

LONE WOOLF

Yasmine Gooneratne

On 16 December 2004, celebrations in Sri Lanka and in Britain will mark an important date in the cultural history of Sri Lanka. A plaque will be erected by the Ceylon Bloomsbury Group, and a commemorative tree planted in Tavistock Square, a London locality in which the writers Leonard and Virginia Woolf lived for some years, and where they jointly established their famous publishing house, the Hogarth Press.

Most centenary tributes are dated from the birth- or death-days of notable men and women. In the case of Leonard Woolf, the event we celebrate on 16 December 2004 is neither a birth nor a death, but an arrival. A hundred years ago, on 16 December 1904, Leonard Woolf disembarked in Colombo, a very new recruit to Britain's Civil Service and, according to his own description of himself at that time as contained in *Growing*, the second volume of his autobiography, "a very innocent, unconscious imperialist". (*Growing*, p. 25). The seven years Woolf spent in Sri Lanka changed his life, and permanently altered his outlook on the world. This might not have been a matter of great significance if Woolf had been merely an exceptionally efficient civil servant. That he undoubtedly was. But there were many such efficient civil servants beavering away in the outposts of the British Empire at the turn of the century. Woolf was one among many; and although he was probably unique among his fellows in achieving then what is still considered the ultimate 'mission impossible', actually ensuring that correspondence received at any Government office under his control was answered on the same day, this centenary celebration is special to Sri Lanka for literary reasons. It marks the beginning of a 7-year experience that gave the island its first great English-language work of fiction, *The Village in the Jungle*.

Many of us in Sri Lanka have read Leonard Woolf's 'novel of Ceylon', and some of us may even have studied it in the 1970s, when some unusually enlightened person in the Department of Education decreed that it be set as a text for the A-Levels in Sri Lanka. Not many of us know a great deal about Woolf himself; and this is also true of readers in Britain, where his literary career has been largely overshadowed by the reputation and achievements of his brilliant wife, Virginia Woolf. So let me begin with some biographical facts: Leonard Sidney Woolf was born in London in 1880, into the family of a wealthy Jewish lawyer. He was educated at St Paul's, a leading British public school, and subsequently at Trinity College, Cambridge. Here he met and made friends with some interesting people who could be said, looking back, to have represented a sampling of the intellectual cream of British society

in his time. Some of the friendships he made during his undergraduate years (such as that with Lytton Strachey) were sustained through letters during the seven years he spent in Ceylon; and most of them were resumed by him on his return. These friends formed the nucleus of what would later be called the Bloomsbury Group, and included the philosopher G.E. Moore, the economist John Maynard Keynes, the novelist E.M. Forster, Thoby Stephen (son of the Literature professor Leslie Stephen), and several artists including Clive Bell and Roger Fry. Thoby Stephen's sisters Vanessa and Virginia were not, of course, Cambridge undergraduates themselves: Leslie Stephen resembled many Victorian fathers in his disapproval of formal education for his daughters, and the University had not yet, in any case, opened its doors to women. But Vanessa was an artist and Virginia a budding writer, and as Thoby's sisters they were part of the group of friends Leonard Woolf saw often and fraternized with at Cambridge.

At the turn of the century Britain was at the height of its power as an industrializing and imperialistic nation. Young idealistic Englishmen in their twenties, Woolf being one, were "not deeply concerned with politics". They were much more interested in what they regarded as Britain's obvious moral duty to bring civilization to the backward societies of the colonies. Being by birth and education a member of the ruling class, it was very natural that the young Leonard should decide to join the colonial Civil Service and assume that duty in a colonial outpost such as Ceylon.

At Cambridge there had been scope for the expression of individual interests – as the membership of Leonard's circle indicates, some undergraduates cultivated their brains as well as their brawn. Leonard and his friends occasionally indulged in some fanciful dressing in the pursuit of 'style', and read fashionably revolutionary or dissenting authors, often in German or French. But he discovered as soon as he left Tilbury Docks on the P & O *Syria*, that among British people abroad certain norms of dress and behaviour applied, to which the newcomer would be wise to conform. The dress code on board ship, for example, was strict. The 'Pukka Englishman' – and Englishwoman – dressed for dinner. Several of Woolf's fellow-travellers might have been contemplating months to be spent in wild and remote parts of the Empire, but they took along with them the evening clothes that enabled them to dress correctly, whether they were playing bridge at the Club among fellow Britishers, or dining quite alone on a mosquito-ridden veranda in the heart of a wilderness in Borneo. (Readers of *The Village in the*

Jungle may remember that scene in the novel when jungle-dwelling Silindu appears out of the night to confess to a British magistrate that he has just killed two men in the jungle. The Sinhala-speaking magistrate, having dined alone in his residence, is still in evening dress. Silindu, weary and tired after a journey of many miles on foot, wears only a loin-cloth. The moment in which these two men converse for the first time without the intervention of an interpreter underlines one of the novel's most important themes, as modern civilization encounters man at his most primitive. (It has always amazed me, by the way, that Lester James Peries's film of the novel, made some years ago, missed the opportunity to make this important thematic point on the screen. Arthur C. Clarke played the magistrate: is it possible that the wardrobe department couldn't find a dress suit for their celebrity actor to wear?)

Some slight eccentricities were permitted to the 'Pukka Englishman', perhaps they were even expected! Woolf, who had taken with him on this first journey out of England a personal library of Voltaire's works in 90 volumes, a wire-haired fox-terrier named Charles, and a set of three bright green flannel collars, to assist him in his task of ruling the British Empire, found with amusement that these possessions were noted by his British fellow-travellers and admired. They inspired respect. (As a matter of interest, those green collars still survive: worn with scarlet coats, they constitute the picturesque riding costume of the Ooty Hunt, the last hunt to survive in India.) In general, however, as Dr Kumari Jayawardene points out in a very interesting paper on Woolf which was published last year (1) the young Civil Service cadet found that it was wise to keep in step with the rest of his kind. Woolf, writes Jayawardene,

seems to have very deliberately assumed a carapace of conformity, being to all intents and purposes the 'Pukka Englishman': this was an appearance that he was very careful to sustain during his entire service in Sri Lanka, few of his colleagues probably knowing of his Jewish origins and penchant for certain dissenting tendencies. (p. 157)

Woolf's postings in Ceylon established him successively as an Assistant Government Agent in three outstations: Jaffna, Kandy and Hambantota. In outstations, the local Club played a very important part in the lives of British officers and residents. Woolf could ride and play bridge; he also played a good game of tennis, and these sporting and social activities helped him to fit in with the life of the Club. His love of dogs marked him as an example of the best kind of Englishman, and he managed a spectacular win in a local sweepstake, which raised his reputation even higher. Woolf's letters to Lytton Strachey reveal his scorn, and even dislike of several under-educated Philistines among his British colleagues, but he seems to have kept these subversive feelings under wraps. He did not go to the opposite extreme, by cultivating friendships with local dignitaries (2), and instead kept them at the right official distance.

It becomes evident, in fact, as we read his autobiography and his letters, that here was a man who was playing a part: an actor on the

great stage of Empire. Writing of Kipling at one point, Woolf allows himself to speculate briefly on whether Kipling's characters were drawn from real life as it was lived under the British Raj, or whether he and fellow Britishers in the colonies were, consciously or sub-consciously, compelled to model themselves on Kipling's characters!

While on leave in Britain in 1912, Woolf took what he was later to call the 'icy plunge' back into his old life and re-entered the circle of his Cambridge friends. But although the old life might have seemed familiar at first, it was not the same. The world had changed, and so had Woolf. His seven years as a servant of imperialism had disillusioned him about many concepts that he had never questioned in 1904: imperialism, for instance, and even the nature of civilization itself:

The seven years in Ceylon left a mark upon my mind and even character which has proved indelible, a kind of reserve or withdrawal into myself which makes me inclined always to stand just a little to one side of my environment.

That is the mark, in fact, of the lone wolf which separates itself from the pack and hunts apart from it: an animal whose characteristics Leonard Woolf knew well from his reading of Kipling's fiction (3). It is interesting that Richard Kennedy, the artist and book illustrator who worked for a while as a young man at the Hogarth Press, described Leonard as looking 'very like a wolf in human form ... an extremely intellectual wolf ... a very Socrates of wolves' (4). In the last week of April 1912, while still in England, Woolf resigned from his post in the Civil Service. And before the year was out, he accomplished two other things of importance: he married Virginia Stephen, and he wrote a novel that Edward Arnold published in 1913, *The Village in the Jungle*.

This remarkable book preceded E.M. Forster's novel *A Passage to India*, and anticipated the ironic stance taken by Forster (and later by George Orwell) in relation to the British Raj. It is astonishing, therefore, that Woolf's book has never attracted in Britain the critical attention and evaluation it deserves. Its memorable poetic evocation of the terror and beauty of the southern jungle, and its unsentimental but sympathetic understanding of the isolated communities that lived in it in the author's time went unremarked in the literary journals and magazines. Lytton Strachey dismissed it as a book that "had too many blacks in it": a remark that sounds offensively racist today, and surprises any one who is aware that it was made by a fellow-writer and friend who had corresponded with Woolf throughout his sojourn in Ceylon, and who knew better than anyone else in the world Woolf's most intimate thoughts about his life and his work. Strachey's off-hand, casual dismissal of the book was, however, typical of British attitudes in its time. As the years passed, and Woolf became increasingly involved with political developments in Britain and Europe, the public memory of his years as a colonial civil servant diminished steadily. A few of the obituaries marking Woolf's death in 1969 mentioned the novel, but they did so merely in passing, as if it were an exotic aberration

on the author's part that did not really fit in with the rest of his life's work, and could therefore be conveniently overlooked and forgotten. Woolf's major contribution to the arts, remarked one writer, was in the patient devotion with which he had nursed Virginia Woolf through her spells of mental illness, thereby guaranteeing to the world the emergence of its foremost female literary genius.

"For a long time," as Woolf wrote in *Growing*, he had been developing in Ceylon what he called an "uneasily ambivalent" outlook on his life and work, exaggerating an

imperialist, stern Sahib attitude to compensate for or soothe a kind of social conscience which began to condemn and dislike the whole system ... As time went on, I became more and more ambivalent, politically schizophrenic, an anti-imperialist who ... loved the subject peoples and their way of life, and knew from the inside how evil the system was beneath the surface for ordinary men and women.

Writing *The Village in the Jungle* seems to have given Woolf an opportunity to exorcise his demons, in particular the demon of guilt. He would be able, from the time of its publication onwards, to put the imperial experience behind him, and grasp the new challenges presented by his marriage, by British and European politics, and – soon to dominate everything else – by a looming world war.

The Village in the Jungle is too complex a novel for me to attempt to discuss it in any detail here. I would like, however, to consider briefly the manner in which legality becomes symbolic in this book of all that Leonard Woolf, a meticulously efficient agent of imperialism, had begun to turn against during his last years in Sri Lanka. His duties as Assistant Government Agent in the Southern Province of what was then Ceylon included frequently presiding as a judge in the Police and District courts of the region, and the novel was born of his first-hand experience of the way justice functioned and was administered under the Raj. The inadequacy of a legal system that enforces petty regulations while ignoring the moral disorder beneath what is legally admissible, becomes in *The Village in the Jungle* a target of Woolf's quiet, despairing irony:

'I shot him through the back.'
'Where did you get the gun?'
'It was my gun. I had it in my house.'
'Was it licensed?' (p. 140)

It is irony that takes in the stage and scenery of imperialism, and the posturing of the Agent/actor himself, as elements in an unreal farce played out against the vast panorama that meets the magistrate's eye as he hears the case that has been brought against two villagers, Silindu and Babun. The reality of 'the interminable jungle' is 'framed like a picture in the heavy wooden doorway', and confronts the accused, the accusers, and their judge, standing in perpetual and ironic contrast to the 'unreal' voices that argue in the court-house (p. 111). And yet it was to his post as A.G.A. of

Hambantota that Woolf owed the authenticity of character and incident, and the insight into motive that give his novel its solidity. His work kept him sitting hour after hour in a Government office,

watching from his room the perpetual coming and going along the verandah of every kind and condition of human being, transacting with them the most trivial or the most important business, listening to their requests, their lies, their fears, their sorrows, their difficulties and disasters.¹

Increasingly doubtful of his right to function as lawgiver in a subject society, Woolf presents the A.G.A., the Ratamahatmaya and the Korala (local notables enlisted in the service of Government), the headman, the traders, and the middle-men as agents of an order that is hostile to the sources of instinctive life. The corruption of the headman (a minor official) and his henchmen, and the legality that ties the hands of the magistrate, are reflections of an unjust system. No individual who is responsible for any aspect of Government administration can exempt himself from the guilt that attaches to the whole.

The inexorable process by which Silindu and his family, and ultimately the village itself, are destroyed provides the thread of the story. Its inevitability, tragic because of the grace, beauty, inner vitality, and essential harmlessness of what is being destroyed, is enhanced by the fatalism of the victims and the strength, cunning and resourcefulness of the hunters. Silindu fears the jungle, yet loves it

in a strange, unconscious way, in the same unconscious way in which the wild buffalo loves the wallow, and the leopard his lair among the rocks. (p. 10)

Even his stride, animal-like, 'seemed to show at once both the fear and the joy in his heart' (p. 10); his mind 'moves vaguely with hatred', he falls upon his enemy with the wild beast's sudden rage, he loves with the uncomplicated passion of an animal, and thinks of his children and the need to provide for them in much the same way that a leopard hunts for its cubs. This joyous, half-primitive creature, tortured beyond endurance by the headman's persecution, reacts at last with the fury of the cornered wild buffalo. The twenty years' jail sentence that rewards him for the slaughter of his tormentors dooms him to a domestication that to him is a death in life; he becomes the human equivalent of the village buffalo that may be seen threshing paddy on the village threshing floor, plodding patiently upon its endless round:

A wooden mallet was put into his hand and a pile of cocoanut husk thrown down in front of him. For the remainder of that day, and daily for the remainder of twenty years, he had to make coir by beating cocoanut husks with the wooden mallet. (p. 164)

Several critics besides myself have written essays and articles on Woolf's novel. My own critical assessments and analyses of the

book, in its published as well as in its manuscript form, are available in print. I have listed them at the end of this paper (5) for the benefit of anyone who would like to read them. I first encountered *The Village in the Jungle* when my father put his copy of it in my hands. I was twelve or thirteen at the time, and too young, I suppose, to understand either the imperial issues with which Woolf was dealing, or the novel's tragic relevance to our country. Many years later, I read it again, and was overwhelmed. To anyone here who has not read it, I will only recommend that they lose no time in doing so.

In her essay, Dr Kumari Jayawardena speculates as to the extent to which Leonard Woolf was influenced in his future life by his experiences in Sri Lanka, and remarks that many who knew him well observed a certain 'foreignness' in him. (p. 181). His wife's nephew Quentin Bell was amazed, as a child, to find that he could speak English: "The first impression, and it was an enduring impression, was of someone from a distant land." Bell also remarks that Woolf was not "separated from his fellows by a 'superior' Cambridge arrogance. If he ever had that quality he lost it in Ceylon." There he developed a patience and respect for simple people, and learned "how to get on with ordinary persons". Jayawardena considers that this made it possible for him to respond to the problems of working people, and to develop a talent for interacting and successfully communicating with them. As a socialist and active member of the Labour Party, Woolf involved himself in supporting movements for colonial self-rule, and in opposing the imperialist policies of the British government. One such occasion, which probably had deep roots in his distaste for the colonial/imperialist machine of which he had been a part while in Ceylon, was in his work with the press and in the House of Commons following the 1915 riots between Sinhalese and Muslims in Ceylon which had been quelled by martial law.

This occasion is of particular relevance to my theme of Woolf as remote, indeed, a 'lone wolf' in the societies in which he moved. It will be recalled that two Sinhalese statesmen of that time, E.W.Perera and D.B. Jayatilake, visited Britain in order to present the Sinhalese case, and found in Leonard Woolf an active and energetic advocate of their cause. During their sojourn in London, the two gentlemen paid a social call on Mr and Mrs Woolf, and E.W. Perera, following the custom of his country, according to which only a barbarian pays a visit empty-handed, courteously presented Virginia Woolf with a small gift of hand-made lace, presumably from Galle. This custom of gift-giving, a part of everyday life in Sri Lanka that is so familiar to us, was well known to Leonard Woolf too, and was perfectly understood by him, as anyone would agree who recalls the incident in *The Village in the Jungle* in which Silindu is careful to take a present of game with him when he calls on the headman Babehami. And yet, it appears that the Bloomsbury intelligentsia had little interest either in Woolf's Sri Lankan experience, or in the novel that reflects it, or surely Virginia Woolf, unarguably one of Britain's outstanding minds of that era, would not have reacted to the colonial visitors

with the ignorance and insensitivity she displayed on the occasion. For Virginia Woolf did not, apparently, share her husband's sympathy for 'colonials', and she seems to have been indifferent to their culture and ignorant of their customs. These are the words with which she recorded E.W. Perera's visit in a diary entry of 16 October 1917:

We came back to find Perera, wearing his ... diamond initial in his tie as usual. In fact, the poor little mahogany coloured wretch has no variety of subjects. The character of the Governor, & the sins of the Colonial office, these are his topics; always the same stories, the same point of view, the same likeness to a caged monkey, suave on the surface, inscrutable beyond. He made me uncomfortable by producing an envelope of lace – "a souvenir from Ceylon, Mrs Woolf" – more correctly a bribe, but there was no choice but to take it.

Virginia Woolf's views, reflected clearly in her insularity, her colour-prejudice, her racist comments on the Sinhalese visitors, and her quickness to interpret E.W. Perera's courtesy as a bribe, tell us a good deal about the less attractive aspects of the Britain to which Woolf had returned in 1912, and from which he seems to have kept himself remote. The incident helps, perhaps, to explain the failure of *The Village in the Jungle* to find an appreciative audience in Britain, although in Sri Lanka and in Southeast Asia generally, it is regarded as a seminal work. As the first great work of creative art to emerge in modern times from the experience of local living, it has long held a place of importance in the developing English-language literatures of Asia and the South Pacific.

Like other authors, Leonard Woolf has had his share of detractors. He and the British poet Ted Hughes have both been targeted for the parts they are supposed to have played in bringing about the suicides of their respective wives, the American poet Sylvia Plath in the case of Hughes, and the English novelist Virginia Woolf in the case of Leonard Woolf. The most recent attack on Woolf of which I am aware occurred a few years ago when, exploiting the stance and language of feminist criticism, a writer named Irene Coates mischievously published a book with the title *Who's Afraid of Leonard Woolf?* in which her 'case' against Woolf included the charge of having, to all intents and purposes, murdered the brilliant and mentally unstable Virginia. I met Mrs Coates in Sydney soon after the publication of her book, and I was disturbed to discover that she intended to sell her 'story' to a film producer in the United States. Given the contemporary taste for sensation in the film industry, she might well have found someone to finance such a project, and I hope very much that her efforts have been unsuccessful. Part of my interest in publishing a new edition of *The Village in the Jungle* has been to analyse and (I hope) permanently eliminate this and similarly irresponsible attacks on a good man and a great mind: I have undertaken that task in an Appendix to the book. But my chief hope in working on a scholarly edition has been that its publication will help to revive international interest in Leonard Woolf's neglected masterpiece, and bring to

academic attention several Sri Lankan and Australian scholars who have published essays and articles on Woolf that are listed in my Bibliography.

If all goes well, Woolf's centenary will see the publication of a new edition of *The Village in the Jungle*, which corrects misprints and other errors that appeared in the first (1913) edition, and remained uncorrected through subsequent reprints. It also provides, chiefly for the scholarly reader's interest, a number of crucial passages that were excised from Woolf's manuscript at its first printing, and examines possible reasons for their omission. This part of my work was made possible through the generosity of Mrs Trekkie Parsons, Leonard Woolf's companion in his later years and executrix of his Will, who had donated the original manuscript to the Library of the University of Peradeniya, a facsimile copy being retained in the Sussex University Library. The late Ian Goonetilleke informed me of the existence and exact whereabouts of the manuscript, which he and the late Gamani Salgado had been instrumental in securing for the Peradeniya library. During a visit to Sri Lanka in 1979, I was able to read and study it in tandem with my own copies of the printed book. Preparation of a definitive edition, which continued through twenty years of University teaching and the writing and publication of other books, including novels, social history and biography, has taken a long time, during which I had no particular date in mind for its appearance. But I will be more than satisfied if its eventual publication coincides with the centenary celebrations of Woolf's arrival in Sri Lanka.

End Notes

- (1) Kumari Jayawardena, 'Leonard Woolf: A Background Note', in G. Robuchon, ed., *I Want to Speak of Tenderness: 50 Writers for Anne Ranasinghe*, ICES Colombo, 2003, pp. 152 – 187.
- (2) When John D'Oyly befriended local Kandyan chiefs fifty years earlier, he became a target of suspicion and gossip in his own community. See Brendon and Yasmine Gooneratne, *This Inscrutable Englishman: Sir John D'Oyly, 1774 –1824*. Cassell/Continuum, London and New York 1999.
- (3) Many passages of *The Village in the Jungle* have close affinities with Kipling's *The Jungle Book*. Especially notable are Silindu's tales of his conversations with wild animals in the forest, which bear comparison with Kipling's story 'Red Dog' in *The Second Jungle Book*. Similarly, the descriptions of the jungle as it gradually overwhelms the village of Beddegama have much in common with Kipling's story, 'Letting in the Jungle'.
- (4) Richard Kennedy, *A Boy at the Hogarth Press* (1972) pp. 17 – 20.
- (5) Yasmine Gooneratne, 'Leonard Woolf's "Waste Land": *The Village in the Jungle*', first published in *New Ceylon Writing* in 1971, later reprinted in the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*. 8.1 (1972) pp. 22-34; Yasmine Gooneratne, 'A Novelist at Work: The manuscript of Leonard Woolf's *The Village in the Jungle*', in the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 18.1 (1983) pp. 91 – 103; Yasmine Gooneratne, 'Leonard Woolf's Novel of Sri Lanka: *The Village in the Jungle*' in H. Antor and K. Stierstorfer, eds., *English Literatures in International Contexts*. C. Winter, Universitätsverlag Heidelberg, pp. 397 – 402.
Courtesy, *The Ceylankan*, Journal of the Ceylon Society of Australia, No. 28, Vol VII, No 4 (November 2004). ■

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