

BDOHP Biographical Details and Interview Index

Ronald Archer Campbell (Robin) BYATT (born 14 November 1930)
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**RECOLLECTIONS OF MR RONALD (ROBIN) A C BYATT CMG
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AM: I would like to start by thanking you for agreeing to be interviewed for the BDOHP. To begin, I noticed from the notes you prepared for me that the Foreign Office was not your first choice of career? So how was it that you did join the FO we both worked for?

RB: Quite a long story. Following my education at Gordonstoun, National Service in the Navy, followed by three years at New College Oxford, a rowing blue and marriage, I spent four years in the Colonial Service in Nyasaland (now Malawi) in the Administration. My father had been in the Colonial Service, Governor of Tanganyika and then Trinidad. It was a very varied and interesting job; if you became bored with your desk you could always go off and build a bridge or sit in court as a junior magistrate, or chase up tax defaulters for a change of scene. But there was clearly no long term future in it. I told my boss at the end of my three year tour that I would be resigning at the end of my leave as there was no future in the job. "Nonsense" he said "this place will certainly see you out". I said that I didn't give it more than ten years. We were both wrong; it became independent as Malawi five years later. I looked at various jobs and eventually applied for the Foreign Service. As there were many months to the next entry competition for the A grade, I was offered, and accepted a temporary job as a B7 in the African Department, dealing with the most of non-British west Africa. Six months later the Belgian Congo became independent. Both the Belgian administration and the Congolese were totally unprepared and the balloon went up. In a month I was dealing with the Congo only and assisted, in turn by HM Consul General Antwerp and HM Ambassador, Helsinki, both awaiting their postings though I was still only a temporary B7.

AM: And did you start off on Africa or was that a later development?

RB: Yes and no. Yes as I have said. But I had a discussion with the Chief Clerk who asked where I wanted to be posted. I said that I wanted to improve my French. "Alright" he said, "We are short of African experience and all these French colonies in West Africa are becoming independent; we'll find somewhere for you". Six weeks later the telephone on my

desk rang. It was the Head of POD. “We’ve got a job for you”. I hoped it was Paris. “Cuba” he said. That well known French speaking colony! I find postings have always been rather like that. So that was how that came about.

Havana, December 1961-63

AM: So that was in December, 1961? Just before everything happened?

RB: Yes, that’s right. And the balloon went up in November, the end of the first year. It was a high old time, extraordinary. Cuba was the eye of the storm. There were demonstrations and riots and protests in Washington, New York, London, Paris but Cuba was silent.

AM: Completely quiet?

RB: Completely quiet. Because the Government said nothing about all this. You turned on the news and there was no sign that anything was happening. But Key West Radio switched to Spanish and broadcast news bulletins on the hour, every hour. It took Castro a week to get them jammed. Meanwhile, every Cuban was at home listening in to Key West Radio.

A trouble was that the radio also carried endless advertisements for what was on cheap offer that week at the “Gulf Stream Food Store” in Key West while food was almost unobtainable in Cuba.

The United States had no diplomatic relations with Cuba; the Swiss represented them but confined their work to consular matters – nothing political. So our small Embassy was kept busy. President Kennedy had been relying on aerial reconnaissance to keep an eye on what was going on in Cuba, but for a crucial week or ten days all was hidden under low cloud; it was the early hurricane season. Our Ambassador, Bill Marchant, divided his small staff into three watches, one driving around trying to see what was going on, one drafting and encrypting telegrams (‘book cypher’ only) which were addressed Flash (the fastest possible handling) to Washington, repeated ‘immediate’ to the Foreign Office, and finally one group taking time off to eat or sleep or look after children. We worked 8am to 8pm or later. We drove around with our two children in the back of the car ostensibly going for a picnic. I do not recall that we saw anything more exciting than a Soviet freighter unloading we could not

see what at a port west of Havana, but our Glaswegian archivist, Rob Cappie, was held up to wait for a huge missile on a low-loader to lumber out of the Havana dockyard on to the main road. This, we were told subsequently, was the first definite confirmation that the Soviets had intercontinental missiles in Cuba. When the fleet of Soviet freighters carrying more weapons to Cuba was turned back at sea the rest of the world heaved a sigh of relief – we in Havana did not. What would happen to the missiles already in Cuba? I remember my wife and I catching eyes over the cot of our youngest as we settled him to sleep one evening and wondering whether we should be there in the morning should President Kennedy decided to bomb the missiles already installed. Only years later did I realise that we need not have worried as it takes something a good deal more subtle than a conventional bomb to set off a nuclear explosion.

Throughout this period at the Ambassador's instruction we all kept a single suitcase packed with essential clothing and small valuables, though how we could have got out of Cuba in case of need God knows. Finally a piece of comedy. Many of the staff went for a weekend break to a beach cottage the Embassy had acquired some twenty miles east of Havana. Jilly took our small daughter back to town for the birthday party of a school friend; on the way back she got tangled up with a large Soviet military convoy which she tried hard to count while overtaking. Arrived back at the beach cottage she found the Ambassador on the verandah, gin in hand, with a full list of the convoy which he had counted as it crossed a main road bridge at the head of the bay. Much to the delight of his staff, when the New Year's honours list came out a few weeks later it contained a KBE for Bill Marchant, under his formal name ('Sir Herbert' rather than 'Sir William').

AM: It must have been exciting. So how long did you have in Havana?

RB: I'm not sure 'exciting' is a word I'd choose. Just under two years. It was still a four year posting. Various amusing things – we weren't allowed in reports to call it an Iron Curtain country - although Castro had announced that it was. We wondered why and were told the reason was that the Treasury have recently agreed a whole lot of terms of service for Iron Curtain Posts. Quite expensive, annual leave and things like that. And so they wouldn't accept that Cuba was an Iron Curtain Post. Communist, if you like but not an Iron Curtain Post within the meaning of the Act.

PUSD, FCO London, 1963- 66

AM: Then you went back to London?

RB: Then I went back to London in 1963. And I had a job in PUSD as a liaison man, which was a fascinating job. I can't now remember all I dealt with except that Indonesia was part of it, which was very interesting. So we were endlessly told that Sukarno (it was the time of Confrontation with Malaysia) had all sorts of terrible diseases and wasn't expected to last more than three or four months. Sukarno in fact died ten or twelve years later. Obviously, there was nothing wrong with him at all at that stage.

AM: That sounds a bit like reporting on Mugabe's health later. And then in '66, UKIS New York?

First Secretary, UKMIS New York, 1966

RB: Yes, that's right. It was a very enjoyable job. Not the General Assembly. One of my colleagues described attending a General Assembly session as like listening to the music of a barrel organ. The first time the chap turns the handle, it was fascinating. Second time was quite interesting, too, to see that it was exactly the same as the first time and by the third and fourth time, you wanted out.

AM: But you were already then dealing with Africa?

RB: Yes, I was dealing with quite a bit of Africa. Almost all of it except Rhodesia. Another colleague, Peter Moon, dealt with Rhodesia. But I dealt with the rest of it. Not that there was much "rest of it". There was Namibia, annually. And other spats here and there occasionally. But really most of those were South East Asia. A lot of Vietnam, Cambodia.

AM: And that was when you had Lord Caradon as Head of Mission?

RB: That's it, yes. Great character.

AM: What did you think of him?

RB: He was a nice man. He was a very good speaker, brilliant orator, really. He could down anybody in debate in a Security Council meeting. But he was a less good negotiator. Quite amusing. His Deputy was Leslie Glass, Sir Leslie Glass, who had started life in Burma in the Colonial Service and spoke Burmese. We got instructions from London telling us to go and see the Burmese Secretary-General U-Thant and find out what he thinks about such and such. And it was always very simple with Caradon, with one exception, always the same telegram. I saw the Secretary-General, and spoke as instructed. He made no comment. There was one occasion I went with him and the oratory was rolling forth, when U Thant leant forward, tapped him on the knee and said "if you would permit me one remark, Lord Caradon," so one had something to say in the telegram. Leslie Glass, on the other hand, you went with Leslie, he started off by saying "do you know Mr Byatt, Secretary-General? He has come along to take a note for us". And then the conversation switched into Burmese, so for the next ten minutes you sat there with no idea what was going on.

AM: So this was in Ne Win's time?

RB: Yes, yes, I think so. He switched eventually into English and asked the Secretary-General questions, and the S-G went on and on so the telegram read "I spoke as instructed, the S-G asked about this, was interested in that, on and on and on", so the contrast was stark.

AM: Hence your comment in your notes that the job of a diplomat is not to speak himself but to get others to do so and listen?

RB: Yes!

AM: Then you had Rockall to deal with as well?

RB: Yes, it was the start of the Sea Bed, Law of the Sea discussions and it occurred to me and my colleague, what was it, was it a colony, was it a Dependent Territory, was it part of the United Kingdom? So we suggested something should be done about it. It was made part of the United Kingdom. Nobody, I think, took to living there, 'cos the waves wash right over the top of it in a storm, but it was made part of the County of Inverness. And thereby moved

the boundary on the seabed between Great Britain and Ireland substantially in Great Britain's favour, as the line from Northern Ireland went out like that [indicates] and the line from Rockall went out like that [indicates].

Rhodesia Department, FCO London, 1972-75

AM: And then back to London and Rhodesia Department?

RB: That's right, yes. The Head of Rhodesia department, an extraordinary Department dealing with only one country, but even so, he was pretty heavily overworked and under strain, so he was given a Deputy in the form of me, my first job was dealing with the Parliamentary Questions, which came flooding in at a rate of knots, ten or twelve a week, very interesting though. And there were occasional visits to Rhodesia, searching always for a basis for a settlement, which didn't exist, the British were desperately anxious for a settlement and Ian Smith thought at that stage he would win in the long run, so he was only interested in a settlement if it was on his terms. He didn't want a compromise at all. And I had several visits, one with Phillip Mansfield [Head, Rhodesia Dept] which started idiotically. We had decided that, given the level of press interest, we didn't want them to know that these two had set off. So we bought tickets, booked ourselves in, as Bryant and Masefield not Byatt and Mansfield. That was alright until we produced our passports at the airport and they refused to accept that these bookings were for us. Took a long time to unscramble, we only just caught the flights in the end. Well, there was nothing else about that visit, I think. Phillip was eventually sent off as Ambassador to the Hague and I took over and ran the Department for two or three years, went twice more to Rhodesia, once with Dennis Greenhill, the PUS and once with Lord Ennals, he wasn't a Lord then, when a Labour Government had taken over. Ennals, I remember, on his return there had to be a press conference, and an interesting politician's comment, I thought, he said "what answers do we want to give?", and I said "it depends a bit what questions we get", "Oh," he said "to hell with the questions, they can ask what they like. But what answers do we want to give?"

Sabbatical Year at Glasgow University, 1075-1976

AM: Then you went on to Glasgow University?

RB: Yes, then I was given a sabbatical year at Glasgow University. It had to be either at Glasgow University where the Foreign Office had a slot which alternated with the Scottish Office, one year one, one year the next, it was either that or St Anthony's in Oxford. I think they were slightly surprised when I chose Glasgow University. It was influenced by the fact that I had just bought this house in Lochgilphead, Argyll, and it was convenient for a weekend commute.

AM: And that was North Sea oil and gas?

RB: Yes, North Sea oil and gas. I joined a group of academics who were working on that subject and I said I would do something about that and its interaction with the Community energy policy which was slowly evolving at that stage. And I found it very agreeable, I must say.

Rhodesia Conference, 1976

But I didn't complete the year because in about July or August the Government decided they would have a Rhodesia conference. I was recalled to prepare and found all was totally unprepared. They had no idea what we were going to achieve or how we were going to achieve it. It served a very useful purpose in the long run in that the number two representative Ivor Richard from the United Nations was summoned to chair the British delegation and his deputy was Sir Anthony Duff and the very unsuccessful Geneva conference launched various ideas in Duff's mind of which he made good use next time round. And I think this contributed significantly to the success of the Lancaster House conference a few years later.

AM: Who else was involved? I see you have Ivor Richard ...

RB: Yes, Ivor Richard came from New York to be the chairman of the conference and Duff and myself and I think Henry Steele was the Legal Adviser.

AM: And one of the key points was the date for independence?

RB: It wasn't a key point really but it was decided rather against the advice of Duff and myself by Ivor Richards as a good point to start with. And on the first day when we had said it was an idea which needed consideration, he started off on the first day by saying "Let's start by picking a date for independence", and they picked the first of April next year, maybe they were thinking of April Fool's day, I don't know. Nothing happened, it was an agonising conference, it dragged on three months, God knows what we spoke about, we didn't actually agree any other point than that one, if I remember. It was one of those conferences which are taking place when there is not pressure for an agreement. Smith still thought he was going to win the war, Robert Mugabe had just taken over as the leader of the Zimbabwe African National Union, and he was confident he was going to win the war, I can't remember, who else was there. Anyway, they were none of them prepared to budge. And so we spent a long time, agonising hours, achieving absolutely nothing. My days always started well. I had a nice room in the hotel in Geneva, with a splendid view of Mont Blanc across the Lake and I used to have breakfast in my room and that was very nice, then I walked up to the Palais des Nations and that was a nice walk too, then into the Palais des Nations and the day fell to pieces like a heap of sticks.

Counsellor and Head of Chancery, UK Delegation to UN, New York, 1977-79

AM: And then you're back to New York?

RB: Yes, back to New York as Head of Chancery. Nice job, quite hard work. Fairly intensive Security Council work. Head of Chancery dealt, by tradition, with all Security Council meetings, whatever the subject. There would be a desk officer as well and the two of you would deal with the Security Council. So a lot of time spent in the Security Council. Two funny little scenes I remember. The Chinese had a very nice, very competent counsellor, called Cho Nan [sic. Int], who had done a university course in Britain and his English was extremely good. And did business in English quite simply and everybody spoke to him in English. We had a meeting about Vietnamese refugees flooding into Hong Kong, we had the Governor of Hong Kong and his Chief Secretary to support us, and milling around in the Security Council before the meeting began, suddenly a hush fell, and everybody was looking in the same direction, and I turned round too. Cho Nan and the Chief Secretary of the Hong Kong Government were speaking together in Chinese. Nobody had ever heard Cho Nan speak Chinese as he always spoke impeccable English so this was a tribute to the Chinese of

the Chief Secretary. And the other, a very, very charming man, I remember, getting into conversation at one of those milling arounds before a S-C meeting started, it was Prince Sihanouk. Finding him absolutely charming, fascinating man, we only spoke for about five minutes but it stuck in one's mind. A very likeable person.

AM: And then, after two years, a new Conservative Government and back to Rhodesia?

Assistant Under Secretary, FCO, Rhodesia and Southern Africa, 1979-1980

RB: That's it, yes. I was called back to London to see if I liked the idea of a Conference leading to a posting as High Commissioner after Independence, something that had never happened before or since as far as I know. I was persuaded by Duff that I should say yes, to coming to the Conference and subsequently being High Commissioner in Zimbabwe. But it was fascinating. I told you before that Duff had profited from the unsuccessful conference in Geneva, and he had us all working like beavers, and everything was worked out in detail, one step ahead of the conference.

The Conference started with a general statement of principles, the first thing it tried to agree, six points but very, very broad brush terms, and while the conference started discussing and arguing about that, Anthony Duff had us all hard at work drawing up a draft constitution which was the next item on the agenda, and so it went on, the British side always had something worked out ready to put forward for agreement on before the conference moved on to the next step. It worked very well.

The step I was involved in was the cease fire. I was sent out to Rhodesia, I thought to get a general impression of attitudes, what people thought was going on but I ended up having to do a good deal more than that, and was asked by Tony Duff to get arrangements for a cease fire agreed with the Rhodesian army before the conference began discussion of a ceasefire. And I remember I went and had a meeting with the JOC as it was called, the Joint Operations Command, the Head of Police Special Branch, the Police Force, Army and Air Force. They used to meet about once a week. I remember raising this with them, and they said "we'll have to think about it. Come again at ten o'clock tomorrow morning". So I came again the next morning, and their answer was simple, "We'll have to do without a ceasefire, there is no way these terrorists can be held to a ceasefire. They simply won't obey it and we'll be

hamstrung.” I knew that was simply impossible, if you get agreement to hold an election in the middle of a civil war without a ceasefire, it was laughable. I had to think fairly fast on my feet at that point, I said “I won’t challenge your military judgement and what you say of the terrorists may be right, but we must have a ceasefire, we must have at least agreement on a scheme for a ceasefire. So what about a fail-safe one? A scheme for a ceasefire which, if it breaks down, allows you to go on as if there had never been a ceasefire?” Yes, they said, they supposed that might work. I reported this to London with some trepidation and was relieved to get from Duff “Well done. We can live with that.” So we looked at it in detail. And eventually something was worked out on those lines. In the event, of course, the chaps on both sides more or less stuck to it and the ceasefire worked well enough.

AM: And some interesting characters involved at that time? Lords Carrington and Soames?

RB: Yes, fascinating. Soames was very impressive, and so was Carrington, Soames was determined that, if at all possible, this interlude, his Governorship in Rhodesia should succeed and that we should come out with some agreement between all parties. Several people including his deputy were convinced that Mugabe was cheating (I think they were right) and that he should therefore be excluded. And Soames said no, there might come a point where that would have to happen but it hadn’t come yet. If there was any possibility of getting a scheme to which all put their names then that was what we must go for and we must ignore a certain amount of cheating. And I think that was right. Although it ended up with a Mugabe Government in Zimbabwe. There certainly was a certain amount of intimidation by Mugabe’s lot but at least it was a general agreement. Carrington was very, very good as Chairman of the conference in London, the Lancaster House conference, and again I think he played his hand, his cards, very well. He never allowed any of them to establish a breakdown point, how he quite did it I don’t know but he always contrived that there should be no point at which they would stick their heels in, he was a very good Chairman of the conference. The combination of Carrington and Duff, their personalities and their styles, was very much responsible for the success of that conference.

AM: In Salisbury, as it still was, you met local representatives of all the parties?

RB: All the parties except Mugabe’s. They steered clear of me, obviously.

After a few weeks, Ian Smith, disliking the way the conference was tending pulled out and returned to Salisbury. He hoped his delegation would follow his lead. But his Deputy, David Smith, said “No, we are very slowly losing the war to the terrorists. Our only hope in the long run is to get the best deal we can here. I am staying”. General Walls, their army commander, agreed and the whole of the rest of his delegation stayed with them. David Smith thus saved Lancaster House from breakdown. In casual conversation I established a link with him; chatting one day I told him that on my uncle’s estate in Argyll, where I was brought up, there was a substantial farmer from Ayrshire named Mundell who liked to boast that he had eleven sons, as indeed he did and that “every one of them has a sister”; before I could add that in fact he had only one daughter to go round the lot, David cut in to say “Aye, she was my mother”.

AM: And you also met Brigadier Gurdon for the ceasefire arrangements?

RB: Yes, we did. He was a key man, a marvellous character, he had been a Brigadier in the Black Watch, he wore a monocle, and his monocle was always firmly fixed in his eye. It had no cord. And he was to be seen running down Whitehall, chasing a bus, jumping on, with the monocle still stuck in his eye.

AM: And you were discussing the ceasefire arrangements with him?

RB: Yes, he came to discuss ceasefire arrangements. And the scheme of the monitoring points, I think they were called, where the guerrillas were to collect themselves, was really his scheme and it worked very well in the end. He was a delightful character, as you would have guessed from the monocle, a colourful character, his daughter is actually a neighbour of ours, here in Argyll.

AM: So you are now coming down to the final points of the agreement?

RB: Yes, it got stuck, I can’t remember exactly what points they were, they were part of the ceasefire agreement, and they were not really radical points. The fundamentals had been agreed, and the whole system of the new constitution and what the Governor was to do, had all been worked out, and a stamp of approval put on it, and there was just this one element, a few elements of the ceasefire agreement in fact, a small detail which they were sticking their

toes in over. And Carrington took a very daring gamble really, he said “we’ll start the process, and that’ll give them something to think about”, he’d send Soames out while the conference was still going on, although it had not reached final agreement.

He sent Soames out to take over as Governor, which surprisingly the Rhodesian establishment allowed him to do. And it was a very moving period; the first day of his Governorship was a pretty fraught day. Soames arrived about two o’clock in the afternoon, having flown via South Africa, overnight flight from London and the morning flight up from South Africa to Zimbabwe, and I met him at the airport, and as a degree of historical continuity, I got Sir Humphrey Gibbs, the last Governor to be on the veranda of the terminal building, to see the arrival of Soames, and arranged that he should be the first caller on Soames at Government House when he was set up there. It went very well, in fact, we had a hectic drive in, I can’t remember who was in the first car with Lord Soames, maybe a military man, I can’t remember, but anyway I was in the second car with Anthony Duff. Frantically briefing him on what I had fixed and so on, as we drove in from the airport. We got to Government House, and it was agreed that Soames would make a broadcast that evening, obviously a very important broadcast; we didn’t really know to what extent the Rhodesians were going to accept this return to legality, and the imposition of a British Governor, in the event it went alright. But this broadcast was to be fairly important; many Rhodesians told me afterwards they had been much influenced by it. We got to work on the text and got a very good text, but he wanted a suitable peroration, something with a real kick in it, we all struggled away and suggested this and suggested that, he was dissatisfied with all of them, nothing would do, “Oh”, he said, “I’ll ask Mary, she’ll get it right” (Mary being his wife). He stumped off, Mary was in the bath, and from the bath she came up, she wasn’t Winston Churchill’s daughter for nothing, she came up with two sentences which just fitted the bill absolutely right. Amazing the way these things are settled. And the broadcast went well.

What else do I remember from that time? Oh yes, there was a very nice Rhodesian army captain, who was the ADC at Government House, I’ve forgotten his name but he was excellent, he really put his heart into welcoming Soames and treating him properly and so forth, and making sure that the Government House machine ran smoothly, very good man. Quite young. So that was the first day, and then Soames set to with a hectic programme, of seeing all the heads of the ministries, the permanent secretaries, one after the other, and seeing various other people as well, including the Chief Justice, whom he found just about as

disagreeable as I had. Curious, Beedle, that was his name, he had been an opponent of UDI, and had moved in to keep Humphrey Gibbs company at Government House for a year or so, the first year of Smith's rule, but then he convinced himself, how I don't know, that this was not illegal, well, he was Chief Justice, law was important, so there was legal justification for the UDI and he took over as Chief Justice again, moved out of Government House, and was obviously extremely reluctant to see the wheel turning round the other way again. I remember paying a courtesy call on him when I was sort of the man in Salisbury and I paid many calls on many people, he was the only one who was really disagreeable, he was as frosty and unpleasant as he could be. So I think Christopher Soames found him much the same. That was a fairly hectic period.

And it became even more hectic – I stayed on after the conference had concluded, which it did quite swiftly, I think quite wisely, the nationalists thought it was no use going on fighting over small points, while people were out there canvassing for an election, and we need to be involved, we need to be there. The Lancaster House conference wound up within a week of Soames's arrival, the next real point was the ceasefire. The provision was they selected about sixteen, I think, monitoring places where the guerrillas were to assemble, where they could be monitored by the Commonwealth Monitoring Force, which was quite small but with detachments from at least a dozen Commonwealth countries, under the command of General Acland, John Acland, whose brother was head of the Foreign Service, the Diplomatic Service, his brother was a more powerful individual than John, really, but anyway, the process had just begun, of the assembling of the guerrillas, a voluntary exercise on their part, they duly turned up, thousands of them, at these monitoring places. Almost the first day, I remember, Gurdon put his head round Lord Soames door, and said "we've just had a report, the first ones are coming in", at two monitoring places, this was very good news. However, the next day or a day or two later, Acland appeared, with a face of thunder, and said "we've just had a report that they've shot down a supply helicopter at a monitoring place", we were all horrified and filed out of Soames's office, as we went out, Adam Gurdon gripped me by the elbow and said "There's some doubt about this, nobody has reported hearing a shot, we're not certain what happened", so that was encouraging, it transpired in fact that what had happened was that the pilot had not noticed an overhead wire, which had caught the wheel of the helicopter, and it had crashed. It was clearly much the same thing for the helicopter crew but it was not the same thing in terms of significance. And in fact the monitoring exercise

went exceptionally well, thousands of guerrillas assembled at these monitoring places, and stayed put.

AM: And you stayed on the as a member of Soames's team?

RB: I stayed on for about a month as a member of Soames's team and left just in time to get home for New Year and take my place in a joint 25th wedding anniversary party, with my brother and a friend, and ourselves, we'd all been married in the same year. And had a great party all together in a village hall in Argyll. So a pleasant way of spending New Year, a pleasant contrast to being in Rhodesia.

AM: Then back to the Foreign Office, dealing with Rhodesia?

RB: Then back to the Foreign Office, yes, I was a sort of fifth wheel, Assistant Under-Secretary, dealing with Rhodesia. Quite a lot to be done, I don't remember the details, but after about three weeks, it was announced that I was to be High Commissioner, and thereafter there wasn't much time to do any Under-Secretary's work except giving briefings, and being briefed, every commercial company you can think of in Britain wanted to see the new High Commissioner, and find out what their chances were of doing business after sanctions.

High Commissioner Zimbabwe, 1980-83

AM: And then you went out to Salisbury/Harare?

RB: I went out to Salisbury/Harare just before Independence with Jilly, my wife, and the celebrations started with a great dinner. In the best hotel in Harare, we had interesting table companions, Jilly sat next to Laurens van der Post, whom she found fascinating, who interestingly had a chair assigned to him but didn't turn up for the independence celebrations, he had presumably been forewarned that there was fear of some trouble, and I sat next to one of Mugabe's guerrilla leaders, sat opposite him. I didn't get a word out of him but I was interested to see he was very silent, looking around him suspiciously through dinner and not eating anything. And the reason eventually became clear, he didn't know how to use a knife and fork and he agonised until finally he saw plates being taken away, set to with his fingers and stuffed as much of his dinner in as he could. Poor man!

AM: So you then had the Independence Day parade?

RB: Yes, the Independence parade, we had a contingent from each of the armies, marched past, Rhodesian Army, Mugabe's guerrillas and Nkoma's, and a contingent from the 1st brigade which the British Military Advisory Training Team, BMATT, had been at work on, amalgamating them, and I was pleased to see was much the smartest of them all. Good Sandhurst training there.

AM: Then you had to go back to London because your daughter was ill?

RB: No, I didn't, my wife did. I saw her off the next day, she went back, she had a long journey.

AM: So you are now in temporary office quarters in Harare?

RB: Temporary office quarters, yes, a miserable little place. Can't remember where it was, we had good quarters coming, but the building had only just been completed, we had to wait about two or three weeks while they finished it off. Meanwhile, we were in temporary quarters, very cramped and frantically busy, hectic. It was so busy that I noted one day that I was sitting in an empty office and it was silent, which was unusual, the usual thing was I had somebody sitting across the desk, asking me something or telling me something, somebody else standing just inside the door waiting for them to finish so they could take their turn, and usually the telephone going at the same time. A chaotic period. So a moment's silence was golden, literally.

AM: And then problems over BMATT?

RB: Yes, there was a battle with London over BMATT because, I felt we had been so successful with the Lancaster House conference, that we must make every effort to complete the process and this BMATT business of trying to amalgamate the three armies into one was crucial, if it went wrong everything else could easily fall apart, the Ministry of Defence, on the other hand, thought that it was extraordinary that this house of cards had lasted as long as it had, and the main thing was to get the British soldiers out of the way before it all fell down,

which also was understandable. So they wanted it done as fast as possible, one month for the amalgamation and training for each battalion, and get them off out within six months. I said, "This won't do". I got the Foreign Office to back me up, and we got our way. Even the head of the BMATT team, General Palmer, agreed with me that we really ought to be prepared to risk a little bit to get a success. It was going to take three or four months, probably, to work on each battalion, and then when we had done so, we had to give them what I called a British "nanny", which was a captain who would be a sort of comfort point for them, for the commanders of the newly united battalion, for six months. So the whole process would take much longer. That was agreed, and that happened, so BMATT became almost a permanent feature of the local scene and they went on, just towards the end of my time, to do the same sort of thing for the Mozambique army. Samora Machel, who was an extremely realistic fellow, saw that this was a very successful and useful exercise, and he sent groups from the Mozambique army across to Zimbabwe to have BMATT training. And that worked very well, too. So BMATT was still there when I left, with some years work ahead of it.

AM: But both Mugabe and Nkomo were keeping some of their people out of this?

RB: Yes, that was not clear at the time. Mugabe thought this was all very well but I need to keep the nucleus of a force of my own, and he got the North Koreans to train a fifth battalion, in the north east of the country, and obviously the North Korean training was very different from ours and the objectives were a bit different to ours. And that battalion became, really, from Mugabe's point of view, useful. From everybody else's point of view a damn nuisance. Nkomo's forces, several of them, simply stayed out of the amalgamating exercise, and took to the bush, in Matabeleland, and we had trouble with both, both of them murdered British tourists, and the Mugabe lot, were eventually used in Matabeleland to deal with the Nkomo lot, which they succeeded in doing, but in such North Korean style that they left behind a deep-rooted resentment with the Government and everything to do with it. It really fuelled the antagonism between Ndebele and Shona, and I think that was a disastrous mistake, really, on Mugabe's part, and divided the country terribly.

AM: And then you had a problem with General Walls?

RB: Oh, yes, we did! That was early on. General Walls went down to South Africa, and allowed himself to be interviewed by a South African journalist, and I was summoned one

day, at short notice, the Prime Minister wishes to see you straight away, so off I went, and he handed me a newspaper cutting from a South African newspaper, which was General Walls's explanation of what a dreadful state of affairs all was in and what an impossible job he had. And Mugabe said "What shall I do about this? Read it, read it". Well, I read it and it was pretty awful. And I said "I'll see him, leave it to me". "Alright" he said, "You see what you can do". Peter Walls, was a man I liked, actually, a nice fellow, he was under huge pressure at that time, and he said "Yes, I am afraid that is me, but it should never have been published, it was clear that this was an off the record discussion, and the man printed it and attributed it to me which he never should have done". And I said to him "well, the trouble is journalists can resist temptation but can only resist so much and there comes a point when the story is so good, they attribute it. The only thing to do is to resolve that you will not speak to journalists either on the record or off the record. So there's nothing, they can't cheat on you that way". OK, he said, I'll do that. I will foreswear speaking to journalists. Mugabe said "OK, it's OK as long as he sticks to that". Unfortunately, he stuck to it for only about three or four months, then he blurted something else out to another journalist. The same thing happened. You couldn't do what I had done, you couldn't do the same thing twice, it's not going to carry conviction the second time round. But Mugabe, quite wisely, as Walls was very crucial for European morale in Zimbabwe at the time, he'd only about six months left to go, or even less as Army Commander before he had to retire on grounds of age, Mugabe wisely didn't sack him, but simply said he should go on leave and stay on leave until his resignation came, or retirement, which he did, and Mugabe appointed his own man to be army commander, the leader of his ZANLA forces, Rex Nhongo, which I think translates as "King War", his wartime name rather than his real name, and he had a wife who's still around, she had a wartime name too, she was known as "Spill blood" or something or other, I can't remember what it was but they were fairly hairy names.

AM: But at this time the relationship with Mugabe was still a working relationship?

RB: Oh yes, most definitely, it was a good relationship really at that stage. And quite a good relationship for most of the first year, Mugabe was fairly heavily dependent on British aid, paid quite a lot of attention to the source of British aid, and, it was really, nearly everything that has gone wrong in Zimbabwe can be attributed in my mind to one great mistake. During the war, the guerrillas, particularly Mugabe's lot, and to a lesser extent Nkomo's, had a recruitment exercise, which was to find a mission boarding school, go in at night, turn the

sixth form out of their beds and march them off into the bush to be trained as guerrillas. And they did far too much of that, so by the end of the war, they had vast numbers of so-called guerrillas, sometimes only partly trained, who felt that they had won the war, their side had one the war, and they were owed a living by the Government and Mugabe was under constant pressure from these people, and eventually towards the end of my time, he succumbed and decided something must be done to make these chaps feel content. I forget quite what the timing was, but that was the spark that led to the take-over of the white farms, in the hope that this would provide land for these people. So the commercial farmers were turfed off their farms to a large extent, not all of them but a great majority, which, of course wrecked the very profitable commercial farming in Zimbabwe and was really attributable to caving in to the pressure from these ex-guerrillas. It went on for some time, I mean even toward the end of my time, one had ex freedom fighters voicing their views who were so young, it was quite clear that they could not have done any fighting in the war which had ended three years ago, a lot of people leapt on that bandwagon, I think.

AM: But you and your wife personally remained on good terms with both Mugabes?

RB: Yes. On the personal level it remained pretty good throughout; as he, under pressure of events, felt it necessary to veer more and more from the path of reconciliation which Lord Soames had urged him to follow, there was inevitably a cooling of the working relationship. There were three main influences on Mugabe's conduct. First of all he is of the Shona tribe, and they tend to be a suspicious people. He was brought up a Catholic and attended a Catholic secondary school and that still influenced his views, especially on matters of social conduct. And he had become a Marxist, or at least deeply influenced by Marx. I remember hearing him, when someone challenged him with that, saying "No, only Marx was a Marxist". Typical – evasion or pedantry?

He is a fascinating conversationalist. Give him an audience of three or four and he will hold them spell bound. But he is not an orator. I remember how that was starkly clear at the state visit of Kenneth Kaunda shortly after independence. They were addressing a large crowd in a football stadium. KK spoke first, I forget about what but it might as well have been how to make an omelette, he held the crowd spell bound. Then Mugabe's turn came, after about ten minutes he had lost them; the crowd were fidgeting in their seats and a few already quietly filtering out of the exits to catch an early bus home. Mugabe reacted by saying more and

more dramatic and radical things to hold their attention. I remember speaking to him one day when the morning's paper had carried an account of a pretty wild speech he had made the day before. I said it was likely to cost him a couple of hundred thousand of foreign investment. "But I wasn't speaking to investors, I was just speaking to a crowd of ZANU/PF women" was his reply. I said that if there were journalists present he was effectively speaking to the whole newspaper reading world. He said he would remember that in the future, but there was not much sign that he did.

His relationship with Britain was generally good in the days of Margaret Thatcher's government, which he saw as having helped him into power and bad with the Blair government which followed which he felt was hostile to him. He would probably have been shocked to realise that Margaret Thatcher, on the other hand, no doubt regarded his successful emergence from the Lancaster House process as one of the failures of her administration. She, and many others, would have preferred to see a Muzorewa/Nkomo coalition. But few foresaw the collapse of Muzorewa's party to only three seats in parliament.

RB: Jilly particularly was on very good terms with Sally Mugabe, who was a charming person, she was a Ghanaian, with strong political views and a spine of steel and already terminally ill. Jilly's relationship with her could be useful in a practical way, trying to get round the Prime Minister's office. We'd asked for a call for Princess Anne on Mugabe. Princess Anne was coming out as Chairman of the Save the Children Fund, and would like to meet the Prime Minister, as he then was. I had asked through the Prime Minister's office if he'd like to receive her; no answer, so we sent a reminder, no answer, and eventually I'd explained the situation to Jilly, and she said "I'll ring Sally". She rang Sally Mugabe who said "Oh, is Princess Anne coming here, of course we'd like to see her. I'd like to see her as well as Robert." This happened on other occasions when the outer office felt the Prime Minister shouldn't do whatever it was we were asking so they simply didn't tell him about. And, jumping the gun, that happened to us, when I subsequently joined the Beit Trust, which operates in that part of the world, and spends a lot of money on all sorts of good causes, and one of the Trustees goes out every year, to do a tour and assess what's going on. When my turn came round, the question was should I call on Mugabe not as Beit Trustee, but as ex High Commissioner. So my successor, Kieran Prendergast, put in a request for me to see him, no reply, no reply, sent a reminder, nothing, no reply, then the day before I was due to

arrive, Mugabe was coming back from somewhere and as usual the whole Cabinet and Diplomatic Corps were turned out to meet him at the airport. When I arrived Kieran Prendergast said to me that he had button-holed Mugabe at the airport, and Mugabe's reaction was "The Byatts are coming? yes, of course, I'd like to see them". Not untypical, it was in fact very awkward for us, I remember, because we were very kindly lent a large house and we decided we'd have a cocktail party for our closest Zimbabwean friends, we couldn't possibly have all of them, and most of them wouldn't have known we were there, but when we went to see Mugabe, he'd got the television cameras there, so everybody in Zimbabwe knew we were around!

AM: And then you come to the April 1981 Aid Pledging conference in Harare?

RB: Yes. The Soameses came out, he was to be the leader of the British delegation to the conference, and in the usual Soames style, he did the job very well, he got quite a good brief and was able to promise quite a large uplift in our aid programme, and he set that out on the first day of the conference, certainly quite a successful pledging conference. Mary Soames came out with him, her objective was to find out, how the charity which she had set up when she was in Government House to assist various Zimbabwean good works had done its stuff, had been successful. So she was to go touring round the country looking at the organisations which had benefitted, she said she'd take Jilly with her. Jilly came back, they both came back, from this tour, with the most wonderful stories. The police had decided that she needed a police escort, being a big-wig, and they had selected a white female police woman to be the escort, and Jilly and Mary had the most marvellous stories, not so much about the tour, which had been quite successful, all those organisations had done very well with the money, but about their escort who had been one problem after another. One was her dress, she insisted on wearing white, and yellow high-heeled shoes, all that was alright but it wasn't ideal when it came to marching across large ploughed fields in the mud. The other difficulty was that she would never, she always insisted on following them, she drove her own Landrover and she followed them in their hired car wherever they went. But she wasn't very good at navigation, and there were several occasions, Jilly told me, when Mary Soames had suddenly stopped the car at the side of the road, Jilly would say "what's the matter?", Mary said "she's taken the wrong turning again, I saw her in the mirror, we'd better wait for her, because if she goes back to Harare and says she lost us, she'll be in trouble". Then they would sit and wait until she reappeared.

AM: And your first visit to Bulawayo?

RB: The first visit to Bulawayo was interesting, it was about four to five weeks after independence, I was seen with Lord Soames as he was departing, which had been noted on the television and everybody wanted to know what it was about. What it was actually about was that Christopher Soames was going up the ladder to the 'plane when he turned round, all this was being televised, came running back down and whispered something to the High Commissioner and ran up again. What did he say to the High Commissioner, what was the last instruction to the High Commissioner? His last instruction was "Get rid of that car, it's hell!" We'd been to Bulawayo, flown down to Bulawayo because we were going to look at BMATT down there, apart from the usual things of calling on the Mayor, calling on the head of the railways and so on, and we came back to Harare, as it then was, in this armour plated car, which was an extraordinary vehicle, the windows, which would neither open or, well, they were shut, were made of glass two and a half or three inches thick, and the weight of the vehicle must have been colossal. It had an air-conditioning system which was presumably more or less alright for a European summer, but wasn't up to dealing with semi-tropical sunshine. The Defence Adviser and I got back to Harare, stripped to the waist, bathed in sweat, it was an awful machine. However, the Office agreed that I might offer it as a present to Mugabe, which I did, and he was immensely grateful, thank you very much, very useful, but I noticed he hardly ever used it, I knew why.

AM: Then you had many Ministerial visitors out to Harare?

RB: Yes, a fair number of Ministerial visitors. The first one, whom I liked, was Cecil Parkinson, who at that time was Minister of Trade, and came out to see what the post-sanctions chances were. Almost everybody from the commercial world was also running out for the same purpose. That was a good one. There were several others. The one that I remember as not being as good was the Secretary of State for Defence, John Nott, and he had an instruction to raise with Mugabe an issue which had been in the headlines. Someone, I suspect the South Africans, or a South African agent had contrived to blow up on the runway at Gwelo three Hawker Hunters which we had just sold to them, I think we sold them six, but three were blown up, and the Zimbabweans, quite naturally suspected the white Rhodesian Airforce officers, and half a dozen of them were arrested, and there were allegations that they

had been tortured, and the newspapers had reported this and Nott had been asked to raise this with Mugabe in protest. He raised it with Mugabe and Mugabe duly told him it was quite untrue, a note was taken, and “Oh” said Nott, “that’s very, very good to have that from you, for our Prime Minister, thank you so much”. And I, tiresome High Commissioner, chipped in, and said, “Well one of these officers had British nationality, and he has seen me and he has told me, himself, that he was tortured. So I suggest a little further enquiry may be needed”. John Nott looked daggers at me, and Mugabe said, right, we’ll look into it. I doubt if he ever did but ...

AM: And you had Lord Carrington out again?

RB: We had him out, he was a success, the Government were very pleased to have him, and treated him as though he was a Head of State visitor, he didn’t stay with us, he was put up in the official guest house, Blair House, it was called, and our only input, no, not our only input, one input was to provide a lunch for him, and it was not a very straight forward lunch. We had to organise a lunch in the dining room for Carrington and his main guests, in my office at the other end of the house, for their advisers, private secretaries, for Lady Carrington, at the swimming pool, and for their security guards and drivers, somewhere else, I can’t remember where, anyway, four lunches going at once. Very chaotic. The other thing I remember was we had to go and, I can’t remember what we were visiting, it was a farm, I think, anyway something out of Harare, where we were to go by helicopter, and it was a very hot day, and so they didn’t close the doors of the helicopter. And the helicopter went like this (indicates tilting hand), I was sitting in the middle, along a seat at the back, with Carrington on one side and Jilly on the other, and I didn’t quite understand how the force of gravity worked, or if centrifugal force offset it, as we suddenly tilted I thought “do you rescue your wife, or your Secretary of State?!”

AM: And then the pace of events slowed down and you went to see your opposite number in Malawi and heard about the RCDS?

RB: I went to see my opposite numbers. The Ambassador in Pretoria had just visited me. I went to Lusaka and Malawi. In Malawi Bill Peters handed me a telegram, why they had sent it to him and not to me, I don’t know, but it was telegram telling me I was to go to the RCDS, more or less straight away, because the course was starting in January, and we were at the

beginning of December, so it was going to be head over heels to get there. I protested. The FCO agreed, they would get the man who would take over from me to do the first two to three months of the RCDS course and I could go in slower time. So that's what happened.

AM: So, then your back to the RCDS? Did you enjoy it?

RCDS 1983-84

RB: I'm not sure I enjoyed it. It was pleasant, it was a nice rest cure, it was certainly not a very challenging job, the job of the senior directing staff, really, was to set up the programme for the year and get lecturers and so forth, well most people were happy to agree to give lectures to the RCDS as it was a prestigious body, so that was fine, and the other thing that was fine was that every year the College divided up into small groups, for overseas tours, about six or eight and a staff member. I went to South America, which I thought I wouldn't see again otherwise, which was right, and then I went to Australia, Indonesia and New Zealand as I thought I wouldn't see those again either, which was wrong as I ended up in New Zealand. South America, I remember, very pleasant tours, one of the places we went to was Chile, which was a little bit doubtful at that time, still General Pinochet. I had been schooled by the Spanish Brigadier who was one of my group, my Spanish was existent but rather rusty, and he had given me various lessons in the aeroplane as we flew around so that I could do a little bit in Spanish, and I was doing my bit with Pinochet, he was listening carefully glancing at me frequently. I started to get the impression that my Spanish was terrific, wonderful, it was only when we had finished with him and got home to get organised for going out to a lunch party that I noticed that in my rush to get to Pinochet from whatever the previous thing was, I had changed into the trousers of one suit and the jacket of another, two different colours. So it didn't have much to do with my Spanish.

AM: And then you were off to Rabat?

Ambassador to Morocco, 1985-87

RB: Rabat. We were nearly three years in Rabat. Lovely country, not really a very lovely job from my point of view. It was very noticeable that for a country that was not that far away, we had very little commercial or other activity. The main thing that happened was the state

visit, the Queen had been on a state visit to Morocco which had not gone perfectly. The Foreign Minister went to London to set up the arrangements for it. He said that the Ambassador was terrified of him, and he said, if it's like this with the Foreign Minister what will it be like with the King, we had better change him fast, so he pulled him out, chose a very good man as his successor, but wouldn't allow him to go to London until the King went. So there was no Moroccan Ambassador in London to organise a State Visit, so muggins had to do it from Rabat, I went back two or three times to London and I said that it was all a matter of a clash of protocol. I said "what do you do if the Queen is going to inspect the guard on the Horseguards Parade, and just as she's about to get into the carriage to drive from Buckingham Palace, you notice that one of the soldiers has got his buttons sewn on in the wrong order?" Answer, you can't do anything; send him back to barracks. It's too late to do anything when the Queen is getting into her carriage. No, that's British protocol; Moroccan protocol is, ask the Queen to wait a few minutes while we re-sew the buttons! Presentation is more important than punctuality!

AM: So, after Rabat, New Zealand?

High Commissioner New Zealand, 1987

RB: After that, New Zealand, yes. A pleasant last Post. Our predecessor had fallen foul of the Secretary of State Geoffrey Howe and of the New Zealand Prime Minister David Lange. He had had a very public row with Lange, I can't remember what it was about, but not very much, not enough to justify a very public row, certainly. Geoffrey Howe insisted he be changed. So as it was nearly the end of the RCDS year Byatt was seized upon. So off we went to New Zealand. It was more interesting than one would have thought because the Lange Government were introducing in New Zealand very much the same sort of reforms that Maggie Thatcher was bringing in here, introduced by a Labour rather than a Conservative government. The only real difference was that the Labour Government didn't do much about the unions. Hands off the unions. But other than that there was quite a lot of overlap and we had quite a lot of Ministerial visitors coming out to see how it was going and how the New Zealanders were tackling this or that or the next thing, which added to the interest of life. And Jilly's three hundred or so cousins also added to the interest!

AM: And you had a fair chance of travelling?

RB: Yes, a lot of travel around New Zealand, and the job included also being High Commissioner to Western Samoa, which was about two and a half hours flight away, and then there were the Cook Islands, right out in the Pacific, which were a New Zealand dependency, and which were also about three and a half hours away by air, and finally I was also Governor of Pitcairn Island, which was rather more difficult to reach. The usual thing was to go on one of the periodic supply ships, which would be chartered to take a load of goods to Pitcairn, they had no harbour there, you had to lower everything into the Pitcairn longboat, and it would be ferried ashore and come back for another load, so the process took two days anyway, maybe three, in which time the Governor would do his stuff on shore, see this and that and the next thing, and then go back to the container ship and fly home from Panama. That was the standard drill, and I had organised that for two or three months' time when I was advised that a Minister, I forget which Minister, a Minister from London, was coming out and insisted that the High Commissioner must be there for his visit, it was not enough for him to be briefed by the Deputy High Commissioner, he needed to see the man himself, so I had to scrap my plan, and eventually we managed to come up with another plan, which was in some ways rather better. I flew to somewhere or other, the Cook Islands, I think, and then flew on to Easter Island, which was a Chilean dependency. We spent two or three days on Easter Island, and then picked up a cruise ship, which was coming to Easter Island to see the statues, and then taking the tourists on to Pitcairn where they were to be for a day and a half. I got to Pitcairn that way, a day and half wasn't really enough, so we stayed a whole week on Pitcairn, and were picked up by another boat, which was a retired Danish lightship, which had sat anchored to a sandbank in the Skagerrak, or Kattegat, I forget which, and had been replaced by an automatic lightship, and this ancient thing had been decommissioned, put up for sale and it was bought by a group of young Danes who had decided to use it for charters round the Pacific, and it was alright, the only trouble was that I found I was given the one smart cabin below and everyone else slept on deck, I spent one night in the smart cabin below, and joined everybody else on deck, because the oil in the bilge was something awful, and the smell was terrible, so two or three days ploughing across the Pacific to somewhere in the Tahiti Group, Friendly Islands, Mangareva where we would pick up an aeroplane, which took me on to the Cook Islands, it was going, I thought en route to New Zealand, but when we got to the Cook Islands, there was an Urgent message for me that the Prime Minister wanted to see me on the runway, I can't remember what it was about, but anyway I went down to see him, saw him on the runway, I was furious, he wanted me to

come off the plane and do something, it didn't strike me as very important, but he thought it was the end of the world, obviously, so I had to agree to that, couldn't really sort of snub the man by getting back onto the plane again, and I spent two or three days in the Cook Islands, and got another plane to take me home to New Zealand. Quite a palaver of a visit to Pitcairn one way and another.

AM: That's run through all the notes you prepared, I wondered if, to round it off, you had any thoughts on life in the Diplomatic Service?

RB: Well, well, I think I enjoyed it on the whole, it is a very varied life, which is one of its attractions, no two jobs are alike, a certain amount of things are standard and come with the rations and have to be done, but on the whole, every post you go to, the job is quite different from the last one, so you have great variety which I find an attraction. My first job, if you got fed up with office work in the Colonial Service, you could always go and build a bridge, and I think variety was the spice of life in the Diplomatic Service also. Usefulness? I don't know, sometimes one thinks it's useful, very often it's scribbling in the sand which the next tide is going to wash out.

AM: Thank you very much, indeed.

RB: Thank you.