

MAKING HISTORY: GEORGE TURNOUR, EDWARD UPHAM AND THE “DISCOVERY” OF THE MAHAVAMSA

Introduction

George Turnour’s 1837 publication of *The Mahawanso in Roman Characters* was momentous.¹ It established lasting philological and orthographic standards for the publication of Pali texts in Roman script, being one of the first such texts, complete with critical apparatus and translation, ever printed. It functioned as a sort of Rosetta Stone for the chronology of ancient India, anchoring Asoka Maurya in the sea of time on the supposed *terra firma* of Megasthenes. And it proved especially significant for the subsequent practice of Sri Lankan history-writing because Turnour’s *Mahavamsa* became the authority on which all of the island’s ancient and medieval history was sorted, adjudicated, interpreted and read into physical, cultural and political landscapes.²

¹ Hon. George Turnour, Esq., *The Mahawanso in Roman Characters, with the Translation Subjoined; and an Introductory Essay on Pali Buddhistical Literature, in Two Volumes. Vol. I. containing the first thirty-eight chapters.* Ceylon: Cotta Church Mission Press, 1837. As is especially clear in Tennent’s account (cited below, n. 7), Turnour had intended to publish a two-volume set, and in fact had finished all but a few chapters of the translation of the second volume, bringing the narrative up to the advent of the British (and hence including as volume two what is now known as the *Culavamsa* or lesser chronicle), but his ill health and untimely death prevented him from completing it. This work was finally completed and published under the editorship of Mudaliyar L. C. Wijesinha in 1889, and thereafter published (1909) as a complete set (including a revised version of the original first volume with an edited version of Turnour’s translation but *sans* the Pali, which is also omitted in the second volume). A complete edition of the Pali by Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala and Don Andris De Silva Batuwantudawa had meanwhile been published separately in Sinhala script, by order of the Government of Ceylon, in 1877; the Wijesinha translation and Sumangala edition, based in Turnour’s work, were used by all scholars until Wilhelm Geiger’s editions and translations of *Mahavamsa* and *Culavamsa* appeared to displace it in the first few decades of the twentieth century (see below).

² This is not the place to attempt a full study of the ways in which Turnour’s *Mahavamsa* proved foundational for subsequent Sri Lankanist scholarship (and a very different tale can be told of its subsequent fate in Indian historiography, despite its hidden, continuing status as chronologically foundational). For initial considerations of its hegemony in the later study of chronicles per se see Jonathan S. Walters, “Buddhist History: the Sri Lankan Pali Vamsas and their Commentary, in Ronald B. Inden, Jonathan S. Walters and Daud Ali, *Querying the Medieval: Texts and the History of Practices in South Asia* (Oxford, 2000) p. 152-64. On the physical, i.e., the manner in which Turnour’s *Mahavamsa* shaped the “reading” of Sri Lanka’s famous ruined cities see Pradeep Jeganathan, “Authorizing History, Ordering Land:

As many readers of this journal will already know, the popular conception that Turnour “discovered” the *Mahavamsa*, as well as the more modest claim that he published the first English translation of it, are both mistaken. Rather, Turnour is said to have “discovered” the *Mahavamsa* commentary called *Vamsatthappakasini* (a.k.a. *Mahavamsa-Tika*) which helped him to produce the first “critical” edition and translation of the Pali text of *Mahavamsa*,³ but his was the *second* English translation of that text to be published.⁴ Yet the popular conception has shown remarkable vitality and even with these caveats acknowledged, Turnour (1799-1843) came to occupy near mythic proportions in the subsequent self-understanding of professional historians of Sri Lanka.

The lauds began even before his death, with prestigious support and commendation from the Asiatic Society of Bengal and a series of important publications in their *Journal*. His contemporary Major Jonathan Forbes, who republished Turnour’s “Epitome of the History of Ceylon” (as “Epitome of Cingalese History”) and various other parts of Turnour’s *Mahavamsa*, as well as his own reminiscences of the man, credits him with having “done so much in restoring Cingalese history, in developing that of India, and in examining the primitive

The Conquest of Anuradhapura.” in Pradeep Jeganathan and Qadri Ismail, *Unmaking the Nation* (Colombo: Social Scientists Association, 1995), available on-line at <<http://www.pjeganathan.org/edited-volumes/>>. On specifically cultural and political impacts of the Orientalist *Mahavamsa* see the essays in Jonathan Spencer, *Sri Lanka: History and the Roots of Conflict* (London: Routledge, 1990) and Steven Kemper, *The Presence of the Past: Politics, Chronicles and Culture in Sinhala Life* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1991). The real physical, cultural and political transformations effected by this reading of *Mahavamsa* (and, in particular, that text’s role/citation in the rhetoric fueling ethnic conflict) should come as no surprise, given that historians since Turnour himself have consistently constructed and narrated Sri Lanka’s archaeological, socio-religious and political history at least through citations to, and often as a mere paraphrase of the Orientalist *Mahavamsa*.

³ This point is made especially clearly in Tennent’s two-volume account, esp. vol. I, p. 314-15 (cited below, n. 7).

⁴ The first was Edward Upham’s, discussed in detail below. But before either of these appeared in print, and apparently also in some connection with Sir Alexander Johnston (see below), the great French Buddhologist Eugene Burnouf translated the text into French and Latin, and circulated it in manuscript. See Kemper, *Presence of the Past*, p. 86 n. 18; Kemper’s entire account of the emergence of Turnour’s *Mahavamsa* and its later vicissitudes (p. 80-95) usefully focuses on different points and reaches some different conclusions from our own (though the accounts are largely complementary).

religion of Gautama Buddha."⁵ Upon his untimely death his obituary in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* described him as "placed...at the head of this department of Oriental literature" for "the merit of having first rendered accessible to the public, authentic materials for the history of the origin and progress of the religion of Buddha... [his *Mahavamsa*] establishes Mr. Turnour's reputation as a Pali scholar, and as an industrious, careful, and learned investigator of the past history of the Island of Ceylon, and of its national system of religious worship."⁶ Sir James Emerson Tennent's subsequently hegemonic *Ceylon: An Account of the Island: Physical, Historical, and Topographical [etc.]* (1859) devotes a whole section to describing, in heroic terms, Turnour's "discovery... that whilst the history of India was only to be conjectured from myths and elaborated from the dates on copper grants, or fading inscriptions on rocks and columns, Ceylon was in possession of continuous written chronicles, rich in authentic facts..." although his "genius" was so "zealous and unobtrusive" that "even his immediate connexions and relatives were unaware of the value and extent of his acquirements till apprised of their importance and profundity by the acclamation with which his discoveries and translations from the Pali were received by the savans [*sic*] of Europe."⁷ Later in the century Pali Text Society founder T. W. Rhys Davids called Turnour's *Mahavamsa* "the foundation of all Pali scholarship."⁸

These plaudits were not undeserved. Turnour's *Mahavamsa* not only was formative for later Pali scholarship but also for the subsequent historical study of Sri Lanka, remaining its primary source, the text and translation of *Mahavamsa* that every historian used, until Geiger's edition (1908) and translation (1912) appeared

⁵ Major [Jonathan] Forbes, *Eleven Years in Ceylon: Comprising sketches of the field sports and natural history of that colony, and an account of its history and antiquities* (London: Richard Bentley, 1840), vol. I, p. 165.

⁶ Anon, "Proceedings of the Twenty-First Anniversary Meeting of the Society... 11th of May, 1844" in *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* vol. VIII (London: John W. Parker, 1846), p. 4.

⁷ Sir James Emerson Tennent, *Ceylon: An Account of the Island: Physical, Historical, and Topographical; with Notices of its natural history, antiquities and productions* (London: Longman, Green, Longman and Roberts, 1859), vol. I, p. 312-313. The entire account of Turnour's work (p. 311-315) is worth the interested reader's attention.

⁸ Cited in William Peiris, *The Western Contribution to Buddhism* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1973) p. 46; we have not traced the original quotation. In this regard cf. Tennent's report (vol. I, p. 313 n) that Turnour "had likewise planned another undertaking of signal importance, the translation into English of a Pali version of the Buddhist scriptures, an ancient copy of which he discovered, unencumbered by the ignorant commentaries of later writers, and the fables with which they have defaced the plain and simple doctrines of the early faith."

many decades later. While Geiger and others were able to correct many small errors and achieve a clearer English prose than did Turnour, Turnour's text and his translation were so well executed that they remain surprisingly usable even by present-day standards. In at least one way Turnour's could even be called better than Geiger's publication insofar as he prints the text and translation together on each page, and thereby encourages the reader to negotiate the Pali and English together. Turnour's achievement becomes especially pronounced, however, when his publication is viewed against the backdrop of the *first* published English translation of *Mahavamsa*, contained in volume one of Edward Upham's *The Mahavansi, The Raja-Ratnacari, and the Rajavali, forming the Sacred and Historical Books of Ceylon; Also, a Collection of Tracts illustrative of the Doctrines and Literature of Buddhism: Translated from the Singhalese* (1833, 3 vols.). It was against this backdrop that Turnour himself introduced, gained funding for and championed the superiority of his own *Mahawanso*.

The many good reasons to applaud Turnour's now famous triumph over Upham (1776-1834) are reviewed in the first section of this article. But a collaborative study of the Turnour and Upham translations (back to back and against the Pali and Sinhala originals), which the co-authors of this article undertook,⁹ also made us understand some of the prices that were paid for Turnour's achievement. We develop our analysis of these hesitations about Turnour's triumph in sections two and three. We suggest there that the standards Turnour set for Sri Lankanist historiography necessarily and permanently un-set other standards – indigenous historiographical traditions, assumptions, practices and notions about hegemonic texts – in a somewhat complicated history, which we try to reconstruct. In hopes not only of reconstructing this untold aspect of the history of Turnour's triumph, but also of at least glimpsing that other, displaced historiography, we use Upham's volumes to peek behind some doors that Turnour's work tried to close. Reading Turnour's triumph against the grain, as it were from Upham's angle, we try to theorize the agency with which *Mahavamsa* was first *presented*, by Sri Lankan Buddhist monks, or its putative "discoverers".

I. Turnour's Triumph over Upham

When Turnour first heard about Upham's plan to publish an English translation of the *Mahavamsa*, he was apparently quite excited. In 1832, writing to the editor of the *Ceylon Almanac*, the young civil servant (then stationed in Kandy) explained that, along with a lack of free time, he had not yet published his own translation of

⁹ We thank Whitman College for a generous Louis B. Perry Award for student-faculty research, June-August 2006, which made possible this collaboration.

the *Mahavamsa* because “the announcement of the proposal of publishing, in England, the translation of the greater part of the works noticed by [him], have deterred [him] from prosecuting that project.” He continued expectantly, “[b]y the last accounts received from home, the translation was in an advanced stage of publication. Its appearance in this country [Ceylon] may, therefore, now be early looked for.”¹⁰ But as he regretfully reflected later, in the introduction to his now famous *Mahavamsa* (dated 1836),

[t]his laudable endeavour on the part of [Sir Alexander Johnston] the late chief justice of this colony to lay before the European literary world a correct translation of an Indian historical work – the most authentic and valuable perhaps ever yet brought to its notice – having, most unfortunately, failed, I have decided on proceeding with the translation commenced some years ago; the prosecution of which I abandoned under the circumstances explained in the foregoing letter [quoted above].¹¹

Because he considered the task important enough to justify personal sacrifices – and ill health finally forced Turnour to leave it, and the tropics, in 1841; he died two years later at the age of 54, in Italy, where he had retired for the climate – Turnour took it upon his own shoulders to bring the “authoritative” *Mahavamsa* to the world’s attention, and did so with great success.

In his introduction to this momentous publication, Turnour sets up the value and authority of his own *Mahavamsa* through a scathing critique of Upham’s *Sacred and Historical Books of Ceylon*, which begins with a harsh characterization of the latter work as “one of the most extraordinary delusions, perhaps, ever practiced on the literary world” and a self-portrayal which makes Turnour’s own “object” precisely to prevent Upham’s translations from ever “being recognized to be works of authority.”¹² He proceeds to fulfil this aim or duty by launching *ad hominem* attacks on all the people involved in Upham’s publication, which culminates in Upham himself. Though Turnour quotes Upham’s own “disclaim[ing of] all pretensions to the philological knowledge and local information, requisite to render

¹⁰ Turnour, vol. I, p. iii. Turnour had begun working on Pali, and the *Mahavamsa*, in 1826, when he obtained a copy of the commentary called *Vamsatthappakasini*. He laid aside these studies from about 1828 until 1833, when he received a copy of Upham’s work.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid. On “citation” as a structure of Orientalist thought, resulting in “endless repetition” of the opinions of its own “authorities” (such as Turnour in the Sri Lankan case), see Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978), esp. p. 115-16, 202-204.

discussion useful, and illustration pertinent," Turnour retorts that the "spirit of candour in which this admission is made" does not "entitle Mr. Upham to be considered exclusively in the light of a publisher, irresponsible for any material defect the work he edits [*sic*] may contain. A fatality...appears to attach to the proceedings of every individual connected with the publication of these Ceylonese works, from which Mr. Upham himself is not exempt..."¹³ Given the delay in communication perhaps Turnour (we would hope), writing these words in 1836, did not yet know that Upham had been dead for two years.¹⁴

It will already be clear that Upham's work, in three large volumes, was actually multi-authored; as a result, it is very difficult to distinguish the different hands involved in transforming the original palm-leaf manuscripts into *Sacred and Historical Books of Ceylon*. As Turnour mentions in the quotation above, and is detailed in section two below, Sir Alexander Johnston (1775-1849), in his capacity as Chief Justice of Ceylon (1805 -1819), put together a collection of Sinhala and perhaps Burmese script (Pali and Sinhala language) manuscripts of *Mahavamsa*, *Rajaratnakaraya* and *Rajavaliya*, plus various miscellaneous texts pertaining to Buddhist and Sinhala philosophy and customs, all of which Upham published in

¹³ *Ibid.*, x. Turnour was not without reason in considering Upham's "disclaimer" insincere; in his voice as editor Upham presumes to "give a brief analysis of the work submitted by him to the public, first observing, that he has paid the utmost attention to preserve the integrity of the original narratives, and to introduce no alteration beyond the necessary idiomatical corrections, and establishing, as far as practicable, a uniform mode of expressing proper names, the titles of temples, &c. while in the notes it has been his constant endeavour to add whatever might render the subject more attractive or less ambiguous." Edward Upham, M.R.A.S., F.S.A., *The Mahavansi, The Raja-Ratnacari, and the Rajavali, Forming the Sacred and Historical Books of Ceylon; Also, a Collection of Tracts, illustrative of the Doctrines and Literature of Buddhism: Translated from the Singhalese* (London: Parbury, Allen and Co., 1833), vol. I, p. xv. If, however, Upham means by "the originals" no more than the Sinhala translation team's English-language products, which arrived in his hands already edited by Rajapaksha and Fox (for details, see below), then his statement may be true (i.e., he did very little editing of the works as received).

¹⁴ It would appear from Upham's obituary in *The Athenaeum*, 1 February 1834, p. 88 that "his literary exertions [had] been trammelled and weakened by severe mental and corporeal sufferings for many years." Yet, "calm and placid in his demeanour, cheerful in the company of those he esteemed, possessed of high moral rectitude and genuine philanthropy, he was respected while living, and will now be regretted." The same words (adding a mention too of his "true Christian piety") conclude another obituary, largely extracted from the first, which appeared in *The Gentleman's Magazine* (March, 1834), p. 336.

translation.¹⁵ As Johnston later explained in an 1826 letter to the Chairman and Deputy Chairman of the Court of Directors of the East India Company, successfully urging their official patronage of Upham's project (Upham also embedded this letter in his massive publication), "an English translation of [these manuscripts] was then made by [his] official translators, under the superintendence of the late native chief of the cinnamom [*sic*] department, who was himself the best native Pali and Singhalese scholar in the country; and that translation is now revising [*sic*] for Mr. Upham by the Rev. Mr. Fox, who resided on Ceylon for many years as a Wesleyan missionary, and who is the best European Pali and Singhalese scholar at present in Europe."¹⁶ Upham then put his own hand to the task, editing Fox's edited manuscript of the cinnamon department chief's edited version of the translation team's work on the original palm-leaf manuscripts, which in the case of *Mahavamsa* (and the Pali-language portions of *Rajaratnakaraya*, as well as the Pali texts

¹⁵ We have not been able to learn which of the original palm-leaf manuscripts, if any, ever made it to England; it may be that at least Upham saw nothing other than the contemporary English translation made for Johnston. Paul E. Pieris, in the introduction to *Ceylon and the Hollanders* (Colombo, 1918), mentions using some of Johnston's original manuscripts that were then in private hands in Baddegama. One way we hope the present article might open up the historical study of *Mahavamsa* is to motivate closer examination of these and other manuscripts of it in Sri Lanka as well as abroad, not (as was the case for Turnour or Geiger) in order to rank them according to authenticity as a guide in producing a "critical" edition of the original, but rather as evidence of something about which we literally know nothing: how, for whom, and why were *Mahavamsa* manuscripts produced? How much did they circulate? How were they used? Quantitatively, such a study might also help to answer the empirical question whether prior to Turnour the *Mahavamsa* was unknown or widely known and respected, left open between Turnour and Fox, as discussed below. Indeed, it is worth noting that *Mahavamsa* (in various spellings) recurs repeatedly in the lists of temple manuscript holdings and overviews of Pali and Sinhala literature which the monks presented to Johnston and Upham published (vol. III, p. 170, 178, 184, 191, 198, 205); as far as Johnston or Fox or Upham could have known, anyway, *Mahavamsa* was certainly a ubiquitous text. Its relative circulation is also suggested by the entries for both *Mahavamsa* and *Mahavamsa-Tika* or *Vamsathappakasini*, in K. D. Somadasa, ed., *Lankave Puskola Pot Namavaliya* (Colombo, 1959-64, 3 vols.). But on the difficulties inherent in defining "the text" and the problem this poses for such an attempt at quantification, cf. below, n. 54. If we take a larger view of what constitutes "the text," *vamsa* materials in general make up a large percentage of the texts in temple libraries as reported to Johnston (Upham, vol. III, p. 169-215), and indeed, as recorded far more systematically and scientifically by Mr. Somadasa.

¹⁶ Upham, vol. I, p. x.

included in the miscellany of volume three) included original Sinhala glosses of the Pali, representing the earliest stage in the translation process.¹⁷

In order to dismiss irrefutably any claims to authority that might be launched on behalf of Upham's team, Turnour did not limit himself to vague accusations against the whole group; without refraining from naming names (and castes), he holds that none of the people who collaborated on the project was capable of accomplishing the task. He asserts that those who first translated the *Mahavamsa* from Pali to produce the Sinhala gloss were either "incompetent" or must have completely misunderstood the directions given by Johnston.¹⁸ The Pali translators formed "a compilation of their own; amplifying it considerably beyond the text, with materials procured from the commentary on the Mahawanso, and other less authentic sources; and in the rest of the work, the original has, for the most part, been reduced to a mutilated abridgement."¹⁹ Turnour then dismisses the team of

¹⁷ This might account for the otherwise bizarre treatment – by Fox (cited in Upham, vol I, p. xi) and even in the full titled of the published volumes, cited in n. 13, above – of the whole collection (including the Pali *Mahavamsa*) as translation "from the Singhalese." The existence of this Pali translation project before the "official translators" rendered the Sinhala (including these translations from Pali) into English is not clear in Upham's volume, and Upham himself may not have fully understood the process by which "the originals" reached him. Turnour, however, who may have known these monks or at least more about them than he lets on (cf. notes 18, 19, 53 below), makes the existence of the Pali translation team evident in his attack on their work.

¹⁸ Turnour, vol. I, p. v.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* Turnour's mention of the *Mahavamsa* commentary is significant, for it makes clear that long before he "discovered" it, *Vamsatthappakasini* was already (that is, still) being used as a guide in reading the text. This passage also makes it likely that his own tutors and monastic friends, especially the one he names ("Galle" of Mulgirigala, who gave him *Vamsatthappakasini*, Turnour, vol. I, p. ii), overlapped to no small extent with the monks who originally collected manuscripts for Johnston, as this same manuscript is listed among the temple holdings they reported to him (Upham, vol. III, p. 205, as "Mahawanse-tiekawe"). More tellingly, Upham's volume three begins with this monk's (or a predecessor's?) answers to the "seventeen questions" put by "the Dutch Governor," see below; More tellingly, Upham's third volume begins with this monk's (or a predecessor's?) answers to the "seventeen questions" put by "the Dutch Governor" (see below; Upham, vol. III, p. 3-6); it also contains a longer series of his answers to ninety questions put by the same (vol. III, p. 33-80) and a doctrinal compendium composed by an earlier high priest of that same Mulgirigala Temple for the Dutch governor (dated 1766, vol. III, p.81-106). This latter account concludes with an historical claim to its land holdings (p. 106): "[the] king of this island, called Dieweni-patisse, who resided in the city Anuradhe-pura, caused, in the 809th year after the birth of Roedoo [i.e., Buddha], in consequence of the happiness which consisted in his doctrine, this pagoda, called Mullegirri, to be erected in a most splendid

Sinhala translators, who first rendered the manuscripts (including the new Sinhala translations from Pali) into English, by casting aspersions on their "nativeness." They are stereotyped as elites from the Low Country ("selected from the most respectable, as well in character as in rank, of the maritime chiefs's [sic] families") who "profess, almost without exception, the Christian faith" and whose "education, as regards the acquisition of their native language, was seldom persevered in beyond the attainment of a grammatical knowledge of Singhalese: – the ancient history of their country, and the mysteries of the religion of their ancestors, rarely engaged their serious attention."²⁰ Even "their principal study...the English language" is called into question on the grounds that however much improved "of late" by British missionary schools, English education in the Low Country had formerly been "pursued [by these men only] in order that they might qualify themselves for...official appointments, which were the objects of their ambition."²¹ Turnour continues his attack by refuting the linguistic skills of the cinnamon department chief, whom he identifies as "Rajapaxa" (Rajapaksha), and of the Rev. Mr. Fox, already returned to England before Turnour commenced his studies. Turnour claims to know "Rajapaxa" personally and that the latter, though a gentleman, "was not himself either a Pali, or an English scholar."²² He likewise reveals that while Mr.

manner, which is situated within the Girrewasoloosda-haspattoo; and, with the consent of the necessary villages, and many people, caused great sacrifices to be made therein, from which time also it has remained in the same state" (cf. n. 64 below, and the corresponding text, on Buddhist land holdings as one of the real stakes in the Turnour-Upham debates). And Upham's lists of manuscripts in temple libraries include those in "Mulgirri Galle Vihari" (vol. III, p. 166f.). This passage moreover supports our suggestion, made below, that for these monks "history" included not only the Pali but also the vernacular historical and "miscellaneous" texts, i.e., those "other less authentic sources" which Turnour notes they also employed in "mutilating" the *Mahavamsa*. Cf. one of the lists of manuscripts published by Upham, which classes together as "halipot" (?) or "historical books amongst the Cingalese (wherein the histories of Ceylon are recorded), namely: – Maha-wanse, Mahawanse-tiekawe, Rajaratnakare, Raja-wallia, [and] Siehelle-wastua" (Upham, vol. III, p. 204-205).

²⁰ Turnour, vol. I, p. v. This may reflect a Kandyan bias against the much more heavily colonized, Christianized and Anglicized regions along the south and southwest coasts of Sri Lanka – which were however the center of the soon-to-emerge "Buddhist Revival" of the 19th century as well as the new Burmese sponsored (and typically very scholastically-oriented) non-Siyam nikayas – which, though not always explicitly, conveys a characterization of the Low Country as the home of "elites" who nevertheless belong to what in the eyes of the Kandyans, anyway, were degraded castes.

²¹ Ibid.

²² This man, who appears to have been primarily responsible for the original English translation, is unnamed in Johnston's letter and indeed throughout most of the 1833 Upham

Fox may have known Sinhala, he “had no knowledge of the Pali language.”²³ And Upham, of course, had knowledge of neither language.

Proceeding to an “illustration” of his “description of defects,” Turnour “confine[s] [him]self to noticing [only] two instances.”²⁴ Following this damning attack on the credibility of the translators and editors, the rather trivial errors he highlights in Upham’s publication are sufficient to convince any reader that the text

volumes (except as a native respondent to the Dutch governor’s inquiries, see below). But Turnour points to a footnote in Upham’s 1829 *The History and Doctrine of Buddhism, popularly illustrated* in which Upham names “Raja-pakse” as his source for claims about the sacrality of the Pali *Mahavamsa*. Turnour (vol. I, p. ix-x) denies that as a native Rajapaxe could have said something so absurd, paralleling his exoneration of Rajapaxe “from all responsibility, as to the correctness, both of the Pali version translated into Sinhalese, and of the Sinhalese version into English” – unless, Turnour adds parenthetically, “he has practised a most unpardonable deception on Sir A. Johnston” (vol. I, p. viii). In a lengthy and interesting passage here, Turnour praises Rajapaxe’s character, reputation and erudition (including access to the Burmese Pali scholarship which Rajapaksha is said to possess as a result of his [“chalia”] caste’s connection to the Low Country Buddhist *nikayas*; cf. below on caste-related documents among the manuscripts originally presented to Johnson) while at the same time utterly undermining any claim to being taken seriously which might have attended the Maha Mudaliyar, as Turnour (and the sole mentions in Upham, vol. III, p. xi, [107]) identify him. “Rajapaxe” (oddly, here Upham uses Turnour’s preferred spelling!) was one of those selected by the Dutch governor to provide answers to his questions about Buddhist doctrine (Upham, vol. III, p. xi, 20-30; cf. above, n. 20), and “Modeliar Rajah Paxe” is identified as the author of *The Budhu Guadma’s Doctrine, Drawn up from a Singhalese Compendium* (also published by Upham, vol. III, p. 107-166), but Turnour concludes that “[Rajapaxe] had no better acquaintance with the Pali, than a modern European would, without studying it, have of any ancient dead language, from which his own might be derived. As to his acquaintance with the English language, though he imperfectly comprehended any ordinary question which might be put to him, he certainly could not speak, much less write, in reply, the shortest connected sentence in English.” To this Turnour adds a note explaining that after Johnston had left the Island, in 1822, Turnour, then Magistrate of Colombo, had to examine Rajapaxe as a witness in his court. This was before Turnour “had acquired a knowledge of the colloquial Singhalese,” so he found himself “obliged to employ an interpreter (the present permanent assessor, Mr. Dias, modliar) not only to convey his Singhalese answers in English to me, but to interpret my English questions in Singhalese to him, as he was totally incapable of following me in English. With Europeans he generally conversed in the local Portuguese” (Turnour, vol. I, p. viii including note). Here Turnour’s own one-time inability to converse with this “native” (whether in Sinhala or “the local Portuguese”) is transformed into an indictment of Rajapaksha’s abilities, which for Turnour outweighs his established, good reputation.

²³ Turnour, vol. I, p. viii-ix.

²⁴ Turnour, vol. I, p. v.

is indeed a failure made obsolete by Turnour's superior work. Turnour first points to Upham's rendering of the name of Sri Lanka's first Buddhist king, Devanampiyatissa, as "Petissa the second." He explains the literal meaning of the name in Pali ("of-the-dewos-the-delight-tisso") then accounts for Upham's weird rendering:

This title in the Singhalese histories is contracted into "Dewenipaitissa;" and in the vernacular language, "deweni" also signifies "second." These "*official translators*," ignorant of the derivation of this appellation, and of these historical facts, and unmindful of the circumstance of no mention having previously been made of "*Petissa the first*" in the work they were translating, at once designate this sovereign "*Petissa the second*"!!²⁵

Even more than the revelation itself, Turnour's double exclamation points ridicule the very foundation upon which the anyway unreliable Rajapaksha, Fox and Upham constructed their translation.

Turnour continues his exemplification of such "unintentional perversion of the text" by raising his second point, the rather embarrassing fact that Upham was confused about the contents of the opening portion of the *Mahavamsa*, in particular the chronology and names of the previous buddhas. In his introduction, Upham claims that the names and chronology of most of the buddhas previous to "Budhu Guadma" are not mentioned in any of the Buddhist histories.²⁶ Turnour writes that it is "unfortunate for the native literature of Ceylon, that it should be so misrepresented in an introduction to a work, which in the original contains in the first page, the *name of every one of the twenty four Buddhos, stated in order of their advent*."²⁷ Unable to confine himself to two examples after all, Turnour then surveys several additional specific, but ludicrous mistakes before concluding:

It is scarcely possible for a person, not familiar with the subject, to conceive the extent of the absurdities involved in these, and other similar passages. It is no burlesque to say, that they would be received, by a Ceylonese Buddhist, with feelings akin to those with which an Englishman would read a work, written by an Indian,

²⁵ Turnour, vol. I, p. vi. Emphasis in original.

²⁶ Upham, vol. I, p. xxii.

²⁷ Turnour, vol. I, p. viii. Emphasis in original.

professedly for the purpose of illustrating the history of Christianity to his countryman, which stated, – that England was the scene of the birth of our Saviour; that his ascension took place from Derby peak; and that Salisbury cathedral stood on Westminster abbey. And yet these are the publications put forth, as correct translations of, and compilations from, the native annals of Ceylon. Such is the force, respectability, and apparent competency of the attestations by which “The Sacred and Historical Works of Ceylon” are sustained, that they have been considered worthy of being dedicated to the king, patronized by the court of directors, and sent out to this island, by the secretary of state, to be preserved among the archives of this government!!²⁸

This is all Turnour has to say about Upham’s volumes, and it proved all he needed to say. Though initially received warmly in an *Athenaeum* review which recognizes *Sacred and Historical Books of Ceylon* as “the first translations that have appeared in Europe of the sacred books that contain the creed of one hundred and eighty millions of our fellow-creatures,”²⁹ Upham’s massive work, an official, collaborative exercise years in the making, was never reprinted, and fell into utter obscurity.

Because of Turnour’s triumph over him, Upham is not remembered as the first translator of *Mahavamsa* (and also of *Rajaratnakaraya* and *Rajavaliya*, hence a pioneer of both Pali and Sinhala translation), nor as the first Orientalist, as far as we have been able to discern, who published a book with the term “Budhism” (perhaps his own invention) in the title (*The history and doctrine of Budhism, popularly illustrated; with notices of kappooism, or demon worship, and of the bali, or planetary incantations, of Ceylon*, 1829).³⁰ His earlier Orientalist studies – *Memoranda, illustrative of the tombs and sepulchral decorations of the Egyptians; with a key to the Egyptian tomb now exhibiting in Piccadilly; Also, remarks on mummies, and observations on the process of embalming* (1822), *Rameses; an Egyptian tale: with historical notes, of the era of the pharaohs* (1824, 3 vols.), *Karmath; an Arabian tale, By the Author of Rameses* (1827) and *History of the*

²⁸ Turnour, vol. I, p. xi.

²⁹ “Reviews” in *The Athenaeum*, April 13, 1833.

³⁰ This large and gorgeous volume, published in London by R. Ackerman, includes 43 hand-colored lithographic plates showing Sinhala deities and ornaments which are well worth the interested reader’s attention. The text is based on the manuscripts in translation as published (plus, apparently, some that did not get published, notably the basis for his discussion of indigenous “sorcery”).

Ottoman empire, from its establishment, till the year 1828; Preceded by the Life of Mahomet (1829, 2 vols.) – and his work indexing the Rolls of Parliament were still insufficient to save his name, at least among subsequent Buddhologists, Pali scholars and historians of Sri Lanka.³¹ Despite his rather extraordinary scholarly reach, from ancient Egyptian embalming to Ceylonese Buddhist historiography, and the statement of his obituary that “[t]o him, indeed, and to the distinguished individual [Johnston] who placed these remarkable [Ceylonese] records in his hands, Oriental literature is much indebted....,”³² Edward Upham, one-time mayor of Exeter, retired London bookseller, dilettante Orientalist, is remembered primarily for his failure to produce the sort of *Mahavamsa* that George Turnour produced, if he is remembered at all.

II. Reading Turnour’s Triumph against the Grain

Turnour’s account makes clear his genuine respect for Sir Alexander Johnston, the then-former Chief Justice who first collected the manuscripts that became Upham’s folly. But in his role as heroic corrector of that folly, Turnour performs a certain sleight of hand on his mentor. In several places he suggests that Upham’s work was ultimately a failure to achieve Johnston’s “object,” which Turnour takes to have been the production of a critical, Orientalist translation of *Mahavamsa* similar to his own. Thus in the passage quoted above, Johnston’s “laudable endeavour” to produce the “correct translation” of an “authentic” and “valuable” Indian historical work is what “most unfortunately, failed.” Turnour accuses the Pali translation team of incompetence or “totally misunderstand[and] the late chief justice[Johnston]’s object,” namely “procuring an authentic copy of the Pali original, and translating it into vernacular language.”³³ Turnour later refers to Upham’s publication as “this signal failure in Sir A. Johnston’s well intentioned exertions.”³⁴

We do not question Turnour’s ridiculing demonstration that Upham’s publication failed to fulfil the Orientalist standards of the late 1830’s; that was clearly the case. Indeed, given the convoluted process that linked the original manuscripts with the published translations we found rather amazing those instances where Upham’s translations really *do* accurately translate the Pali (and, more often, the Sinhala) originals, which however turn out to be not as rare as one might infer

³¹ His obituary in the *The Athenaeum*, 1 February 1834, p. 88, suggests (specifying his greatest success, *Rameses*), that his work’s “general circulation” was “prevented” by its being “written in a style so turgid and diffuse.”

³² Ibid.

³³ Turnour, vol. I, p. v

³⁴ Turnour, vol. I, p. xi.

from Turnour's critique alone. Rather, we question Turnour's claim that producing an Orientalist *Mahavamsa* was ever Johnston's intention, let alone that of the monks who were responsible for the collection and initial translation of these texts. As is clear in the bulk of Turnour's 1836 introduction, taken up with analyzing the importance of *Mahavamsa* for questions raised by historians of ancient India (which is similarly the preoccupation of Turnour's 1832 letter to the *Ceylon Almanac*), finding "authentic" Indian history was actually the "object" of the influential 1830's Orientalists of Bengal among whom Turnour made his own career in a series of important publications.³⁵

Johnston, on the other hand, collected his manuscripts around the time of the fall of Kandy (1815), and hence in those early days of Orientalism before the rise of its "professionals" like Turnour, described by Edward Said and more recently bemoaned by William Dalrymple;³⁶ Sir Alexander would have been prescient to have anticipated historians' problems and philological standards that emerged as the cutting edge only a generation later, especially given that he, like Upham, apparently knew neither Sinhala nor Pali. Indeed, writing his testimonial letter in 1826, probably a decade more or less after the fact, Johnston states his purpose in gathering the manuscripts to have been considerably different from anything that Turnour allows.

"After a very long residence on Ceylon as chief justice and first member of his majesty's council on that island, and after a constant intercourse, both literary and official, for many years, with the natives of every caste and of every religious persuasion in the country," Johnston made it his duty to create "a special code of laws...scrupulously adapted to the local circumstances of the country [Ceylon], and to the particular religion, manners, usages and feelings of the people."³⁷ As soon as George III's government "fully approved of [his] opinion, and officially authorised [him] to take the necessary steps for framing such a code," Johnston reports, he

³⁵ For details of these publications and the history of what genuinely could be called Turnour's "discovery" (yet, ironically, is attributed to James Prinsep instead!), namely the identification of the author of the Firoz Shah pillar as Asoka Maurya, see Walters, "Buddhist History," 152-59.

³⁶ Said focuses on the narrowing of boundaries and imagination created in the work of pioneering professionals such as Sacy and Renan; Dalrymple, *White Mughals: Love and Betrayal in Eighteenth-Century India* (New York: Penguin, 2002), focuses less on the scholarly than the social limiting of purview which this shift to professionalism, beginning just as Turnour and Upham were publishing their works, entailed.

³⁷ Upham, vol. I, p. ix, quoting Johnston's own testimonial to the Directors of the East India Company, 13 November 1826.

publicly informed all the natives of the island [!] of the use and beneficial object which his majesty's government had in view, [and] called upon the most learned and the most celebrated of the priests of Buddha, both those who had been educated on Ceylon, and those who had been educated in the Burmese empire, to co-operate with [him] in carrying his majesty's gracious intention into effect; and to procure for [him], as well from books as other sources, the most authentic information that could be obtained relative to the religion, usages, manners, and feelings of the people who professed the Buddhist religion on the island of Ceylon.³⁸

The men whom we have dubbed "the Pali translators," who were responsible for collecting all the Johnston manuscripts (and providing Sinhala glosses of the Pali portions), were thus likely not the bumbling incompetents misunderstanding what they were supposed to be doing whom Turnour's caricature makes them out to be.

Rather, they "compared...all the best copies of the same works in the different temples of Buddha on Ceylon" which were then "carefully revised and corrected by two of the ablest priests of Buddha on that island."³⁹ And this conference of the most learned Buddhist monks whom Johnston could locate, we assume, would have understood the gravity of the situation in which they gave their carefully considered joint response to an official request for self-representation. Though we do not know precisely when during his tenure Johnston collected the manuscripts, given his statement (quoted above) that he commenced this project after many years on the island, it must have overlapped with the preludes, enactment and aftermath of the second Kandyan War, the 1815 Kandyan Convention and the subsequent 1818 Rebellion.

Indeed, Johnston's request, coming as it were from the government itself, was not taken lightly. "The priests," he continues,

after much consideration amongst themselves, and after frequent consultations with their followers in every part of the island, presented to me the copies which I now possess of the Mahavansi, Rajavali, and Rajaratnacari, as containing, according to the judgment of the best informed of the Buddhist priests on Ceylon, the most genuine account which is extant of the origin of the Budhu

³⁸ Cited in Upham, vol. I, p. ix

³⁹ Ibid., p. x.

religion, of its doctrines, of its introduction into Ceylon, and of the effects, moral and political, which those doctrines had, from time to time, produced upon the conduct of the native government, and upon the manners and usages of the native inhabitants of the country. As the priests themselves, as well as all the people of the country, from being aware of the object which I had in view, felt themselves directly interested in the authenticity of the information which I received, and as they all concurred in opinion with respect to the authenticity and value of the information which these works contain, I have no doubt whatever that the account which they give of the origin and doctrines of the Buddhist religion is that which is universally believed to be the true account by all the Buddhist inhabitants of Ceylon.⁴⁰

Here Turnour's sleight of hand is revealed. Johnston was concerned to locate and understand the contents of those texts which *Buddhists* considered the most "authentic" and "valuable" self-representations upon which to base just laws; he was not trying to see to it that the *translations* of them, let alone only of the Pali *Mahavamsa*, be "authentic" and "valuable" in the way George Turnour deployed those terms. Turnour's "authenticity" was to be determined philologically, getting as close as possible to the original text and a literal rendering of it in English, for the sake of knowing the original text; Johnston's "authenticity" was to be determined by what leading and representative Buddhist monks had to say, for the sake of knowing those monks' views. Turnour found "value" in *Mahavamsa* to the extent that it solved puzzles about the most ancient periods of Indian history; Johnston found "value" in it, and the other historical and non-historical texts Upham published, to the extent that they shed light on the actual circumstances of then-present Ceylon, over which the British had, after all, recently become the acknowledged masters.

Johnston's charge to the monks would appear in fact to have been radically open: the monks he contacted were to produce the required information "as well from books as other sources," and Johnston did not even specify that the requested books should be *histories* as opposed, say, to the sorts of "tracts" that make up volume three of Upham's publication. The point for Johnston and Upham was to present the world with self-representations of Ceylon's Buddhists in (translations of) their own voice (volume three actually contains extensive transcripts of interviews with several of these same leading monks), on the basis of which appropriate laws – and characterizations – could be made. This is precisely how "the world" received

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. x

Sacred and Historical Books of Ceylon, too, if an early review in *The Athenaeum* is any indication. The reviewer affirms (in much their own words) that Johnston and Upham have succeeded in their purpose by presenting an authentic and valuable picture of Ceylonese Buddhism. The reviewer concludes by recommending that those who want further information about Buddhism should attend "the interesting exhibition of a real Buddhist Temple" then running at the famous Christian missionary institution out of which grew the YMCA, Exeter Hall in London's Strand, "under the care of a very intelligent native of Ceylon, who is able and willing to explain the tenets of Buddhism as at present received in that island."⁴¹ For at least some of "the world," then, genuine Buddhist voices made directly available to the discerning (British) public were still what lent authority – authenticity and value – to European knowledge of Buddhism.

We do not know what words were used to ask the monks to produce "authentic" and "valuable" self-representations, but the range of texts and their correspondence to Johnston's actual charge indicate that they *did* understand in some detail what he was seeking, and tried to provide it. The question thus becomes: how can we understand the learned monks' presentation of *Mahavamsa* and other texts to Johnston as a response to the new colonial master's charge?

An answer to this question begins at those junctures in Upham's *Mahavamsa* which Turnour disparaged (quoted above) as "mutilated abridgements" or "amplifications" that went "considerably beyond the text, with materials procured from the commentary on the Mahawanso, and other less authentic sources." The learned monks who collected manuscripts for Johnston (and presumably had them copied, and served on or sent underlings to serve on the team/s that initially translated the Pali into Sinhala) certainly could have presented Johnston with a literal rendering of only the *Mahavamsa*, had they so chosen (or had that been what Johnston requested of them). But they provided instead a vernacular gloss that "translated" according to different standards and practices than those of emergent European Orientalism. They also presupposed as valid "con-text" a set of related materials – two other vernacular histories as well as a series of Buddhist texts that became volume three of Upham's publication – which differed from those of interest to Turnour (who, for instance, has barely a word to say in his voluminous writings about *any* of the post-*Mahavamsa* histories, let alone then-contemporary Sinhala-language historiography).

This Sinhala gloss on *Mahavamsa* which became the basis of Upham's "translation" reflected indigenous reading practices that kept "the text" more open than Turnour would have countenanced. Like a commentary, this Sinhala gloss (as far as we can know it from the much-edited English form in which it survives)

⁴¹ "Reviews" in *The Athenaeum*, April 13, 1833.

apparently “read” the Pali *Mahavamsa* according to the monks’ own then-present purposes and predilections, summarizing or omitting some details and expanding others, rather than making any pretense of being a literal re-rendering of the ancient text. This is, indeed, precisely the correct method for reading *Mahavamsa* according to *Vamsathappakasini*, the *Mahavamsa* commentary upon which Turnour and later writers claimed his authority. There, “the book called *Mahavamsa*” is to be “listened to” in the original 5th century verse and simultaneously contemplated at length (or passed over without mention): “heard” in the sense of “understood” (or what we would call “interpreted” and “effected”), in that instance via 10th century scholarly prose which interpolates later or separate material that is not technically “in” the *Mahavamsa* text, engages rival historians and makes judgments about the comparative trustworthiness of contradictory reports, declares in its silence that large chunks are not worth discussing further, glosses curious language or grammatical constructions or archaic names, and so forth.⁴² In actual practice, of course, this is precisely what any historian does with her or his sources: summarize, choose particular points upon which to focus new interpretations that draw on outside materials, quote or paraphrase those points as proves appropriate, pass over huge swathes without mention, or substitute then-contemporary language and names.

And as with any historian’s work, by looking at what the learned monks chose to omit, and what they chose to embellish, we can start to imagine what they might have been trying to do as historians, just how they were trying to answer, historically, Johnston’s charge that they provide a self-representation upon which appropriate laws might be established. The Pali, the text, is always the given; what matters is how it is read or, in the words of *Vamsathappakasini*, not just its letter (*byanjana*) but also its purpose or true meaning (*attha*). That “mutilated abridgement” presented to Johnston, can be understood, in other words, as a then-contemporary *reading* of the *Mahavamsa* which highlighted the points its authors considered important in answering the specific charge laid before them. Interpreting this reading is, however, a complicated matter because subsequent “mutilations” by Rajapaksha’s team, then Rajapaksha himself, then Fox, and then Upham make it difficult to confidently interpret specific omissions and interpolations as the work of the original monks. But even through the layers of editing, and, against the grain, especially through Turnour’s criticisms of it, we must at least imagine a world in which this sort of “open” reading of the *Mahavamsa*, despite its not proceeding according to 19th century European historiographical and philological standards, might still have constituted good historical practice *for the monks who were doing*

⁴² See Walters, “Buddhist History,” p. 125-141, esp. 126-127.

the self-representing. If Turnour is right that neither the Sinhala translators, nor Rajapaksha, nor Fox knew Pali, then Upham’s *Mahavamsa* in all its abridgement and amplification might be largely what the monks provided as the original translation (into Sinhala); this is certainly Turnour’s view of it. He should have expected no less of the learned monks who provided Johnston, and him, their manuscripts, for as Anne Blackburn has shown, this sort of bilingual reading of ancient Buddhist texts – an open Pali which is read and revised through its Sinhala glosses – was state of the art for late Kandyan erudition.⁴³ But Turnour himself would have none of that, and his triumph over Upham was so thorough that it requires considerable effort even to imagine a non-Orientalist historiography as “good.”

As though to insist from the beginning that to understand Sinhala Buddhist government one must understand its history, and to understand its history one must understand the openness of *Mahavamsa*, those Buddhist monks also provided Johnston with two earlier such vernacular readings of the Pali text, namely *Rajaratnakaraya*, which embeds select *Mahavamsa* verses (in Pali) within Sinhala prose narration of its contents (this distinction being lost in Upham’s translation), and *Rajavaliya*, which, making no pretense at all to be “true” to the Pali, narrates solely in rather colloquial Sinhala prose a history which culminates in armed Buddhist resistance to Portuguese aggression. Though Turnour’s works discount these texts in virtual silence, Johnston anyway understood that they were to be taken together as a package: “they are *all three* explanatory of the origin, doctrines, and introduction in the island of Ceylon, of the Buddhist Religion.”⁴⁴

These various Sinhala paraphrases of Sri Lankan history – which together constitute a dialogue among different readings of *Mahavamsa* – were presented along with an astonishing range of “tracts” that included: statements by various scholar-monks (including the Mulgirigala monk who gave Turnour his *Vamsatthappakasini*) on points of Buddhist philosophy and history, and Buddhist-

⁴³ Anne M. Blackburn, *Buddhist Learning and Textual Practice in Eighteenth Century Lankan Monastic Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). In another paper, one of the co-authors presents a new perspective on one of Upham’s other Sinhala histories, *Rajavaliya*, as “good” history, in part by showing that many of the characteristics which led Orientalists, starting with Turnour, to dismiss it as inauthentic were in fact characteristics of the cutting edge historiography of late premodern southern Indians, including the Nayakkars whom the British officially displaced as kings of Kandy: Jonathan S. Walters, “Buddhist Historians after the World-Wish: Rajavaliya Reappraised,” delivered at the April 2006 festschrift conference for Ronald Inden, “Sacred Cows and Mad Prophets: Papers on South Asian History and Religion in Honor of Ronald Inden” (publication proceeding).

⁴⁴ In Upham, vol. I, p. viii. Emphasis added.

Christian controversy, originally prepared in response to questions posed by “the Dutch governor” (and indicative of the fact that Johnston’s “object” had already been pursued by his Dutch predecessors); translation of a doctrinal compendium, also produced at Mulgirigala for (a different?) Dutch governor, called Iman Willem Falck, in 1766; various lists of temple manuscript holdings and attempts at cataloguing the genres of Pali and Sinhala literature; an extended version of the history of the Bodhi Tree; another compendium of “the Budhu Guadma’s Doctrine,” a detailed gazetteer which documents historically boundaries and extents of the island’s geography, according to its local owners (members of the nobility and “Budhu temples”); a text on proper performance of full moon day rituals; a list of the names of the *Jataka* stories together with some brief descriptions of a few of them; concise descriptions of various *Vinaya* practices relevant to Johnston’s charge (how to become a “Samanera or Ganoonnancy,” “How to become a Teroonancy or High-priest,” “Livelihood of the high and subordinate Priests called Teroonancys and Samenera Oenancys,” “List of different Siwoores or Priests’ Garments”); a discussion of whether or not it is “lawful for the Buddhist priests to be sworn to their testimony;” a description of Ceylonese marriage practices; an extended list of the chief Buddhist temples in the island; a discussion of the effects of merit; and four separate texts on the Ceylonese caste system, which conclude the entire Upham publication with the claim – here Rajapaksha’s hand is perhaps evident – that the “Chalia” caste (to which that cinnamon department chief himself belonged) deserved to be exempted from taxes and duties, and is the most trustworthy for service in government!

These “miscellaneous” texts supplemented the histories’ revelation, namely *that* Sri Lanka is Buddhist of necessity, with information about just *how* that Buddhist destiny played out in the past and, by implication, how it should be lived out in the then-present. This surely mattered to those monks; the Buddhist identity of the king was a central concern underlying the end of the Nayakkar dynasty in Kandy and initial inroads of the British, the Kandyan Wars, and the 1818 Rebellion, which emerged in a realization that the British did not really intend to protect and maintain the Buddhist religion in the same way that earlier dynasties of overlords had done, despite that provision in the Kandyan Convention. And Fox, at least, seems to have understood this as the sort of conscious self-representation which had been requested: “A more judicious selection in my judgement could not have been made from the numerous Buddhist works extant, esteemed of authority among the professors of Buddhism, to give a fair view of the civil and mythological history of Buddhism, and countries professing Buddhism...these three works, with a translation of a portion of the jatakas, will furnish the European public with all that

the Buddhists can urge on the subject of their history or mythology.”⁴⁵ Thus those Buddhist monks – whom Johnston anyway took to be representative, and the most learned scholars in the whole Island – provided a sophisticated, multivalent answer to Johnston’s question. They gave him not a single text but a whole historiography complete with its philosophical and practical underpinnings, framed as an open discussion of the absolutely irrevocable Buddhist destiny of Sri Lankan government.⁴⁶

It is possible that non-Buddhists in the editing chain might have been responsible for the omission of certain details such as the opening lines of the *Mahavamsa* which confidently declare the march of buddhahood across aeons of time by naming the twenty-four, not yet twenty-five, buddhas; something the Buddhist monks surely understood (these verses constitute a popular liturgical chant, elaborated in detail by *Rajaratnakaraya*) and had every reason not to elide; or the crucial bit of information that when the Buddha first visited the island he did so in order to “sanctify” it (to use Turnour’s translation of *visodhetum*).⁴⁷ But other “mutilations” and “amplifications” seem more likely to have been the work of those learned Buddhist monks themselves, such as the addition of extended narratives of Gajabahu, Asokamala, and Kelani Tissa which are absent in the Pali, but maintained a well-attested importance for then-contemporary Sinhala Buddhists (including elaboration in *Rajaratnakaraya* and *Rajavaliya*), and perhaps also the curious omission of the entire battle scene between Dutthagamani and Elara, much celebrated in *Mahavamsa* itself as well as the other Sinhala histories published by Upham.⁴⁸ The former narratives, in various Sinhala versions, encoded dialogues

⁴⁵ Upham, vol. I, p. xi-xii.

⁴⁶ Ironically, Upham’s publication, perhaps as a result of one of the later, non-Buddhist editors, does not specify, as does the original text as well as Turnour’s translation, that the Buddha visited Sri Lanka with the intent of sanctifying the land as the place where his religion would flourish. In describing the Buddha’s first visit to the Island, Upham writes that “On the ninth month after his attainment of the holy state of Budhu, he came into Lakdiwa (Ceylon), at the course of the constellation of Poosa, on the day of full moon” (Upham, vol. I, p. 5). Turnour translates the Pali more closely, on the other hand, and specifies that “being the ninth month of his buddhahood, at the full moon of the constellation pusso, unattended, visited Lanka, for the purpose of sanctifying Lanka. It was known (by inspiration) by the vanquisher, that in Lanka filled by yakkhos, and therefore the settlement of the yakkhos, - that in the said Lanka would (nevertheless) be the place where his religion would be glorified” (Turnour, vol. I, p. 2). The point still got made in Upham’s publication, however, most strongly in the translation of *Rajaratnakaraya* (cf. below, n. 65).

⁴⁷ See preceding note.

⁴⁸ For Upham’s extended narratives, which partially overlap with similar stories in his translations of *Rajaratnakaraya* and *Rajavaliya*, see vol. I, p. 228 (Gajabahu), p. 209-216

about political relations with southern Indian kingdoms (Gajabahu), royal purity (Asokamala) and royal piety (Kelani Tissa); perhaps the monks wrote them into the “translation” of *Mahavamsa* in order to preserve these as focal points for the historiographical discussion (which they did not however become for Turnour and his successors such as Forbes and Tennent; it was only after World War II that historians began to evince sustained interest in the Sangha-State connection and transregional politics of the *vamsas*).⁴⁹ The same could be true of other lengthy interpolations, apparently from *Vamsathappakasini*, of the lineage of the primordial king Mahasammata, and the Buddha’s genealogical connection with it (on the basis of which the Sinhala kings responsible for *Vamsathappakasini* claimed descent in that imperial lineage, kinship with the Buddha, and a right to overlordship in India).⁵⁰ The transformation of Dutthagamani from mighty warrior into benevolent ruler, effected in the elision of the entire battle with Elara, might have been motivated in a similar vein, i.e., keeping the British focused on the point that equitable law and good government are grounded in the ruler’s respect for and

(Asokamala), and p. 113-14 (Kelani Tissa). In addition to being narrated in the other histories Upham published, the significance of these stories to then-contemporary Sinhala Buddhists is clear in the even longer versions of them that appear in various “minor chronicles” in Pali and Sinhala, and especially in the Sinhala story literature. Some also circulated separately in popular poetry, especially the Gajabahu story (for some examples see P. E. P. Deraniyagala, ed., *Sinhala Verse [Kavi] collected by the late Hugh Nevill, F.Z.S. [1869-1886]* [Colombo: Ceylon National Museums, 1954-55, 3 vols.] #445, 539 701, 780; cf. #61, 125, 220, 371, 417, 517 for similar popular poems about the lineage of Mahasammata). Cf. also n. 49 below. The omission of the whole battle scene, which led Geiger to dub *Mahavamsa* an “epic,” may have political meaning, as we speculate below (see n. 51), though there are certainly other possibilities.

⁴⁹ On the politics of the Gajabahu story see Gananath Obeyesekere’s early meditation, “Gajabahu and the Gajabahu Synchronism: An Inquiry into the Relationship between Myth and History,” in *Ceylon Journal of the Humanities*, I,1 (1970), p. 25-56; on Kelani Tissa see Jonathan S. Walters’ revisionist reading, *The History of Kelaniya* (Colombo: Social Scientists Association, 1996). The inclusion of the extended story of Asokamala may reflect the preoccupation with caste which can be detected at various points in the Upham publications (cf. above, n. 20 and n. 22, on caste and region in Turnour’s dismissal of the translators responsible for these interpolations; below, on the contents of Upham’s third volume, including four separate texts on the Ceylonese caste system).

⁵⁰ The “race” of Mahasammata is detailed in Upham, vol. I, p. 8-20; the “generation of Mahamayadewe” is narrated on p. 20-29 of the same volume. Turnour’s translation dispenses with the lineage of Mahasammata in a short passage (as does *Mahavamsa* itself); Turnour, vol. I, p. 8-10. The ancestry of the Buddha’s mother is not provided in *Mahavamsa* (and hence not in Turnour), but becomes a major concern of *Vamsathappakasini*, as does the lineage of Mahasammata (on which see Walters, “Buddhist History,” p. 129-32).

participation in Buddhist institutions (Dutthagamani's construction of the Great Stupa is translated in full, rich detail).⁵¹

In any event, we suggest that those learned Buddhist monks tried to provide a body of material for translation which, in their estimation, represented an appropriate response to Johnston's charge. As Johnston indicates, they were not a little concerned to see that this response be made carefully. This was, after all, the monks' unique opportunity to directly address their new Buddhist king, George III. Despite "mutilations" that subsequently occurred in the haphazard and increasingly uninformed translation and editing process, they ultimately (after some fifteen years) succeeded in giving if not George III (long-since dead) then at least Europe's "literary world" a tolerable approximation of what they apparently intended: English translations of several vernacular (Sinhala) histories based upon readings of the ancient *Mahavamsa*, supplemented by varied treatises representative of the range of Sinhala Buddhist tradition.

But from Turnour's perspective, and from the perspective of all subsequent historians, what Upham provided was no more than a ludicrously bad reading of the Pali text. By extension, the underlying historiography practiced by the monks was irredeemably flawed. In Europe, early Orientalists like Bopp had already shown Turnour's generation of scholars that the text is a dead and closed thing meant to be handled only by competent philologists and adjudicated by the universal truths of European common sense, bypassing all the intervening "native" history and the messy circumstances of its own composition and transmission to speak directly to the present. Early Buddhologists such as Burnouf in Paris and Hodgson in Nepal were already establishing the scholarly rules for competence in such matters – such as critical editing and consistent transliteration including diacritical notations – and a text as important as *Mahavamsa* deserved nothing less.⁵² Again, it is hard to imagine

⁵¹ Upham's *Mahavamsa* does proceed later to narrate in some detail the military accomplishments of Parakramabahu I (now dated 1153-1186), which means that it would be incorrect to take the monks' gloss as straightforwardly pacifistic. Perhaps what the translators (at some point in the chain) wanted to avoid was the suggestion, made in the Dutthagamani "epic" as told in the Pali *Mahavamsa*, that the island's Buddhists resisted *foreign* overlords in the precolonial period. This is, conversely, a strong implication in *Rajaratmakaraya* and a matter of recent and probably eye-witness history in *Rajavaliya*.

⁵² On the early 19th century rise of philology and what he considers its devastating effects in alienating human beings from their own languages and ideas (just as biology alienated them from their own lives and bodies, and economics alienated them from their own labor), see Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (Random House/Vintage Books, 1973), esp. p. 280-302. As a dead text, *Mahavamsa* spoke only of the dead: for Turnour it spoke of Asoka Maurya in ancient India, and for his successors like Forbes and Tennent it spoke of the ruins of ancient Ceylon.

the very existence of the modern study of premodern Sri Lankan history without the scholarly apparatus and enthusiasm that Turnour provided. Yet Upham's work survives to let us see how that scholarly apparatus and enthusiasm kept Turnour, and has kept us from hearing the voices of then-contemporary Buddhist historians whom Turnour dismissed out of hand on the basis of epistemological presuppositions they perhaps had never even encountered, and the supposed sin of reading their own history the way they read history, rather than the way he read it. This silencing of the "native" historians' voices and undermining of their historiography, this unfortunate misrepresentation of the monks' self-representation, was effected as much by Turnour's epistemological myopia as by Upham's flawed publication.

III. Discovering the *Mahavamsa*

The popular truism that George Turnour "discovered" the *Mahavamsa* is false insofar as Johnston already had collected that text long before Turnour began his studies.⁵³ The claim is also ironic if we are correct in suggesting that Turnour's attempt at championing the historians of ancient Sri Lanka involved silencing their then-contemporary descendants; rather than saving indigenous historiography Turnour co-opted and transformed it into something utterly new, even foreign to the Sri Lankan context. But, upon reflection, it is no truer to say instead that Johnston (let alone Upham!) "discovered" *Mahavamsa*, nor to credit Turnour with "discovering" the commentary on *Mahavamsa*.

Rather, these texts must already have been known to the monks with whom both Englishmen conferred. In Turnour's own admission (quoted above), Upham's Pali translation team had translated *Mahavamsa* into Sinhala with the help of the "unknown" commentary, years earlier while he was still but a schoolboy; these texts had already been considered important enough to be chosen by committee as representative of the "authentic" traditions which Turnour, like Johnston – despite their differing "objects" and ideas about authenticity – sought. In fact, these ancient texts had been preserved for more than a thousand years by successions of scribes

⁵³ Our speculation (see above, n. 17-19) that the monks who gave *Mahavamsa* to Turnour may very well have been associated with those who conferred to answer Johnston's original charge, raises the interesting possibility that Turnour was given *Mahavamsa* as an after effect of the Johnston/Upham project! He was apparently first given the text in 1826, and the commentary in 1827, when he was serving in Ratnapura. This was probably about a decade after Johnston had roused up "the whole island's" interest in it. That the monks may even have consciously tailored their presentation of the text to the two different inquirers, Johnston and Turnour, is intimated in n. 66. below.

and scholars who recopied them, updated them, and produced increasing numbers of mutilated abridgements and amplifications of them, long before Turnour commenced his studies. It is inconceivable that either Turnour or Johnston ever would have located *Mahavamsa*, let alone the commentary and later histories, if Ceylon's scholar-monks did not already know and value those texts. Indeed, according to Fox, *Mahavamsa* itself was a veritable religious icon in then-present Sri Lanka: "the Mahāvansi is esteemed as of the highest authority," he informed Upham's readers, "and is undoubtedly very ancient. The copy from which the translation is made is one of the temple copies, from which many things found in common copies are excluded, as not being found in the ancient Pali copies of the work. Every temple I have visited [during a long career as a Wesleyan missionary in Ceylon] is furnished with a copy of this work, and is usually placed next [*sic*] the Jatakas or incarnations of Buddha."⁵⁴

Turnour takes particular exception to this statement, maintaining that "Mr. Fox labours also under some unaccountable delusion, when he speaks of 'abridged temple copies' and calls the Mahawanso a 'sacred work,' found in almost all the temples. It is, on the contrary, purely and strictly, an historical work, seldom consulted by the priesthood, and consequently rarely found in the temples; and I have never yet met with, or heard of, any abridged copy of the work."⁵⁵ This, in response to Upham's publication of not one but three such "common copies" of *Mahavamsa*, which he himself rails against as "abridgements," and despite the fact that he got his own manuscripts, as did Johnston, from the temple libraries of "members of the priesthood" who, as we have seen, not only "consulted" but were engaged in dialogue about the meaning and purpose of the ostensibly unknown text!

⁵⁴ Cited in Upham, vol. I, p. xii. In interpreting this statement it is important to remember that for the monks from whom these manuscripts were obtained, "the text" of the Pali included, as it were, many supplemental texts such as the so-called "minor chronicles" of particular relics or places, vernacular elaborations of the legends of *Mahavamsa* characters, and so forth. We are aware of *bana pot* manuscripts which literally place this kind of material, sometimes mere excerpts from the more popular Sinhala versions of various *vamsas*, "next the Jataka" (i.e., texts of particular *jataka* stories) for use in temple study and entertainment. Some of Turnour's disagreement with this statement may reflect his own more limited understanding of what constitutes "the text" of *Mahavamsa*, including only manuscripts of the Pali original so-named, which even Fox, in his discussion of the histories' comparative authority (see below, n. 67), admits to be the terrain of only the most learned inquirers (beginners focusing instead on *Rajavaliya* then working into the *Mahavamsa* through *Rajaratmakaraya*). The lists of library holdings published by Upham strongly support Fox's contention over Turnour's (see above, n. 15).

⁵⁵ Turnour, vol. I, p. ix.

Even more disingenuous appears Turnour's statement in the introduction to his 1833 *Epitome* (variously reprinted, and included in the introduction to his *Mahavamsa*), that, "I have never yet met with a native who had critically read through, and compared their several historical works, or who had, till lately, seen a commentary on the *Mahawanse*," when in that same introduction Turnour reveals that the "materials...collected by [him]" in order to write his "Epitome" included not only the *Mahavamsa* and the commentary but also a range of other Sinhala histories, including those translated by Upham!⁵⁶ While he plays down the significance of the monk-scholars who gave him all those texts and taught him to read them (or as he would have it, "(assisted in the translation from the Pali by my native instructors)"⁵⁷), he surely was not rummaging through forgotten libraries "discovering" any of these "materials" on his own. But that is the impression he conveys to his readers and Tennent, for example, describes how Turnour "undertook, with confidence, a translation into English of the *long lost* chronicle and thus vindicated the claim of Ceylon to the possession of an authentic and unrivalled record of its national history."⁵⁸

Though inaccurate, this language of "discovery" is important. Drawing on Tzvetan Todorov's stinging analysis of "the Discovery of America" (as though America was not already inhabited by tens of millions of human beings and hundreds of developed polities when it got "discovered") "discovery" can be viewed as a euphemism masking a grab for power: as in America, what actually happened was not "discovery" but "conquest."⁵⁹ Indigenous, vernacular readings of ancient Sri Lankan history, and the historiographical culture (standards, practices, assumptions) that sustained them, were displaced in a new hegemony still enjoyed by post-Enlightenment European historiography. Henceforth Turnour's way of reading

⁵⁶ Turnour, vol. I, p. ii-iii. This foundation for Turnour's claim to being a "discoverer," namely that only he bothered ever to look at the text, is greatly enlarged by Tennent's later claim (vol. I, p. 314) that "being written in Pali verse, [*Mahavamsa*'s] existence in modern times was only known to the priests, and owing to the obscurity of its diction it had ceased to be studied by even the learned amongst them." Oddly, here (in the 1832 letter which introduced his "Epitome" to the *Ceylon Almanac* of 1833) Turnour uses the spelling *Mahawanse*, whereas elsewhere he uses *Mahawanso*; Upham's translation uses the same spelling, *Mahawanse*, in the running page header, whereas elsewhere it is always *Mahavansi*. Did Turnour's contribution to the *Ceylon Almanac* reach England as the *Sacred and Historical Books of Ceylon* were going to press, and induce the editor (or printer?) to "correct" the spelling, at least in the running headers?

⁵⁷ Turnour, vol. I, p. iii. Parentheses in original.

⁵⁸ Tennent, vol. 1, p. 315. Emphasis added.

⁵⁹ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* (HarperCollins, 1992).

Mahavamsa (or its commentary) would count; indigenous readings that diverged from good Orientalist practice would not count. And in not counting, not even being worthy of mention, the whole of Sri Lankan historiography that had been developing since the composition of *Mahavamsa* got consigned to Turnour's dustbin in one fell swoop.

In demolishing Upham's publication while altering Johnston's charge, Turnour guaranteed that whatever those Buddhist monks were trying to say – about their own future as British colonial subjects! – would never be listened to. To rephrase Said's epigram from Marx, "the natives cannot get their self-representations heard; they must be represented."⁶⁰ Ironically, even the much-vaunted Pali commentary upon which Turnour staked his claim to fame was apparently not allowed to speak. For Turnour, *Vamsatthappakasini* (like all the Pali commentaries) was no more than a reference book that helped with grammar and interpretation, and annoyed when it entered into arguments with rivals, made assertions about real estate ownership, or interpolated moral and political lessons in "fables" about historical figures (none of which Turnour apparently understood as such); the commentary was never treated as a text unto itself, with an integrity and a message that needed to be heard in order to understand and effect, as it claims, the very "purpose" of *Mahavamsa* (*vamsa-attha-p-pakasini*).⁶¹ How much less so the vernacular "commentaries," starting with the gloss that became Upham's translation?

More ironic still, Turnour offers up his vehement critique of Fox's suggestion that there is anything "sacred" about *Mahavamsa*, as though himself unaware of the contents of the introduction to the commentary he was using, which specifies that the *Mahavamsa* is to be read and interpreted with grave care as the

⁶⁰ Marx's original quip as cited by Said (*Orientalism*, p. [xiii]) is: "They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented."

⁶¹ See Walters, "Buddhist History," p.126-27. Turnour's lack of care with the commentary is especially evident in his misunderstanding of its colophonic statement about the *Mahavamsa*'s author, Mahanama, whom he fails to distinguish from the author(s) of the commentary, which (according to the commentary itself) was a group of "blossoming people-lotuses" (teachers, i.e., leading monks) and "tractable people-lotuses" (students, including the king and/or members of the royal family) studying the text together in order to determine its real "purpose," some 500 years after Mahanama's time. As a result Turnour never even considers the possibility that the commentary's readings might differ from Mahanama's own, even though, for some obvious examples that should have made him do so, the commentary explains that certain names have changed since Mahanama's time (G. P. Malalasekera, ed., *Vamsatthappakasini: Commentary on the Mahavamsa* [London: PTS, 1935], vol. II, p. 616), and refers to monastic debates in the time of a much later king (vol. I, p. 176).

very word of the Buddha (*buddhavacana*).⁶² Turnour's insistence that "an intelligent native of Ceylon, never could have been the author of this...asserti[on] that the Mahawanso is 'one of the most esteemed of all the *sacred* books of his countrymen'"⁶³ strikes us as even more astonishing than Upham's mistake about the number of previous buddhas, given that the specifically Buddhist destiny of the island's good government appears not only in those same first-page passages but is woven throughout the entire *Mahavamsa* text, *even in Turnour's own translation*. This mischaracterization was not "only academic," however. It helped foster a process of secularization and feigned separation of religion from government and historical consciousness which played a critical role in debates (during the 1840's and 1850's) about the religiousness of popular Buddhism in the Island, and about just limits on the government's responsibility to support it; these in turn fed a systematic dismantling of Buddhist monastic wealth, educational institutions and political power, a process whose effects and counter-effects are still being felt today.⁶⁴

Because Upham's volumes, such as they are, constitute the only evidence we know to have survived of the monks' reply to Johnston, only they can answer our question about how the monks seized their opportunity to advise George III on his new role as Buddhist king. We can at least say with certainty on the basis of Upham's volumes that the monks tried to respond to the Government's request for self-representation by providing Johnston *historical* texts which drew upon and

⁶² Ibid., p. 126; cf. Malalasekera, *Vamsathappakasini*, vol. I. p. 3-4, where the term is predicated not only on *Mahavamsa* itself, but more precisely on the "explanation of the unclear verses in the versified *vamsa*," i.e., this very commentary. In other words not only the *Mahavamsa* itself but also the open, dialogical reading of it by which we have characterized the indigenous historiography, is itself the word of the Buddha, as "sacred" as anything in a Buddhist context could be.

⁶³ Turnour, vol. I, p. ix. Emphasis in original.

⁶⁴ For an excellent, concise and recent interpretation of these debates, and their "real world" effects, see Judith Snodgrass, *Presenting Japanese Buddhism to the West: Orientalism, Occidentalism, and the Columbian Exposition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), esp. p. 94-102. Snodgrass makes clear that Tennent, one of Turnour's earliest and most devoted champions, played key roles in these colonial policy discussions. Her book will also be interesting to Sri Lankanists for the new perspective it provides on the emergence of modernist (a.k.a. "Protestant") Buddhism in Ceylon through comparison with its Japanese counterpart. In particular, her analysis of the agency with which Japanese representatives at the Parliament of Religions of the Columbian Exposition (1893) "played" its Christian bias, and later old Colonel Olcott's enthusiasm, to their own religious and political ends in Japan and abroad, has important implications for our understanding of the work of the Ceylonese delegate at that Parliament, Anagarika Dharmapala.

interpreted the Pali *Mahavamsa*, together with Pali and Sinhala texts demonstrating the wide range of local learning, custom and practice according to which that history could be drawn upon and interpreted for the new, colonial (and especially judicial) context. It was they, not the Orientalists, who established that this discussion of Buddhism’s future in the island would be historical, and that the historical discussion would focus on *Mahavamsa*; it was they, after all, who gave the text to its “discoverers,” whether Johnston or Turnour, in the first place. Especially given that the supplemental texts are mostly Buddhist, which Johnston’s original charge had stipulated their answer be (to the exclusion of mentioning history at all), those monks likely chose these histories because they emphasize the importance of Buddhist institutions in the proper governance of the island. It is possible that they also had some foreknowledge, perhaps gained in their meetings with Johnston and Turnour, of history’s preeminence in then-contemporary European intellectual culture, and of the central role played by historical precedent in European legal and diplomatic institutions. Especially in the Upham-published reading of *Mahavamsa*, but also in texts like *Rajaratnakaraya* and *Rajavaliya*, history is the succession of Buddhist kings doing Buddhist things. Dynasties come and go; some – but only those which embrace the Island’s Buddhist destiny – thrive; no government thrives that undermines the religion, the environment, or the health and well-being of the people.⁶⁵

Taken together in this light, the three vernacular histories which those monks put forward for translation may constitute something of a spectrum. *Rajavaliya*, the most recent text, composed exclusively in rather colloquial Sinhala, focuses on conflict and battle, especially the bloody details of confrontations with the Portuguese, ending however (in many versions, including the one given to Johnston) on a hopeful note with the defeat of the Portuguese by the Dutch and a renewed Kandyan kingship near the end of the 17th century; it is the most virulently anti-colonial and anti-Christian of the three. *Rajaratnakaraya*, which mixes Pali and Sinhala in the original (this disappears in the translation), narrates a strong Sinhala Buddhist political history but concludes before its own day (which was the late 16th

⁶⁵ This is especially clear in Upham’s translation of *Rajaratnakaraya*, which includes such blunt statements as this one in its opening chapter: “Before the coming of Budhu, and before his religion was promulgated, the island was an abode of devils, but when his religion was preached, and followed, it became an abode of men...hence it follows that this island can never be governed by a king who is not of Budhu’s religion. And should it happen that a king of a different religion should ascend the throne by force, he would soon be driven from rule by the same virtue by which the devils were expelled: and that is the cause why kings of the Budhu’s religion continue on the throne of Ceylon, and why the kings are faithful, and persevere in the same” (Upham, vol. II, p. 1-2).

century), during the last gasps of Kotte/beginnings of Kandy (in the late 15th – early 16th century); its narrative overlaps with the arrival of the Portuguese (1505) but they remain conspicuously insignificant, and relations with them (or by analogy the British) are therefore left an open subject. The *Mahavamsa* itself, in the Sinhala gloss which those learned monks provided, ends in the 14th century, well before the rise of the last Sinhala kingdoms of Kotte and then Kandy, before there were any Europeans involved at all.⁶⁶ Perhaps this selection of texts was meant to imply three types of Sinhala-European interaction – violent confrontation (*Rajavaliya*, precisely what Johnston would have been concerned to avoid), a different encounter than that which actually happened with the Portuguese (*Rajaratnakaraya*, probably what Johnston would have preferred), or recovery of the old precolonial world of the Sinhala Buddhist kings (*Mahavamsa* in the Sinhala gloss, ostensibly what Turnour was attempting) – representing the range of real alternatives for their relationship with “the natives” that lay open to the British as they attempted to occupy the Sinhala Buddhist throne: precisely what Johnston had charged the monks with providing.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ This striking fact that the *Mahavamsa* given to Johnston ended in the 14th century suggests that the Pali translation team worked with a genuinely old *Mahavamsa* manuscript. According to the (*Culavamsa*) text (99.75-80), King Kirti Sri Rajasimha (1747-1782) had the Pali *Mahavamsa* updated to himself after discovering that the extant manuscripts only narrated the island’s history up to the same 14th century point where Upham’s translation likewise ends. Thus the manuscript used by the Pali translation team was produced between the 14th and mid-18th century. Curiously – perhaps to counter his fetishization of the text’s antiquity? – it appears from vol. II of Turnour’s *Mahavamsa* translation (which was published posthumously, see above n.1) that Turnour worked with “amplified,” more contemporary manuscripts, which included not only the extension up to Kirti Sri but also an additional extension up to the advent of the British which presumably was made after Johnston collected his manuscripts! In addition to thus making clear to Turnour that the *Mahavamsa* is a living and open text, perhaps his “native instructors” were trying to make it clear to him as well that the point of studying *Mahavamsa* is to coordinate what the new British overlords *do* in their position as Sinhala Buddhist kings, with the meaning and purpose of Sri Lanka’s long Buddhist history (which was of course closer to Johnston’s than Turnour’s “object”).

⁶⁷ It may be in this context that we can best make sense of the odd report given by Fox (Upham, vol. I., p. xii) and elaborated upon by Upham (vol I., p. xvi-xviii), namely that a certain hierarchy among the three historical texts existed for “the natives:” *Mahavamsa* is the most authoritative but the hardest and least well known; *Rajaratnakaraya* stands in the middle in terms of difficulty, popularity, age, and authority; *Rajavaliya* has the least authority and is the most recent (and up to date) of the three, but is easy to read and hence widely known. The term “authority” or “authoritative” is, as we have seen, thrown around by these writers in various ways, so it is not clear whether the “native” claim being reported

In any event our point is that the learned monks who produced for Johnston the collection of manuscripts, ultimately published by Upham, did so in some answer to Johnston’s call for a self-representation upon which to base equitable laws that were universal in nature yet adapted to the unique, local context. The monks were not trying to fulfil Turnour’s desire for a critical edition and translation of an ancient Indian history. They chose to focus the discussion on history in general and *Mahavamsa* in particular, for their own reasons and according to their own standards; and the Sri Lankan historiography they presented was an open, dialogical tradition spanning many centuries and embracing a variety of different readings. They chose moreover to include that particular, still unstudied miscellany as representative of the range of their learning, assumptions, and practices and therefore an appropriate guide in interpreting that historiographical tradition for new, colonial purposes. Whatever the monks were trying to say – and we recognize that we have offered up no more than intimations of some anyway speculative scenarios – the point is that they said it thinking that “his majesty’s government,” George III himself, would be listening.

Conclusion

In contrast to the indigenous historiography of those Buddhist monks who gave the colonial officers their manuscripts, Upham’s own historiographical standards, assumptions and practices turn out to be much closer to Turnour’s than the latter would have liked to think. Upham, like Turnour (and echoing the testimonial he published from Johnston), was excited (however naively) about the significance of the historical narratives he was given to edit and publish, and he dedicated them “to the King’s Most Excellent Majesty” as “works...recognized as authentic and valuable Records of Buddhism [which] present the only historical accounts of those

here, if such a thing existed at all (which Turnour doubts), was originally a claim about the texts’ relative reliability, antiquity, or the relative reverence in which they were held. But in the present register, taking “authority” to have a political resonance, the meaning of the claim – however garbled by those who reported it – might have been: “returning to the old political structure (*Mahavamsa*) is of course the given, the original and best course, but the hardest and least popular of the three; achieving it involves close study. Facing the encounter afresh with as it were a clean slate (*Rajaratnakaraya*) is easier, but still has its difficulties. Johnston had best examine these histories closely and take stock of their importance for the people, among whom *Rajavaliya* (violent resistance) is the easiest and best known option.”

celebrated Monarchs, whose wisdom and virtue have at various periods so powerfully contributed to the prosperity of Ceylon.”⁶⁸

Broadly speaking, Upham shared Turnour’s world-view and considered himself, however amateurishly, part of the same club (perhaps it is fortunate for Upham that he was dead before Turnour’s attack appeared in print, and for Turnour that Upham was never able to retort).⁶⁹ In places his work even exhibits something of a critical eye, highlighting as it does certain passages as “stamped with an appearance of truth which nothing can destroy” (even if they turn out to be, as in this instance, the lineage of Mahasammata, one of the long interpolations made by the Pali translators).⁷⁰ It was precisely Upham’s pretension to the authority of Orientalism that infuriated Turnour: Upham did not merely print the books but dared to edit and introduce them, to make generalizations on the basis of them, and to vouch for their authenticity, without really having any idea what he was talking about. But despite failing to be an Orientalist of Turnour’s calibre – and it is only Upham’s failure which fortunately allows us glimpses in his volumes of the indigenous historiography Turnour suppressed – Upham shared Turnour’s world; his epistemological presuppositions and scholarly practices, his basic understandings of history and religion or what makes government good or the discrete boundaries of “a text” and the meaning of “translation,” and so on, were surely far closer to Turnour’s than to those of the learned Buddhist monks at the other end of the translation chain.

If Upham’s translations had been “better” by the standards Turnour promulgated – if his *Mahavamsa* had been a literal and complete (and un-embellished) rendering of the Pali; if those monks had known they would later be held to Orientalist standards for “translation” of *Mahavamsa*; if any of the editors had possessed the necessary linguistic skills – Turnour never would have had to take the task upon own his shoulders, and the open, dialogical historiography which the monks first presented might never have been so utterly rejected in favour of the authority of a fixed, dead and thoroughly dissected *Mahavamsa* text in Pali. But that was not to be; it is still the case that *Rajavaliya*, though employed as a near eye-witness source for colonial history, even recently (and very usefully) re-edited and retranslated, has seldom if ever been treated as the work of a fellow historian (probably a long succession of them) who also had access to the Pali historical chronicles and had x, y, and z to say about the ancient and medieval periods they

⁶⁸ Upham, vol. I, p. [i]. Note how clearly Upham, unlike Turnour, grasps Johnston’s “object”.

⁶⁹ Upham and Turnour literally belonged to the same club, as Members of the Royal Asiatic Society. Upham was also a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries.

⁷⁰ Upham, vol. I, p. xvii.

narrate, and the significance of that history for the then-present. However much Turnour’s triumph opened new doors for the study of Sri Lankan history, making possible the sophisticated lists of kings, identification and reconstruction of archaeological sites and inscriptions, and reliable chronology upon which it proceeds, that “triumph” also closed other doors, starting with the equal footing, at least, which those Buddhist monks claimed, however implicitly, for indigenous historiography; an openness and multivalence which Upham’s publication still allowed, and even demanded.⁷¹

Turnour’s own reading (or gloss) of Sri Lankan history (in his *Epitome of the History of Ceylon*),⁷² and even his “critical edition” and translation of the original *Mahavamsa* text, also “mutilated” and “amplified” the Pali, as have all subsequent professional historical accounts of ancient and medieval Sri Lankan history, and editions and translations of these texts, not one of which includes all the details given in *Mahavamsa*, refrains from adding details and explanatory information found elsewhere than in *Mahavamsa*, nor is composed, as is *Mahavamsa*, to be read aloud as a poem. But rather than standing as one among the many other such mutilated abridgements and amplifications, the many other such readings already in dialogue with each other about the interpretation and significance of Sri Lankan history, in Sinhala, when he began his studies – hardly even acknowledging them – Turnour, as privileged knower, worked to guarantee that his Orientalist way of reading *Mahavamsa* would henceforth stand alone as “authentic.” In making *Mahavamsa* into the kind of history an Orientalist scholar could use, Turnour un-made a historiography that informed those historians whose history it was, and who gave him both the texts and the language skills he required in order to make his “discovery” at all.

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⁷¹ Tennent (vol. I, p. 317, n.1) makes clear that in the first generation after Turnour, historians such as Knighton and Pridham, writing in 1845 and 1849, respectively, used the other two historical texts published by Upham together with Turnour’s *Mahavamsa* in order to include the details they provide about early colonial history. Indeed, *Rajavaliya* (though not for the most part *Rajaratnakaraya*, perhaps because it is still un-translated except in the now very rare Upham volumes) is still used in this way, merely as a supplement to the *Mahavamsa* (the latter remaining the exclusive authority for the ancient and medieval periods).

⁷² This was first published in the *Ceylon Almanac* in 1833 (introduction dated 1832), then reprinted as embedded in the introduction to Turnour’s *Mahavamsa*, dated 1836 but published in 1837, and also as a separate pamphlet soliciting funds for the publication of the text, dated 1837.