

By
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Living in retirement Prof. E. O. E. Pereira

Scholar and gentleman



A loyal supporter of school cricket matches and University cricket tournaments, E. O. E. would unfailingly turn up in good weather and bad to give his sons and their friends his generous encouragement.

Professor Pereira's contribution to public life includes service as a member of several important commissions of inquiry: among them the Official Languages Commission, the Loan Commission, the Commission of Inquiry into the Mirigama train disaster, and the Commission of Inquiry into the collapse of the Cement Corporation Building.

In late 1969 he was nominated as Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ceylon in Peradeniya. Those were the days just prior to the insurgency of 1971. In these troubled times, when politics first disrupted University life and destroyed academic freedom, incidentally sowing the seeds of today's student unrest, indiscipline and destructiveness, E. O. E. Pereira was like a beacon to students and colleagues alike.

Upholding decent human values when all around him political expediency was the order of the day, he set an example of a kind that is badly needed in present times. Describing him as 'immune to bureaucratic intimidation', a Peradeniya student noted in a letter to the press at the time of the Vice-Chancellor's retirement that in losing Professor Pereira the student community had lost 'what may be the last line of defence against manipulators and ladder-climbing stooges, a leader of that rare breed - a man of principle'.

Now in retirement in his home in Wellawatte, Professor Pereira is always glad to see visitors and friends and talk over past times. Although at nearly 80, you would expect the generations to blur somewhat in his memory, he never forgets a face, a name - or a cricket score.

No doubt his country will honour him in some way appropriate to a scholar of his eminence in this his 80th year. In the meantime, former students and colleagues, friends and contemporaries of 'E. O. E.' who would like to collaborate on a more personal celebration of the birthday of a great man are invited to write to:

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her home village without delay.

Hearing of this 'punishment', the Vice-Chancellor drove up to the Hall in his ancient car (held together, his students affectionately supposed, by pieces of string and lots of good will!), ascertained the facts of the case from the Warden, and said that he wished to interrogate the student.

On meeting the student - now isolated in her room, and the object of the contempt and ridicule of her peers - E. O. E. and his wife invited her to stay with them as a guest at the Vice-Chancellor's Lodge until her brother arrived, and until he had had a chance to talk things over with the young man in question. This courtly and humanitarian action, and his tactful handling of the situation, made possible the eventual marriage of the young couple, converting social disgrace and a probable suicide into what has turned out to be a happy marriage.

In the heady days following the ULF victory at the General Election of 1970, a group of political agitators taking the law into their own hands with an arrogant display of the mantle of 'authority', decided to humiliate and send home a number of senior University officers including the Registrar, the Bursar, and the Assistant Bursar. (These officers were accused of being 'anti-socialist' in their political views.)

E. O. E. Pereira, then Vice-Chancellor, walked out of his office and met the agitators in the lobby. "Good morning, gentlemen," he said, his usual courtesy tinged on this occasion with an irony that was missed by the mob. "And is it your wish that I should also go home?"

Born on 13 September 1907, Professor Eustace Pereira will be eighty years old this year. While at Royal College he won most of the major prizes

available to students in the science stream - the De Soysa Science Prize, the Mohamed Ali Arithmetic Prize, and the Evans Prize for Mathematics (the latter shared with another eminent Royalist, Danton G., Obysekere). He was a sportsman, too, and was awarded House colours, narrowly missing College colours in cricket.

His contemporaries in the cricket field included LDS. (Chippy) Gunasekera, Neil Joseph, Louis Belleth and R. Rajaratnam, all now deceased. Also a contemporary was D. W. L. Lieversz, who is still active in public life as a Director of the Ceylon Electricity Board. Like Lieversz, who had two sons play and shine for Royal in cricket as well as in other sports, two of E. O. E.'s sons, Lorenz and Bryan, have done well for the College, the former (like Lieversz's elder son Darrell) also captaining the side.

Sri Lanka's President J. R. Jayewardene was a class-mate of Professor Pereira's who stayed on an extra year to obtain his cricket colours.

Royal College was then sited at Thurstan Road. Its buildings, cricket and rugby grounds now form the nucleus of the University of Colombo campus. It boasts a cricket pavilion that is a period piece worthy of careful preservation. One hopes it will not be sacrificed, as was the Royal College pavilion in Racecourse Avenue, to the demands of 'development'.

Eustace Pereira entered the University of Ceylon in 1928, and graduated with First Class honours, winning the Engineering Scholarship and securing first place in the Faculty of Science. This enabled him to enter Downing College, Cambridge, where he has the distinction of being the only university graduate to have completed the 3-year course in 2 years.

His contemporaries at Cambridge were Fitzroy Gunasekera (later of the Survey Department), Clarrie Cooray of the Indian Civil Service and later Chairman of the Tea Propaganda Board, Dudley Senanayaka, a former Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, and R. H. Wickramasinghe who was himself a Wrangler at Emmanuel College. E. O. E. Pereira graduated from Cambridge University with First Class honours in 1931.

It is of interest to note that Professor Pereira's grandfather, Edwin C. Pereira, was a member of the first batch of medical students to graduate from the Ceylon Medical College in 1872 / 1873. A Gold Medallist, he died of diabetes at the early age of 26. His father, George Eustace Pereira, was educated at St Thomas' College, Matara, and then at St Thomas' College, Mount Lavinia.

He read for the first M. B. examination at Medical College, but due to family reasons could not complete his degree. He joined the Department of Railways as a Station Master, and died at the age of 43. His distinguished son returned to Ceylon on completing his Cambridge degree, and for 15 years was attached to the Department of Public Works. He married Miss Mavis Scharenguivel in 1939.

Their three sons, Lorenz, Bryan and Allan, followed their father to Royal College, thus making it possible for their contemporaries (such as the writer of this article) to meet this rare spirit early in school life. E. O. E. has the unusual gift of being able to communicate with young people as if he and they belonged to the same generation.



Prof. E.O.E. Pereira with engineering faculty students of the University of Peradeniya

When someone in Sri Lanka wishes to express admiration of another, he will describe him as 'a thorough gentleman', or as 'a gentleman to his fingertips'. Experience tells me that such praise is rarely deserved. One of the very few persons who, I am certain, would be universally acknowledged to fit the description is Professor E. O. E. Pereira, now retired from the University of Ceylon at Peradeniya where he was Foundation Dean of the Faculty of Engineering and later Vice-Chancellor.

Combining in himself the personal qualities of fairmindedness, high principle and courtesy, he proved himself an outstanding scholar during his career at Royal College, Colombo, and at the Universities of Ceylon and Cambridge.

Cultured and soft-spoken, 'E. O. E.' (as he was generally known) achieved greatness in a sense other than the monetary or political, which are ephemeral in any case and too often tainted with the unpleasant traces of expediency and even of corruption. Throughout his long career he continued, often in most unpropitious circumstances, to play the proverbial straight bat.

An incident that occurred during his term as Vice-Chancellor illustrates the essential nature of this good man, and puts to shame the record of many who claim to be 'cultured', well-educated, and 'civilized'.

A blind undergraduate at one of the Halls of Residence on the Peradeniya campus had the misfortune to become pregnant to the young man, also blind, that she hoped to marry on completing her degree. The Warden of the Hall piously held her up to her fellow-students as a glaring example of dire immorality, urged them to ostracize her instantly, and demanded that her relations (her parents being dead) remove her from the Hall and return her to