



Sir Christopher Ondaatje was born in Sri Lanka, educated in England and built a successful career in finance and publishing in Canada. In the early nineties he sold all his business interests and returned to writing where he himself has broken new ground as a respected book reviewer and a writer of thought-provoking books dealing with significant biographical, historical and geographical events.

Since 1995 Ondaatje has devoted his time to travelling, writing, and administering The Ondaatje Foundation. He is a life patron of the National Portrait Gallery where the Ondaatje Wing is named after him. The Ondaatje Theatre at The Royal Geographical Society; and The Ondaatje Prize at both The Royal Society of Literature and The Royal Society of Portrait Painters are other major benefactions. He was made a Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) in June 2000, and awarded a Knighthood in the Queen's honours list, June 2003.

Sir Christopher Ondaatje is the founding president of the Canada-Sri Lanka Business Council. He left a huge legacy behind which we are carrying on with dignity and decorum.

Below is an interview he gave Canadian Business in 2006.



Sir Christopher Ondaatje: “If you want to be successful in business, you have to be selfish and you have to be in a position of power.”

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Jan 8, 2006, Laura Bogomolny

“I left Ceylon in 1947 as a relatively wealthy young boy, but by 1951, after independence in 1948, our family was destitute. We went virtually bankrupt. I had to leave school because we didn't have any money to pay the fees.

The only real ambition I had was to rebuild my family's fortune.

I just concentrated on being very good at one thing: I learned everything I could possibly learn about the instruments of finance.

I chose Canada because, with my small background in finance, I figured this was the new frontier. In 1962, I got my first major break, which was working for the Financial Post in Toronto. That was really my first foot on the Canadian ladder.

On Jan. 1, 1970, we started our own firm, Loewen, Ondaatje, McCutcheon & Co. Ltd., the first exclusive institutional brokerage in Canada. We just delved into this financial world with very little capital, but immediately we were successful. Within a year or two, we were making more money than we possibly knew what to do with.

From the 1970s right through the '80s, we enjoyed phenomenal years of growth in Canada and in Europe. At one time, Europe contributed to over 75% of the firm's profits.

I was single-minded, I had a natural talent for finance, and I was genuinely, genuinely interested in it.

I got fed up with this whole world of finance. It took me the greater part of a year and a half to unshackle myself from the Canadian investment business.

One of the phenomena of the North American capitalist system is that if you manufacture a piece of paper, the Street will put a value on it. Initially, I dealt in pieces of paper for other people. But I eventually dealt in pieces of paper for myself. And it was only then that everything I touched turned to gold.

There is no substitute for hard work. You have to learn the game, you have to learn the people, you have to learn the economy, you have to learn the corporations.

It is one of the weaknesses in the investment business today. Most of the people manage money, but very few people do the thorough research we were doing.

In the end, the greed factor came in. It became an impersonal statistical game, and that was not what I was there for. It just wasn't that fun anymore.

I was disillusioned. I became philosophical about money. It is all very well having money, but if you don't do anything with it, it is sort of useless.

I have reinvented myself. I have bought myself a new freedom away from the shackles of finance and away from the responsibilities of running a public company or corporation. I'm free.

I'm involved in all these other aspects, which I really am interested in, but they don't make me any money, right? And that's OK, because they are unbelievably satisfying. I've trained myself not to do things only to make money.

Every 500 years there is an invention or a happening that changes the world, like the birth of Christ or the fall of Rome. Now, it is the invention of the chip. It has changed the world forever. Communication is global now.

When I was in Canada, you could be regional and powerful and successful. It is less of an opportunity now because of the global environment. Canada is a wonderful country. It has enormous potential. But if I was starting in Canada, I would have a global outlook.

The one thing Canada has that is really needed in the world is energy. Energy and natural resources.

I see the battles on the horizons being between East and West, and South and North.

You will see, over the next 40 to 60 years, a decline in the power of North America. You are going to see a decline in the power of the Western world. You are certainly going to see a decline in Christianity, which you are seeing right now, and the rise of Islam.

What I see in the East is the rise of two major world powers. One is China and the other is India.

With our money and our know-how in the West, wouldn't it seem natural for us to somehow finance, to somehow associate ourselves with, to somehow harness ourselves to this incredible growth?

Sir Wilfrid Laurier said the 20th century would belong to Canada. I think he was wrong by 100 years. I think the 21st century belongs to Canada.

You've got to be careful if you invest in the East, which I did in buying Forbes & Walker in Sri Lanka. We had a rough time because of something I did not realize. Being successful in Canada, in North America and England, I figured I could take my know-how to Sri Lanka and make it work. It doesn't happen that way.

There are tremendous hazards to investing in the East. They don't want the West to come in with their money and power and take over the country.

I only write about subjects I have a connection with.

I am writing a book on Leonard Woolf, Virginia's husband, who was in the civil service in Ceylon from 1904 to 1911. I'm using the book to hide behind Woolf to give a 100-year history of the island. A very opinionated book. It is almost certainly going to be my last—and hopefully my best—book. I finished it now—104,000 words.

If you want to be successful in business, you have to be selfish and you have to be in a position of power. Free enterprise is a privilege. If it's abused, it should be confiscated. It is the abuse of power that I am violently against.

I've given all my money away now.

You cannot rule the world from the grave. All you can do is try to do the best you can while you're alive.

I know I'm getting older, but I don't particularly want to get old. I'm trying hard. I'm dancing as fast as I can.

I'm a really happy man. I am where I want to be, doing the things I want to do, without any of the pressures."

Timeline: Sir Christopher Ondaatje

London

Born Feb. 22, 1933, in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka)

Financier, explorer, author, philanthropist

1956: With \$13 in his pocket, immigrates to Canada from England. In 1962, sells advertising for the Financial Post.

1970: Co-founds Loewen, Ondaatje, McCutcheon, Canada's first independent institutional brokerage. Runs Pagurian Press.

1988: Sells stake in LOM Ltd. for \$12 per share. Repurchases controlling interest in firm in '92 for \$2 per share. Divests again '95.

1998: Releases Journey to the Source of the Nile, a travelogue of his time in Africa. Sells more than 70,000 copies worldwide.

2000: A Royal Ontario Museum gallery and new wing of London's National Portrait Gallery named after mega-donor Ondaatje.



COMING BACK TO THE LAND HE LOVES

(The 2006 article below is reproduced – Courtesy: Sunday Times, Sri Lanka)



He looked east to his much-loved Ceylon from which he had been “wrenched” out as a boy and then looked west towards Canada and made a simple decision. That decision taken in London, as a callow youth yet with an incisive mind, was the turning point in his life.

More than half a century later, this multi-millionaire financial wizard now retired from the corporate world, and indulging in his passion for travelling, adventure and writing, sees it as a “good economic decision”.

Who is this enigma, who prefers coconut arrack to palmyrah arrack, considers rice, curry and tilapi “a first-class dinner”, enjoys a hot wild boar curry; is equally comfortable being knighted by the Queen of England as he is gazing at the myriad stars over the ancient city of Anuradhapura or gingerly stepping across heavily-mined areas to photograph the scarred shells of buildings or island-hopping off Jaffna; or tracking a sleek leopard at Yala? What has made him what he is today?

This is what we attempted to find out when we set out, albeit with some trepidation, to meet Christopher Ondaatje, whose brother Michael, author, and Booker Prize winner, is more familiar to Sri Lankans with the award of the annual Gratien Prize in memory of their mother.

Before the interview a frantic search on the net gives only a sketchy description about Christopher Ondaatje.....born in colonial Ceylon, educated in England, made his money in Canada from banking, finance and publishing, retired from the corporate world in 1995 and now travelling the world. A few clippings from local newspapers in the 1990s focused on him briefly when he bought Forbes and Walker through the Ondaatje Corporation.

An insight into what is closest to his heart, however, comes out in Ondaatje's latest book: 'Woolf in Ceylon -- An Imperial Journey in the Shadow of Leonard Woolf 1904-1911' where he retraces the footsteps of Woolf, 100 years after him to his haunts in Jaffna, Kandy (even Bogambara prison where after the visit Ondaatje is advised to wash his hands with carbolic soap to ward off scabies) and Hambantota. Through its pages, the reader also gets a chance to look into Ondaatje's own life and love for this land.

Ondaatje, who turns 73 on February 22, himself sets the tone for our interview when we meet him at his sister's elegant home in Nawala last Monday. He is in Sri Lanka for the 'celebration' tomorrow of his book on Woolf, well-acclaimed both here and abroad.

With a warm handshake and an enigmatic smile, he puts us at ease, in his own suave manner while taking time to pat his sister's dog, Hector. Ondaatje's own life seems to be the stuff stories are made of. The eldest son of a wealthy family of Dutch origin, his early childhood was idyllic. Born in Kandy, he lived his early life on his father's tea estate at Pelmadulla, schooled at St. Thomas College, Gurutalawa and briefly at Breeks Memorial School up in the Nilgiri Hills in India. Most of all what is etched in his memory are the many journeys made to different parts of the country, including stays at Taprobane (earlier known as Count de Mauny's island), the tiny isle off Weligama in the south and also forays into Yala, nurturing his fascination of leopards.

"I love leopards, most people do," he laughs when we query whether this love is linked to him being dubbed one of "Toronto's most aggressive and predatory businessmen". His explanation is....."in business there are only winners and losers, no halfway. Those who are selfish and unselfish.....if you go for what you want then you are considered to be selfish".

"As a young boy, life was wonderful and wild.....sketching birds, collecting birds' eggs," he recalls. It was not to last, however, and reality struck all too soon, when he had to leave the land, the life and the people he loved. Didn't he have an option? "You do what your father tells you," he says.

The heartbreak comes out in his book when he writes: "I am thrilled by Yala partly because I connect it with happy memories from my early years. When I was still a boy my father took me on a trip around Ceylon for a fortnight by car. The year was 1946 and I was twelve. It was probably the highlight of my life until then, and it was certainly the last thing my father and I did together, just before we were separated for ever." He never saw his father, Mervyn, again.

Ondaatje was off to public school in England and a completely different life. "You had to learn to be an Englishman.....new school, new rules, and new lessons. Thank God there was cricket, a passion with me." He sees cricket as the redeeming factor, helping him an "outsider" to integrate into this environment at Blundell's School in Tiverton, Devon. Later in Canada he would be part of the bob-sledding team sent to the Winter Olympics of 1964. More trauma dogged his youth, money and family troubles far away in Ceylon that would have a permanent bearing on his life, for his father had a drinking problem. Penury stared them in the face, the family, which had wine and dined at such places as the Queen's Hotel in Kandy during those colonial days, was destitute. Ondaatje without a means of completing school, started work in the city of London at the National Bank of India, expecting to come back to Colombo as an Assistant Manager.

By this time his mother, Doris, too had come over to England, making a break with his father. "Mother was an incredible woman. When things collapsed for us, she had made the decision to leave my father and come out to England with no money but just to be with her children. She took a job in a boarding house, running the place in exchange for a room in the basement she shared with my sister Janet and a tiny little triangular room in the attic which was my room. We were poor but my mother would explain to us that although we were living in Chelsea with the Bohemians we were the real Bohemians. We were the people who had lost or given up everything and we were living the Bohemian life in London. She gave us incredible confidence. When we walked out of the house onto the street, we considered ourselves aristocrats and princes. It is her confidence, stamina and sense of drama that stuck with us. Somehow we survived and somehow we lived and learnt and wrote about it particularly Michael," he says. His other siblings are sisters Janet and Gillian in between himself and Michael and Susan.

A tinge of sadness creeps into his voice as he speaks of his father who loved him dearly and whom he loved deeply. “He had a drinking problem and he was a tyrant. His world collapsed when I left for England and my mother divorced him. His family was his life and he was left a broken man. He had quite a sad death in Kegalle.”

Throughout this turbulent period in his life Asia was also in transition. The British Empire was on the wane. Looking east Ondaatje saw the business of the bank he was working for and other eastern banks, the wealthiest in the world, “disintegrating right under my eyes”. From 1962-1987 were the fastest growing years in North America and Toronto was the fastest growing city there and his gamble to head west in 1956 paid off although in later life after he had achieved his aim of making money, this hard-nosed tycoon urged the west in the 1990s to look east towards Southeast Asia for new economic frontiers.

His youth was dedicated to working hard, his sights set on breaking into investment particularly stock-broking to “rebuild my family fortune by hacking my way into corporate finance”. This was also the time, in 1959, he married Valda, his Latvian wife. They have three children and 12 grandchildren, says Ondaatje, very much the family man. Son David is in California, daughter Sarah in Connecticut and youngest daughter Jans in England where he and his wife also live. Is Valda with him on this trip to Sri Lanka? “No,” he smiles, “she is enjoying a rest back home.”

1961 was the year he read Woolf’s autobiographies published in five volumes, the second of which was ‘Growing’. In those “unputdownable” pages, he was reading about the Ceylon that he knew and loved. “Imagine my surprise,” he says and with it came the resolve to write about this man (Woolf) and about Ceylon much more than he had done, for he had left out such integral areas of the country as Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Dambulla, Sigiriya. “He hardly talks even about Colombo.....Not the caste system.....Inadequately dealing with Kataragama and does not use the word mudaliyar.”

With humility, Ondaatje explains he had to “learn to write”, adding, “in Sri Lanka we are taught very well. English is taught well”. The task before him was to learn to write, complete the research and to get credibility not with just one book but with several. And like in all of his other ventures, he says that’s what he has done. The seven books he wrote before Woolf include ‘Olympic Victory’, ‘Journey to the Source of the Nile’, ‘Hemingway in Africa’, ‘Leopard in the Afternoon’ and ‘Man-eater of Punanai’ which he says sells even now. If he had his life to live over again, any changes he would wish for?

“Not gone into finance to make money in selfish business. If we had the money and kept the money, I would have started earlier...I’ve been writing and exploring only for 16 years...but then I would have started earlier. First I would have liked to go to Cambridge and then later done real exploration for the Royal Geographical Society....as opposed to writing about my heroes one of whom is Leonard Woolf, a remarkable man.”

He first gave in to the lure of Sri Lanka only in 1990. Though the corporate burdens were still heavy, he came back and picked up the pieces of his childhood which resulted in the book about the man-eater. Since then the country of his birth has seen him pay at least one or two visits every year. A holder of British and Canadian passports, with many an honour bestowed on him in both of these adopted countries, and indulging in the pursuits of the rich such as golfing, sailing, travelling and photography, he says, “I keep coming back because this is my country and I am very much at home here. What I’m doing is living the life I led before I left Ceylon. Within a day or two of being here, I am off in a jeep with a driver into the jungle. Ask anybody, any expatriate, it is the thing they miss most.....that and cricket.”

How many get a second chance like this, he muses. “Dabbling in corporate finance was fine but this is fantastic,” is how he describes what “chucking up business” has done to him. “I feel 10 years younger. It is immensely satisfying and enjoyable.”

Tentatively we query what he has done for this country. Yes, we’ve read about all the philanthropy, the National Portrait Gallery in the UK naming a wing after him over his contributions, Ondaatje becoming part of the exclusive club of the Labour Party’s ‘million plus’ and the Ondaatje Fund which fosters the development of learning and international understanding.

“No, I do not want to award a literary prize because I don’t want to step on Michael’s toes, he is my brother. There is an Ondaatje Bungalow that I built in Yala to help reduce the poaching and for better policing of a certain area which seemed unprotected. This is to do with my great love,” smiles Ondaatje. His fondness for the country is evident in the quote that sears our very being as Ondaatje concedes: “You can take the boy out of Ceylon, but it is not easy to take Ceylon out of the boy.”

Ondaatje on Woolf and Jaffna



Christopher Ondaatje has used Leonard Woolf as a shadow behind which to make a social commentary of a hundred years of Ceylon's and Sri Lanka's history. "It's not just a biography, it is also a travelogue and involves literary criticism and a social commentary not just of the present day or Woolf but about independence, post-independence, 1972 name change and about the escalation of tensions between the Sinhalese and the Tamils." "Frankly the metamorphosis from Ceylon to Sri Lanka has been a turbulent journey," explains Ondaatje.

"I worked hard at it and used two props.....the travelogue or safari and photos, 60 in all." The super photos in the book include some which he himself clicked braving mines and all and others he found rummaging through boxes and boxes at the archives of the Royal Geographical Society in England. "These photos were taken during Woolf's time in Ceylon and have never been seen before."

Leafing through the book he picks out two "fantastic" pictures – 'Street scene, Colombo, around 1905' and 'Village crowd, Ceylon, 1910'.

When asked for a comment on Jaffna, which he visited in March 2004 in the footsteps of Woolf who was posted there in 1904, this is what Ondaatje says, "The world has a different view of Jaffna than it actually exists. In fact, Jaffna is very much a part of Sri Lanka and when you travel in Sri Lanka researching the book, if you can ignore the checkpoints and the military and the militant attitudes of the people paid to be militant, the people of Jaffna and the people of the south, basically the Tamils and the Sinhalese are very much the same islanders who are fed up with the war which is disturbing the normal way of life.

"Everybody talked about it in Jaffna. People were incredibly kind and friendly but it was impossible to ignore the devastation I witnessed around me: Elephant Pass fort no longer in existence, the churches, almost rubble, the kachcheri where Woolf worked just a ruin now and the magnificent old Jaffna fort merely a shadow of its former glory with only its scarred perimeter still standing."

Another book in the offing? Though Ondaatje has vowed that Woolf will be the last and he will cry halt, only time will tell.
