

Prof. Robert Hoisington Paul

Professor Robert Hoisington Paul was born on 9 February, 1904 and has his early education at the Anglo-Chinese School in Singapore and later at S. Thomas' College, Mount Lavinia. He passed the Junior and Senior Cambridge Examinations and the London Matriculation Examination in the First Division and won a Scholarship to the University College, Colombo, the forerunner of the University of Ceylon. There he obtained the B.Sc (General) Degree of the University of London with First Class Honours at the age of 20, and was awarded the Coomaraswamy Physics Prize and a Ceylon Government Engineering Scholarship for studies in the United Kingdom.

He entered Trinity College, Cambridge, and in 1928 obtained the Mechanical Sciences Tripos with First Class Honours. In fact he was the first Sri Lankan to achieve this distinction. He had also been a Senior Exhibitioner of the College. Thereafter he served a graduate apprenticeship with the Metropolitan Vickers Electric Co., Manchester.

On his return to Sri Lanka in 1930 he was appointed as a Lecturer at the Ceylon Technical College, Colombo, the only institution providing engineering courses at that time.

The development of the higher level electrical engineering courses and the laboratory facilities at this college were largely due to his efforts. No doubt much credit for the eventual recognition of the college in 1942 by the University of London to prepare students for its B.Sc. (Engineering) external degree should go to him. He was then appointed its first Professor of Electrical Engineering, and from 1944 to 1949 held the Post of Director of the College. Simultaneously he functioned as the Registrar of Patents.

Although hampered by poor research facilities and heavy teaching loads he was able to produce scientific papers which were published abroad. One of them, published in the Journal of the Institution of Electrical Engineering, London, won for him the Institution's Overseas Premium in 1944.

When the University of Ceylon established its Faculty of Engineering in 1950, Professor Paul was a natural choice as its first Professor of Electrical Engineering. The Faculty was to train engineers in larger numbers and with greater technical skills to meet the development needs of the post-independence period. It was his responsibility, once again, to plan the laboratories, train the staff and develop the courses of study in electrical engineering. This he proceeded to do with his usual enthusiasm, first in temporary locations in Colombo and later in its permanent campus in Peradeniya.

The basic concept of the electrical engineering laboratory complex at Peradeniya was largely his and is a fitting tribute to his efforts.

The department was built up over the years mainly by recruitment from among the ablest students who graduated under his guidance. By the time of his retirement in 1968 about 130 electrical engineering graduates had passed out and the department had gained much prestige internationally.

Professor Paul took a keen interest in the engineering profession. He was President of the Institution of Engineers, Sri Lanka in 1968.

He was a Fellow of the Institution of Electrical Engineers, London and also the Overseas Representative in Sri Lanka of this Institution from 1964 to 1978, the first Sri Lankan to hold this position.

A founder member of the Sri Lanka Association for the Advancement of Science, he served briefly as its General President in 1945. His services were sought by the Government of the day on many occasions. He was a Member of the Commission on Broadcasting and Information (1965) and the advisory Board of Technical Education (1966), to name but two major assignments.

He passed away on 3rd July 1978 at the age of 74. When the University of Peradeniya began holding its convocation after a lapse of about 10 years, the degree of Doctor of Science (honoris causa) was conferred on him posthumously in 1980. A man of great ability, initiative and drive, Professor Paul has made a lasting impact in the development of electrical engineering education in this country. His commitment to his profession was total.

Nearly all electrical engineers employed in key posts in the country today can trace their academic ancestry to Professor Paul.

Eng. J. Meegoda