

COCONUT PALMS



SANDALWOOD BOXES

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

In Daylight (Printed Matter Press, 1995)
Monumenta Nipponica (Saru Press, 1995)
The Painting Stick (Pine Wave Press, 2005)

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From the Japanese (2013)
World Without (2015)
Seeing Sights (2016)
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COCONUT PALMS
and
SANDALWOOD BOXES

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FRONT COVER IMAGES, clockwise from top left: *View of Colombo*, from Henry Charles Sirr, *Ceylon and the Cingalese* (1850); *English Marine Drive in Bambalapitiya, Colombo*, Honeplus, Creative Commons; *Burned Library*, Jaffna Photo Gallery; *Rock Painting of Semi-Nude Women at Sigiriya, Sri Lanka*, Vidu Gunaratma/Shutterstock.com

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ESTIMATED EXPENSES

minibus to Nuwara Eliya

wide-spread valleys

gently undulating ground

flowing rivers

towering mountains

gushing cascades and

a well-wooded country

are passed in quick succession by the delighted traveller

jam butties at a halfway roadside teahouse, and then
a twisting road up into cloud –

grey trees float in the mist below,

tea bushes drip from every leaf

estate signs in English

(Kensington, Kingston, Kent)

to supply the demand

*an influx of labourers has already (1841) begun to flow into the colony
from the Coromandel coast, and more particularly from
the fertile and populous delta of Tanjore*

no sign of leaf pickers today (too wet?)

descendants of the Tamils brought in

first for the coffee estates and then for tea

between 1840 and 1870

starting from age twelve, mostly female

living with half a dozen others

in small rooms

in line barracks

without windows

ESTIMATED EXPENSES OF ESTABLISHING A PLANTATION OF
THREE HUNDRED ACRES IN THE ISLAND OF CEYLON FOR
FOURTEEN YEARS

First Year's Outlay.

1. Purchase of land, 300 acres at 5s	£75
2. Two superintendants, £150 each per annum	300
3. One hundred labourers employed cutting and burning jungle, planting, <i>₹</i> . <i>₹</i> . at 6d per day, or 15s per month, for twelve months	900
4. Four overseers, £1 each per month	48
5. Purchase of tools, consisting of mammoties, cattles, felling-axes, spades, rakes, broad axes, <i>₹</i> . <i>₹</i>	200
6. Building huts for labourers	50
7. Two bungalows for superintendants	200
8. Furniture for ditto	50

[*₹*. *₹*.]

.....

(go forward fourteen years)

Total produce in fourteen years	£52,260
Sale of estate	3,000

Total receipts	55,260
Deduct total expenditure in fourteen years	26,744

Net profit	£28, 516

*the boldness of the scenery around Newera Ellia
can only be equalled by that of Snowdon
as it is encircled on every side by craggy mountains*

a discouraging main street and a temperate climate
which is to say

pissing rain
soaked clothes
chilled bones

clipped verges
mock-Tudor bungalows
*chimneys with their respective
columns of smoke wreathing upwards*
a golf course
hillsides vanish into mist like the Cairngorms on a bad day

*the bracing air enables
Europeans to walk out at any hour of the day*

*the faculties soon regain their lost vigour
the frame is invigorated
the palled appetite recovers its tone
and speedily the hollow sallow cheek becomes rounded
and assumes health's roseate hue*

a downpour hammers the tin roof all night
but stops by morning

chilly
a filtered quality to the light
clouds lift, the sky glazed grey

the minibus to Kandy
descends the twisting road, and
as the sun comes out
what was unseen yesterday can now be seen:

dirt tracks zigzag red across terraced slopes
rocky outcrops gleam and steam
tea bushes trace contours
in whorls of close-planted rows
(huge green fingerprints on the hills)

a damp, planted mountainscape
stitched together with
cascading white threads of waterfalls

shaped at first with *mammoties, catties, felling-axes,*
spades, rakes, broad axes, &c.
in the hands of sweating men
and now kept in trim
(18 kilograms a day)
by Tamil women's nimble fingers

PARRICIDE, USURPER, SYBARITE

Sigiriya, 'Lion Rock'
a sheer volcanic plug, six hundred feet high

carved steps lead upwards to a ledge
 which leads to an iron staircase
which leads to a gallery of pictures painted
on a cliff face under an overhang

 here
 I
 am
 on a
 little
 metal
 perch
 three hundred
 feet up
 face
 to
 face
 with

a frescoed vision of
 ripe-breasted goddesses
in pristine colours, floating on clouds
 (*viju kumari* and *meghalata*
 'lightning princesses' and 'cloud damsels')
clad in translucent gossamer
bearing water lilies, lotus blossoms, frangipani and fruit

the ledge is bordered by
an undulating 'mirror wall'
of porcelain, once so polished that King Kashyapa
(reigned 477–495 CE: parricide, usurper, sybarite)
could see himself in it as he walked past

now covered with 8th–10th-century graffiti:

*ladies like you
make men pour out their hearts
and you also have thrilled the body
making its hair
stiffen with desire*

*I am Lord Sangapala
I wrote this song
we spoke but they did not answer
those ladies of the Mountain
they did not give us the twitch of an eye-lid*

and

*I, Badai, came with many others to see Sigiriya; since everyone else
wrote poems, I did not*

on a wide platform halfway up the cliff
stone steps are flanked by
gigantic lion's paws of brick and moulded plaster

from there, climb to what was once the gate
mount an iron ladder to a ledge
 then traverse a sloping slab
on shallow footholds above an overhang –
 heat rebounds from granite –
 feet slither in sandals wet with sweat –
 this is bloody dangerous! –
until we reach the summit and breathe again

the remains of the red-brick fortress bake in the sun
the royal park far below is
grand and symmetrical, a Sinhalese Versailles

defeated in battle, Kashyapa
drew his dagger from his waistband, cut his throat
 'proudly raised aloft the blood-stained blade'
sheathed it, then fell down dead

long hot silences on a crag top high in air
a lizard's scuttle in
a dusty water tank cut from solid rock

nap on a bench beside
 a lotus-filled tank in the royal park
then take a path through trees to the exit where
a white goat methodically crops grass by the gate

the village straggles
 along the foot of the rock
mud walls, thatched roofs
 smoke-blackened door frames
tea shop, vegetable stall, barefoot children
old men riding bicycles shakily along the dusty street

(Kashyapa? eighteen years of pomp)

the slow seethe of living:
 cattle, paddy fields, spices, vegetables
 cooking pots, festivals, temple and forest
calamity, recovery, endurance, survival
and millennia of labour in the fields

MIHINTALE

for Jan

blossom scattered on
 worn steps of a granite staircase
ascending between grey-barked trees

a valley
choked with oak and frangipani

 arboreal ebb and flow
 leaf to loam to leaf to loam to leaf

a statue of a lion rampant
neatly carved scrotum and member erect

...

*a curious rock chamber, once a hermit's eyrie, and now the
trysting-place for multitudes of bats*

*his bed a level space on the rock, five feet long by two feet
broad*

it commands a most extensive view

*but, having a precipice on either side, to reach it is difficult,
to recline on it would be perilous*

...

the cave

 where Mahinda slept and sat in meditation
looks out over
forest, hills, and a half-dry tank

butterflies float up on rising draughts
wind arrives from huge distances to sway the trees
 cicadas burst into sound
then (after how long?) suddenly fall silent again

you say, in the stillness, in the pause:

*we could sit here for five minutes
and think we'd been here for ever
we could spend our whole life here
and think we'd only just arrived*

we sit looking down
 through half a mile of humid air
to an orange-robed figure walking steadily across
a small square patch of cleared forest