm De Ravel, Boullé, Saad & Wyman, where he worked during the daytime while attending evening classes at the University of Natal to eventually qualify as a chartered accountant. At this firm he was responsible for all the accounts of most Mauritian farmers in Natal. During this time he met his English wife Norma whom he married in 1965.

Chapter 14 deals with a major family tragedy in 1968 when Gerard's parents Philippe and Eva as well as his sister Elaine were killed along with 123 passengers in a Boeing 707 crash near Windhoek. Although tragic, this moment started Gerard's career. His father

was well insured and Gerard inherited a 20% share of his entire estate. Shortly afterwards he purchased his first blocks of flats (Tavistock in Innes Road and also Bencorum on the beachfront).

In 1980 Gerard founded Grovewalk Holdings Ltd with Eric de Ravel. All the blocks of flats in Durban whose name carries the term 'grove' were at some stage part of this company; for example, Sutton Grove, Park Grove, Silver Grove and Grove Walk. After doing exceptionally well, the company eventually ended up in trouble when it entered the low-cost housing market, buying out huge tracts of land. By 1994 it was liquidated. At age 52, the formerly wealthy Gerard found himself in debt and unemployed. His current fortunes came from a business, Provest, which was subsequently founded with his youngest daughter Angelique and which has since the year 2000, made millions for Gerard. It was subsequently sold to Investec Bank.

It would be justifiable if some readers feel they could have done without some of his self-praise and self-justification for his actions, rightly and wrongly, as well as the message to grandchildren. However, it is also acceptable as he stated his intention to write for the family.

A section of 93 photographs contributes to the value of this book as it contains more than family photographs: these images also have historical value for twentieth-century KwaZulu-Natal. A family tree is a big help to understand the structure of the De Rauville family in South Africa. Overall, Arde's book makes lovely reading and is highly recommended.

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