# Thomia

Posted on

Unveiling the Thomian Story Afresh




Thomia – a book that contains a formidable history of country and College.

Thomia is a book on the Island’s modern history told through the annals of a colonial-era private boys’ school. However, it’s more than a mere telling of history and more than a book about a school. It tells parallel stories through the eyes of those who lived in an era and were closely and remotely connected to its events. In doing so, it gives a human face to those who lived in it, providing character to names and context to events, and for the first time, creates a great theatre about lives and social situations.

**Words** Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane.

**Photography** Dinesh Fernando.

**The evolution**

The often-used Shakespearean quote that all the world's a stage where men and women are merely players, with their exits and entrances, each playing many parts in their lifetimes, could not be more accurate than for Thomia. Written by Richard Simon, Thomia tells the interwoven histories of modern Sri Lanka and Saint Thomas's College (STC), Mount Lavinia, a British-era private school established in 1851 by the first Anglican Bishop of Ceylon, James Chapman.

Thomia is a two-volume book that explores STC's influence on modern Sri Lankan history and its role in the nation's growth through some of its prominent Old Boys who have had a lasting impact on the country's social, cultural, and political fabric. From the Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford to the School of Pythagoras at Saint John's College Cambridge, to unnumbered days, if not years, spent at the STC Mount Lavinia library, to scouring the vast universe of cyberspace, referencing every single issue of the College Magazine from 1884 to memoirs of Old Boys', Richard's Thomia journey was extensive. From connecting with the descendant of an English warden to digging out the most intriguing personal stories to speaking with eminent Old Boys to stumbling upon invaluable correspondences at the Australian National Library, Thomia is the magnum opus on one of the country's most prestigious private boys schools.

Richard, an Old Boy of STC who has written books on Sri Lankan history and culture, describes Thomia as his personal project. Thomia began as a coffee table book on STC around 2011 at the request of Warden Reverend John Puddefoot and members of the Old Boys Union. The progress on the Coffee Table book shifted according to the changes at the College, sometimes held back and subsequently revived while the author persisted with his quest. The College and the Coffee Table book parted ways eventually, and it has since soared into an eponymous project covering 200 years of modern history of the Island following a decade of researching and writing.

Sprawled into 81 chapters and 1,300 pages, the history of the College is confined to 150 years since its founding. However, the chronological chronicling begins in 1801 with the British government's attempt to establish a modern Western-style education system in Ceylon. Richard unveils the road to STC in 1851 from 1801, carefully chronicling the development of public schools, from an initial State-sponsored modern education system overseen by missionaries to eventually

returning to government control following progressive reforms of the Colebrook-Cameron Commission.

The name “Thomia” in itself reflects the distinctiveness of this project. This term would be unfamiliar or unknown to the majority associated with STC. However, it was a terminology that gained currency at STC in the 1940s and remained present until the 1960s. The College Magazine and other sources have referred to this not-so-well-known term promoted by L A H Arndt, a master at STC, that had been popular for around thirty years, petering out after Arndt’s retirement. Upon discovering it while reading for the project, Richard renamed his book after this lesser-known name. So, what does Thomia mean to the writer? Richard points out that the term varies between denoting the institution, seen in its historical continuity, or as a conscious non-physical entity – as an idea reflecting the school’s spirit of brotherhood.

> Thomia is a two-volume book that explores STC’s influence on modern Sri Lankan history and its role in the nation’s growth through some of its prominent Old Boys who have had a lasting impact on the country’s social, cultural, and political fabric.




Richard Simon – the author of Thomia who has based his writing on ten years of exhaustive research.

**A unique technique**

Before Thomia, several others, as well as former masters, had written books and articles about STC that became essential sources for Richard. Still, they had all dealt with events connected to the school. In contrast, Richard follows a very different and first-of-its-kind technique to tell the College's history.

The narration alternates between the history of the College and the country, presenting the events of STC against the backdrop of selected events in Sri Lankan history. One sees a scrupulous researcher in Richard, evident in the portrayal of the wardens, the masters, and the famous Old Boys of the College for who they were, conjecturing their personalities, humanizing their stories, and narrating them like a biography. It's an attempt, like novelists do, to make the reader feel present in all

those different periods and situations. Two hundred years of history produces considerable content for the book. It’s right to say that Thomia is a retrospective study of the personal, local, and global vicissitudes of two centuries that delve into the personalities of men who founded, administered, taught, and studied at the College, their families, and backgrounds, their influence inside and outside the College; the disagreements, the rivalries, and the oddities of the so-called men of God. Further, the writer places STC in the backdrop of a prosperous Ceylon and a changing Ceylon of dissenting local voices and movements favoring self-government, communal violence, rising ethnocentric nationalism, the world wars, and the Great Depression. It reveals the role of the sons of the College in influencing the events of pre and post-independent Ceylon, their political maneuverings, and pro-nationalistic reforms that set the stage for the storms that followed and engulfed the Island in extremism and ethnic violence. He writes about the abuses and excesses at STC, violence perpetrated through bullying and ragging, and extremes of corporal punishment, explaining the school’s response to those incidents. The researcher in Richard has left no stone unturned in his search for information, revealing the splendor and the inglorious of STC and the country, designed by people and events connected to the school, brilliantly compared and creatively elaborated to highlight their impact on the College.




To the unversed who may wonder why STC is so important in the country’s recent history, four of the prime ministers of Ceylon were educated at the College,

including eminent civil servants and public administrators, men in the judiciary and military, in the academia and in the field of arts and entertainment, who had made significant contributions to the country. Significantly, most of them rose to prominence as dissenting voices of British occupation, who led movements and resistance against the foreigners and who would someday, trained and skilled by the British and armed with English values and habits would, dictate the country's destiny, mostly positively while others have had lasting influences that reverberate to this day.

**Truth be told**

The truth in all historical matters could be hazy, may or may not be grounded in facts, and replete with the writer's motivation and biases. This could not be truer than in perusing history in private correspondences. Richard was aware of this fact when he embarked. Nonetheless, he has meticulously dug out never-before-known information from the private letters of people involved with the College, allowing him to construct biographical matter on his subjects from their personal thoughts and opinions, and that's what makes his storytelling so different and compelling, as he provides a unique angle to the school's history, gives voice and life to people and a stage for their theatrics.

Moving on from the genesis of the College and its news-making men against a national and global landscape of events, the most provocative are the events in post-independent Ceylon led by several Old Boys. A changing social tapestry achieved by design by men that the school nurtured, who embraced Englishness wholeheartedly and represented society's affluent upper class, dealt the heaviest blow to the status quo against the backdrop of a secular English-speaking administrative apparatus. In what could be described as a forthright take on facts, the writer dives into the crises created by the so-called eminent Old Boys of the College and how they singularly changed the lives and future of some of Ceylon's best men and women for good.

**Exposés**

The writer explores the nuances of those extreme changes lengthily through a specific period that he describes as the peak of Thomian influence in politics and society between 1931 and 1975. It begins with the appointment of D S Senanayake, the first prime minister of independent Ceylon, to the State Council of Ceylon as the Minister of Agriculture and Lands in 1931 to the ouster of Finance Minister Dr. N M

Perera from the United Front government in 1975. A fascinating factor from Richard's meticulous findings sheds light on why this period in the country's history became exceptional and qualifies for elaboration. All the Mount Lavinia, Thomian-bred strongmen of pre-independent and post-independent struggles, had been the protégés of Warden William Arthur Stone, who had very different views for a British colonialist, strongly favoring independence and inculcated that belief in the boys. In Warden Stone, Richard discovered a man of different stock from a working-class background who had studied at the University of Cambridge. This feature led the writer to explore Stone's pre-Thomian days in England, which would help understand his departure from his predecessors.

S W R D Bandaranaike, the fourth prime minister of Ceylon, the man who changed the country's future for good by switching to vernacular administration and education, was boarded at Warden Stone's house in the first term at the College, coming face to face with Stone's revolutionary thinking, revealing yet again Stone's profound influence on many of independent Ceylon's future leaders. This aspect, Richard decided, demanded much focus in Thomia. Hence, Chapter 30 – "The Forge", traces Stone-era Old Thomians' influence and dominance in Ceylon's public life – politics, civil service, law and judiciary, journalism, and other fields. The subsequent "Men of Stone" chapter explores the Thomian contribution to public, social, and cultural life in early and mid-twentieth century Sri Lanka.



**Social change and its influence on STC**

The most provocative account about the College is set in the 21st century, between the chapters “The Nadir” and “Restoration”, which explores the changing character of the STC population and its impact on the school and how the Governors and Old Boys prevented the school from becoming the “exclusive preserve of the rich”. The evolving Thomian community mirrored the parallel socioeconomic evolution in which a new capitalist class was becoming dominant. Amid this, the College struggled with fulfilling its foundational principles of propagating a particular type of Christian belief and practice and serving the country by raising a breed of creditable men. STC also bore an image, in the writer’s words, a conduit for the best of Anglophone and Western culture. But in time, the old composition of the school student population changed. The families in the “old money” category who dominated STC in its early years hailed from the Mudliyar and Kandyan noble families, followed by the sons of the coconut-belt nouvelle bourgeoisie around the 1860s. This new class embraced Anglicanism and leveraged the business opportunities afforded by the colonialists.

> Thomia is a retrospective study of the personal, local, and global vicissitudes of two centuries that delve into the personalities of men who founded, administered, taught, and studied at the College, their families, and backgrounds, their influence inside and outside the College; the disagreements, the rivalries, and the oddities of the so-called men of God.

Then arrived the post-independence winds of change that had a dual impact in shifting people's fortunes; there were social and economic transitions happening among the once thriving commercial class hailing from the suburbs south of Colombo, whose fortunes broke up over several generations, relegating them to a new group of old money people no longer wealthy but carried a proprietorial attitude to the school, with their descendants still strong within the STC fraternity. While the fortunes of one group faded, post-1977 market liberalization spurred the rise of another nouvelle bourgeoisie – a "new money" class whose influence within STC was growing, but the collective interests of several groups from the old guard, including rich and influential Tamil Anglican families and a section of liberal-minded Old Boys managed to keep the College in line with its founding values and ideals and eventually peace prevailed with Warden Neville de Alwis at the helm in the 1980s, who brokered a compromise between the old and new factions, ensuring the longevity of a Thomian community loyal to its roots.

**Selling Thomia – a unique proposition**

Thomia is Richard's most extended private project, his "baby", which he nurtured from an embryo to maturity, completing in manuscript form in January 2023. Richard has already spent a lot of time and personal money to travel for research, making it a full-time project since 2019. He hopes to publish this work in a deluxe two-volume hardcover octavo first edition in late 2024 or early 2025. As a self-published book into which the writer has poured his heart, soul, and personal resources, Richard owns his work. He has complete control over the publishing process, and given the enormity of the final product, he hopes to pay for the cost of publishing through subscription, selling them before publication. He has been promoting his work among the Thomian fraternity here and abroad through a unique website that comprehensively explains what Thomia is all about and guides anyone interested to register with the subscription list for a copy of the book.

Richard believes his project will be a reference point for thousands in the future and, importantly, a nudge in the right direction for individuals to read College

history differently and in perspective. Ten years was a fantastic journey of discovery for Richard – of STC’s resilience and remarkable ability to rise from the lowest point, continuing to uphold its motto “Be Thou Forever”, a fraternal spirit revealed through the chapters of Thomia.

For Subscription: thomia.com