

LETTER FROM CEYLON

Reginald Heber (1783–1826), Anglican Bishop of Calcutta (1823–1826)

to Mary Allanson Heber (1767–), his mother

Point de Galle, 27 September 1825

I write from a small port near the southern extremity of Ceylon, where we are waiting for a fair wind in order to embark for Calcutta, and where I am happy to steal the first few moments of leisure which have occurred to me for some time, to tell you that we are all three well, that we have received good accounts of our dear little Harriet, and that we are thus far prosperously advanced in our voyage to rejoin her.

We left Bombay, where I had been detained much longer than I expected, on the 15th of last month, and had a favorable voyage to this island, of which we have now seen a considerable portion. All which we have seen is extremely beautiful, with great variety of mountain, rock, and valley covered from the hill-tops down to the sea with unchanging verdure and, though so much nearer the Line, enjoying a cooler and more agreeable temperature than either Bombay or Calcutta. Here I have been more than ever reminded of the prints and descriptions in Cook's *Voyages*. The whole coast of the island is marked by the same features, a high white surf dashing against coral rocks, which, by the way, though they sound very romantically, differ little in appearance from sand-stone; a thick grove of cocoa-trees, plantains, and bread-fruit thrusting their roots into the very shingles of the beach, and hanging their boughs over the spray; low thatched cottages scattered among the trees, and narrow canoes, each cut out of the trunk of a single tree, with an out-rigger to keep it steady, and a sail exactly like that used in Otaheite.

The people, too, who differ both in language and appearance from those of Hindustan, are still more like the South Sea islanders, having neither turban nor cap, but their long black hair fastened in a knot behind, with a large tortoise-shell comb, and seldom any clothing but a cotton cloth round their waist, to which the higher ranks add an old-fashioned blue coat, with gold or silver lace, and a belt and hanger to match, a fashion which they apparently received from their Dutch conquerors, and which has a very whimsical appearance. The Canadians, who inhabit the interior of the island, and whose country, as you know, was conquered by the English about ten years ago, wear a more showy dress, and one more uniformly Oriental. They are now all tolerably reconciled to our government, as well as the Cingalese, or inhabitants of the sea-coast, and their chiefs are rapidly acquiring a knowledge of our language and imitating our customs.

We went up with the Governor, Sir Edward Barnes,¹ who, as well as Lady Barnes, have shown us much attention and kindness, to Kandy, where I preached, administered the sacrament, and confirmed twenty-six young people in the audience-hall of the late King of Kandy,² which now serves as a church. Here, twelve years ago, this man, who was a dreadful tyrant and lost his throne in consequence of a large party of his subjects applying to General Brownrigg³ for protection, used, as we were told, to sit in state to see those whom he had condemned trodden to death and tortured by elephants trained for the purpose; and now, in this very place, an English governor and an English congregation, besides many converted natives of the island, were sitting peaceably to hear an English bishop preach!

Christianity has made, perhaps, a greater progress in this island than in all India besides. The Dutch, while they governed the country, took great pains to spread it, and the black preachers whom they left behind, and who are still paid by the English government, show a very great reverence for our Common Prayer, which is translated into their language, and a strong desire to be admitted members of the Church of England. One excellent man, named Christian David, I ordained last year in Calcutta, and there are several more in training.

¹ Lieutenant-General Sir Edward Barnes (1776–1838), British Governor of Ceylon (1820–1822 and 1824–1831)

² Sri Vikrama Rajasinha (1780–1832), King of Kandy (1798–1815)

³ General Robert Brownrigg (1759–1833), British Governor of Ceylon (1813–1820)

There are also some very meritorious missionaries in the island. One of them is the son of our neighbor, Mr. Mayor of Shawbury, who, together with another Shropshire man, Mr. Ward, has got together a very respectable congregation of natives, as well as a large school, and built a pretty church, which I consecrated last Sunday, in one of the wildest and most beautiful situations I ever saw.

The effects of these exertions have been very happy, both among the Roman Catholic descendants of the Portuguese and the heathen. I have confirmed, since I came into the island, three hundred and sixty persons, of whom only sixty were English; and in the great church at Colombo I pronounced the blessing in four different languages—English, Portuguese, Cingalese, and Tamil.

Those who are still heathen are professedly worshippers of Buddha; but by far the greater part reverence nothing except the Devil, to whom they offer sacrifices by night, that he may do them no harm. Many of the nominal Christians are infected with the same superstition, and are therefore not acknowledged by our missionaries. Otherwise, instead of three hundred to be confirmed, I might have had several thousand candidates.

Many thanks for the kind trouble you took to get subscriptions for the female schools at Calcutta. I hope we shall be able to raise nearly money enough for them in India. On the whole, I rejoice to believe that in very many parts of this great country “the fields are white already to harvest;” and it is a circumstance of great comfort to me that in all the good which is done, the Church of England seems to take the lead, that our Liturgy has been translated into the five languages most used in these parts of the world, and that all Christian sects in the East seem more and more disposed to hold it in reverence. Still, little, very little, is done in comparison with all which is to do.

The Young Man's Book of Classical Letters (Grigg and Elliot: Philadelphia, 1841):27–30.