

## **Rev W.S Senior: Teacher, Poet and Priest by Cedric James Oorloff**

Courtesy: The Ceylon Churchman.

Also published in the Sunday Times October 24th 1971

Walter Stanley Senior was born on 10th May, 1876 the son of the Vicar of St. Thomas' Church in Nottingham. Educated at Marlborough and Balliol, he offered himself in 1896 to the CMS for work overseas. In 1906 he received and accepted an invitation from Fraser to come out to Ceylon and be his Vice-Principal at Trinity College, There Senior worked for ten fruitful years.

In 1915 he left Trinity, Kandy to take on the Incumbency of Christ Church, Galle Face, where in addition to his Parish- work, he got going, in the slums of Wekande, in Slave Island as it was then known, the School of Hope, a night school where the boys of the area came for evening classes and other activities.

Later he resigned the Incumbency in order to take on an appointment as Lecturer in Classics and Registrar of the University College, Colombo.

### **Classics**

In the magnificent Chapel of Trinity College Kandy, stands a pulpit of excellent craftsmanship, erected there to commemorate "Walter Stanley Senior, Teacher, Poet and Priest." All these he was, and more besides.

Living as I did in a different parish, I had no personal experience of him as a priest, except that 'his pastoral care for me and for all with whom he came in contact was manifest in all he said and did. And I know that the Older parishioners of Christ Church still refer nostalgically to his ministry among them Lecturing at the college was work he loved doing for on the one hand, he was a keen and sensitive Classics scholar, rejoicing in the opportunity now given him to "talk" Roman and Greek culture with his colleagues on the staff, on the other it brought him in close contact with young people, in whose cause he delighted to labour. I had the privilege of having him as my teacher at the University College. How well I remember the polish and easy cadences of his Latin proses, and the patience with which he endured our feeble efforts at imitating him. He was an inspiring teacher of English Literature too and one of the methods he used to introduce us to its wealth and beauty was the method of public declamation ' of selected pieces of poetry.

### **Poet**

The poet in him helped him rouse inert minds and unseeing eyes to the beauty and wonder of creation. Mountains and hills and streams were mountains and hills and streams to me—just that and nothing more until I learned to see them with his eyes, and they became in a strange but convincing way glories of God's creation, eliciting awe and wonder and praise and thankfulness. Happiest of the memories of my undergraduate days is the hike he organized for us, for me and a group of mutual friends. For ten glorious days we roamed on foot among the mountains and valleys of Uva and the Central Province, starting with the climb up Sri Pada, then by devious ways, past Bogawantalawa, over the Bopats, on to Agrapatna, over Horton Plains, past Ohiya, Idalgashinna and Haputale to Badulla; then back by Welimada and Nuwara Eliya and Maturata to Rikiligaskande, and so to Kandy. I was only 20 then; he was over 50. But he accompanied us, un-fatigued ...and-uncomplaining, for much of the way, kindling-in all of us, by his quiet enthusiasm, an appreciation we had never had for the incomparable beauty of this island of ours.

### **Artist**

Senior was an artist, then, using language as a medium for conveying to others the truth and the beauty behind the appearance of things. He has written poetry and prose of the highest order, much of it still unpublished. His worthiest piece, perhaps is "Pisgah". the poem which won him, in 1914 the

triennial prize at Oxford for a poem on a sacred subject. It contrasts Balaami and Moses in their crises of decision and indecision on Mount Pisgah.

"E'en thus, of truth assayed, on Pisgah stood  
Balaam seen base, and Moses greatly good,  
Moses greatly good, The Master Spirits of the Middle East.  
Each on high Pisgah, poet, prophet, priest,  
His climateric hour of vision spent,  
To that sure bourne his youth had chosen went.  
Ah, in the stripling's beauty who might see,  
For shame or glory, what that bourne should be ?

But the whole poem must be read if it is to be truly appreciated. Other poems too he has written on sacred subjects—"Judas Maccabaeus", "St. Peter's Deliverance from Prison", "Domine Quo Vadis?"—all of them of the same high quality.

### **Ceylon**

Better known, and more homely, though equally beautiful, are his collection of poems about Ceylon. They reveal a deep knowledge of the country, an understanding of her people, an insight into their weaknesses and their strength, a live sympathy with their yearnings. The best introduction to these poems are the stanzas entitled: "The Call of Lanka".

The Spirit of Lanka cries out for a bard to sing the glory that had been hers, and the glory that was to be. And the poet answers:—

"I offer a voice, O Lanka.  
I, child of an alien isle;  
For my heart has heard thee, and kindled,  
Mine eyes have seen these and smile  
Take, Foster-Mother, and Use it;  
'Tis but for a little while".

A little later, because it wasn't good enough in his eyes that the epic of our country should be the work of an alien, however loving a foster-child he might be. Lanka's bard must be a son of the soil. And Senior had no doubts that one would arise in time.

"For surely of thine own children,  
born of thy womb, shall rise,  
The Bard of the moonlit jungle,  
the Bard of the tropic skies.  
Warm from his Mother's bosom,  
bright from his Mother's eyes".  
And when he came he would sing of Sri Pada  
and Dunhinda. of Sigiriya and Minneriya,  
of whatever is old and lovely in this old and lovely land.  
But most shall he sing of Lanka  
In the brave new days that come,  
When the races all have blended  
And the voice of strife is dumb;  
When we leap to a single bugle,  
March to single drum.

Here was great faith, and here again in his "Call to Lanka", where he sees her People,

March to a mighty purpose,  
One Man from shore to shore,  
The stranger become a brother,  
The task of the tutor o'er;  
When the ruined city rises,  
And the Palace gleams once more.

His vision was not the Seam of a misty-eyed optimist. Freedom he insisted the people must have, freedom and unity; but these were not to be had for the asking. There was a cleansing and a struggle to be gone through before these could be achieved.

"And would ye free a people from a long and strong control?  
And would ye keep ' your freedom while ' the testing ages roll?  
'If ye fain would free the body ye must first make free the soul".

And then he goes on to tell us with the frankness of a true friend some of the things that must be shaken off before we can toe truly free—"the binding mesh of mammon", for instance, and "the base ungenerous gibe" We need to know the truth, he goes on, for only the truth can set us free.

This is why the University-to-be was to him a factor of over-riding import.

"There is health in the Halls of learning,  
there is Hope in the House of Mind,  
That they who were deaf shall listen,  
and they shall see who were blind".

Even the village school had its part to play,' for there ' keen minds were ..... ardent hearts awakened.

Then there were the bigger schools in Colombo and Kandy,

"Where Lanka bids her  
beautiful, her brave,  
Look in Life's eyes, and  
with Life's lessons cope".

But the goal was not even a University College, like the one he lectured in, but a truly national University,

"Built peradventure by a rocky stream, built per-adventure by the peacock sea,  
Behold the slow fruition of a dream, our island-goal, some University,  
Where dateless hosts of visionary youth, Asia with Europe one in holy quest,  
Shall read aright the starry deeps of Truth, adoring bend, and offer Being's best'.

He did not sit so lightly to the question of the siting of the projected University as the first line seems to suggest. He was in the thick of the controversy between those who, like him, wanted it in the metropolis, and those who demanded that it, should be built at Peradeniya. It is difficult to understand why this lover of the —

-"Lush Kandyan hills where lingers yet,  
Aye, and will linger till the last of time,

The Voice once heard, the Vision once beheld", who could speak of the "chasmed heights" as the healing skirts of God"

should be so resolutely opposed to the Dumbara Valley site. But he was! And at considerable ' cost To his emotions ..... The tension was great", he says,  
"and even affected friendship, to my grief."

### **Allegiance**

We have had glimpses, then, of Senior's deep and willing involvement in the life of this country. But he had his allegiance to his family too. Their claims on him had now become pressing, and in 1928 he

decided he would have to go back to his, people in England. Read what he has to say about the inevitable break in his "Goodbye" and his "Desiderium".

In the former he trots out, not yet seriously, some arguments in support of a return to England, and then goes on:—

Yet, o my soul remember, when you've sailed the seas away  
And the English climate's chilly and the English clouds are gray  
When the birds are sad and silent, and the sun is seldom seen  
And life is miles of houses with miles of mud between  
You will see in a sudden vision, you will see with a sudden sigh  
The scarlet splashed flamboyant awash in the azure sky  
You will see Anuradhapura and the old kings' bathing pool  
And the shadowy blue king-fisher, the carven granite cool  
And the pass of Haputale and the lowland flat and far  
And through Gravellea feathers, the rosy evening star  
And the moon-besilvered jungle, the dipping magic cross  
Mid steady balm in-blowing from the silver foam and floss  
And better than places — faces, the Aryan face (your own)  
With its brown and olive beauty, the youths and maids you've known  
And the tender pearl of India in the black and brilliant eye  
My soul, you will break with longing — it can never be Goodbye.

### **Ashes**

And so, reluctantly, this great lover of Lanka left the home of his adoption for the home of his birth. He returned to Ceylon in 1936, but only for a short holiday. It was clear, even then, that he was a sick man. In 1938 he was called to his eternal home. His tale of days was told, his span was spun, to use his own metaphors. On him was conferred "the Freedom of the endless morn."

The ashes of this poet of Ceylon, this seeker of souls, this servant of God, were interred on the 23rd of February 1938 in the garden of the hill-top Church of St. Andrew in Haputale among the hills and valleys he loved so much. For him "It can never be goodbye".

Comment from Dr Nihal D Amerasekera, Wesley College: Rev W.S Senior, Ceylon's "Poet Laureate", will always be remembered for the famous "Hymn for Ceylon" which we sang at end of term assembly during the Principalship of Mr C J Oorloff. As a schoolboy I was mesmerised by its soul stirring lyrics and haunting melody. The students sang it with passion and almost lifted the roof. Such was our affection for the hymn. His gravestone is a testament to his life "He loved Ceylon"

Cedric James Oorloff was a Classics scholar and belonged to the elite brigade of Civil Servants of the British Raj. His final assignment in the CCS was Controller of Immigration and Emigration. After Independence he decided to move into a hitherto un-chartered field of education and became Wesley College's first Ceylonese Principal.