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II. REVIEWS

The Genesis of an Orientalist: Thomas William Rhys Davids and Buddhism in Sri Lanka, by Ananda Wickremeratne. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1985.

Like most of the great Orientalists, Rhys Davids has scarcely received his biographical due. He has been aptly described as the most influential Pali scholar of modern times. He founded the Pali Text Society, and set in train its vast output of editions and translations. Several of these were from his own hand, besides the ones he produced under other auspices. The general works in which he popularised Buddhism stand unsurpassed, in authority, eloquence and prestige. His interpretations of Buddhist ideas, designed to conform to the scientific and rationalist ideas of his time, have had an enduring influence, in the West and also in Sri Lanka and elsewhere in Asia. Yet, there have been only two brief sketches of his life, those contributed by Chalmers to the *Dictionary of National Biography* and the *Proceedings of the British Academy*.

For the present pioneering work Wickremeratne has used a variety of sources, chiefly Rhys Davids's own publications, and unpublished records of the Sri Lankan government, the Colonial Office, and the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain. But these sources are not likely, by themselves, to throw much direct light on Rhys Davids's private life and innermost thoughts. Unfortunately Rhys Davids's daughter, Miss Vivian Rhys Davids, appears to have refused to allow Wickremeratne to read such of her father's papers as were in her possession. Her aim, Wickremeratne suggests, was to discourage him from investigating the premature end of her father's career as a civil servant in Sri Lanka.

Despite this considerable obstacle, Wickremeratne casts much valuable light on Rhys Davids. Somewhat more than half this book is devoted to a detailed examination of Rhys Davids's period of ten years in Sri Lanka. Wickremeratne surveys his activities as a well-informed administrator, his archaeological researches, his close acquaintance with Buddhist monks, his study of Pali with the learned and captivatingly unaffected Yatramulle Unnanse, and his earliest ventures in scholarly publication.

Wickremeratne then turns to the circumstances in which Rhys Davids left Sri Lanka. Various exculpatory hints as to these

have been put about by friends and admirers in order to protect his reputation from those who might have been expected to assail it, the same pious motive which seems to have prompted Miss Rhys Davids's attitude to Wickremeratne's researches. But, as so often in cases such as this, the facts assumed to be safely embalmed in suppressed private papers were easily established from official records, and appear, at any rate in a latter-day perspective, to be far less discreditable than might have been feared. As Wickremeratne soon discovered, Rhys Davids was in fact dismissed the Civil Service.

The charges were (a) that he improperly imposed fines on his subordinates for minor lapses, and on the owners of cattle caught trespassing; and (b) that he misappropriated some of the monies. Rhys Davids could and did cite statutory and common law as well as administrative precedents in support of his actions. He may have exceeded his powers in some instances, with harsh consequences for the Sinhalese villagers involved. Nevertheless he emerges from Wickremeratne's pages not as a tyrant or a peculator but rather as the victim of a fateful train of circumstances. He had fallen foul of his immediate superior, Twynam, who seems to have been a pettifogging martinet, by a somewhat cavalier attitude towards administrative detail. By his tactlessness on one or two occasions he also lost the opportunity of winning the golden opinion of no less a person than Gregory, the governor, who shared his enthusiasm for Sinhalese archaeology. On receiving Twynam's report on the matter of the fines Gregory hurried forward the official inquiries. Besides some earlier displeasure with Rhys Davids, he was anxious to leave no room for suspicions in Sri Lanka that a white official's irregularities were being covered up.

When Gregory recommended Rhys Davids's dismissal the officials at the Colonial Office gave conflicting advice to Lord Kimberley, the Secretary of State for the Colonies. He in turn finally decided, with considerable misgivings, to follow that of his Parliamentary Under-Secretary, Knatchbull Huggysen. The latter's arguments were that Gregory, as the man on the spot, should be supported in his decision, and that it was of overriding importance to safeguard the reputation for fairness and probity of British officials in Sri Lanka. Wickremeratne's examination of this episode, an historian's rather than a judge's or counsel's is probably the best part of his book.

Wickremeratne next deals with the years during which, having returned to England, Rhys Davids established himself as an

Orientalist. This part of the book covers the publication not only of his general surveys of Buddhism but also of his scholarly articles, the establishment of the Pali Text Society, his period as the Secretary of the Royal Asiatic Society, and his role in the early moves to establish an institution for Oriental Studies in London.

Rhys Davids's ideas on Buddhism take up the final part of the book. They were shaped by his personal background and experience. His father, with whom he was intimate, was a Welsh Non-conformist Minister with a scholarly interest in English ecclesiastical history. This background could have helped, Wickremeratne suggests, to form Rhys Davids's preference for Buddhism as against Hinduism. Some passages in Davids's writings might also suggest that it shaped his sympathy for Theravada as against Mahayana and for Early Buddhism as against the Buddhism practised in the Asian societies of his day.

Wickremeratne points out that in order to prepare for entry to the Indian Civil Service, Rhys Davids went to Germany, where a university education was cheaper than in Britain, and where it was also possible to earn something as a private tutor. He joined the University of Breslau where his Sanskrit studies under Stanzle laid the foundations of his career as an Orientalist. Unfortunately there were no sources available to Wickremeratne for a closer look either at Rhys Davids's boyhood or at his German years, during which latter he must have encountered some of the influences which formed him: not only the methods of Biblical criticism but also the theological rationalism and anti-metaphysical ideas then gaining ground in Germany.

A similar difficulty has also limited Wickremeratne with regard to Rhys Davids's reactions to Sri Lankan Buddhism. For even the diaries, quotations from which occupy a whole chapter of this book, are not private documents in which Rhys Davids might have set down his personal reactions. They were official records of his day-to-day activities which he was required to submit to his superiors. There is also little reference in this book to the influence upon Rhys Davids's approach to Buddhism of the scientific and anthropological thought of his time. He refers approvingly in his writings to ideas of Huxley and Comte. He also writes, with marked effusiveness, of Tylor's *Primitive Cultures*, which emphasised the underlying affinities of all cultures and religions whether classical or primitive.

In some shrewd glimpses Wickremeratne shows that Rhys Davids's response to Buddhism was deeply personal as well as

that of a scholar glad of the chance to break new ground. "Was Rhys Davids a Buddhist?!" asks Wickremeratne. Rhys Davids himself, as Wickremeratne records, sidestepped the question. Wherein he was shrewd. For nowhere in the ancient texts are good equivalents of the terms 'Buddhist' or 'Buddhism' to be found any more than of 'Hindu' and 'Hinduism', these being the coinage of modern missionaries, who misread South Asian religious traditions in the light of Christian ideas.

In the concluding part of his work Wickremeratne shows how Rhys Davids's admiration for Buddhism and his interpretation of Buddhist ideas accorded well with the apologetical needs of English-educated Buddhist in Sri Lanka. Three generations of Protestant missionaries had criticised Buddhism. On the other hand there were Colonel Olcott and the Theosophists. The Sinhala Buddhists welcomed them as allies in Buddhist work, but were greatly concerned over their 'esoteric' approach to Buddhism. For this consisted in ignoring the texts and giving entirely new meanings to Buddhist terms so as to reconcile them with the bizarre mish-mash of Theosophy. Then there was the ineffable Annie Besant, with her espousal of revivalist Hindu orthodoxy and her claims, which had something to do with the factional disputes among the Theosophists, that Buddhism was a not very distinctive part of Hinduism.

With the ideas and attitudes of these various critics and perverters of Buddhism, as they might have appeared in Sri Lankan eyes, Rhys Davids's own approach was markedly at variance. In his general works his emphases were quite other than those which the missionaries had made in order to ridicule Buddhism. He rejected Theosophy, plainly regarded Buddhism as the most significant tradition in South Asian religion, and wished to keep it in the forefront of European scholarly attention.

As a Sri Lankan, and an historian familiar with the records and archives, Wickremeratne has been well-placed to explore this and the other themes in Rhys Davids's life upon which he has concentrated. He seems to have worked under difficulties, but he has made a substantial contribution to the study of Rhys Davids.

A.P. Kannangara