

Book Review

“Footfalls in the Wild” by Lyn de Alwis

Reviewed by Antoinette Thiruppathy

One of the perks of my career as librarian, editor / proof-reader, has been the opportunity to read and enjoy a good book, manuscript or article. Imagine my delight then, when I was asked to do the final proof reading of a collection of Lyn de Alwis’s writings and speeches, compiled under the title, “Footfalls in the Wild”. I had read a few articles by Lyn in the local newspapers from time to time, but even so, browsing through the book, I was overwhelmed by the depth of his love and care for his charges, both captive and wild.

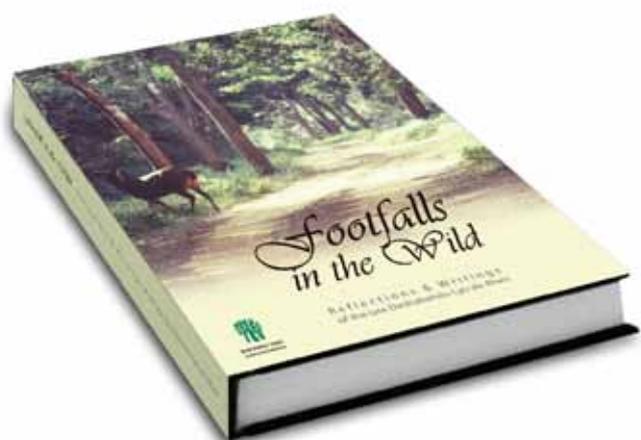
The book is arranged according to several phases in Lyn’s life. The first section deals, not unnaturally with the Dehiwela Zoo, synonymous with Lyn de Alwis’s name. As director of the National Zoological Gardens, Lyn enjoyed a 30-year span of service from 1955 to 1985. Here are Lyn’s encounters not only with the animals and their keepers, but also with the officials responsible for the zoo’s destiny. Despite financial constraints and budget lines, Lyn managed to acquire over a period of time “at least one species from practically every country and every recognized animal order”.

Along with eminent zoologists like Gerald Durrell, Lyn personalizes some of his more amiable charges like Letchmi, the elephant matriarch; Stephen, the chimpanzee; Tony and Paulita, the hippos; Samuel and Nedge, the courting ostriches; Mimbo and Lima, the pair of baby gorillas; Suli and Sulang, the performing sea lions, and many, many more... However, it is his most intractable charges like Charlie and Eunice, the laughing hyaenas, whose escapades evoke tears of mirth. There is also the heartwarming story of Koko, the baby orang-utan whose recovery from near death was thanks to “the human kindness, determination and teamwork by a group of people who cared for an animal as though he were a family friend”.

Lyn has several firsts to his name - some of his more memorable achievements being the Walk-through- Aviary, the Butterfly Park, the Herpertarium and “Min Medura”, Sri Lanka’s first national Aquarium, displaying many forms of freshwater and marine life, including penguins. The Pinnawela Elephant Orphanage, set up in 1975, in a 12-hectare coconut plantation, is another of Lyn’s pet ideas. This entailed hand rearing of baby elephants rescued in the wild, when their mothers had died at the hands of poachers or cultivators. Here too, Lyn’s charges had their own distinctive names. The orphanage has since evolved into a captive breeding centre. One must not forget Lyn’s attempt at cost-cutting by establishing “Lihiniya”, the Zoo Farm, which provides much needed fruits, yams, vegetables, leaves, grass and even fish for the zoo’s diverse inhabitants.

The section ends with Lyn’s account of the years leading to the Golden Jubilee of the Zoo in 1986, where he traces the origins of the Zoo from John Hagenbeck’s small menagerie of mammals, through the days of the Colonial Office to its present international status.

In 1970, Lyn was invited as a consultant to design and establish the Zoological Gardens of Singapore. In the next section of the book,



Singapore and Beyond, Lyn narrates the transformation of a rainforest into a uniquely landscaped environment – a delight not only for the animals but also for the viewing public. While in Singapore, Lyn meets Jumbo, the coconut monkey and recounts with much relish and a sneaking sympathy for the adventuresome intruders, Singapore’s bizarre brush with three young tuskers who swam across the sea from the coast of Johore to Pulau Tekong, one of Singapore’s offshore islands. He pays tribute to all those who carried out the capture and translocation of the elephants to their new home with professionalism and military precision. Lyn also introduced the Night Safari to Singapore (the world’s first), where subtle lighting and careful topography enables the visitor to view animals and birds in their own jungle setting at night.

What was anathema to Lyn, as to many other conservationists, was the wanton killing of animals, particularly the elephant and other endangered species, along with the destruction of their natural habitats. Lyn’s battles to save this natural heritage are mythic. He got an opportunity to even temporarily halt some of the more pernicious development projects, which threatened to destroy wildlife, when he was appointed Director, Wild Life, in addition to his substantive post. His armory consisted of persuasion, lobbying and/or persistent argument, until the battle was won or lost. But most often, Lyn won. His saga of Wasgomuwa, the Elephant Corridor and others are in the third section of the book, “Sri Lanka’s Wild Life: An enduring Love”. Lyn waxes lyrical in describing nature’s bounty in our wild life sanctuaries and national parks, home not only to a thousand birds and mammals, but also to the sand dunes and plains, lagoons and lakes, which to him constituted “a timeless, serene world of great beauty” and a “sylvan fantasy”.

Lyn’s narrative takes in leopards at a kill, the failure of the monsoons to fill the waterholes, and the “dastardly crime of poaching”. On the bright side, Lyn is emotive about “Snow White” - Yala’s first pure white deer, and the leopards at Wilpattu, which Lyn calls the “most beautiful of all the cats... its sleek spotted coat and its lissome

grace add beauty to this arrogant creature”. Another animal that evokes Lyn’s admiration is the elephant, which to him is “the largest denizen of the forests with none to match its size, strength or intelligence” and relates his encounter with a lone tusker, while his staff stood helplessly by watching this “silent duel in the hot river sand”. But Lyn’s faith in the “primeval bond between man and animal” is vindicated and the elephant reverses and melts into the scrub.

The final section of the book is devoted to Wildlife Conservation at Work. This is the culmination of a lifetime’s devotion to nurturing and conserving animals and their prime habitats with the aid of scientific data gathered by numerous researchers in the field such as universities and scientific institutions. Lyn’s agitation for the preservation of wildlife has already resulted in national parks and sanctuaries, buffer zones, jungle corridors and strict natural reserves, to benefit both wildlife and the people. His concern for wildlife conservation is best articulated by the WWF’s premise that... “If mankind lets whole species perish, when will their peril also become ours?”

Footfalls in the Wild

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