



SINNAPPAH ARASARATNAM

1930-1998

Sinnappa Arasaratnam, who died in Sydney in October 1998, had a long and distinguished career both in Australia and elsewhere. Born in Sri Lanka in 1930, he received his Ph.D. from the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London. Subsequently he served in the universities of Ceylon and Malaya before becoming Professor of History at the University of New England in 1973. He retired in 1996, after serving for many years as Head of Department there. He also served for many years as President of the South Asian Studies Association, a position which carried with it, membership on the

Council of the Asian Studies Association of Australia. Among many honours, he was Smuts Fellow at Cambridge in 1977-79, and was felicitated in a festschrift in 1996 ('Asia and Europe: Commerce, Colonialism and Cultures,' a special number of South Asia [vol. XIX]). One of the recognitions he most prized, even though it came so late in his career, was his election to a Fellowship of the Academy in 1996.

Arasaratnam was, like many other distinguished academics in Australia, better known internationally than he was in his adopted home-land. His reputation rests mostly on his seminal studies of early modern trade in the Indian Ocean area, but he also made an important contribution to our understanding of the place of Indians in Malaysia, and of various aspects of communalism in his native Sri Lanka. He was a most productive writer, producing twenty books, including published lectures and collected essays, and about ninety articles and book chapters (a full bibliography of his writings is included in the festschrift noted above). All of his work was notable for copious research, especially in Dutch and English sources, and for an attention to detail which however never lost sight of the broader picture.

This broader picture, which covered the history of the eastern Indian Ocean from 1600 to 1800, was spelt out in several books and articles. Arasaratnam was able to show us the resilience of Asian economic forms when faced with competition from the English and Dutch trading companies. Only when the latter used their military strength at sea, and from the mid eighteenth century on land, did they achieve, using non-economic methods, a more prominent position. The story ends around 1800, for by then there certainly was a growing gap between an assertive and expansive, because industrialising, Europe and its Asian interlocutors, who increasingly were marginalised and denied opportunities .

Those of us, a widely dispersed international group, who work in this and cognate fields will continue to draw inspiration from his work and do our best to emulate his impeccable scholarship. The world of scholarship has lost a fine historian. Those who knew him have lost a dear friend.

MN Pearson