

Sri Lanka: Remembering Batty Weerakoon

Friday 30 October 2020, by [WIJENAYAKE Lal](#) (Date first published: 5 October 2020).

The first anniversary of the passing away of Richard (Batty) Weerakoon, who was Batty to all those who came to know him, falls on October 7th. He had a varied career as a political activist who rose to the position of the General Secretary of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party, lawyer who rose to the position of one of the leading lawyers of our time and creative writer with a collection of serious writings to his credit. He studied at Trinity College, Kandy, and was a contemporary of Lakshman Kadiragamar, who was a life-long friend of his. He entered the University of Ceylon, in 1952, and there he was elected as the President of the Student's Council in 1955. He read English under Prof. Ludowyke at Peradeniya. He was committed to left politics and well-known for leading the University students on the historic March from the Peradeniya campus on Harthal day in August 1953; it ended in a clash with the police at the entrance to the university. He was Minister of Science and Technology and Minister of Justice and Ethnic Affairs in the Chandrika Kumaratunge Cabinet.

The biggest achievement he was proud of was to have successfully led the Ceylon Federation of Labour, which was the largest Trade Union Federation at the height of Trade Unionism in our country for long years

Batty, born on the 20th of January 1932, at Mathale to a well-known respected Kandyan family in Tenne with a conservative background took to left politics at a very young age, and this shows how attractive and respected the left movement was at that time. After he left the university he joined the LSSP and was closely associated with left stalwarts of the time like NM, Colvin, Leslie, Doric de Sousa and Bernard Soysa. In fact, he served for sometime as Private Secretary to NM when the latter was the leader of the Opposition in the 1956 Parliament. He passed out as an Advocate of the Supreme Court and had the privilege of studying under Colvin R de Silva, and this opened up his life to professional greatness. But Batty was essentially a left activist. As Minister of Science and Technology he fought against the sale of Eppawala Phosphate Deposit to foreigners and campaigned the protection of natural resources and the environment.

His Prof. G. F C. Ludowyke memorial lecture in May 2003 at the Peradeniya University stunned many academics at his incisive understanding of English Literature. He specially mentioned with deep gratitude that it was Prof. Ludowyk in his first year helped him discover in himself the talent to write imaginatively. He remembered with joy the occasion when he was offered by Prof. Ludowyk the prize to the student who could best turn out a story and how that prize had introduced him to the pleasing engagement to story writing. In spite of his busy life as a left activist, trade unionist and lawyer, story writing he did and published several well studied books such as 'Sinhala Jathaka Stories' (1974), 'Sri Lanka Mythology' (1985), 'Mythology and the Early Aryan State' (1998), 'Elephant Kraal and Other Stories' (1990), 'Alexander Solzhenitsyn - Soldier, Prisoner and writer' (1972), 'Kusumasana Devi as Dona Cathrina of Three Sinhale.' (2013). He also authored a book, "Sri Lankan Labour Legislation."

Batty put out numerous booklets on political issues relevant to the time. These are available for

reference at the Dr. N. M. Perera Memorial Library.

His deep insight into Sri Lanka's mythology is evident in the dedication of his book on the subject to his grandfather; he says, "My paternal grandfather, born in Aluwihara, bought to me a representative of the last generation on which the old traditions had as yet been relevant, Bernard Soysa, having looked at the book, told me that I have written about my ancestors meaning the Yaksas. That I think is a relevant comment because one can regard the Yaksas as a people who passed on to us a large part -if not all of our indigenous mythology. In cultures that is transferred downwards done by ancestors who in the Vedda language are called Nae-Yakas. Theravada Buddhism did not seek to incorporate it unlike what Hinduism did to the Mythologies especially of the Indian peninsula. Our Mythology was thus preserved in tact for us. It is the language of a people and I found that it was there for me."

One salient feature of Batty's illustrious life that touched me was that he did not go after cheap popularity. He stood by principles even at the most adverse circumstances. When I met him in his last days when he was bedridden I saw that his main concern was about the deteriorating political situation in the country and in no uncertain terms expressed his dismay at the politics of today and the plight of the underprivileged and the working class for whose rights he had fought throughout his life.

He was a Buddhist in his way of life and his philosophy of life. May he attain Nirvana!

Lal Wijenayake

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