



**Situating the Kegalle Rebels of 1971: The Narrative Disconnect
Between Michael Ondaatje and Those Who Took His Family Gun**

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ABSTRACT

The article uses Michael Ondaatje's representation of the Kegalle rebels of the 1971 insurgence to examine the question of historical disconnect in the writer which has resulted in his reduction of an era-defining political event to an amusing anecdote. This anecdote – to do with a group of young rebels who came to collect the Ondaatjes' family gun in Running in the Family – has been widely quoted in literature on Ondaatje's work, but without sufficient emphasis on what appears to be a historical alienation of the writer. The present discussion attempts to reconstruct the fate of the Kegalle rebels who disappear from Ondaatje's field of vision after the gun was collected. Through the association of narratives written by former insurgents in Kegalle who retreated to Wilpattu after the uprising failed, I attempt to reconstruct their story to offer an overview of the history Ondaatje misses out on. By interpolating work such as Raja Proctor's Waiting for Surabiel the article also draws on the role of historical awareness and political empathy in representing a politically-turbulent era.

The age of an insurgent ranged from fifteen to twenty. They were a strange mixture of innocence and determination and anarchy, making home-made bombs with nails and scraps of metal and at the same time delighted and proud of their uniforms of blue trousers with a stripe down the side...

– Michael Ondaatje, *Running in the Family*, p. 103.

Sandhurst-educated Lt.-Col. Cyril Ranatunga was quoted as justifying the execution of his prisoners: ‘We have learnt too many lessons from Vietnam and Malaysia. We must destroy them completely.

– *International Herald Tribune*, 20 April 1971.

1. Introduction

Michael Ondaatje’s *Running in the Family*, a playful family history incorporating the memory of kinsfolk, friends, and numerous acquaintances, and arranged to overlap the country’s national history, was first published in 1982. The book’s author, who migrated from Sri Lanka in the mid-1950s as an adolescent, had been away for almost a quarter of a century and made trips in 1978 and 1980 to gather material for his book (Knowles, 2010, p. 436). In the decades following publication, *Running in the Family* became hugely popular among Sri Lankan and international readers alike and, despite critical assessment of the book’s refusal to “participate actively in the referential”, English Departments in the country’s leading universities often used it as a prescribed classroom text (Kanaganayakam, 1992, p. 40). The book’s style of narration seems to have been influenced by what Ondaatje regarded to be a character trait among “a certain type of Ceylonese family” with exaggerated stories that kept “their generation alive” (Ondaatje, 2009, p. 186). Despite its obvious reliance on historical detail and grand events, as a story with the quirky and the quixotic which relentlessly

pendulums between the poignant, farcical and the absurd, *Running in the Family* can be best introduced as a sentimental saga of a privileged social milieu of colonial Ceylon whose occupations and pastimes were cut off from the world shared by the country’s ordinary walks. In terms of reception in Sri Lanka, *Running in the Family* – when compared to *Anil’s Ghost* (2000) and *The Cat’s Table* (2010) – became arguably the more popular of Ondaatje’s works with a local interest, while its formal and thematic concerns inspired writers like Carl Muller in the writing of his 1993 bestseller *The Jam Fruit Tree*.

In his construction of the lives of his family’s immediate circle from the 1920s to the 1950s, Ondaatje makes key reference to three notable estates – two of them situated in the Kegalle district in the country’s Sabaragamuwa Province – which were either family homes or leisure retreats. Of these estates, the Gasanawa (sic) Estate¹, situated a few kilometres from Kegalle on the Colombo road and supervised in the 1920s by family friend Francis Fonseka, was groomed to meet the requirements of drinking parties, dances, and tennis games (Ondaatje, 2009, p. 36-38). Introduced as a “prime spot of land in the heart of Kegalle town” (49), Rock Hill Estate belonged to the writer’s grandfather Philip Ondaatje which he bequeathed to his grandchildren. In the book, Philip Ondaatje is presented as a stern patriarch who “[pretended] to be English” (Ondaatje, 2009, p. 50) and visited London every two years to “buy crystal” and to learn “the latest dances” (Ondaatje, 2009, p.50). After Philip’s death in 1938, Rock Hill went into disuse until, in the 1950s, Mervyn – Michael’s father – moved there with his second wife and children, opened a chicken farm, nursed his dipsomania (Ondaatje, 2009, p.52-55; 101-102), and sold the estate piecemeal in times of financial difficulties (Ondaatje, 2009, p.52). Rock Hill is featured prominently in the section titled “Kegalle (ii)”. Despite its decline during post-independence, the estate still

echoed indelible memories and a historical imprint of the feudal-capitalist world which Philip Ondaatje reigned in. This background history is necessary in assessing the incident of a group of Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) rebels walking in there to collect the Ondaatjes' family gun at the outbreak of the April 1971 insurgency.

2. Results and Discussion

I

The encounter between the rebels – whom Ondaatje refers to as a “strange mixture of innocence, determination, and anarchy” aged between “fifteen and twenty” (Ondaatje, 2009, p.103) – and the author’s stepmother Maureen is a memorable and often-quoted passage in the literature on *Running in the Family*. Conforming to the “Maoist and Vietnamese models of ‘peasant revolution’ as its ideological reference” (Moore, 1993, p. 599) the 1971 insurgency has been characterized as a “youth rebellion” (Keerawella, 1972, p. 4; 49) brought on by a largely rural Sinhalese movement in response to social and economic grievances and alienation. For Mick Moore, the JVP was the force to take the lead in furthering the radical political agendas of Sri Lanka’s post-independence nationalism and socialism (Moore, 1993, p. 604). Originating in 1965 from a renegade pro-Peking splinter of the Sri Lanka Communist Party (CP), the JVP presented the fermenting unrest and hostility of the youth, proletariat, and urban working class against the prevailing capitalist/elite system that inherited government in 1948 the promise of a new order and an end to what Kenneth Bush has located as “a politics of exclusion” (Bush, 2003, p. 102). The singular encounter of the rebels’ walking to Rock Hill and confiscating the family gun, therefore, is loaded with political and revolutionary symbolism. The gun was being taken away to be used in a war against the government which historically supported the system in which estate-holders, like the Ondaatjes, thrived. The rebels’ inquiries after

the gun, Ondaatje writes, were “courteous” (Ondaatje, 2009, p. 104). While its handing over was being negotiated on Rock Hill’s front porch “the rest of the insurgents had put down their huge collection of weapons, collected from all over Kegalle, and persuaded [the writer’s] younger sister Susan to provide a bat and a tennis ball” (Ondaatje, 2009, p. 104). Having included Susan in the game, the rebels are reported to have played cricket on the Rock Hill lawn all evening; a reference which Carol Leon has likened to a “domestication” of the insurgency (Leon, 2002, p. 25).

The extent to which Ondaatje has brought in playful exaggeration (in the tradition of a “certain type of Ceylonese family”) in the framing of the above episode is a conversation that invites mixed interpretation. In any case, it is problematic that Ondaatje’s narrative does not seriously engage what was at the time the most devastating political upheaval in Sri Lanka. In instances, he readily identifies the rebels’ being “courteous” and not harming ordinary people when holding up a rest house in their search of food (Ondaatje, 2009, p. 103). A fleeting show of sympathy for the rebels is also visible where Ondaatje refers to the “quatrains and free verses” the rebel prisoners wrote on the walls of universities that were turned into incarceration camps where they recorded “the struggle, tortures, the unbroken spirit” and the “love of friends who had died for the cause” (Ondaatje, 2009, p. 84-85). But, such fleeting reflections fail to convert into a significant commentary or critique and often peter out among other random observations. In an extreme instance, having commented on charcoal drawings made by a rebel fugitive in hiding, Ondaatje proceeds to compare them with Sigiriya frescoes (Ondaatje, 2009, p. 85) which, as juxtaposition, borders the ludicrous.

Despite a hint of cultural and social entitlement in Ondaatje’s overall assessment of the rebels, it does not manifest class-

viciousness. At best, despite his inability to immerse in the historical oppression of the working class and rural peasantry that engineered the rebellion, Ondaatje presents himself as one who looks on the desperate eruption with the understanding of a detached observer. Ondaatje's position shows both depth and consideration for the rebels in comparison to some other English language writers belonging to the emerging bourgeois class in Sri Lanka, post-independence. As indicative examples, hailing from Anglicized, urban upper middle class backgrounds, Manuka Wijesinghe and Madhubhashini Ratnayake in *Monsoons and Potholes* (2006) and *There is Something I Have to Tell You* (2011), respectively, demonstrate haughtiness in their framing of the rebellion. While Ratnayake trivializes the uprising as a "ranting against privileged classes" by those fed by "the paddy fields belonging to the feudal households" (Ratnayake, 2011, p. 126-127), Nihal Fernando draws attention to Wijesinghe's "vituperative and unbalanced" commentary of the JVP where the writer labels the insurgents as a "red fungus" (Wijesinghe, 2006, p. 123) and as "chimpanzees" (Wijesinghe, 2006, p. 124). Fernando draws a comparison between rampant "demonization and dehumanization" of the working and peasant classes with the "unfeeling and intolerant elite attitudes" as demonstrated by Wijesinghe, the writer he critiques (Fernando, 2006, p. 222), to have, at one level, encouraged the revolution.

Despite the general empathy he felt for the uprising of the historically-downtrodden through the crumbling ruins of empire, Ondaatje's apolitical narrative from that historical moment prevents him from framing the events of 1971 as a significant part of *Running in the Family*. Rather, he makes himself content and self-absorbed in familial tall tales and playful pseudo-histories. As a result, Ondaatje opts to play the role of an uncritical and non-intervening bystander who excuses himself beyond a few

marginal comments as history unfolded before him. Considering Ondaatje's powers as a writer, it is tempting to speculate that an assertive negotiation could have enabled a deeper delving into the insurgence.

Critic Arun P. Mukherjee comments on *Running in the Family* as a work without "a god, a cause, or a country", thus rendering a more hostile view of the writer's dislocation. For Mukherjee, *Running in the Family* demonstrates its writer's historical and spatiotemporal limitations in narrating a "Third World country with a colonial past" and "otherness" (Mukherjee, 1985, p. 51) in what he considers "a sad example of cultural domination of the Third World intellectuals who cannot see their world without applying imported categories to it" (Mukherjee, 1985, p. 58). While, as a generalization, this comment trivializes a more complex issue related to postcolonial self-representation, it nonetheless draws attention to the glaring absence of classes outside Ondaatje's social milieu, their day-to-day struggles and tensions which – unless the writer was blissfully unaware of them – have, in *Running in the Family*, gone unacknowledged at the expense of a self-absorbed narration of a small and exclusive circle:

We hear about the "race riots" because Ondaatje's uncle is directing an enquiry commission but we are not told what they are about. Ondaatje is similarly fuzzy about the student revolt in 1971 and its meaning. We are shown vignettes of people dancing in the moonlight to imported songs of the twenties. We hear about continuous traffic of people going to Oxford and Cambridge. We see Ondaatje's mother dancing in the style of Isadora Duncan, reading Tennyson's poetry and Shakespeare's plays. However, we hear about the independence only in parenthesis. We do not hear about the Ondaatje family's exploitative relationship to Sri Lanka. (Mukherjee, 1985, p. 57)

While Sonia Snelling's article on ancestry and history in *Running in the Family* (which she discusses in comparison to Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*) provisionally defends Ondaatje against Mukherjee's critique (Snelling, 1997, p. 31), her counter is not sufficiently in depth or detailed. Carol Leon's assessment that *Running in the Family* "interrogates and unsettles historiographic endeavour" (Leon, 2002, p. 29) supports Snelling's location of the book as a successful "[unsettling of] colonial history on many levels" with a "refusal to conform to the Western emphasis on grand-scale historical events" (Snelling, 1997, p. 31), which Snelling bases on Ondaatje's reference to the cricket match at Rock Hill instead of discussing the political events of 1971. Neluka Silva urges Ondaatje to demonstrate "an implicit awareness of the oppressive mechanisms of colonialism" (Silva, 2002, p. 81) through what she terms an "inclusion of the nationalist voice" where Ondaatje quotes several lines from Lakdhas Wikkrama Sinha'sⁱⁱ poem "Don't Talk to Me About Matisse" (Ondaatje, 2009, p. 86). Presented without commentary or engagement, the nine lines which draw the section "The Karapothis" (sic) to a close demonstrates to Silva a "deep-seated rancour bred by prolonged cultural colonization and the overarching need to rehabilitate the indigenous culture" (Silva, 2002, p. 81). There is however no evidence to support Silva's claim as, at best, Ondaatje's interest in Wikkrama Sinha, than it being an empathy for decolonization, seems to be triggered by the chance discovery of both writers having studied at the same school, St. Thomas' College, Mount Lavinia, in the 1950s (Ondaatje, 2009, p. 85-86).

In their efforts to defend Ondaatje and make him relevant (in some way) to a postcolonial discussion that vies to "rehabilitate the indigenous culture" (Silva's words), critics like Silva and Snelling do the writer disservice by promoting powers the writer does not manifest. Ondaatje's definition of the 1971 rebels as a mixture of "innocence,

determination, and anarchy" is a powerful assessment which makes memorable reading to his contribution in narrating insurgency while, as a storyteller, he yet manages to conclude the Rock Hill episode with suspense. As to what happened to the youthful and courteous cricket-playing rebels is a question that agonizes Ondaatje's reader. In seeking an answer, one has to go beyond *Running in the Family* to historically-informed creative narratives – like Raja Proctor's *Waiting for Surabiel* (1981) and Somachandre Wijesuriya's *First Rising* (2001) – that interpolate the consciousness of Kegalle villages at the time; and to the biographies and sketches by men and women who brought on the insurgence in Kegalle in April 1971.

II

In the public sphere, the story of the Kegalle rebels exists in fragments told by men and women who took part in the insurgence in 1971, controlled parts of the district for 24 days, launched a daring retreat to the Wilpattu sanctuary amidst relentless army attacks, and survived the ordeal to return to society later on. These narratives have mostly been written in Sinhala and, in general, contribute to an extensive literature on the 1971 rebellion that has gradually entered the public domain in the past four decades. In the present instance, my reading of biographies of those who fought in Kegalle is carried out with an echo of Ondaatje's summative judgment – of the rebels' being a mixture of innocence, determination, and anarchy – in mind. While part of the exercise is directed at constructing a history of the rebels as they operated in April 1971, it is equally an examination of textual matter that speaks for the humanitarian impulse with which some of the rebels approached the attempted coup: the instinct that made them come across as "courteous" at Rock Hill, and considerate at the hold up at the Ambepussa rest house.

Set in the skirting of the vast Sabaragamuwa Province, Kegalle is one of the last townships on the Colombo-Kandy main road before the sharp ascend of the Kandyan hills. In geographic terms, it is about 76 kilometres from Colombo and 40 kilometres from Kandy. The road from Kegalle to Kurunegala, the main town of the adjacent North Western Province, branches off the Colombo-Kandy road at Ambepussa, 17 kilometres from Kegalle town. The Kegalle-Avissawella road begins just outside the town at the Galigamuwa junction situated at a distance of 4 kilometres. The Sabaragamuwa is made of a geographical and topographical diversity that supported guerilla warfare and presented rebels remote access routes through jungles and hamlets to deep forests like the Wilpattu which was a reserve the JVP had earmarked for basecamps in the event of a prolonged war. Leading up to the insurgency, the Kegalle activism was centred on Sarath Wijesinghe, a native of the district, who was also a leading spirit of the Socialist Society of the University of Peradeniya (Cooke, 2011, p. 123). The team Wijesinghe gave leadership to is generally identified in the literature as one of the main groups that contributed to the JVP's growth between 1968 and 1970 (Jayatunge, 2011, p. 514; Keerawella, 1972, p. 33).

One of the most comprehensive accounts of the JVP's delegate in Kegalle and its activism and retreat – albeit, from the point of view of a servant of the establishment – is found in Judge A.C. Alles' *The JVP 1969-1989*. Alles was a presiding member of the Criminal Justice Commission (CJC), a five-member panel appointed in 1972 to conduct trials against the captured insurgents, whose writings on the insurgency are used as reference texts to this day. Alles' report on Kegalle consists of ten pages and includes four photographs (Alles, 1990, p. 120-130). If his estimate is accurate, by the time of the insurgency there were no less than 570 JVP rebels operating as groups in the Kegalle, Warakapola, and Rambukkana areas:

Ariyadasa was in charge of 200 at Warakapola, Wasantha Dissanayake alias Podi Dissa in charge of about 25 at Balapattawa, Seneviratne in charge of 25 at Galigamuwa, Sadi Banda in charge of 40 at Imbulgoda, Piyasena in charge of 25 at Morontota, Justin Wijesinghe, Sarath's brother, in charge of another group at Morontota, Seneviratne, librarian of Kegalle town, in charge of about 20 at Deevala, and Premasiri of about 35 at Nilpalagama. There was also a group in charge of Patrick Fernando at Pindeniya, [and] about 200 in the charge of the area leader of Rambukkana" (Alles, 1990, p. 122).

In my reconstruction of the Kegalle rebels, I primarily draw into dialogue three narrativesⁱⁱⁱ of participants among whom two – H.P. Ariyadasa (popularly known as Thulhiriyé Ari) and Wasantha Dissanayake of Balapattawa – are mentioned in Alles' list of area leaders. The third source incorporated into my reconstruction is J. Samaratunge (or, Bola Samare), the Kurunegala leader who joined the Kegalle rebels in mid-April to lead the long retreat to Wilpattu commencing on 29 April 1971. Between 5 and 23 April, the rebels seem to have enjoyed temporary control of sections of the district while engaging in sporadic fighting with the army. On the main roads in places like Warakapola and Kegalle they constructed roadblocks (Halliday, 1975, p. 198). However, after the initial shock and setback, assisted by international military aid, the state troops quickly launched a counter-strike to wrest the advantage of the battle. On 29 April, having sufficiently pushed the rebels back, the government air dropped leaflets for the rebels to surrender (Ivan, 2010, p. 240-241). Narratives on the fighting consistently draw attention to the superior fire power of the state military in whose face the rebels could, at best, only manage a determined burst and a retreat to their basecamps (Gunathilake, 2015, p. 20-22). Except for weapons confiscated from police and army

deployments on which they relied (Ivan, 2010, p. 140-141), the rebels mainly used shot guns and home-made crude bombs: a preparation which echoes Ondaatje's assessment of the rebels' innocence, determination, and anarchy.

Thulhiriya Ari, a native of Thulhiriya, was invested with the leadership of neutralizing the army deployment in that area and of attacking the Warakapola police station on 5 April. A graduate in the Arts, Ari is said to be the first Thulhiriya boy to enter university from which he graduated in 1967 (Jayatunge, 2011, p. 542). As Ruwan Jayatunga concedes, during the CJC trial, Ari was praised by the judges for his humane treatment of police and army personnel captured under his watch and for his swift dispatching of injured security personnel to receive medical treatment (Jayatunge, 2011, p. 542). The attack on the Thulhiriya army deployment was carried out with the purpose of confiscating weapons and ammunition. In preparing his contingent for the attack, Ari's main advice to his men was that "none should be hurt or killed" (Ari, 2006, p. 27). His plan of attack was to "create the impression of [the camp] being surrounded" and to "entreat [the army] to surrender" (Ari, 2006, p. 27). He advised his group that weapons should not be used unless in a desperate situation and only as a last resort.

When they broke into the Thulhiriya camp and took it under their control, the rebels delivered a short speech to the non-commissioned workers explaining the purpose of the struggle and requesting the workers' cooperation (Ari, 2006, p. 29). The rebels proceeded to explain to the soldiers of the camp that they had no conflict with them and that their purpose was to retrieve weapons, after which the security guards and the soldiers were also set free (Ari, 2006, p. 29). The same night, the rebels used a strategy similar to Ari's plan of attack at Thulhiriya to wrest control of the Warakapola police station. Here, under Dorawaka Somé,

the rebels surrounded the police and, promising the safety of the officers, requested the police to surrender. When the police responded with offence, the rebels had retaliated by setting the police building on fire. However, as the policemen made their escape, the rebels refrained from shooting while busying themselves collecting weapons. If the chronology of Ondaatje's framing of the Rock Hill episode is accurate, the rebels' arrival to collect the family gun most likely happened on the day after this attack.

However, the rebel position as a whole deteriorated fast and the little advantage they gained in the first week of the insurgence fizzled out when the police and army regrouped to strike back. Alles concedes that the rebels took the decision to retreat to Wilpattu on 23 April after having fought for two and a half weeks (Alles, 1990, p. 124). According to Alles' report, except for three groups, the rest of the Kegalle rebels (127 in number)^{iv} assembled at Balapattawa to begin the retreat on the night of 29 April. They were led by Nimalasiri Jayasinghe alias Loku Athula, and Samaratunge (Alles, 1990, p. 124). Samson Gunathilake, who marched with Samaratunge from Kurunegala to Balapattawa through Rambodagalla, Parapé and Rambukkana, recounts the adventures of that daring journey (Gunathilake, 2015, p. 19-27). Arriving in Balapattawa during the second week of the insurgence, they learnt that the Kegalle leader Wijesinghe had been killed in what appeared to be an accident during weapons training and that the incident was being kept a secret (Gunathilake, 2015, p. 26). Later, in his sixties, Samaratunge retrospectively reflected on the uncertainty caused by Wijesinghe's accidental demise but - given the precarious circumstances - of having "no place for emotions like grief" (Jayatunge, 2011, p. 516). The rebels camping at Balapattawa prepared their retreat as two groups. "One group consisted of Loku Athula, Podi Dissa, Bandhu, Sujatha Handagama and Thulhiriya Ari," Samaratunge narrates. "The

second group rallied under my leadership and was commanded by Kagama Upasena” (Jayatunge, 2011, p. 516). The two groups set out using alternative routes and joined forces at a safe point. Burdened with guns, dynamite, and bombs and deprived of sufficient food and water the rebels headed towards the Madahapola mountains through the hills at Yakdessa (Jayatunge, 2011, p. 517).

Though he doesn't emphasize the point, Alles' report draws attention to the support the retreating rebels received from Buddhist temples in villages and forest areas. The retreating party either rested or received provisions and medicinal aid from at least four such temples (Alles, 1990, p. 124). Once their trail was discovered, the army and air force launched several combined attacks on the retreating party (Dissanayake, 2006, p. 70-72; Jayatunge, 2011, p. 518-519). *The Times* reported on the supply of mountain artillery guns by Yugoslavia which were particularly used against the Kegalle rebels (Halliday, 1975, p. 205). With their cadre being captured, killed, or estranged from the main party, incidents of decamping increased. By the time the rebels reached Narammala their numbers had dropped to 60. It had further dwindled to 40 when they arrived at the Nathagané hill close to Wariyapola (Alles, 1990, p. 124). In Madahapola, another rebel contingent joined the retreat and when they proceeded to and camped at the Bambaragala mountain for two weeks the fugitive party had risen to about 100 (Alles, 1990, p. 124).

Even amidst the challenging retreat to Wilpattu, Samaratunge claims to have been constantly reminded of Mao Tse-Tung's great march. But, as the relentless attacks from the army escalated in frequency and intensity the group continued to weaken, scatter, surrender, or get killed^v. By then, there was very little stamina left for a counter-attack. In Samaratunge's estimate, when they finally reached Wilpattu, from the group of 200 who

began the retreat only 21 were left (Jayatunge, 2011, p. 518). Samaratunge felt remorseful, sad and guilty that “[he] couldn't make the retreat successful” (Jayatunge, 2011, p. 518). By this time, Loku Athula, the most senior leader of the retreating party, had been captured by the army in an ambush near Inginimitiya village (Alles, 1990, p. 129). Writing in 1976 – and oblivious to the fates of the likes of Samaratunge and Ari who absconded their hunters – Alles concludes his report on the skeptical note that one couldn't know whether, in the end, “any of the Kegalle party reached Wilpattu” (Alles, 1990, p. 129).

As the retreating party camped at Bambaragala – which was a natural fortress with dense forest and a ring of caves – they were attacked by an army contingent. As the army searched the interior of the central cave the rebels called their bluff by hiding in the surrounding and letting on that the army was under rebel siege. This move is resonant of the strategy used earlier in Thulhiriya and Warakapola, except that in Bambaragala the rebels were desperately short of ammunition. Here, Wasantha Dissanayake alias Podi Dissa proceeds to address the troops in what was later popularized among the rank and file of the army as the “lecture on the mountain”. Drawing on historical and class factors that underpinned the JVP struggle, and worded as an appeal to the soldiers to lay down arms (Dissanayake, 2006, p. 72), the “lecture” resonates in its content Ari's speech made at the Thulhiriya camp on 5 April. Delivered as an uninterrupted sermon over two hours against the deadly silence of the forest, Dissanayake's speech seemed to hold its audience. On hindsight, Dissanayake remembers the encounter as follows:

I told them we had the whole area surrounded; that there wasn't a way of anyone getting out. Demanding their attention I carefully explained as to why we were at war and the purpose of our struggle. Then, in a way that brought on tremors, I went on to explain who *they*

were: the underlying basis of their war, and as to whom they served in this fight. I questioned whether their fight should be against their own parents, brothers, sisters, and social class, or whether it should be against the rulers who exploited the country's people. (Dissanayake, 2006, p. 72).

The speech concluded with an entreaty for the army to lay their weapons down on the promise of "the warmth of brotherhood" (Dissanayake, 2006, p. 72). From Rock Hill, Thulhiriya, Warakapola, to the deep forests of Bambaragala, the rebels' incentive to dialogue and didactically explain the foundations of their struggle, their assurance of the opponents' safety, and the plea for soldiers to surrender and walk away produce a significant and consistent pattern. Whether this idealistic approach, as Ondaatje reflects, borders on innocence and determination, or whether it blends with a humanitarian impulse and sentiments induced by class-mindedness has to be closely reflected on. However, the reluctance of the rebels to be trigger-happy even when they had that capability contrasts with the military excess used by the state troops and police in the subsequent suppression of the rebellion. Realistic estimates of persons killed in the state's counter-emergency action vary between 5000 (Ivan, 2010, p. 243) and 5000 and 10,000 (Halliday, 1975, p. 201). The disfigurement and disappearance of bodies, and bodies being thrown in rivers and the sea have contributed to conclusive estimates being difficult to pronounce^{vi}.

Much later, when he was captured and held in custody at Kurunegala, Dissanayake had come to learn the full impact of his speech in the Bambaragala forest (Dissanayake, 2006, p. 73). In custody, he was regularly requested by both soldiers and officers to repeat the speech. Dissanayake was given the epithet, the "Orator of the Mountain" (Dissanayake, 2006, p. 74) and when he was finally handed over to be taken to Kegalle, soldiers of the

Kurunegala commandant had stood in two files for Dissanayake to walk through. Their parting words to Dissanayake spoken in front of their Kegalle colleagues demonstrate both goodwill and respect for the rebel leader: "Wasantha, if we hear that the police [in Kegalle] much as lay a finger on you we will launch an air raid on them" (Dissanayake, 2006, p. 75).

Overall, the narratives Ari, Dissanayake, and Samaratunge share of the Kegalle rebellion have to be considered as products of working-through memory, and as retrospective reflections of adventures they engineered and were a part of almost thirty five years from the point of narration. When considering such stories with an inevitable nostalgic vein, one must be cautious not to fall into traps set by sentiment and romanticization. While the narratives I have considered show reasonable maturity and balance – such as, for instance, Samaratunge's remorse and reflection over civilian deaths (caused by the rebels) during the retreat – official praise for the conduct of leaders such as Ari who provided safety for wounded servicemen inspire a confidence among readers in their reception. However, as interventions that provide insight to a historical moment often suppressed in mainstream history, the contribution of rebel narratives to the understanding of the Kegalle rebellion reads as a significant compendium.

III

It is safe to conclude that Michael Ondaatje's knowledge of what fierce exchanges happened between the army and the retreating Kegalle rebels in jungles and remote wastelands was limited. Except for Alles' initial report on the insurgency, published in 1975, personal narratives of rebels I incorporated in reconstructing their retreat were published much later and in Sinhala. The travels, sight-seeing and interviews which helped Ondaatje to frame *Running in the Family*, as mentioned earlier,

took place in 1978 and 1980 (Knowles, 2010, p. 436), while the book's first edition was published by McClelland and Stewart in Toronto in 1982. A year before this publication, a novel by Raja Proctor bearing the title *Waiting for Surabiel* was published in Colombo. Spanning several decades and concluding with the insurgence of 1971, *Waiting for Surabiel* presented the story of Surabiel, an underclass labourer who runs away and finds work in Kegalle. While intelligently depicting the emergence of a new nation in the immediate post-independence decades, Proctor's focus also falls on the ongoing exploitation of the working class which continues to remain in the receiving end of gross social injustice. Through a complex channel of events, in 1971, Surabiel finds himself implicated in the uprising for a just and equal world order. Written with a keen historical awareness of Sri Lankan politics in the late-colonial period and immediate post-independence, Proctor's approach demonstrates an empathy and maturity which sets him apart from the forbidding boundary of the historical outsider.

In particular, Proctor's depiction of politics between the late-1940s and the 1950s outlines the immediate post-independence political friction between a (fictionalized) United National Party (UNP) and the Trotskyite Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), and in 1952, the emergence of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) which consolidated its path on the nationalist aspirations of the country's Sinhalese-Buddhist majority. Proctor's visceral characterization of Kegalle as an interlock of Sinhalese villages, small townships, and vast estates settled by British colonials is essential to the broader picture of the 1971 uprising as a local response (in Kegalle). In this respect, Proctor's illustration of events between national independence and the eve of the insurgence draws solidarity with Somachandre Wijesuriya's perceptive novel *First Rising* (2001) which reads as a social critique of the 1956-1971 period.

Proctor makes significant references to bills passed in the state council safeguarding free and compulsory education and language reforms which appealed to the nationalist sentiment of majoritarianists. *Waiting for Surabiel* is grounded on a measured reading of these social and economic conditions and the radical shift within Marxist politics where a "new left" broke through the stiling of its "traditional" counterpart (in the LSSP and CP).

D.C.R.A Goonetilleke, a leading authority on Sri Lankan writing, opines that Proctor "undoubtedly favours insurgents" and that he "renders their idealism with considerable warmth" (Goonetilleke, 1993, p. 140). Goonetilleke's assessment of Proctor's treatment of the rebels draws attention to the devastating flood which hits Kegalle ahead of the insurgence and constitutes the longest section of the novel. In relieving the villages from the flood, armed forces employed as relief teams and ordinary villagers – including youth who, in the immediate future, would rally around the call for rebellion – are seen working in solidarity. Once the insurrection broke out, despite shared social and class affinities, the low ranking military men and the village youth were drawn on opposing camps fighting each other: a historical irony/tragedy which both Wasantha Dissanayake and Thulhiriya Ari strive to communicate in their speeches in Bambaragala and Thulhiriya.

As a man of the world, Ondaatje's sensibilities, discipline and education make him receptive to the historical meaning of the 1971 rebellion: the upsurge of a people trodden down for centuries rising against whom they marked as the wielders of that oppression; and a revolutionary challenge to pull down the very class to which Ondaatje's kinsfolk belonged. In that sense, Ondaatje's own position is somewhat of a paradox: of being generally aware of the challenge to the power of an exploiting class by the exploited, being receptive and understanding of that

challenge in historical terms, but – as a writer – being unable to engage fully or intimately with the rebellion owing, at one level, to his historical and class otherness. It has, perhaps, contributed in a way to the only sketch Ondaatje produced on the 1971 insurgence being a curio of sorts.

3. Conclusion

Ondaatje's situation, in its most fundamental, has to be understood and acknowledged as a historical condition; one which Ondaatje shares with another writer who has featured in the margins of the present discussion: Lakdhas Wikkrama Sinha. Neluka Silva's admiration of Wikkrama Sinha's "Don't Talk to Me About Matisse" as an expression against the "deep-seated rancour bred by prolonged cultural colonization" and an agitation for the need to "rehabilitate the indigenous culture" (Silva, 2002, p. 81) is symptomatic of its reception among leading academics in the country. In presenting his views confronting colonialism and inter-class friction within Sri Lankan society, Wikkrama Sinha has written several notable poems among which, particularly those in *Lustre. Poems* such as "Discarded Tins" (1965) and "The Poet" (1965), strongly emphasize on – and even seem to welcome – revolutionary social transformation. For instance, in "Discarded Tins", the poet encourages the exploited slum-dwellers at the skirt of the city to manufacture crude bombs out of tins and to throw them at their exploitative "rich cousins" (Wikkrama Sinha, 1965, p. 48). The poet laments that the explosions that "must happen" continue to occur "in the wrong places" (Wikkrama Sinha, 1965, p. 48). However, as Nihal Fernando points out, Wikkrama Sinha's poems written after the 1971 insurgence demonstrate a complete omission of reference to the insurrection which Fernando finds to be "enigmatic" in a poet who was "generally anti-establishmentarian" and who taught at the Vidyalankara Campus (Fernando, 2015, p. 2-3). Fernando speculates this omission to be

motivated by "ambivalent feelings" Wikkrama Sinha may have had towards a movement like the JVP which was against the traditional class structure of which he was a part and, in his poems, to which he "occasionally discloses" a "loyalty" (Fernando, 2015, p. 3).

Despite the historical alienation I have attributed to Ondaatje in the present discussion, by publishing *Anil's Ghost* – a novel which is generally thought of as being set in the late 1980s, where the JVP had launched a second insurrection against the state and where, in the country's north and east, a war had broken out – he (to borrow from Rock Hill) opts to bat a second time. Of course, the Ondaatje who writes *Anil's Ghost* is a more experienced writer whose relationship with his Sri Lankan home, perhaps, was in a more developed stage. It would make interesting reading as to how some of the observations made in this discussion conferences with Ondaatje's immersion with history, politics, and the ordinary folk in *Anil's Ghost*. However, it is a theme for a separate essay.

4. References

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Notes

ⁱ The name of the estate is Gasnawa and not, as Ondaatje styles it, Gasanawa.

ⁱⁱ Note that, contrary to popular reference, I adopt the spelling of Wikkrama Sinha's name as it appears in his publications. However, where the name has been referenced in the literature as 'Lakdasa Wikkramasinha', with a view to not complicate things, I have left it as it is.

ⁱⁱⁱ For purposes of reference and quoting I use my translations of the original Sinhala texts.

^{iv} Contrary to Alles' record, Samaratunge concedes the retreat party from Kegalle to have consisted of around 200 persons (Jayatunge 218).

^v Alles also draws attention to the JVP retreat from Kegalle as being "a tale of murder, arson and looting" in which six civilians died in rebel hands (Alles 130). Samaratunge confesses having felt guilt and remorse over these deaths for which, as the leader of the group, he accepted responsibility at his trial (Jayatunge 519).

^{vi} Halliday relays reports of summary executions of peasants and rebels in Kegalle, including a damning statement given to media by the army commandant which I have quoted in the frontispiece of this article. Another officer is quoted as admitting to insurgents being taken to cemeteries and "disposed of" (Halliday 200-201).