

## An Appreciation

## Dr. S.M.A. Perera

The engineering fraternity in Sri Lanka heard of the shocking news of the death of one its distinguished members (the above named) on Feb. 11, 2008. A few colleagues of his who had seen him at the hospital the previous week thought he was recovering from his ailment but alas it was not to be.

Melva was born to be a very respectable family who originally resided at Kollupitiya but later shifted to Ratmalana. He has one brother who is a Catholic priest and four sisters, two of whom married eminent engineers.

Melva, as he was known to us, was in the second intake of students to the newly formed Faculty of Engineering of the University of Ceylon in 1951. It was then housed in Colombo. Melva was an extremely popular, gregarious personality but with all his fun and games finished with a First Class Hons. Degree in Civil Engineering.

After University he wanted to see the world as well as gain international experience. On completion of one year as an Instructor at the Faculty he took the slow boat to England. Life was easy in 1956. When Melva entered UK the immigration officials looked at his passport and waved him in. There was not even a stamp on the passport.

In England he was able within a week of his arrival to get a job with a leading U.K. Consultant, Sir Freeman Fox & Partners and was able to work on several prestige projects. In fact, Melva's career would cause envy amongst recent graduates. He was able to work on the world's largest pumped storage project at that time (FFESTINOG) in Wales, London Airport Extension Scheme and also as a site engineer at the Oldbury Nuclear Power Plant. He was whilst in London the unexpected recipient of a Government Scholarship and after entering Imperial College completed his D.I.C. and later was awarded a Ph. D. in Fluid Mechanics in 1962.

Whilst he was at the University his roving eye had spotted the charming Miss Nimali de Silva whom he later married in 1961. They have one son, Malik, who is an executive in a mercantile firm. Nimali and Malik have been a source of strength to Melva throughout.

After seven years he decided

to return home. He was not interested in a soft job in Government Service but joined a Consultant Engineering Firm and was posted as resident engineer in the Castlereagh tunnel for one year.

At this time the Engineering Faculty was able to persuade him to join the University staff where he served as a Grade I lecturer in Fluid Mechanics for three years.

The lure of construction drew him out again from the monotonous life at the University and he found himself attached to Ceylon Development Engineering Company (CDE) which was the pioneer and also leading engineering contracting firm in Sri Lanka at that time.

He was with CDE for a period of 22 years beginning with an assignment as Project Manager for the Mousakelle Dam. The

*In England he was able within a week of his arrival to get a job with a leading U.K. Consultant, Sir Freeman Fox & Partners and was able to work on several prestige projects. In fact, Melva's career would cause envy amongst recent graduates. He was able to work on the world's largest pumped storage project at that time (FFESTINOG) in Wales, London Airport Extension Scheme and also as a site engineer at the Oldbury Nuclear Power Plant. He was whilst in London the unexpected recipient of a Government Scholarship and after entering Imperial College completed his D.I.C. and later was awarded a Ph. D. in Fluid Mechanics in 1962.*

CDE was formed by the well known sportsman and bold entrepreneur Pin Fernando, with the mercurial M.S.M. de Silva as the General Manager at the start. Several pioneering engineering methodologies were tried out by this firm such as large-scale use of ammonium nitrate for rock blasting at the Mousakelle Dam quarry, usage of Bentonite for piling works etc.

In 1978 Melva was appointed Joint Managing Director of CDE but shortly afterwards in 1981 he was appointed Managing Director. Being the only firm engaged in complex engineering works such as dams, tunnels etc, Melva had to provide leadership to the CDE staff apprehensive about tackling new assignments. But he was equal to the task. He got down experts from Sweden to train CDE Staff in their first tunneling job. Sri Lankans gained valuable experience on jumbo drills, controlled rock blasting etc and became skilled tunnellers.

However, the firm had difficulties in winning projects financed by international funding institutions due to various rules of these agencies which

sometimes seem to be unfair to a fledgeling company trying to establish itself around the South Asian region.

After he left CDE he set himself up as a private engineering consultant. Although he was devoted to constructing for the major portion of his career he did not ignore the broader aspects of the profession. He was an active member of the Institution of Engineers Sri Lanka (IESL) and was its President in 1982. He was also a member of the University Grants Commission for several years and contributed much to the furtherance of engineering education in Sri Lanka.

He has submitted several well prepared papers to the IESL journal. He also delivered the Wimalasurendra Commemoration Lecture at the IESL in 1990.

Latterly he had mastered the techniques of arbitration and was a much sought after arbitrator in the resolution of construction contract disputes. He participated and made valuable contribution to educate engineers at several seminars conducted by the IESL and ICTAD on "Arbitration". I am aware that

during the last two decades he was a prominent member of several committees appointed by the Government or various Departments and Corporations to find out what went wrong somewhere and how to put it right. I need not emphasize that he was held in very high esteem in the engineering circles of Sri Lanka.

I have been writing so far only about his outstanding career. He was always dedicated not only in his work but also in numerous other activities he partook. He was an excellent companion, good mixer, tolerant of others of lesser intellect and possessed of unobtrusive ways. He had an excellent voice and was a much sought after singer at the many occasions he spent with his friends. One feature of his life was that he never talked about his many achievements to others even when pried to do so. In that respect he was a gentle giant.

The Engineering profession in Sri Lanka has lost an icon. But he will be remembered for a very long time. May his soul rest in peace.

M. Goonaratne