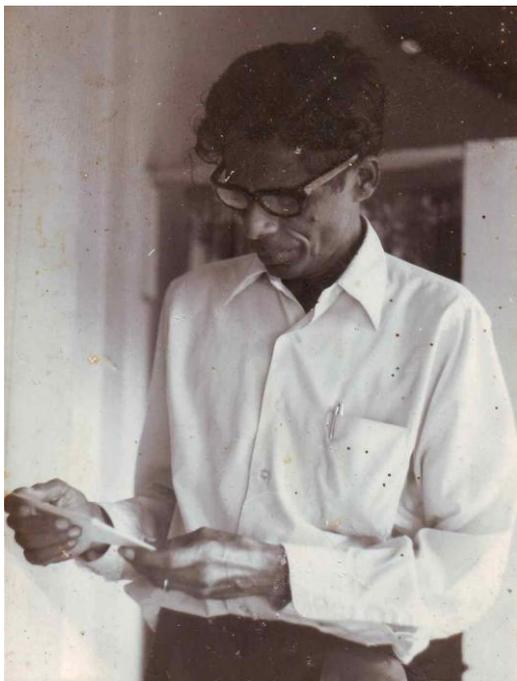




MR. B.L. FERNANDO - A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

By Bernard VanCuylenberg

Advance your clocks forward by an hour at the end of October and "Daylight Savings" commences. Turn back the clocks by an hour at the end of April and it ends. This article I hope will turn back the collective Anthonian memory to an era when St. Anthony's College Kandy, that magnificent institution of learning by the banks of the mighty Mahaveli or, as someone referred to her as "The College on the Hill", basked in golden sunshine in the halls of academia and excelled in the field of sport. St. Anthony's was a beacon of learning, envied, admired and emulated by other schools. Right through the 1950's and into the sixties "Lux De Coelo" enlightened her way.



Within her hallowed portals there were teachers who as the title of this article suggests were (to paraphrase the playwright Robert Bolt) 'Men for all seasons'. The names George Denlow, George Macky and Robert Wright stand supreme. To complete this distinguished quartet, I wish to add another illustrious name which is a byword among generations of Anthonians - Mr. B.L. Fernando, that doyen of Sinhalese teachers, a quiet achiever, a gentleman of infinite patience and kindness who to this day is fondly referred to as 'B.L.'

Mr. B.L. Fernando was my Sinhalese teacher from Form 1, up to the Senior Form (V Arts 'A'). My classmates and I had a deep respect for the man, and the fact that the Sinhalese language held no difficulties for me was an asset! Beneath the tough exterior in the classroom which meant that any breach of discipline was dealt with firmly and nipped in the bud, there beat a kindly heart as I soon discovered in my dealings with him over the years. In my senior years I more than burned the midnight oil, with the G.C.E. examination looming on the horizon. I would write essays on my own and show these to him after class for perusal and correction. Not once did he say he was too busy, and having corrected my mistakes would always encourage me to take the language to a slightly higher level. 'B.L.' like the other Masters mentioned in this article had a priceless gift which endeared him to his students. He knew the art of 'Student psychology' - he knew how to get to the heart of a student and never lost sight of the human element. Sinhalese was a subject not liked by many students, but the man was loved by all. That distinction must be clearly emphasised.

As a senior boarder in the "Journey's End" we used to get three newspapers a day which were left in the study hall - the "Daily News", the "Dinamina" and the "Thinakaran". I added reading the "Dinamina" daily to my curriculum, something which Mr. B.L. Fernando greatly encouraged. I will never forget the day when I passed in Sinhalese at the GCE examination, he summoned me to the staff room (opposite the tuck shop) and congratulated me saying in Sinhalese "I watched your efforts and always knew you would make it...." I remember to this day the depth and sincerity in his words which brought tears to my eyes. Unashamedly, they still have the same power fifty one years later, more so that he is no longer with us. However, not everything was peaches and cream and there were some "negative" moments which is the experience of any student on his academic journey. For reasons of brevity I will relate just one.

One afternoon -- it was the second period after the lunch interval in the Form V Arts 'A' -- Mr. B.L.Fernando came in for the Sinhalese class. One student had the temerity (!) to circulate what I love to call "Forbidden Fruit" - a copy of the glossy 'Playboy Magazine' which was spiced red hot with pictures which would make the devil blush !! This was the tree in the V Arts A garden, and every student wanted a bite of the apple! The student in the last row then proceeded to pass the magazine under the desk to his neighbour which was not hard to do because the desks were right next to each other. In this way the magazine found its way from desk to desk while the class listened to 'B.L.' in silence and feigned attention. Lulled into a sense of false confidence, the downfall of any student (!) we forgot there was one much smarter than us. From his elevated desk at the head of the class Mr.B.L.Fernando had observed the shenanigans of his students, but kept up appearances of normality until he decided to pounce. This he did with quiet diplomacy. Gently leaving his seat he walked down the class at the precise moment when the magazine was passed onto me by my colleague and in a flash grabbed the magazine from my hands ! I was petrified, and when he flicked through a few pages I almost disappeared under the desk !! I expected a tirade of angry words, even the proverbial cuff on the ear. What followed was worse. Fixing me with an angry stare he looked me straight in the eye and in slow articulate tones told me in Sinhalese "Thamusey te mona sex de bung !!!" Colloquial translation: "What sex for you men ?!!!" Having confiscated the magazine, he calmly walked back to his seat. The matter did not end there. That same evening he met me near the library and let me have the 'coup de grace' "I did not expect such behaviour from you !" I made a vow then and there to turn over a new leaf - better still, not to turn over the leaf of any "Playboy" magazine in future !! At least not while I was a student at St.Anthony's !!!

I was pleasantly surprised to discover Mr.B.L.Fernando's love of music. Often I would find him singing snatches of a favourite song, especially when I passed him along the corridors in the quadrangle and after hours. I recall the time I had to get some sentences corrected and I went to his home. These were not part of the normal curriculum, but work done in my own time using words culled from "The Dinamina". I had to wait while he finished listening to a top hit by the

sweethearts of Sinhala pop, Lata and Dharmadasa Walpola. Before he checked my work he went into raptures about the lyrics and melody of the song he had just heard, and asked me for my opinion.

The Anthonians who studied under Mr.B.L. have long left the bosom of their Alma Mater and gone their separate ways keeping their tryst with destiny. We have traversed the highways and byways of life and today there are Anthonians in the far flung corners of the globe. Yet the ties that bind are strong and being an "Anthonian" is one of them. As the years pass and the gold of the day surrenders to the blue of the night, our schooldays and masters like Mr.B.L.Fernando dwell in the realms of the collective Anthonian memory. The memories grow fonder, the songs sound sweeter, and reminiscing goes deeper as the years pass. And with reminiscing come the heartaches.....

Perhaps I echo the sentiments with generations of Anthonians who studied under Mr.B.L.Fernando when I paraphrase a verse which one of my schoolmates wrote in my autograph -Remember the autograph books we passed around ? To me an autograph has become a book of precious souvenirs which carries one through life. He wrote:

"Many a lonely heartache
Sometimes a silent tear
But often a beautiful memory
Of a Master we loved so dear....."



Memories.....what would life be without them....