

Reminiscences of an Old Thomian at 80 plus

I am writing this report on the request of Niranjan Duraisamy, a committee member of your OBA (NSW), a request made by him soon after he heard that I had had some connection with STC in the early years of my life (I was born in 1920).

I am not a good writer, nor is my memory so good, but I shall try to do what I can.

I cannot claim to be a Thomian 100%. I was at STC only for 2 short periods – two periods widely separated from each other in time – first as a student and next as a teacher.

I have been a student and teacher in several other schools too, in my career, and hence cannot be expected to be too sentimental about my association with STC.

However, I do have a soft corner for STC, because it was at STC I started not only my regular student career but also my proper working career.

Now for the 'report' I promised – of my connection with STC. This report contains some 'hear-say'. I must be excused if any 'hear-say' is found incorrect.

I started my regular student career in the Kindergarten at STC in Mt. Lavinia, from 18-01-1927 (after pre-school attendance in a school in Wellawatte).

The Kindergarten was in a spacious building by the side of Galle Rd, between Galle Rd and Hotel Rd. It had a large open ground in front, alongside Galle Rd, which was the Play Ground for its boys.

In the Kindergarten:

We were taught how to sharpen a pencil, how to fix nib to a pen and how to hold the pencil or pen when drawing or writing. We were taught to write properly in 'civil service style', by practising on 'Royal Crown' copybooks and 3 ruled exercise books. We were given plenty of

exercises in drawing pictures in drawing books and making models of various things in clay. We were also taught to weave boxes and baskets with cane or rattan.

The activities thus listed may have been common in any kindergarten, but I must say, after subsequent observation in many other schools, that the training given at the STC Kindergarten then was really outstanding. After having passed the Lower and Upper Divisions in the Kindergarten, I was admitted to Form 1 in the Primary Department of the Main School (STC) by the sea, on 16/01/'29.

In the Primary Department we used 'High Roads of Literature' Books 1 & 2, in addition to other Readers, for our literature and General Knowledge lessons.

We, some Tamil students, just a few of us then, were given our Tamil lessons in the Dining Hall. Neither the Teacher nor we his students took the lessons too seriously.

The construction of the Chapel (of Transfiguration) was started during this period.

I left STC on 15.08.30, after having passed Forms 1 & 2 (Standard 3), because my Father was transferred from Colombo to serve in Jaffna, and I had to go with him.

When leaving STC, as a student, my Pupil's Record Sheet was endorsed by Cannon R.S. de Saram. He had signed it as 'Acting Warden'. The Warden then must have been his predecessor.

After completing my Primary, Secondary and Tertiary education elsewhere, I joined STC again, as a teacher. That was my first job in my working career.

That was towards the end of the 2nd World war. During the World War, as is well known, the STC Mt. Lavinia buildings were commandeered for use as a hospital for the victims of the war, and the school had to be broken up and placed in different parts of the country, two of them being

Milagiriya (in Bambalapitiya) and Gurutalawa.

I joined the Milagiriya Branch as a teacher in May 1944, to teach Botany, Zoology & Chemistry to the University Entrance Students. Mr Manikkasingham was the Head Master of that Branch then. He, I was told, was an Old Boy of STC and a classmate of Warden Saram.

The Milagiriya Branch was accommodated at the St Pauls Girls School in Milagiriya. The Girls school had its classes in the morning and STC had its classes in the afternoon.

In addition to teaching the Sciences to the University Entrance Students, I was Form Master of the S.S.C. Class. The monitor of that class then was a bright young lad, named Lucian Fernando. He, I am told, after a brilliant student career in the University, joined the clergy and was later the Assistant Chaplain of S.T.C, Mt Lavinia, during the time of Warden Selvaratnam. Rev Baldwin Daniel, a former Chaplain of S.T.C Mt Lavinia, reports that he too was a student at S.T.C Milagiriya during this time.

Three, among the teachers at Milagiriya, whose names I could recall were: Walatara, who I heard later obtained a University Doctorate and was the Specialist for English Education in the Ministry of Education, Arndt, who probably served STC till he retired, and Samuel, who later joined Royal College and, after retirement, while in Jaffna, was I heard, shot dead accidentally by the Indian Army which was in control of Jaffna then.

I was transferred to the Gurutalawa Branch in January 1945. Dr Hayman was in charge of that branch, then.

The Gurutalawa Branch was accommodated in an Estate belonging to someone closely connected with STC (I think it was F.R. de Saram).

This estate had a large extent of fertile land, which had been used for cultivation of crops, and a good set of fine buildings, which had been used for residence and estate administration by the owner and his

large staff. All this was handed over to STC for its use.

Dr Haymen was at the Bandarawela R. Station to receive the first set of teachers and students going from Colombo, and take them to Gurutalawa.

On the way to Gurutalawa, the bus taking us broke down somewhere, maybe after passing Welimade. It was late in the night and no motor mechanic could be contacted at that time of the night. All of us, including Dr. Haymen, had to spend the night in a neighbouring wood (forest) of gum trees (or perhaps, eucalyptus trees).

We collected dry wood from the surroundings, built campfires and warmed ourselves seated or moving around them all through the night. Only late the following morning were we able to contact a mechanic in a neighbouring town and get the engine repaired. We continued our journey to Gurutalawa peacefully after that. Dr. Haymen too had to suffer with us, through no fault of his.

On arrival in Gurutalawa the students and teachers were accommodated in the residential quarters there. Classes too were conducted in those buildings.

Work on the dormitories and a swimming pool had been started earlier. The dormitories were soon completed, and the students and some teachers were transferred to these dormitories. (The swimming pool was completed much later).

Temporary structures were then put up to conduct classes. Boys and teachers helped in levelling the ground to put up these structures. Some classes were then held in these structures.

Rev. John Foster was the Chaplain. Two among the teachers, with me then, were Mr Anandanayagam and Mr Davidson. (They became Wardens of STC Later).

Other teachers with me then whose names I could recall were: Nesiah, who later became Senior Lecturer in Education at the University of Ceylon.

Wijegoonawardana, who I heard later, entered the Ceylon Over-seas Service. Goonawardana, who later obtained a University Doctorate in Education and was Asst. Director for Vocational Guidance in the Ministry of Education. Ponnudurai, who I heard later entered Education Service in Pakistan and Rajaratnam, who later entered service in the Department of Industries, Ceylon.

Some students at Gurutalawa, whose names I could somewhat recall, were:

A Ratwatte boy who got the prize for Agriculture at the Prize Giving held there in 1945 – he I am told is a member of the Ratwatte family to which our former Prime Minister Mrs Bandaranaike belonged.

A Selvaratnam boy, a talented artist, who displayed his drawings at the above-mentioned Prize Giving – he I heard, later became the most famous Race Horse Owner & trainer in Sri Lanka.

A Cader boy, who was a School Prefect there then – he I heard became an influential member of the Colombo Municipal Council.

Two Thambiah boys (brothers-in-law of Warden Anandanayagam) – the elder one later was a judge of the Supreme Court and retired as Chief Justice of Sri Lanka, and the younger one was a lecturer in the Sociology / Political Science Department of University of Ceylon, and still later migrated to Canada to join the staff of a University there.

Warden Saram's son too was a student at Gurutalawa during this time.

Teachers and students used to walk cross-country, mostly steep down hill, to the plain of Diyatalawa on Saturdays for recreation and seeing a film in a theatre there.

Some teachers used to walk along a road through dense forest, on a neighbouring hillside, to OHIYA R' Station about 6 miles

away to catch a train to Colombo, when bus was not available to take them to the Bandarawela R' Station to catch that train.

During this time the Government took over the Aided schools. Some schools opted to remain independent. S.T.C was one of them. Warden Saram met the staff in Gurutalawa during this time and discussed the conditions of service of those who would remain on the S.T.C staff. A feasible scheme of conditions of service for them was agreed upon and put into effect soon after.

I believe the buildings at Mt Lavinia were given back to S.T.C in January 1946, after the war.

Dr. Haymen had been sent to Mt Lavinia then to take charge of the school there, as Warden Saram had to go on his long due leave.

Mr. C.H.Davidson took over as Head Master of the Gurutalawa Branch.

S.T.C at Mt Lavinia was a Day School from January 1946 to April 1946. Boarding Houses were re-opened in May 1946. Students from the scattered Branches were brought back to Mt Lavinia, and S.T.C started functioning as a full Boarding School from May 1946.

I was transferred to Mt Lavinia in May 1946. I left S.T.C (from Mt. Lavania) in December 1946 (for personal reasons).

I finished my full-time working career in Sri Lanka in 1971 (serving finally as Head of the Bambalapitiya Branch of the Educational Publications Department).

I wish S.T.C all the best in its future. God be with it now and always.

C.W.Vethanayagam
(Student 1927 – 1930 & Teacher: 1944 – 1945 STC Milagiriya,
1945 – 1946 STC Gurutalawa, May 1946 – December 1946 STC Mount Lavinia)