

# American confronts American at Eppawela

By Rohan Wijesingha

In the history of Sri Lanka, few foreigners have visited her shores without exploitation in mind, were it for conquest, for spices, for precious stones, or as now, for cheap labour, cheap land, and cheap holidays.

The names of the old Colonial 'heroes', those who mastered their roles of domination, are well recorded and are still remembered by the names of roads, institutions, and natural places of beauty. However, not so well honoured are the handful of expatriates who empathised with the local people, identified with their hardships, and fought against their own Governments for the rights of the majority.

Much has been written about Bracegirdle in the last few weeks. Largely forgotten by many, his death has sparked memory, and he has justly received all the praise and respect he deserved.

At about the same time, another Englishman, Herbert Reginald Freeman (1864-1945), was making a connection in a different way with the people of this land. A Government Agent, who served in office all over the Country, while at Anuradhapura, was elected in a free vote by the people of the North Central Province to represent them on the State Legislative Council in 1935. This was not once, but twice - in two elections!

Freeman was a popular man who had the reputation of working for the people. He never canvassed as the other candidates did, but merely sat on culverts and spoke to anyone who would listen in fluent Sinhala. He never returned to England, but died a much-respected man in his adopted home.

In the same mould Professor Jonathan Walters, an American, though lacking any aspiration to be in Government, is a person of the Freeman mould. Chair of the Department of Religion at Whitman College (USA), he is an elected member of the Board of Directors of the American Institute of Sri Lankan Studies. Having studied Pali, Sinhala and Sanskrit at Peradeniya University between 1983 and 1985, he speaks Sinhala fluently, and when in Sri Lanka, has adapted well to his adopted home, a "purana game" near Eppawela.

He was first taken to his "gama" by a batchmate at Peradeniya in 1984. Of it he says, "I was instantaneously enchanted with both the environment and the people. I realised that this 'purana game' represented the purest Sri Lankan tradition I had (or have) encountered in my travels and studies ... I live as one of the villagers in every sense (eat the same food, wear the same clothes, bathe in the tank, roam in the jungles, work in the fields, help out in the home, visit and transport the ill, etc.) and feel a bond with the people that goes beyond ethnography. I have been visiting this village/Eppawela Town for 15 years ... I find the indigenous life-style very beautiful and pleasant ... Eppawela is my favourite place on the planet."

Over these past fifteen years, Professor Walters has developed research projects on indigenous medicine - Sinhala beheth/deshiya vedakama/gurukama. He works with the local Vedamahattayas studying their practices and helping them make their medicines. Living in the home of his former batchmate, he also engages in a lot of charity work - paying for medicines and education, among other things.

"One of the things that has really impressed me over the years is the villagers' ingrained love for the land and the environment. All the villagers know every jungle path and old tree; every large rock is named. Everyone recognizes the weeds growing beside jungle paths and even major roads as medicinal ingredients (aushada), and makes every effort to avoid stepping on them. When a Vedamahattaya must cut a plant to make a medicine he literally worships it, asks for its forgiveness and help in curing the patient, and chants healing mantras while pulling it up. The natural landscape is recognized

and treated as a precious garden, filled as it is with delicious wild fruits, honey, beautiful flowers, reeds for weaving mats and baskets, old wood for cooking, and so forth. Though the wild elephants who roam these jungles pose serious threats to their health and well-being, the villagers recognize that they also have a right to exist there - even to the point of sacrificing precious water for them to drink.

## Threatened

It has not always been as idyllic as it sounds. These ancient villages and their way of life are now under siege by emissaries of alleged progress. As Professor Walters puts it, "I have long worried for the future of the villagers, who increasingly are caught up in cash crises created by so-called 'development'. They are greatly disadvantaged vis-a-vis their urban counterparts. For many years I have been helping them to petition the Government for access to Mahaweli water, which would help them survive better."

However, the controversial proposal by Freeport McMoran to develop the existing production of phosphate at Eppawela has paled all of their other problems into insignificance. Under the guise of one of



The phosphate mine in 'phosphate kande' Eppawela. There are six such hills



Mahamankadawela Piyaratne Thero who leads the opposition to the American project

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Large tracks of jungle at Eppawela which is home to about 150 elephants

its pseudonym companies, IMC Agrico and Japan's Iomen Corporation, this mining conglomerate has been granted approval, without an Environmental Impact Assessment, to strip-mine the rich phosphate deposits at Eppawela. This is despite the recommendations of renowned scientists and environmentalists on the disastrous consequences of such mining.

According to the National Science Foundation Committee Report on Eppawela Phosphate, commissioned by the Honourable Minister for Science and Technology, economically, also, the proposal from Freeport McMoran has little advantage to National interest. Herring and Fantel of the US Geological Survey and the US Bureau of Mines have shown that the world's known reserves of phosphate will be depleted in 50 years. According to the proposal, Freeport McMoran intend to exhaust the reserves of Rock Phosphate at Eppawela in 30 years!

## Out of proportion

Even more significantly, the current import price of Rock Phosphate is about \$75 per ton. It will cost Freeport McMoran a mere \$5 to produce this same quantity of Rock Phosphate. Not only is the country going to lose its future deposits of a very valuable resource, but will have to spend a vast amount of money in buying it back as essential fertilizer. Only IMC, and their minions, will rake considerable profit from this.

Walters' election by the people of Eppawela as International Representative on the Committee for the Protection of Eppawela Phosphate is of special meaning to him. "Compassion for the people of Eppawela is my primary motivation. I truly think of those people as though they were my own parents, brothers and sisters, children. Moreover I want to see 'my' village and the civilisation of which it is part survive longer than 30 years, for the sake of future generations of villagers, and of the world at large, and of myself ... As a scholar of religion who specializes in an anti-materialist creed like Buddhism, I also feel intense loathing for the greed which is fuelling IMC's interest in Eppawela - companies like this make me ashamed to be an American, and I feel a duty as a conscientious American to speak out against the atrocities they wreak on the rest of the world."

## Not interested

Professor Walters tried to discuss the Eppawela proposals with the American Ambassador in Colombo but was informed that this was a matter between the Sri Lanka Government and IMC. Allegations against IMC and Freeport-McMoran for their appalling record of environmental and human rights violations, especially in Indonesia, has been well documented in both the local and international press.

## Inspiration

Professors Walters is just one of thousands who are against the further exploitation of Eppawela. The Committee for the Protection of Eppawela Phosphate is co-ordinated by the Rev. Mahamankadawela Piyarathana, and upwards of 5000 villagers have already marched in protest on numerous occasions. "I have also become very devoted to Rev. Piyarathana and out of that devotion want to do all I can to help him in his efforts. In my view he is the epitome of what a religious leader should be, sacrificing everything for the good of the people and environment."

I have not met any villagers who support this project. They know exactly what it will mean for their lives and the lives of their descendants, and affirm that even if IMC tried to bribe them with millions of rupees they will not sell. It is likened to selling their own mothers - what price would be sufficient for that? Even the current employees at Lanka Phosphate, who in the short run would benefit from the deal, are opposed - but as Government employees they are afraid to speak out too loudly.

The other villagers, though, talk about this all the time, morning to night ... There is enormous support for the monks ... I would say that he is not creating the opposition, rather he is co-ordinating it. The opposition is much deeper than rabble rousing. It comes from deep in the hearts of the villagers, who love their lands and would rather die than leave ... (The Rev. Piyarathana) is a villager himself who shares all these feelings; he has even planted an impressive medicinal garden at his temple even if the Government allows these international eco-demons to come, he is willing to sacrifice his life and I have absolutely no doubt that thousands of villagers are willing to do so as well."

## Contradiction

Professor Walters is disappointed that despite the enormity of the damage that is being proposed to this historic and fertile region, that more environmentalists and human right activists, especially from Colombo, are not opposing this scandalous deal. The Honourable Minister for Science and Technology has long been a fierce opponent of this deal. The Honourable Minister for Cultural Affairs, too, has expressed his opposition in the past. In addition, the Honourable Minister for Industrial Development, in a newspaper headline of 10 August 1999 while commenting on another matter, claimed that "It is not that I love Industry less, but I love the environment more!"

With such notable opposition to proposed environmental destruction from within its cabinet, and the detailed reports from erudite scientists against the deal, it is astonishing that the Government continues to pursue negotiations with IMC for the destruction of Eppawela.

Not surprisingly, allegations of bribery and corruption abound especially as such a large discrepancy exists between the cost per ton to IMC of \$5 when compared to the market price of \$75!

Her Excellency, The President, has recently taken upon herself the task of investigating such allegations. Perhaps now, with the powers at her disposal, the truth of this could be investigated, and this treacherous development shelved for the greater good of the Nation.

In the meantime, Professor Walters, now back in America, carries on the fight for and with his fellow villagers, under the leadership of Rev. Piyarathana. Addressing him in kinship terms, the villagers believe that his heart felt association is the result of having lived in the village during many previous lives.

"My hope is that I will be able to retire there in old age, and to be reborn there in the next life!"

If the present rate of extraction of Rock Phosphate by Lanka Phosphate continues, purely for national use, especially in the manufacture of fertilizer for tea, rubber and coconut, the present reserves should last at least 200 years!

Of the proposal, Professor Walters says, "since the emergence of this plot to mine phosphate (it) has been my central pre-occupation, for I fear that the entire village - indeed the entire region - will be destroyed by the project, in the short term due to environmental and cultural pollution associated with the mining itself and the construction of the factories and in the long term because this village will become part of the strip mine itself. The loss is inestimable, and indeed for me, unthinkable - thousands of people, 2000 year old archaeological ruins, elephants, and other wildlife, tanks and jungle. Villagers mourn the loss of a single tree or pond; how could anyone bear the destruction of this entire region?"

Of his many academic qualifications and election to positions of responsibility, Professors