A Letter From Governor North to the King of Kandy.

by

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This letter, written in Sinhalese, and dated 30th January, 1803, was addressed to the King of Kandy. The sender of the letter was Frederick North, Governor of the British possessions in Ceylon. On the left bottom corner of the last page is the signature of North. The letter itself runs into four pages, and is written on paper. It is in contrast to letters from Kandy, which were always written on ola or palm leaf (sometimes referred to as 'cadjan' by the British). The first paragraph of the letter which is in the nature of a prosasti or salutation to the King, is in a larger hand than the rest of the communication. The body of the letter is also punctuated by stereo-typed shorter salutations, which betray unmistakable Christian influence. Dutch influence is also evident from the reference to කඩුඩ්ඬඩ්ඬඩ්ඬපඩ් for Major-General (p. 31.6). This letter is the Sinhalese version of a letter drafted in English, a copy of which is found in the Secret Diary of the Governor for 1803, and now in the National Archives, Gangodawila, Nugegoda. The introductory salutation to the king of Kandy, and the shorter salutations at frequent intervals are exclusive to the Sinhalese letter. The Sinhalese version, incidently, is an unimpressive rendering of the original letter in English. It is also lacking in lucidity and the directness characteristic of the other. The language is mostly colloquial, and wanting in refineness expected of a document of this nature. Attention also may be drawn to a Tamil character in p. 41.9.

The present letter by itself is not very significant, but owing to the fact that not very many such letters have been preserved, it has considerable historical, linguistic and archival interest. This letter which is an original document is at present in the possession of the Director of National Archives of Ceylon. It was part of a bundle of papers removed from the palace of Kandy in 1815. Such bundles or lekam-miti (used in the sense of a bundle of papers; land registers were also known as lekam-miti) were preserved in the Kandyan Court, and reference is often made in their correspondence with the Dutch or the British to former documents in their possession, especially when drawing attention to previous correspondence. The present document, in its original form however is not in a very good state of preservation, but fairly satisfactory photo-stat copies are available in the Archives.

This letter is a sequel to a long correspondence that ensued the alleged plunder of arecanuts belonging to some Puttalam merchants by some subjects of the King of Kandy, in June 1802. This incident finally led to the first and the abortive British invasion of the Kandyan Kingdom in 1803. From September 1802 onwards Governor North sought by public remonstrance to the Court of Kandy, and by personal letters to the King, to obtain redress for this alleged depredation. In the meantime through intermediaries North exchanged messages with Pilima Talava, the First Adigar of Kandy, and with Leuke Disava.
another member of the Kandyan aristocracy. However it is quite apparent that Governor North was taking advantage of this alleged wrong to bring pressure on the King and the Court of Kandy to agree to a treaty, the conditions of which were wholly advantageous to the British. This proposed treaty had been his obsession from the time he assumed office in 1798. The exchanges between North and the King, and the Court of Kandy, regarding the arecanut incident did not bear any fruit, and finally, showing much exasperation, North decided to declare war on Kandy. This was done on the 29th day of January 1803. On the same day a letter to be sent to Kandy was drafted in English. It explained the urgent desirability for a treaty to be drafted, on the lines indicated in it, and whereby peace could be restored, and all hostilities would cease. The letter also carried a veiled threat of the British being in a position to sponsor a rival claimant to the throne of Kandy. The proposed treaty contained sixteen articles, many of which had been advanced by the British from the time of North’s assumption of office.

The Sinhalese version of the letter carries the date of the following day, i.e., the 30th of January 1803. On the 30th two other very important and long letters were also despatched by Governor North, to Lord Clive, Governor and the President of Fort St. George, Bombay, and to Lord Hobart, Governor of Madras, through which he intimated them with the developments in Ceylon. The invasion of Kandy itself proved to be a very costly affair, both in money and men, and ended in a humiliating rout of the British forces. As a result, at least for the time being, all hopes of the proposed treaty being concluded also had to be given up.

The Letter in English: Secret Diary for 1803, pp. 190-3.

Sent the following letter to the King of Candy, Most Illustrious Sovereign.

Your Majesty cannot be ignorant of the sincere desire which I have always felt to remain in harmony and alliance with Your Crown, to prove my attachment and respect for Your Royal Person, and to support Your Authority which, when I first arrived on Ceylon, was but newly established and was considered as by no means secure—

You will no doubt therefore of the grief with which I am filled at finding myself obliged by the aggression of Your Government to enter Your Dominions with an armed force in order to indemnify my Government for the (p.190) expenses that aggression has occasioned to It, and to secure It from similar outrages in future—

I take this opportunity of laying before Your Majesty the Declaration of the causes and the objects of the entrance of my troops into your territories which I hope will convince that my intentions are guided by Equity and Moderation, and that they are by no means hostile to Your Majesty or Your subjects—

As a still stronger and more unequivocal proof of my desire to restore a good understanding between our two countries and to establish it on firm grounds, I also have the honour of submitting to Your Majesty and Nobles of Your Court proposals for an immediate and perpetual
peace and union, and if Your Majesty and Your Nobles will be pleased
to agree to and sign in the manner usually observed in Treaties, and to
transmit them to my Commission Plenipotentiary Major General
Macdowall who commands the British forces, he will put an end to all
hostile operations (p.191) and Your Majesty's subjects as well as the
inhabitants of the British settlements will enter again into the enjoyment
of commerce and tranquility.

I am not authorized to conclude any perpetual Treaty without the
express permission of the King, my August Master, but I know too
well the Justice and the Moderation of his character, and his sincere
desire of living in the most perfect friendship with Your Majesty. No
doubt of his acceding, willingly, to all that is stipulated for your Majesty's
advantage in the proposed articles, which till his answer can be received
(as it may be expected within one year) I will cause to be most religiously
observed on the part of my Government—

In the meantime, it is unnecessary for me to observe, that the agg-
ression on the part of the Court of Candy which has brought on the
present hostilities has left me at perpetual liberty to recognize and
support the claim which any other Prince of the Family of the Sun may
form to the Diadem now worn by Your Majesty on whose head I would
wish (p.192) to preserve it by the Treaty which I propose as long as the
Sun and Moon shall endure.

Sgd. Frederick North.

Colombo,
29th January, 1803.

The Sinhalese Letter

The Sinhalese Letter
LETTER FROM GOVERNOR NORTH

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KARUNARATNA WIJETUNGA

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