

A Collective Look at the Transformation of Ceylon, 1800 – 1948*

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The University of Ceylon History of Ceylon was conceived many years ago with aims more modest than those of the *Cambridge Modern History* at the turn of the nineteenth century. Yet the two multi-volume projects have much in common in their conception, planning and execution.

Lord Acton, one of the founding fathers of the Cambridge project, in his circular letter to the contributors of the *Cambridge Modern History*, laid out its aims in terms of the ideals of history writing then current. The Ranke admonition to historians to write their history 'as it really happened' had left its mark on British academic historiography. It was the fervent belief of the historians of the late nineteenth/early twentieth century that this was indeed an attainable aim. Acton himself expressed this belief in this letter when he said: "Nearly all the evidence that will ever appear is accessible now." He then went on to enunciate this classic dictum: "Our Waterloo must be one that satisfied French and English, Germans and Dutch alike; ... nobody can tell, without examining the list of authors, where the Bishop of Oxford laid down the pen, and whether Fairburn or Gasquet, Liebermann or Harrison took it up."¹

The experience of the twentieth century has been to move away from the expectation that uniformity and universality in history writing are attainable ends. Definitive histories, like ultimate truths, are ever receding ideals and no historian in the modern age will claim definitiveness or finality for his end product. Histories in our day seem to age more rapidly than film stars. The *Cambridge Modern History* has been replaced by a *New Cambridge Modern History*² which will doubtless be replaced by something newer in the foreseeable future.

Yet to accept this, is not to fall to the opposite pole of an absolute relativism, denying completely the validity of an ultimate explanation of the historical process. A historian who begins by denying the possibility of his arriving at universally acceptable historical explanations by the skilful exercise of his craft, denies the validity of the historical science and will write, not

* *The University of Ceylon, History of Ceylon volume III From the Beginning of the 19th Century to 1948*, edited by K. M. de Silva, Colombo Apothecaries Co. Ltd., 1973, 579 pp., Rs. 60 and £5.00.

1. Lord Acton, *Essays in the Liberal Interpretation of History*, ed. by W. H. McNeill, Chicago 1967, pp. 396–399.
2. *The New Cambridge Modern History*, 14 vols. Cambridge from 1957.

history, but journalism. In this respect, Lord Acton was formulating the highest level of idealism the historian can aim at, though one may feel that he was not fully alive to the practical difficulties in the attainment of these aims. He was articulating the concept that if all his contributors were true to the scientific methodology of history writing, then they would all come up with universally acceptable interpretations devoid of the stamp of nationality, religious adherence or other personal proclivities of the authors.

Though the framers of the University of Ceylon History project have not chosen to issue guide lines to their contributors as Lord Acton had done, the history they have produced has gone far towards meeting the criteria set out by him. This is especially so of the third volume, which we are now discussing, more than of the two parts of volume I so far published.³ That history bristled with controversy, and the prejudices and pet theories of contributors shot through every page. Those volumes were overtaken by monographs and dissertations soon after they were written and have now become quite dated in many subjects they wrote about. The third volume seems as authoritative and definitive a history of modern Ceylon as one is likely to have for a long time.

This springs from a number of factors which have favoured the present volume, despite the many mechanistic difficulties that the Editor outlines in his Preface. It is based on the solid scholarship of a generation of Ph.D. Theses written in western universities in the 1950s and 1960s. It is written by a body of scholars whose background is very similar. Graduated from Peradeniya, research degree from a British university seems to be the almost identical background of almost every one of the contributors. This has given the contributions a generally uniform body of values and assumptions and a uniformly critical methodology of historical scholarship. It is indeed a tribute to the objectivity of the contributors to the volume to say that the reader would not really know when Dr. Vijaya Samaraweera lays down the pen and where Professor Jeyaratnam Wilson takes it up, without looking at the list of contents.

The points of strength, however, are also the sources of weakness. Much of the work betrays the character of condensed Ph.D. theses. Thus at times arguments are heavily packed and one wishes to know more of the evidence on which they are based. Those areas which are cogently and penetratingly written on are the areas on which the contributors are specialists. Thus the topics that come out in bold relief in the volume are: Early British policies; the Colebrooke-Cameron reforms; English education and the growth of an elite; Missionary activity and its social impact; Plantation agriculture; Some aspects of peasant agriculture; Constitutional and administrative development; Some aspects of Nationalism. Among areas which are weak in the treatment are: The Buddhist and Hindu revivalist movements; Many other aspects of peasant agriculture; Kandyan provinces and Tamil areas generally; Society below the level of the elites.

3. *History of Ceylon*, Volume 1, Parts I and II, University of Ceylon Press Board, 1960.

Quite understandably, both in terms of the available evidence and therefore of scholastic interest and achievements, this history appears as a view of Ceylon from the south-western littoral. This in a sense has been the feature of Ceylon's historiography from the earliest times. The nuclear area of power and development at any given time becomes the focus from which the historian views the island. Thus the Mahavamsa and the early Sinhalese chronicles had Rajarata as their epi-centre. Later medieval chronicles shifted their focus to the South-western interior and later on to Kanda Uda Rata. Portuguese, Dutch and British historians wrote volumes on the ports and the littoral. The historians of independent Ceylon have continued to see and reveal more of the south-western littoral than of other parts of the island. There are some aspects of development for which this would be a very valid angle of vision. The nationalist movement spread out from the western seaboard, as also did the formation of the new elites, both entrepreneurial and professional, and even the Buddhist revivalist movement. But all these movements did not stop here and need to be followed up as they spread into each and every other area of the island.

One of the ways by which this may be achieved is for historical scholarship to turn its attention to regional studies. It may be argued that Ceylon is too small a territory to be carved up in this way and that the powerful Indian argument for regional studies does not apply. It is worth recalling that, in India, historical and political studies are now narrowing down on the district as the starting point of investigation. It cannot be accepted that Ceylon is too small for regional studies. As long as a state is divided into regions with distinctive social systems, culture patterns and economic organisation, then these smaller units must be investigated, if only to be fitted more meaningfully to the whole. One has only to see the paucity of information on the Tamils of the north and of the east, and on the Muslims of the southwest and the east, to see how much our understanding of parts of the whole has yet to proceed.

Volume 2 of this history, covering the period 1500-1800 is yet being written. And this is another drawback the authors of this volume have to contend with. The eighteenth century is still very much the dark age in Ceylon's history and yet it is so relevant to many of the hypotheses and interpretations that these authors have presented. One needs to know to what extent the economy of the lowlands had been monetised, how much Portuguese and Dutch agricultural policies had resulted in changes in proprietary rights, how far the non-agricultural castes of the lowlands had gone in upward social mobility, and a host of other related economic and social questions have to be answered.

The one linking theme through all the chapters of this work is the social, economic and political transformation of the island in the one and a half centuries, 1800-1948. This transformation is cogently analysed and described in its various stages in different chapters which identify a particular theme. The political transformation is what comes up most forcefully and clearly from the first intrusion of British power in the wake of the Revolutionary and

Napoleonic Wars, the annexation of the Kandyan Kingdom, the foundation of the British bureaucratic framework, the rise of political nationalism at various stages and the step-by-step transfer of power to Ceylonese hands. The economic transformation is traced again through its various stages of the initial British impact up to 1832, the expansion of export agriculture, both plantation and small-holding, the changes in the traditional peasant agricultural sector and the growth of the economic infra-structure. The social transformation comes into view through education, Christian missionary activity, the growth of elites and the revival of traditional religious and literary cultures.

In all these respects, as the volume (with its 533 pages) progresses, the story of this transformation unfolds and provides it with a unity which blurs the fact that there have been as many as 12 contributors. It is indeed a tribute to an excellent piece of editorship, a remarkable effort at coordination by all concerned and, not least of all, to the modern scientific historiographic tradition that produced this galaxy of scholars.

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