

Introduction

K often tells friends that he was brought up in Ceylon as if it is something they need to know in order to understand him. K began writing this memoir by making notes more or less at random: *nanny...horton plains... rhododendrons...light and sound of pressure lamps...monsoon rain...smell of gun oil...cutting his hand... snakes in the drain at school...not liking curry...trout fishing in the rain – stolen tinned mandarins...mulligatawny soup*. The list quickly extended to several pages and it soon became clear that it contained a story that he at least found keenly interesting, perhaps because it might be about his present as well as his past.

To begin with, a few facts. K was born in Ceylon, at the Hatton Nursing Home, on 27 September 1949, and lived there until 1962 when he went to Scotland for secondary schooling. He returned on two or three occasions during his teens and twice in middle age, in 1996 and 2006. He hopes to return again. Everything else is memory, which is a story he tells himself, without deliberate falsification but with origins by no means confined to the imprint of historical events and for motives going well beyond a desire to establish what might or might not have happened.

A child in his world. Homes and other houses - bungalows, factories, towns, a distant city. Landscapes - gardens, rivers, forests, mountains, a distant sea. Other people - mother and father, nanny, siblings, servants, teachers, friends, relatives. Reflection and action - reading and dreaming, learning and suffering, fighting and playing, walking along paths by river banks and through forests, pulling fish out of mountain streams or broad low country rivers. A world of written and unwritten rules and shared assumptions - master and servant, home and school, up country and low country, pale people and dark, us and them, Ceylon and Scotland, home and home.

Ceylon rather than Sri Lanka. Ceylon is what it called itself when he lived there (it became Sri Lanka until 1974). Although Ceylon was an independent country in those years, his perspective was that of a colonist, a child or perhaps an orphan of empire, and that perspective was integral to the way in which he saw himself and his world. He doesn't apologise for that or regret it. That is who he was.

Comparing then and now, change and continuity, of course. Different houses, landscapes, people, books, paths, mindscape. But he still like to read, dream, wander, in a landscape with gardens and rivers and forests and mountains. he is still uncertain about where home is and have to settle, more or less contentedly for wherever he is. Righteousness and trespass appear much as they did then. And so on. The child is father to the man.

The Bungalow and the Estate

They lived in bungalows, large houses provided for the managers of tea estates of whom his father was one. They moved from estate to estate so the different bungalows blend into each other. K walks from the garden at Balmoral across the verandah at Eltofts, goes in through the dark drawing room at Fernlands to his bedroom at Glasgow. And then climbs out of its bay windows to another garden again. Perhaps because he went away to boarding school at the age of 7 and was 4

years older than his nearest brother Alan, he developed a sense of self in which he was happily solitary with parents and brothers and sister following parallel but separate paths. K thinks of himself as always having his own room and regarding it as a sanctuary from which he emerged to wander through the estate or join the family for meals or outings.

A bedroom in the bungalow at Glasgow stands for all the others. A vast room it seemed at the time with a polished wooden floor and a vast bed, an imperial bed, behind a heavy pleated mosquito net. K remembers the feel of the netting under his fingers, a combination of soft and scratchy. When he went back to Glasgow in 1996 the bedroom seemed smaller than he remembered it but still large compared to subsequent bedrooms. He kept his books in there and his toys. His clothes must have been somewhere there too, he doesn't remember.

As for the rest of the bungalow, his parents' rooms were private places that he entered in their absence with excitement, a sense of trespass and an ear open for their return. The public rooms, drawing and dining rooms, were of little interest to a child but the way they used them have influenced his requirements for all subsequent houses. The same is true for the verandahs which he has missed in any later houses which lacked them. Off to the back were the kitchen and servants quarters where he rarely ventured.

Outside, the garden. The bungalows were set in spacious and manicured gardens. Coarse, large-leaved grass, cannas with their fleshy stalks, thriving bougainvillea, extensive vegetable gardens particularly later when his mother went into business as a market gardener. K climbs out from his bedroom at Glasgow through a bay window to a patch of lawn with orange and mandarin trees and a swimming pool close by.

At Balmoral, you could also go out from the house to fruit trees, avocado and mulberry and guava. K climbs the guava trees to get the fruit and pays the price of jamming his feet uncomfortably into the narrow angles between the red-barked trunk and branches. Then back indoors to his room with a handful of little red guavas whose taste he still searches for in Australian supermarkets. These days it's not too hard to get guava juice or guava jam and he likes them well enough but they don't taste the same..

Beyond the garden, the estate and the landscape. High country tea in Ceylon thrives in a landscape of abundant rain and good drainage with a some shade trees – how much shade a matter of debate at the time and, judging by observation on his last visit, still contested. In the tea country gravel roads wind around small steep hills, well engineered with stone-built bridges and culverts to carry away the abundant rainfall. An extensive network of paths allows the pluckers and labourers ready access on foot to all corners of the estate. His father made good use of a motorcycle on one estate but also did a lot of walking, years later explaining his lack of enthusiasm for recreational walks by noting that he had done more than enough walking in his working life.

K had the freedom of the estate, on foot and by bicycle, sometimes accompanied by a dog and occasionally going down to the local tennis club or crossing over into neighbouring estates (although he always had some sense of where the boundary lay and that crossing it could be regarded as a mild form of trespass). It rains a lot in

the tea country but he didn't worry much about getting wet as the rain was often warm. When he visited Glasgow Estate in 1996 the Superintendent summoned an old man who remembered being sent out to bring him home for meals when he was a child of about his age. In 1996 he looked older than K and he carried less extra weight.

K remembers two dangers as he wandered around the estates. One was from the Bambara bees whose black nests hung high on the branches of tall trees. If you annoyed them they would hunt you down and sting you to death. No hope of outrunning them, the only chance was to find some water and submerge yourself completely. To breathe you would need a hollow stick, or, if a hollow stick could not be found, you would have to hold your breath as long as you could then come up for a gulp of air and duck down quickly before the circling bees could swoop. Cycling through tea estates near Bandarawela in 2006, he and his daughter Ella passed under a tree with Bambara bee nests. K told her the childhood story, without pausing to take a photograph of the bees. It did occur to him that at a pinch they could have converted their bicycle pump for use as a hollow stick. As they only had one bicycle pump, they would have had to take turns.

Rabid dogs were the other danger. There were plenty of dogs about – pi-dogs they were called, bony brown or piebald dogs that looked like Australian dingos.^[3] One of their beloved dogs, a dachshund named Hawkins, caught rabies and had to be killed. They children played with the dogs and if they had caught the disease would have been at risk of a ghastly death (of which they knew the lurid details – cruel thirst and foaming at the mouth). Rabies injections are very painful. You need several, in the stomach. He doesn't actually remember having them – he doesn't remember any needle or pain – but he have a story in memory that he did have them, from which the pain is missing. Reflecting on what he do and doesn't remember, he have often wondered if it might have been his brother who had the injections, or whether the memory of injections themselves has been suppressed because it took on the intensity of the pain.

K remembers some mishaps. Running from the office down towards the bungalow on Balmoral, he tripped and cut the corner of his mouth on the pruned branch of a tea bush. he can see the branch, cut at a 45 degree angle and remember the taste of blood and how he scrambled up and ran on down to the Bungalow. More seriously, riding home from the Tennis Club on his bicycle carrying a glass bottle of lemonade he fell off the bike and cut through the tendons of his left hand with glass from the broken bottle. Blood soaking through the shirt he used to wrap his hand, and the visit to a local dispensary where the wound was tidied up with a pair of sharp scissors and stitched with a local anaesthetic. From there he was taken to the [Hatton](#) Hospital where the potential consequence of cut tendons were understood, and so quickly on to Colombo where a London-trained surgeon was able to save him the use of his hand, no doubt at considerable expense to his father.

While tea usually replaced coffee in the mid and low country, many tea estates above 5000 feet were cleared out of virgin jungle some of which remained on the higher and steeper slopes. Most of his father's estates were surrounded by other estates but the jungle was never far away. K remembers climbing up through a eucalyptus grove where wild cardamom grew to the edge of the forest and then entering it by wading from pool to pool up a small stream. This was a damp

mountain rainforest with the lichen they called Old Man's Beard hanging on small thick-barked and a dense undergrowth. Animals were hard to see but easy to imagine. Elephant and leopard no longer lived in those forests but deer could still be found.

K is not sure if it was that stream or another where he found small [garnets](#), the colour of rust or dried blood, in the gravel at the bottom of the pools. Ceylon has long been famous for its gemstones but as a child that was largely out of his ken. Later, on a holiday return to the island from school in Edinburgh, his father sent him on a long walk up through forested mountain valleys to the [Horton Plains](#), guided by a local man from the estate. K had to work hard to keep up as they pushed along narrow paths through thick and soaking scrub. At one point they came close to the edge of a grassy valley with a small stream running through it. They could see men working in and around pits cut in the ground down by the river and his guide told him to keep quiet and stay in the forest. The men must have been illegal sapphire miners who the guide feared might become aggressive if they thought they were being spied on by allies of authority.

They shared the bungalow and its garden with many servants. First, in his heart and recollection, was Nanny, Mrs Dingarimenike, smooth-skinned and plump in her sari and white blouse, her scent hovering just beyond the edge of memory. Remembering her K finds himself wondering about her other life with her family, largely unknown to him at the time and since. He doesn't even know if she had her own children. Even now he find sit strange to think that he was in truth closer to the margin than the centre of her life. She taught him a few words of sinhala but he found this no help when he tried, with little success, to learn the language before returning in 1996.

Other house servants he remembers as young men in clean white sarongs and shirts. K became close to one called Thomas and suffered heartbreak when he was dismissed for stealing a silver spoon (or so he remembers). Then there were the higher status drivers who worked for the estate when not conveying the family, and lower status garden coolies and night watchmen, older men who had lives which stretched further beyond his ken than those of the house servants.

Last but not least the Appu, the head cook, whose kitchen domain he remember as being out of bounds, either because his parents had issued an edict or because he respected the status of an Appu. Cooks came and went and good ones were sought after and were expected to be able to prepare both English and Ceylonese food. They ate a lot of curry and the cook was not required to hold back on the chilli. His father's tastes are indicated by his later habit of sprinkling dried chillies on other dishes (eg bacon and eggs).

K was not born with a love of hot curry and so regularly dined on rice mixed with chopped tinned Kraft cheese and tomato sauce. The decision to start liking curry was a rite of passage. K was staying overnight in the Horton Plains Rest House ¹, in his early teens, by himself, a wad of his father's rupees in his wallet, and nothing else but curry on the menu. Beer was also on the menu and may have given him courage (he learned only later that alcohol makes curry taste hotter). K remembers

¹ It is now called the "Farr Inn Rest House". Google Images comes up blank, although there are plenty of text references.

finding interesting tastes behind a discomfort that changed its nature because it was associated with the intense pleasure of being by himself in one of his favourite places with money in his pocket, beer and food to spend it on, and no-one to question his choices.

Of course they didn't eat only curry at home. Some other foods he remembers: crumbed brains, mulligatawny soup, rhubarb froule, egg hoppers and string hoppers, half avocados with vinaigrette in the hollow, half grapefruit with sugar. K serves these dishes to his family and friends, except the brains, which he orders when (rarely) he finds it in a restaurant but has never cooked for others.

The Anglo-Ceylon cooking which their Appus practised survives in the 1600 recipes of the [Ceylon Daily News Cookery Book](#). This was first published in the 1920s and his daughter brought him back the most recent edition after spending a year in Sri Lanka as a volunteer. Its continuing popularity suggests that contemporary Sri Lankans have not disowned the Ceylon in which they and their own parents and grandparent lived. They see the colonial times, Portuguese and Dutch and British, as episodes in a longer story. Of course, that may partly be because the ancient mutual antipathy of Sinhalese and Tamils sometimes lets the colonisers off the hook. K remembers how the Tamil and Sinhala on trilingual road signs in the fifties were sometimes painted through leaving only the English legible.

Parents

Like all children he saw his parents mainly in relation to himself, and like the most fortunate children, he basked in their devotion. Of their relationship to each other he had little sense, partly no doubt because he went early to boarding school and so was away from them for long periods. K knew they had occasional arguments but doesn't recall ever feeling particularly distressed by them, still less responsible for them as some children do.

K remembers his father as someone who returned to the bungalow from work, on the estate or in the office, whose centre of being was elsewhere. The paternal masculine territory was outdoors, working or playing, fishing often and more rarely hunting. K followed his father out into the world, wandering around the estate on foot or bicycle, looking down at the streams with an eye to where a fish might lie or up at the forested hills with a dream of exploring them.

K still follows him in a world which has the same structure. A place to walk through, with rivers and mountains and birds and beasts. A world containing boys' treasures. His father's fishing rods and reels and guns and knives and some leftover army gear, ammunition pouches perhaps, were kept in a cupboard into which he would sneak a look when he was out. His father let him clean and oil the guns and reels and two scents remain reliable providers of proustian moments - gun oil and the explosive used in shotgun shells. He remembers the make and calibre of the guns (a Webley and Scott .275 Calibre Rifle with a hunting scope, a [12 gauge shotgun by Cogswell and Harrison](#), a single barrelled 20 gauge shotgun and a .22 calibre rim fire rifle). K could still take them apart, clean them and put them back together.

Later his father acquired a revolver, small and surprisingly heavy, he can feel it in his hand. His father once smuggled it back into Britain when he went home on leave. His father died a few years ago but the last time he looked there were still leftover shotgun shells in a bottom drawer in his workshop in Scotland.

Since those days he have always had his own collection of fishing equipment and knives. K used to own guns but sold them in a moment of political correctness or poverty, and the gun laws in Australia have since become very restrictive. Back then, apart from a pocket knife or two his own collection was of toys. Toy guns, bows and arrow and swords, home made or purchased. His best toy guns were his last – a pair of colt revolvers, cap guns, in a velvet lined wooden case, which he cleaned with real gun oil.

These days in Australia the only toy guns you find in toy shops imitate the laser cannon from science fiction movies and it would be a criminal offence to take a pair of imitation revolvers onto an aeroplane. Later he had an air rifle which he used to shoot sparrows and squirrels, to his father's disgust. And he remember asking for a real rifle, a .22 calibre rim fire rifle, for a birthday or xmas present and taking the refusal in good part, knowing himself to be too young for such a treasure.

His father's authority and status was confirmed by his fluency in both Sinhala and Tamil. It allowed him to exercise authority over his employees and it made the family dependant on him to understand what was happening around us. One memory stands out. K must have been in his early teens, on holiday from boarding school in Scotland and they were staying by the beach, maybe near Trincomalee. His father fell into an animated conversation with a Buddhist monk which K found interesting because it appeared to concern him. His father later told him that the monk had been admonishing him because he had failed to put K into a monastery for a few months as a responsible Singhalese father would have done for a son of his age. K's father accepted the rebuke with humour and good grace, as was his nature.

His father made things by hand, big brass spoons for fishing, a fishing knife made from a file, a wooden boat with a real steam engine. Later, he rebuilt his mother's house in Scotland. K has followed him there as well, but with skills that fall short. Once, many years after they had both left Ceylon and both downed a few too many whiskies, K's father told him he felt K had always favoured his mother over him. K doesn't remember what he replied. He now think that he might have found it easier to do what he thought his mother wanted than what he thought his father wanted, but that did not mean he was uninfluenced by his example or indifferent to his wishes.

The bungalow was his mother's domain – she commanded the servants, held the keys to the store room with its treasures, planned the meals in consultation with the Appu, taught and encouraged K to read and write and do sums, tried in vain to teach him to play the piano, held him and let him go away to boarding school. She spoke enough Sinhala and Tamil to get by in her dealings with servants but not enough to be a bridge to the other cultures of the island in the way his father was. K is curious and uncertain about what it was like for her to be in Ceylon. Looking at surviving photographs, she looks very young, as of course she was, younger than her grandchildren are now.

Planters and other adults

His recollections of the community of which his parents were a part may well be unreliable but that would not make them any less revealing of the world as he perceived it. An ostensibly virtuous and undoubtedly timid child, he knew that adults were capable of misbehaving and had mixed feelings about it. Broadly

speaking, it was other adults rather than the family who misbehaved. His Uncle Allan and Aunt Margot personified rectitude in those days. But the boundaries of misbehaviour were movable, sometimes intruding into their own drawing room. His first encounter with alcohol came when, getting up early and going into the drawing room he sampled the dregs at the bottom of the glasses left behind from the previous night's party. He also remembers overflowing ashtrays, headaches and nausea. He still doesn't much care for the taste of gin.

Those and other dimensions of adult misbehaviour were personified by the unknown but vividly imagined family of one of his wilder fellow pupils, a precocious and charming boy named Christopher who later, when he went back to Ceylon as a teenager, took his pick from the girls at whom K gazed with terror strong enough to almost entirely suppress any consciousness of longing. K remembers his smile and a certain ruthless quality about him.

K would have glimpsed Christopher's "people" at the beginning and end of school term. They might also have been the subjects of overheard gossip. They lived, fittingly given their unsoundness, in the low country, on a mixed plantation, away from the pruned and weeded propriety of the tea country. K saw them as occupying a dangerous intermediate space between "us", the white planters, and the other inhabitants of the island. He encountered their like again when, many years later, he read "Running in the Family", Michael Ondaatje's memoir of his Ceylonese Eurasian family with its hard drinking hard living aunts and uncles. It remains one of his favourite books because it sanctions and celebrates behaviour that seemed forbidden and alluring when he was a child.

Half-suppressed memories of sex and money and booze and freedom. K is in the back seat of an open-topped sports car, driving fast on a warm evening, listening to the conversation of two or three older men, his father one of them. His cousin Terry is with him in the back seat. The adult men are talking about another man who is looking for a wife and has had various relationships including a recent affair with a girl visiting from Britain which didn't work out.

Books

Books were in his mother's domain. K doesn't remember being read to but is sure he was. He had his own books from an early age and remembers choosing books to take away to his room from a low bookshelf, in he doesn't remember what bungalow. What books might they have been? G A Henty was a favorite. The [Wikipedia article](#) on Henty says that

...his children's novels typically revolved around a boy or young man living in troubled times... Henty's heroes -- which rarely included young ladies -- are uniformly intelligent, courageous, honest and resourceful with plenty of 'pluck' yet are also modest.

Exemplary reading of obvious appeal to a young imperialist and retaining an influence on his notions of human virtue. K recently read the first three chapters of *Through the Sikh War* in which Percy, the schoolboy hero, goes out India to join out his uncle, a soldier in the service of a Maharajah in the Punjab, and becomes a man

in various skirmishes and wars in which the force of British arms triumphs and the Punjab is annexed. Something of the old allure remained, but K did not embark on Chapter IV.

K also remembers *Wild Ceylon* and *Vanished Trails* by the surgeon and author Richard (R L) Spittel. which focus on the author's search for surviving Veddas, Ceylon's aboriginal jungle dwelling people. *Wild White Boy* is the title of another book by Spittel which points to the origin of K's interest in tales of the Veddas. In imagination as a child and later in dreams he was with them in the jungle, crouched by a smoky fire or, bow and arrow in hand on the trail of a monkey or a monitor lizard or a spotted deer. K doesn't think they had *Wild White Boy* on their bookshelves but home made bows and arrows were readily available.

Another favourite was a masterpiece, a minor classic, that K has read a number of times. John Still is less known today than Leonard Woolf or Michael Ondaatje or Romesh Gunasekera but *The Jungle Tide* stands comparison with anything written in English about Ceylon. Still's prose gives a pleasure that is independent of its subject matter. His work resembles Spittel's in that subject matter - journeys in the jungle, its plants and animals, hardships and beauty. For both the jungle stands for a past which is under threat from the modernity of which the writer is an ambivalent representative. But there are also differences.

John Still was a scholar who could read the inscriptions on the fragments of temples, Buddha images, roads, irrigation channels and tanks which he found half submerged in the northern Jungles and relate them to the Greek and Latin inscriptions on other antiquities. For Still's classically educated readers a comparison with classical antiquity would have enhanced the status of the ancient Ceylonese kingdoms. He expects that the jungle will one day return to overwhelm the shabby artefacts of modernity.

Still may have been a better writer than Spittel but his work presents a less immediate engagement with the landscape and people. His tone is essentially nostalgic and he shows only occasional interest in the inhabitants of the jungle. Spittel was more interested in people than ruins. At the time he wrote the hunter-gatherer culture of the [Veddas](#), the aboriginal people of Ceylon, was under threat from encroaching Singhalese and Tamil Cultivators. Spittel worked tirelessly for many years to bring them food and medical care and promote their interests with officials. He was also a pioneer conservationist who took the lead in establishing the [Ruhuna](#) and [Wilpattu](#) National Parks. As a writer he is a mixed blessing, too keen on beginning chapters with lengthy quotations from his own somewhat overwrought poems but also capable of observation and humour.

K also read and re-read [Jim Corbett](#)'s books about hunting man-eating tigers and leopards in the foothills of the Himalayas and they were also favourites of his father. *The Man-eating Leopard of Rudraprayag* is Corbett's most memorable title, perhaps because it scans and so invites a rhyming second line to complete the couplet. Corbett writes boys' own books, single-minded in their focus on the hunting of a man-eaters in a vividly described mountain landscape. Corbett was a skilled hunter with an intense, almost telepathic awareness of the natural world that makes him seem close kin to primitive hunters, bushmen or aboriginals. Some of his books are [still in print](#) in India, as is [The Jungle Tide](#).

K recently watched on late night television [a made-for-television movie](#) of *The Man-eating Leopard of Rudraprayag*. Of course, a love interest had been introduced. The fictional Corbett had to endure the amorous advances of an attractive but clearly unsound Memsahib, the frustrated wife of a District Commissioner whose earlier failure of nerve when faced with the tiger Corbett had come to kill seemed to be associated with other deficiencies in virility. Corbett was tempted but did not succumb. K thought it unseemly that Corbett should have been required to put up with that kind of thing.

However K himself feel stirrings of interest in that kind of thing when he encountered it on their own bookshelves. *How Green was my Valley* by Richard Llewelyn included scenes of sex in the open air which he found stirring. Nicholas Monserrat's books about the navy touched on the sailors' activities on shore and introduced him to the expression "bun in the oven". K remembers that his mother, although generally not one to restrict him to children's reading, had misgivings when she found him with *How Green was my Valley* at what must have been an early age.

In the Jungle

A blessing of K's childhood was that the world of imagination and the physical world were complementary. He read books about wandering in the jungle and delighted in doing so himself. He remembers going shooting with his father, pursuing snipe along the raised paths which divide flooded paddy fields or trying to call up jungle fowl by softly clapping with cupped hands in dense forest. He had the use of a single barrelled 20 gauge shotgun, but never did much damage with it, certainly not to the rapidly zigzagging snipe. Occasionally, with more than a hint of shame, he did manage to kill some other bird that made no attempt to escape, remaining in place on the water to allow a clear shot, but was nevertheless classified as "game" and thus available for slaughter. He remembers limp warm bodies with blood on the feathers.

A memory sharpened by fear has K and his father out with a tracker in open country with scattered clumps of trees. The tracker became aware that there were elephants nearby and warned them that it could be dangerous to come upon them unexpectedly as there was a baby in the group. Then suddenly there they were, 50 yards ahead on the track, apparently none too pleased to see them, one of them screaming and raising its trunk. The tracker waved his arms and shouted something in Sinhala at them as the party retreated, quickly but without turning their backs. The elephants let them go unharmed.

K's happiest memory of the jungle is of a holiday in which he also came close to wild animals but with no sense of danger. The family were camping on a low country river somewhere in the north. He remembers the big home made tents of white canvas with their heavy wooden poles and the white light and soft roar of kerosene fuelled pressure lamps. One morning they found a leopard's tracks close to the tent. Someone shot a jungle cock and K remembers being warned not to touch it as it would be covered with ticks.

Every day K went off up or down the river fishing, using a heavy spinning rod with brass spoons made by his father and catching more fish than ever before or since.

Mainly Walliya², a large catfish, rather sluggish on the end of the line, but also another species whose name he forget which fought harder and seemed more of a prize. In memory the Walliya were as almost as long as he was. He took them back to camp where the servants filleted everyone's catch and hung the meat up to dry on ropes strung between the trees. K remembers flies around the drying fillets but doesn't remember any smell. The river banks were sandy and when you went out in the morning there were always new animal tracks. It was hot and dry and the river was good for swimming as well as fishing although the adults said there was a crocodile in one deep pool. As they did not prevent him from swimming in it, K imagines they must have been teasing.

Another jungle fishing memory stands all on its own, divorced from where they might have been camping. His father was with him. A shaded pool in dense forest. He knew it was a big fish as it pulled line rapidly off the reel. Then the line went dead as if the lure were hooked on a rock or tree and his father told him the fish must have tangled the line around a log and was certainly lost. But then it was back on the end of the line, the rod plunging as the fish fought for its life. His father told him to take his time and not try to bring it in too quickly – his usual advice when a big fish was on, which K has passed on to his own son and which on this occasion he successfully followed. A nice mahseer, one of the best known sporting fish of India and Ceylon. K has a picture to prove it. They could only assume the fish must have how untangled itself by retracing its path.

They also went on safaris to the game reserves where they stayed in lodges and drove around in open land rovers with a guide. They photographed innumerable spotted deer and pig, a few sambhur and elephant, and very occasionally, hard to spot both in reality and in the subsequent photographs, a leopard, dozing under a tree or relaxed on a branch or moving quickly away into the shadows. But leopards were few and far between and K sometimes tired of these bumpy drives, thinking he had seen have seen one too many herds of spotted deer. His most intense memory of a game reserve is of an early morning walk he made by himself. A great rock rose out of the jungle near the lodge where they were staying, with a small shaded rock pool half way up the path which led to the summit. Out before breakfast in the cool of the morning he walked towards the pool with eyes down and mind absent, raised his head and saw a big cobra looking at him from the other side of the pool. He doesn't remember either fear on his part or hostility on the part of the cobra. K kept still until the snake moved away.

Fishing

There is more to be said about fishing. Some of the mountain streams were stocked with rainbow trout. The British took their sports with them to their colonies. Along with golf, tennis, cricket and rugby football, trout fishing was introduced in a number of colonies – New Zealand, Australia and India as well as Ceylon.^[7] Trout are not native to Ceylon, any more than they are to Australia and New Zealand where they now also thrive, sometimes at the expense of indigenous species, in suitable streams. In Australia the organisations which introduced trout were called Acclimatisation Societies. In Ceylon they called it the Fishing Club. You had to be a member to fish on the trout streams and the Club employed locals to act as

² “Walliya” is what I remember it being called, although I haven't been able to Google the word as the name in a Ceylonese fish, except in an earlier version of this text published on my own web site.

gamekeeper, with what legal authority he doesn't know. Sri Lankans love fish and trout curry was no doubt sometimes enjoyed by villagers living near these rivers.

His father taught him fly fishing, with help from relatives. The streams were fly only - lures and bait were despised as well as forbidden. Pat, his father's sister, reputed in the family to be the most gifted trout fisher of her generation, also took him out. He thinks he may have caught his first fish under her guidance. He believes she later gave up fishing because she did not want to kill the fish, a decision he seems to be approaching himself. His father's cousin Alan had a pond in his garden where he remembers catching a trout one Christmas morning using a new rod and reel he found under the tree. He was never a gifted fisherman. What he loved was being alone on the river and his father shared and respected his taste for solitude and allowed him to wander off on his own from a relatively early age.

Three trout streams in particular he remembers. A stream runs through Nuwara Eliya and could be fished within the golf course. He would fish while his father played golf. It was well stocked and small fish were easy to catch which he didn't mind although he knew in his heart it was a kind of cheating, a fishing kindergarten in which he was lingering too long. It is usually raining in his memories of fishing there, but he doesn't mind because the rain is warm and he expects he will catch something soon. A [Sri Lankan tourism web site](#) lists that river as holding trout but it looked like a muddy garbage-filled ditch when he visited Nuwara Eliya in October 2006.

Another of his favourites was the Bulu Ella stream, which ran through a jungle valley so that you had to push through thick and thorny scrub to access its pools and rapids. It set his expectations for what a trout river should be like, because when he found similar conditions years later in Australia on the upper reaches of the Murray River it became his favourite Australian stream. He remembers wrapping a fish in wet newspaper and cooking it in the ashes of a fire by the Bulu Ella, and the painful joy of sitting with scratched legs in a hot bath containing a few drops of Dettol after returning from it or some other jungle stream.

And the itching of leech bites, which he learned to take for granted in those days and find he can still regard with something approaching equanimity (there are leeches in Northern Australia and still plenty in Sri Lanka as he discovered in the Sinharaja Rain Forest in 2006). When his father was around he would make them drop off by touching them with the tip of his cigarette. Otherwise, they would fall off when sated, fat as raspberries, leaving your socks remarkably full of blood, or you could salt them or pull them off. The bite sites swelled up and itched fiercely and of course he made it worse by scratching.

The best of the trout streams ran through the Horton Plains. The 3000 hectare Horton Plains National Park, an area of montane jungles and patna grass plains, is now one of Sri Lanka's main tourist attractions, featured in the prospectus of most Tours of the Island. The van drivers who smoke and chat as they wait (interminably, in these hard times) in the main streets of Nuwara Eliya offer to take any passing tourist there for a negotiable price. He refused their offers on both of his recent visits, in 1996 and 2006. The decision had nothing to do with time or money. He knew that did not want to put at risk one of his most vivid memories of Ceylon by sharing a sacred site with a snap-happy crowd streaming out of a Tour Bus.

The journey to the Horton Plains, by Land Rover, was long and difficult, along a rough dirt road that was maintained erratically and crossed a number of streams. Car sickness was a strong possibility, but eventually you came out of the jungle and parked near the Rest House, screwed your reel to your rod, threaded the line through the guides, knotted on a leader and tied on a fly. Those knots are still the only ones he can remember. The Horton Plains stream runs through a valley of patna grassland dotted with small rhododendron trees before dropping steeply down into dense forest. In contrast to the Nuwara Eliya and Bulu Ella stream it contained larger, fewer and warier fish, so there was a high degree of anticipation and his very occasional success was especially rewarding. His father showed him how to gut fish with a knife and put a handful of grass in the hollowed out belly.

He usually fished down to Baker's Falls, a small waterfall which divides the grassland from the forest below, but hardly ever went past the broad pool under the waterfall, which was already a few hours from the car. This allowed him to imagine the river below as a chain of deep pools full of large and ravenous fish that had never before seen an artificial fly. A close cousin to the remote and virgin Rocky Mountain or Alaskan streams that featured in *Field and Stream*, the American hunting and fishing magazine that his father brought back from Nuwara Eliya. He still buys *Field and Stream* occasionally and its formula hasn't changed. Virgin streams still feature, as to bloody battles between men armed with bows and arrows or knives and grizzly bears about 19 feet tall.

School.

He left the estate to go to boarding school at the age of seven. Driving there, a long, nausea-inducing journey along twisty roads, his tin trunk in the back of the Morris Minor Estate. Saying goodbye meant tears from his Mother, manly affection from his Father, for him a quality of sadness experienced as tightness in the chest and pressure around the tear glands. He still feels the sadness of parting in much the same way and remember that first parting when he experience other separations.

The first night in the dormitory, audible sobbing. A voice in the darkness: Cameron, stop blubbing. I am not blubbing, Cameron fiercely insists, and isn't, but he is wide awake, aware of the other boys in the darkness and the hardness of the bed and the stiff sheets around his shoulders. There is a dorm mother, a large café au lait burgher (Eurasian) woman called something like Ma McCue who keeps them in line and sews on their buttons. She comes in and tells them to be quiet and go to sleep but Cameron lies awake a little while longer.

The teachers were a rum lot. That description is not meant disrespectfully. In retrospect it seems they might have had various reasons, more or less creditable, for not being teachers in an English primary schools. He remembers a proto-backpacker and hippy English teacher getting them to sit in the lotus position on their desks, and a maths teacher with a taste for the gin bottle whose gift for teaching and love for his subject deluded him into thinking he was good at maths, at least until a painful encounter with calculus in his teens. And a latin teacher, a stiff upright man in a grey suit with the air and haircut of a scholarly storm trooper who he remembers, implausibly, as given to travelling around the country by local bus, wearing his grey pin stripe suit and carrying a rolled up umbrella. And a large moustachioed geography teacher who looked like a paedophile from Central Casting

(but whose innocence he has no reason to doubt).

As he remembers it, they ran wild, committing frequent misdemeanours and occasional crimes. They were probably born to it, boys and girls, little princes and princesses in their fathers' kingdoms. There was plenty of space to run wild. He remembers a patch of forest above the school where they had made tunnels through the undergrowth to a central lair which only the favoured were allowed to enter. It seemed continuous with all the high country jungle which covered the peaks and valleys around Nuwara Eliya. If you look for Nuwara Eliya on Google Earth you will see that it is still partly surrounded by jungle.

Closer to home, he remembers jumping down into the large ditches which drained the clay soil of the playing fields to find frogs and tadpoles. And cross country running around the Nuwara Eliya lake, running in the rain on sodden turf past local carp fishermen and splashing through swamp at both ends of the lake. And poking little snakes with sticks in the concrete drains behind the classroom block. Tic polongas he remember them being called, but that might have been wrong. he have recently found tic polonga defined as *the name of one of the two most poisonous snakes in Sri Lanka (the other being the cobra), otherwise known as the Russell's viper*. They knew their little snake were poisonous but surely they could not have been baby Russell's Vipers.

Socially, you had to fight, or at least prove yourself willing. In his early days, he remember battling an older boy who thought it his right to give orders to new boys like him. He went down to defeat but his frenzied resistance won him enough respect to be left alone from then on. And a later fight, in the school hall, surrounded by screaming girls, with Alistair Sharp Paul, a close friend at the time, now a successful Melbourne businessman. His objective, luckily not achieved, was to injure him severely by banging his head against a light switch. Playground supervision wasn't what it might have been – although there must have been some supervision, without it they could easily have turned into lords of the flies.

The school was co-educational and the girls were a separate tribe, and certainly not any kind of civilising influence: they were just as feral as they were. Between the older boys and girls, aged up to 13 or 14, there must have been sexual experimentation but he was only distantly aware of it. He does remember something of the kind between other boys, taking place in darkness at the other end of the dormitory, with no attempt at concealment. As a late developer, he took no advantage of any such opportunities.

However, there are memories of transgression. There was a pear orchard above and behind the headmaster's house, forbidden ground as private property but a temptation not always resisted when the pears were ripe. Graham Torrance and he were raiding it one day when they were spotted by the headmaster's wife out of a side window. This was a caning offence and they were summoned to his house for six of the best. He doesn't remember the pain – what has remained is his response to it, and Graham's. he wept, while G shed not a tear. The moral ascendancy he gained that day has not entirely dissipated. But K does still love the taste of pears.

They - perhaps half a dozen of them - escaped unpunished from their worst offence. They stayed awake after lights out until they were confident the authorities had gone to bed, then crept out of their dormitory down a darkened corridor and sent

someone through a kind of serving hatch that led into the headmaster's study to find the key to the school store room in one of his desk drawers. Once they had the key, they were into the store room and, after replacing the key, back to the dormitory bearing their loot. Someone brought a can opener and they gathered round, squatting down on the floor between the beds and reminding each other to keep quiet. There are tins of peaches (from Australia) and of mandarin oranges, and condensed milk, and cold (of course) baked beans and/or spaghetti. K has always had a sweet tooth and might feel as he does about tinned mandarin oranges and condensed milk even if these crimes had not been committed.

How they knew the key was kept in that drawer he doesn't know. The only authorised entry to the study that he remember was on Sundays when the headmaster called them in there to dispense boiled sweets from a large rectangular tin with a press on lid. Flat square sweets in different colours with a powdered sugar coating that did not always stop them from sticking together. Someone might have spotted a key then and remembered seeing it being used to open the store room. They knew that their offence was serious and became increasingly anxious the longer it remained undetected. As he remember it, he was the one whose growing anxiety led him to urge the others that they should quit while they were ahead. Fear of punishment rather than love of virtue prompted their abandonment of crimes which were never mentioned although they must surely have been noticed.

K doesn't believe they could have pleaded hunger as an excuse for the pears or the tinned fruit. Certainly the mandarins and condensed milk were a luxury, perhaps never served to the children, but the food was plentiful and nourishing, although these days the nutrition police would find something in their diet to denounce. He remembers toast made with caddy bread, a slightly oily white bread which he enjoyed on later visits to Ceylon. Tinned marmalade to go with it. Curry once a week, with no hint of chilli. And two varieties of stew, thin stew and thick stew, both containing gristly cubes of meat, potatoes, carrots and turnip, and differing in one key ingredient – flour in the thick stew.

And one last misdemeanour, this time in the holidays. Somebody's birthday party on a neighbouring estate. The children playing in the garden, the adults chatting and sipping drinks in a drawing room with doors opening onto the garden. Fireworks were supplied and in those days children were allowed to let them off. They send a few into the sky then someone thinks of a much better idea and they aim a rocket down towards the open door of the drawing room. Total success – the rocket bounces from wall to wall of the drawing room, shrill cries, consternation, evasive action, spilled drinks. Later, confiscation of fireworks despite protestations of innocence.

While his own memories of the Hill School are happy, it must have been a difficult life for some children. K remembers one boy who he knew slightly from life outside the school and who seemed to have no friends. Because of their prior acquaintance he treated K as a friend and on one occasion when he was bullied by members of some pre-teen gang with whom he was on good terms, appealed to him for support. K refused to provide it and he collapsed into desperate weeping. However, K found himself afflicted by remorse and later in the day sought him out and provided some private comfort. One of K's first moral dilemmas (he had no misgivings about the fighting).

These tales of crimes and misdemeanours do not pretend to provide a reliable account of life at the Hill School. They are simply what K happens to remember, rather than, eg, the joy of his studies. Actually, he does remember one thing about his studies which perhaps explains why he do not remember them as joyous. Those were the days in which the study of history mean the memorising of dates – dates of Kings of England then dates of significant events in each reign. K remembers getting up after lights out and going into a toilet cubicle to work on his significant events. What came after, boarding school in Scotland, relentless supervision, and an obsessive concern with getting good marks, perhaps also plays its part in colouring memories of earlier days.

The Order of Empire

His life in Ceylon, in the bungalow, the garden, the estate, along the rivers and through the jungles, was always sustained by on a sense of being in place, where he should be, in a world with a proper and intelligible structure. A little prince. But there was also a world outside that circle of safety, not so much hostile as different, intriguing, frightening.

The estate was a condition as well as a location, his playground and his father's kingdom. K had no doubt that his father was in command. A hierarchy of assistant superintendents, clerks, factory staff, house servants, garden coolies, kanganis (field supervisors and sub-contractors), pluckers, coolies, all answered to him, hundreds of people. K knew, vaguely, that there were distant authorities to whom his father was answerable – owners far away in London, Colombo Agents who employed him and sent their emissaries, the Visiting Agents (VAs), who came to assess and judge his performance. These were senior planters whose assessments could advance or blight a career – his father eventually became one himself. But for him at the time they were simply visitors to whom he had to endure being introduced, for whom the cook was expected to put on an exceptional spread, and with whom his parents sat up late drinking or playing bridge.

K knew his father was responsible for and concerned about the quality of the estate. He understood, from conversations at home and dismissive or respectful observations made in the car while driving past other estates, that quality was locally expressed in the smoothness of the tea bushes, the absence of weeds, the neatness of the paths and drains.^[8] Quality was also expressed in the prices at which tea from the estate sold at London auction houses and he remember his father's satisfaction when a record was achieved by one of his Estates. Science also played its part in promoting quality and productivity – they knew all about the Tea Research Institute (TRI), an independent research organisation financed by a levy on tea exports which ran its own estate (St Coombs) and collaborated with planters in developing experimental tea clones and techniques for cultivation and disease control.

K's father was, K believed and still believes, an enlightened monarch who had good relations with his staff, spoke their languages, respected their cultures and worked to improve their conditions, putting pressure on estate owners and managing agents to provide funds for improving the housing for labourers on the estate. They lived in rows of whitewashed houses called Lines which he remember as having open ditches in front and unglazed windows with wooden shutters. There were always children playing around them and women looking out from open doors. He

is not sure if he was forbidden to go too close to them or too shy – for whatever reason they were places he looked at from a distance. They looked much the same on the Tea Estates he visited in 1996 and 2006.

His father's rule was, to some degree, spiritual as well as economic. K remembers the sound of drums as a wedding procession approaches the bungalow, fading back momentarily and then growing louder again the road climbs up around hillsides and through clumps of trees. They are coming up to the bungalow to include his father in the ceremony. He looks down from the edge of the garden at the approaching procession and feels intensely shy on being asked to come out and take his place. A caste mark is applied between his eyes. When it is over he is glad to get away. But it also seems natural and proper for the wedding party to come up to the Bungalow to receive his father's blessing.

When he was a child he expected to become a planter, to inherit his father's kingdom. Being the son of a planter gave him a clear identity and an undisputed status. he was one of us and they were Tea Planters, living in the up-country, which consisted mostly of Tea Estates, of which they were in charge. Bungalows, the command centres of tea estates, occupied prominent locations on hilltops or ridges. You see lots of them from the train that goes from Kandy to Nuwara Eliya. And even from the road you can usually see where you are in the up country with views across valleys to other estates, bungalows and factories, surrounded by the distant mountains. Most of the tea planters were white, not all, but the Sinhalese planters were in many respects people like the whites, living in bungalows, commanding servants, fluent in English, dressed in khaki, keen on tennis or golf or fishing.

Difference began in the small towns scattered through the tea country . Dark people from a different world, so many of them, so few of us. Adults and children all together, packed into buses or clustered behind the doorways of shops, looking out at us with dark eyes, blank or hostile or amused. Runny noses on the children, adults with teeth red from chewing Betel, spit marks on the dusty road, pregnant dogs with swollen udders. At night the light of kerosene pressure lamps divided the shops and alleyways into a vivid chiaroscuro of glare and shadow. People half seen at the boundary between light and darkness, imagination conjuring secret lives in the back rooms.

The broader landscape was also divided between safe and dangerous, ours and theirs. The up country was cool, its climate usually conducive to outdoor activity, work, sport, gardening, with some of the moral virtue of British weather.^[9] Tea is a monoculture, a green carpet on the hills that was incessantly pruned to subordinate it to their purposes and everything else that grew was subordinated to tea. Trees were to provide shade for the tea and weeds are not tolerated. At the time, this tea scape seemed natural but on his more recent visits K has noticed how much erosion there is and seen it as a landscape haunted by the ghost of the forest that used to cover it.

The low country was different. Hot, humid, fecund with unpruned and diverse vegetation and with people living everywhere along the roads in houses half-hidden behind trees and bushes^[10], it had no obvious structure of authority and it lacked commanding viewpoints from which the topography could be understood. The roads were choked with traffic, potholed and slow to travel. Dogs and cows and crows fed on refuse. Sweat, dirt and sunburn were not to be avoided and the

mosquitoes were worse than at home. There could be no doubt in the low country that Ceylon had its own life and history, anything but a monoculture either culturally or agriculturally, much more than just an extension of their garden or their estate.

The other defining location in his imagined world as a child of empire was home in a different sense of the word. Home as the source of scratchy broadcasts of test cricket at odd hours of the day or night, heard on a bakelite valve radio with a long aerial strung between trees in the garden. Home as the source of letters and presents from Granny. Early in his career his father took leave, 3-6 months, every 3 years and they travelled to and from Britain by ship, usually through the Suez Canal but once, in 1956 when it was closed by the Suez Crisis, all the way around Africa. He loved the sea voyages. He remembers the smell of paint in the corridors outside their cabin and the thick glass of the porthole. And the taste of coca cola which they didn't have at home and which he still associates with ocean travel. Later, on the northbound journey, sea sickness in the choppy waters of the Bay of Biscay and an odd mixture of excitement and disappointment at the first sight of land, always grey and dim through rain.

Later, leave was every 2 years or 18 months and he remember the long narrow tube of the BOAC Comet on which he was sometimes by himself going to and from Boarding School in Scotland. The heat and humidity and smell of India when they opened the cabin door after landing in Bombay. No non-stop flights in those days, the Comet hopped from airport to airport across Europe, the Middle East and India. Whether by ship or by plan, the journey was serious, befitting a change of worlds. And a strange thing - in either direction, he is going home, and leaving home.

Britain is confusing at first. They are in London and he is wondering who all these white people are and why they doesn't appear to know them. He looks up at his parents and any white person they meet for signs of the mutual recognition or acknowledgement that would have been common in up country Ceylon.

Reassurance comes at the end of the long overnight train journey to Scotland. In Fortrose, while they don't know everybody, they seem to know a lot of people, many with a connection to Ceylon, and his Grandmother knows almost everyone. And soon he find his place. An attic up a ladder where he can read before going out to explore an inviting landscape just as in Ceylon. The golf course, the beaches, the woods up the hill the path to the village and its lolly-rich shops took the place of the estate and its surroundings as a private landscape in which he is free to roam.

The journey back to Ceylon also has a shape of its own. Arriving in Colombo is arriving in the heart of the low country, the smell and noise and human multitude. They don't generally linger and he is more than happy with that. The journey back to the Estate is less comfortable than the overnight train ride from London to Inverness. The car is small and tightly packed, the air is hot and humid, the road is twisty, often they get stuck behind a bus or lorry and so make even slower progress, car sickness is not to be avoided. And then they are home to a welcome from the servants and a rediscovery of house and garden and estate.

For many years, at school and university and for some time afterwards he had a recurring dream about driving home from Colombo in which they kept making wrong turns and losing elevation while climbing a steep slope to return to the safety of the tea country. The dream landscape was a stylisation of the real one. The

geology of central Ceylon can be described as a plateau with another plateau on top of it, the walls of the plateaus sometimes gradual and sometimes quite steep. You will see what he mean if you look at the island on Google Earth or take the train from Colombo to Nuwara Eliya when the railway line clings precariously to the edge of steep slopes as it climbs the walls of the plateaus. Or you could walk to World's End at the Horton Plains and look thousands of feet down to the low country below. Driving back to the Estate from Colombo they were climbing the walls to get to the kingdom on the other side.

In the dream, he never made it back to the estate, the welcoming servants, the house and garden. He doesn't have that dream any more but he there is another which might have taken its place. He struggle to get to an airport despite knowing he will be too late to get on the plane. It sounds as if he is a bit further away from the kingdom in that he doesn't even get to start the journey.

Conclusion

Do he miss Ceylon? Yes and no. The 'yes' answer is also half of the answer to another question - do he miss being a child? What is lost of Ceylon isn't so much the place as the way in which he was at home there. As his parents' child, he knew who he was in a kingdom that was richer and safer and more interesting within its boundaries because some things outside those boundaries were strange and threatening. Later, of course, life became more complicated and the balance shifted away from security towards unease . That may be why he has always enjoyed remembering Ceylon and why it came easily and felt good to set down some memories in these pages. A story which he like to tell himself because he is more comfortable with the role he play in it than he is with other roles in other stories.

But 'yes' is only half the answer. he certainly doesn't spend all his time missing Ceylon or missing being a child. What he loved in Ceylon he have been able to find in other landscapes, and the longer he live in Australia the more abundantly he finds it there. And the enterprise of living that started in Ceylon has continued in other places, with the advantage of a good beginning. Childhood in Ceylon gave him a way of inhabiting and creating his world through imagination and action that shapes the way he lives.

[1] D M Forest in his *A Hundred Years of Ceylon Tea* writes that *Shade has always seemed to him one of those subjects in which personal whim and private superstition have played at least as important a part as scientific doctrine*.

[2] Apis Dorsata, as best he can make out. [Here](#) is a photograph from China.

[3] [Wikipedia defines pie or pye dog as a feral dog living near a human settlement and interacting only minimally with humans](#). The sri lankan versions looked, and still looked, very like Australian dingoes.(link to picture)

[4] *Usnea barbata* is the scientific name for a lichen used as a herbal medicine whose common name is old man's beard. [Here](#) is a picture. It may or may not be the same plant.

[5] Proustian moments are involuntary memories which, according to Wikipedia *possess a vivid and plenary sensory immediacy that seems to obliterate the passage of time between the original event and its re-experience in involuntary memory*.

[6] [Here](#) is a link to the Wikipedia article on G A Henty

[7] Alternatively, you could say that the British took various birds and animals with them to their colonies – rabbits, foxes, hares, sparrows, trout.

[8] D M Forrest in his *A Hundred Years of Ceylon Tea* writes: *The mountains may be steep and jagged, the plains luxuriant and steamy, but wherever tea is grown there is one prevailing note – order. What the plantation pioneers evolved and what their successors have evolved in the face of all tropical inducements to ease off, is a self disciplined routine aimed at the production of as much and as good tea as possible from a given acreage of land*.

[9] Of course the real thing, encountered in Britain, generally seemed too much of a good thing notwithstanding its moral virtue.

[10] Ernst Haeckel, a German, contemporary and colleague of Charles Darwin, published his *A Visit to Ceylon* in 1883. It describes his travels and scientific researches in Ceylon on a six month visit the previous year. He observes this form of ribbon development in which most almost all low country roads in the south and south west are surrounded by smallholdings.