

APPRECIATION

Subject: The passing away of Victor C.L.Walatara

Victor Walatara

A generation slowly fades away. The death of Victor Walatara last Tuesday is the latest marker in fixing the boundaries of the Sri Lankan intellectual landscape of the 1950s and 60s as represented in a small way by successive Sixth Forms of the time at the school by the sea.

As the most influential literature teacher in what STC called its Upper School, Victor was preceded by his illustrious predecessor Dick Hensman. Like Dick, Victor was not just a teacher: he was a philosopher, a mentor, a guru. In his engagement with his sixth formers he brought to the classroom and his favourite venue, the Library, as he did to the Literary and Debating Society, and the editorial discussions of the college magazine, the critical sensibility and philosophical and moral values, the social and literary qualities, that influenced a whole generation of Sri Lankans in public and intellectual life.

Whenever I am exposed to various educational environments in other parts of the world, I think how fortunate we were, in schools like ours, to have such a rounded development. The range and personalities of our teachers at College were extraordinary: F.J.A. Senaratne with his open library, which held the most recent – and most wide-ranging – international publications, which he made accessible to sixth formers even before they appeared in the Library; W.D.Pinto-Jayawardena the grammarian, Ahubudhu the poet, Coperahewa the writer, Jinadasa the artist and Vini Vitharana the iconoclast, all passionately engaging us in the Hela Havula; C.H. Davidson with Latin and his marksmen of the rifle-shooting team; C.R.Wise with his passionate commitment to geography, Doss with his boxing, both mental and physical; Kovoov with his rationalism and science; Brookie de Zilwa with zoology, swimming and putt-shot; Bowyer-Yin with classical western music; Cook with his regular rhetoric: ‘Class Mudaliyar, bring forth my bow of burnished gold, bring forth my chariot of fire’ – cane and chair duly put in place; Lassie Abeyewardene with his cricket and a permanent, avuncular, diplomatic, presence on the Mt Lavinia campus..... among many others.

In at least half of my eleven long years at school, Victor Walatara was a principal intellectual undercurrent beneath it all. In our college form days, when we were often left to our own devices, he was still a bit of a lone and reticent flag bearer, but his impact on students and teachers was always powerful. Later on, I think, he was a major influence on school policy.

As a guide, Victor was a devastating critic. Trained in the Scrutiny-Leavis-Ludowyk school of Practical Criticism in the English Department at Peradeniya, he was amongst the first ‘deconstructionists’ I encountered. Victor would focus on a single word and tear an essay to shreds. But one came away not put down but exhilarated – he set the bar high and the challenge was exciting. Some years later we became friends. He had left his position at the school -- in disappointment or boredom -- and became the manager of the Lake House Bookshop.

He spent a few months with me in England during my early days as a university teacher and researcher. We chatted for nights on end, staying up till dawn, endless cigarettes, coffee, ideas, and gossip. When I finally returned home in the 70s, his bookshop office and Beach Road home were regular haunts. Victor was one of the motivating personalities behind my writing career, publishing two of my most read books: Sri Lanka-Island Civilisation and Rock and Wall Paintings. His bookshop office was a meeting point for a wide range of people, his old university colleagues, former students, regular book hunters and persons he described with his characteristic gravity as 'the serious reader'.

When I returned in 2002 from a long assignment abroad, he had retired, moved, as I recall, with his family to a house they had built far inland in Ratmalana off the Attidiya Road. He became progressively reclusive, and was reluctant to get involved in editing projects I thought could be a new chapter in his life, most suited to his remarkable and underutilised abilities and experience. He was a perfect editor but only one project took off. Those were days without Email and his house was not easy for a messenger or student to find. Although often humorous and supportive, Victor was also sceptical and cynical. He saw through any bogus façade or posturing, and frequently painted a grey picture of life.

Now, in retirement, his acidity had increased but had also softened. I had many suggestions but he just couldn't be bothered. The last time I spoke with him, months ago, he mentioned his illness. As I could not easily go myself I asked an equally dear mutual friend from schooldays to make what was for that friend too a long overdue visit to Victor, to see how he was doing and to give him our greetings.

It was with great sadness that old friends heard of Victor's passing away, many of us some days after it happened. Although he had turned his back on creative ambition, and never manifested his remarkable qualities, he had achieved much in the people he influenced and the work he had equipped them to do. I don't think Victor had any religious beliefs, but if he were able to view his death he would be the first to say that after a long life, he has been liberated from 'the tragedy of existence and the agony of the senses'.

Senake Bandaranayake