

BDOHP Biographical details and index

Ivor Thomas Mark LUCAS (Born 25 July 1927)

Career outline with, on right, relevant page numbers in the oral history to the career stage:

Entry to diplomatic Service, 1951	pp 2-4
Middle East Centre for Arab Studies, Lebanon, 1952	pp 4-5
3rd, later 2nd Secretary, Bahrain, Sharjah and Dubai, 1952	pp 5-8
Economic Relations Department, FO, 1956 (but actually mainly comments on Middle Eastern issues and the Suez Crisis)	pp 8-12
1st Secretary, Karachi, 1959	pp 12-16
1st Secretary and Head of Chancery, Tripoli, 1962	pp 17-21
Central Department, FO, 1966	pp 21-23
Counsellor, then Chargé d'Affaires, Aden, 1968	pp 23-25
Deputy High Commissioner, Kaduna, Nigeria, 1969	pp 25-29
Counsellor, Copenhagen, 1972	pp 29-31
Head of Middle East Department, FCO, 1975	pp 31-36
Ambassador to Oman, 1979	pp 36-38
Ambassador to Damascus (Syria), 1982-84	pp 39-42
General comments on career	p 42

Education, War Service and entry to the Diplomatic Service

MM: Perhaps I should start by confirming your early education. You were educated at St Edward's School, Oxford and then went to Trinity College, Oxford. Did you then go straight into the Diplomatic Service?

IL: Yes I did, in 1951.

MM: How about National Service?

IL: Well, there wasn't National Service in those days. In between school and Trinity College, Oxford I had three and a half years doing normal service, mostly in the Middle East as it happened.

MM: Did you undergo language training at any stage?

IL: Yes, but later. When I was commissioned, I was sent off to the Canal Zone in Egypt in October, 1946 and, early in 1947, my regiment was moved to Palestine, somewhere in what is now the Gaza Strip, and then the regiment was converted from Field Artillery to Heavy Anti-Aircraft, and I had to go on a conversion course in Acre where there was School of Artillery, and having done that I rejoined the regiment which was by that time in Tripolitania.

MM: And what did you end your service as?

IL: I finished up as a Captain in Libya.

MM: Whereabouts?

IL: Well, first of all in a place called Garian which was an inland town, and then we moved down to the coast to a place called Zavia and that's where I completed my service in about February 1948.

MM: And then you went to Oxford.

IL: And then I went to Oxford that October, yes. I may say that, in between those months, I spent some time as a temporary in the German Political Department of the Foreign Office, which gave me a taste of what I thought I was going to aim at.

MM: What gave you the idea of the Foreign Office?

IL: Well, I was always rather interested in travel, very interested in politics, ever since - I think it was the summer of 1940 - I was taken by a friend in Southampton to hear a speech given by Robert Hudson, who was Minister of Agriculture at the time, and I thought all that sounded extraordinarily interesting. And curiously enough, rather ironic in retrospect, my role-model thereafter became Anthony Eden who, in 1956, was my idea of the Devil Incarnate over Suez.

MM: Interesting. Your father was a Labour

IL: Yes, he was ennobled in 1946 by Attlee, partly because of some war work he'd done in connection with the motor industry but mainly, I think, because Attlee was pretty short of representatives in the Upper House, so he became a Hereditary Peer. He later, if you're interested in transfer across benches, having for some time been a junior Minister of Transport became a cross-bencher. My elder brother succeeded him in 1967. He rapidly moved from the cross benches to the Tory benches. He also became a junior Minister and was one of the Hereditaries who were weeded out.

MM: Was your father connected with Lucas Industries?

IL: No. Unfortunately not! He ran a retail motor business in Southampton. But he did become, round about the time I was born in 1927, the youngest ever President of the Motor Agents' Association and he was recalled to those colours during the War, which set him on the path to the peerage.

MM: So there were family reasons why you should be interested in the problems of government and foreign affairs and so on.

IL: Indeed. That's right.

MM: Both closely interlinked. So it's understandable, therefore, that you should have joined the Diplomatic Service and, after your time in the Middle East, what was your introduction to the Foreign Office?

IL: When I joined with twenty-four other successful candidates in the Autumn of 1951, we were told some of us would be needed to learn hard languages, and I thought that it might be wise to plunge in and volunteer for that, rather than do something I wouldn't be interested in and, of the hard languages on offer, it seemed to me that Arabic was not only connected with my Army experiences, which I'd rather enjoyed, but also gave a wider geographical range than something like Russian or Chinese or Japanese that seemed more or less related to a single country. So I opted to learn Arabic. I then went with others to the School of Oriental and African Studies for a ten-week preliminary course and those of us who weren't weeded out at that stage were then sent off to the Middle East Centre of Arab Studies in Shemlan in the mountains of Lebanon behind Beirut, where we spent a further ten months wrestling with the language and also, which I actually found more interesting, doing what they called background studies.

MM: What did that entail?

IL: It entailed a lot of lectures by a resident principal instructor, Norman Lewis, whom I found very inspiring, and also visiting lecturers from the University in Beirut or the Embassy or other diplomats from the Arab world.

MM: Now that's an interesting word, 'inspiring'. Can you specify in any way what it was that you found inspirational about his presentation of the Middle East? I was going to say to the Arabic World but it's really the Middle East isn't it.

IL: Well Norman Lewis was by profession a geographer. He'd served in the Friends' Ambulance Unit in places like Syria during the War and his instruction was simple but very effective. It wasn't too academic, like so many lecturers you get, but he gave us lectures on the history of the Middle East, religious backgrounds, cultural backgrounds, and the way he put it across I found extraordinarily fascinating. It just reinforced the interest I'd had from the beginning.

MM: You felt that you were dealing with a valuable civilisation.

IL: Yes, and a much misunderstood one, as I've come to realise in due course.

MM: So that was a good introduction. And then presumably you took up a junior position in the Foreign Office. Where did you go to after MECAS?

Posting to the Gulf States, 1951-56

IL: After MECAS in December 1951 I was posted off to Bahrain under the wing of an august gentleman called the Political Resident in the Persian Gulf, at that time an old Indian Political Service gentleman called Sir Rupert Hay. At that time the Foreign Office, although it had taken over responsibility for the Gulf States after the War, had not got anyone who really knew that part of the world very well. Rupert Hay was the last of the Indian Political Service Political Residents and he supervised the Political Agents in Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the Trucial States – now UAE - and the Consul General in Muscat, the Sultanate of Muscat and Oman it was called at the time. Then after a few months he retired from the scene and was succeeded by the first Foreign Office Political Resident who was Bernard Burrows. He had come via a rather unusual promotion from Counsellor in Washington.

MM: That was a pretty extraordinary posting, wasn't it?

IL: Although not an Arabic trained member of the Service, he had had a lot of experience in the Foreign Office dealing with that part of the world and had also had a posting to Cairo, before going to Washington.

MM: Oh, so not so extraordinary!

IL: No, it was a natural progression.

MM: So how long were you in this part of the world?

IL: From Christmas 1952 until March 1956 I oscillated between Bahrain, the Political Residency where I was the Third and then the Second Secretary, and the Political Agency in Sharjah which was the office which looked after the seven Trucial States.

MM: And were you subject to Sir Rupert Hay's guidance in those places or were there separate agents?

IL: Well in Sharjah I was first of all under a senior colleague named Michael Weir, who had been in MECAS the year before me, and he had as another underling the Hon Martin Buckmaster, who was also at MECAS the year before me, and we shared a tiny little office in the Sharjah agency which very soon was dubbed by those around us as 'the Hons' cupboard'.

MM: And that finished in 1956. Was that before the Suez fiasco?

IL: It was. But interestingly, I think, just before I left there was an incident in Bahrain involving Selwyn Lloyd which, on reflection, I suspect may have affected his judgement at the time of Suez a few months later. Selwyn Lloyd was on his way to a meeting in Karachi and he dropped in on the way in, first of all, Cairo and that coincided with King Hussein's rather sudden and unexpected sacking of Glubb Pasha. Selwyn Lloyd thought that this had been deliberately timed for his visit to Cairo so that Gamal Abdul Nasser could snub him. So he arrived with this chip on his shoulder in Bahrain a couple of days later and, on his way from the airport with his entourage, the vehicles were involved in a minor local riot with stones being thrown and what-not, and people shouting rude things through the car windows at Selwyn Lloyd. That's what he thought; he thought it was all part of this Nasser-inspired plot. In fact what the people were shouting through the car windows was, "Belgrave go home!" Belgrave was Sir Charles Belgrave who was the Ruler's adviser - British, but quite separate from the Political Residency. And so it seemed to me later on, having got this rather exaggerated notion that Nasser was behind everything that went wrong in that part of the world, it probably affected his judgement.

MM: But then the Egyptians were very active, weren't they, in stirring up anti-imperialist fervour in all sorts of places.

IL: Yes they were. All this was sort of post-War, post-imperial reaction, which was Arab nationalism more or less at its peak because, after the War when the British no longer had the economic means nor the political will to run the Empire in the way they had before the war, and got out of the sub-continent, they also got out of Palestine, and this led to a new movement called Pan-Arabism which operated at various levels, mostly at an emotional level. The Arabs weren't quite as united as they liked to make people believe and they had rather vivid imaginations about their glorious

past which they wanted to revive; and all this combined with resentment at long years of foreign domination, particularly by the British in that part of the world.

This reflected itself in by far the most interesting thing that happened during my service in Bahrain. A High Executive Committee emerged on the local scene demanding things of the then Ruler which we ourselves had granted to our most backward colonies at least fifty years before: more say in what went on, fairer distribution of the oil revenues and so on. Now, in 1954 or thereabouts, this High Executive Committee really got the bit between its teeth and there were local demonstrations against the ruling family. Bernard Burrows thought that we should get to know these people so that we should know what was going on, and I was deputed to maintain, certainly not an open, but not a particularly clandestine relationship with them, which was going quite nicely until one day the Ruler sent for Bernard Burrows and said, "I hear that the young men in your Residency are hob-nobbing with my opposition. I won't have it! If you want to know what's going on in my island, you come and ask me!" So that was the end of a beautiful friendship as far as I was concerned. But I think the real lesson behind that was that, in those days in the Gulf, we were formally responsible for the foreign affairs and defence of these States. We had no standing to intervene in their internal affairs, though we did have a certain degree of extra-territorial jurisdiction that was a hangover from the Ottoman "capitulations". We had treaties with all of them going back many years. These Gulf States were not protectorates as in the Aden situation; they were British Protected States. But these were fine distinctions which the outside world never understood, so that we were in the position of what I call responsibility without power. In other words people thought that everything that happened, or did not happen, in those places was the responsibility of the British Government. And in Bahrain, in particular, that was far from being the case. We did try to guide them but there was a definite limit to the extent to which we could enforce what we thought they should be doing. In the Trucial States the situation was somewhat different. They were far more backward; they hadn't at that time got any oil and we still had rather more influence in practice on what went on. The judicial role we had there was a big one; one actually sat in court cases involving foreigners.

MM: By 'foreigners' you mean non-British and non-Trucial.

IL: Exactly. Also we got involved quite deeply in administering some aspects of life in the Trucial States. They had very little money except for what the oil companies paid for exploration rights. The British Government gave a modest amount of economic aid, and that led us to establish something called the Trucial States Development Council, which was a very modest affair but was a building

block from which, eventually in 1971, the United Arab Emirates emerged and now, of course, is one of the oil-richest countries in the region. So we did get involved much more with internal affairs, whatever the formal situation may be, in the Trucial States than we did in Bahrain. I found it absolutely fascinating because I don't know of any other diplomatic posting at that time which combined diplomacy, administration and judicial, which was a very unusual training. And most of the diplomacy, I must say, was devoted not to maintaining relations between Britain and the seven Trucial Rulers, but maintaining the peace among the Trucial Rulers themselves, with their petty territorial disputes and so on, reinforced by the belief, that turned out to be right, that oil might be found in any of them at any given moment. And it was eventually found to an enormous extent in Abu Dhabi, which was the main State, and in neighbouring Dubai. In those days, I can remember, I actually felt a considerable degree of embarrassment at the way in which these seven poor Trucial Rulers had to lick our boots. Twenty years later, after the sudden access of oil wealth and all that, I felt even more embarrassed over the extent to which we had to lick theirs. Full circle!

Return to the Foreign Office in 1956 and reaction to Suez

MM: Anyhow you came back to the Foreign Office in 1956, were there for three years, so therefore you were in the Foreign Office at the time of Suez. Have you got any observations to make about that?

IL: Yes. First of all I thank my lucky stars that I wasn't at the time in a department dealing with the Middle East. I was in a dreary department called Economic Relations Department. I remember being so thoroughly ashamed about that action at Suez, which was based on duplicity, dishonesty and total misjudgement, the kind which, if I may interpolate here, we've not experienced again until 2003. When I heard of the bombing of Port Said, I actually wept for shame.

MM: That we could do that!

IL: That we could do that! And there was such a variety of stories put around to explain why we were doing it. First of all it was to separate the combatants, the Israelis and the Egyptians, although the Israelis were well within Egyptian territory by the time we decided to do that. Then there was unblocking the Canal and only finally did anyone admit that the object of the exercise was to topple Nasser. Every time a Government spokesman opened his mouth, he told a different story. I remember at the time recalling that, on my nursery wall at home, there used to be a plaque which said, "The advantage of telling the truth is that you don't have to remember what you said." Even if the Suez

operation had succeeded, and it's ironic now to look back and reflect that it did not succeed largely because the Americans put a stop to it - even if it had succeeded, I think we would have been faced with occupying Egypt, a hostile country, and probably other parts of the Middle East as well, with the sort of results, I guess, that we're witnessing in Iraq to-day.

MM: Couldn't we have just reoccupied the Canal Zone?

IL: I don't think we could. We had evacuated the Canal Zone only fifteen months before this, partly because we realised it was no longer politically a viable proposition, and partly because with retrenchment abroad we really couldn't afford to keep troops there any longer.

MM: Yes, it was extraordinary really, wasn't it? Quite extraordinary. Anyway, you were in the Economic Relations Department and you must have seen some repercussions there too.

IL: Not directly. The people that saw the repercussions were the people on the oil desk in the Economic Relations Department. My particular role had to do with things like the Special United Nations Fund for Economic Development, or SUNFED for the Unfed, as we called it; rather esoteric topics of that kind. I found myself dealing more with papers about Burmese rice and Pakistani jute than the Middle East. Fortunately after about eighteen months I managed to wrestle free of the Economic Relations Department, and I was transferred to what was then called Eastern Department where I was on the desk dealing with Saudi Arabia, and Muscat and Oman.

MM: So your expertise in the field was at last becoming useful.

IL: Yes, but I have to add that the expertise was on occasions rather sadly lacking. At that time we didn't have any relations with Saudi Arabia; they'd broken off relations because of Suez. So we had no embassy in Jeddah, which was then the capital, so it fell to me as the Desk Officer to write the Annual Review for Saudi Arabia in 1958. 1958 was a very critical year in the Middle East. The Iraq Hashemite monarch was overthrown and assassinated; there was trouble with Jordan and the Lebanon, and we and the Americans sent troops to try and keep things in order, and all these crises seemed to have occurred without the Foreign Office or the embassies on the ground foreseeing them at all. I was determined that the same criticism should never be levelled at the Saudi Arabian desk, and I studied the situation in Saudi Arabia very closely, and came to the conclusion that there were all the signs of

incipient revolution there and we were not going to be caught out. And I freely predicted that would happen, and am still waiting for it!

Years later, after I retired, I worked in the Sensitivity Review Unit, which was the part of the Foreign Office which dealt with the papers coming up for release, or not, under the Thirty Year Rule. And, on my first day, I opened my first box and in it the first paper was the Saudi Arabian Annual Review for 1958, with my signature on it and its prediction, which proved so badly wrong. But of course I wasn't allowed to suppress it under the prevailing ethos of the Sensitivity Review Unit, which was to release as much as you possibly could; quite right too.

MM: So what happened to your review? Still there?

IL: It's still there! A standing indictment to my expertise! But a more interesting thing I had to do at that time, 1958, was my responsibility for Muscat and Oman. This is a slightly long story, if you can bear it. While I was still out in the Gulf, we were dealing from the Agency in Sharjah, there was something of a *cause célèbre* at the time, which was the Buraimi crisis. Buraimi was an oasis on the borders between Abu Dhabi and Oman and six of the villages belonged to Abu Dhabi, three of them belonged to Oman. Nobody had really taken much notice of them until Aramco, which was the American oil company in Saudi Arabia, thought that there were promising signs of oil in the area and the Saudis, in August 1952, sent an occupying force into the Buraimi Oasis and took over these villages. Formally, we were representing the Ruler of Abu Dhabi in this dispute, informally, but much more closely, as it happened, the Sultan of Muscat and Oman. The Sultan assembled a large army which he was going to send across the mountains from the Batinah Coast in Oman - it's the Gulf coast of Oman. When Whitehall and Washington got to hear that this army was about to march on Buraimi to evict the Saudis, grave doubts were expressed; to be more accurate, the Americans put great pressure on the British Government to tell the Sultan to call off the dogs. A telegram was sent to the Consul General in Muscat saying, "You must at once go to Sohar," which was the coastal town where the army was being assembled, "And tell the Sultan that he can't do it."

So the Consul General, a chap called Leslie Chauncy, who was another old Indian retread, climbed into his Land Rover and made the three or four hour journey up the coast to Sohar, saw His Highness, Sultan Said bin Taimur, who said to him, "If that's the message you have for my troops, you'd better tell them yourself!" Which was rather a shrewd move. So Chauncy did, the army was stood down, and the Sultan never forgave us. What happened next was there was an arbitration tribunal set up, an

international tribunal, to make a judgement about the rights and wrongs in Buraimi. The arbitration tribunal was suborned by the Saudis, which caused the British member of it, Sir Reader Bullard, to resign; the whole process collapsed and, in October 1955, the Buraimi Oasis was reoccupied by the Sultan's troops plus the Trucial Oman Levies, which was a kind of gendarmerie which we had set up in the Trucial States round about 1951/'52, and so the position was restored. But the reason the Sultan never forgave us was that he reckoned that during the time the Saudis had occupied the Buraimi Oasis between August '52 and October '55 they were able to do a great deal of work underground in the interior of his country. This then led, in 1957/'58 to the Jebel Akhdar War, in which, though the Omanis are rather shy of admitting it these days, the SAS, under the redoubtable Colonel Johnny Watts, managed to restore the Sultan's authority over the interior leaders who had been suborned by the Saudis.

I mention all this because all that led, in 1958, to the Sultan coming to London to negotiate with Julian Amery, who was then a junior Minister in, I think, the War Office, a series of agreements whereby on our side we obtained certain facilities in the Island of Masirah and a place near Salalah, the very south west of Oman, and the Sultan in turn obtained help in the form of a certain amount of money but, most importantly, loan-service personnel to build up his own armed forces. And from that stemmed our commitment to Oman on the military side which later took the form not only of helping out so that the Sultan could restore his authority in the oil-rich interior of Oman but also later, in the 1960s and '70s, helped him to deal with a rebellion in his southern province of Dhofar, which was indigenous but later supported by the Marxist regime in South Yemen as Aden became after independence. So all that was part of my remit as the Muscat and Oman Desk Officer in 1958; absolutely fascinating work.

MM: Of course it has to be said, doesn't it, that, since we didn't have an embassy in Jeddah at the crucial time, it was very difficult really to know how shaky, or how strong the House of Saud was at that stage.

IL: Yes - it still is!

MM: We've an embassy there.

IL: We have an embassy but I think it's still very difficult to.....

MM: And of course we've got numerous military advisers.

IL: Absolutely. By and large my impression is that people who go and serve there, whether as diplomats or military men, tend to take a more optimistic view of the future of the monarchy, as indeed happened in the later part of my career in Iran.

MM: Let's leave the Foreign Office and your time in the Eastern Department behind us and move on to your next appointment, which was Karachi in 1959-62.

Posting to Pakistan in 1959-62

IL: Correct. Well I was promoted First Secretary and went to join the High Commission in Karachi where I was the only Foreign Office, as distinct from the Commonwealth Relations Office, member of the staff. They always did have a Foreign Office chap on the staff there but he didn't deal with external affairs. He was put on the Pakistan internal desk.

MM: Oh really! Rather unlike Delhi then. The Foreign Office man there was always external affairs.

IL: I didn't mind that a bit except for one minor item which was that, when the Royal Visit to the sub-continent took place in 1961, I was out on a limb but having to deal with the work of the External First Secretary while he coped with the visits! But it was a very interesting time to be in Pakistan because, in October 1958 - a few months before I arrived there - a gentleman called Ayub Khan mounted a military coup and it caused a number of people, particularly in Commonwealth circles, to say "This isn't cricket, old boy! We can't have military dictatorships in the Commonwealth." But in my view, and a lot of other people's I think, for the first three or four years the Ayub Khan regime was the best Government Pakistan has ever had, before or since. Ayub was a Muslim of course, but a moderate one. He was a plain, down-to-earth soldier without much political guile, but he and his Government did manage to turn things around, in the sense that the economy improved, and relations with India were better than they'd ever been. I remember Pandit Nehru coming to Karachi to sign the Indus Waters Agreement at that time. Ayub also had a stab at introducing a measure of democracy which he called Basic Democracy, which fundamentally was to apply democratic principles at a level which local people could really understand, and with a series of village councils, district councils and provincial councils and so on, it wasn't a bad idea at all.

A rather amusing offshoot of this was, when the Queen and Prince Philip came in 1961, we in the High Commission in Karachi found ourselves writing speeches for the Queen in which she said, "Of course we fully understand that not everyone can follow the Westminster brand of democracy and here, in Pakistan, you are fashioning your own particular kind; and jolly good luck to you!" Our colleagues in Delhi were beavering away writing speeches for the Queen to say, "How marvellous that you Indians are following the pattern of the Mother of Parliaments." The Pakistanis said, "You can't possibly be under any illusion that Nehru is running anything other than a one-party state disguised as democracy," whereas the Indians asked "How dare the Queen praise this ridiculous system of Basic Democracy!" So we got the worst of both worlds.

Problems which face military regimes

The trouble that Ayub had was the trouble which besets many military regimes. I discovered exactly the same thing happening ten years later with General Gowon in Nigeria. They take power and they say, "We're going to clear up the mess left by the politicians and, in six months, we'll hand the country back to civilian rule." But the first thing that happens is that they find the mess was even worse than they thought, and the second thing that happens is that the military men get into the mess up to their necks. Corruption, and the fact that they clamp down on the freedom of the press, they abolish or, at any rate, restrict the activities of parliament, and they get totally out of touch with public opinion. All these things happened in due course to Ayub but this was after I left. During the time I was there, he had other problems. One was that, being a moderate Muslim, he came up against what would now be called, wrongly but understandably, fundamentalism. The Mullahs, particularly in the North West Frontier area of Pakistan, had enormous influence over the ordinary villagers. They told them all sorts of extraordinary things about what was in the Holy Koran, and these villagers believed it, and Ayub was determined that the country must not succumb to that kind of extremism. So that was one problem he had.

The other big problem he had was with East Pakistan. East Pakistan was united with West Pakistan at the time of independence in 1947 almost solely because it was Muslim. But the geographical distance between them and the fact that West Pakistan was very much of the Middle East while East Pakistan was very much of South East Asia meant that this joining together was very unrealistic. I remember Curzon referred to Bengal, as it then was, that became East Pakistan, as a 'low-lying country inhabited by low, lying people', which was very unfair. They were extremely capable, intelligent people. They

were grossly over-populated, they were subject to, as they still are, to the most terrible visitations of nature: floods, typhoons, goodness knows what.

MM: Cut off from their capital city!

IL: Indeed. Which was Calcutta, that's right. So Ayub was well aware of this and he did his best to accommodate the East Pakistanis but they, with a funny sort of psychology, felt that, if you tried to help them, you were being patronizing and, if you didn't, you were being neglectful. Ayub was well aware of this and he sent his most trusty lieutenant, General Azam, as Governor to Dacca to try and court the East Pakistanis but I think he'd only been there about six months before Azam decided to throw in his lot with the East Pakistanis. So that didn't work and well, eventually we know what happened in 1970-71; East Pakistan became Bangladesh.

So Ayub had all these problems: corruption, lack of being in touch with ordinary people, the religious factor and the East Pakistani division. And eventually he was removed and the one man in his Government who really had a political head on his shoulders, a gentleman called Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, took over. He was somewhat leftwing leaning, a very clever man but he eventually got overthrown by another military dictator and hanged, which was an absolutely monstrous event.

MM: Of course you've glossed over the fact that the capital of West Pakistan was Karachi in those days and the High Commission was there. Did that cause any problems? I mean the fact that it was down there on the coast, on the steamy coast?

IL: It caused problems for Ayub. Although Islamabad in my time was no more than a pipe-dream of Ayub's, that is what eventually happened. Ayub's objections to Karachi were twofold: one was that, as you say, it was extremely steamy and he felt that the Civil Servants were all huddled over their fans and air-conditioners and not doing any work, so it would be better to get them up into a more normal climate; and secondly it was the business centre of the country and corruption was rife and the Civil Service was involved in it; and of course thirdly it was the nearest point to the thousands and thousands of refugees who came across the borders after Independence. I think I'm right in saying that at that time, 1947, Karachi was quite a charming little fishing town of about 300,000 people and, by the time we got there twelve years later, there were two and a half million people there; grossly over-populated with the result that ordinary facilities couldn't keep pace with it. So on the whole Ayub thought Karachi was a bad place for the capital to be and he found this more agreeable spot in

the Potwar Plain not far from Rawalpindi. Part of the Government had moved to Rawalpindi by the time I left and I remember going up to talk to people in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs there who were not actually huddling over their fans and air-conditioners doing no work - they were huddling over their oil heating stoves doing no work! As for corruption, I think the long arm of corruption reached certainly as far as Rawalpindi and Islamabad.

MM: So that was quite an interesting little interlude in the Commonwealth.

IL: Well it was very interesting. My one regret about those years was actually being in Karachi which was, for reasons I've just mentioned, a very uncomfortable place. It was rather like the Gulf climate but for nine months of the year instead of six. Fortunately I was able to get out and about and the rest of the country was delightful, and I went on a number of tours with my High Commissioner, who was Sir Alexander Symon.

I don't know whether you want me to expatiate on Sir Alexander Symon. He started off as a boy clerk in the India Office and could never forget it, or let anyone else forget it! He was a real Yorkshire terrier. His method of operating with his staff was to go and have long talks with Pakistani Ministers or officials. He would then come back and summon his First Secretary or whoever was responsible for the particular subject he was dealing with. He would give a long exposé of his interview and he would finish up by saying, "You know my mind; now you go and put that into words!", which was not always easy. One little anecdote, if I may, which I recall with a mixture of amusement and horror - he and his wife Dodo, who was a very simple, unpretentious, delightful woman, shared a birthday on May 13th. One year they gave a party for the senior staff at their Residence, which was called Runnymede, and half way through dinner the word went round that, when it was over, we would be expected each to do a party piece, which meant that all conversation came to a halt while people racked their memories and their minds for suitable contributions. We all trooped out onto the verandah after dinner and did our party pieces. The most memorable was a rather rude rhyme which came from the Military Adviser, and it was all about some hostelry further north, in Rawalpindi or Lahore, and the rhyme went something like this:

"What will you have?" said the waiter,
Pensively picking his nose.
"I'll have boiled eggs, you bastard.
You can't stick your fingers in those."

And there was more in the same vein. Anyway, at the end of our party pieces, Sir Alexander got up and said he'd enjoyed them all enormously and was sure all of us had too, so he was going to play them back to us on his tape-recorder which he'd carefully concealed throughout the proceedings.

He stayed as High Commissioner for seven years, and that was because he became Dean of the Diplomatic Corps and the next in line was the Russian, and the Pakistanis said, "We can't possibly have the Russian as Dean of the Corps. Please keep Sir Alexander here until the Russians have gone." They then retired and the delightful Dodo, some months afterwards, wrote us a charming letter in which she expatiated on the difficulties of retirement and said, "Alec and I are forever getting out of taxis and forgetting to close the door and pay the fare!"

I got on very well with him; I think because I was the Foreign Office chap he treated me with undue deference. A lot of people found him a bit too hot to handle. Because of his background, he could be rather pompous.

MM: He had a fearsome reputation in the CRO.

IL: Yes, I can imagine! He was then succeeded for the rest of my time by an admirable man called Morrice James who had been in Delhi and in Lahore, and he was one of those people for whom I have enormous respect because, whomever you took to see him, even though he was quite a lowly minion - I remember at that time I was involved in something called the cheap book scheme, the low price book scheme for university students, and I used to have to wheel quite a lot of visitors in to see him - whoever it was, he had this wonderful gift of making that guy feel that he was the one person he wanted to see that morning. And unfortunately he died not long afterwards, having been ennobled as Lord St Brides.

MM: That's right. Very sad really. I remember poor Elizabeth James died several years earlier than Morrice. Well, there we are. That's Pakistan. So from there you came back, still as a First Secretary, and went as Head of Chancery to Tripoli, Libya.

Posting to Libya in 1962

IL: Tripoli, Libya, yes. I had been in the Army there, as I've mentioned, in 1947/48. One of the first things I remember when we arrived in Tripoli in 1962 was that I said to my family, "I must take you up to Garian because, in the broken-down Italian barracks where I had served as a Lieutenant and then Captain in the Royal Artillery, during the War a bored American soldier....."

MM: German! A German soldier!

IL: A German soldier? Oh, you know the story.

MM: Well, go on!

IL: He had painted on one of the walls of the barracks a picture of the coastline of North Africa in the shape of a delectable lady reclining on her side. Every day when I went to work at Garian I could have examined this thing, but it was there and I just didn't bother! I said to them, "You must come and see the lady of Garian." We had to pay for the privilege; it had become a tourist site.

MM: I'm surprised they didn't ban it!

IL: But Tripolitania, and Libya generally in those days, was another very interesting place to be because, up till that time, we'd had quite a special relationship with the Libyans, based on our friendship with, and service to, King Idris, who was not nearly as old and frail as people thought. One of the conspiracy theories that used to go around was that King Idris would take a weekly trip around the town in his Rolls Royce just to show himself, but in fact, said the Libyan opposition, he had died some years before but, in order to maintain their hold on Libya, the British had made a wax effigy which they stuck in the back of the Rolls.

However, there were strong winds blowing from the direction of Nasser's Egypt at the time and these meant that the King came under increasing pressure to reduce, if not to eliminate altogether, the British and American military presences in Libya. And in January 1964 - we were between Ambassadors at the time and, although the Consul General in Benghazi was in charge of the Embassy, because the main part of the Embassy was in Tripoli, I was effectively Chargé d'Affaires.....

MM: He remained in Benghazi?

IL: He remained in Benghazi, yes. Getting together with my colleagues in January 1964, we thought these disturbances were rather serious and perhaps heralded a rather significant change in our relationships, although the received wisdom at the time was that, although opposition to the monarchy was quite strong in Tripolitania, in Cyrenaica he had the solid backing of all the backwoodsmen from the desert who would never let him down. We heard something similar in Aden some years later and it proved equally ill-founded.

Then the new Ambassador arrived.

MM: Who was? Donald Maitland?

IL: Do I have to mention the name? It happens to have been the one Ambassador with whom I never established a rapport. 'No names no pack drill!' It was his first ambassadorship and, when he arrived and he had advice from his staff that things were not going as well as we would like them to go, it was not something he thought should form the basis of his early reports to the Foreign Office. And he said, "Oh, you don't want to take too much notice of this. They will go on saying this but they don't really mean it, and everything will change." I said, "I think I can just see the last British soldier leaving the beaches of Tripoli with a Libyan in attendance saying, 'Don't worry, old boy. We don't really mean it.'" Anyway, over a series of changes of government and two abdications by Idris which he was persuaded to rescind, the situation really did get to the point at which we had to negotiate our withdrawal, which was completed after I left. The interesting thing about that part of my work was not so much the negotiations with the Libyans but negotiations with our own military and the Treasury and the Ministry of Defence, who were determined to make the best of a bad job and drive a hard bargain. They said, "You must tell the Libyans of course we are prepared to withdraw but we'll be leaving a certain amount of equipment behind and we expect compensation." I argued that the Libyans were quite likely to say, "Oh thank you very much but we don't want it." What would we do then? Anyway, that was quite an interesting little interlude.

MM: So what had we still got there then?

IL: We had got the garrison in Benghazi; we had got part use of the airfield which, in my Army days, used to be called Castel Benito and was now called Idris; and we had quite a considerable

military presence outside Tripoli, and with all the rather pleasant accoutrements that went with it as far as we were concerned: the British Forces Broadcasting Service, British Forces Post Office, the Naafi, the Officers' Club, all these things which made our lives much more tolerable. But eventually all of them had to go and so did the Americans' airbase at Wheelus Field just down the road from Tripoli.

MM: Wheelus was closed as well, was it? And was Castel Benito still a joint user airfield, RAF as well as civil?

IL: Yes, in my time.

MM: So nothing had changed really, except that Libya had found oil.

IL: Oil was first discovered in 1962, which made a difference. And they had quite clever people who were planning to spend a lot of the oil money on development and not just waste it on sophisticated weaponry and God knows what, but the machine really worked too slowly and people got a bit impatient, and wanted to know when they were going to get the benefit of all this. And another thing I remember which I found amusing at the time and still do, one of the main concessionaires in Cyrenaica was BP. They found oil right down in the interior and they wanted to build pipelines to the coast at Tobruk to export it. But the route lay through all kinds of different tribal areas and wayleaves had to be negotiated with each of them. This was taking such a long time that - and he told me this himself - the BP General Manager, a chap called John Haines, said he got so fed up after months and months of frustration that he went to King Idris and said, "Your Majesty, during the War I was a prisoner in Tobruk, prisoner of the Germans. I spent a great deal of time and effort trying to find ways of getting out of Tobruk. I never dreamed that, all these years later, I would be equally frustrated trying to find ways in again." And the King was so impressed by this that, according to John Haines, he cut the red tape and they got their facilities in Tobruk.

MM: Good story! And, going back to the facilities and so on that you mentioned. Presumably the British Military Hospital was still there? Was the Officers' Club still the Uaddan?

IL: No, the Uaddan in my time was the most fashionable hotel. The Officers' Club was at a place called Piccola Capri a little further along the coast.

MM: So that was a new post-independence development.

So you left there without too much regret?

IL: I was there for three and a half years and was ready to move on, for personal and other reasons. But I enjoyed it.

MM: Did you have the same Ambassador throughout?

IL: No. My first Ambassador was a delightful man called Charles Stewart, who had been Consul or Consul General in Jerusalem years before. He wasn't an Arabist but he was the sort of chap, rather like the boss I had in Sharjah at one time called Christopher Pirie-Gordon; not particularly zealous in pursuit of his official duties but, when he had to be, very effective.

But the thing I really remember about him, if I'm permitted another anecdote, is that he had a most wonderful gift of telling stories against himself. And one particular one, I remember, related to the Chinese Ambassador. He was a Chinese Nationalist and, by that time, the Chinese Nationalists had relations only with the Americans and with the Libyan host government. Everybody else had recognised the Communist Chinese. The Chinese Nationalist Ambassador was a very agreeable man called Chen and he was a great friend, with his wife, of Charles and Caroline Stewart - they played golf together, they played bridge together. But of course they could never be invited to anything official like the Queen's Birthday Party because we didn't have relations. One day Chen rang up Charles Stewart and said, "Charles, I've got a big problem and I'd like your advice." "What's the problem, old chap?" And he said, "You know that our colleague, the Dean of the Corps, the Turkish Ambassador, is about to leave and, according to the usual custom, the next man to take over should take over the papers of the Deanship and give a farewell party and so on. Unfortunately," Chen said, "The next man in line is the Egyptian, and the Egyptian firmly refuses to have anything to do with this." "Why's that?" "Well, because they have no diplomatic relations." "So where do you come into it?" "Well, I'm next in seniority and feel I should try to help, but I don't quite see how". So Charles said, "Well look, Chen, couldn't you go to the Egyptian and say, 'I perfectly understand the official position but, on a personal basis, couldn't you give this farewell party for the Turk?'" "But I can't possibly do that, Charles!" "Why on earth not?" "Because I have no relations with the Egyptian." "In that case, Chen," said Charles, "Why the bloody hell are you ringing *me* up?"

MM: So an interesting diplomatic situation! You mention that the Americans had to give up Wheelus Field. Did they resent that, or did that cause them any problems?

IL: My recollection - and I don't think I had a great deal to do with it at the time - was that they were not happy about it but they accepted it as perfectly understandable in the circumstances, given the pressures the Libyans were under.

MM: So what is the position now? Which is the main Tripoli airport? Is it Wheelus Field?

IL: No, I think it's Idris.

MM: Idris, still.

IL: I think so. I don't honestly know. I've never been back.

Return to Central Department of the Foreign Office 1966 and dealing with Foreign Secretary George Brown

MM: So let's move on then. You came back to the Foreign Office in 1966.

IL: Yes, and I found myself in a completely different environment as Assistant Head of Central Department. Central Department dealt with all the European countries other than communist countries and West Europe. So we had the Nordics, we had the neutrals Austria and Switzerland, and we had Greece and Turkey. And although the main problems that arose in my time, between '66 and '68, were Gibraltar and Cyprus, which were respectively Colonial Office and Commonwealth Relations Office responsibilities, we of course got heavily involved. In fact my Head of Department, a very remarkable man called Alan Davidson, used to keep those two subjects - particularly Gibraltar, which was at the top of the priority list at the time - he kept those very much to himself and I was deputed to look after the other parts of the parish, except when he went on leave when I was supposed to pick up the threads and deal with them!

But it was a very interesting time. Alan Davidson had the reputation of being rather severe and austere, which indeed he was; he was a very meticulous operator. But I think I learned more in my time from him than from almost any other person I worked for.

And then, of course, way above him the presiding genius at the time was a gentleman called George Brown, who caused endless problems but I always found him personally a very warm-hearted man.

MM: George Brown! When not drunk!

IL: I remember one occasion when a deputation of Labour MPs came to see him to object to the Labour Government's policy on the Greek Colonels. This delegation made a long spiel in which they said it was absolutely outrageous that this particular Government should have any truck with a military regime like that one, and we ought to expel them from NATO and throw them out of the Western European Union etc etc. And George Brown listened patiently enough to all this and, when they'd finished, he said, "Well gentlemen, there's nothing between us in our objectives here; we all want to see Greece return to the path of parliamentary democracy, but your way will not achieve it. If you have differences with people like that, you've got to keep talking to them", and so on and so forth on the lines of the departmental brief. And at the end of about half an hour they were a little bit mollified. He showed them to the door and he shut it, and he turned to his Private Secretary and myself as he went towards the drinks cabinet, and he said, "You know, none of that bloody lot could run a toffee shop in this country, but they all know how to run Greece."

But he did get himself into a lot of hot water by not reading his briefs and there's one famous occasion when he was giving a farewell lunch for a departing foreign ambassador. The Permanent Under Secretary at the time, Paul Gore-Booth, was there and George Brown literally got up at the lunch and said, "I'm supposed to make a speech about you but, as nobody's told me anything about you, I'll have to do the best I can without a brief." And he had been sent a brief; he just hadn't bothered to read it. It was an outrageous thing to say in front of the PUS.

MM: I daresay Paul Gore-Booth knew all about that.

IL: Yes. We all got used to him and his trouble was that he wanted to be seen to be active, to be seen to be doing things. There was another occasion when I think there'd been a crisis in Athens - I think it was the time that King Constantine had made an abortive attempt to remove the Colonels, and our Ambassador, Michael Stewart, had been in London for consultations and was on his way back to his post. George Brown was at a NATO meeting in Brussels, and the 'phone rang at about 7.0 o'clock in the evening. I recognised the far-from-dulcet tones at the other end. "Where's Michael Stewart?" it

barked. I said, “Well, Sir, we know that he left to get back to Athens but we believe there’s been a delay *en route* and we aren’t quite sure where he is at the moment.” “Are you trying to be deliberately obstructive?” he said. “Get hold of him at once. Find out where he is and tell him to ring me.” And I spent the rest of the evening tracking Michael Stewart down to Nicosia, spending a lot of money in the process no doubt. And Michael Stewart rang George Brown from Nicosia, so George Brown was able to sit down at dinner with his NATO colleagues saying that he was in close touch with the situation, though Michael Stewart knew no more than we did about what was going on.

MM: Yes, oh well, I’m afraid that sounds fairly typical really. Sad.

IL: I had a lot of encounters with him in my later career when he was out of office but still thought he could descend on the Middle East to settle this or that crisis. He became a bit of a problem.

Posting to Aden as Counsellor 1968-69

MM: Now to 1968-69 and you are going to Aden as Counsellor on promotion.

IL: Yes. A rather unhappy Aden gained its independence in November 1967 and I arrived about three months later I think. Aden was not a great monument to British imperial endeavour, I must say, and one of the things that went wrong was that, in the same way that the Cyrenaican backwoodsmen in Libya in whom we’d placed so much trust didn’t prevent the eviction of King Idris in 1969, so in Aden we had reckoned that there were a lot of hot-headed trade unionists who were going to be very troublesome, but we had some reliable tribal rulers in the Aden Protectorates in the hinterland, and we put our confidence in them. When things finally got out of hand in 1967, it was indeed the hinterland which ruled but it was not the tribal rulers but the hotheads of the National Liberation Front. It was they who established the first and, so far, still the only Marxist regime in the Middle East under the name of the People’s Republic of South Yemen. They were dedicated to scientific socialism at home and the support of liberation movements abroad. So that was also one of the many instances of where the British had cobbled together a federation – in this case of the Aden Colony and the Aden Protectorates - which didn’t work out as we had planned it at all. So one found oneself in the early part of 1968 sitting around a table negotiating with people who one knew had been responsible for shooting one’s compatriots dead only a matter of months before, which wasn’t very comfortable.

But that period didn't last very long because what we were getting round the table about was the post-independence financial settlement. We had promised the Government which we thought was going to succeed us when we left a sum of I think about £60m over five years. When it turned out to have such a very different complexion, we scaled that down to something like £1.2m. They were naturally pretty upset about that and, not very surprisingly, they washed their hands of us and turned to the Russians who felt bound to support what they thought was going to be a nice little puppet regime; that didn't really work out either.

So I only spent fifteen months there, most of which was devoted to telling the Foreign Office that, in the new circumstances, there wasn't really a job for a Counsellor to do.

MM: They agreed!

IL: They agreed!

MM: What was the diplomatic institution that you were a Counsellor in? Was it an Embassy?

IL: Yes it was. The first British Embassy to the independent South Yemen Republic.

MM: So who was the Ambassador?

IL: Headed by a really delightful man called Robin Hooper, who had a tremendous war record but, with it, modesty amounting to acute shyness. I had come across him when I first joined in 1951 and he was Head of Personnel Department. I'm not sure which of us was the more embarrassed. He shifted from one foot to the other saying in his quiet way, "I'm trying to think of some advice I can give you. One thing, however, I think I would say is don't get married before you've been in the service at least five years." Now I had to tell him that I had ignored that advice to very good effect.

And then there was a fairly long *interregnum* in which the Foreign Office had lined up a successor to Robin Hooper, and I duly applied for *agrément* to this chap, and nothing happened. Month in month out I didn't get any answer and, meanwhile, rumours had reached us from the direction of Nicosia that someone called John Phillips had his bags packed with the Aden address on them. Eventually I had to go to the Foreign Ministry and say, "Look, this is getting very embarrassing. I really must have an answer. The Foreign Office are getting rather impatient." A diffident Permanent Secretary said,

“Well, to be truthful Mr Lucas, our difficulty is that the man you’ve suggested is called Phillips and we happen to know that he was refused as Ambassador in Saudi Arabia some years ago because he was a Jew.” And I said, “Well, absolutely no relation at all; this man is John Phillips, who has a lot of experience in the Arab world.” And they said, “Oh, well that’s all right then!”

MM: How incredible!

IL: You probably know the story of Horace Phillips. He was a brilliant Arabist and served as Counsellor in Jeddah and the Saudis loved him and accepted him as Ambassador, whereupon some Jewish newspaper came up with a headline saying, “First Jewish British Ambassador in Saudi Arabia.” And the Saudis said, “We’re very sorry about this. We’ve nothing against him at all but, in the circumstances, you’ll understand we can’t have him.” So he spent the rest of his career in places like Turkey and Indonesia.

MM: Anyhow, that was Aden.

IL: Aden - I spent fifteen very enjoyable months. Aden has the reputation of being really the end of the world. When you stay there any length of time, you get to know that it has something to offer. I played more cricket than I’ve ever done in my life, a lot of tennis, and I really quite enjoyed it.

MM: But no job for a Counsellor! You went from there to become Deputy High Commissioner in Kaduna, Nigeria.

Posting to Kaduna, Nigeria as Deputy High Commissioner: Nigerian Civil War

IL: Well it was to the six northern states of Nigeria. That’s what the situation was constitutionally at that time. And it was six months before the end of the civil war. And Nigeria, as you probably know - it was about the only thing I did know about it at the time - was, when it became independent in 1960 and a for a few years after that, a model of the transition from imperial rule to independence. But then, being another of these federations we’d cobbled together, the tribal and religious and other differences rose to the surface and there was a bloodbath in 1966 which included the end of an almost holy man who was their Prime Minister called Abubakar Tafawa Balewa. He had something very gracious to say on Independence; he said, “We’re grateful to the British officers whom we have known

first as masters, then as leaders and finally as partners, but always as friends.” And that was the way in which Nigerians approached us at that time. A really rather remarkable dictum I think.

MM: Were there many expatriates left in the Nigerian Civil Service at that time?

IL: Yes, particularly in my area, which covered 75% of the entire territory of Nigeria, and the reason for that was a very interesting one. When Lugard, the then Governor General of Nigeria, set up what is called the Dual Administration in the northern part, he came to a deal with the Emirs, the traditional rulers at the time. He said, “I will not interfere with your Administration. I will just put a supervisory body on top of it so we will be nominally the rulers but let you carry on in more or less your own way.” But, in return for that, he had to promise that he would not allow any of the Christian missionaries from the south to cross the Niger. Sixty years later, when Nigeria became independent, the southern part of the country that had had the benefit of the educational input of the Christian missionaries, and the Yorubas who were mostly Christians but with a substantial Muslim minority, and the Ibos who were almost totally Christian, had all the capable people. The northerners had hardly any at all. And rather than throw open their Civil Service and other positions to the Yorubas and the Ibos whom they didn’t trust further than they could throw them, they had expatriates running the show for them - mostly British but, if they couldn’t get British, people from the sub-continent and so on.

So you had that part of the country which was still rather backward. And I used to find, when I went around the six governments that I had to deal with, that there were two distinct reactions from Nigerians. Nigerian officials would say, “Oh well, you left us a pretty poor legacy in the shape of education and administration and so on.” And I would say, “Oh but your Emirs believed that, if they had had the advantages of the Christian missions up here, they would soon lose their own positions - and I daresay they were quite right - so it was partly your doing.” “Oh!” they would say. “But you should have forced us to be educated.” On the other hand I went to the Ahmadu Bello University, which was largely a British but partly an American creation both in terms of money and of personnel, and students there, when we discussed this subject, would say, “You should leave us to work out our own salvation. We don’t want your culture and your educational methods shoved down our throats.” So we were on a hiding to nothing.

Anyhow, after the bloodletting of 1966, there was a series of military coups and, at the time I arrived there, they were within six months of the end of the famous Civil War where Ojukwu and his Biafrans were trying to secede - that’s the Ibos in the Eastern Province where most of the oil happened to be

situated, and they thought they would rather like it for themselves. General Gowon, the Ayub-like figure - though not a Muslim, a Christian from the Hausa Christian community in mid-Nigeria - was determined to maintain one Nigeria. And so he did! Helped to a considerable extent by Harold Wilson's Government in London. Despite serious opposition here at home arising from the fact that night after night the television screens were flooded with pictures and stories of the starving Biafran babies and all that sort of thing, Harold Wilson reckoned that it was in Nigeria's and Britain's own interest to keep this federation in being. And he stuck to his guns - literally - and it all ended at the end of 1969 and the beginning of 1970. And we were all ready to harvest the gains of our loyalty and support when a very unfortunate incident occurred.

The Military Adviser in the Lagos High Commission, Colonel Robert Scott, had written a scathing report on the Federal Armed Forces and what an absolute shambles they were. He had inadvertently left a copy of this report on the back seat of his car, from where it found its way to the Sunday Telegraph via a gentleman called Jonathan Aitken. So a case was brought under the Official Secrets Act and, when the court came to hear this case, which turned on the wrongful use of confidential diplomatic documents, the defence for Jonathan Aitken argued that there was nothing confidential about this document; everybody knew perfectly well the Federal Armed Forces were a shambles, the documents themselves had been over-graded - shouldn't have been more than 'unclassified' - and Jonathan Aitken was exonerated, with the Sunday Telegraph. The fact that our best friends in Nigeria now knew what we really thought of them was not germane in the court's view, and that set us back a bit.

However, it didn't last all that long and I found this posting a most absorbing one. Very tough domestically but, from the work point of view - particularly during the last six months of the Civil War when the High Commissioner, first Sir Leslie Glass then Sir Cyril Pickard, were more or less confined to barracks in Lagos, I was virtually the monarch of all I surveyed. And this included visits at least once or twice a year to each of the capitals to which I was accredited, some of them three or four hundred miles away. It was fascinating.

MM: Do you remember any particular expatriate British who were left behind in the Nigerian administration?

IL: Yes, I remember in particular a very delightful Australian called St Elmo Nelson and his wife Lynette. They lived in a sort of mud house in Kano called the Gidan dan Hausa, and they were more

often than not one of one's ports of call on visits to Kano, which were quite frequent because, although Kaduna was the capital, Kano was very much the commercial centre of Northern Nigeria. And then there was the Chief Justice in the Northern States, Nigel Reed (a New Zealander, I think). A lot of the governments had British officials either in the middle ranks or pretty close to the top. That was a mixed blessing in my view because a lot of these people had served in Nigeria for ages and had probably stayed in the same regions because otherwise they would have had to learn different languages. They became even more fiercely loyal to that particular region than the Nigerians themselves, and it was my brief to preach the virtues of one Nigeria and support Gowon's efforts towards that end, and I used to think these were the people who were undermining all our efforts. They could see absolutely no good in Lagos and only their particular region deserved continued support and loyalty. They were more Nigerian than the Nigerians in a way.

They had similar problems to those that I mentioned earlier in the Pakistan context about corruption. Nigerians used to say that, though the politicians who preceded the military regime might have been reprehensible, they were better than the military because, whereas at least the politicians did things and put forward projects which were vote catchers, the military men just kept the money in their own pockets.

Also in the North, there was a really fascinating religious situation. The Hausas were commonly regarded as predominantly Muslim and the north as the Muslim area. In fact I did some research, as did other people, which revealed that probably no more than 45-50% of the Hausas were Muslim, perhaps between 5-10% were Christian, and the rest, something between 40-50%, were pagan. So there was a sort of competition for the allegiance of the pagans between the Muslims and the Christians - particularly on the part of Christian missionaries. Islam appealed to the pagans as being a third world religion rather than one associated with the imperialist past. But during the time I was there it was interesting that the Christian religion in the north was becoming more and more Nigerianised and this helped the Roman Catholic missionaries among Christians because they were more relaxed and broad-minded about things like polygamy.

But, while I was there, the very first Anglican Bishop of Northern Nigeria, a Yoruba named Festus Oluwole Segun, was appointed. A charming man, he admitted at his induction that this was the very first time he'd ever been north of the Niger, because of that past interdiction to which Lugard had agreed. It was a very different kind of Christianity from the one the missionaries were preaching. It was very much liberalised in its practices; it was very much song-and-dance, jigging and dancing up

the aisle and so on but, no doubt about it, it was a very enthusiastic kind of Christianity. And, looking back now and reading what one does read about what's going on in that part of Africa, we were very lucky that Christian/Muslim relations presented practically no problem at all.

MM: Yes indeed. Well, thank you very much for that. That's a very interesting glimpse of a fascinating country.

IL: It is.

MM: You left there and went to Copenhagen in 1972-75. Quite a contrast really.

Posting to Denmark 1972-75

IL: In those days one used to fill in a form every year called a Post Preference Form which asked questions like, "Are you happy in your post, if not why not, and where would you like to go now?" I had ignored this for the most part because I never thought that they took any notice of it. Or did the reverse of what you asked! But on this occasion I felt that my wife Christine had had long years in Arab countries and Nigeria, trying to cope with armies of indifferent servants, and it was about time that she had a change. I looked religiously through the Foreign Office list to try to find posts which were going to be vacant and which were the right seniority and which we would enjoy, and I came up with three. I think one was San Francisco, one was Nicosia - but that was grabbed by the then Head of Personnel Department. Served him right because, shortly after he arrived there, the Turks invaded! We were left with Copenhagen with which I was delighted, partly because of the prospect of the country and partly because the Ambassador there was Andrew Stark who, in my brief period working as a temporary in the Foreign Office in 1948, had joined the German Political Department from the Board of Trade on the very same day as I joined it. And so we had a head start, so to speak. And it was a truly delightful posting. I'm often asked which was my favourite post and I always have to say, "Well, they all differed. Some had advantages from the work point of view, others from the people, others from the country". Although we soon learned that armies of indifferent servants were better than none at all, Denmark stands out as the most enjoyable place I think we've ever been in; the only place outside the hot Muslim developing country scenario. And it was a very interesting time to be there although the work itself didn't enthuse me as much as my work elsewhere, partly because, in places like Sharjah or Tripoli or Kaduna, you were very much the man who mattered; big fish, little pool syndrome. In Denmark there were no language problems of any kind; people dealt with each

other perfectly happily directly between London and Copenhagen and, particularly after we joined the Common Market together in 1973, the Embassy tended to be on the sidelines. So from that point of view....

MM: Why, because there was direct linkage between.....

IL: Yes, absolutely. Officials in Whitehall would ring up their Danish opposite numbers and get on perfectly well. But there was another side to that picture. For the first part of the time I spent in Copenhagen we were trying to persuade the Danes to join the Common Market with us; during the second half of my time in Copenhagen the Danes were trying to persuade us to stay in the Common Market with them. This was during the time of the Jim Callaghan re-negotiations.

A lot of interesting things went on during the first half of my time in Copenhagen, not least Ted Heath's visit in a last desperate bid to persuade the Danes to join. It depended partly on whether we did, it depended partly on whether the Norwegians did, so there was a sort of slow bicycle race between the Danes and the Norwegians, each wanting the other to make the decision first. However, Heath came in the Spring of 1972 and was such a totally different Heath from the one we thought we knew - he was relaxed, he was amusing - and the climax came on the last evening of his visit when the Danish Social Democrat Prime Minister, Jens Otto Krag, gave a splendid banquet in his honour at Christiansborg Castle. I think it was the first time it had ever been used for such a purpose. And, towards the end of the dinner, the Danish Prime Minister got up and made the most perfect English-style after-dinner speech in perfect English, witty, and I sat there with a mixture of admiration and dismay, because I knew what a turgid script the Embassy had prepared for poor old Heath. The general theme of Krag's speech was to recount what happened when King Christian IV of Denmark paid a State Visit to James I in 1603 or thereabouts, and the fantastic retinue he brought with him and the revelries they got up to, and I thought, "Ted Heath's not going to match this at all." However, the Dane eventually sat down and Heath got up and he said, "Mr Prime Minister, we've listened with great amusement and instruction to your excursion into history. I only wish, Mr Krag, that I had the staff to do the same for me!"

And while the speech by Mr Krag was going on, I'd seen Ted Heath scribbling away on the turgid script we'd given him, and he then launched into something very amusing after his initial sally, and they were prepared to listen to anything he had to say. He recounted what happened some years before when the Danish Foreign Minister at the time, Per Haekkerup, who was the Danish George Brown, had

been on an official visit to London, not on the grand scale of Christian IV of course, but got up to some pretty high jinks including a trip down the Thames which ended up in a colossal sing-song including a song to the tune of John Brown's Body, with a line which ran 'We'll make Nancy Astor sweep the steps of Transport House'. It went down extremely well and I noticed, when everyone was leaving the banqueting hall, that the turgid script with Heath's scribbles on it was still on the table in front of him, so I went and nicked it and it's still among my archives.

So they did join. No, there was one more glitch before they joined and that had to do with George Brown. Peter Shore had intervened in the Danish debate on whether to join the Common Market by making a statement in London saying, "The Danes should be aware that, when Labour gets back into power, we will leave the Common Market." The Danes got very worried about the effect this was going to have on their electorate and, casting around for someone to counter Peter Shore, they learned that George Brown was on his way back from holiday and he was I think staying in the Embassy in Paris at the time. He was dug out of there, asked to come to Copenhagen, where he gave the most rumbustious press conference in the Hotel d'Angleterre. During this press conference he said, "I don't know who on earth this Peter Shore is, but he's got no business committing the Labour Government to anything, so forget it!" And that helped.

MM: Good for him! Right, so after your time in Copenhagen you became Head of the Middle East Department back in the FCO.

Head of Middle East Department in the Foreign Office

IL: That came as a bit of a shock because we were expecting a little more time in Copenhagen, but a chap called Patrick Wright (later Lord Wright of Richmond), who was Head of the Middle East Department at the time, was suddenly transferred I think to be Foreign Office Adviser at No. 10 and so they hauled me in to take his place. I spent four years there. It was the longest posting I ever had in my career and really the most critical because the Middle East Department dealt with ten countries; nine of them were Arab countries, all of which I knew to a greater or lesser extent, but the tenth was Iran about which neither I nor the Desk Officer knew anything at all. And it showed! Most of my time in the next four years was spent grappling with the decline and fall of the Shah, which was a seminal experience. That was the end of 1978, beginning of 1979. It all started at the end of about 1977. It was a classic example of how, when a really tough regime decides it's got to start relaxing a bit and it

unscrews the lid, the steam underneath blows the whole lot off. I think de Tocqueville said that once you have been a tyrant and you start trying to be something else, you're doomed.

There were other problems at the time. Iraq was one of my many problems.

MM: Were they at war at that stage?

IL: No they didn't go to war together until 1980. In the summer of the year I joined the Middle East Department Saddam became the *de jure* President, having been the *de facto* ruler for a year or two. But they were a very difficult regime to deal with. We didn't enjoy good relations with them. There were various unhappy incidents with British citizens and even diplomats, but funnily enough we had very good and close relations with the Iraqi Embassy in London, who kept in pretty close touch with us, which was in marked contrast to my old friends in the Gulf. Whereas a lot of foreign embassies beat a path to our door to get our assessments of what was going on in Teheran, the Gulf embassies didn't seem interested, which was partly because they were not so much embassies as travel agencies and welfare centres and so on.

There was a problem in Saudi Arabia when King Faisal was assassinated. There were all sorts of problems in the Yemen. Although the Yemenis, both South in Aden and North in Sana'a, had for years entertained a conspiracy theory according to which the crafty British had deliberately divided them in order to rule, once Aden became independent, the two drifted further and further apart with a series of quite ghastly coups and murders of presidents and so on. But Iran was really the big point in those four years.

Arms sales to Iran

MM: We were very anxious to sell them arms at that time!

IL: Yes, you've hit the nail on the head. This was one point on which I had my doubts about the official policy. There were good arguments for arming the Shah. He was a bulwark against the expansion of international communism, which I happened to think was rather exaggerated; he was a member of the Central Treaty Organisation and he had a big role to play in the Gulf. None of those things added up together really justified the amount of weaponry of the sophisticated kind which we were selling him at the time. A year or two after all this, a 'Times' leader commented that "it would be

absurd if the ramparts of the Western world were to crumble under the weight of weaponry intended to defend it". And that, to some extent, is what happened because people in Iran were getting more and more disillusioned with the Shah's rule and wondered what on earth this was for. And, when it came to demonstrations in the streets, there's no doubt some of the weaponry we were supplying was used, which was very embarrassing.

MM: How when you are Head of a crucial Department in the Foreign Office and you have doubts about the official policy to supply Iran with weaponry, did you make your views felt? How were you overruled?

IL: Well, I made my views felt. For example, I remember a meeting late in 1979. I had to come home for it from Muscat, and somebody in the Foreign Office obviously had a sense of humour and said, "We're going to have this debate with Defence Sales," the Ministry of Defence purveyors of arms. "We'll get this chap Lucas to make the case against." Which I did. I used some of the arguments I've mentioned but also the one which I thought, in the case of Iran, was particularly important. The official line was that it was a very good thing to make the Shah dependent on our arms because that gave us some leverage with him. In fact precisely the reverse was true. We needed to sell arms in order to maintain production lines for our own requirements, and therefore we became dependent upon the Shah. So the leverage went the other way. Secondly I argued that the extension of the arms sales to some of the Gulf countries was really absurd. It may have been good business but they didn't need them, they couldn't afford them, they couldn't make them work when they did get them, and I think this was eventually proved justified when Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990 and, for all the billions of dollars the Kuwaitis had spent on this sophisticated weaponry, who was it they had to call on to pull their chestnuts out of the fire but the Americans.

Now all this was overridden by a simple argument, which I found extremely difficult to combat; 'If we don't, someone else will.' The French.

MM: The French!

IL: Or the Americans.

MM: Or the Russians!

IL: Or the Russians indeed! And that was the clinching argument. The thing that really irritated me was that, although I personally got on perfectly well with various Heads of Defence Sales in the Ministry of Defence, they themselves often used the most absurd arguments. Two in particular I remember. When one of the Heads of Defence Sales was interviewed - can't remember whether it was on the television or the radio round about 1977-78 - he was asked, "Don't you feel qualms when you see the tanks that you have sold people like the Shah being used for such awful domestic purposes?" And his answer was, "Before I came to this job, I was employed by British Leyland. If a British Leyland lorry was involved in a street accident and somebody was killed, I didn't feel any responsibility!" The analogy was utterly absurd. And another one, two or three years after that, said, "Of course it's a great advantage to sell these countries our weapons because, if we go to war with them later on, we do at least know what we're up against." There are better arguments than that but that's the sort of thing they said. And the longer all this has gone on, the more convinced I have become that arms for the love of Allah, as I call it, is mainly counterproductive. It's not just morally reprehensible but it is in practice very often against our own best interests. Except that it's good business. You look at the money we've earned with this Yamama contract in Saudi Arabia. It hasn't done them any good.

Lack of contact with religious fraternity in Iran

The other thing that is interesting, I think, about those years dealing with Iran was that the Iran Revolution really crystallised what for some years had become a growing self-confidence and self-consciousness among Muslims and we in Iran, our Embassy, really didn't know much about what was going on in the religious fraternity, which was as you know what finally turned the tide against the Shah. The Shah said, "I won't have you having contacts with the religious fraternity here." And we were so much in awe of him that we obeyed this injunction. I believe that, for that reason, we did not know as much as we should have done about what was going on in religious circles that proved so important.

MM: Did the Shah know?

IL: I don't believe the Shah knew either. In fact Tony Parsons, who was the highly respected Ambassador at this very time, used to tell the story that he went to see the Shah one day and the Shah said, "I know what's going on in this country. I have six separate intelligence agencies reporting to me every morning, telling me what's going on." And Tony Parsons said to him, "Your Imperial Majesty,

I'm sorry to tell you that each of those six agencies, before it comes to see you, checks up with the other five as to what they want you to be told." I think that's probably true.

Lack of understanding of the popular sentiment in Iran

But the interesting thing about the Iran Revolution - two interesting things: one, it was an eye-opener as to how a really apparently solidly entrenched tyranny could be overthrown, largely by a silent majority making itself felt, and with very little blood shed when it came to the point, and the Shah wouldn't have it when it came to the crunch. A lot of people around the region took note of that. But, more importantly, it crystallised growing self-confidence and self-consciousness among Muslims generally. Of course it was a Shia revolution but it affected Muslims worldwide. I draw comparisons. In 1952 when I first went to the area, the Muslims in my experience were suffering from a kind of schizophrenia. They greatly admired the advantages of western materialism and technology and so on, but they didn't want to go along with the ideological baggage which was involved. So they were in two minds and, among the younger generation in particular, if it came to a choice between the two, they tended at that time to think that, "Well, our religion is stuck in the 7th century AD, it hasn't moved on. We've got to adapt to modern times and, if that means that we throw the Holy Book out of the window, too bad!" And that was a bad thing because, once they'd thrown the Holy Book out of the window, there was a vacuum open to all sorts of other alien ideologies. Twenty years later, this was what was crystallised in Iran in 1978-79. Truthfully the reverse had happened. Western society had become, from their point of view, unacceptably permissive, and their economies were in disarray. They weren't so admirable as they had been, whereas the Muslim religion seemed to be the answer to all their problems. I regard 1967 as the crunch point in all this. This was the Six Day War, which was the worst of all the disasters inflicted on the Arabs and their feelings of humiliation and injustice and betrayal over Palestine. A lot of Arabs and Muslims further afield thought, "What on earth has gone wrong?" And one of the answers was "We have tried too slavishly to imitate the West. We have to return to the roots of our own culture in the Islamic religion."

At the same time that that political feeling was going around, there was the feeling that Allah had blessed the faithful, the most faithful being those in the Gulf, and the oil riches they'd acquired, so there must be something in our funny old religion after all.

Unfortunately a lot of western observers, particularly politicians, have (a), not understood how deep in the Arab psyche the shame of Palestine has gone, and (b), they've tended to stereotype and generalise

and exaggerate the Islamic religion. In my experience the vast majority of Muslims are devout but not fanatical; very few of them want theocratic regimes like Khomeini's. But that doesn't mean to say that they don't hang on to their own religion. Some of them are trying to mould it into new shapes to be more in keeping with the times, others want to go back to what they regard as the golden age and revive the caliphate. They're not monolithic, that's the point. The militants are a very small minority but our own ignorance and our own misinterpretation and the way we deal with this problem is increasingly throwing the moderates into the arms of the extremists. And all that, I believe, really began with the Iran Revolution, although it's now lost a lot of its early ardour.

Appointment as Ambassador to Oman in 1979

MM: So shall we move on to your first ambassadorial appointment to Oman in 1979?

IL: Yes, well as I mentioned earlier, I had been dealing with Oman for some time before. I had visited it in early 1975 when I took up my post at the Middle East Department. I went on a visit with Roy Mason who was the Defence Secretary at the time and this had some interest because he was going to see Sultan Qaboos who had been in power since 1970 and has been ever since, and whether or not single-handedly - another matter - he has transformed the face of that country. His father was extremely backward; even when the oil started coming, he wouldn't use the revenues and all that. Qaboos has wrought an enormous change for the better. At the time, early '75, he was worried that the Dhofar War, which was about to be finished, was going to mean that the British were going to take the boys home, and he was very worried that that would send the wrong signal and would not do his regime any good. The Ministry of Defence, on the other hand, thought, "We can't afford to keep these guys there any more and we want them back home, and they want to come back home." So, Roy Mason arrived on the scene in Muscat with mixed messages - one from his own ministry saying, "We need to pull out", the other from the Foreign Office saying, "No no, it would send the wrong political signals. They've got to stay." After half an hour with the Sultan, he'd come down on the Foreign Office side, much to the chagrin of his own officials. And our military commitment and involvement remained. It had to be whittled down since but it's still there.

I had thought this was a wonderful place to be Ambassador if I ever got the chance and my predecessor, a chap called Jim Treadwell whose last post it was, was determined to stay on (a), till he retired and (b), till the Queen and Prince Philip had made their notable visit to the Gulf in February, 1979. And he sent me a Christmas card one year; inside was a splendid old print of Muscat Bay where

the Embassy was situated with Portuguese forts on either side. Underneath the picture he'd written, "The forts are still there to repel invaders!"

Anyway, the visit duly took place and I ought to have said that it was the most satisfying single thing that happened to me in the Middle East Department. It was a very unusual visit, covering many more countries than the Queen had ever visited before at one time, and some of them very new to her of course. It was a howling success, which was very pleasing apart from the fact that I wasn't included in the entourage - that's another matter!

So I arrived there in May, 1979 within days of Margaret Thatcher arriving in No. 10, and she rather dominated my two and a half years there because of course she was 150% keen on arms sales and she had a great meeting of minds with the Sultan on this. Together they thought that the Iran Revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, and then the Iran/Iraq War starting in 1980; all this meant that there was a tremendous threat to the area. This persuaded Margaret Thatcher and Sultan Qaboos that they must react by building up military strength. Personally I doubted very much whether however many Jaguars and whatever we sold to Oman, if the Russians were really to invade, which seemed highly unlikely, or the Iranians, which seemed equally unlikely because their Revolution was an ideological rather than a military one, whether any amount of sophisticated weaponry would repel the invaders. However, I lost that battle and who's to say I was right? They've done very well since. But it made for an interesting situation and also it meant that a whole lot of very interesting people came out from London to visit and stay with us. The visitors included military, politicians and MPs, which made it a very busy post, but a very interesting one.

Later on, the other thing that happened on my watch was the introduction of American involvement in the military scene in Oman. The Omanis were the most robust of all the Gulf States in reacting to these supposed threats. Other Gulf countries thought, "Yes, there is a threat, but an even greater threat to our position will be if we get too closely associated with people like the British and, more especially, the Americans who were responsible for supporting public enemy No. 1, which was Israel, if we get too close to them it will be political suicide for us." But the Omanis said, "Yes, we understand that problem. Nevertheless we've got to stand up and be counted." During my time they entered into negotiations with the Americans to grant the Americans facilities in the country, not exactly bases but places where they could operate from and where they could pre-position equipment. It was called 'access agreements'.

I remember the Queen's Birthday Party in 1980, which we held in April for climatic reasons. The Omani Foreign Minister arrived early and said could he speak to me upstairs; I thought he wanted a stiffener before the party. What he said was, "There's something very funny going on in Masirah," which is the island to the south where the RAF had a presence and which was one of the places the Americans were negotiating about. He thought it was something to do with Afghanistan. I had no idea, so I sent a rapid telegram off to London saying, "What am I going to tell him?" It then emerged that, in the middle of these very delicate negotiations, the Americans had beaten the gun by using Masirah as a launching pad for the abortive hostage rescue attempt in Iran. The Omanis were absolutely furious, understandably since part of the deal they wanted to do with the Americans was to stipulate, "You will never use these facilities without asking us, and never for any purposes of which we might not approve." And I like to think, because the Embassy in Washington told us so, that the Americans were very grateful to my Embassy for stepping in and cooling things, so the negotiations proceeded notwithstanding and were eventually brought to a successful conclusion.

MM: Yes, that is interesting.

IL: Then of course we had the great Margaret Thatcher visit in April 1981. She was the first, and I think probably still the only serving British Prime Minister to visit Oman. She was there for thirty-six hours, never drew breath, gave an absolutely marvellous demonstration of activity and rushing around doing the right thing. But it all left a bad taste in the mouth because of Mark. Mark suddenly arrived on the scene and it was subsequently alleged that Margaret Thatcher had promoted the interests of a firm called Cementation in the award of a contract to build a new university because Mark had an association with that firm. This story still does the rounds. I don't believe it's true and said so at the time, and I still believe that. She never put a foot wrong in my hearing at least during that visit. She may have said that it would be good if a British firm got the contract, but she never mentioned a name; least of all did she ask for Sultan Qaboos to give Mark Thatcher an audience, as some people alleged. But it still reverberates, particularly in the light of recent events.

MM: Gosh! How embarrassing! Especially when it's not true. Anyhow, you went from there to Syria, your final post.

Final posting as Ambassador to Damascus, Syria

IL: Yes, that was also to do with Patrick Wright because he was being moved from Damascus to some other post - I can't remember exactly which one it was, some high-ranking post - so I was called in to replace him. So in two out of my last three posts I was called upon to try to fill his rather capacious shoes. I have on occasion said to him I wouldn't have minded continuing that tradition of following in his footsteps, but it didn't happen!

Of course Damascus was a complete contrast with Oman. Oman is one of the places I always quote as being one of those where the work itself was the best thing about it, because we really did have a special relationship and, despite some of my private doubts, it was a real pleasure to work with those guys. They are unquestionably the most agreeable Arabs I've ever encountered, partly because their associations with the sub-continent and East Africa make them much more outward looking, much more tolerant, much more attuned to foreigners.

So I then go off to Damascus where totally the opposite is true. Although we were responsible to a large extent for liberating Syria from the French, it's still our record in Palestine which is held against us, and they really didn't want to have very much to do with us at all.

MM: They're still French-speaking, aren't they.

IL: Yes. It's a very interesting thing that, although politically the French guys may be hated for their record in Lebanon and Syria, they still seem to like to imbibe the French culture; they look to Paris as the centre of the world. Very interesting. Hats off to the French and they've got something there that we haven't. I don't quite know what it is!

Anyway, they weren't really interested in us. And two things happened within weeks of my arrival in Damascus which really set the scene. The first, I don't know whether you ever heard about this, in February 1982 there was what was called the Hama Massacre. This is a city in central Syria which was a hotbed of the Muslim Brotherhood and, although a lot of Syrians blamed the Muslim Brotherhood for provoking what happened, an equal number deplored Hafiz al Asad's very tough reaction to it which was to knock down about one third of the city and murder people; the figures vary from about 10,000 to 30,000, somewhere in between the two. It was really an amazing thing to do and amazing how they managed to keep it so quiet. I had to present my credentials about a week after this

started. My first thought was, "Oh it'll be cancelled because the President will be much too distracted," but it wasn't and I saw him. I thought I'd be out on my ear the moment I'd handed over the letters, but I wasn't. I had about twenty minutes on the sofa with him. He looked like everybody's favourite uncle and, although he knew as well as I knew what was happening a hundred and twenty miles up the road, he didn't show the slightest sign of distraction or concern. I came to have a grudging admiration for him; very, very tough but extremely shrewd.

And the second thing that happened after Hama was the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and all that ensued with the multi-national force and the Americans and the bombing of their barracks in Beirut. Total disaster. But the fact that Hafiz al Asad in Syria came out of all that on top is a fantastic tribute to the way in which he got his own way, as compared with Saddam Hussein in Kuwait, who was also tough but not nearly as shrewd.

So it was a very interesting job trying to find out what was going on, analysing it and reporting it, but one never felt that one had the slightest influence on what was going on there. The compensation for that was that Syria as a country was infinitely the most fascinating place I'd ever been in, a tourist's paradise, and at that time there were no tourists, which was ideal. They've got everything from third millennium remains to Greco/Roman ruins to crusader castles to Ottoman palaces and, although it was a tough regime, they didn't prevent us travelling around and seeing all these things. The people themselves, cultured, delightful people deserved a much better government than they got but, to my amazement - and I got this badly wrong - you know the Hafiz al Asad regime was a minority regime; they're Alawites, a kind of peculiar off-shoot of the Shia. They came to power in about 1963 in spite of the fact that the country had until then been ruled almost exclusively by the Sunni élite. And when Hafiz al Asad died in 2000 it was my firm belief that, knowing there was this minority problem in his regime, he would not add a dynastic problem. But he did. His son, not his eldest son - his eldest son who was groomed for succession died in a car crash - the second one, who was quite an Anglicised fellow, he's a surgeon who studied here.

MM: English wife too.

IL: English wife. No, sorry - Syrian wife who was educated here; her father was a heart surgeon. So Anglicised but a political infant, wasn't in politics at all. When he came to power after his father died there were great hopes that he was going to liberalise the regime, but these have not been proved

well-founded. I think he's still struggling but the old guard seem to be still in charge, which is a great pity.

MM: When you went around in Syria, did you speak French or Arabic?

IL: Arabic.

MM: Yes, why should you after all? Can you speak French?

IL: I can, but not as well as you do; I mean make public speeches in French!

MM: But you were able to make them in Arabic.

IL: To a point.

MM: How did this go down?

IL: Very well. I mean Arabs are delightfully receptive when you try to speak their language, even if you're not all that good at it. They love it.

MM: It must be a huge advantage I would have thought, and not to be tainted by the French imperial brush.....

IL: Well most of the Ambassadors in Damascus have been Arabists, most of them much better qualified than me. I never achieved the higher standard Civil Service exam in Arabic.

MM: But you'd got a lot of experience of.....

IL: Yes, I could get by, no more than that. No I certainly wouldn't have dreamed of speaking French even if my French was rather better than it was.

MM: I was wondering about that. So, an enjoyable final post?

IL: Apart from the job, I must say, which eventually impelled me to accept the offer of early retirement because there was nothing else on offer. They said they would be happy for me to stay on till the end of my time, which would have been for another two years. In fact my successor had to pack his bags in a hurry when, not for the first time, relations were broken off with the Syrians; it was eighteen months after he arrived, over something called the Hindawi Affair, which involved a Syrian who was accused of planting a bomb on an El Al aircraft.

Yes, when Christine and I look back on our career, I think it's fair to say we enjoyed all of them in turn. I always used to find a surprising number of colleagues always thought the last post was better than the one they were in at the moment, in retrospect. We enjoyed them all, and we sometimes look back and wonder how on earth we did enjoy some of them, but of all of them Syria is the place, apart from Denmark, we'd really quite like to go back to.

MM: Have you been back?

IL: Haven't been back, no. We've only just been back to Oman, as I mentioned, after twenty-three years.

May I add that my 33 years in the Diplomatic Service had as their backdrop two main factors. First, there was the process of adjustment to Britain's new place in a world dominated on the one side by the emergence of the two super-powers and on the other by the forces of nationalism and independence. The Diplomatic Service naturally suffered its fair share of the pains involved. Then, second, there were the beginnings of the change from a fairly docile to a militant Muslim world. At the turn of the century this was to become a dominant feature of the international scene.

MM: Well, thank you very much indeed for that.

Transcribed by Joanna Buckley in February, 2005