

United Service Institution A Centenary Tribute*

Melville De Mellow**

This month a century ago, Charles Metcalfe Macgregor founded a unique institution in India which is, even today, an unparalleled treasure house of literature on the art and science of warfare. This nostalgic resume of the 100 years of this remarkable institution makes a sad revelation that even after one hundred years in existence it is still homeless. A time came in its life when it could not afford to maintain even a bicycle and its properly had to be sold to pay back the arrears of municipal taxes.

The United Service Institution began its life in a defunct Town Hall in Simla in 1870, moved later to Army Headquarters, and then to premises above the old Scotch Kirk. In 1910 it got its own building, at a cost of twenty-six thousand rupees, near the Combermere Post Office, on land leased by the United Services Club. Membership in the year of the birth numbered 215.

The objective of the Institution was to promote the study of naval and military art, science and literature. Today, it has voluntary membership of 4,700. However, it is ironic that a hundred years after its birth, USI still does not possess a building of its own housed as it is in a few rooms of Kashmir House - the Secretary and his staff operating from what was once the Maharaja's pantry!

There were many others associated with the USI during the hundred years of its existence who added lustre to the Institution by virtue of their own eminence. Among them were Lt. General Sir Douglas Haig, the Honourable Sir Hery McMahon, Field Marshal Lord Birdwood, General Sir Claude Auchinleck, General Sir Phillip Chetwoode, Lt. General Sir Kenneth Wigram and Viscount Gort.

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As per the editorial of *Yojana* January 2007 Special Issue, "*Yojana* completes 50 years. We decided that we cull out 50 of our best articles to celebrate those fifty years," The article was chosen as one of the 50 best articles.

**The Late Mr Melville De Mellow was the first Hockey 'blue' at the Indian Military Academy, Dehradun. He served with the Royal Warwickshire Regiment and 5/2 Punjab Regiment of the British Indian Army. The Government of India honoured him with Padma Shri in 1963. He won national and international fame as a news broadcaster and commentator.

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In 1933, Ram Chandra, an ICS Officer, became the first Indian member of the Institution while the first President, after Independence, was General K.M. Cariappa who was also the first Indian Commander-in-Chief of the Army.

The USI Library is a gold-mine of knowledge indispensable to the development of thinking of Service Officers on defence and warfare. The library boasts of forty thousand bound volumes, manuscripts, rare old books and prices, including one of the only-six available copies in the world of Aelian's "Tactics" published in 1616, a book that revolutionised warfare tactics in the 17th century. Tarlton's own apologia of the conduct of his operations, during the American War of Rebellion (1787) and Claude De Vauban's Military History of Marlborough and Eugene, published in 1737, are the other rare acquisitions. The printed works deal with every aspect of warfare, particularly the wars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

February 1971 is therefore an important milestone for the USI. Its 100th birthday should afford a good opportunity for serious stocktaking and a reappraisal of its future functions.

In the light of today's need it must evolve into an autonomous "Think Tank", serving not only the Armed profession, but Government, Parliament and the public at large.

Thanks to Metcalfe's foresight, we have today an institution which is the second oldest of its kind in the world, with a Journal that is the oldest professional defence Journal with continuous publication in India and in Asia. May that one small candle, that was lighted by Metcalfe a century ago and which has shed light and understanding to so many who have been involved in the search for knowledge and the pursuit of historical fact, flare forth to illuminate the enquiring minds of men for many centuries to come.