

British Royal Encounters with Sri Lanka

Posted on



The Governor introducing Sinhalese chiefs to the Prince of Wales, 1876 (Illustrated London News)

The 23rd Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) takes place in Colombo between 10 and 17 November. Charles, Prince of Wales, will represent Queen Elizabeth II now that he shares her royal duties. It will be the third time the Prince has graced Sri Lanka's shores, the latest in a remarkable succession of British royal encounters with the Island.

Words Richard Boyle

Surprisingly, although the Kandyan Convention of 1815 ceded the entire Island of Ceylon to the British Empire, it wasn't until 1870 that the first member of the British Royal Family visited the colony. India was the precious gem of the Empire and overshadowed Ceylon, not considered by officials to be of sufficient interest to royalty.

So in 1870, when Queen Victoria was revered by many colonial subjects around the world, including the Ceylonese, the mood was one of "glorious expectation" when it was announced that Victoria's second son, Prince Alfred, the Duke of Edinburgh, would be the first member of the Royal Family to visit Ceylon.

An illustrated book was commissioned to document the Prince's five-week stay; the standard official record before the appearance of film. The author was a Briton resident in Ceylon, John Capper, the respected editor of the Times of Ceylon.

The Duke of Edinburgh in Ceylon—A Book of Elephant and Elk Sport (1871) contains lithographic illustrations by the Island's supreme artist, J L K van Dort. It's not just the first but the finest royal narrative concerning the Island.

The subtitle aptly describes Prince Alfred's main activities, although banqueting and socialising should be added. The Prince arrived on March 30. The next day a grand reception was hosted by Governor Sir Hercules Robinson at Queen's House: "The Royal presence brought together chiefs and headmen who had not left their jungle homes for half

a lifetime.” Two days later the Prince, the Governor, and a large entourage travelled to Labugama to witness an elephant kraal (in which elephants were trapped in a funnel-shaped enclosure). Some 10,000 people attended, and so the encampment was the size of a small town. The spacious building erected for the Prince and the Governor’s party consisted of a central reception hall topped by an octagonal smoking room, and two large wings.

The Prince returned to Colombo, attended a ball, travelled to Ebawalapitiya for another kraal, and then proceeded to Kandy where a reception and an exhibition of the Tooth Relic were arranged. The Prince subsequently left for Bogawantalawa for a spot of elk-hunting and on his return to Colombo attended an entertainment hosted by Charles Henry de Soysa. Some 3,000 guests were invited to the fawningly-named Alfred House, remembered only in street names today. A Hungarian wizard, nautch-girls, jugglers and trapeze artists performed. “The plate, goblets, and knife and fork provided for his Royal Highness were of massive gold, set with rubies, emeralds and pearls.”

Then off by sea to Trincomalee for elephant hunting in the wilds of Kiliveddi. But the main camp was destroyed by fire, which resulted in a shift to Kompanachchi where he killed two elephants before descending the Mahaweli Ganga in a canoe with “no compunction in knocking over red-deer, buffaloes, or anything that came in his way”.

The Prince of Wales, Albert Edward, Victoria’s eldest son (who succeeded her as Edward VII in 1902) visited Ceylon in 1875. The seven-day tour was documented by the prince’s private secretary, William Howard Russell, in *The Prince of Wales’ Tour: A Diary in India* (1877), with sketches by the royal artist Sydney Hall.

The prince’s stay was, like his brother’s, dominated by hunting and banqueting. Arriving in Colombo on December 1, the Prince proceeded to the Pavilion, at Kandy, the residence of Governor Sir William Gregory. He attended a state banquet followed by a modest perahera. Two days later he left Kandy by train for Nawalapitiya, then by horse to Ruwanwella where he indulged in some elephant hunting, killing just one. On his return to Colombo he attended a ball and set sail on December 8.

The Prince’s sons, the Duke of Clarence and Prince George, landed in Colombo in 1882 as midshipmen aboard HMS *Bacchante*; the only occasion two royal brothers visited Ceylon together. Solomon Dias Bandaranaike was invested by the Duke of Clarence with the rank of Maha Mudaliyar of Colombo.

The next royal visit, by the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall and York in 1901, was documented by the official royal photographer, Colombo’s W L Skeen, in *The Royal Visit to*

Ceylon, April 1901 (1901). It was a return trip for the Duke: he was the Prince George who visited in 1881.

In 1906 Queen Victoria's third son, Prince Arthur, Duke of Connaught and Strathearn, visited Ceylon and returned the following year with the Duchess and their daughter Princess Victoria to unveil a memorial in Kandy to members of the Ceylon Mounted Rifles (CMR) killed in the Boer War. (The CMR regularly provided mounted escorts for visiting members of the Royal Family.) Solomon Dias Bandaranaike in *Remembered Yesterdays* (1929) refers to a visit to Sigiriya by the ladies during which they were attacked by the rock's bees, a perennial hazard to those who ascend and descend noisily.

In March 1922, the then Prince of Wales, who ascended the throne as King Edward VIII in 1936 but abdicated the same year to marry the American divorcee Wallace Simpson, arrived in Ceylon during one of his 16 tours of parts of the Empire. His visit coincided with that of D H Lawrence, who wrote a notable poem about a perahera staged for the Prince, "Elephant", which foreshadows the crumbling of Empire:

Pale, dispirited Prince, with his chin on his hands, his nerves Tired out Watching and hardly seeing the trunk-curl approach and Clumsy, knee-lifted salaam Of the hugest, oldest of beasts . . .

Prince George, Queen Elizabeth's father, who became King George VI when he replaced Edward VIII, visited Kandy on May 16, 1925, on his way to China. A reluctant king, he was beset with a stammer, mostly overcome with the help of an unorthodox speech therapist as told in the film *The King's Speech* (2010).

The most significant royal visit was by Queen Elizabeth II in 1954...

The Duke of Gloucester made three visits, two of great value. The first was in 1929 when he landed in the Island on his way to Japan. The Duke's second visit in 1934 concerned cultural heritage: the return of the golden throne to the Ceylonese (it had been housed at Windsor Castle), now displayed at the National Museum in Colombo, together with the crown and regalia. The Duke's third visit in 1948—accompanied by the Duchess of Gloucester—was of historical importance: the opening of Ceylon's first Parliament after Independence was gained on February 4.

The most significant royal visit was by Queen Elizabeth II in 1954 —the first by a reigning monarch—accompanied by Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh. It took place during a lengthy Commonwealth excursion begun just five months after Her Majesty's coronation.

The couple arrived at Colombo aboard the liner Gothic on April 10 for a ten-day tour. There was a royal procession through Colombo, a civic reception hosted by the Prime Minister, Sir John Kotelawala, and Queen Elizabeth opened the first session of the second Parliament of Ceylon wearing her coronation gown.

The Queen travelled by royal train to Kandy where she experienced a perahera with 140 elephants. She then toured the ancient cities of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa, followed by a three-day visit over Easter in Nuwara Eliya. On Good Friday she attended the service at Holy Trinity church; likewise the Easter Sunday morning service. To commemorate her attendance, the Queen gifted the church a blue carpet and a stained glass window featuring the United Kingdom's Royal Coat of Arms. It was the age of the newsreel, and many of these scenes, some in stunning colour, can be viewed on the British Pathé website.

This was not Prince Philip's first visit to Ceylon. In 1939 he joined the Royal Navy and boarded the battleship HMS Ramillies in Colombo in 1940. Later that year he served on two cruisers and spent time ashore in Ceylon. Commanded to go to Trincomalee to assist a naval team surveying the harbour, he purchased a Standard 9 car to drive himself there and back. He returned to Trincomalee in 1945 but didn't become reacquainted with what, apparently, is his favourite car until 1954. Thankfully it remains in Sri Lanka, displayed at the Galle Face Hotel.

Between October 21 and 25, 1981, Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip revisited the Island primarily to witness the construction of the Victoria Dam, Sri Lanka's largest hydroelectric project that commenced operation in 1985. Once again they travelled to Nuwara Eliya and Prince Philip paid a visit to Pedro Tea Estate, where he witnessed the stages of tea production.

In 1995 Princess Anne visited Sri Lanka to witness the country projects of Save the Children, a charity she has been president of since 1970. Between February 3 and 6, 1998, the Princess' brother, Prince Charles, attended the 50th anniversary of Independence Day. He met with representatives of Prince of Wales' College, Moratuwa, which was established in 1876 after the visit of the then Prince of Wales. In 2005 Prince Charles returned in the wake of the tsunami to witness affected areas in the Batticaloa district.

Now, in November 2013, Prince Charles makes his third visit (only the Duke of Gloucester made as many) to represent Queen Elizabeth at CHOGM. Another and perhaps the most important British Royal visit to Sri Lanka.

