

To all those involved in the organisation of the Royal-Thomian festival of 2022 held at the Punchbowl Oval on Australia Day.

Karen and I had a wonderful time and wish to thank you for the privilege of being chief guests. We were very appreciative of the great courtesy shown to us. Everyone was very welcoming.

We felt that the organisation of the event had stepped up to a higher level compared to what we had experienced some years ago at Doonside. Or it may have been because we stayed to the end for the first time.

The formalities conducted at the end of the games was a revelation. It dispelled any false notions I might have had that the Royal-Thomian festival was nothing more than a stage for old Royalists and Thomians to relive their school days, and imbibe the nostalgia associated with the Royal-Thomian.

The event was concluded with great dignity. It commenced on the right note by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land and the past presidents from both schools. Everyone tapped into the meaning of the rivalry in that the result was less important than the game and the spirit in which it was played. I wish more old boys from both schools resident in Australia could experience the manner in which the formalities were conducted. It was very proper and professional.

As we were leaving we also realised that an event like this works smoothly because of the effort put in by many unsung heroes. We noticed the dismantling of tents and the packing of chairs and speakers and felt that the volunteer spirit was alive and well. It is very easy to take the people behind the big match soundtrack, the caterers, scorers and adjudicators for granted.

The sound of the *nakisma* brought back pleasant memories. The greatest thrill I have ever felt was batting in the 1969 Royal-Thomian with a drum beat in the background. I wanted to savour the moment for as long as I could and this helped me to focus on the task of digging in for my team. Karen remarked that she felt that she like she was back in the Royal-Thomian where muted sounds can be picked up depending on which enclosure one is in the vicinity of.

We picked up a lot by observing the over fifties and over sixties at play. While their movements may have been sluggish there was something aesthetically pleasing about the tops they wore and the way in which they carried themselves.

I also noticed the high calibre of the players' cricketing accoutrements in terms of the latest in pads and gloves. There is nothing more pleasing to a cricket lover than to see cricketers who care about how they present and display their love for the game through the clothing and equipment they sport, and the bags they carry their gear in. The jerseys worn by players from both schools in all three games were extremely chic. Through their pride in being associated with smart cricketing attire, they added colour and cool to the cricketing aesthetic, while upholding the traditions of the game.

The open event is very essential in that it showcases the calibre of cricket in the actual Royal-Thomian. After all, we were celebrating a quality cricket game as much as the fun that surrounds it. I felt that the setting (wicket, outfield and pavilion) was ideal for top notch cricketers to produce their best and hint at the fact that the Royal-Thomian produces cricket of the highest quality as much as generating nostalgia of a special nature.

To reiterate what I said in my speech, the big match concept is unique to Sri Lanka, and its origins lie in the Royal-Thomian, the quintessential big match. The big match is also cricket's gift to the sporting world, for no sporting encounter in the world, however big, accommodates up to ten different bands, two thick souvenirs, and multiple reunions.

Therefore, it is incumbent on expatriate Royalists and Thomians to celebrate the tradition, not by replicating the institution, but by using as much imagery as can be transferred, and adding fresh imagery appropriate to the location. (The jerseys worn by the players was a case in point. They are a concession to limited over cricket and T20. The flannelled pants on the other hand are a concession to tradition.)

Events such as this do not happen at the press of a button. It takes a few committed individuals with a love of school, cricket, and a dedication to the spirit of the Royal-Thomian, to unfailingly organise this event on a yearly basis.

In 2019, I organised a dinner in Colombo to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the 1969 Royal-Thomian. The Thomians supported me in making it a success in a true spirit of camaraderie and brotherhood. Our rivalry has turned into something bigger – mutual respect. And through that change in attitude we become better Royalists and Thomians. This spirit was very tangible amongst the players who participated in the three games at the Punchbowl Oval.

Karen attended her first Royal-Thomian in 2014. Not only was she impressed by the carnival atmosphere, she thought the cricket was of a high quality and resembled that of a test match. Most of all she picked up the great camaraderie that existed between former members of both schools of a certain vintage. She sensed that again at Punchbowl Oval.

Even as a player I saw the Royal-Thomian as much more than a game between two teams. I saw it as an interaction within members of a Royal-Thomian community, with the men in the middle the trigger for the release of a plethora of emotions and nostalgic reverie. And the vast majority of people who keep the tradition alive after leaving school are rarely those who obtained fame in the middle. They do it out of love, not personal fame. The community is bigger than the individuals who constitute it.

So, last Wednesday I witnessed the Royal-Thomian community in all its glory. I met former cricketers as well as those who never enjoyed representative honours but whose love for the game and the tradition of the game is unparalleled and unquenchable. I met people whom I didn't know and had very interesting conversations with them. I got more out of the event than I anticipated.

From the early eighties to the early nineties I dabbled in grade, shire and social cricket. While my batting had clearly deteriorated I enjoyed surprising success as a bowler and as a catcher. But I gave up cricket because I felt that cricket wasn't the best avenue by which to express the youthfulness that lay beneath an ageing body. So, I took to dancing and long-distance cycling and succeeded in not making a fool of myself, and in doing things that belied my age. (It is nice to outshine young whippersnappers.)

Not being a social person I prefer the company of books to people and I prefer to write about the Royal-Thomian than to attend physical events associated with it. But last Wednesday I felt that perhaps I have been depriving myself of many interesting encounters by being a recluse. Karen did remark that there were a lot of intelligent people in attendance and that she enjoyed the conversations she had with them. Beneath the frivolity there is plenty of depth to inspire many an article.

So, once again, congratulations on a job well done. I enjoyed the cricket. Even more, I enjoyed the manner in which the organisers were in frequent consultation to ensure there were no glitches. I evidenced teamwork of the highest calibre no different to the teamwork that results in the best outcomes in the middle. We were surrounded by heroes, namely, everyone who turned up to be associated with a unique institution and pitched in, thereby enhancing the atmospherics.

Regards,

Eardley and Karen

*Disce aut discede
Esto perpetua*