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W. S. Senior and "The Call of Lanka"

by Derrick Schokman

There cannot be many who remember the Reverend W. S. Senior whose 65th death anniversary falls on February 23. Educationist and poet, he came here (then Ceylon) in 1905, and was so entranced with the country and the people that he stayed until 1928, in what he regarded to be the "best years of his life".

Senior spent the first 10 years at Trinity College, Kandy as Vice Principal when A. G. Fraser was Principal. He then moved to Colombo to take up the incumbency of Christ Church, Galle Face, and also to lecture on the classics to students at Royal College, and University College, forerunner of the present Colombo University.

His love for this country is plainly writ in his prose and verse selections, which were published by Trinity College (1960) in a book entitled "The Call of Lanka-Ceylon in prose and verse".

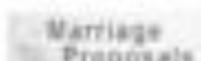
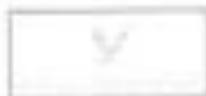
Indeed Senior's love for the country was so great that on retirement in England he expressed a wish that his ashes be brought to Ceylon and buried in the churchyard at Haputale.

On April 16, 1938, Easter Eve, Canon de Saram conducted the funeral service in the Haputale Church, attended by many old students and friends, and the casket was buried in the little churchyard.

The words on the Kandyan tombstone, erected by his Ceylon friends, bears this epitaph:

Walter Stanley Senior
Died February 23rd, 1938, aged 61,
Poet of Ceylon
Seeker of souls,
Servants of God,
"It can never be Goodbye"

Why did Senior chose Haputale? It was his favourite place where he enjoyed the finest scenic views in this country, with the mountain panorama of the Uva on the one side, and the flat low country a breathless mile beneath.



stretching 70 miles to be remotest south-eastern corner of the island.

He had a home there for his wife and young family, coming up to join them whenever he could from Colombo. It was for them the centre for walks, talks and simple pleasures.

It was on one of those walks that Senior was inspired to write "The Call of Lanka", the poem for which he is best known in this country. In his own words:

"From the little mountain village of Haputale we turned on to the Dambatenne road, which leads along all but five level miles of glorious island panorama five thousand feet below to Dambatenne factory, chief monument of Lipton".

From there they proceeded to Pitaratmale Estate where: "a few feet below lay a beautiful lake of lotus, overshadowed at points on the reflecting margin by tall Albizzia trees, with white and shapely limbs whereon huge black cones of swarming bees were pendent. Up the steps behind the lake a picturesque rocky stepway leads through tea, grevilleas, eucalyptus, to the craggy ridge where "The Call of Lanka" initially took shape.

The poem begins as follows:

"I climbed o'er the crags of Lanka
And gazed on her golden sea,
And out from her ancient places
Her soul came forth to me.
Give me a Bard, said Lanka,
My Bard of the things to be".

The Bard having sung of Lanka's ancient places and greatness the poem proceeds as follows:

"But most shall he sings of Lanka
In the brave new days that come,
When the races all are blended
And the voice of strife is dumb"

That poem was written at a time when the national movement for independence was hotting up in this country. But it still carries a message for us who are today in the throes of striving for peace and goodwill within our borders.

"Rise Child of Lanka and answer! Thy mother hath called to Thee"