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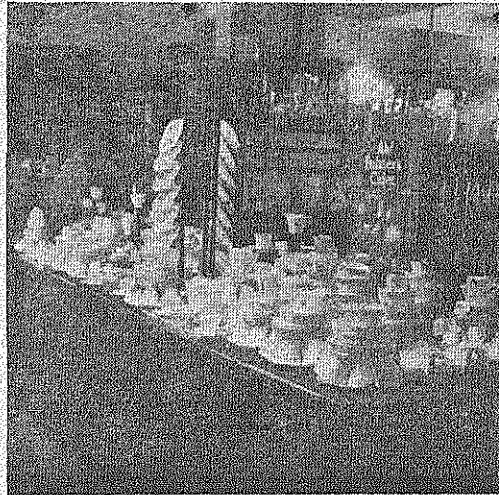
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Journal of the Dutch Burgher Union of Ceylon.



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Contributions are invited from members on subjects calculated to be of interest to the Union. MSS. must be written on one side of the paper only and must reach the Editor at least a fortnight before the date of publication of the Journal.

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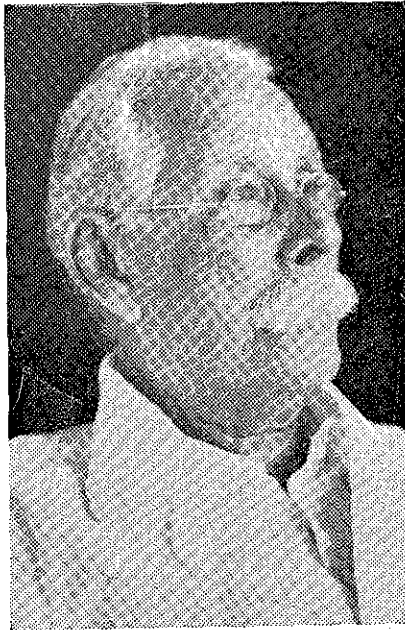
APRIL, 1937.

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WILLIAM KNIGHTON.

An interesting literary figure about a hundred years ago was that of William Knighton. Sprung from a good family, Knighton was a relative of Sir William Knighton, Keeper of the Privy Purse to George IV. He was born in Dublin and educated at Glasgow, and arrived in Ceylon in 1843 at the age of nineteen. He is popularly supposed to have come out to fill the post of Headmaster of the Colombo Central School, but it is curious that he makes no mention whatever of his tutorial appointment. In one of his books he refers to the four years he lived in Ceylon as "a coffee planter and the editor of a newspaper", and again he speaks of "the coffee estate which I left England to manage". However, there is no doubt that shortly after his arrival he held the post of Headmaster of the Colombo Central School, which he probably obtained through the influence of his uncle, who, according to him, was "the head of a mercantile house in Colombo". He describes him as "a kind though eccentric old bachelor, who had lived for fifteen years in the island".

During the year or so which he spent in Colombo, Knighton enjoyed himself to the full, despite the heat and mosquitoes, of which he complains. He indulged a good deal in riding and boating, and gained admittance to the higher social circles of Colombo. He was invited to Queen's House but found the Governor's dinners "stiff, formal and unenjoyable", and a ball which he attended was not "the acme of felicity" to him. Being of literary tastes, the Fort Library made a special appeal to him. "An admirable institution it is" he says, "well supplied with the current and standard literature of England, and containing many valuable classical and foreign works of travel".



MR. WILLIAM SPERLING CHRISTOFFELSZ,
I.S.O., J.P.

By courtesy of the "Times of Ceylon."

The coffee estate, of which he was part proprietor, now claimed his attention, and he decided to devote his whole time to it. He therefore resigned his appointment as Headmaster and proceeded to the Kandy District, where the estate was situated. He had at first some doubts as to the wisdom of this step, but these were soon dissipated. "My collegiate studies in England, it is true," he says, "did not appear to be the best possible preparation for such a new and untried mode of life, but I was mistaken. There was not so much difference between a wine party in college, and a planter's party in the jungle. The former a little rougher, more boisterous and more boyish, the latter a little more intellectual often, and to me more interesting from the variety of character it displayed. I was certainly as well prepared for a coffee planting life as three-fourths of those who had already embraced it, whilst by my devotion to active physical exercise and to study, I was far better suited for it than men who had abandoned an apathetic Anglo-Indian existence in the large towns of the East, to engage in it".

If one may judge from his book "Forest Life in Ceylon", Knighton seems to have enjoyed his life as a coffee planter, but the facts appear to have been otherwise, for Mr. Douglas Dewar, in his book "Bygone Days in India" states that two years of estate life was as much as Knighton could tolerate, and he "thankfully accepted an invitation to become the Editor of the *Ceylon Herald* on a small salary". This paper had been started in 1839 by Mr. Mackenzie Ross, among the contributors to it being Mr. (afterwards Sir) Richard Morgan and Mr. James d'Alwis. The paper dragged on a precarious existence for a few years, and in 1842 it became the property of Mr. James Laing, at one time Deputy Postmaster of Kandy. From him it passed to Dr. McKirby, or McCurdy, and it was on the death of the latter that Knighton became Editor.

Although well qualified by education for his new appointment, Knighton had no technical knowledge of the inner working of a newspaper office. "Totally ignorant" he says, "of the mysteries of printing, innocent of the difference between a composing stick and a galley, between Great Primer type and Diamond, I seated myself at a little table in the mysterious office, sole manager and director, editor, corrector of the press, accountant, cashier, treasurer, and letter-writer of the newspaper and of the printing-office". The staff consisted of Knighton, one clerk, a Goanese head-printer,

some compositors, and a couple of peons. "Fortunately" writes Knighton, "the paper was published but twice a week, so that I had ample time to write leaders and correct the proof sheets, to write letters to myself and answer them in the editorial columns, to note down answers to correspondents in my liveliest vein, and to go through all the other business".

The *Ceylon Herald* ceased publication in June 1846, and thus brought to an end Knighton's connection with Ceylon journalism. He then went to Calcutta to take up the post of lecturer in History and Logic in the Hindu College there. Newspaper writing however still continued to hold a strange fascination for him, and he wrote a good deal for the Bengal Press. After he had been some time in Calcutta a local firm announced that they were about to issue a daily paper printed on a steam press—the first that had ever reached India—and Knighton was asked to edit the paper. The salary offered was not attractive enough to make it worth his while to devote his whole time to the work. The publishers informed him that this was not necessary. All they wanted was that Knighton should undertake to write on local politics and they would arrange for the rest. Knighton accepted the appointment but not for long. Returning to England, he became associated with the literary clique which included Carlyle and Emerson. About the year 1858 he received a nomination to the Indian Civil Service, and proceeded to Fyzabad in 1859 as Assistant Commissioner at that station. After a service of ten years in India he returned to England, owing, it is said, to a disagreement with the Government.

Literary pursuits continued to engage much of Knighton's attention after his retirement from India. His friends included Lawrence Oliphant, A. P. Sinnett, Sir Richard Burton, and Charles Dickens. In 1887 he was elected Vice-President of the Royal Society of Literature, London, and two years later he was selected to unveil the statue erected to the memory of Shakespeare in Paris, where he was Vice-President of the International Literary and Artistic Society. He also received the degrees of M.A., Ph.D. and L.L.D. from Giessen University.

About the year 1850 Knighton married Miss L. Mackay, member of a well-known Scottish family, and there were two children of the marriage: one, a boy of great promise, who died at school, and the other a daughter, who married Dr. J. K. Condon,

of the Indian Medical Service. Knighton died at Tileworth, St. Leonards on Sea, Sussex, in 1900, when nearly eighty years of age.

Knighton made good use of his opportunities while in Ceylon. He travelled extensively, visiting Kandy and Nuwara Eliya, and even ascended Adam's Peak. Within two years of his arrival in the island he wrote a History of Ceylon, which he dedicated to the Rev. J. G. MacVicar, Minister of the Scotch Presbyterian Church in Ceylon, who was one of the first persons to whom he was introduced in Colombo. Knighton speaks of Dr. MacVicar as "a pious man, an exception to the general rule in India", and attributes the origin of his History to this gentleman, "without whose assistance it could not have been completed".

It was at this time that the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society was founded, and it was doubtless on Dr. MacVicar's suggestion that Knighton was appointed to be its first Secretary. He read a paper entitled "General Observations on the translated Ceylonese Literature", which was afterwards published in the first number of the Society's Journal. He also presented the Society with a copy of his work "Aristotelian Logic".

Knighton's next work "Forest Life in Ceylon" was written in London in 1853. As has been very aptly pointed out by Mr. J. P. Lewis, the book is concerned, not with forest life, but with Knighton's experiences as a coffee planter on an estate which had been newly cleared and planted. The book was subjected to a scathing criticism from the Press. The *Ceylon Times* said:—"Mr. Knighton's book, for maudlin sentimentality, equals anything ever poured forth from that once fruitful repository of Grub Street, the Minerva Press". The *Examiner* was equally caustic. "The book abounds in the stock anecdotes of the Colony, well worked up, and though they are but few and stale withal out here, they may be new at home and very attractive under Mr. Knighton's pen, which is of the flowery description".

"The Private Life of an Eastern King" met with no better reception. Reviewing the book when it appeared in 1855, a Ceylon newspaper spoke of it as "a farrago of trash". Knighton in his Preface explains that the incidents narrated in the book formed the subject of conversation at a friend's house in the autumn of 1854. "I made the acquaintance of the narrator—the 'Member of

the Household"—and thinking the facts strange, I proposed to him to write a book on the subject. He was by no means unwilling. Chapter after chapter was compiled from his notes and verbal communications, and read out to him as each was finished. The 'Member of the Household' however, would not put his name to it, so the work was at first issued anonymously".

The story centres round the King of Oudh and five European members of his household—his tutor, his librarian, a German painter and musician, the captain of his body-guard, and last but not least, his barber. Much speculation was rife as to the identity of the five members of the household, and in 1918 a letter appeared in the *Pioneer* newspaper on the subject. Some correspondence ensued, in the course of which one writer asserted that Knighton was the King's barber. This roused the ire of Lieut-Colonel James Knighton Condon, the eldest grandson of William Knighton, who indignantly repudiated the suggestion. Mr. W. H. Solomons, whose death occurred recently, now entered the lists, and suggested that it was possible, though not probable, that Knighton, finding no avenue open to him for obtaining first-hand knowledge of the private life of an Eastern King, should have practised the tonsorial art with this object in view. He added that "anybody who knew Knighton would agree that his ability to disguise his personality was about equal to that of late Sir Henry Irving". With this pronouncement the matter was allowed to rest.

Among Knighton's other works may be mentioned *Tropical Sketches*, (2 Vols), *Edgar Barton, An Autobiographical Novel*, (3 vols), *European Turkey as it is, Training in Streets and Schools and Struggles for Life*, the last named of which attracted considerable notice not only in London but also in Paris and Berlin. Knighton also contributed an article entitled "Village Life in Oudh" to *Fraser's Magazine*.

J. R. T.