

## Warren Ranjithan Breckenridge (1938-2009)

*“Cheese, wine, and a friend must be old to be good”* (a Cuban proverb)



Warren Ranjithan Breckenridge, known to many of us simply as “Dr. Breck”, stood head and shoulders above the men and women who constituted the then academic elite of the Department of Zoology, University of Peradeniya, on his retirement in 1998, as an academic and as an example of a decent human being. His life, values and character were shaped largely by his middle-class Tamil origins from Manipay in the Jaffna peninsula, Christian education at Trinity College, Kandy, entertainment from Hollywood, and an insatiable thirst for jazz. He was an immensely likeable person of charm and dignity who was loved and appreciated by all. Breck was known for his personal charm and his private kindness even towards those who disagreed with him. He was admired for his character and steadfastness. Breck was perhaps the last of that ancient, extinct breed of decent, kind-hearted, cultured, well-read, and classically educated scholars in Sri Lanka. It is this fact that makes his passing away, on September 6, 2009, even after having lived beyond the Biblical life span of three score and ten years, poignant and unacceptable. People still feel a genuine sense of loss. He was 71.

Breckenridge is an Anglo-Saxon name meaning “bracken-covered ridge”. Breck’s great-grand father, Robert adopted it when he converted from Hinduism and was baptized by the American Missionaries, many of whom were descendants of the Pilgrims of New England. Rev. Edward Warren, the American missionary founded the first Christian school in Tellipalai in 1816. Harriet Winslow, the great-great-grandmother of the then US Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, founded Uduvil Girls’ School in 1824 – the first girls’ boarding school in Asia. She lies buried in Manipay. This explains the prevalence in Jaffna of such American surnames as Armstrong, Arnold, Ashbury, Breckenridge, Buel, Champion, Cooke, Fitch, Mather, Mills, Nevins, Page, Hoole, Hunt, Rice, Strong, Williams and Winslow. One Meenatchie became Clara Kimball.

Breck was named Warren after a character in a play *“The Strange Case of Blondie White”* performed by a group of actors from Kandy who called themselves the ‘Kandids’ which included Breck’s dad who played the role of Frank Warren, a crime novelist. The play was staged the night before Breck made his entry into this world.

Breck was born in Kandy on 10 December 1938 into a distinguished Tamil Christian family. His father, the legendary R.R. Breckenridge who taught English at Trinity College, was a martinet who had a profound influence on his children. He graduated from the University of Ceylon (Colombo) with Honours in Zoology in 1961 and was recruited into the staff as Assistant lecturer. He was quite a dandy in the university and could be seen speeding on his Lambretta scooter in Colombo, raising both dust and eyebrows. As Desmond Morris once said, “Biologically speaking, if something bites you, it’s more likely to be female”. And Breck did get bitten, and that’s how he fell in love with Chandra Abeyaratne, one of the most attractive students in the campus – a real head turner who could stop traffic along Thurstan Road! Despite the differences in their race and religion the two got married and went on a Commonwealth scholarship to Canada in 1964 where Breck

began his postgraduate research studies at the prestigious McGill University in Montreal under the supervision of Prof. K.G. Davey. While McGill conferred on him the Doctorate for his research on the “Growth and reproduction in *Hymenolepis diminuta*”, Chandra blessed him with a beautiful baby girl named, Nadine. The sun was shining.

It was while in North America that Breck developed his passion for jazz and a love for *The New Yorker*, especially the issues edited by Harold Ross. He was fond of the vocal styles of Astrud Gilberto, Anita O’Day, Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald and Sarah Vaughan. He’d spend hours listening to the deft performances on the piano by Art Tatum, Duke Ellington, Earl “Fatha” Hines, Fats Waller, Oscar Peterson and Teddy Wilson. But of all the singers, the one he loved most throughout his life was none other than Ol’ Blue Eyes, Frank Sinatra. Breck had a vast collection of the old 78 rpm records. He was a fan of Willis Conover and would listen to his Jazz Hour six nights a week on the Voice of America starting with its signature tune, “Take the A Train” by Duke Ellington. He was heavily influenced by the writings of Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and J.D. Salinger. He loved movies, especially those directed by John Huston such as *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* starring one of his most favorite actors, Humphrey Bogart; John Ford’s *Stagecoach* shot against the backdrop of stunning Monument Valley located on the southern border of Utah near northern Arizona. Breck was a regular member of a select group invited to attend the screening of films at the American Library in Kandy.

The family returned to Sri Lanka from Canada in 1968 and Breck decided to move to the University of Peradeniya and join the Faculty of Science as a Lecturer in Zoology at a time when Prof. Hilary Cruz was the Head of Department. I was in my third year, specializing in Zoology. It was the time when one was proud and privileged to be a student at Peradeniya. With lecturers of the caliber of Prof. H. Cruz (Zoology), Prof. Appapillai (Physics), Prof. M. Sultan Bawa (Chemistry), Dr. M. Selvaratnam (Chemistry), Prof. Wannigama (Chemistry), Dr. S. Balasubramaniam (Botany), Prof. M.D. Dassanayake (Botany), Dr. Wester Modder (Zoology), and Dr. W.R. Breckenridge (Zoology), the Faculty of Science was a powerhouse of intellectual vigor. Breck impressed all of us as a decent man on a

personal level, easy to get on and wonderful to hang around with. He would take us on weekends to historical sites and explain a bit of the old civilization that Sri Lanka was. I vividly remember the trip we did with Breck in his Volkswagen beetle and Dr. Balasubramaniam in his Ford Prefect, to the Ruhuna National Park where we found ourselves surrounded by a herd of elephants. Breck’s sense of humor prevailed and we survived to tell the tale. Breck can be amusing about serious things as well as serious about amusing things.

Breck was an avid reader who maintained a record book “*vade mecum*” – in which he would note down some of the interesting facts that he read. He was perhaps one of the very few academics who regularly used the library to read journals such as *Science* and *Nature* and shared what he read with the students. Much of his research interest was focused on the study of the limbless amphibian, the primitive Caecilian *Ichthyophis* endemic to Sri Lanka. He also carried out research on the Gastropod mollusks and on Temnocephalid and Acanthocephalan worms. In addition to his duties as a lecturer and researcher at the university, Breck had a long association with the *Ceylon Journal of Science (Biological Science)* for 16 years from 1982 to 1998, first as a Sectional Editor and then as the Chief Editor.

Breck was appointed Professor of Zoology in 1986. He took over the Headship of the Department of Zoology from Prof. Hilary Cruz in 1982. After 37 years as an academic, Breck resigned in 1998 to become the Principal of his old *alma mater*, Trinity College, Kandy. Many of us were surprised at this career change at such a late stage in his life when he was 60. Although the position had its perks, it also belies the difficulties in running a school and accommodating the wishes of hundreds of parents clamouring to get their kids in using every trick in the book. Breck realized that managing teachers and students in a school was far more difficult and exasperating than doing research in the University. But then it was too late. The University of Peradeniya, in recognition of his contributions to the advancement of science, conferred on him the title of Emeritus Professor in 2004.

My wife and I were very close to him. He was extremely kind towards us and our two children whom he loved. When I was offered a position in Indonesia by the World Wildlife Fund in 1984, he encouraged me to take it.

Working close with him I realized that he was fluent in his written Tamil although he did not speak it well. He and I would spend hours translating question papers from English to Tamil and at times neither of us would understand what had been translated. He and I communicated at regular intervals while I was working in Southeast Asia. When writing to me he always referred to me as 27X but never explained its meaning or significance. He always wrote to me about the good things in life and cheered me up with his wry sense of humor. Later on he impressed me as one who can take life's vicissitudes in his stride.

Breck was a highly principled, cultured and courteous gentleman. The respect he earned over

a long life of service means that hundreds of students, friends and well wishers across our country, no matter their caste, creed or class, will mourn the passing of a good teacher and a compassionate man. The memory of such good men, even in death, must remain a part of our lives. Breck is survived by his wife Chandra, and two daughters Nadine and Anouk.

Rest in peace Dr. Breck, we will miss you.

Charles Manoranjan Santiapillai (27X)  
Department of Zoology  
University of Peradeniya  
Sri Lanka  
e-mail: [CharlesSantiapillai@gmail.com](mailto:CharlesSantiapillai@gmail.com)