

REFLECTIONS ON THE DIAMOND JUBILEE OF S.THOMAS' COLLEGE AT GURUTALAWA

This year marks the Diamond Jubilee of S.Thomas' College, at Gurutalawa. The occasion is one which calls for introspection in search of a justifiable reason for celebration. It is the past rather than the present which provides it. It is in a dream recaptured, the dream of the Hayman-Foster era of the College's History. But, it is more than a celebration of nostalgic memories. It is an act of faith that seeks to transform that dream whose reality was experienced by the restricted number of an older group of Old Boys; in to a vision for the future, and a dynamic for action.

Those were the glorious twenty odd years from 1942 to 1964 during which the School earned the justifiable reputation of the best in the island and arguably the best in the world. This view echoes the valedictory message of Warden Buck to the boys of S.Thomas' College then at Mutuwal over one hundred years ago. "You belong to one of the best schools in the world, a School (then barely 50 years old) with splendid traditions and most honourable name and I charge you to hand down those traditions and that name to those who come after you untarnished and unimpaired..... you have learnt the best lessons in the world at S.Thomas' College, not only English, the Classics and Mathematics, but true manliness and courage, purity and all the things that make a man and a gentleman."

It is a mandate for the Old Boys of the School as the true custodians of the School's traditions in every age; and more so at this time when the splendid traditions and most honourable name have been imperilled by a process of socio political change particularly affecting S.Thomas' College at Gurutalawa.

Manliness was in the forefront of the thinking of the Educators in the Public School System. However this resulted in a license to sadism of the most opprobrious kind. Bishop Chapman, founder of S.Thomas' College in 1851 while serving as an Assistant Master at Eton took strong exception to the practices and excesses that prevailed and devoted himself to improving the conditions of the boys. A significant change for the better was the contributions of Thomas Arnold the famous Head Master of Rugby who pioneered the educational reforms of the 1830's. Thomas Hughes a great admirer of Arnold followed with the classic novel "Tom Brown's School Days" where he admirably captured Arnold's delight in games and boyish high spirits and created an enduring image of the Public School product.

Manliness as thus conceived lay in the equal emphasis on sports in to a body and character building activity expressed in the Latin dictum Mens Sana in Corpore Sano – A healthy body in a healthy mind. "But Public Schools which expanded rapidly in the 1840's became increasingly conscious of their role as the prime source of leadership for the imperial cause and in preparing young men for their destiny as the defenders of this heritage". This was embodied in the bon mot attributed to the Duke of Wellington that the Battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton. It was left to Edward

Thring the celebrated Headmaster of Uppingham Public School founded in 1584 and a contemporary of Bishop Chapman at Eton to effect qualitative changes in the school which set standards for public school education in England. It was Thring who founded the Head Master's Conference and at Upping opened the first school gymnasium in England, introduced wood and metal workshops, and provided a swimming pool!

Small wonder then that Canon A.J.Foster the Chaplain non pareil of S.Thomas' reverts to Edmund Thring in an end of year sermon he preached at Gurutalawa. He set out Thring's aims of the ideal Public School, its structure and core values. The small school. The Small House. The care of persons. The insistence of a standard of honour for every member of the school from Head Master to the smallest of boys.

As for the concept of manliness, Dr.Hayman provided it with a new dimension. Taking advantage of the magnificent environment of the school set in the beautiful farm gifted by Leslie de Saram; the whole Welimada plateau became our extended playing field inviting us to adventure and explore with its challenge and thrills. From the sleepy hamlet of Gurutalawa to the mighty mountains that were its back drop, through its exciting jungle trails, to the grandeur of the Pattipola bluff, the then serene majesty of Horton plains, and the purple evening shades of the Ohiya forest where dusk fell like a Benediction in some vast Cathedral.

He had in mind the now famous Gordonstoun School founded by Kurt Hahn which counts Prince Philip and later his son Prince Charles as distinguished alumni. "Public Schools have remarkable achievements to their credit....." wrote Hahn. "Where they fail is in the protection of adolescence; loyalties draw their vitality from an intact human strength that is the basis of all devotion. The strength is generally present in children as they come into public schools. It can survive adolescence but only on one condition; if on the threshold of puberty, health giving passions are stirred and subsequently sustained. The passion for adventure and enterprise, the passion for craftsmanship and building, the passion of writing, painting, music, the passion of exploring and researching." Dr.Hayman gave such passion a positive chance of absorbing and enthralling the emotional strength of the growing boys in his care. And he added this too. The motto of New College, Oxford, "Manners maketh man". Not merely courtesy, but the whole approach to life, which for want of a more exact term he called the art of gracious living and to a man of greatest humility this was not a matter of whether you were rich or poor. Echoes of Warden Buck – all the things that make of a man; a gentleman.

But within the structure of a small school, (the number of boys evened out at 40 odd in the earliest years, and was around 300 when Dr.Hayman left. He himself hoped that it would not exceed 360) with its values well in place it was the care and concern for every boy that invested "Guru" with a very special quality. The warp and the woof of our every day life cannot be better expressed than in how Dr.Hayman himself demonstrated that care and that concern.

He knew every boy by name. His end of year Staff meetings dwelt on every boy's progress in work and behaviour. No Assistant Master dared leave the campus till the staff meeting was over and his Reports done. He himself rarely, left the Campus, and particularly over weekends sought to arrange activities to keep the boys interested and occupied. When he did leave the Campus in between term School holidays he toured the country taking films of the ruined cities and of Wild Life in Yala and Wilpattu which he would show the boys in the next term. Wherever possible he visited the homes of the boys to meet their parents. If he had to sack a boy he would personally take him home to his parents. He gave himself a minimum of 28 periods in the time table. He considered himself first a teacher and realised the need to inter-act with his wards where ever possible. He was daily on the playing fields. He could tell a visiting parent where his son was most likely to be; as games were compulsory and registers were kept. After dinner he would visit each dormitory in rotation for a chat. He was particular that Dorms should be kept clean and tidy and the House Masters saw to this; He was on 24 hours duty, and most masters followed his example, impelled by his dedication and example and not under duress.

He waited for the boys to return from away school matches however late, greeted the bus, inquired of how the game went, sat with the team over dinner and listened to the details recalled. He took his fair share of directly supervising the Sports activities that were his specialty, swimming, life saving and scouting. He introduced shramadana to the boys leading the way himself. He pioneered outward bound and gained great delight in inviting other school teams for their holidays to Gurutalawa for special swimming and life saving camps. He made it a point to give boys who were dismissed from other schools a second chance at Gurutalawa. He looked upon it as a challenge but it was also an extension of his care and concern, which had a universal outreach.

Dr.Hayman was unique. "Matura it tece pol rupee le stampa" wrote Ludovico Ariosto (1474-1533). Nature made him and then broke the mould. No one could be so unimaginative as to expect his successors to be like him. And yet he was and is a veritable Template for Head Masters of boarding schools whether Public, Private or Government anywhere in the world. In Gurutalawa itself experience gets in the way of Emerson's aphorism that an institution is the lengthened shadow of one man. Rather it has been borne out that the influence of the man was in inverse relationship to the length of the shadow. There are palpable reasons for this at the micro level and this occasion must not succumb to an acrimonious appraisal. Suffice it to say that the broad sweep of social change engendered overtly in 1956, undergirded as it was with a pernicious strand of mono culturalism, was the principal macro cause. It confronted the values of a tradition which was perceived to be alien and brought about a schizophrenic loss of identity in Gurutalawa traumatized by its currents.

But for a time the tide was stemmed and the malady was held at bay supported by stalwart members of the staff of the Hayman-Foster era firstly by the youthful and energetic Mr.Frank Jayasinghe (1965-68) and then by Mr.E L Perera (1968-74) one of the great Thomian teachers of the Warden De Saram era followed by an Old Thomian

Mr. Lyn Illangakoon, a gentleman to the manner born who after three years as Head Master was moved to Mount Lavinia as Warden in 1977.

The high Water mark was the brutal murder of Bala Gunasegaram on the morning of October 29th 1989 in the Societal mayhem that was unleashed by the J V P in the years 1988-1989, the very two years of his stewardship. Bala was a disciplinarian and a man of unimpeachable integrity. He would not, could not, did not, compromise his values and his standards. He had prepared for the daunting even awesome task ahead of him by researching and reading every note and comment made by Dr. Hayman when he was the Head from all the files and documents available to him in the College office. One of his favourite quotations was from Psalm 84 "I had rather be a door keeper in the house of my God than dwell in the palaces of the wicked". The last vestige of the shadow was effaced by the spitting bullets of a T.56.

In this Diamond Jubilee year 60 years after the first boys took their seats in an improvised classroom on May 12th 1942 the tide has turned. The Wheel had come full circle. The English language has emerged as the key language of a Globalised world for Communication, the dissemination of knowledge and in the Information Technology Revolution, shorn to its Sri Lankan detractors of its imperialist stigma. The phobia of Kaduwa and its associational shibboleths have been exorcised. An enlightened government has given it its head as a driving force in our Educational system by reintroducing it as a medium of instruction.

Numbers in the school which had been a bench mark for quality rather than exclusivity had come down from a preposterous 1300 odd at one time to 413, albeit not by choice, except that of the parents of children who had at one time sent them to Guru to acquire proficiency in the English language not available in Government Schools. Ironically from the same social milieu as the proponents of Kaduwa. Finally with its special Public School association and embodiment of public school values its specific Englishness its overtone of privilege, cricket has captured the imagination of the country as never before. It pervades as a sub culture from Point-Pedro to Dondra head. Sri Lanka's World Cup Trophy in 1996 has contributed more to National self esteem than anything one can think of. This exclusive Public School game has become a vehicle for social mobility. An equalizer. A meeting point. A unifying force. We do not have to go on our back foot to defend our traditions and our public school heritage any more.

But there is a perspective we should not miss. We have taken the game of cricket and played it in a fashion of our own; exciting the imagination of the spectators the world over. Similarly while being moored to the core values (the soul) of our traditions, rejecting what is specious, spurious and transitory in change (and that is what tradition is all about) we have to develop, grow and improve on what we have inherited to suit our own culture and needs. Dr. Hayman openly recognized this on a visit to the Island in 1970.

No doubt this Diamond Jubilee year is a defining moment in the history of STC at Gurutalawa. The way back is the way forward. We have a mandate to discharge, in the

compelling exhortation of Warden Buck, inspired by the example of Dr.Hayman and to the great teachers who worked tirelessly in our heritage. We have also a new Chairman of the Board of Governors in Bishop Duleep de Chickera one time Chaplain and Sub Warden of Mt.Lavinia, and a New Headmaster in Mr.G C Mendis, Educationist who had taught previously both at Gurotalawa and at the Prep School, Kollupitiya and is well acquainted with the Thomian ethos. The opportunity has presented itself to rehabilitate those traditions that have earned the College its good name, to restore its image to the many parents who seek the best for their children, and to do justice to the Thomian hallmark. Otherwise our Celebratory Fund Raising Dinner Dance on November 16,2002 will be yet another picnic on the Gadarene Slopes.

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