

A patriot for all times



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Every day, when I step in to Lake House, I take a moment to bow before the statue of the founder of Lake House, D. R. Wijewardene, who almost single handedly created a publishing revolution in Ceylon, as Sri Lanka was then known. There is a portrait of him right near my desk, the famous picture taken by none other than Lionel Wendt.

Indeed, only a few people have influenced the course of Sri Lanka's history in the manner that the late D.R. Wijewardene, founder of the Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Limited (ANCL), has done. As we commemorate the 136th Birth Anniversary of this noble son of Sri Lanka, it is time to reevaluate his yeoman service to the Nation and to journalism.

Wijewardene, founder of the Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Limited (ANCL), will always be known as the doyen of the newspaper industry in Sri Lanka. Born on February 23, 1886, Don Richard Wijewardene was the third son of a family of nine. He received his early education at S. Thomas' College, Mount Lavinia and later entered the Cambridge University in England, where he met some leaders of the Independence Movement of India and also witnessed the power of media in moulding public opinion.

Freedom struggle

This was a turning point in his life that inspired him to actively contribute to the Independence struggle in his native land. Incidentally, Wijewardene is credited with rediscovering the Lion Flag that was brought to the ground by the British on March 2, 1815, from an archival facility in London.

Wijewardene, hailing from an affluent family, could have looked the other way and pursued his business interests while the people back home suffered under the yoke of colonialism. But he did not. He wanted to be in the vanguard of the freedom movement and in newspapers, found the perfect medium to carry forward the freedom struggle.

A patriot to his fingertips, Wijewardene found the right opening for his anti-colonial mission by purchasing the Sinhala publication *Dinamina* started by legendary editor H.S. Perera. The *Dinamina* had run into financial difficulties by 1914. Wijewardene with his brother, D.C. Wijewardene bought the rights of the *Dinamina* and transformed it into one of the most dynamic dailies in the country. In 1918, D.R. bought an English paper, the *Ceylonese* which had also run into financial distress. He paid Sir Ponnambalam Arunachalam, its founder, Rs.16,000 (then a massive sum) for the paper and the plant and goodwill. Wijewardene revived it and renamed it the *Ceylon Daily News*.

This newspaper has become such an ingrained part of people's lives that many old timers and even younger readers still call it the CDN, long after the newspaper shed the 'Ceylon' tag. It became one of the most influential voices in the local political scene, shaping opinions and creating debate and it remains so, having already passed its centenary.

He then purchased the *Observer*, which was already 90-years-old, having begun publishing in 1834. The *Daily Observer* folded around 10 years ago but the *Sunday Observer*, is as vibrant as ever and nearing 100 years. The Sinhala weekly *Silumina* was started in 1930 and the *Thinakaran* in Tamil followed a couple of



D. R. Wijewardene, Founder of Lake House

Wijewardene revolutionized the newspaper industry and journalism in Sri Lanka with his fearless commitment to exposing the truth through ANCL newspapers. As one of his biographers, the one-time Chief Editor of the Daily News H.A.J. Hulugalle wrote, 'before he was fifty, D. R. Wijewardene had established several flourishing newspapers, built up a great business and influenced the course of the island's history. Perseverance, courage and a high sense of public duty were the main elements of his success.'

years later, making ANCL the first trilingual publishing house in the island.

The ANCL was formally established in 1926 and all operations were shifted to the purpose-built 'Lake House' building by the banks of the Beira Lake in the heart of Colombo in 1929; hence the name 'Lake House'. The company, the biggest newspaper publisher in Sri Lanka, still operates from this historic landmark building and the name 'Lake House' is now synonymous with ANCL.

Wijewardene, with his hand-picked team of erudite editors and journalists who shared his noble vision and mission, was in the forefront of the Independence struggle through his array of newspapers. In fact, all of Sri Lanka's leading journalists have begun their careers here at Lake House.

Wijewardene saw his Independence dream being fulfilled in 1948, but unfortunately passed away just two years later on June 13, 1950, leaving a lasting legacy that will forever be etched in the minds of all Sri Lankans and in the annals of journalism in Sri Lanka. His sons are still in the newspaper business, having formed a separate company which is now the second biggest publishing company in the country.

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Perfectionist and a trailblazer

He was a perfectionist and a trailblazer. The Lake House edifice, instantly recognized by people across the island, is a proud monument to his lasting legacy.

He also installed the latest printing technology available at that time and assured a good working environment for his employees. The ANCL continues this tradition, having recently installed some of the latest digital machinery.

Wijewardene also understood the power of the visual medium and established a studio called ChitraFoto at Lake House premises where some Sri Lanka's foremost photographers honed their skills.

Indeed, men of his calibre are few and far between. While the newspa-

NATIONALIST MOVEMENT

■ D. R. Wijewardene was elected Secretary of the Ceylon National Association in 1913, marking his formal entry into politics. Together with its President Sir James Peiris he agitated for Constitutional reform and self-rule.

■ D. R. Wijewardene and E. W. Perera traced the location of the banner of last King Sri Wickrama Rajasinghe, the last King of the Kingdom of Kandy to the Royal Hospital Chelsea where it was kept since the surrender of the Kingdom to the British in 1815. The recovered banner became a focal point in the Independence Movement and it became the flag of the Dominion of Ceylon upon its Independence in 1948.

■ Wijewardene was in touch with local events and organised the first deputation to the Secretary of State for the Colonies with H. J. C. Pereira along with E. W. Perera. As a result of lobbying benefits Ceylonese were given another concession of a seat in the British dominated legislative council. To this seat majority of the Ceylonese elected Sir Ponnambalam Ram-anathan against Sir (Dr.) Marcus Fernando. He would later organise a second deputation too. He was also instrumental in starting the Temperance Movement and the Amadyapa Sabha.

- Wikipedia

per industry has changed drastically since the 1950s, the ideals he cherished in the field of journalism still hold true. However, not all journalists and media outlets play by these rules. Today, print media outlets are facing stiff competition from electronic and new media - there was no television here during Wijewardene's time.

Newspapers have also embraced the Internet even as they compete with dedicated news websites and citizen journalism websites, not to mention Facebook and Twitter.

All main ANCL newspapers are available on the web and the *Daily News* and *Dinamina* are also available as apps on iOS and Android platforms. Readers can also subscribe to breaking news alerts on their mobile phones and a news feed is available on Facebook and Twitter.

In fact, ANCL was the first in Sri Lanka and South Asia to have web editions with the launch of *Daily News* and *Observer* web editions in 1995 and it has always kept pace with the latest technology. All the media are converging today and one cannot predict what the media landscape would look like even in 2030.

Today, people are bombarded with news 24/7, on their mobiles, on television, radio and the Net. Truth and accuracy often become casualties of this 'race to be first' and even national interests are sometimes disregarded. Despite these developments, reports of the death of the (printed) newspaper are greatly exaggerated. Newspapers still have a story to tell - one that is more analytical, more in-depth and assuredly more trustworthy than the sound bites and video clips of the Internet age.

Yes, newspapers will evolve and change over time but all journalists, regardless of their platform, still have to be guided by the principles that Wijewardene believed in - being bold, truthful and objective - in this noble mission.