An Interview with Tissa Kariyawasam on Aspects of Culture in Sri Lanka

Le Roy Robinson

Tissa Kariyawasam is Chairman of the Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation National Television Center.

He is also Professor of Sinhala at Sri Jayawardenapura University, Nugegoda.

He was formerly Director of the Institute of Aesthetic Studies at the University of Kelaniya.

He was born on August 23, 1942, in a village called Ganegama in Baddegama in the District of Galle in the Southern Province.

He went to primary school in Pilagoda and received his secondary education at Ratnasara Vidyalaya, Baddegama.

In 1964 Kariyawasam graduated from the University of Peradeniya with honors in Sinhala and with Ceylon History and Archaeology as complementary subjects.

From 1964 to 1967 he taught Classical Sinhala Prose Literature and Modern Poetry at the University of Colombo.

In 1968 he received a Master's degree from the University of Peradeniya. His thesis was "Demonological Rituals and Scoiety." In 1973 he was awarded a Ph. D. from the University of London, England. His dissertation was "Religious Activities and the Development of a New Poetical Tradition in Sinhalese from 1852 to 1906".
ROBINSON: We've gone into education in Sri Lanka, into theatre and dance and literature. Now, if you will, let's take up publishing, at least in general. Do you know any publishers here?

KARIYAWASAM: As a matter of fact, I know Sirisumana Godage fairly well. He's rather highly respected by writers here. He's rather successful, I suppose, but he wasn't always. He had a hard time at first. His life story is a kind of Sinhala Horatio Alger.

ROBINSON: Well, then. Let's forget publishing in Sri Lanka in general, and you can tell us the life story of Sirisumana Godage. First, what is his background? His education? How did he get into publishing?

KARIYAWASAM: Godage is from Palatuwa. That's a village close to the city of Matara in the Southern Province about 100 miles from Colombo. He comes from a farming family and his father was a tenant farmer. He completed his secondary education in his village school. In Sinhala only. He was the sixth in a family of eleven brothers and sisters.

ROBINSON: That fact alone tells us a lot, doesn't it?

KARIYAWASAM: It was an important motivating factor in his life. Early on he realized the economic difficulties confronted by his parents, especially his father, the only breadwinner in the whole family. To
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feed eleven children! He also realized the futility of his pursuing higher studies — there just wasn’t enough money. He was studying at Gunaratana Maha Vidyalaya in Palatuwa, Matara. The school commemorated Ven Atampala Gunaratana.

ROBINSON: What did Godage do after he finished secondary school? I guess he was lucky to be able to do that.

KARIYAWASAM: As I understand it, he and a few of his village friends in similar circumstances discussed the ways they could go, the avenues they could take, into the future. Someone among them suggested that they all leave Palatuwa and go to the capital, Colombo, where they thought the pastures were greener. They thought there were jobs galore there.

ROBINSON: What did his parents say about that?

KARIYAWASAM: The whole group left for Colombo without the permission of their parents. Godage was only 15 years old then. In 1951. He was born in 1936, in May.

ROBINSON: What did he do in Colombo?

KARIYAWASAM: Actually, it was Kalutara, a city near Colombo. About 25 miles away. Kalutara had a college for Sinhala teacher trainees. Near the college there was a boutique, a small restaurant, meant for the teacher trainees. You know, the staple food of Sri Lanka, rice and curry. Godage got his first job in this boutique, as a helper. The work was hard for him. Too hard. He couldn’t keep up with it. Besides he was homesick for his hometown, for his parents, for his brothers and sisters. After only a month at the boutique he went back to Palatuwa.

ROBINSON: But I suppose his parents still had pressing money problems?

KARIYAWASAM: Yes, of course. Living at home was not easy for him. He considered himself a burden on his parents. He asked himself why should he be a burden on them. Yes, he left home on the sly
again.

ROBINSON: Back to the rice and curry boutique?

KARIYAWASAM: No. He went to Colombo. This time he started to work as an assistant in an aquarium. The aquarium was named Lumbini, by the way — after the birthplace of Siddhartha, the future Buddha. It had various subsidiaries. One was a dairy. Another was for birds. Godage was given work in the bird section. By the way, these birds were meant for pleasure; in Sri Lanka people do not eat birds.

ROBINSON: How did he feel about that?

KARIYAWASAM: Well, he told me that from early childhood he'd been fascinated by nature. And as a Buddhist, he felt very sympathetic toward birds. Anyway, he was quite satisfied with the work. He was trusted by the owner too.

ROBINSON: What was his next step? When did publishing come into his life?

KARIYAWASAM: Yes. One day he went to see his paternal uncle at Piliyandala. That's about twelve miles from Colombo. The uncle was a businessman in the coconut industry. The uncle had a friend in the adjoining village, Bokundara. Godage's uncle's friend had a printing company named after himself, Wijesekara Press.

ROBINSON: So Godage got a job at the Wijesekara Press.

KARIYAWASAM: Not quite. Wijesekara used to do business with N. J. Cooray Company at Maradana. Printing types are cast there. Wijesekara introduced Godage to this company. Godage was hired. And he learned how to cast the types needed for printing. Then Godage's uncle, who was aware of his nephew's talent, took him to the owner of another press who was also a book publisher, D. F. Dodangoda and Company. Godage was trained in bookbinding there. Bookbin-
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ding was a lucrative business. In those days, you should know, books were considered treasures by teachers and Buddhist priests. And they were practically the only people who could buy books then. They would buy a book for 1.50 rupees, say, or 2 rupees, and for another 2 rupees they'd get it bound by a book binder. At the time hard cover editions were unknown. Godage would bind a book with Rexene, a kind of artificial leather, and then print the name of the owner and the title of the book on the side of the book in a gold color. The owner would then place the book in an almirah, a showcase where everybody could easily see the gold engravings.

ROBINSON: You said bookbinding was a lucrative business in those days. Were the book binders and printers well paid?

KARIYAWASAM: That's a good question. The binders and printers themselves were poorly paid. At Dodangoda there were discussions among them to launch a strike. They were sacked. And so was Godage. There was no law to protect workers at that time. As you may know, workers' protests and strikes were introduced into Sri Lanka during the British period by the compositors attached to various printing presses here.

ROBINSON: Godage was more skilled, but he was out of work. What did he do?

KARIYAWASAM: As he put it, he was on the road again. What did he do? He got a small room in Gorakana. He converted it into a workshop. He started binding books. As you know from your discussions with P. N. Cumaranatunga, Gorakana became famous in the first half of this century because it was the village where the famous scholar Munidasa Cumaratunga lived.

ROBINSON: May I presume that Godage now became successful in the bookbinding business?
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KARIYAWASAM: Again, not quite. Gorakana was not exactly meant for readers or books. It's a place famous for furniture. What Godage actually did was to start a new venture making autograph books and photo albums. He was able to sell some of these things. Successful? He lived from hand to mouth. But he tried to save money whenever he could. Otherwise, there was no future for him. Anyway, with great difficulty he did manage to save a few hundred rupees. Then he heard that a company in Colombo, on Wolvendhal Street, wanted someone to assist in their business of making cash books and ledger books meant for businessmen. Godage started working there. He learned how to make these account books and he learned other branches of printing. At the same time he attended the Student Press on Drieberg Avenue run by A. F. Fernando. Now it's known as Jayanta Weerasedera Mawata. After a colleague of Munidasa Cumaratunga, A. F. Fernando was the teacher at Nalanda Vidyalaya in Colombo in charge of technical education, and at the Student Press young boys could learn the printing trade.

ROBINSON: You're right. This is a Sinhala Horatio Alger story. What happens next in the story?

KARIYAWASAM: In the late 1950s — 1957 — Godage entered into a partnership with a colleague of his. They started a small shop for bookbinding. You see, the partner had a place and some money. Godage had the tools. And he went from priest to priest, Buddhist priests, at Maligakanda, and he collected their books for binding. The business showed signs of prosperity. He was paid a daily salary. Usually, about three repees a day. It wasn't much, but he wasn't disheartened. Godage said he thought they would go a long way.

ROBINSON: Were there that many priests at Maligakanda?

KARIYAWASAM: This is another aspect of culture in Sri Lanka that will
interest you. One of the famous. Oriental seats of Buddhist learning was situated at Maligakanda. Namely, Vidyodaya Pirivena. Buddhist bhikkus who came from distant villages to study Sinhala and Pali and Sanskrit resided at Maligakanda Pirivena. It was established by the High Priest Sri Sumangala of Hikkaduwa in 1873. I think Dr. A. V. Suraweera mentioned this to you. Rich Buddhists of this country built rooms for the bhikkus in the names of their dead relatives. So as to accrue merit for their existence. So at the Maligakanda Pirivena there were nearly 100 rooms. Godage went from room to room, as I said, collecting books from the priests for binding. He tactfully persuaded them to get their books bound. Anyway, the road to Maligakanda became famous for two things. One was the book trade. Godage’s bindery was on that same road. The other one was the market for the eight requisites of Buddhist priests. You can still see these shops along this road. The eight requisites of a bhikku are a razor, an alms bowl, a belt, a strainer, three robes and a needle.

ROBINSON: Was this as successful a business as Godage had thought it would he?

KARIYAWASAM: Yes, it was a very successful venture. But let me tell you this. The bhikkus loved books. They always used the term vahan-sa — reverend, or venerable — on their books. It’s an honorific title used only for monks. After the title of the book they used Pot Vahanse. Pot is book. Pirit Pot Vahanse. Pirit is the title of the book. As I said, the name of the monk and the title of the book were embossed in gold color, and the books were bound with a Rexene cover.

ROBINSON: You suggested that Godage was a strong Buddhist. Did this contact with the monks of Maligakanda have any influence on him?

KARIYAWASAM: As a matter of fact, it did. It changed his life. He met the Venerable Balangoda Ananda Maitreya, Maha Nayaka Thero of
the Amarapura Sect. He's now 95 years old. But he still functions as a religious and social leader. This priest read Godage's horoscope and he asked him to study astrology, which Godage did. With the priest. He also studied Sanskrit under him. Moreover, the priest had a printing shop at Balangoda, in the Sabaragamuva Province, and he gave Godage a few old machines that could be helpful in his business and he wished him success. The priest predicted that he'd be successful. And soon after that Godage started his own binding firm at Dematagoda, about a mile from Maligakanda. Unfortunately, Godage had to give up his Sanskrit studies since he had to make a living.

ROBINSON: Can you give us some idea of the basic economics of starting that kind of business at that time?

KARIYAWASAM: Oh, the rent for the shop was about 50 rupees a month. The owner would probably want about three months' rent in advance. Godage had to pay about 150 rupees to move in. But let me explain another aspect. When he'd last consulted the priest his horoscope showed his auspicious time to start a new business was three months later. Godage had faith in astrology. So he anticipated nakata — the auspicious time — and, although he did pay the required rent, he did not actually start the new shop at the new premises. For three months he lived hand to mouth again. Then at the nakata he opened the shop. He got more work. He was able to save money. He could buy the tools and machines and other equipment he needed for a full-fledged business. As for prices, the price of a book was about 1.50 rupees or 2.50 rupees. That was the normal price. For the binding Godage charged about 2 rupees.

ROBINSON: Changing the subject, Dr. Suraweera told me that in the 1950s Vidyodaya Pirivena at Maligakanda became the University of Sri Jayawardenapura at Nugegoda. Would you mind detailing that a
KARIYAWASAM: In 1959. Up to that time, there was only one university as such in Sri Lanka. That was the then University of Ceylon at Peradeniya. It was Western oriented. When the Bandaranaike government came into power, the two famous seats of Oriental learning, Vidyodaya Pirivena and Vidyalankara Pirivena at Peliyagoda, were elevated to the status of universities. When we say Oriental learning, we mean the studies in all the Oriental languages such as Pali, Sanskrit, Prakrit, Hindi, Sinhalese, Buddha studies, Eastern philosophy, astrology, and various other disciplines. It was a landmark in the development of higher education in the Sinhala medium.

The Sinhala language and Sinhalese culture and the Buddhist religion were the accepted values of the ordinary people of this country. They rejoiced in the birth of these new universities, expecting these two institutions would uplift the culture, religion and language of the majority of people here.

The two new universities conducted their entrance examinations from 1959 on. Buddhist priests who had their formal training in the Oriental subjects in their own villages were able to register as degree students. Therefore, the young village boys who could not enter the University at Peradeniya got the chance to sit for this exam and to pursue higher studies.

And, actually, this is not changing the subject. Whether they were priests or laymen there was one thing all these students needed — books. There was a big demand for Oriental books.

ROBINSON: And Godage helped to satisfy this demand.

KARIYAWASAM: Correct. As I said, the University at Peradeniya was being criticized for its Western-oriented culture. And its attitude toward our traditional culture was also a bone of contention among
the traditional-oriented elite. Thus Maligakanda and Paliyagoda were the places where people who were interested in books were living. Godage thought it was a fine chance for him to supply books to the undergraduates, so he started his book selling department. As for the economics of it, it was primarily done in the discount system, or as popularly known on a commission basis. Let’s say a book was priced at 3 rupees. Godage would sell it for 2 rupees 40 cents, 20% off. He’d make about 10% profit. He’d also give a discount of about 10% to small libraries.

ROBINSON: Did he also sell books to the bigger libraries at universities?

KARIYAWASAM: Well, he did get some university work. The Reverend Veragoda Amaramoli Nayaka Thera became the Librarian at Vidyodaya University, and he was one of the high priests who had been very pleased with Godage’s book binding. He gave Godage an order to bind all the books in the university library. You see, this university was started with the Reverend Velivitiye Sorata Nayaka Thera as its first Vice Chancellor — formerly he’d been the Principal of Vidyodaya Pirivena — and those student priests who had learnt at his feet and some lay devotees of his offered lots of books to the newly established university. For Godage, binding all these books was a very heavy task at the beginning, but it was a prosperous business. He earned between 700 to 800 rupees a month. Actually, he had to work from five in the morning until late at night. Seven hundred rupees a month is a big amount when you compare it to the salary of a civil servant which was about 225 rupees.

And he needed help. He’d always thought that he should help his relatives in his native village whenever he could. So he took in a boy from the village who was keen on joining his business. And then he brought in another one. He taught both of them the bookbinding
ROBINSON: He was doing quite well then.

KARIYAWASAM: Yes, but, as he’ll tell you, his life was full of unexpected happenings. His business was running smoothly, but the owner of the building he was in reclaimed it. So Godage had to move. Luckily he got a bigger room not far away. He added three more assistants to his staff. Then he had to move again for the same reason. Incidentally, his monthly rent kept going up a little. On the other hand, he got a chance to supply books to the other new university, that is Vidyalankara University. That was during T. G. Piyadasa’s time as Librarian there.


KARIYAWASAM: Mr. Piyadasa was the Principal of Gurukula Vidyalaya at Kelaniya before he joined the university as Librarian. He was the librarian for nearly 25 years. An earlier book of his was An Introduction to Library Science. That was in Sinhala. Piyadasa advised Godage about his career. So did Jayasiri Lankage of the Library Association. He’s now the Librarian of the University of Kelaniya. Yes, Piyadasa and Lankage helped Godage to find ways to develop his activities. In a very competitive field. Both scholars were generous in guiding him. Lankage was also a scholar in the field of library science. At the time he was educating the librarians of this country through the Library Association. He became the head of the newly established Department of Library Science and Information Services.

To get back to Godage, he was now selling books and binding books and supplying books to various libraries. He was doing very well. But again in the midst of success he was confronted with the same problem. The owner wanted the premises back. This was in
1970. To make a long story short, he found the place in Maradana, where he now is. Of course, at the time Maradana was not a good place to do business.

ROBINSON: Why was that?

KARIYAWASAM: General conditions are better now in Maradana — a slum area — due to the developmental activities during the last ten years or so. The place was full of gangs then. There were many street fights. The area was notorious.

ROBINSON: Why did he go into business there then?

KARIYAWASAM: Godage is very sober in his habits — he meditates every day — and he thought that since he wasn’t going to hurt anybody, nobody would come after him. Anyway, Maradana was not so far from Maligakanda, where he had spent most of his life. And situated nearby were schools like Ananda Maha Vidyalaya, Nalanda Maha Vidyalaya, Gothami Balika Vidyalaya, and Museaus College. Apart from these schools, there was Sri Lanka Vidyalaya under Baddegama Vimalavamsa Nayaka Thera, which was a great seat of learning for priests and laymen. Aquinas College and Carey College were also in the vicinity.

The demand for books was high. And now Godage started to publish books. On a very small scale. He told me it was a pathetic story. To get a book from a writer and giving him his copyright and printing the book and selling it — the whole procedure was difficult. Business-wise, too. Godage started with a children’s book. He printed 500 copies. He distributed these among book shops. They charged him 25%. Some big wholesale book dealers didn’t like his entering the field. Some wholesalers asked him for five or ten copies on assignment — for which he paid their commission in advance. Then when he went to collect from them, some of them didn’t want
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to pay him. Some said they'd spent the money. Come back tomorrow, you know. Likewise he wasn't able to collect his money from some of the booksellers. He want to some of them three times to get his money, and after that he gave it up. Some booksellers charged him 30% for selling the book. He was actually losing money as a book publisher. It gave him a bitter taste in his mouth, he says. He felt hurt. Emotionally.

Luckily he received encouragement again. Two other people encouraged him. One is Mahinda Rejapaksa. He's now a Member of Parliament, from Hambantota District. He's an attorney-at-law. At that time, he was at the University of Vidyodaya. The second was Dr. Bandusena Gunasekera, a senior lecturer at the University of Kelaniya. They encouraged him to keep trying to publish books. They introduced him to various authors. They helped him get manuscripts from them.

Also the owner of the Maradana premises gave Godage permission to reconstruct the building, and then he expressed his willingness to sell it to him. Godage thought what a chance. At last he was going to be able to own his own place. He bought the land. He erected his present two-story building there. After that he had his own place. He wasn't worried about paying his monthly rent. At last he could stop moving from place to place with all his books, equipment, machines, furniture. What a relief.

ROBINSON: How did Godage achieve the recognition he seems to have as a publisher?

KARIYAWASAM: As you know, a publisher needs to get recognition among writers and booksellers and readers — and the common people too. This acceptance came to Godage when he published the poetry of P. B. Alwis Perera, one of the famous poets of the Colombo
period of Sinhala poetry that Wimal Dissanayaka has told you about — in other words, the modern poetry of this century. Perera was considered a progressive writer and was accepted as the leader of the poets of the Capital. He was the Chairman of the Young Poets’ Association. He had about ten works of poetry to his credit. Some of his poems dealt with the poverty and social injustice in this country. Apart from this, he was influenced by the poetry of Tagore and most of his poems deal with natural beauty. He wrote in Sinhala only.

As for Godage’s business, by 1982 book publishing had become the most important part of his complex. You see, book binding and keeping the bound volumes in a well protected almirah became things of the past. The new library editions were introduced. Let’s say a publisher prints 2000 copies of a book. He gets about 200 copies bound separately as a “library edition” or else a hard cover edition. Another point : by that time binding a book was expensive. What Godage did for 1 rupee 50 cents in the 1960s had risen to about 115 rupees in the 1980s. Readers could not afford it. Anyway, he increased the number of books he published every year from 10 to 25.

ROBINSON: Did Godage publish the work of any other well known Sinhala writer?

KARIYAWASAM: Yes, of course. For example, he began to publish books written by Gunatilleke Bandara Senanayaka. He was one of the finest writers we had. He started his career as a journalist. He introduced “free verse” to Sinhalese literature. In 1945. He was a master of the short story. Later he became blind and had to dictate his work to someone, one of his relatives.

Then for the first time in the history of book publishing in Sri Lanka Godage paid 20% as the copyright fee even before the 5000 copies went to the book stalls. You see, usually the writer received
his copyright money after the books were sold. But in G. B. Senanayaka’s case, Godage changed the system. It was an innovation. For the good.

Let me tell you another thing about Godage. At that time, G. B. Senanayaka was very feeble. He had no other source of regular income. Godage did the same thing for all Senanayaka’s books. He printed them and gave him the money immediately. After he died, Godage paid 10% to Senanayaka’s relatives. That was a great thing for the family of the writer. He was a bachelor and was living with the wife of his brother and her children.

ROBINSON: Has Godage ever won any publishing prizes?

KARIYAWASAM: Yes. For three consecutive years he was awarded the National Literary Academy’s prize for the publisher who publishes the highest number of books. No other publisher could compete with him. One year he began with 25 books, then reached 40, and than 50, and finally 62. Publishing 62 books by one publisher is a great event in the history of publishing in Sri Lanka. It’s not only a credit to him but also to the publishing industry here as a whole. Godage has printed biographies, novels, short stories, poems, school readers, text books, scientific writings, physiological works, and an introductory course in English.

ROBINSON: Incidentally, about how many titles has he published altogether?

KARIYAWASAM: Up to now about 900.

ROBINSON: What about profits?

KARIYAWASAM: As I think I’ve already suggested, in a way book publishing is not so profitable in this island. Now it’s more profitable to sell books published by someone else. Wholesale book sellers charge a writer an unjustifiable commission. That is, about 45%. 
There are some book sellers who charge 50%. As for Godage, he has
two mobile vans that go from village to village, city to city, selling
books to the book stalls. He gives the seller a 20 to 25% discount. He
holds exhibitions of books at various state functions, and in this way
brings books to the common readers. By common readers I mean the
people who are employed and buy books. Not students.

Again let me point out that Godage sometimes publishes books
not to make money but to show his gratitude to writers for their devot­
ion to Sinhalese literature. Writers who have spent their whole life
in the name of literature. So he has published felicitation volumes to
commendate the services rendered by writers like G. B. Senanayaka, Ediriweera Sarachchandra, Ganegama Saranankara, and your
friend A. V. Suraweera. Your essay on *Atta Bindeyi Paya Burulen* is
in that one, you know.

ROBINSON: What kind of tax situation did a publisher like Godage have
to contend with?

KARIYAWASAM: Taxes? Yes, Godage had obstacles in that area too.
Once the Inland Revenue Department supposed that he was a big
businessman. They asked him to pay a large amount of income tax.
They had the idea that the publishers — and writers. — of this
country are earning big money. Godage was not in a position to argue
with the Revenue Department. But let me point out one other thing.
Many writers whose works he had published and many whose works
he had not published got together and signed a statement that they
presented to the Minister of Finance — then Ronnie de Mel —
who is responsible for the activities of the Inland Revenue Depart­
ment, and they invited him to redress Godage's grievances. The in­
come tax department was incorrect in its assessment. This action
was also a unique event in the publishing history of this country.
ROBINSON: Did the idea for that petition originate with Godage?
KARIYAWASAM: He says frankly he did not help to organize it at all. It was the good name he has earned among the writers of Sri Lanka. About 80 Writers signed this petition, including Dr. Ediriweera Sarachchandra.

ROBINSON: Speaking of organizing, what kind of organizations are there in the publishing industry of Sri Lanka?
KARIYAWASAM: There are various organizations here, of course. Godage himself, for example, is a committee member of the Book Publishers Organization He’s also the chairman of the Book Traders Association. He’s director of the Printers Association. And he’s a member of the board of directors of the Copyrights Association.

ROBINSON: He must be very busy. Well, moving toward the finish for now, would you mind saying something about Godage’s family? His old village friends?
KARIYAWASAM: His boyhood friends are still paid laborers, but one is a postal peon, a clerk. Unfortunately, his first wife died of cancer. A few years back he married for the second time.

ROBINSON: Anne Ranasinghe says marriages here are carefully “organized” according to horoscopes.
KARIYAWASAM: Of course, before marrying Godage consulted their horoscopes. They were very good ones. His first wife was from Ukvatta in Galle. His present wife is from Majuvana in Baddegama. A child of his from his first marriage — “from the first bed,” he’d say — is studying at St. Anthony’s in Baddegama. Incidentally, his wife is a great asset in his life. She assists him in business. She helps him to run the business complex smoothly.

ROBINSON: You’re from Baddegama too, right? All in all, Godage seems like a nice guy.
KARIYAWASAM: You see, in childhood he was brought up in a liberal atmosphere. He read the novels of Piyadasa Sirisena. He modelled his own character according to the values of Sirisena. He doesn't hurt anyone. He has no jealousy toward others. He knows if he does the correct thing he will gain by doing so.

ROBINSON: One last question — then we'll go into the ola manuscripts and Hugh Neville. What's Godage's opinion of current writers in Sri Lanka?

KARIYAWASAM: He says one thing he has noticed is the craze for money of the young generation of current writers. They want to know how much money he'll pay them even before he sees a manuscript. Sometimes their first manuscript at that. "God only knows who will publish them." he's said to me. He thinks this mercenary attitude needs to be changed. The publishers can't do that, though. Dedication and sometimes even suffering are the essential qualities to becoming a writer. Money cannot create a writer.

ROBINSON: Before we go on, what are some of Piyadasa Sirisena's novels? What were his main themes?

KARIYAWASAM: *Yantam Galavuna,* The Narrow Escape. *Jayatissa Saha Roslin,* or Happy Marriage. *Adbhuta Agantukaya,* The Strange Visitor. In general, Sirisena's main purpose in writing fiction — and poetry — was to convert Sinhalese Christians back to Buddhism and to resuscitate the dying culture of the Sinhalese people. You see, in accepting the foreign faith and culture many people of the English-speaking middle and upper classes gave up the traditional ways of life here. Some critics argue that Sirisena was more a religious pamphleteer than a genuine novelist. You can say that the resentment of the Sinhala-speaking middle class at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th against the extremely
anglicized mode of living of the urban upper classes reached its climax in Piyadasa Sirisena's works.

ROBINSON: Well, you may as well say something more about G. B. Senanayaka, too. What were his main themes?

KARIYAWASAM: As I said before, he introduced blank verse, or Nisan-das, into Sinhala poetry. Some writers criticized him negatively for introducing antitraditional poetry into Sinhala. For English readers, Senanayaka's short stories are more accessible. "Treasure" and "The Quarrel", for example. "Treasure" is about a murder committed, under the influence of a superstititious belief, in the search for a hidden treasure. "The Quarrel" describes a family problem — the father's dealings with another woman are viewed with suspicion by the mother. Their child is unable to understand the implications of the problem. In another story, "The Vesak Lantern", Senanayaka tells how the Vesak or Full Moon Day can influence a child's perception of the world. Senanayaka had a limited scope in his short stories; they almost always dealt with quarrels between mother and father and something unrecognizable to the child's mind.

ROBINSON: Can you give an example — in English — of one of Gunatilaka Bandara Senanayaka's free verse poems?

KARIYAWASAM: There's one called "The Silence" that you might like.

    She sat motionless,
    leaning back
    on hands pressed
    to the ground.
    As a strand
    of her loose hair,
    lifted in the wind
    blowing softly,
brushed my face,
I gazed at her
golden face
and thought
to ask her
that which I had
for a long time
yearned to ask her.

To finish up, I'd like to say a little more about P. B. Alwis Perera, the poet I mentioned before. He tried to describe the sorrowful state of our country's working classes. His book entitled *Vedanava*, The Suffering, describes the suffering of the prostitute, the boutique keeper, the farmer, the laborer. Perera not only described the miserable state of the working poor but criticized that they were paid so poorly by their employers. Unfortunately, his writings were not considered poetically good regardless of their political value. Aside from that, he was influenced by Tagore, as I said, but was not in a position to understand the philosophy of Tagore's nature poems, so his own writings along these lines were merely descriptions of Beauty and Nature without any depth, without any deep ideas.

ROBINSON: Now, I think we are ready for your questions about Hugh Neville. And the *ola* leaf, the palm leaf, manuscripts he collected that are now in the British Museum.