



SIR ERNEST DE SILVA

ADM IT 1907; CALL 1912

SRI LANKAN PHILANTHROPIST



INNER TEMPLE
LIBRARY

MEMBERS PROFILES

PROFILE

Albert Ernest de Silva (known as Ernest), the banker, businessman, philanthropist and philatelist, was born in Colombo, British Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) in 1887. His family was extremely wealthy; his father, the businessman Albert Emmanuel de Silva, owned more than 10,000 acres of land and was arguably the richest man in Ceylon in the early 20th century. Ernest was educated at Royal College, Colombo and Clare College, Cambridge (alongside Jawaharlal Nehru, a close friend), and joined the Inner Temple. He was called to the Bar in 1912. He married Evadne Lukshmini Gunasekera the following year, with whom he had six children. After Ceylon's independence in 1948, she became one of the country's first female senators.

De Silva owned thousands of acres of land, including the 1200-acre Salawa estate (used as a rubber plantation) and land in the expensive Cinnamon Gardens area of Colombo; at current prices, the latter property would be worth approximately £400 million. His company exported Ceylonese produce, mainly to the UK and Europe: graphite, coconut, cinnamon, cacao, rubber and tea. In 1939 he became the founder-chairman of the Bank of Ceylon, the first state-aided bank indigenous to the country; he was also the governor of the State Mortgage Bank.

As well as for his business and banking work, de Silva was known for his philanthropy. He donated money and land to a vast number of charitable causes. He and his wife founded the first orphanage in Ceylon, donating 9 acres of land in the suburb of Katunayake, Negombo, for the purpose. He established the country's first tuberculosis sanatorium and donated a cinnamon and coconut estate to fund its expenses, also serving as the President of the Ceylon National Association for the Prevention of Tuberculosis. He provided the country's first X-ray machine when he funded a Radiology unit for the National Hospital in memory of his father. He funded the building of four major schools, all of which provided free education. Many of his philanthropic activities were linked to his Buddhist faith: in 1911 he purchased the island of Polgasduwa and donated it to the Venerable Nyanatiloka Mahathera, a German Buddhist monk, to set up a hermitage. In 1923 he built a temple, the Veluvanaramaya; he was the President of the Young Men's Buddhist Association and the founding chairman of the Kalutara Bodhi Trust, a humanitarian charity founded on Buddhist principles in 1951.

De Silva was an enthusiastic and successful stamp collector, with a world-class collection; it was said to be second only to that of King George V. It included the Penny Black and the orange-red "Post Office" Mauritius one-penny stamp; issued in 1847, this is one of the rarest and most valuable stamp designs in the world (the next issue of stamps, produced the following year, changed the wording from "Post Office" to "Post Paid"). De Silva gave this stamp to his cousin, Sir Cyril de Zoysa, to fund the construction of the YMBA headquarters. A talented billiards player, he was the patron of the Ceylon Amateur Billiards Association; he was also the President of the Ceylon Turf Club and twice won the Governor's Cup with his horses Louvello and L'Allegro.

On 1 January 1946 de Silva was knighted by King George VI for his services to Ceylon, becoming Sir Ernest de Silva. Flower Road, the location of his mansion, was renamed Sir Ernest de Silva Mawatha, and a stamp was issued in his honour. After Ceylon became independent, a cause which was close to de Silva's heart, he was offered the post of Governor-General, but declined.

Sir Ernest de Silva died on 9 May 1957. His home, Sirimathipaya Mansion, is now the office of the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka. He is remembered for his integrity, honesty and generosity; at his funeral the Prime Minister, S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, thanked him for his services to the country, saying he was "a true gentleman in every sense of the word".

BIBLIOGRAPHY

The Sunday Times, 20 May 2007

<http://www.sundaytimes.lk/070520/Plus/pls13.html>

