

The Three Princes of Serendip

by Richard Boyle © 2000

Part One

In response to queries regarding his recent allusion to the origins of ***The Three Princes of Serendip***, Richard Boyle now recounts the fabled story that inspired Horace Walpole to coin the word ***serendipity***.

On the morning of January 28, 1754, an exceptional Englishman sat down at his desk in the library of his gothic mansion, Strawberry Hill, to attend to his correspondence. It was a daily ritual, for the man in question was probably the greatest letter writer of his era, or of any other for that matter. On that winter's morning in Twickenham, London, he composed a letter in which he committed to paper for the first time a word that has contributed much to the English language. As a consequence, he resurrected a strange Oriental tale that would otherwise have been condemned to obscurity.

The man in question was **Horace Walpole** (1717-97), fourth Earl of Orford, son of Prime Minister Robert Walpole, connoisseur, antiquarian and author of the famous gothic novel, *The Castle of Otranto* (London, 1765). The word he invented was, of course, ***serendipity***. And the tale he rescued from literary oblivion was *The Three Princes of Serendip*. The letter - to Horace Mann, an envoy in the service of King George II stationed in Florence - was written to acknowledge the safe arrival of a portrait of Bianco Capello, a 16th century beauty and Duchess of Tuscany. This letter is contained among the 31 volumes of *Horace Walpole's Correspondence* (New Haven, 1937), edited by Wilmarth Sheldon Lewis.

It was in 1980 at a London library that I first accessed *Horace Walpole's Correspondence* in order to delve into the history and derivation of the word *serendipity*. The Index gave two references. Number one was to the letter in which Walpole made first *written* usage of the word, for Walpole infers that he coined it beforehand. It is necessary to quote this letter almost in its entirety to provide the precise context of the word's usage.

"The head," Walpole writes of the portrait, "is painted equal to Titian, and though done, I suppose, after the clock had struck five and thirty, yet she retains a great share of beauty. I have bespoken a frame for her, with the grand ducal coronet on top, her story on a label at the bottom, which Gray is to compose in Latin as short and expressive as Tacitus (one is lucky when one can bespeak and have executed such an inscription!) the Medici arms on one side, and the Capello's on the other. I must tell you a critical discovery of mine *a propos*: in an old book of Venetian arms, there are two coats of Capello, who from their *name* bear a *hat*, on one of them is added a flower-de-luce on a blue ball, which I am persuaded was given to the family by the Great Duke, in consideration of this alliance; the Medicis you know bore a badge at the top of their arms; this discovery I made by a talisman, which Mr Chute calls the *sortes Walpolianae*, by which I find everything I want *a point nomme* wherever I dip for it.

This discovery indeed is almost of that kind which I call *serendipity*, a very expressive word, which as I have nothing better to tell you, I shall endeavour to explain to you: you will understand it better by the derivation than by the definition. I once read a silly fairy tale called *The Three Princes of Serendip*: as their highnesses travelled, they were always making discoveries, by accident and sagacity, of things which they were not in quest of: for instance, one of them discovered that a mule blind of the right eye had travelled the same road lately, because the grass was eaten only on the left side, where it was worse than on the right – now do you understand *serendipity*? One of the most remarkable instances of this *accidental sagacity* (for you must observe that *no* discovery of a thing you *are* looking for comes under this description) was of my Lord Shaftsbury, who happening to dine at Lord Chancellor Clarendon's, found out the marriage of the Duke of York and Mrs Hyde, by the respect with which her mother treated her at table.

On reading Walpole's description of the process of serendipity - "*They were always making discoveries, by accident and sagacity, of things they were not in quest of*" it becomes evident that the example cited is not suited to the coiner's definition. The ineptness of this example, and the further one that Walpole cites with reference to Lord Shaftsbury, fail to illustrate the grand concept of serendipity.

I found the second reference to *serendipity* in *Horace Walpole's Correspondence* to be a footnote to a sentence in a letter to the social reformer and religious writer, Hannah More. The pertinent sentence from the letter, dated September 10, 1789, reads: "Nor is there any harm in starting new game to invention; many discoveries have been made by men who were *a la chasse* of something very different." The editor comments in the footnote to this sentence, "Horace Walpole coined the word 'Serendipity' to describe this process: see Horace Walpole to Mann January 28, 1754."

Personal experiences of such a nature can be culled at will and need not be bothered with here. What is most significant is that history reveals many examples of accidental and sagacious discovery while in pursuit of something else. Christopher Columbus' discovery of America, Alexander Fleming's discovery of penicillin, and Alfred Bernard Nobel's discovery of dynamite, are just a few examples.

Of course numerous writers – including myself - have tried to link the Island of Serendip with the serendipitous experience, but most of these attempts have been contrived. There are exceptions, however. Take John Barth, for example, who writes in his extraordinary retelling of the Sindbad saga in *Serendip, The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* (New York, 1991): "You don't reach Serendip by plotting a course for it. You have to set out in good faith for elsewhere and lose your bearings serendipitously."

It was not until the late 1980s that the bibliographer H.A.I. (Ian) Goonetilleke informed me of the existence of a seminal book on the subject titled *Serendipity and the Three Princes: From the Peregrinaggio of 1557* (University of Oklahoma Press, Norman: 1964). Edited by Theodore G. Remer, this work contains a definitive etymology of the word *serendipity*, the history of *The Three Princes of Serendip*, and the first direct English translation of the tale. Having ascertained there was no copy to be found in any of the major public libraries in Sri Lanka (and, I suspect, in any private library), I asked an American friend to unearth one in the United States. Several years went by and nothing transpired. Then one day my faith in him was rewarded when he arrived in Sri Lanka with a photocopy of the book.

My first task on reading it was to make two further copies. One I sent to Ian Goonetilleke, knowing that this was one book not to be found in his library, although he had, of course, encountered it in years gone by while engaged in his bibliographical labours. The other I sent to Arthur C. Clarke, as he had touched on the subject of serendipity in his

autobiographical writings concerning Sri Lanka but had never had the opportunity of reading the tale.

I received a letter from Ian Goonetilleke dated June 9, 1997 thanking me for his copy. As those who know Ian are all too aware, he is the Horace Walpole of Sri Lanka, a prolific and fastidious writer of letters. I quote the relevant section of his letter in full, because it not only mentions his first encounter with the book, but also provides an indication of his skill with correspondence.

"In a day of unusual tedium and ensuing diminution of mood, serendipity presented itself in both unexpected and curious fashion," Ian writes. "Along with a letter from our ambassador in Washington there was a dirty brown piece of postal advice saying a 'damaged registered letter' for me had to be collected from the Athurugiriya Post Office. After lunch my wife's niece's husband got on his push bike and returned in half an hour with two torn pieces (originally constituting a white envelope with its Rs 16.00 stamp) and the virgin white copy of Remer's *Serendipity*. It produced an even greater sensation of accidental discovery than 30 years earlier when I asked at the famous round Reading Room of the British Museum for Remer's volume – and was totally absorbed. Since that calculated act of detection, this afternoon's joy was undiluted, and I did not let go of the copy till I had virtually read it in one sitting, and darkness set in. What an assiduous and arduous chase! The gift provided an ecstatic experience of a kind only too familiar and frequent in a past crammed with such happenings."

As I have mentioned before, *The Three Princes of Serendip* was published in Venice in 1557 by an enterprising printer called Michele Tramezzino. That Tramezzino was well-respected can be judged by the fact that the book bears the imprimatur of Pope Julius III. The title page of *The Three Princes of Serendip* claims that one Christoforo Armeno translated the book from Persian into Italian, but there are serious doubts as to whether Armeno ever existed, except in the fertile mind of Michele Tramezzino. Most likely Tramezzino was himself the compiler of the various tales, which were probably of ancient origin, mostly Indian.

It has been suggested that Tramezzino used Serendip in the title of his book not only because it imparted an exotic flavour, but also because the island was topical in 1555 when the book was being compiled. News was seeping through from Rome that the Spanish Jesuit Francis Xavier (who was canonized in 1622) had introduced Christianity to the island a few years earlier. As Sir James Emerson Tennent reports in *Ceylon* (London, 1859), "It was by the fisher-caste of Mannar that he was invited to Ceylon in 1544." For devout Venetians, this represented a victory for God and the Church, a victory in a strange and far-off land variously known as Ceilao, Zeylan, Taprobane, and Serendip.

"In ancient times there existed in the country of Serendippo, in the Far East, a great and powerful king by the name of Giaffer. He had three sons who were very dear to him. And being a good father and very concerned about their education, he decided that he had to leave them endowed not only with great power, but also with all kinds of virtues of which princes are particularly in need."

So begins the fascinating story of *The Three Princes of Serendip*. In order to provide the best tutors for his sons, the king travels throughout the island until he finds a number of scholars, each specialized in a different field, "And to them he entrusted the training of his sons, with the understanding that the best they could do for him was to teach them in such a way that they could be immediately recognized as his very own."

As the three princes are endowed with great intelligence, they soon become highly trained in the arts and sciences. However, when the tutors inform the king of his sons'

achievements, he is sceptical. So he summons his eldest son and announces that he wishes to retire to a monastery and that his son should succeed him as ruler. The eldest son politely refuses, insisting that his father is wiser and should reign until his death. The two younger sons also refuse when commanded in a similar manner.

Although the king is astonished by the wisdom displayed by his sons, he decides to send them on a prolonged journey so that they can acquire empirical experience. He summons his sons and, giving the impression of being angry and disappointed because they have all disobeyed him, banishes them from Serendip. "Thus they started their peregrination and moved out of his kingdom until they reached the kingdom of a great and powerful emperor, whose name was Beramo."

Misfortune befalls the princes when a camel driver stops them on the road and asks them if they have seen one of his camels. Although they have not, they have noticed signs that suggest a camel has passed along the road. Ever ready to dazzle with their wit and sagacity, the princes mystify the camel driver by asking him if the lost camel is blind in one eye, missing a tooth and lame. The camel driver, impressed by the accuracy of the description, immediately hurries off in pursuit of the animal.

After a fruitless search, and feeling deceived, he returns to the princes, who reassure him by supplying further information. The camel, they say, carried a load of butter on one side and honey on the other, and was ridden by a pregnant woman. Concluding that the princes have stolen the camel, the driver has them imprisoned. It is only after the driver's neighbour finds the camel that they are released.

The princes are brought before Emperor Beramo, who asks them how they could give such an accurate description of a camel they had never seen. It is clear from the princes' reply that they had brilliantly interpreted the scant evidence observed along the road.

As the grass had been eaten on one side of the road where it was less verdant, the princes deduced that the camel was blind to the other side. Because there were lumps of chewed grass on the road the size of a camel's tooth, presumably they had fallen through the gap left by a missing tooth. The tracks showed the prints of only three feet, the fourth being dragged, indicating that the animal was lame. That butter was carried on one side of the camel and honey on the other was clear because ants had been attracted to melted butter on one side of the road and flies to spilled honey on the other.

The deduction regarding the pregnant rider is more complicated than the rest and is somewhat lewd, so I shall let the princes tell it themselves: "I guessed that the camel must have carried a woman," said the second brother, "because I had noticed that near the tracks where the animal had knelt down the imprint of a foot was visible. Because some urine was near by, I wet my fingers (in it) and as a reaction to its odour I felt a sort of carnal concupiscence, which convinced me that the imprint was of a woman's foot."

"I guessed that the same woman must have been pregnant," said the third, "because I had noticed nearby handprints which were indicative that the woman, being pregnant, had helped herself up with her hands while urinating."

Although Walpole mistakenly believed it to concern a mule, it is of course this camel episode that he latched onto as an example of serendipity, inadequate though it may be.

Part II of "The Three Princes of Serendip"

The Three Princes of Serendip

by Richard Boyle © 2000

Part Two

Continuing **Richard Boyle's** retelling of the story of *The Three Princes of Serendip*, in which the princes leave the island of their birth and travel to the land of Emperor Beramo, where they surprise him with their deductions concerning a lost camel.

Emperor Beramo is so astounded by the princes' sagacity in the matter of the missing camel that he invites them to be his guests. He is soon convinced that they are blessed with the powers of prophecy when they divine that one of his counsellors is planning to poison him. Their remarkable abilities prompt him to tell them a strange story. He relates how there was once a Mirror of Justice in his realm that revealed the guilty, so ensuring peace and tranquility. However, the mirror was stolen and taken to another land, where it came into the possession of a Virgin Queen. Beramo urges the princes to retrieve the mirror so that justice can be restored.

Their task is complicated by a giant upright hand that has appeared upon the sea near the queen's capital and is terrorizing the inhabitants. The decision is made to bring the mirror to the shore and orient it towards the hand. As a result, the hand starts to clutch at animals rather than humans. Understandably, the queen is reluctant to part with the mirror, as it now prevents any further human loss. The daunting challenge for the princes is to subdue the hand once and for all.

The princes arrive at the queen's capital and proceed to the beach to confront the hand. The eldest realizes that it is a symbol illustrating that if five men unite for a single purpose, they can conquer the world. So he holds up his hand with only the second and third fingers erect, demonstrating that it is an error to believe that five united men are necessary, when only two would suffice. The giant hand disappears forever beneath the sea and the queen gracefully surrenders the mirror.

When the princes return the Mirror of Justice to Beramo, they learn of the catastrophe that has befallen the emperor in their absence. Beramo has fallen in love with a beautiful slave girl called Diliramma, who one day questioned his honour in public. In a fit of rage, he had her bound and abandoned in a forest. The next day, Beramo was filled with remorse and ordered a search for his paramour. No trace of her was found, leaving Beramo ill with sorrow.

Witnessing the emperor's suffering, the princes advise him to build seven beautiful palaces and to reside in each one for a week. In addition, the best storyteller in each of the seven most important cities of the empire is to be brought into his royal presence to recount a marvellous story.

Whoever compiled the stories that are interwoven in *The Three Princes of Serendip* was informed about Persian as well as Indian sources. Thus, in the tradition of Persian narrative, the overarching story of the princes' adventures provides a framework for relating seven novellas at this juncture. This format appears to be patterned after the Persian poem, *The Seven Beauties*, by Nizami. The novellas (the seven stories told to Beramo by the seven storytellers) have similar themes: love and hate, innocence and wickedness, mistaken identities, multiple coincidences and magic powers. Unfortunately, they are too long to be synopsisized here.

Over the weeks, in his various palaces, Beramo listens with appreciation to six of the stories, his health steadily improving. While listening to the seventh story, about a ruler who spurns his lover, Beramo suddenly realizes that it concerns Diliramma and himself. On being questioned, the storyteller reveals that he knows Diliramma and that he is searching for her lord to tell him that she still loves him despite his act of cruelty. Overjoyed, Beramo sends for Diliramma and they are reunited.

Beramo asks the three princes how they conceived such an effective remedy. They tell him they recommended seven different palaces to be built so that variety might cure the root of his illness, insomnia. As no trace of Diliramma had been found in the forest, they refused to believe that wild animals had eaten her. Therefore they suggested that storytellers be summoned from afar in case news of her might be received. As Diliramma had been discovered in the forest by a travelling merchant, who took her far away, their strategy turned out to be precisely correct.

The princes return to Serendip, and the story ends with the three wise sons of King Giaffer becoming three wise rulers. Upon Giaffer's death, the eldest son succeeds his father as King of Serendip. The middle son returns to the land of the Virgin Queen, marries her and becomes king. Emperor Beramo, who has a daughter, sends for the youngest son and offers her in marriage. Soon after the wedding, Beramo dies, and his son-in-law becomes lord of his empire.

This, then, is the endearing story of the *Three Princes of Serendip*. The background to its publication is no less intriguing. The slim volume was popular with the intellectuals of 16th century Venice, whose favourite pastime was riddle-guessing and reading from topical books, such as Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron*. Collections of riddles, fables and the like were published in large numbers during this period; some books, such as *The Three Princes of Serendip*, owed their very existence in print to the need for new material to fuel the literary games played in elegant Venetian parlours.

That the publisher and supposed compiler of the work, Michele Tramezzino, accurately gauged Venetian literary tastes of the period is evident from the fact that a second edition was published in 1584. Furthermore, the book became popular abroad in Europe. In 1583, a German translation appeared. This was followed in 1610 by the first translation into French. The first appearance of the book in English occurred in 1722, titled *Travels and Adventures of Three Princes of Sarendip*. However this was based on another French translation, published in 1719.

The translator added other stories, so this version does not accurately reflect Tramezzino's work. Most importantly, it was this version that Horace Walpole read as a boy, and which lingered in his mind until adulthood, when it became the vehicle for the coinage of **serendipity**. As mentioned earlier, the English speaking world had to wait until 1965 – 400 years after the original publication - for an English translation direct

from the original Italian. This is extraordinary considering the speed with which the tale was translated into French and German, and one reason why it is so little known.

The book contains fables from the Indian *Panchatantra*, but some of them are known in other lands. The tale with the widest currency is that of the one-eyed camel. The same tale is found in the Jewish *Talmud* and in the folklore of Korea, Ukraine, Serbia, and Croatia. In 1767, Voltaire was accused of plagiarizing the camel episode from the 1722 ersatz French 'translation' of *The Three Princes*. Voltaire had written a story called *The Dog and the Horse* that features a philosopher called Zadig who, just like the three princes, makes brilliant deductions from marks in the sand. But the story, in one form or another, was known by many peoples long before either Voltaire or the 'translator' lived.

On a more general level, the leitmotif of three princes occurs in folklore worldwide. For instance, there is a Middle Eastern tale called *The Three Princes*, retold in recent years by Eric A. Kimmel (New York, 1994), in which a beautiful princess sends her three suitors off to find a rare object, saying she will marry the one who returns with the greatest wonder. Each finds a wonder indeed, and together they save the princess's life. Since she can marry only one, she chooses the prince who made the greatest sacrifice. Fortuitously, it is the one she has loved all along.

By chance I discovered that Isaac Asimov wrote a story called "The Fable of the Three Princes," which is contained in *Magic: The Final Fantasy Collection* (New York, 1996). This variation on a theme features King Hilderic and Queen Ermentrude of Micrometrica, who have triplet sons and wonder how to decide which prince should succeed as king. In order to make a choice, the king sends his sons on a long journey in search of wealth for his impoverished kingdom. The princes end up in a rich and powerful kingdom where – yes, you guessed it – they compete for the hand of a beautiful princess.

It is a coincidence that just before the first direct English translation of our particular tale appeared in Remer's *Serendipity and The Three Princes*, the American writer Elizabeth Jamison Hodges published a children's book called *The Three Princes of Serendip* (New York, 1964), with drawings by Joan Berg. Hodges, a librarian at Robbins Library in Arlington, Massachusetts, travelled to Ceylon in the early 1960s and corresponded with H.A.I. (Ian) Goonetilleke on the subject of serendipity. The content of her book is drawn from *The Travels and Adventures of Three Princes of Sarendip*, the 1722 English version from a French translation, as well as several German translations. Hodges followed up her first book with a companion volume, *Serendipity Tales* (New York, 1966), with drawings by June Atkin Corwin, in which she retells the seven stories that helped cure the Emperor's great malady:

"Silence fell in the great hall of the palace at Anuradhapura as the three princes began to relate the seven mysterious tales they had heard in the seven Persian palaces of the Emperor Vahram. And the tales they told were of fantasy and magic, fate and sorcery, kind dragons and terrible demons, the good and the beautiful, the triumph of virtue courage and patience over evil and discord."

Hodges died quite recently, in October 1999, so the previous paragraphs serve as a Sri Lankan obituary of this unfamiliar writer, who embraced both Serendip and the concept of serendipity.

Perceptive readers will have realized that the common factor linking my previous three articles in the *Sunday Times* is the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*. This is no coincidence, for their disparate subjects fall within the ambit of recent research into the 67 words of Sinhala and Sri Lankan origin to be included in the third edition of the *OED* –

OED3. Now is the time once again to bring up the subject of the greatest repository of the English language.

I maintained in "The Professor and the Madman" (*Sunday Times*, July 16, 2000) that the *OED* entry for *serendipity* is deficient because it is not specific about the authorship of *The Three Princes of Serendip*. More important, though, is the criticism that the *OED* is largely responsible for perpetuating the other main misconception regarding *serendipity*. This is contained in the *OED*'s definition of the word – "the faculty of making happy and unexpected discoveries by accident" – a definition at variance with Walpole's original meaning.

Theodore R. Remer, editor of *Serendipity and The Three Princes*, puts the argument most succinctly: "He (Walpole) prescribed a gift for discovery by accident *and* sagacity while in pursuit of something else. These ingredients are cumulative and should be stated *in toto*; one or more Walpole-prescribed ingredients should not be lacking. It is possible that the nouns used by dictionaries, such as 'ability,' 'faculty,' or 'aptitude' may imply a 'gift' – but these terms are not quite the same as gift. Nor are the words 'happy,' 'valuable,' 'agreeable,' or 'desirable' any substitute for 'sagacity'.

Earlier this year I referred this criticism to the *OED3* editorial team. The Associate Editor, Jeremy Marshall, replied: "It is established policy of the *OED* that we aim to describe how words are or have been used, not how they 'ought' to be used. I agree that Walpole's original usage should be mentioned, but it is indeed given in the *OED*'s etymology; however untrue later usage may be to the coiner's intention, it must form the basis of the definition of the word as it has been adopted into the language."

Where Marshall writes of the *OED*'s aims as being to describe "how words are or have been used, not how they ought to be used," he alludes to a lexicographical principle pioneered by James Murray, the first editor of the dictionary. Previous lexicographers, such as Samuel Johnson, believed they had an interventionist duty to correct language usage. Murray, on the other hand, insisted that the lexicographer should take a passive role, dedicating himself to recording the history of words and how their usage changes over time.

With *serendipity*, it is clear that there was a lacuna in usage from the time Walpole coined it until 1875 or thereabouts, as I shall shortly explain. Remer declares that it was "untainted by popular usage" during this period. In order to adhere to the historical principle described above, I believe it is necessary for the *OED* to point out this change in usage, rather than relying on the user to spot the difference between the etymology and the definition.

Marshall then went on to answer my own criticism: "As for the origins of the term, I think the *OED* is unspecific about the authorship of *The Three Princes of Serendip* for the simple reason that the editors did not know it." This prompted me to send a copy of my article "The Accidental Paradise," (*Serendip* magazine, March/April 1999) – on which this series is based – to the *OED3* editorial team. Hopefully, a change will be made to the entry during the current revision programme, which around the year 2010 will result in the complete *OED3*, containing an estimated 1.3 million words.

Discussion regarding the history of the word *serendipity* goes back some 125 years, prior to the publication of the *OED*. The major forum then was the Oxford periodical *Notes and Queries: For Readers and Writers, Collectors and Librarians*. Edward Solly, an editor of *Notes and Queries*, published the first inquiry on February 27, 1875. "Princess of Serendip," it was erroneously headed. "Where in his admirable letters does Walpole refer to the story of the Princess of Serendip, and where is the story itself to be found?"

Solly replied on April 17, 1875: "Horace Walpole used the word serendipity to express a particular kind of natural cleverness." He then went on to cite the camel story from *The Three Princes of Serendib*. "I presume it is the story of these three Princes that your correspondent is inquiring after," he ended.

The next query was published on July 27, 1879. "Serendipity – A word coined by Horace Walpole to express luck of a person who sooner or later obtained what he desired. Can anyone suggest any history to the word? It does not appear to have any root or etymology. Did it not probably arise from some mere passing table-talk? The word has been quoted in some recent monthly."

Solly began by providing a more accurate definition – "the discovery of things which the finder was not in search of." He continued: "I have recently noted at the end of *Impartial History of the Life and Actions of Peter Alexowitz, Czar of Muscovy* (London, 1724) an advertisement of the book Horace Walpole referred to entitled *Travels and Adventures of Three Princes of Sarendip*, interspers'd with eight novels, illustrated with 8 Copper plates. Sold by W. Chetwood at Cato's Head in Russel Street, Covent Garden; and T. Edlin at the Princes-Arms, over-against Exeter-Exchange. Walpole was about five years old when this 'silly fairy tale,' as he calls it, was published in 1722." (Solly here refers to the English version from a French translation, mentioned earlier.) "It is now scarce, for I have not been able to meet with a copy in the last few years, during which time I have been hoping by 'serendipity' to find one whilst looking for other things."

Solly is credited in the *OED* with the first subsequent usage of the word after Walpole's coinage. The relevant illustrative quotation is contained in Solly's 1880 *Index of Titles of Honour*: "The inquirer was at fault, and it was not until some weeks later, when by the aid of serendipity, as Horace Walpole calls it – that is, looking for one thing and finding another – that the explanation was accidentally found."

More recent examples include the following from the April 1955 issue of *Scientific American*: "Our story has as its critical episode one of those coincidences that show how discovery often depends on chance, or rather on what has been called 'serendipity' – the chance observation falling on a receptive ear." Another comes from the October 1980 issue of *TWA Ambassador*: "It becomes a glum bureaucracy, instead of the serendipity of 30 people putting out a magazine."

One of many illustrative quotations for Sinhala and Sri Lankan words I have submitted to the *OED* happens to be for *serendipity*. It comes from William McGowan's *Only Man is Vile: The Tragedy of Sri Lanka* (New York, 1992). Although not particularly illustrative, at least it has direct reference to the island, which no other does. "If serendipity were to strike the island now, I'm afraid the dose would have to be massive," it reads.

From *serendipity* comes the derivative **serendipitist**, which is illustrated by a marvellous piece of 'stream of consciousness' by James Joyce in *Finnegan's Wake* (1939): "You semisemetic serendipitist, you (thanks, I think that describes you) Europasianised Afferyank!"

There is, of course, a separate entry for the adjective *serendipitous* sense **a** being "Of persons having the faculty of making happy and unexpected discoveries by accident." One of the illustrative quotations is from the *Times Literary Supplement*, August 22, 1958: "In the matter of adventure Miss de Banke was serendipitous to the *n*th degree."

The more usual sense **b** is "applied to discoveries, meetings, etc., of this kind." The earliest quotation for this sense is from John Wakefield's *Death the Sure Physician* (1965): "It's rather fortunate that I should come across a chap with similar interests . . . distinctly serendipitous in fact."

Hence the adverb **serendipitously**, one illustrative quotation of which comes from the *Daily Telegraph* of November 29, 1974: "We can imagine Hodder meeting Stoughton . . . and their discovering, serendipitously, a mutual interest in books. Another comes from the *Times Literary Supplement* of November 14, 1980: "He had the knack of always being serendipitously on hand when a tenement caught fire."

I have also submitted to the editors of *OED3* the previously mentioned quotation by John Barth for *serendipitously*. Readers will recall that he writes in *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* (New York, 1991): "You don't reach Serendip by plotting a course for it. You have to set out in good faith for elsewhere and lose your bearings serendipitously."

This quotation has extra significance because it is, in itself, an excellent definition of *serendipity*. Moreover, it is a definition that fittingly employs the island name from which the word is derived.

Concluded