

KNOX ON ELEPHANTS

Merlin Peris

When he came to writing his *Historical Relation of Ceylon*, Robert Knox dwelt at considerable length on a matter which, from his confessed ignorance or secret reluctance, results in making it appear little more than the curious hobby of an eccentric monarch. I refer to Rajasingha II and his acquisition of a large number of sundry Europeans, not the least among them Knox himself. Defeated Portuguese soldiers, Dutch prisoners of war, shipwrecked mariners, deserters and malefactors fleeing from justice at the hands of his enemy (p.17: 182 etc), even ambassadors (p.180-182), some of whom had come to "Conde Uda" to secure the release of these others, were (we are told) constrained to remain behind. These were then either assigned to direct duty under the King at Court, or detailed to certain villages for a purpose which Knox then pretends not to understand, but which could well have explained the "superiority" and presumptuous behaviour of these foreign "prisoners" on the one hand, and the aloofness and suspicion in which the villagers held them, on the other.¹

Knox himself was taken captive, along with his father, his close friend, Stephen Rutland, and several other Englishmen in 1660 and enjoyed the King's enforced hospitality in the interior of the island until he decided he had had enough of it and made his escape to the Dutch fort at Arippu in the October of 1679. From here the Dutch took him to Colombo, and thence to Batavia for a more expert debriefing before they returned

¹ On the Dutch, see p.182 ("The number of Dutch there"); on the French p. 185; on the English captives p. 128. They were scattered through the Hathkorale, placed singly in villages 4 to 5 miles apart, and fed and lodged in different houses each day. The King's order was to feed them well and look after them. Knox traded, travelling freely all over the kingdom, lent paddy on exorbitant interest and later owned a prosperous farm. Some Frenchmen distilled liquor and kept taverns in the city. In all his 20 years Knox pretends he didn't know the purpose for which the King used them and that it is worth some inquiry (p. 186). His own conclusion - at least the avowed one - is that the King loved and favoured these Europeans, delighting in their company - though the King never once invited his company! Ryan, in his edition of Knox, thinks people like Knox really enjoyed their stay, and Saparamadu remarks the comparative ease with which he and Rutland got away, when they did (see S.D. Saparamadu ed. *An Historical Relation of Ceylon by Robert Knox*, Maharagama, Ceylon (1958) p. xxii - xxiii.

Beside this collection of white-skinned homo sapiens from Europe - reckoned at almost 500 by the end of his reign - Rajasingha II (A.D.1635 - 1687) also reared a menagerie of other unusual animals. Among these "Toys and Novelties" of his, Knox lists "Hawks, Horses, Dogs, strange Birds, and Beasts" (p.49), not forgetting "a Black Tygre caught and brought to the King, and afterwards a Deer milk white", both of which, we are told, he very much esteemed, "there being no more either before or since ever heard of in that land (p.21).

But for all that, Rajasingha's favourite appears to have been an elephant, caught during the last years of Knox's sojourn, which was, according to the author's description of it, "spotted or speckled all the body over" (p.21; 49). For, as he says, "tho he hath many and very stately Elephants, and may have as many more as he pleases, yet he prefers this before them all" (p.21).

It is with the mention of this animal that Knox, 19 years, 6 months and 14 days a "prisoner" in "Zeilon", as he variantly spells the English for the island, detains himself on the subject of elephants with an account of nearly two whole pages worth (21-23), which I wish to treat here, along with sundry other notices on elephants scattered throughout the *Historical Relation*, both for their coverage of the subject and for the veracity of the information which Knox had gained from the people and from his own acquaintance - indeed "brushes" - with elephants both during his stay in the island and his subsequent escape through the jungles of the north. For, it may well be said at the outset that, notwithstanding the reliance Knox had gained among scholars of history and sociology here in Sri Lanka and elsewhere for the "artless naivete" of his account and the great deal of information that he had acquired from his own first-hand experiences and also from other sources, there is much here too that is not free from fault or garbling due to a strange "aloofness" that one feels exists between the author and the natives throughout his long stay in the island - and indeed in the case his "old Master, Rajah Singah", whom he is bent on portraying as the tyrant *par excellence*, even a distinctly malicious intent. As this has, with recent scholarship, begun to be recognized - though a more complete and thorough evaluation of the dependability of Knox remains to be undertaken - I shall restrict myself to the subject of my interest, elephants. If any criticism of Knox arises there from, it would only be incidental, though I confess that to some extent elephant behaviour - and indeed human behaviour towards elephants in the island - have remained one of the constants that can serve as a loadstone to test the dependability of Knox, when that comes to be undertaken.

There is not the least reason to doubt Knox, however, when he says that Rajasingha owned hundreds of elephants (p.21; 49); he means of course tame elephants. But indeed all the elephants in the wild also belonged to the Crown (p.49), and he would have drawn on them from time to time by capture - though whether he took them singly

by noosing, or in larger numbers by kraaling is, as we shall see, hopelessly confused in Knox's evidence. In any case, we are unfortunate even as to a more approximate number, which might give some idea of the strength of a king's stables at this time when the use of elephants for war, at least in the field, was, due to geographical considerations and the increasing use of firearms, of dubious benefit. His predecessor but two, Rajasingha I (A.D. 1581 - 1598) is said to have marshalled the fantastic number of 2,200 elephants to the assault on the fort of Colombo (A.D 1587 - 1588)². Even if all these did not belong to the King but were mostly enlisted for the purpose from various chieftains and religious institutions, the number must have been misread or (for some reason) grossly exaggerated, considering the logistics of the operation, let alone the managing and feeding of them. Codrington thought that elephants had ceased to be used for battle by the 12th century,³ with Geiger concurring on the grounds that the thickly wooded nature of the terrain in which the action took place rendered it very doubtful that they were used to charge the enemy.⁴ Rajasingha I of course brought them into use for a siege, as they continued to be used even well into Moghul times in India - though there is some evidence of their use in battle as well against the Portuguese⁵ - but the introduction of cannon and firearms into warfare in the island must have seen the end of the *athpanthiya*, which was a regular unit of the fourfold army (*caturangani sena*) of the earlier

² Paul. E.Pieris *The Portuguese Era*, Colombo (1913). He is quoting Diogo do Couto. He mentions this in *Ribeiro's History of Ceilao* (1909) p. 65; for the original refer "Couto: History of Ceylon", Engl. transl. by Donald Ferguson *JRAS* no. 60, vol. xx (1908) p.289. Senerath Panawatta, to whom I owe the tracing of this reference, is of two minds on the number, writing in his letter to me: "The enormous number given in this operation, even if considered as approximate as suggested by Ferguson and cut down right by 50%, we get 1100 War Elephants! I think it would be too much of an injustice to cut it down by half, specially it being a first hand account .It appears that Couto himself did not hesitate to accept these figures to be included in his account which was prepared to be sent to (the) King of Portugal - at his own request. No doubt he would have been cautious when writing up his account which was contemporaneous".

³ H.W.Codrington and A.M.Hocart *A Short History of Ceylon*, London (1926) I.1. p.69.

⁴ W.Geiger *Culture of Ceylon in Medieval Times* Weisbaden (1960) p.155.

⁵ As at the battle of Mulleriyawa (1559); see Pieris *op. cit*, p.85. See also Fernao de Queyroz, *Conquista temporal e spiritual de Ceilao*,ed. Colombo (1916).

kings, in the armies of these later ones. Notorious as a *genus anceps*⁶, the noise and impact of shot and shell would have been enough to make the best of animals cause as much disaster and panic in the king's ranks as he intended causing in those of the enemy.

Thus, even if it is somewhat surprising that Knox should have omitted mention of the King's undoubted use of elephants for royal and public work to suggest that he captured them merely for his recreation and pleasure (p.22; 42), it would really have been quite surprising if he made no mention of the King's use of them for dramatic killings in war, if indeed the King had maintained and used them for such, seeing, as we shall see, the author's prejudice against his "old Master". Such an use, while not failing to excite the interest of his readers (though the more scholarly among them would have read of the employment of elephants in the Hellenistic theatres of war in Classical sources and it was perhaps not as expressive of the King's cruelty as his use of them in executions), would still have contributed to the impression of his heavy-handed violence.

The elephant population in the island in Knox's day must have been quite considerable, ranging freely over most of it. Some would put it at around 40,000. They were numerous even more than a century and a half later, when it was still possible to kraal herds in close proximity to Colombo⁷. Knox himself ran into elephants more than once during his escape, and though for the most part fear of them made him cautious and travel by day, when he might have been spotted and recaptured (p.166), he had cause enough to be thankful to them on at least one occasion, when a herd was heard crackling branches and small trees between him (and his companion, Rutland) and the voices of men which were audible behind him, prompting the devout Biblist that he was, to compare them to the darkness that came between the Israelites and the Egyptians (p. 164). He himself remarks the presence of many herds, both elsewhere and along the route he took. They were particularly numerous in the wilderness which he calls "Parroah Mocolane" (p. 156), and in the north, along the "Coronda oyah", which was dried up at

⁶ As Livy (xxvii. 14) calls them. Appian (*Hisp.* 46) likewise recognized they could be a "common enemy" (*koinoi polemioi*).

⁷ P.E.P.Deraniyagala, in his *Some Extinct Elephants, their Relatives and the Two Living Species*, Colombo, (1955) p. 45 refers to a map of Colombo of 1730 which reveals the fact that elephant kraals were held on the recent Ridgeway Golf Links of the city. He adds that elephants were common in the Western Province barely two centuries ago, kraals being held in the vicinity of Veyangoda, others at Negombo (D'Oyly and P.E.Pieris) and Labugama (Capper), while in the Southern Province elephants were kraaled regularly at Kottawa near Galle and these records were maintained up to 1829.

the time and the haunt of "far more Elephants than higher up" (p. 165 - 166), not to mention the "Malwatu oyah", coming down to these rivers in their numbers at night to slake their thirst (p. 167). The fear of elephants seems to have been equal, if not greater, than the fear of his recapture by "mine enemies", "the Chingulays".

On two occasions elephants proved a positive hindrance to Knox and Rutland. One of these was when they had cast away all pretence of being on a trade trip along with their sales-ware and struck into the woods to follow the Malwatu Oya (it was about 3 or 4 hours after dark on Sunday the 12th of October); it was a lone elephant, which they failed to scare away, and so had to spend the night where they were (p. 162). The other was 4 or 5 days later, when they were already close to the Dutch fort at Arippu and had decided to pass the night under a tree on the bank of a river, perhaps in the path used by elephants coming to quench their thirst, and so were forced to drive them off, as villagers do even today, by flinging firebrands at them (p. 167).

For all that he has sporadically said about elephants in the *Historical Relation*, Knox's interest in the animal, though more than in all other birds and beasts that the island had, is not much more than of any curious layman from a part of the world unfamiliar with the beast, who had now spent nearly twenty years in a land in which they dominate both the forest as well as the civilized activities of its inhabitants. At any rate, it cannot be said to exceed the interest such a man would have had for so remarkable a beast. So that it should surprise no one when he uses the occasion of the mention of the King's especial elephant to launch on an account of elephants in general and the country's elephants in particular.

Listing elephants among a number of other animals, large and small, that the island had, "Cowes, Buffaloes, Hogs, Goats, Deer, Hares, Dogs, Jacols, Apes, Tygers, Bears" and such (p. 20), about which he says little or nothing descriptive, Knox devotes as much as two whole pages (p. 21 - 23) to describing the elephant, telling his readership mostly unfamiliar with these matters "the manner of taking them, and afterwards their Sagacity, with other things that occur to my memory concerning them" (p. 21). As a pretext for this he adverts to the fame of the Sri Lankan elephant above that of the Indian.

This last notion can only be one that Knox had come by from hearsay as a trader in these parts, though neither he nor his father had ever handled such bulky cargo, nor would have had the opportunity to test the veracity of the claim. Or perhaps he was only reflecting what he had come by in his reading. For it merely perpetuates a canard which the first westerners to write on Taprobane were to carry away with them, the Alexander-historians, Onesicritus and Megasthenes, and passed down through others like Cosmas Indicopleustes and the Portuguese Ribiero - though, to say the least, it was not too bad

advertisement for the trade in Sri Lankan elephants, disadvantaged as they were in the matter of tusks and in a region in which elephants were plentiful.⁸

On the other hand, Knox's observations about the nature and behaviour of elephants, tame and wild, must owe a great deal, if not everything, to what he had himself heard or saw of the beasts during his long stay in the island.

The elephant, Knox writes, is the greatest in body and also in understanding (p. 21). The first cannot be gainsaid - that is, if we are talking of land animals. About the second too one may have reservations, if one takes into consideration the dog and some other species of carnivora, and against the elephant in the wild state as against the tamed and trained. For once domesticated, as Knox himself observes, he will, despite his huge size, do whatever his keeper bids him, which beasts without hands can do (p. 22). On the other hand, Knox is surprised that a beast with such physical strength and mental capabilities is so "easily caught" (p. 21).

Much of the rest of the information Knox would have gained from inquiry or hearsay during his years in villages surrounded by jungles teeming with elephants, except, that is, where he may himself have confirmed such reports by his own observations. A case in point is the elephants' devastating manner of feeding, which is to "shove down with their heads great Trees, which they love to eat, when they be too high, and they cannot otherwise reach the boughs" (p. 22) or that they "take great delight to lie and tumble in the water" (p. 22)

The Sinhalese report, says Knox, that elephants:

"bear the greatest love to their young of all irrational Creatures; for the Shees are alike tender of any ones young ones as of their own: where there are many She elephants together, the young ones go and suck of any, as well as of their Mothers; and if a young one be in distress and should cry out, they will all in general run to the help and aid thereof; and if they be going over a River, as here be some somewhat broad, and the streams run very swift, they will all with their Trunks assist and help to convey the young ones over" (p. 22).

⁸ For Onesicritus, see Pliny *Nat.Hist.* vi. 81 = fr. 13 Jacoby; for Megasthenes, see Aelian *De Nat. Animal.* xiii.8; xvi.18. See Cosmas *Topographia Christiana* xi.449c and Jaoa Ribiero *Fatalidade Historica* Lisbon (1836) transl. into English by P.E.Pieris, *The Historic Tragedy of Ceilao*, 3rd ed. Colombo (1925) p. 146; 148 - 149.

Knox's observations, here as well as on his escape, about the feeding habits of elephants, which involved the felling of whole trees to get their boughs, or uprooting smaller ones to eat, are all too well known to need comment. Suffice it to mention that when one considers that a single elephant requires as much as 300 to 500 pounds of fodder a day and keeps feeding most of the time when it is not travelling or sleeping, the resultant devastation of the forest in a grazing area by a herd is considerable; so much so that in some African countries serious debate has been raised among ecologists and conservationists, both concerning the forest-cover as well as the survival of the elephants themselves. Tusks, trunk, head and body-weight are all put to use in this leisurely but ruinous process of foraging, leaving all but the bigger trees and a few unpalatable plants uprooted and trampled underfoot.

As for the elephant's love of water, it is now known that, quite apart from their need to drink as much as 30 to 40 gallons a day, they need to cool off their huge bodies. The spraying of dust or mud over them, even immediately after a bath, and the size and constant flapping of an elephant's ears have to do with this same need to keep the body cool, while in extreme drought conditions an elephant may fetch water with his trunk from inside his own body to spray himself. Knox had seen keepers of the King's elephants made to do this last on people as a prank - only, he implies that they then took up the water from a source outside (p. 23).

About an elephant's natural love of water, Deraniyagala says that the elephant is as semi-aquatic as a water buffalo.⁹ Long ago Aristotle saw it differently. He says "The elephant is found by the banks of rivers, but he is not a river animal", and concludes that, while it can make its way through water as long as the top of its trunk can be above the surface, "for he blows with his trunk and breathes through it", he also thought it was a poor swimmer owing to the heavy weight of its body.¹⁰ Modern opinion seems, however, to justify Knox on this question, and amply, with examples of quite remarkable feats of swimming by elephants. Not the least of these is the instance cited by Sanderson of a batch of 79 elephants who swam 6 hours continuously without touching ground, and after a short rest, 3 more,¹¹ while Lieut-Colonel Williams tells of an animal

⁹ *op. cit.* p.65

¹⁰ Aristot. *Hist. Animal* ix.46; 630b 25(Pseudo-Aristot.?) But see Nearchus in Strabo xv.1.43 = fr.22 Jacoby. Elephants are excellent swimmers.

¹¹ George P.Sanderson *Thirteen Years among the Wild Beasts of India* London (1878) p. 51 - 52. The animals were being sent from Dacca to Barrackpur, near Calcutta, in Nov. 1875. See R.Carrington *Elephants* Penguin Books (1962) P.

that went island-hopping 200 miles across the Bay of Bengal, with sometimes a mile of open sea between the islands, and took 12 years for the jaunt.¹² For all that, an elephant may drown, as in a flash flood or torrent, and on occasion a bloated carcass may be seen floating down a river, like that which figures in the parable of the *Sonaka Jataka* (No. 529).¹³

As for what Knox had heard from the Sinhalese about the elephant's love of their young, this is in general true. Quite apart from the mother's strong affection for her calf - a vivid example of which is given by Williams in the case of a calf which had got swept away by a torrent¹⁴ - Deraniyagala witnesses the earnest concern of she elephants for the calves of others and the near indiscriminate dependence of the calves themselves on other cows than their own mothers in the events that followed upon the kraal at Panamure of 1944.¹⁵

A clearer picture of the relationship of the members of a herd to each other is however emerging with the close and continuous scientific studies of African elephants undertaken recently in Amboseli, Manyara and other Parks by intrepid young researchers like the Douglas Hamiltons, Cynthia Moss and Joyce Poole, of which I am sure P.C.Lee's paper on 'Allomothering among African Elephants' (*Animal Behaviour* vol. xxxv p. 278 - 291) should be most enlightening on this point of Knox's observation. It was surely observation of this sort of community mothering and even feeding that was responsible for the popular belief among the Sinhalese villagers that, at the birth of an elephant calf, seven other shes came into milk.

The herd, which is itself the basic unit, is an extended family composed of several cows and their young and range from new-born offsprings to aged grandmothers,

67. See H.H. Scullard *The Elephant in the Greek and Roman World* Cambridge (1974) P.22: "the sinuses in their skulls help them to keep afloat".

¹² J.H. Williams, *Elephant Bill*, Reprint Soc. London ed. (1950) p. 72 - 73. See p. 91: Elephants are good swimmers and (contrary to Aristotle) extremely buoyant, he says.

¹³ Williams *loc. cit.* attributes this to heart-failure, but says Burmese put it to the bite of the Nat Shin, a watersnake no one has ever seen.

¹⁴ *op. cit.* p. 60 f.

¹⁵ *op. cit.* p. 60

with the young constantly under the watchful eyes of the cows. Elephants are known not only to help their little ones with their trunks across rivers, as Knox tells us (p. 22), but even themselves to cross a bit down-stream, if there was a any danger of their calves being swept away.

Tennent, however, doubts whether Knox is right when his authority is cited to show that the love of elephants for their young exceeds that of other animals, and suspects that their indiscriminate kindness towards all the young of the herd may rather argue against the strength of parental attachment than for it. Instances, he says, are not wanting in Sri Lanka of the adults of a herd abandoning their young ones in flight, notwithstanding the cries of the latter for help.¹⁶

The notion that elephants do not breed in captivity must have been a canard even in Knox's day, since it is hardly likely that no instances were known, in a land that reared so many elephants, of tame elephants copulating. Elephant courtship, to lead to mating, calls for surroundings and circumstances that are both natural and familiar, so as not in any way to inhibit or in the least put off either of the participants - and one of these circumstances must surely be the proximity of the rest of the herd.

Elephants do not engage in the elaborate courtship rituals of some other animals. Aristotle had been told that "elephants copulate in lonely places, and especially by riverside in their usual haunts".¹⁷ The matings that go on in the Pinnawela elephant orphanage, one of which I myself witnessed and resulted in the birth of its first calf there, is proof enough that when the conditions are right, elephants can, and do (to use Knox's words) "breed tame ones with tame ones" (p.22). As it generally was in the island in his day and up to recent times, however, Knox would be right that, where she-elephants conceived in captivity, it was when they had been hobbled and put out into the woods for foraging and encountered wild males (*loc. cit.*). These could be lone-ranging 'rogues', or bulls grazing by themselves in the proximity of a herd. However, there are

¹⁶ Sir James Emerson Tennent *Ceylon: An Account of the Island, Physical, Historical and Topographical* London (1860) vol.ii, Part viii 'The Elephant', p. 302 - 304. He refers to an interesting paper on the habits of the Indian elephant in the *Philosophical Transactions* for 1793, in which the author, Mr. Course, says that "if a wild elephant happens to be separated from its young for only two days, though giving suck, she never after recognizes or acknowledges it", although the young one evidently knew its dam, and by its plaintive cries and submissive approaches solicited her assistance.

¹⁷ *op. cit.* v. 2; 540 a20.

instances when isolated tame elephants have been seen mating, though these may have been pretty infrequent.

Remarkable as it may seem, Aristotle had more knowledge than most writers until recent times on the constitution and behaviour of elephants, even though it is doubtful whether he had any opportunity to observe them in their natural habitats or dissect one. At any rate, he is closer to the correct period of gestation of she-elephants than is Knox, who lived in the midst of elephant life, both tame and wild, and in an island which knew and employed them for over two thousand years and more. For, we find the philosopher giving this as 2 years, as against 1 given by Knox (*loc. cit.*), adding as the reason that the embryo is the size of a calf two or three months old,¹⁸ and (elsewhere) that "it is not easy for large masses to arrive at perfection in a small time".¹⁹ According to Deraniyagala the gestation period varies slightly with the sex of the calf; while for a female it can be anything from 17 1/2 to 23 months, a male takes 21 months to 24 months.²⁰ It is more like 22 for either.

Wild elephants, says Knox, run faster than a man (p.22). The gait, even at this speed, is a shuffle, not a gallop, since the peculiar structure of an elephant's legs (which we need not go into here), preclude this; in any case, it would be too violent a motion for so vast a body. But this shuffle can be increased to a pace which is as fast as an Olympic runner, even if the elephant cannot maintain it for more than a short distance. Even so, when Knox and Rutland armed themselves for their flight through the jungle, they did so only with long-handled axe and knife against tiger (i.e leopard) and bear, for "as for Elephants there is no standing against them, but the best defence is to flee from them" (p. 162). To stand against them is to get killed, whence Knox says, "Travellers and Way-faring men go more in fear of elephants than of any other Beasts" (p. 22). The only other recourse - and that too in wooded places - is to dodge behind trees, as he says cultivators could do if attacked when shooing off depredators from their gardens (p. 22).

Upon this sort of action, Tennent observes:

Among full grown timber, a skilful runner can escape an elephant by dodging behind trees, but in cleared land, and low brushwood, the

¹⁸ *op. cit.* v.14; 546 b7

¹⁹ Cf. *De Gener. Animal* iv. 10: 777 a10

²⁰ *op. cit.* p. 71

difficulty is much increased, as the small growth of underwood which obstructs the movements of man presents no obstacle to those of an elephant.²¹

What is strange, however, is Knox's acceptance without reason that, while wild elephants can run faster than a man, tame elephants cannot (*loc. cit.*). The supposition may have grown from the fact that, while people are often heard of as having been killed by wild elephants, from whom they would surely have been expected to have fled, deaths from tame ones were more a matter of sudden unexpected attack at close quarters. Of course it is possible that Knox may have witnessed elephants being raced at festivals; but if so, this would have been of tame elephants against tame, so that he would have had no opportunity to see the popular belief contradicted of their speeds relative to the wild, not to mention of both tame and wild relative to men.

Describing the phenomenon of *musth*, Knox observes that at such times elephants will run raging, with their keepers on their backs, until they have thrown them down and killed them. A warning of the onset of this condition, he adds, is "an Oyl that will run out of their cheeks", which, when it appears, "immediately they chain them fast to great Trees by the Legs" (p. 23).

Knox would have been more correct if he had said the effluence flowed *down* the cheeks rather than out of them. For it emanates from the swollen temporal glands through slit-like orifices midway in the line between eyes and ear-holes before it runs down the cheeks, and into the corners of the elephant's mouth (*de' madha kevenava*).

During this period the animal is subject to a paroxysm, which Knox is right in saying is an "infirmity" for which the Sinhalese use no medicine, since the animal is not sick. However, during this time the elephant is extremely irritable and it is dangerous even for the owner or mahout to approach it; it is on such occasions that most people who have been killed by tamed elephants have been killed. And the majority of these have been mahouts.

Knox is emphatic that female elephants do not undergo *musth*. The first westerner to have mentioned this condition in elephants, Megasthenes, is reported differently by two different sources. Arrian, following him, says it occurred in females: "certain pores about the temples of the females open and exhale;"²² Strabo, on the other

²¹ *op. cit.* p. 331

²² Arrian *Ind.* 13 f. = fr. 20 Jacoby

hand, tells us it is the male, who during breeding-time in the spring "is seized with a frenzy and becomes ferocious; at that time he discharges a fatty matter through the breathing-holes (*sic*) which he has beside his temples."²³ Scullard is thus made to wonder whether Megasthenes could have attributed the phenomenon to both sexes, and thus been in line with what he took to be the modern view.²⁴ The fact of the matter however appears to vindicate Knox's information. For, while recent studies have shown that she-elephants of the African sort secrete as strongly as the males, the incidence of glandular secretions in females of the Asian sort is rare; but in neither sort does it amount to the condition which accompanies this symptom in males, which has now been observed to be associated with a rise in the levels of testosterone in the blood and thus positively linked with male sexuality.²⁵

All that was done by the Sinhalese when an elephant came into *musth*, observes Knox, was to secure the animal by its feet to strong trees and wait the period out (*loc. cit.*). Deraniyagala however mentions the practice of mahouts of shortening the period of *musth* by frequently prodding the nerve centre (*nila*) which is located at the anus, known as the *Guda Marge nila*.²⁶ (The efficacy of this we may as well leave to the mahouts themselves, since the whole system of *nila* has still to be scientifically established and shown to be more than a matter of reflexes conditioned by prods and commands during (and as part of) the animal's taming/training.)

At the time of his writing his *Historical Relation of Ceylon* Knox appears not to have known the word "tusk" at all; he calls tusks indiscriminately "Teeth", so that, were it not for the contexts, there would have been a degree of ambiguity on whether by "Teeth" he meant the elephant's tusks or its molars. Thus, when he observes that, "tho there be many (Elephants) in the woods, yet but few have Teeth, and they males onely" (p. 21), he is certainly talking of tusks. Besides, he is generally right in his

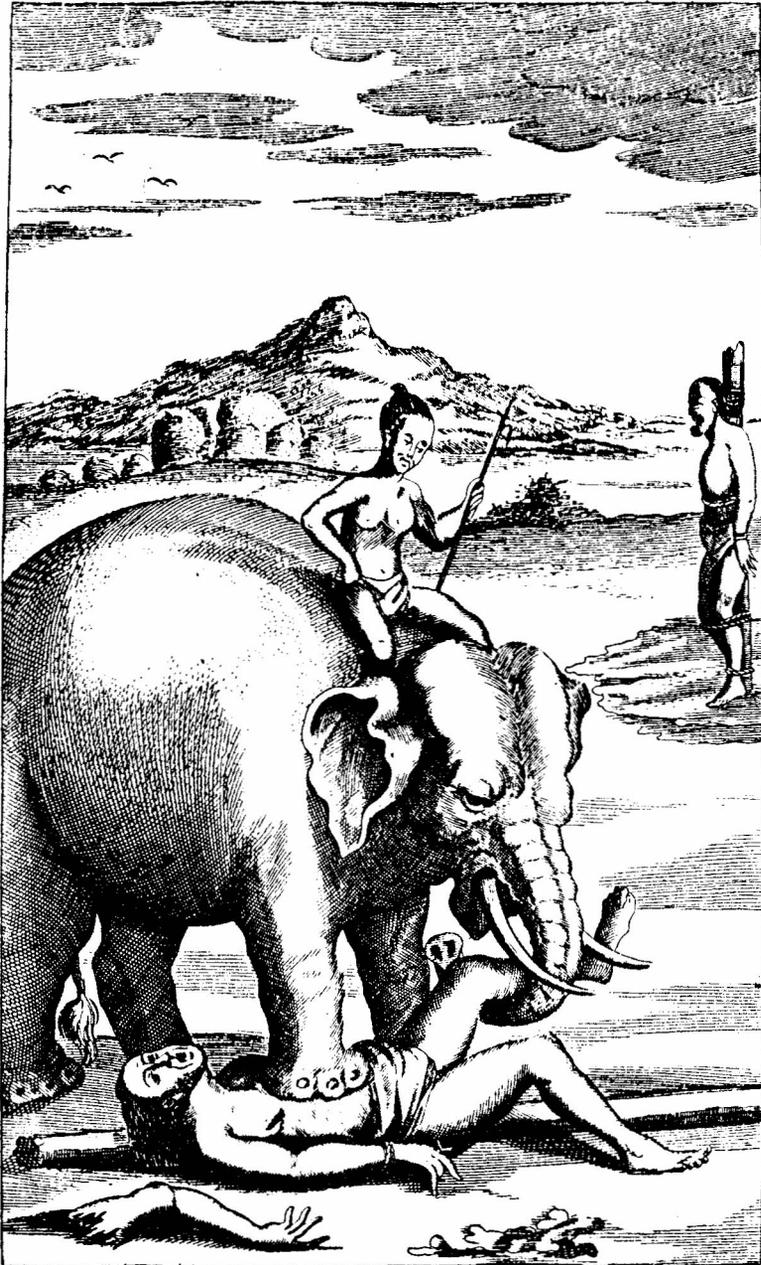
²³ xv. 1.42 - 43

²⁴ *op. cit.* p. 58

²⁵ *op. cit.* p. 58

²⁶ *op. cit.* Plate 1, location 28. See Cynthia Moss *Elephant Memories* Glasgow (1989) p. 110. Bull elephants undergo *musth* for about 3 months every year; the females cyclically come into estrus for 4 days or so at a time. On the characteristics of a male in *musth*, as identified by Joyce Poole, see *op. cit.* p. 113 f. See also the latter's 'Elephants in *musth*, lust' *Nat. Hist.* vol. 96 (II) p. 46 - 55; 'Raging Bulls' *Animal kingdom* vol. 90 (6) p. 18 - 25 etc.

PLATE I



An Execution by an Eliphant.

observation. For, it is a curious fact that while in Africa around 90% of elephants, both male and female, carry tusks, and tuskers, though far less, are not rare in other Asian countries that have elephants, the number in Sri Lanka is as few as 6-7 in the hundred. However, they are not invariably male, as Knox supposes; an *athinna* does appear now and again. The rest have only tushes, 10 or 12 inches in length and 1 or 2 inches in thickness²⁷.

Because of the paucity of tuskers in the island, R. Lydekker had assumed that the Ceylon elephant did not have tusks, and that their occurrence at all owed itself to crossings with tuskers imported from India²⁸. Williams had heard this phenomenon attributed to the fodder available in the island; he fails to be more specific, even if he had heard what it was about the fodder that militated against the growth of tusks.²⁹ Though the presence of tusks is an 'accident' rather than a 'differentia' which distinguishes a separate species, the Sinhala language enjoys the luxury of two distinct words for the tusk-elephant and the tush-elephant, viz. *atha* and *aliya*. The latter could however be of late origin, perhaps even derived from Arabic and introduced by the Moormen, either the so-called *panikkeas*, who specialized in the capture of elephants in the north and north-east of the island, or the Arabs themselves who were involved in training them thereafter to sell them to the vakeels sent by south Indian rulers to purchase

²⁷ Deraniyagala (*op. cit.* p.43), going by 670 tame elephants, found 6% of all and 11% of males were tuskers. Of the 1300 elephants shot by Major Rogers, only 60 were tuskers, i.e. 4%. Considering the attraction both hunter and catcher had for tuskers, the percentage could well have been far less. In fact Tennent (*op. cit.* p. 274) puts it at a mere 1% of all elephants in the island.

²⁸ *The Game Animals of India, Burma, Malaya and Tibet*, 2nd ed. (1924) p.15.

²⁹ *op. cit.* p. 19. Against Lydekker's hypothesis, it could be possible that Sri Lanka did have a fairer percentage of tuskers, before historic preference for them thinned the proportion considerably to what it had become in Knox's day - and was surely still poorer when Tennent made his reckoning. Today tuskers are a rarity. Deraniyagala is however perhaps overspecifying when he identifies his so-called *vilaliya* as a tuskless breed (*op. cit.* p. 40; see also R.I.Pocock 'Notes on the Asiatic Elephant'. *Ann. and Mag. Nat.* xith series, vol. x. p. 273 - 280). As Williams had heard it, did the rich swamp fodder, which made these animals giant, have something to do with the tusklessness?

them.³⁰

Be that as it may, the strong preference for tuskers for state and religious ceremonial, and also the greed for tusks as a valuable item of trade, made tuskers a much hunted class, and therefore also at the same time, a protected one. Since dead elephants, like captive elephants (as a practice at least), did not breed, the percentage of tuskers must have continued to decline down the centuries. Consequently we learn that in provinces near Senkadagala Maha Nuwara, where the killing of an *aliya* brought flogging plus imprisonment in Kandy itself, (with the liability also to confiscation of property), the killing of an *atha* risked severe lashings through the streets of the capital plus imprisonment in a distant province.³¹

As for the State's need for tuskers, we have Knox telling us that when the King commanded the capture of elephants, he went in for "such as have Teeth" (*loc. cit.*). As is well known, the practice of importing elephants to Sri Lanka, which would otherwise have sounded even more ridiculous than the proverbial "owls to Athens" (since Sri Lanka not only had, but even exported elephants of her own) may have been of elegant tuskers, which the island badly lacked. In this context one will not fail to recollect the great expedition organized by Parakramabahu I against the king of Burma (c. A.D. 1165), of which the *causa belli* had much to do with the latter's imposition of provocative conditions on the sale of Burmese elephants to Sri Lanka.³²

Where Knox's allusion to tusks as "Teeth" is liable to a degree of confusion is when he simply asserts of the island's elephants that "their Teeth they never shed" (p.22). This again must surely mean tusks; for in that curious process known as 'molar succession' by which the compacted set of an elephant's grinders are replaced by another set, the worn-out set is shed - a fact which would perhaps not have been missed by a

³⁰ See Tennent *op. cit.* p. 271, n.1. The Greek word *elephas*, from which the word 'elephant' is derived, meant 'ivory', as to Homer, before it meant the animal. It is surprising Tennent, with his knowledge of Greek, looked elsewhere for the *antos*, when it is simply the genitive suffix of *elephas* and means thus 'the (animal) of the ivory'. His reference to Benary's conjecture that *elephas* may be a compound of the Arabic *al* and *ibha*, a Sanskrit name for the elephant, no matter its doubt with regard to *elephas*, raises an interesting etymological possibility with regard to our own word *al iya*.

³¹ Deraniyagala *op. cit.* p.67.

³² *Culavamsa* tr. W.Geiger, Part II, Colombo (1953) p. 64 f. See also p. 69, n. 3

people who would, by the time of Knox, have reared elephants for over two millennia. Knox may therefore be reflecting an observation of the Sinhalese with respect to the two elongated incisors of the elephant, its tusks, though here again, a thorough scientific investigation - which they had no cause to undertake - would have shown that the permanent tusks were in fact replacements of milk tusks, which are shed early in infancy. Dereniyagala writes:

" It is generally thought that tusks are never shed. Dissection of young animals, however, reveal that this view is erroneous. The milk tusk is fusiform, with a feeble bifid apex, is enamel-coated, and possesses a long conical root that is hooked at the end. The permanent tusk rudiment is shorter and is a compressed cone with a feeble bifid apex and a wide open root; it is entirely of dentine and its surface is fluted. In tuskers, the milk tooth is shed within six months and is relatively short; in tush-elephants, double this period is necessary, and the milk tooth is relatively elongate when compared with the rudimentary permanent tusk."³³

Anyone may be forgiven such ignorance short of a veterinarian or zoologist, who, like Deraniyagala, has made a close study of the dentition of the *Elephas maximus* of Asia. Knox, a layman here, as in most other things he writes about, is little better than his own uninformed observation or that of his native informants in this matter as well. On another item of information, however, in which inquiry from more responsible sources would have put the record straight with him, Knox joins in concurring with the superficial view - that is, if indeed it was not in the first place his own unprompted surmise. I mean the matter of the tipping or docking of tusks, upon which he is found stating: "the Elephants that are kept have all the ends of their Teeth cut to make them grow the better, *and they do grow out again*" (p. 23: italics mine).

Following, as the detail does, upon the use of elephants as executioners and the sheathing of the tusks of these with iron points for the purpose, the notice must suggest that it is these elephants that Knox is talking about when he says their tusks were cut. On the other hand, the reference to the animals as "Elephants that are kept" may simply imply all tuskers that had been tamed and reared, as against those of the wild.

If the intention with which tusks, when they were cut, were cut, was to make them grow out (surely) the better, it would have been a self-defeating exercise and only reduced their possible length by that much. For tusks, like any teeth, grow at the root,

³³ *op. cit.* p.51

with hardly any worthwhile addition possible at the crown. Besides, if the purpose of long tusks was aesthetic, the deprivation of the gracefully tapering tip and the consequent blunting of the tusks would, if anything, have had the opposite effect. The practice is dictated rather by utilitarian considerations, such as to give free play to the trunk, where the elephant had developed crossing tusks (*dala pootuwa*), or to reduce pressure on the bone socket when carrying or levering timber and such-like, or, in the case of aggressive animals (as I have learnt from my own inquiries as well), simply to render them less injurious to the others. Of this last, H.N. Marshall, who had performed tipping on several elephants during his service as a "teak wallah" in the jungles of northern Thailand, observes that "once a savage animal had been tipped in this way, it usually became much more docile, seeming to realize that its once potent weapons had lost much in stabbing power."³⁴

Alongside this cutting of tusks to make them less obnoxious to others must have been the original purpose of capping them with ornately worked sheaths with knobs, which even nowadays are used upon them as ceremonial accoutrements. When, on the other hand, docked tusks needed to be rendered lethal once more, there was the simple expedient of fitting them with substitutes for their lost tips by way of pointed sockets such as are mentioned by Knox himself in his notice on execution by elephants, to which I shall in a while advert.

Elephants continued to be as much an item of wealth and commerce in Knox's day and age in the island as they had been for centuries past.³⁵ For instance, Knox knew that at some time the King had been paying tribute to the Portuguese to the tune of three elephants a year (p.176). On the other hand, the Prince of the Malabars, whom Knox calls "Coilat Wannea", though independent of the King as well as of the Dutch, paid an acknowledgement to the Hollanders of a certain rate of elephants per annum (p.175). Elephants are listed by Knox among other things as constituting the commodities of the land of "Coilat Wannea" (*loc.cit.*) This territory, north of the "Coronda Oyah", Knox found teeming with elephants far more than there were further north, so that travel by night was a fearful undertaking, the river being so full of them and other wild beasts (p.166).

³⁴ *Elephant Kingdom* London (1959) p.34-35.

³⁵ The earliest reference to this is in Aelian (xvi.18), who says that the elephants of Taprobane were stronger, bigger and cleverer than those of the mainland and that the natives built large ships and transported them to sell to the king of Kalinga. The trade continued down the ages, and was exploited by the Portuguese and Dutch as well.

Knox itemizes tusks among the produce of the Sinhalese and the wealth of the several treasuries that the King had (p. 31). They also constituted one of the things, along with bees-honey, wax and venison, which the King's officers received from the "tamer sort" of Veddahs, who were in a kind of subjection to the King, in return for arrows, cloth and the like (p.61). Knox had, however, some reservations about accepting the story told him of the way Veddahs catch elephants, because of a knowledge he himself had which makes him preclude the possibility:

"It has usually been told me that their way of catching elephants is, that when the elephant lies asleep they strike their axe into the sole of his foot, and so laming him he is in their power to take him" (p.63)

The reasons the Englishman gives for discounting the truth of this (he calls it a "fable") are, firstly "that the sole of the Elephants foot is so hard, that no axe can pierce it at a blow", and secondly, that "he is so wakeful that they can have no opportunity to do it" (*loc. cit.*)

It is most unlikely that the Veddahs hunted elephants for their ivory. What tusks they gave the King's officers in exchange for the few things they needed, they must have found upon the skeletons of dead tuskers, or scattered in the jungle by other elephants - a curious habit now fairly convincingly evidenced of African elephants at least.³⁶ We are left to assume, then, that the Veddahs now and again killed elephants for food, as the Pygmies and certain other African tribes did. The action described, however, merely shows how the Veddahs immobilized the elephants; of the more difficult task of killing it thereafter Knox seems not to have heard anything.

³⁶ My colleague, Gnanasiri Gunaratne of the University of Kelaniya draws my attention to the Chaddanta Jataka (No.505) of the *Sinhala Jataka Potha*. Here the tusks of the King of the Elephants, who is no other than the Bodhisatta, are, on the insistence of the Queen of Kasi, cut by the Veddah chief, the elephant himself cooperating in the sawing. I find this evidence of a casual nature and not strong to prove the point that Veddhas engaged in killing elephants for their tusks. Iain Douglas-Hamilton in *Elephants and Other Land Giants* p.49, citing David Sheldrick (1957). H.C.Sirr (*Ceylon and the Cingalese*, London, vol.1 (1850) p.195-196) was mystified by the discovery of large tusks found buried in the jungles. His surmise was that this could be the work of villagers or the animals themselves falling on their tusks and snapping them off as a result. The latter is ridiculous, the former probable, and with the Veddahs as well. But, as is now known, elephants themselves may have been responsible for this burial of the tusks of their dead fellows.

By "lyes asleep" Knox would give us to understand - as he may have misunderstood it himself - that the injury was inflicted when the animal was actually lying down asleep - in which position even tame elephants are caught rarely - whereas what Knox could have been told was of occasions when the animal was asleep *on his feet*, which was how it slept mostly, leaning against a tree or rock. Tennent writes:

"It is scarcely necessary to explain that the position is accidental, and that is taken by the elephant not for any difficulty in lying on the ground, but rather from coincidence that the structure of his legs affords such support in a standing position, that reclining scarcely adds to his enjoyment of repose; and elephants in a state of captivity have been known for months to sleep without lying down."³⁷

Dozing in this posture, an elephant may swing back the lower part of a foot now and again, when a noose may be quickly slipped up it by an expert nooser, or a sudden swift axe blow struck at the sole thus presented to a Veddah, who would have crept noiselessly up to it from behind. The method adopted by these Veddahs of immobilizing these huge animals by maiming the feet was, Diodorus tells us, adopted by native Ethiopians - only, they were known to attack the Achilles tendon and hamstring the beasts.³⁸

Considering Knox's reservations on the matter on account of his private knowledge of the thickness of the elephant's sole, should we not conjecture 'heel' instead? Hobeit, they must indeed have been very desperate Veddahs who resorted to the killing of an elephant, even if, when they did so, they were assured of a huge supply of meat for the tribe for many days together. One hardly hears of the practice among the Veddahs in recent times.

In contrast to the Veddahs, the two reasons for which Knox finds the King having elephants 'taken' both suggest the luxury and indulgence of the typical tyrant that

³⁷ *op. cit.* p.297; also p.384

³⁸ Probably deriving from Agatharches. These people are simply identified as *Elephantomachoi* (Elephant fighters). A single man would hang on the tail of a lone elephant, plant his feet on his left flank and hack the right ankle of the beast with a sharp axe, hamstringing it and even bringing it down. At the battle of Hydaspes Alexander's soldiers adopted the method of hamstringing elephants, using special curved swords called *copides*, and axes. The Romans also often resorted to this device of rendering elephants immobile and thus useless.

he wants to portray Rajasingha as. If war was no longer a purpose, surely the services of elephants in heavy labour must still have been good and prime reason for the acquisition of elephants by a king of Sri Lanka. Yet nowhere does Knox mention the practical use of elephants in public work involving hauling, lifting or compressing. Rather, the capture and possession of the numerous elephants the King had are construed merely as one of his "Pastimes and Recreations" - except, that is, when he used them with diabolical intent to destroy the property of those who had courted his displeasure, or to trample down rebels in his palace corridors, or otherwise execute criminals with maximum horror and suffering. Any more serious purpose remains so much unaccounted for in the *Historical Relation* of Knox as that of the various Europeans, like himself, whom Rajasingha kept in similar large numbers. What matters elephants could, and would, most usefully and conveniently accomplish are, on the other hand, transferred to the people under this ideal tyranny:

" And this is the manner how he employs his People; pulling down and building up again, equalling unequal grounds, making sinks under ground for the passage of water thro' his Palace, dragging of great Trees out of the wood to make Pounds to catch Elephants in his Presence; altho' they could catch them with far less labour, and making houses to keep them in, after they are taken" (p. 45 - 46).

In other words, men are made to do the work of elephants, even for the capture and stabling of the elephants themselves, while the elephants are both caught and kept merely to gratify the vanity and pleasure of the decrepit monarch. "He stands not upon any Villiany to establish himself, or strike terror into his People", says Knox immediately afterwards, then adds the one piece of information which he subsequently retracted as palpably false - that the King had even murdered his own fifteen year old son (p. 46).

Even in the matter of the feeding of his elephants the King is shown to be wilful and perverse. For his officers could gather jack fruits for them from anyone's land without let or leave - though here some English resisted, physically ejecting the officers, who attempted to feed the King's elephants with fruit from their compound, with an impunity that must underline the singular relationship that subsisted between these truly remarkable sort of 'prisoners' and His Highness, which was hardly enjoyed by any of his own free citizens (p.134).³⁹

³⁹ A quality of Knox's account, which results in the warped picture he has of Sinhalese society as well as the King, is the tendency to generalize from narrow experience or/and exceptional or casual instance. The jak fruit affair seems a case in point. The transfer of the English to another property later is construed

In places where the jungle was dense, the tracks were blocked by thorn gates with watchers set to guard them, especially those leading to and from the city in which the King had residence. But these thorn gates, we are told, were kept high enough (10 to 12 feet) to let a man on an elephant pass through (p. 54 - 55). Other than along these tracks, the jungle must have been quite impenetrable, as for instance the King found it, when in retreat from Nillemby (14 miles to the south of Kandy) during the rebellion of December 1664, so that his men had to drive an elephant before them to bulldoze a way through the thick (and perhaps also thorny) underbrush for him and his followers to make their passage to safety (p. 58)

Knox tells us that it was only occasionally that Rajasingha came out of his palace; and when he did so, it was not always upon an elephant; he used a horse and a palanquin also (p. 36). But if he rode an elephant, it would have been his royal elephant, the *mangala hasthi*. In the later years of the writer's stay in 'Conde Uda', this would have been none other than his favourite, that spotted or speckled beast mentioned earlier on, though he does not tell us so. The spots or speckles he talks of must surely have been the patches of depigmentation (*gomara*) visible on the bodies of some tame elephants, though not easily discernible upon wild ones (if they did have them) because of the dust and mud with which they habitually covered themselves. These commence appearing after the first year and spread to all parts of the body to a greater or lesser degree, becoming pink or white on a skin that is otherwise more or less dusky black. In the case of this particular animal, in addition to being a tusker, as it surely was, it must have had a number of such patches distributed pleasingly over its whole body. And *gomara*, far from being considered blemishes, were looked upon as a feature of beauty in elephants, both in Sri Lanka and India.

If the later kings of the island had little use of elephants for war except perhaps in siege operations, there yet remained their peaceful use in labour and also ceremonial to justify their acquisition and heavy maintenance. For the latter purpose temples too, like the kings and chieftains, kept a varying number of elephants. Notable among the temple ceremonies, Knox mentions "the Perahar at Conde", giving, as of other things of the island, a quaint description of it as it was performed at the time and witnessed by one who but half understood the meaning of its symbols, rites and rituals. The ceremony itself is described as held in honour of "Allout neur Dio", represented by a painted stick carried on the shoulder of a "priest" mounted on an elephant that was caparisoned in white cloth, while another "priest" sat behind the first, holding a sort of umbrella over him. The elephant was flanked, on either side, but somewhat behind, by two other

as punishment for this, though the reason may have been quite another. their bravado, and the resultant leniency speak in the other direction.

elephants, upon each of which rode a "priest", with another behind him holding similar umbrellas - these representing "Cotteragam Dio" and "Potting Dio" respectively. But this trio is preceded by a grand procession of as many as 40 to 50 elephants, caparisoned in white and with brass bells hanging on either side of their necks, which tingled as they went, while behind them came a numerous procession of grandly dressed gentlewomen and others, with the King's commanders and soldiery bringing up the rear (p. 78-81).

When the King himself rode in the procession in the time when he took pleasure in it, says Knox, he invariably did so on a horse (p. 79). Similar festivals were held in diverse cities and towns, he adds, though we may be sure they were not on such a grand scale as "the Perahar of the City of Conde" nor with so many elephants gracing these.

To turn to quite a different matter, Knox tells us that elephants were kept night and day inside Rajasingha's palace with the express purpose of trampling down the multitude in the event of a tumult (p. 35). If this was so, it may have been after the revolt of 1664, or otherwise, the chiefs in charge of these elephants were in complicity with the rebels; for when 200 or more of these rebels broke into the palace, the elephants did nothing of the kind of things Knox tells us they were purported to do. Nor indeed were they even marshalled in their might against that solitary intrepid French ambassador who walked out on the King, when he would have looked quite quixotic in placing his hard upon the hilt of his sword, had those who intended to block his way at the gate with elephants not called them away and let him pass (p. 184). Still, we may accept that this interesting alternative to stout gates was there for that purpose - for a gate offered no more than a passive obstruction and needed a contingent of soldiery to man it, whereas an elephant blocking doorway or corridor would have been quite a formidable proposition, even for the doughtiest of rebels.

Rajasingha II was not the first king of Sri Lanka, as he was certainly not the last, to use elephants for execution. Nor was this the only mode of execution known with them; there were beheading and impaling and other refinements in the way of disposing of criminals, dissidents and traitors that were practised alongside the occasional execution by elephants. But even the Dutch, who were the first to question Knox upon his escape and arrival in Colombo (p.172), may have been impressed, as would Knox's readership thereafter, by this unique manner of execution, so thoroughly unfamiliar to them, by the use of this equally exotic and overpowering beast.

The use of animals by human beings to kill those whom these animals would otherwise not have been inclined to kill, being neither threat nor food to them, and to have them do so in a manner that gratified the lust for cruelty on the part of the users beyond anything in the nature of the beasts themselves, is a perversity that demeans men

far below their wretched instruments. It is diametrically opposed to the noble service these same animals were enlisted for and proudly and with dignity performed, in the ceremonials of the gentle religion of Buddhism in the island and, if anything, harks back rather to the gory performances of the Roman amphitheatre. The intention of the rulers was surely also to serve those inclined to crime, disobedience or revolt as a chilling deterrent in a society which was still inured to violence and viciously vindictive. Knox writes:

"The King makes use of them (Elephants) for Executioners; they will run their Teeth through the body, and then tear it in pieces, and throw it limb from limb. They have sharp Iron with a socket with three edges, which they put on their Teeth at such times; for the Elephants that are kept have all the ends of their Teeth cut to make them grow better..."(p. 22 - 23)"

Here again there cannot be the least doubt that what the writer means by "Teeth" are tusks. But here again the evidence involving them is somewhat controversial. The use of an elephant to stab a victim with his tusks, even rearming them with iron sockets for the purpose, if the intention was to make that death agonizing, even if ripping and tossing the limbs of the poor wretch thereafter may be horribly dramatic. For, the job with the tusks would have killed him outright by then. Besides, with the elephant having no neck to speak of which would help him to depress his head, he would have found the exercise somewhat awkward, if not impossible, to bring his tusks to bear upon a man whom he was holding down prostrate on the ground with a forefoot at the same time. As for the pointed iron sockets, these would perhaps have been useful to arm the tusks (especially those that were short or blunted) for a frontal attack upon erect human beings in war - as indeed elephants needed to be trained to do, since they did not naturally go for the enemy with their tusks. If it is then implied that the elephant was used for disposing of his victim by stabbing, I am sure human executioners would have been capable of a far better job of prolonging the agony, using spear or sword. What I suspect, however, is that somewhere down the line Knox's evidence had got mixed up, suggesting to him that the executions by elephant were done with the tusks, and that these tusks were capped with artificial points to make them stab and rip the victim the better. He is perhaps going by hearsay or imagination, into which evidence of arming of tusks (for battle) and a sight of such sockets had insinuated itself. There is no inkling that he was himself ever a witness of such an execution.

Fortunately, I am not alone in finding the exercise as described, even briefly, by Knox, as awkward and unlikely. For Tennent, directly contradicting Knox by name, says he was assured by a Kandyan chief, who was witness to such scenes, *that the elephant never once applied his tusks*, but rather, he did what his strength specifically

PLATE II



One Impaled on a Stake.

recommended him for towards accomplishing a systematic and excruciating death, i.e. "placing his foot on his prostrate victim, (he) plucked off his limbs in succession by a sudden movement of his trunk".⁴⁰ Sirr, who about the same time as Tennent witnessed in mime an execution in Kandy, himself saw no indication of the application of the tusks. On the other hand, in this case the elephant was seen to have set about methodically crushing the limbs of the victim with his foot rather than tearing them off; this he did, prolonging the suffering by avoiding the vital organs; then, when given the command to "complete his work", he placed one foot where the victim's stomach would have been, and the other where the head, and emulated crushing the life out of him.⁴¹ This elephant, writes Sirr, was of enormous size and mottled - recalling the favoured elephant of King Rajasingha II - though of course it is quite impossible that it could have been the same beast.⁴²

Remarkably enough, the illustration which accompanies the text at this point in the *Historical Relation* (Plate I) appears to bear out Tennant more than it does Knox himself! Who the "graver" was, who was responsible for these drawings of the book neither Knox nor Robert Hooke mentions in their *Epistles Dedicatory* or *Preface* to the work. But while these drawings deserve independent inquiry into their reflection of actuality, the same may be said of Knox's verbal accounts themselves. Still, the fact that he let even the obviously ridiculous depictions remain, must suggest that they are not the free imaginings of the artist but conformed to the instructions, and indeed satisfaction, of the author. Donald Ferguson conjectured, but without any proof, that they may have been the work of Knox's own brother, James, an artist, who died on the 23rd of March

⁴⁰ *op. cit.* p. 281. Instances of elephants thought to have jabbed at fallen men with their tusks may really be of attempts to crush them with the base of the trunk, with the tusks getting in the way. The hunter, Carl Akeley's escape, recorded by Dr. Sykes (see Scullard *op. cit.* p. 228) may be truly thanks to the tusks!

⁴¹ *op. cit.* p. 185.

⁴² *op. cit.* p. 185-186. In antiquity, as in Aristotle and Megasthenes, elephants were thought to live around 200 years. Apollonius of Tyana (see Philostratus ii. 12) is said to have seen near Taxila an elephant called Ajax who had fought for Porus near 350 years ago! However, the elephants life-span is no more than that of a man, around 80 years, perhaps even less.

1681.⁴³ H.A.I.Goonetilleke concurs to the extent that the mysterious artist is one who, "however, praiseworthy, and sometimes delightful his drawings", and however, deceptive he was in the "accuracy of his delineation", had neither seen his subjects nor (as he thinks) done justice to Knox's instructions. As an extreme case in point, he refers to the depiction of the "Vadda or Wild Man" as an "almost pantomime figure of a be-whiskered, seventeenth century aristocrat in a state of near-nudity, sporting a top-knot and an enormous pipe, clutching a stage bow and arrow gingerly in his right hand".⁴⁴ But if so, and even granting that there is no evidence that Knox "personally stood over the artist's drawing-board", why, it may be asked, did he not himself, in the nearly forty years he lived after the publication of the book, express dissatisfaction with these illustrations or talk of replacing any or all of them in the enlarged second edition he was planning a few years before he died? Instead, these illustrations continued to be imitated, adapted, or elaborated upon unhesitatingly in later editions and translations of the *Historical Relation*.

If we are to suppose that the engraver, not working on his own knowledge or inspiration, was complying with Knox's directions, it is remarkable that the elephant in the illustration is neither shown stabbing his victim with his tusk, nor the tusks themselves tipped with iron sockets of any sort; instead, the animal, with instructing keeper mounted upon the nape of his neck, is seen holding the body of his victim down by his right foreleg, while he wraps his trunk round a leg, preparatory to tearing it off, perhaps with that sudden wrenching movement mentioned by Tennent; in the foreground is the wretch's left arm, already torn off his body.

The scene is surely a 'place of Execution' such as is described by Knox elsewhere (p. 40), to which he says prisoners were led through the city in public view to terrify all, with carrion dogs following them to eat their flesh. For, in the background of our 'Execution by an Elephant' (*sic*) is to be seen a man tied to a stake, while a supplementary illustration (the Puritan in Knox seems to delight in the gory spectacle of the wages of sin, even if they are meted out by a diabolical despot) shows a man impaled, with two dogs greedily for his flesh and blood, and carrion crows swarming

⁴³ D.W.Ferguson *Captain Robert Knox: the twenty years captive in Ceylon and author of "An Historical of the Island Ceylon in the East Indies" London, 1681. Contributions towards a biography.* Colombo (Ceylon) and Croydon (England) (1896 - 1897) p. 26 and 28.

⁴⁴ "Robert Knox in the Kandyan Kingdom, 1660 - 1679: A Bio-Bibliographical Commentary" *The Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities* vol. 1, No.2(1975)

in, while from a tree in the background hang sundry arms and legs (Plate II). As Knox describes the place of execution, "there are always some sticking upon Poles, others killed by Elephants on the ground, or by other ways" (p. 40).

Among those who were executed by elephants were, to the knowledge of Knox himself, a Portuguese in the service of the King, an English courtier named Henry Man, to whom this Portuguese fellow addressed a letter entreating him to get him off the work he was doing in the King's service, and the man to whom the Englishman had given the letter for translation. "All three were at one time and in one place torn in pieces by Elephants" (p. 135).

It is the manner of the capture of elephants in the time of Rajasingha II that is Knox's lengthiest notice on elephants. But it is here that he is also most controversial and at the same time found to be most prejudicial to his "old Master". For, while the account itself seems to be a confusion of two or more methods of capturing elephants - or, it may be, a reversal of the sequence in a kraaling - Knox declares that the catching of elephants was purely for the King's pleasure, that the construction of pounds was a deliberate infliction on the people, and that some wild elephants were used by him perversely to devastate the lands of subjects who had displeased him.

"When the King commands to catch Elephants, after they have found them they like, that is such as have Teeth...; unto these they drive some She-Elephants, which they bring with them for the purpose; which when once the males have got a sight of, they will never leave, but follow them wheresoever they go.; and the females were so used to it, that they will do whatsoever either by a word or a beck their Keepers bid them; and so they delude them along though Towns and Countreys, thro the Streets of the City, even to the very Gates of the Kings Palace; Where sometimes they seize upon them by snares, and sometimes by driving them into a kind of Pound, they catch them" (p. 21).

A few pages later, talking of the King's "Pastimes and Recreations", which he says "is all he minds or regards", Knox refers again to this practice of making the people "bring wild elephants out of the Woods, and catch them in his Presence", adding: "The manner how they get them unto the City I have mentioned already" (p. 42).

It is in what he says soon afterwards in the account under review that Knox, whether by his own misconstruction of the evidence or his uncritical acceptance of hearsay hostile to the monarch, underscores his prejudice against Rajasingha. For, he says that when the men have brought an elephant which has not as yet been secured,

along with the tame female, into the King's presence, if the King likes him not, he commands the men to let the animal return to the wild. It is with such still uncaught animal that the King likes that, according to Knox's account, the fun and games begin. For His Majesty then appoints a place near the city, to which this animal is driven with the shes - "for without them it is not possible to make him stay" - and there he is kept till further orders are given, "which perhaps may not be in two or three or four Years" (!) All the time this elephant is watched by great men with soldiers, and if he strays, is brought back, "fearing the Kings displeasure, which is not less than death it self". In such circumstances the wild elephants thus detained "do, and may do, great dammage to the Country, by eating up their Corn, and trampling it with their broad feet, and throwing down their Coker Nut Trees, and oftentimes their Houses too" - and their owners may not resist them. And then Knox adds: "It is thought this is done by the King to punish them that ly under his displeasure". After two or three years the King may still ultimately have such an elephant set free in the jungle. "For he catcheth them not for any use or benefit he hath by them, but onely for his recreation and pleasure" (p. 21 - 22).

At least four details in this account should cause surprise in the critical, who have any knowledge of the capture of elephants. The first of these is the manner the wild elephants are rounded up for capture, when that capture also involves a pound (or *kraal*). The use of she elephants can only be for the lure of individual animals, like a lone tusker, when seen and coveted, and not for a whole herd, for which the *kraal*, a massive and expensive task, is usually undertaken. Secondly, it would be an amazing thing if, let alone a single wild elephant, a number of them were seen, of their own accord, walking "thro' Towns and Countreys, through the Streets of the City, even to the very Gates of the Kings Palace", however lovesick they may have been for any special beauties of the King's stables. Thirdly, the pound itself; if this was a *kraal* or *keddah* of the sort that the Portuguese had introduced into the island and was being used by the Dutch as well to catch larger numbers instead of individual animals as in the past, the construction of one "at the very Gates of the King's Palace" is, to say the least, absurd.⁴⁵ Lastly, the idea that a wild elephant was kept surrounded by "great men with Souldiers" and prevented from escaping by this human ring, not for a day or two, but, both day and night, "for two or three or even four years" is, if one can imagine what it entails, quite simply unbelievable.

What then have we here? I cannot think why, but it seems to me that Knox's account here is a garbling of least two distinct ways of taking elephants. The first of these is a traditional one, which made use of tame females with which to lure and noose

⁴⁵ The alternative is a small corral, and the plurals used by Knox merely reflect repetitive practice. But if so, where is the entertainment worthy of our monarch?

individual wild elephants (male, in that case, and tusked most surely) which had been seen and desired; the other, the elaborate *kraal* method involving the encirclement of an entire herd (or even two or three herds) by a large number of men under headmen, and a "drive" which directed them into the stockade. But again, as I suggested before, what we have here may be no more than the several principal stages of the *kraal* itself, only scrambled. In that case the encirclement of the animals by "great men with Souldiers" would point to the use of beaters under chiefs, who would then drive the herd, with noise and fire, into the stockade, preventing any from breaking out of the human ring; the use of tame elephants would come thereafter, when the trapped animals would be isolated and subdued for noosing and securing; this would be then followed by their being conducted by the tame animals out of the stockade (and now understandably) through the countryside and even the streets of town and city to the place, or places, in the neighbourhood where they would be tamed and trained during the succeeding months.

The *kraal* itself needed to be well in the jungle and adequately camouflaged, if it were to serve its purpose of receiving a stampeding herd unsuspected. Knox must be singularly naive if he thought that wild elephants would come out of the jungle, amble casually through populous human habitations and up to the very gates of the royal palace in broad daylight, and there enter a pound that would have been visible even from afar - be it out of love for certain shes or to gratify the whims of a monarch, who wished to view a *kraal* now and again from the comfort and convenience of his palace balcony. Little wonder then that Knox thought elephants, for all the sagacity he concedes them, could "easily be caught" (p. 21), and even with far less labour than the Sinhalese were expending on the matter right then (p. 46).

The location of the pound at the gates of the King's palace must then be pure imagination on the part of Knox himself - that is, if he had not been misled to think so by his informants' exaggerations. The making of a stockade for the purpose of catching wild elephants was no easy matter; Knox himself had some idea of the difficulty; he considered it one of the harsh drudgeries imposed on the people by Rajasingha, involving "the dragging of great Trees" (p. 45 - 46). Besides, the erection of one merely to capture three or four tuskers, who at best had been foolish enough to follow the female decoys into town, is not only absurd but also a waste of huge effort, especially when these elephants were already almost in the bag.

Some idea of the work entailed in organizing a *kraal* can be gained from the descriptions in Tennent, Deraniyagala and others, who have witnessed the work involved in the last of the *kraals* to be held in the island. The identification of the herds to be brought in, the selection of the site for the stockade, the felling, logging and hauling of huge tree trunks and the erecting and buttressing of them to withstand the repeated charges of the enraged elephants, the camouflaging of everything man-done so as to allay

the suspicion of the herds, the amassing of a very large number of villagers and elephant-men and organizing and deploying them for the drive, the provision of a pavilion for the distinguished guests to view the operation - these and a hundred other things have to be looked after, in the light of which Knox's notice suggests he little understood, and certainly had not seen the catching of elephants by *kraal*.

If the King viewed such an operation, it must inevitably have been in deep jungle, and from a grand-stand erected for him, his queen, courtiers and retinue, overlooking the stockade at the place where most of the action was due to take place, as was, for instance, for the Governor and his entourage at the *kraal* of 1847, of which Tennent was a spectator and has left us a full account,⁴⁶ or the one sponsored by the Government at Ambanpola in 1930 and visited by Deraniyagala, which was provided with two *paththirippu* stands, one for the up-country Sinhala ladies, and the other for the Governor and his party.⁴⁷ D'Oyly tells us of combats staged between herds of elephants in an amphitheatre-like *gal indhikeda* or stone enclosure in the forest, which were viewed by the monarch, King Kirti Sri Rajasingha, in this manner.⁴⁸

Later on we find Sirr reiterating the silly story that, to please the King, elephants were brought to the city and captured in his presence. But when it turns out that his source is none other than Robert Knox, one wonders whether he had the authority to talk of a 'herd' and as 'driven', instead of three or four odd (indeed odd!) wild elephants infatuated by a few tame shes.⁴⁹

One of the techniques of capturing wild elephants by the use of tame female decoys, has the decoy tied to a tree upon a hill, where wild elephants are in the habit of grazing, with three or four pits dug around her. When the males lured by her fall into these pits, they are left to starve for 7 or 8 days, then brought up well-secured, by piling the floor of the pits with branches. This method of capture, of which Knox knows nothing, though it is attested for a century or so before him, is described in the book of

⁴⁶ *op. cit.* p. 344 f.; on the banks of the Kimbul Oya off Kurunegala.

⁴⁷ *op. cit.* p. 85 f.

⁴⁸ James D'Oyly *A Sketch of the Constitution of the Kandyan Kingdom (1809-1815)*. See Deraniyagala *op. cit.* p. 66.

⁴⁹ *op. cit.* p. 190.

Duarte Barbosa.⁵⁰ The one that Knox could well have been confounding with the *kraal* system may, however, be that called *ath-mandu*, in which the expert noosers, usually Moormen, called *panikkeas*, sometimes used a tame elephant to approach a wild one, creeping up under its belly, and then slipped a noose up the victim's leg. The noose was then attached to a *poradde*, or collar, of the tame elephant, which straightaway walked to a suitable tree, dragging the noosed animal, which was down on its knees. Tennent is full of admiration for the courage of these men, two of whom will sometimes noose the largest of elephants without even the aid of a tame one to approach it.⁵¹ And it must be by methods such as this that wild elephants were captured, and singly, before the introduction of kraaling to the island. But what is of course as likely is that Knox is talking, as if it happened outside as an alternative, of the noosing that was part of the operation associated with the *kraal* itself.

Called *vara mandu*, the ropes "to catch and tie the Elephants with" were usually made of buffalo hide, or, as Knox reports in his quaint language, "Cow-hides, as die of themselves". And the making of them was itself assigned to the Rodiyas, together with the right to the flesh of the dead animals. This was in the King's service, and the Rodiyas guarded this privilege against usurpers such as the Weavers even by resort to violence and the threat of their personal pollution (p. 31).

These men were so low, the author of the *Historical Relation* says, that nothing they can do can make them lower, even sleeping with their daughters and mothers (*loc. cit.*). On the other hand, the men who caught elephants, and likewise the keepers of elephants, were, like the smiths, inferior to the "Hondrews", who will not eat with them, yet wear apparel like them and could sit on stools (p. 68), showing they were somebodies in Sinhalese society, whereas all below the "Couratto", or Elephant-men, "may not sit on stools nor wear Doublets nor wear their Cloth low down their legs" (p. 69). Among the three things considered most valorous among the Sinhalese, says Knox elsewhere - the other two being fighting the enemy and catching wild boars - was hunting elephants (p. 27).

The elephants caught were apparently kept in stalls - Knox refers to them as "houses" - the *hasthisala*, for the making of which too his tyrannical Highness, King Rajasingha, conscripted labour. Such stalls are mentioned, for instance, in the *Kaka*

⁵⁰ *The Book of Duarte Barbosa* (1518) transl. from the Portuguese by M.L.Dames vol. ii, London, Hakluyt Soc. vol. mcmxxi p. 113-114.

⁵¹ *The Wild Elephant, and the Method of Capturing and Taming it in Ceylon*, London (1867) p. 97-100.

Jataka (No. 140) and *Kapi Jataka* (No. 404), where they catch fire and cause burns to the elephants. But such stables cannot have been provided for all of the numerous elephants the King owned; the majority of them may have been distributed throughout his kingdom, and for the most part tethered by their hind legs to strong trees or rock pillars such as the one, rightly or wrongly, shown today in the precincts of the Yatala Temple in Mahagama as of the redoubtable Kandula.

Knox includes for us a brief but graphic description of the fortuitous depredations that cultivators in villages hemmed by jungle had to face from wild elephants, which in language and effect is no different from what he says those people had to put up with, who had provoked the ire of the King and had sundry wild elephants wilfully confined to their land. Talking of these wild elephant raids he says:

"The People stand in fear of them, and oftentimes are killed by them. They do them also great damage in their Grounds, by Night coming into their Fields and eating up their Corn and likewise their Coker-nut-Trees, &c. So that in Towns near unto the Woods, where are plenty of them, the people are forced to watch their Corn all Night, and also their Ortyards and Plantations; into which being once entered with eating and trampling they will do much harm, before they can get them out. Who oftentimes when by lighting of Torches, and hollowing, they will not go out, take their Bowes and go and shoot them, but not without some hazard, for sometimes the Elephant runs upon them and kills them" (p. 22).

Though the number of elephants in the island is considerably reduced, the problem remains as bad as ever for the elephants with the alarming reduction of jungle land and rapid increase of cultivations. As they did in the time of Knox with bows, today cultivations and villagers, in anger and desperation, set traps or blast at them with guns. Writes B.W.M.Gooneratne:

"It must be frustration, to say the least, to have a herd of elephants enter one's field during the night and make a meal of one's half-yearly income. The cultivator resents the presence of the elephant and its activities, which can plunge him into debt, and certainly make him and his family go hungry. There is no guarantee that the thief will not come again, so elephants are shot at from watch huts in the chenas, sometimes killed, but usually maimed and grievously

wounded."⁵²

Gooneratne draws attention to Knox's account and commends the cultivators of old who, having had similar problems in safeguarding their crops, succeeded in their task without having to decimate the elephants.⁵³ As regards Knox's notice that the King deliberately used wild elephants to devastate cultivated land belonging to those who lay under his displeasure, hedging them in for years together with soldiers under chiefs, Gooneratne says nothing, but has some information on a royal practice which could well have been misconstrued or even maliciously inverted, whether by Knox's source or Knox himself. This is the service on behalf of the king called *pelmura*, in which large numbers of people were enlisted under headmen to protect the king's field, not destroy that of his enemy, and by keeping out, not keeping in, wild elephants. This *rajakariya* of the cultivators, akin to *wahalmura*, i.e. guarding the king's palace, the cultivators of old were only too proud to perform. As for his own crops, if a cultivator reported damage, far from receiving compensation, he was a disgraced man, and might even have to pay a fine to the headman for the negligence or failure on his part. If elephants were plentiful near any village, it was the duty of the local headman to co-opt the villagers and drive them away with tom-tom and other such noises to the ample jungle beyond.⁵⁴

In his *Epistle Dedicatory* dated March 18, 1681, Knox claimed to have written nothing except what he himself was assured was the truth from personal knowledge, or what he had received from the Sinhalese themselves "of such things as are commonly known to be true among them". This simplicity and candour of the man has, from the first publishing of the *Historical Relation*, won him a reputation for honesty. What is regrettable, however, is that this has often been confused with veracity, since, as we have seen in the case of our own limited subject of attention, Knox is not only surprisingly ill-informed for one who had spent such a long period of time among the Sinhalese, both in his own villages and outside, but also surprisingly ill-comprehending or gullible - not to mention certain innate prejudices which he harbours against both the King and the people, whom he, notwithstanding the unique nature of his imprisonment, persists in seeing as his "enemy". And yet, for lack of any substantial evidence on the social and

⁵² 'The Ceylon Elephant, *Elephas Maximus Zeylanicus*: its Decimation and Fight for Survival' *The Ceylon Journal of Historical and Social Studies*, vol. x, nos. 1 and 2, (June - December 1967) p. 152.

⁵³ *op. cit.* p. 153.

⁵⁴ *op. cit.* p. 152. citing D.J.G.Hennessy "I Watch in a Chena' ris vol. II, no. 3 (Dec.1940) p. 155-158.

political life of 17th century Sri Lanka, if not because of it, the *Historical Relation* has been taken, for better as for worse, as a respectable documentary of the life of the times - indeed, its veracity sometimes being confirmed by information of which the source can be traced to nowhere else but its own pages!

There are many things that are baffling about the man, his stay in the island and his activities that need to be considered further. Some time in the past K.W.Goonewardena, in an article entitled *Some Comments on Robert Knox and his Writings on Ceylon*, brought up good discussion on Knox in which he pointed to certain linguistic, geographical and even sociological limitations on the author's part, which would account for the eccentric - I would say even 'cockeyed'- picture' of Sinhalese society which the *Historical Relation* gives us.⁵⁵ Regrettably his study is itself restricted, and his arguments not always conclusive, as a result of which he lets Knox get off rather lightly. But, as he would himself be the first to admit, a proper assessment of the Englishman's work as a source can only come with a more comprehensive and detailed examination of his information.

If then some idea of the nature of the undertaking is indicated by the limitations and prejudices of Knox from Goonewardena's comments on the *Historical Relation*, I trust this inquiry of mine, of which I must remind that the prime concern remains with elephants from my love of them, may in its own way serve to show how extensive such a study could really be.

--

⁵⁵ *University of Ceylon Review* vol. xvi, nos. 1 & 2 (January April 1958) p. 39-52. See also S.Arasaratnam *Dutch Power in Ceylon: 1658 1687*, Amsterdam, Djambatan, (1958). While appreciating that Knox serves to correct certain factual distortions found in the Dutch sources, he is aware of the danger of placing too great reliance on him for a true picture of the society of the time. "A system that worked with the sanction of custom and tradition is looked at from the outside and not in perspective".