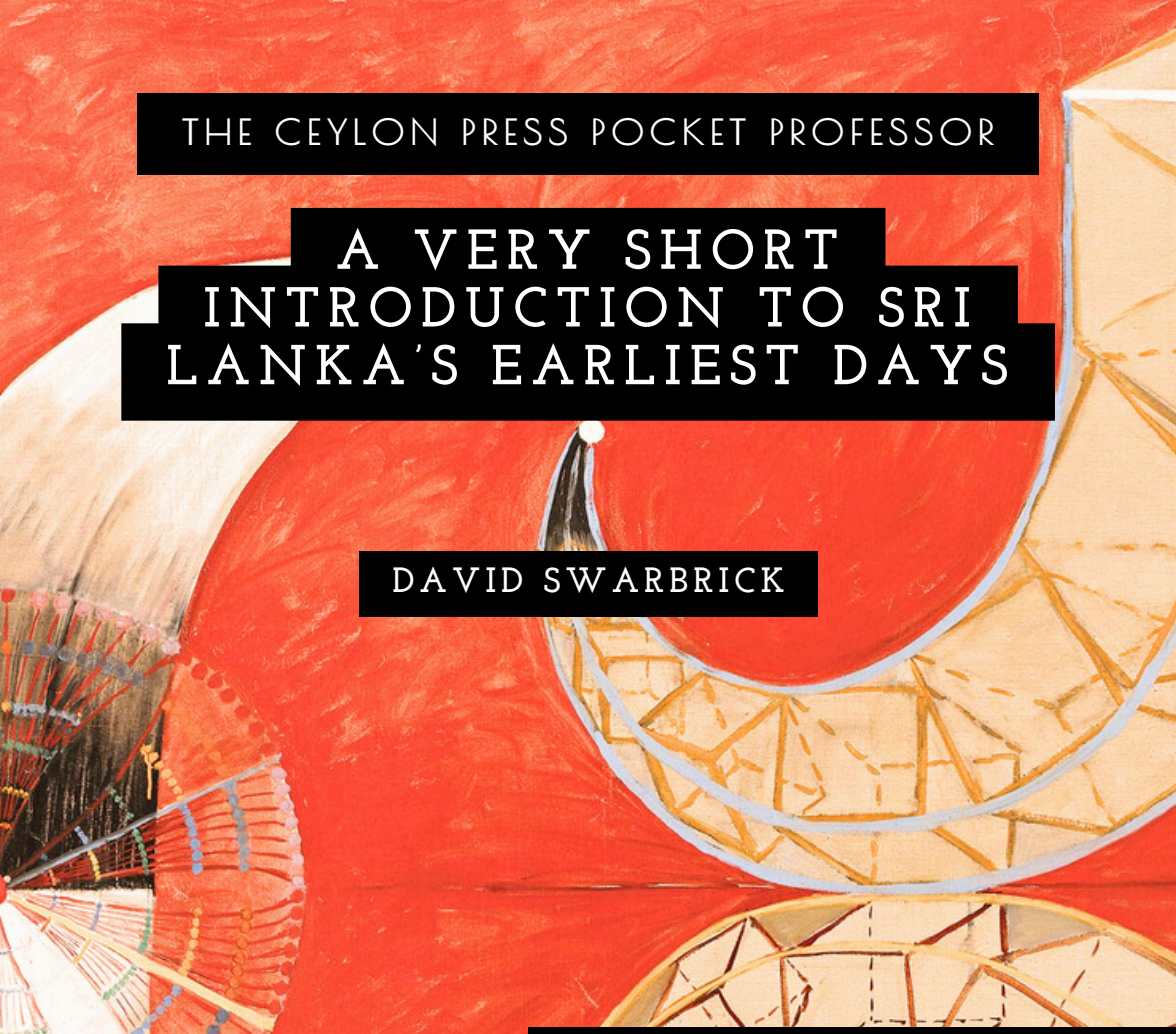
THE CEYLON PRESS POCKET PROFESSOR

A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION TO SRI LANKA'S EARLIEST DAYS

DAVID SWARBRICK



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FOR JAMES

Child of History

1

WHY?

"Maybe there were some troubles at first but we must admit that this journey has not been that bad."

HERGE'S ADVENTURES OF TINTIN

It took a refugee from Nazi Germany, with an interests in economics and Buddhism to note the singular connection between two of the most obvious characteristics that distinguish Sri Lanka.

"Small," remarked E. F. Schumacher in his eponymous book in 1973, "is beautiful."

It was economics, rather than Sri Lanka that Schumacher had in mind, but, as with all seismic observations, his simple statement lent a formative new way to understand previously inexpressible truths.

For Sri Lanka is both small and beautiful. So small in fact that it could fit into India 50 times; into Britain almost 4 times or even Peru almost 20 times. Its nearest neighbour, Tamil Nadu, could accommodate it twice over, with land to spare. Head a little further north and 10 times more people crowd into nearby Pakistan, or 6 more into Bangladesh.

Schumacher's only other book, published on his deathbed in 1977, "A Guide for the Perplexed", is a study of how humans live in the world – but it could easily have lent its title to a mandatory guidebook for issue to every person who passes through Bandaranaike Airport, citizen or guest, VIP or economic migrant.

For little about the island is straightforward, despite or because of its size and beauty. Confronting it for the first time is like first encountering Rubik's Cube, that infamous multi coloured rotating brick toy whose coloured ends appear so easy to organise into blocks. The outcome, though satisfying, and apparently almost effortless, remains virtually impossible to achieve.

Just below the surface of almost everything on the island, and simmering with delight, richness, chaos, or just plain thwarting befuddlement, lies the complexity of what is quite possibly the most byzantine and bewitching country in the world.

The more you see, the more you wonder. Why?

Why, for example, make a simple presidential election quote so convoluted and full of enough own-goal traps to risk making the spoiled votes equal to the good ones?

The 2024 presidential election brought almost 40 candidates forward for a preferential style vote of such complexity that the Election Commission had to issue a two hundred word note on how to mark the ballot paper correctly.

But perhaps this is to worry unnecessarily for the country's political system has, as horse riders might note, plenty of form. By 1978, when the current constitution was adopted, it had already enjoyed 3 earlier ones, roughly one every 16 years.

Now regulated by this, its second constitution since independence, Sri Lanka possesses a governing document of such elastic resilience that it has undergone an average of one major amendment every second year and has still survived.

Such political robustness is nothing less than what should be expected of an island whose circuitous history meanders through over 2,500 recorded years to take in at least 12 former capital cities, as many, if not more kingdoms, and 300 recorded kings, some half of whom were estimated to have murdered the other half. Conundrums, reversals, and the

sudden appearance of polar partisan opposites have riotously followed almost every step of that wild journey. The kings eventually made way for the world's first elected female head of a modern state when in July 1960 Sirimavo Bandaranaike was elected Prime Minister. Yet in 2018 a new President reimposed a four-decade-long ban on women buying alcohol.

Given that barely 6% of the country's supreme law-making body, its parliament, is filled with female MPs, this institutional sexism is understandable – but to fully explain it one needs to look little further than the fact that just under a fifth of all MPs have just one A level to their credit. But there's much more to the rule of law than exams. Should parliament depress you, look to the country's Supreme Court, a focused and resilient body that has thwarted attempted coups and power grabs through the decades.

"Do I contradict myself?" asked the American poet, Walt Whitman. "Very well then, I contradict myself, (I am large, I contain multitudes.).

And so too does Sri Lanka.

Despite Nobel Prize winning scientists, Booker-prize winning writers, and architects that have profoundly reshaped how people live right across the tropical world, its best universities barely scrape into the top one thousand worldwide with a pedagogy that deliberately fails almost half its students.

Honest domestic consumers eager to pay their electricity bill must first correctly guess which of 8 categories they fit into before they can pay up, proof, if ever it was needed, that here at least there is little pleasure to be had in being a consumer. Used car

prices have more than doubled in the past few years, and at any one time, eggs, onions, rice, milk powder or even turmeric have entered an Alice in Wonderland world, priced well out of the reach of ordinary people.

Yet still the kiribath is made. This dish, of coconut flavoured milk rice, is unique to the island, the muse behind Anuradhapura's Kiribath Stupa, a monument of almost unimaginable antiquity that once was said to house the sacred tooth relic itself: the left Canine tooth of Gautama Buddha. The snack itself never fails to delight, a comfort food that pushes Butter Chicken, Shepherd's Pie, spaghetti or chocolate brownies to the back of any gourmet's fridge - yet seems but a demure option in a national cuisine enriched by visitors that stayed too long - Portuguese love cakes, Dutch lamprais, Lisbon pumpkin preserve, deliciously crispy yellow deep-fried Amsterdam koekjes , Tamil dosas, idlis and vada, roast paan, Keralan hoppers, English fish cutlets, Christmas cake, brown Windsor soup or tea itself.

Given the island's history, it is no surprise that so many national resources should be devoted to the health care of its people. The remains of at least 5 ancient hospitals are found among Anuradhapura oldest ruins, and with them the tantalising Brahmi inscriptions of two physicians from the second century BCE.

King after king built and enlarged the hospitals across the land and endowing them with revenue. One even built a hall for several hundred patients, each to be attended to by a slave. The third century CE king, Buddhadasa, was so committed to health that he even took to doctoring himself, curing snakes and monks alike.

Today the nation's free universal Western health care system is among the best in South Asia. Even so, patients, feeling some degree of illness, need first to self-diagnose before electing to see the correct doctor, praying all the time, as they hobble towards the hospital, that they are heading towards the right cure – a fate that eluded a recent government minister who fell ill after spectacularly drinking a 'miracle' COVID potion, concocted by a man who claimed to have received its recipe from Hindu goddess of destruction, Kali.

Even so, it competes head-to-head with traditional medicine. In village after village, town after town, the ancient medical practices of the land, are easily accessible, endorsed by the government, with their own doctors, ministry, training, teaching and hospitals, cures and alleviate the suffering of thousands of people, daily.

Nothing is really what it seems. The island's geography makes it look as if the country itself is easy to grasp. Huge flat coastal plains ring each golden kilometre of the entire island.

Dotted with orderly coconut groves and orchards of cashew and mangosteen, it seems as if nothing could ever hide on such neat and tidy land.

Yet step inland and the plains become hills, the hills, mountains and plateaus, their slopes entangled by dense jungles sliding down into shudderingly steep valleys that carry over 100 rivers to the sea. With 1200 notable peaks, the country may have fewer mountains than distant Lebanon (1,652 peaks), but like Lebanon, its highlands have encouraged villages to look on one another as France might gaze upon Germany or China upon Hong Kong.

"Strength lies in differences, not in similarities," noted Stephen Covey author of "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People," but the island's cultural differences have led to civil war, terrorism, and racism. Yet so too have they created a multi-cultural homeland, whose deep, and stunningly rich traditions delight in the very differences between Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Singhalese, Tamil, Burger, Moor, Malayalam, Ambalavasi, Mapilla, Telugu, Vaddars, Waggai or Vedda.

Its paramount religion, Buddhism, the one religion in the world that most definitely cherishes peace, is routinely hijacked by extreme nationalist monks calling for the elimination of other religions, the consequences of their hate crimes, rendered inconsequential by the protection they enjoy from key establishment figures.

One recent President, found guilty of failing to prevent the 2019 Easter bombings, is facing jail, whilst Sri Lanka's irrepressible Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith, demanded a UN probe into the event, claiming that the "massacre was part of a grand political plot". Unlike most other democracies, politics and religion dominate the Sri Lankan national agenda and are demanding, and often argumentative bedfellows.

Democratic Socialist Republic may be the nation's formal title and the old castes, (and there were scores) may have faded to the point of being almost forgotten but class remains paramount, albeit now accessible through talent and wealth – not just family. Love marriages may be increasingly common, but the newspapers are nevertheless inundated with mothers advertising for future sons-in-law with good prospects or daughters-in-law with modest and proper attitudes.

Live openly with your gay lover in India: in Sri Lanka, gay life is all about explaining why you can't yet get married. Even so, the appearance in Time magazine of country's most famous no-nonsense lesbian brought patriotic cheering from most sections of society.

Even Sri Lanka's weather celebrates the illusion of certainty with confident wet and dry forecasts upended by climate change, and able to defy its forecasting pundits in the blink of an eye. Sudden cyclones torment one side of the country whilst the other basks in placid sunshine. Despite a countryside dominated by massive monocrops, from tea to rice, almost a third of Sri Lanka's mammals and plants are endemic. Nearly five hundred kinds of birds fill its skies. Its real and flourishing wilderness are undeniably deep and absorbing – from lowland and montane rainforests to the dry zone and thorn scrub that harbour cheetah and swarms of ever rarer Sri Lankan albatross butterflies.

In almost every aspect of its existence the country defies logic, gravity, ratio analysis, forecasts of almost any kind, the forces of Microsoft Excel. Yet still it spins its potent and inexplicable magic.

2

MAKING MATCHLESS

"“Well, I must admit, your taste in friends is unique, Tintin.”

HERGE'S ADVENTURES OF TINTIN

So how exactly did it get to be like this? What makes Sri Lanka unique; and what is the source of its fecund magnetism?

The answer, or more correctly answers, lie in its history; a history many do their best to avoid, a task made easy by its boundless complexity.

For Sri Lanka's history is no worn antique costume left to hang in some dreary museum showcase. Rather, it is something commonly worn – like a sarong or sari - every day, in plain sight, inciting you to deconstruct it. Like pleats of cloth, the distinctive themes of the nation's story lie entwined in its extraordinary, and often bizarre rulers; from the moment it became an island independent of India to the Nirvana of its first and greatest royal dynasty, the Vijayans.

Harnessing the power of water technology and the centralising forces of religion and administration, to an aristocratic attitude that would have made the court of the Holy Roman Emperor appear commonplace, its later Lankbranaka kings made good a kingdom like no other in Asia, despite an authority shattered from time to time by belligerent northern invaders, and regicidal courtiers.

When their kingdom of almost 1500 years was finally destroyed in 993 CE, its citizens recreated the old times in new kingdoms that stretched from Polonnaruwa to Kandy, as undeterred by reversals – much as Winston Churchill once was: "Keep buggering on!"

And for hundreds of years good was almost good enough. At the slightest hint of danger or invasion, the kingdom, complete with as much of its power base

as it could muster, would move on like a gypsy encampment. Elephants, precious stones, abundant agriculture, art, and architecture so sure and pure as to make its contemporaries seem trite and predictable; trade routes, an enfolding geology and cinnamon that drew invaders like a dog on heat - all were part of the unparalleled allure of one of the smallest and most elaborate kingdoms in the world, one that would remake itself each time it was knocked down or, more typically, self-immolate.

That such a royal travelling circus lasted as long as it did was itself impressive. But it was little match for boatloads of rapacious and well-armed foreigners. The arriving European forces feasted on all they found, more stirred, and inspired than by most other parts of their far-flung empires. Portuguese, Dutch, and British rule each lasted an average of 150 years apiece, with Danish colonists raking up an improbable 2 months.

As Buddhism retreated right across Aisa, in Sir Lanka it blossomed, surviving even the ravages of the Europeans. And with it came the flowering of Singhala culture and in its wake, the beguiling threads of alternative cultures from the Malay Moors to the Tamils. And, in this, the interweaving of traditions, was created some of the nation's most rare and beautiful things from food to laws and novels, songs to surrealist photography.

Nothing, not even the massive introduction of cash crops like coffee or tea, or trains and roads that penetrated the once closed hinterland, nothing could really outshine thousands of years of accumulated independent culture, geography, climate, still less attitude.

For attitude, that hardest to pinpoint, but most critical of all human accomplishments, is the granite in the country's heart, which has carried it through good times and bad. Most especially, the very bad.

When the patrician politicians inherited the promised land, with Independence in 1948, it seemed as if the good times would never end. Yet within 10 years the many "isms" and ologies" that were to torment the nation took centre stage, with wars, attempted coups, assassinations, and social and economic experiments that often left the country much worse off than ever before.

Desperate quick-fix initiatives for economic, racial, and social equality collided with the collapsing macroeconomics of the wider world. Together, they drove the country to the edge of bankruptcy several times since Independence. Still worse, they also fed not just the civil war between the Tamil north and the Sinhala government in Colombo, but also the still more extreme Marxist Leninist civil war that erupted with incalculable violence within the Singhala community and twice pushed the country to near anarchy.

And now, two and a half thousand years later, the country your plane arrives at, wafting across warm blue skies, above winking water tanks, vertiginous mountains every bit as glorious as Tolkien's Mount Mindolluin; above golden seas dotted with basking whales and fishing boats, clay-red rooftops and languid palms – Sri Lanka awaits like a puzzle you never imagined existed; one that confounds, enfolding you in secrets and insights that stretch like ghost stories deep into the tropical night.

3

A STRANGE KEY

"Is this professor Calculus that is walking in this dark?"

HERGE'S ADVENTURES OF TINTIN

Rusty, derelict, and irresistibly optically-challenged, the old Talaimannar Lighthouse is a gratifyingly improbable key to help unlock the start of Sri Lanka's recorded history. It presents an even more unlikely clue to explain the profound differences the island presents with the rest of the world. Heraclitus, the weeping philosopher, with his fondness for the paradoxical, noted that "the hidden harmony is better than the obvious," and certainly the well-concealed harmony of this much mistreated lighthouse offers as good a set of clues as a historian is ever likely to find anywhere else on the island.

Despite its unmistakable presence and purpose, there is little truly obvious about a lighthouse such as this that no longer works. One of a necklace of lighthouses built to help ships avoid disaster, the old Talaimannar Lighthouse marks the start of Adam's Bridge at its Sri Lankan end. Erected sometime after 1850, it rises, with hearty inelegance, like a cooking pot on stilts, "a black skeleton steel tower 113 feet in height," noted one observer in 1931, one of the last to witness how its once burning fire blazed a red warning to those few ships incautious enough to risk sailing nearby.

Twenty-three other lighthouses dot the country's coastline, fourteen still active. Most are early twentieth century constructions, solid Edwardian, or First World War structures built with such consummate skill as to survive with resolute determination into the present day, despite monsoons, tsunamis, and decades of pounding surf, alleviated by minimal maintenance and the gathering indifference of most citizens, more agreeably distracted by the greater celebrity of architecture offering penthouses in downtown Colombo or glittering air conditioned shopping malls in previously blameless ancient towns.

A few, like Beruwala Lighthouse, Kovilan Point Lighthouse or the Little and the Great Basses Reef Lighthouses, off the coast at Yala, are accessible only by sea.

Two of the oldest, dating back to 1863, stand guard over the deep-water harbour at Trincomalee: Foul Point Lighthouse and Round Island Lighthouse; with a third, the 1857 Old Colombo Lighthouse, left peering with myopic despondency through a muddle of unremarkable modern buildings towards a now almost invisible ocean.

Others, like Sangaman Kanda Point Lighthouse have been so shattered by nature as to be reduced to mere stumps.

The tallest and still active – at 49 metres - is at Dondra Head on the southern tip of the island, an edifice improbably constructed from rocks imported from Scotland and Cornwall.

The most famously beautiful is the 1939 lighthouse at Galle, although the 1928 Batticaloa Lighthouse, the dizzily patterned one at Hambantota or Oluvil Lighthouse - the only one to date from after Independence - might all offer winning challenges to that accolade.

Pause briefly for but the merest hint of thought and it is of course no great surprise that so small a nation should boast so great a range and number of lighthouses.

Like lonely exclamation marks finally given a voice of their own, these lofty beacons beat out a ghosty metronomic refrain that states, with unmissable clarity, the first and most profound reason for why Sri Lanka is as it is.

This is an island. That is what those lonely lighthouses declaim. An island, capacious, yes; but nevertheless, a single island; a piece of land unattached to anything else or a mere part of a string of other infant islands that make up an archipelago.

And that fact – more than any other – has determined the country's character; for "islands," as Richard Dawkins, remarked, "are natural workshops of evolution."

Of course, from Barbados to Singapore, there are many other island nations. Cuba may be twice Sri Lanka's land mass, but its population is half, a disproportionality shared by Iceland, Ireland, and New Zealand.

Madagascar and Taiwan share population sizes similar to Sri Lanka's but are either much larger or smaller in land mass. Only Japan and the UK present island nations that far outstrip Sri Lanka by land mass and population. This may seem to be immaterially semantic – but a closer inspection shows just how deep the differences go, and, in so doing, make up the character of an island like no other.

But of all its many peers, Talaimannar, much battered in the civil war and now finding a modest following amongst kitesurfers, remains the country's most significant beacon, for it is precisely here where Sri Lanka, in appearing to touch India, simply runs out into the sea and disappears.

Looked at from the Indian end, its infrequent visitors are mildly surprised that the lighthouse is not part of the Indian mainland. Or if not geographically so, then at least politically, or culturally. Or environmentally. Or perhaps linguistically.

But it is not. It is none of those things. In fact, the closer you look, the greater are the differences. However much help the Old Talaimannar Lighthouse was once to shipping, it doggedly maintains its still greater purpose, which is to signal to all commers that what lives beyond its rusty form is an island, utterly divergent from the mainland beyond.

Flashing multi coloured neon lights blinking to the blast of heavenly trumpets could hardly make the point better.

One step further and you enter a world whose flummoxing and flamboyant similarities with the mainland merely disguise its differences.

More potent than any fortress, the three seas that surround Sri Lanka are a salty Cordon Sanitaire keeping separate a sixty-five thousand square kilometres land mass.

On either side of the island stretch two vast bays, so incalculably immense that it seems petty to note that they contain 6.5 million square kilometres of water.

Like the ears of Mickey Mouse, to the west the Arabian Sea and to the east, the Bay of Bengal sit separated from one another by India to the north and centre, and Sri Lanka to the south, with the entrance to the Arabian Sea coming through the tiny Laccadive Sea - a modest antechamber or buffer oceanet that links the island more immediately to India, the Laccadive, and Maldive Islands.

Together these oceans bind Africa to Indonesia, with Sri Lanka lolling perfectly in the middle, a bejewelled tummy button, more dazzling than anything Beyoncé might have worn in her navel to the Oscars, the BRITS, or Cannes.

Even so, a still mightier body of water stretches, bastion-like, to Sri Lanka's south - the Indian Ocean, a vast water mass that holds one fifth of the world's total sea water. Were you to set out across this sea on your super yacht from Galle and head south you would encounter nothing until you reached Antarctica's Davis Station, with its recorded minus 41 Celsius temperature.

But to the island's north the ocean story is very different. Here lie the Palk Straits, and the Gulf of Mannar, with the shoals and islets of Adam's Bridge separating them like the vertebrae on an crocodile's back.

The bridge, a here-yesterday, gone-tomorrow geological formation of casual and confident utility, was prehistory's great gift to Sri Lanka, a land corridor that was later drowned in a fifty-kilometre stretch of water so shallow that in some sections it is barely one meter deep. But despite being often more a child's paddling pond than an ocean, the Palk Straits is a deterrent all the same.

Simply by virtue of being an island, Sri Lanka has presented to India and the rest of the world a geographical barrier that has dissuaded all but the most powerful and insistent of invaders – be them human, fauna or flora.

Of course, it has not always been effective. Several notable invasions from south India have got through, the deadliest in 993 CE when the Chola king, Rajaraja 1, destroyed the 1,500-year-old Anduraupuran kingdom.

The remarkable tenth century Thiruvalangadu Copper Plates compares his campaign to the Hindu Supreme Being: "Rama

built with the aid of monkeys, a causeway across the sea, and then with great difficulties defeated the king of Lanka by means of sharp-edged arrows. But Rama was excelled by this king whose powerful army crossed the ocean by ships and burnt up the king of Lanka."

Over the succeeding centuries several other indomitable Tamil conquerors also managed to breach the island's seas. So too did the more skilled sea-faring colonialists – the Portuguese, Dutch and British - for whom the island shores (and the pecuniary scent of cinnamon) presented an insistent challenge rather than an impediment.

Even so, its three seas have prevented hundreds, if not thousands of random opportunistic invasions, and migrations from ever getting through. Other countries, across the mainland of Europe, the Americas and Asia were not so lucky. Their borders - rivers, mountains, ditches – were much more casually and regularly violated and offered little by way of an ideal evolutionary workshop.

But if anyone or anything wanted to invade Sri Lanka, they had to get very serious about the task. And this, more than anything else, limited the impact the world had upon the island for most of its recorded history, especially at its most critical and formative point – its start.

It also meant that what splashed up on its shores usually stayed there. It did not merely wash away again like footprints in sand. It was left in place to go native. And native it went. From being physically connected to India and sharing with it everything from prehistoric man to cycads, Sri Lanka then drew up its drawbridge, scuttled its land connection and seemed

to float away, reachable only by ship or occasionally; and, for the shortest of times, by land, when the tide was exceptionally low to give traction to what remained of Adam's land Bridge.

Later, and very occasionally, something important would slip past – the most notable being its first Singhala king, Vijaya. But this was rare.

And so, as a more Edenic version of Edgar Rice Burroughs' Land That Time Forgot, Sri Lanka was left develop on its own terms. Like a prodigious stew in a slow cooker, brimming with rare ingredients, it was allowed, enabled, and encouraged to go AWOL.

And so it did.

4

ISLAND ARK

"Now it has become an interesting case and I'm also quite excited."

HERGE'S ADVENTURES OF TINTIN

There is no agreement amongst scientists on exactly how many species inhabit the island – the arguments over the correct number begin upwards of 10,000 – but when the country became an island, all were given that rarest of opportunities – to evolve, climate permitting, with little other outside influences.

From bats to mice, squirrels to shrews; elephants to monkeys; from tree nymphs to magpies, bears to frogs, vipers to geckos, worms, slugs, crabs, molluscs, tarantulas; pines to palms, moss to lichen, primroses to grasses, Sri Lanka marked out, and remains to this day, one of the world's richest biospheres.

It has a degree of endemic-ness that is unparalleled across Asia. A staggering 16% of the fauna and 23% of its plants are home grown.

Sporadic invasions apart, when Sri Lanka interacted with the outside world, it did so largely on its own terms. The Anduraupuran kings married into, fought with, and shared much with their Tamil neighbours – but kept them at bay for fifteen centuries.

Merchants working the golden goose trading hub that was the Indian Ocean called in on Sri Lanka at its centre, plying goods, technology, ideas, and courtesy of the Indian Emperor Ashoka, religion itself. Sri Lanka took what it wanted and returned to its private preoccupations. Like other successful island nations, little could ever compete with the excellence of anything that was homemade.

This striking self-focus even withstood four hundred years of colonial occupation, and the still earlier settlement of parts of its coast by Malay Moors and Arabic traders. And what the occupiers imported – be it mass horticulture, systems of

government, music, food, transport, or technology – Sri Lanka artfully transmogrified over time as if it was no different to the shared fauna and flora from India that it evolved and absorbed into its own unique endemic biosphere.

Its 1,340-kilometre coastline gave it the means to better defend and nurture all that it possessed. From music to parliamentary procedures, recipes to hydroelectricity, saris to contemporary art, its island status has taken most mainstream things off-piste, for as the Red Queen said to Alice, "It's ridiculous to leave all the conversation to the pudding!"

But if the island's story unfolds around The Old Talaimannar Lighthouse, when can it be said to have begun?

Two hundred million years ago when it was still part of the southern supercontinent – Gondwanaland?

Or the later Jurassic Period, the Age of the Dinosaurs, as evidenced by the rock formations of northeastern Sri Lanka?

Perhaps forty-five million years ago when, as part of the tectonic plate its shared with India, it rammed into the Himalayas? Or later still, the Miocene Epoch twenty-five to five million years ago when it separated from the Indian mainland? Or perhaps just a few thousand years ago when sea levels rose submerging many of the islands of Adam's Bridge?

All these dates are valid – and yet 1480 CE offers a much more iconic, and intriguing option.

As years go, 1480 was actually a rather modest year, the world over: little that would matter later,

happened then. But for Sri Lanka, it was the year of the Great Storm – a tempest of unforgiving fury. It fell like a guillotine across the Palk Straits.

The storm that raged then across Adam's Bridge's 50 kilometres of partially sunken limestone banks would have a more profoundly symbolic impact on the island than anything since India and Sri Lanka had first separated from the supercontinent of Gondwana, millions of years earlier.

Even the ending of the Ice Ages, and the subsequent rising of sea levels had not been able to effect so great a change. At extreme low tides, and before the limestone stacks had been so eroded, it has still been occasionally possible to simply walk from India to Sri Lanka.

The Storm of 1480 changed all that. It ripped into the limestone, shattering it – leaving behind a watery thoroughfare that is still, to this day, too treacherously shallow for most ships to dare a crossing.

Peeping up above the water line remained some seventeen tiny islands, eight Sri Lankan, and nine Indian, that still to this day provide a home from home to dugongs and turtles, terns, godwits, and oystercatchers; blue flowered vines and even a grass named in honour of the moustache of Ravana, the demon-king god of Lanka who most unwisely kidnapped Lord Rama's wife, Sita.

For just as Ravana was annihilated by forces greater than anything he had been able to resist, so too was Adam's Bridge. The storm rendered it a bridge no more. From 1480 onwards you would have to swim, or sail across. Emblematic of what was or might have

been, but is no longer, it sits between the two countries, hinting at a unity that had already, hundreds of years before, fragmented so completely as to be missed by most of the earliest founding myths of both cultures.

Its destruction made symbolically plain what was already nakedly obvious. Despite their proximity, their shared history and even their similarities, the two lands were wholly different. As the lost magnetic pull of the sub-continent become more remote, Sri Lanka continued its journey forward, an island that would put down its own unique roots, to create a history to dwarf that of most other countries, ten times larger.

Adam's Bridge was a bridge crying out for repair, even before the great storm of 1480 shattered it forever.

Unpredictable, and uneven, sailing had long been the better option. But for Sri Lanka's first settlers – who had still to master boats – a short walk from India was all it took.

And walking was what they did: Palaeolithic and later Mesolithic migrants from the Indian mainland who simply strolled across, their effortless trek belying the extreme complexity that hundreds of years later would colour Sri Lanka's relationship with India – from war, intermarriage, Buddhism itself - and the borrowing of kings and armies.

Since Jurassic times, some 200 million years ago, Sri Lanka had, as part of India, broken off from the great Gondwana sub-continent that had been formed in the Triassic era a 100 million years earlier. Adam's Bridge was becoming the sole point of access to the

far south; but by 7,500 BCE it was almost unwalkable.

As successive mini-ice ages wavered one way and then another and sea levels rose or fell over a 700,000-year period, the bridge was laid bare at least 17 times. Until then this roughly 100 kilometres wide, 50km long finger of land had been so effective a crossing that it even bore rivers across it, explaining the similarities between the island's freshwater fish and those of India.

And not just fish. Plants, animals, all flocked over, whilst they still could. Some were doomed to become extinct in their new home: the Sri Lankan Lion, and possibly an ancient variant of cheetah too; the unique Sri Lankan hippopotamus; two dissimilar subspecies of Rhinoceros: Sinhaleyus and Kagavena; and the bison-like Ceylon Gaur, the last recorded one living a miserable and solitary existence in the zoo of the Kandyan King, Rajasinghe II.

And with them all came unknown numbers of prehistoric men and women, sauntering south in search of a better life – an ambition not that dissimilar to that of the many tourists who decant into Colombo's Bandaranaike airport today.

5

RESIDENTS

"We're saved! Snowy, we're saved!"

HERGE'S ADVENTURES OF TINTIN

Beguiling hints of these earliest inhabitants are still only just emerging. Excavations conducted in 1984 by Prof. S. Krishnarajah near Point Pedro, northeast of Jaffna revealed Stone Age tools and axes that are anything from 500,000 to 1.6 million years old.

As the fossil record demonstrates, the land they inhabited was ecologically richer and more dramatic than it is today, teaming not with a plenitude of the wildlife still found in Sri Lanka today.

Hundreds of millennia later, one of their Stone Age descendants was to leave behind the most anatomically perfect modern human remains yet uncovered on the island.

Balangoda Man, as he was to be named, was found in the hills south of Horton Plains inland from Matara, a short walk from the birthplace of Sirimavo Bandaranaike, the "weeping widow" who ran independent Sri Lanka with steely determination for almost 20 years. His complete 30,000-year-old skeleton is bewitchingly life-like.

Probing his remains, scientists have concluded that Balangoda Man and his heirs were eager consumers of raw meat, from snails and snakes to elephants. And artistic too, as evidenced in the ornamental fish bones, seashell beads and pendants left behind.

Across the island, similar finds are being uncovered, pointing to a sparse but widespread population of hunter gathers, living in caves – such as Batadomba, and Aliga. The tools and weapons found in these caves, made of quartz crystal and flint, are well in advance of such technological developments in Europe, which date from around 10,000 BCE compared to 29,000 BCE in Sri Lanka.

The island's Stone Age hunter-gathers made the transition to a more settled lifestyle well ahead of time.

By at least by 17,000-15,000 BCE, Sri Lanka's original hunter gathers had taken to growing oats, and barley on what is now Horton Plains, thousands of years before it even began in that fulcrum of early global civilization - Mesopotamia.

Astonishingly, their direct descendants, the Veddas, are still alive today, making up less than 1% of the island's total population, an aboriginal community with strong animist beliefs that has, against all odds, retained a distinctive identity. Leaner, and darker than modern Sri Lankans, their original religion - cherishing demons, and deities - was associated with the dead and the certainty that the spirits of dead relatives can cause good or bad outcomes. Their language, unique to them, is now almost – but not quite - extinct. Their DNA almost exactly matches that of Balangoda Man.

Barely a couple of competent arrow shots away from where Balangoda Man laid down and died is Kiripokunahela, a flat-topped rocky hill. The spot, at first sight apparently wholly unremarkable, presents to the adventurous traveller (for to get to the site requires a willingness to hike far in hot sun whilst constantly checking a compass), what is quite possibly the island's first and most eminent art gallery.

Hidden in a shallow cave, the most minimalist of minimalist salons, a leopard faces off against a man riding an elephant. Painting in a thick white paste, this infinitely ageless portraiture has defied most scientific analysis. All its admirers seem to agree

upon is that it is the work of tribes that predated and most likely gave rise to the Veddas of Lenama.

This most singular of all Vedda tribes is famous for having been later annihilated by the Lenama leopards, as a punishment ordered by the Murugan god of Kataragama for crimes and wickedness now long since forgotten. Only one person is said to have survived the devastation, his testament passed down through his ancestors, recalling leopards far bigger than those common to the region, with stripes not just spots, reddish fur, and massive paws.

Curiously, the animal's reddish fur was later also witnessed by Hugh Neville, the impossibly renaissance civil servant and scholar of anthropology, archaeology, botany, ethnology, folklore, geography, geology, history, mythology, palaeography, philology, and zoology. Encountering the beast in the 1880s, he observed that it "stood higher than any I have seen before and was remarkably thin. The tail was of the full length and unusually long. While the fur was of a dark tawny orange with no appearance of spots."

Neville is also the only reliable source for the Nittaewo, said to be a diminutive and still earlier version of the Vedda standing between three to four feet in height, covered in reddish hair like tiny Yetis; and whose language amounted to a sort of burbling, or birds' twittering. Neville noted that their name may have derived from the Singhala word ""nigadiwa" used to describe the primate tribes that predated Prince Vijaya.

Whatever the Nittaewo's distant ancestral relationship to the Vedda, it was insufficient to secure their ultimate survival. Neville recounts that the last

members of this miniature race were genocidally suffocated by smoke forced into their cave over three days by the Vedda themselves sometime around 1800.

Successful for a time, the early Vedda tribes terrified and excited island visitors.

It was the early Vedda tribes of Yaksha and Naga that Fa-Hsien, the 5th century CE traveller had in mind when he conjured up his fable of early Sri Lanka in his book “A Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms,” a colourful travelogue that rivets the early archaeological origins of the country to flamboyant fables and macabre myths.

“The country,” wrote Fa-Hsien, in the precise and scholarly prose you might expect of a monk whose name could be literally translated as "Illustrious master of the Law," “originally had no human inhabitants, but was occupied only by spirits and nagas, with which merchants of various countries carried on a trade. When the trafficking was taking place, the spirits did not show themselves. They simply set forth their precious commodities, with labels of the price attached to them; while the merchants made their purchases according to the price; and took the things away.”

Fa-Hsien is said to have stayed on the island recording all he saw sometime around 408-410 CE, making, it was rumoured, an unlikely home for himself in a remove cave in Yatagampitiya, miles from Kalutara that most unexpectedly could be twinned with distant Balangoda.

Hidden beneath its floor were found the 37,000-year-old remains of another Stone Age man, boasting the

same wide jaw bones, large palette, and teeth of his northerly cousin. But neither kinship nor the unusual size of some of their body parts could ultimately save neither Stone Age settler.

"It is not the strongest of the species that survives," wrote an observer compelled to put on paper what Charles Darwin had perhaps thought but never actually said; "nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is most adaptable to change." And if the exterminated Nittaewo demonstrated an ultimate deficit of such a capability, the Vedda themselves were to do little better.

As the first tantalising hints of the Stone Ages' transition into the Iron Age rippled across the land, new waves of colonization into the island came from India to mix with the principal tribes of the Vedda.

Mix – and fight, for as new travellers arrived from the sub-continent, Balangoda man and his ancestors were pushed into the more inaccessible parts of the country, especially the rainforests, a small part of which, Sinharaja Forest Reserve, miraculously survives in its original state today.

Today, digested and intermarried into Sinhalese culture, forcibly moved on by repeated government development initiatives and water harvesting projects, barricaded from the forests and caves that nurtured them and driven from hunter-gathering into the narrow world of subsistence rice farming, a few still perform their ancient rites, especially for death, when the body is covered by leaves and honey is offered to ancestors and river deities. "We pray," noted one survivor "for their afterlife so that their souls will belong to the deities; they will look after us."

Even from the start, the Vedda's struggle with the new settlers was a deeply unequal one. Using the progressive technology of the iron age, the new colonialists were able to clear land and plant crops, mine for metals like copper, and even establish pearl fisheries, each advance securing them an ever-greater share of the land's resources.

6

MOVING ON

"You know, my friend, life's like a bicycle. To keep your balance, you must keep moving."

HERGE'S ADVENTURES OF TINTIN

By 1500 BCE there is evidence of cinnamon being exported to the ancient Egyptians. A series of major excavations in Anuradhapura dating to around 900 BCE has uncovered abundant treasure including artefacts that show the use of iron, the domestication of horses and cattle, the use of high-quality pottery and possibly even the cultivation of rice. The settlement was large – even by today's standards: four hectares.

Other equally large settlements undoubtedly wait still to be found. One that has already been unearthed and studied are the burial mounds at Ibbankutuwa near Dambulla that date back to around 1,000 BCE.

Here a wealth of pottery vessels interned with the dead contain ornaments of bronze and copper, beads and, most interesting of all, such stones as carnelian and onyx that could only have come to the island from India.

By the early 7th century BCE evidence comes of the use of the Brahmi script using a language that is an early form of Sinhala.

Inventive, adaptive, increasingly sophisticated - urban living was arriving – whether as an independent island-wide development or because of the rapid spread of urbanised culture from India still using Adam's Bridge as a convenient thoroughfare, is still the stuff of impassioned academic debate. Either way, the evolutionary ball was rolling like never before. From urban living, came city states. And into one of these, in 543 BCE, stepped the Indian Prince, Vijaya.

Prince Vijaya and his band of flowers supercharged the human side of the "natural workshop of evolution" that was the

island of Sri Lanka. His arrival, and that of other, now long forgotten, later migrants, ignited the creation of a Singhala culture that would make the land stand out as unmistakably different to any other country as the Rare Vesak Orchid, (Dendrobium Maccarthiae) is to the 100,000+ hybridized orchid species worldwide.

This orchid, named for an obscure British Governor and nascent trainspotter from the 1860s, Charles MacCarthy, is found only in the deep forests around Ratnapura and Sinharaja. Here in dark, damp thickets it produces large pinkish-purple petals picked out with deeper purple borders, very occasionally throwing off a pure white variant that sends orchites and anthophiles into startling bursts of rapture.

Made possible only by its degree of separation from the outside world, the orchid's coloured petals cannot survive the sun – and the plant withers into a modest oblivion when exposed to too much light. Of the country's 74 endemic orchids, it is the one to have the greatest favour with patriots who have proposed it as the best possible replacement for the blue water lily (Nymphaea nouchali), adopted in 1986 as the country's national flower.

This unfortunate flower choice, made by a government committee who confused it with a violet and more invasive water lily (Nymphaea × erangae) led to such confusion and consternation that formal stamps, textbooks and presidential greeting cards still sport the rogue lily masquerading as the national flower.

But perhaps the very pandemonium around its symbolism gives it an unlooked-for degree of perfection as the nation's national flower. Like colonialism itself, migration, ethnicity, national identity and binary perceptions of a pure and perfect

past, the torturous and tricky tale of the country's Vesak Orchid and Water Lily is as good a way as any to view of Prince Vijaya and the dawning of a Singhala culture, no less dazzling and unique for all it borrowed and transferred.

"We shouldn't be hesitant in selecting a new national flower," remarked Pradeep Rajatewa, founder of the Flora Sri Lanka website, "if the existing one has a confusing identity, the concept of a national flower shouldn't be concrete." "I am," sang Gloria Gaynor, an artist much favoured by Sri Lanka's Dilmah Tea Radio Station, " what I am; I am my own special creation; So come take a look; Give me the hook or the ovation."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Swarbrick is a publisher, planter, hotelier, hermit, and writer.

He was born in Colombo and raised, with few concessions to modernity, in India, Singapore, and the Middle East. Cornish, he gained his degrees on the Celtic fringe: at the Universities of Wales, and Stirling, prolonging an introduction to accepted working hours for as long as was decently possible.

Having worked at News Corp's HarperCollins UK as board director for various otherwise homeless departments including sales, marketing; and HarperCollins India, he ran Hachette's consumer learning division. Prior to this, he launched Oxford University Press's first commercial online business, Oxford Reference Online.

When the doubtful charms of boardroom bawls, bottom lines, and divas diminished, he returned to Sri Lanka, the land of his birth hundreds of years earlier, to rescue a spice plantation and set of art deco buildings that had gone feral in the jungle.

Today, as the Flame Tree Estate & Hotel, it has become one of the country's top ten boutique hotels, run by the kindest and most professional of hospitality teams; and overseen by several small schnauzers.

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