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N.U. Jayawardena – The First Five Decades

1st Edition

N.U. Jayawardena Charitable Trust

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Frontispiece: N.U. in deep thought on the Galle Ramparts

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UNCHANGING HAMBANTOTA

I came from a humble family and did not have any privileges of class or caste. I only had a great longing to study, and believed, even as a child, that education would open up vistas of greatness for me. As I grew older I had no desire to stagnate in a village that had few opportunities for the young to realize their dreams. Each of us when we are young, whatever our social and economic status, have visions of achieving greatness and leaving behind a mark for posterity.

(N.U. Jayawardena, interview with Manel Abhayaratne)

The Family

Ubesinghe Jayawardena Nonis, later Neville Ubesinghe (NU) Jayawardena (1908-2002), was born on 25 February 1908 in Hambantota. His father, Ubesinghe Jayawardena Diyonis was born in Tangalle, in the Hambantota district, in 1879, and his mother, Gajawirage Podinona (known as 'Nona Akka'), born in 1887, was from Devundara (Dondra) in the neighbouring Matara district. They were both Buddhists of the *Durava* caste. Of their eleven children, a daughter died in infancy and two sons died from illness in childhood – a not uncommon feature at that time. NU's parents already had two daughters, Charlotte and Rosalind, when the eldest son NU was born. In a society where a male child was much desired, NU's birth was welcomed and celebrated. As was customary, his horoscope was cast. His maternal grandfather carefully read it, and gave it to NU's father with the request that he should not show it to anyone. When asked whether there was bad news in it, the grandfather had assured his son-in-law that there was no such thing, but that he should keep it carefully for reference at some future date (de Zoysa manuscript, p.37).

As the eldest son, NU held a privileged position, and much care and attention were lavished on him by parents, grandparents and





NU'S SOCIAL MILIEU

I am proud of my humble beginnings. My earliest memories are of my parents, humble people. My father was in charge of the resthouse at Hambantota and held the conferred rank of arachchi, and later he farmed a rather large but unproductive extent of paddy land.

(N.U. Jayawardena, interview with Roshan Pieris, 1987)

Religious Background

NU's parents, born in the 19th century, were essentially people of the South who had never travelled beyond the Hambantota and Matara districts, until their old age when they moved to Colombo. They were devout Buddhists who had lived through the Buddhist Revival Movement in Sri Lanka, which occurred from the middle of the 19th century onwards. The South also had a regional consciousness as being the "Gods' own country" (*deviyange rata*), since Kataragama, the pilgrimage site of Buddhists and Hindus, was in the region.

There was also a historic memory of former greatness in the South of Sri Lanka. The people of the Matara and Hambantota districts were steeped in the early history of the Ruhuna region, when Tissamaharama was a powerful kingdom associated especially with King Dutugemunu (c.100 BC), his father King Kavantissa and mother Vihara Maha Devi. The region abounds in important historic and religious sites, in places such as Mulkirigala, Tissamaharama, Kirinde, Sithulpawwa and Kataragama. In Devundara (Dondra) was the ancient Vishnu *devale*, revered by both Hindus and Buddhists – with its rituals and annual *perahera* (procession).

An important challenge to the colonial establishment had come from the Buddhists, who opposed Christianity as being the religion of the foreign rulers and challenged Christian missionaries, who dominated education. The Buddhist Revival Movement of the 19th

16. Hambantota coastline with boats

EMANCIPATION THROUGH EDUCATION



27. School drill

I remember my first day in school when I was five years old... There were about 30 students. Our classroom was a long, single room with a low wall from where we could see the playground, and the paddy fields further away.

(NU, interview with Carol Aloysius, 2000)

The Colonial School System

In Sri Lanka there had been a virtual revolution in education in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, reflected in the rise of literacy and educational levels. Primary schools expanded in urban and rural areas, and literacy rates increased rapidly. In leading towns, well-staffed and equipped high schools in the English medium (some with boarding facilities), drew in boys and girls from all parts of the island. Parents from rural areas or small towns would try to somehow raise the necessary funds to send their children to schools in provincial capitals (and if possible, to Colombo) for their secondary studies, in order to broaden their horizons and prospects. While those living in villages were often caste-conscious, the schools in the towns had a universalism, which discouraged parochial feeling. Students sent to urban centres for their studies became more aware of social and political issues affecting Sri Lanka and the rest of the world. NU was part of this process. His family, in the quest for upliftment through education, chose to move him from a small school in Hambantota (St. Mary's), where he had his primary education, to a secondary school in the larger town of Matara (St. Servatius'), and then to a prestigious school (St. Aloysius') in the provincial capital of Galle – all of which were run by Jesuits.

The country had a network of non-fee-levying government schools teaching in Sinhala and Tamil, and one – Royal College – teaching in English. There were also English-medium non-gov-

GALLE AND ST. ALOYSIUS' COLLEGE

So my life from rags to riches, from elementary education to self-acquired knowledge, from shattering adversity to rewarding accomplishment, is an epitome of the determination, the tenacity, the purposefulness, and, above all, the cultural values, inculcated in me, as a Buddhist, by the teaching and the example of the Christian Fathers and Teachers who moulded my up-bringing in the impressionable age of my youth. I then learnt never to take no for an answer!

(N.U. Jayawardena, *The Aloysian 1915-1990*
Diamond Souvenir, p.256)

The picturesque town of Galle, with its sea front, harbour, Dutch ramparts and walled city in the Fort, figured prominently in NU's life in the early 1920s. During Portuguese and Dutch occupation, Galle had been the main port of the island, since it possessed an excellent natural harbour, with trade and commerce with Europe and Asia conducted from there. In the 19th century, Galle continued to be a busy entrepôt and commercial hub, and was the main port of Sri Lanka up to the 1880s. Compared to Tangalle, Hambantota and Matara, Galle was a bustling town, with a variety of ethnic and religious communities – Sinhalese, Tamil, Muslim, South Indian Chettiar, European, and Burghers of Portuguese and Dutch descent – with their temples, kovils, mosques and churches. Galle had several large girls' and boys' schools run by Christian missions or by the Buddhist Theosophical Society.

There were government and mercantile offices, banks, hotels, cinemas, and shops. Among the important foreign mercantile establishments in Galle were: E. Coates & Co., Charles P. Hayley & Co., Volkart Bros., and the engineering firm of Walkers. Main Street had several large shops – The Galle Stores, National Stores, Modern Drapery Stores, Abdul Rahims, and Lakmini Jewellers, among oth-



Left : 41. Galle Ramparts
Top : 42. Fruit Vendors

THE LURE OF GOVERNMENT SERVICE

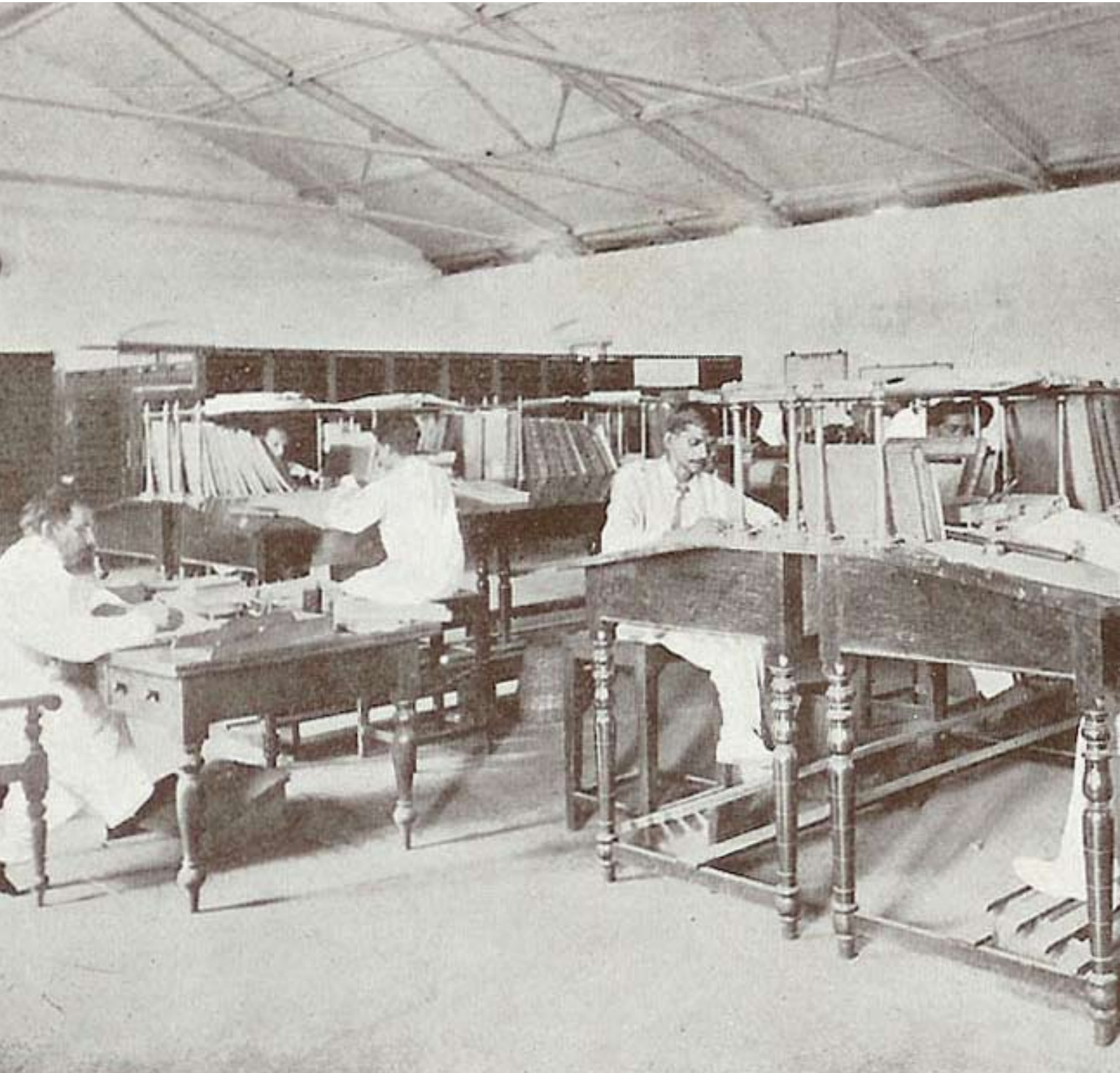
In the nineteen twenties great importance was given to success in the Class 2 (of the Clerical Service) Examination. Parents considered it a fitting occasion for great rejoicing and celebration...

(A.E.H. Sanderatne, 1975, p.6)

Underdevelopment and the Ruhuna Diaspora

In the Southern Province, comprising the districts of Hambantota, Galle and Matara, where NU grew up and had his education, the economic opportunities and prospects for social advancement for educated youth were limited. Many young people, such as NU, were obliged to leave their natal villages for employment outside; and the list of distinguished Sri Lankans who were originally from modest origins in Southern villages is impressive. They were usually the sons of cultivators or minor government employees. Contributing to this situation was the prevailing character of the economy, which provides the background for understanding the path of NU's career and his flight from the South.

A glance at the economy will reveal the nature of the problem. In the Hambantota district, which was thinly populated and resource-poor, the economy continued to remain undeveloped, and incapable of meeting employment and income needs. Several factors, which account for the undeveloped state of the economy of the Southern Province, were researched and reported on in the late 1930s and early 1940s by B.B. Das Gupta, Professor of Economics of the University of Ceylon. The report revealed low productivity, chronically so in paddy, where the smallness of holdings discouraged improvements. Family incomes included the earnings of large numbers of women who found employment in spinning coir, or making rope, but their earnings were described as a 'dole' rather than an income. In many cases, productive assets were held by absentee interests who



Left: 60. Government clerks at work

EARLY EMPLOYMENT AND THE MOVE TO COLOMBO

The 1920s in Sri Lanka was a period of excitement and change. Politically there was significant movement after many decades of stagnation... [S]ocially... there were breaches in traditional hierarchies and practices. Some... who in earlier times had little say in society for class and caste reasons, achieved high status positions... and middle-class women shocked the orthodox.

(de Alwis & Jayawardena, 2001, pp.1 & 5)

An Uncertain Future

After leaving St. Aloysius', NU seemed to be uncertain about his future, and initially applied for a job as a teacher:

When I was 16, in 1924, I did not know what to do and I thought the best thing would be to teach. My father had come at this time to Tangalle, which is our ancestral home. I stayed with my parents after leaving school and I decided to apply for a teaching post at the same school [St. Mary's] in which I had my education. (interview by Manel Abhayaratne)

NU's application was accepted and he was hired. However, since NU was underage, he could not be registered and his salary was paid out of the principal's own pocket. NU stayed with his uncle who was working in the Hambantota Kachcheri. NU still did not give up his desire to study:

I wanted to pursue my studies but I wanted to do it by studying by myself. There was a series of books advertised by a London tutorial college and I decided to get them down and study to further my qualifications. (ibid)

According to NU, his father was anxious that he join the public service and follow in the footsteps of his uncle (who was later ap-



MARRIAGE TO GERTRUDE WICKRAMASINGHE

Gertrude's brother-in-law and sister strongly opposed the marriage because I was only a clerk. But she was determined and said she would only marry me or remain a spinster.

(N.U. Jayawardena, interview by Roshan Pieris, 1987)

Meeting at the Resthouse

While waiting in Tangalle for his letter of appointment to the clerical service, NU was introduced by an uncle to an important member of the *Durava* clan who had achieved government recognition – Gate Mudaliyar Norman Wickramasinghe of Gorakana, Moratuwa. He and his wife Caroline and daughter Gertrude Mildred (known as Gertie) planned to stop at the Tangalle Resthouse on their way to Kataragama. The main reason for this visit was to see if NU would be a suitable husband for Gertrude. Marriages during this period were arranged by relatives and elders and did not deviate in terms of caste. Norman and Caroline Wickramasinghe had, no doubt, been on the lookout for bachelors who were bright and with good prospects for advancement.

It was not unusual for young women with some wealth and status to marry educated men of the same caste – even if of humbler social origins – as long as they had good prospects. Sometimes a prospective father-in-law would even finance the education of an intelligent young man, of his own caste, who would later become his son-in-law. One famous case of a ‘dowry scholarship,’ as it was popularly known, was that of James Peiris, a leading political figure of the 1920s. His education at Cambridge was paid for by Jacob de Mel, one of the wealthiest landowners and liquor renters of the time, whose daughter Grace married Peiris.

Caste-consciousness was widely prevalent and did not disappear with capitalist development and modernist trends. While the caste



Left: 77. Wedding photo of NU and Gertrude

EARLY CAREER AND LONDON DEGREE

I cannot say why I specialized in Banking and Currency – I think it was a hunch and perhaps literature was more readily available in Ceylon.¹

(N.U. Jayawardena reminiscing in the 1950s on why he selected this subject for his B.Sc. (Econ.) degree in 1931)

Studying for the B.Sc. (Econ.)

The 1930s were transitional years in NU's career, when he added to his academic knowledge of economics in its practical and operational aspects. During this period, his abilities were recognized by persons of standing under whom he worked. This helped greatly in his development. What is more, his marriage gave him a certain degree of financial security and a congenial environment in which, while employed, to pursue his studies. NU in later years, often spoke with deep gratitude of the support and encouragement that his wife Gertrude gave him in his studies.

NU, even after entering the Clerical Service, did not relinquish hopes of studying for a degree. The circumstances in which he realized them were in part accidental. Shortly after he passed the London Matriculation in the First Division, he received a letter from Wolsey Hall, the well-known Correspondence College in Britain, enclosing a prospectus of study for degrees including the B.Sc. Economics. It also suggested that a knowledge of economics was greatly advantageous for public servants, especially those in colonial countries. Spurred on by this letter, NU registered for the course while working as a clerk. According to NU, if not for the Wolsey Hall letter, he never would have thought of studying economics. He had always wanted to be a doctor or lawyer but could only aspire to the clerical service. The letter from Wolsey Hall placed him on a path that would take him to heights far beyond what he then could have imagined.



Left: 86. NU in graduation gown

1. From an undated document (c.1950) in N.U. Jayawardena Personal Files. NU seemed to have an instinct for perceiving things that would become important in the economic and commercial development of Sri Lanka, as persons who watched his career over the years would observe. This would be only the first of such "hunches."

THE BANKING COMMISSION

Such financial teeth as I possess were cut with the Commission that was appointed to examine the banking system of this country – the Pochkhanawala Commission – of which I was Assistant Secretary.

(N.U. Jayawardena, Senate Debate, 3 Oct. 1961, Hansard, p.832)

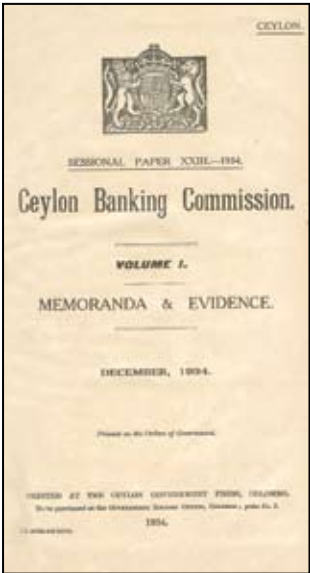
NU, aged 26, published his first important article on the Sri Lankan economy, in the *Ceylon Observer Centenary Issue* of 4 February 1934 – two months before he was to begin work at the Banking Commission. It was a sweeping 100-year survey of the economy between 1834 and 1934, written in his clear style. As he stated:

One of the arresting features of the economic history of Ceylon during the last hundred years is the phenomenal growth of her trade. Between 1834 and 1926, when the peak was reached, the value of trade increased nearly two hundred fold. In the same period there also occurred a complete change in its character and distribution. From a few staple articles, the schedule of imports and exports has expanded into a numerous list, which, particularly in regard to imports, is continually increasing.

The article not only described imports and exports over the period and issues concerning the balance of trade, but also the fluctuations in the economy, and cyclical recessions, including the collapse of the coffee industry in the late 1870s. NU wrote about the five-year recession (1880-85) caused by the coffee crisis, the “annihilation of capital values,” and the collapse of the Oriental Banking Corporation in 1884, one of the country’s early ventures in banking. The period 1900 to 1913 he styled the “Good Years,” a unique period of “universal progress and real prosperity”; and he claimed that there was “no comparable period in the history of Ceylon trade,” in tea,



92. NU at his desk



93. Cover of the 1934 Banking Commission Report

NU AT THE LSE

[The London School of Economics] seems to prefer intense, committed, often workaholic scholars and public figures.

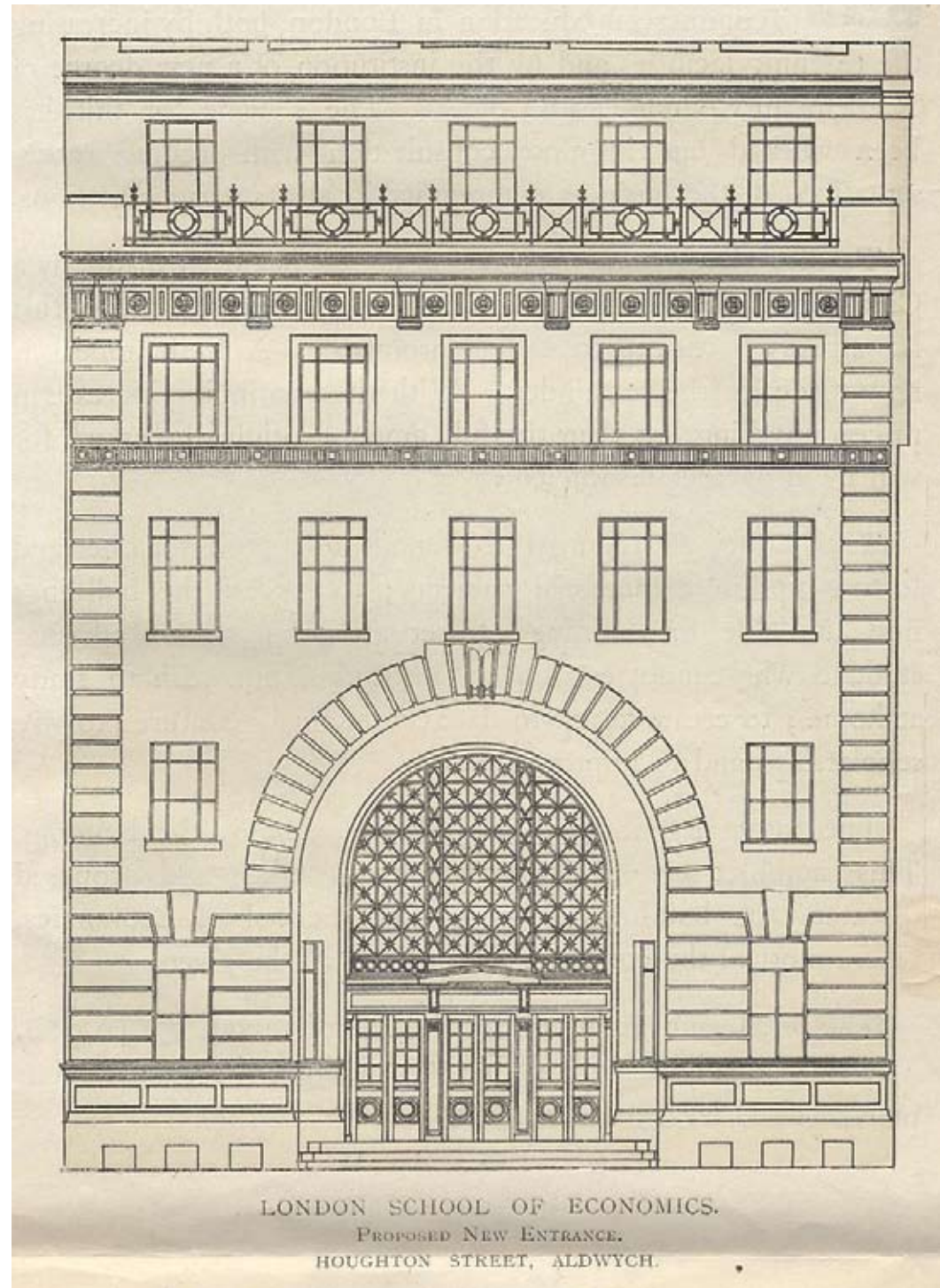
(Dahrendorf, 1995, *History of the LSE*, p.191)

NU in London

NU's next big break came in 1938, when aged 30, he received a scholarship and leave to pursue postgraduate studies at the London School of Economics (LSE) as an internal student. The government was in the early stages of setting up a new Commerce and Industry Department, and NU's superiors had selected him to undertake the special one-year course of training in Business Administration offered by the LSE, to make NU's services "more useful to the department." He was expected to: "make a closer acquaintance with modern business methods and to acquire training in practical commerce" (N.U. Jayawardena Personal Files).

In his admissions application, NU stated that he was interested in acquiring "a close acquaintance with the foreign marketing of primary agricultural products"; and that the Sri Lankan government would make arrangements with the recently established Colonial Empire Marketing Board to enable NU to familiarize himself with their marketing surveys. His special interest was the marketing of "oil seeds," since Sri Lanka was the leading exporter of copra and coconut oil (letter to Prof. Arnold Plant, 18 Jan. 1938).

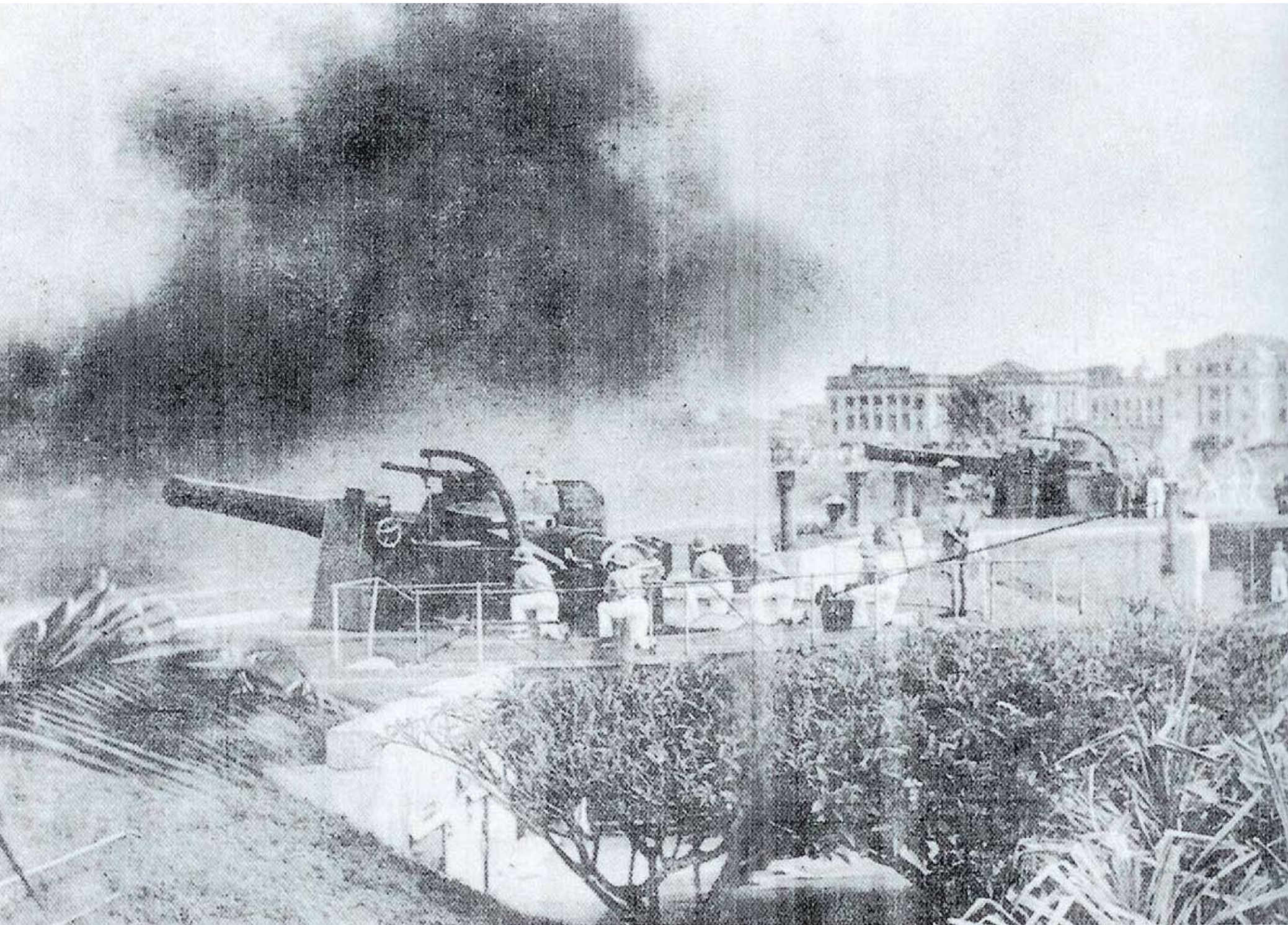
LSE records indicate that NU received a scholarship of £300 for the year as well as half-pay as an allowance. The cost of the course was £30. Whereas his leave was for one year, NU provisionally sought permission to extend his studies for a further year. With his sights set high – as they always were – he had ideas of completing a Ph.D. in two years if the LSE allowed it. For NU, this would not have seemed an unusual goal. However, there were strict rules and he was



Left: 102. Drawing of the Houghton Street entrance of the LSE – the building was completed in 1922 and is now known as the "Main" or "Old Building"



103. A classroom at the LSE



CHAPTER 11

WARTIME IN SRI LANKA

The wheels of the vehicles of war with which Nazism [was] halted came from the latex of rubber trees collected on thousands of rubber estates in Ceylon. The millions of cups of tea that cheered troops on freezing battlements [came from] our plantations... When we talk of aid to developing countries... let us... remember that small countries like Ceylon helped Britain, the United States... and Russia when they were most in need of aid.

(Oliver Goonetilleke, as quoted in Jeffries, 1969, p.63)

NU and State-run Industries

A more confident NU returned to Sri Lanka in December 1939. Already the only qualified economist in government service, he now had expertise in the new field of business administration, along with an enhanced worldview from his year abroad. His value as an officer in the government had vastly increased, and his career would soon reach a new launching point – in 1942 – when Sri Lanka was beginning to mobilize for war. Wartime called for the marshalling of clear thinkers and effective administrators, persons with good judgment, unafraid to take quick decisions amid crisis conditions. NU had all these qualities in full measure. His discipline and organizing capacity equipped him to deal with the challenges presented by wartime emergencies. During this period, NU would be called upon to fill several posts linked to wartime contingencies.

Upon his return from London, NU resumed his position as Commercial Assistant in the Department of Commerce and Industries, and continued in this post for another three years with greater responsibilities. The government had sent NU to London for training in business administration primarily because it wanted to give “a lead to private enterprise by starting certain *state-aided concerns on*

**THE POST-WAR PERIOD AND
INDEPENDENCE**

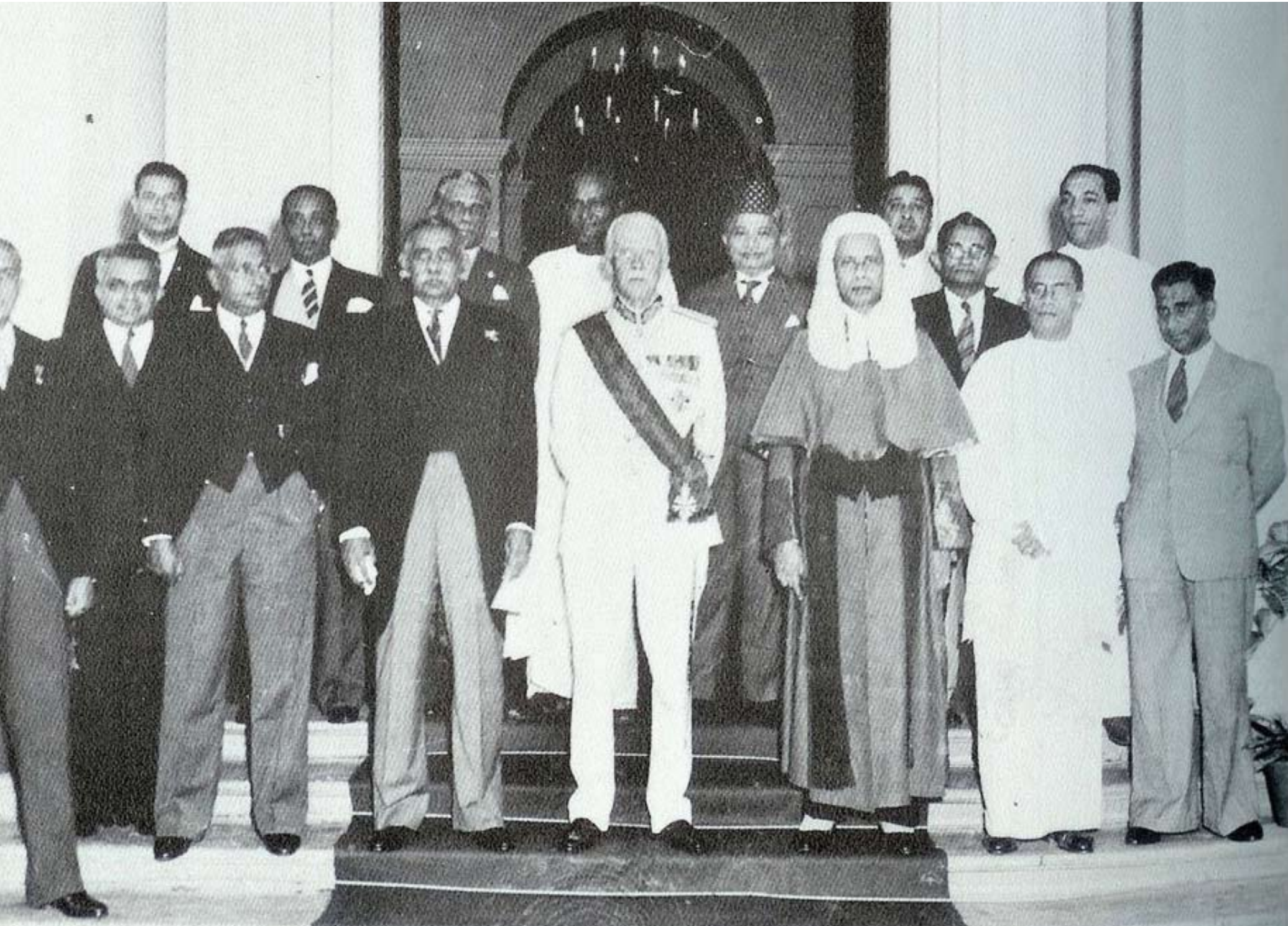
In regard to finance, my government intends to seek expert advice with regard to changes in our financial structure which may be necessitated by the transition from a colonial to a free, national economy.

(Throne Speech, Sir Henry Monck-Mason Moore, Governor, 25 Nov. 1947)

The post-war period presented the country with a series of further economic hardships and challenges. The burdens of inflation, shortages of food and other imported items, as well as rationing and a series of controls, increased in the war's aftermath. The State continued to play an interventionist role in the market, stepping up its regulatory controls, due to the continuing shortages of essential goods and the scarcity of exchange with which to buy these goods. Stanley Wickramaratne has aptly described, the "plethora of controls" regulating the supply of goods and services, and in general the free mobility of its citizens during and after the Second World War, which:

... were departmentalized by the State and named Food Control, Textile Control, Rubber Control, Tea Control, Milk Food Control, Petrol Control, Poonac Control, Price Control and Import-Export and Exchange Control... [After] Independence these control mechanisms gradually ceased to function except the last two mentioned. (Wickramaratne, 2002)

Sri Lanka was adversely impacted by factors associated with the worldwide economic and physical destruction caused by the war and had to hold its own in a world reeling from economic breakdown. Competing for access to markets and limited resources from a weak position, Sri Lanka had few options and was held hostage to the vagaries of the international market. As a small nation with an un-diversified economy, it relied heavily on the export of a few agricul-



THE CENTRAL BANK



Left: 142. N.U. Jayawardena, first Sri Lankan Governor of the Central Bank

In studying Ceylon's economic and financial problems, I have drawn heavily upon Mr. N.U. Jayawardena's unrivalled understanding of the operations of the Ceylon economy.

(John Exter, 1949, *The Exter Report*, p.56)

NU's Rise to the Top

The peak of NU's career in the public service – and what he considered the most gratifying period in his professional life – was his rise to become Deputy Governor, and then Governor, of the newly created Central Bank of Ceylon. While his period in the bank lasted four years, his term as Governor, which was cut short, lasted just sixteen months. However, his legacy is such that the creation of the Central Bank is inextricably linked with his name, as NU had been closely associated with the Bank even in its embryonic stages and had set up exchange control operations, which became the largest department of the Central Bank during its early years. The experience accumulated during his period in government service, along with his economic and business administration training, made him one of the few government officials who grasped the theoretical dimensions of the role of a central bank. As Controller of Exchange he also had experience in some of the functions of central banking.

Many countries of Asia and Africa in the post-colonial phase regarded the creation of a central bank as both an economic necessity and a symbol of political prestige, marking the shift from colonial rule to national independence. The well-known writer on central banking, R.S. Sayers, of the London School of Economics, notes that: "Colonies which have become politically independent have regarded a central bank as an *outward and visible sign of independence, and the lack of one as signifying continued subjection,*" adding that this has been "an important aspect in Ceylon and Burma, where central

POWER POLITICS

Politics in Sri Lanka are not merely the politics of democracy, they are also the politics of family.

(de Silva & Wriggins, 1994, p.3, writing about the 1950s)

Politics and Kinship

NU, who was an outsider in caste and class terms, had succeeded in reaching one of the highest positions in the country during a turbulent chapter of Sri Lankan politics. However, he would become unwittingly embroiled in the internecine rivalries within the United National Party (UNP) and face a crisis which would completely alter the course of his life. The central focus of his life was his work, and he remained somewhat oblivious to the pitfalls of political infighting. His fate, however, was to be linked to a chain of political events that took place in the 1950s, beginning with the death of Sri Lanka's first Prime Minister, D.S. Senanayake, and eventually culminating in the overwhelming defeat of the UNP and the landslide victory of the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP) coalition headed by S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike in 1956.

The UNP had dominated the political scene from 1947, when they won 42 seats in the first General Election of independent Sri Lanka. The key personalities of the UNP at that time were D.S. Senanayake, his son Dudley, R.G. Senanayake, J.R. Jayewardene, John (Lionel) Kotelawala, Oliver Goonetilleke, and S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike. The latter left the UNP and crossed over to the Opposition in order to build up a political base in 1951, when it became apparent to him that D.S. Senanayake was grooming his family member John Kotelawala as his successor.¹ In this early phase of post-independence party politics, the leadership of the UNP devolved largely around kinship, so much so that it was jokingly referred to as the "Uncle-Nephew Party."²



Left: 157. D.S. Senanayake, in Privy Councillor's attire

1. According to Wriggins: "it was generally understood that Mr. Bandaranaike, as leader of the second largest component of the U.N.P., would succeed D.S. Senanayake who was expected to step down from the party leadership... But Mr. Senanayake did not step down. It became clear as time went on that Mr. Senanayake was not sure that his post should be reserved for Mr. Bandaranaike. On the contrary, it became evident that he was grooming his nephew Major John Kotelawala, for the post instead. These maneuvers were explicable as part of a long-standing family competition between the Senanayake and Bandaranaike family clans." (Wriggins, 1960, p.110)

2. According to Wriggins, "a wag has said it was neither 'united' nor 'national' nor a 'party', but rather a precarious association of Sinhalese relations" (Wriggins, 1960, p.106).

THE PHOENIX RISES



Left: 164. NU (c. 1956)

I am like that elastic piece of rubber which bounces up highest when it is pressed and trampled most.

(NU's letter to his father-in-law Norman Wickramasinghe, Dec. 1931)

Finding Solace in Religion and Community

Earlier, when NU's workload was so enormous, he found little time for religion. However, during the difficult time associated with the Commission of Inquiry, this changed. As Neiliya relates:

At this time, he became seriously involved with religion and a great supporter of the Lunava Temple. This gave him great strength and courage in his work no matter what crisis he faced.

This temple was located on the outskirts of Colombo in Lunava, where NU had lived until the mid-1930s. Its chief monk was Thero Galkisse Sri Visuddhananda of the *Amarapura Nikaya*. The temple had a *devale* devoted to the deities, Kataragama and Suniyam. NU took part in the *pujas* and rituals of the temple, humbling himself as required by sweeping the temple grounds. He also visited the Rector of St. Aloysius', Father Morelli, who boosted his morale and restored his confidence (N.U. Jayawardena, 1990, "Down Memory Lane"). It is interesting to note that, according to S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike's biographer, James Manor (1989, p.307-8), SWRD and his wife Sirimavo, too, frequented this temple in times of crisis during SWRD's premiership.

Although NU had been the only one of the *Durava* caste to reach the top of the administrative hierarchy at the time (de Silva & Wriggins, 1988, p.286), caste did not play a part in his way of thinking; but throughout his life, it was to him whom relatives and clan members turned for help. Now, when in his hour of crisis they rallied