



# VISUAL POSSESSION: LANDSCAPE PAINTING IN BRITISH CEYLON

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## Abstract

Cultural theorists consider landscape as a signifying system of great political and social importance. Hence, landscape offers enormous promise as an object of study, in relation to both structural political practices and individual intentions. The genre of landscape painting was introduced to Ceylon through European Colonialism, not only as a mode of artistic endeavor but also as a tool of governance, as in the case of surveying and mapping. Hence, landscapes were closely associated with colonial power discourse. Through a visual analysis of 19<sup>th</sup> century landscape paintings of Ceylon produced by visiting painters, engineers and military officers associated with the British imperialist regime, this paper attempts to investigate the 'look' that framed the painter's power relationship to the land at a particular moment of history. It also reveals how compositional devices were invested in making colonialist claims, and how social hierarchies between locals and rulers were built.

**Key words:** Landscape, power, colonialism, picturesque, panorama

## Introduction

Critical opinion has often attributed the emergence of landscape painting as a genre to the history of imperialism. Kenneth Clark, in his pioneering work on landscape painting, identified it 'as a chief artistic creation of nineteenth-century England' (Clark, 1949). Later historians, while acknowledging Britain's contribution, also referred back to its precedence in other cultures. They pointed out that landscape painting could be traced back to European landscape art of the fifteenth century that spread with trade and empire to more distant outposts of British and European cultural influence (Helsing, 2008). Another intervention was made by W. J. T. Mitchell, who contested the idea of locating the origins of landscape painting in Europe by shedding light on the Chinese contribution to landscape painting and landscaping environment. He further argued that the emergence of landscape painting in China, Japan, Rome, seventeenth-century Holland and France, and eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain establishes the connection of the genre with imperialism (Mitchell, 2002:9). In like manner, Edward Said, in a discussion of the great voyages of geographical discovery stretching from Vasco da Gama to Captain Cook, argued that 'they were motivated not only by curiosity and

scientific fervour, but also by the aspiration to dominate' (Said quoted in Mitchell, 2002:247). Thus, as has been suggested by Mitchell (2002: 5-34), 'representation of landscape is not only a matter of internal politics and national or classical ideology but also an international, global phenomenon, intimately bound to the discourse of imperialism.'

As a cultural phenomenon, other historical factors and cultural actors, besides imperialism, mediated the emergence and spread of landscape painting as well. Patt explains how seventeenth-century scientific revolutions in thinking and a new worldview, coupled with the mechanistic view of nature, significantly shaped the landscape as an object of study that furthered colonial trade, medicine and military interests (Pratt, 1992). Thus, picturing, mapping, mirroring and representing the world emerged as the only reliable way of knowing that produced a modern consciousness of the self that was based on territoriality. Nicholas Green emphasized that 'it was the material conditions and cultural developments germane to capital that generated those vocabularies of looking which were capable of bringing nature into visibility as a significant form of social experience.' (Green quoted in Hirsh 1995:7) It can therefore be inferred that landscape painting is a bourgeois form of authority and a 'way of seeing fashioned by capitalism' that displaced older aristocratic historical painting (Berger, 1972, Birmingham quoted in Mitchell, 2002:8). Denis E. Cosgrove argues that landscape constitutes a discourse through which identifiable social groups historically formed themselves and their relation both with the land and with other human groups, and that this discourse is closely related epistemologically and technically to a way of seeing (Cosgrove, 2008). Consequently, one could argue that the mechanics and the socio-economic process which determined the emergence of a bourgeois class, concomitantly contributed to the development of the landscape genre in painting as a signifying system.

Debates in the mid eighteenth century located perception as the subject of philosophical inquiry that inaugurated the most inventive period of landscape aesthetics in the West. The culture of travel, increasing leisure and a growing interest in gardening further contributed to this objectification. In Europe, the possibility of adventure in distant colonies and the prospect of painting scenes never painted before, held more attractions than, say, a visit to Italy. In this regard, voyages to the Pacific often formed the prelude to world travel. Thus, India became a key destination for many (Smith quoted in Hirsh, 1995:12). 'While in England, the aesthetic enabled a re-enchantment of the domestic rural landscape, abroad it gave free rein to alternative fantasies of ruggedness, turbulence and the primeval power of nature,' according Archer. In this context, 'all of India was seen as virgin terrain awaiting a "picturesque" invocation' (Archer, 1969:18-19).

Art historians have long noted the proliferation of landscape painting in early modern capitalist cities. In such market-dominated contexts, artworks were no

longer produced primarily by individual commission but through anonymous demand. Further, they also point out how landscape painting came to be popular among amateur painters. This situation, in a certain sense, bridged the art-craft binary. This shift in patronage and artistic engagement changed the very material presence and size of the paintings. Watercolours, prints, and the easily portable support of paper became popular media for these paintings. Their convenient transportability allowed a wide range of cross-cultural exchanges. Hence, it is evident that the expanding worldview - made possible through imperialist projects, the capitalist economy, growing scientific interest in natural history, and possibilities for long distance travel—with the available aesthetic code, bourgeois class interest, newly emerging non-aristocratic art patronage and the ready availability of art materials contributed to the emergence of landscape painting in the nineteenth century.

### **Production of a scenic colony**

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, apart from being a part of leisure activity in the private sphere of families of European elites stationed in Colombo and in plantation areas in the central hill country, landscape painting in the public domain in Ceylon existed, but not as an artistic mode. Topographical documentation operated as an objective record of an actual place, serving as a major tool of documentation, similar to the activities of surveying, mapping and collection of natural history. Common mapmaking tools like pen and ink, and watercolour tints were portable and convenient to use outdoors and in remote locations. Early topographical drawings were often the work of surveyors and mapmakers of the colonial public works department or colonial military apparatus, since the techniques of perspective and topographical drawing were regularly taught in military academies. Sumathy Ramaswamy, in her seminal work on cartography and bodyscapes in India, argues that the lack of emotional grip in scientific mapping encouraged artists to incorporate anthropomorphic forms of colonial or national states within their emblematic or cartographic forms (Ramaswamy, 2007). One could extend her argument to understand the landscape painting activities of surveyors and military officers. Perhaps, the lack of emotional expression in cartographic representations encouraged these colonial officers to paint landscapes.

In addition, a few travelling watercolour painters, both amateurs and professionals, captured the 'exotic, wild land' and its people as part of their exploration and expeditions. These painted landscapes represent the painters' longings, curiosities, expectations and prejudices about the newly possible world enabled by colonization and modernization. The primary consumers of these landscape paintings were people in the metropolis. Metropolitan others' wild and distant lands and their history—both natural and cultural—became consumable, exchangeable and portable through these paintings. Purchase of these prints,

Helsingerg argued in a different context, might have helped these consumers gain at least visual access to foreign lands. ‘They also represent circulation; they provide an analogue for experiences of touristic travel’ (Helsingerg, 2002). Landscape representation of Ceylon in the colonial period was preoccupied with three themes: scenic landscapes, archaeological sites and modern dwellings. Later, local elites learned this mode to signify their cultural capital. However, this article focuses on the scenic landscapes of European amateur and colonial painters who worked in Ceylon.

John Webber, William Alexander and Gordon Cumming documented Ceylonese landscapes in 1776, 1792 and 1802, respectively. Topographical artists like William T. Lyttleton, John Deschamps, and Charles Donatus Corbet O’Brien were stationed in Ceylon in 1814, 1828 and 1845—1866, respectively. Charles Auber, who served under the 67th Regiment, came from India to assist the British forces in Ceylon to suppress the Uva Rebellion of 1817—1818. Auber, who held the post of Deputy Assistant Quartermaster General, was retained in Ceylon because his services proved useful in topographical researches and surveys and was much required in addition to those of officers now in the Quartermaster General Staff (de Silva, 1985, Raheem, 1986). Samuel Daniell and Andrew Nicholl were two other important professional landscape painters then active in Ceylon.

### The picturesque and the ‘regional’

The *Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* defines ‘landscape’ as a large area of the countryside, especially in relation to its appearance, or a view or picture of the countryside or the art of making such pictures. Interestingly, this reveals the reciprocity between landscape painting and the countryside. The word picture here is associated with a particular way of seeing that is picturesque. The ‘picturesque’ is the term used for beautiful landscape views that lend themselves particularly well to painting. There is a reflectivity between the representation and perception of landscape. With the ideal of the picturesque, natural views began to be looked at from a painterly perspective, and the general ideal of nature also became ‘wilder’ (Johansson, 2008). The picturesque in painting is well marked by a foreground, background, middle ground and side wings. In his series of guides to the painting of picturesque scenes produced between 1782 and 1809, Dr. William Gilpin pointed out that:

*Nature is imperfect from the point of view of a picture and needed to be ordered and improved. The composition must be organized to contain a background, and off-skip, and a foreground with side screens; for each of these parts of composition he listed the most suitable ingredients. Mountains and lakes were best for the background; rivers, woods, and valleys for middle distance; and rocks, leafy plants, ruins, waterfalls and*

*broken ground for foreground. The picture also needed to be enlivened with groups of human figures and animals (Gilpin quoted in Archer, 1969:19).*

The idea of the picturesque proved to be a powerful framing device for the way in which non-western culture came to be perceived and represented. To the European artist and explorer, 'the picturesque...provided...a congenial, respectable, eminently civilized standpoint from which to study and enjoy the wildness' (cited in Thakurta, 2002:8).

A notion of each country included a particular type of landscape, or in Humboldt's words: 'a certain natural physiognomy,' a formulaic solution, which becomes evident in nineteenth-century landscape painting (Hirsh, 1995:11). Smith calls this a 'typical landscape' and relates this with attempts at early ethnographic descriptions. He further reveals that these typical landscapes emerged from a tension between the convention of romantic description and more scientific ethnological information (Smith, 1992). James Turner characterizes seventeenth-century landscape descriptions as 'composite', not a portrait of an individual place but an ideal construction of particular motifs. Their purpose was to express the character of a region or a general idea of good land (Turner quoted in Pratt, 1992:48). Hence, in the early landscapes of Ceylon, there was a conscious effort to identify the colony by certain typical scenes. However, these typical scenes did differ with the shifting political and economic intentions of the patrons.

Early picturesque representation of the Ceylonese countryside can be seen in engravings of the Dutch, which capture a panoramic view of the coastal landscape from a comfortable vantage point, the dock of the steamships. Here, the land became capable of possession from the outsider's distant view. These colonial panoramic or picturesque views not only erased traces of the locals, but also their own conceptions of their surroundings (Plate 1). This was in contrast to many seventeenth-century paintings in Holland which portray a view of the ocean or sailing vessels from the land that depicted voyages and adventurous journeys to colonial shores.



Plate 1. J.W. Heydt, *Sea around Mannar*, Late Eighteenth Century, Dutch VOC Engraving

Even though a similar approach is evident in the British representations of Ceylon, their intervention in landscape painting is marked by a shift in focus: from the coastal areas to the hinterland of Ceylon, i.e., to the hill country. British colonial painters' and photographers' overwhelming interest in the interior mountainous landscape for their picturesque exploration has valid historical reasons. The Kandyan kingdom that covered the entire hill country persisted as a challenge to the colonial regime until 1815 when the British finally subdued it. Chains of mountains, deep valleys and rain forests became a site of curiosity as well as a threat to security. Further, the capitalist economic encroachment in the form of coffee, tea and rubber plantations added a new economic validation to the region. In addition, the pleasant climate suitable for European life styles converted the hill country into a region suitable for holiday homes for most English colonial administrators and visiting painters. In this context, the painted landscapes of Samuel Daniell, William Lyttleton, Gordon Cumming, Charles Auber and Andrew Nicholl and the picturesque photographs of Charles Scowen & Co. and W. L. H. Skeen & Co. that focused on the hill country became major visual texts through which the colonialist search for the 'regional' in the Ceylonese landscape could be understood. These images produced Ceylon as an exotic, scenic as well as oriental location.

Samuel Daniell died in Ceylon in 1811 at the age of 36. Five months after his death, the *Ceylon Government Gazette* advertised sales of his belongings

and equipment that included a telescope, copper plate, paints, brushes, cakes of watercolour and crayons (de Silva, 1985:12). This reveals the technical and material means that made the picturesque landscape paintings possible and accessible. The *Gentlemen's Magazine* in 1812 referred to his death thus:

Mr. Daniell was ever ready with *his own eye to explore every object worthy of research and his own hand to convey to the world a faithful representation of what he saw* (de Silva, 1985:2).<sup>1</sup>

This comment further clarifies the mechanics and politics of the optics operating behind these kinds of representations. In these representations, seeing became a powerful tool of 'exploration' which was combined and associated with 'faithful representation'. Further, this exploration and its conveyance depended on the 'worthiness of object'. The judgement of worthiness was made solely from the onlooker's point of view.



Plate 2: Samuel Daniell, *Distant View of Trincomalee*, 1808, Engraving

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<sup>1</sup> Italics are mine.



Plate 4: Gordon Cumming, *Fort Frederick, Trincomalee, 1873, Water Colour*

In one of Samuel Daniell's depictions, interlocking land with the waterfront provided a panoramic view of Trincomalee<sup>2</sup> (Plate 2). Fort Frederick on the right side of the picture plane further frames the view. This juxtaposition of fort and land depicts how land is connected to colonial expansion, inevitably coupled with military surveillance of the imperial state. This fort, built by the Dutch in 1622 on the site of a shrine dedicated to Shiva and conquered by the British in 1795, served as a haven for the Duke of Wellington. The artistic intention here was far from naively representing the beauty of natural surroundings. The scenery reminds one of Mitchell's observations that the standard picturesque landscape is especially pleasing to the eye because it typically places the observer in a protected place (a 'refuge') with screens on either side to dart behind or to entice curiosity, and an opening to provide deep access at the centre ( Mitchell: 2002:16). The emptiness of the landscape without the traces of or interference by local inhabitants produced a certain stillness and remoteness. As Mary Louise Pratt points out in a South American and African context, colonial landscapes are often imagined to provide dramatic or romantic contexts for the individual explorer, but they are also frequently emptied of rival human presence ( Pratt quoted in Bunn, 2002). She further states that the passiveness created by 'virgin', uncultivated, uninhabited land is not threatening, but inviting or justifying further invasion, insertion, exploration and exploitation by the European male ( Pratt, 1992: 61). Samuel Daniell's representation is similar to another watercolour capturing the panoramic view of the same location by Gordon Cumming (Plate 3). Here, Cumming's panoramic survey from the fort suggests total visual control

<sup>2</sup> Trincomalee's natural harbour became crucial to maintaining a military balance in the region with the British establishing storage facilities for adequate fuel.



over the sweeping land. The success of these paintings lies in the visual capturing and accurate representation of tropical light and climatic conditions.

The politics of colonial looking could be further understood through critical observations on the panoramic view. Jay Appleton elaborates panorama as a fundamental concept of 'seeing without being seen' and 'prospect/refuge' derived from military ways of experiencing landscape and the enemies within it (Appleton quoted in Bunn, 2002). To describe the new bourgeois vision called panorama, Foucault employed terminologies such as 'eye power' and 'sovereign gaze'. Alan Wallach calls it the 'panoptic sublime' to indicate the 'thrill of visual mastery'. Wallach further points out that inhabiting the panorama is possible if the visitor's relation to reality is mediated by his or her identification with the power of the state. The panoramic mode, in effect, supports the state's claim to stand over and above society, as well as its claim to centrality in a world in which the distant and foreign falls under its purview (Wallach, 2008). Hence, the comfortable, thrilling viewpoint in these colonial landscape paintings was always from the position and the point of view of the western world. Pratt observes that in the eighteenth century, systematizing nature as a European knowledge-building project created a new kind of Euro-centred planetary consciousness (Pratt, 1992). In addition, employment of telescopes and viewing tubes allowed viewers to experience a heightened sense of the colonial via a visual dialectic between panoramic breadth and telescopic detail. The pairing of panorama and panopticon by these authors, on the other hand, suggests a close relationship between the aesthetics of the panoramic landscape and the act of surveillance (Mitchell, 2002).



*Plate 4: Gordon Cumming, Lankatilaka, Kandy, 1874, Water Colour*

In his letter to Major Charles Doyle in 1818, military artist Auber described the nature of the landscape of Ceylon, some of which he sketched. His concerns reveal how military interests and the aesthetics of optics went hand in hand in these paintings, especially in the aftermath of the fall of the Kandyan kingdom.

*I have traveled through the whole of the interior and have visited all the passes and defiles and I can in some measure give you a description of this extraordinary country and the course of the extraordinary system of warfare that has been carried on in it. The greater part of the interior is composed of chains of mountains, the hills covered with thickest jungle and wood I ever beheld, the valleys between so narrow that musketry forces from either side can take effect. Had the present force been in the country, it is probable that no rebellion would have broken out and even if it had, it might have been nipped in the bud (quoted in Raheem 1986:1A).*

Gordon Cumming described the panoramic view of the surroundings of Lankatilaka, Kandy (Plate 4) in his diaristic information:

*It is most beautifully situated on the crown of a great mass of red rock, which rises...from the deep circular valley, all devoted to rice fields, which at the time of my visit were flooded, like innumerable blue curving lakes...the exterior is so picturesque that I gladly devoted all my time to secure a large sketch of the whole scene from across the valley (Cumming quoted in de Silva 1985).*

Cumming's manner of writing reveals the interrelation between the textual and the visual as well as the literal and the poetic in these colonial landscape representations. His association with the land is on visual terms. Here again, his writing and painting represents the artist's comfortable location across the valley that brings the entire landscape under his visual control. Similarly, Gordon Cumming's painting 'Breadfruit Tree in Uduvakanda' (Plate 5) brings out the immeasurable depth of a valley behind a breadfruit (*Artocarpus altilis*) tree that is studied in detail. The contrast between the detailed documentation of natural history and a scenic landscape adds depth as well as tension to the scene. This reveals the colonial painter's anxiety to measure the local landscape at both micro and macro levels. It is also relevant here to remember Smith's acute observation with regard to the Pacific region. He points out that European conventions of representation (both visual and textual) were transformed through encounters with 'other' people and places. His work exemplifies the tension in representational techniques; between a picturesque mode premised on neo-classical ideas of Italian origin and a 'descriptive' mode associated with observation, empirical record making and experimentation (Smith, 1992:112). Moreover, in 'Breadfruit Tree in Uduvakanda', the visual depth and atmosphere of the hill country suggests the artist's mastery over the depiction of distance and weather that had become

accurately measurable with the scientific developments of the period. Moreover, it is important to note here that the bread fruit tree, painted in the foreground of the painting, was not a local species of Ceylon but was spread in the tropical region through European colonial expansion.



Plate 5: Gordon Cumming, *Breadfruit Tree in Uduvakanda*, 1874, *Water Colour*

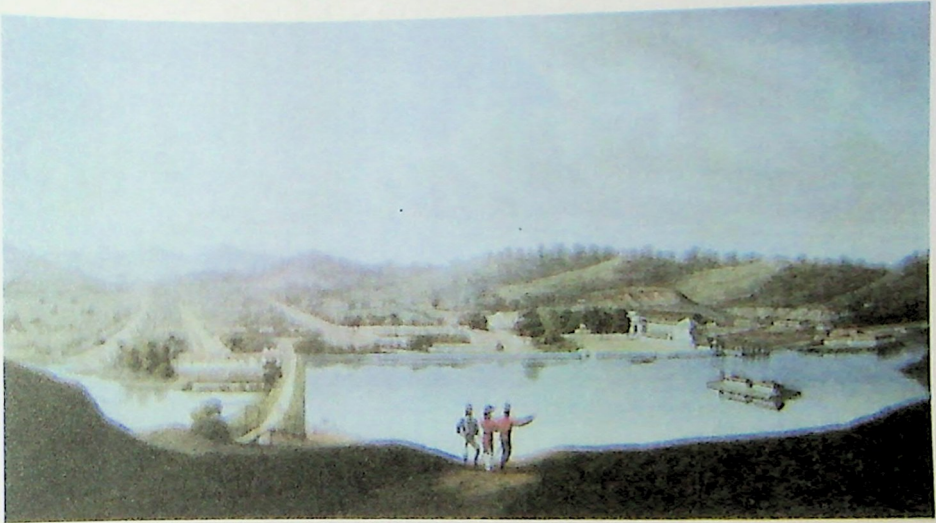
In contrast, the reference to the local architecture of the Buddhist temple of Lankatilaka in the background helps the artist feed the 'expected' notions of an exotic oriental landscape to a European audience. Therefore, the entire landscape is situated within multiple tensions between the present and the past, occident and orient, local and global, and nature and culture. Further, what is important to note here is that the land captured in these paintings is depicted from the point of view of the outsider rather than the insider. Interestingly, the outsider, the artist is distanced and screened by the alien breadfruit tree. This brings the element of surveillance into the picture frame. As a means of surveillance, this accurate, detailed documentation of the colony gave a sense of control and stability to the painter as well as to the colonialist viewer.



*Plate 6: Lt. William Lyttleton, View from Amanpoora, on the Road from Colombo to Kandy, 1814, Engraving*

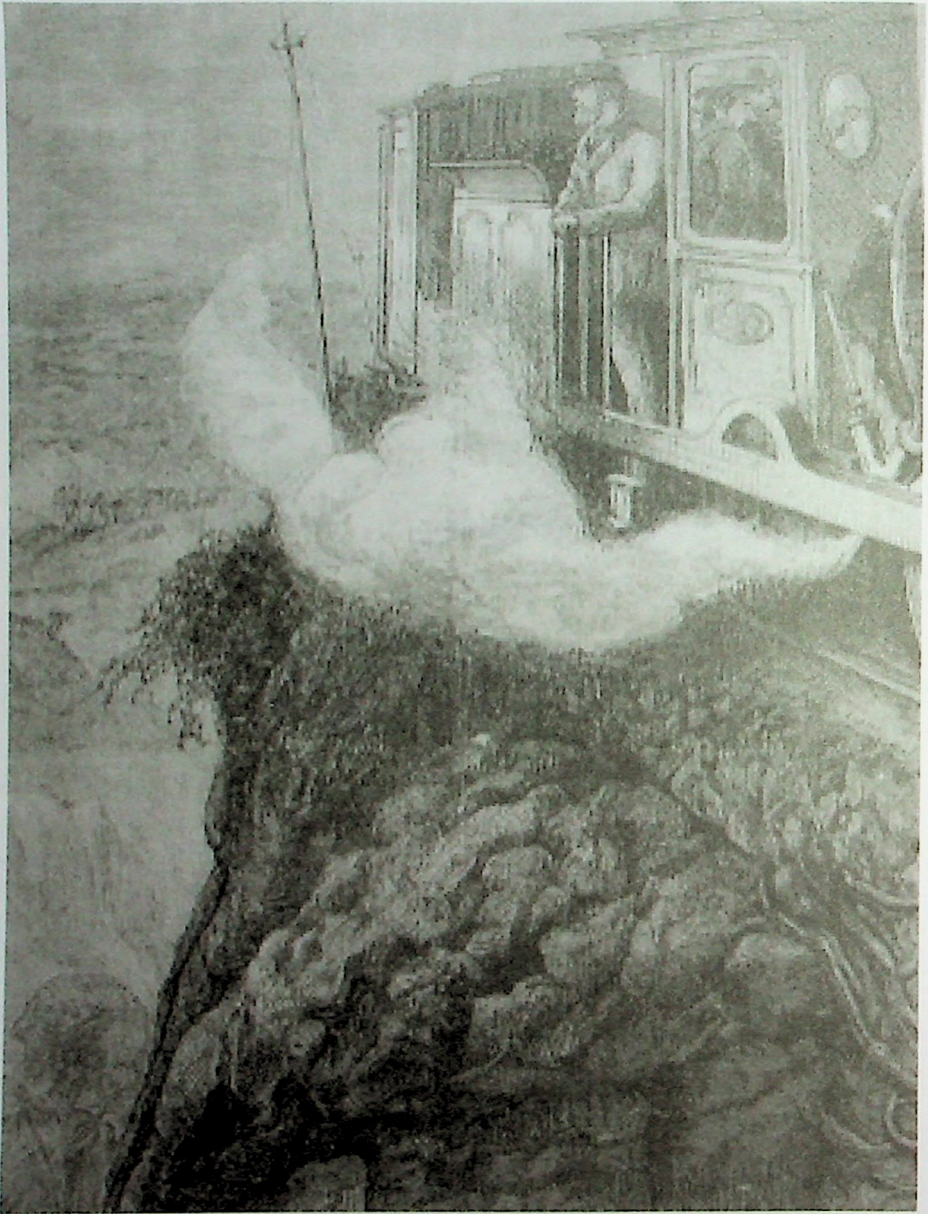
W. H. Lyttleton's 'View from Amanpoora, on the Road from Colombo to Kandy' has a sombre appearance (Plate 6). The vastness of the picture plane and the diminutive scale of the locals, while expanding the visual field through the play of proportion, place the locals as part of nature, engaged in day-to-day activities. The local people in the foreground and the vast, hilly land in the background are interspersed with commodious barracks capable of containing a strong detachment of the British administration/army. Sombre hilly landscapes and locals with their cattle are shadowed by the moving clouds, while the middle ground is occupied by the English detachment which is bathed in bright sunlight. Abdul R. and Jan Mohamed argue in a different context that the interplay between darkness, race and visibility creates continuing tension in colonial paintings; it is perhaps also intimately related to the compositional strategy in English landscape painting that relegated rural labourers to the shadowy areas of the picture plane (Mohamed quoted in Bunn, 2002). Moreover, R. K. de Silva observes that the land in the area surrounding the detachment shown in the painting is the land newly cultivated with English vegetables (de Silva, 1985:44). In which case, the locals in the foreground could be labourers working in that newly emerging cultivation, working to fulfil the needs and desires of colonialists. By depicting the cultivated land flooded with light and placing the labourers in the shade, the painting glosses over the presence of the locals. Closeness between the colonial settlement and the cultivated land, on the other hand, suggests that the English, as cultivators, were cultured when contrasted with the locals who are more intimately bound to nature. Further, as Bunn argues in a different context, the impoverished urban

proletariat is offered the utopian vision of being able to move into a new economic system where commodities present themselves without the intervention of labour (Burn, 2002). In the process of the visual transition of local scenes into colonialist landscape paintings, images of locals become insignificant and are transformed into a part of nature that could and should be controlled. The locals appear as servants engaged in their daily work or as nomadic wanderers leading their cattle in an 'alien' land. In contrast, the colonial masters, the settlers, were painted in postures of leisure or in that of supervising servants or viewing the landscape.



*Plate 7: Lt. William Lyttleton, Town of Kandy from the Castle Hill, 1814, Engraving*

In sharp contrast, a painting titled 'Town of Kandy from the Castle Hill' (Plate 7) brings the colonial masters within the picture frame. Three military officers, one of whom is authoritatively pointing his finger towards the 'temple of the tooth', which is visible on the right side of the Kandy Lake, occupy the centre of the foreground. The panoramic view is achieved from the castle and the colonialists are placed at the centre of that view, between the sky and the mirror of water, in a commanding position. The whole landscape is frozen by its extreme stillness. The only disturbance to that calmness is the active bodily positions of the colonialists. Since the city of Kandy was seen as the last seat of local political power forced later to surrender to the British Raj and a holy site of pilgrimage of Ceylonese Buddhists, the painting codifies the message of the British conquering local territory, history and society.



*Plate 8: The Prince driving on a locomotive engine over the Ghaut, "Sensational Rock", The Graphic, January 8, 1876, Newspaper illustration*

A couple of apt examples to illustrate the thesis of this paper would be an 1890s photograph titled 'View on the Colombo-Kandy Railway' from the stable of W. L. H. Skeen and Co., and a newspaper illustration that appeared in the *Graphic* on 8 January, 1876 (Plate 8), depicting a railway engine on top of the 'sensational rock' employing a panoramic picture frame. The newspaper print went a step further in the panoramic display by depicting the Prince of Wales (who left for Colombo from Kandy on 2 December, 1875 by the mountain railway), assertively surveying the landscape passing by from the locomotive engine. Immense visual depth in the print characterizes this bird's eye view of the vast and sweeping landscape. The newspaper reported:

*You are not looking down upon a flinty surface of barren rock. On the contrary, nowhere else is vegetation more abundant and you see myriads of trees, flowers which cover the ground (Graphic quoted in de Silva, 1998:182).*

The country is thus opened up to full view before the visitor. In general, the print suggests the technological revolution and human rational superiority over nature or the rationalizing civilizing mission of the British upon the irrational, uncivilized, under-developed colonies. In colonial Ceylon, the the association between the train and the hill country, in particular, implied the expansion of the capitalist plantation economy. The railway was initially introduced between Colombo and Kandy to link the harbour with the plantation estates. The royal presence in the steam engine proclaimed the English legacy over the colonial world in the age of speed, capitalism and technological revolution. Interestingly, this particular print suggests how the technique of surveillance was associated with British economic and technological encroachment on the colony. Capturing the viewer and the viewed within the same frame, the print contains a third person's view. In the light of the afore-mentioned advent of the railway line to Ceylon, the view expressed by William Boyd, a planter, is worth recounting.

*[A] new era is dawning on Ceylon. ... The steam engine will be heard in every hollow, the steam horse will course every valley; English homes will crown every hillock, and English civilization will bless and enrich the whole country, causing the wilderness to blossom as a rose, and making Ceylon as it was in former times, a garden of the world and the granary of India. (Boyd quoted in Duncan, 2005)*

The above statement justifies colonialism as 'a blessing of English civilization' referring to the introduction of the train. Moreover, without mentioning the developments that led to the present stagnation, the statement valorises the colonial future by linking it with a 'golden age' of the past.

The years spent by the celebrated Irish painter Andrew Nicholl in Ceylon were not so peaceful ones in the island's history. Around the middle of 1848, there was general unrest in the Kandyan region as a reaction against the imposition of heavy taxes by the colonial administration. Nicholl wrote a detailed account of his tour, published in two parts in the *Dublin University Magazine* (quoted in Lakdusinghe and de Silva, 1998:3). He described all that he saw around him in minute detail, suggesting the eye of a trained observer. Nicholl's descriptions include detailed observations of natural history set against a picturesque description of the landscape. As a colonial painter, he fetishized the periphery in terms of its sheer use value.

*"In the month of July 1848, three of us left Colombo in a hired palanquin carriage to proceed to Kandy...the roads run parallel with the Kelani Ganga, from the bridge of boards. The scenery is of a beautiful sylvan character, its banks being lined with alternate rows of jack and teak trees. ... Passing native gardens of citron, pomegranate, clove, orange, and lime trees, with the brightest many-coloured convolvulus-formed flowers hanging in garlands from their branches. Suria cotton trees and coffee bushes appear as you approach the secluded vale of Ambepusse, where there is an excellent rest house."* ( *Dublin University Magazine* quoted in Lakdusinghe and de Silva, 1998:5)

*"On leaving Sigiri, we obtained a magnificent extensive view...over 150 miles of forest; which appeared like a vast sea, studded with islands... with glimpses of the Mahavelli Ganga, winding among the most wonderful trees, the rarest and most costly wood in the world with which this great forest abounds—calamander, japan, jack, teak, satin, ebony, tamarind, sago, halmille, and iron trees interspersed with beautiful flowering shrubs, which filled the air with fragrance"* ( *Dublin University Magazine* quoted in Lakdusinghe and de Silva, 1998:7).

In these descriptions, representation of local inhabitants is negligible. In her discussion on European travel writing on Africa, Pratt observes that the landscape is written as being uninhabited, unpossessed, unhistorized, unoccupied even by the travellers themselves. The activity of describing geography and identifying flora and fauna structures a social narrative in which the human presence is marginal, though it was, of course, a constant and essential aspect of travelling itself. European authority and legitimacy are uncontested, a vision undoubtedly appealing to the European reader (Pratt, 1992:51-52). Nicholl's writings and his paintings show how both media shared rhetorical similarities and played identical political roles in the hype of colonialism.

Nicholl conveys to the reader the sense of awe occasioned whilst travelling at times in rugged, forbidding terrain, and at others, through uncharted tropical



jungle. The curiosity to know coupled with social and economic recognition in the metropolis has an element of heroism; an adventurism that thrives in these paintings and writings. Inventionist fantasy completely displaces the reality of the landscape before the onlooker and becomes the content of the vision. The same element constructs the colony both as beautiful and dangerous. Here is an example from Nicholl's writings.

*"Thus terminated my sketching tour through the forest of Ceylon, the most interesting I ever had in my life: and although attended with both danger and fatigue, yet enjoyment which I derived from it far more than compensated for the hardship of the journey, and will ever be considered by me the most delightful of all my sketching excursions, either at home or in distant lands"* (Dublin University Magazine quoted in Lakdusinghe and de Silva, 1998:11).

### Conclusion

It is important to remember here that many of the landscape paintings discussed above, also explicitly marked by the colonial presence through the images of fort, soldiers, breadfruit tree or military detachment. In some cases paintings also shown colonialists as they were engaged in various activities. As Helsinger points out, in the context of British landscape paintings, colonial painters' affirmation of conventional travel views expressed in British travelogues of the period, can be read as an assertion of different modes of possessing the colony, not simply by owning or appreciating it as landscape but also by inhabiting and naturalizing it through activities that will be viewed as morally, aesthetically and legally transgressive from the perspective of the dominant culture (Helsinger, 2008). Hence, colonial landscape paintings visually represent the imperialist multiple claims on conquered territories. Through framing the colony's geography by imperial optics and power, colonialists produced a picturesque landscape which is neither local nor foreign.

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