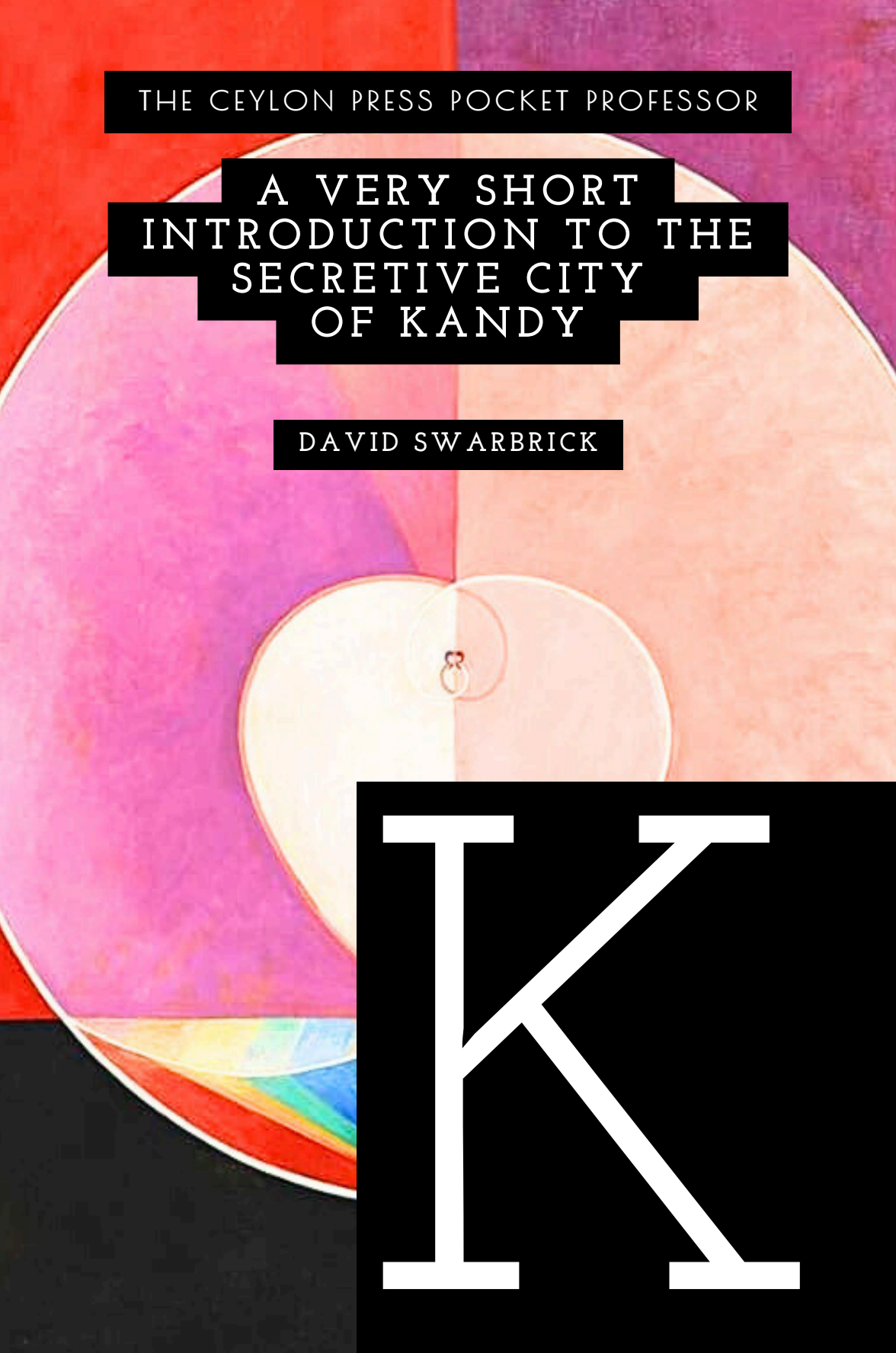
THE CEYLON PRESS POCKET PROFESSOR

A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION TO THE SECRETIVE CITY OF KANDY

DAVID SWARBRICK



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& The Editors of The Ceylon Press

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FOR HARINDRA

Wisest &
Kindest
of Sages

1

DOWN CITY STREETS

"Not here, not there, not anywhere!"

DR. SUESS

Proper guidebooks to Kandy lay out in fine anatomical detail, the history, economy, and topography of the place, its sites and services listed in useful and functioning order. Sadly, this book does not do that. It is an improper guide, the documentation of a personal quest (sometimes, struggle) to understand a little of what really makes Kandy, Kandy; and what is most especially worth seeing: and why.

Kandy's inimitable reputation belies the fact that the city is barely 500 years old, an adolescent in Sri Lankan terms, given that the country's recorded history goes back with stylish ease for at least 2,500 years. Not that anyone dares tell Kandyites this particular fact. Kandy regards itself – and to be fair, is greatly regarded by much of the rest of the country – as Sri Lanka's true and real soul. Its heart.

This characteristic is not something acquired merely because it houses the island's most precious possession – the tooth of Lord Buddha. It is also due to the city's record in having withstood wave after wave of colonial invasions. Kandy was the last island kingdom to fall to foreigners. By the time of its formal capture, in 1815, it had already resisted and survived over 300 years of colonial rule that had engulfed the rest of the island. For over 3 centuries, the kingdom held firm. In doing so, it was able to foster, protect, and develop the distinctive Singhala culture that had once permeated the entire island. It kept the light burning.

But it was ever a culture under threat. From the arrival of the first European soldiers, administrators, priests, businessmen and planters in 1505, the country's priorities changed radically. Everything became secondary to making money – first from cinnamon and other spices; then from coffee and tea.

No one has yet attempted to put a value on the goods shipped by the colonists from the island – but given that 90% of the world's cinnamon came from here, it is impossible to escape the conclusion that the money Sri Lanka generated for its occupiers was big. Very big. And, and the author of a recent book on crooks and thieves remarked: "all money corrupts, and big money corrupts bigly."

As the rest of the country was turned into a cinnamon-producing farm, Kandy stood out, a Sinhalese citadel, offering its shelter to the rest of the country for all but the 133 years that it was occupied by the British. This, more than anything else, is what makes Kandy so very important across the island. In a multicultural country still working on how best to present itself, this particular legacy is enduringly important.

It is, all the same, a city that demands your full attention, if you are ever to get beneath its interminable congestion; edifices inspired by recent Soviet style planning decisions; and traffic plans that could be bettered by donkeys.

As stressed pedestrians pirouette on impossibly narrow pavements, cars hoot past on wide roads, once shaded by mara trees – before health and safety got to work. If ever there is a city weeping for love and attention; for common sense and courteous urban planning, it is Kandy. It is a city that has fallen victim to the grim concerns of business, bureaucrats, traffic warlords; and the unfulfilled promises of passing politicians.

Nor is it mecca for hardened shoppers. This most addictive of modern hobbies may have replaced religion in most other countries, but here, in this most religious of cities, it takes a back seat. Niche boutiques are few - though there is no shortage of shops stocked with the essentials. An old bazaar, the Kandy Bazaar, sells everything from bananas to bags, batiks to bangles. Kandy City Centre, a ten-storey mall built to an almost inoffensive architectural style in the centre of the city offers a more sophisticated range of items. Bucking the trend is Waruna's Antique Shop, a cavernous Aladdin's Cave of marvellous, discoveries, its shelves and drawers stuffed full of ancient flags and wood carvings, paintings, jewellery, and curios.

And then there is the very Sir Lanka approach to specialised products. Every so often as you travel the island you hit upon a village dedicated to the obsessive production of just one item. There is one that only does large

ceramic pots. Another is lined with cane weavers. One, more perilously, is devoted to the creation of fireworks. Down south is one for moonstones; another for masks. And in Pilimathalawa, next to Kandy, is one dedicated to brass and copper. The ribbon village of shops and workshops keeps alive an expertise goes back to the kings of Kandy, for whom they turned out bowls and ornaments, religious objects, and body decoration. Three hundred years later the craftsman remain, melting and moulding, designing, and decorating, stamping, and sealing, engraving, and polishing.

A surer path to satisfaction is to park your purse and cravings for new clothes, shoes, phone accessories or mass manufactured ornaments and head for Kandy's Royal Bar & Hotel. This old walawwa is typical of many of the buildings that haunt the city's tiny, crowded streets, betraying with hints of bashful sorrow, the still remaining traces of striking 17th, 18th, and 19th century vernacular architecture.

Walauwas – or mansions are they are called in the West – abound in the city, as Kandyan nobles set up their family residences as close to the royal palace as possible. Proximity is power - but after the king was deposed this particular force lost its draw; and their city address became of diminishing importance.

The city's greatest walauwe is now The Queen's Hotel. It was first turned into a mansion for the

British Governors, before transcending into the hotel equivalent of an aging maiden aunt, chasing an elusive restoration as an improvised Jane Austen bride might a suitor. It's unequalled site, on a corner overlooking both temple, lake, and palace, makes you want to go round and round the block just to take it all in properly.

Many other such buildings hide down other city streets, balconies and verandas, screened windows, and opaque courtyards, squirreled away secretly behind shop hoardings that have yet to be bettered anywhere on the island for their chronic ugliness. Kandy is nothing if not the most secretive of cities. Its wonders reveal themselves best to those who look most.

"Secrets," noted James Joyce, "silent, stony sit in the dark palaces of both our hearts: secrets weary of their tyranny: tyrants willing to be dethroned." But Kandy's many secrets, held by old families in lofty mansions high above the city; in the unspoken concerns of the people who walk its streets, may be weary now – but they are most unwilling to ever be dethroned. Like threads you pick at, they unwind from way, way back - to explain almost everything. Here history is not dead; not even sleeping or dazed. It is instead ever on the lookout.

Before you even get to the city's colonial tribulations still less its modern day ones, its deeper history is a still more byzantine tale of competing plot lines in which kings, caste,

money, and religion complete with such complexity as to make Human Genome Project look like a walk in the park.

Its first line of kings from the Siri Sanga Bo family, wrested the kingdom's independence from an older Sri Lankan kingdom. But beset by forcible catholic conversions, fever, and internal strife, they petered out, exhausted and baffled, in 1609, barely a hundred years later.

Its next kings, the Dinajara, arose from an aristocratic hill country family. During this dynasty's 150 year rule, the kingdom entered into what doctors sometimes refer to as Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), the kings having to look defensively outwards against the encroaching colonists as well as inwards as an never ending line of rebel princes, nobles, dissatisfied monks, put-upon peasants and angry matriarchs forced a spaghetti of shifting alliances that are all but impossible to clearly track.

That is survived this long was a remarkable achievement just of itself.

Its last kings, the Nayakars, lasted but 76 years. In a sense, they never really stood much of a chance. Coming from India, their rule was forever undermined by the unceasing power struggle they faced against the older established interests of the monks and nobles they inherited with their new kingdom.

And yet, despite all this, the kingdom survived for 300 years, building out as elegant capital in a web of tight streets around a vast new lake, surrounded by hills. It is said that nearly 500 historical buildings hide in plain sight in this way along city streets that still follow the old medieval grid that first encompassed the capital.

To have progressed from jungle to a city with quite so many significant buildings in barely 300 years was remarkable. For most of Sri Lanka's recorded history, progress itself, and all that came with it – writing, religion, architecture, war, kingdoms, trade - happened on its coastline and across the dry northern plains of the island. The centre – the highlands, with Kandy at its belly - was merely part of an impenetrable and economically irrelevant mass of mountains, and moors. It was a useful place from which to capture elephants; for hunting, and for a few aspects of horticulture. But that was about it.

It took Sri Lanka's rulers 19 centuries before they bothered to seriously tame and colonise the interior, the moment happening around 1357 when one of the descendant refugee kings of the Polonnaruwa kingdom set up a new smaller kingdom in Dambadeniya, headquartered for a while in Kurunegala. This brought Kandy to within reach. Within about a hundred years, the city gained its own first king, when Vikramabahu declared UDI, morphing his governorship of the region and breaking from

the control of his liege cousin, the Kotte king around 1469.

Picture it, from that period to the kingdom's fall in 1815, the city locked purposefully in a tight valley surrounded by hills, and those themselves surround by taller mountains. It was a political and geographical arrangement that certainly kept the kingdom safe. But in another sense, it was also like sending itself to jail, the city taking on some of those aspects that gated communities have today: insular, argumentative, with everyone knowing everything about one another.

As the aristocratic classes blossomed, building their walauwe houses cheek by jowl close to the royal place, it became a petri dish for secrets, for political rivalries magnified many time over by the absence of any greater context than what was going in the temple and palace. Hardly surprising then that secrets remain so deeply embedded the city's DNA.

"Democratic socialist republic" that Sri Lanka states it is in its current documentation, it is also an oligarchy. Of the 100 or so families who dominate politics, administration, and business, almost half either come from Kandy or are related to such prominent Kandyan families as the Molligodas, Madugalles, Ehelepolas, Ratwattes, Weerasekeras, Pieris, and include ministers, MPs, judges, generals, and such presidents as Sirimavo Bandaranaike. Many of

those that can't claim such links often keep houses in these area.

Nearly all of the city's stunning and historic buildings hide down scruffy streets as enigmatic as the families who built them. Waluwa-spotting is a rewarding game to play in the city, though it is easier to detect public buildings- the wonderful, tormented art deco railway station, for example, Ehelepola Walauwa, now a wreck; the 1920 Post Office; the Dunuwille Walawwa, now the headquarters of the Kandy Municipal Council; or Giragama Walauwa, now given over to shops.

A public building that especially stands out is the Kataragama Devalaya, a Hindu shrine built by an 18th century Buddhist king. It is a perfect example of a rare surviving treasure – its architecture enlivened by the most intricate carvings, and colours chosen to forever banish grey. Still more dazzling is the nearby Pillaiyar Kovil, a Hindu temple dedicated to Ganesh, the elephant-headed son of Siva; and built by a Buddhist king for his Tamil Dobhi. Its Muslim equal is the arresting Red Mosque, built around 100 years ago with a candy-striped façade in reds and whites.

Spotting hidden wonders like these is like playing hide and seek with a particular naughty child. You eventually get the hang of it. It is like coming out of a major cataract operation and seeing the world as once it was. For Kandy has

plenty of beauty to reveal to the patient eye.

Up and alongside the Royal Palace, is an antique road of street lawyers and notaries, their signs embossed with their professional achievements - and the chunky-as-chutney neo-classical mansion, now called the President's Pavilion which waits, Miss Haversham-like, for the elusive head of state to drop by. Built in the late eighteenth century and embellished with a trowel in the nineteenth, it is a two storey edifice with nine bays, sporting balustraded parapets and looking out over lawns and gardens forbidden to the public and rarely seen by anyone else either.

More accessible by far and just down from this ghostly palace is Kandy's main Anglian Church, the Church of St Paul. The church's terracotta bricks - now weathered to a red-ochre hue – have withstood more than the most expected tests of time. Just two years after its completion it weathered the shattering 1848 Matale Rebellion – and then all the succeeding wars and insurrections that beset the island, protected by vast gates of wrought iron fabricated far away in Edwardian England. Inside the dimly lit church is a majestic pipe organ donated by Muslim businessmen from Bradford, a silver-gilt communion set gifted by the King of England – and a blazing 1874 stained glass window of the Crucifixion, the Ascension, the Angel in the Tomb, and the Nativity, the gift of a planter's widow.

The church itself was built in 1846. This, it turned out, was just two years before one of the most popular hymns in the Anglian songbook, Hymns Ancient & Modern, was first published. "All things bright and beautiful, All creatures great and small, All things wise and wonderful, The Lord God made them all," was one of the Anglican faiths' catchiest songs, written by Mrs Cecil Alexander's for "Hymns for Little Children," and published in that most revolutionary of years – 1848. Its accompanying music – the sort that, once in your head, never leaves it, propelled this modest number to worldwide fame, the score written by William Monk, better remembered for "Abide with Me." So it is perhaps of little real surprise to come across Monk's own grandson laid out in enteral rest in the graveyard adjacent to St Paul's.

The British Garrison Cemetery, created in 1817 - two years after the formal annexation of Kandy – is typical of many crumbing imperial graveyard found across Asia, their stones spelling out in the most personal of ways, the story, and behaviours of the British occupiers. This one is a home to almost two hundred souls, laid out like crazy paving, including John Robertson the last European to be killed by a wild elephant in Ceylon, and the colonial ruler, Sir John D'Oyly whose penchant for sarongs and beards made him the country's first foreign hippie. A visiting Englishman wrote that "a stranger visiting this spot would be charmed at the magnificent scenery which surrounds it. In

this lonely spot lie many hundreds of kindly Scots, who cut off in the very prime and vigour of their manhood, sleep the sleep which knows no waking, under the rank weeds and wiry grasses which cover their neglected graves. Many a sad tale of hardship, agony, and pain, could the tenants of these nameless graves tell, were they permitted to speak."

In equal sorrow - if not the same disorder - lie two hundred of the eighty-five million victims of World War Two, intombed in perfect order at the flawlessly maintained Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery. Ceylon escaped much of the horrors of that conflict but rather eccentrically found itself the location of Southeast Asia Command, set up in Kandy under Lord Mountbatten to be in overall charge of Allied operations.

2

GOD AND MAMMON

"Sometimes the questions are complicated and the answers are simple."

DR, SEUSS

Kipling believed that to understand a country and its history you had to smell it. Yet the past is documented in so many other ways - in books, or architecture; in music or even food. In Sri Lanka, it is the temples that best hold its story. Even so, their stories, like their secrets, are often hard to capture, and harder still to comprehend. It is thought that there are well over 1,000 temples scattered in and around Kandy and its hinterland. Few are properly documented and remain secrets to all but the people living next to them. Each one would have once had a pivotal position in its society, its influence casting itself out like a fishing net to encompass the administration, governance, and politics of its local society in ways that are now long lost. To see such places today, shorn of all this context is like being told something intimate and confidential but having little wherewithal to properly interpret their mystery.

For the island's temples are far more than just places of worship. If every you are able to read them right, you will read the real record of the land. They are garrulous witnesses to its kings and wars, its festivals and customs, everything in fact that reflects back the country's life for over two thousand years. Many of the island's greatest medieval and early modern temples lie in and around Kandy. And many of these were built or restored by Kirti Sri Rajasinha, the second Kandyan king from its third and final royal family, the Nayak Dynasty of Madurai, India. An especially passionate Buddhist

devotee, with a fondness for the religion's more aristocratic expressions, it was his reforms that did much to restore Buddhism which had been badly damaged by the unrelenting forces of colonialism, especially – at the time – from the Dutch.

Given Rajasinha many other challenges, including fighting the Dutch and seeing off serial internal rebellions, it is surprising he was so successful with his religious priorities. In order to jump start what by now was a most depleted Buddhist Sanga and to purge it of what he saw as practices inconsistent with the teachings of Lord Buddha, he enlisted the help of Buddhist monks from Thailand and backed the founding what became the Siam Nikaya, which is now the largest of the two most prominent Buddhist chapters on the island.

This most establishment of establishment orders is located at the Malwatu Maha Viharaya, a complex of temples and monasteries that were given the 14th century pleasure gardens of the earliest Kandyan kings as their new address. Like the White House or Vatican, Malwatu Maha is a power magnet, fusing religion and politics into so certain a draw as to ensure that, should you ever have problems locating the President, important ministers, notable visiting foreign dignities or ambitious politicians and celebrities, there is a more than certain chance that you are likely to find them queuing outside the doors of the chief prelate of the Chapter

here.

Barely five miles away from Malwatu Maha is another of Kirti Sri Rajasigha's temples: the Galmaduwa, the loneliest temple in Kandy. Barely anyone goes there; indeed it is not even a proper temple, its construction being abandoned by the king whose busy mind had moved from temple making to fresco painting. Yet it is an arresting building, the most Hindu of Buddhist shrines with a high tapering gateway exactly like those used to highlight the entrances to temples across Tamil Nadu.

The frescos the king abandoned Galmaduwa Viharaya for can be seen a mile or so up the road at the Degaldoruwa Raja Maha Vihara. With hindsight, the king's change of priority was bang on for the frescos that cover the walls of this temple are among the very greatest ever commissioned by any of the island's kings. Despite being inevitably religious in character, telling with due piety, the story of Lord Buddha, their sub text, as well as their sheer artistry, marks them out as exceptional. Into their scenes are incorporated the images of their times – Portuguese firearms, for example, the uniformed attendants of the kings, processional elephants, fish, trees as stylised as corals, the inside of homes, flowers, furniture, coaches, queens, guest arrivals and dinner parties.

On the opposite and western side of Kandy, are several other incomparable temples – albeit

ones whose daily visitor numbers can be recorded with the forlorn fingers of a single hand.

The greatest by a whisker is the Lankatilaka Rajamaha, built around 1350 by the kings of Gampola, Versillian rulers with a reputation for enjoying all the finer points of culture.

As the Black Death destroyed faraway Europe, Sri Lanka's late medieval kings enlisted the artistry of a Tamil architect famous for his Hindu temples to create a Buddhist edifice that merged the Sinhalese architecture of Polonnaruwa period with Dravidian and Indo Chinese flourishes.

It could have been a car crash of a building; instead Sthapati Rayar, the architect, pulled off a masterpiece. Elegant, highly incised white walls stretch into a roof of patterned tiles across three granite stories, the inside adorned with frescos.

A few miles on is the Gadaladeniya Temple. Built around the same time as the Lankatilaka Rajamaha, by the same kings, to the design of another renowned Tamil architect, Ganes Varachari, this temple is, if anything, yet more distinctive, its Vijayanagar architecture blending Dravidian, Deccan, Islamic, Hindu and Rajput features with other more common Singhala qualities.

Remarkable though these temple are, one other exists that is yet more heart stopping for its sheer, naked beauty. It is best appreciated – at first at least – from afar. Very afar. From the Presence Chamber in London's Kensington Palace in fact. For here, where English monarchs received foreign ambassadors, is a fireplace of limewood carvings and cherubs by Grinling Gibbons. No wood sculpturers are the equal of this Michelangelo of woodcarving, who immortalised Restoration England and his patron, Charles II with his "unequalled ability to transform solid, unyielding wood and stone into something truly ethereal. None - expect one practicing at a similar time in the middle of Sri Lanka - Delmada Devendra Mulachari.

Mulachari is renowned for many things but the rarest by far is Embekke Devale. A medieval masterpiece, the temple had withstood wars, weather and most especially the interminable conflict waged by the Portuguese and Dutch on the island's last kingdom – in nearby Kandy. By the 1750s it was in a sorry state, its dilapidated walls noted by the rising young artist, Mulachari who lived nearby, his family, one of a number of Singhala artists from the South, having come north to seek work. Wood carver, sculptor, architect, artist, - Mulachari worked for the last three kings of Kandy; and most especially Rajasinha. In this the king was greatly helped by Mulachari, who built for him the Audience Hall and the Octagon in the Temple of the Tooth, and the Cloud Wall that surrounds its

lake.

Travellers, whether local or foreign, with a temple in mind, head with unfailing sureness to The Temple of the Tooth, and not Embekke Devale. Although just fifteen kilometres apart, the two temples are worlds apart in artistry. The Temple of the Tooth has a stolid, almost bourgeois respectability. By comparison, at Embekke Devale, you enter instead a magical world in which formality occupies but the smallest of parts.

In every section, in every place, are the surviving 500 statues of the great artist, each a stroke of artistic genius in of itself. Exquisitely carved models of entwined swans and ropes, mothers breast feeding children, double headed eagles, soldiers, horses, wrestlers, and elephants – all validate why this temple is famed across Asia for its world class carvings. But there is more. Fantasy intervenes. Erupting from a vein is a figure of a women; a bird takes on human attributes, a slight of hand revels that an elephant is a bull; another, that is a lion.

"For my ally is the Force, and a powerful ally it is," said Yoda in Star Wars. If measured simply by faith alone, nothing on the island, still less in Kandy, competes with The Temple of The Tooth, located in centre of the city. Proof of its appeal is evident every year in the half million people who attend its 7 day Perehera, when the tooth is

paraded through the town on the back of a large elephant. From Cananda to Japan, several hundred million Buddhists watch the televised coverage of the festival. And every 16 years or so a still more popular festival occurs when the tooth is uncovered and shown to its worshippers. In 2025, the last recorded event, almost 2 million people attended – around 20% of the island's entire population.

With crowds such as these, it is no surprise to learn how greatly the city's economy depends on religion in one way or another. "Those who believe religion and politics aren't connected don't understand either," remarked Mahatma Gandhi. Religion, money, politics, faith, power, and morality: in Kandy they dance around the same stupa – as they have always done. Within the temple's grounds are to be found all the structures and buildings of the island's last royal place too. The whole complex merges one into the other, a confusion that makes clear the unremitting opacity of the line between religion and state has always existed in the country.

To most Sri Lankans, the Temple is holier even than St Peter's is to Catholics and at least as sacred as the Kaaba's Black Stone is to Muslims. Even so, it is merely the last and latest temple to give a home to the relic that makes it so important. The relic - said to be Lord Buddha's left upper canine tooth - arrived on the island around 371 CE hidden in the hair ornamentation of an Indian princess.

Almost immediately it became the island' s most precious possession, legitimising the reign of kings and validating a priestly theocracy. Often on the move to escape war, capture, thieves, frenzied Catholics, rival warlords, or Tamil invaders, it lived in almost a dozen other temples in Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, and Dambadeniya, to Yapahuwa, Gampola, Avissawella, Kotte before coming to rest in Kandy.

As a relic it has plenty of competition. Scores of alternative artefacts assert a connection to Lord Buddha – including bowls, hairs, and bones. But the tooth is considered the most important for it touched the words he uttered as he prayed. Across the world, thirty-two other places claim ownership of Buddha's teeth. If all are credible it would account for the teacher's entire set - eight incisors, four canines, eight premolars, and twelve molars. But somehow, by dint of custom, history, worship, faith and record, the tooth now in Kandy is by far the most celebrated one. And as for the tale that the original tooth was pounded to dust by the Portuguese Archbishop of Goa in a fit of excessive evangelical catholic excitement: well, no one really believes that.

The relic's continuing importance can be measured by the fact that a victorious President or Prime Minister's first call on winning an election here, is to the Temple of the Tooth. There, like hundreds of thousands of devotees,

the winning leader receive a monkish blessing. For much of its existence the temple has also been a target, destroyed by both the Portuguese and the Dutch; by weather, war, and insurrection; and the temple you visit today is in its fourth or fifth edition (depending on your definition of restoration).

The building, designed in classic, gracious Kandyan style, has double peaked tiled roofs underpinned by a panoply of pure gold and is surrounded by a golden fence. Elaborate frescoes adorn its walls. The chamber is richly decorated with elephants, guardian stones, and moonstones restored after LTTE bomb blasts.

Seven caskets studded with gems and shaped like stupas fit one into another, the last holding the relic itself. Rituals are performed three times daily: at dawn, noon, and dusk. Once a week the tooth is symbolically bathed in water scented with herbs and flowers. And once a year it is paraded around the city streets in a vast Perehera procession of elephants, priests, fire eaters, dancers, and acrobats.

The palace that surrounds the temple it is a poignant shadow of its old self, the British having destroyed half of its buildings. Even so, the ones that remain are outstanding examples of the zen-like elegance of patrician hill country architecture, with wooden pillars, decorative carvings, distinctively pitched roofs, and walls and windows that open out interior spaces with

so artful a restraint as to give the resulting light a unique and calming luminosity.

This can be seen most immediately in The Royal Audience Hall, the Magul Maduwa, a wooden structure, built by King Sri Vikrama Rajasinha in 1783. Much good it did him - for here it was, in 1815 that the Kandyan Convention was signed, brutally ending the island's last kingdom.

Unhappily, many of the palace's buildings have become squats for lucky civil servants, their unbending bureaucratic domicile, twitching with room partitions, plastic furniture, and rusty fans, distorting most of the original architectural features that once made these buildings so exquisite.

The stunningly graceful Ulpange, built in 1806 by King Sri Wickrama Rajasinha as a bathing pavilion for queens, is a police post. The Wadahindina Mandappe Audience Palace is home to the stuffed remains of Rajah, the chief elephant in the Kandy Perahera, who died in 1988, prompting a full day of national mourning.

The Pattirippuwa, an immeasurably stylish octagonal pavilion, has been commandeered by a library. The King's Palace, the Raja Wasala, is a Museum. The Queens' Chambers, the Meda Wasala, with its fetching courtyard and veranda, has been commandeered by the Department of Archaeology; and wild horses are

not likely to drive them out. But at least the Maha Maluwa, the boundless terrace adjacent to Kandy Lake has not been encroaching upon; and at one end bears a stone memorial beneath which is buried the skull of Keppetipola Disawe who led the failed rebellion against the British in 1818.

In the oddest set of circumstances, his skull, following his execution, found its way to the Phrenological Society of Edinburgh. It took 136 years before it was returned to the city of his death to lie now beneath this monument overlooking the lake. High official, landowner, aristocrat, patriot, freedom fighter, Keppetipola's life and death show also that he really was the hero he is today considered to be.

But if Keppetipola Disawe is the island's most obvious state hero, the country's folk hero is undoubtedly Sura Saradiel, a bandit, and a gang leader from the nineteenth century. Dubbed Sri Lanka's Robin Hood, Saradiel was hung by the British on 7 May 1864 in Bogambara Prison Kandy, along with his childhood friend, Mammale Marikkar - the last two people to be publicly executed. To the British, Saradiel was little more than a gangster, though today his exceptional good looks would have won his modelling and TV contracts aplenty. Dacoit though he may have been, but his penchant for redistributing some of his stolen items amongst poor villagers won him, and wins

still, many fans. One of these has made him a love song in concrete, recreating it in Saradiel Village. Located near his mother's village and a few miles from Kandy on the Colombo road, this little fantasy hamlet is peopled with tableaus from the past: craftsmen and cooks, the hero's family, farmers a gypsy snake charmer; a coffee shop, toddy drinkers in a tavern; an astrologer's house, workshops for carpenters and goldsmiths.

It is perhaps no mere coincidence that two such famous rebels should have come from around Kandy. The British annexure of the kingdom in 1815 entirely failed to seal the deal. Keppetipola was no lone wolf. His leadership of the 1817 Uwa-Wellassa Uprising or Great Liberation War, as it is also, known gained the support of numerous other Kandyan chiefs – and for a moment British control was almost broken.

The shattering scorched earth policy pursued by the British colonial government after the war was responsible for thousands of deaths and the economic destitution of huge areas of the hill country. But things did not end there. Just 30 years later in Matale, just up the road from Kandy a second massive uprising broke out as poor farmers objected to the sweeping land reforms that were dispossessing them. Once again, British control over the country hung in the balance. Kandy, and the hill country's guardianship of Singhala independence, may have been defeated – but it was not dead. It merely hid, waiting for the chance to break free.

3

HILLS & BLOODSHED

"Think and wonder. Wonder and think."

DR. SEUSS

Hills are of course what Kandy is celebrated for - and its most famous city-centre mountain, Bahirawa Kanda, or Gnome Mountain, is home to one of the tallest statues of Lord Buddha. It was once, more memorably, home to some atypical human sacrifice, involving a particularly beautiful girl, Dingiri Menika who lived right next to the Flame Tree Estate and Hotel, in Galagedera.

Selected to stimulate the moribund fertility of a Kandyan queen, the girl was kidnapped by soldiers, loaded with jasmine, and propelled with elephants, drummers, and banner-bearers to a stake for overnight consumption by demons. Quite why anyone thought a feast such as this might make the despondent queen procreate is a mystery. Fortunately, the king's elephant keeper got to Dingiri Menika first; rescued her, married her, in fact - and set up home with her in Welligalle Maya, in Cross Street, close to Kandy Super Phone, Ltd, a present-day mobile phone supplier. But although the king, Sri Wickrama Rajasinghe, chose to terminate all future human sacrifice, his late-burgeoning liberal values were not destined to bring him any greater luck. Within a few years he had been exiled to India, along with at least two of his four wives, the third of which was to use her exile for bankrupting shopping sprees.

Protected by a necklace of high mountains - Alagalla Mountains, Bible Rock, Uthuwankanda, Devanagala, Ambuluwawa, the Knuckles and

and Hanthana - and surrounded by dense jungle ideal for guerrilla warfare, the Kandyan kingdom's natural defences helped it withstand repeated invasions. Secretive defensive, forever on the alert, the kingdom guarded its independence with valiant and unrelenting focus. Such behaviour was not quite on a par with the fabled Sakoku isolationist policies that made the Japanese Tokugawa shogunate so famous until they were breached by American gunboats in 1853 – but it certainly had much in common with it.

The Alagalla Mountains is an especial trekkers' paradise, offering its visitors a range of hard core or easy treks. Its range of dry evergreen, montane, and sub-montane forests are home to many species of fauna and flora, including wild boar, monkeys here, squirrel, anteaters, porcupine, monitor lizard, tortoise – but it is especially noted for its 50 recoded bird species which include Sri Lankan junglefowls, Layard's parakeets, and yellow-fronted barbets.

A little over 15 miles from Alagalla is Bible Rock itself, a stunning example of a Table Mountain. Over 5,500 feet high, its curious open book shape inspired early Victorian missionaries to give it its canonical name, though 300 years earlier it performed a vital task as a look out post for the Kandyan kings, eager to spot the latest colonial invasions, especially those of the Portuguese. A classic series of bonfires, running mountain to mountain, starting here, and ending close to

Kandy was the trusted warning signal that was used, just like the famous Armada Fire Beacons in England in 1588. Steep though the climb is, it doesn't take long to get to the top – and one of the best views in the country.

Some four miles away from Alagalla is the little town of Balana. The Balana pass, on the southern edge of the Alagalla Mountains was the second of two critical entry points into the kingdom, the other being at Galagedera. "Balana" is the Sinhala word for" look-out," and look out it did, commanding from its perch 2000 feet about sea level, a perfect view of the entire territory that any enemy would have to cross.

Balana foiled a Portuguese invasion in 1593. Several later attempts by the Portuguese resulted in their armies being destroyed – most especially at nearby Danthure. The political, military, and religious machinations that led to this point were as intricate and complicated as anything since the ascent of man. They involved the scandalous conversion of Buddhist kings to Catholicism, the betrayal of a kingdom, the reassertion of Buddhist militarism, the forcible marriage of the last dynastic princess to a succession of Kandyan kings, and the last great throw of the dice by the Portuguese to seize control of the entire island. Shameless cheek, betrayal, gorilla skirmishes from impenetrable jungle depths, abysmal weather and escalating terror marked the Danthure campaign. It was to end on the 8th of October 1594, the Portuguese army of twenty thousand men reduced to just

ninety-three at the battle of Danthure. The survivors were left wishing they had not outlived their compatriots as their noses, ears and gentiles were severed. A memorial of sorts, even if only in the heads of passing guests, can be felt at the Danthure Rajamaha built centuries before the events that were to immortalise it occurred.

Just a few years later, in 1603 another attempt was made. The Portuguese observer Queyroz wrote “the new fortalice of Balana stood on a lofty hill upon a rock on its topmost peak; and it was more strong by position than by art, with four bastions and one single gate; and for its defence within and without there was an arrayal of 8,000 men with two lines of stockade which protected them with its raised ground, and a gate at the foot of the rock and below one of the bastions which commanded the ascent by a narrow, rugged, steep, and long path cut in the Hill.”

Three days of bitter fighting eventually led to its capitulation, the Portuguese conducting a special Thanksgiving service in the fort, but it was a very short victory. Within days the Portuguese had fled, their long retreat back to Colombo beset by guerrilla fighting. But by 1616, aided by the accent of Senerat, one of the few notably inept Kandyan monarchs, Balana was reoccupied by the Portuguese - and improved with a drawbridge over a moat, the addition of a large water tank for sieges

foundations opf the higher buildings in their quadrangular layout of 3 circular bastions. Parts of the lower fort are lost in the jungle - its many ramparts, ditches, and buildings.

And it was here, around Balana, at the Battle of Gannoruwa, that the imperial ambitions of the Portuguese finally met their grim finale. The mercenary army of Diogo de Melo de Castro, the Portuguese Captain General, had marched up from Colombo a third time to try, in 1638, to capture the Kandyan kingdom of Rajasinghe II. The king, sitting with deceptive and majestic leisureliness under the shade of a great tree, conducted the battle with razor sharp stratagems. Weakened by mass desertions, just 33 Portuguese soldiers survived of the 4,000 that made up the army, almost all of them reduced to heads piled up before the victorious king.

The king, with his alliance with the Dutch, had managed to drive the Portuguese from the island once and for all. This proved to be a mixed blessing as his dubious association merely saddled him with a new colonial occupier. The Dutch were to prove much more professional and ruthless than the Portuguese as they went about their colonial mission.

Bnut Portugal's failure marked the blossoming of the last kingdom - the kingdom of Kandy. The kingdom was to endure for over two hundred years; and to meet head on the invasive forces of two more colonial armies – the Dutch and the

British. And although it ultimately succumbed, betrayed more from within than without, it put up such a fight as to ensure the continued survival of the island's culture until it could be better cherished after independence in 1948.

And fight it did. The Kandyan kingdom, having seen off the Portuguese, next repulsed two major attempts by Dutch armies in 1764 and 1765 – as well as one of the two British attempts. The last, in 1815 succeeded more because of bribery than military prowess.

Accessing the kingdom became an obsession after the British annexure. Roads became the new colonists' first major fixation. Sri Lanka excels at the improbable and the unexpected - and close to Balana is a village that is, in its modest way, a beacon to this history of transportation on the island. Kadugannawa shot to modest fame in 1820 when the British, fresh from having seized the entire country and put down a major rebellion, set about building a proper road to connect Colombo with Kandy.

At the Kadugannawa Pass they faced a rock of such magnitude that blasting it away or circumnavigating it was no option. Instead an army of builders lead by Captain Dawson of the Royal Engineers, pieced a sufficiently large hole through it to allow horses and carriages access. Although Dawson died of a snake bite before the road was completed, the Captain was credited with building the island's first modern highway; and, rather extraordinarily, his own

workers clubbed together to build a tower in his memory, the Dawson Tower. Somewhat shakily, it still stands.

As befits a location of such transportational importance, the country's National Railway Museum is also to be found in Kadugannawa. The country's first train ran in 1858, and the network now covers fifteen hundred kilometres using a lock-and-block signalling system of such antiquity that trainspotters mark the country as their number one travel destination simply to witness history in action. Harder critics argue that little has changed since the 1858 – not least because the railway department runs one of the country's greatest deficits – averaging an annual forty-five-billion-rupee loss.

But, as Senneca said, "it is not the man who has too little, but the man who craves more, that is poor." And who can be poor who can ride in trains and carriages of such vintage beauty, with doors and windows open to catch the breeze; with food sellers who scamper up and down with doubtful offerings; and – from time to time - destinations that are all to briefly reached. All this history is celebrated at the Museum, home to innumerable old engines, locomotives, rail cars, trolleys, carriages, machinery, and equipment. Despite all this, the real and most secret glory of Kadugannawa is actually a bridge. Trainspotters, tourists and pontists flock like sheep to the Nine Arch Bridge, a viaduct built in 1919 between Ella

and Demodara. But connoisseurs go to a smaller, older one much closer to home – the Triple Arches Bridge of Kadugannawa, built in 1887 when the first rail lines were being laid. Today it is a dreamy ruin, its arches lost in the ever-encroaching jungle. Listen hard – for here you can still catch the chatter of long departed passengers heading to the hill country.

4

WHERE THE GRASS IS GREENER

"You're off to great places! Today is your day! Your mountain is waiting, So get on your way!"

DR SEUSS

One of Kandy's greatest and most wonderful secrets is its nature. The city sits in a valley surrounded by 5 main hills, up which, like an indulgent bubble bath, buildings of later regret have begun to creep. But one side of the city remains nicely protected - UdawaththaKele Forest. Once a forest hunting reserve for the kings, it is now a magical 104 hectare protected nature reserve. It is home to 460 plant species; butterflies, snakes, snails, lizards, toads, frogs, insects, monkeys, civet, deer, loris, boars, porcupine, the ruddy mongoose, giant flying squirrels, bandicoots, and bats. But its real draw are its birds. Over 80 species have been recorded here, many endemic, including Layard's parakeet, the yellow-fronted and brown-capped babblers, the Sri Lanka hanging parrot, the three-toed kingfisher, mynas, golden-fronted and blue-winged leafbirds, spotted and emerald doves, Tickell's blue flycatcher, the white-rumped shama, the crimson-fronted barbet, the serpent eagle, and brown fish owl.

Other birds – turtles, cormorants, egrets, pelicans, eagles, owls, herons – can be found swimming away on Kandy Lake. Known as the Sea of Milk, the lake is surround by a dramatic Cloud Wall across much of its three-kilometer circumference and is overhung by huge rain trees. In its eighteen-metre depth lurk whistling and monitor lizards, turtles, and numerous fish including an exotic 9-foot-long alligator Gar – a fish with a crocodilian head, a wide snout, and razor-sharp teeth.

Nature tamed is another aspect of the city. "Will you come to our party to-day, Carrie Wynn? / The party is all ready now to begin; / And you shall be mother, and pour out the tea, / Because you're the oldest and best of the three."

Elizabeth Sill, a Victorian children's writer, was the first person noted to use the phrase "being mother" when it came to pouring out the tea. It echo is heard in almost every country of the world, pouring, one hopes, Ceylon Tea. But although tea is now synonymous with Kandy, it was something of a late comer to the city's attributes.

Just outside the city centre is Giragama, a tea factory set amongst several hills of tea which offers Stalinist style tours and presentations. The factory is a short hop from where the very first tea bushes were grown on the island. Tea first arrived here in 1824, with plants smuggled from China to the Royal Botanical Gardens in Peradeniya. Now the island's dominant culinary export, the crop began life accidentally. Famous though the island it for its remarkable teas, it was first famous for its coffee. In 1845 there were just thirty-seven thousand acres of the crop but by 1878, coffee estates covered two hundred and seventy-five thousand acres.

Tamil labourers arrived (seventy thousand per year at one time) to help the industry grow and in 1867 a railway was built from Kandy to Colombo just to carry coffee. It was, said the

papers, a “coffee rush,” but one that benefited many – for a third of the estates were owned by native Sri Lankans. Investors flooded in and by 1860, Sri Lanka was one of the three largest coffee-producing countries in the world.

But in 1869, just as it seemed as if the coffee boom would go on and on, the crop was hit by a killer disease - Hemileia vastatrix, "coffee rust” or “Devastating Emily” as it was known by the planters. It took time to spread – but within thirty years there were barely eleven thousand acres of the plant left. The industry was wiped out. That the country did not follow suit is thanks to a Scot named James Taylor and his experiments with tea. He emigrated to the island in 1852 to plant coffee and spotted early the effects of coffee rust. On his Loolecondera Estate in Kandy he immediately started to experiment with tea until, from plant to teacup, he had mastered all the necessary techniques and processes necessary to succeed with this new crop.

In 1875 Taylor managed to send the first shipment of Ceylon tea to the London Tea Auction. Despairing coffee-planters, sat at Taylor’s feet to learn tea production. Within about twenty years the export of tea increased from around eighty tons to almost twenty-three thousand tons in 1890. Tea had caught on. The few estates that made up the eleven hundred acres of planted tea back in 1875 had, by 1890, grown to two hundred and twenty thousand acres. Today, the country is the home

of the cuppa. Its climate is perfect for the plant and its modern history is in part moulded by it. Tea accounts for almost two percent of total GDP and employs directly or indirectly, over a million people.

Terrain, climate, light, and wind shape quite different brews. The varied regions of the island make distinctively different teas – just as the different parts of France or Spain make such dissimilar wines. The most subtle tea is said to be come from Nuwara Eilya. Here at six thousand feet the climate is rugged, bracing, cold enough for frost, and best able to foster teas that are golden-hued with a delicate, fragrant bouquet.

A more balanced flavour comes at four to six thousand feet from the Uva region. Here the bushes are caressed by both the NE & SW monsoons; and a drying Cachan ocean wind that closes the leaves, forcing a high balance of flavour. It is aromatic, mellow, and smooth. A very tangy flavoured tea comes from Uda Pussellawa, at five to six thousand feet, a thinly populated region, famed for rare plants & leopards, and bombed by the NE Monsoon to give a strong dark pungent tea with a hint of rose.

From Dimbulla, at three to five thousand feet, comes a tea with a very clean taste. The region is drenched by the SW monsoon – which means crisp days, wet nights, and a complex terrain that makes a reddish tea, most famous as

English Breakfast Tea. Kandy, the first home of tea, is noted for its most classic of tea flavours. Here the tea plantations are typically at two to four thousand feet, to inspire a bright, light, and coppery tea with good strength, flavour, and body.

A more caramel flavour is found at a little over sea level - Sabaragamuwa, home to sapphires and humid rainforest. The region is hit by the SW monsoon which makes for a robustly flavoured dark yellow-brown tea. The last and lowest lying tea region is Ruhuna which runs from the coast to the Sinharaja Rain Forest. The region is shielded from monsoons and has a soil that promotes rapid long, beautiful leaves that turn intensely black and make strong, full-flavoured dark teas.

Tasting all this delicious tea that emanating from so many different parts of the island is more than a little distracting – for the greatest irony in the country's tale of tea is just how secretive its real origins have since become. Loolecondera, the estate where it all started, still exists just outside Kandy, surrounded by hills of tea – but it is almost entirely inaccessible. Determined tea adventurers with reliable 4 wheel drives can just about make it up to the estate. But like so much in Kandy, it hides in plain sight. It is perhaps a human inevitably that anything given half a chance to become a secret, will become so – though perhaps this is truer in Kandy than elsewhere.

The only secret Kandy cannot really hide lies just outside the city centre: the Perediniya Royal Botanical Gardens. Here, glorious, drunken avenues of Cook's Pines, Palmyra Palms, Double Coconuts, Cabbage Palms, and Royal Palms lead off into shady dells. The garden was refashioned in 1821; and is today one of the finest, if not the finest, botanical garden in Asia; the modern garden set up by Alexander Moon for the receipt and experimentation of plants introduced for commercial development. Moon's catalogue published soon afterwards listed one thousand one hundred and twenty-seven "Ceylon plants."

This commercialization of land was the start of a massive period of deforestation in the country. In 1881, eighty four percent of Sri Lanka was forested. In less than twenty years, British colonial agriculture reduced forest coverage to just seventy percent.

Moon was one of a line of prodigious British gardeners in Sri Lanka, an enthusiastic enforcer of a project begun in 1810 under the advice of Sir Joseph Banks when a garden was opened on Slave island in Colombo. In 1813 the garden moved to Kalutara where there was more space for planting, before finally transferring to the better climate of Peradeniya. Now the gardens stretch over one hundred and fifty acres with four thousand plant species filling the space.

Its palm collection is among the best in Asia

with about two hundred and twenty species, but the garden's chief glory is its arboretum of ten thousand trees, many over a hundred years old and relied upon to flower in stunning colours. Among them is a Javan fig tree with a canopy of about 1600 square meters.

There is even an arboretum of trees planted by famous people including a huge Ironwood (Tsar Nicolas II); a rather stunted Camphor Tree (Mrs Sirimavo Bandaranaike); a Yellow Trumpet Tree (King Akihito of Japan) and a Sorrowless Tree (Queen Elizabeth II). A Cannonball Tree planted in 1901 by King George V and Queen Mary of the United Kingdom is however pipped to the post for age by the one growing at The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel.

Its bamboo collection includes the giant bamboo of Burma, the largest known in the world, yellow building bamboo, feather bamboo, prickly bamboo, and Dwarf Chinese bamboo. The fern collection includes over a hundred indigenous and exotic species, whilst the Spice Garden houses the oldest nutmeg trees in the world, including ones planted in 1840.

To any Sri Lankan, the term "kumarihaami" is immediately graspable. On the surface it appears to merely, and somewhat cautiously, describe elderly ladies who enjoy considerable influence within their family and community. But this in no way captures the degree of social richness, and power - shot through with often obstinate and glittering eccentricity - that is a

proper Kumarihaami. A cross between a dowager duchess and an exiled Queen, her word is law, and her recommendations ignored at your very considerable peril. Nancy Aster, the Empress Dowager Cixi, or the fictional Dowager Countess of Grantham in "Downtown Abby" are all good foreign examples. Sri Lankan examples today can be found in any town or village on the island. Or, better still, on the pages of many a contemporary Sri Lankan novel, not least Ashok Ferrey's "The Ceaseless Chatter of Demons."

Peradeniya's Royal Botanical Gardens, one hopes, has something of the Kumarihaami about it. Managed by a government department that excels as much in bureaucracy as in horticulture, its attributes, like those of the eternal dowager, imply that it will go on and on forever. This much I hope is true for "when great trees fall in forests," said Maya Angelou, "small things recoil into silence, their senses eroded beyond fear."

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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