

Recollections of St Thomas' College, Gurutalawa: an extract from a personal memoir

If I remember correctly, in 1950 St Thomas' College, Gurutalawa, had 214 pupils. Not only was it among the best of schools, it was also the most expensive boys' boarding school in Ceylon. I was completely out of my financial and social class, the other boys being from wealthy families, parents who held well-paid jobs or had political position and power. For example, of my two closest friends, the father of one was the Surveyor General of Ceylon; the father of the other was a parliamentarian from Matara – Cabinet Minister, Secretary of Defense etc - with estates and other business interests. But our friendship lasted till they passed away many, many years later. No doubt, being in a boarding school, spending so much time together, tested and bonded the friendship. They did not notice income-difference or, if they did, had no regard for social status. Indeed, going further, both of them had nothing but contempt for social pretense and affectation; for the status and admiration money buys. One of them, rejected privilege and inherited advantages in Ceylon, and opted for an anonymous life in the United States.

Transported abruptly from geographically flat, dusty and hot Jaffna to Ceylon's "Upcountry", I fell in love with those mountains, with that climate and atmosphere. Long before the Tamil Tigers began their fight to establish a separate state, my personal wish was for a "separate state" consisting (on the lines of Virginia Woolf's *'A Room of One's Own'*) of one room and an attached bath somewhere Upcountry, a place to which I could retreat, at the least, during the European winter months. (I left Ceylon in 1963.) Perhaps, somewhat strangely, I was a Jaffna Tamil for whom Ceylon started in Kandy and went up. The poet Keats imagined that the Biblical Ruth working in the fields felt even the corn to be "alien", though they were no different from the corn in the fields she'd known. Similarly, I found those mountains more beautiful than any other, anywhere else in the world. They stirred a deep emotion in me, while my response to mountains elsewhere was only aesthetic. (Since the emotional cannot be separated from the aesthetic, I suppose I should say "visual", rather than "aesthetic".) It is only over the last few years that I have, at last, managed to relinquish (a key word in Buddhism) those mountains; to see other mountains without making a silent, nostalgic, comparison; without feelings of deep loss. During school holidays, and after Gurutalawa, I lived with my parents in Dehiwela, by the sea. I spent many hours with friends in and by the sea there and down South in a Ceylon that had not yet been taken over by tourists, tourist hotels and commercialization. But, unlike the sea - restless, constantly in motion - the mountains have a calm permanence and strength. (My love for the hills and mountains was strengthened by the five years I spent in Kandy: four years at University; one, teaching at Trinity College.)

The school bus met us at Bandarawela and drove us to Gurutalawa. A couple of kilometers away from the school, there was Gurutalawa village, consisting of a few, scattered, houses and a small grocery store: nothing else but the mountains and valleys. The sprawling school with its sports-grounds, farms and orchards had no fence but we were not permitted to leave school premises, unless we obtained permission to go for a walk. We raided the orchard for fruit, and the farm for carrot, more for the danger and excitement than out of hunger. I had a friend who was a "natural" with insects and reptiles. Sometimes, he'd appear with a big but harmless snake, caught by the neck, the rest of it wrapped and wriggling round him. It was not a case of *'Androcles and the Lion'* (Bernard Shaw) but Seneviratne with a snake. All ran away in terror, all except me who, being accepted as a friend, walked safely but cautiously, a few steps behind him. With confidence and calmness, he'd raid the school's bee hives, and give us chunks of wax, dripping with honey.

The Headmaster, Dr. R. L. Hayman, tried as far as possible to base his school, with its motto of *Esto Perpetua*, on that of the English public school. I say "his" school because, being an educational missionary and wealthy, he poured a lot of his own money into the school. Among other things, he paid for the construction of a swimming pool: we were the second school in the Island to have a swimming pool. If I am not mistaken, he also paid for the first (school) swimming pool, that at St Thomas', Mount Lavinia. The English "public" schools, of course, were (are?) very private and are "credited" (sic) with helping to establish and run the British empire. We slept in dormitories. The day was regulated by the sound of the school-bell. The man who rang it was known to us as "Bell Simon", to differentiate him from the one who drove the school bus (painted in the school colours of blue, black and blue), "*Bus Simon*". The first bell, and we rushed to wash and get ready for physical exercise. Though dressed only in shorts and vests, the exercise soon warmed us up. Then it was breakfast, chapel and off to classes. There were school prefects assigned to each dormitory, and one of their duties was to see that we left our beds without a single crease; shoes by the bed in a straight line, and such things. It was, I suppose, rather like a military barracks but, given the fact that there were about thirty boys to a "dorm", the result of this imposed tidiness was positive.

Subjects included practical agriculture, where we worked with our hands. It was usually the last lesson, so that we could then wash up. Many of the teachers were from Britain. (I remember getting off on arrival that first day and seeing Dr Hayman waiting to greet us. He was a burly figure then and strange to me, being the very first white man with whom I had contact.) The agriculture teacher was from Wales: Mr Pegler? Sometimes, I heard him sing, as he pulled off the petals of a flower, one by one: "She loves me. She loves me not. She loves me" and so on. A taciturn man, but if the last petal ended with "She loves me", he visibly cheered up. At the end of the lesson, the farming tools had to be cleaned and put away. Mr Pegler would say, "After a good meal, comes the washing-up." An odd statement not only because farming was not the equivalent of a good meal to us but, given Ceylon's culture then, and the social class of the boys, it was most unlikely any of them washed up the plates after meals at home. Gymnastics was taken care of by one Mr. Scott. We helped to build an 'obstacle course' that included walking on planks over a pit; climbing a wooden wall with the help of ropes, and such things.

We had a cadet corps, with uniforms, .22 rifles and a shooting-range. Mr. Amarasinghe, often seen with a pipe, was in charge. I remember him telling us that, even as a man knows his own wife in the dark, so we must know the parts of the rifle, and be able to assemble it in total darkness, going by touch and feel. (Given our age, this was an exciting, though not an experientially comprehended, analogy.) If, while marching, a boy put the wrong foot forward, Mr Amarasinghe tied a handkerchief to the erring foot and, thereafter, called out *Leensu kakulla, nikkang kakuula* (the leg with the handkerchief, the leg without), rather than "Left, right, left". The derisive suggestion was that the culprit did not understand commands when given in English. It indicates the status English then had - and my reason for mentioning this, apparently insignificant, detail. Similarly, *Godaya*, in the sense of someone from a rural background, was a common, casual, epithet. City-dwellers, the world over, tend to be condescending towards rural folk, but *godaya*, as used in school, had another connotation: rural, ipso facto, not Westernised. This Western-orientated cultural condescension has much to do with the violent social and political reaction that, soon after independence, found expression.

Daily participation in some game or the other was compulsory. Attendance was kept to make sure that everyone was present and taking part. It was very much a case of *Mens sana in*

corpore sano. The school was divided into "Houses" and, given distance and our isolation, instead of inter-school, we had inter-House, competitions. Dr Hayman also encouraged hiking. We were given a packed lunch, knapsacks from the cadet armoury, and sent off under the guidance of senior students with maps. We left in the morning, hiked the whole day and got back in the evening. A favourite destination was Horton Plains (and precipitous 'World's End'), then a little-visited area: cold, very much in its natural state, often covered in mist which brought with it a sense of mystery, and a suggestion of timelessness. Mrs. Hayman, who was the school's matron in charge of first-aid and the "sickroom", didn't like these hikes because we invariably returned with scratches and bruises. (The Haymans didn't have children of their own.) Every teacher had a cane and could use it on us, usually on the outstretched palm; sometimes, on our backs: "six of the best". Writing this now, I myself am shocked, for it conjures up pictures of cruelty and terror out of some novel by, say, Dickens. But though the cane was there, and the freedom to use it, there was not one teacher who had a reputation for sadism. In other words, it was an effective, but rarely resorted to, deterrent.

A digression: after all, this memoir, though perforce about me, is meant to be more about places and times past. Once, the swimming team went down to Colombo. The pool at St Thomas' was not available but Dr Hayman arranged for us exceptionally to use that of the Colombo Swimming Club. (I hope I remember its name correctly.) Membership was for "whites-only", even though Ceylon had gained independence in 1948. We were impressed with how clean and "shining" everything was. We didn't stay long, and the "white" people - no doubt, they had been informed and their consent secured - behaved as if we were not there, were invisible. The problem was with our Ceylonese waiters. They scarcely concealed their disdain, even though we were from an "elite" private school. I remember my mother (born 1908), going still further back and into British imperial times, telling me that the housemaids with "white" children or babies in their "prams" wouldn't speak to housemaids looking after Ceylonese children. This might seem exaggerated, if not incredible, and that is why I break off to mention it, to give a little insight into an aspect of social history. Barack Obama records (The Audacity of Hope) that, visiting Kenya and being in the company of his Kenyan cousin, they were ignored in a restaurant, attention being paid to "white" tourists. Once, when I was a child, something similar happened in Colombo, but my Uncle - he'd had military experience - strode up to the waiter, caught him by the collar and demanded, *Api Kalu nissaade?* (Sinhala for "Is it because we are black?") The tourists were most embarrassed: they had not wanted to break the queue; had not noticed we were there first. It is a historical fact that, during the centuries of white domination, white people believed they were superior in every aspect - military and scientific; cultural and moral. But, as Achebe observes in *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, the worst "sin" was that the third-world accepted and internalized this evaluation. I don't know if the expression is still used but among the highest of compliments that could be paid in Sinhala was *Uue Sudha vaage* - "He is like a white man". Someone feeling neglected or not properly treated would ask, *"Api kalude?"* "Are we black?" meaning, "Is it because you see me/us as black?"

The most popular teacher was the Rev A J Foster (MA, Oxford). A tall, slim, man, he was chaplain, history teacher and coach. Taking the first, service was 'high church', with chanting (*Kýrie, eléison*) and incense. "Father Foster" brought drama and dignity to church service, and I recall settling with anticipation to listen to his Sunday sermon. Where history was concerned, he showed me, among other things, the relevance and importance of geography. A reflection of the time was that the emphasis was almost entirely on European, particularly British, history: the voyages of discovery, Nelson, Wellington and the defeat of Napoleon, the Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions. Abandoning his usual white cassock and getting into a

pair of shorts and knee-length socks, "Father Foster" joined in our games, sometimes playing football for one team, whistle in the mouth, since he was both player and (impartial) referee. The weekends were free. There was no swimming on the time-table but we'd go to Father Foster's door, knock and ask whether he would, please, supervise swimming: we were not allowed in the pool unless there was a teacher present. He never refused, and the usual answer, in his deep voice, was "I'll be there in twenty minutes". Then the cry would go round the school: "Fossy is taking swimming" and those keen would hurry to get changed. Thanks to him, I participated in school debates: two teams, each with three speakers, the leaders speaking first and then again to sum up at the end.

At 21.25, the lights in the "dorms" would briefly dim. Five minutes later, the school generator shut down for the night, plunging the world into darkness. I recall moonlight nights when, through the soft mist that had descended, and beyond the valley, I could see the outline of distant mountains: mysterious, reposeful and strong.

Those were very happy years though, during the first or second week, I had my first experience of what is known as "racism". Involved in an argument with another boy, he called me "*Para Dhemala*" (foreign Tamil). It is perhaps the most common abuse hurled at Sri Lankan Tamils, rather like the "*Paki*" in England for all Asians. Having lived in Jaffna, I was not conscious of my "Tamilness", there being no contrasting 'Other' to build ethnic identity and consciousness on distinction and difference. I was surprised, naively thinking, "So what? What has *that* to do with anything?" Being a Tamil then was a fact, one without importance or significance. Whether one was Sinhalese, Tamil, Burgher (there were several of them, this being long before the Burgher exodus) or Muslim weren't we all one - Ceylonese? Puzzled, I shrugged it off but, somewhere, it must have lain dormant, to be awoken by later events. Marcel Reich-Ranicki, in his autobiography, *Mein Leben*, states: „Meinen Eltern bereitete ihre Identität überhaupt keinen Kummer. *Darüber haben sie... nie nachgedacht, nie nachdenken müssen*" (A rough translation would be: "Identity caused my parents no worry. They never thought about it, *never needed to think about it.*" Emphases added.) But, being Jews, Nazism brought them all, violently and brutally, to face the question of identity. A separate (ethnic), rather than an inclusive, unifying (national) identity, was forced upon them, whether they would or not.

Though Dr. Hayman never directly said anything on the subject, it was understood that he had no regard for a boy who "sneaked" on a fellow pupil – even though such information would be of advantage to school authorities. Similarly, the spirit the school sought to imbue was such that, to eat without sharing with others was considered shameful. (There was a word, school slang, to designate such behavior but I don't remember it.) Muslim boys observing the fast during Ramadhan were an exception. They received parcels from home; set the alarm, got up before daybreak and ate so as to last the day.

Dr. Hayman was perhaps somewhere between forty and fifty then. I believe he got his doctorate in Physics when in his 20s, and it then being a very rare and high qualification, he must have had many openings and opportunities, but chose instead a life of service in the field of education. He was a thorough gentleman, decent and just; incapable of meanness or the unworthy. He was generous in the care of his pupils, even as he was generous in bringing into Ceylon his own money to build and maintain the school. But things did not turn out as he would have wished. The Island had gained independence in 1948 after almost five centuries of Western, Christian, rule. During this long span of time, Ceylonese culture in general, including religion (Buddhism and Hinduism) and language (*Sinhala* and *Tamil*), had been neglected, if not disregarded. Now, with independence, there was vociferous cultural

assertion, an aspect of which was a rejection of things "Western". (The Tamils were next on the list. Unlike with the West and Westerners – powerful, admired, needed - the rejection of Tamils took a virulent, violent, form.) Private Christian schools began to draw hostile, public and state, attention. Foreign Christian teachers, missionaries, doctors and nuns were seen as allies and agents of Western imperialism.

I hope Dr. Hayman had the insight and wisdom not to take things personally but to understand the broad, historical, shifting of the templates. If not, he must have felt very hurt and sad. Generally, history does not make individual exceptions. The lava flows heedlessly, sweeping down on the good and the bad without discrimination. Though we experience pain individually and personally, history itself is not personal. History targets abstractions - groups, categories, the other – and is blind to the fact that groups are made up of individuals, human beings, and that some individuals (like Dr Hayman and Father Foster), both for what they are and for the positive contribution they make, are good of a rare order, and very valuable.

These are (some of) my thoughts and (fallible) recollections. In memory of Asoka Perera and "Tinker" Dharmapala.

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Charles informs us that the above is “*from a Memoir I'm writing for my two sons and their children (and, one day, children's children) - they know little, if anything, of Sri Lanka*”. This Article appeared in the Sunday Island News Paper of July 05, 2009.