Scribblings

Included here are occasional pieces written from time to time. They are not connected to each other and cover several subject areas. Most are based on personal knowledge and some have been published.

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On reading books written by others

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A man called "Ceylon":

my tenuous link to the First World War.

One day, around noon, two schoolboys were walking home from school. It must have been about 1883, and the boys were from S.Thomas' College at Mutwal. Mutwal and Kotahena were, then, the home of upper-middle-class people, many of them Burghers.

The two friends were Burgher boys and, like all their clan, they were adventurous and independent. School did not, probably, hold much attraction for them. They lived very close to the busy port of Colombo, though Galle was yet the country's main port. With the coming of steamships the port of Galle was proving to be a risky haven. In fact, soon after this fateful day, Colombo was chosen as our main port and Galle became a peaceful back-water.

The two schoolboys ambling back home after school knew nothing of this, nor would they have cared. Ships, though, fascinated them, as they have fascinated boys throughout history. Ships of many countries; seamen of many colours speaking queer languages; majestic sailing ships, tall-funneled paddle-wheelers, some still carrying sails for an emergency; flags of many nations, the smell of coal and gritty black smoke, bullock carts trundling over cobblestone roads carrying cargo from the warehouses, *nattamis* pushing their hand-carts and loudly cursing all who crossed their way – all the hustle and bustle of a busy port open to the sea (there was no breakwater, then). So the two boys were probably exchanging tall tales about shipboard life on board exotic countries they sailed to. By-and-by, they came up to the entrance to the port and hung around it, drinking in all the strange smells and sounds. Suddenly they saw, pasted on a window in an office, a large notice: "CABIN BOY WANTED". One, the more adventurous of the two, made a quick decision and walked boldly in. Boldness was his friend: soon he was back with a beaming smile - he had got the job! Now came the ticklish question of telling the family, who were sure to sabotage the adventure. Flushed with success, he made another quick decision. He persuaded his friend to take his books home, two days later, and tell them that the vagabond "had run away to sea". By the time this was done the ship and the new (and probably seasick) cabin boy had sailed away.

That boy was my mother’s father, Lloyd Oswald Felsianes, and his story gives me a link to the “Great War” that was meant to save Civilization a hundred years ago (but didn’t) but only began a race for domination which goes on today. It is the story of a peaceful man caught up in a war he had no interest in. So let me say something about my “Dehiwela Grandpa”.

My earliest memories are of him in his late seventies or early eighties, a wiry man of average height, about 5ft.5 or so with close-cropped white hair, white moustache, and a large, pitted, pink nose. Always dressed in white singlet, white slacks and white deck shoes, he chewed sticky stumps of “ ’baccy” (chewing tobacco). A very faded, sepia picture (since restored) shows him in his ‘thirties, on shore leave in Singapore. It shows him in a dark three-piece suit and he sports a watch-chain.

He had tattoos on his forearms, one of a mermaid – he assured us that he had seen them! He told us he had sailed the seven seas, on many ships and right round the world. What ship did he sign on? We don’t know but, somewhere along the line the cabin boy became involved with the Engine Room and became – as my Mother remembered – an “Engineer”.

On all these ships he sailed one he was the only man from Ceylon and so he was called "Ceylon" by his shipmates on every one.

And so, after the sailing the seven seas, the prodigal returned home in the late 1890's, married and settled down in Dehiwela with his family, working on the cargo-cum-passenger "Lady" ships (“Lady Blake”, “Lady McCallum” and “Lady Havelock”) which the Ceylon Steamship Co. Ltd. operated around the island. (I remember the High Priest of Seruwavila temple telling me *“Api may ratata aawey*

naven – We came to this country by ship": that "country" being Trincomalee!). One of them would leave Colombo on a voyage round the Island on every other Wednesday. She would sail round the southern coast, stopping at Galle, Hambantota, Batticoloa, Trincomalee, Point Pedro, Jaffna, and end up at Pamben. She would make the return trip to Colombo every other Friday. The round trip took eight days. The ships are no more: the "Lady Havelock" came to grief in Batticoloa in the cyclone of 1907 and her boiler, which Grandpa must have tended, was said to be yet at rest in a garden opposite the Rest House – at least, till the tsunami.

Somewhere during this period, he came to know a POW in somebody else's war: the Boer War. We don't know anything about this except for a gift the POW had given him. It was a pipe, for smoking, carved out of the root of a tea bush. Along the stem he had carved "Boer Camp, Diyatalawa" and, on the bowl, the coat-of-arms of the Orange Free State.

But the "Ceylon Steamship Company" wound up in about 1908 and he had to fend for his wife and three small girls. Having divorced and re-married by this time, a berth on a merchant vessel was no longer an option and so he joined the Colombo Port Commission as a Tug Driver. My Mother remembered two he worked on – "Samson" and "Goliath" – perhaps because of their Biblical names, but there may have been others, too. It was a quiet life in a port that was becoming increasingly busy. Ships were not berthed alongside the quays then, but were anchored in the stream, with bows facing the prevailing monsoon wind. When the monsoon changed, the berthed ships were swung round to face the wind again. So the Tugs were always tuned to wind and wave and it was a most routine job.

But all that changed, a hundred years ago this month, when the Great War caught up with him. Colombo was an important port for the British Empire, because of sea-borne trade and travel. The Indian Ocean became a happy hunting ground for German submarines, and raiders. The greatest fear was of the "Emden" which was cruising, preying on merchant shipping: ships were sunk, cargo taken over and also the ships' crews and passengers who were treated humanely and sent home by various ships that were spared from a watery grave to serve this humanitarian purpose. But, although she entered the popular Sinhalese vocabulary, the "Emden" never did sight Ceylon, though sailing past her. Not so another raider, the "Wolf" which was a raider and mine-layer. The "Wolf" laid mines in the Approaches to Colombo Port which, accounted for the British freighters "Worcestershire" (7175 tons) and "Perseus" (6728 tons) even as late as 1917. Clearly, Colombo had to secure the Approaches by sweeping and clearing mines laid.

But Fleet Minesweepers could not be spared. The Port Commission had to fend for itself and “make do”. The tugs "Samson" and "Goliath" were refitted with minesweeping equipment, and they worked as minesweepers to keep the entrance channel to the harbour clear of mines. Much later, in the early years of the next World War, they were called upon to do the same duty for training the fledgling Ceylon Naval Volunteer Force. So we know what they must have looked like as Minesweepers: “Samson”, for example, was fitted out with Mk.V Oropesa minesweeping gear and Lewis guns and had two Officers, an Engineer and a crew of 37.

And what of my grandfather? He must have carried on, as usual. Minesweeping was a defensive task and the Tugs were not called upon to fight. There were no aerial attacks to fear and danger lay beyond the harbor entrance. He remained a merchant mariner; he was not mobilized: he was just doing his job for the Port. Yet, his work was – as the war work of other merchant mariners – was appreciated.

When the fighting stopped and medals were being handed out, he was not forgotten. He was awarded the War Medal and the Victory Medal both of which were inscribed "DRI. L.O.FELSIANUS. MINE SW." I still have them, though I had to get the ribbons replaced.

But I was too small to remember much more: he had retired by the time I remember him. He died in 1946, as the second innings of the “Great War” was nearing its end. I must have been about his age when he “ran away to sea”.

He was my first link with ships and wars and seamen: and maybe, just *maybe*, that’s where the fascination began.

August 2014

THANK YOU, COMMANDER PROCTOR

“Vijaya’s” first officers

L – R: Lt.E.Sanmugaratnam, Lt.Victor Hunter, Lt.Cdr.Rajan Kadirgammar

Lt.Alanson Caldera, Lt. Rajah Proctor, S/Lt.Eddie White.

I met Rajah Proctor only once: a meeting that lives in memory.

In 1960 my naval career was beginning and Commander Rajah Proctor’s was ending. With a degree from London he joined Ceylon Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve in 1942, became a competent officer and saw active service off Colombo, Trincomalee, Addu Attol and Diego Garcia. Then, when the Burma Front was opened, he had sailed a little Motor Fishing Vessel across the Bay of Bengal to Akyab for logistical runs up-river to the frontline. With the end of war and the dawn of Independence Proctor was absorbed into the Royal Ceylon Navy, underwent advanced training in Gunnery School in the U.K. and continued to serve at sea. His last, fateful command was H.M.Cy.S Mahasena which, along with the minesweeper H.M.Cy S. Parakrama, had sailed on a “show the flag” cruise to Hong Kong and Japan. But Murphy’s Law prevailed and things went wrong. When that happens a Captain has to take the rap, and Proctor was out in the cold.

Now under suspension pending a Commission of Inquiry, Proctor was killing time at our Training camp in Diyatalawa when I met him. That day, NHQ had warned us of industrial unrest in the country. We were not to go to Badulla for the sailors’ fortnightly pay but report to Colombo for the money. The Commanding Officer, sent for me and

detailed me for this task "Aye, aye, Sir" I saluted, too wet behind the ears to understand – let alone appreciate – how inexperienced I was for the task. Chatting with the C.O. across his desk was Proctor, in civvies. He now turned in his chair towards me. "Schooley…" he said – for that was what Instructor Officers were, in naval parlance – "Schooley, I don't think you know what you are taking on. Listen to me, carefully. You are going with an armed party on a long journey when there is unrest in the country. I cannot teach you everything, now, but keep you wits about you. Think ahead - what would you do if your men need to stop and stretch their legs? Don't stop where there are people. Stop only where there are no houses and you can see the road before and behind you. Then…….." And so on.

This man, awaiting the axe to fall (as it did) on his own career, yet felt compelled to advice a neophyte. I never met him again, but I was there at his funeral many years later.

I - in the Navy to teach English to officer cadets - had heard that Proctor had recently been published a book: **"A Child Must Cry and other tales: A collection of short stories of Ceylon and India"**. He had started writing them while supervising a refit of H.M.Cy.S.Vijaya in Grimsby, in 1952. The book carried a Foreword by the Australian Writers' Professional Service, Melbourne, beginning: *"These stories have deeply impressed us."* Now I searched for it, found it, read it and - lost it! But, a few years ago; Nazreen Sansoni showed me a copy she had found in a second-hand bookshop. "Read it and tell me what you make of it" she said. I photocopied it, returned Nazreen's copy and lent mine to an old salt. But he "crossed the bar", and I had not the heart to search for it among his "effects". Nazreen, too, had lent her copy to someone she had lost track of.

Finally, Anandalal Nanayakkara, a speaker at the Colombo Chapter of the CSA, and a collector of books, found me a copy. I set about reading it in earnest. And so began the rediscovery of a man

. I was totally unprepared for his understanding of, and empathy for the impoverished folk, rural and urban, of South India and Ceylon, and of the lives of the fishermen of both sides of the Palk Strait. I will not try to evaluate them: Mulk Raj Ananda, then the doyen of Indian Literature and Art, placing Proctor above *"the fake tropical pieces of Somerset Maugham….the narratives of Andre Malraux (and the) occasional Hemingway"* says: *"… he knows the way into the hearts of obscure fishermen, villagers and lumpens whose romantic struggle to grapple with their simple destinies is far more genuine than the European writers could demonstrate…. (He) reproduces the accents of the Indian Ocean….with a tempestuous warmth that is unselfconsciously passionate……."*

Neither will I speak of his totally fictional pieces, written light-heartedly, which do not speak to me of Rajah Proctor, the man.

To me, he was so very much a man of his time. It dawned on me that he and I had both lived through the later1940s – he, as a naval officer and I, as an adolescent schoolboy. That was when the British Raj was breaking up and the countries that had been "British India" – India, Pakistan and Ceylon – were viscerally united against their erstwhile master. In Ceylon, then, horse racing was a major sport; we had "Viennese Specialists" in our hospitals; Dakotas were the workhorses of the air; smuggling and illicit immigration to and from an impoverished southern India to the economic 'paradise' of Ceylon was the Navy's chief worry. So all I will do is to comment only on the stories that talk of those times: ***A Child must Cry, The Doctors, Race Horsing, My Story, Does Anyone know Why?*** and ***"Vande Matharam".***

In ***A Child Must Cry*** Proctor is the actor-narrator. A naval officer on anti-illicit immigration patrol plucks out a boy from a wrecked boat in stormy seas. The Royal Ceylon Navy's main operational role then was of patrolling the northern seas – a role largely forgotten today. Just as it is today, people smuggling was common: except that, then, the smuggling was from India to Ceylon. A fisherman moonlighting as smuggler finds that a passenger is his own small son. A storm blows up, the boat capsizes and a naval patrol picks up the little boy. That is the scene, but the theme is of father-son relationships. The love between the rescued boy and his missing father is reflected in the officer's mind as he thinks of his own son. The two stories twine and the officer finds both children becoming one. *"I slanted the mug against his lips and said, 'Son, it'll give you strength, drink'. His thin, cold-blued lips moved apart. His adam's apple jerked as he swallowed, its fire opened his eyes wide. They were round and shiny, soft as moonlight…."* But beyond the story-teller's art is the hard truth of the poverty that made people-smuggling inevitable; smugglers preyed upon immigrants but both needed each other. Here is the tragic kernel of this story – as true today as yesterday.

The Doctors explores a tragedy of a different kind. Who remembers the "Viennese Specialists"? They were Austrian Jewish doctors who had, somehow, survived the Nazi domination and the Allies felt obliged to rehabilitate - in the colonies. There were some very good doctors among them and I, personally, remember a Neurologist who cured a close friend of epileptic fits. But our own medical men sniggered that they were not really 'Specialists', nor even qualified doctors. This story is of such an 'unqualified doctor', and is told in his own words – in a series of flashbacks into the days he was on the run – at a disciplinary inquiry by his Ceylonese colleagues. Yes, he says, he was only a final-year medical student, whose studies were cut short by the war, lived in the shadows as a "*Medicine man"* forever on the run till: " '*Who conferred you the right to practice? What country?'…"France! A Prefect of Police".* And so he becomes "*Doctor Von Ludwig Berchenstein. COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: Vienna,*

Austria. DISPLACED PERSON." A very well told story, it leads you to sympathize with this non-doctor who is a better doctor than the qualified ones, his accusers. And you think of our own IDPs.

I include ***Race Horsing*** – a light tale – for the same reason as ***The Doctors***: because it is about a hardly remembered facet of 20th. century Ceylon. It is about a "Turf Accountant" forced to flee his creditors in England, who breaks journey in Colombo *en route* to Australia. Here, he meets characters from the horse-racing underworld world who specialize in doping horses. It was, indeed, a big business in Colombo, then, much to the embarrassment of the venerable Colombo Turf Club. Finally the CTC turned to a member, a Science Master in a leading school to carry out tests on the horses before each race in an effort to curb the practice! I should know, as I have watched him at work – for he was my father-in-law!

My Story is very different. The narrative is set in Gunnery school in England (where Proctor was trained?). A class of Marines and Commonwealth naval officers is gathered for a lecture on "Aid to Civil Power", emphasizing the principle of 'minimum force'. The lecturer warns the mixed group, that some of his examples would involve Commonwealth countries, but only the Pakistani officer asks that, if a story involves his country, he should be allowed to give his own version. The lesson proceeds and comes to that classic example of excessive force: the "Amritsar Massacre" by the British in 1919. After the lecturer's clinical analysis, the Pakistani officer asks for his turn. His story is emotionally-charged: of a man who gives his revolver to his wife to teach his little son to shoot, and then marches to his death. In 1939 the son, now a man, confronts Lieut. Gen. Sir Michael O'Dwyer, the man who gave the infamous 'crawling order', and shoots him in public in England. The officer, shaken by emotion, says *" that man was my father*" who, at his execution said, "My mission is over". *" 'But…but…aren't you a Pakistani?' it was the overgrown marine. 'Yes' Mohamed Azad replied softly, a catch in his voice, 'I am a Pakistani now; I was an Indian for twenty-two years. My family were Indians' "* The story is presented in fiction form but the events are true and it shows the ambivalent feelings towards the British that linked the peoples who had been part of the Raj: I, myself – like many other Ceylonese – shared this anti-British feeling, while supporting the war. Today, when the West is "holier-than-thou", this story is required reading.

Does Anyone Know Why? is about another of the Navy's tasks after the war – flood relief work. I remember the great flood of 1947 when our own garden was islanded and we gave refuge to the less fortunate. The story is of a group of sailors arriving with a rowboat – probably a whaler, as this was long before fiberglass dinghies and outboard motors – in tow. The water is rising and villages are taking refuge in the highest areas, the road and the railroad which stood much higher than the paddy fields as I well remember. Contemptuous remarks greet them: *" What's this? A row boat? A boat on*

dry land?. We need floats and catamarans! Not row boats!. Huh! Land sailors ".. But the water keeps rising and the strong current soon makes the smaller craft ineffective. The roomy rowboat now comes into its own. Picking up people marooned on rooftops becomes the real task and the boat patrols the waters searching for them. The theme, though, is not about rescue, but the greed of people and how even those in need prey upon each other. The arrogant merchant in his multi-storied house, the money-lender unwilling to leave is wealth, the robbers on small craft stealing whatever they can. The scene and the atmosphere are genuine and this is really a period piece. To me, the memory of what must have been this self-same flood, lends it a particular poignancy.

And so we come to ***"Vande Matharam"***: fittingly the last story. The title is of India's alternate National Anthem and has much to do with the different strands of India's freedom struggle, seen in this story. ***"Vande Matharam"*** was also the anthem if the Indian National Army of Subhas Chandra Bose, who tried to link up with the Germans and the Japanese to oust the British from India. I remember listening to it being broadcast from occupied Singapore – "Radio Shionan" – calling "our brothers and sisters in India and Ceylon". This story is set in India and the focal point is a ceremonial naval funeral of a village schoolboy who had run away to join the Navy and later died at sea. Looking on are the rural folk who do not understand anything of the ceremonial. They stare at the coffin: " '*Aah, silver fittings! Polished wood' they whispered to each other. 'What money! A year's wages! The Government must be paying, what a waste!...A year's wages! Good money!'"* The sailors in crisp funeral array, the buglers sounding the "Last Post", the Firing Party, the National Flag draped over the coffin: *"It was all for Govindan! It couldn't be, it couldn't be!"* But the Chief Gunnery Instructor's mind goes back to Govindan's bravery the day when the Indian Navy mutinied against the British and faced them down. Yes, it happened – but who remembers? The boy who ran away, the popular messmate, the ship's hero during the Mutiny and now, being committed to Mother Earth under the mango tree he had planted. *"The Admiral's eyes looked deeply into hers: 'Govindan died for his Motherland, that it might belong to his brothers and sisters'. The crows feet crinkled round the Admiral's eyes as a dawning radiance glimmered in hers…….'Vande Matharam' he said. 'Vande Matharam,' she repeated softly, holding herself erect in the purple twilight."*

Yes, this book speaks to me of the days we were both privileged to live in: days of joy and ideals. Rajah Proctor wrote novel – "The Fisherman's Daughter" and "Illicit Immigrant" –both very good. But his short stories remain my favourites.

CARING FOR A TREE

We have, in Sri Lanka, a tradition of respecting and caring for trees, even if we don't treat all trees alike. This caring attitude - which must have come down from our early pre-Buddhist, animistic culture - got a later impetus and validation from the gratitude the Buddha himself showed the Bo-tree which spread its sheltering shade over him during his meditations' that led to his Enlightenment. So we revere the Bo-tree. But it is not the only tree we. care for. There is that special, perhaps symbiotic, relationship with the fruit trees that grow close to village homes. Then there is the special care we show the many, many shade trees that provide travellers shelter from the sun: we know that kings of old made it their business to plant such trees. Under many of them were the "ambalams," or temporary resting places, where travellers broke journey for the night. Among the travellers were the carters who rested and fed their animal's under them; who cooked their own meals under them and, most importantly, showed their gratitude for the shelter provided by cleaning up the site and making it habitable for others before they moved on. In earlier days, many of these trees, too, were Bo- trees, though of the non-revered "kaputu-bo" variety - trees that had <u>not</u> been planted for worship but which had grown from the droppings of crows in the normal .manner of seed dispersal in the case of **ficus** trees. This has now had unfortunate repercussions because, when we began to don the clothes of Buddhist piety in place of Buddist practice - an unfortunate late 20th. century phenomenon - many carters were dispossessed of their informal shelters. Such a tree, in Dehiwela, suffered this fate about two years ago and I watched, sadly, the progress(?) of this site from its traditional role to that of place of worship, complete with electric lights and concrete balustrades, which have kept out the carters and created a lorry and taxi park.

So I was pleasantly surprised to come across, within the last few years, two examples of caring for particular trees: one here, in Colombo and the other in Sharjah, in the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.). Let me speak of the latter first. In Sharjah, the central town square is called "Rolla Square", it is bordered by well-tended Rolla trees - Banyan trees to us - and has a striking central piece. This is in the shape of an isosceles triangle resting on its base: at ground level is an opening in which there stands the sheet metal image, in the round, of a gnarled tree-trunk, complete with branches. The opening in the brickwork arching over this is in the shape of the foliage of a shady tree and the overall impression is of a tree. For this is a monument to a tree, a Rolla tree, that had been the only tree of any size that had, once, been there in this village in the desert. It had been the focal point of communal life and, under its shade, all meetings had been held and much" business conducted. Sometime or other, perhaps with the growth of village to town, the tree died and the grateful community resolved not to forget its gratitude to the tree. And Rolla Square is the result.

I now come to the Colombo example.

For very many years, whenever I passed the Wellawatte bridge on foot, I would wonder what that slab was that stood upright on the seaward, and Galle-ward, of the bridge, near the Savoy building. Tall and narrow, with a pointed top apex, it looks like a tombstone. In fact it has some letters incised which are too faint to be read. Today, even the faded letters are covered under layers of paint and posters. I could get no help from anyone about this slab and was desultorily thinking of writing to the Editor about it when, without searching for it, I opened a book about Colombo in the last century, and there was the answer I was searching for! So let me share with you what I found there, with some additional information I gathered, for this is an interesting story.

The book - "Ceylon in Early British Times" by J.P.Lewis, undated but, from internal evidence, probably published in 1913 - identifies the slab as that erected by firs. Sophia Marshall in 1820 under the Banyan tree by the roadside near "Layard's Folly", and gives us the text of the inscription. But who was Sophia? Who was Layard and what was his folly? And the Banyan tree - where was it? I had to get all these questions answered before the picture became clear.

Henry Augustus Marshall was a young Englishman who "came out" to this country in 1798 and never sighted his own country again. This was before Ceylon was a Crown Colony, before it was under the King of England, and the administration was carried on between the East India Co. and the Crown under a system referred to in history books as "Dual control" On his way here, Marshall stopped off at the island of St.Helena, where Napolean was later to be briefly interned; was hosted by Col.Robert Brooke, the Governor from 1778 to 1801; met his daughter, Sophia and married her; and reached Ceylon with his bride in 1798. The Governor in Ceylon, Sir Frederick North had mixed feelings about young Marshall. "He is a young fellow of good parts and considerable erudition," he commented, "but a little of what we used to call at Eton 'a pretending fellow', owing to have lived too much with fine fellows in that noisy chaos, Devonshire House. I hope his marrying so comfortably as' he has done will cure him of that defect." Marriage, at least, appears to have made him financially stable. Lewis says "The Marshalls had a 'charming abode situated on the seashore about three miles from Colombo', and therefore at Wellawatte or Milagiriya." By 1823 he had been appointed Auditor General, a post he held till his death in 1841. He had to bear the name "Inequity Marshall", not for any act of inequity on his part but because there already was an "Equity Marshall" - the Hon.Sir Charles Marshall, Puisne Justice (1828-1833) and later Chief Justice (1833-1836) till he was stripped of office and pension for participating in a duel.

There was also, around this time, a Government Agent of the Western Province named C.P.Layard, who conceived of a grand plan to drain away part of the flood waters of the Kelani ganga by linking the Kotte-Kirillapone-Nedimale canal to the sea at Wellawatte. Alas! it turned out that the canal bed was much higher than the flooded area and the project came to be known as "Layard's Folly". (I am indebted, for this information, to the Peoples' Bank ECONOMIC REVIEW of August 1981, devoted to

'Inland Waterways'). In all fairness I must add that the defect was corrected and the original function was performed by the canal until Colombo's urban decay set in: in fact, the CEYLON MANUAL of 1910 describes the Kirillapone canal as 1 mile 25 chains in length, 50 feet in breadth, with banks of natural sand and a navigable depth of 3 feet 6 inches.

This, then, was the canal by which Sophia's Banyan tree stood. In H.W.Cave's "Book of Ceylon" is a photograph (Plate 163) which shows a down-stream view of the bridge and a large, spreading tree is visible at one end. This, probably, was the tree in question. Sophia Marshall, living in her 'charming' sea-side bungalow in either Wellawatte or Milagiriya, made it her special mission to tend this tree. Why? Perhaps her bungalow was close to the canal's outlet to the sea. Perhaps she was a lover of trees and an earlier day "Ruk Rekaganna". We do not know for certain except that her verse shows her appreciation of and caring for the tree. In the verse itself is a poignant wish for Sophia herself to be remembered, in the years that were to come, as the benefactor of the tree. Here, then, is the verse as recorded by Lewis:

"To him whose gracious aim in mercy bends, And light and shade to all alike extends, Who guards the traveller of his weary way, Shelters from storm and shades from solar ray, Breathe one kind wish for her, one pious prayer, Who made this sheltering tree her guardian care, Fenced in from rude attacks the pendent shoots, Nourished and framed its tender, infant shoots, traveller, if from milder climes you rove, How dearly will you prize this Indian grove. Pause then, awhile, and ere you pass it by, Give to Sophia's name one grateful sigh.

A.D.1820"

Lewis adds: "We fear that nobody now notices the stone or deciphers is 'half worn letters', and that consequently Sophia's touching appeal is wasted on the dusty air of the Wellawatte Road."

How much more relevant to today are Lewis' words than even to the days when they were written!

The tree itself has gone, like so many of Colombo's - and Sri Lanka's - loveliest trees.(Happily, the Banyan tree at the Dehiwela Bridge, still stands, affording a perch for the numerous pelicans who, themselves, are being hunted out of existence by the human denizens of the canal bank.)

Sophia herself has gone, as all of us will. Strange, then, that on cold and lifeless stone, and on dry, dusty paper, alone remain the record of a so-human act of caring and the all-too-human wish for "one grateful sigh" from a traveller from a "milder clime".

Marshall, himself, never went back to milder climes and lies buried somewhere in Colombo. What became, I wonder, of
Sophia?

Next time, though, on Wellawatte Bridge, I will pause awhile and think of her.

PORTRAIT OF AN UNCOMMON LADY.

Clarice Ruth Devendra (nee Felsianes)

There's something I've yet left undone; and now, at 75, I think it's time to do it.

There is no real reason for not having written about my mother. I have written about my father and others but, about her, only in passing, merely as somebody's wife, or mother. But she was exceptional, as a person. Reading my sister's recent notes I saw "Mother" (as we called her) in a new way and realized that this time, I had to write.

In the 1920s marriages which crossed communal, ethnic and national divides, were quite unexceptional amongst the emerging intellectual elite: one such was my eldest paternal uncle's. It was a bold decision for him, a village boy from Kalegana, in rural Galle. Then my father followed, marrying a Presbyterian Burgher girl, and emotions must have run high Kalegana. *Seeya,* and *Achchi*, however, accepted the inevitable in good grace.

How did they meet, these two persons from such different backgrounds? Strangely, it was the very purity of their religious beliefs that brought them together. The 1920s, was the heyday of the "Temperance Movement". The colonial government was anxious to raise revenue by auctioning Arrack licenses. Religious and lay leaders of all faiths rose up strongly in protest, generating a groundswell so great that the government compromised, letting the people in each area decide whether they wanted an arrack tavern in their area, or not. The "Temperance Movement" girded up its loins and entered the fray. Believers took to the streets asking people to vote a resounding "NO".

In Dehiwela, among these believers, was the family of Lloyd Oswald Felsianes, a retired sailor who had grown to manhood as an engine driver on tramp steamers. Returning home as a young man he married Mabel Herft, and they he had three girls. The youngest, Clarice Ruth ("Ruby" to all), was my mother. Unfortunately, the marriage ended while my mother was yet a baby. She grew up without a mother: something that profoundly affected her. It was one of the things that moulded her. Grandpa subsequently re-married Grandma and the couple adopted a son and joined the Dutch

Reformed Church. Mother, thus, acquired an archetypal step-mother: the other factor that greatly influenced her mindset. One of first pupils of the Presbyterian School for Girls, at Dehiwela, she was one of the few living when the school celebrated its 75th Anniversary. She had qualified and was working when the “Temperance Movement” campaign began. Given her strongly Christian background, she became a propagandist for the cause. In Dehiwela the “Arrack” lobby lost the election, and there is no Arrack tavern there, yet.

Among the campaigners was a good-looking young Sinhala Buddhist teacher from Nalanda Vidyalaya dressed in the new “National dress”. So it was in the “heat of the battle” that my Father and Mother, met and fell in love. A friend of Father who had the ear of Lloyd Felsianes, spoke up for him and a marriage was duly agreed to - not a Church wedding, but at the Registrar’s office.

Mother’s family must have been bewildered. Mother once said that Grandpa had cried – but only because he thought his little daughter was going to become a Sinhalese! He – like many more – did not know the difference between being a Buddhist and being a Sinhalese. (In any case, she didn’t become either!).Though emotionally unprepared, Grandpa was determined not to be as inflexible. The family had no bad word for the groom. They always remained very close to us, and we were in and out of each others’ houses. “Dehiwela Grandpa’s” house – he lived in several, but always in Dehiwela and so earned this name – was our favourite holiday home where we had a whale of a time. We kids were thoroughly spoilt by our much older cousins, particularly at Christmas time.

My parents’ long and amicable partnership was based on mutual respect, refusal to make “demands”, and willingness to compromise. Father, a strong Buddhist, never asked Mother to change her religion: I remember him buying her a new Bible and a Book of Psalms when her old ones were tattered (the old one had a faded sprig of “forget-me-not” flowers pressed between the pages – a memento of their Nuwara Eliya honeymoon). She read her Bible privately, perhaps seeking solace when she needed. But she never went to Church except when her step-brother, the Padre, would preach. Near the end of his life, my Uncle (Father’s youngest brother) and I cautiously probed him how a Buddhist’s ashes should be disposed of, after cremation, because we knew was that he had strong views. We thought we were treading softly, but he understood: “Ashes?” he said, “Ashes? What are they but ashes? They are not me! Throw them away – there, under that tree there, if you like!.....But.. ” he told us, “….you must remember to give Mother a proper Christian burial.”

Mother had her own ideas about Family. She, who had not known the warmth of a mother’s love, but had known only a step-mother, she was determined that the family will be close and united. The family was, to her, a Unit. The children must share a

common ethical and value system. So it was understood that, while we children would all be Buddhists, we would be respectful of all religions. So, amongst our reading matter, were the “Bible Stories for Children” which Mother had brought from Dehiwela. This attitude, compounded of the best of Buddhism and Christianity, moulded our own characters.

But Mother went farther; much farther. If the family was to be a Buddhist family, she had to be part of it in some way. For her wedding she had worn a Charleston frock, white silk stockings and shoes and a long veil: quite in contrast to Father’s simple National dress and shawl. She continued to wear frocks but, when the Sari came to be the women’s National dress, she adopted it – they were made-up saris, then – and tied her hair in a “bun” at the nape of her neck – but she wore no jewellery. She stuck to that till the day she died, and was she often assumed to be Sinhalese!

Her experiences with a step-mother made her particularly soft towards children who had lost their own mothers or fathers. It was, in fact, a soft-spot for the underdog: whether child or adult, man, woman, or shanty-dweller. Ever-ready and armed, she was, with her own remedies and people – mostly women – would come to her for advice and first-aid. Whether it was a man who fell from a tree or someone who had been criminally assaulted, she was the first to be called, the first to be on the “crime scene”, the first to call on by-standers to help her in her self-imposed acts of mercy. She was free with her advice: from the efficacy of “green oil” (*sarvavisadiya*) for tonsillitis to marriage counseling and birth-control (of course, sometimes not welcomed!). How many battered wives came home for “tea and sympathy” with her! Father always backed her up because they both believed that marriages were meant to work, and they always worked towards reconciliation.

Her other guiding rule was: “No favouritism”. All the kids had to follow the same rules. All had – when they reached a certain point – to sweep the house, dust the furniture, clean the cobwebs, take turns washing the plates and polishing the cutlery, make up the beds and, when we lived in a village during the war, draw water from the well and carry it in buckets to fill the storage barrel in the *maeda midula*. Boys could not bully the girls: a girl threatening to shout the dreaded word, “*Amma*….!” was enough to stop the would-be doer in his tracks. She was a disciplinarian and the cane was her weapon: and, strangely, our animosity was directed towards the cane and the wielder! We knew well-enough what the whacking was about, that it was not done unfairly, and that we could do little about it. But the cane still stung! So, in my younger days, my enemy was the cane itself. Once, just once, I managed to lay my hands on it and gleefully broke it up into little pieces!

Mother had very modern ideas of bringing up children to bear responsibility at a very early age. The elder two seem to have had the worst of it: they had to go shopping

and to the Co-op stores for the weekly rations, the elder brother (not yet ten years old) had to take his sister to Eye Hospital to have her eyes tested (three of us were in spectacles by the time we were ten).

In the years we lived in a village during the war years, Mother blossomed: she became the font of Wisdom to the women, who sought her out. She, in turn, learnt recipes, and medicines and folk ways and wisdom from them. Perhaps she also learnt the nature of real Sinhalese village folk. When the floods of ’47 came, she took in all those who lived on lower ground and, single-handedly, ran a refugee camp at home. Clothes and rations came from friends in Colombo.

We kids were given free reign to roam the village barefoot, to eat every fruit we could get at, go for baths in the irrigation channel and at the village *peella* and learn how to cope with leeches (salt, lime or tobacco juice). She knew who made the best *kavun* and *kokis* and *kalu dodol* and had them make them at home: we were absorbed bystanders impatiently waiting to eat the forbidden dregs in the pan. She salted and laid-by jars of *lunu dehi*, made the most delicious *jambu dosi* while strictly rationing our intake of that fruit from the tree. Trees we could climb, if we could. She, and we, loved the village life.

She anticipated the difficult questions that would come from us one day and was ready. Books, she knew were our friends and we had access to all of Father’s books, however valuable. We had grown up knowing to respect them. Stacked innocently among them were two, “Sex knowledge for Boys” and “Sex knowledge for Girls”, meant for us to find! Of course we did, and read both. Animal life around us demonstrated. There was no need for questions thereafter: we were “experts”!

Although Father’s brothers and sisters were close to us (some more than others), Mother had had some bad experiences with his not-so-close relatives. Early in their married life, Father had tried to introduce her to them, but she was not made welcome. How deeply it must have hurt her! But when Father and his brothers had to dig deep into their savings to meet the wedding expenses of a sister, she made her disapproval quite plain. She had nothing against her – in fact she was like a daughter to her – but it was the sense that the hard-earned family savings were being dipped into. Father had no choice, though, and he made his own personal sacrifices. The unfair hand that Life had dealt her: the lack of a mother, a step-mother who had side-lined her, the cruel treatment she had had to face sometimes became just too much for her. One such day, my younger sister and I were fighting and my sister came running to her shouting “*Amma…..”,* with me hard on my heels to defend myself, when it suddenly became too much for her. Putting her head on her arms on the dining table where she was sitting, she burst into tears. We were shocked beyond belief, for we had never, never seen her

cry. Our quarrel forgotten, we tip-toed away guiltily and stayed away for a long while. We learnt, that day, that even Mothers were frail.

When we came to Colombo, life was easier for her, and us. We had a new car and we were past the difficult age. She took to helping their friends' children by giving them a home in Colombo for many years. These were the friends who had been Father's colleagues at Nalanda Vidyalaya and Dharmaraja College, who had been closer to us than our relations over the years: our virtual "Uncles" and "Aunts". Some were kids just out of Primary school and others were in the University. Our home was open to all comers and people kept dropping in at any time, without having to make appointments. The keystone of this new life was Mother. One child, she discovered, had a neurological problem and, true to her style, she took it upon herself to cure him. And she did. Then there was another child would regularly run away home – sometimes with a group of others – and had to be hunted down!

She now could visit her sister and have her over for holidays and renew links with her nieces and their children, all much older than us. The re-connection with the Burgher half of our family gave us a lot of fun – particularly when the Padre Uncle got married to a lady who shared Mother's first name and became the new "Clarice Felsianes". Mother had no great fondness for Grandma, her step-mother, but every Christmas, she would pay a visit to Grandma and we got to know "that" side of the family as well.

Father took up his Buddhist activism again and she supported him, again. Particularly when the first international conference was held – The World Fellowship of Buddhists – she was in the thick of it. A couple of years later, when the conference was held in Thailand, she accompanied Father and was by his side at every event – bringing back lovely Thai jewellery and other exotic things.

One by one, we grew up and left home. My brother was the first to go, to take up a job in Trincomalee. I was next, to go to the University which had shifted to Peradeniya. The sisters followed, upon their marriages. But the nest was not empty. My brother had discovered, in Trincomalee, one of our Burgher cousins who was in a bad way, with two tiny children and a wife suffering from Tuberculosis. He spoke feelingly when he came home and the upshot was that Mother took over the two kids and freed their father to enter their mother into the Sanatorium. They were like toys for us and we learnt what little kids were like. The smaller one was really a toddler but the two of them became all our friends' mascots. Their mother, poor girl, did not recover and so they remained with us till they each grew big enough to go to school, and schools were found for them. One Christmas, when their father could not come, we determined that they should not miss the excitement and our Buddhist house was decorated with a Xmas

tree with streamers and bulbs and presents under the tree. Shortly after that, they rejoined their father.

Old age and illnesses were catching up now on both of them. Ever resourceful, they demanded nothing from the children. Even after Father suffered heart attacks, they rented out a small Annex and Mother carried on. But I was transferred to Colombo from Trincomalee. Pooling their resources and mine, we moved into a comfortable house. But Time was catching up, on all. Mother had lost her sister, and now her brother, the ex-Padre, died and his wife had nowhere to hold the funeral. She asked Mother if she could have it at our place and the answer was typical: “It’s Somasiri’s house. We must ask him”. And so, we had a funeral in our house, for the first time; an event of great interest to our own children. It was not to be the last as, within months, my Father suffered a massive stroke in his sleep. I remember Mother waking me up, shaken, saying, “Father is snoring in a funny way and I can’t wake him up”. He died the next day.

That was the end of Colombo houses for me. Mother coped magnificently in coming to terms with her loss. Little by little she began to tell us bits about her past, but never as a tale of woe, and we began to understand what she had had to endure. Within a year I found a house in Dehiwela, and so we moved back to Mother’s childhood haunts, where she lived with us for fifteen years. We lived on a strict budget, at first. Mother often wanted to contribute but I urged her to use her pension to pamper herself (which she didn’t, but bought presents for the grandchildren.) With the two growing children of mischievous age often annoying her, life was not all roses all the way for her – nor for me, torn between the children and Mother. This is one place I failed her. I looked after her, yes, but I failed to give her emotional support. Fortunately, my wife filled the gap and did all that a daughter could do for her. Fortunately, too, the children grew up and I became more financially stable.

Christmas was the highlight of the year. She planned it for many months and the grandchildren awaited it in high glee. On the Eve, they all descended on us and did all the decorations and arrangements – it was their festival as much as her’s. It was a glorious gathering of the clans. It was a lunch for all on Christmas day itself, with Mother’s special dishes – salt beef from “Elephant House”, “*lansi samboley*”, crusty curried hard-boiled eggs, ham and home-ground mustard sauce, topped off with Love Cake. As the lights came on, Mother played Santa, seated by the tree – we somehow managed to find one, always – and handed out the presents to her grandchildren in strict order of seniority. It is a memory that remains with them yet.

But Life is not always Christmas, and it is fleeting. Her bone structure became frail and she had a fall. She was hospitalized at “Merchants’ Ward” and my brother and I would take turns, visiting her every day. From being the moving spirit in the Ward, gradually she became more and more silent. We were told that home nursing would suit her more. We bought a hospital bed and all equipment and brought her home, but life had little meaning for her. She would refuse to open her mouth to be fed and had to be fed nasally. My wife was with her all day, while I was at work. And so I was at work one day, when the Rev. Crosby de Kretzer came on his motor bike to tell me that she had passed away.

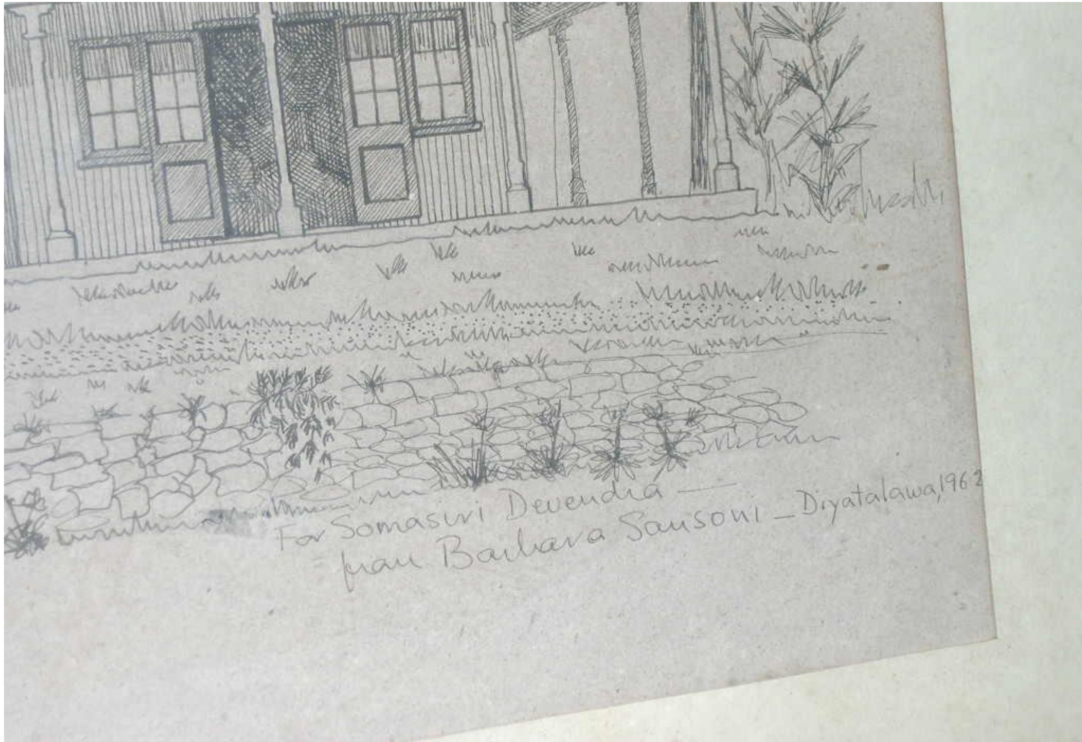
I had now to live up to my promise to my Father. Mother had written, before she fell ill, the names of the Pastors whom she liked to conduct the service, and the hymns she wanted sung. Difficult though it was, the Church did all that. My problem was a burial plot: as Buddhists, we had no family plot. Aunty Clarice came up with the answer: “Let her be buried with her brother, at Kanatte. Here’s the Deed for the plot”. So the Christian burial that Father had wanted for her was duly given, with the Service being conducted at home.

Mother’s greatest achievement – and Father’s, too – was the bringing-up of us in keeping with the pact they had made: the creation of a non-traditional environment of tolerance and respect for all, where money was the least important component. Land they both refused to buy, as it was the root of family break-ups.

For me, what matters most is what she told me one day. Our car had had an accident – I must have been about 14 - and she and I had been the worst injured. Apparently I had passed out and my Apothecary Uncle had been shouting my name to wake me up. I had suddenly gained consciousness, and said “I’m all right, I’m all right – how are the others?” I was concussed and taken to be kept under observation and Mother - much more badly hurt - and I were on wheeled trolleys, side-by-side staring up at the ceiling. It was then that she told me, “Somasiri, I’m proud of you”: the most rewarding words I have ever heard.

Forgive me, Mother, for all I couldn’t do for you.

Barbara, the “Takarang Maligawa” and I



Reading Sally Hulugalla’s piece last Sunday (“Leaf through Barbara’s Masterpiece”) of the launch of the new version of Babara Sansoni’s “Viharas and Verandahs” and, in particular of the ‘iron house’ in Diyatalawa and the temple at Dowa, took me back to those delightful days of the early 1960s.

In 1962 I was the only unmarried officer, in our ‘ship’ in Diyatalawa – Her Majesty’s Ceylon Ship “Rangalla”, or “Uva Camp” to the locals – living in solitary splendour in the Wardroom: that made me the official host to visiting dignitaries. One day I was told to stand by to entertain a Second World War officer, a Lieut. Cdr. Hildon Sansoni who would be coming on a long-ish holiday, with his family. He turned up alone, a day ahead of the rest and proved to be a most enjoyable character with a puckish humour and a fund of stories. Hearing my name he asked me “Are you D.T.Devendra’s son?” When I said “yes” he surprised me by talking about my father’s account of Embekke Devale, recalling the title “The Pillared Pride of Embekke”, and adding that I would enjoy talking to his wife who would be here the next day.

Tomorrow brought Barbara, Simon of the beautiful face and the curly-mopped little Dominic of the mischievous smile. She was delightful company and wanted to know whether there were any old buildings in the area. I, having being bred on a diet of

all things old and beautiful, had noted several on my twice-monthly trips to the Bank in Badulla (for the sailors' fortnightly pay), a most lovely drive, then. I remarked that there was somebody who was writing a weekly illustrated column featuring brick kilns, hen-houses etc and she admitted – not bashfully, (something she never could be) – that she was the culprit. So I volunteered to be her guide.

Our first stop was Dowa temple where I saw her at work for the first time. I was surprised and impressed. She did several drawings while I was shooed-off to look after the children. And so began several forays down various roads, in her Volkswagen, stopping at various houses, mostly Muslim ones. She visited them alone. Alone, she said, she could get to see the insides: accompanied by a raucous brood, she would have been refused.

One evening she wanted to see a particular place, Bogoda Bridge, to which she had been directed by Roland Silva. I did not know of it. Following his instructions, we got nowhere and so we kept asking assorted people where it was. Finally, we found the narrow, winding, gravel road leading down to the river. It was an overcast day, I remember, because I was to take the photographs that formed the base of her drawing: so I remember adjusting for light. It was a fantastic place. On our return, it began to rain and the gravelly road turned a trifle slippery. Barbara, at the wheel, was decidedly on edge and I kept up a patter of interesting trivia interspersed with helpful driving hints. Suddenly, Simon decided to do his bit. From the back seat, he recited – in a distinctly doleful voice – a popular Radio Ceylon Commercial Service jingle: "Death rides on bald tyres"! Only a mother's love must have stopped her from strangling him!

Every evening became an animated talk-shop: Barbara talking of Geofferey Bawa and Ulrik Plesner, Hildon about his threat to 'thrash' 'Big' Bill Tilden the world tennis champion (resulting in the headline "Hildon 'beats' Tilden!"), and I slipping odd bits in-between. Barbara was impressed that my father's "Classical Sinhalese Sculpture" had been published by the prestigious publishing house of Alec Tiranti of London (now, alas! no more, as I learnt when I searched for it in London) where she bought her art materials.

One night I produced my copy of Ananda Coomaraswamy's "Medieval Sinhalese Art". This was her introduction to the man and she became a devotee overnight. (*I did something similar to another visiting dignitary, the Rev Marcelline Jayakody, with whom I was talking about Sinhala music and Viswanath Lowji, and he, about Shantiniketan and Ananda Samarakoon. I produced my Pye 'Music Box' and played, for him, the first LP of classical Indian music with Yehudi Menihun's spoken introduction. The Reverend Father was silent in contemplation after the last strains faded away and then said, quietly to himself: "And to think I had to come to a naval camp in Diyatalawa to hear such heavenly music"!)*

We had finished visiting all the old houses for miles around when I asked Barabara, “Why don’t you draw this building?” “Why? What’s so special about it?” she countered. “Look beyond the *takarang* cladding”, I persisted, “See the proportions and balance. See the Australain *Jarra* wood frame, with the metal outside and the panelling inside. The *takarang* absorbs the heat during the day and at night, when we close the doors and windows, we can stay bare-bodied inside. The pillars, floor and fireplace are of teak. This is a perfect house for this climate. That’s why it was the holiday retreat of the C-in-C, East Indies Fleet”. Next day, she inspected the building and, saying “You are right”, sat herself down in the middle of our sunken garden, and made the basic drawing, and reference sketches of the foliage of the trees. She announced that she would finish it back home.

“And now”, I said, “there is the question of my fees”. “Fees?” she asked. “Yes”, I said, “this drawing”. “Oh that! But of course” she said and so it has hung in my home these many years. Her gift to me.

Our friendship prospered. She stayed with us in our house in Trincomalee and I was again the guide. She would sit absorbed in her drawing and I would keep the children amused and out of mischief: a picture comes to mind of my showing them a dung-beetle at work. Many, many years later, when “The Architecture of an Island” was published, she asked me (in her inimitable style) to review it for her. It was a very pleasant task because of many things. It was published in the “Sunday Times” and both Barbara and I were pleased with it, even if no one else was.

Thank you, Sally, for bringing those days to life again; and Barbara – more strength to your elbow!

A LETTER TO MENAKA

September

My dear Menaka,

How wonderful to get your present and to know that you still remember, and think of me!

Yesterday we had a wonderful reunion - my sisters, my brother and I (and our wives) with your parents and Aunty Chitra. It has been so long since all of us had been together like this. None of us are young any longer: so it was a semi-geriatric crowd!

What made it so special was that, although we could individually remember bits and pieces of our collective past, when we all got together, we shared those bits and the memories and experiences became more vivid. I did not expect, for instance, that your Amma would remember that she and I used to gossip by post when I was in Ratnapura and she in Colombo. Neither of us were in our 'teens, then! And here I am, writing to you!

It is comforting, in times of stress, to think back on the happiness of past days. You remember I sent you a sort of story about our childhood, some years ago? It was first written in a climate of nostalgia. But, after writing to you, and adding to it, I found that it was more than nostalgia and that I was hiding, even from myself, a continuation of that story. So, this year, I sat down and rewrote it, trying to make it both my, and somebody else's story, bringing it right up to the time you came into the picture! Do you realize that it was you that made us come together once again - to pick up the threads we had let drop from our hands? Yes that is exactly what you did: so, this story is, now for you, dedicated to you, just to say "Thanks for the memory". Someday, if I ever get it published, the dedication will appear. Show it to Amma, as she was there in the beginning and the end, but keep it for yourself.

Do keep in touch and may the blessings of the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha be with you.

November

Dear Uncle,

I know that Ammi and Thaththi had a great time in Sri Lanka, being with you and Aunty Ransiri. That lunch would have been very special. Among the things they brought back was the T- shirt for me. Thank you for the loving thought.
Your letter and short story brought a tear to my eye. No doubt Ammi will keep in touch with you but I am fighting for my life again, it happens when we write to each other! I am only looking at the funny side!

Menaka

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For Menaka.

BIRDSONG AND FROGS' CROAK AND EARLY-MORNING MIST

I

1955

When they were in their middle 'teens, in that neither-here-nor-there age, there was this group of boys and girls who decided they would go out walking, very early every morning. They were from two families, their ages ranging through the gamut of the 'teens and their interests ranging as widely. They would get up at about five and meet at some place between their homes and walk, generally, to a Race Course close by. They found it piquant to be abroad at a time when the city had not got into its stride; to be walking about their usual haunts at such an unusual hour; to be dressed in the most informal sort of clothes. It was an exciting violation of all their usual norms - time, clothes; everything - which stimulated them. The Racecourse became their usual haunt, since it took them away from the houses and roads familiar to them or, rather, gave them a different, distanced view of those same roads and houses. It was a little like playing truant, but without the worrying sense of guilt. It was exhilarating, too, wading through the dew-heavy grass, splashed up to the knees, with shoes a-dangle in their hands. It took them away from reality - at least, for a little while.

Somehow they began to wander further afield. Some one discovered a new place for the walks, somewhere where the illusion of unreality was even greater. They would walk along the boundary of a Rugger field, a sandy path carpeted with cassuarina needles and very country-like with the wind making cosy rain-on-the-roof noises in the trees towering above them. Further on, the road became stonier and more rugged and the scene gave way from the tonsured green of the Rugger field to a wilderness of shrubs and bushes. Still further, the land became marshy and the road lost itself. When they felt equal to it, they could wade through the mire and emerge on the next major road. For this was a marsh, in the process of reclamation.

It was a delightful place, with a gurgling stream and trees and bushes which had grown by themselves. There were birds and frogs and little unidentifiable animal noises which made the illusion of the countryside very real.

*

The years passed by and the early morning walks stopped of their own, and they lost touch with this backwater – and gradually, even with each other - though they would glimpse its progress from time to time. Much later, one of them lived closer to this site and its growth became, to him, a thing to wonder at. The marsh was gradually filled up and became a spreading patch of reddish earth, churned by caterpillar tracks, which turned to clinging mud after the first shower of rain. The trees and bushes were cleared away. When, he wondered, later, did the first house come to be built there? But here and there, along the edges, a few shanties appeared. No one took any notice till, suddenly, there was a full-grown shanty town!

II

1960

" As I pass by shanty town now, I peer through the 'bus windows and marvel at its complexity. It is quite some years old now, and is fully fledged. No longer is it bare land glaring back the noonday sun. Every few square feet has a house on it: a house built up of planks, cadjans, flattened kerosene oil tins, tar-paper, leftover bits of Vesak pandals - all the bits and pieces the builder could lay his hands on. There are little gardens fenced and planted with flowering shrubs. Little paths run between the houses and are lost to sight in the vegetation, for the trees and bushes have come back with the houses. It's true: plants do love human company and thrive nearest them. The stream still runs, but its banks are now encrusted with trees and it seems to have changed character and been subdued by responsibility.

"Shanty town is now a village, a village within a city; a village, I suppose, with its own traditions and legends and meeting-places. And a history of incidents - like the big fire that blazed there one Christmas night. Many shanties were burned down then, but the

scars healed quickly with shanty town's amazing powers of rejuvenation. Growth, I think, is its secret and its strength.

"I look from the windows of the passing 'bus and wonder what legends and ghosts people those twisting lanes, for undoubtedly they do.

"During the day the women and girls cluster round the street taps and, villager-like, talk of things that concern them. I, of course, am the outsider, and the view - through a 'bus window - is symbolic.

"I am the outsider and only the memory of the past binds me to the scene. Yet, what I knew was the bare land, and the song of a bird heard in the mist. That is not the village. The village is a living thing, and the land is only where it lives. It has tamed the land and used it; and even if it is wiped out someday, the land will never become what it was before. It may even revert to birdsong and frogs' croak and early-morning mist; but never again will it be a childhood fantasy to me. Something very different.

"The City, it seems to me, is a 'many-layered flame'; the city we speak of, 'a face to meet the faces that we meet'; itself an illusion. Was the illusion we succumbed to in childhood, after all, not an aspect of reality? I wonder. Isn't the city but a group of villages in which live villagers? And every village, like shanty town, living out its life within the confines of the city? Is the city the aggregate of the villages, or is it a village itself?

"I wish I knew."

III

1989

"...even if it is wiped out someday..." It was, in fact; in the name of Urban Development.

Decades later, events brought him back to this piece of land. Shanty town was no more: a market place had been built where it had been. The land had been tamed by administration.

But further back, in part of the same land, had arisen an International Conference Hall - yet another unreal something. Beautiful, impressive, and a nation's pride set in acres of landscaped garden, it now became his, to look after and maintain. He had been away from all this so long, the city had changed so much and he, himself, had become so jaded that it took him weeks to recognize the land. But as he roamed the acres of garden, searching an escape from an experience that had depressed him, the features of the land quietly re-emerged from the remote byways of memory. Specific images he came to recognize through layers of change. The stream, it was, that triggered the rush of recognition: seeing it from outside the garden, from the former cassuarina-needle-covered sandy path, now his perimeter. Recognition brought about affection, a love for the land which stripped away layers of insensitivity deposited over the years. Work became pleasure. The gardens, a spring of creativity. He began to notice the birds that walked the lawns and nested in the trees. The 'Star-class' prisoners who worked the gardens with love and tenderness, growing little plots of manioc and vegetables and miniature paddy-fields, building little shacks for themselves in amongst the trees, to blank out the reality of the prison cells that awaited them, at night. The flowering trees that bloomed in rotation, the bees that built their hives high up in the eves of the Hall, the closely-trimmed lawns and the smell of fresh-cut grass. The yet undisturbed wild trees and marshier wetlands behind the Hall.

The link with childhood cleansed the mind. Working early or late, he could return to the world of birdsong and frogs' croak and early-morning-mist. The images of shanty town receded. A richer and stranger fantasy than that of childhood began to emerge.

1995

"But fantasies are only that, no more. Reality is people, not land. What happened to the people who walked the paths of this enchanted land? Some discovered happiness, all became familiar with sorrow; some died, others sought refuge in anonymity; some achieved creativity, some roamed the world. Almost all lost touch with each other.

"And then, from the one of us, we heard a cry of agony from across the sea. A much loved child was suffering from a serious illness. I, who thought to have found a peace of sorts, tried my own therapy of healing through fantasy, writing to the child legends of the days when happiness ruled our own childhood world: for I thought I had found that fantasy could heal. Painfully she wrote back, "Your letters and stories are great to read......I am getting better day by day. I find that the 'illness' is not so disturbing...Please continue to hold me close in your thoughts". But did it, really, help her? I don't know. She survived, and still does, and now even has her own child; but the trauma of her experience still reverberates within her family. It did, however, gently as a spider's web, string a tenuous thread re-linking some of the scattered group. Her mother writes: 'That time of youth, when everything seemed promising and exotic, was a time to relish. So much has happened since....'

"I still visit the Hall, which gives me peace. Consciously, I try to keep alive a fantasy. It is so lovely and comforting a thing: it can even keep unhappiness at bay. But how long can I spin it out, I wonder? For as long as I live, maybe: Life, after all, is illusion."

(Menaka left us today, 8th. February, 1996)

IN THE FORESTS, IN THE NIGHTS

“Tiger, tiger, burning bright.
In the forests of the night…”

Once again, it was spring-cleaning time. Spring-cleaning my old computer, that is. From time to time it signals that I have strained its capacity and I must do some pruning. So I sit down and go through the directory, trying to figure what to throw out.

So there I was, engrossed in this task, resisting the temptation to read through every old letter and document, before deleting it. Trying to find out what "C:\pw\Chitra" stood for, I suddenly came upon a letter starting "My dear Tuna". Now, why had I filed a letter to Tuna under "Chitra"? I eventually figured out what had happened was: writing to Tuna, I had built it round bits of an earlier letter written to Chitra. The pieces I had thought worth repeating had remained deep-frozen in the computer's memory, retaining their freshness. Re-reading the letter brought back the details of the experience and my reactions at that time. Now, more than a year later, I could piece together the memories with a little less emotion.

> *".... you know how I got involved in raising a corps of raw volunteers for front-line duty in the east. It began, as usual, with an appeal for help to raise one and - you know me - my ego did not let me say 'No'. So, like so many times in the past, I said 'Yes' (when I shouldn't have) and got into deep water. What was happening was that we were trying to raise a group of about ten thousand to send out to the eastern front, to relieve regular troops for the push up north....."*

It was a quixotic scheme, with more "gung-ho" than common sense. The funny thing was that it worked. The call had come one night. "I say, Somasiri, you are not doing anything special these days, or are you? Good! Look, there is this thing we've got to do - I said I would do it – and it's what you and I did once before, so there's nothing new to it. Only thing is, its sort of urgent. So how about tomorrow? Good. Well,……" And that's how it began - twenty years after I had retired from the Navy!

We had a bare room, two desks, a jeep and some borrowed odds and ends. But we could use the magic words "Defence Ministry". And so we began the task of cajoling the provincial organizations to find us volunteers. We had precious little to offer them beyond honour and discomfort. Not a very good marketing plan. Again, funnily enough, it worked. Starting as a trickle, the names eventually began to stream in. We selected area leaders, called them over and explained to them what it was all about. Our message, the one we tried to get across, was that they were coming to help the country through the most dramatic moment in its history. Their hope, though, was that this would help them get a government job after the fireworks were over. Anyway, we got them - not the ten thousand we hoped for, but less than half that number.

> *".......They got about two weeks training. We had only World War II .303 rifles to give them. Even the uniforms we gave them were what we could squeeze out of donors - we were operating without voted funds, and there was a parallel operation to arm-twist industrialists and motivate 'persons of good will' - and we started training them in groups of several hundred each, in a number of training camps all over the country. After six weeks of this, I had to go for my Conference, for about two weeks. The very day I got back, my assistant had started deploying them to the operational areas. It was a logistical nightmare. We had to coax them back from home, feed them, kit them up, buck them up, provide them with an army escort and shoot them (not really!) across....."*

It was pretty chaotic, naturally. My assistant - a lady officer - was "on the ball" and wading through the mass of conflicting orders by all manner of geriatric Generals, still managing to mix Efficiency with PR. There were several new faces in the group, people who were even less able to cope than we were. Add to that the many Generals, each doing his own thing, and you can imagine the rest. I am afraid I did not do well in

my task – fighting the old Generals and getting myself ‘frog marched’ out of the parade ground! Still, what still amazed me is that this entire Heath Robinson operation, held together by a string and a prayer, actually worked

That left us with the overwhelming question: how would our "cadres" fit into the battle-scarred areas they were being sent to?

> *"....They were attached to the army and so they were safely part of a system, but of a system that was foreign to them. As one said, later, they all thought the life of a soldier was glamorous - remembering only the soldiers home on leave, in their best uniforms, polished boots and sage advice on of how the war should be fought and where the Generals were wrong. Reality, they found, was a bit different. We had them in the really jungle areas - Vavuniya, Welikanda, Singhapura, Thoppigala - where the 'tiger' was burning bright. We had a good percentage of drop-outs......."*

(The reasons they gave were numerous: some serious, and some downright hilarious!)

> *".....but those who remained really won my admiration. It was the boys from Colombo who would not go: these "Kolamba Kaakkas" thought it an unspeakable indignity to bathe in the tanks up there! NO I'm NOT making this up!"*

Having duly installed all we could muster, it was our task to see to their welfare, take them their pay, placate and re-assure their parents, find those little extra comforts for them - rain-capes, water bottles - find more money to give them, arrange a way to talk to their parents, take parents and others to the front to show them the sons were alive. Most important, it was to meet and talk to them in the places they were working.

"I often went to all the places to speak to them, sometimes with their fortnightly pay. There they were, working alongside the regular soldiers, sharing their discomforts and companionship. After the initial culture shock, they had adjusted themselves well enough. You see, both soldiers and volunteers came from the same rural background and in spite of the bullying by the regulars they got along well. The biggest problem our volunteers had, was homesickness: they did not have the soldiers' long service behind them. Not all were young boys: we had placed no real age limit and I remember a be-spectacled one past his mid-forties, every inch of 5-foot height, doing his best to report to me, Army style, that his platoon was 'Ready for Inspection, Sir!' Later, talking to him informally, I found him devastated at the vast acreage of paddy fields abandoned by frightened villagers - he was a landless peasant farmer, and he was aghast at the wastage. He even floated the idea that the land be given to his own people!"

The fear we, at headquarters, lived with was the news of the first casualty. Yes, we had made all the arrangements for the event, but it was something we ex-service persons did not want to see, or happen. Please, please let them live through the next three months! we prayed.

"They were not confined to work inside the camps. They had been sent to release trained soldiers for operational work. We sent them with minimum training but, to an operations commander losing his better troops to other areas, one man with a gun equaled another man with a gun; and so they were sent alongside the regulars to all the positions manned."

It would gave been the unkindest cut if I did not visit them at their outposts.

"Once, it was to a static position in a not-very-remote village. Still, the 'tigers' had attacked it two nights previously, and the villagers were still recovering from the trauma, gathered up and guarded in the village school building by the army. The village bordered the jungle, in the middle of which was a known enemy staging point towering above the distant trees......"

The road linking the towns and townships ran through thick jungle, where lurked the 'tiger'. A little away from the road, linked to it by gravel paths, were the homesteads of the villagers who lived and farmed the fields; whose sons worked often in the townships.

"They had come in the night, with an informer, identified the homes of the Home Guards who worked their fields by day and patrolled with the Police at night, and had selectively butchered their families in a 'night of the long knives', in the silence and darkness of their friend, the night. There was a jitteriness in the air, but neither the soldiers nor our volunteers were affected. Neither had the most of the villagers chosen to go away: only a few."

While we were talking to the troops a wireless message came of an attack on the village we had just passed through. It was, we later realized, just a scare tactic, but the troops on stand-by ran for their weapons and were immediately ready to go hot-foot to the site. We gave them one of our vehicles, and followed them. But the attackers had thrown their scare and melted back into the jungle. Just another day. Just another incident.

The jungle was the womb of both danger and refuge, we found. In the more remote villagers, where the silent death had come from the jungle, it was common for

the villagers to steal into the jungle at twilight, with some mats and food, and hide there till morning. So their huts were empty when the 'tiger' came a-visiting.

Deeper in the forests were other little campsites, manned by a handful of men. There, they were really living rough:

> *".....one was an old road-metal quarry site, blasted over the years with dynamite, forming an arena-shaped hollow. There they were, perched on bare rocks in the jungle, with not a thing between them and the sky. By day they sheltered under the trees fringing the site. At night, they would ambush the known 'tiger' paths......"*

Yes, our raw volunteers, within a few weeks, were good enough to go on operations. Night in the forest spells both danger and safety. The regular routes that the 'tigers' took from the jungle north of the road to that south of it were known, but an ambush is only as good as the men who lay it.

> *"..... but often they could not take them on because the numbers of real soldiers were so few: they were all being sent up north."*

I could imagine the frustration of the regular troops when they had the 'tigers' in their sights but could not take them on, for lack of numbers.

> *" Night in the jungle, even under threat, could be beautiful - the stars were unbelievably bright to our eyes, long accustomed to seeing them through the haze over the city. By day, we would see elephants feeding by the roadside, peacocks pecking at the grains of rice fallen off passing lorries, along the road.*

"Night in the 'headquarters', such as it was, was only relatively better. Often the big artillery boomed in support of another position, kilometers away, and under attack. The jerry-strung wiring in the camp would give way and the lights go out and bits of roof would fall into your drink! We experienced the immediate, fragile and spontaneous friendships that bloomed for a night, only, when all that one wanted was the company of human beings. Relaxing after a hard day in the parched dryness and alert for the signals that would call them to stations once again.

"We had our share of misfits among the 'Dad's Army' types on our co-ordinating staff, who preferred to stay out of the field, if they could. We worked in civvies, in non-military vehicles, and it was easy to pretend we were some sort of govt. servants. So we made a point of dragging the reluctant Generals along every time we visited the outposts, pretending that we believed they were our best guides. As soon as we went back, they went back too - to the bottle! One letter I treasure from a devout Christian from Ja-Ela, out there in the jungle, calling the Blessings of God on me for doing something he had requested - something I would have done anyway, but not if I had not gone there."

I am no Christian, let alone a Roman Catholic, and so the letter was a bit of a puzzle. It took many readings for me to decipher the sonorous resonance of Church Sinhala in which it was written. Translated, as well as I can, into the English idiom it read:

" Lord in Heaven, dispenser of Justice to all beings, hear my prayer, in the name of your Son, Jesus of Nazareth!

"O Lord, our Father, who dwelleth in Heaven! We thank Thee, O Lord, for sending us Lieutenant Commander Devendra as the Deputy Commandant of our Force. Thank you, O Lord, for revealing to him the correct way to heed to my request. Give him, O Lord, the wisdom to carry out his duties in the future correctly. Defeat, O Lord, the forces of Darkness that try to hinder him, and help him lead our Force, through you, from Darkness to Light!

"This, I ask of you, Lord, in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, your Son."

A song to remember, indeed.

We had our volunteers further north too, in the forward defence lines. The closer they were to the combat zones, the higher their morale was, too, as it was among the regulars.

> *".....The Army morale was so utterly high. I remember, in Vavuniya, going to a platoon headquarters manning a number of points on the forward defence line. The headquarters was a low, two-'roomed' mud hut one had to stoop to enter. Yet, the OIC was conducting an analysis and strategy session, complete with blackboard and pointer: he, and his officers - all in their twenties - had identified a possible weakness in the line and were planning how to meet the contingency. At an abandoned Church we could see, barely half a mile away, the 'tigers' would gather every night. The officers were happy to see us and talked freely. Our volunteers were doing good work, had now learnt to handle more sophisticated weapons and were fit for combat in every way"*

The war games in Colombo became so unimportant in these dry, dusty, thirsty, clearings in the scrub jungle, where the troops were trying to create a semblance of domesticity and a substitute for family life.

"We went on to the main barrier at Thandikulam, just north of Vavuniya, where the people from "no-man's land" between our and 'tiger' territory would cross between these two areas. They came every day, the locals, and bought all the same things every day, to sell at what must have been pretty high prices, back in the villages. All coconut and kerosene oil was carried in the plastic 'Pepsi' litre bottles - the consumer society had reached even 'No Man's Land'! There was a sort of Custom's Shed, pretty big, where they had to place their purchases on cement benches and stand behind them, while their purchases were examined by women in uniform. All were known persons, and all knew the weekly ration allowed. So only occasionally did we see something being confiscated. These "Custom's Officers" were Home Guard and Army women, in battle fatigues, all from the area and therefore equally at home in Sinhala and Tamil. I also went up and talked to the middle-class, English speaking people coming in from Jaffna for some family wedding in Colombo, returning to work from leave, coming for a holiday with their children in the south, coming to sit some examination. Many were pensioners and we found we had so many friends in common. Tissa - G.A. in Jaffna when Alfred Duraiappah was assassinated – was remembered well. I remember asking a young woman, a University lecturer, what she taught and where she had had her University education. She was lecturing in Business Administration, having got her first degree from Jaffna and her MBA from Sri Jayawardenapura. And all these were waiting, like Godot, in a ramshackle building, to be questioned and probed. They had all done this trip many times and were quite used to it; it was only the wasted time they complained about. How much this country was yet one! But all of us realized

that one large segment of the Jaffna population had been plucked from the mainstream and was not part of this nostalgic picture.

"I am sorry if the story is a too-personal narrative."

At the time the letters were written, I had felt the need to put into words my experience of those six months. Mostly, I wanted to write about night in the jungle and the people who found it a refuge: the 'tigers' going about with deadly purpose, the soldiers on watch or in ambush, the villages hiding the night out in it, to escape the attacks on their villages. I wanted to go out on patrol, to spend a night with the villagers, to experience it all at first, not second-hand.

But it was not to be. The operation I had been called in to assist was successful, and in six months the north had been taken, our own operation was whittled down and I went home. So the work I wanted to do was left undone: what I had wanted to write, left unwritten.

Until the computer revealed the seed of the story that had been left unwritten.

(And - YES! - we did not lose a single volunteer!)

"HERCULES" AND HESPERUS

(The story of the "Avondster")

It was the last day but one of that season but I had not gone to our diving base (in SLN.SDakshina) but stayed back. I heard the vehicles return and Patrick, the

expedition's Australian photographer, ambled up to me and nonchalantly said, "Somasiri, we found something interesting. Like to see it?" He knew I was hooked, but I did not know I was being set up for one of Pat's "candid camera" shots. The team was clustered around the van and there was this block of what looked like living coral on the ground. I bend down to examine it (giving Pat his shot!) and suddenly realized that this was not "of coral made" but something infinitely more "rich and strange". It was a ship's bell, covered with teeming marine life – bits of coral, colorful anemones, little scuttling crabs, barnacles – but no hint of the metal. Only its shape gave the secret of its identity.

We had been diving on the site of a ship that had been sunk centuries previously. It was just outside the breakwater and the surge made for turbulent conditions down there. We had known that it was a wreck-site of the ship called the *Hercules* as it was marked on old charts as "Hercules Kirkopf". Mike Wilson (later Swami Sivakalki) and Rodney Jonklass had identified the site in 1956, done a library search and some diving, discovering quantities of cannon on the seabed. An eyewitness had described the ship as a first-rate VOC East Indiaman which had been lifted up in a great swell and smashed against rocky Gibbet Island. But there was no further, material evidence.

And now, before me, was her bell. Little by little we cleaned it, the marine creatures removed, the barnacles and corals chipped away. Finally, the metal emerged and, with that, the letters cast on the bell. Partly damaged on top and its clapper missing, it still showed the moulding on top and bottom and the words were clear: AMOR VINCIT OMNIA ANNO 1625. "Love Conquers all". A strange motto it was, for an armed merchantman that had been conquered by the unforgiving sea.

More research on the *Hercules* (we had located thirty cannon on the site and were to retrieve two sounding leads from there) fleshed out the story for us. Built in Sandam (present Zaandam) in 1655, she was one of two ships of the *jacht* class (the other being the *Achlilles)* around 140 Dutch *voet* (feet) in length, carrying a crew of 220 each. The Dutch, with their bureaucratic zeal for recording facts, have left several documents of the sinking. A fleet of four ships, the *Thoolen, Angelier, Elburg* and *Hercules* were ready to sail to Batavia and were awaiting fair weather to clear the treacherous entrance to the Bay. Conditions were ideal, with the winds blowing off shore, at six o'clock on the morning of 22nd May, 1661, and the commander of the city, Isbrand Godsken, had informed the Admiral Rijckerslof van Goens. Van Goens had sent him to the Governor, Adriaan van der Meijde who, as it happened, was fast asleep. So Godsken made the decision to send the Pilot on board. Working quietly, the Pilot soon had the *Elburg* and the *Thoolen* safely out of the Bay and he went on board the *Hercules,* while Godsken boarded the *Angelier* and was witness to the *Hercules'* disaster.

> "When the crew of the *Angelier* had weighed anchor and were busy hoisting the sails, a strong cross-wind suddenly blew up. We managed to furl the sails and throw out an anchor. But, on the *Hercules*, half a pistol shot away from us, things began to go wrong. I saw the anchor rope part. This was strange as the rope was not bad and none of the other ships in the Bay had faced such a

problem. Then they tried to throw out the second anchor but they had not secured it to the mast as they should have, and so they lost that anchor, too. Without anchors, she was a plaything of the elements; the bow turned towards land and she broke up on the rocks a few minutes later".

Although the whole cargo (1700 packets of fine cinnamon and a consignment of Canarese rice) was lost, the Pilot was discharged after a Board of Inquiry. He had explained that, while weighing anchor, the cross-wind had struck and the ship had swung around, getting the anchor rope caught between the hull and the rudder and, consequently, parting. She probably had her full complement of 220 on board, and we can imagine how many lives were lost, that the site came to be marked on charts as *Hercules Kirkhof,* the graveyard of the *Hercules*..

How human a story can a single coral-encrusted ship's bell tell!

The *Hercules* was but one of several VOC vessels recorded as being lost in Galle Bay. They each have a tale of human weakness to tell, but I will only tell that of the last, on whose bones we are diving now.

The *Avondster* (meaning the evening star *'Hesperus'*) was in the evening of her life. Originally an English ship, captured by the Dutch and modified, by 1659 she was no longer fit to undertake the arduous trip back to the Netherlands and was being used on the inter-Asian trade routes radiating from Batavia. On 23rd. June, 1659, she had taken on board cargo for Negapatnam, in India, and was waiting to sail at dawn, at her moorings off the Black Fort (Zwaart Bastion). Somehow, the old ship slipped her moorings and started drifting. The Mate, Bartel Schagh van Danshish, left his watch and went below. It was the boatswain's mate, Evert Albers and the steward, Dirc Willemsz who placed the small watch on look-out and went to rouse the skipper, Arent Danielse Lem, who was asleep below and, by the time he came after a quarter of an hour to order that another anchor be dropped, the ship struck bottom and broke her back. The skipper and Mate were less lucky than the Pilot of the *Hercules:* they were arrested, tried, convicted and ordered to pay for the loss.

Her back broken, *Avondster*, rested on the seabed for centuries. Unknown to her, much happened in those years in the countries of her birth and death. The Dutch gained control of our maritime provinces and, in time, lost it. The imposing Fort of Galle surrendered to the British without firing a shot. Sri Lanka's last kingdom, embroiled in internal conflicts, came to a tragic end. Two major wars, involving the whole world came to be waged. At sea, "wooden walls" gave way to iron hulls and sail to steam. Under British rule, Galle's treacherous rocks claimed too many ships, even those with steel hulls, that it became a problem. The port of Colombo was developed, and Galle became a backwater.

While all these changes were taking place, the *Avondster* slumbered where she had sunk. The sea was kind to her. Alternating monsoons, shifted the sand layer above the rocky bottom every year in unwavering rhythm, sometimes covering, sometimes

exposing her. Lying on her side her timbers, standing proud of the seabed, began to give away. Loose artifacts, tumbling out of the hulk were washed away by the currents, rolled hither and thither over the seabed, to be picked up by local divers and sold in curio shops. A blanket of silt gradually settled over, burying and preserving her. Finally, there was no hint of a ship to be seen. Midway in the twentieth century Independence from foreign domination emerged in Sri Lanka and, in time, a man from Galle emerged as Prime Minister. He heeded the call to rescue Galle from the status of the backwater that she had become. An ambitious Marine Drive was built, followed by a Fisheries Harbour. *Avondster* still slumbered below the waves. The new constructions, though, brought about a “sea change”; subtle changes to the hitherto unwavering patterns of current flow, forcing the currents to veer round the new obstacles in their path seeking new routes, new areas to erode or silt up. Gradually, the *Avondster's* shroud of silt began to be eroded and bits of the wreck began to appear.

It was then that when she was shown to us.

We had a dirty site to work on: much of the time visibility was limited to a few feet, or less; there was a sewer emptying into the Bay not far off and, obviously, someone was slaughtering chickens and dumping the unwanted bits into the sewer. All around us were floating chicken feet and other unmentionable stuff. Before we had identified the ship, we had already named it “Chicken Foot site”! But it turned out to be one of our most important of the 25 we have located in the Bay. As archaeologists, our interest is a wreck-site and the ship as a “time capsule”, not in isolated artifacts. But, till the Conservation Laboratory was completed, we retrieved little. What we did, bring the past vividly to life: remains of the ship’s galley (kitchen) built of brick and lead sheeting, coils and coils of the rope and cordage that were so essential on board sailing ships; pulley-blocks and other ship’s “spare parts”, wine bottles of the period, the Apothecary’s medicine chest (one jar contains mercury, then used to combat syphilis), a shaving bowl, ivory combs, parts of a gun carriage, earthenware jars and fragments of ceramic wares and pottery, candle snufferd, pewter spoons: a combination of materials from east and west, Chinese, Dutch and south-east Asian. From the nautical archaeology perspective, the details of her hull construction and planking are give new information. The work still goes on and this site will, one day, become one of Sri Lanka’s major attractions.

The most human (literally and metaphorically) of the finds was a human skull. There is no record of anyone from the ship going down with her. A latter day treasure hunter, perhaps, who got trapped in a hold? (It *was* found below the weather deck). Or maybe it was a skull that traveled down the sewer, along with the chicken feet, mute testimony to an unsolved murder? To add to the mystery, it is a possibility that it the skull of a woman, and it was found below a layer dated to the 17th. century. Most tempting, it is, to surmise that *here* was the reason that the skipper was tardy to come on deck, and for the authorities to be unaware of an unofficial “visitor” whose existence only the skipper knew about!

Helen of Troy's face may have launched a thousand ships but maybe, here was a face that sank one ship!

The work on the *Avondster* is far from over. What more will she teach us?

On reading others' books

MOUNTAIN, RAIN CLOUD, TREE

(*On reading the late Pundit Gunapala Senadheera's doctoral thesis*)

Some years ago I listened, fascinated, to Dr. Gunapala Senadheera speaking on various clues to pre-Buddhist fertility rites in ancient Sri Lanka. He talked about the frequent use of the prefix "Kala", "Megha-varna" etc. with the names of kings. These, he said, referred to the rain clouds that brought the crops their much-needed rain. He spoke of the *Arahat* Mahinda, on the day after the first night spent in the *Maha-megha-vana*, predicting that, in years to come, the spots he consecrated would become the sites of the *Ruwanweli-seya*, the *Sri Maha Bodhiya*, the *Thuparama* and so on. The Venerable Thera could do so, said Dr. Senadheera, because the sites he consecrated, and thereby "converted" to Buddhism, were sites of conspicuous trees which were already being venerated and at which the Thera himself offered flowers: he was, in fact, tapping an existing reservoir of veneration. He spoke of the rocky heights and mountains, wearing rain-bearing clouds round their shoulders, where dwelt pre-Buddhist deities, later to become sites of Buddhist shrines.

My mind went back forty-five years ago when I, as a schoolboy, read an anthropological work, "The Mountain and the Tree", which impressed me with its account of how a pre-Christian, Druidical, mid-winter fertility rite was similarly converted to Christ's birthday, Christmas, complete with the fertility symbols of Christmas tree, yule log, mistletoe and all.

I heard the voice of my father reciting a folk-stanza sung by villagers on pilgrimage to Anuradhapura, in "Sinhale", to worship the Buddha at the ruins of the great shrines and to pray at the *Sri-maha-bodhiya* - which, alone, was not abandoned to the "jungle tide" - for the favour of a son:

Gamey sitan payvy-payvy - *Tisa vevata yanna* *yi*

Tisa vevay rath-nelumay - *Batta malu kanna* *yi*

Ethaena sitan payvi-payvi - *Bo-maluvata yanni* *yi*

Udu maluvay Bo-samudini - *Pirimi puthek denna yi*

("From the village have we come, have we come, here, to Tisa Weva

Here have we had our fill of the curried seeds of the red lotus

From here will we go, will we go to the Sacred Bo tree

Oh Lord of the upper terrace! Grant us the boon of a son")

Here was the link I was searching for: Buddhist shrine, tree worship, fertility rite.

Recently I had the chance of reading Dr. Senadheera's researches in their final form, in his doctoral thesis on "Buddhist Symbols of Wish-Fulfilment", now published in India by The India Book Centre, New Delhi. Here he goes farther a-field than in the lecture I had listened to. He deals with all the familiar - and not-so-familiar - "auspicious" symbols (*Magul Lakunu*) familiar to us in Sri Lanka as well as to Buddhists elsewhere in Asia. He delves deep into the origins of the symbols and finds them rooted in a core of symbols common to the whole of the land-mass of Asia and Europe and the islands adjacent. He discovers the Bo-tree in Bulgaria and ancient Thracia, and the "*Tri-ratne*" in the Samurai helmet. He finds the "*Makara*" in the "mugger", or Indian river crocodile. He sees the cart wheel behind the "*Swastika*". He sees the image of the Buddha, himself, being given an auspicious validity by placing, under it, a "basket" of auspicious objects in the shape of the "*Nidhana-gala*", and by covering the Foot-print with such signs. And water, water he sees everywhere - in the "*punkalasa*", the Makara's "*tirigi-tale*" tail, the abode of the *Naga*. And bringing us firmly back to earth, he sees the essential unity that binds the Moonstone - that assemblage of auspicious elements - to today's "*magul-poruwa*" and fire walking. For the most appealing and welcome thing about his research is that it shies away from the erudite, the esoteric and far-fetched explanation in favour of the simple, the obvious and the close-to-home. Anyone really interested <u>must</u> read this book: it is beyond me to summarise it.

What does emerge from reading his thesis is the conviction that all these symbols are <u>not</u> essentially Buddhist symbols but, as he calls them, "symbols of wish fulfilment" or, in lay language, symbols of prosperity. It is the "lucky" aspect that is common to them all. So, in paying our respects to them, we are going in search of good-luck; not in search of release from the cycle of birth and death. But, given the harsh realities of everyday life over these many centuries, is this not natural? Particularly in a rural agrarian society? (Or, even today, in the urban rat-race?) The symbols are so closely related to village life - the creepers that twine round the trees, the lotus in the tank, the buffalo in the paddy-field, the cart-wheel, the pot of water for the thirsty traveller, the giant tree (*Vanaspati*) spreading its hospitable branches to traveller and cart-bull alike, the flames from the fire in the hearth. Images of a simple village life "that has been, and will be again". No wonder they are recognised and accepted and have survived so long. And no wonder, too, that only a simple and down-to-earth explanation can make sense out of them.

Dr. Senadheera is not chary of accepting the fact that popular Buddhism became a "Buddha-cult" with the personality of the Buddha replacing those of "devas" and "bandara-deiyos" who resided in the mountains (*Saman deviyo* on Sri Pada) and in conspicuous trees (*Kalu-devata-bandara* in the Sri Maha Bodhiya). As Buddhism "converted" pre-Buddhist shrines the displaced spirits and deities underwent "a sea-change, into something rich and strange" and took up residence in Buddhist shrines; and Buddhists in search of wish-fulfilment found no difficulty in addressing their prayers to St. Anthony, Kaliamma and the god of Kataragama. But I digress: I cannot tap the richness of detail in the book into this little space nor can I try to convey the exciting provocativeness of the material it lays open to the reader, should you only open your mind and be receptive.

Instead, I will try to share an idea that dawned on me. Have you not noticed the sudden efflorescence of the *Buddha-puja* all over the country? Sudden? "Yes", in that it suddenly acquired political patronage and purpose. But, "No", otherwise. *Bodhi-pujas*, like the poor, have always been with us. In many a temple today the *Caitya* and the *Budu-ge* are mere adjuncts to the main shrine, which is the *Bo-maluwa*. So the pre-Buddhist symbol, and attendant deity, have come back to settle, as comfortably as the "*Satara-varan-deviyo*", in the Buddhist shrine. So the wheel has come full cycle.

But, if wish-fulfilment is the name of the game, is it not better that we address our prayers to the Tree, rather than to the Man who received Enlightenment under it? After all, the Tree is the older symbol, the truer symbol of fertility, the older object of veneration - as old as the human needs and wants that are sibilantly whispered under its rustling leaves by millions every day.

Perhaps we need the Tree than the Man who meditated under it: who searched for the truth, not in the tree but within himself.

Perhaps we need to set the Wheel in motion once again

.

Perhaps.

"The Island of Fate": the Dream of the Intellectual Soldier

(*On reading*"The Cocos Islands Mutiny" by Noel Crusz)

(Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2001)

Dreams used to come in the brutal nights,

Dreams crowding and violent:

Dreamt with body and soul

Of going home, of loving, grieving and telling our story.

The girls we loved in the shadows of a cadjan hut,

Until quickly and quietly crept the morn;

And the heart cracked in a bloody quest.

Now we have found our home again

Our hunger is quenched as all the stories have been told,

It is time we shall hear again the alien's command

That you die at dawn………and who cares to leave the fold?

The writer is Gratien Fernando, leader of the Cocos Island Mutiny, under guard in a makeshift stockade, watching sandbags being piled up for him to face the firing squad at dawn.

Noel Crusz, like Everyman, was on a personal pilgrim's progress. His goal: the truth about the Mutiny. Thirty years on the trail he found no "yellow brick road", but only tortuous paths, *cul de sacs*, blank walls and blanker record rooms, till it was difficult to tell fact from fiction. Along the way he met many witnesses: some helpful and honest, others grudging, dissembling, greedy, boastful. Some, for the lack of fact, fictionalised and thus devalued the story. Others tried to prise his hard-won material and money, offering for sale dubious material for thirty pieces of silver. But he persisted, seeking facts, shunning the bankrupt's choice of "faction". Finally, the official documentation came his way and he could, at the age of eighty, at last lay down his pen and say,: *"I am also at journey's end. I have seen the full range of human emotion experienced by the officers and men who were involved….the politics of army factions…..the readiness of*

some to exploit and distort the conflict between authority and expectation…..between leaders and those who lose their way…..between the Asian dream and the colonial fulfilment…..and the deeper quest for enduring values." Some of us, his near contemporaries, patiently awaited this work. I, for one, feel rewarded for my patience and, now, must have my say.

What is it about this Mutiny that reverberates over half a century on? Why does it deserve a book? Many are the reasons, many the questions that had to be explored. Three mutinies in the British Army during the Second World War, but only the three mutineers from Cocos were hanged for Mutiny. "Why?" one is entitled to ask. Consider: in the mass exodus that followed the raid on Trincomalee, the Government Agent (Brevet Colonel D.J.Lanktree), the District Judge and the senior Pilot (Commander Palliser, RNR), abandoned post through cowardice in the face of the enemy. They were handled with kid gloves. Consider: Paymaster Lieutenant Susantha de Fonseka, CRNVR, Member of the State Council for Panadura and Deputy Speaker, who would go straight from the training camp to Council, in uniform. Once he spoke strongly against the low price paid by Britain for our rubber, over which they had a monopoly, and which they re-sold to others at very high rates. For daring to criticise the British Government, wearing the King's uniform, his commission was withdrawn. Yet, three young men, far away from home on a remote mote of dust in the Ocean were hanged. Reason, indeed, for speculating whether discipline depended on colour. Reason, inevitably, for mutiny.

Who were they and why did they mutiny? What, indeed, is the story? The events themselves? What made them happen? Or even Crusz's search? All of them - take your pick. Crusz opts, true to his journalistic discipline, to sift truth from rumour and to record it, leaving material for analysts and the future.

The Mutiny took place, and must be viewed against the background of war and the Asian dreams of Independence. It affected simple individuals, driven by idealism, inadequately trained, with an undertow of colonial prejudice and mistrust. This is a perspective not readily available to students of pure military operations history. Crusz has covered all these angles, showing his awareness and concern with them, yet claiming no definitive status for his work. The story is not complete, he says, the motives yet open to interpretation; fallible human witnesses and incomplete documentary evidence are, alas, not enough. His humility in presentation, his essential humanity and his dogged dedication to his Quest ensures that this book will be the best work written on this subject for many a long day.

The book is structured simply: "Before", "During" and "After". As Somerset Maugham put it, a story must have a beginning, a middle and an end. Crusz takes over 60 pages to cover the background to the events on Cocos, 75 for the central story - of which only 7 describe the incidents of the night – and 65 for the closing scenes and his search for the truth.

Having waited so long for this book, I went through it with a fine-toothed comb. Unsurprisingly, I found lapses in the first part. I cannot fault Crusz, researching the core story and its reverberations, for this failing. But let me dispose of them first:

> Some are simple errors like "Hoodstower" for "Hood's Tower", SAGALING for SAGAING, SUTLEG for SUTLEJ. There are factual errors: the CRNVR could not provide assistance in Colombo or anywhere else in 1937, as the first recruits were enlisted only in 1938. Ceylonese leaders in the State Council did not volunteer to join the war. In fact, the matter was out of their hands: the Imperial Defence Conference which met in London in 1932 laid down the principle that all Dominions, Colonies or Protectorates, whether represented at the conference or not, had to assume responsibility for their own defence as soon as possible. The CDF and the CNVF (later CRNVR) were formed in pursuance of that. More serious is the internal contradiction of facts relied on. Dr. N.M. Perera and Colvin R de Silva could not have intervened to speak on behalf of the convicted mutineers. Note 5 to Chapter 1 says that they had been imprisoned on 17.6.40 in Kandy and escaped from there on 5.4.42 during the raid. It is common knowledge that they, thereafter, went underground in India, their whereabouts not known during this time. They were to be arrested if found. Then, the technical errors, such as the description of the SAGAING as a merchant ship when she was really a Henderson (British and Burmese Steam Navigation Company) Passenger Liner requisitioned by the Admiralty. She sustained hits, but the fire was put out before being beached at Malay Cove. EREBUS, too, was neither scuttled nor was she a very old warship. She was a monitor, a heavily armoured and armed vessel, meant mainly to provide heavy artillery support from static or slow-moving positions. She continued to provide logistic and technical assistance to other ships after the raid. The OKAPI was not a 365 ft vessel but a much smaller, converted South African Whaler. The description of HERMES, too, is insufficient and in some ways inaccurate. But these details do not matter; they do not influence the narrative.

I will not try to deal with Crusz's narrative – the book must be read for that – for its fascination for me lies elsewhere. There is the Ceylonese schizophrenia - pride in and dislike of the "Whites" they were fighting for. There is the "Asian Dream"- an admiration for the Japanese (and even the Germans!) they were fighting against. There are the fault lines in Ceylonese society that became deep fissures under the strain of home-sickness, extreme youth, poor training, bad leadership and enforced solitude in a strange land. There is the motley cast of characters that played out this drama. And, this above all: the character of Bdr. Gratien Fernando, *"the intellectual soldier who brought with him to Cocos 'not a bagful of clothes but a bagful of books'"* and whose *"words spoken…..and indomitable courage on the way to the gallows were on everybody's lips for weeks to come both among prisoners and staff".* Truly, a character out of Joseph Conrad.

Every drama needs a backdrop and Crusz is right in spending much time in describing the background. The political historian will recognize the Ceylonese schizophrenia. The British were looked up to, for they wielded power. They were disliked, because they misused it. They were distrusted, for their perfidy in sacrificing Malaya to lure America into the war. Consequently, in a knee-jerk reaction, the Japanese were looked up to – to put the British in their place. To the credit side of the Japanese was that they were the one Asian nation that cocked a snook at the "whites". So was their vision of an Asian power bloc, and their perception as Buddhists. On the debit side was that they were the "unknown devil", whose atrocities, ultimately, began to erode their charisma. Within itself, Ceylonese society, too, had many a minor conflict that could erupt under stress, as they did in the Cocos: Buddhist Sinhalese, Hindu Tamils, Christian/Catholic Burghers and Eurasians, each competing for a higher place in the pecking order. The perception that the Services were being monopolised by the Burghers and the Catholics: educated youths from 'good' family backgrounds were favoured. A large percentage came from Catholic schools in and out of Colombo. Of the leaders of mutiny, Gratien was the odd man out as he came from a traditional Sinhala Buddhist home and, though a convert to Christianity at S.Thomas' College, continued to be influenced by his first religion. Crusz comments: *"Interestingly……none of the mutineers were former students of (Ananda and Nalanda)"*. Echoes of these concerns became rampant cries in the days of the "The Betrayal of Buddhism" and "Catholic Action" in the mid 'fifties. Within the Army context, the Ceylonese (all members of the British Army) considered themselves superior to their Indian counterparts in the Indian Army. Overseas postings in Malaya and the Seychelles opened their eyes to the stark realities: "Black is black and White is white, and never the twain will meet". And all these simmered below the surface at Cocos, waiting for an accident to happen.

The trigger was bad leadership, on the part of the Officers and the NCOs. Gardiner, a Britisher with a Ceylonese commission, seeking an overseas posting to escape a troublesome marriage. *'Cool, composed…calculating while…seething with anger'*. With war's end, he erased himself from the records, retreating into nothingness.(Why?) Stephens, a nineteen-year old, opinionated Eurasian with only a planter's experience of handling indentured Indian labour. Ignorant and boastful de Sylva, who pushed Gardiner over the brink, and carried his alleged "secret" to his grave: perhaps that it was he who may have been responsible for many things? The NCOs unable to detect a plot being hatched amongst the handful of men on this speck of an island. (After the executions, Quartermaster Sergeant Perera was discreetly *"dishonoured and drummed off"*). All Gardiner had to do was follow his predecessor, Lyn Wickramasuriya's sensible and professional parting words. But he was a Britisher, and so he knew better.

The events on Cocos cast long shadows - when the 1962 *coup d'etat* was foiled, a number of CGA officers of that vintage were among the plotters. (Even the Army's official History observes a conspiracy of mealy-mouthed silence on this: five lines about it, "no names – no pack drill", and 40 pages of official reasons why they were not penalised.) But, when the Regiment was disbanded and re-formed, it was entrusted to none other than Lyn Wickramasuriya. "In my beginning is my end."

In 1971, when the Navy was infiltrated by the JVP, I saw elements of the same social dynamic that propelled the Cocos Mutiny. It is there today in the resurgent JVP and the "Sinhala Urumaya" waiting in a wings for a date with Destiny. No, the Cocos Mutiny may not yet be over.

Only seven pages for the act on centre stage. They must be read over and over again. Dare I suggest some answers to Crusz's questions? Yes. Why did both Stephens and Gauder fail to kill the other? About ten shots were exchanged. Stephen missed with five rounds in his revolver (a weapon "for executions and suicides", we used to call it) and limped away with one yet in the chamber. Gauder, who had fired five rounds from his rifle and wounded Stephen twice, had him in his sights, but watched him walk away, in spite of his hatred for his one time schoolmate. Crusz asks – were they, in fact, incapable of really killing each other? I venture to think not: Gauder could have, as Edema, Peries and Patterson had done, inserted only one clip of five rounds into his magazine. If so, when Stephens walked away (with one round yet in his "weapon for executions and suicides"), Gauder was out of ammunition.

The failure of the Bren to fire was the turning point. Why did de Sylva, the officer, send a NCO, Jayawardena, to check the weapon after a Mutiny? The responsibility was his. Later, he disagreed with the NCO's report. Jayawardena claimed he knew about the Mutiny, and took unilateral steps to foil it by loading blanks. Why did he did not share the information with de Sylva? My guess is that Jayawardena was banking on the silence of de Sylva, and that de Sylva had his reasons for not wanting to appear in Court even as an expert witness – for reasons he carried with him to the grave.

And so we come to Gratien. The quintessential loner, the educated soldier, the man with a vision, of integrity, whose only intellectual stimulation came from his 'bagful of books'. Perhaps, in the absence of peers, he fell back on planning in a 'bookish' way – perhaps. He did not divulge the latter part of his plan – how to win over the CLI and the Cable and Wireless civilians on the other island. But there are indications that he had friends there among the CLI troops, and among the Wireless Station staff: how else could he get into his hands, while under imprisonment, coded messages, decoded and handed over to him? He is shown as more competent than his superior officers in strategic planning but, ironically, less competent in the handling of arms. *"Yon Casius, has a lean and hungry look. He thinks too much. Such men are dangerous"*. He was determined to take all the blame himself, to never ask for pardon, to preserve and pass on his dream. Only a man obsessed with honour could say things like: "Everything seems right with me, yet everything is wrong". "It is not in my power to like or hate." "I had not the least grudge against Capt.Gardiner, personally. I would have done the same for any white man." Mervyn de Rooy has made a perspicacious throw-away remark that Gratien was like *"Walter Mitty, the Undefeated, inscrutable to the last"*, the hero of his own escapist illusions. An attractive, plausible possibility but, I think, ultimately untenable. Unlike Mitty, Gratien was a charismatic figure thrown up by the dynamic of his time. He began the mutiny, recognised the moment it failed, unhesitatingly surrendered, to save the Dream for another day. Had he lived, he would

have seen the Japanese lose the war, the British lose their Empire, the Japanese win the peace, and the Dream, almost, come true !

The real Gratien would only have emerged from the book he was writing: “The Island of Fate”. It had been seen by some, but has vanished from the face of the earth. Nothing found in his locker. Did he carry his ‘notes’ about on his person that night and destroy them, just as he tore up the list of conspirators’ names and the ‘Savings Books’? (Incredibly, the guards did not ‘bother’ to look at, or pick up the pieces!). Perhaps, he wanted to ‘erase’ himself after his failure?

The last word has to be in praise of Noel Crusz, not only for his tenacity but for having put into this book all the elements that the average Sri Lankan writer, writing about Sri Lanka, would avoid for political correctness. The book is now receiving the recognition it deserves as an exercise in military research and reportage. And so, he emerges as the other hero of the Cocos Island Mutiny.

On reading **SPIT AND POLISH by Carl Muller.**

(Penguin Books 1998.)

In today’s Sri Lankan English literary scene, I have often been advised, it is politically incorrect to be the least bit critical of another’s work - in public. So I am aware that I am breaking taboos here, but I do so trusting in the good sense of the Editor and a down-to-earth author. Having got that off my chest let me describe my reactions to this book.

The blurb, really, says it all:*”…this book is a veritable treat for Carl Muller fans as well as for those reading him for the first time.”* Well, I am unashamedly a fan; but sadly, in this book, Muller has done himself a great disservice: first, by repeating and modifying some stories from his delightful earlier book *“A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Cemetery”* and then by alternating “faction” with History.

I like the earlier book better because, like Muller, I experienced life both in the Navy, and in the U.A.E. This helps me relish Carloboy’s rambunctious frolics and the tales of journalistic derring-do in the Gulf. I like the later book less because I learnt some History, and I take my History neat – no ice or soda, please!

But let me talk of the stories in this book, first, and then about his historical chapters.

It takes a truly exceptional writer to gracefully ease – not shoe-horn – his early stories into new clothes, or to fit a new role. Those of us who had reveled in T.H. White's glorious "*The Sword in the Stone*" – a lighthearted, mythical account of King Arthur's childhood – were disappointed in what happened to it in the transformation into Book 1 of an omnibus trilogy, "*The Once and Future King*" (later to become Walt Disney's "*The Sword in the Stone*" and the Musical, "*Camelot*"). And so it is with Muller's treatment of some of the stories from his earlier book where, full of outrageous fun and drama, each story stood straight and tall, needing no Von Bloss family escutcheon to lean on. But in "*Spit and Polish*" they are presented as a "*spin-off from the Penguin trilogy*" and suffer in the transition.(What on earth does one call a Trilogy that acquires a fourth leg?) Still, though not vintage Muller, the "factional" part of the book is full of belly laughs, almost unbelievable escapades and with more than a touch of sex interest. (The Signals Office always operated a lending Library of much-handled, cyclostyled, 1950s porn!). Those who knew the Navy then would vouch for the authenticity of the atmosphere they evoke and the macho self-image the Navies of the world have spun around themselves! Many incidents, we know, are real, and the thin disguises make for good guessing-games and blushes. Hoary "yarns" swapped at old sailors' "get-togethers", are woven into these tales, and Geography and Chronology get as gloriously mixed up as the Burghers! Still, "Faction" is not presented as fact, and is all the more enjoyable. There is the odd story or two where "faction" becomes "fiction", but who's to complain? Tales of the *"Vijaya"*, of Talaimannar, the groundings of patrol craft, Diyatalawa, trips to Burma – all have an authentic flavour, and bring to life old scenes, even though the facts are stretched like old elastic. Old sailors will thank Muller for putting all this in print and Penguin, too, thinks these tall tales will appeal to many. It's good to know that there are others out there to laugh along with us at these crazy antics – welcome to the club! One thing intrigues me, though: how come Carloboy was so lily-white after he joined the Navy? (Puzzle that one out –but don't get your knickers in a twist!)

And now for the History. Is there really any justification for forcing two disparate disciplines into one book? I think not. If – and only if – the historical chapters provide a backdrop to add depth to the high-jinks on centre stage, perhaps a case could be made. But this is not so: the History chapters ("which are mostly genuine" says Muller) cover the late 1930s and the war years: the stories are of the 1950's. What Muller has attempted, though, is a potted History of the Second World War. Sadly, not even he can do that in 124 pages (which includes 42 on the Indian National Army, the Ceylon Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve and the Cocos Island Mutiny, leaving him 82 for the rest). If it

is History that he is writing, a writer needs be accurate. Unfortunately, Muller isn't; but, along the way, he does some good things, and I wish he had stopped there.

One of the Good Things is that he has given a much-needed boost to the INA (Indian National Army) and its Ceylon Unit. Few, now, know about it. But his sources (all English or Indian, and all duly acknowledged) are not comprehensive. He speaks at length about the Kotelawela connection, but has left out the Aluvihare connection (Bernard Aluvihare was an M.P. when Muller was in the Navy). He does not seem to know of Dr. Arsecularatne's published accounts of the Ceylon Unit. It was not "*Chalo Delhi*" but "*Dilli Chalo!*" (and what of the other cry: "*Inquilab Zindabad!*"?) I, for one, remember listening to the faint, static-crackly broadcasts to us from Japanese-held Singapore "*This is Radio Sho-nan, calling our Brothers and Sisters in India and Ceylon*", followed by the strains of "*Vande Mataram* ". This song was later made a National Anthem of India alongside "*Jana Gana Mana*", in a tribute to Bose and the INA. Muller, quoting one of his sources speaks of Sinhalese and Indian boys who were put ashore at Trincomalee to sabotage the British operations. They were discovered and shot. "*Corr makes mention of four Sinhalese youths*", says Muller. Today, we need to know who they were, as they would head the list of our National Heroes. This is their due. But enough: Muller has done his bit for the INA, for which, much thanks.

About the Ceylon Naval Volunteer Force, the Ceylon Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve, the "*Overdale Wyke*" etc., I was tickled pink to find large chunks of my own work appearing here! It's genuine research material and Muller is welcome to it. Knowledge is free and some of this material has lately been discussed on the Internet, too. But a nod in my direction would have been nice: the foreign sources *re* the INA have been acknowledged *in extenso*. I've got this funny feeling that Muller has not read my "*History of the Navy in Sri Lanka. Vol.1. The Ceylon Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve*" (1995) or "*Nursery of the Navy*" (*THE ISLAND*, Saturday 23rd. 1994). Yet he uses material that could only have been culled from them. So he makes several mistakes, *e.g*. the "*Overdale Wyke*" was not "small, trim, with plenty of bite," but a trawler converted for minesweeping; she was not our first fighting ship – H.M.Tugs.*Samson* and *Goliath*, equipped with Lewis guns and Mk V Oropesa sweeps, even in the First World War – alone can claim that honour; there was an H.M.S.*Semla* but no *Sernia*; the MFVs were never H.M. Ships - they were Motor Fishing Vessels (not commissioned ships) and alas! they did no minesweeping in Akyab and never went up-river. But again, enough.

The story of the Cocos Island Mutiny is well told from good sources, and with feeling. It is indeed a pity that, in our post-Independence euphoria, we have forgotten

those martyrs. Again, Muller has done something worthwhile in bringing this before us again. Of such stuff is a nation's morale made.

The best thing about the rest of Muller's potted history is that it is readable, but the missing links are many, particularly about the war in the Indian Ocean. The East Indies Fleet's attacks on Japanese-held Burma; flights of 35 or more USAAF B-29s flying out of China Bay to bomb Singapore and Penang; the role of the charismatic SACSEA (Supreme Allied Commander, South East Asia) Adm. Louis Mountbatten, with his HQ at Peradeniya where the Wardroom and Galley were staffed exclusively by CRNVR personnel; the secret submarine bases in Fremantle, Brunei and Subic Bay; the last Allied submarine to sail on a mission before VJ Day and the return to Base of another from the last World War II mission by a submarine (H.M.S/M *Trident* :her 34th. mission since 1939), both at Trincomalee, are some of them. Mistakes are there a-plenty. To mention but one, the Marshall plan was not the one for Britain to storm across the Channel, dreamt up by Chief of the U.S. Army Staff, George Marshall. It was "a post-World War II recovery program of U.S. financial aid to certain European countries, initiated June, 1947" and named after George C. Marshall when he was Secretary of State in 1947-49 (later Secretary of Defence and winner of the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1953). Again, Truman was not the insensitive killer he is made out to be. He appreciated that it was his personal duty make a decision (remember his motto "The Buck Stops Here"?) and that the responsibility was to be his, and his alone. (Many later U.S., and Sri Lankan Presidents would have agreed with him.) But I will not go on. History just cannot be made to, nor can meekly lie cheek-by-jowl with "faction". Less 124 pages, this would have been a better book.

(*On launching* **"TIME AND CHANCE"** ***by Siri Ranawake***

When this book was launched in Australia, it was seen (I quote) as *"a sensitive account of (the) migrant experience*", an *"insistent relevance …..to Australia …in its passionate pleas for a cosmopolitan humanism, of respect and acceptance in multi-ethnic, multi-religious societies*".: and a *"significant addition to the corpus of migrant based literature in Australia*". (I have quoted from Prof. Devleena Ghosh.) From an Australian and sociological perspective that may be a valid assessment: but not from my perspective as a reader and writer. I think it lacks something. To pigeon-hole this book as "migrant based literature" is to pay no attention to it is a creative work. This is

certainly not yet another account of how and why someone migrated and what he/she found in Australia: This is an exploration of a person. So let me try to present this book from that perspective.

I see this book as a work of true creative writing, one that has validity beyond Colombo, or Sydney. It is creative in the way that a lump of common clay, slapped on the potter's wheel, is delicately shaped into a graceful urn by the eyes, the hands and the mind of the potter. Let me try another metaphor. The author, like an imaginative chef, has selected her ingredients – events, persons, experiences and feelings – mixed, seasoned and marinated them and served us up an exciting new dish, to be savoured; discriminatingly and mindfully. This is no two-dimensional story of a migrant: it is a story of one particular woman – a complex woman called Rohini Ramasamy.

For Sri Lankan readers I have a word of caution. Please do not turn detective, looking for missing details or for insights into the life of the author. This is a work of fiction, not biography. This, I know: and I'll tell you how. I first met Siri Ranawake or, Sudharma Alles as she was, then, a long time ago, along with her friends from Visakha, in the near-mythical Peradeniya of 1952, where we all experienced the hazy-gauzy ambience of that period. We were all there, and together: yet each one of us carried away into our lives memories coloured by our own perceptions. Alas! Marriage, claimed Siri immediately after we graduated and so we drifted apart. Perhaps Siri and I lived parallel lives: she was married to an Army Officer and I was a Naval officer, but we were never served in the same area together. We met again when I moved into a house in Dehiwela, a few doors from her father's house. I came to know the family and remember her father walking past our house on his way to cheer on the Havelocks! But, like all families, her family also dispersed and the house was sold. In 1983, that gracious house was ravaged and torched, and the tenants rescued by the Buddhist priest. In the novel, too, Rohini's house is torched in 1983 and she is rescued by her neighbours. But Siri was in Australia in 1983. What is in the story – and that's my point – was no part of Siri's life. Neither is it the writer's invention. The truth is that the backdrop to Rohini's story – and ours – is the deeply disturbing experiences we went through in those years, and for which everyone of our generation was in some way responsible. In the story these events are not History, but things that changed Rohini's personal life. Siri, the writer, treats Reality in a cavalier manner: stretching Time out or compressing it, and leaving out factual details, as the narrative demands. This is a fiction writer's prerogative, and Siri extends it even to the more intimate aspects of Rohini's life. For instance, she dwells upon and spins out the tale of university life for forty-two pages and then, almost in passing, she tells us:

"In the midst of all this turmoil, Suren and Rohini graduate from university, marry and begin their lives together."

And, in the same matter-of-fact way, speaks of the birth of Rohini's first child is dealt as:

" Rohini's uneventful pregnancy advances…..Rohini arrives home…..Menika takes a proprietary interest in Rohini and the baby"

Quite obviously, this is no one's biography. It is the flow of the story that determines what is to be said and what is not. And we readers must exercise "a willing suspension of disbelief" till the story ends.

Here we see Siri, the potter, seated at her wheel, shaping her urn of clay.

So what is this story about? To find that out you must read the book. I can say: "This is the story of a girl who becomes a woman." A girl who, when the story begins, feels hemmed in by (I quote) "*the menacing escarpment that brooded over her childhood home*". This menace, this fear that the world is trying to impose itself on her, is something she senses throughout her life. The unwelcome astrologer, the unwanted attention she attracts, the riots that shatter her "scallop shell of quiet", and even London itself where she escapes to, are all *"menacing escarpments"* that stifle her. She needs to explore herself, to try to understand her nagging dissatisfaction. She admires her father, and later her father-in-law, for their intellectual and ethical world-view, born of another age. But she is scornful of her mother's compliant attitude towards married life, which was also born of another age; and she finds herself wary of her mother-in-law. These two women she comes to understand much later in life, almost too late. Strangely, she seems less than close to the husband she had chosen than what one would expect. It seems more a partnership than a marriage of minds and it seems she cannot share her feelings with him, or discuss with him the matters that matter to her. She is a Seeker, not understanding what she is seeking, yet giving in to Life's demands, accepting what it gives her. We get a glimpse of her uncertainty of herself, why she nurtures the memory of a "might-have-been" emotional experience which surfaces, at odd times, unpleasantly surprising her. We follow the writer into the interstices of Rohini's mind and – like Rohini herself – we stumble upon "black holes", that neither she, nor we understand. Finally, we realize she is no ordinary woman, but an intelligent and complex one, someone content and yet not quite content with where Life has led her.

In the last chapter, Siri describes her, in late middle life, in a series of disjointed phrases:

“These days Rohini looks inwards. Her focus is on the small things, the significant things that lie at the heart of the family….at the home….. The colours in her garden…..

“(she) reflects on the peaks and troughs of marital life, devoid now of physical intimacy. Somehow, she is content.

“…a relaxed evening and she and Suren go to bed to read. For her, reading is still a transcendent experience….Now and then, the spectre of loneliness hovers briefly, but she pushes it aside, ….”

And she ends with these revealing words:

“Perhaps later she will write her story. Storytelling is important, a healing process. Without stories there is no pattern, no understanding, merely ingrained lifelong habits, events passing before the eyes of disinterested observers, a life lost in the living of it.”

“A life lost in the living of it.”

These are not the words of a migrant. They are those of a powerful and complex personality.

So where is the migrant experience? It is there: in Rohini (the fictional migrant), and perhaps in Siri (a real-life one) Some of my favourite lines from a poem by a Greek poet, I think, encapsulate that experience:

You tell yourself: I’ll be gone

To some other land, some other sea,

To a city far lovelier than this

Could ever have been or hoped to be –

…………………………………………….

There’s no new land, my friend, no

New sea; for the city will follow you endlessly,

The same mental suburbs slip from youth to age,

In the same house go white at last –

…………………………………………………....

No other place, always this

Your earthly landfall, and no ship exists

To take you from yourself…..

Friends, I am privileged today to introduce you to – not one, but two extraordinary women – Rohini the creation, and Siri Ranawake, the creator.