

## EDWARD LEAR: PAINTINGS AND DRAWINGS IN SRI LANKA

Edward Lear was born twelve years after the beginning of the nineteenth century and died twelve years before its end. He was the twentieth of twenty-one children born to Jeremiah and Ann Lear. He began to earn his living as a commercial artist at the age of fifteen, and soon developed his exceptional talents for sketching in water-colours and painting in oils. He also made a name as a remarkable illustrator of ornithological, botanical, and zoological books, though his primary interest lay in landscape painting. But, it is, perhaps, for his magical gift of nonsense verse and witty drawings that he is popularly known. The life of a wandering draughtsman came naturally to him, and he travelled extensively in Europe and parts of Asia for thirty years. He was a confidante of the Tennysons, Holman Hunt taught him to paint, he gave a course of drawing lessons to Queen Victoria, and his two closest friends were a Viceroy and a Chief Justice.

He undertook the last of his tours to India and Ceylon at the age of sixty-two, when he was already handicapped by illness and the frailties of age. He arrived in Bombay on 22 November 1873, and left India on 12 January 1875. He was the guest of the Viceroy, his intimate friend the Earl of Northbrook. He crossed over to Ceylon on 09 November 1874 and left on 12 December largely because his loyal Greek manservant Giorgio Kokali developed dysentery in Kandy. He divided his time between Colombo, Galle, Matara, Ratnapura and Kandy but the bulk of his drawings and sketches consist of landscapes on the southern coast, and some particularly impressive ones of the excursion to Ratnapura where he stayed with Hugh Nevill of the Ceylon Civil Service, the son of a very close friend William Nevill. He was bowled over by the sheer luxuriance of the vegetation and foliage, and lusted after the variety of trees interspersed with views of the sea, river and mountain scenery. The breadfruit and jak trees were special favourites, with the ubiquitous coconut vistas a particularly enticing draw. He sketched compulsively for almost three weeks, till Kokali's illness took up his time. He travelled by mail coach and one-horse trap to the South and Ratnapura, and train from Colombo to Kandy and back.

The entire Lear material consisting of his journal, diary and water colours, and drawings relating to this Indian expedition is in the Houghton Library of Harvard University. The thirteen month safari produced over 1500 drawings. A total of 76 water colour sketches and drawings relating to Ceylon have been identified, catalogued and described by the writer in 1973. Of them 68 were done while in the island, 2 in 1884 and 6 in 1885. Only the later eight are finished water colours. The last six were part of the 200 original landscape drawings illustrating lines from the poems of Alfred Lord Tennyson, as Lear was an intimate of the poet and his wife Emily, and named his two villas in San Remo after them. The first of the 1874 series was done on 09 November in Colombo and the last on 04 December in Kandy at 7:00 a.m. and 7:30 a.m. respectively, as Lear had the habit of putting both time and date on his sketches, besides making notes on tone and colour effects for future guidance. Only one of these

Ceylon drawings has ever been noticed in any monograph on Lear up to now. In Philip Hofer's *Edward Lear as a Landscape Draughtsman* (Harvard University Press, 1967) plate 85 (p.39) is a view of "Hanwele, November 28, 1874". The original is an ink drawing over pencil with green and yellow wash (19.5 x 12.8 inches). It was reproduced as a greatly reduced monochrome lithograph. The original was exhibited in the Arts Council of Great Britain at the "Edward Lear Exhibition" held in London in July 1958, listed as No. 59 in the catalogue. Readers wanting further information on Lear's travels in Ceylon are referred to the present writer's essay "Coco-nuttery and the Serendibbians" in *Sri Lanka Through Other Eyes* (New Delhi: Navrang, 1984). The present offering is but a tiny facet of a much larger work in progress, and is intended to deal only with three oil paintings and two ornithological drawings available in two locations in Sri Lanka, of whose existence little is known, and has never been recorded in the swelling corpus of writings on Lear in the last hundred years. It is time to fill this particular lacuna.

### DRAWINGS


1. Parrot (1856) Pen and black ink drawing on paper. 30 x 22 cms.
2. Owl (1856) Pen and black ink drawing on paper. 24 x 28 cms.

These two drawings, in prime condition still, were acquired for ten rupees in January 1957 from Geraldine Garnier (Mrs. B.D. Garnier) of Kotaboola Group, Kotmale by the late Wilmot P. Wijetunge, Wijetunge Walauwe, Matara. Mr. Wijetunge was a booklover, antiquarian, and scholar of the theatre. Knowing of my interest in Lear he gifted them to me in 1965. On inquiring from Mrs. Garnier in 1957 as to their provenance, she vouchsafed the information (letter to Mr. Wijetunge of 08 February 1957) that her father, who died in 1916 was Edward Walter of Croft, Leicestershire. He had given them to her when she was a child. His father (her grandfather) Henry Fraser Walter of Papplewick Hall, Nottingham, had known Lear. As Edward Walter was born in 1850, Lear had done the two drawings when Mrs. Garnier's father was six years old, perhaps to amuse him (?) even though they are accurately and carefully delineated. Both drawings are signed and dated "Edward Lear, 1856". When they came into possession of Edward Walter is not known.

### PAINTINGS


As with nearly all his major artistic work, these three oil paintings are based on watercolour sketches, which he worked over in later years at leisure. All these were obviously done in 1879, though only two are dated. I was delighted to examine and describe the paintings through the kind courtesy of Mr. & Mrs. David Gladstone (then High Commissioner for the United Kingdom in Sri Lanka) in their official residence, Westminster, House, 128 Wijerama Mawatha, Colombo 7 in 1988. Their provenance is unknown, but the Gladstones kindly volunteered to write to the Foreign Office in London for any available data on original ownership, date of purchase, and how, why and when these paintings were sent to Colombo to be hung in Westminster House.

Sadly, but not surprisingly, no information was forthcoming. The transfer, however, took place sometime after 1952 to go by the evidence on the labels on the back of two of the three pictures. These are the only completed oil paintings of Ceylon landscapes the author has seen and they have not been listed or referred to (as far as the writer's knowledge goes) in any catalogue or book on Lear's life and work. It is a classic example of the phenomenon of serendipity that they happened to be hanging on the walls of a prominent residence in Colombo for many years, largely unnoticed, until a Sri Lankan Lear fan was fortunate enough to get to know a British High Commissioner through a mutual Irish poet friend Richard Murphy, whose father, William Lindsay Murphy (later Sir), was the last British Mayor of Colombo, and its first Municipal Commissioner. The Gladstones were gracious enough to provide colour photographs of them.

1. "Ceylon, Road near Galle" 1879. Oil on canvas signed with Lear's monogram  at bottom left corner of picture. 35 x 22 cms.

A busy road scene near the town of Galle with a group of Buddhist monks carrying fans in right foreground, a double-bullock cart in left foreground, and a native man and woman in front of the cart. They are dressed in Indian style, and obviously Tamil, though Lear, five years later, may not have quite learned to distinguish between Sinhalese and Indian styles of dress. But the couple may well have been Tamil or Moor inhabitants of Galle. Tall clumps of trees (coconut predominant) with plantain groves on either side in the background, and a clear strip of blue sky between. Mostly green, yellow, brown and soft red colours with green in the ascendant as usual.

There is a tiny 1/2 inch strip of gilt wood attached to the bottom edge of the frame giving the title, date, and by "Edward Lear". This and the picture following were framed in London and parts of older frames dating from 1867 were used at the back. The frames are finished with gilt mounts. There is a paper label on the back of the frame with the following legend: "This picture was hung in the Treasury Common Room on the occasion of the Commonwealth Prime Minister's Economic Conference in London, November - December 1952". The picture described next has a similar label.

2. "Ceylon" 1879 by Edward Lear. Oil on canvas, signed with monogram  at bottom right edge. 35 x 22 cms.

Landscape with two Buddhist monks in left foreground, with rocks and low vegetation. Favourite coconut palms taper into the sky behind vegetation. A group of three smaller figures (two monks and an attendant male) in the right foreground. In the centre background a misty landscape with hills in the distance. Yellow monks, deep green fronds and tall trunks of trees, and shimmering tones of pale blues offer striking contrast with vivid verdure. A river flows in the middle. As with the picture described at No. 3 it could possibly be a scene near Avissawella or Ratnapura. If the former, the river would be the Kelani Ganga; if the latter it would be the Kalu Ganga. A Ratnapura location is more likely for No. 3, however, supported by the related journal entries as well.

Similar gilt wooden strip fixed at bottom of frame carrying legend, and label on the back, with similar style framing back and front. The two pictures are identical in size, and vertical in format.

3. **Untitled**, unlabelled, and undated, but containing Lear's usual monogram **QL** at **bottom** left hand corner. Oil on canvas. 25 x 44 cms. Horizontal in format.

The picture could be titled : (River Scene Near Ratnapura with Adam's Peak in Distance.) A landscape with Kalu Ganga in the foreground centre, and thick clumps of trees and assorted shrubs and vegetation on both banks, and in the centre background a range of hills with Samanalakande (Adam's Peak) prominently sited (with unmistakable cone) plumb in the centre. The foreground is as usual vivid and lush green, with the omnipresent coconut trees towering above other vegetation. The immediate foreground is in brown tones, with the river in soft blue and green shades, and haze-filled mountains in the distance. A branch with rose-red flowers floats in the water - a touch of romantic fancy?

The gilt label at bottom and paper label at back are missing, and the picture has been reframed in Colombo in recent times (to go by the style at the back) but retaining gilt framed mounts in front. From similarity of technique, mood and subject it is most probable that this picture was painted in the same year (1879) as the other two.

These three paintings, based on his 1874 sketches in the island, are in all probability the only extant works in oil on Ceylon subjects that Lear was able to complete before his death, and thus occupy a unique niche in his prodigious oeuvre.

In his lonely last years at San Remo, he thought often of Tennyson's shipwrecked sailor Enoch Arden, marooned on his desert island. In 1881 he began on a huge painting (15 feet long) of a fantasy tropical place. As he confessed in a letter to Mrs. Holman Hunt on 28 August the same year (Ms. Johns Rylands University Library, Manchester): "Besides my Tennyson landscapes, I am going to try to paint one subject more, 15 feet long!! Do not laugh . . . I mean, in this new subject (which is already much backed by innumerable studies) to introduce every kind of flower and tree I saw in India and Ceylon & c. & c. . . ." This unfinished painting was on his easel when he died on 29 January 1888, and its further adventures are unknown.