

BDOHP Biographical Details and Interview Index

Sir Ewen Fergusson, GCMG 1993 (KCMG 1987); GCVO 1992.

Born 28 October 1932; elder son of late Sir Ewen MacGregor Field Fergusson; married 1959, Sara Carolyn, daughter of late Brig-Gen. Lord Esmé Gordon Lennox, KCVO, CMG, DSO and widow of Sir William Andrew Montgomery-Cuninghame, 11th Bt; one son two daughters.

Education: Rugby; Oriel Coll., Oxford (MA; Hon. Fellow, 1988).

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BRITISH DIPLOMATIC ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with Sir Ewen Fergusson GCMG

conducted by John Hutson

2nd December 1998.

JH. Sir Ewen, before we get to the major posts that you occupied at the top of the Diplomatic Service could I ask you first what decided your choice of career and have you any comment on your rather remarkable transition from National Service to Diplomatic Service?

EF. I was born in Singapore. I had always envisaged having a career which took me around the world and when I was 17 or thereabouts I read a book by Fitzroy Maclean - 'Eastern Approaches' - which made me think of the combination of glamour and excitement which would come in the Foreign Service. Of course, between the ages of 18 and 21 I wasn't at all serious about what career I might have but it was an extremely useful way of stopping further impertinent questions to say I would try to get into the FO; because it was notorious at the time that only a tiny, tiny proportion of the people who tried got in. Nonetheless it was seen as a respectable aspiration and having got in and then having to do my National Service it was also a useful protection against pressure from my Regiment to think of making a career in the regular armed forces. But during the later part of my National Service the crisis over Suez blew up and although my own Regiment wasn't directly involved elements of it were involved in the planning for Suez. I left the army on completion of my National Service, had a few weeks in London to fix myself up, and joined the Foreign Office just at the time when the landing craft were midway between Cyprus and Suez and I was thrust into African Department which was short of staff. Africa in those days being, as far as the Foreign Office was concerned, primarily North Africa with Egypt as its main country. So the transition, from being in an army that was gearing itself up for action over Suez and moving into the African Department of the Office which was actually dealing with the Suez crisis was a relatively coherent transition.

JH. I see, thank you. That does pose the question were you, as a National Service Officer, of course, were you then aware that Suez was in the wind before it happened, given the secrecy that seems to have surrounded the matter?

EF. I don't think that anyone would have known that military action would be undertaken until the final decisions to undertake it. On the other hand, the Suez issue was a

preoccupation for everyone, whether or not we would find some negotiated solution and it has to be said that when a group of Officers from one's own Regiment are spirited away to a team at Corp Headquarters and when the Corp Commander is known to be a particularly efficient and distinguished officer it is not surprising that there should be surmises about what they were up to.

JH. Yes, indeed. Could I then go on to say that apparently your first job in the Service, although beginning in 1957, was that of Assistant Private Secretary to the Minister of Defence? This looks like a unique start to a Diplomatic Service career. Would you like to tell us about it?

EF. I was in the Africa Department from November 1956 to the spring of the following year doing a variety of jobs, virtually every job except the Egyptian jobs. At that time, after Suez, there had been a change of Minister of Defence from Anthony Head to Duncan Sandys as a result of Macmillan taking over from Anthony Eden as Prime Minister. There were policy issues, in particular the ending of National Service and the introduction of all regular forces, which, I believe, Anthony Head was unwilling to carry through within the Defence budget allotted to him and Duncan Sandys was willing to take on all the various challenges of reshaping our armed forces. He was an extremely demanding taskmaster and his own private office very rapidly showed signs of strain. He had been a serving diplomat in his early years, in the early thirties, and it appears that he asked if some young person from the Foreign Office could be released 'to sort out the telegrams'. In practice looking after all the incoming telegrams to the Minister from Defence and Foreign Office sources was part of my job but the burden in the Private Office was such that it was all hands to the pump. I would say that as an Assistant Private Secretary I had my very full share of the total responsibility of the Minister's Private Office. It was unusual for a young officer in the Diplomatic Service to be lent to another Minister except in the case of No. 10 Downing Street. I think it wasn't until a good deal later that the Treasury drew on the Foreign Office for Private Secretaries so I was a very odd animal and to the best of my knowledge that experiment wasn't repeated.

JH. Quite, but it is nevertheless a compliment that as a new arrival having only been some months in the Office you were selected. I wonder if you have any other comments on your first jobs either in the Office or abroad, the first posting abroad being Addis Ababa.

EF. Working Private Office of a major Cabinet Minister was a marvellously formative job to have and allowed me at the start of my career to see the interaction between politics and administration, between the announcement of decisions and the carrying out of decisions; and that experience I found of inestimable value to me throughout the whole of my career. The

issues which the Ministry of Defence confronted during that period up to summer/autumn 1959 were major issues. So it was both fascinating and incredibly hard work because Sands was a very demanding person.

JH. On these fascinating issues is there anything you would like to put on the record?

EF. The key issue in the Defence White Paper of 1957 was the concept of Massive Nuclear Retaliation. It was interesting because Sandys had a great deal of experience himself, more probably than any of his military advisers, about the whole area of rocket launched weapons and throughout the whole period I was with him he was testing, testing the validity of the concept of ballistic launched nuclear deterrent weapons. The data didn't remain constant and it was towards the end of his time that the vulnerability of unprotected launch sites started to become apparent. At that point it became clear that either we would have to find other means for delivering our deterrent vehicle or we couldn't have a deterrent. What I also remember, at the start of my time with Duncan Sandys, was how minute was our stock of nuclear weapons which we had available. It wasn't until there had been a planned build up, and of course I don't carry the figures in my mind now, that we could be said to have any kind of nuclear deterrent. But the concept of massive nuclear retaliation was in many way a valid concept. It was superseded by the ideas launched by Kissinger over flexible response but the inherent dilemma of when and how you would use tactical nuclear weapons was apparent then and it never seemed to me that we had satisfactorily resolved, in all the time that we had contemplated using nuclear weapons within the European theatre, the underlying difficulty that you would be damaging and massively damaging the civilian populations. The definition of what was strategic and what was tactical was never very clear in anyone's minds and I think that it is fair to say that later on it became quite difficult to conceive the circumstances in which nuclear weapons could be used at lower than strategic level.

JH. Thank you, that's fascinating. We must return to the light of common day and get on with your career which then involved Addis Ababa and a return to the Foreign Office. There, after two years, I think, you moved to the Diplomatic Service Administration Office which I think was only a temporary structure and I would only ask you to dwell on that, the DSAO or Ethiopia, to the extent that you think it worthwhile.

EF. As far as Ethiopia is concerned I felt that after two and a half years with Duncan Sandys that it would be nice to get back to the kind of adventurousness that had originally motivated me to join the Foreign Office. And it happened that the Second Secretary post in Addis Ababa was coming up some months later. I was sent off to Manchester University to learn Amharic. So the first point is that even in a country where there is an arcane language such as

Ethiopia I do believe that the effort that one puts into learning the local language is effort enormously rewarded. Not long after I arrived in Ethiopia - it was only 9 months after I got there, by which time I was conversationally fluent in the language, there was rebellion against the Emperor. The fact that I could speak the language, I could enter into Ethiopian families, not necessarily the Western educated younger people, made a great difference to the extent of my ability to penetrate into the Ethiopian scene. There is a more general point I would make which is that in 1960 when I reached Addis Ababa, Africa was the sexy subject. From spring 1957 when Ghana had got its independence there was a great wave of independence-granting towards the former colonies in Africa. We were acutely conscious of the Soviet threat, the Soviet ideological threat and the Soviet practical threat. Looking back over my time in Ethiopia you had first of all the fact that the Chiefs of Staff regarded over-flying rights over Ethiopia as of major strategic importance because of the transit of troops and so on to the Far East. We were still in Aden, we were still until a few months after I got there in British Somaliland, we had latterly left Sudan, we were still in Kenya and Uganda, so that Ethiopia was important to us and we were seen by the Ethiopians as important to them. The transition to an interest in Africa which is almost exclusively devoted to aid, that transition was certainly not apparent in those days.

JH. Quite - that very helpfully adds perspective. Moving on, you then had a complete change moving to New York, already a First Secretary, and I read Head of the Industrial Section of the British Trade Development Mission there which supervised all our commercial work in the States. What did the industrial section do?

EF. Am I allowed to jog back to the four years I spent in what was the Foreign Office Personnel Department and then with the Diplomatic Service Administration. For the first two years I was the universal aunt for all the posts abroad in the Foreign Office except Western Europe and the Americas. I then did two years which included recruiting at the Civil Service Selection Board and also something called Structure in the Service - taking in new entrants and training and so on. The point I want to make is that a Labour Government came in and immediately, particularly from the time Michael Stewart became Foreign Secretary, interested itself in the educational composition of the senior personalities in the Foreign Office. In the second of the two jobs I did in Personnel Department I was in the front line in seeking to increase the number of applicants to the Diplomatic Service from Universities other than Oxford and Cambridge. It is a subject which is of relevance today but all I would say is that the participation at that time by Oxford and Cambridge in the UCCA mechanism increased the creaming component of Oxford and Cambridge at undergraduate level and given that the Foreign Office selection was based on a competitive selection process it was at one and the same time not surprising and yet politically disappointing that the massive

increase in the number of applicants from Universities other than Oxford and Cambridge that I had participated in generating did not make any significant difference to the composition of the branch 'A' entry. I think that a message was which very difficult for Ministers in the Labour Government of the time to accept but which intellectually they accepted was that recruitment to an organisation like the Foreign Office was a reflection of the nature of society itself and was not a reflection of bias on the part of the selection committee.

JH. Thank you. I could almost wish we were doing this interview about education because we could go on from there a long time but we must leave it there.

EF. To save you repeating the question, I went to the Harvard Business School for a summer programme for a couple of months and that gave me some confidence and a name to drop! For four years I was the Head as you said of the Industrial Marketing Section. This more or less coincided with the aftermath of the November 1967 devaluation and a major political push from the government to exporting as a result of which a massive number of potentially enthusiastic exporters flooded across the Atlantic. I can only say that for the next three years or so I saw my role as partly positive but very substantially negative in trying to deter people from coming to the United States market unless they had properly prepared themselves, unless they had the financial resources, the management determination to approach the US market seriously. The tragedy was that established exporters who had approached the market seriously and were doing well in the United States often had their efforts frustrated by the poor reputation that followed the arrival of the wrong and wrongly prepared people coming into the US market. I also came out of the four years running the Industrial side of our exports in the States not at all persuaded, that in a free market like the United States where there were facilities available for any aspect of commercial activity through the normal commercial mechanisms, the government servant had a significant role to play on the interface between business and business. There was a very clear role for the Commercial Department in Washington dealing with the US government and that is absolutely understood but whether I, Ewen Fergusson and the seven commercial officers working for me, had a significant and measurable and cost effective role in helping British businessmen sell products from sheet steel to scientific instruments to American businessmen that I am pretty sceptical about.

JH. Were you just helping people to sell things or were you putting people in touch with potential buyers of licences and other co-operative arrangements whereby exports also are promoted even if they are not actual things?

EF. The answer is that services were part of the area that I was responsible for. My point was

not that we weren't efficient, that we weren't hard-working and enthusiastic. My point is that if you actually were to cost the total cost of the trade promotion services in the United States and you were then to add that to the sales cost of UK Inc. I think you would find that the extra sales generated by the commercial services would not be seen by business as an acceptable extra cost to them.

JH. Shortly before you got there there was a report by a well known consulting firm about our exports to the States which most of us thought singularly ineffective in making useful recommendations and that tends, in a way, to support what you said.

EF. I just have one gloss to make because at the time in the state trading countries government servants had an indispensable role. In much of the third world where development aid and debt were very important issues and where governments were principally involved our commercial services had a very important role. In countries of difficult social or linguistic composition, Japan or the Arab countries, the specialist knowledge of the government experts had a role to play. My point relates specifically to those countries which do not have these kinds of difficulties and where there is a great deal of political pressure for the Diplomatic Service to show what efficient trade supporters they are because the countries concerned are close to us or conspicuous. I think that the basic proposition needs very stringent analysis.

JH. Yes, I think your definition includes the United States and very few other countries, but I shouldn't comment. Should we then move on to the remarkable fact that after a relatively short time in the Service, about 15 years, you moved on to be a Counsellor and Head of Chancery in our Mission to Brussels. This was, I believe, during the final bout of our negotiations on entry into the EEC and the first years of our membership. I wonder what you would like to record about that job and about the issues that came your way during it.

EF. The Head of Chancery's job was essentially a chief of staff's job in that he had to make sure that the machine stayed on the road. During the very specialised period of the negotiations themselves it had been assumed that there would be a lull during the course of which all sorts of difficult organisational decisions could be sorted out at leisure. Life wasn't like that and from the day after the signature of the Treaty of Accession we continued to operate at an extremely rapid pace. We had first of all to make sure that the Delegation in Brussels which became the Permanent Representative's Office a year later, that that Delegation office ran efficiently. To give you an example, I was the only Counsellor at the time I arrived and by the time I had been there six months we had nine Counsellors! All of whom, in the heady atmosphere of the time, hand picked as among the most brilliant people

from Whitehall. The team in Brussels had to be meshed together under constant work pressure and so there was a major organisational task to get people who were not used to working together, who were not used to some of the disciplines of life in a foreign posting, to operate efficiently.

JH. They were all from different Ministries?

EF. They were all from different Ministries. I was in fact the only person at Counsellor level who was from the Foreign Service, from the Diplomatic Service, and the imbalance was there at more junior levels. It was also a difficult phenomenon during that first year 1972 when we had negotiated our entry but were still not full participants, to find out what was going on because the Six had still not taken on board psychologically the fact that we were full members and were very keen to keep the reins of power firmly in their hands until the 1st. January 1973. The second leg was that the delegation required a great deal of new structuring. That we achieved, I think, quite efficiently and quite rapidly. We also moved to new offices, right next door to where the Commission and the Council of Ministers are which in itself was a significant burden for me as chief of staff. But much more was the exploitation of the efficient integrated machinery of the Permanent Representative's Office to get Whitehall to face up to the task of attuning itself to entry into the European Community. We used ourselves and were used by the people in London as a major lever for getting Whitehall itself to establish the kind of co-ordinating mechanisms at Ministerial and at senior and junior official level which were indispensable if we were to be effective in the new world we were entering into. Now even in those days there were people who questioned whether we had successfully negotiated our terms of entry to take into account major British interests, like fish. There were people who were worried about the longer term institutional aspects and one of my specific roles was to cover the institutional side of Community development and to be responsible under the Permanent Representative for looking after British Parliamentarians coming to the Community institutions [the Labour Party boycotted the Parliamentary institutions of the Community until after renegotiations and so my role was exclusively with the nominated Conservative MP's but that didn't mean they were any easier to deal with!]

JH. Yes, I see. Have you any comments on the ways of working of people above your own level - starting perhaps with Mr. Heath or with Geoffrey Rippon.

EF. I didn't work very closely with either of them. Geoffrey Rippon had been very much involved in the actual negotiation and I arrived in Brussels just in time for the last formal session of the negotiation, a week or so before the Treaty of Accession was signed. And that would also apply therefore to Ted Heath whom I saw (but through a glass darkly) in his

participation in the European Council, in the occasional meetings in Brussels. In those days there was not a European Council at Prime Minister, Head of State and Government level; there were the occasional summits. We saw Foreign Ministers, we saw Ministers of Agriculture and Ministers of Finance but we didn't see Prime Ministers to the same extent.

JH. I think comments on personalities, of course, need to be what you think historians ought to know, something that perhaps they don't know already. If you have any as we go through and think they are useful, then please let us have them; but I take your point. I would like to ask you about the rest of your time in Brussels which included us becoming full members on the 1st. January 1973. Shortly afterwards it included the first oil price shock which it seemed to me ended the years when the Community could solve problems by throwing money at them because there was economic growth all the time - whereas almost from the moment of our membership that period seems to me to have ceased. We had a number of problems but whether about that or about the beginnings of renegotiations I'd be glad to know what you think about our first years in the Community.

EF. The first year, from the 1st. January 1973, became increasingly difficult - incidentally I was the transmitter of the first decisions taken by the British government to the Community institutions of the 1st. January 1973 because my two superiors were away and it fell to me as the next in line to transmit them - there is no doubt that life started to look more difficult partly because the Community in its early phase which included, of course, the great French empty chair period had been largely concerned with setting up structures and by the time we came in it had started to look at the political policies which those structures ought to be putting into place. As soon as you did that a lot of the problems that had seemed easy looked more difficult. It had to be said that Wernher the Luxembourg Prime Minister produced his report on Economic and Monetary Union in 1971 and I think in my memory that it was pretty well too hot to handle, not least because in 1973 there were all the oil price problems you mentioned, there were problems with our relationships with the United States, there were problems because to the French the United States was a convenient whipping boy which helped to cement both French unity and the French role within the Economic Communities and because our own perception of the United States was very different from that of our partners. I think that you are right that there had been a period of German-led growth and the oil price shock slowed that down. It is difficult for me, essentially because of my role as chief of staff, to pick out particular areas of policy whether Agriculture, Finance or Foreign Affairs, whatever, there would be people who are much better equipped than me, Michael Palliser, who was my boss, being a conspicuous example; but we certainly were conscious that we had to change the method in which we negotiated by displaying great resolution and great skill and by adopting, from the French, some of their techniques of negotiating; not

least the attempt to try to get the negotiation onto ground of your own choosing .

JH. I see. Thank you. Did you also

EF. I beg your pardon - what was also the case was that the Heath government through 1973 looked increasingly fragile with industrial troubles at home, the miners strike, and finally in February 1974 the defeat of the Heath government and the arrival of a Labour government under Harold Wilson with Jim Callaghan as the Foreign Secretary. I think that it is worth saying something about the renegotiation period because in effect you had an unholy alliance between the new Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary and the official machine who wanted very much to find a way of helping the government to fulfil the political commitment to renegotiate in the full knowledge that not much was going to be possible. So there was a great play with mirrors you could say and I participated in the enormous pleasure in June 1975 that the referendum went so significantly in favour of our staying in Europe. But let us not pretend it was "renegotiation". It wasn't renegotiation; it was a way of helping over a domestic political difficulty in the United Kingdom and on the basis that the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary were committed to find a way through their own difficulty they received quite a lot of support, within reason, from their Community partners.

JH. I have heard it said that the notable omission from the subject of renegotiation was the fisheries agreement which, it seems to me, our future Community partners fixed with some haste before we could have an influence on its nature.

EF. You are entering into quite a technical issue. This had all been sorted out before I got to Brussels but as it happened in the Council of Ministers structure the Ambassadors level dealt with a number of subjects including the major negotiation with Britain, Ireland, Denmark and Norway. Fisheries were not seen as a central issue and while the Ambassadors were going ahead and having a genuine negotiation their deputies cooked up a common fisheries policy some would even say cooked it up as speedily as they could because they thought that they could derive advantage of cooking it up before the awkward arrival of Britain, Ireland, Denmark and Norway all of whom had very significant fisheries interests, all of whom had significant contributions to make to the Community's fisheries pool which it was in the interests of the Six to align on over. I think that it was said, and I have no judgement to make on this, it was said that one of things where Geoffrey Rippon couldn't interest himself adequately was in the fisheries issue and that we let slip some points in the final fisheries negotiations. I was in fact very much involved in the psychological consequences during the job I did next, if I can leap ahead, because Tony Crosland, who was the second of the Foreign Secretaries that I was Private Secretary to, Tony Crosland was the MP for Grimsby and

therefore whether it was a matter of the Falkland Islands or it was matter of Iceland, or it was a matter of the Community fishery policy it was something that he couldn't but take a serious interest in.

JH. I am grateful for all that and I would indeed like to move to your time as Principal Private Secretary to three Secretaries of State in fairly quick succession. The first being Mr. Callaghan, of course, then Mr. Crosland and finally, perhaps for the longest period, David Owen. I would be glad for anything you think should be added to what has been said about the Private Office or about the ways of working of these Ministers and their contributions to our policies and interests at that time.

EF. I was removed in very short order from Brussels because Jim Callaghan decided that he wanted a change of Private Secretary. It was a matter of not more than two weeks between my first hearing about it and my starting work in London and I was with Jim Callaghan for six months until he became Prime Minister in March 1976. I was then inherited by Tony Crosland and was his Private Secretary until he died in February 1977 and was again inherited by David Owen. I left round about April 1978 when I had done over 2 1/2 years as Private Secretary. If I ever were to write a book it would be about my experiences with Duncan Sandys, my experience with these three Ministers -different Parties - but nonetheless from a Private Secretary's point of view both periods representing the opportunity to see the interaction between politics and administration at first hand. But Nicko Henderson wrote a book called 'Private Office' which I think is a superb work of art - very slim, elegant and since Nicko had written that I don't think that there is a role for another book on the Private Office. Nonetheless you cannot do that job unless you throw yourself into it with complete dedication, complete abandon. You have one role in life and that is to ensure the interests of your Minister are effectively interpreted and carried through. I had therefore to make a very significant psychological shift between how I worked with Jim Callaghan, how I worked with Tony Crosland, how I worked with David Owen. I have to say in retrospect it was quite a exhausting period. The major difference arose because Jim Callaghan was Deputy Leader of the Labour Party, he was a previous Home Secretary and Chancellor of the Exchequer, he was seen as being a major influence in Cabinet, he was a major influence in his Party and all these attributes gave him a weight which the Foreign Office was very happy to have at the head of its organisation because my own view is that officials long for clear direction, officials long to feel that if they have put a cogent case for Ministerial decision that their Minister will have the domestic political strength to ensure that those arguments hold ground when the matter is discussed in Cabinet Committees or in Cabinet. This was absolutely the case with Jim Callaghan whose relationship with Harold Wilson wasn't an easy one but nevertheless the two saw each other as being the two elephants of the Cabinet. Tony Crosland

had a particular status because he was very clever and developed for himself, with his book on the Future of Socialism and other works, he had developed for himself the status of intellectual of the Labour government. It is true that he also had a mordant wit and people were a bit frightened of him. He was, as Jim Callaghan was, a good chairman, he was a very good chairman within limits; he wasn't, in the concluding 9 or 10 months of his life that I saw him, he wasn't at his most active and energetic and I think his instinctive reaction was not to seek to change things around, not to seek to change things too much and so his method as chairman was essentially to see how to get through the meeting effectively not to recreate a new world. But as I say he was thoughtful, he prepared himself very carefully for important meetings. His intellectual ability gave him the respect of his Community colleagues during the short time he was chairman of the Council of Ministers and from that point of view it was a tragedy that his sudden death curtailed his performance.

David Owen was very different. He was appointed from his role as Minister of State because he helped solve the same political dilemma that Tony Crosland solved; the Labour Prime Minister could not appoint Peter Shore, who might have been one candidate for Foreign Secretary, because he was bitterly hostile to Europe; he couldn't appoint Shirley Williams for the opposite reason that she was too much in favour; Denis Healey, who would probably have made a brilliant Foreign Secretary, was firmly embedded as Chancellor of the Exchequer and this was a period when the British economy was going through extraordinary difficulties. The IMF agreement was reached with Denis Healey's participation and so, needing someone to succeed Tony Crosland, the attractive solution was to appoint the young David Owen who had had a consistent interest in defence and foreign affairs issues and had already had some time in the Foreign Office. But he is a person of great courage, great instinctive feel for where the issue lies but of quite different intellectual discipline from his two predecessors so far as the management of the Foreign Office was concerned. It was an extremely difficult task for his three private secretaries to make sure that the officials in the Department accurately understood what the Minister wanted by comparison with the very orderly intellectual process under Tony Crosland. Given the Minister's restless energy, we are talking about David Owen, never let him stay content with a decision which seemed to have been reached, officials would go away and come back thinking that they had acted as the Minister had wanted them to act only to find that the Minister's thinking had moved on and that they were well behind the game. I once used the illustration of playing a salmon as the method by which one could get David Owen to a solid decision. You hooked the fish but then it jumped, and you saw it in one part of the river, you then saw it jumping in another part of the river, it streamed up and down and eventually you might succeed in winding it into the shore. If you did that you might be lucky in finding that the salmon was in your hand, in other words that you had a decision that you could act on. But it was a precarious process and it didn't always

take place in perfect amity because David Owen not only had a different form of intellectual make-up but he was so hard working that he over-burdened himself and tired himself and sometimes the way in which he focused on paper or on people was by creating a quite powerful tension between him and the object that he was focusing on. This wasn't always comfortable. He sometimes attacked the Private Secretaries themselves; it was sometimes felt directly by the senior officials or indeed more junior officials with whom the Foreign Secretary came into contact. But I spell this out in those terms just to show the psychological pressure on the Private Office to try and make sure that the machinery of government works - the business goes ahead - is very considerable.

JH. Thank you; that is a very valuable little cameo and I am most grateful. I wonder if I could do something rather exceptional and phrase a rather long question for our remaining time. After that, you were Assistant Under Secretary in the Office, I don't know what subject you were dealing with, then you went as Ambassador to Pretoria, you came back to the Office as Deputy Under Secretary - this time dealing with the Middle East and Africa - and then you had about five years in your final job in the Service, that is as Ambassador in Paris. May I ask you to start on what you would principally like to talk about from that full period, given that there are so many things about Africa and so many things about the Middle East and of course about our relationship with France that we can't possibly give them all equal priority and just take them necessarily in chronological order; so could I pass the difficult task of selection to you?

EF. The four years that I spent as Under Secretary I was the Assistant Under Secretary for our bi-lateral relations with countries in Europe. You could say that that period, which ended not very long after Mitterrand had become President of France and brought Communists into his government, you could say that that period of looking at European policies meshed quite closely with the five and a half years I spent in Paris. I would only single out one job that I had as Under Secretary and that was to supervise the Republic of Ireland Department, because my visits to Belfast, to Dublin, to the 'H' blocks and so on gave me a pretty austere view of the likelihood of any short-term fix of the Irish situation. In so far that there is a parallel between the job I had as Assistant Under Secretary for European Affairs and the three years I spent as Deputy Under Secretary dealing with Africa and the Middle East it was that the Irish problem struck me as not much less intractable than the Arab/Israel problem with many of the same pressures acting on personalities. By the time I got to Paris I had had the experience of dealing with an extraordinary number of problems relating to the tensions between one community and another or communities and other communities where each community defined itself not so much because of how it felt about itself but by its opposition to other neighbouring communities. Whether that is Yugoslavia, whether that is countries in

Africa, whether that is countries in the Middle East, this experience certainly gave me a very cautious view of the prospect of human nature changing adequately for solutions to be achieved. The general observation I make is that one of the problems in dealing with the Americans is that they believe that problems have solutions and they believe that those solutions will be more rapidly arrived at by the volume of resources thrown at the problem. I don't happen to share that optimistic view!

JH. Not in respect of Northern Ireland.

EF. Certainly not in respect of Northern Ireland and not really in respect of any inter-communal problem.

JH. Clearly, as you say, their identity is in the problem not the solution. We see that now for Northern Ireland, don't we? Thank you.

EF. But other than that I, of course, had spent four years in Ethiopia and when I went to South Africa it was, I think, helpful for me in the perspective which I brought to South African affairs. I was only there for two and a quarter years, but my approach to South Africa was on the basis of previous Third World experience. One of the troubles about judgements about South Africa comes from the people who believe that because it had a white government and because it had a significant European- origin educated class that South Africa could be viewed as if it was on the way to becoming an enlarged Hampstead Garden Suburb. If you came to South Africa with Lagos, Dar es Salaam, Ethiopia, Bombay, Calcutta, as your picture of the norm for the Third World then, I think, that your attitude to conditions in South Africa would be very different. This comes back to the problem of being ethnocentrist in one's attitudes, assuming that what is good for us is necessarily good for everyone else.

JH. Illuminating. Did you see any evolution in this during your two and a quarter years in South Africa?

EF. The intellectual basis for Afrikaner policy was reinforced by their concept of the total onslaught from the Soviet world and the total response that that justified. The Black Nationalist movements particularly the ANC were seen to have a strong white communist influence in them. In the time that I was in South Africa there was a slow movement in social terms but the concept of the total onslaught, the total response, was the dominant component, very conveniently self interested if you were an Afrikaner. In fact, the main problem I was dealing with in my time in South Africa was Namibia. The other thing that I can just

comment about being in South Africa was that because of the nature of our relationship British Ministers scarcely ever came and I only had one Ministerial visit in the two and quarter years I was there. That was from Malcolm Rifkind. By contrast, when I was in Paris I would guess that we probably had about fifty Ministerial visits a year at every possible level! When I came to London as Deputy Under Secretary, I had been picked for that job because of my South African experience, and South Africa remained the sexy subject. Nobody could pretend that Ewen Fergusson knew everything that had to be known about U.N. resolutions 242 and 338 concerning the Arab/Israel dispute. So as far as the Middle East was concerned, while I was supervising the Middle Eastern Departments, I was heavily dependent on my Arab expert at Assistant Under Secretary level; but in African affairs I had a much broader experience and it has reflected in the nature of the relationship and the nature of the work I did. In the end I was appointed to Paris. My understanding, indeed what the Foreign Secretary told me, was that there was a toss up between No.10 and the Foreign Secretary about who should be Permanent Under Secretary; I can only say on the best assessment I could make of my own talents and personality I was extremely pleased that the cookie crumbled to allow me to go to Paris where I had five and half years of what I would say was the most fulfilling part of my life.

JH. That is very interesting because it has always been very obvious that Paris is one of the most strenuous of the top Posts because of the intensity and indeed tension of relations which we always seem to have with France; and the flood, as you already mentioned, of prominent visitors. I don't know how you survive five and a half years of that but they have brought up many issues and many personalities. Once again I must ask you to make your own choice of these. But you certainly must have seen a great deal of Foreign Secretaries, Messrs. Howe, Major and Hurd, though Howe and Hurd mainly, not to mention the Prime Minister and indeed to some extent President Mitterand and his Ministers with whom he either? a parti alli or a parti parte for one period. Could you please go into this field?

EF. It was very interesting. I suppose that the meetings I had with Mrs. Thatcher were politically the most fascinating. Indeed she was staying with me in November 1990 on the occasion when the news came through that she had not won sufficient votes to guarantee her re-election as the leader of the Conservative Party. I regarded the gossips that I had with her in the car, when I met her at the Airport - took her back - the weekend she stayed in Paris, I regarded these as an absolutely fascinating bonus to my professional experience. When I arrived in Paris I thought that the French had a very much enhanced respect for the United Kingdom, because in the end the French admire discipline. They admired and perhaps still admire the sort of forthright qualities that Mrs. Thatcher represented -the decision making powers she had shown over the Falklands campaign. I felt that we needed to exploit more that

sort of reputation. On the basis that people accept you at your own valuation it was important that the Embassy should be as visible as it could be. So there was a public display component to what I set out to do which involved a very substantial increase in the number of people through the house and which was matched by the increased flow of Ministers, members of the Royal Family and so on who came to France. That in itself was arduous but fortunately my wife took to it like a duck to water. There was also the management of a substantial Embassy. People would say an Ambassador like you has no role because the Foreign Secretary sees his opposite number far more frequently than you see the French Foreign Minister, which is absolutely true, and the Prime Minister saw Monsieur Mitterrand more frequently than I would see Monsieur Mitterrand; but in fact the breadth of work which the Embassy covered continued to expand. The political interaction - the political, social, economic, agricultural, cultural interaction - between France and Britain never ceased to grow and the Ambassador had to know what was going on. The Ambassador certainly felt that it was his role to be the visible focal point of all intergovernmental action between Britain and France, with due modesty because of the enormously important and thriving direct links, in thinking of the increasing and thriving direct links between the government and administration in London and the government and administration in France. I went to Paris with my previous Brussels experience, my European Under Secretary's experience as "a convinced European". I can remember my euphoria at the announcement about the outcome of the 1975 referendum. But I have to say that my five and a half years in Paris made me much more sensitive of how difficult Britain's role in the European Community was, is and will be. One of the most important things that I had to try to do was to ensure that British people understood what French attitudes were. The French, particularly older people, enormously admired aspects of British life and policy, the older ones were deeply conscious of the gratitude France owed to Britain for the War time experience and yet related to that was the profound French cultural jealousy of the increasing domination of English and a perception, a deliberate perception, that there was a phenomenon called "Les Anglo-Saxons" which was an unholy alliance, an unholy unity, between les anglaises and les americains which was in some way hostile to France or if not hostile represented an extremely uncomfortable challenge. One has to remember that in the immediate post war period in France and when de Gaulle came back in 1958 the most effective way of bringing together a deeply divided French society was on a platform of anti-Americanism. So the closeness of the British relationship with America automatically put us in the "to be mistrusted" box - so far as many French politicians were concerned; and of course it is also true that the concept of liberal free enterprise as exemplified by Mrs. Thatcher was completely against three hundred years of French economic tradition. More importantly, for all that the French are no less nationalist than the British, their nationalism is subsumed in an overriding need to find an acceptable working relationship with the Germans; and while it is true their relationship with

us might be heart, their relationship with the Germans was very much head and on any major issue of policy the French saw it as being a determining factor to move things so that it helped them in corralling the Germans. The Germans, for their part, particularly under Kohl, were so obsessed with the need for reconciliation that they saw their relationship with France as central to their policies. So these two major countries in Europe who collectively form a far larger economic grouping than we do in GDP terms, these two countries in Europe, for all that they would want to have good relations with us, primarily wanted to have good relations with each other. I think that, coming back to my role as Ambassador, one of the important points was to try to soften fond delusions about the extent to which, whatever we did, we could develop a special relationship with France and above all to disabuse people of the notion that concessions made to the French would somehow generate good will. The French had a purely cynical view of this and would pocket any concessions made to them and then it would make no difference to the fundamental basis of their policy - for perfectly understandable reasons, if you can look at it dispassionately.

JH. Quite. You have put a very complicated set of relationships in that nutshell. I would like to ask more about that but must ask first, I think, what all this meant for the nature of your day-to-day work. Was there a large public relations component in sort of getting something across to the French people direct through the media rather than the Quai D'Orsay? Was it mainly with the top figures in the French government and establishment - where was the heaviest part of your effort?

EF. I think that one has to take the Embassy as a whole, because part of my role was running a highly talented group of people who formed the staff of the Embassy and, depending on the importance of the issue or the speed of the reaction required, would with me in minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day interaction with the French administration. I would say that I probably saw a good deal less of the French Foreign Minister than the Foreign Secretary would see of the French Foreign Minister. I would very rarely see President Mitterrand. On the other hand, I would be in touch with the senior officials which they had working for them. I would see and be friends with the Minister of Defence or with the Minister of Justice, or with the Minister of Agriculture, in other words, the social life that I had was very much geared to making sure that I had some chance of contact with the principal figures of the Paris establishment. I make one observation which is that it is a highly competitive scene because there are some 120/130 Missions all of whom want to know the people who count. The British Ambassador has all sorts of advantages going his way in facing up to this competition but if he relaxes, doesn't do his stuff, those advantages will slide away. Being around, being visible, being seen, was a part of my professional duty and to some extent part of my pleasure. I make one observation about France, which is that it is Paris dominated and

within Paris there is an establishment. We talk about an establishment in Britain; there is no establishment as such in Britain today, but in France there is this extraordinary interlocking group of social relationships, people who have been to the 'Grandes Ecoles' - ENA - who may be Ministers, art administrators, businessmen or whatever. So you plugged yourself in and you tried to get the snowball to roll so that you covered as wide a scene as possible. I would say one thing though which is that official French policy was unsympathetic to for instance our ideas about liberal free enterprise economies. The centuries of Colbertisme still dominated attitudes - there is only one small party the PR which had any serious conviction that free enterprise based open markets were the desirable route. But French public opinion was in no sense homogeneous and I saw my role as not just to confront official French policy but also to seek out those people, businessmen in particular, who would be likely to have a better understanding, greater sympathy for what we were seeking to achieve or what our underlying attitudes were. This just added further dimensions or further layers to the onion that one was trying to penetrate.

JH. Someone wrote in 'The Times', last week, I think, it was something like:- it was the abiding conviction of the Foreign Service, which they tried to persuade Ministers of, was that influence is the thing that you have to sacrifice everything for - so that influence in effect means power and the furtherance of British interests. This was in the context of making concessions in the EU to obtain influence. In the process of making other people's views, like the French views, understood by the British government we tend to expose ourselves to this accusation. Do you think that there is anything in it?

EF. One the one hand and this applied, for instance, when I was in South Africa. If you are going to have any influence at all you have got to be able to communicate and it is not difficult to behave in such a way that you have no opportunity to communicate at all. On the other hand, the people with whom you are trying to communicate are themselves highly professional, highly intelligent people who understand very well how they would present their interests; I think that respect comes into this. I don't believe, and I made this point a bit earlier, I don't believe that by making unnecessary concessions you win the day and I come back to the French technique of negotiation which is - to have a clear sight of what it is that you might want to achieve yourself - to seek to move the terrain of the argument onto ground of your own choosing and to be obdurate in not moving from your own principles unless and until you see that you absolutely have to do so, causing trouble, not attending meetings, being thought to be bloody minded, all these are secondary things to the achievement of your own national interest. Diplomacy is about the achieving of your national interest. For all that in Europe this is cloaked in a wider framework, for that you will find French people who will talk about a federal Europe, what they mean is some vehicle which will best safeguard French

national interest. We would be fools to think that we should behave in some softer and more genial way and that we would derive advantage from doing so.

JH. Indeed. So you don't think that the accusation that we tend to make concessions to gain influence or further influence - you don't think that that is justified.

EF. I expressed my own opinion but there is no doubt that there is a curiously deep wish on the part of many members of the Diplomatic Service to be liked and who think that because we have a rough time if we take a hard line we will in some way lose influence in that particular country. I think this comes back to the point of respect and communication. You have to have means by which you can explain your point of view. You have to be honest in explaining your point of view and you have to explain it in a way which will take account of the sensitivities of your hearer, but having said that I don't think that being soft in what you do gets you anywhere. Alas! the Diplomatic Service has succeeded in the eyes of some people in giving the impression that it wants to be nice to foreigners.

JH. Indeed it seems to have given that impression to Mrs. Thatcher and so the Press believed. I don't know whether you experienced any of that.

EF. Well, Mrs. Thatcher, of course, deeply distrusted 'the Foreign Office' and there is this charming phrase that her attitude to the Foreign Service and the Church of England were equal and opposite. She liked the Church of England as an institution, she liked members of the Diplomatic Service as individuals and the word Foreign Office - FO - was like a red rag to a bull to her because it smacked of concession, it smacked of not taking a tough line and yet she visibly respected those senior members of the Foreign Office with whom she worked. I wonder whether in the end the hard line Thatcher view of diplomacy wasn't beginning to come apart, because certainly when I got to Paris, as I mentioned earlier, she was held in enormous respect but the fact was that on a number of key issues - the word No when confronted with reality to compromise did not prevent a shift. I remember Geoffrey Howe saying to me that the difference between him and Mrs. Thatcher (at the time we were talking about African affairs) was that she was the park railings and he was the police cordon and both of them had the objective of protecting the terrain but sooner or later the pressure on the park railings built up and the park railings tumbled and you had no way of safeguarding the land behind it whereas the police cordon gave a bit here when the pressure was hardest but simultaneously took a bit there. He believed, - and he would, wouldn't he? - he believed that in diplomacy this was a more effective way in the long run of securing interests than the Thatcher technique.

JH. Is there any particular passage of discussion, perhaps in the car afterwards, with Mrs. Thatcher or any of these Ministers with whom you dealt which you think historians should be interested in. Anything particularly illuminating. That may be a difficult choice; you may feel you would rather not.

EF. The delight of being with Mrs. Thatcher was that the reactions that one had were at such different levels. There was driving around Paris with Mrs. Thatcher doing a bit a sightseeing but the French insisting on having a motorised outrider and Mrs. Thatcher cowering down in the car saying - Oh if I did this in London and people saw me I would lose the election. I said to her if you didn't do this in France you would forfeit the respect of all the French people who are around. That was one small example. Of course, the historic episode of total fascination was the episode of the leadership election in the Conservative Party. Mrs. Thatcher arriving on the Sunday for the Security Conference Summit where clearly she had perceived that to be seen on equal terms with Gorbachev, Bush, Kohl, Mitterand, one of the big five, would be to her advantage. It was obvious when she arrived in Paris that she was nervous. She was a very lonely figure during the Conference because she had the Russians on her right, Douglas Hurd had the Americans on his left and was persistently in conversation with them so one saw this lonely figure of the British Prime Minister. Then the news came through and it was obviously an appalling shock to her. I would only say that next day when I drove her to the airport: here was this person who knew she was going back to face the music, knowing that she was going to face an extremely difficult internal political problem and yet her courage and determination never flagged. I think that that is the single aspect, the single anecdote affecting personalities which I would put to the top in my time in Paris.

JH. Thank you. Could I ask two more more general questions in our remaining few minutes? You said much earlier on that officials working to Ministers long for clear direction. This reminds me of something that Mr. Heath said to me when I caught him in the lobby of the Goethe Institute, when his hosts had somehow managed to leave him alone just for a few moments. He said to me that the leading civil servants in the Commission, he didn't specify a country, had done things in building up the Community which British civil servants could never have achieved. This makes one wonder about the different administrative systems, as well as legal and other different systems, that we have compared with the Continental countries all of which I suppose were administered by Napoleon at one time or another, whereas we were not. Is this part of the reason for the abiding difficulties we seem to have with the Community - that we are always either unready or unwilling to get the best out of the Community for Britain?

EF. I think we are different. One of the areas of difference is that we are not Cartesians.

Another is that we aren't French speakers or so strongly influenced by French culture. What this means is that our natural approach to problems is to start down the road and then to have a general idea of the direction in which we are going, but to stitch things together as we are going along, whereas the Continental system, dominated by the French, is to have structure, to form where you are going. But I think that has its disadvantages in the inflexibility which it can lead to. The French and ourselves have civil services which are 'elites' and this is true by comparison with the Germans, or the Italians, or the other Europeans. The Spaniards, I think, may be more in tune with the French and the British, that is that entry into the government service is difficult and many of the most able people at the level of University exit will consider going into government service. I don't believe that is true in Germany. The Netherlands is a different situation; they have a small number of remarkable people who have achieved remarkable things, but there is no doubt that if on a particular issue the French and the British officials had a community of interest our technical skills in managing them would tend to mean that acceptable outcomes would be achieved; there is no doubt also that both in terms of diplomacy and in terms of the home civil service the French would look at us as being the model to which in many ways they would aspire, partly because the French political influence, that is party political influence on behalf of the party in power, is much stronger over their government service than it still is in this country. That is a subject which many serious French people are extremely concerned about but I do think that if the construction of the European Community had been left to the British we would have done as well as what was done. I come back to my point. I think we would be less good at creating rigid structures because essentially we are more distrustful of them and because whereas history has given to most Continental countries the need to accept that structures are created after cataclysm, that structures are created afresh, that structures are created on paper, the contribution that British history can bring to the world we live in is the concept of evolution. We have slowly altered our institutions to take account of the changes in the society in which our institutions are operating and it is this flexibility which, I think, is so important in the stability which Britain represents by comparison with virtually all its European partners.

JH. So the 'elite' civil servants are less inclined perhaps to take the initiative or to, as you say, to create these firm structures in advance of trying things out.

EF. I certainly don't think we are more reluctant to take the initiative; that is a quite different point. I don't think that we see that the first requirement is to set up a structure before getting things done.

JH. Thank you. Perhaps, I should ask you, bearing in mind that this is not for immediate media publication, what should we do now in the Community.

EF. Look after our own interests.

JH. Thank you. Would you like to expand on that in the present circumstances, where as you have pointed out, we are not part of a triangle of three top powers, indeed I think that our GDP is less than that of either Germany or even France and we are not politically quite part of that either. We should obviously seek to achieve respect rather than liking, as you have said. What should we be doing about any of the current problems?

EF. Just to put the economic statistics - the French have a GDP 40% bigger than ours, the Germans GDP is nearly twice the size of ours, so between the two of them they represent an economic zone that is very significantly greater than that of Britain, that is one point. The second point I would make is that the Franco/German relationship is at the basis of the current pressure for establishing the Single European Currency. I happen myself to be much in favour of an evolutionary development of Europe but I think that this will take a long period of time and I think that the forced speed with which the continental Europeans are going towards the single currency is inherently very dangerous. I can tell you a little anecdote. It was lunch at No. 10 with Prime Minister ? and his European Minister and his Ambassador and on the other side of the table was Mrs. Thatcher, her Private Secretary, Charles Power, and me and in the middle of lunch Rocard turns to Mrs. Thatcher and says "I bet you, Mrs. Prime Minister, that in 50 years Europe will be a federal state - she replies; it will take a thousand years - Ah, says Rocard ,but you accept the principle." Now I myself think that Europe is going down a very dangerous road, not the moment to start spelling it out, going down a very dangerous road in its determination to install a single currency and I don't myself think that it is Britain's interest to go in, I would say until it has been possible to see over a decade or more whether the euro-zone will, or will not, work.