

PROF. T.W. RHYS DAVIDS, 1843 – 1922

By: Richard Alexander

The scene was a court-house in Sri Lanka, then known as Ceylon, and the learned but youthful magistrate was a Colcestrian who had entered the Ceylon Civil Service in 1886 when it was a British Colony. A case regarding the occupation of a village temple came before him and a document was produced in court as evidence in a language that no one present could understand. There was a lull in the proceedings of the court and since no one could be found who would offer a translation of this document, the case was postponed. Enquiries revealed that this language was Pali in the Canon and commentaries of Buddhism were first recorded.

The magistrate was no other than Thomas William Rhys Davids, the eldest son of Rev. Thomas William Davids, the Pastor of the Lion Walk Congregational Church of Colchester, Essex, England, in 1841. His mother was Mrs. Louisa Davids (nee Louisa Winter), the founder and first Superintendent of the Lion Walk Girls' Sunday School. The Rev. Davids was an ecclesiastical historian and had to his credit two histories of the Church in the 'Annals of Evangelical Non-conformity in the County of Essex (1863)' and the Annals of Reformers before the reformation,' which he could not finish. It is on record that Mrs. Louisana Davids wrote a competitive essay on Sunday School work and was awarded a prize of £100.00. She was also the author of a Sunday School Hymn Book. Thomas William Rhys Davids was born in Colchester, probably in St. John's Green, on May 12, 1843.

This seeming trivial incident in a court of law in Sri Lanka had far-reaching effects, for it fired the imagination of young Rhys Davids to such an extent that he "felt like some watcher of the skies when a new planet swims into his ken." Sanskrit, he had already studied at Breslau University in Germany where he took the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. Now he was drawn to the study of the Pali Language and incidentally of 'orthodox' Buddhism. His philological knowledge soon helped him to begin his study of Pali, which was the language spoken by the majority of the people in Northern India at the time of the Buddha. He became a devoted pupil of the famous Sinhalese Scholar of Buddhism, the monk Yatremulla, and made such rapid strides in grasping the Pali Language that he was soon able to copy and understand the ancient inscriptions in the ruined cities of ancient Sri Lanka, and also study the history of Buddhism. After ten years of devoted study he returned to England where he was called to the bar by the Middle Temple in 1877, but he practised little, devoting most of his time to the study and interpretation of Buddhism.

Dr. Rhys Davids soon embarked on a career which not only marked the beginnings of a great research-worker in the field of Buddhist research, but also brought to the lime light a new and brilliant scholar who could unravel the mysteries of Eastern lore for the benefit of the Western world. His life's work had begun, and he set himself a task which by all standards appeared to be colossal. His aim in his own words, "was to render accessible to students the rich stories of the earliest Buddhist literature now lying unedited and practically unused in the various manuscripts scattered throughout the University and other Public Libraries of Europe." His first publication was "Ancient Coins and Measures of Ceylon (1877)." This was followed in 1878 by 'Buddhism' in the series on Non-Christian Religions issued by the Society for promoting Christian Knowledge in London. By 1914 this volume had run into the 28th. edition. This was indeed a very valuable book in the eyes of the Western scholars of that period since he gave a very realistic interpretation to the much misunderstood word 'Nirvana' by quoting certain passages from the 'Tripitaka'. The 'Tripitaka' was the Buddhist Canon and it consisted of three parts known as 'Vinaya Pitaka' (Basket of discipline), 'Sutta Pitaka' (Basket of discourse) and 'Abhidamma Pitaka' (Basket of ultimate doctrine). Nirvana, as he understood it, was not annihilation in the sense often given to it, but "a moral condition to be reached here, in this world and in this life." It was in other words, an ethical state (Holiness) to be reached here and now. It also meant the annihilation of 'raga' (craving), 'dosa' (aversion) and 'moha' (delusion) to reach what may be termed the 'summum bonum'. Backed by his knowledge and interpretation of the 'Tripitaka', "The Buddhist heaven", he fearlessly wrote, "is not death, and it is not on death but on a perfect life here and now, that the Tripitaka dwell in those terms of ecstatic description which they applied to Arahatsip, the goal of the Excellent Way, and to Nirvana as one aspect of it.." "The very gods envy the blessed state of those who, here on earth, escaped from the floods of passion, have gained the fruit of the Noble Path, and have become cleansed from all defilement, free for ever from all delusion and all sorrow, in that Rest which cannot be broken – the Nirvana of Arahatsip which can never be lost." Arahatsip was an ethical state which was reached by the enlightened disciples of the Buddha. These interpretations of Dr. Rhys Davids have stood the test of time.

Dr. Rhys Davids' unique scholarship in Pali brought him not only a reputation but also an ever-increasing band of scholars who rallied round him. It was in the province of translation that he shone most. In 1880 he began a translation of the 'Jataka' book containing the Birth Stories of the Buddha. This book was published in 1925 under the title of the Buddhist Birth Stories (Jataka Tales). His contribution to the well-known series 'The Sacred Books of the East' under the editorship of Prof. Max Muller, in the form of translations of the Buddhist Suttas or Discourses followed in 1881. It was at this time that he founded what

is known to this day as the 'Pali Text Society', an important landmark in English Buddhist Studies. The aim of this society which was manned by research scholars from time to time, was to critically edit and publish the Buddhist manuscripts which were lying unused in libraries. His untiring labour in the field of Buddhist Studies brought to this society an honoured place in the English speaking world. His energy and enthusiasm made it possible for all the Pali Tripitaka to be edited and published. The Pali Text Society is respected today for the noble record of work it has to its credit, and the true scholarly spirit of its founder and his band of scholars has been a shining example to those who have followed them in their wake. An outstanding scholar who shared the burden of his translations, and also produced her own reviews and editorials, was Dr. Rhys Davids's wife, Caroline Augusta, daughter of Rev. John Foley, Vicar of Wadhurst, Sussex. She was a most devoted and accomplished helper and her name will hold an honoured place in the Buddhist Studies.

Honours came thick on Dr. Rhys Davids. In 1892 he was appointed Professor of Pali in the University College, London. He became the secretary of the Royal Asiatic Society (1885-1905). In 1904 Prof. Rhys Davids accepted the chair of Comparative Religion in the Victoria University, Manchester, the first University post created for that purpose. He became the first president of the Buddhist Society of Great Britain and Ireland in 1907. He was also a founder member of the British Academy. In 1915 he resigned his Manchester University Professorship and retired to Chipstead in Surrey, but by this time he was full of years as well as honours, for he had to his credit an LL.D. degree from the University of Edinburgh, the title of Doctor of letters from Manchester and a Doctor of Science from Copenhagen and Sheffield. But it was not to be a retirement from work for he still continued to labour on perhaps the greatest achievement of this life's work and that was the preparation of the new Pali Dictionary which was to contain all new words, the unusual grammatical forms and peculiar application and meanings of the Pali Language that most of his research had disclosed. With the help of Dr. W. Stede he struggled on even at the feeble age of 78, often interrupted by illness, to publish in 1921 the first part of the Pali Dictionary. He did not live to see the second edition of the Dictionary, for shortly after the third part of the first edition was published, he died of hypostatic pneumonia.

Looking back on the career and life of Prof. Rhys Davids we are struck by his great devotion to a task that he set himself to do. Such devotion is rare in this world. Such single-mindedness of the purpose in the pursuit of Truth within oneself is rarer, but above all these it is his general outlook as a humble individual in the great international Brotherhood of Man, that we have to admire and follow. His outlook arose far beyond the limits of the Pali Language which he mastered, or Buddhism from which he drew his inspiration. It rose to

ethereal heights. A very characteristic passage from one of his lectures delivered 1881, and showing how he felt in regard to the fruits of his research, runs thus: “It is not too much to say that a New World has been once more discovered by adventurers as persevering as Columbus and perhaps at present earning as little gratitude as he did from his contemporaries; and that the inhabitants of the Old World cannot, if they would, go back to the quiet times when the New World was not because it was unknown. Everyone to whom the entrancing story of Man’s gradual rise and progress has charms particularly its own, will welcome the new Light; others will have to face the new facts, and find room for them in their conception of the world’s history - that history which is the Epic of Humanity. Happy are we if the strains of that epic are ever ruling in our hearts! An abiding sense of the long past whose beginnings are beyond imagination, and of the long future whose end we cannot realise, may fill us indeed with a knowledge of our own insignificance – the bubbles on the stream which flash into light for a moment and are seen no more. But it will perhaps bring us nearer to a sense of the Infinite than Man in his clearest moments, in his deepest moods, can ever otherwise hope to reach. It will enable us to appreciate what is meant by the Solidarity of Man, and will fill us with an overpowering awe and wonder at the immensity of that series of which we are but a few of the tiny links. And the knowledge of what Man has been in distant time, in far-off lands, under the influence of ideas which at first sight seem to us so strange, will strengthen within us that reverence, sympathy and love which must follow on a realisation of the mysterious complexity of being – past, present, and to come – that is wrapped up in every human life.”

Though Prof. Rhys Davids has built for himself “an edifice more lasting than bronze” – *monumentum aere perennius* – it would be singularly unfortunate if the present generation of Colcestrians should be so lacking in gratitude to such an illustrious fellow-countryman as to relegate him to the limbo of the distant and forgotten past.