Prof. Hilary Crusz (1920-1989)

“Life is not what one lived, but what one remembers and how one remembers it in order to recount it.”
Gabriel Garcia Marquez

It was twenty-five years ago on May 18, 1989 that Prof. Hilary Crusz died at the age of 68. In his passing, we had lost one of the intellectual giants who contributed so much to the development of the academic culture in the Faculty of Science, at University of Peradeniya. It marks the end of a golden era of science education, for he was one of the extraordinarily gifted generation of scholars who were known and respected for their great intellect, academic learning, and dedicated service. By the sheer force of his intellect and personality he exerted a powerful impression on anyone who was fortunate to have studied under him. He was a brilliant teacher who mesmerized his students with his wit and wisdom. So profound had been his influence on an entire scientific discipline that as long as Zoology is taught at the University of Peradeniya, he would be remembered with love and appreciation.

Hilary Peter Crusz was born on August 30, 1920 in Galle. He began his early education at the Sacred Heart Convent, Galle and then moved to St Peter’s College, Colombo in 1928 for secondary education. He was a gifted student who must have inherited his ability to teach from his father Michael Charles Crusz - a well-known teacher and a strict disciplinarian at St Peter’s College, Colombo – who probably had the strongest influence upon young Hilary. He was an extraordinarily gifted pupil who excelled in studies winning prizes each year with religious regularity. He entered University of Ceylon and came under the influence of Prof. David R. Burt and took up the study of Parasitology that was to be his forte until his death. In 1942 he married his childhood sweetheart Decima Rabot at St. Mary’s Church, Bambalapitiya. Decima remained a tower of strength to him throughout his life. They were blessed with four children.

In 1947, Hilary Crusz won the coveted Government Scholarship and went to England to continue his postgraduate research studies in Parasitology at the prestigious London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. He gained his PhD in just two years and returned home in 1949. There is an old definition of the specialist as a man who learns more and more about less and less until he knows everything about nothing, whereas the generalist learns less and less about more and more until he knows nothing about everything. Prof. Crusz did not fit either category as he was more of an all-rounder. On his return to Ceylon he moved to Peradeniya from Colombo as Lecturer in charge of the Faculty of Science of the University of Ceylon and made Peradeniya his academic home until his death. Colombo’s loss was Peradeniya’s gain, for he was a man of great vision, commitment and unbridled enthusiasm. As the newly appointed Professor and Head of the Department of Zoology at the University of Ceylon (Peradeniya Campus), he built up an outstanding, intellectually rewarding and academically stimulating institution which became the envy of all. As Professor of Zoology he was more than a person: he was a phenomenon. His mere presence enlivened the academic atmosphere.

Few people have been endowed, as Prof. Crusz was, with the gift of the gab. He had a brilliant mind, an excellent command of the English language and a golden tongue that never failed to inspire his audience. For those of us who were fortunate enough to have studied under him, his lectures were a treat. He was magnificent when he delivered them. Listening to him was an unforgettable experience. We were spellbound even when he taught us French. The power to keep people interested in what he spoke was partly a matter of his personality, for he knew the art of oral scientific presentation. He was one of those rare scientists who had a genuine love for the subject they taught. He never used slide shows to entertain his students; instead, he would use the ‘pregnant pause’. He had a sense of theatre. There was something hypnotic about his eyes. With his inexhaustible supply of jokes, witty sayings and anecdotes, he dazzled us in style. There was never a dull moment with Prof. Crusz. He was a man of many parts: zoologist, classical scholar, linguist, writer, singer, poet and philanthropist. He practiced science as an art. The diversity of his knowledge and interests is echoed in his writings, which covered a variety of topics including religion, science, and philosophy.
It was Prof. Crusz who introduced for the first time, the study of the ‘Ecology, Conservation and Management of Large Mammals’ into the curriculum, long before ‘Wildlife Biology’ became famous. He established a research link between the Department of Zoology at University of Peradeniya and the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC, USA and provided opportunities to some of his more promising students to assist the team of Smithsonian scientists in their study of the Elephant and other Large Mammals in Sri Lanka. His academic standing was recognized both at home and abroad. He was appointed a member of the Editorial Board of the prestigious International Journal, Biological Conservation. He was also a member of the International Jury in Paris that awarded a prize for original scientific work related to the environment.

Prof. Crusz was a strong advocate of academic freedom – the right of any scholar to carry out research on any problem that interests him within his field of expertise. He strongly believed that academics had a duty both to teach and to do research. He provided every opportunity to his staff and students to do research, and was genuinely delighted when their work resulted in publications. His strong suite was combativeness and he was usually on the lookout for a China shop. He was the most courageous and effective opponent of the act of ethnic-based standardization that was introduced into the admission of students to the Universities.

In the first year, most of us found him rather fierce and intimidating as we did not know him well. But later on, those who chose to meet him on equal intellectual grounds found him a very charming and agreeable person. The kindness was always there but hidden under his stern exterior. He enjoyed a Rabelaisian sense of humour. He had that endearing habit of being thrifty with money while being generous to the poor. Although he was easily provoked to anger and would often lose his temper, he had that extremely rare human quality to say sorry when he was wrong. He was also a deeply religious man whose beliefs were put into practice in all that he did.

To the future generations, Prof. Hilary Crusz has left his scientific legacy that includes not only his many publications but also a love of Zoology and a way of teaching it. To those of my generation who knew him personally, he has bequeathed fond memories of a brilliant teacher and mentor, a man of the highest personal integrity and one whose friendship brightened our lives. What he generously gave us were his time, encouragement and inspiration, perhaps the most valuable gifts that such a singular person could offer his students. Today, lecturers of Prof. Hilary Crusz’s caliber are as rare as teeth in hens. Until he died, he remained mentally sharp, physically fit and socially active. His death had left an empty space in the academic community of the University of Pradeniya. He was a remarkable and most memorable teacher who appeared much larger than the Department he built, developed and headed. I feel privileged to have known him and studied under him.

Charles Santiapillai
Adjunct/Faculty of Applied Sciences, Rajarata University of Sri Lanka, Mihintale, Sri Lanka & Adjunct/Faculty Darr School of Agriculture, Missouri State University, Missouri, USA
e-mail: charlessantiapillai@gmail.com