

C E Y L O N

THE strategy of a world war has imposed a new 'grand tour' upon our generation. Via the African desert, the Appenines, or the beaches of Normandy, we travelled to the Rhine; and then, sweating in crowded transports, bound for India, Burma, Malaya or Japan, we gasped across the Persian Gulf to call, usually, at Ceylon. Here, at the commercial port of Colombo or in the great natural harbour of Trincomalee, the Navy massed its White Ensigns for what proved to be an unnecessary invasion of Malaya; and here in the months that succeeded the atom bomb we waited impatiently to come home.

For Jack ashore, Ceylon offered ebony elephants and sapphire engagement rings; noodles and birds' nests in a Chinese café; and a ride in a rickshaw, with an almost naked coolie pulling you through the streets, and making you feel, half-guiltily and half-excitedly, like a Roman emperor. But there was little beer and no girls. We were soon bored, and longed for Tyneside, the Gorbals, or the New Cut.

Looking back, one remembers the constant sunshine, the flamboyant trees flowering their vivid petals down the quiet avenues of English bungalows, the blare of oriental music from arrack taverns, and the indescribable stench of the little native streets. And one tries to write down a description of Ceylon that will mean something in England.

When one became expert, one learnt to differentiate between two kinds of natives. There were the Sinhalese, who wear cotton skirts called sarongs, have narrow faces and prominent teeth, and are the original inhabitants of the island. Englishmen tend to complain that they are fundamentally lazy and have no sense of business; they do not share the prestige of martial races like the Sikhs or Gurkhas, and when the Japanese raided Colombo—very lightly by London standards—almost the entire native population fled from the city and wouldn't come back for a week; this was considered to prove that they had no 'guts.' They are, however, said to be quick to draw knives in quarrels among themselves. Personally I found the Sinhalese friendly and polite; and sensible in not wearing the hot days out in unnecessary labour or business affairs.

The Tamils were the second type of native. These are immigrants from South India; they have round faces; they work hard, save their money, and send it back to their native villages; mostly coolies, they are popular with European estate managers. Large colonies of Tamils have settled permanently in Ceylon, and make up a considerable minority in the population, and many of the shops are owned by

Indians, who have more business skill than the Sinhalese.

The Tamils and Sinhalese speak completely different languages, but among the educated classes English has become the 'lingua franca' of Ceylon, and in many well-to-do homes the native tongue is relegated to second place. The Ceylon Government has recently tried to arrest this tendency by encouraging the use of the vernacular in schools and in the law courts, but many lawyers have found themselves unable to carry on a legal argument in their own language! This is only one example of the Westernisation to which the island has succumbed. As soon as a Sinhalese or Tamil rises to the dignity of a clerkship he discards his sarong for a pair of trousers, puts socks and shoes on his feet, and does his best to adopt European habits. The women, although comparatively free by Oriental standards, are more conservative and have retained the traditional and beautiful saree. Nationalist Ceylonese politicians, although themselves the products of a Western education, are strongly opposed to this European influence, and are sounding a recall to the native language and culture in terms that remind one of the Fianna Fáil in Ireland.

Then there are the Burghers. These are the descendants of the original Dutch colonizers; they have intermarried fairly freely with the native peoples, but some families claim a pure European descent. Numerically the Burghers are unimportant, but culturally they play a big part in the life of the country as managers, chief clerks, customs officers, and so on. They are generally capable and unbribeable—qualities to which the Sinhalese cannot aspire. Their native tongue is English, but with a distinctive accent; their women wear European clothes, and enjoy jitter-bugging; they tend to despise the Sinhalese, and like to be regarded as Europeans. The English colony, however, does not admit them to social equality. I had the privilege of living for some months with a Burgher family; it was typical of their home background that we spent Christmas Day singing English carols and Scottish ballads on the verandah. It is an easy judgement to say that the Burghers, belonging neither to the English nor the native communities, are living on an artificial and borrowed culture. But the problem of how to synthesise an East to which they belong, and a West after which they hanker, is not easily solved.

Finally one must mention the English, who occupy most of the managerial positions in the large commercial houses and on the tea and rubber estates. I had expected to find a rigid colour bar, but officially no such thing exists; at cinemas and to a certain extent in hotels, Europeans sit side by side with the wealthier class of Ceylonese; nor did I see any signs of that racial arrogance and public bad manners that are popularly supposed to distinguish the Englishman East of Suez. But while relations between the English and the natives

may be correct, they cannot be described as cordial; socially they move in entirely different circles. The English often grow very fond of their own personal servants, but—wherever they are—they dislike the natives in the mass, and have no desire to know them in person. This is an attitude which it is easy to criticise in England, but into which one slips with surprising and alarming naturalness when abroad. It is only fair to say that there are prejudices on both sides, and sailors with 'liberal ideas' or enquiring minds did not find it very easy to obtain an introduction into Ceylonese homes.

One of the canons of British rule is that one never interferes with the religion of the natives. But one gradually learnt the elements of the situation. The Sinhalese are Buddhists, and Buddhist monks in their yellow robes are frequently seen in the streets; temples are few, small, and uninteresting architecturally; to enter them one must remove one's shoes; inside there is often only one vast sedent Buddha, with that ageless look of interior contemplation that has been set for all time upon his face; sometimes there are groups of statues representing incidents in the life of the Buddha, that might have come straight out of Madame Tussaud's. Services, I am told, are only attended by a handful of the devout, but occasional processions and pilgrimages are immensely popular. Some Buddhist monks, I was told, are fine scholars and deep contemplatives, but discipline is lax and one occasionally read in the paper of unseemly brawls and scandals. It is probably true to say that Buddhism sits lightly on the people today, but it has acquired a certain prestige as the national religion, and is favoured in Sinhalese nationalist circles for that reason. Many of the natives are very careful about not killing any kind of animal or insect, and are genuinely distressed when they see an Englishman stamp on a beetle. In the remote villages, belief in magic and nature cults are general, and even in Colombo an old tree at the bottom of my garden was never without a votive lamp burning before it.

The Tamils are Hindus. I was never able to get inside a Hindu temple, but they seem to be filled with a remarkable collection of animal-gods, resembling the rococo creatures on English fair-ground roundabouts. All the Tamil shops and cafés have crude lithographed pictures of their gods hung up on the walls; I was able to buy some of these, but the crowd who gathered round during the transaction expressed great surprise that an 'English master' should be interested in such things! I was never able to discover anything about Hindu theology, apart from the 'divinely ordained' nature of the caste system, which has largely influenced the Sinhalese social hierarchy. At an office with which I had some dealings, the English manager, in the absence of the office messenger, told his clerk to fetch something for

him from his car in the road outside; the clerk, feeling affronted at being told to do such a menial act, immediately gave notice! That is an attitude which one continually comes up against; I found it very difficult to persuade my native boat's crew to carry anything on to the jetty, and I often felt obliged to lend a token hand myself to show that it wasn't just 'coolie's work.'

Almost all the Christian denominations are represented in Ceylon, though their members constitute only a small percentage of the population. The Anglican Church, now called the Church of Ceylon, has a number of excellent fee-paying schools, to which most of the wealthy Ceylonese send their children; they are considered to have a very much higher educational standard than the Buddhist colleges. Its churches, clean and simple, reflect the typically English virtues, and most shades of broad and high church are represented among them. They are almost all situated in the well-to-do residential quarter of Colombo, and I think it is fair to say that the native Anglican congregations are drawn from the professional and middle classes. What in the past has probably been a social asset will increasingly become a liability in the Ceylon of tomorrow, but the Anglican church will, I believe, gain more than it loses from the change. The first Ceylonese Bishop in the Church of Ceylon was created last year.

The Catholic Church claims, I believe, more members than all the non-Catholic sects, and evidently has deeper roots among the poor; the population of several fishing villages along the west coast has been entirely Catholic for many generations. In Colombo, the Cathedral and several churches are built in the heart of the native town, and are full all day long with worshippers who squat on the floor before their favourite shrines—the Christ Child seemed a particular object of devotion. They make the sign of the Cross carefully several times over, and like to touch the venerated statue with their hand before they leave the church. I was told that many Hindus and Buddhists who are not baptized Christians like to invoke the aid of Christian saints, and swell the numbers at Catholic processions and pilgrimages. I suppose it might be cynically said that the illiterate native who is converted to Catholicism only exchanges one lithographed picture for another, but the enormous queues that I saw waiting outside the confessionals on Christmas Eve indicate that there is a real sacramental life among them. The Burghers, too, are almost entirely Catholic, though there remain a few congregations of the Dutch Reformed Church. The Catholics possess several large and well-built schools and colleges, though I believe these do not enjoy quite the social or educational prestige of their Anglican counterparts. A native Catholic bishop was also created last year. All the Catholic churches that I saw were furnished with pink plaster-cast images that seemed

to have come from the Rue St Sulpice; I cannot say how this strikes a native congregation, but it seemed to me profoundly shocking that, while Europe can boast her black Madonnas, for Ceylon apparently God and all the choirs of Heaven are Frenchmen.

Ceylon seems happily free from religious rivalry or quarrels; Buddhists and Hindus live side by side, and suffer each other placidly; when I was shown over the early Buddhist sites at Anuradhapura I discovered to my surprise that the official guide was a Hindu Tamil; this is rather like employing a Moor as a guide in Rome! As for the Christians, I rather formed the impression that the period of conversions had passed, and that all churches were intent on building up and strengthening their existing organizations. A recent Education Act, making instruction in the vernacular compulsory, and forcing almost all schools into the free state system, has called forth protests from Catholics as well as Anglicans, and has created a situation similar to that in England today.

The government under which this small island (roughly the size of Ireland) has been administered during the past twenty-odd years has been an ingenious adaptation of the committee system used by the London County Council. Elections were held from a universal suffrage (immigrant Tamils, however, excluded) for a State Council, possessing wide powers in internal affairs; in order to allow Europeans and Burghers to take part in government the Governor had a small number of 'nominated' seats at his disposal. On the whole I think it is fair to say that this system has worked well. Ceylonese can point to the fruits of an increasing degree of self-government—a partly native judiciary, an almost purely native university, free education for all, military and naval formations largely administered by native officers, a state co-operative system evolved under the stress of war, wage and price controls that make Ceylon probably the most prosperous country in the East today. The difference between Ceylon and India is very marked; in Ceylon there is little grinding poverty, remarkably few beggars, and there has been no famine. Moreover, in Ceylon there have been no riots or mutinies; with the Japanese fleet a few hours' sailing away, Ceylon remained—at least passively—loyal.

It is only fair to record the complaints made by English and Burgher residents about the Ceylonese government. They say it is corrupt. This seems to be true; it is certainly advisable to have a small bribe ready when applying for any kind of a pass or permit; but this is, unfortunately, a characteristic of all oriental régimes (except the Chinese Communists, we are told), and indeed of many European and American ones. They say it is inefficient. This is certainly true compared with Anglo-Saxon standards, but I did not find the post-office,

for instance, any more infuriating in Ceylon than, for example, in Spain. They say the rationing system is a farce, and that everything has to be bought in the black market. Alas, Great Britain is one of the few countries in the world fit for self-government if this is to be a criterion. They say that the States Council is 'just a collection of windbags.' It is true that the standard of debate often falls to the level of petty personal bickerings, and that the member for Bibile spoke for, I believe, three days on the motion for the last Budget; but such oratorical marathons are to be paralleled in the American Senate.

A more serious complaint is that the Ceylonese do not understand the meaning of democracy. The elections are invariably decided on a communal basis; that is to say, that in areas where the Tamils are in a majority (such as extensive areas in the north of the island) a Tamil representative is elected, while always Malays will only vote for a Malay member, and so on. The result is that political parties in the English sense hardly exist; the States Council consists of a majority block of Sinhalese, and a minority of Tamils and other smaller groups. The Tamils are nervous of legislation that will penalize them. In my experience I saw no signs of communal jealousies among the people themselves; I was in command of a small harbour boat with a mixed Tamil and Sinhalese crew, and—though each nationality would boast of its superior virtues—they seemed to live happily enough together. But there is no doubt that, among the political leaders, the fear of discrimination is a very real one.

Critics, too, may fairly claim that the prosperity of this little island is due, not to anything done by the Government men, but to the careful planting and management of the tea and rubber estates, which are largely owned by British firms. The Sinhalese are good at cultivating coconut plantations, where all you have to do is to wait for the nuts to fall off the trees five times a year, but I am told that when they have bought tea or rubber estates they have not shown the good husbandry and care for the soil that has marked the British administration.

In 1944 a Commission, headed by Lord Soulbury, visited the island, consulted local opinion, and recommended a new Constitution, which is to come into force this year. It is designed to take Ceylon one step further on the road to dominion status, or—as it is now called—*independence*; it provides for a government almost identical with that of a Western democracy—an upper and lower house, a prime minister and cabinet, and all the rest. As a concession to the fears of the Tamils and Burghers, the Governor has reserved the power to veto bills affecting linguistic, cultural, or religious minorities. The States Council, including the European members,

approved the new Constitution with only a handful of dissentients; but the Tamils remain nervous. The first Prime Minister of Ceylon is expected to be Mr Senanyake, the present leader of the Council. This wealthy Sinhalese landowner has shown considerable skill in directing his country's affairs during the war years; he is opposed as a reactionary by the left wing student parties, but he is probably the only man with sufficient stature and breadth of vision to transform a Sinhalese communal group into a national party.

Time alone will show whether this—or any oriental country—will successfully master the delicate balance of democratic government. Political parties that flaunt the old communal distinctions are beginning to form on the extreme left; I found the university divided between the Communists and the Trotskyists, the latter, under the name of Sama Samajists, being apparently the more popular. The coolies are forming into powerful trade unions, invariably under Communist or Trotskyist leadership, and are beginning to try their strength with token strikes. As it is, the 'workers' are divided between the two races; one wonders if a class unity will prove more real than the communal unity. The next election may see the appearance of a left wing workers' party, but old habits and suspicions may still prove too strong.

Ceylon has given tea and rubber to the West, and in exchange has received Christianity and Democracy. We shall watch her progress with sympathy. But while Sinhalese and Tamils, Communists and Trotskyists, Europeans and Burghers, seek—or refuse—that unity and cooperation, without which democracy is impossible, let us remember the unity that already does exist before the altars where all kneel together, or in the confessionals where English sailors were absolved by native priests. Neither India nor Ceylon can exist as nations while they are cut in half by communal rifts; the future for Christianity is prejudiced by its association with the Imperial power, yet who can say but that, in God's good time, a new unity will come to the divided peoples of the East within the Mystical Body of Christ; or that missionary priests, steeped in the traditions of Oriental contemplation, will return to the conversion of an anarchic and materialistic West.

GEORGE SPEAIGHT.