

*The Genesis of an Orientalist: Thomas William Rhys Davids and Buddhism in Sri Lanka*, by Ananda Wickremeratne. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1985.

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Like most of the great Orientalists, Rhys Davids has scarcely received his biographical due. He has been aptly described as the most influential Pāli scholar of modern times. He founded the Pāli Text Society, and set in train its vast output of editions and translations. Several of these were from his own hand, besides the ones he produced under other auspices. The general works in which he popularized Buddhism stand unsurpassed, in authority, eloquence and prestige. His interpretations of Buddhist ideas, designed to conform to the scientist and rationalist ideas of his time, have had an enduring influence, in the West and also in Sri Lanka and elsewhere in Asia. Yet, there have been only two brief sketches of his life, those contributed by Chalmers to the *Dictionary of National Biography* and the *Proceedings of the British Academy*.

For the present pioneering work Wickremeratne has used a variety of sources, chiefly Rhys Davids's own publications, and unpublished records of the Sri Lankan government, the Colonial Office, and the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain. But these sources are not likely, by themselves, to throw much direct light on Rhys Davids's private life and innermost thoughts. Unfortunately Rhys Davids's daughter, Miss Vivian Rhys Davids, appears to have refused to allow Wickremeratne to read such of her father's papers as were in her possession. Her aim, Wickremeratne suggests, was to discourage him from investigating the premature end of her father's career as a civil servant in Sri Lanka.

Despite this considerable obstacle, Wickremeratne casts much valuable light on Rhys Davids. Somewhat more than half this book is devoted to a detailed examination of Rhys Davids's period of ten years in Sri Lanka. Wickremeratne surveys his activities as a well-informed administrator, his archaeological researches, his close acquaintance with Buddhist monks, his study of Pāli with the learned and captivatingly unaffected Yatramulle Unnanse, and his earliest ventures in scholarly publication.

Wickremeratne then turns to the circumstances in which Rhys Davids left Sri Lanka. Various exculpatory hints as to these have been put about by friends and admirers in order to protect his reputation from those who might have been expected to assail it, the same pious motive which seems to have prompted Miss Rhys Davids's attitude to Wickremeratne's researches. But, as so often in cases such as this, the facts assumed to be safely embalmed in suppressed private papers were easily established from official records, and appear, at any rate in a latter-day perspective, to be far less

discreditable than might have been feared. As Wickremeratne soon discovered, Rhys Davids was in fact dismissed by the Civil Service.

The charges were (a) that he improperly imposed fines on his subordinates for minor lapses, and on the owners of cattle caught trespassing; and (b) that he misappropriated some of the monies. Rhys Davids could and did cite statutory and common law as well as administrative precedents in support of his actions. He may have exceeded his powers in some instances, with harsh consequences for the Sinhalese villagers involved. Nevertheless he emerges from Wickremeratne's pages not as a tyrant or a speculator but rather as the victim of a fateful train of circumstances. He had fallen foul of his immediate superior, Twynam, who seems to have been a pettifogging martinet, by a somewhat cavalier attitude towards administrative detail. By his tactlessness on one or two occasions he also lost the opportunity of winning the golden opinion of no less a person than Gregory, the governor, who shared his enthusiasm for Sinhalese archaeology. On receiving Twynam's report on the matter of the fines Gregory hurried forward the official inquiries. Besides some earlier displeasure with Rhys Davids, he was anxious to leave no room for suspicions in Sri Lanka that a white official's irregularities were being covered up.

When Gregory recommended Rhys Davids's dismissal the officials at the Colonial Office gave conflicting advice to Lord Kimberley, the Secretary of State for the Colonies. He in turn finally decided, with considerable misgivings, to follow that of his Parliamentary Under-Secretary, Knatchbull Huggysen. The latter's arguments were that Gregory, as the man on the spot, should be supported in his decision, and that it was of overriding importance to safeguard the reputation for fairness and probity of British officials in Sri Lanka. Wickremeratne's examination of this episode, an historian's rather than a judge's or counsel's is probably the best part of his book.

Wickremeratne next deals with the years during which, having returned to England, Rhys Davids established himself as an Orientalist. This part of the book covers the publication not only of his general surveys of Buddhism but also of his scholarly articles, the establishment of the Pāli Text Society, his period as the Secretary of the Royal Asiatic Society, and his role in the early moves to establish an institution for Oriental Studies in London.

Rhys Davids's ideas on Buddhism take up the final part of the book. They were shaped by his personal background and experience. His father, with whom he was intimate, was a Welsh Nonconformist Minister with a scholarly interest in English ecclesiastical history. This background could have helped, Wickremeratne suggests, to form Rhys Davids's preference for Buddhism as against Hinduism. Some passages in Davids's writings might also suggest that it shaped his sympathy for

Theravāda as against Mahāyāna and for Early Buddhism as against the Buddhism practiced in the Asian societies of his day.

Wickremeratne points out that in order to prepare for entry to the Indian Civil Service, Rhys Davids went to Germany, where a university education was cheaper than in Britain, and where it was also possible to earn something as a private tutor. He joined the University of Breslau where his Sanskrit studies under Stanzle laid the foundations of his career as an Orientalist. Unfortunately there were no sources available to Wickremeratne for a closer look either at Rhys Davids's boyhood or at his German years, during which latter he must have encountered some of the influences which formed him: not only the methods of Biblical criticism but also the theological rationalism and anti-metaphysical ideas then gaining ground in Germany.

A similar difficulty has also limited Wickremeratne with regard to Rhys Davids's reactions to Sri Lankan Buddhism. For even the diaries, quotations from which occupy a whole chapter of this book, are not private documents in which Rhys Davids might have set down his personal reactions. They were official records of his day-to-day activities which he was required to submit to his superiors. There is also little reference in this book to the influence upon Rhys Davids's approach to Buddhism of the scientific and anthropological thought of his time. He refers approvingly in his writings to ideas of Huxley and Comte. He also writes, with marked effusiveness, of Tylor's *Primitive Cultures*, which emphasized the underlying affinities of all cultures and religions whether classical or primitive.

In some shrewd glimpses Wickremeratne shows that Rhys Davids's response to Buddhism was deeply personal as well as that of a scholar glad of the chance to break new ground. "Was Rhys Davids a Buddhist?!" asks Wickremeratne. Rhys Davids himself, as Wickremeratne records, sidestepped the question. Wherein he was shrewd. For nowhere in the ancient texts are good equivalents of the terms 'Buddhist' or 'Buddhism' to be found any more than of 'Hindu' and 'Hinduism', these being the coinage of modern missionaries, who misread South Asian religious traditions in the light of Christian ideas.

In the concluding part of his work Wickremeratne shows how Rhys Davids's admiration for Buddhism and his interpretation of Buddhist ideas accorded well with the apologetical needs of English-educated Buddhists in Sri Lanka. Three generations of Protestant missionaries had criticized Buddhism. On the other hand there were Colonel Olcott and the Theosophists. The Sinhala Buddhists welcomed them as allies in Buddhist work, but were greatly concerned over their 'esoteric' approach to Buddhism. For this consisted in ignoring the texts and giving entirely new meanings to Buddhist terms so as to reconcile them with the bizarre mish-mash of Theosophy. Then there was the ineffable Annie Besant, with her espousal of

revivalist Hindu orthodoxy and her claims, which had something to do with the factional disputes among the Theosophists, that Buddhism was a not very distinctive part of Hinduism.

With the ideas and attitudes of these various critics and perverters of Buddhism, as they might have appeared in Sri Lankan eyes, Rhys Davids's own approach was markedly at variance. In his general works his emphases were quite other than those which the missionaries had made in order to ridicule Buddhism. He rejected Theosophy, plainly regarded Buddhism as the most significant tradition in South Asian religion, and wished to keep it in the forefront of European scholarly attention.

As a Sri Lankan, and an historian familiar with the records and archives, Wickremeratne has been well-placed to explore this and the other themes in Rhys Davids's life upon which he has concentrated. He seems to have worked under difficulties, but he has made a substantial contribution to the study of Rhys Davids.

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This is a biography of the important English Pāli scholar T. W. Rhys Davids (1843 – 1922), whom the author claims is now largely ignored. *The Genesis of an Orientalist* is divided into four parts: “The English Prelude”; “A Youthful Proconsul in Sri Lanka”; “The Embattled Scholar”; and “On Buddhism and Buddhists.” It is an uneven work; the best chapters detail Rhys Davids’s interval in the Ceylon Civil Service (1866–1874). Its final quarter, however, largely departs from the stated biographical aim and becomes a cluster of disparate reflections on issues pertaining to Buddhist studies and interpretation.

A brief sketch of the youth and education of Rhys Davids at Breslau (where he studied Sanskrit for three years) leads directly to the heart of the biography. Rhys Davids’s appointment to Ceylon marks the beginning of his long attachment to Theravāda Buddhism. This portion of the biography is also valuable for its description of government, economy, and society in late nineteenth-century Ceylon. The standards of entrance into government service were high, and the work was unquestionably arduous. In the course of his eight years in Ceylon, Rhys Davids served in a half-dozen locations, first as a police magistrate and ultimately as an assistant government agent. During Rhys Davids’s final appointment in Anurādhapura, he was charged with misappropriating funds received from minor fines for such matters as straying cattle. He shared the revenue from some of these fines with his servants (who helped to enforce certain aspects of the law) and to purchase a second set of administrative regulations, which the government was too miserly to provide. Rhys Davids was dismissed from the civil service by an unsympathetic administration on frail charges of tax abuse.

How Rhys Davids overcame this stigma and entered fully, even passionately, into Buddhist scholarship in Britain, is the subject of part 3, which details his role as founder of the Pāli Text Society, secretary of the Royal Asiatic Society, and, finally, professor of comparative religion at Manchester (1901 – 1915). This segment of the biography contains as well interesting notes on British attitudes toward training and preparation for Asiatic civil service. Unlike continental Europe, where Asian history and classical languages were seen as having a productive place in the education of government officers for overseas service, Britain favored a more “practical”

program of modern Asian languages and “character training.” The book also provides interesting particulars about various chairs of Asian subjects at British universities (almost all poorly funded). In part 4, Ananda Wickremeratne departs from the chronological scheme and addresses a large series of themes, essentially focused on Buddhism and its relationship to the West during Rhys Davids’s epoch. Despite a general lack of organization and argument, there are several interesting points to be found here, such as the controversial impact of Theosophy on Ceylonese Theravāda Buddhism, and Rhys Davids’s complete failure to “seriously address” Mahāyāna Buddhism.

As biography, this work has certain serious omissions. For example, it ought to have paid much more attention to the crucial role of Caroline, Rhys Davids’s celebrated scholarly wife. A photograph or two would have made the biography more lively. The text is also marred by many spelling and typographical errors (including key Pāli words) and the use of inappropriate solecisms (such as “sans”). It is not a book without merit, but it would have benefited greatly from careful editing.

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<http://www.academicroom.com/>

This book about one of the foremost orientalists of the nineteenth century also represents both a study of the confrontation of two cultures and an examination of the birth of the discipline of Buddhist studies in the West. Rhys Davids, a close associate of Max Müller and a major figure in bringing Buddhism to the attention of Europeans, has been almost forgotten today. This book seeks to commemorate the man and his contributions. But the book is more than a biography, for, as the author suggests in the epilogue, it contributes to a new understanding of the British Raj in India and Ceylon. Since Rhys Davids served during a formative period of his life as a British administrator in Sri Lanka, we glimpse in his biography the more human side of the Raj.

Wickremeratne divides the story into four parts: “The English Prelude,” “Sri Lanka,” “The Embattled Scholar,” and “On Buddhism and Buddhists.” The reader’s interest will be captured most by the second and third sections.

The second section traces Rhys Davids’s career as a young civil servant in Sri Lanka. By citing extracts from Rhys Davids’s diaries and official correspondence, the author depicts Rhys Davids’s daily life in his posts at Galle, Anurādhapura, and other places. Although some may find this section slow going, it serves to enrich our understanding of history. Here we see clearly neither the romanticized Raj of recent movies and television nor the tyrannical Raj depicted by some but, rather, the encounter of West and East in the work of one human being. Rhys Davids was probably not unrepresentative of many of the British in India. He tried as an assistant government agent at Anurādhapura to teach the villagers better and more efficient techniques for such things as agriculture and sanitation. He became frustrated at the difficulty of instilling “English ideas of industry and liberty among the people.” He noted at one point in his diary that the inhabitants of a certain village were “unwilling to cultivate the land because a devil is on the rock, but really from laziness” (p. 78). At the same time, however, his diary reveals a great compassion for and appreciation of the Sri Lankans and their culture. Respecting their traditions, Rhys Davids sought to involve the village leaders and headmen in the administration of government and to rejuvenate village councils. He had great regard for the sacred sites at

Anurādhapura and studied the *Mahāvamsa* to document for the British authorities the right of the *Sangha* to control those places.

Part 3 details Rhys Davids's career as a scholar after he was dismissed from the civil service. In this section, Wickremeratne gives a good account of the significance of Rhys Davids's scholarship in the context of the nineteenth century and the origins of Buddhist studies in the West. His books and writings provided Europe with a fresh perspective on the Buddhist traditions, which had previously been depicted primarily and with great bias by missionaries in Asia. Seeking to establish valid approaches to the interpretation of the Buddhist tradition, Rhys Davids advocated the value of the Pāli canon and founded the Pāli Text Society. He was also a major figure behind the *Sacred Books of the East*.

This section on Rhys Davids's scholarly career not only offers new insights into the origins of Buddhist Studies but also suggests the relationship that such early scholars had to the beginnings of the field of the history of religions. Confronted by an academic establishment that regarded European culture as "the only progressive culture in the world," Rhys Davids sought through his writings and lectures to convey an understanding of "alien civilizations and cultures" (p. 161). He pointed to the value of comparative religious Studies. He thought that an understanding of Buddhist civilization might correct some of the illusions that Europeans had about their superiority. He wrote, "Sinhalese have an epithet which they apply in good humored sarcasm to Europeans and which means fellows with hats, hat fellows (*Toppikarayo*). These fellows with the hats and the eighty ton guns and other signs of artistic and spiritual eminence are sometimes gifted with a sublime and admirable self-complacency" (p. 164).

For its depiction of the British period in Sri Lanka, as well as for its contribution to our understanding of the origins of Buddhist studies, this book has significance. It shows us Rhys Davids as a real person dedicated to helping the Sri Lankans both as an administrator and as a scholar. The book might have been even richer if the author, as he tells us in the introduction, had been able to obtain Rhys Davids's personal papers, which are now in the possession of his daughter. Despite being deprived of this resource, however, Wickremeratne has written an admirable book that should interest scholars and readers concerned with either South Asia or Buddhist studies.

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