



SILHOUETTE

THE STORY OF KANDAWALA

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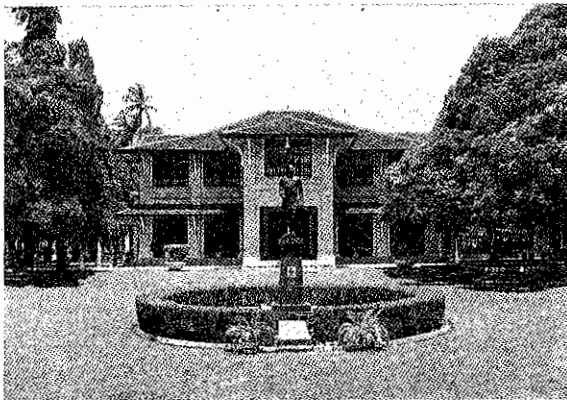
INTRODUCTION

Sir John Kotelawala – Kandawala. These names evoke a life style, a set of human values that are fast disappearing in the ferment of modernism. It is fitting therefore that the youth of today should be told about this patriotic former leader, who gave his home to the nation so that the dictum he lived by would not perish “සිය රටටමයි කඩදාස” It was not an empty boast. It was a deep seated conviction of love of country and people. Suffice it to recount one example of the spirit that moved in him.

Sir John in the last years of his life wrote a yet unpublished work, titled ‘Lets We Forget’. It is with some amusement that he recalls in this volume the machinations of a public figure very much in the forefront of ethnic politics today. To the suggestions made to live, Sir John had only one response.

“If, you had made this offer anywhere else except under this roof, I’d have beaten you to within an inch of your life. Your low standard has, strangely enough, brought you to the wrong person. How dare you all think that for all the world, for any price whatever, I’d ever dream of betraying my country? Consider yourselves lucky when I say.....!”

Much has been written about Sir John’s bluff exterior, of his rumbustous sense of mischief and scant regard for decorum, both in private and in public. Much more however has been written about his honesty and contempt for the “expedient”; when the chaff is blown away, the grain shining and pure dazzles he was a man imbued with a sense of history.



Kandawala. Sir John’s home lent itself to the making of history. Today the population of the surrounding areas of Kandawala, is many times more than it was in the first quarter of the century. What is today miles of middle class and working class housing, interspersed with factories and bordered on Galle Road with bustling shops and business centres, was then, vast coconut lands with an occasional paddy field or rubber plantation. It was a leafy green stretch of land, a refuge one might say from the toils of political battle. It was a place where its owner acquired a deep love of land, its animals, trees and human beings.

Today, we remember that noble man who bestowed his wealth to the youth of the nation. He dreamed that a band, of well educated and well trained officers would pass out from his institution to swell the ranks of others already dedicated to preserving and fighting for the nation and its culture.

Under the direction of the Board of Management, the Kotelawala Defence Academy has renovated and put back in order the house and its effects as a memorial to Sir John. During the years 1980-93 the KDA was in the process of establishing itself as a recognised seat of learning and military training. The buildings are now complete, the academy established and several batches of young officers have passed out and are now serving the country. In the context of fulfilled hopes and aspirations, the founder is honoured with a memorial such as the museum, that is in keeping with the greatness of his gift.



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This article will give you an understanding of the bungalow, its furniture and effects, the gardens, trees animals and the artifacts of Kandawala.

It is hoped that this article will also help you to understand the human being who inspired the establishment of the Defence Academy, dedicated to serve the "MOTHERLAND FOREVER"

BEGINNINGS

Kandawala did not belong to Sir Jon's ancestors. It was his own "home from home"; the one that he designed built and furnished in his own style for his own purposes.

In 1920 when yet a young man he happened to bid for a piece of land (100 acres in extent) under the hammer of an auctioneer. His rival at the bidding was a businessman called Abdul Caffour – Although the price was getting too high for him there was no stopping Sir John when his interest was aroused. And through in actual fact he had only Rs. 20,000 to his name the bidding stopped at Rs. 69,000 with him calling out the figure. The bill settled with the help of his accommodating mother, Sir John settled down to design, build and furnish.

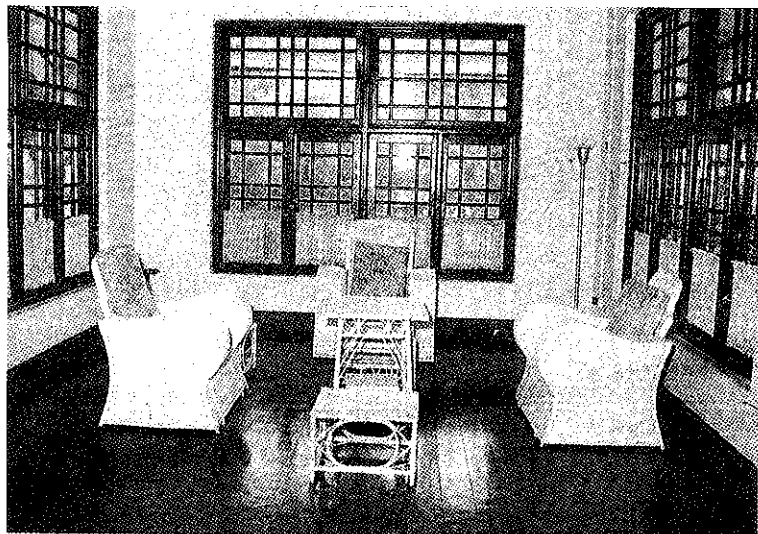
Originally there had been only a 3 roomed house in the cinnamon jungle cum coconut land he'd purchased. That house remains to this day. It was later occupied by Sir John's servants. The main house was constructed in 1926. It was in 1931 that Sir John entered politics and Kandawala proved to be a boon to the people of Ratmalana, for the Minister of Transport (Sir John) made it his business to develop and transform Ratmalana to the satellite town it is today.

During the 2nd world war Kandawala was commandeered by the Royal Air Force, and an air raid shelter was constructed. This still survives on the eastern boundary. Sir John shifted to Maharagama for the duration of the war.

THE HOUSE

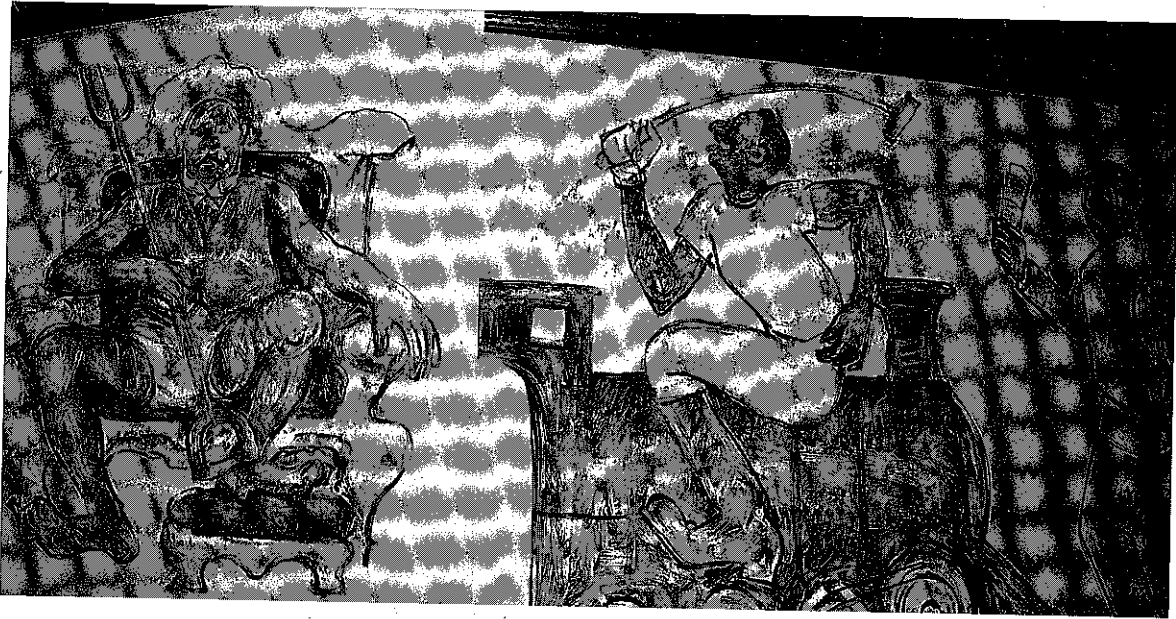
Sir John built his bungalow in 1926. It is said that a friend from France helped to design and lay-out the buildings and the garden. It is a spacious 2 storied house built in a semi- Italian style with open verandahs on both sides with glass paned windows. A sensible arrangement for the tropical rains, that can turn torrential in Ratmalana.

The ground floor comprises spacious living and dining areas, a lobby cum bar space, and the best feature, a large airy library. The point of interest in the library is a panel of around 3 in width and running the full length and breadth of the room entirely covered by cartoons) of the likenesses of the members of the State Council government of Ceylon of the pre 1948 era. These have been done by the renowned cartoonist Collette, who never ceased to amuse





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Sir John with his witticisms and grotesque yet clever drawings. This library was not only the repository of numerous photograph albums and scrap-books. It also contained a selection of books of a great variety on religion, history, archaeology, economics, biography, animals to name but a few. Many of these have been gifts from friends and associates.

A teak stairway leads up to the top floor wherein are located airy, spacious bed-rooms. The Sunday Mail of Singapore of Oct 22nd 1955 recounts "the furniture and fittings are made of ebony satin-wood and ivory. Above the staircase leading to the top floor bedrooms, the wall is lined with framed cartoons that have appeared in Ceylon newspapers lampooning Kotelawala. They are among his proud possessions". The framed pictures are no longer extant. It is possible that the Sunday Mail was misinformed about the library freize.

On the top floor are several bed-rooms, chief among them the master bed-room, with its massive teak furniture. Another point of interest is the "Burma Kamara" or Burma room so named because it used to be occupied by Sir John's friend Mr. U Tin Tut and his family during holidays spent in Sri Lanka. It is also possible, according to an old retainer, that this room was so named because of its special furniture and effects. These had been a fragrant camphor wood chest and mattresses filled with "savendara roots" giving the room a special eastern fragrance. There is also a morning room on the top floor furnished with deep comfortable chairs which perhaps was used in informal gatherings. In Sir John's last years he had got installed, at the back of top floor, a lift, to help him come down when necessary.

The house and furniture are of a by-gone era when space and solid construction were not so rare.

THE GROUNDS

Although originally Kandaweala was in extent a 100 acre degrees, it had reduced to 47 acres at the time it was gifted to the government. In 1935 the then Minister of Works Sir Macan Marker bought 15 acres at Rs. 3000 an acre for the construction of Ratmalana Airport. With the passage of time Sir John sold some land to various property developers and finally he was left with 47 acres in 1980.



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"Surrounding the house are lush, well planned gardens where pineapple and bananas grow and domestic elephants roam at will", says the Sunday Mail, Singapore in 1955. The Bangkok post on Nov 18 1955 reports 'In the grounds of Kandewala, Sir John Kotelawala, a devoted cricket fan has had a cricket pitch laid. He plays there at week-ends with members of his staff on rare nights, he is off duty he holds open air parties under the palms. Richly costumed Kandyan dancers whirl and shake in their traditional ballets". The grounds had been almost entirely frown with coconut trees, some rubber and about 15 acres of paddy. Even though he did not plant the land himself he had the great good sense to preserve the indigenous trees that give majesty and an air of beauty to the land.

The verdure is of many types. A great many varieties of fruit tree and bushes have survived the "building projects" of the last 10 years. Chief among them is a beautiful verdant wide-spreading Gal Siyambala tree in the front yard of the house. Its deep shade is such a gift! Others are numerous Mangosteen, Mango, Pini Jumbu, Beli, Rambuttan, Nelli, Ambarella and two rare star apple and velvet Apple trees.

Indigenous 'hard' woods have been grown perhaps with an eye to giving character to the garden. Among these are specimens like Teak, Hora, Ebony, Mahogany, Jak, Davata and Na. Throughout the year, the Kandawala premises bloom with flowers of a variety of colour and shades. There is no dearth of both flowering trees and flowering shrubs. Mara of two kinds 'Mai Mara' and 'Pare Mara' red and yellow of the Ehela, Na and Sal are of the truly Ceylonese indigenous varieties.

Among the flowering shrubs are Bouganvilla, Frangipani, Hibiscus, Cannas, Roses, Anthuriums and Exora. Bamboo and ferns are both of the potted varieties and widely growing by the side of the summer house and lake. Medicinal trees such as Camphor, Cinnamon and Kohomba are found in several places. Ornamental plants such as Indian willows have been grown in the front yard of the bungalow.

All of these in the words of the enthusiastic reporter of Bangkok Post, Nov 18 1955, made for Sir John, "A princely mansion".

ANIMALS

The vast parklands of Kandawala offered an idyllic home for numerous animals and birds. Sir John was very mindful of his pets, their food and shelter. It is said that every morning the owner sat down to his breakfast only after he had fed his animals first.

Sir John had been a good horseman. He had four steeds that he and his guests rode for morning exercise. His special concern had been for four elephants that had near the run of the gardens. There also had been a Kangaroo he brought back from a visit to Australia. There had been about 40 herd of buffalo, cows and bulls that provided milk and curd for Sir John's establishment. He also had about 25 herd of deer and 25 herd of elk that grazed and graced the gardens. The pond situated in the lawn at the front, had been the home of 2 pairs of white swans. They were the cynosure of his visiting dignitaries and numerous photographs have been taken of these. Peacocks, chinese geese, ducks, hens and other poultry comprised the bird population.

He also had 3 per dogs Bully, Spot and Rajah. The care given to his animals belies the dark stain on his reputation of 1956 vintage. He had never allowed the slaughter of animals on his premises.

MEMORABILIA

The monuments displayed in the Museum are chiefly those that Sir John was presented with in his official capacity. A large number of silver scrolls mounted on ebony elephants, silver trays in the shape of Sri Lanka, statues, trowels (used in stone-laying ceremonies) and various other trinkets and objects fill the glass-fronted cabinets.



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The hall stand contains several walking sticks, one of them intricately carved with Sir John's likeness on the handle. Two verses in Sinhala extolling the greatness of the Prime Minister decorate the top half of the stick.

The most valuable artifact of the museum, from a historical point of view, is the priceless Gandhara Buddha statue of around 190 B.C. This antique statue was a gift to Sir John by Mr. Mohammed Ali, former Prime Minister of Pakistan. Sir John had the highest veneration for the statue.

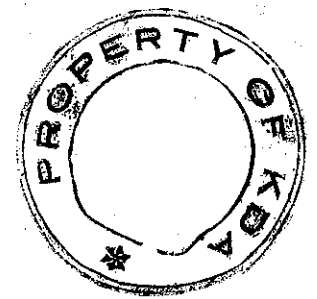
The Gandhara Buddha is a study of the "Illuminated Soul" of the Enlightened One. In the pre Gandhara School devotees venerated the symbolic representations of the Buddha in forms like the Wheel of the Dhamma. But with the spread of Mahayanism, the artists and sculptors of the time brought into spatial dimensions the form and features of the Buddha. They used the Hellenistic tradition to represent the features of the Buddha. The statue displayed here, is a representative of the Gandhara School personifying the Lord in the grace and dignity of an Olympic God. It is a sculpture in stone weighing about 10 kilograms.



As Prime Minister of Ceylon (12th October 1953-56), Sir John was honoured twice by Queen Elizabeth II. He was admitted to the order of Companion of Honour in 1954 and made Knight of the British Empire in the late forties. The ribbons of office and medals were two of Sir John's valued possessions. In 1954 on her visit to Ceylon, she and the Duke presented Sir John with a silver inkstand named Common wealth Town. Sir John as Prime Minister was a guest at the Coronation ceremony of Queen Elizabeth II in 1954. Various memorabilia of the Coronation are also on display.

The highest decoration that could be conferred by the Republic of France the Legion of Honour was bestowed on Sir John in 1954.





A list of other gifts and mementos is given below.

DESCRIPTION	PRESENTED BY
01. One Silver Wolf and Cubs - Rome	IL SINDACO DI ROMA - SALVATORS REBECCHI NI
02. Silver Cigar Box	Ichiro Haloyama, Prime Minister of Japan
03. Silver Cigar Box	Fild Marshal T. Tilutsonggurs
04. Silver Cigar Box	Acting Minister of Foreign Affairs - Thailand
05. Silver Railway Coach	Colonel Wasakan Sancha
06. One Large Key (gold)	Tokyo - Metropolis
07. Cigar Box - Silver	Ceylonese Community - Thailand
08. Silver Dagger	Chief Minister - Federal of Malaya
09. Crystal Ship	Foreign Minister of Thailand
10. Marble Taj Mahal	Hiralal Patni - India
11. Wooden Mallet	Mayor of San Fransisco

CONCLUSION

The Kotelawala family belonged to the upper social class and Sir John grew up in that life style. Sir John was, for a time, the Prime Minister of Ceylon, but he remained always a simple man with an appreciation of the fundamental things of life. In politics, his former private secretary Dr. Ananda Tissa de Alwis, recalled that "he was the most honest man ever on the Sri Lankan scene". The various newspapers of the time, both local and foreign, tried to portray Sir John as having lived among lavish accoutrements. But his home at Kandawala was not a luxurious mansion. He did not care for the grandeur of carpets and wall hangings, primarily because they are not suitable in a tropical environment. He ran what actually could be described as a bachelor establishment devoid of frills and ostentation. The only feature he had insisted upon during the designing and construction of the house was that the doors and windows should open out on all prospects of the surrounding trees and parkland-that from whatever point of the house one looked out, one's eyes should rest upon the garden. His spirit sought the outdoor- and perhaps for this reason Kandawala was always his home.