
REMINISCENCES OF GALLE

Joe Simpson

Galle: As Quiet As Asleep By Norah Roberts, Vijitha Yapa Publications (Colombo), 2005; softcover (2nd edition) - 499 pages; Rs. 899/=

Never to be confused with the American best-selling romance novelist of the same name, Norah Roberts, who survived well into her nineties, was born near Colombo in 1907, one of fourteen children from several marriages of T. W. Roberts, an Anglo-Barbadian Ceylon Civil Servant, Oxford scholar and cricketer *par excellence* who became District Judge in Galle. After severe hearing loss in her late twenties drove her from teaching, Norah ran the Galle Fort Library (est. 1871) for four decades until she retired in 1982. I clearly remember first meeting Norah, then in her late sixties, one hot and humid morning in September 1973 when, as a newly arrived VSO English teacher at Richmond College, I paid my dues to become a member of the quaint old library on Church Street, next to the Fort Post Office (Judge Roberts, then still alive in his nineties, had long migrated to England). It was only a couple of years before she finally 'retired' in her mid-seventies that the tireless Norah (who never married) began her self-appointed Herculean task, never before attempted, of writing the "compleat" history of Galle from its earliest days. It would dominate the next ten years of her life.

This is the long-awaited 2nd edition of Norah Roberts' resulting factfile of Sri Lanka's southern capital, first published by Aitken Spence Printing Ltd., Colombo in 1993. Thanks to editor Michael Roberts, Norah's much-younger half brother and a newly retired anthropology professor from the University of Adelaide, Galle *aficionados* finally have another 'window of opportunity' to lay their hands on a Sri Lankan modern classic, for far too long out of print and virtually unobtainable. Dr Roberts reveals in his preface that, because the original printers had not preserved the master copy of the 1st edition, its entire text had to be computer-scanned for this new edition. Definitely, then, this has been a labour of love, enhanced by the intimacy of some Roberts family snapshots added to the back of this new edition, in my view an inspired editorial decision. Photographer

Dominic Sansoni's superb images of Galle Fort are an added bonus.

Another glory of this new edition is Prof. Albert Dharmasiri's red-and-gold front cover design, initially the brainchild of Sri Lanka's doyen architect and art historian, Ismeth Raheem: it depicts a fantastical 19th century Galle Fort, from the Australian artist Donald Friend's richly colourful *City of Galle*, a six-metre-wide mural painted in 1961 for the Colombo office of Mackinnon Mackenzie & Co., P&O's long-time East of Suez shipping agents. (Readers will find Friend's complete masterpiece, showing the crescent-shaped Harbour filled with ships, reproduced on the book's inside front cover.) Evoking the "fair field full of folk" in the vision of the poet Langland's fictional Piers Plowman as he dreamed on medieval England's Malvern Hills, the front cover illustration perfectly complements Norah's own glorious gallimaufry of Galle characters, whom she describes as having lived in "a medieval town, overpowering in its beauty." To bring us back to earth, the publisher has inserted another, more realistic image, that unfolds from within the new edition's back cover a truly startling panorama of the town's devastated bus station and cricket ground, with Galle Fort looming behind, photographed just after the December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami.

As a "people's historian" who found her craft late in life, Norah Roberts was really a soul-mate of the late "Grandma" Moses, America's famed octogenarian folk-artist – both autodidacts, their creations are similarly imbued with a purity of spirit, a freshness and bold vigour not always found among the trained 'professionals.' Donald Friend's description of his 1961 mural –*the design of it simple, the details unimaginably complicated*–applies also to Norah's own sweeping panorama of Galle. "The Devil is in the details," and in Norah's book sharp-eyed readers will notice the small inaccuracies that pepper the text, perhaps inevitably in a wide-sweeping chronicle that draws on such variegated original and secondary source material, both written and oral. As her brother Michael rightly comments, it would be the work of decades to correct them all. In the final analysis, however, it

scarcely matters for like Friedl's mural—the ultimate product is *sui generis*, with an integrity all of its own.

The design of it simple – fifteen chapters in all, beginning with a poetic sentence that sets the tone of the whole book: “Galle is the capital of the Southern Province, a quiet town dreaming by the sea.” Norah begins her saga with the Ramā-Ravana legend about the origin of the low hills that surround the crescent-shaped harbour, and observes that no Sinhala chronicle mentions Galle before the 12th century – never an ancient royal seat, it escaped royal battles. The visits of the Moorish traveller Ibn Batuta in 1344, and the Chinese general Cheng Ho in 1409, receive due mention, setting the stage for Galle's historic role as a trade emporium, if not actually the Tarshish of the Old Testament. The colonial Dutch compelled their retired marine pilots to remain in Galle, so fearful were they of precious information getting into the wrong hands. Norah tells us she once knew an old lady who remembered the dancing on the platform as the first train rolled into Galle Station in 1891! From sailing ships to pigeon-post, to an 1848 lighthouse shipped from London that burned down in 1939, to bustling Victorian-era hotels crammed with steamship passengers, to Sinhalese *medalalis* and Moorish gem merchants... Portuguese, Dutch and finally British invaders come and go. For Galle, as Norah reminds us, is “the heritage of not only Lankans, but of all mankind”.

No dry compendium of historical events, Norah's chronicle is first and foremost about the *people* of Galle down the years, in all their glorious multi-ethnicity. Her chapter on the history of the Ceylon Moors (Muslims) is a salutary reminder, in these polarized times of “Dubya” Bush and the “neo-cons”,

that Islam was once widely regarded as a far greater civilizing influence on the world than the Christian West. Who could ever forget her image of the gem dealer S.M. Naina Marikan, “slim, fair, gentle in manner,” walking past the Fort Library on his way to work at the NOH, decade after decade, resplendent in his coal sarong and tall hat? Reading about the old Muslim families, I was reminded of gentle old Magdon Ismail, an elder whom I encountered during one technicolour sunset on the ramparts over thirty years ago, his prophet-like robe fluttering wildly in the brisk sea breezes as he spoke of Islamic philosophy. Or the little Muslim girls who peeped shyly through the curtains of covered bullock carts, now sadly disappeared from Galle Fort, as I rode along behind on my ancient bicycle.

For anyone acquainted with some of the old families of Galle, and wishing to know more, Norah's book will ever remain a goldmine of information – Ephraums, de Vos, Bartholomeusz, Ludowyk, the “Closenbergs” Pereraras, Amarasinghe, Dahanayake, Macan Marikan, they are all here, and many, many more besides. It is indeed “a fair field full of folk.” Many of these grand old families have long since departed Galle, their modern descendants scattered around the globe in the great Lankan diaspora, enriching other cultures as they once enriched Sri Lanka. For them, especially, *Galle: As Quiet As Asleep* is a testimonial, *à la recherche du temps perdu* – but also a roadmap for what, one hopes, will be a better future for the island that its late author chronicled with such boundless affection and optimism. Norah's final words perhaps best sum up this marvellous book's fiercely determined spirit: *Grow with me / The best is yet to be – 'dear Galle'!* ■

Joe Simpson is a Canadian who taught at Richmond College, Galle, as a voluntary teacher.

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