

# THE CEYLON JOURNAL



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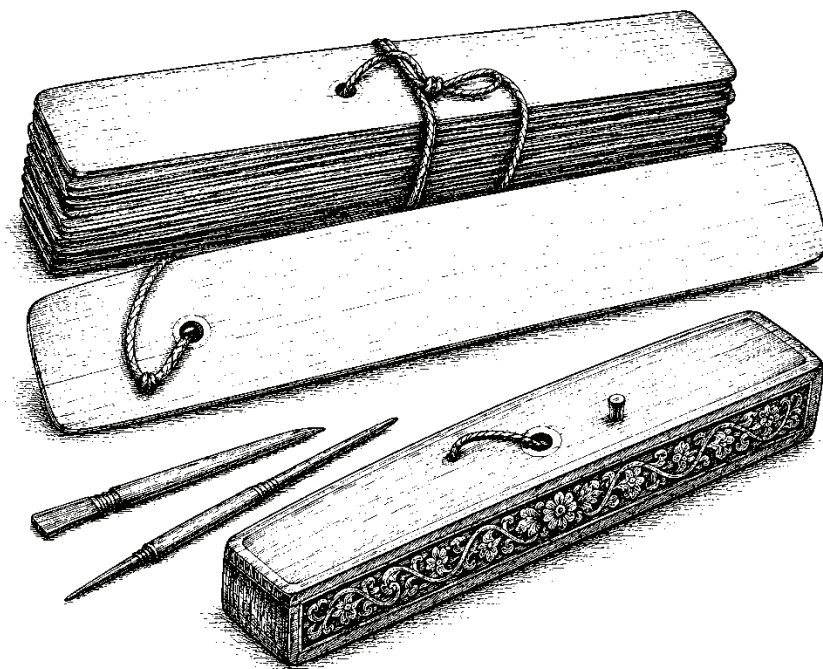


2026

Dedicated to the  
**Hugh Nevill Collection**

&

**Don Hendrick de Silva Gunaratna**



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*Articles for publication, books for review & journals in exchange to:*

Editor-in-Chief  
*The Ceylon Journal*  
avishkamario@gmail.com

For inquiries and subscriptions:  
Sri Lanka: +94 72 583 0728  
Australia: Jeremy De Lima +61 421 478 485  
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# From the Editor's Desk

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“To delve into our past and explore our rich heritage to enrich our identity and inspire our people to create a better Sri Lanka.”

The fifth issue of *The Ceylon Journal* arrives at a time when serious intellectual culture in Sri Lanka remains fragile, scattered, and too often neglected. Yet within these pages there is visible evidence that a determined and disciplined scholarly effort can still produce work of lasting value. This volume continues the journal's attempt to bridge history, art, architecture, politics, archaeology, aviation, and cultural memory in a manner accessible to both the specialist and the informed reader.

One of the most striking aspects of this issue is its breadth. The volume moves from the final years of the Jaffna Kingdom to the artistic memory of D. S. Senanayake, from traditional Sri Lankan architecture to the psychology of Geoffrey Bawa, and from the Air Lanka Tristar disaster to the forgotten intellectual worlds preserved within the Hugh Nevill Collection. It also contains lesser-known facets of the marvel of the Sri Lankan railway line to the health care scene in the 1980s, Old Park and Passion Plays in Jaffna as well as how “compassion” has been experimented in higher education and the remarkable tale of the father of modern art in Sri Lanka. Such variety is not accidental. Sri Lankan studies cannot survive through narrow compartmentalization. A nation's civilisation is understood not merely through kings and wars, but through paintings, buildings, folklore, rituals, railways, songs, archives, and even the language with which ordinary people narrate their lives.

This issue is dedicated to Hugh Nevill and Don Hendrick de Silva Gunaratna. Nevill remains one of the most fascinating and complicated scholarly figures connected to nineteenth century Ceylon. Though a colonial civil servant, his contribution to the preservation of Sri Lanka's manuscript heritage was immense. The Hugh Nevill Collection today remains among the greatest repositories of Sri Lankan manuscripts outside the island. More importantly, as the essays in this volume demonstrate, the collection preserves not merely Sinhala literary material, but traces of Tamil, Vedda, folkloric, ritualistic, and multilingual worlds that modern scholarship has too often neglected. The rediscovery and critical study of such material is not an exercise in nostalgia. It is essential if Sri Lanka is to understand the true complexity of its civilizational inheritance.

The growth of *The Ceylon Journal* itself also deserves reflection. What began as a modest publication has steadily evolved into a serious intellectual platform drawing together academics, independent researchers, writers, collectors, professionals, and younger scholars. The launch of the previous issue and public lecture held earlier this year demonstrated that there remains a genuine hunger for thoughtful discussion conducted without fashionable jargon or artificial obscurity.

A few months ago, Architect Lakmith Fernando joined the editorial team of *The Ceylon Journal*. His inclusion reflects the journal's growing engagement with architecture, space, aesthetics, and the built environment, subjects too often marginalised within local intellectual discourse despite their deep connection to memory, identity, and civilisation itself.

Ultimately, *The Ceylon Journal* matters because it preserves continuity. It creates a record of thought. It allows a society to speak to future generations. In an age increasingly dominated by speed, distraction, and superficial commentary, the patient cultivation of scholarship remains one of the few enduring acts of cultural responsibility.

**Avishka Mario Senewiratne**  
May 17, 2026

## Launch of the previous issue of *The Ceylon Journal* and Public Lecture



***Avishka Mario Senewiratne presenting the lecture: “When Ceylon Found its Voice”***

The launch of the fourth issue of *The Ceylon Journal* and the accompanying public lecture titled *When Ceylon Found Its Voice* was held on Saturday, 17 January 2026, at the auditorium of the Sri Lanka Medical Association, Wijerama Road, Colombo.

The event drew an audience exceeding one hundred and thirty-five attendees, comprising medical practitioners, academics, legal professionals, clergy, journalists, corporate leaders, and members of the wider intellectual community. The primary sponsor of the evening was Sampath Bank Private Banking, whose support contributed significantly to the success of the programme. The proceedings commenced with an introduction delivered by Dr. Kanchanakesi Warnapala, who also paid a moving tribute to the memory of the late Ainslie Joseph, to whom the event was dedicated. Her remarks set a reflective and scholarly tone for the evening.

A complimentary review address on the fourth issue of *The Ceylon Journal* was presented by Prof. Rajiva Wijesinha, who offered an incisive appreciation of the journal’s intellectual scope and editorial ambition. The event was moderated with clarity and poise by Dr. Praveen Weeratunga, ensuring a seamless progression of proceedings.

The principal lecture was delivered by Avishka Mario Senewiratne, Editor of *The Ceylon Journal*, who spoke on the evolution of English newspapers and journals and the birth of the press in Ceylon. His address traced the emergence of print culture with precision, contextual depth, and rhetorical assurance, engaging both specialists and lay listeners alike.

An animated open discussion followed, during which numerous members of the audience raised perceptive questions relating to journalism, intellectual history, and the responsibilities of the press. The quality of the exchange reflected the keen interest and scholarly seriousness of those present.

The vote of thanks was proposed by Dr. Shane Halpe, after which a raffle was conducted. The prize, a second edition print of *Coins and Currency of Ceylon* by H. W. Codrington, was won by Mr. Nisal Pathiraja. The event was widely regarded as a resounding success. Commenting on the occasion, Prof. Asoka de Zoysa observed: “Four journals published in such a short span of time,

astonishing. I was genuinely impressed by the professionalism of the team and the clarity of their vision. The outcome fills a long-standing gap in Sri Lankan studies.

Too often, our academics eager for international readership reach for high flown language and ritual name-dropping Foucault here, Bourdieu there, Derrida everywhere. In contrast, these four volumes invite the reader to actually read. One grasps the author's intention quickly and without intimidation.

Long neglected areas of art writing are addressed, with themes flowing effortlessly from the pre modern to the modern and postmodern, mercifully without jargon that not even the writer fully understands. Avishka's own presentation at the launch set a benchmark for scholarship and rhetorical command."

The launch reaffirmed *The Ceylon Journal* as a significant and growing presence within Sri Lanka's intellectual and academic landscape.

**Dr. Shane Halpe,**  
**Social Media and Project Co-ordinator**



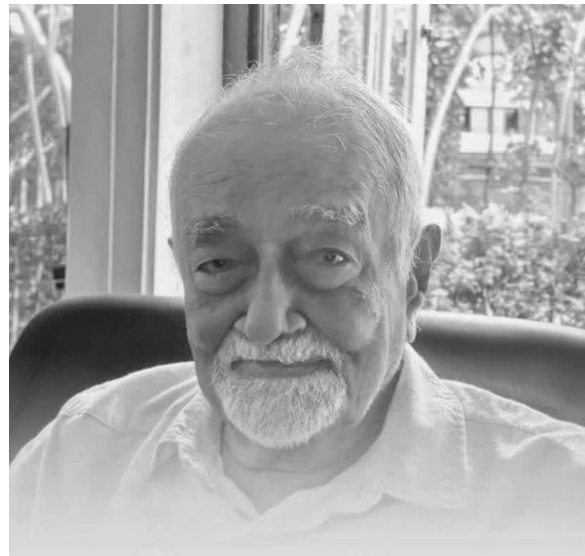
## In Memoriam

Friends of *The Ceylon Journal* who passed away in the last six months



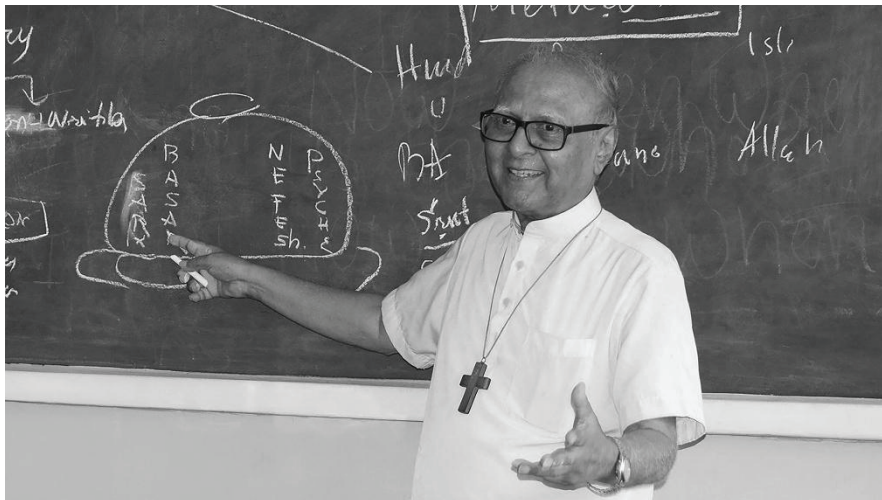
**Nihal Seneviratne**  
(1934-2026)

Secretary General of Parliament (1981-1994)



**Vidya Jothi Dr. Raja de Silva**  
(1924-2026)

Commissioner of Archaeology (1967-1979)



**Fr. (Prof.) Aloysius Pieris sj**  
(1934-2026)

Theologian, Indologist, Founder/Director of Tulana (1974-2026)

# A Note on Hugh Nevill and Don Hendrick de Silva Gunaratna

Tom Peterson

**T**he *Hugh Nevill Collection of Sinhalese Manuscripts in the British Library* is arguably one of the world's most significant resources for studying Sri Lanka's sociocultural past, containing some 2227 olahs as well as several thousand hand-written and often-overlooked paper folios.<sup>1</sup> The collection takes its name after the colonial administrator, scholar, and collector, Hugh Nevill (1848–1897), who, between 1865 and 1897, had various roles in the Ceylon Civil Service (C.C.S.) and collected manuscripts to form a personal research library.<sup>2</sup> Following a decline in health in 1897, Nevill returned to Europe along with his library. The contents of the Nevill Collection therefore date to at least 1897, although some individual manuscripts are considerably older. Rather than return home to Britain, Nevill went to Hyères in southern France.

When he died later that year, it was the well-known Colombo Museum librarian and Oxford professor Don Martino de Silva Wickremasinghe (1865–1937) who transported the manuscripts to Britain, and they have remained there since.<sup>3</sup> This sequence of events, triggered and facilitated by Britain's colonial occupation of Sri Lanka, caused the vast repository of Sri Lankan sociocultural heritage and historical sources now known as 'the Nevill Collection' to become inaccessible to most Sri Lankans thereafter. The British Library has digitised a small number of Nevill Collection manuscripts, but the vast majority remain un-digitised and inaccessible outside of the library.

One aim of this volume of *The Ceylon Journal*, then, is to help increase awareness and interest in the collection, its contents, and its biography, with a view to stimulating further discussion around the archive and encouraging wider accessibility and dissemination in the future. The volume features another article by myself, which considers how the Nevill Collection materials can help to diversify our understanding of Sri Lanka's sociocultural past; and the present article, which offers a brief and hopefully useful introduction to Nevill as a collector, colonial administrator, and scholar. This introduction also introduces readers to Nevill's 'clerk', Don Hendrick de Silva Gunaratna, who collaborated with Nevill to collect and analyse what they called 'folklore', but who Nevill failed to credit publicly.<sup>4</sup> In doing so, this brief article primarily aims to explain and contextualise the collection and its form for the reader. I begin with some details about Nevill's early life, after which I discuss his scholarly and administrative careers, concluding with a short account of Gunaratna and his collaboration with Nevill.

In 1848 in Tottenham, London, Hugh Nevill was born into a financially-comfortable and scholarly family who took collecting seriously: while Hugh's father, William Nevill (1808–1847), was a wholesale hosier by trade, he was also part of several scholarly societies and developed a collection of minerals and meteorites so important they have been compared with those of Hans Sloane (1660–1753) and Sir Arthur

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<sup>1</sup> There is also a sizable collection of objects known as 'The Hugh Nevill Collection' kept by the British Museum, as well as other 'Nevill' objects in other British public institutions. These objects were in Hugh Nevill's possession when he left Ceylon in 1897 and have been treated in a similar manner to his manuscript collection. See Jansari, Sushma (2019). 'Colonial Collecting in Ceylon: Dispersing the Hugh Nevill Collections across the British Isles', in Peton, A. B., and Paul, K. A., *Arts of South Asia: Cultures of Collecting*,

University of Florida Press, Gainesville, pp. 62–93.

<sup>2</sup> Peterson, Tom (2025). 'The Lyric in Lanka: Alternative Histories of Music through the Hugh Nevill Collection', unpublished doctoral thesis, SOAS, University of London.

<sup>3</sup> Kariyawasam, Tissa (1989). 'An Addendum to the Hugh Nevill Collection of Sinhala Verse (Kavi)', *Vidyodaya Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 3:1 and 3:2, pp. 199–212.

<sup>4</sup> Peterson, 'The Lyric in Lanka'.

Russell (1878–1969). Hugh’s older brother, Ralph Nevill (1845–1917), was a member of multiple scholarly societies, and Hugh’s eldest brother, Geoffrey Nevill (1843–1885), developed an important collection of shells now included in several national museums, drawing attention from pre-eminent nineteenth-century naturalists Charles Darwin (1809–1882) and Alfred Russel Wallace (1823–1913).<sup>5</sup>

While the Hugh Nevill Collection holds a particular significance for Sri Lanka, it can also be seen as resulting from the wider Nevill family pursuit of forming globally significant collections, helping to illustrate the archive’s in-built subjectivity beyond its national significance. The Hugh Nevill Collection is Nevill’s personal library, reflecting his specific interests, lived experiences, and interactions in Ceylon: while it is now freely accessible to those who are able to travel to London, its formation was not neutral, official, or intended for a public readership.

Another factor behind the archive’s idiosyncrasy is that, unlike some of Nevill’s peers in the C.C.S., such as H.C.P. Bell (1851–1937), Nevill’s roles did not include historical or archaeological research, and so he was not officially responsible for collecting, archiving, or studying historical objects or literary material. Instead, Hugh’s employment was formally distinguished from his scholarship and collecting, and so his collection was developed voluntarily, informally, and in an amateur capacity: much like his father’s collection of minerals and meteorites.<sup>6</sup>

However, this does not mean that his C.C.S. and scholarly careers were not intertwined. During his time in Ceylon, Nevill was relocated several times by the administration, spending

time in Colombo, Matara, Galle, Batticaloa, Kandy, Trincomalee, Anuradhapura, Jaffna, and Chilaw, among other places. This relocation determined and redetermined for Nevill the communities and materials that he could come into contact with, leaving a direct and inextricable link between his C.C.S. career and the biography, form, and contents of the Nevill Collection.

When Nevill arrived in Colombo in 1865, he took on employment as Private Secretary to the Chief Justice and was elected to join the Royal Asiatic Society Ceylon Branch (RASCBC). The RASCBC evidently held him in high regard because, on 31 August 1867, Nevill was elected as their Honorary Secretary, a position he held until at least 4 December 1869.<sup>7</sup> Arriving in his late teens, the first few years of Nevill’s life in Ceylon were spent in Colombo, simultaneously developing his profile in the C.C.S. and the local anglophone scholarly milieu.<sup>8</sup>

It is unclear when exactly Nevill started collecting manuscripts, but we get several accounts and developments during his time as a District Judge in Matara, between 1885 and 1886. Nevill handwrote separate catalogues for the Sinhala prose and verse olahs in his collection, the latter of which was later edited by P.E.P. Deraniyagala into a three-part series titled *Sinhala Verse (kavi)*, published by the Ceylon Government Press between 1954 and 1955.<sup>9</sup> In this catalogue, Nevill mentions several manuscripts that he collected while in Matara and the nearby town of Dondra, as well as who he collected them from. These include copies of: the *Kōvīla Pevīma*, a text within the wider *Pantis Kōlmura* ritual, which ‘came from the Kapurāla of

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<sup>5</sup> Here I borrow considerably from Jansari, ‘Colonial Collecting’.

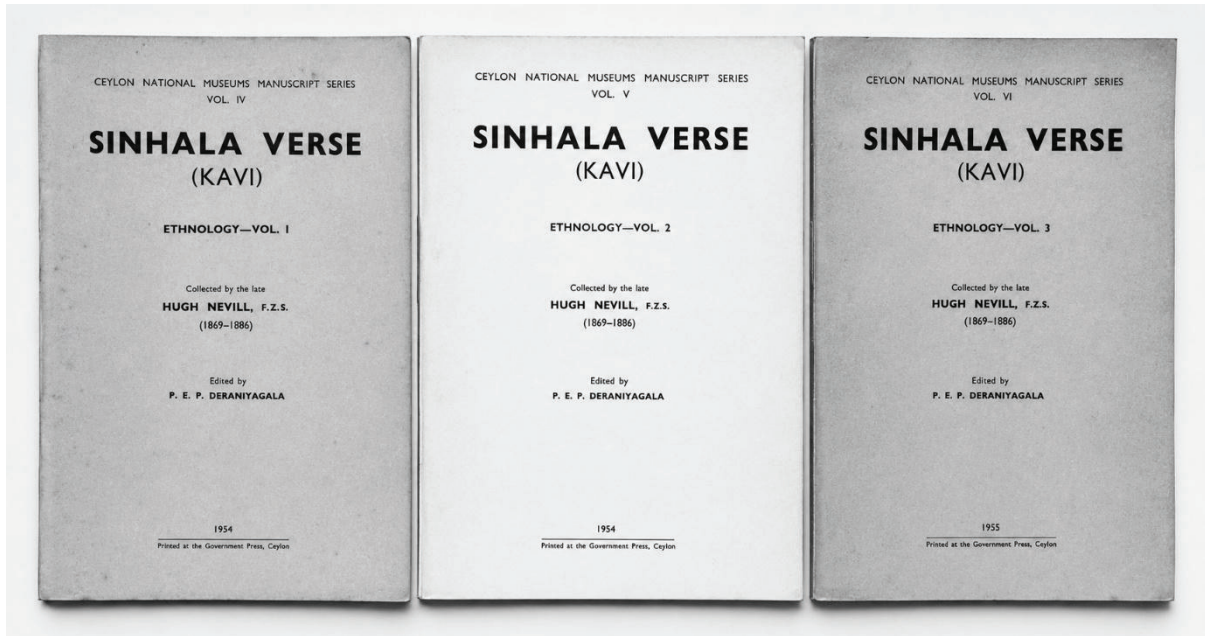
<sup>6</sup> Peterson, ‘The Lyric in Lanka’.

<sup>7</sup> Peterson, ‘The Lyric in Lanka’.

<sup>8</sup> As Sushma Jansari has noted, J. R. Toussaint’s *Annals of the Ceylon Civil Service* has led to a common misconception of Nevill as an underachiever. According to Toussaint, Nevill was ‘a somewhat eccentric man, and this circumstance may have retarded his advancement in the [C.C.S.], as the highest appointment he held was that of District Judge’. Toussaint was actually mistaken about Nevill’s C.C.S. career, his most senior role having been Acting Government Agent (Kariyawasam, ‘Addendum’).

Jansari also helpfully points out that Toussaint’s ‘main object’ in writing the *Annals* was to ‘entertain rather than inform’, meaning his account of Nevill was never required to be entirely reliable (Jansari, ‘Colonial Collecting’; Toussaint, J.R. 1935. *Annals of the Ceylon Civil Service*, Colombo Apothecaries, Colombo).

<sup>9</sup> Nevill, Hugh. (1954). *Sinhala Verse (Kavi)*, Vol. 1, edited by P.E.P. Deraniyagala, Ceylon Government Press, Colombo; (1955A) *Sinhala Verse (Kavi)*, Vol. 2, edited by P.E.P. Deraniyagala, Ceylon Government Press, Colombo; (1955B). *Sinhala Verse (Kavi)*, Vol. 3, edited by P.E.P. Deraniyagala, Ceylon Government Press, Colombo.



*From the Collection of A. M. Senewiratne*

the Dondra or Devinuwara Dewāla', who Nevill neglected to name; the *Kavi Mutu Hara*, a kavi rendition of the Dasaratha Jataka, which Nevill acquired through 'the kind help of Jambuwatte Piyaratna Tera of the vihare in Dondra'; the *Kummāsapinḍa Jātaka Kavi*, the title of which is self-explanatory, and which was brought 'to [Nevill's] notice' (i.e., given to Nevill) by J. P. Ekanayaka Esquire of Matara; and both the *Mini Ran Dama*, a kavi eulogy for the historical figure Rabel Erindu of Matara, and the *Don Andara Puvata*, a kavi and sindu eulogy for Rabel's son, Don Andara, which were 'given to [Nevill] by the family' of Rabel Erindu and Don Andara.<sup>10</sup> These manuscripts remain in the Nevill Collection today,<sup>11</sup> and further details about them can be found in the *Sinhala Verse (kavi)* publications mentioned earlier. Although Nevill did not collect these manuscripts in an official capacity, his status as Matara's District Judge is likely to have affected and perhaps initiated his contact with these contributors, as well as potentially

influencing them to part with their manuscripts. As such, although Nevill appears not to have stolen these olaḥs or used physical force to acquire them, their transition of ownership took place within, and was probably facilitated by, the wider colonial dynamic and context of the period.

This context also seems to have drawn Nevill to meet Don Hendrick de Silva Gunaratna (sometimes referred to by Nevill as Don Henry de Silva Gunaratna),<sup>12</sup> who served as a Gansabhawa Clerk in Matara during Nevill's tenure as District Judge.<sup>13</sup> Since Gansabhawa Clerks acted as liaisons between colonial offices and local *gansabhanas* (village council of elders),<sup>14</sup> it seems likely that Nevill saw Gunaratna as a useful contact for collecting 'folklore' (thought of as intimately connected with rural and village populations) and that this formed the basis of their collaboration.

Nevill left Matara for Kandy in 1886, but it appears that he and Gunaratna continued working together afterwards. In a note in among

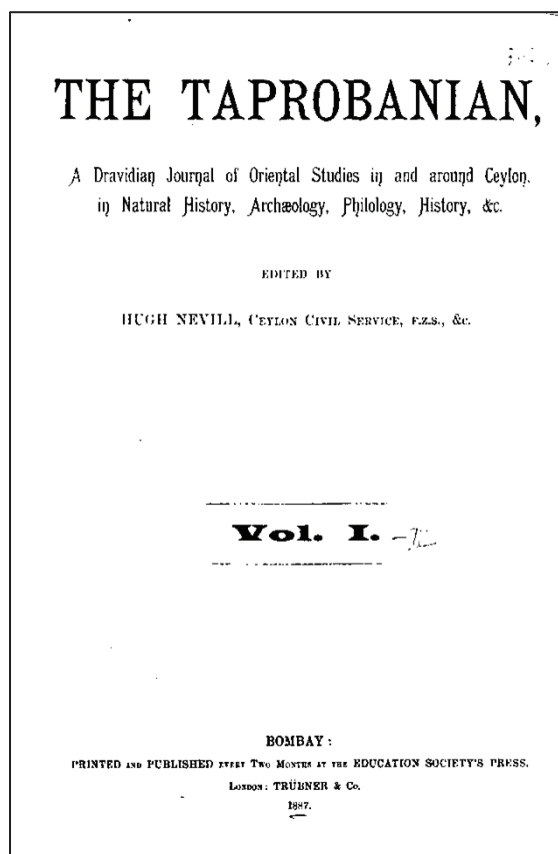
<sup>10</sup> Nevill, *Sinhala Verse* Vol. 2, p. 155; *Sinhala Verse* Vol. 3, pp. 119–120, 262–263, 123–124; Peterson, 'The Lyric in Lanka', pp. 138–140.

<sup>11</sup> Somadasa, K. D. (1995). *Catalogue of the Hugh Nevill Collection of Sinhalese Manuscripts in the British Library: Index Volume including a Glossary of Proper Names by Dr. Charles Hallisey*, Pali Text Society, London.

<sup>12</sup> Regrettably, there appear to be no records of Gunaratna's date of birth or date of death.

<sup>13</sup> Anon. (1885). *Ceylon Blue Book*, Government Printer, Colombo, p. 232.

<sup>14</sup> Saparamadu, S. D. and de Silva, Mervyn. (1962). "Glossary", in Leonard Woolf, *Diaries in Ceylon, 1908–1911: Records of a Colonial Administrator, being the Official Diaries Maintained while Assistant Government Agent of the Hambantota District, during the Period August 1908 to May 1911*, edited by S. D. Saparamadu and Mervyn de Silva, p. lxxv.



the paper folios now in the British Library, Nevill described how he had acquired an oral text he described as ‘Kandian Folk-Lore’ called ‘A story of a hare and a jackal’:

This story is taken down by my clerk, Don Henry de Silva Gunaratna, from a Kandian boy living near Peradeniya.<sup>15</sup>

As I discuss elsewhere, this note, among many others, helps to indicate the central role that Gunaratna played at various times in acquiring oral texts and songs for Nevill: Gunaratna would listen to people sing or tell stories and write down what he heard, sometimes in Sinhala script, sometimes in Romanised transliterations.<sup>16</sup> Through this collecting method of listening and transcribing, Gunaratna contributed hundreds of

<sup>15</sup> Nevill, Hugh and Gunaratna, D. H. de Silva. (N.D.A.). *Folklore Texts & Notes (Sinhala & English)*, British Library Manuscript Or. 6616(D).

<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately, there are very few transcriptions that could represent rhythm in the collection, but their meaning and authorship is currently unclear. There are no transcriptions of melody.

<sup>17</sup> Peterson, ‘The Lyric in Lanka’; (forthcoming). ‘Acoustic

transcriptions to the archive now known as the ‘Nevill Collection’.<sup>17</sup> These transcriptions also show that Gunaratna categorised the oral texts he collected, giving them both Sinhala and English-language titles, including as ‘Children’s charms &c. [etc.]’, ‘Songs while dancing’, ‘Songs from Low Country’, ‘*Raban pada*’, and ‘*Hal gaba*’, for instance.<sup>18</sup> This categorisation practice, which organised texts according to themes, performance styles, and provenance, indicates that Gunaratna’s contributions went beyond the acquisition of material to include editing and analysing material: an intellectual engagement that wrote Gunaratna into the conceptual framework of the archive.

In the popular and scholarly imagination, Nevill and the Nevill Collection tend to define one another: Nevill is best known for the collection, while the collection itself now bears his name. But these understandings have often been misleading. Rarely do people mention or even know of these paper folios and so, given the collection’s vast holdings of Sinhala olaḥs, a common misconception is that Nevill was especially fascinated with palm-leaf manuscripts as collectable objects, which is not true; similarly, Gunaratna’s intervention in the collection is widely unrecognised, leading most to accept the archive’s designation as the ‘Nevill Collection’. While it is true that the collection as a whole served as Nevill’s personal research library, Gunaratna was instrumental in acquiring and interpreting the oral texts and songs now embedded in the library and receives public recognition for his contributions here. If we had a portrait of Gunaratna, it would feature alongside Nevill’s above.

Naming the archive *The Hugh Nevill Collection of Sinhalese Manuscripts* has also caused another common misconception: that both Nevill and the collection were primarily concerned with Sinhala history. This is

Palimpsests and the Colonial Archive: The Hugh Nevill Collection and its Resonance in Contemporary Sri Lanka’, *Ethnomusicology*; Nevill and Gunaratna, *Folklore Notes & Texts*; (N.D.B.). *Ballads & Tales (Sinhala & English)*, British Library Manuscript Or. 6616(F); Peterson, ‘The Lyric in Lanka’.

<sup>18</sup> Nevill and Gunaratna, *Folklore Notes & Texts*, ff. 96b, 97b–99.

reasonable given that some 2224 of the 2227 olahs are inscribed in Sinhala script (2 are in Telugu and 1 is in Tamil). But when we turn to the collection's paper folios, we find a far more equal spread of Sinhala, Tamil, and Veddah materials, the existence and contents of which have been widely ignored. My other article featured in this volume addresses this diversity, using the paper folios, as well as articles in Nevill's self-published periodical, *The Taprobanian* (1885–1888), to discuss a nineteenth-century

practice of pigeon worship in Thambiluvil that Nevill saw as an aggregate of Sinhala, Tamil, and Veddah sociocultural, religious, and linguistic histories. Together with this introduction, the article aims to begin shifting some common misconceptions around the collection, shine new light on overlooked and underappreciated aspects of its contents and biography, and demonstrate how these can highlight often forgotten aspects of social diversity in Sri Lanka's past.

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# Contributors

## **Prof. C. R. de Silva**

Professor Emeritus, Old Dominion University, USA, having served as Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean, College of Arts and Letters at that institution. Formerly Dean of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Peradeniya

## **Avishka Mario Senewiratne**

BA (University of West of Scotland), CPL/IR (Civil Aviation Authority of Sri Lanka), Independent Researcher, Proprietor – Heritage Publications

## **Dr. Tom Peterson**

PhD, MMus (SOAS, University of London), Postdoctoral Researcher (University of Tübingen), Honorary Postdoctoral Research Associate (SOAS, University of London). Ethnomusicologist and Cultural Historian of Sound and Music in South Asia at SOAS, University of London, and the University of Tübingen

## **Sunela Jayewardene**

Environmental Architect, Environmental Conservationist and Author. Founder and First Chairperson of the Federation of Environmental Organizations of Sri Lanka (FEOSL), Advisor to the Government of Sri Lanka Member of the Steering Committee of the Geoffrey Bawa Moonamal Award for Excellence in Design for Ecological Coexistence

## **Dr. Dhanuka Bandara**

BA (Hons) English (Peradeniya), MA English (Miami University, USA), PhD English (Miami University, USA). Senior Lecturer in the Department of Linguistics and English, University of Jaffna.

## **Aousten Aloysius**

B.Arch (Moratuwa), Diploma in Urban Design (Moratuwa), M.Arch (Frankfurt University of Applied Sciences, Germany) Chartered Architect (Sri Lanka) Architect, Principal Architect Aousten Aloysius Chartered Architects (Jaffna, Sri Lanka) Former Project Architect (Germany) and Licensed Architect (Sri Lanka) Design Tutor, University of Moratuwa Researcher in Post-Conflict Urbanism, Heritage-Led Regeneration, and Place- Identity and Memory.

## **Prof. K. D. Paranavitana**

BA (Hons) (Peradeniya), PhD (UNSW-Australia), D. Litt (Rajarata University of Sri Lanka) Former Deputy Director of the Sri Lanka National

Archives, Former Professor of Humanities, the Rajarata University of Sri Lanka

## **Lalith Seneviratne**

CEng MIET, Ashoka Fellow, Lemelson Fellow

## **Malaka Talwatte**

BEng (Hons)(Warwick), MSc (Warwick), Chair - George Keyt Foundation

## **Prof. Rajiva Wijesinha**

MA, DPhil (Oxon), Emeritus Professor of Languages, Sabaragamuwa University, worked also as Head of the Peace Secretariat, and as Consultant at the Ministry of Education to reintroduce English medium in the state sector, Member of the Parliament of Sri Lanka (2010-2015)

## **Dr. Gamini Goonetilleke**

MBBS, FRCS (Eng), FCSSL Senior Consultant Surgeon, Colombo, Sri Lanka Past President - The College of Surgeons of Sri Lanka

## **Dr. Ruwantissa Abeyratne**

DCL, PhD, LL.M, LL.B, FRAeS, FCILT Senior Associate, Aviation Law and Policy, Aviation Strategies International, Montreal

## **Dr. Gauthami Kamalika Jayathilaka**

BA (Hons) Sociology (Peradeniya), MA Sociology (Worcester-UK), MA Social Research (Leeds) PhD Sociology (Leeds) Dean and Senior Lecturer of the Faculty of Indigenous Social Sciences and Management Studies, Director Research Council, Gampaha Wickramarachchi University of Indigenous Medicine - Yakkala, Sri Lanka, Former travel writer/journalist

## **Rev. Fr. A. Anton Stephen**

B.Ph. and B.Th. (Rome), M.Phil in Christian Studies (University of Jaffna), MA in Social Communication (Rome), Diploma in Human rights, Director, Maraianthi, Catholic Media Centre Jaffna Diocese

## **Dr. SinhaRaja Tammita-Delgoda**

Academic, Historian, Art Historian and Filmmaker. B.A. Hons (Wales), M.A Medieval Studies (York), Ph. D History (Kings College, London)

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THAT'S HOW WE WON OUR INDEPENDENCE



WHEN LORENZ MET D. S. SENANAYAKE

*by Akalanka Jayasuriya*