

MOUNT LAVINIA

The Governor's Palace

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Mount Lavinia

The House

This is the story of Mount Lavinia, a house that originated in the mind of a British Governor and witnessed important events in the history of Sri Lanka. It is a building transcending history, not merely bricks and mortar, but as a symbol of the British Empire. Strong, imposing and resilient, a building that followed the ebb and flow of Empire: revelling in its days of glory and weathering its decline. At times lonely and isolated, falling into a state of emptiness and disrepair, and yet remaining a perfect reminder of Ceylon's colonial past.

Romance, political intrigue and grand designs have long been associated with Mount Lavinia. Among its many highs and lows it was not spared the humiliation of an auctioneer's hammer, worst among the innumerable indignities that can befall a historic building of repute.

Yet the indefatigable spirit of Mount Lavinia survives, passing through many vicissitudes, with its history spanning two centuries, its archives now complete with details of its life-story finally pieced together.

Even its name stimulates interest and speculation, romantically attached to a beautiful dancer, who entertained and entranced an aristocratic British Governor within the setting of his own creation.

Mount Lavinia, the country residence of former colonial Governor's, stands magnificently on a promontory overlooking the sea, proudly taking its place in history. Holding the same allure it has held for many over the last two hundred years, it continues to be a source of mystery and fascination.





*As she danced
before him,
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King Tom was
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The Legend

LOVINA APONSUWA

In the year 1805, Sir Thomas Maitland, a gallant military General, sailed to the island of Ceylon (as Sri Lanka was known at that time) to assume duties as the second British Governor. He was better known by the sobriquet 'King Tom'.

King Tom had the desire to build a grand country mansion for himself, as he was very dissatisfied with the accommodation provided for him on arrival, which he regarded as hardly fitting for a man of his rank and stature. On his travels around the island he discovered the perfect location for a stately house, on a promontory overlooking the sea in the village of Galkissa, not too far from the capital, Colombo.

It was in the year 1806 that King Tom built his new

residence, a symbol of the power and authority vested in him, as His Majesty's Governor of the island of Ceylon. Indeed King Tom built a house fit for a king, wherein he fulfilled his greatest desire of creating a pleasure-dome filled with excitement and entertainment to escape the inevitable pressures upon his freedom as Governor, within a rigidly circumscribed colonial English society.

Here within the portals of this house, King Tom first set eyes on a beautiful mestizo dancer, Lovina Aponsuwa, the half Portuguese and half Sinhalese lead dancer of her father's dancing troupe. As she danced before him, enticing him with her long flowing jet black tresses and fixing his attention with her large, expressive, hazel brown eyes, King Tom was mesmerised. He fell instantly in love with Lovina, for nowhere had he seen such perfection, such beauty, and such grace. Lovina and her dance troupe became regular performers at the Governor's house. Flattered by the attentions of this high-ranking official, Lovina, the lowly dancer was further elated when, as a token of his growing affection, she learned that he was to name his grand country mansion Mount Lavinia, after her.

Before long, King Tom and Lovina were engaged in a clandestine romance, their deep passion for one another flourishing in secret, away from the disapproving eyes of the English society in Colombo, and the moral imperatives of such a closed community.

Lovina's life could not have been more different from that of her

exalted paramour. She was from the lowest caste among the Sinhalese, the Rodiya community, looked down upon by the higher castes. She lived in humble dwellings a short distance from the Governor's grand mansion. An underground tunnel enabled the Governor and his beloved to keep their trysts secret. The mouth of this tunnel was a disused well near Lovina's dwelling place, and the underground passage led to the cellars of the Governor's House. Their romance continued for six years with Lovina a regular visitor at King Tom's private residence.

The duties of conscientious Governorship soon took their toll on King Tom, however, and poor health forced him to leave the island of Ceylon and his adored Lovina. The Governor, an honourable man who wanted to do his very best for Lovina within the social mores of the time, presented her with a parting gift: a large piece of land in Attidiya, a village some distance away from Galkissa.

Although the departure of King Tom was to naturally seal the end of their love affair, Lovina's name is remembered as providing the inspiration in naming the Governor's house. Indeed, it is believed that her descendants still live in the vicinity of Mount Lavinia. The legend is the story of Lovina, how she fervently held the attention, and captured the heart of a distinguished British Governor of Ceylon.

To this day, the secret tunnel remains, keeping alive the memory and spirit of the beautiful mestizo dancer, elevated in the popular imagination to 'Lady Lavinia'.



A Place in the Country

THE ARRIVAL OF SIR THOMAS MAITLAND

Lieutenant-General Sir Thomas Maitland set foot in Ceylon on 17th July 1805 taking up his appointment as His Majesty's Representative: the second British Governor of the island.

At the age of forty-six, he was a man with considerable military experience, having proved himself an effective leader in India and elsewhere. On arrival he characteristically set to work with great vigour. Maitland spent his first six months familiarising himself with the economic and administrative situation of Ceylon following the departure of the first British Governor, Frederick North. Duty bound, he visited almost every district, and meticulously examined the public expenditure of each department. By 19th October 1805 Maitland had sent an extensive report to the Colonial Secretary in London, in which he submitted 123 folios of detailed manuscript, containing 57 enclosures.

Thomas Maitland came from one of the oldest families and clans of Scottish nobility, whose ancestry can be traced to the Normans. There is evidence that the Maitlands were descended

from one of the companions of William the Conqueror, who in 1130 settled in Northumberland, part of Scotland at the time. The name Maitland is believed to have derived from variations of the names Matulant, Mautalent and Maltalent. Thomas Maitland came from a long line of ancestors with military backgrounds, and among his near-contemporaries in the clan were Captain Frederick Maitland of the HMS *Bellerophon* who accepted Napoleon's surrender, and General Sir Peregrine Maitland who commanded the Foot Guards at Waterloo.

He had been born into a wealthy family, much of that wealth inherited through the maternal side. His mother, Mary Lombe, was the granddaughter of a Norfolk weaver, who had accumulated the then considerable fortune of £120,000. His elder brother, James, as the family heir, took the title and became the eighth Earl of Lauderdale. Thomas Maitland, as the seventh Earl of Lauderdale's second son, followed the family's military traditions, and was commissioned into the Seaforth Highlanders Regiment in 1778 at the age of nineteen. He went into active service in India where he impressed and gained the respect of Lord Cornwallis, the Viceroy of India. From his experiences serving in India, he developed a life-absorbing interest in the British Empire and the problems of its administration.

*Sir Thomas Maitland
National Portrait Gallery,
Scotland*

