

A Sketch of the Life of Ñānamoli Thera

(Osbert Moore)

From Tresco to Dodanduwa

by Maurice Cardiff (1996)

In the autumn of 1967 I was transferred from Belgium to Thailand. On my first weekend in Bangkok, I went to look at the temples by the river in the old part of the city. In the precincts of one of them, I stopped to look at a bookstall which displayed an assortment of Buddhist texts translated into numerous languages.

The monk behind the counter asked me what country I came from. When I told him I was from England, he picked up one of the texts and handed it to me announcing that it was the work of an Englishman. Its title was ‘Mindfulness of Breathing’, a translation from the Pali Canon by Ñānamoli Thera. Opening it I found on the inside cover a biographical note on the translator. ‘Ñānamoli Thera’, I read, ‘was born in England in 1905 as Osbert Moore.’ The note concluded: ‘His premature death in 1960 was a great loss to the Buddhist world.’

Astonished, I exclaimed that Ñānamoli had been a friend of mine. The monk, hardly less surprised, told me what a great man he had been and how deeply revered for his scholarship and dedication to the monastic life. I bought the book, not in the hope of being enlightened by its contents, but because the note about its translator had revived

memories of more than thirty years before when I had been an undergraduate at Oxford.

I had just finished my first year so the lunch party must have been in the summer vacation of 1934. William Buchan, a school friend, had a room in Elizabeth Bowen's house in Clarence Terrace. She had been intrigued by his description of Beckley Park, a house a few miles from Oxford near the Buchan's home at Elsfield. He had arranged the invitation, in which I had been included, for her to have the chance of seeing it.

I woke with a sore throat, first symptom of an emergent cold. When I arrived at Clarence Terrace, the rain, only a few drops as yet, had already started. William had a bullnose Morris with seating for driver and passenger in front and, in the "dicky" behind, a foldback bench open to the weather. The prospect of a fifty mile drive in the "dicky", if the rain were to continue, was daunting; but the pull of Beckley, although I knew it well already, was strong. Elizabeth's husband, Alan, was generous in lending me a rainproof hat and a heavy raincoat.

Driving out of London the rain became more persistent. It thinned a little over the Chilterns but, as we dipped into Oxfordshire, it turned to a drenching downpour. The mile long drive to the house, less drive than track, was full of potholes from which water splashed into the "dicky" and seeped into my shoes. Though otherwise protected by Alan's coat and hat, I was shivering with the damp and my sore throat had developed into a head-stifling cold.

It was not the best of days for seeing Beckley but, whatever the weather, its hold over me never failed. An early sixteenth-century hunting lodge, it had been built on the site of a medieval castle with a triple moat. Tall and narrow it had fine leaded windows with stone mullions set in walls of red brick, rose-pink in sunlight, but now turned to a darker almost purple shade by the rain. Plunging through the deluge under umbrellas, we crossed the narrow bridge which arched over the moat between the drive and the house. At the front door, we huddled in the porch as William tugged at the iron bell-pull. In response to a remote clang, Susan, daughter of Mrs Feilding, who owned the house, came out to welcome us and help us dispose of dripping coats and umbrellas.

The door led directly into a partially timbered, high-ceilinged hall which, with the pouring clouds outside, was deeply shadowed. It had a large, open fireplace with plain stone chimney-piece. Though midsummer, a concession to the inclement weather, a massive log smouldered between fire-dogs on a bed of ashes. Mrs Feilding, short but foursquare and formidable, stood to one side of it.

She wore, as always, a coat and skirt of a material which closely resembled hessian, and a hat seemingly modeled on a man's bowler. Though reputed to have been a great beauty in her day, she had clearly let her looks go, particularly in regard to her teeth of which one yellowing survivor was permanently and prominently visible. The daughter of an American father and a German mother, and

brought up mostly in France and Italy, she had a slight foreign accent, and there was a touch of continental formality in the manner in which she received us. It was evident, too, when she turned to introduce a tall young man who, standing in the shadows at one end of the hall, was so obscurely present that he might have been confused with the figures in the tapestry on the wall behind him. Now he stepped forward but stopped short of the circle round the fire, responding with a slight bow to her bald statement -- although her guest of some years, she had never been known to address him other than by his surname -- "This is Mr Moore."

Despite the smouldering log, the hall was chilly. As long as I had known the house one of the lower panels in the window on the opposite side of the room had been jammed open, as on this occasion, with a piece of antler. It was rumoured that Mrs Feilding's passion for fresh air, even in winter when the fog rolled in from the nearby Otmoor marshes, had been responsible for her husband's early decease. Still shivering from the drive, mopping a running nose and stifling sneezes, I had moved close to the fireplace both to avoid the draught from the window and to take what warmth I could from the glowing log.

Remarking on my all-too-evident condition, though not commiserating with it, Mrs Feilding stated that she had never had a cold in her life. She attributed this to her practice of keeping a clove of garlic in her shoe. If I wished to try it for myself, Mr Moore would obtain a piece for me from the kitchen. I begged her not to put him to such

trouble. Fortunately the parlor maid entered at that moment to announce in a strong Irish brogue that lunch was ready.

The dining room had been the original kitchen of the hunting lodge. It had a vast open fireplace with an ancient spit with weights for turning it. The present kitchen, a cross between basement and cellar, was beneath the hall. When it flooded, as it frequently did in winter, the maid would emerge from it in white cap and apron and wearing Wellington boots which left wet footprints on the floor. Only colleens from the Irish bogs could be induced to put up with such conditions.

As we took our seats round the refectory table, Elizabeth remarked to Susan on the beauty of the needlework on the high-backed chairs. Mrs Feilding, sharp-eared, informed her that the chairs had been a present from Mr Moore. They had been in bad condition. He had embroidered the tapestry on the seats and backs himself.

“But it must have taken years!”

“No, only months,” Susan said. “And he’d never done any embroidery before. He copied the designs from old materials and worked them straight on to the canvas.”

Elizabeth’s astonishment and admiration were acknowledged by the embroiderer with a modest bow.

I remember no details of the conversation over lunch, but, as usual at Beckley, whenever a name or a date or a fact

needed to be recalled or confirmed, or a divergence of views remained unresolved, Mrs Feilding would announce: "We will ask Mr Moore. He will tell us." And Mr Moore, hitherto silent, would provide with quiet assurance the correct answer to the question put to him or settle, rationally and beyond dispute, the controversy, however abstruse the subject.

After lunch when we had returned to the hall for coffee, Mrs Feilding announced: "Mr Moore will now play to us on his harpsichord."

He had bought the harpsichord -- early eighteenth century in a splendid walnut case -- six months before. His friends had been astonished as he was not at all well-off and it had seemed an uncharacteristic extravagance. Besides, though known to be knowledgeable about music, he had never studied the piano or any other instrument. Confident that he could teach himself, he had learnt to play remarkably quickly and with considerable skill.

He kept the harpsichord in an oak-paneled parlour adjoining the hall. Even with the door open the music could only be remotely heard in the hall, itself. But now, as if to ensure that it would be quite inaudible, as soon as he started to play, Mrs Feilding began talking very loudly and without stopping, until the piece was finished. She then coolly thanked him.

As it was no longer raining, William suggested that he should take Elizabeth to see the garden. It was still gloomy

and damp outside so I decided to stay by the fire. I had picked up a book to read when I was seized by yet another sneezing fit. This reminded Mrs Feilding of my reluctance to try her garlic cure-all. Insisting again, she had the maid bring me a whole garlic on a saucer. Under her instructions I removed a clove from it and put it into my shoe. It pressed uncomfortably against the sole of my foot.

Returning from the garden tour, Elizabeth exclaimed enthusiastically about the topiary work. “Especially the bear. It must have been extremely difficult to clip it to such a realistic shape.”

Almost the whole garden was topiary, architectural or geometric in design, except for the bear, which was certainly its masterpiece. It stood twelve feet high settled in a comfortable bell-shape on its haunches, its head, with ears pricked, convincingly modeled, its forepaws indicated by deftly clipped protuberances emerging from its body.

“My husband planted all the yew and box,” Mrs Feilding said, “when we first came to live here. My son, Basil, and Mr Moore have clipped them into shapes following my husband’s intentions. Mr Moore, however, is wholly responsible for the bear.”

It did not rain during the drive back to London, but by the time I reached the house at which I was staying, my cold was so much worse that I decided to go to bed. Mrs Feilding’s cure-all had failed to be of any help. When I took off my shoe I removed it and threw it out of the

window.

There is a hiatus here; and, the text jumps ahead to Sri Lanka in the 1980s. [Editor.]

The forest began a short distance from the outskirts of Kandy. There had been a drought on the island. Although the trees still gave a welcome shade, dried-up leaves covered the path to the Hermitage. I had sent a letter to the Venerable Nyanaponika but doubted whether he would have received it. Happily we found that he was expecting us. The Hermitage was a simple wooden hut, but its one room resembled a scholar's study rather than a monk's cell. The walls were lined with books and there were more books among the papers on the desk from behind which he rose to greet us.

Nyanaponika was in his eighties. He had come from his native Germany to Ceylon, as it then was, as a young man drawn by his interest in Buddhism. He had joined the island monastery on the lake at Dodanduwa and stayed on to become its abbot.

In 1982, the year of our visit, he had been long retired to his Forest Hermitage where he worked with the Buddhist Publication Society of Kandy on the publication of Buddhist texts and translations. I had corresponded with him some fifteen years earlier when I was living in Bangkok. Shortly after my arrival in the city, I had become friends with a Thai publisher and owner of a bookshop specializing in books on Buddhism. When I told him I had

known Ñānamoli well in his lay life, he had asked me to write an article about him for Visakha Puja, a Buddhist quarterly. Nyanaponika had read the article and had written to ask my advice about the publication of certain posthumous papers of the late Venerable Ñānamoli. As they were not directly concerned with Buddhism, the expense could not be met by the Buddhist Publication Society. He wondered if I knew of any friends of Ñānamoli who might be prepared to subscribe to their publication. I gave what help I could. A year later he had sent me a copy of the papers collected under the title, *A Thinker's Note Book*.

We spent an hour with Nyanaponika. He told us, gesturing towards his desk, that he was still working on manuscripts left by Ñānamoli when he died. He extolled his exemplary life during the eleven years he had lived in the monastery and the naturalness with which he had taken to its austere simplicity. He considered him to have been, in his field, the outstanding scholar of his time. His profound knowledge of Pali, acquired only after his arrival in Ceylon, had made it possible for him to elucidate in his English translations some of the most difficult texts of the Theravada canon. His industry had been tireless, but, though producing a remarkable body of work in so short a time, the meticulousness and accuracy of his scholarship had never faltered.

He spoke, too, of his personality, of his detachment -- so much at one with the teaching of the Buddha -- which seemed to have been inherent in his nature; but, also, of his

compassion, evident in the friendly smile he had for all who approached him. He had lent ready and effective help in practical matters when called upon and had been generous in giving advice and guidance to the younger monks in their studies.

He told us how privileged he felt to have known him (a framed photograph of Ñānamoli in his monk's robes hung on the wall opposite his desk) and how deeply he had valued his friendship and regretted his premature death. Having read my article in *Visakha Puja* he was anxious to hear anything else I could tell him of his early life.

Before leaving I asked him for an introduction to the present abbot at Dodanduwa. He wrote a note but as he handed it to me he had a sudden doubt. "I hope you haven't come out here because you intend writing a book about him. It would be very wrong not to respect his wishes."

He picked up a copy of the *Thinker's Note Book* and handed it to me open at the first page of the editor's preface. He had headed it with a quotation from the Note Book, itself.

'I shall never be able to compose my biography: but let no one else have the presumption to do so; for this would amount to theft. -- Don't worry, no one will think of it.'

It was ten years after our visit to Sri Lanka that I decided to write a sketch of Osbert Moore's life. He was such a remarkable man I had always felt that some account of his

life should be written. This sketch falling far short of a biography could scarcely be considered disrespectful to his wishes.

For circumstances of his early years and army career I relied upon what his friend, Basil Feilding, told me in the many talks we had before he died, and the letters he wrote to Basil's sister, Susan, during the war. I had no qualifications for assessing the value of his contribution to Buddhist scholarship while at Dodanduwa. For his life there I had what I learned from Nyanaponika and the monks remaining in the island monastery to draw upon, together with the further letters he wrote to Susan from the Hermitage which, with the wartime letters, the Feilding family kindly lent me.

The first I heard of the Feildings, though not by name, was when staying with the Buchans, as William's guest at Elsfeld. Beckley was only a few miles away. Due to some quirk in the telephone system their line frequently became crossed with that of an unknown neighbour. On picking up the receiver, they would hear a woman's voice with a foreign accent ferociously berating whoever had called her or to whom she was making a call. Though frustrated, the Buchans were intrigued. By the time I went up to Oxford a few months later, they had got to know the owner of the voice and her family and had fallen under the spell of their remote and beautiful house. It was when William took me to meet Basil Feilding in the antique shop he then owned in the Broad, that I met Bertie Moore for the first time.

Basil's maternal uncle, Christopher Brewster, had married

the daughter of von Hildbrandt, the distinguished German sculptor who as a young man had bought a beautiful and extensive property in Florence within easy walking distance of the Duomo. On visits to his aunt and uncle who had inherited San Francesca, Basil developed a serious interest in painting and an enduring aspiration to become a painter, himself. He also picked up enough Italian for him to choose it as his principal subject when at Oxford. Neither a gifted linguist nor dedicated scholar, he was helped in writing essays in Italian by Bertie Moore, a fellow student, who spoke and wrote the language fluently. On discovering that they had other interests in common including a predilection, amounting in Basil to a passion, for old master paintings, old furniture and, in general, antique objects remarkable for their craftsmanship, oddity or uniqueness, they decided, after leaving the university, to open an antique shop together in the Broad.

The two partners could hardly have been less alike in appearance, personality or background.

Basil was tall, handsome, with fair hair and a high colouring which gave him a rather bucolic look. He might have been taken for a young farmer which in a desultory way he was, living after his marriage in the home farmhouse at Beckley, keeping sheep on part of the land which went with it and letting the rest for grazing. He had had a conventional public school education but life during the holidays at Beckley with its most un-English emphasis on art and literature, and its lack, apart from a little rough shooting, of the traditional diversions and sporting

amenities, was far from that of the orthodox county house. Nor did the old hunting lodge, itself, have any affinity with the great, grey barracks of the county families; but beautiful and sequestered and filled by his parents with fine old furniture, it was to have a strong, lasting and, ultimately, restrictive hold over him. Inheriting comfortably from his father, it was for the opportunities it offered to add to its treasures, rather than as a business venture, that he started the shop. Lacking the necessary patience and persuasiveness, he was not temperamentally equipped to be a successful dealer; but as a collector, buying on his own behalf, he was unfailingly discerning and astute. While far from being indiscriminately gregarious by nature, he had a disarmingly naive charm and was warm and open in the company of his friends. Chronically flirtatious, his response to the presence of any pretty girl who attracted him, was blatantly enthusiastic, sometimes to the chagrin of Peggy, his young and beautiful wife.

Had I the presumption of the biographer against which Bertie (the name could hardly have been less suited to him) wrote so strongly, a visit to the Scilly Isles at an early stage would have been essential, since it was there that he was brought up. That much, and most of what follows; for reticent in most things, I never heard him speak of his early life, I learned from Basil in whom he minimally confided, and who once spent a brief holiday with him at his home on Tresco.

His father had been an explorer who was reputed to have discovered a hitherto unsuspected range of mountains in

Africa. Out of prejudice against education in principle, or possibly because of financial considerations, he did not send Bertie away to be educated, leaving him to make what progress he might in the local schooling available. Whether adequately taught or not, obsessed with the pursuit of knowledge from an early age, he supplemented what he learned in the classroom by frequenting the public library where he delved into books on any subject which interested him, remembering almost every word of what he read. He had a particular gift for languages and had made such good progress in Italian and French that he managed to persuade his father to let him try for a place at Oxford.

He was successful and entered as a modern languages student at Exeter College. He took up rowing and rowed for the first college eight at Henley. Perhaps because he gave up too much of his time to this activity, or because Basil distracted him from his studies by persistent demands for help with his own, when it came to a degree he obtained only an undistinguished third.

It is understandable that the two should have become friends through the Italian connection, but how, living in the Scilly Isles, Bertie had acquired the knowledge of pictures and old furniture which made him such a valuable partner in Basil's antiques enterprise, is more mysterious.

It was in the shop that I met him for the first time. Basil was discussing a delivered piece of furniture with Leonard Huskinson, a large and ebullient friend. Between them they seemed to be taking up most of the premises' limited space. Not until Leonard turned to ask for his opinion did I

become aware of Bertie's presence, standing, as he was, silent, motionless and as much into the background as was possible. This state of withdrawal, this all-but-absence, habitual to him, arose as I was to learn, partly from shyness but also because, contemplative by nature, he felt most at ease as a detached observer of a situation or as a listener-in -- rarely participating unless pressed -- to a debate.

In appearance, he was tall and, perhaps from rowing, gave the impression of being strongly built. His dark hair was worn rather short and tidily brushed. His complexion was pale and his mouth in repose firmly set. His eyes, thoughtful but giving little away of what he was thinking, expressed, with his overall bearing, an alert but guarded intelligence.

Now, in response to Leonard's appeal, he came forward and bending over the piece of furniture, gave a verdict on its date and authenticity, so authoritative, if mildly expressed, that it was accepted by the others without further question. But it was not only his expert knowledge or even his rare finds, such as a Durer drawing come-by in a country cottage, but his eye for the unusual which helped to give a special character to the shop in the Broad. Objects of a mechanical nature particularly appealed to him. Among these were eighteenth century barrel organs; for one of which (retained by Basil for his collection) he composed on a paper roll a fugue on the national anthem; and early automata, then little regarded, on which he tested his ingenuity in putting their mechanisms in order. Two such were kept at Beckley for a time while being repaired: the

one a monkey shoe-black which polished another monkey's boots; the other, a clock set in an off-shore storm complete with revolving lighthouse and ships rocked by waves.

This last may have had a special appeal for him since he had a love of the sea from his island upbringing. According to Basil who had experience of it when staying with him at his family home on Tresco, it brought out an unexpected, dare-devil streak in his character. In weather blustery enough to make Basil apprehensive, Bertie and his father took him for an outing in the Moore's sailing dinghy. Clear of the harbour, the sea proved to be rough and grew steadily rougher as the wind strengthened. Undeterred, with Bertie growing more exhilarated as the waves rose higher, his father -- described by Basil as a 'kind of retired buccaneer' -- headed the boat so far out that when they turned round, the land was only dimly in sight. But worse was to come. As they neared the harbour, the wind drove them towards some rocks. The closer they approached to disaster, the more elated Bertie became as he and his father struggled to head the boat out to sea. Their last minute success, followed by perilous tacking to regain the harbour, left Basil severely shaken while for father and son it had evidently been no more than an invigorating and challenging adventure.

On one of his annual visits to Tresco Bertie decided, out of boredom, to try painting in oils for the first time. The subject he chose would have been daunting for most beginners but in the two canvasses he brought back with him he had succeeded in representing, with near

photographic effect, single waves at the moment of breaking.

Since becoming a partner in the shop he had lived at Beckley. When Basil married and moved to the farmhouse, he stayed on as a guest with Mrs Feilding. It was a time which he described in his one brief autobiographical note as a 'very pleasant and mainly graceful rock-pool', adding that 'the financial insecurity beginning in 1937 and the outbreak of war in 1939 silted the pool up'.

The insecurity coincided with and may have been partly caused by Mrs Feilding's death. She had made herself ill by insisting on going out in the worst of Otmoor weather to feed the numerous cats which haunted the topiary. Reluctantly forced to take to her bed and still wearing her man's bowler -- for this and what follows I rely upon the account given me by her daughter, Susan -- her condition so deteriorated that, despite her protests, a doctor was sent for. He diagnosed pneumonia, prescribed medicines and advised that her bedroom window, which she always kept open, should be shut. As soon as she was left alone she picked up a large book from beside her bed and hurled it at the window breaking some of the leaded panes. The Otmoor fog, once again in its role as the angel of death, rolled in and while the family were playing cards downstairs in the hall, she died.

Her death did not have an immediate effect on Bertie's situation. For the next few months Susan, never over-anxious to rejoin Hugh, her military husband in India,

divided her time between Beckley and her London flat. Although devoted to each other, Susan and Basil had very different temperaments. She lacked his easy going charm and generally (on occasion he could be provoked into spectacularly ferocious outbursts) amiable disposition. Feline both in appearance and character, her attraction lay as much in her high intelligence as in her rather hard-featured beauty. Whereas Bertie's friendship with Basil was cemented by shared interests and mutual respect for each other's very different qualities, a relationship developed between Bertie and Susan on an intellectual level to which Basil had no pretensions.

While Susan was at Beckley, Bertie stayed on. Encouraged by her, he was no longer, as in Mrs Feilding's day, so withdrawn as to be confused with the figures in the tapestry or so restricted in conversation as to be little more than a purveyor of encyclopaedic knowledge on request. Now, in response to Susan's bright talk and that of her weekend guests(1), when a subject discussed sufficiently drew him, joining in, though modest as ever, he would inadvertently astonish with the range and depth of his intellectual resources. It was the period which, on looking back, he may well have thought of as the rock-pool at its most graceful; but it did not last. When Basil decided to leave the family house and move with his family into Beckley, Susan withdrew to London and Bertie departed into exile in a rented room in Oxford. The antique shop had come to an end. If his financial position had already been insecure, it must have become even more so.

While staying in Oxford some weeks later we spent an evening with him. After the surroundings he had been used to at Beckley, reduced to a small, drably-furnished room and bereft of friends to whose day-to-day company he had been accustomed for so long, we might have expected to find him despondent. But this was not the impression he gave. He seemed, if anything, more deeply at ease with himself, as if a restricted, solitary existence was better suited to his contemplative nature than his former life with its many distractions; the old house, and the fine things it was filled with, and the talk and comings and goings of its inmates. He made no hint of complaint about his changed circumstances and spoke of Beckley and the Feildings with affection but without nostalgia or regret.

Inevitably we discussed the ever-increasing threat of war and what he should do if it broke out. He told us that he would join the army with the intention of staying in the ranks. We agreed that while there were obviously many other reasons for wishing to come out of it alive, it was tantalizing to think one might be denied the knowledge of what happened when it was over.

Noticing how little there was of his own in the room, apart from a few books, I asked him what he had done with all his possessions, for I had imagined that the harpsichord was not all that he owned of the many objects which he and Basil had collected and kept at Beckley. He replied that he had left the harpsichord in the Oak Room; other than that he had no possessions to bring with him "except these", he added, bringing a small leather bag out of his pocket. After

undoing the strings at its neck, he turned it upside down to let a miniature hoard of gold, paper-thin, medieval coins pour out on to the table in front of him.

Some months after our visit war was declared and the rock-pool finally silted up.

Bertie joined the army in the ranks as he had said he would, and was drafted into the anti-aircraft regiment. Finding time passed slowly beside his gun when not in action, he took to knitting stockings in elaborate patterns including, according to Basil, a pair with white rabbits round the tops. Like all recruits he had to fill in a form stating his qualifications. Naively; for he was quite happy with his gun and had no wish to be taken away from it; still less to be considered for a commission; he put down all the languages he knew, including Turkish which he had learnt out of a book before going on holiday with Susan and a party of friends. On arrival at Smyrna he had stepped off the boat speaking the language and being understood and, still more remarkable, understanding it when spoken to. Someone reading his forms at the War Office was sufficiently impressed by them to have him summoned for an interview. At the time there was a shortage of Italian-speaking officers to cope with the large number of Italian residents who had been interned. His fluency in the language, when tested, resulted in his transfer to an Intelligence Corps officer-cadet training camp in Surrey. As I happened to be an officer-cadet myself at Sandhurst, nearby, we wanted to meet for lunch at a hotel midway between the two establishments.

Officer-cadets had to put up with the indignity of wearing a forage cap, a silly enough headgear in itself, but made even sillier and more conspicuous by having a broad white band stitched round it. However jauntily I tried to wear it, it made me feel, as, I noticed, other cadets looked, extremely foolish.

I arrived at the hotel before Bertie. As it was a fine day, I settled myself at a table in the garden. I saw him approaching before he saw me and was struck by how, doubtless without giving a thought to it, he had hit upon a way of wearing the wretched cap so that it seemed to have nothing to do with him. Instead of making him look foolish it was the cap, itself, which was shown up as an extraneous absurdity.

Over a rather muted lunch we exchanged news of our mutual friends, now all dispersed. He spoke little of his army life except to complain of its boredom. I felt that it had the effect of making him draw deeper into himself. It was an autumnal occasion and a melancholy one. It was several years before I was to see him again.

In February 1941 Bertie was posted as assistant intelligence officer to a large camp for Italian internees on the Isle of Man. His early letters to Susan from the island are mostly short and hastily written. He makes unfavourable comments on the islanders, the climate of perpetual rain and the Victorian architecture of the boarding houses in Douglas. Though not yet at ease and frequently

overwhelmed by his work at the internment camp to which he is attached, he counts himself lucky in his superior officer, Geoffrey Dennis, whom he finds congenial and 'someone he can talk to'.

Although in his rented room in Oxford he had seemed reconciled to exile from the 'rock-pool', now so much further removed from it, he continually and urgently asks for news of his Beckley friends, is worried that he may be out of favour with Peggy and anxious about Basil who, totally unsuited by temperament to army life, is for ever having his applications for a commission turned down. Each letter ends with a plea for an early reply.

For the first few months his morale is sustained by the help he receives from his superior of whom he writes, when Dennis is summoned for consultation at the Foreign Office: 'I miss him as a friend, supporter and chief. Towards the end of 1941 Dennis is transferred to the BBC and Bertie is promoted senior intelligence officer in his place.

Following Dennis' departure and left with no one on the island with whom he has 'the smallest inclination to associate' his letters become longer with comments on the books he has been reading and with a growing tendency to introspection. He quotes in one letter a couplet from Pope's *Essay on Man*.

'But when his own great work is but begun
What reason weaves by passion is undone.'

He goes on: ‘... which brings me back to the iron-hard doctrine that unremitting self-control is the only thing that matters, plus patience, of course, and the contemplation of the virtues’.

Having arrived at such a conclusion it is not surprising that when Susan was to ask his advice on an unsatisfactory emotional involvement, his response is a tough one which, he admits, it is unlikely that she will be able to bring herself to follow. ‘I think X has taken you for granted and so is treating you rough. The only thing is to treat him rough and if he does not react he is not worth bothering about. It only needs a little strength of mind ... I think you ought to start by having the telephone cut off.’

One of the books which has impressed him is J.W. Dunne’s *New Immortality*.

‘After reading it I have become convinced of what I was already almost sure of, that the infernal question of time is at the root of most of our difficulties and that it is, in fact, only by scrapping the whole idea as nothing more than a sensory illusion that we can hope, so to speak, to clear away some of the metaphorical soil and find out what the metaphysical roles are made of.’

Later in the same letter: ‘Passion and morality, right and wrong, justice and injustice are sticking in my gizzard at present, and I can’t somehow hook them into the mechanical-mathematical half of the scheme. It is like oil and vinegar: put them together in a bottle and shake them as you will, they will never mix, but employ the yolk of an

egg and with care you have the perfect mayonnaise. The truth is I have no egg yet.'

A few months on (it is now January 1943) he reads two books about Yoga, *The Inner Reality* and *The Hidden Teaching Beyond Yoga* by Paul Brunton, which he finds 'rather interesting'. Perhaps an understatement for later he writes: 'I am adopting the practice of meditation, i.e. concentration on the infinitesimal, and I find it rather absorbing. Having no one to talk to favours introspection. I have also found my appreciation of music has grown enormously. Also it is about three years since I quarreled with anyone -- this must be a record and gives me a pleasantly detached feeling.' And finally: 'I think the mayonnaise is beginning to mix, though too much oil or vinegar at once still unmixes it and one has to begin again.'

In his next letter, dated 16th February, he writes 'I am submerged in work and have written over two hundred reports already this year. Words simply pour off my pen... It is sometimes rather tiring but I don't think I want to change. I have learnt more since being on this island than in the whole of the rest of my life. Study of human nature and philosophy at the same time seem to go well together and act as a counter balance.'

By the autumn, with the advance of the allies in Italy, he is unsettled by the possibility of a transfer. Early in 1944 he is moved to Rotherham and sends a brief note to give his new address. It is the last of his letters written while still in England.

If Bertie's uprooting from the quiet haven of Beckley to become, within a few months, intelligence overseer of Italian internees on the rain-sodden Isle of Man must have been an extraordinary experience for someone of such a retiring disposition, the role in which he found himself cast on being transferred to Italy was so astonishingly improbable that he was to write of it some months later: 'If anyone seven years ago had foretold what I should be doing now I would have dismissed it as fantasy.'

What that role was he hinted at in the first of his Italian letters written six months after the note he had sent from Rotherham. After promising to try to get news of Mrs Brewster, Susan's aunt who had stayed on in Florence during the war, he describes a meeting with an Italian saboteur: 'a most elegant young man with a black beard and singularly delicate hands.'

And then later: 'I had to appear sometime ago as a witness to a spy trial and was four-and-a-half hours in the box. I was referred to as Captain X (such a thrill!) and by Italian witnesses as Captain ics, which got translated back into English as Captain Hicks.' If spy-catching was the pursuit in which he was principally involved, as subsequent references to similar trials in his letters seem to infer, what he had learned on the Isle of Man of human nature, particularly in respect of its Italian bent, must have made him a formidable operator in that murky world which he was to describe as 'resulting from the passing of armies – poverty, corruption, unscrupulous exploitation, plotting, denunciation and, worse than all, enjoyment in these

things.’ But however deeply he was drawn into it he never abandoned that pursuit of the elusive philosophical mix, proof against ‘unmaking’ of which he had written while on the Isle of Man. After his reference to the spy trial he went on to describe visits to Perugia, Assisi and Gubbio, all three of which had been undamaged in the war. ‘Perugia is lovely and Gubbio quite fascinating -- somehow that other world which is behind the mountains or round the corner, seemed nearer in Gubbio than I have ever known it.’

In another letter a brief glimpse of Basil’s partner in the Broad re-emerges when he mentions buying ‘a perfectly fascinating miniature Venetian chest-of-drawers, about 1700, made entirely of glass and mirrors and glass flowers, about four inches high and on the outside looking like a piece of needlework.’ But, generally, he finds little of interest in the antique shops and everything very expensive.

The longest letter of the Italian series, dated March 1945, is the only one in which he writes about himself. Looking back he considers how much his wartime experience has changed him, reflects on the extent to which he has been affected by, his present work and reveals how the development of his inner life has led him through philosophical speculation to the study of mysticism.

‘I have now been five years in the army. What untold and nameless horrors the word army used to raise in my mind in time gone by. My first existence came to an end with the beginning of the war. The first year served to destroy -- I am beginning to realize now -- all the illusions and most of

the complexes to which I was previously a prey -- even the inferiority complex gone -- and all the constructions built on them razed as flat as Cassino. Out of the ruins has come something quite different. For the last two years I have become increasingly absorbed in philosophy and mysticism, especially the latter, the former being a kind of blueprint or map. The sensuous world is receding more and more rapidly into the background.

I have the feeling of being swept down some great river in a canoe. I have no doubt that I shall end in the infinite ocean.'

Of his work: 'I am lucky in having become as detached as I am. Sometimes the world seems so universally and increasingly sinister that if it still represented reality to me, which it does not any longer, I should be swamped. As it is I can regard it quite objectively, though it occasionally requires a slight effort. Even the stinking morass of corruption, exploitation and hatred that seems to be in prospect for Europe for the next fifty years does not matter nor all the buildings and paintings and irreplaceable objects which have gone for ever. *Now* is no more than then. And the question of time is only due to the arbitrary order in which we look at time in sections ... The future remains an inscrutable blank -- the unreal future, that of the rest of my existence. What does it matter? I know where I am going in reality and the prospect is infinitely great.'

In June of the same year he mentions for the first time Harold Musson, an officer colleague, with whom he has become 'great friends'. 'We were together at Caserta and

used to hold interminable arguments in the Mess on all sorts of subjects. The atmosphere of the H.Q. coupled with the work which, although absorbingly interesting, (the three of us had the cream of the whole of Italy) was rather like living on caviar and cream which upsets the digestion and rather told on our nerves.'

This gormandizing relish, which Bertie admits to sharing with Musson and an unnamed officer, was presumably in having the pick of the big game in spy-hunting, appears at odds with what he had written in his previous letter of his detachment from the real world or, as he put it, 'the world of his existence'. Perhaps, because he had become so insulated from it in the fastness of his 'inner' reality, it was possible for him to engage with all his intellectual faculties in the 'outer' reality of the hunt without being troubled by concern for the ultimate fate of the prey when captured.

If the richness of the fare told on his nerves, he found some relief in social diversions in Rome: the hospitality of the Barberinis to whom the Brewsters were connected, a Mrs Fothergill whom he found entertaining and an acquaintanceship with Iris Origo before she left for Tuscany. These he only records in passing. More important to him was his friendship with a working class family living in a basement flat off the Via Appia Nuova, a two mile walk from the headquarters. 'I used to go and see them fairly frequently and always received a most charming reception and was never asked for anything. How they and their like lived with the prices in the black market and often nothing to be had for ration cards, I don't know ... I have

often spent an evening with them when someone would come in with an accordion, the uncle with a guitar and another neighbour with a marvelous voice who would sing Neapolitan songs.'

Despite these distractions it appears in his later letters, particularly in one dated 13th of July, that he is becoming increasingly unsettled in his work and the responsibilities it entails.

In that letter, after a disparaging account of Lord Grimthorp's garden at Ravello, he mentions that he is reading 'the best treatise on Buddhism he has so far come across written in Italian by a man called Evola -- a remarkably clear, objective and complete exposé of the subject.'

Although he does not refer to it again in subsequent letters, its influence on him must have been very strong, for it came close to bringing his army career to a disastrous end.

In November he tells of a job he has been offered by the BBC, but which he is afraid he will not be able to take as the army is unlikely to release him. A few weeks later he confesses that he finds his nerves on edge: 'I am beginning to feel strongly that I have had enough of intelligence and never want to hear the word *secret* again.'

His final letter from Italy, the only one undated, was probably written early in 1946. 'I am having a frightful time just now ... my responsibilities seem to grow in the most appalling fashion.' And at the end after mentioning visits to the opera: 'Without some sort of distraction of this

kind I think I would go wild in the present state of things as they affect me.'

For what happened in the period between this letter and a card, dated 9th May, posted from London and giving the time of his arrival by train to spend a weekend in the country with Susan who was by then living at Stanton with her husband, Hugh, I have only Basil's account to go on. He assured me that he had had it from Bertie, himself.

After reading Evola's book, *The Doctrine of Awakening*, his attraction to Buddhism became so strong that it brought the two realities, of which he had previously written that he could keep them detached the one from the other, into a contention which, while continuing in his work, he found it impossible to resolve. The successful hunting down of spies, ending, as it usually did, with their execution, could not be reconciled, as he was now forced to accept, with the Buddha's teaching on the sanctity of life, not only human but in all its forms. (A few years later in coping with poisonous snakes in the compound at Dodanduwa, rather than killing them, he practised luring them into jars so that they could be removed unharmed out of danger to the community.) In the dilemma in which he now found himself, he asked to be relieved of his counter-espionage duties and followed this up with a refusal to divulge evidence, known only to himself, with regard to investigations already in hand. The situation, it must be added, was not without a touch of black comedy and cynics might see in his conduct a gamble which paid off. Gamble or not it required courage, for it could have easily led to a

court-martial and a harsh sentence. According to Basil, for some time this was a real possibility; but either by a fortunate coincidence or due to manipulations by superiors well-disposed towards him and convinced of his sincerity, his release requested by the BBC was granted and he was allowed to leave for London to take up his appointment in the Italian section.

Like the card of 9th May, the letters Bertie wrote to Susan while he was working at the BBC refer mostly to weekends spent at Stanton or arrangements for meetings in London. Curiously there is no mention of Harold Musson in the earlier letters although his release from the army must have followed soon after his own, since already by March 1947 he was writing from the flat they were sharing in St George's Terrace. It is only in letters written over a year later that Musson's name appears and then in a context which implies that he and Susan were not on good terms.

Certainly the Feildings were unfavourably impressed by him when Bertie took him on a visit to Beckley. Asked many years later what he was like, they described him as a 'poseur', 'precious', 'an Oscar Wilde-like character wearing a cloak'. So portrayed it is difficult to conceive of him as the dedicated convert to Buddhism he proved to be, still less to imagine as remotely possible the circumstances of his death.

There are some references in the letters to new friends he had made through Susan and to colleagues at work, but none to the progress of his 'inner life' which had been such

a recurring theme in those written from the Isle of Man and Italy. On the direction in which it was taking him he appears to have kept her in the dark almost to the very last.

A few months after our arrival in 1948, the director of the Italian section of the BBC came to see me. After introducing himself he said that he believed that I was a friend of his assistant Osbert Moore.

I shook my head, "I'm sorry there must be some mistake. I don't remember knowing anyone of that name."

"But he told me, himself, that he knew you well when he was living near Oxford."

"Oh, you must mean Bertie! I had no idea his name was Osbert. It sounds too pretentious -- not like him at all. How is he? What's he doing?"

"He's fine. He works with me. He's incredibly efficient. I don't know what I'd do without him. I certainly wouldn't have been able to come out here if I hadn't known everything would be all right in the office so long as he was in charge. He intends taking a holiday in Italy later after meeting with the broadcasting people in Rome. He hopes to have the chance of seeing you."

I wrote to Bertie inviting him to stay. He accepted and spent two nights with us on his way back from Rome, before setting out on what he described as 'a jaunt through northern Italy.' We were still living at Gemetto which with

all its attractions had the disadvantage of the early start I had to make to reach my office on time and my frequent late return in the evening.

Accordingly I saw less of Bertie than Leonora did but we both agreed that though his personality seemed little changed, he had become more self-assured, less withdrawn and open in conversation. He had always been given to silences which, for our part, we had never found disconcerting. Now, Leonora reported, they had taken on a new dimension. Whereas before, apparently no more than a refuge from being drawn into talk for its own sake or in which he had no inclination to take part, they were longer and deeply meditative, producing, as she found when sitting in the same room with him, a benign and restful atmosphere.

He spoke little of his wartime experiences other than to tell us that he had spent some years with Italian internees on the Isle of Man before being transferred, following the allied advance, to the headquarters at Caserta in southern Italy. He had even less to say about his work with the BBC although it was for talks in Rome at the State and Vatican radio stations that he had come out. We discussed Italian politics in which he was still interested from his time in Intelligence at Caserta. Possibly from what he had then learnt of disreputable intrigues at the Papacy, he had acquired a dislike of the Catholic church which he expressed with uncharacteristic vehemence.

Before his arrival we had been counting on him, with his encyclopaedic knowledge, to tell us the names of various

trees in the park with which we were unfamiliar. He did not disappoint us: not merely identifying them and describing their various characteristics but naming the countries to which they were native.

During his visit he had worn the same quietly respectable suit and shirt with collar and tie. But he surprised me on the morning of his departure by appearing in khaki shirt and shorts, heavy boots and carrying a rucksack. It was an outfit which, at that time in Italy, anyone who had given more thought to his appearance than Bertie, would have been deterred from wearing as too embarrassingly conspicuous. I drove him into Milan and dropped him at the foot of the flight of steps leading up to the railway station. As with his rucksack on his back he climbed the steps, people turned to stare at him, finding him, as was plain from their looks, a target for ridicule. At the top he turned and waved. I waved back. It was the last time I was to see him.

In the early autumn of the same year (1948) I had a second visit from the BBC director. As our discussions were inconclusive he decided to call on me again on his way back to Rome. When the time passed and I heard nothing from him, I assumed he had changed his mind. It was not until a month later that he wrote to me with an apology and an explanation.

While he was in Rome he had had a message to say that Bertie had resigned from his post. He had given no hint of his intention, although at least one member of the staff was a close friend. He had simply left a note on his desk saying

that he was resigning forthwith and would not be coming back to the office. The director had had to cut short his stay in Rome. On his return to London he learned that Bertie had already left for Ceylon, apparently with the aim of becoming a Buddhist monk.

It appears that on one of Bertie's visits to Stanton in August he told Susan for the first time he was considering giving up his post at the BBC to leave with Musson to study Buddhism in Ceylon. Writing later in the month from Holland where he is on holiday, he starts by thanking her for having him to stay: 'If life was like all weekends at Stanton there would be no need to consider mirages in the East! Your disapproval of my proposal is much appreciated -- very much so. There is only one thing I would say at this moment which is that there is no question of choosing between friends. If I went to Ceylon with Harold Musson in order to study and, may be, practise Buddhism, it would be merely that, having decided to go, there is no point in traveling alone (at least to start with) if you can travel in company.'

In disapproving of his project Susan may have revealed her resentment at his closeness to Musson. In the months before the war when they had been together at Beckley, she had been the dominant personality, appreciative of Bertie's remarkable gifts and intent upon drawing him out from the diffidence he was only fully to shake off in the course of his army career. Now they were on equal terms and while she may have felt rejected when he told her of his intention to leave with Musson, for his part, however much he valued

and continued to value her friendship, the loyalty she might have expected of him, would have been counter to the practice of non-attachment in which he had schooled himself in Italy and which had been reinforced by his study of Buddhism.

Of his final decision to leave with Musson, despite her disapproval, she responded generously when he turned to her for help in the disposal of his possessions, agreeing to take on the responsibility of power-of-attorney on his behalf. With his farewell letter he sent her a meticulous inventory of the contents of his flat with details of what was to be sold, including his harpsichord, and what given away and to whom. The letter, dated 14th October, concludes: 'I am eternally grateful to you for your help and understanding in all this and I know of no one else to whom I could turn under the circumstances who would have the comprehension and sympathy that you have. Thank you for everything. My best love to Hugh, yours Bertie.'

The letter which began with the heading 'Business First', ended with a postscript giving the address of his bank in London and that of the Chartered Bank in Ceylon to which letters could be forwarded.

Susan was not alone among Bertie's close friends to be dismayed by his departure. Geoffrey Dennis, who had been so helpful to him in his early days on the Isle of Man and responsible for his appointment to the BBC, was deeply wounded, the more so because he had known nothing of Bertie's immediate intentions until he read the letter of

resignation left on his desk. Unaware that Musson had also departed for Ceylon, he wrote to him at St George's Terrace. The letter was kept by Susan among her letters from Bertie.

'My dear Musson, This sudden departure of Osbert's without notice, throwing up everything, has surprised and moved me. With yourself, I was by far his most intimate friend and although I knew that this kind of thing was working in him, I had no sort of notion that it would be so soon or so sudden. It is a terrible blow to me ... but, quite likely, (scored out) he had done the right thing.'

The letter goes on to ask when it would be convenient for him to call at the flat to collect some of his possessions left there. It is signed, G. Dennis.

It would seem from the formality of his signature and his addressing Musson by his surname that, although they must have met frequently at the flat, they can hardly have been on the friendliest terms. Perhaps he had reacted to him as the Feildings had done, and like Susan, had resented his closeness to Bertie.

If both Susan and Dennis had become emotionally attached to Bertie, even jealously so, it was doubtless because of the extent to which they had come to value the stimulus of his remarkable intellect and the humanity underlying his reserve. On his side, beyond this, he could offer no more than friendliness and understanding. Early on he appears to have set himself against emotional involvement (even at

Beckley he had had a touch of the monk about him), dedicating his life to that iron-hard doctrine of unremitting self-control, advocated, as already quoted, in one of his letters from the Isle of Man: a doctrine so in tune with the teaching of the Buddha, that he might be seen to have been well on his way to becoming a Buddhist before his discovery of Buddhism.

Bertie's relations with Musson appear to have been singularly cerebral from the start, originating, as described by himself, in their interminable arguments in the Mess at Caserta 'of the kind that never get anywhere, such as trying to prove by logical deduction that music must be literature, etc., etc..'

Their shared interest in Buddhism must have drawn them intellectually closer and was, doubtless, the subject of discussions at St George's Terrace which, if no less interminable than those at Caserta, instead of getting nowhere, led to their decision to leave for Ceylon. Once there, they hoped to join a monastic settlement in which, as they had learned, there were a number of European monks.

The first of Bertie's letters to Susan from Sri Lanka was written after he had been living for seven weeks on the island. He has read no newspapers since his arrival and intends to give up reading them for good. Although he had planned to 'retire into the unknown and stay there', he feels that after the trouble he has put Susan to, he owes her a letter. But clearly he is finding it difficult to cut himself off from the past, for he adds a postscript: 'Do write when you

feel inclined and no matter what it is about.’ All twenty two letters which were to follow, contained similar pleas.

There was, of course, nothing discreditable, in his failure to make the clean break he had intended, though surprising, perhaps, given the resolution he had shown in giving up his post at the BBC and abandoning friends of a lifetime. It was, however, a little disconcerting to find in his next letter an admission that ‘to study and possibly practise Buddhism’ as he had claimed, was not the sole motive for his decision to leave for Ceylon.

Susan had written to tell him of the death of an old aunt whom he had been helping to support. This leads him to write of the family fortune squandered by his grandfather and father. ‘I used, years ago, to feel this rather, but now, as this has been a contributing (though by no means prime) cause of my coming here, I am more than glad of it as it helped to push me into the hermit life which, in the right circumstances, is the life I have always wanted to lead.’

There follow instructions about the disposal of his remaining possessions. ‘Their smallness being mainly due to the support of aged relatives whose income seemed to get smaller as the cost of living and taxes got bigger. Had I, for example, remained at the BBC I might have hoped to get back to where I was before the war by the time I was sixty. What a prospect!’

Later, in the same letter, he writes: ‘I have no regrets for leaving England. I had, however, expected regrets from

separation from one's friends, but have been surprised at their strength. The fact probably shows the danger to myself of declining into an impecunious old bore depending for moral support on the long suffering of others. Old hungry and querulous ... a prospect both unattractive and unbecoming. Besides there are positive reasons for wanting to be a hermit.'

The Island Hermitage at Dodanduwa, where he is already living, though not yet as a monk, appears from his description which follows, with its rich jungle vegetation and abundant bird, animal and reptile life, a beautiful, exotic if not altogether peaceable place to retire to, and certainly far removed from the comfortless caves in rocky and desert landscapes often associated with hermit dwellings.

'The hermitage really consists of two islands joined by a causeway. Polgasduwa (coconut tree island) has been the hermitage since before the first World War, whilst Madiduwa (round island) was a cinnamon garden which was given to the hermitage by the owner.

The original hermitage is covered with a forest jungle of mangroves, palms, creepers and what not amongst which are seven isolated 'houses' (one room each) and a refectory. Madiduwa is more open and covered with cinnamon bushes and coconut palms. Both are surrounded and the causeway arched over with a narrow belt of mangroves ... The lake is large, about two-and-a-half miles across and brackish as it connects with the sea. It is entirely

surrounded by hillocks covered with coconut palms. A huge colony of cranes which spend the night feeding in the countryside among the rice fields, roost by day and squawk in the island mangroves. Iguanas wander among the bushes, some three feet long and oddly prehistoric-looking, whilst similar looking water lizards swim in the lake. Large birds whoop and shriek and small birds sing rather saccharine and sentimental songs -- often, indeed, tunes rather than songs. Drums beat for long periods from many places on the mainland, sometimes all night and sometimes all day, with complicated rhythms. All day from the nearest mainland comes the monotonous pounding of coconut husks being beaten into fibre.

‘The weather is always summer. The sun is now overhead. It is apt to be very heavy at midday but there are always clouds about and the sky looks absurdly English. Often it rains, and what rain! Clouds pile up with thunder and lightning. Then you hear a strange roaring like a waterfall across the lake and soon the rain bursts on the island with astonishing violence.

‘The day, at present, is spent like this: I aim to get up at four and meditate till about seven. Then sweep the room (the only manual work allowed to monks) and make tea in the kitchen. Breakfast arrives brought by one of the four lay attendants. It consists of rice gruel made with coconut milk, rice cakes with spiced sauce, sweets and bananas and papaws. I spend the morning between learning Pali, meditation or cooking. Sometimes food is brought and sometimes not, in which case, I cook it from supplies I

keep in hand.

‘In the afternoon one sleeps for a bit, bathes in the lake and meditates afterwards. At seven or so there is tea in the refectory for anyone who wants to go there. Here one has cups of tea and lemon and talks of doctrine with the monks, or Pali discourses are recited. It is dark at this time and the refectory is open on two sides to the air. Strangely when the doctrine is discussed or Pali recited, large toads come out on to the floor to listen, their large golden eyes unblinking. When it is over, they go away. The atmosphere is almost Franciscan, especially when the rain roars so loud that you have to shout to be heard and the feeble light of naked oil wicks is drowned by the almost continuous blue lightning accompanied by the crashing of thunder -- or again on one of those incredibly grandiose nights of the full moon when soft strong light streams down through the dense trees.

‘One goes to bed at about ten. As you see, one does not eat after midday, a habit which I have taken to kindly. I sleep on a board with a thin mattress which is also reasonable as I have always liked hard beds ...

‘Two things impress me about the monks here, Sinhalese, German and Burmese, -- that is their extraordinary kindness, solicitude and cheerfulness and that there are no subjects which are taboo for discussion or anything which you have to take on trust.’

Towards the end of the letter, he writes that he and Musson have decided to join the order, the first of the two

prescribed initiation ceremonies to be held within a few weeks.

For the next eleven years of his life at the Hermitage, interrupted only by occasional visits to other monastic settlements and by some quite protracted pilgrimages to Buddhist sanctuaries particularly venerated by the Sinhalese, was to follow the routine already described. He had found 'the hermit's life under the right circumstances' which he had been looking for, but the circumstances were such and so far from solitary, that as a hermit's life, strictly speaking, it hardly qualified. Despite its name the Island Hermitage was, in fact, a small monastic community much revered for its strict adherence to Buddhist doctrine. From his own account it had many visitors including lay supporters, Sinhalese dignitaries both religious and political, foreign monks, especially Burmese, and world-traveling seekers after truth some of whose eccentricities he gently derides. He does, however, in the interest of his own seclusion, make the path of some twenty yards or so from the refectory to his hut sufficiently maze-like to deter all but the most persistent of unsolicited intruders.

I had supposed from his growing interest in mysticism through which he had come to see philosophy as only 'a map or blueprint' that he had decided that it was as a Buddhist monk that he might best pursue his cultivation of that 'inner reality' of which he had written while in Italy that he knew where it was leading him and that 'the prospect was infinitely great'.

At the time when I had first heard of his departure for Ceylon, I had little knowledge of Buddhism beyond what I had read in Alexandra David-Neale's intriguing but unreliable account in her book *With Mystics and Magicians in Tibet*. Unaware of the existence of different sects I had assumed that mysticism played an accepted role in Buddhist practice. I did not realize that the Theravada sect, to which the Sinhalese adhered, was so different from the Mahayana sect of which the Tibetans were followers. Ñānamoli, as he must now properly be named, describes the difference in two of his early letters.

He begins by answering a question of Susan's about Pali.

'It is a dead Indo-European language and a sort of dialect of Sanskrit ... in which the Theravada canonical texts (the oldest Buddhist texts) are written. It has no alphabet of its own but is written with mainly Sinhalese, Burmese, Siamese, Sanskrit, Cambodian and, now, Latin characters.(2) It was brought to Ceylon from India by the son of the Emperor Asoka and later spread to Burma, Siam and Cambodia. Mahayana Buddhism, which has Sanskrit texts, is found in Tibet, Nepal, China and Japan.

'As to the origin of the terms Mahayana and Hinyana (Theravada) in the former the doctrine of how to act to reach Nirvana became overshadowed by a fantastic theology ... while the aim to become an Arahāt, or one who attained Nirvana while still alive, became overshadowed by the idea of the Bodhisattva, or one who has reached the point at which Nirvana is attainable and who renounces it

to remain in the world until all other beings have been 'saved'... This northern Buddhism styled itself Mahayana, or the 'greater vehicle' and invented the name Hinayana, or the 'Lower Vehicle' for the southern form according to which no one gets to Nirvana unless they do something about it, and which holds that one should go straight ahead and not bother about anything or anyone ... the object of living a monk's life here is to practise renunciation and meditation in order to get out of the endless round of becoming and making some headway towards Nirvana ... good works, it is held, are all very well but are best practised by laymen who are better fitted to perform them ... this seems sensible.'

Sensible it may well seem to one who, without taking any irrevocable vows, has renounced all worldly possessions to adhere to the strict rules of the monastic life with the sole object of attaining to his own salvation; but to Westerners it must inevitably appear coldly self-centered and lacking in obligation to the rest of humanity.

This, however, is not at all how the monks are seen by the Buddhist laity. By a tradition which may have been eroded in recent years by Western influence or the conduct of hostile political regimes, the monasteries are regarded as centres of exemplary living in accordance with the precepts laid down by the Buddha, thereby extending a benign influence among the community as a whole, and offering the devout the opportunity of gaining merit by supporting them with food and other necessities: the more dedicated the monks, the greater the merit gained.

Now in choosing to join a Theravada order Ñānamoli had turned away from the mysticism to which he had been drawn while in Italy, since the southern sect, though it may count some locally accepted 'saints', has given little encouragement to mystics, but it was as a mystic, retired to some remote mountain cave, reaching out, through the rigours of renunciation and intense spiritual exercise, to that other world which he had once glimpsed in Gubbio, that it had been tempting to imagine, on hearing of his exodus to the East, as a fitting outlandish destiny for the gentle, withdrawn and slightly mysterious Bertie of the Beckley years. And yet it seems odd that he should have recommended Susan to read, for her better understanding of Buddhism, the life of Milarepa, ('for atmosphere', he suggests) the great Tibetan mystic who after starting life as a highly accomplished and homicidal magician, ended, after a harsh and exacting penance, as a saintly poet-monk whose life was so austere that, existing only on grass, his emaciated body turned green.

It must be said from his own description of it, the Island Hermitage, so far as atmosphere went, bore little resemblance to Milarepa's cave which is still a centre of devout pilgrimage and has about it a remarkable aura of sanctity.

But the Hermitage, aside from providing an agreeable if frugal retreat for the practice of renunciation and meditation, had much else to offer, not least the friendly cheerfulness of the monks and their readiness to give

advice and discuss points of doctrine with lay visitors and supporters.

Some months after he had settled on the island, he joined a five day excursion to visit the ruins of a monastic centre in the jungle dating from the first century, but abandoned in 1400. It is typical of numerous such excursions, or pilgrimages, he was to undertake during the years to come. Though some were more exacting than others, with meals provided by willing helpers wherever they stopped, together with endless cups of tea and 'polite conversation', they have about them a touch of Anglican church outings.

'A party of seven of us including lay supporters set out in a converted army truck. We first called at a monastery between Galle and Matara where we were given tea, and polite conversation was indulged in ... It had a most attractive atmosphere ... rather like a spacious eighteenth century farmhouse with its yard and wide verandas ... and prints here and there on the walls ... All wore an air of dignified and simple seclusion.'

They travel on to another monastery, Seenimodera, which proves a disappointment.

'New dwellings, new shrines, new (and gracious, how awful!) sculpture and all or most of it in cement. The principal (most hospitable, cheerful and an indefatigable talker) has a passion for having an example of everything mentioned in the Texts in the way of monastic equipment ... The whole thing was in the style of a child's painted,

plaster Noah's ark, and its ugliness was only equaled by the charm and amiability of the people there. More tea...'

It was dark when they reached Tissamaharama, an early centre of learning and pilgrimage abandoned about 1500 but now restored. Here there was more tea. As the area was malarial they slept under mosquito nets. Ten miles on through a jungle heavily scented with jasmine bushes, they reach their first objective, a ruined monastery called Madunagalavihara. Here there are rocks three hundred feet high 'fitted out as cave dwellings, temples and so on. The view from the top was really an Italian primitive come to life -- the flat green jungle like a sea all round out of which rose huge, fantastic granite rocks like the bodies of elephants, rounded, grey, enormous and very old. Scattered about almost as if taken out of a box and set there for ornament were isolated hills and mountains, jagged single, twin and triple cones and hogs' backs -- to the south the sea and to the north the central massif.'

Yet another ten miles and they reach Cittalapabbata the abandoned settlement for which they had set out. 'The area coveting the hills was bigger and more impressive, but the outstanding feature was the tremendous atmosphere surrounding it. ... It is said to have contained so many saints at one time living there that it became unsuitable for meditation and retreat owing to the crowds which came constantly to see them ... We spent the night there with a fire to keep off bears ... At dawn the singing of the birds was like the tuning up of a big orchestra.'

On the return journey they visit a forest hermitage where there are crowds of people and pious slogans attached to the trees. 'As we wandered round looking at the rather Grimm's Fairy Tales cave dwellings, we were followed by a party of the public. Eventually we came to the reception room, a deeper, larger cave elegantly white washed and well furnished. Here we had tea amid much bowing down and exchange of politeness ... Supporters came from all over the place and from Colombo nearly one hundred and seventy miles away to prepare dana (that is, food for the monks). Opportunities to be able to do this are booked up for years ahead. The whole thing -- especially such things as appointing a relay of people to fan a statue of the Buddha on hot days -- much amused our party and, personally, I found it quaint to say the least.'

They stopped again at Seenimodera for their midday meal. 'Our host was in greater spirits than ever. During ablutions at the well, he seized a German hermit of some sixty-odd years and scrubbed his face heartily with soap while he bleated in protest.' They leave with their host talking and beaming to the last as he waves goodbye from the veranda steps.

The rest of the journey was uneventful. A visit to only one other monastery is recorded, '... very neat, new and tidy with a very smart new library -- more tea and polite conversation.

Since then I have not been off the island and have not wanted to go anywhere, unless, perhaps, to retire to Cittalappabata -- but the food problem there is difficult.'

But the calm of the Hermitage was disturbed some months later by what must have been a most distressing event: the arrival of Harold Musson's mother, whether in an attempt to persuade her son (now called Ñānavira) to leave the monastery or with the notion of embracing Buddhism, herself, is not clear. It was that Musson must have left London, possibly without telling her of his intentions and, certainly, without giving her his address. Distracted, she wrote to Susan to ask her to send a message to her son through Bertie. Susan included the message in her first letter. He replies that he has delivered the message but it was unnecessary as mother and son were already in touch.

Mrs Musson's visit occurs a year later, probably in December 1949. It seems she may have confided in Susan who may have written to Bertie to warn him of her intentions. In an undated letter, probably written in January 1950, after a long description of the behaviour of the island cats he comments on her visit.

'Mrs Musson has been and returned. I cannot help feeling that all would have been happier if the visit had not taken place. Still, it is difficult to know the workings of one's own mind, let alone that of another. Certain water creatures delight in adorning their shells with other shells, pebbles, and leaves. Sometime they stick on another living creature without regard to its likes or dislikes. In the building up of systems of relationships between people one sometimes observes one building into his or her scheme of things -- his or her psychological house or shelter, as it were -- the

personality of another ... Anyway I cannot help feeling that while Mrs Musson is very unhappy, she has made herself much more so by insisting (which appears to be the case only don't say I said so should the question arise) on coming out here, otherwise she would probably not have had the seizure which was at first thought to be a stroke and later diagnosed as 'conversion hysteria', I am told. (All this again for your ears alone.) The mind is a very strange thing indeed. No wonder the whole world rushes madly round seeking distraction from the terrors of its own mind (that is the real escapism) and doesn't look inside!

Even Susan, worldly and far from soft hearted, herself, must have found this view of the affair rather callous, for in his next letter he writes. 'I, too, am sorry for poor Mrs Musson. It seems that a further diagnosis discovered a stroke which has affected the speech centre. Even now she has not fully recovered. 'Be an island unto yourself for there is no other refuge.' There seems to be an impasse here out of which there is no getting.'

This is the last we hear of Mrs Musson. More strangely, Harold Musson, himself, is only mentioned again twice in the whole correspondence. Eighteen months later, in answer to an enquiry from Susan, he adds as a postscript to a long letter: 'You asked, by the way, if Harold Musson is still here. Yes, still here.' In a later letter, prompted, perhaps, by a further enquiry, he writes that when he had stated that he was still here, he had meant in Ceylon. 'He has, in fact, moved a hundred and fifty miles away north of Colombo.' That is all.

There are few descriptions of Buddhist ceremonies in the letters. The fullest and most interesting is his account of the funeral of his much revered Sinhalese preceptor in Colombo.(3)

‘He was seventy-eight, had a fall last month, broke his hip and died of pneumonia. I went to Colombo when I heard it and he was still conscious when I saw him in one of Colombo’s big nursing homes. It was a death in the grand scale of, it appears, a national figure, and it took place in full public. A death of the sort that seems to have been lost in Europe since the eighteenth century. His pupils took turns at recitations round his bed and increasing crowds of people kept coming day and night, some serving soft drinks from time to time and sitting on the floor. As the days went by the visitors grew more important. The ex-prime minister and the Governor General came and the newspapers were full of it. It was a most strange experience to watch someone one has known personally and greatly liked and looked up to, slowly die in the full glare of the public eye.

‘After his death he lay in state in the monastery library for four days. Then the body was taken in procession to the burning ground in the afternoon. It was preceded by a single drum that beat a slow, syncopated tapping, like water dripping on to fallen bread fruit leaves, and a single shawn that went on repeating the same three note phrase. The effect was most moving and extraordinarily right. The procession was two miles long with five hundred bhikkhus

and flocks of people carrying banners and flags. The whole length of the streets being lined with split palm shoots and hung with white cotton drapery.

‘The scene at the burning ground was a Byzantine painting or, perhaps, a Siennese primitive. In the immediate foreground, from where I was, a belt of human figures blocked in only two colours: yellow-brown bhikkhus and white laity gave the setting a vigorous classical simplicity. Behind them in the middle distance rose two edifices: on the left the hearse in the form of a pavilion or pagoda made of looking-glass columns and gold and white paper: on the right the pyre which was a higher pavilion, a castle with turrets and domes made entirely of white cotton stretched over a frame. The hearse stood out bright and hard against a single big blackish-green tree, but the soft white pyre seemed to fade half into the sky which was a vague pigeon-grey with huge dim cloud-castles half hidden in it. At sunset the pyre was lighted. The upper part went up in flames while people round about flung firewood and oil on to it. Next morning I went with a small party to collect the ashes.’

Another ceremony he attended he found tawdry and the atmosphere, with large crowds, disagreeable. He had set out on an excursion with a Sinhalese monk which took them first to Anuradhapura for the anniversary of the arrival of the son of the Emperor Asoka when he came to convert the people of Ceylon. ‘The great stretches of shady, grassy parks full of majestic ruins were swarming with hundreds of thousands of people. The great shrine, now

restored and looking like the dome of St Paul's placed on the ground, smooth and whitewashed and surmounted with a gilt pinnacle, was floodlit. From the terrace on which it stands (crammed with people in every attitude of worship and refreshment-eating, and literally piled with lotus flowers) the great swell of the dome, which hides all but the top of the spire, seemed to hang suspended with the full moon behind it. Impressive.

'From there it is about a quarter of a mile to the sacred Bodhi tree ... half-way between was a huge temporary open pavilion in the centre of which a kind of roofed ornamental rotunda filled with monks taking part in a non-stop recitation of scriptures which had lasted for a month all day and all night. As they recited amid a blaze of coloured electric fairy lamps, the rotunda rotated slowly and the recitations were laid on through loudspeakers. The effect was peculiar and indigestible ... I was not sorry to leave Anuradhapura, impressive as the miles of ruins are and the parks and the great lakes and the three enormous stupa domes.' They went on to Mihintale nine miles away where, according to legend, the Emperor's son alighted after his miraculous flight through the air from India. He finds the monastery, seven hundred steps up a granite staircase 'a rather wretched recent building bordering on hovel architecture – rich and mean, important, hearty and busy, hospitable and worldly.' They spend the next day exploring the ruins.

They set out to walk back to Anuradhapura towards evening by a little frequented jungle track. 'The road for

some miles is quite deserted and shut in on both sides by the monotonous jungle -- the jungle which is so easy to get into and so hard to get out of. Where visibility is reduced to about ten yards. By day it is hot, airless and dry. There is an uneasy sense of being watched or just observed with indifference or verging, perhaps, on dislike. No Sinhalese will go into it without first breaking off a green branch and hanging it on a tree as a placative measure and there are tree shrines and ant-hill shrines near jungle villages or on lonely roads which no particular religion will own. It is quite quiet except for some occasional hidden bird that warbles off and on with the sweet voice of a concert flute blown by an idiot child, or, rarely, a slight rustle is caused by something always out of sight ... Sometimes there is a tree with a greasy patch high up on its trunk where elephants rub themselves. Or one comes across an isolated tall tree full of cicadas scraping out loud rhythmic music, as dry and tuneless as a Bartok quartet, to an audience which isn't there. Rarely a troop of monkeys crashes through the branches and flings sticks and abuse at one as they pass, but this only underlines the normal tone of closeness, suspense and commonplaceness.

'Besides ourselves on the road there was only a man and boy and the man's wife in sight. She had quarrelled with him and was walking on far ahead sulking, carrying a child and not looking back while he kept shouting at her to stop, but she only walked faster and said nothing. He was carrying a small, battle-axe-shaped hatchet of the kind used for fighting off attacks by bears.

‘The jungle is full of bears. They live on termites mostly which they suck out of termite hills, and honey; but they loathe the sight of man. If a bear sees one, it rushes upon him, screaming horribly, I’m told, and claws out his eyes. They wake up about sunset.

‘The sun was, in fact, just going out of sight, and it was very quiet ... The darkness comes on very quickly. The jungle which mostly dozes by day, under the stupefying sun, wakes up then. Slack strings are tensed and vibrate. Whole orchestras of crickets strike up, things prowl and owls hiccup and cough and fireflies drift up and down. The sense of being observed gets worse. As the sun went down the woman’s fear suddenly overcame her anger. She stopped and waited for the man and boy with their axe to catch her up. We left them behind in the darkness. It was some time before we came to the first houses.’

The excursion turned out to be one of the longest he undertook, or, at least, described.

Joining up with some other monks in a bus they went down the east coast as far as the centre of the island where they turned inland to visit temples in the neighbourhood of Kandy. ‘We spent every night’ he concludes, ‘in a different monastery and saw many others. I was surprised by the number of monks who live isolated in remote caves in the forest.’

Two years later, he tries out cave dwelling for himself, but only for ten days. He does not mention having any companions with him, neither does he make a point of

being alone which he surely would have done had his stay been quite solitary, nor does it seem likely that the happening he describes at the end of the ten days would have taken place unless other monks had been with him.

‘To get to the place I had to go by bus eight miles beyond Hambantota and then walk two miles in the uninhabited jungle to a high rock which stands above the tree tops about one hundred feet. There are three ruined brick shrines on top and a lot of ruined stone buildings on the sides where there are also deep pools of water. At the bottom on one side there are two caves in one of which I stayed. The nearest houses were two miles away along the road.

Each night elephants and tortoises and other things left their footprints in the jungle track. I saw a wild deer and some jackals and a very big gorged python under a tree (incredible sight!) and a peacock in flight (there were lots of them screaming rather royally, musically and triumphantly in the jungle). Also I caught a glimpse of a tusker elephant one evening in the dusk. Hornbills in the trees, too, as big as geese (their heads are too big for their bodies and their bodies for their tails so that when they perch on a branch they first topple forward and only right themselves with unseemly antics) and lots of monkeys. At night huge black scorpions would creep out of their houses (holes in the ground) and sit outside their doorsteps waiting for something to happen. In the morning, lovely pink-plush mites walked about looking for guidance, alone or one following another or in little files of three or four like large animated wild strawberries ... There was a most improbable view from the top of the rock, just the view, exactly, that a

fly must get when it sits on one of the things in a Palissy-ware plate(4) – all mossy looking jungle with a complete six or seven mile distant rim just like a plate. Beyond the rim (in an altogether other world, nothing to do with me at all) was the whole range of the Ceylon mountains to the north and east ... and to the south, over the rim, a small strip of salt-pan and then the ocean ... My plate, which hypnotized me, was nothing but a mossy mass of jungle crawling with living things (some enormous), ringing with birds, heavily scented with

several sorts of jasmine and jungle flowers ... all the plants blooming away after the rain and trying their best to strangle each other, animals whooping like demons and tearing each other to bits and millions of birds singing away like lunatic angels. Nature seems to me on such occasions like a mad ogress in a flowery cotton-print crinoline frock and spring hat. She is quite horrible, isn't she? and as fascinating as one of her painted vipers is to a painted bird.

‘At the end of the ten days about one hundred and fifty people from different places came flocking together by cars, bullock carts and on foot, and produced a ceremonial meal.

Very senior monks came and gave sermons under the neighbouring banyan tree which was the monkeys' bedroom at night. After which everyone played at Johnny Crowe's garden for a bit and then went their various ways abandoning the place to the animals.’

Delightful and sometimes alarming descriptions of animals, birds, reptiles and insects occur throughout the letters. The

earliest have pages on the behaviour of the cats on the Hermitage island. They produce a comment from Susan to which he responds: 'You are right about animal and human behaviour -- the parallelism works both ways and argues, one would think sometimes, in favour of the notion of rebirth -- I don't mean metempsychosis(5) of anything so concrete or tiresomely immortalistarian as that, but more in the sense of strains of consciousness that might reproduce themselves in different levels of existence. I don't see why, for instance, some of the people one has met should not be reborn as an ant-hill or did not exist say as a hornet's nest before they became human. Who knows, too, whether the present state of the world is not mostly due to the contents of some termite-hill having contrived to get born into it? And nowadays, too, it is becoming fashionable to talk about the "collective unconscious".'

He claims to have become fairly practiced at bottling snakes, including a two-and-a-half foot cobra, in old Horlicks containers, for transportation to a neighbouring uninhabited island.

'We catch on an average two a month, mostly varieties of Kraits, I believe ... I must confess I personally like snakes and were I alone I would let them be and feed the cobras. There is a very nice and harmless whip snake speckled green and brown who rears up when one meets him and wriggles his neck in an extraordinary way like a Turkish stomach dancer.

Rat snakes, six to eight feet long, go about with complete unconcern for one's presence. The other day one climbed a

mangrove tree and seized a dozing crane by the foot. There was a fearful uproar among the cranes and the victim escaped. Two days ago, in washing a handkerchief, I found myself washing a two inch grey scorpion mixed up with it. It gave me a lot of trouble getting the soap off it after which I put it in the cinnamon bushes hoping it was none the worse. Kindness to twelve inch centipedes which leap at you and make a rattling noise and remind one of miniature models of the long chains of iron luggage trolleys on the platform of the Gare de Lyon, is admittedly difficult. I bottle them and release them at the far end of the island. The suspected presence of a centipede is, one notes, very inimical to the preservation of dignity.'

In hot weather he observes that 'the birds sit about with open beaks, look wild ... with a tendency to shriek madly. One bottle-green bird with white patches round its eyes and front which makes it look as if it had stuffed its face into a bowl of porridge and let it all run down its shirt, shrieks "Kotoruwa" (coconuts) alternatively from left to right, its whole body with passion and will go on doing it for hours.'

After climbing Adam's Peak (the highest mountain in Sri Lanka) on the way down he encounters a millipede 'the amiable kind, you know, which rolls itself in a spiral. It was climbing up a tree and was all made of shiny black lacquer rings. Its lemon-yellow legs flowed by in waves. It was quite a foot long and proportionately thick. Also there was a dragon lizard marbled mossy green and brown with a jagged mane and an ivory white rhinoceros horn on the tip of its nose. I met a daddylonglegs today, but not quite the

kind one is used to. Though its body and wings were the ordinary size and shape, its legs were a full three inches long, thin as one hundred cotton, gracefully curved and clothed in yellow and white banded football stockings. It was like one of those creatures in Dali's *Temptation of St Anthony*. A product of natural selection? Nonsense! Made by a creator, then? But why not the third possibility, that its family had always been interested in being different and had worked it out long ago for themselves?'

It is not until August 1952 that he first writes of his intention to translate into English some of the texts from the Pali Canon. By 1955 he has become so absorbed in the work that he lets almost a whole year pass without writing to Susan. He tells her that somebody wants to publish one book he has translated, originally for his own edification. 'It is the principal commentary on the Tipitaka and was written in Ceylon at the time of St Augustine. After a wave of conflicting feelings, I eventually agreed, but that meant typing it, about one thousand pages, and then, of course, in the process altered my style, changed my mind and generally had a distracting time of it. This took from April to October spending all daylight hours every day, typing about five pages a day and revising it. Now someone is reading through it and I have got to compose an introduction ... I can no longer hide behind the author translated but have to come, as it were, off my fence and actually say something, myself.'

Later he writes that he has put his name in the first letters of each sentence in the preface. It amuses him to see if

anyone will notice. 'It represents partly the getting past an obstacle and partly some rather abstruse literary amusement for myself.' Two years later, when translating various texts has become his primary undertaking, he describes it as 'a particular kind of soothing occupation like playing a musical instrument and solving mathematical problems.'

Despite his declared ambition to 'obtain to obscurity' he is clearly not too put out when someone writes to tell him that 'my remaining here, coupled with translating Pali, is creating a sort of legendary reputation in Colombo. Now if that were so, I think it would be fine, for then I might travel even further by letting my legendary, or otherwise, self go and live in, say, Colombo while I stay here without it. I think we could get on very well at a distance, we could write to each other, of course, occasionally, but not depend on each other in the rather futile way we do.'

Although from 1952 onwards his translation work so absorbed him (one rather wonders how much time was left for the meditation which took up most of his early days at the Hermitage and which he had declared, along with the practice of renunciation, to be the object of living a monk's life), he still went on occasional outings or pilgrimages. It was on one such in March 1960 that, at the age of fifty-five and apparently in sound health, he was struck down by a fatal heart attack.

Here would seem a fitting point in this sketch of his life to quote from the tribute paid to him by the Venerable Nyanaponika in his introduction to the posthumously

published *Thinker's Note Book*.

‘What was known of the monk life of the Venerable Ñānamoli to a wider public in Ceylon and abroad, was his outstanding scholarly work in translating from the original Pali into lucid English ... His translations showed the highest standard of careful and critical scholarship and a keen and subtle mind, philosophically trained. His work in this field is a lasting contribution to Buddhist studies.

‘It was characteristic of him that he had limited his publication to that scholarly field, so that his “public image” was that of an able scholar and exemplary monk, which left him enough of his cherished “obscurity”.

‘Very few knew, or even suspected, those other facets of his rich and profound mind, which in the present volume appear in such an astonishing variety ... Yet there were still other layers of his mind (and still not the deepest) without which the personality presented by this book and in his scholarly work would be incomplete and misleading. These other features of his character, however, manifested themselves only in his way of life and in his human relationships. From his unrelenting realistic world-view, as appearing in his note books undeceived by the deceptions and self-deceptions of life and our own minds -- a reader could possibly gain the impression of a harsh if not cynical character with a rather contemptuous view of mankind. But this would be very far from the deep humanity and friendly composure of his nature which made his self-effacing reticence still more unobtrusive. He had a natural affinity

with the Buddha's detachment as well as his compassionate outlook ... His friendliness and compassion were un sentimental and undemonstrative, but of a simple human warmth. His quiet and friendly smile will be unforgettable to his companions ... The simplicity and frugality of a Buddhist monk came quite natural to him ... In the Buddha's teaching on reality and man's situation in it, he found fresh inspiration for his own thought, and the Buddha's practical path to deliverance being the solution to the human predicament, was the guiding and directing force of his inner life.'

I do not think there is anything in the preceding extracts taken from his letters from Ceylon, with the possible exception of his rather heartless attitude to Mrs Musson's visit and his strange reticence about what had become of Harold Musson, which detract from Nyanaponika's tribute. Indeed, there is a most sympathetic aspect of his character, untouched on in the introduction, as revealed in his keen observation and aesthetic appreciation of the natural world around him and his readiness to preserve the lives of creatures not merely repellant to most people, but lethally dangerous to handle, as in the care with which (here, surely, a hint of St Francis!) he cleaned the soap off the scorpion inadvertently caught up in his laundry.

Sadly, however, there proved to be much in the letters, whole pages, indeed, which not only tend to reproduce and reinforce the unfavourable impression which Nyanaponika admitted might be drawn from a reading of the *Note Book*, but are at odds with those qualities the tribute so warmly

extols: his detachment, compassion, self-effacement and dedication to obscurity.

After the first three letters, short and hastily written, the contents of which have already been touched upon, the correspondence takes off into those densely-written, many-paged missives which were to be despatched, with only rare lapses of more than a few months, until shortly before his death. What is striking about them is how different they are in tone and content from those written from the Isle of Man and Italy, and how changed the personality of their author appears to have been by the two years he spent in England.

There are several possible influences which may have helped to bring about this change.

One was the effect of working at the BBC where, probably with justification, he felt himself to be intellectually superior to his colleagues, and was contemptuous of the prevailing atmosphere of petty intrigue: another was his close friendship with Musson, although, apart from their addiction to abstruse metaphysical discussion and their mutual attraction to Buddhism, there is nothing in the letters to indicate how their intimacy in London may have affected him, or why it should have depreciated after their arrival in Ceylon. More important, perhaps, was the influence of Susan, herself, and the weekends at Stanton. When he admits to the strength of his regrets at separation from his friends, he declares his ties to be centred on Stanton and Beckley, but it is always to Susan that he writes. When she asks him if she can give his address to the

Feildings, he replies: 'Of course I have no objection to Basil and Peggy having my address. I have not written to them (for selfish reasons, if you like) because I want to write as few letters as possible and because I might find it difficult at times to know what to write about. It is better not to go to a party if one has not suitable clothes to go in, though this has nothing to do with one's regard for those whose party it is.'

In his early letters from the Isle of Man he had been desperately eager for news of the Beckley circle, whereas now it is for news of friends to whom Susan has introduced him while he was in England, some scarcely more than acquaintances, that he has an insatiable appetite, protesting when she hints of some new twist in relationships that she has not told him enough.

He takes a keen interest in Susan's relations with her daughter, Valerie. Responding to Susan's complaint that she has learnt through a friend that Valerie has been deceiving her about her sentiments towards her young man, he comments: 'If she is putting it on, it shows considerable ability on which she should really be complimented, although it is scandalous that it should be at your expense.'

However impressive his detachment may have appeared to his fellow monks, the correspondence shows, in respect to the past, that it was flawed, for whatever else he may have succeeded in renouncing, his yearning for gossip from England is so strong that he can write: 'I am tantalized by your saying that you have a lot more to tell me and I am

full of curiosity about S-, etc; write and tell me everything about everybody.'

As to compassion, he showed little towards Mrs Musson, nor does it surface often elsewhere in the letters other than in cool expressions of sympathy or regret. The attempted suicide of a former colleague in London he finds 'interesting because there is something poignantly modern in the strident incongruity of the mixture of champagne and coal gas, and something so personally right that even that should fail.' Of the death of a Dutch friend with whom he went on a holiday in the Netherlands shortly before leaving for Ceylon, he has nothing to say except that his attitude to art was encyclopaedic and he had no genuine appreciation of painting. When he hears that the wife of a cousin of Susan has left him, his comment is vicious. 'The story sounds too true to be good. You should keep in touch with her because it will be most interesting to hear a first hand account of hell, for she will certainly go there.' As it turned out, she outlived Susan, who ended her life suffering from the hell of a mind-incapacitating stroke, to become a distinguished art historian, remaining on the friendliest terms with her former husband.

When Susan writes that Geoffrey Dennis, who so befriended him in the Isle of Man and who was responsible for requesting his release from the army to join the BBC, has asked for news of him, he feels it necessary to explain why he never introduced him to her. Gratuitously and without a hint of gratitude for what he owed him, he gives an unrelentingly disparaging account of his character,

listing among his defects, 'his bad taste and vulgarity of manner, aggressive humility, restless hunting after spiritual satisfaction and venomous wrangling with his wife over their divorce.' He ends by telling Susan he has no objection to her letting him know that he is in Ceylon.

That harsh and contemptuous view of mankind of which Nyanaponika warned, is expressed in the letters more strongly and frequently than in the *Note Book*. It was, perhaps reinforced by his study of Existentialism which, itself, may have been encouraged (as seems likely from what we were to learn later) by tea-time table-talk with the German monks at Dodanduwa. After describing it as a dismal, though rather convincing, philosophy of pessimism ('we are in hell and at cross purposes and there is no way out') he asks Susan to send him two works by Sartre which were left in his flat, and for any others more recently published. A reading of *L'Être et le Néant* he admits to leaving him somewhat shattered. 'While it is a difficult and forbidding book, it is the most convincing philosophical treatise I have ever read.

Still, I would not recommend anyone to read it.'

Along with his existentialist studies his interest in the state of the world revives and his early resolution to stop reading newspapers is abandoned. His reaction to events is predictably, and often with good reason, pessimistic, but while he deplores them he does not conceal that they reassure him of the rightness of his decision to withdraw into the monastic life. He sees himself as 'sitting on the fence, but such a small and obscure one that it is unlikely

that anyone will bother to uproot it.'

The news that Susan's son, Robert, has become a convert to Catholicism and, later, that he is to enter the Dominican order revives his old prejudice against the Catholic Church. The only attraction it has ever had for him is in 'its decorative grandeur, emotional glamour and thrill of mystery.' But he has 'always been unable to perform the sacrifice of reason on the altar of emotion which the Church demands, mainly because it disgusts me.' He cannot stomach St Thomas Aquinas' philosophy which 'seems to me to have an alien, oppressive and unsatisfactory, smartish taste.' While he finds papal infallibility and the bodily assumption 'not only absurd but in bad style,' he is strongly against the taking of irrevocable vows as imposed by the Church. In Buddhism no such vows are demanded. After reading the Ceylon letters and with Nyanaponika's eulogy still in mind, I felt that the subject of whom I had set out to write this account, had developed two quite different personalities: the one, hard-hearted, cynical, astringent, gossipy and not without malice (so very different from the character we had known or thought we had known in the past -- withdrawn in his shy friendliness and retiringly modest though so erudite and many gifted); the other (not at all at odds with what we might have then conceived -- for there was always a touch of the monastic about him -- as his eventual destiny), the exemplary monk and dedicated scholar only breaking off from elucidation of obscure texts to make pilgrimages to remote jungle sanctuaries, impressing those he travelled or met with by his piety and equable temperament and always

observant of the nature around him while equally sympathetic to whatever creatures, commonplace, exotic or even venomous, he encountered.

When we visited Sri Lanka in 1982 we had already learnt in Bangkok of Ñanamoli's renown as a Pali scholar and translator, but it was not until some years later, after Susan's death, that Basil lent me the letters he had written to her during the war and from Dodanduwa.

Certainly our visit to the Venerable Nyanaponika in his Forest Hermitage was the most rewarding event of our stay.

A few days after our meeting with him, armed with the letter of introduction he had given, we set out from Colombo to visit the Island Hermitage at Dodanduwa. The sixty mile ribbon of pot-holed and dangerously-cambered tarmac running along the west coast between Colombo and Galle was jammed with traffic of all kinds from vast lorries to ox carts and bicycles, through which the driver of the taxi we had hired, drove with alarming aggressiveness.

The lake at Dodanduwa reaches at its western extremity to within a few yards of the road. There were several fishing boats pulled up on the shore, but when we asked one of the fishermen to take us out to the island, he refused, explaining that tourists were forbidden to visit the Hermitage and that he would get into serious trouble with the monks. It was only when we showed him our letter from Nyanaponika, addressed to the abbot, that he reluctantly agreed.

The lake is about two miles long with the island in the middle. Starting out towards it, had we already read Ñanamoli's letters, we would have seen that its setting had changed little since his description of it written some thirty years before. Despite the proximity of the tourist-infested fringe along the coast, no new buildings had sprung up along its shores and no speed-boats disturbed its glassy surface. The low hills rising steeply out of the unbroken jungle were still elegantly tufted with coconut palms. All that was missing was the sense of remoteness remarked on by Ñanamoli, for if there were still the thumping of coconuts being pounded for their fibre or the constant beating of drums 'in complicated rhythms', they would have been drowned by the noise of the traffic on the Colombo road.

Nearing the island we saw on the shore to one side, within easy rowing distance of it, a temple with numerous outbuildings, the settlement, no doubt, to which our hermit had, as we were to read later in the letters, made occasional trips as breaks from meditation or translating from the Pali. Our boatman headed for a gap in the ring of mangrove trees which hedged in the island. Steering through it under arched branches he sidled the boat against a wooden landing stage. As we got out he kept looking round so nervously that we feared he would not obey our instructions to wait for us. A path tunneled through the trees, wound up from the shore. We had just started along it when a Sinhalese, evidently a lay brother, came hurrying to meet us. We held out our letter defensively, but he did not

bother to look at it, explaining that a message had already been received from Nyanaponika and the monks were expecting us.

Pointing to the boatman, he asked if we had paid him for bringing us over. When we replied that we had agreed on a modest sum, he turned on the man with a spate of abuse in Sinhalese which left him cowering at the bottom of his boat. He had no right to ask for anything, we were told. On no account should we think of paying him.

The tunnelled path opened on to an area of level ground on which a wooden hut with a corrugated iron roof stood out from the partially cleared jungle. This, our guide told us, was the refectory where the monks would be waiting to receive us.

The hut was rather dark inside and austerely furnished with a table and chairs at its centre from which four youngish looking monks (shaved heads make age difficult to determine) rose to give us a friendly welcome. They spoke fluent English with a German accent. We were presented to the abbot who was sitting by himself in an armchair in one corner. As he was Sinhalese and spoke no English we were only able to exchange polite bows and smiles. We explained to the others that we had known Ñanamoli well many years before when he had been living near Oxford, that we had corresponded with Nyanaponika about him and were naturally interested in seeing the place in which he had spent the remaining years of his life after leaving England.

One of the monks offered to show us his “cell”. It was only a short distance away along a path which zigzagged through the semi-jungle. Though quite small and sparsely furnished the hut offered an agreeable enough retreat for anyone of a solitary disposition. Next we were shown where he was buried, an unmarked patch of cleared ground under a tangle of tropical greenery.

On our return to the refectory we found tea with lemon awaiting us. We sat down at the table with the monks, two of whom had been long enough at the Hermitage to have known Ñānamoli. From all that Nyanaponika had told us of his dedication to the monastic life and his international renown as a Pali scholar, we assumed that his memory would be sufficiently revered by his brother monks for those who had known him personally or even only by repute, to be interested in hearing something of his English background and early life.

Accordingly I told them all that I knew of his upbringing on Tresco and of how, despite having received little formal education, he had been accepted as a student at Oxford. I went on to describe how, when living at Beckley (what another world it is seemed with its fine furniture and topiary garden from this tin-roofed shed in its jungle setting!) he had astounded all who met him by his erudition, gift for languages and the varied skills in which, though self-taught, he had excelled. They listened politely, but I sensed that they were not much interested in what I was telling them, so I let my account of Bertie, as we had known him, trail lamely off. They smiled but asked no questions and made no comments until one of them

conceded, though rather dismissively, that he had been an able and dedicated scholar.

In the silence which followed we drank our tea and were encouraged to refill our cups.

As there appeared nothing more to be said, I was about to suggest that it was time for us to leave when I was asked by one of the monks, and the others perked up as they waited for my answer, if I had known the friend he had come out with. They were clearly disappointed when I admitted that I had never met Musson and knew nothing about him. But now my own curiosity was aroused and, once reminded of him, I was prompted to enquire why, if he was still in the community, he was not present at the tea-table.

If a little dismayed by their cool attitude to the memory of poor Bertie, had I been a friend of Harold Musson I would have been heartened by their reply, for they spoke of him with the mixture of enthusiasm and reverence usually reserved by the faithful for a guru or near-saint. Revealing that they were existentialists they told us how much they owed to him for his interpretation of that philosophy in Buddhist terms, and how they acknowledged him as their continuing inspiration. Some years before, committed to the exacting demands of his faith, he had withdrawn to a remote part of the island where he had built himself a hut beside a jungle track a mile from the nearest village. There with great courage and endurance, a true anchorite, he had dedicated himself to a life of solitude and meditation, relying on the village people to fill his begging bowl with sufficient food to sustain him. After some years, he had

developed cancer.(6) Declining any form of medication he had set himself by the practice of meditation alone to arrest the progress of the disease and overcome the pain it inflicted on him. He had had friends in Colombo who visited him from time to time, but he refused the medicines they brought until one such visitor managed to persuade him to accept a bottle of pain-killers. For a time he put them aside and did not use them until, finally, when the pain became insupportable and he found it impossible to continue meditating, he took all the pills at one go and killed himself.

A good death, calm and resigned whatever the suffering, is considered by Buddhists to be of the greatest importance, especially for a monk, to ensure the spirit a propitious onward passage. Of all ways of dying suicide is considered the worst.

Horrified by the manner of Musson's death, the hierarchy in Colombo had reacted with inordinate asperity. We were not told what form this took, but it seemed likely that he had been refused the full burial rights customarily accorded to a monk.

His existentialist followers had been so disillusioned by their behaviour that they were considering leaving the island. They had heard that there was a growing interest in Buddhism in Europe and wanted to know if this was true of England. We were able to tell them that there was a Theravada temple in London and that we knew of a flourishing monastery in the country.(7) They appeared

encouraged by this and we parted from them with a friendly exchange of the ritual smiles and bows.

We found our boatman still waiting for us. As we recrossed the lake, the noise of the traffic growing steadily louder, we pondered the contrast between Nyanaponika's heartfelt tribute to Ñanamoli and the casual regard in which his memory was held by his brother monks at the Hermitage. With our own recollections of him in mind and the adoration and affection we had felt for him, Nyanaponika's adulation had not come as a surprise. That the monks, younger and with their existentialist leanings, should have lacked the perception to see in him more than a dry scholar, was understandable. What had really astonished us was what they had told us about Harold Musson. Known only through the Feildings' disparaging description of him, had we learned before our visit of his decision to become a lone hermit in the jungle, we might have taken it as a theatrical gesture; but from the account we had just been given, especially of Musson's death, there could be no doubt of the sincerity of his resolve and the endurance he had shown in carrying it out.

When preparing this sketch of Osbert Moore's life, I read the letters he had written from Dodanduwa, I found it difficult to explain his failure to mention anything of the friend he travelled out with and together with whom he had been initiated into the same monastic order, until in answer to a direct enquiry and then with evident reluctance giving only minimal information. Even if he may have questioned Musson's motives in choosing to live as an anchorite, why

in his reply to Susan did he confine himself to the bare statement that he was living 'a hundred and fifty miles away'? Was it, possibly, because he felt a weakness in his own position, since after all that he had written of his desire for a hermit's life, he had been content to stay on at Dodanduwa, appreciative of his growing fame as a Pali scholar while enjoying the frugal but easy going and, when he felt the need of it, companionable atmosphere of the community?

At the time these questions did not trouble us, but even if we had already read the letters which gave rise to them, we would not have been any less moved to have seen the island retreat in its beautiful tropical setting where Bertie, whom we had so much esteemed and so regretfully remembered from Beckley days, had passed in meditation and abstruse Theravada studies the last eleven years of his life.

(1) One of these was the actress, Peggy Ashcroft. When I met her many years later and reminded her of Beckley, her immediate reaction was, not to speak of the uniquely beautiful house and its garden, but to ask: "What became of that extraordinary man, Bertie Moore?"

(2) He mastered the first four of these before beginning his translations.

(3) His preceptor was the Venerable Pelene Vajiranyana

Maha Nayaka Thera. (Ed.)

(4) Shades of the antique shop in the Broad. The ware was made by Palissy in the sixteenth century: plates and dishes and vases, mostly green, and remarkable for being covered with all sorts of objects and creatures, lizards, toads and snakes and foliage in high relief.

(5) Basic to Buddhist doctrine, but not now much believed in by sophisticated Buddhists. A Tibetan lama, of the long established Tibetan colony at Darjeeling, to whom I gave some account of Ñānamoli's life had no doubt that he had been born to become a monk as a result of the high spiritual level he had attained to in his previous existence.

(6) The disease Ñānavira suffered from was actually amoebiasis, not cancer. His prescribed medication caused him further complications. The manner of his death was not quite as described here. (Ed.)

(7) This must be a reference to Chithurst Buddhist