

The 100th anniversary of Gottfried Keller's death : the poet of sadness and joy

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The Poet of Sadness and Joy

It seems like a whimsical prank of the calendar when two separate happenings of national significance are shown as practically concurrent. That is the case now, with the 700th anniversary celebration in 1991 of the Confederation and the declaration of 1990 as "Gottfried Keller Year".

Es blitzt ein Tropfen Morgentau
Im Strahl des Sonnenlichts;
Ein Tag kann eine Perle sein
Und ein Jahrhundert nichts.
Gottfried Keller

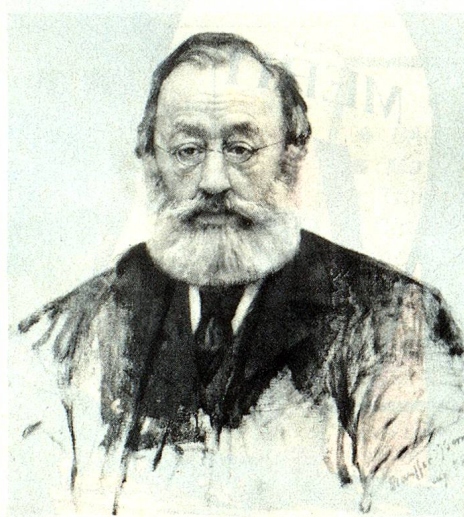
In the public speeches that one hears on festive occasions, some lines are often quoted from a poem (not one of Keller's, but by his contemporary, Jeremias Gotthelf) which can be translated roughly as: "That light must be lit at home, that is to shine upon our Fatherland". But Keller's poems, novellas, his novels "Der grüne Heinrich" and "Martin Salander", his articles and essays, and last but by no means least, his letters, show how Switzerland, her history and her institutions, the often lovable (but sometimes less attractive) characteristics of her citizens that provide the "raison d'être" of his writings bear witness to his devotion and dedication to his native land. But at the same time, devotion in years of mourning and sadness, when towards the end of the century, economic depression, a crumbling of our feelings of social responsibility, and a crisis of morality affecting the whole nation, put a brake on the upswing of the still young State. His book "Martin Salander" provides a bitter reckoning with the events of those times. We like to see – and praise – Keller as the jovial and optimistic singer of stirring public-spirited ballads, as the composer and author of patriotic festival songs and stories, but tend to overlook the fact that his own fate equipped him with sensitive antennae for observing also the less admirable developments in the social and political sectors.

His escape?

He was the son of a father whom he later depicted in "Der grüne Heinrich" as a hard-working and ambitious master craftsman, eager to further his education and a strong believer in economic efficiency and stability. Coming from such a background Gottfried Keller seemed destined to find a niche in a time-honoured and conscientious bourgeoisie. But his father died when Keller was five years old.

His mother marries again, and although the second marriage does not last long, it too

has an important influence on her son, as indeed his father's death had already done. As a logical outcome of these happenings, Keller is at the age of 14 expelled from the Industrial School of the Canton of Zurich because of "continual refractoriness". Nor is it surprising that a year later, he abandons the idea of learning a "solid trade" and decides to break out in the opposite direction, with the ambition of becoming an artist. He begins in the studios of several active Zurich



Karl Stauffer-Bern (1857–1891). Gottfried Keller, 1866, oil painting. Art Museum, Zurich. (Photo: Zurich Central Library)

painters, and continues in Munich in 1840, until two years later his studies come to culminate in "external and internal misery". This somewhat unusual prelude to the career of a poet has to be mentioned from time to time to complete the picture – as now for instance in the lovely monograph by Bruno Weber with the title "Gottfried Keller, landscape painter" and the biographical volume by Hans Wysling "Gottfried Keller, 1819 – 1890" (both published in Zurich in 1990).

The return

In 1842, Keller comes back from Munich to Zurich. Three years later, he says in a letter to one of his friends: "... you ought to know that I am an utterly radical poet, and share my joys and sorrows, as well as my time, with my party...." These years are marked

by the tensions and conflicts between the advocates of more liberal rights and greater freedom for the population, and of more democratic structures, on the one hand, and on the other, the defenders of an authoritarian, conservative federal state closely linked to the churches. Some aspects of the long series of conflicts include the closure of the monasteries and convents in the Canton of Argovia in 1841, the virtual banishing of the Jesuits to Lucerne in 1846, the exploits of the "irregular" troops waging their violent campaigns in 1844 and 1845 ("Freischarenzüge") and the decisive "Sonderbund War" after which it was at last possible to establish the Confederation in 1848. The "Sonderbund" was the alliance between seven conservative and mainly Catholic cantons, directed against the other, mostly pro-democratic non-Catholic cantons. The "Sonderbund" troops were finally defeated in 1847, leaving the way clear for the formation of the new constitutional structure of the Confederation. Throughout the conflicts, Keller stands on the side of reform and innovation – or rather, he does not only stand: he plays an active part in the struggle itself, using the weapon of prose and poetry that – somewhat to his own surprise – he understands so well, for writing his pamphlets and verses.

A chance to study at last

After the establishment of the new State he says in a letter that his "latest young lyric poetry sits shivering on the cold heath". But his party friends – now holding public offices and with much responsibility – show their gratitude by enabling him, with the aid of State scholarships, to "catch up" on the subjects that he was not allowed to study at school. His sojourns in Heidelberg and Berlin bring him into contact with artists and savants, one of whom is for instance the philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach, author of the book "Vom Wesen des Christentums" (1841) who becomes for Keller a father figure and mentor, who helps him to ascertain and confirm his own relationship to the Church and to his faith. But once again, he encounters the problems and troubles of an unsecured existence and is in danger of experiencing a complete artistic and financial disaster. He finishes "Der grüne Heinrich" – written mainly in Berlin – with the words: "In tears, and on the basis of my own experiences and feelings". But with four volumes and the first part of his collection of novellas "Die Leute von Seldwyla" he at last achieves celebrity and literary fame in Switzerland, and farther afield too. The time has come for him to return to Zurich.



A political job!

After a few years devoted to social and professional consolidation he establishes friendships with professors at the "Polytechnikum" (now the ETH, or advanced college of technology). They try to persuade him to join the staff as a lecturer, but he does not accept such offers. And in 1861, he is appointed to be the First State Registrar for the Canton of Zurich (in German his title is "Staatsschreiber"), and he holds that post until 1876. He is elected to the Great Council of the Canton, and remains a member until 1866. The post brings him a welcome salary, but leaves him little leisure time for literary work. Even so, during the years that he spends in the service of the Canton he is able to see "Sieben Legenden" ("Seven Legends") published in 1872, followed in 1873 and 1874 by the first three volumes of stories about "Die Leute von Seldwyla" (later increased to four).

After leaving his post of State official, he publishes "Zürcher Novellen" in 1877, "Das Sinngedicht" in 1881 and "Salander" in 1886. He works in 1879/80 on a revision of "Der grüne Heinrich", of which he produces a second text, and on the compilation of his

collected poems ("Gesammelte Gedichte"). In 1889, a ten-volume collected edition of all his writings is published.

Honours

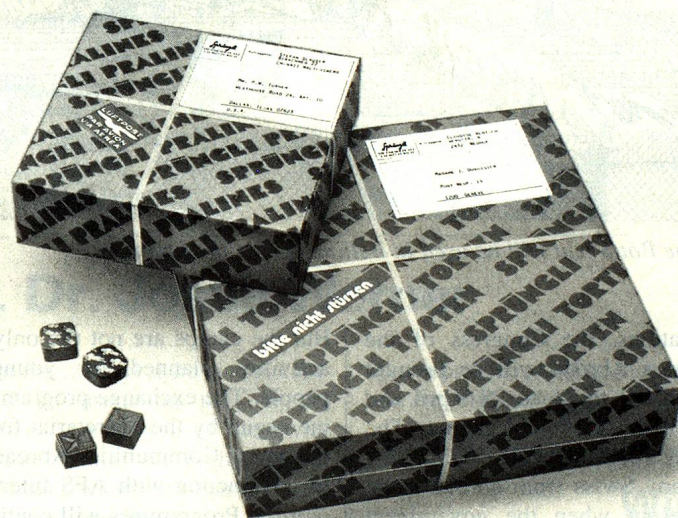
There is no lack of expressions of public appreciation. He becomes a *doctor honoris causa* of Zurich University. The City awards him the right of citizenship "with special thanks for the zestful stories in the 'Zurich Novellas' and the Federal Council congratulates him on his 70th birthday, while the publisher of the complete works pays him more than 30 000 marks as a fee. All these distinctions bear witness to the applause and admiration that are his due.

Solitude

Do these tributes give Keller grounds for satisfaction and gratification? The last years of his life are characterised by that spirit of resignation about which he once said – in another context – that "It isn't a very nice neighbourhood". It may have something to do with the loneliness that he could never completely banish, regardless of all the enjoyment that he displayed at convivial gatherings and festivities. Perhaps there is

some connection with Keller's diminutive stature. His head and sturdy torso were supported by a comparatively slight "undercarriage" as somebody described him when he was about 50 years of age. He calls himself a "midget" (although the height of 162 cm, equivalent to 5 feet 3 inches shown in his passport does not imply that he was a particularly short person). His small stature was perhaps an obstacle to his approaches to the rather plump ladies with whom he fell in love. At all events, he remained a bachelor all his life. And Keller himself declares in a letter in 1881, more clearly than all speculation, that: "At the end of it all, all those individuals feel more or less melancholy who have been able to learn something more than how to scrape a living. But all said and done, who would wish, at the very end, to live on without this quiet basic sadness, without which true joy does not exist?" And in the long run, is it because of this strange and ageless dialectical contrast of sadness and joy in Keller's writings that they live on and continue to exercise their influence on the reader of today?

Raetus Luck, Vice-Director of the Swiss National Library



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