



THE NATIONAL TRUST – SRI LANKA LECTURE ON
THURSDAY 29TH AUGUST 2019

“A CONCEPT FOR A POLICY, A SHORT HISTORY OF NUWARA ELIYA”

By Deshamanya Vidya Jyothi Ashley De Vos

The 119th Session of the Monthly Lecture Series of the National Trust - Sri Lanka will be held at the HNB Auditorium, 22nd Floor, HNB Towers, 479 T.B. Jayah Mawatha, Colombo 10 at 6.30p.m. on Thursday 29th August 2019.

Dr. John Davy came across the plains by accident in 1819. Coming up and crossing the KotmaleUva boundary through thick forests, infested with elephants, Davy and his group descended into the Nuwara Eliya plains. A valley fifteen to twenty miles in circumference and of an average height of 5300 ft. above the level of the sea. The Boundary Mountains covered in thick leach infested forests, with flora similar to the botanical varieties found on the Namunucula range. The dark and gloomy quality of the thick virgin forests often highlighted by the presence of the red rhododendrons added to the excitement of the new discovery. The valley was completely devoid of any form of human habitation, but was very rich in wildlife, especially elephants.

H.W.Cave, writing a century later in the late 1890's, states, "There is probably no other place in the world that possesses such a remarkable combination of attractions as Nuwara Eliya. 7500 miles from London, 6 degrees north of the Equator, 6200 ft above the sea, lies this unique retreat. Up to now practically inaccessible must now become familiar to thousands. Similar to the West Highlands of Scotland, one can enjoy the purest, invigorating air and temperature, but yet look down upon a luxuriant tropical country at the feet. If necessary within an hours walk one could leave the moist atmosphere and reach the dry hills and sunny plains."

"From the base of the mighty upheaval rise abruptly four extensive ledges, at different elevations and a number of lofty mountains, some of which reach the height of 5.000-8,000ft above sea level. The highest called Pidurutalagala, reaches 8280ft and at the foot of it lies the Nuwara Eliya plain, just 2000 ft below. Its position is roughly speaking, in the centre of the highlands and approximately at the highest elevation, overtopped by only one of the mountain ledges. What wonder, then, at its pure and unpolluted air and its marvellous effects on the enervated constitutions of denizens of the low country, who use it as a sanatorium for recruiting the energies they have lost."

Governor Barnes who on knowing of its existence, personally surveyed the valley in 1828 and proposed to the Secretary of the Colonies, that it may be suitable for use as a convalescent post. Thus, saving the inconvenience and expense of sending individuals to Europe for the recovery of their health. He also recorded its military importance stating that Kandy and Badulla were within easy reach of the valley.

The early roads or paths into Nuwara Eliya were the tracks or trails used by elephants. After eight months of study Captain Dawson created a new road trace from Kandy to Nuwara Eliya, which Governor Barnes recommended in his report to be executed in the near future.

Barnes also records the temperature as hardly reaching 70 degrees Fahrenheit and descends as low as 29 degrees F. In the first ever printed report of an Assistant Government Agent, A. King in 1867 refers to the temperature constantly dropping below Zero, the frost covered landscape and the heat of the Maturata Valley, from 4000 ft onwards, an almost unbroken belt of virgin forest. "At the top of the elevated country the land is depressed and in the hollow so formed is situated Nuwara Eliya".

It is also probable, from geological evidence, that the whole valley was one time an extensive lake, which broke through and flowed out down the mountain slopes. Today, this prehistoric water body is reduced to only the stream that flows at the bottom of the valley, the lower end of which was dammed by Governor Gregory to form the lake, which in some small way is indicative of the original landscape.

The fact that the name Nuwara Eliya is referred to in traditional folklore shows that its existence as a place was known. Dr. John Davy, the European discoverer of the plains, records that the native guides called it 'Neuraellia-pattan'.



Ashley de Vos is the Senior Vice President of The National Trust – Trained as an Architect, a Landscape Architect, in Conservation and Heritage Management and in Urban renewal. Fellow of the Sri Lanka Institute of Architects and Member of the Royal Institute of British Architects for 46 years.

He was a full time Faculty at the University of Moratuwa, today serves as Visiting Faculty & Examiner in the Departments of Architecture, Design, Urban design and Landscape Architecture. He has also been a Visiting Faculty at the International Centre for Conservation, Rome (ICCROM) – Italy, University of Baghdad – Iraq, East West Encounter, East West Centre, University of Honolulu, Institute of South Asian Studies, University of Amsterdam – Netherlands, Lahore College of Arts, Lahore – Pakistan, The National Centre for Conservation, Restoration & Museum Sciences, Havana – Cuba and the Asia-Pacific Cultural Centre for UNESCO (ACCU) & Nara National Research Institute for Cultural Properties, Nara – Japan.

He has won the following awards ‘South Asian Architect of the Year’ International Award (1996, 1998 & 2004). Seven Design Awards from the SLIA and a Life time Achievement Award from the Sri Lanka Institute of Architects (2009). Two PATA Heritage Awards (Dutch Period Museum Project 1980, Jetavana Project 1982). Winner of the National e-Swabhimani Award for the animated film, a “Day in the life of the Jetavana Monastery at Anuradhapura” (2010).

Archt. De Vos was the Chairman, required to the report on a Tourism Master Plan for the East Coast, Sri Lanka presented to Hon Milinda Moragoda, Minister of Tourism. Is the current President, Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka, Past President of ICOMOS (Sri Lanka), and Wildlife & Nature Protection Society of Sri Lanka, was Director Conservation of the UNESCO/CCF Jetavana Stupa and Monastery Project and Director General of the Galle Tsunami Rehabilitation Project after the 2004 Tsunami, is a Member of the Advisory Board of the Department of Archaeology, was a Member of the Galle Heritage Trust, Central Environment Authority, Governing Council, University of Moratuwa, Katubedde and Board of Governors of the Arthur C. Clarke Centre, Katubedde.

He has also been Elevated to National Status, as Vidya Jyothi, (Light of Science 1994), Desamanya, (Pride of the Nation, 2006), in recognition of the continued contribution to Architecture, Conservation and protection of the Environment. The Jathika Uruma Prasada Pranama (Protector of Cultural Heritage of Sri Lanka, 2014) in recognition of continued efforts to protect the Cultural Heritage of Sri Lanka.

Since 1976 – 1990, he has been Partner / Director, Design Group Five International and from 1990 to date in practice as Ashley de Vos Consultants.

The National Trust – Sri Lanka conducts monthly lectures on the last Thursday of each month. The lectures are open to the members and the public at a nominal fee. The HNB Sustainability Foundation is the principal sponsor of the events of the National Trust – Sri Lanka.

Further information can be obtained from the Trust Office Tel 2682730 / 0778081214 at the Post Graduate Institute of Archaeology, 407 Baudhaloka Mawatha, Colombo 7. Members please bring your Membership Card and Invitation if available.