PEARL · FISHING IN · · · CEYLON.

A SOUVENIR

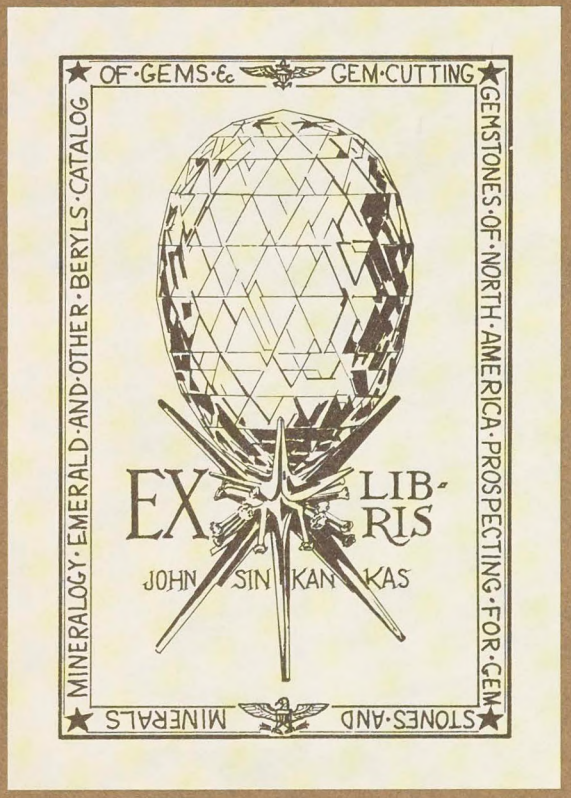
OF

THE PEARL FISHERY

Held at Marichchukaddi, in 1925.

PUBLISHED BY

PLÂTÉ LTD.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FISHING FOR PEARLS.

A Pictorial Record of the Pearl Fishery
1925.

BY

PLÂTÉ LIMITED

WITH LETTERPRESS BY

BELLA SIDNEY WOOLF (Mrs. W. T Southorn)

"To enjoy true happiness we must travel into a very far Countrey and even out of ourselves, for the Pearl we seek for is not to be found in the *Indian* but in the *Empyrean* Ocean."

Sir THOMAS BROWNE.
(1605-1682) Christian Morals.

FISHING FOR PEARLS.

THE fame of the Ceylon Pearl Banks goes back into the mist of ages. We know that in 600 B.C., Vijaya, the first King of Ceylon, sent a present of chanks and pearls to his father-in-law, the King of Madura. Pliny discourses on the value of Ceylon Pearls and on their formation, and the mediaeval "globe-trotter" Ibn Batuta gained first hand knowledge of a Pearl Fishery in the 14th Century.

Dawn on the Banks.

From time to time in the long history of the Ceylon Pearl Fishery, breaks have occurred. The spat has vanished, the young oysters have been swept away by adverse currents or have been destroyed by rapacious fish.

After one of these intervals, lasting nineteen years, the present Pearl Fishery was opened in February under the supervision of Mr. F. J. Smith, (Government Agent, Northern Province), Dr. Pearson, D. Sc., (Marine Biologist to the Government of Ceylon), Captain Kerkham., R. N. R., and Mr. A. H. Malpas. Dr. Pearson and Mr. Malpas have devoted years of research to the life history of the pearl oyster.

A Dhoney Getting into Position.

Seen from the Government trawler "Nautilus", on arriving from Colombo, the Pearl Banks reveal nothing in the grey dawn save a collection of red or white flags fluttering in mid-ocean. These are attached to buoys and are laid down to mark the fishing purlieus.

At day-break the fishing fleet approaches, towed by the smaller trawlers "Lilla" and "Violet". It is a wonderful relic of the past-this fishing fleet. In high-prowed "dhoneys" like these, the fishermen set to sea two or three thousand years ago and the mode of diving has probably not altered one jot or tittle since the days of the first King of Ceylon.

Preparing to Dive.

The "Nautilus" allocates positions to the fleet of boats and as soon as the signal is given the divers begin their work. It is a scene of clamour, movement, colour, entrancing in its ever-changing phases. The"dhoneys" are crowded with brown figures—the "munducks," who lower the divers, busy with the ropes; the divers clambering over the side; the other occupants of the boats chattering, pulling at gear, cooking, or doing nothing with a maximum of noise.

The divers are Tamils or Arabs. The former come chiefly from S. India, the latter from the Persian Gulf. Their methods of diving vary slightly; the Arabs are superior in their quickness, staying power and concentration. There are two ropes controlled by the "munduck". A stone or metal "sinker" is attached to one rope, a net basket to the other. The diver descends with one foot on the "sinker" and the second rope and net bag in his hand. Arrived at sea bottom, he gathers the oysters and throws them into the bag. Then he pulls at the rope and is hauled up to the surface by the "munduck". The Tamil does not hold the rope till he reaches the surface—he begins to swim. The Arab comes up to the surface holding the rope and in this way saves time. The Arab puts on a nose-clip, the Tamil holds his nose with finger and thumb.

The Divers Rising.

Are there not.....

Two points in the adventure
of a diver,

One when a beggar he
prepares to plunge?

One when a prince he rises
with his pearl?

Robert Browning
Paracelsus Part 2.

The average time that the diver stays under water is between 60 and 70 seconds, but cases are known in which he has remained below for two minutes.

The divers work in pairs and their shells are packed into bags on the deck of the dhoney. At noon the "hooter" sounds and diving ceases for the day. The Government "sealing officer" sets out in his launch and goes from one boat to the other putting the Government Seal on the bags.

Sealing the Bags.

When this useful precautionary work is accomplished the "dhoneys" collect round the tugs, set their sails and are attached to the tugs by tow lines. A more beautiful sight than the "dhoneys" following after the tug cannot be imagined, their huge brown and white sails shining in the sunshine and a curling sparkling wave breaking from their bows and rushing towards the tug.

On arrival at Marichchukaddi the boats cast off and make a rush for the Harbour. "First come first served" and every diver is anxious to be the first to get his oysters into the Government "Kottu."

Marichchukaddi, seen from the sea, is a most attractive spot—a low reddish coast line, turf and tree-covered, with a background of jungle.

As a rule a few native dwellings are all the sign of life displayed at Marichchukaddi, but when "Pearl Town" springs up, a population of 30,000 to 40,000 inhabitants appears as if by magic.

Taking the Fleet in Tow.

It is delightful to watch the incoming "dhoneys" making for the shore, skimming over the sparkling water. The moment the boats are beached the divers leap ashore, seize their bags and carry them up the shore on their heads. They look like the slaves in the story of Aladdin bearing treasure and so indeed they do in many cases. The bags are dumped in the "Kottu," a huge pallisaded enclosure with a numbered place set aside for the bags from each correspondingly numbered boat. The shells are counted by Government Officials and made up into bags of 1,000 each. Government's share is two thirds, the diver keeps one third.

The Race for the Shore.

The diver gathers up his bags and hurries off to a grass-grown space where an eopn market is held. There is a crowd of buyers of every nationality and age and the chatter of tongues is astonishing. The divers sell in small quantities—at the beginning of the fishery they obtained as much as a rupee a shell. The purchasers thrust their shells into palm-leaf bags and hurry off to open their treasures. It is a most amusing sight to see single figures or groups of two or three seated knife in hand, searching for pearls, utterly absorbed in the hunt.

The divers who have sold all their oysters seek the Bathing Pool, and wash the salt from their weary limbs. A continuous flow of talk in which the word "sippi" occurs incessantly shows that they are living over again the day's adventures.

"Pearl Town" itself provides a fund of entertainment. You wander along the pleasant little roads between rows of cadjan huts in which every variety of article is displayed for sale, foodstuffs, clothes, umbrellas, bead necklaces and household utensils in profusion. The streets are named Diver Street, Main Street, and so forth—there is a Police Station, a Post Office, and a Court House.

Carrying in the Bags.

The Pearl dealers who have come from long distances in India sit in a row of huts, with their brass "sieves" for grading pearls and their huge brass-bound chests. Under a tulip tree sit the pearl drillers who perform the delicate operation of piercing the pearls.

At 9 p. m. the sale of Government Oysters takes place, in the Court House, presided over by Mr. F. J. Smith. Rembrandt would have painted this scene joyfully—the upturned dusky faces of the buyers who squat on the floor in serried rows, the gorgeous colours of cloth and turban half-revealed by the light of a lamp. The bidding is conducted in Tamil, Sinhalese and Arabic and oysters are sold in lots of not less than one thousand.

The Pearl He Found.

The purchasers of large quantities remove the shells to "totties," enclosures which contain the oysters till they rot. Maggots seize upon them in millions and eventually all the flesh is eaten away. The residue is examined, sieved, and sifted numbers of times and even the dust is picked over so that the tiniest seed pearl may not escape.

"He was a bold man that first ate an oyster," says Colonel Atwit in Swift's "Polite Conversation." One might add he is a bolder man who braves the perfume of decaying oysters and seeks for pearls. But the glorious uncertainty of the gamble ledas him on and there are few thrills equal to the satisfaction of finding "the pearl we seek."

The Court House.

Mr. A. H. Malpas writes as follows in the British Empire Exhibition Official Ceylon Hand Book:—

"It is not until we reach the period of the Portuguese occupation of Ceylon, that we find any detailed account of the manner in which a pearl fishery of those days was conducted, although fragmentary references to earlier fisheries are frequent and from these it would appear that the general methods for the conduct of a fishery, have remained substantially unaltered during the last 2000—3000 years.

Examining the Oysters.

During the Portuguese period, Mannar was the centre of the pearl fishing industry. It was then a town of some importance and prosperity, but owing to a long succession of lean fisheries or entire absence of fisheries, Mannar had lost much of its prosperity when the Dutch captured this town in 1658 and succeeded to the pearl fisheries.

The Dutch held a number of profitable fisheries before they lost Ceylon to the British in 1796. Thus we see that the pearl fishing industry of Ceylon passed from the Sinhalese to European hands through the Portuguese, the Dutch, and finally the British, who by a long established prescriptive right control and administer the pearl banks to the present day.

The Pearl We Seek.

The pearl oyster *(Margaritifera vulgaris)*, is not a true oyster but belongs to the mussel family. It somewhat resembles the scallop in shape although the two halves of the shell are almost equal in size and they have not the characteristic corrugations of the scallop. Like the marine mussel the pearl oyster possesses a byssus or bundle of tough horny threads which it has the power of casting off and renewing at will. By means of this byssus it anchors itself to rocks or other suitable objects.

Frequently bunches of oysters 20 or 30 in number are attached to each other round a central anchorage of rock or may-be a dead mollusc shell, and frequently one finds numbers of oysters secured to the upper part of the large fan shaped pinna *(Pinna nobilis)* which lives in a more or less erect position with its pointed extremity embedded in hard mud.

The Pearl Driller.

In fact oysters show an amazing aptitude in attaching themselves to any fixed or slowly moving object on the sea bottom.

There are two spawning seasons a year, coincident with the periods of the N. E. and S. W. monsoons, when millions of young oysters are liberated. Thus each year sees two spat falls or deposits of young oysters.

The first few days of the young oyster's life, immediately it is hatched from the egg, are spent as a free swimming larva in the surface waters of the sea, until such time as the shell is formed, when the oyster sinks to the bottom and anchors itself by means of its byssus, either to other oysters, or to any existing anchorage. Should the young oyster fall on sand it does not generally survive a long period. Only those oysters falling on rock can be expected to reach a fishable age."

The Fleet Returning at Sunset.

There is many a fair pearl laid up in the bosom of the sea, that never was seen nor never shall be.

Joseph Hall, Bishop of Exeter.
(1574—1656.)