

## Cyril Wace Nicholas (1898–1961): Gentleman, scholar and the first warden of the Wild Life Department, Sri Lanka

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It would be almost impossible for anyone to review the history of wildlife conservation in Sri Lanka without a reference to the contributions of C. W. Nicholas – the first warden of the Wild Life Department. He laid the foundation for the scientific management of our wildlife resources. Although today he remains largely forgotten, it is no exaggeration to say that of the many colourful personalities who have administered the Wild Life Department since its inception, Nicholas was arguably the most brilliant, erudite and scholarly. He became one of the most influential and admired men of his generation. A man is usually judged by the company he keeps, and Nicholas' friends included such dogmatic, intellectual giants as the late Nicholas Attygalle (the Iron Chancellor), Senarat Paranavitana and E. F. C. Ludowyk, to name a few. Scholars of the intellectual calibre and brilliance of Nicholas have become rare today in Sri Lanka, that his death, even after four decades, has left a huge empty space in the country. None of the successors could step into Nicholas' shoes. A modest man by nature, Nicholas was nevertheless a man of many talents, and hence writing about him is to present a portrait of an oddity.

Cyril Wace Nicholas was born into a distinguished Burgher family on 5 August 1898. He received his early education at Royal College, Colombo and then proceeded to Cambridge University, England. Nicholas enlisted in the British army during World War I, and fought at the expense of his academic career in Cambridge, and was awarded the Military Cross for bravery. Back in Ceylon (as Sri Lanka was then known), Nicholas sat the Special Civil Service Examination for War Service personnel. But despite being placed first on the list, he was denied an appointment to the Civil Service on medical grounds, and instead he was posted to Batticaloa as an Assistant Superintendent of Excise, where he later became the Deputy Commissioner. It was then that Nicholas was seconded for service as the first warden of the newly established Wild Life Department on 1 December 1950. This was the beginning of the

golden age in wildlife conservation in Ceylon. As warden, Nicholas began immediately the task of reorganizing the Department, recruiting some of the most dedicated and courageous men to protect and manage wildlife. Whatever else may be said of Nicholas, he took ability wherever he found it. The Game Guards and Game Watchers he selected were 'the pick of the jungle men' in the island. But he also recognized that wildlife protection was not a matter of legislation only, and that wildlife reserves could only be perpetuated if they received the widest support from the public.

From the outset, Nicholas also recognized the importance of systematic research and its need as a basis for improved management of wildlife. He worked more by intuition than by method, and given his background in classical education, he practised science as an art. He had a great love for the ancient history of the island, its remarkable irrigation schemes, and its fauna and flora. Being unmarried, he was prolific in his research and publications as a spawning salmon. His writings in *The Ceylon Forester*, provide a scholarly analysis of the status of the Ceylon elephant in antiquity. Nicholas traces the fate of the elephant from the early Sinhalese period to that of the British. We learn that centuries before the birth of Christ, the ancestors of the Sinhalese brought with them from Northern India, their inherited skill in the capture and domestication of the elephant.

Nicholas was a man ahead of his time. Long before the concepts of the Minimum Viable Population (MVP) and Forest Corridors became a part of the lexicon of Conservation Biology in the West, he had enunciated them in no ambiguous terms. In the Administration Report for the year 1953, Nicholas states that, 'There is a biological minimum for every species of animal; if the population falls below that minimum, breeding ceases and extinction follows.' He also recognized the futility of trying to census the elephant in Ceylon, given the dense and tangled nature of the vegetation it inhabits. Nicholas did not restrict his observations to animals

alone. His account of the Wild Flowers of Yala and Wiplattu National Parks in *The Ceylon Forester* (1959) remains a minor classic. In addition, he prepared keys for the identification of the common grasses, sedges, shrubs, and trees in the reserves.

In addition to his work on wildlife, Nicholas was particularly interested in the history and antiquities of Ceylon, and devoted almost his entire adult life to the study of ancient inscriptions in the Brahmi script found in caves and rocks in remote areas. When he was the warden of Wild Life Department, he would visit the caves in Yala as often as possible and eye-copied the inscriptions for future study. His detailed study of more than 400 cave inscriptions and the publication of the texts and translations represent a level of scholarship that is unmatched even today. Compared to what Nicholas accomplished in life without the luxury of a University degree, the output of many of our present day academics, even in their narrow field of expertise, is a penny candle besides a bonfire. Nicholas became well known and respected for his numerous scholarly contributions to the *Journal of the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, and the *University of Ceylon Review*. One contribution entitled, 'Historical Topography of Ancient and Medieval Ceylon' formed the entire issue of the *Journal of the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* (Vol. VI, new series), running to 233 pages! In the words of Senarat Paranavitana, this monograph 'will no doubt remain the standard work on the subject for many years to come'. It covers the period from the earliest times to the end of the 13th century AD by which time, the medieval Sinhala Kingdom had begun to disintegrate. 'A short account of the history of irrigation works up to the 11th century' published in the *Journal* brings out a vast array of facts hitherto unknown to the general public. The University of Ceylon in recognition of the need to compile a comprehensive history of Ceylon, invited various specialists to contribute chapters in their fields of expertise, and one of them was

Nicholas – a person to whom the lack of a University degree was not a hindrance to the pursuit of excellence. He was also appointed a member of the Editorial Board. Today, our education, even at institutions of higher learning, has become as barren as a mule for any creative human purpose. As the French mathematical astronomer Pierre-Simon de Laplace remarked on his deathbed, ‘What we know is not

much; what we do not know is immense.’

Cyril Wace Nicholas, by force of his intellect and personality, exerted a profound influence on all who were fortunate to have come into contact with him. As Christy Wickremasinghe, an octogenarian and one of the few members of the ‘old gang’ who is still alive told me that to work with or for Nicholas had been a great

privilege for him and his colleagues. To them, the days of labouring under the exacting standards set by Nicholas are now cherished memories. Nicholas died on 14 August 1961.

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