

Thoughts on Gurutalawa and Mt Lavinia

Bradman Weerakoon

Wed 6th June at 9.00 am STC College Hall

Warden Prof Indra de Soyza, Fr Marc Bilimoria, Headmasters, staff, distinguished Old Boys and friends of the 4 manifestations of the great St Thomas' College at Mount Lavinia, Gurutalawa, Kollupitiya and Bandarawela and the lucky present students of STC Mt Lavinia;

It's always a pleasure to be with the Thomian family and this is truly the extended family. It's meant so much to me throughout my life and perhaps to each and every one of you here present.

Five years ago I was very honoured to be chief Guest at the annual College Prize Giving – one of the most important events in the school calendar and perhaps to many of us, only second in importance to the Royal – Thomian match itself.

Today, as one of the founder students of Gurutalawa, I feel very privileged to be called to speak at this special Assembly which

Celebrates the 70th anniversary of STC at Gurutalawa and to

Inaugurate an annual 'Gurutalawa Day' at Mount Lavinia

The brilliant thought (of the Warden and Sub-Warden) behind both ideas is to keep the present generation of Thomians intimately aware of the historic connections between the two schools.

I am sure there are many better qualified than me to do so, but I am delighted to try and make an attempt to capture even a small part of that 70 year long association and how it can be enhanced.

Mine will be a personal, anecdotal and highly subjective memoir about basically 3 things;

- **WHY the TREE (STC planted in 1851 in Mutwal (Modera) and since 1917 had grown so well by the sea, had to be very suddenly (without any warning or consultation) relocated in May 1942 along with two other saplings at Milagiriya and Getambe to an unknown village in the Uva hills; the Miligiriya and Getambe shoots died after a short time.**

- **Of HOW and WHY this young branch which was planted in the village of Gurutalawa at 4000 feet above sea level developed in the special way it did, and**
- **Thirdly and finally, provoke some reflection from all of you (students included) as vital stakeholders, on how the Mt Lavinia and Gurutalawa might work together in the future.**

1. So first - What was the Context in which Guru was conceived.

As in many other cases a serendipitous response to a circumstance totally unconnected with the earlier history of the School. Of course it had weathered many a storm since its inception.

STC 1851 with an almost 100 year history – moved from Mutwal the centre to an outlying area in Mt Lavinia in 1917 as a result of technology changing (steam replacing wind power) and the Port of Coombo becoming a fuel dump for the steamers to the Orient.

And now in 1942 soon after Japan entered the War with its attack on Pearl Harbour in Hawaii USA STC while managing very well at Mt Lavinia it was suddenly faced with immediate elimination as a result of requisitioning for an urgent War need. The War in Asia needed a large hospital to cater for the injured, coming in their thousands in ships from Burma, Malaya and Singapore fronts after battles with the Japanese. So very soon the trauma of leaving (Warden de Saram bearing the impossible burden of handing over a fine asset - these halls and classrooms and laboratory and cricket grounds became operating theatres and wards for those ill, dying and convalescing.

(One of the happy accidents was Mary who married Rollo Hayman and became for long the Florence Nightingale who looked after sick Thomians for many years)

Warden de Saram's immense contribution was being able to influence his first cousin Leslie de Saram and Mrs de Saram to gift his wonderful Farm of 32 acres at Gurutalawa for a school. So the second World War (like LOVE in Webbers famous song) **Changed Everything**.

It certainly upset our young lives; great holiday adventure with new opportunities. And an attitude to change which has stuck through my life. I actually looked forward to change from then on.

In our young lives these were great CHANGES

From visits home every weekend to once in 3 months.

The writing of a weekly Letter home which was of course duly censored by the Headmaster.

Every 3 months or so a **fantastic night - mail train ride** into the hills in clean berths.

And most of all, **great freedom from parental attention.**

And in school very **small classes**; with **individual teacher attention (in my opinion the single most important factor in promoting motivation and self growth)**

and **the joy of sometimes coming first in class** as the class had only 2 boys.

2. How and why did the young branch develop in the way it did

Our Founders had the imagination to change with the times. Many innovations to suit the new circumstances. One had to improvise; 'no point complaining; just find a substitute'; In the lead were Hayman and Foster setting the good example

- a. Essentially a boarding school. 2 day - scholars
- b. The primacy of Farming - Gurutalawa the Farm of Leslie de Saram; the orchard of oranges and mandarins before the night raiders stripped the trees of all fruit.
 - i. Agriculture – planters; (my CCS viva 250 marks – what happened to potatoes in Boralanda)
 - ii. Animal husbandry – Guernsey; Freesian and Red poll stud bull; early lessons in reproduction
- c. War and war drills
 - i. Identifying Spitfire and Hurricanes and Jap fighters; gurkhas
 - ii. Food shortages and rationing; bagiri and manna dust but Dr Hayman sat and ate with the boys; Lessons Learned;
 - iii. Evacuation
- d. Teachers ; the absolute cream – in the sciences; Maths; Geography, (GD Wije) and History (Fr Foster) Ceylon – a problem
 - i. All round - International staff; English; Scot, Irish, South Indian, Kerala, Bengali, Chinese,

- ii. And boys – planters children, burghers, and expatriate – no international schools, large no of Tamil in the profile
 - iii. And more recently ‘girl Thomians’
- e. And what about the female sex
 - i. Daughters and wives – all beautiful and roused intense competition
- f. Love of the Out Doors
 - i. Geography; peoples lives; Photography; scouting; Hiking, Pictures in Diyatalawa
- g. Sports;
 - i. Cricket on a sloping patna; makes for excellent fielders and hook shots
 - ii. Umpire – Dr Hayman in giving run - outs but not a clue about lbw and changing
 - iii. Volley ball with the staff
 - iv. Ethnic relations; the Sinhala and Tamil societies; knew castes but it meant little
- h. Learning of the new – not afraid of strange things;

3. And that brings me finally to the third area – the reflection of how the TWO institutions can assist each other

Basically do they each do the same thing – one on a very big scale and one very small ?

Or do they do somewhat different things (under the same umbrella) which complement each other.

The great challenge for the future will be how there can be a successful and practical blending of the unique characteristics of both;

not of one being superior and the other inferior but of both contributing to produce the best. What may be called a win –win situation.

Perhaps what is *do - able* without fundamental changes is in the non material elements – of maintaining at the highest level the worthwhile traditions or values of STC.

A simple example would be the special quality which is associated with the Thomian spirit of never giving up. The GRIT which enables those famous last wicket stands in cricket which happen so often and for which S Thomas' is well known and which changes defeat into victory.

There are several elements which encourage, promote and nurture this spirit. I would identify these as:-

- the school motto; Esto Perpetua ' Be thou for Ever' ; stand firm to your principles; don't compromise.
- the ideal of the cultivation of a 'sound mind in a healthy body' in the Latin *Mens sana in corpore sano*; - the all rounder which is idealized in our highest achievement of the Victoria Gold medal
- the centrality of Equality
- Unity in diversity; to celebrate diversity
- To be inclusive -not exclusive and elite which we were for a while
- And to nurture a school EXPERIENCE which would include and enable appreciation of the
 - ARTS
 - Sciences
 - Languages
 - Literature
 - Music and the fine arts and
 - Religion and Morals

STC not interested only in the number of distinctions the student gets BUT in the kind of person the school produces. the PRODUCT - the kind of person who would emerge after 8 years or so of tutelage

**Perhaps captured in the poem 'God give us men' – (Gilbert Holland)
of**

Strong minds, great hearts, true faith and ready hands;

Men whom the lust of office does not kill;

Men whom the spoils of office cannot buy;

Men who possess opinions and a will;

Men who have honor; men who will not lie;

Perhaps the two institutions can compete in achieving MEN of that kind.

And Gurutalawa being the smaller and more pliable can be

What the Romans called the *alter ego* -

Mount Lavinia's - *The other self*

**And That would perhaps be the best way in which we could honour
the two great men - the founders of Gurutalawa Dr Hayman and Fr
Foster - whose portraits we unveil today.**

Thank you,
