

Sri Lankan Poetry in English: Getting Beyond the Colonial Heritage

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THE CONTINUING AND growing vitality during the last three decades of Sri Lankan literature in English seems to be disproving the prophecies of gloom and doom made periodically about it. In 1964, in *The Ceylon Observer*, Ashley Halpe said: "Now, after more than a hundred years of Ceylonese writing in English, we can at last see the approach of the end. For those who have kept a finger on the pulse, the realisation must surely be accompanied by relief. Nothing of major significance has been achieved, nor is such an achievement likely in the short future that remains" (2). In 1971, in his review-article "New Ceylon English," T. Kandiah argued: "there is no distinctively *Ceylonese* style for creative writing in English. If a distinctively Ceylonese style of writing had ever had a moment when it could have come into being, the creative writers had missed it" (91-92). In 1981, in her "Introduction" to *An Anthology of Modern Writing from Sri Lanka*, Ranjini Obeyesekere asserted: "For the most part, the prognosis for creative writing in English in Sri Lanka is gloomy. As has been the case with the English theatre in Sri Lanka, creative writing in English is unlikely to have the chance for survival that its counterpart in India has" (17). But Sri Lanka's English writers have reached particularly in the field of poetry a degree of achievement that compares favourably in quality with good poetry in English anywhere.

As in many countries, the colonial period in Sri Lanka was, despite fitful flashes, generally an era of mean achievement as far as original writing in English was concerned; it did produce the novel *The Village in the Jungle* (1913), still the finest imaginative work