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Adrien Lebreton, S.J. (1662–1736): A search for the identity of a neglected botanist in early Martinique

Daniel McKinley

Father Adrien Lebreton, S.J. (1662–1736), clearly deserves some notice as an early student of the Martinique flora. Yet, when not entirely overlooked, he has been incompletely and obscurely cited or nearly inextricably confused with other people in most modern botanical and biographical references. He has been more or less authoritatively confounded with Raymond Breton (1609–1679), author of a West Indian Carib Indian dictionary, with a Le Breton who was author of a book on the Swahili language about the time of World War II, and, most commonly, with F. Lebreton, a French botanist and agricultural writer who died about 1790. Fortunately, Jesuit publications (which are not cited by botanical bibliographers) furnish a reasonably full biography of him and, moreover, give a better account of his botanical activities than any single botanical bio-bibliographer has done. One lesson to be learned is that botanists of his era usually earned their bread in activities far removed from the study of plants. They may well have left secure traces of their lives in the bibliographies and archives of their major professional affiliation. Thus it has proved to be with Father Lebreton.

In his history of American botany, Samuel Latham Mitchill (1814: 181), under date of 1732, records that: "P. Le Breton's alphabetical catalogue of the more noted plants, especially of American trees, was begun this year, and continued during 1733, in the Journal of Treves [*sic*]. The descriptions are not merely good, but botanical. The performance is indeed so valuable, that a good judge of such

matters has considered it a pity that it was so nearly forgotten and unknown. The republication of it may, therefore, be deemed a welcome offering to every American that loves botanical science." Mitchill did not identify his "good judge."

I puzzled over this student of "American trees." Most of Mitchill's citations are easily identified; this one proved otherwise. A study of several standard authorities revealed neither a title that might fit the work referred to nor even a likely candidate for Mitchill's "P. Le Breton." A little research did clarify the periodical publication, sometimes called *Journal de Trévoux*. It is more properly known as *Mémoires pour l'histoire des sciences et des beaux-arts*, publication of which began in 1701 (*National union catalog*, 1968–1981, 375: 196). A look at the article in question, serialized in 15 parts under the general title of "Descriptions des principales plantes de l'Amérique" (Lebreton, 1732–1733), reveals several ambiguities in Mitchill's account.

The initial used is undoubtedly the abbreviation of "Père," since the printed work gives "le Père Le Breton, Missionnaire D.L.C.D.J." The plants are West Indian, replete with native and other names, but not American in a general sense, surely something that Mitchill ought to have noticed. Nor is the account mainly about trees. And, most obviously, having started enterprisingly enough with "Abel Mosch," this substantial and ambitious, alphabetically-arranged work of some 102 species accounts later ends abruptly with a full account of "Montochiba, Mangle ou Man-

gue," only about halfway through the alphabet. (Gavin Bridson has drawn my attention to an early reference to one segment of this work, evidently a reference to Lebreton's account of Anil or Indigo in July 1732 [Anon., 1740].)

Clearly, Mitchill had never seen the work in question, or even had a full account of it. He probably translated his entire citation from the *Bibliotheca botanica* of Albrecht von Haller (1771–1772, 2: 261), where all of these abbreviated and somewhat misleading conclusions are adumbrated.

But, if not "P. Lebreton" (or "Breton," or "Le Breton"), what was his name and what manner of man was he? No clues are evident in the *National union catalog* (1968–1981), Jackson's *Guide to the literature of botany* (1881), Pritzel's *Thesaurus literaturae botanicae* (1872–1877), Lasègue (1845), *Catalogue of the books, manuscripts, maps and drawings in the British Museum (Natural History)* (1903–1940) or, most notably, since both are so intimately concerned with West Indian botanical history, Chardón (1949) and Urban (1898–1904; 1904). He apparently had never been a member or correspondent of the Académie des Sciences (Institut de France, Académie des Sciences, Paris, 1968). Joseph Ewan (letter, 25 April 1986) was unable to find any reference to him in histories of French botany. Might one have an example of what John Hendley Barnhart (1919) called "fictitious botanists"?

A later, more comprehensive work by Barnhart (1965, 2: 356) offered a clue but no forename: "Missionary in Martinique. Author of 'Observations sur la plante qui porte le Cafe.' *Journal de Trévoux* [sic] 466–469, Mar 1726." He further cited "Mem. Acad. Caen 1855: 451," perhaps promising more information.

Journal de Trévoux (Lebreton, 1726), indeed, does have the article on coffee, which is mainly a botanical description of the plant, devoid of the romance that might well have been indulged, considering that some authorities

claim the very first coffee plant to make its way to the New World had been brought to Martinique only a few years earlier. This latter point becomes clear when the work cited by Barnhart in *Mémoires de la académie nationale des sciences, arts et belles-lettres, de Caen*, is studied (Du Bois, 1855). (This is clearly Barnhart's only source of information about Lebreton.) The paper by Du Bois is a spirited account of the colorful career of Gabriel de Clieu, hero of many a tale of daring and persistence in the history of coffee (Ukers, 1935: 2–5), together with a considerable bibliography on coffee that cites the Lebreton article. (Both Du Bois and Lebreton seem to have been neglected by later historians of coffee and, since Lebreton's seedlings, raised to blooming age, were derived from seeds matured in Martinique [Lebreton, 1726: 467–468], his paper of March 1726 certainly favors the arrival of de Clieu's plants there in 1720, as stated by Du Bois, not "about 1723," as later authorities such as Ukers seem to think, and certainly not in 1727 or 1728, as stated by John Ellis [1774: 17, 43].)

Where might other information be found? The greatest modern source of botanical biographies helped, but in a rather ambiguous way: Stafleu and Cowan (1979, 2: 779–780) appear, at first sight, to treat only one Lebreton. He is listed with the initial of "F." and we are further told that he was a French botanist who "fl. 1787," and that he is to be cited as "Lebreton." (While Stafleu and Cowan emphasize botanists working after 1753, this is not exclusively so, and, in any case, it would not justify homogenization of information on more than one person under one name.) A considerable list of authorities is appended. Of the 11 references, all but two turn out to be exclusively concerned with F. Lebreton, a shadowy figure, sometimes listed as "agriculturist," and said in the *National union catalog* to have "d. ca. 1790." Since his work of 1787 is said by Soulsby (1933: 720) to be entirely Linnaean in character, this French contem-

porary of Sir Joseph Banks (Banks, 1796–1800, 2: 518, 3: 24, 564, 590, 5: 319; Dawson, 1958: 525, 942) seems an unlikely candidate for confusion with a Martinique botanist-missionary who flourished about 1726–1733. However, F. Lebreton's rare work, entitled *Manuel de botanique*, with a long and interesting subtitle (F. Lebreton, 1787, etc.), and described by the Hunt Botanical Library (Stevenson, 1961, 2(2): 461) as containing "large sections on American and Indian plants," is perhaps worthy of further investigation, to see if there is not at least a family connection between the two botanists.

Of the two remaining citations, one reference (Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, 1974, 3: 390) is to a twentieth-century Le Breton and has no relevance to botany, the author having written a small manual of the Swahili language.

That a West Indian botanist may be involved, however, is shown in Stafleu and Cowan's eleventh reference, to "Index Herbariorum" (Chaudhri et al., 1972, pt. 2(3): 421), in which a Lebreton (no initial or forename) is credited with plant specimens in the Jussieu Herbarium, Museum Nationale d'Histoire Naturelle, Paris, that were said to have been collected in the Antilles and Cayenne (the latter being in French Guiana, in South America). It is implied that they are ferns. A letter to this institution has received no reply and it is evident that the collection must be checked personally.

But, after an account so nearly restricted to the Lebreton of about 1787, a separate entry by Stafleu and Cowan (page 780) rather obliquely introduces a matter of much greater interest: "Eponymy: *Lebretonia* F. von Paula von Schrank (1822) is dedicated to Rev. C. Breton (or Le Breton) (fl. 1732–1733), French missionary, who studied the flora of South America." We shall see that the initial "C." is incorrect—if he is our Martinique botanist—and the relevance of South America to

his area of study remains to be proved. But, at least, we seem finally to be back on the track of Mitchell's Martinique botanist, with the added possibility of a South American connection.

With that South American link in the air, I felt I was on the right track when I found it recorded in von Martius (1836: 5) and in the *Catholic encyclopedia* (Stein, 1912) that von Schrank was inspired in natural history by a "Father Sluha," who, after the expulsion of the Jesuits from Brazil, was rescued from a Portuguese jail by the Empress Maria Theresa and set to teaching in his native Hungary, then part of the Austrian Empire. What manner of man Szluha (the native spelling) may have been is not easily discovered. Neither of the above sources gives a first name; in her definitive biography of von Schrank, Zimmermann (1981: 18, 154) was unable to furnish any information on him. Oddly, it would seem, there is also no mention of Szluha in Schwartz von Megyes's history (1935) of the Oedenburg (now Sopron) collegium, where Szluha taught von Schrank. It is therefore a great pleasure to thank Dr. Ladislao Lukács, S.J., who has searched the Vatican archives and provided quite a full account of Johannes Nepomuk Szluha, who was born at Ogyalla (a Hungarian settlement, called Stará Ďala in modern times, until 1948, when the name was changed to Hurbanovo), 24 August 1723, and died in Greece, 18 July 1803. He was a missionary in Amazonian Brazil from 1753 to 1760. There is, however, no indication that that worthy man ever had any connection with Lebreton or his work.

The genus *Lebretonia* was proposed by von Schrank for a species of the family Malvaceae (Schrank, 1817–1822, [9]: plate 90). The exact date of publication of the name is unclear to me. Although Stafleu and Cowan (1985, 5: 327), in their account of von Schrank, give comprehensive dates for the work as 1817–1822, they appear to suggest a date of 1821

for part 9 that includes plate 90 that treats *Lebretonia coccinia*. Farr et al. (1979, 2: 944) confirm the date 1822. This is a genus now known under the conserved name *Pavonia* Cavanilles (1786), and this matter need not detain us further (Farr et al., 1979, 2: p. 1273; Jackson et al., 1893–1895, 2: 46).

As for Lebreton himself, von Schrank wrote (1822, text, in Latin and German, accompanying plate 90), freely translated: "I gave the name in memory of P. Le Breton, missionary of the Society of Jesus, who contributed in the *Journal de Trévoux*, in the months of June to November 1732 and from January to November 1733, an outstanding catalog of trans-equatorial American plants, that catalog being praised by Haller and thought by him worthy of being republished, although now made in large part superfluous by the work of Humboldt, Spix and Martius in Peru and Brazil."

This clearly shows that von Schrank had no special knowledge of Lebreton by way of Father Szluha, for his statement is little more than a paraphrase of Haller (as was true of Mitchill in 1814). It does have the misleading effect, if read uncritically, of suggesting a South American connection for Lebreton.

So, our man Lebreton has a dubious first initial but is without firm life dates. We know of no works by him except an essay on coffee (1726) and an inadequately characterized and incomplete list of pre-Linnaean plants (1732–1733). Does the published record contain more information? My friend S. D. Dickinson, having frequently had help from French bibliographers in his work in the archives of early French travels in America, suggested that I write to the Bibliothèque Nationale. A prompt reply from Andrée Lhéritier of the Department of Catalogues and Bibliographies set me onto several additional trails by providing the most detailed account of Lebreton yet to come to my notice—apparently unknown to bibliographers of botanical biographies: A substantial biography in the Jesuit bibliography of de

Backer and Sommervogel (1869–1876, 1: col. 868; 1890–1932, 1: cols. 137–138). (The mystery of the initials "D.L.C.D.J.," quite cryptic to all people to whose attention I had brought them, also became clear: "[D]e la Compagnie de Jesus.")

The fuller biography of our botanist is in the third edition of the Jesuit bibliography (Backer et al., 1890–1932), where the fore-name of Adrien is made known, and where Lebreton, born at Blois (Orléanais), France, is given firm life dates of 4 March 1662–14 July 1736, having entered upon his novitiate 6 October 1679. How long he was resident in Martinique is not stated, as the account merely indicates that he became a missionary in "the isles of America" and died in Martinique. (Father L. Lukács, S.J., writes in a letter to me [translated by Father John O'Malley]: "Hadrianus Le Breton . . . entered the Society of Jesus in Paris, October 6, 1679; pronounced his final solemn vows in the Society on August 15, 1695. [Franc. 19, fol 79r] He died on July 14, 1736, in Martinique. [Franc. 27, 104v] He was in Martinique from 1701–1705; from 1705–1717 on the island of Santo Domingo, and after that once again on Martinique.")

The account of Lebreton in the Jesuit bibliography is entirely the work of Sommervogel. The notice of Father Lebreton was much briefer in the 1869 edition when Sommervogel made his first contributions than in 1890. He is not mentioned at all in the first edition, written only by Augustin and Alois de Backer (1853–1861). It is probable that Sommervogel became aware of Lebreton and his works in his bibliographic analysis of *Journal de Trévoux* (Sommervogel, 1864–1865), where all of Lebreton's known publications appeared.

In addition to name and dates, Sommervogel added substantially to information about Lebreton's botanical works, both manuscripts and published works. First, all publications are listed with full pagination. In addition to those already cited, there is a third major work:

“Observations d’un botaniste habitant des Isles occidentales de l’Amérique, sur les plants dont parle le P. Labat dans les six tomes de son Voyage aux Isles,” an ambitious work, covering 93 species or groups of species of plants, that was serialized in seven parts in 1727 and 1730.

This third work is a thorough study of the plants of Jean Baptiste Labat’s *Nouveau voyage aux isles de l’Amérique* (1722) and deserves careful consideration by commentators of that Dominican friar’s work, as astutely pointed out by Langman (1964: 423). However, she has confused our Lebreton with the Rev. Père “Raimond” (Raymond) Breton (1609–1679), author of a Carib dictionary and contemporary of, and apparently collaborator with, another Dominican writer, Jean Baptiste Dutertre (1610–1687), the faults of whose earlier natural history of the West Indies Labat was anxious to emphasize (Langman, pp. 158, 257). Our Lebreton was often critical of Labat and it would be interesting to know the roots of that antipathy, considering that Labat had been forced by nervous politicians to return to France in 1705, never to be allowed to return to the West Indies (Allen, 1951: 439; Bracey, 1925: 86–95; Chauleau, 1966: 149–151).

Finally, Sommervogel cites evidence to suggest the possible survival of additional works of Lebreton, in the form of manuscripts and plant specimens. First, we learn that Lebreton sent to Father Gouÿe various specimens of plants from Martinique, as noticed in news items in the *Histoire de l’académie royale des sciences. Avec les mémoires de mathématique & de physique. Amsterdam*, in 1703 and 1704 (Gouÿe, 1703, 1704). I have not discovered if these specimens are still extant.

Second, Sommervogel quotes the catalogue of books in the library of C. L. l’Héritier de Brutelle (dated 1802 but sale not held until 1805) that lists a manuscript: “Observations sur quelques plantes de l’Amérique, avec des descriptions and quelques figures, envoyées à

MM. Fagon & Renaudot, par le Père Le Breton, missionnaire au Cap Français, en 1715. In-8°. v.f.” (Debure, 1805: 149). (A note by Debure suggests that this work might be valuable, if it is the same ‘P. le Breton’ spoken of by von Haller [1771–1772] with great praise, a suggestion that Lebreton was not generally known at that time; it is evident from the date that this material may have resulted from Lebreton’s years on the island of Santo Domingo, not Martinique.)

There is then another reference to more unpublished material by Lebreton, this time in the catalogue of the library of the great botanical family of de Jussieu (A. de Jussieu et al., 1857: 451). 1) “Relatio historica de S. Vincentii insulâ Karaybicâ. 4°, 44 pp.—(En tête:) Une lettre;—(a la fin:) Recueil de dissertations. 8°, pp. 54.” An annotation mentions an accompanying letter from Lebreton on the lives of the islanders and remarks on the curious plants of America (the 54 pages already cited). 2) “Herbier Karaïbe, ou Traité des plants qui croissent dans les isles Karaybes de la Dominique et de Saint-Vincent, selon l’ordre alphabétique. 2 vol., pet. 8°.” The latter two volumes, one is told, contain descriptions of almost 500 plants and drawings, many of them perfectly executed by pen. “The author stayed almost 20 years in these islands” (evidently, an incorrect figure).

The last-named work may have been the source—diminished by editorial selectivity—of the unfinished list of Martinique plants of 1732–1733. The possibility that the entire account of plants that Father Lebreton knew has survived is worth further investigation. That it might also be accompanied by what are presumably his own illustrations—none of which seems ever to have been published—makes it all the more desirable to find whether the work is still extant. Information on the whereabouts of any of these manuscripts and on any of his plant specimens could only add to our knowledge of this shadowy but unjustly ig-

nored and unnecessarily obscured early New World botanist.

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Department of Biological Sciences
State University of New York at Albany
Albany, NY 12222