

# A COLONIAL CLERGYMAN ON SRI LANKA'S NATURAL BEAUTY AND ITS 'HEATHENS'

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R.K. de Silva, 2011, *Poetical Sketches of the Interior of Ceylon*. Benjamin Baileys original manuscript of 1841, with an Introduction by Dr R K de Silva. London: Serendib Publications, Price Rs. 4200/-

It would have been quite impossible for Dr Rajpal de Silva to have avoided describing his discovery of this manuscript as anything but 'serendipitous' considering that he made this "happy and unexpected discovery" by accident, in the Oxford Dictionary definition of Horace Walpole's epithet.

Dr de Silva found Benjamin Bailey's sonnets thirty years ago in an antiquarian bookshop in London and it is his industry that has provided us with a well-delineated portrait of an extraordinary character. For want of information to the contrary, I rather think he would be the one remembered in the 'Bailey' Street of the Fort in Colombo, between Millers and Cargills.

I would like also to take this opportunity to acknowledge Dr de Silva's splendid work in his exceptional three volumes devoted to the visual impressions of the Dutch and the British during their days in Sri Lanka.

These books are worthy of recall after the twenty years and more since they first appeared: *Early Prints of Ceylon* published in 1985, *Illustrations and Views of Dutch Ceylon, 1602 1796* in 1988; and *19<sup>th</sup> Century Newspaper Engravings of Ceylon-Sri Lanka in 1998*. They were all meticulously crafted, both in the exacting research Dr de Silva devoted to them, and in the style and perfection these productions achieved.

This new publication turns the page, as it were, from the pictorial records made by the colonialists of those times to poetic expressions of an Englishman in the early years of the British Raj in Sri Lanka. They are unambiguous expressions and are, in their way, as compelling in their interest as the response of the artists using various techniques. The pictorial artist was no critic of the landscape: he loved what he beheld, else he ignored it. In this instance, however, we have a painful

contradiction between a bigoted missionary and a romantic lover of nature. Language is the vehicle of comment and in the various guises he assumes, Bailey is at once the poet deeply in love with the island whose adulation is overtaken by an over-zealous clergyman. Not every prospect pleases him.

These 'Poetical Sketches' are a new and rare experience in our encounter with the colonial expatriate. Bailey's work consists of a formidable output of some 190 sonnets. It requires, in my mind, an equally devoted reader to sustain his interest while the poet meanders through mountain and valley, very much like the rivers themselves that carved their way through this landscape.

Benjamin Bailey (1791 1853) was a clergyman, Archdeacon of Colombo, a contemporary and friend of the poet John Keats who described the priest as "one of the noblest men alive at the present day." The images he evokes of the Sri Lanka of his time are ardent. Wherever he looked, it seems he encountered nothing short of an earthy paradise. The Rev Bailey's Christian faith was greatly encouraged by what he saw, and he is unrelenting in his admiration of these revelations.

Dr de Silva's publication contains the three parts that constitute the 'Poetical Sketches of Benjamin Bailey'. Part 1 consisting of 52 sonnets was published in 1841. Part 2 is made up of 80 sonnets, and Part 3 of 58; and all three parts appear together in the present volume for the first time. This publication also includes copious and most interesting notes which elucidate for the reader the experience upon which the poet draws. In addition there is also a small group of poems all devoted to extolling the islands beauty. The notes reveal the man as well-read and scholarly as we might expect of an Oxford alumnus.

I am not competent to comment on the literary value of these works except to say that they certainly fulfil the intensions of their author. The sonnets follow the required 14-line construction, and, as I said, lavish line upon line on the countryside. Bailey travelled extensively in the twenty years

he spent in Sri Lanka and his eulogies seem to stem from a solitary contemplation of the world around him. He derives great consolation from what he sees and with the piety of the true believer, thanks God for them.

In Sonnet LIV in Part 2, 'Influence of natural objects on the mind', he recounts each detail of this marvellously unfolding landscape:

I have been asked, what spot of this fair Isle,  
Whose beauty hath for many days been spread  
Before me, I preferred. I have not heed  
To the true feeling of my bosom while  
I answered. But if mountain pile on pile,  
Innumerable vales where scarcely foot can tread,  
If rivers rolling o'er their rocky bed,  
The rushing waterfall, the rippling rill,  
Forests that darken on the mountains brow,  
And fling a mystery o'er the deep ravine;  
If all that crowds upon my memory now  
All that the heart hath felt, the eye hath seen,  
Can please, or sooth the soul, I only know  
I have been soothed wherever I have been.

Bailey identifies the many places he visited. His spelling of their names is quaint but in today's usage he considers Kandy, Warakapola, Kadugannawa, Katugastota, Dumbara, Gampola, Ramboda, Nuwara Eliya, Pidurutalagala and so on, in Part 1. And again in Part 2, Bailey writes of Utu wankanda, Kundasale, Namunakula, Idalgashinna.

And yet many more in Part 3. Wherever it is, Bailey is in raptures.

I picked the sonnet on Diyatalawa arbitrarily but it is as typical as any in this collection of sonnets. He wrote:

...Alone,  
While in my ear with notes of thanksgiving  
The birds and falls and murmuring water sing  
In love, as well as might I feel thee, One  
Father of All! Diatalawe, none  
Among the mountains of this isle will cling  
With brighter beauty to my memory  
Than thou...

For all that, Dr de Silva's diligent research reveals Bailey to have been incensed by what he described as the 'heathenism' and the 'idolatry' practised by the Buddhists and the Hindus of the island.

He fulminated vehemently against Buddhism when the Governor, Lord Torrington, withdrew an injunction "to do away with the hateful ConneXtion with the heathen Idolatry and Atheistical Buddhism of the Island" in 1849. Bailey wrote six long and strong letters to the "Ceylon Times" of those days under the pen-name of Vetus, taking in his stride the Roman Catholic Church whose practices he thought allowed for the "reverence of images", and "assimilated so much the idolatry of the Buddhist in the Wihare, and the mixed worship of Hinduism and Buddhism in the Dewale..."

His intransigence in these matters was to lead to his dismissal from the appointment he held and to his return to England in 1852 where he was to die the following year. This was also the time when Queen Victoria, exercising her prerogative as monarch, ordered the removal of all restrictions placed upon Buddhism and Buddhist practice in Sri Lanka. She restored the rights of the people to practice freely the religion of their choice. Temples that had been torn down were rebuilt or repaired and some in the South bear witness to this magnanimity in the portraits of the Queen, sometimes with Prince Albert, painted over their entrance facades.

Neither would it appear that Bailey had much regard for the people of the country whom he thought were "ignorant" and "barbarous". He often regrets "these savage Despots" did not appreciate what they had been gifted by the hand of God.

In this view he had an ally in Bishop Heber of Calcutta, the composer of hymns:

What though the spicy breezes blow soft o'er Ceylon's isle:  
Though every prospect pleases and only man is vile;  
In vain with lavish kindness the gifts of God are strown;  
The heathen in his blindness bows down to wood and stone.

Even at moments of ecstasy Bailey could not bear the sight of the Buddha image carved in stone, which he ridicules. In a sonnet called 'Buddha Erect' (XV in Part 2) he writes:

The Idol but a mighty baby seems,  
Standing Erect. His posture gives the air  
Of Imbecillity. The Worshipper,  
Did he not wallow in the muddy streams  
Of aged superstition, of his dreams  
Of ignorance might from this face beware,  
That inexpressive vacancy of stare  
Of the Colossal Infant...

I think that Bailey's problem lay in his abhorrence of the 'heathen' religion which tainted his appreciation of the people. That he yet harboured a forgiving and understanding heart is revealed in a rare piece called 'The Kandyan Village' (XXVIII of Part 2) in which he finds the people "with eager and inquiring looks all stand / And gaze and smile... / And happy are the faces in this land / Of nature and simplicity". He is even prepared to concede that "The Kandian sings or chants his country song... not untunefully... Allured to dance, / A child with its fond mother in this throng / Of happiness is seen". And he is moved to exclaim: "O may Life's chance / Ne'er bring me where Love's current runs less strong!"

Bailey's letters to the "Ceylon Times" are vehement political diatribes. His sonnets, to the contrary, are generous expressions of innocent, unbridled pleasure.

If we are to overlook the prejudice that mars his acceptance of the people of a country which provides him with such inspired eloquence, we may yet extract from these poetical sketches some truly delightful moments.

It is Dr de Silva's remarkable achievement that he has successfully resurrected the priest, the poet and his prejudice from an ancient leather-bound volume of Bailey's original work. It is an overwhelmingly difficult task, a feat of exceptional discipline and scholarship, which calls for our sustained applause. ■

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