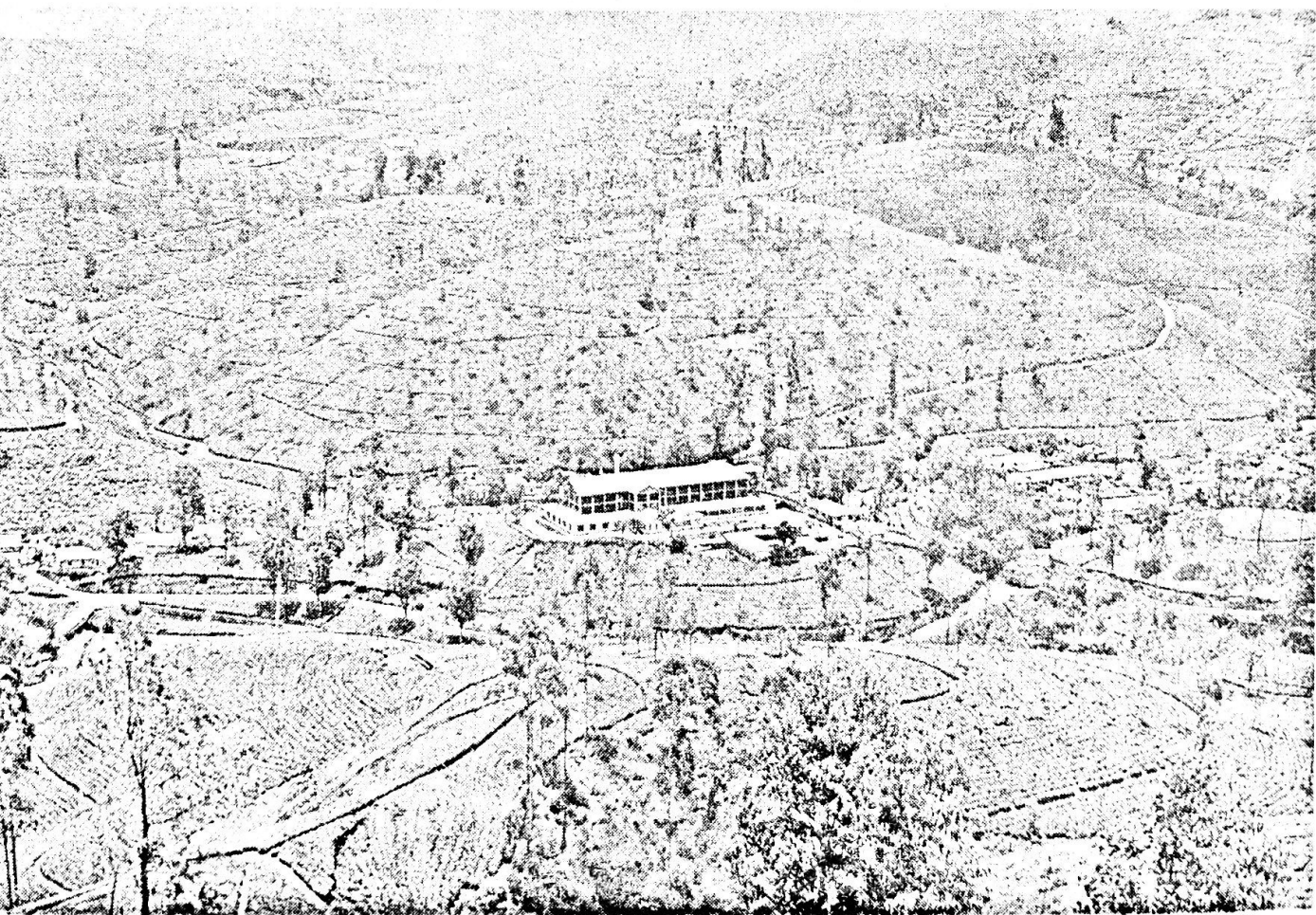


# MY MEMOIRS OF THE PLANTATIONS OF CEYLON



Sepala Ilangakoon

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# **Mackwoods Estates and Agencies Ltd.**

## **Mr.N.S.O.Mendis**

### **The Businessman**

Mr. N.S.O. Mendis - Noel to his contemporaries and NSO to us, was an unique businessman who scored numerous firsts. Amongst his achievements, he was the first Ceylonese to buy and own an Agency House - Mackwoods Ltd. Also, he was the first Ceylonese to own a ship, to own a major engineering firm - European owned Walkers, Business houses such as Mackinon Mackenzie, Lewis Brown, Delmege Forsyth, Times of Ceylon (he started the Daily Mirror), the Sterling Companies - Alliance Tea Company of Ceylon, Imperial Tea Estates Ltd. and the Carolina Tea Company of Ceylon Ltd. NSO was also an army man - in the Ceylon Garrison Artillery where he was the youngest Ceylonese to be appointed Major.

### **A family man**

NSO's wife Lena, son Ricky and two daughters Mary and Sriyani were a very closely knit family. He gave his youngest child his initials — Noeline Sriyani Olga (NSO). He was as good a family man as a churchman. I do not know whether he gave one priority over the other. He never lost his cool. His bounty was limitless.

### **The company man**

When NSO was looking for a Director, Adrian Wijemanne his Managing Director and Ivor Ferdinands suggested my name. He took me 'Sight Unseen'. When I first met him in his office, we discussed a wide range of

plantation matters but not my terms of employment. When he finally came to it, I spontaneously suggested - "Sir, I would prefer not to discuss the subject. I am perfectly content to leave the matter in your hands as I know he had got Adrian on the line and having related what transpired, added "Give him 500 more than what you offered him." (+500 at that time, was fantastic!)

NSO's technique was special. In a short time he sized up a man. If he was not up to his expectations, he did not sack him but made the individual feel so unwanted that he resigned. If the man was exactly what he wanted, he did not hesitate to give him complete responsibility; he did not interfere or look over the shoulder and in that scenario, one never let him down. I never did and in due course, moved right up the ladder to reach Chairman and Managing Director of Mackwoods Estates and Agencies Ltd. in a very short time.

NSO was wise. He knew what his company wanted in the line of good management. He knew also that he could do no better than go for the elite and exclusive Ceylon Civil Service. He employed in various positions, Adrian Wijemanne, Max Caspersz, Gusty Weerasinghe, J.V. Fonseka and Tissa Chandrasoma as I remember. All first class men. If there was no suitable vacancy, he would put the CCS man in cold storage paying him well, until a suitable appointment appeared.

NSO's office was in the Fort, along Lake House Road, over looking the Beira lake (now D.R. Wijewardene Mawatha). When the premises were acquired by the state, we moved to the most prestigious road in Colombo - Independence Avenue leading to the Independence Hall on the 'Golden Mile', a grand old building of the Lady Havelock Gardens Co. which belonged to NSO.

This location was so distinct and magnetic that it soon attracted another acquisition, this time by the Chairperson, Janawasa Commission. My interview with her which she readily gave, was disappointing. Finally, in response to my plea that the law gave me two months to vacate, not two weeks, her closing words to me were "But I am the law !! " I thanked her and left.

We then hurriedly packed hundreds of files and books in tea chests and moved these and the furniture to a very large store where tea chests were stacked, 101, Vinayalankara Mawatha, Maradana. After breaking centuries of cobwebs, hoovering the accumulated dust and white washing the walls,

in due course, it was made quite presentable, with special rooms for me and the Directors.

## **Mackwoods Estates**

Mackwoods Estates and Agencies Ltd. (MEAL) had an appreciable and sizeable portfolio of estates, mainly those belonging to the sterling company - Central Province Tea Company Ltd.

**Selwyn Pryor** was the proprietor/Chairman of Central Province Tea Co. Ltd. which had a string of estates which were managed by MEAL.

Selwyn was six three and well proportioned. He had a deep baritone voice which he used to good effect. His dress was rather flamboyant and he insisted on wearing a red handkerchief in his coat pocket with much of it hanging out. He held his drinks well. Our respect for each other was mutual and we got on well. His father had sent Henry, the other son also to Ceylon as an accountant, but he was soon called back by the father.

Selwyn was so satisfied with the manner in which I directed Mackwoods, that he transferred his other companies managed by another well respected agency house, also to Mackwoods, giving my company an unexpected and very welcome boost.

**John Brodie** of Endane, Kahawatte, was the king pin and flag bearer of Selwyn's estates. He was held with a great deal of respect and his word was law. I did not agree with some of his views and had to use my scientific knowledge, of which he had none, to convince him. Give the devil his due, he invariably fell in line. I do not recall John's wife Rosemary.

**Leslie Dunuwille and Damayanthie** were by far the most senior on the Central Province roll. They were on Ingestre, Dickoya, where Dhamitha Perera (later, my son in law), was his creeper.

Leslie was very conscious that he was of Kandyan stock and did not hesitate to say so to those he met for the first time. They were both very kindly people of unlimited hospitality. They had a son Hiran and four daughters including twins, all as comely as their mother. Here's wishing the family all the best.

**Malin Goonetilleke and Charmolene** - Malin is the son of Harry and Olive of Kandy. Harry played the organ at St. Paul's Church, Kandy. Malin crept under John Brodie at Endane, Kahawatte. Malin and Charmo are a lively and positive thinking couple who speak good English as it should be spoken. I

have a great personal regard for them. They have two bright children - a daughter, Charmali who was Games Captain and Head Prefect at Bishop's College and a son, Himesh who was Head Prefect of Trinity College and captained the Rugger and Cricket teams.

**Dhamitha Perera and Riyanjani** - Donga to those who know him, an outstanding cricketer of S. Thomas' College, Mount Lavinia, had an enviable studies and sports record with almost every sport at college in his bag, except swimming. Riyanjani, Rio or Riya to all her friends, was herself an all round sports star at Bishop's College, Colombo, having won colours and captained the hockey, swimming and tennis teams. It was only by an unfortunate quirk of fate that she missed being made Head Prefect of the school although everybody - parents, students, teachers, prefects and other staff had already chosen her as the most deserving to be made Head Prefect. But she took the disappointment in her stride and gave every support to the Head Prefect appointed by the Principal. She showed no resentment or pique and earned the admiration of all. As her father, I would opine that Rio was behaving true to her character.

No wonder then, that Dhamitha was attractive to Rio. When she asked Sunetra and me, we readily agreed with her choice, as we too liked him immensely. They were married at our home in Rosmead Place on 18 August, 1978 and have been making their own homes in the various estates to which Dhamitha was transferred.

Through the kind courtesy of Patrick Hall of the Commonwealth Development Corporation (CDC), they had the golden opportunity of employment on Bulwa Estate, East Usumbaras Tea Co. Ltd. Tanga, Tanzania for about four years. They were our hosts for Christmas, 1990 when they took us on Safari to the glorious Mount Kilimanjaro and the world renowned wild life parks and nature reserves - Lake Manyara, N' gorongoro Crater and Serengeti. All this will form another chapter in my Memoirs.

Dhamitha and Rio returned to Sri Lanka. Having worked at Forbes and Walker plantations, he ended up as Chief Executive Officer of Agrapathana and Kotagala Plantations Companies. They have now sent down their roots at Mount Lavinia, right opposite S.T.C., where they have constructed a house and planted a garden, which are about the best in Colombo.

Their three stalwart boys are Thomians. Like their father, they excelled in cricket and while Rishan is a pace bowler who will do very well for his team in due course, Preshith retired from cricket for valid but unfortunate

reasons and although he was born and bred in cricket where his heart is, not to be outdone, he made up his mind to let by-gones be by-gones and valiantly took to rowing like his father, elder brother Shami and my son, Yevindra.

The twins are tall, well proportioned and as handsome as Shami and like their father, they have a well - developed sense of humour. They are now speedily coming out of their shell especially concerning the gals ! Best of luck to you both and look out gals ! Here they come !!

**Tony Downall and Cheryl.** Tony was at Bramley, Nuwara Eliya and was always smartly rigged out. Rather diffident in what he wanted to say, he was always worth his salt.

**Upali Hordagoda and Mallika** of Diyagama West and High Forest, Kandapola, are a decidedly amiable couple, always smiling. Even today, they maintain a close and friendly relationship with us. We like them a great deal.

**Lionel Almeida and Yvonne** formerly of Endane, Kahawatte, were an entertaining couple. She is the sister of Malin's wife Charmo.

**Mike Clark** of El Teb, Passara was a well rated planter by all except his Agents who could not fathom his plantation science. I understood his language and we clicked. He was basically a naturalist and an adventurer. Just for the heck of it, he floated down the Mahaweli in a raft and met his car at Trincomalee !

**Anil de Silva** of Wattegoda. Sad to say, he had lost an eye but he never allowed this impediment to affect his work. Bravo Anil ! I admire you.

**Gehan Perera and Mangalika** of Aislaby, Bandarawela, were gracious hosts who took good care of their guests with their lavish hospitality.

**Billy Roland and Valerie** of EL Teb, Passara, later suffered a tragedy when Billy was shot as a result of mistaken identity. Valerie, a devout Christian, has been intrepid and resolute in her misfortune.

**Pat Cumarasamy and Thilaga** of Hoonocotua were both of a retiring nature and never obstreperous. I liked their quiet, generous hospitality.

**Nihal Samarasinghe** of Dimbula, Pathana, is best known as "Baila" - not that he dances the baila so well. Perhaps because the bailas he sings are not for polite society ! However, he is always popular with everyone.

Other names which come readily to mind with a recollection of their then faces no doubt somewhat different now, are -

- Richard Doudney, Wally Jones, Tilak Ratwatte, Bill Young, Chris Bean, Royce Vantwest, Niel Arnolda, Errol Arnolda, Dimitri Gunasekera, Nihal Perera, Peter Clark, Arthur Moss, Freddie De Run, Russel Tennakoon, Don Bernard, Ian White, Rohan Thambinayagam, Bishan Katugaha, Lalith Obeyesekera and Arasu Saravanamuttu.

I offer my apologies to my friends mentioned only by name, as limitations of space do not warrant even a few words for each—and I am bound by my printer's stipulations. Sorry, boys!