

# A Bygone Age.

By R.V.G. Daniel

Stepping back in time to the twenties and thirties, Ceylon was then a British colony. On account of her natural beauty she had been hailed as the Pearl of the Orient. Ceylon tea put her on the world map. There was peace, order and good government for her 4 million inhabitants. Development was mainly cultural. On the world scene the League of Nations was defining many of the Rights of men, women and children. Jaffna made pleasant countryside with market gardens, paddy fields, lowing cattle and flocks of sheep on pasture. The buggy cart and horse trap were gradually giving way to the growing number of motorcars. In spite of the industry of the people life was relaxed. It was not uncommon for students from all parts of the country, ethnic differences notwithstanding, to come to the Christian schools in Jaffna for education as these schools were reputed to provide good education and discipline. The long years of service of the Church Missionary Society to the community in the field of education came to fruition in the centenary of their premier institution in the North, St John's in 1923. This must have been the finest hour as they were already in the process of withdrawing from the Ceylon scene, their mission accomplished. The Rev. Henry Peto M.A (Cantab) was the Principal of the college at this time. A year later H.R.H the Prince of Wales, (later Duke of Windsor) visited Jaffna. This was perhaps the first and last visit of British Royalty to this part of the country. The clock tower in Jaffna town was built in commemoration of this visitation. Before the end of the twenties the Ghandian struggle for independence in India had begun and continued throughout the thirties. The fight for freedom, the non-violent nature for the struggle and the simple way of life of Mahatma Ghandi appealed to the people of Jaffna and quite a few took to wearing Khaddar. About 1930 when Mahatma Ghandi visited Jaffna Peto invited him to address the College. He did so in the Robert Williams Hall seated cross-legged on the table on the platform. Some two three years later in the same hall a spellbound audience enjoyed a performance by Rabindranath Tagore and his troupe from Shantiniketan. These were two of the greats of the time. The Great Depression ran through the thirties. While it caused great hardships in industrialised countries it brought prosperity to Ceylon as the industrialised countries dumped their goods here giving the people a better life style in the westernised way. Many seized the opportunities of the times to go in for higher education and to enter the professions. To a selected few the prestigious Civil Service was the goal. The catchword of the thirties was Boycott. In Jaffna it meant the boycott of the newly formed State Council. At that time politics in Jaffna was the preserve of a few learned men and this was perhaps the first instance when the armchair politics of the Tamils came to be translated into action. In India it meant the boycott of British goods in the struggle for independence and was there with satyagraha to baffle the ruler. Peto presided over the fortunes of St John's during these two decades. The Ceylonisation policy of the Government made Peto the last Britisher to be the Head of the College. Peto was a gentleman from Cambridge, read in the Classics, and belonged to the elite of the time from whom men were picked for positions of responsibility and leadership. Accordingly he was the man of the hour to take St John's into the next hundred years to meet the needs and aspirations of a plural society. He built upon the traditions of the past and put in place the facilities and structures necessary for the development of the child in body, mind and spirit. Apart from regular education students were able to pursue their interests and develop their talents in various fields including cadetship. The annual staging of Shakespeare's plays took students to high standards of theatrical performance. Peto soon made St John's one of the leading schools in the Island. About 1932 when he put the name of the 501st student on the roll he was so overjoyed that he made it a notable event by declaring a half holiday for the College. Peto's interest in the behaviour of students went beyond the normal needs of maintaining discipline in the College. Upholding honour and fairplay at all times he used every opportunity that came his way to bring home to the students the ethical and social values which will stand them in good stead in life. Even the few who fell afoul of Peto took their medicine like a man which meant six of the best on the back before the entire College. They were not averse in later life to recounting their exploits and how Peto got around them and made men of them. He wanted every lad in the College to go out into the world first as a gentleman of honour and integrity. The tradition that he left behind was there to inspire his successors to still greater heights in their stewardship and to face the changes and chances that came their way in the post independence years. Although the people were not aware of it at that time the twenties and thirties were the closing years of an era. The rapid changes which began in the forties after World War II transformed every aspect of life bringing the world to as we see it now. St John's may well be proud of its record of service to the community over the last 175 years. In spite of the vicissitudes of time the College stands strong and high in public esteem as ever before.