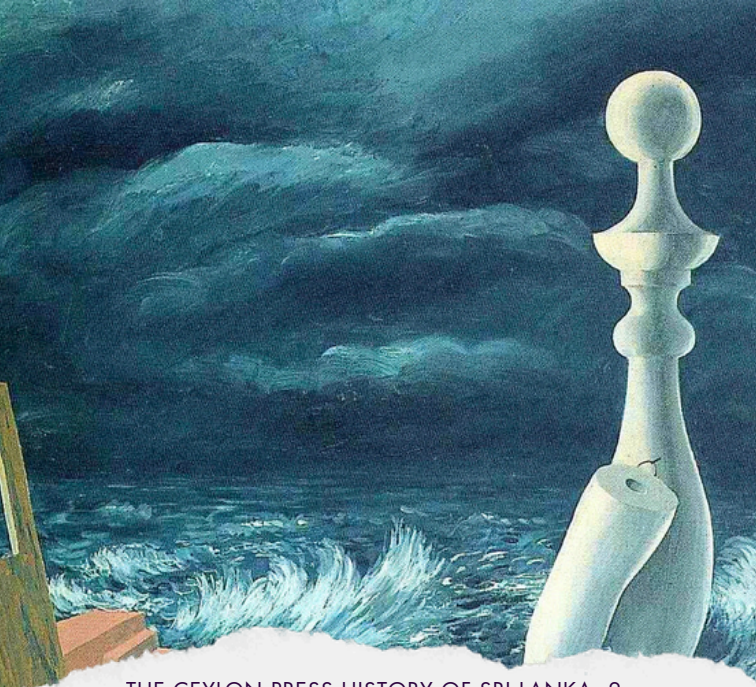
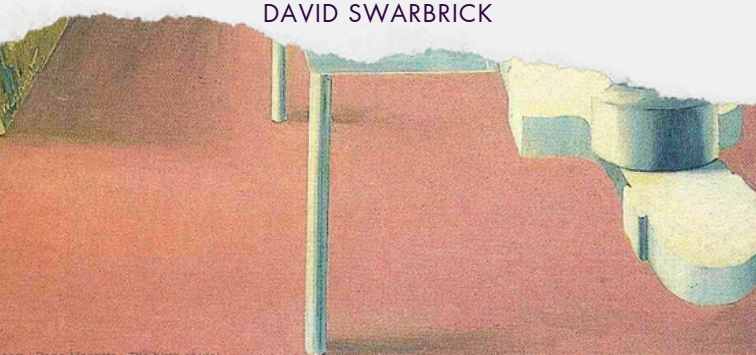


THE CEYLON PRESS HISTORY OF SRI LANKA 2

THE ISLAND THAT FLOATED AWAY

SRI LANKA & THE GREAT STORM

DAVID SWARBRICK



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"The vast unfathomable sea is but a Notion-unto me."

THE THREE VOICES,
LEWIS CARROLL. 1869.

ONE

Hidden Harmony

Rusty, derelict, and irresistibly optically challenged, the old Talaimannar Lighthouse is a gratifyingly improbable key to unlocking the start of Sri Lanka's recorded history. It presents an even more unlikely clue to explain the profound differences the island shows compared to 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." Indeed, 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 an ocean now almost invisible.

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

The most famous is the 1939 lighthouse at Galle. However, 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 ghostly metronomic refrain that states, with unmissable clarity, the first and most profound reason why Sri Lanka is as it is.

TWO

A Workshop of Evolution

This is an island. That is what those lonely lighthouses declaim. An island, capacious, yes; 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 have populations similar to Sri Lanka's, but are either much larger or much smaller in land area. Only Japan and the UK are island nations that far outstrip Sri Lanka in landmass 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 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, runs out into the sea and disappears.

From the Indian side, its infrequent visitors are mildly surprised to learn that the lighthouse is not part of the Indian mainland. Or, if not geographically, 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 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 comers that what lives beyond its rusty form is an island, utterly divergent from the mainland beyond.

Flashing multicoloured 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 65,000-square-kilometre landmass.

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.

THREE

The Drawbridge

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 a 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. This land corridor 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 of a child's paddling pond than an ocean, the Palk Straits is a deterrent all the same.

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

Of course, it has not always been effective. Several notable invasions from South India have occurred, the deadliest of which was in 993 CE, when the Chola king Rajaraja I destroyed the 1,500-year-old Andhraupuran kingdom.

The remarkable tenth-century Thiruvalangadu Copper Plates compare 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."

In the centuries that followed, 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 mainland 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.

FOUR

The Land That Time Forgot

And so, as a more Edenic version of Edgar Rice Burroughs' Land That Time Forgot, Sri Lanka was left to 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.

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 endemicity unparalleled across Asia. A staggering 16% of the fauna and 23% of its plants are homegrown.

Apart from sporadic invasions, Sri Lanka interacted with the outside world mainly 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-geese 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 prosperous island nations, little could ever compete with the excellence of anything 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 were 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 enabled it to defend better 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!"

FIVE

Fourteen Eighty
CE

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 it 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 by, 1480 was actually a relatively 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 end of the Ice Ages and the subsequent rise in sea levels had not been able to effect such a significant change. At extreme low tides, and before the limestone stacks had been so eroded, it was still occasionally possible to 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 fragmented hundreds of years before, so entirely that it went unnoticed by most of the earliest founding myths of both cultures.

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

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Swarbrick is a publisher, planter, hotelier, hermit, and writer. He was born in Colombo and, with few concessions to modernity, raised in India, Singapore, and the Middle East. Cornish 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 possible.

Having worked at News Corp's HarperCollins UK as a board director across departments including sales, art, and marketing, and at 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 and bottom lines diminished, he returned to Sri Lanka, the land of his birth hundreds of years earlier, to rescue a spice plantation and a 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.

It also helps fund The Ceylon Press, set up to make Sri Lanka's rich and complicated story more accessible. The Press' books, companions, podcasts, blogs, and guides are freely available at theceylonpress.com.

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