



THE COLLECTOR OF COMPANIES

Even in those parlous times, a few clever and daring entrepreneurs still met with success. One such was Noel Servulus Oswald Mendis, who in 1955 abandoned his successful legal practice for a more adventurous career in business. N.S.O. Mendis (like D.S. Senanayake, he was generally referred to by his initials) was among the first to identify the opportunities created by the withdrawal of European capital following the upheavals of 1956. That same year, he made history by becoming the first Ceylonese magnate to purchase a formerly British-owned company, the old-established business house of Mackwoods.

Mendis was a man of original ideas. He had his own concept of Ceylonization, which involved replacing European managers in the companies he bought with former members of the Ceylon Civil Service. It was a good enough idea in principle (senior civil servants of the era, whose skills had been acquired under an earlier, more demanding regime, tended to be versatile, competent managers), but as business in Ceylon suf-

fered ever-increasing government regulation and political interference after 1956, it began to look like genius. Mendis's civil-servants-turned-managers retained their connections in government and the bureaucracy and found it easy to speak the same language as their former colleagues. It was an incalculable advantage, given the temper of the times.

Throughout the Fifties and Sixties, N.S.O. Mendis continued to develop and extend his commercial empire. He snapped up several plantation companies on the London Stock Exchange, adding them to an ever-expanding portfolio of old-established Ceylonese firms. Among the latter was the Walkers group, whose parent institution, Walker, Sons & Co., had been an indispensable part of the Ceylon plantation enterprise. John Walker, a tenacious Scot whose early career had been a catalogue of disappointments and tragedies, first made his name as an inventor and manufacturer of coffee-processing and plantation machinery. His claim to immortality was a device called the disc pulper, which was soon in use on coffee plantations all over the world. Throughout the Colonial period, Walkers (the firm actually went through several changes of name) remained Ceylon's largest and most highly

ABOVE

Shipping magnate and shipper Noel Servulus Oswald Mendis, collected old-established mercantile firms as other men collect stamps and sold Mackinnon Mackenzie of Ceylon to John Keells over a gin-and-tonic at the Colombo Club.

OVERLEAF

Pomp and circumstance: the Mackinnons boardroom today, with its telescope-equipped window looking out over Colombo Harbour.