

# **Jacques Elisée Reclus**

**15 March 1830 - 4 July 1905**

**By Samuel Stephenson**

**(Edited by Douglas Fix)**

Jacques Elisée Reclus was born in Sainte-Foy-la-Grande, Gironde, France on 15 March 1830 to Jacques Reclus (a devout Calvinist pastor at Montacaret and a teacher at the Protestant College of Sainte-Foy) and Zéline Trigant. Elisée was the fourth of twelve children and the second son.(1) In late 1831, Reclus' father left Sainte-Foy to become the pastor of the farming communities on Castétetarbes and Orthez in the department of the Lower Pyrenees. Reclus was left with his maternal grandparents in Laroche until late 1838, when he rejoined his family in Casteetarbes.(2)

In 1842, Reclus traveled to Neuwied in the German Rhineland and received an education in both modern and classical subjects, learning multiple languages, at the multinational school of the Moravian Brothers. After finishing his education there in 1844, Reclus joined his older brother Elie at the Protestant College of Sainte-Foy. He studied for his baccalaureate there until 1848, when he moved to Montauban, France to study theology in a Protestant seminary with Elie.(3)

The brothers and one of their close friends, Edouard Grimard, were greatly excited by the Paris uprisings of 1848, and in 1849, owing to the defiance of their teachers, they were advised to leave Mauntabaun. The three then traveled to the Mediterranean for a number of weeks, after which Elisée went to Strasbourg to study theology; he also spent time in Orthez and Sainte-Foy, and then went to Neuwied in the autumn of 1849 to teach for the Moravian brothers.(4) Reclus resigned from this job in January 1851 to study at the University of Berlin, where he arrived in February. During his six-month stay in Berlin, Reclus also attended a number of lectures by the noted geographer Carl Ritter.(5)

In December 1851, Reclus returned to France with Elie, where the brothers opposed Napoleon III's coup d'état and were subsequently forced to flee to England. Elisée spent 1852 working as a tutor in London and on a farm south of Dublin. Reclus traveled to Liverpool, and then on to New Orleans aboard the *John Howell*. In Louisiana, he worked briefly as a dockworker and also as a tutor to the children of

Septime Fortier on a sugar plantation in St. James Parish. While in the United States, Reclus, a vegetarian, contracted yellow fever, from which he eventually recovered.(6) Reclus' impression of the United States was not a positive one: "It is a great auction hall where everything is sold, slaves and owner into the bargain, votes and honour, the Bible and consciences. Everything belongs to the one who is richer."(7)

Reclus left the United States aboard the steamer *Philadelphia* in late 1855, bound for Panama. After spending an unplanned fifteen days in Cuba, he finally arrived in Aspinwall, and thereafter traveled aboard a series of smaller vessels to Rio Hacha in New Granada, Columbia. Reclus spent a year and a half in Columbia, planning a plantation venture (subsequently aborted); he left for Paris on 1 July 1857, not long after the general amnesty of 1856.(8)

On 14 December 1858 he was married (in a civil ceremony) to Clarisse Brian of Sainte-Foy, daughter of a French sea captain and a Senegalese woman. The couple then took up residence with Elie and his wife Noémi in Paris.(9)

Throughout the early 1860s, Elisée spent long periods of time traveling outside of Paris, conducting research for a number of travel guides produced by the publishing firm Hachette. Reclus was also actively involved in a number of societies during this time, including the Freemasons, the Freethinkers, the International Brotherhood of Michael Bakunin, and a number of anarchist cooperatives. In 1864, Elisée and Elie even helped to co-found the first Rochdale-type cooperative in Paris, L'Association générale d'approvisionnement et de consommation. The next year, Elisée developed his connections with socialist and anarchist circles further by traveling to Florence, where he visited Bakunin and was introduced to the local circle of activists. Reclus was also one of the first supporters of the League of Peace and Freedom and participated in the Berne Congress, giving an address that promoted wide-ranging decentralization on 24 September 1868.(10)

Reclus was imprisoned in Versailles in 1871 for his part in the "Paris Commune." He was subsequently removed to Brest, where he was tried (in November 1871), convicted and sentenced to prison in New Caledonia. However, before he was sent there, his sentence was successfully mitigated by an international petition to the French government from a number of scientists, including the signatures of Charles Darwin and Alfred Russell Wallace, among others. As a result of this international action, Reclus was merely exiled. He then moved to Clarens on the Lake in Geneva, Switzerland, where he lived until 1892. Once there, Reclus plunged into the writing of a 19-volume geographical work covering the whole world, entitled *Nouvelle géographie universelle*. It was finally completed and published in 1894.(11) As an interesting side-note, Reclus is purported to have initiated the "Anti-marriage movement" from his residence in Geneva in 1882.(12)

After the publication of the *Nouvelle géographie universelle*, Reclus moved to Brussels, Belgium where he took up a job as professor of comparative geography at the New University of Brussels. Reclus also engaged in lecture tours, attending the Edinburgh Summer Meetings of 1893 and 1895, among others. In 1895, with the support of Alfred R. Wallace and Patrick Geddes, Reclus proposed the construction of a huge relief globe on the scale of 1:100,000 (a diameter of approximately 420 feet), but this project did not ever come to fruition. Reclus continued working and writing until his death, from heart disease, in Thourout near Bruges on 4 July 1905 at the age of 75.(13)

### **Selected Publications(14)**

"Lettres d'un voyageur." *L'Union* (New Orleans) 1, vii (7 February 1857).

Translation and introduction to: Carl Ritter. "De la configuration des continents sur la surface du globe, et de leurs fonctions dans l'histoire." *Revue germanique* 8, xi (1859): 241-267.

"Fragment d'un voyage à la Nouvelle-Orléans." *Le Tour du Monde* 1 (1860): 177-192.

*Voyage à la Sierra-Nevada de Sainte-Marthe: Paysages de la nature tropicale.* Paris: Hachette, 1861.

"Introduction." Pp. xvii-clix in Vol 1 of *Dictionnaire des communes de la France*. By Adolph Jaonne. Paris: Hachette, 1864.

"Le Monte Etna et l'éruption de 1865." *Revue des Deux Mondes* 58 (1 July 1865): 110-138.

"Atlas de la Colombie, publié par ordre du gouvernement colombien." *Bullein de la Société de géographie* 5th series, 12 (August 1866): 140-146.

"Les Républiques de l'isthme americain." *Revue des Deux Mondes* 74 (15 March 1868): 478-498.

*La terre: Description des phénomènes de la vie du globe.* Paris: Hachette, 1869.

*Histoire d'un ruisseau.* Paris: Bibliothèque d'éducation et de récréation, J. Jetzel, 1869.

*Les Phénomènes terrestres.* Paris: Hachette, 1872.

Series of 25 unsigned articles, all but one entitled "Géographie générale," in the *La République Francaise* (Paris), 15 February 1872 to 8 January 1875.

*Histoire d'une montagne.* Paris: Bibliothèque d'éducation et de récréation, J. Jetzel, 1880.

"L'Anarchie et le suffrage universel." *Le Révoté* 3rd year, No. 24 (21 January 1882): 1-2.

"Le Gouvernement et la morale." *Le Révolté* 4th year, No. 23 (6 January 1883): 1.

"Anarchy: By an anarchist." *The Contemporary Review* 45, v (May 1884): 627-641.

"La Richesse et la misère." 6-part article published in *Le Révolté* / *La Révolte* from *Le Révolté* 9th year, No. 12 (25 June-1 July 1887) to *La Révolte* 1st year, No. 8 (5-11 November 1887).

*Nouvelle géographie universelle: La terre et les hommes*. Paris: Hachette, 1894.

*Projet de construction d'un globe terrestre à l'échelle du cent-millième*. Paris: Edition de la Société nouvelle, 1895.

"Recent books on the United States." *Geographical Journal*, vol. 6, no. 5 (November 1895): 448-453.

"On Vegetarianism." *The Humane Review*, vol. 1, no. 4 (January 1901): 316-324.

*L'homme et la terre*. Paris: Librairie Universelle, 1905-1908.

## Honors and Memberships

Probably a member of the Lodge of the Philadelphians (1852); helped direct the cooperative credit society La Société du Crédit au Travail (1863); member of the Freemasonry (1864); member of Michael Bakunin's International Brotherhood (1864); member of the Paris section of the International Working Men's Association (IWMA) (1865); probably a member of the Freethinker society Agis comme tu penses [Do as you please] (1868); almost certainly a member of the Paris Batignolles section of the IWMA (c1868); probably a member of the Alliance of Social(ist) Democracy; Gold Medal, French Geographical Society; Gold Medal, British Geographical Society.(15)

## Notes:

1. Fleming, Marie, *The anarchist way to socialism, Elisée Reclus and nineteenth-century European anarchism* (London: Croom Helm, 1979), p. 29; Dunbar, Gary S. "Elisée Reclus in Louisiana," *Louisiana History* 23, iv (1982): 341; Geddes, Patrick, "A great geographer: Elisée Reclus, 1830-1905," *Scottish Geographical Magazine*. 21 (1905): 553; *Dictionary of scientific biography*, Charles Gillispie, ed., (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975), Vol 11, p. 337; *Who was who*, Vol 1, 1897-1916 (London: A. and C. Black; New York: MacMillan Company, 1920), p. 590.

2. Fleming 1979, p. 29.

3. Ibid., pp. 29, 32-34; Dunbar 1982, p. 341; *Who was who*, Vol 1, 1897-1916, p. 590; Geddes 1905, p. 492.

4. Fleming 1979, pp. 34-36; Geddes 1905, p. 493
5. Fleming 1979, p. 36; *Who was who*, Vol 1, 1897-1916, p. 590; *Dictionary of scientific biography*, p. 337; Geddes 1905, p. 493; Dunbar 1982, p. 341.
6. *Who was who*, Vol 1, 1897-1916, p. 590; *Dictionary of scientific biography*, p. 337; Geddes 1905, p. 493; Fleming 1979, pp. 36, 40-41, 45, 47, 51; Dunbar 1982, pp. 341-45.
7. As quoted in Fleming 1979, p. 50.
8. Dunbar 1982, pp. 350-51; Fleming 1979, pp. 45, 47; Geddes 1905, p. 493; *Who was who*, Vol 1, 1897-1916, p. 590; *Dictionary of scientific biography*, p. 337.
9. Fleming 1979, p. 59; Geddes 1905, p. 493.
10. Fleming 1979, pp. 59-60, 63, 65-73; Woodcock, George, "Anarchist Phases and Personalities," *Queen's quarterly* 87, i (1980): 84.
11. *Who was who*, Vol 1, 1897-1916, p. 590; *Dictionary of scientific biography*, pp. 337-38; Geddes 1905, pp. 494-95, 550.
12. *Who was who*, Vol 1, 1897-1916, p. 590.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 590; Geddes 1905, pp. 496, 555; *Dictionary of scientific biography*, pp. 337-38.
14. Dunbar, Gary S., *Elisée Reclus, historian of nature* (Hamden, CN: Archon Books, 1978), pp. 163-83; *Who was who*, Vol 1, 1897-1916, p. 590; *Dictionary of scientific biography*, pp. 337-38; Geddes 1905, p. 553-555; Dunbar 1982, p. 351; Woodcock 1980, p. 84; Fleming 1979, p. 51.
15. Woodcock 1980, p. 84; Fleming 1979, pp. 61-63, 65-68, 73.