

Transformation, Reinvigoration and Reinvention: The Art and Life of George Keyt (1901 - 1993), Part I

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The material for this article has been drawn from the recently published work, *George Keyt. The Absence of a Desired Image* by SinhaRaja Tammita-Delgoda (Taprobane Collection, Sri Lanka 2023)

Born a year after the turn of the 20th century, George Keyt was one of the leading figures of European modernism in Asia. Fusing the influences of Modernism and Cubism with his own unique idiom, Keyt became one of the most important Asian artists of his time and the most celebrated Sri Lankan painter of the 20th century.

George Percival Sproule Keyt was born in 1901. Ceylon was then at the height of its prosperity and was considered one of the jewels in the imperial crown. Riding this wave of affluence was a diverse and cosmopolitan élite. Often described as "Ceylonese," it was bound together by Western values and a deeply Anglicized lifestyle.

Keyt's parents were Eurasians, an ethnically diverse community of European and Asian origin which had grown up during three waves of conquest and colonialism by the Portuguese, the Dutch and finally the British. Known as Burghers, during the British era, they became an integral part of the colonial structure. They were employed by the British to staff the government service and people the legal, educational and medical professions. Their way of life was almost completely Western, English was their mother tongue and Christianity their religion. The Burghers were regarded as the loyal servants of empire and accorded a privileged position amongst the other communities. They prided themselves on their European identity and their service to the British Empire.

This wedding photograph depicts George Keyt at 29, on the day of his marriage with his family and in laws.

Keyt however was born and grew up in Kandy in the central highlands. This was a very different world to the Europeanized atmosphere of Colombo. A



The Janze and Keyt families unite at the wedding of George and Ruth - 1930



Ushering in the Buddhist Revival in Ceylon. Colonel Henry Steel Olcott and Madame Helena Pavlov Blavatsky

natural fortress, surrounded by rugged mountains and impassable tropical jungles, the Kandyan Kingdom had held would be conquerors at bay since the 16th century. Although Kandy finally fell to the English in 1815, it remained deeply grounded in its beliefs and traditions. At it the very heart of this culture was worship of the Buddha.

Keyt was sent to Trinity College, Kandy, one of the island's leading schools. Founded during the heyday of empire, Trinity College was a public school on British lines. Established in 1872 it sought to provide a Western and Christian education which would mould the young people of the newly conquered Kandyan highlands. From the very outset however, Keyt showed that he had no interest in Western education and no intention of being moulded into anything.

Although he read widely and voraciously, Keyt refused to learn or study and left Trinity without passing any exams. After Trinity, Keyt found himself drawn to the Buddhist temples and monasteries which dominated Kandy. The last bastion of Sinhalese culture, Kandy was heir to a civilization going back thousands of years. This rich, multi-layered inheritance captured Keyt's imagination and appealed to his mind. This heritage was kept alive by the two great monastic orders, the Malwatte and the Asgiriya, which had for centuries had been repositories of Sinhala lore and learning.

Keyt was fascinated by the rhythms of the temple and the life of the monks, who introduced him to the teachings and the texts of Theravada Buddhism. This opened his eyes to a whole new world of knowledge and a completely different way of life. Keyt began to understand the Sinhala language and study the history, the literature and folklore of the land. He proved himself an eager and attentive student. Immersing himself in Buddhism and Sinhala culture, he read widely and deeply. Like many "Ceylonese" of his era, Keyt had been completely ignorant of the culture and the heritage of his own country. This was the first real education that he had ever had. It provided him with a structure, giving him a direction and purpose which he had been lacking.

The early 20th century witnessed a gathering tide of Buddhist consciousness. During the last century, British policies had gradually whittled away the place of Buddhism in society. With the dawn of the 20th century, there was an upsurge of religious and cultural sentiments throughout the colony. The stirrings of anti-colonial resistance combined with the beginnings of a renaissance in Buddhism. Keyt was swept up in this new fervor and he published a series of articles on Buddhist subjects for a publication known as the **Buddhist Annual**. Grounding himself in the teachings of the Buddha, Keyt built up a thorough understanding of its doctrines and practices. He also acquired a knowledge of Sinhala and Pali and produced translations of Buddhist texts. In 1925 Keyt produced a series of line drawings for the **Buddhist Annual**, relating episodes from the Life of the Buddha. These drawings mark the beginning of his career as an artist.

The Buddha and His First Disciples, George Keyt, **The Buddhist Annual of Ceylon** (1925) Volume II, No. 3

The Enlightenment, George Keyt, **The Buddhist Annual of Ceylon** (1925), Volume II, No. 3

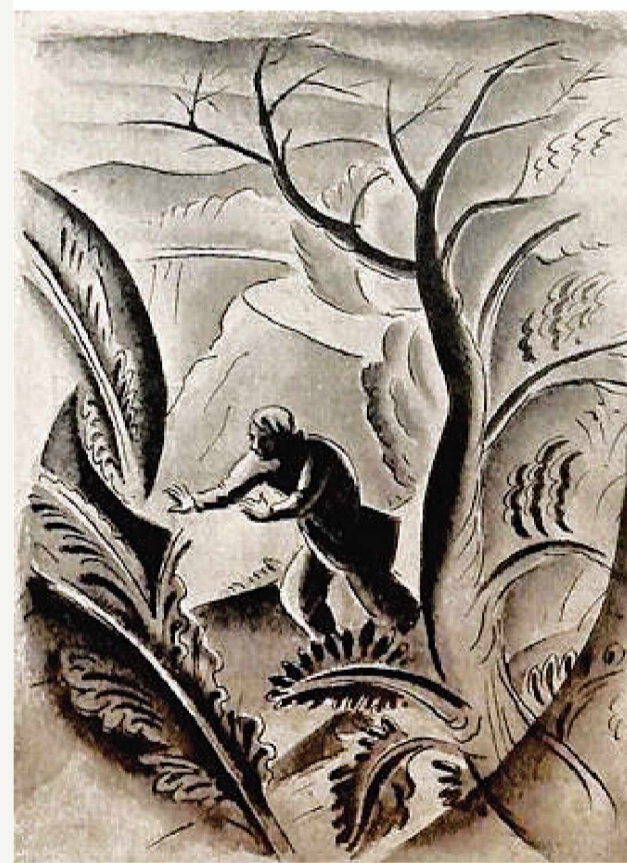
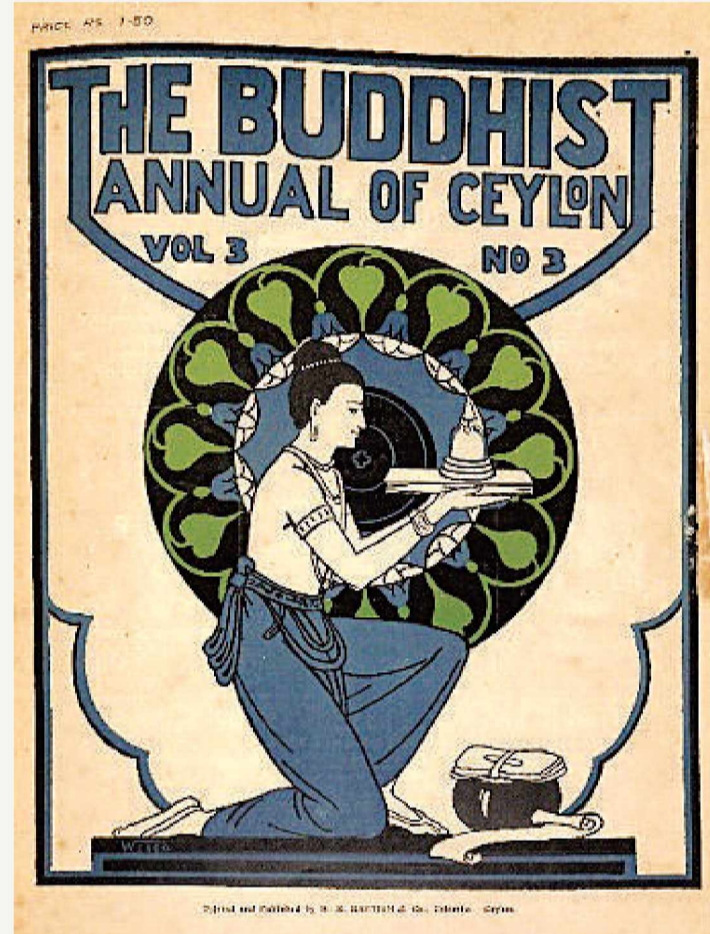
In 1938 George Keyt published his first major literary work, **Poetry from the Sinhalese**. In his youth Keyt had steeped himself in Romantic and Victorian poetry; he now imbibed the world of Sinhala verse in all its many forms. Completed when he was nearly 40, this work shows how far Keyt had moved away from his colonial inheritance. The sheer depth and variety of knowledge that it unveils suggests how much Keyt had grown and how deeply he had immersed himself in the culture of his land.

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Buddhist Monks (1932), Oil on Canvas, 60 x 88 cm. Sapumal Foundation



The Walk in the Rain, George Keyt, Ceylon Observer Annual(1936)



Ploughing (1953). George Keyt. Oil on Board. 92 x 123 cm Taprobane Collection

In 1938 Keyt published an illustrated short story, entitled *The Walk in the Rain*. The illustration depicts a figure stumbling through a stark, modernist landscape. The eye is drawn to a darkened figure in silhouette, trying to find his way through a storm of wind, rain and imagined fear. During this time he published two volumes of poetry. **The Darkness Disrobed** (1937) and **Image in Absence** (1937). These two works suggest that he stood on the threshold of a great change. His poem, **The Path**, begins with these words, "It is solid things I renounce." The last two lines end as follows, "And I travel where discernment and blind eyes fear to go, Or feel it is foolish to travel."

Abandoning his wife Ruth and his two young daughters, Keyt began a new life with his children's ayah, Lucia, in the hills and valleys of the Kandyan countryside. He found himself in the midst of a rural farming community, a world close to nature, governed by the sun and the needs of daily life. Turning his back on the life which he had lived, Keyt immersed himself in this new reality. This new environment opened his eyes to a totally different way of

looking at the world, giving him a depth and an originality which sharpened his creativity. Although Keyt himself came from a Westernized, deeply colonized background, he was able to understand and appreciate this world for what it was. As he moved further and further away from colonial convention, he was able to see more deeply.

No telephone bells rang in the Kandyan village. Oil lamps lit the evening. The smallest glimmerings of dawn began this day. The affairs of the village regulated the conversation. But this conversation was not so limited as some would suppose. The art was the great art of Kandyan dancing. The religion was the grand, humane, intellectual,

inexhaustible Buddhist faith. The history was the continuous history of 186 kings recorded by Buddhist priests in the Pali chronicles. Sinhalese poetry, almost dead in the towns, still flourished in the country.

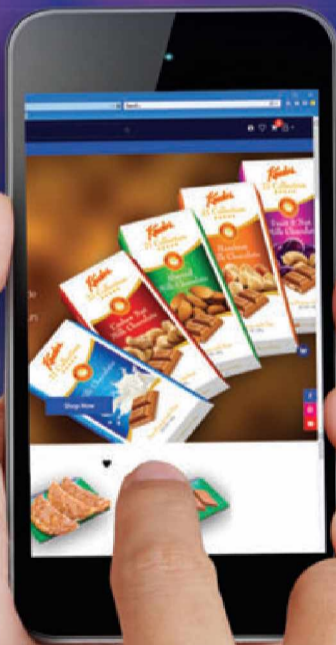
Martin Russell, **George Keyt** (Marg Publications, Bombay, 1950)

Ploughing (1953). George Keyt. Oil on Board. 92 x 123 cm Taprobane Collection

As he saw, he was able to create. In changing his world, Keyt had discovered an identity and a foundation. This gave him the confidence and the direction to evolve and explore. Keyt had not only changed his religion, he had changed his lifestyle, had left his wife and his home to adapt to a new way of living. In doing so, he set about creating his own style of painting. Breaking with colonial culture, Keyt was able to identify with a national heritage and an indigenous consciousness.

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