

BDOHP Biographical Details and Interview Index

John Cecil CLOAKE (born 2 December 1924)

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RECOLLECTIONS OF JOHN CLOAKE'S DIPLOMATIC CAREER

RECORDED AND TRANSCRIBED BY ABBEY WRIGHT, APRIL 2013

Entry to Foreign Office and Information Research Department, 1948

AW: This is Abbey Wright speaking with John Cloake on Wednesday 3 April 2013.

We're going to start at the beginning of your diplomatic career, John, and it's summer 1948; and I'm going to ask "What took you into the Foreign Office?"

JC: I had always been very interested in the possibility. I had an uncle who was very much my mentor and role model and who was in the Home Civil Service in the War Office for most of his career and then a Ministry of Defence Under Secretary. He'd been in World War One. He then read history at Cambridge, which I wanted to do, and I thought I wanted to follow the same sort of career but I was very interested in the foreign side. The army in the latter part of the war had taken me to India and then to Japan. I can boast that I was the first officer in the British or Indian armies to land from the sea in Japan after the war. I won't go into that story because it's not relevant to the diplomatic side. And then back, after the war, at Cambridge 1946-48 I was reading history but I also had tucked away a travel scholarship which I had won at school in French and couldn't be taken up during the war, and owing to curious post war regulations I found that I had qualified to take a BA at the end of my first year back. So I said "Well, does that mean I don't have to keep terms anymore?" and they said "yes", and so I said "In that case could I go to Paris and brush up my French?" This was all agreed. Afterwards, while discussing this with my very dear friend and mentor Herbert Butterfield I mentioned that I had a certain inclination towards the academic life as well, and I asked him "What do you think my prospects would be if I decided to go for academia?" and he said "I see you as helping to make history rather than just write it, you can write it after you retire" and that is what I've done. And so I put in for the reconstruction entry.

AW: The reconstruction entry? What was that exactly and how did it work?

JC: First of all there was a qualifying paper where you had to do stuff on paper at Burlington House. Then there was the country house episode where for a two-day stay, normally a

weekend, you went and had a series of interviews and group discussions and individual problems. That simply reported to the actual selection board which was about 12 people, dons, trade unionists, civil servants, what have you, who took the final decision. So there were no real written papers at that time except this first qualifying one. And that was the reconstruction exam which they had said they would run for some years but come 1948, they said the last year would be 1949. I had said that I wanted to do my full three years history tripos after the war and I was only in my second year but I thought I would put in for the exam and then I could have another go the next year if necessary. The weekend before my finals, or at least my Part One finals, I had a telegram from the Civil Service Commission saying "Can you come to the country house this Saturday and Sunday?" Well, I had planned to play golf, I didn't believe in last minute revision, and so I said yes and when we got there all was explained: that the House of Lords were about to have a debate on the Foreign Service, the Civil Service and the Reconstruction Examination and the Commissioners of the Civil Service had decided that the best thing they could do was to get the press to write it all up beforehand. There was very little time and so the only thing they could think of was to invite one party of candidates down and let the press go through it with them. And so we were told on arrival "If anybody feels put off by the presence of the press (who'd been told they might not have any contact with the candidates until the interviews were finished and they could not attend private interviews but might sit at the back of the group sessions) just come and tell us and we won't hold it against you but will invite you later". I can't really see a candidate for the Foreign Office saying "The press put me off"! In fact the press were very good, we had lots of political and diplomatic correspondents, photographers and so on and they did behave themselves very well, sometimes becoming quite partisan. I remember in the course of one discussion with everybody together, somebody made a good point and the press man sitting behind me nudged his colleague and said "That's one of my chaps"! And it so happened that on the last morning, a lovely sunny day, I had finished my interviews, probably before anybody else and I got out a deckchair and the Sunday Times and started to do the crossword and one of these press people came up, very cautiously, and said "Have you finished?" I said I had and he brought a deckchair and sat beside me and started interviewing me and everybody else came round until somebody else came out. We got a very good write up, which was good and the press were complimentary about the candidates. The Civil Service Commissioners were pleased and the Lords had their debate. At the end of it all I found myself coming out actually top in my grade. There were two categories by age. I was

in the younger lot and I came top of that list and top of the other group was Peter Ramsbotham about whom I will speak more later.

I had put myself down for the Home Civil Service as well as the Foreign Service because I thought if I don't get into the Foreign Service, I'd like to try for the Commonwealth Service, which was still part of the Home Civil at that time. And if I had any doubts, they were resolved by two letters which I received on the same day. One from the Civil Service Commissioners saying "Sir, I have been instructed by the Commissioners to inform you that you have been selected as a successful candidate ..." and one from the Foreign Office that started "Dear Cloake, Congratulations". That would have settled it if I hadn't already known that I wanted the Foreign Office! They said that they didn't want to wait for me, and I had to forgo Part Two and start immediately, August 1948.

AW: And did you go straight into the Information Research Department?

JC: Yes I did. I had no idea what it was. I reported to Personnel Department who told me to go along to see Ralph Murray, Head of Department. Ralph received me very cordially but said "I'm sorry I have to go to a meeting in the main building" (we were in Carlton House Terrace at that time) and handed me on to Milo Talbot who was his number two next door. Milo was a splendid chap, a pre-war diplomat, very proper, very good at protocol, including foreign office procedure. He sat me down in his office, explained what IRD was about, explained that I was to become the first "third room". Up to then there had just been Ralph Murray and him and the so called "intelligence section" of four regional experts, an editorial section of two, and a reference section of five and that was the department. I was to join the central core as the first "third room", but there wasn't an actual third room for me so I'd be sharing a room with Milo Talbot. He threw some of his in-tray at me and explained about drafts and minutes and so on and said for the first couple of days to write on bits of paper and pass it to him and after a couple of days he said "you've got the hang of it, carry on", which I did. A few weeks later he rang me one Monday morning and said "John, I won't be in for a few days, I've got to go and bury a cousin in Ireland". A few hours later his telephone rang and the voice said "I just wanted to congratulate Milo on being a peer". So I hastily looked at my Times and found that he had inherited from a cousin the Barony of Talbot de Malahide! Later he invited me there for a weekend and it was all great fun. But I think Milo then decided that IRD was really not the thing for a peer. Adam Watson, Assistant in Southern

Department, another pre-war diplomat, a very much left-wing-ish intellectual, had spent most of the war in the Moscow Embassy, and knew a lot about Communism in Russia and was itching to get into IRD. He and Milo did a swop and we then had a totally different atmosphere. In the meantime Milo had taught me all there was to know about Foreign Office procedure. Ralph Murray had been a newspaper man and he ran the department as half newspaper office and half F.O. department and couldn't care less about procedure. Adam Watson didn't care about procedure either and so I became the department expert, after all of my two or three months since joining, on the right way to produce submissions to the Secretary of State and this, that and the other. Adam had all these useful contacts, Celia Kirwan whom he brought into the office who was the sister in law of Arthur Koestler, Leslie Sheridan who was brought in, and Denis Healey who wasn't brought into the office but was nobbled to help.

The whole job and the whole department grew at an enormous rate because it had been agreed that we should go onto the secret vote for the funding except for the diplomatic service officers, the rest of the thing was on the secret vote. And by the time I left a year or so later, we were sixty strong or more with our own admin officer.

AW: And your role?

JC: My job there was very largely to receive all the incoming papers from other departments. We were dependent on what other departments would send us, and I would farm them out to Intelligence who passed them on to Reference Section to note; as well as dealing with any sort of policy matters which concerned the department. I spent quite a lot of time dealing with questions like setting up a new radio station. I was joined by another chap and then we actually moved to a third room! And I think we did a good job. One of the things I especially remember was that we spent a lot of time on the question of international conferences, communists trying to launch conferences of, for example, international youth and to get the people to various Iron Curtain countries and say what a nice place it is, what good chaps they all are. We spent a lot of time trying to nobble people who were going and I do recall that on one occasion I was told to nobble the Astronomer Royal who was off to Warsaw or somewhere and I got a dinner at the Athenaeum out of that one! Briefing him and telling him not to be taken in by these people. I think that's all I have to say on the IRD.

3rd Secretary, Baghdad, 1949

AW: Yes, and that was about a year?

JC: Yes, a little over a year and by this time I'd joined the St James's Club. Adam belonged to the Travellers Club and he took me along to have lunch with a chap called Philip Adams who was in Personnel Department and we were chatting away and Philip Adams asked if the Middle East interested me. Not very long after that I was summoned to Personnel Department who said "We want you to go to Baghdad as the Ambassador's Private Secretary". The news was broken to me that I would be Sir Henry Mack's fifth Private Secretary in 18 months. The first one had moved in the due course of postings, but the second one had had a nervous breakdown, the third one had been ill, the fourth had lasted 24 hours, and there it was! Personnel Department said to me "Of course he's a wild Irishman, and the veins in his neck grow purple with rage at least three times a day, but never mind, he's very fair on paper"! And I also went to see Piers Carter who later became Ambassador in Afghanistan but who, at the time, had recently returned from Chancery in Baghdad. He said to me "There is one golden rule for you as Private Secretary. Anything concerning the Macks and their comfort and convenience for you takes precedence over anything but a declaration of war"! Having heard all this I said to Personnel Department who had mentioned that the Macks were in London on leave, "Can I call on them so if they don't like the look of my face I won't waste a lot of time going there and coming back"! But I was told, no he won't bother to see you, he says if we've chosen you, that's all right.

So I arrived in Baghdad in October 1949. The journey is worth mentioning. On the same plane there was a new Consul who was going out. We flew from the very beginnings of Heathrow, a few huts in those days, on a plane that had just come off the Berlin airlift I think. It was really a Lancaster bomber which had been converted to a York civil aircraft. It was appallingly noisy! We had to stop about three times on the way to Baghdad because of its short range. I had to have diplomatic uniform, and I managed to buy a second hand one, but I couldn't find a sword. Eventually, I was able to buy the sword of the former Ambassador in Baghdad. I shoved it in my golf bag. The Office had been quite generous with an airfreight allowance but when I took these things in to the BOAC place in Victoria, the day before I flew myself, and when they were checking things in, they said I couldn't take a sword, it

would need an export licence. I said “Don’t be silly, it’s not really a sword, with difficulty you could get it to hold a crumpet in front of the fire”. She then said “If you take it with you on the plane, you don’t need an export licence” so I went on with this b... thing on my knee because it wouldn’t fit in the luggage rack! So we stumbled off the plane, me clutching my sword, and were met by David Summerhayes, the Third Secretary in Chancery at the time and the acting Private Secretary since the last one was thrown out. He took us to his house while he went back to the office and some time later he returned to say “Sorry you’re going to have to have supper on your own, the Ambassador insists that I go back for a dinner party”. He said “I told him I was supposed to be looking after you but he (Mack) said, “Never mind I need you here”.

The next morning was Saturday morning so I went into the office, David Summerhayes (and I’ve never known anybody hand over quite so fast) handed over to me and, slightly to my surprise, though I think they may have told me beforehand, I found that Mack not only had a diplomatic Private Secretary but also an Air Force ADC, a Flight Lieutenant, sharing the same office with me. This was because we had a treaty with Iraq and we had a lot of Air Force at Habbaniyah and Basra with an Air Vice Marshal in Habbaniyah and it wasn’t thought appropriate that we should have an Air Attaché but the Air Force wanted to have somebody in the office. They had always provided an ADC for the High Commissioner when there was a High Commissioner and so they provided an ADC to be a go-between for the Ambassador and the Air Vice Marshal. But of course he was the Social Secretary.

So, I sat there on Saturday morning and David Summerhayes went in to give Mack his papers and said “John Cloake is here Sir”. Well I never saw Mack all that morning, though they kept reminding him I’d arrived. He went off back to the Residence and come Monday I went in and had all his papers ready, and Denis the ADC came in and said “Mack’s ill in the Residence and wants his papers in a bag”, and so I put them in with a little note and when they finally came back I asked what was his reaction, and he’d said “Well, I can read his writing”! And all week he stayed at home and I never met him. Finally on the following Monday morning, I took in his papers and put them on his desk saying “Good morning Sir, I’m John Cloake”. He said “Huhh”. And that was that!

On the other side of my office was Humphrey Trevelyan doing his first diplomatic job after leaving the Indian Political Service, as Counsellor, number two, in the Embassy, who greeted me with great pleasure and enthusiasm.

I could go on talking about Baghdad forever but I'm going to be a bit selective.

Mack was a dinosaur. He firmly believed, I think, that the only people in his Embassy that mattered at all were those on the Diplomatic List. He carefully didn't even know the names of anyone else except the sole male shorthand typist who had been allotted to him. He was Crane, surname only. And if for some reason Crane wasn't there, I would get a buzz "Send in that girl who does for me when Crane isn't here"! He ignored all the junior staff totally. Lady Mack was, I suppose, the worse of the two. She was an appalling snob. Well, I don't know what was the matter with her, it may have been drink, it may have been something else. On one occasion, she went through the entire staff list with me saying "not one of us, John", about Trevelyan, of Herbert Gamble, "bloody consul", of another "bloody commercial" and so it went on. Everybody was absolutely "not one of us" and when we got down to the bottom of the list, I was in the fortunate position of "nothing known against"! At the very bottom of the list was Philip Mallet, "What were Personnel thinking about, sending him as Commercial Secretary? His father is Ambassador in Rome!" Philip was an amusing character, he only died a year or two ago. We kept in touch ever since. He was courting his wife while we were there. She was working in Baghdad, nice girl, still alive. Philip purchased a very old two-seater car, and I mean really broken down with knob off the gear handle, a hole in the floor. It made an enormous clanging noise as it drove and he came to the Embassy in it. Mack summoned me "Tell Philip Mallet that he is never to bring that horrid machine through the gates again. He can go round the side, if he must come to the Embassy in it".

We really had a very good staff. Nearly everybody ended up an Ambassador somewhere. People like Donald Maitland, Geoffrey Arthur.

The other thing about Mack was that the rudest word in his vocabulary was Consul and the rudest adjective was commercial. He could just about stand having a session with the British oil men in Baghdad because that was "politics" but never had anything to do with the very large British commercial community except on the King's Birthday Party when they were all

invited until when, at the appropriate moment, he would shout above the throng “John, tell the band to play God Save the King” and it was time to go home.

AW: And at that period in Baghdad it was still the Monarchy?

JC: Yes, yes, the King was at Harrow. The country was basically run by Nuri Said Pasha as Prime Minister who was an Arab Revolt man. There were three generations visible in Iraq. There were the originally Turkish educated Iraqis, many of whom had been in the Arab Revolt, and then there was the second generation who had been educated either at Alexandria College in Egypt or the American University in Beirut. The third generation, who were coming back from Cambridge or MIT with either English or American wives, could find no place for themselves because the older people were blocking all the posts. I had quite a number of young Iraqi friends, in particular one in the protocol department of the Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs who kept ringing me up, as private secretary to the Dean of the Corps. He introduced me to other friends of his and there was quite obviously an awful lot of resentment, not quite misery, and disappointment that these brilliant young men with splendid degrees couldn't get worthwhile jobs and this later boiled over of course.

The other thing we noted about Mack was that he would only pay attention to the government. He had no truck with the opposition at all. There was an opposition, and one of my favourite stories is that we (and I should preface that by saying that Denis Shepherd the ADC finally had a nervous breakdown and I had to take on his job as well as mine) had a moment when Nuri Pasha finally decided to have a holiday. He resigned the premiership and appointed his pal Saleh Jabr as Prime Minister in his place. Mack held out for some weeks but in the end said it was no use and that he had to have the new cabinet to dinner. So he divided them up into two dinner parties and at the second one included Tahsin Qadri, the head of the royal household, one of the Arab Revolt people and a man whom I enjoyed very much, a very amusing character. My job was to greet everybody and Tahsin came in and looked at the dinner placements and burst into hoots of laughter. He said “At last Henry Mack has made a mistake, the government resigned this morning!”

And just to go on a little bit about the Macks and their comfort and convenience. One of the tasks which I had to perform in the absence of the ADC was that if the Macks wanted to go to the local British club for a film show, not only did I have to warn the president of the club in

advance, but as they set off from the Embassy I had to be on the steps to press the button to turn out the guard as they left. I then had to be at the club with the president to greet them on their arrival, without overtaking them on the way and there was only one main street! So I bribed the corporal driving the Rolls to drive very slowly down the main street while I flung my car up onto the flood bank of the river and shot past them. It never occurred to them that they were putting anybody to any inconvenience. Absolutely no feeling for anybody but themselves. In the end I actually felt slightly sorry for them. What had happened was that back in early 1948 the then Ambassador, Stonehewer-Bird was ill. We were trying to negotiate a new treaty with Iraq post war. There was a lot of feeling against it. Nuri Pasha had gone to England accompanied by the Counsellor who was Chargé d'Affaires, leaving the Commercial Counsellor in charge of the Embassy. The Embassy was attacked. The Commercial Counsellor had no useful contacts and could do practically nothing and the story was that the Office, I suppose it was the then PUS, had said to Mack "I want you to go to Baghdad and stop the rot. You'll just be there for a short time to sort things out and then we'll give you a decent post". Now Mack had never been, except for a very brief time attached to Eisenhower in North Africa, outside the European capitals, Paris, Berlin, Vienna, that round. There they were in Baghdad, forgotten! They'd been there for nearly two years and then came the posting, and they were certain they were going to get Brussels. But it was Buenos Aires! Evita and all that! I have never seen anybody so crushed. They were absolutely in the dumps. I was the one who put them on the plane, came back to the office and champagne all round!

One of my tasks had really been to try and hold the staff together. In hatred of the Macks! Quite typically, Peggy Trevelyan would ring me up and say "John, are we in or out today? Because I'm giving a party and would like to invite the Macks but I don't want to be snubbed again!" Well that was Baghdad really.

AW: Did you see the next Ambassador in?

JC: Yes I did. Jack Troutbeck who was moved from the British Middle East Office. Now he had been on a visit to Baghdad about a year before and we'd thought what a nice person he was. Mack had taken him with me and the ADC down to Babylon, and we'd been impressed by how nice he was. By this time Trevelyan had moved, and his place had been taken by Harold Beeley, also a future Ambassador, and Harold had written to Troutbeck saying "Do

you want the whole Embassy to turn out on your arrival?" Troutbeck had said "No, I just want a little quiet dinner with you and John Cloake". He'd left his wife behind in Beirut because she wasn't feeling well. We went to have supper with him and I started to pour the drinks and Jack Troutbeck said, "No, let me do that". Dinner was announced and we stood by to let the Ambassador pass through. He stopped and literally stamped his foot on the floor with a hand on both our shoulders and said "I will not be treated like a bloody Governor-General, in you go" and that was a change! Almost immediately after that I was due for my home leave and the new ADC was about to come, it all fitted.

3rd (then 2nd) Secretary, Saigon, 1951

At the end of my leave I had two calls from the Office, one from Travel Section saying my tickets were ready for the return to Baghdad and another from Personnel Department saying to hold everything because I wasn't going back to Baghdad. They told me that what had happened was that the Inspectors had been and they saw no reason why the Ambassador in Baghdad should have both a diplomatic Private Secretary and an ADC. So they had asked Troutbeck how it could be justified and he replied that since he'd arrived he'd only had one or the other and since he'd survived, it couldn't. So the Office took the opportunity to grab me back and leave him with the ADC. They said they had a post in mind for me, that it was a diplomatic job, it was tropical, not a consular one, it was a good thing I spoke French fluently. In my mind we were now at either Haiti or Saigon and they wanted me in a hurry, so that meant Saigon! And two or three days later, that's what it turned out to be.

So in August 1951 I arrived in Saigon where I have to say, the Head of Mission couldn't have been more different! A really very, very nice person, Hubert Graves, former Japan Consular Service and then serving in Washington during the War as a Far Eastern expert and had only fairly recently come to Saigon which had only just been upgraded from a Consulate General to a Legation and we all had both titles. I was Third Secretary and Vice Consul, and the head of Chancery was First Secretary and Consul, and Graves was Minister and Consul General. We all shared political and consular work. There was one colleague who was doing the consular job most of the time but when he went on leave, Graves asked me to take it over, which was good training and he was a splendid person to train me in what consular work was all about. So I did a little bit of everything including visiting British prisoners, swearing in a new ship's captain, and marriages! Nobody really trusted the local marriage laws. On one splendid occasion the daughter of the Military Attaché in Tokyo was to marry the nephew of

the French High Commissioner in Saigon. The M.A. had been very worried and asked Graves to make absolutely sure she was properly married! First the couple went along to the French Mairie and had a French civil marriage, I was interpreter and guide and supporter to the young lady. And then we all went back to the office where Graves formally said “John, are the doors open?” and performed the consular marriage, all very properly done, and the next day they were married in the Cathedral, so we reported that she had been properly married! We had several consular marriages.

AW: What interested you most in this role?

JC: Basically I was doing political work and Graves said to me that he would like me to take a particular interest in Cambodia and Laos. We covered all three ‘Associate States’ from Saigon at that time. I accompanied him on visits there and frequently accompanied Malcolm McDonald the Commissioner General to Angkor because he had discovered Angkor and adored the place! So I covered Laos a bit and Cambodia slightly more up to the time I went on home leave. While I was away the Office finally decided the time had come to open an office in Phnom Penh under a resident Chargé, under Graves, but had refused to do the same thing in Vientiane for Laos. So when I returned, Graves said “You are going to be my Chargé des Affaires Laotiennes” and the Office have agreed to you going up there once a month”. This was a splendid idea because there was virtually no diplomatic corps at that time in Vientiane because of course the French were not diplomats because they were more or less running it. There was an American Chargé d’Affaires on detachment from Saigon for six months, of my ranking, very junior. He had an office and a Siamese clerk and there were two American aid people attached to him who spoke no French - an appalling waste of everybody’s time and trouble. There was a Siamese Minister with a military attaché and that was it. When I arrived I increased the strength of the diplomatic corps by twenty-five per cent! And it was wonderful because the poor Americans, and I knew two or three of them in succession in this job, were constantly being bombarded with cypher telegrams from Washington or Saigon. They didn’t trust the Siamese clerk so they had to decipher everything themselves and then encipher the reply themselves and actually take it to the post office to telegraph it to Saigon! And never got out to see anybody or anything. I would come up for my visit, pop round doing my calls – Prime Minister, Foreign Minister, Defence Minister, French High Commissioner, French General, one or two other ministers and pop into the American and tell him what was happening and then swan off to the provinces for

three days staying with a Governor or something and then go back to Saigon and write it all up. Wonderful. I claim to have actually typed on the American Embassy typewriter the first diplomatic note from a British diplomat to a Laotian minister originated in Laos. We had an awful lot of protocol work. Every time one of the Three Kings of Orient or French Governors General arrived at the airport, everybody had to go and stand out and wait for them and frequently they weren't on the plane after all and after we'd stood in the sun for hours. A lot of congratulatory telegrams were despatched on peoples' birthdays and I was reckoned to be the best "marmalader" in French in the Legation, so I had the job of writing "marmalade" telegrams. So that was quite amusing.

AW: And the war?

JC: The war was constantly going on and frequently at night one would hear artillery in the distance. At one briefing I was at when a French general was briefing an English visitor, he said "The front line is twilight. We control the day and the Vietminh control the night" and that was very much the case. I had a friend from school and in the army, who was still in the army and stationed in Singapore and was sent up to have a look at what was happening. He was taken directly up to the Delta with a French escorting officer to a Foreign Legion HQ. The Foreign Legion colonel opened a bottle of champagne and said "Would you like to see the river?" and so they went off and got into a little assault boat and half way across were being fired on. My friend said "You do control the other side of the river?" "Légèrement, légèrement" said the colonel and they landed on a tiny beach head with about 20 legionnaires blazing away, with the colonel wandering around tapping them on the backside! My friend got back to Saigon to the most enormous telling-off by the French General. He said "I don't care a bit about you, but imagine if an English officer had been killed up in the Delta".

Another interesting moment was with the Cao Daiists, a curious religion founded by a Vietnamese bureaucrat in the 1920s who claimed to have had a revelation from Victor Hugo (in very bad French verse), but this led to the foundation of this religion. It was a sort of mix of Christianity, Islam, Taoism and Confucianism. It had a Catholic hierarchy with a pope and cardinals, the only big difference being that there were women cardinals as well as male. A Holy See had a huge cathedral that looked like St Marks in Venice done by Walt Disney, coloured dragons round the pillars but otherwise St Marks! And they had their own private army. On one occasion we went out for a great do at the Holy See, the Cao Dai army was

marching past and I accompanied Graves; and the French were there in strength. The pope had died and the senior cardinal who was acting pope refused to appoint enough cardinals to have a quorum so that he remained acting pope! He was wonderful in great silk robes with a coolie hat and big black Raybans taking us personally round the cathedral!

Then another recollection of those days was Graham Greene who was at the time writing 'The Quiet American' but who was much involved with Trevor Wilson who was our Consul in Hanoi. They had been in SOE together, I think, and Trevor Wilson was an absolute pain in the neck to General de Lattre who reckoned he was an English spy. It was all very awkward and he finally threw Wilson out. But I got to know Graham Greene well; he came and had dinner several times. When I finally left, I found him on the plane home! We had a very boozy journey home together which was quite fun.

AW: And your overall impressions of Saigon in this period?

JC: Well, the main impression that I had was that the French were always fighting last year's war. When I got there the Vietminh were really only launching attacks of battalion strength, the next year the French were coping with that and the Vietminh were brigade strength. So it went on and finally the Vietminh were an army group and the French were only coping at a divisional level. They were losing an enormous lot of French officers - not French troops because their troops were either French Foreign Legion or Moroccans. The Moroccans were not popular. A Vietnamese general said to me "bloody Moroccans - they not only rape our wives and children but also our soldiers!" The French were obviously losing heart, back in Paris anyway.

AW: And how were the Americans? How were your friends reacting at this stage?

JC: Ah! It was interesting. They had a large military mission declared but what wasn't open was disclosed when I went off for a few days holiday at a coastal resort called Nhatrang, a bit up the coast from Saigon. We found a whole lot of American Air force people there who, and this was a great joke, were having their drinking water flown in from Manila every day, but were eating ice-cream in all the bars in Nhatrang! They were helping the French with aircraft.

The Americans were great friends. It was a small diplomatic corps. There were the Americans, having large military and aid missions, but a relatively small diplomatic embassy, the Italian Minister and a young secretary, a Thai Minister with a secretary, an Indian Consul General, a Dutch Vice Consul and that was the lot. We got very close. The Australians set up whilst we were there from my spare bedroom! I and another chap were allotted a very large French colonial villa with a splendid concrete tennis court, lawns and things, on the condition that we acted as the Legation hotel. It was very difficult and very expensive to get rooms in the two decent hotels, so any official guest was put up in our house. We got an allowance to cope with this. And so when the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of External Affairs of Australia arrived with a potential Chargé d'Affaires in tow, he came to us and set up the new mission literally in our spare bedroom, and we gave them a corner of the office until they found space.

We were a very close group – British and Americans and a young Australian couple who came a few months later. My exact opposite number in the US Embassy was a young lady diplomat, Pat Byrne, who quite surprisingly became an ambassador on the same day that I did! And my dearest friend was a young lady, Molli Morris, who was working for the CIA; and we were all very close. A couple of years after we had left Saigon the two girls came over on a visit to Europe, I got my former housemate and we all met in Paris on May 9th 1956, and Molli and I got engaged on May 11th!

So, war or no war, Saigon was an enjoyable posting and I made really close friends with a lot of these Laotians. Jumping ahead for a moment, two or three years later when I was in New York, my telephone rang and it was the chap I had known as Chief of Protocol in the Laotian Foreign Office who I had subsequently heard had been posted Ambassador to India. I asked him where he was now and he said “I’m the Foreign Minister”. Not long after we had a party at home to which we invited some of the Brits from the UN Mission and we had the Laotian Prime Minister, Foreign Minister, their Ambassador from Washington and Minister of Communications. And after all the Brits had gone we all went off to a Chinese restaurant together! And this was the sort of relationship that built up, it was wonderful.

I should also mention that of course King George VI died and Queen Elizabeth came to the throne. I was home on my home leave during the Coronation. Not officially attached to any of the parties but Graves was also on leave and I was attached to Graves to help him with

anything. It turned out, rather at the last minute, that the former (not the current) Vietnamese Prime Minister and his wife were going to turn up and Graves besought the office to do something for them. The best they could do for them was seats on the stand outside Buckingham Palace and for me to escort them. General Gruenther (US SACEUR 1953-56) had just been promoted to the Abbey, so I had a ticket in General Gruenther's name for that stand to accompany the Vietnamese. So I was there on the stand outside the Palace for the Coronation!

And then another day I was to take the very nice Crown Prince of Laos to the theatre. I already knew him fairly well and he had rather sensibly opted to go to see Sonja Henie skating at Earls Court rather than facing an English play! His French was excellent but he didn't have any English and so we went to that and we had supper at his hotel. It was all part of this bonding. I came away very bonded to Laos though never to see it again I'm afraid.

Towards the end, of course, things were beginning to look nasty. The Vietminh had invaded the north-east corner of Laos and appeared to be threatening the northern capital Luang Prabang. The French were fortifying Dien Bien Phu on the way, to stop them. There was increasing demand in Paris to put an end to all of this. The Korean War was being brought to a close with a conference and it was decided to have a conference on Indo China as well. Just before this Graves had asked me to do a think piece of what might happen if we were faced with the possibility of a divided Vietnam with Communists in the north and non-Communists in the south, which I did and which he was very pleased with and which was sent off. I think however it was overtaken by the Office saying "We want John Cloake back in the office soonest", because of the Geneva Conference. Graves was certain, and so was I, that I was to be part of the Geneva delegation. I got home to find out that I wasn't. I was to be the long-stop in the Office while all the people who had never set foot in Indo-China went off to Geneva. It was rather a shame. However there it was. I shan't bother with the rest of the Geneva Conference as I have previously given those recollections.

At this point, John Cloake's note for the FCO Historical Section, "Memories of the Geneva Conference period 1954", December 2012, is appended.

I was posted as 3rd (later 2nd) Secretary (and Vice-Consul) in the Chancery of the British Legation in Saigon (very recently upgraded from a Consulate-General so we all had consular

ranks as well as diplomatic ones) from August 1951 to the end of March 1954. There were only three of us in Chancery: the 1st Secretary Head of Chancery, who was also the Deputy Head of Mission, and two 2nd Secretaries - which meant, because of long home leaves with sea travel both ways, that there were only two of us most of the time. I did a lot of the political work, including keeping an eye on Cambodia and Laos up to the middle of 1953 when we opened an office in Phnom Penh under a resident Chargé d'Affaires, and thereafter as Sir Hubert Graves's "Chargé des Affaires Laotiennes", visiting Laos for about a week every month.

My last task before I was called back to London was to draft a 'think piece' for Graves on what our policy should be in the event that the impending Geneva Conference appeared to favour a partition of Vietnam. I was actually working in South East Asia Department (SEAD) before this reached London, as I was called back with only a very few days' notice to reinforce SEAD during the Conference. Not, as I had expected, as a member of the Conference delegation, but to act as the sole desk officer for Indochina and Thailand and as 'rear party man' for the delegation throughout the duration of the Conference. I believe that I may be the only survivor of the FO team who had any first-hand knowledge of the events of that period.

A lot of my time was taken up drafting replies to PQs, but I also had to draft supplementary briefs for the S of S and submissions on incoming telegrams from Graves and from Malcolm Macdonald in Singapore. It was immediately obvious that Eden respected Graves's reports and advice far more than Macdonald's. I also had the task of keeping the S of S up to the minute on developments in the battle for Dien Bien Phu, for which I telephoned the Head of the appropriate MI Department in the War Office three or four times a day to learn what they had heard from Paris or Saigon, and then sent bulletins to the Private Office.

One weekend in the middle of the Conference (I forget the date) I was the only duty officer for SEAD. I knew that Eden was briefly back in London, but the rest of the delegation, including the Head of SEAD and Denis Allen, the Assistant Under-Secretary, were still in Geneva. When I reached the Office on the Saturday morning a messenger told me that Colin Crowe, the Head of Far East Department, wanted to see me urgently. Colin told me that he had just fielded a phone call from the US Embassy saying that they had an urgent message on Indochina to be delivered to the S of S. On being told that no-one of the rank of AUS or

Head of Department would be available they had stood down their Deputy Chief of Mission and were sending a Secretary from the Political Section instead.

So shortly thereafter I was the recipient of the message being delivered by Arthur Ringwalt, 1st Secretary, whom I had already met several times to discuss Indochinese developments. The message was nothing less than John Foster Dulles's proposal to use the US Air Force to batter the Vietminh into submission by a 'massive campaign' of bombing. The Americans had put nothing on paper; left no aide-mémoire. It was obviously necessary to get the message to the S of S as quickly as possible. I commandeered a shorthand typist from the pool and dictated an account of what had been said to me. While it was being typed I checked what senior people were in the Office. Of the normal chain of command above me only Harold Caccia, the Deputy Under-Secretary (Political), was in. So I took my account to him; he added his signature below mine; and I delivered the document personally and immediately to the S of S's Private Secretary.

I never saw that paper again. As far as I know it did not return to the department for filing. Whether it ever found its way onto the FO files or Eden's private papers - or whether Eden tore it up in a rage and threw it in Dulles's face - I do not know. Unfortunately, it did not occur to me to have a carbon copy kept for the file; it was obviously a highly secret communication, of which it was better not to have copies knocking around. But it is clear that Eden very firmly spiked Dulles's guns.

Although I was never called on to take notes at a meeting between Eden and Dulles, I got a clear impression from the records (and from subsequent conversations with my American friends, Arthur Ringwalt and Bob Zimmerman, in the US Embassy) that those two did not converse; they talked past each other. This was even more obvious during the Suez crisis two years later, when I was Private Secretary to Sir Ivone Kirkpatrick.

The Americans were very unhappy about the outcome of the Geneva Conference in respect of Indochina. In the end they reluctantly acquiesced in the Geneva accords de facto, but would have no part in them and refused to sign them. Then, it seems to me, they set out deliberately to undermine them. With what, in the end, were disastrous consequences for them.

However, I'm not sure whether I put this in my note about my Geneva time so I will just refresh one point and that is that after Geneva, when I was still in South East Asia Department, and basically had a desk which was called the Three Kings of Orient (Siam, Laos and Cambodia). It was also concerned with the International Commissions set up by Geneva. The Russians were Co-Chairmen and so any report by the International Commissions had to be submitted to the Co-Chairmen, the Russians and ourselves, who decided what to do with it. I very soon discovered that if we took an initiative and suggested immediately to the Russians that we should publish, then they would usually agree. If we sat back for a bit, they would come up with something unacceptable. So we did this and one day I had a telephone call from the telegram examiners, and they said "Mr Cloake, we've got a telegram in from Moscow, we think it must be for you, it has no reference, but it says 'Russians Agree'!"

AW: Did you subsequently learn Russian?

JC: No. I learned to read a bit.

Private Secretary to Permanent Under-Secretary, 1956

So there I was in South East Asia department. I'd been asked if I would be a resident clerk but I turned it down. I was in the throes of being about to get married. In July 1956 I was then told I would take over as Private Secretary to the Permanent Under Secretary, from Michael Palliser who would give me a briefing. Michael Palliser said "Ivone Kirkpatrick is the most peculiar man. You could work for him for three years to his entire satisfaction and never exchange a word except 'yes sir'. He never talks to you." And I found this was absolutely true. He never confided. Once or twice he would tell the story about how he had delivered the London end of the German ultimatum in 1939 to the German Embassy when he was Head of Central Department, but that's the only time I've ever known him reminisce or exchange any word and he never ever confided in what was going on.

AW: Was that difficult?

JC: Very difficult for a private secretary. There were two of us in the office, myself and Barbara Evans who was basically a short hand typist who had climbed right up the pole to become Assistant Private Secretary. Nice woman but terribly, terribly jealous of her position.

If I didn't go out for at least an hour at lunch time she would be thinking that I didn't think her capable of doing the job in my absence! It really was a bit trying!

The great moment of my time there was Suez. (Kirk didn't talk to us but spent almost his entire time at No 10). I had a file in the safe about the military preparations but nothing about collaboration, I knew nothing about any of that until afterwards when I got the whole story from Donald Logan. After we had attacked Suez and on the day that we had to consider stopping, essentially because of the American pressure and Macmillan had said, "We've got to stop". We were on the telephone. I had my phone through to Pierson Dixon in New York and Barbara had her phone through to Makins in Paris, and Kirk was running between the two. Anyway the decision was taken and at this moment the Chief of the General Staff came through on the telephone, General Templer, as he was at the time and whose biography I later wrote. He wanted to speak to the PUS very urgently and I put him through and I listened. "What do you mean urgent, General? We've 24 hours to think about that!"

AW: It must have been a very pressured place?

JC: Yes it was. And he liked to tease the Assistant Under Secretaries. He would come in early and before he'd even read his telegrams he would ask me to call an AUS. "I'm afraid he's not in yet" I would say, "Well, tell him to come and see me as soon as he is". He would do this very frequently. He seemed to be humourless with hardly any heart except of course that he and Anthony Eden shared war experience and were convinced that Nasser must be stopped in the way that Hitler could have been stopped; and it really didn't matter, I think, to them how we did it as long as we stopped him. Kirk was much more worried about the possibilities of the Israelis doing something to upset the Jordanians in which case we would have to help the Jordanians under our treaty obligations than he was about interfering with Egypt.

The only other story I have from then was on the day when Kirk came back from No 10 giving me a bit of paper that was to be typed with two top copies. It was the ultimatum and he said "We'd better call in the Egyptian Ambassador and the Israeli Chargé d'Affaires, twenty minutes difference between them". The dear office messenger who whenever we had more than one visitor would always come in and say "Is it all right for them to meet in the

waiting room?” was absolutely thrilled when I said that on this occasion they were not allowed to meet!

Private Secretary to Parliamentary Under-Secretary, 1957

Kirk was due to retire and Hoyer Millar was taking over, who had been in Bonn. He wrote me a very nice letter saying that he was sorry but that he wanted to bring his private secretary with him from Bonn to be his private secretary in the Office. So I was moved to be the Private Secretary to the Parliamentary Under Secretary who, at the time I was told of this, was Douglas Dodds Parker, a very nice man, and I started going up to that office and getting to know what it was all about. And then Douglas was chucked out of the government, to his annoyance, and his place was taken by Ian Harvey. He was a very nasty man. My first impression of him was when he came in to meet Ivone Kirkpatrick. He marched through the office trumpeting “I’m Ian Harvey”. By the time I took over I had been Douglas Dodds Parker’s secretary for minus three weeks and Ian Harvey had just taken over by the time I moved upstairs. He was nasty to his staff. There were the Parliamentary Office girls and I had an assistant private secretary, a very nice young lady called “Bill” Easton who finally married John Killick. Harvey was beastly to them all, including me. He would throw things at us and on one occasion a ruler even went out the window into Downing Street! He would never read his briefs. He had been President of the Oxford Union and he thought he knew it all. We had tremendous pressure with parliamentary questions still in the aftermath of Suez and departments would send up their briefs and Harvey would never bother to read them. On one occasion, in an adjournment debate, he made such a mess that he really got beaten by Selwyn Lloyd. I forget, but I think he had been Selwyn Lloyd’s fag at Fettes, or the other way round. Selwyn Lloyd, whom I didn’t exactly adore, was at least better than Harvey. When it was a Foreign Office day for parliamentary questions, I would stagger across to the House of Commons with two red boxes stuffed with papers for the briefing immediately before Question Time and almost certainly without any lunch, a bar of chocolate in the pocket. On one occasion Selwyn Lloyd said “Ian, if there is one person in the Foreign Office who has a worse job than I do, it’s John Cloake!”

What was interesting was that there were Foreign Office questions addressed to the Prime Minister, who was by then Macmillan, and we had to go through the same process except that I had to go across to Number 10 to do the briefing. I found this very interesting because Macmillan was a very shrewd old bird and a master of parliamentary procedure. In those

days questions to the Prime Minister were always questions numbered 45 and after. Macmillan would look at the questions “Ah, that’s a nasty one, 47. I’ll fluff 45 and we’ll never reach 47”. And he would! He’d make an awful mess of number 45 which didn’t matter and then it would be out of time and we’d never reach number 47 which was the awkward one! I enjoyed that!

I escaped from there before Ian Harvey was caught in the Park with a guardsman. It was rather curious because he was married to Christopher Mayhew’s sister. I’d known Christopher Mayhew in my IRD days because he was Parliamentary Under Secretary then. Nice person, I liked Christopher Mayhew a lot. But because of this relationship Christopher used to frequently pop into the office to suggest that they should pair and there was quite a lot of pairing went on between them.

Harvey had the brief of looking after the Information Departments and when we went off on a trip to Germany, he wanted to look at all the information operations there and I went as his bag carrier. We did a tour round three or four of the main Consulates in Germany and their information offices and for about four days we remained on civilised terms. He wasn’t rude to me once on that trip. The most interesting thing was that when we were in Berlin, of course that was West Berlin, we had a trip into East Berlin to have a look. How absolutely appalling it was (it was 1957) with great blocks of apartment buildings, or offices, you couldn’t tell the difference, all covered in white lavatory tiles. Very little life, so unlike West Berlin so full of excitement.

Consul (Commercial), New York, 1958

Finally I escaped. Molli and I were just married back in 1956 (during Suez) and Molli had said “For once John you are in an office where you might be able to influence our next posting, so let’s go to Rome!” So we were learning Italian. But then a note came in from Personnel Department to Ian Harvey saying “With your permission we propose to move John Cloake to be Consul Commercial in New York”. Well I’d never been in Molli’s country. She only knew New York as a place to catch ships and go to theatres because she was really a Washingtonian. So I said to Ian Harvey “Don’t you dare answer this until I’ve talked to Molli!” Molli and I agreed that we could put Rome on the back burner and it would be nice to go to New York. So that was agreed and we were supposed to get to New York by a given date. However we’d just bought tickets for the Gala Opening of My Fair Lady, a week or

two later so I rang up Personnel Department and said “Think of the prestige of a British Consul who will have seen My Fair Lady at the Gala Opening in London!” and they put off my departure for another fortnight!

AW: That was something of a change of direction for you?

JC: Yes it was, but it was a time when the Office was getting very commercially minded and New York was commercially very important. My job was promoting capital goods exports. At that stage, Washington was still controlling the whole US commercial business, although not long after that the job was handed over to the Consulate General in New York. I don't have very much to say about New York. It was lovely being there. We toured a certain amount in the States, up to New England, down to Washington and Virginia meeting Molli's family. Her mother by this time had moved from Washington to Arizona so we went West. Her mother's family had come from Missouri where her ancestors had been lead miners in the lead mining town of Bonne Terre. It was a company town. The main street had no shops on it, there were just the company officials' houses and that was where Molli's grandmother lived. She died and Molli's mother asked us to go out and deal with the arrangements. I had some leave so we went off to Missouri and spent 10 days or so in this little Mid-Western town. The mine had closed by then and was a showplace but everybody in that town knew exactly who we were and what we were doing!

The ladies came round in their little white gloves at 11 o'clock in the morning. Molli was in her blue jeans! They all knew exactly what time we'd gone to bed the night before! Molli's mother had arranged for an elderly black woman who had been the maid of Molli's great aunt to come and look after us, Maud. We drove down from St Louis in the evening and she had a meal for us. Next morning Molli said “Maud, I'd better give you some money for shopping”. “Don't you worry Miss Molli” said Maud “I've opened charge accounts for you all over the town”! Molli's great grandfather had been superintendent of mining or something, but her grandfather had run the drug store and we called in and found that the current owner had actually been her grandfather's apothecary. So Molli went off to talk to him in the back and while I was sitting at the counter, having a cup of coffee, a man came and sat down next to me and said “Is your wife's father still in Japan?” In 1924 when Molli's parents were married, her father was an American journalist working in Japan and this chap had made a pair of boots for him. It was extraordinary living in this little community for a while. Then

we met Molli's stepmother. Her father was a correspondent for United Press so Molli was born in Washington, then spent the first three years of her life in Mexico, the next two in Shanghai. Her parents separated and Molli's mother brought her back to Washington and some years later her father married again, an absolutely charming woman who kept in the background as long as Molli's mother was around but after she died, came very much into our lives. I met her for the first time on this trip. We finally ended up going over to Los Angeles to meet the great aunt who by this time was nearly 100. She actually made it to 102 and was the tallest straight up lady, who lived in Beverly Hills in a large house there. Her husband, Molli's great uncle, had run the company's railway from Bonne Terre to St Louis and made a lot of money doing it. She had a very elderly Chevrolet which was built like a London taxi and wouldn't change it because she could get into it without stooping.

AW: Back in New York, what sort of size was this commercial operation?

JC: In the New York Office, we had a Deputy Consul General, three UK based Consuls, one doing industrial goods, one consumer goods, one fairs and shows and we also had one locally recruited Brit living in America who had also risen to the rank of Consul, who worked on the consumer goods side, and I suppose five or six locally engaged commercial staff working for us. That was the New York office and then every Consulate in America at that time had commercial staff and there must have been 14 or 15 Consulates at that time. New York was the entry point for most businessmen at that time so even if we weren't in the coordinating role we did a lot of coordinating.

One of my jobs was to keep an eye on the development of the St Lawrence Seaway and I rather enjoyed that. Going up to all the little ports along the river and occasionally popping in to Canada.

The first time we went up to Buffalo where I had business, I said to Molli "let's stay the night at Niagara Falls". After supper we set out to see the Falls, it was after dark but they were lit up. We decided they would be much better seen from the Canadian side, so we got into the car and drove over the bridge. We came to the check point half way over the bridge. We hadn't got our passports with us but I explained to the official who we were and he said "Sir, as British Consul in New York, welcome to Canada. Whether those bastards will let you

back again is up to you!” So we parked the car and two minutes later they turned the lights off!

So five minutes later were back with the “bastards”! And they let us back in, having rung the Canadians to say “did you let the British Consul in New York out?” So that was my first introduction to Canada.

We did a lot of commercial work and then towards the end of our time when we had about six months to go, we had a lovely apartment which Molli had found, the bottom two floors of a brownstone, West 10th Street, the edge of Greenwich Village, the owners who were in London were coming back and had given us notice to move out. Just at this moment the Deputy Consul General on the consular side, the actual number two in the office, fell ill, badly ill, hospitalised and back to the UK with about 6 months left on his lease, so we moved there and I became acting Deputy Consul General for the rest of my time in New York.

That was interesting too. Back to some consular work, very different from Saigon I must say! One thing that remains in my mind was trying to rescue some poor Briton who had got called up into the US Army. And one of the other things we did was selecting Fulbright Scholars and I got to know quite a lot of the Ivy League academics. We made some very good friends. Some of them persist. I still keep up with a man who in my day was a young history professor at Columbia University, who is now retired. Essentially it was pleasant, we got to know Molli’s family well, made friends, and Molli said that she learned far more about the United States when she was married to me than in the rest of her life.

Our original Consul General had changed and our new Consul General, Alan Williams, said to me in one breath “John, you are being posted to Moscow, my mother-in-law will teach you Russian” and it turned out that his mother-in-law who was Russian had left St Petersburg in a hurry in 1917 and was living in New York. So we did go and have some Russian lessons from her. The only textbook we could find was a Communist one and so we learned how to say “is this the way to the tractor repair station?” in an impeccable St Petersburg 1917 accent! At this time Tom Brimelow, who was later Permanent Under Secretary, and who was one of our very best Russian speakers in the Service was actually serving down in Washington. On one occasion I said to him “Look, we’re getting to speak with a St Petersburg style, does it matter?” “No” he said “it’s becoming very fashionable, persevere!” But I didn’t learn much

Russian actually, I learnt enough on the spot when we got there to be able to see what was in the papers rather than read them properly.

AW: Before we move on to Russia properly John, you mentioned that you had one further recollection about the very start of your time in New York in June 1958?

JC: Yes, just about two or three weeks after I had arrived, the Middle East blew up! Revolution in Iraq, American Marines landed in the Lebanon and this, that and the other! Hoo-hah in the Security Council. Our Representative Sir Pierson Dixon, known to all as Bob, came rushing in to the Consul General and said "All my staff are on leave, lend me someone". And what I imagine the Consul General then said was "Take young Cloake, he's just come from London where he's been doing a political job and I expect he knows damn all about commercial work as yet" and so off I went with Bob Dixon. As the Security Council met, I found myself sitting in the number two chair of the British Delegation because the only other member of staff who was there was Bob's Private Secretary and I outranked him considerably. He was a young man called Douglas Hurd! So Bob said to me "you obviously don't know the ins and outs of the UN work, so Douglas and I will do the lobbying and I want you to listen very carefully to all the speeches. There is an immediate translation which is wired through to your ear phones and then a consecutive translation which is broadcast and I want you to compile the record telegrams for London". So this is what I did and I must say that on that first day I was scared stiff because Bob Dixon and Douglas kept leaving me alone! I was representing the UK and I hadn't a clue. I thought that all I could do if something happened that I didn't know what to do about was to simply throw myself on the mercy of the Secretary General and say "Please postpone proceedings until I can find my boss!"

Only five chairs for each country were actually wired for the immediate translation and by the second day the number two, Harold Beeley, whom I knew in Baghdad, came back so I moved to number three chair and by day three there were at least two more members of the staff and Bob Dixon arranged that I should sit behind the Canadians. By about day five, the Canadian Foreign Minister arrived and I became an Honorary Swede for the rest of the proceedings! But I prepared my telegrams and they would go off for the record and Bob Dixon would add his comments in the immediately following cypher telegram. I enjoyed it a lot and learned a little bit about the UN. And then back to my commercial work.

AW: So, after New York did you have a break before Russia?

JC: Yes, about a month. This is probably the moment to mention that while we were in New York my mother had died and my father had retired from his general practice and he moved from what had been our house into an apartment where there wasn't room for us and so when we came on leave from New York and in the month between New York and Moscow we stayed in the Richmond Hill Hotel because there was no decent hotel in Wimbledon where he lived. We got to know Richmond well and Molli did shopping at Harrods for an entire month I think! We had been warned that it was practically impossible to get anything decent to eat in Moscow so we should bring with us as much as we could which would eventually be supplemented by consignments from Copenhagen and overnight train shipments from Helsinki!

1st Secretary, Moscow, 1962

AW: And how did you first find Moscow in the Spring of 1962?

JC: What I must say about Moscow is that it was terribly claustrophobic; the atmosphere was one of sheer paranoia all over the place. I think for our first two or three weeks there I was followed everywhere I went, but after that time they decided I was a proper diplomat and not a spy and the following ceased. But the militia were everywhere. We lived in a block of flats entirely devoted to diplomats and foreign correspondents with a big courtyard in the middle where we kept our cars, and as we drove out one militia man would salute and one would telephone. As we came back, one would salute and one would telephone and when we had been back in our flat for about three minutes the telephone would ring and when you picked it up, nobody would be there. One of my colleagues developed the habit of answering "Da, Lubyanka"! And then of course when one arrived at the Embassy there would be a group of militia, one would salute and one would telephone and so on ...

We were very limited as to where we could travel. There was a 40km/25 mile limit around the centre of Moscow beyond which we were not allowed to go without having given notice and a good third of that area was closed anyway. When I say give notice, one was not given permission to go. You notified them that you wanted to go and if you heard nothing you

assumed it was all right, but it wasn't necessarily; and they might stop you and turn you back.

We had Russian staff. A very nice maid who was probably a major in the NKVD, our cook who was probably only a 2nd lieutenant, and my driver who was no doubt a captain. A curious situation was that the inspectors had decided that First Secretaries should be allowed half a driver so we had to share one. This was mainly to look after the cars because there were no garages and you had to have a sort of mechanic to keep your car in condition. About every two or three weeks the driver would say "I have to take the car away to get it serviced" and that would mean getting the tape recorder in the door changed!

Our staff also included a nanny because young John was about two and we had been told we must have a nanny because you couldn't trust the Russian staff to look after him when we went out in the evening. So we interviewed various potential nannies. And the other thing somebody had said to us was "don't take a beautiful young girl because if you do, you'll lose her in months!" So we ended up with a rather grumpy old Norland Nurse and this was a disaster. She and my wife fought the whole time over our son until we finally had to send her home and send a telegram to the beautiful young girl whom we'd really liked very much and she came out and it was absolutely splendid. She got engaged to a young man in the Embassy before we left and lived happily ever after. So that made life easier after a while but it put Molli off very much to start with.

AW: And the job?

JC: Now my job essentially as the senior First Secretary in Chancery (we had a Counsellor who was Head of Chancery) was to pursue the everyday contacts with the Russian Foreign Ministry over whatever subject it might be. And whatever subject it might be, I had only one contact that I could see and that was the UK Desk Officer, a Mr Safonov. He was a quite pleasant middle-aged chap who at a post abroad would probably have been one of the reasonably pleasant contacts. But if you went to see him at the Ministry, you were shown into an empty interview room, never to his office or anything like that, and he would come in and talk to you. He'd summon you to the Ministry to receive a reply and would never, ever, tell you anything on the telephone. And so it would be that one day I would go there and it would be "Yes, Mr Cloake, I will ask someone in South East Asia department" about a

problem in Laos, or “Yes Mr Cloake I will ask the Ministry of Interior if they know what has happened to Mr Greville Wynne”, or “Yes Mr Cloake I will ask the Ministry of Shipping about the problem of the Devonshire crab fishermen’s pots” and so on. He would summon me back, I would drive 25 minutes across Moscow to the empty interview room where he would say “Now Mr Cloake you left a note about the Devon crab fishermen’s pots and the answer is yes”. I had one sanction. If I wanted for some reason to express my displeasure with whatever was happening I would try to talk to him on the telephone. He was scared stiff. You could hear it. I will just cite one instance. Three of our girls had saved up to go down to Georgia, the Black Sea or somewhere. They had given their notice but they got there and were promptly turned back. No recompense. I rang Mr Safonov and I kept telling him about this but he said “Mr Cloake, come to the Ministry” and finally rang off, scared stiff that anyone listening might misinterpret what he was saying. Quite awful from that point of view.

Wherever I went in the world, I always had to have a project. My Moscow project was Russian churches. The Russians were just then spending quite a lot on restoring churches as architectural monuments, rather than as churches as such. I used to spend my Sunday mornings going along and photographing them. Occasionally I would get shooed away by a security guard if a church was too close to the military. But I managed to photograph most of these churches and I made very sure that Mr Safonov knew exactly what I was doing so that if I was arrested he would at least know that I had told him all about it in advance. There was one place about 40km north of Moscow called Zagorsk that had a splendid group of monasteries and was a real tourist place but I learned about another monastery that they had been restoring which was still a working monastery and wanted to go and see it but it was outside the 40km limit, not far out, about 50-55km, and at Easter time. So I gave notice. I drove myself with my wife, the nanny and two year old John. We reached the 40km limit and for the rest of the way at every corner there was a motor cycle combination to see us through and after we passed they drove away. When we came back it was the same. Watching every moment!

AW: And there were crises during this period?

JC: Yes, there were several while I was there. There was the U2 business, which I didn’t have very much to do with but it was looming in the background. Then we had the

Penkovsky/Wynne espionage case where Greville Wynne, a travelling salesman, was arrested. In the end it did turn out that he had been the contact of this Colonel Penkovsky who was giving us a lot of useful information. Now that of course was handled largely by the Consul and not by me, but for part of this time the Counsellor who was Head of Chancery had gone on leave and I was acting Head of Chancery and that meant at least that I had to deal with the British press over it all which was very interesting.

And of course the other great crisis was Cuba. I have my own thoughts about Cuba. I am convinced that the Russians never intended for it to reach the brink. They were trying it on. "This new young President, let's see how far we can go". I have two main reasons for believing that. One is the press. I didn't really know Russian but I had learned enough to be able to look at the press and ask one of our young Russian speakers "Why does this article not contain the usual formula about so and so ...?" or whatever. The press reports from Havana were never such as to rouse the Russian people to any sort of threat. There was no war hysteria or anything like that. By this time the Russians were beginning to develop a bit of gentle domestic economy, you could buy things on the never-never as long as you did it through your factory and so on. I think once people start buying capital goods on the never-never they are less warlike! But the main reason is that on the real critical evening when everybody was sweating blood in London and Washington and everywhere, the Chief Foreign Editor of TASS spent the evening at a party with the Reuters correspondent in Moscow, not at his desk. I thought that was very, very significant. I don't think that's ever really been recorded, my thoughts on all of that.

AW: When the crisis was over, how was it reported in Moscow?

JC: Hardly at all. There was never any sort of war atmosphere in the press and as far as I can recall I don't think that the fact that the Americans had presented an ultimatum was ever noted.

I might just mention here, although it really belongs a bit later, that years later when I was temporarily at the London School of Economics we had a visit by two Russian academics who were talking about the difference in the way the Russians and we reacted to events in the world. They made the point that we were reactive and the Russians were proactive. They would see a situation and say "What can we get out of this?" whereas we would wait for the

situation to develop and then try and use damage limitation. I thought that was applicable to the Cuba thing.

We were able to do very little touring because we were very tied up with young John and the rest but we had our diplomatic friends taking in each other's washing and gossip. A particular friend who turned up was my former Laotian Chief of Protocol who was now the Laotian Ambassador in Moscow and he organised a State Visit by the new King of Laos whom we had known as Crown Prince Savang. It was normal practice that whenever there was one of these great State Visits that they would give a party and the Russians would give a party for them. The Laotians gave a party for Savang to which Heads of Missions and Senior Defence Attachés were invited and one First Secretary and his wife, Molli and me! We arrived just after the Politburo, which was Bulganin etc. So they had just shaken hands with King Savang and the rest and we came in. For some reason Bulganin had joined himself onto the receiving line! Molli cut him dead and went straight to curtsey to Savang! Who embraced her, an old friend. The way the reception was normally done was that there would be a big hall with everybody and then an inner chamber where the top brass were. As we were leaving the big hall one of our friends, a Laotian Minister, came out and said "just wait till the Politburo have gone". As soon as the Politburo had left we were immediately ushered into the inner place where Savang picked a tulip which had been flown in from Holland especially, and gave it to Molli. And I have a lovely photo somewhere of our son holding the tulip after we got home! This is just a particular way of emphasising of how we had loved the Laotians and they us in turn.

I can't think of anything else particularly exciting about Moscow. We came home in May 1963 on a Russian cruise ship, knowing that we were going to be on a home posting.

AW: And the Ambassador during your time there?

JC: Yes, I should mention that at that time the Ambassador was Frank Roberts. The story was told of him that when he was Private Secretary to Ernie Bevin, Ernie Bevin called for the PUS and said "You got to get rid of him, he buzzes!" Frank Roberts was a buzzer! And then his place was taken by Humphrey Trevelyan and his darling wife Peggy and we adored them very much but as the Minister Bill Barker said to me once, "The trouble with Humphrey is that he doesn't believe any of us have a home life". Humphrey was very good at using my

expertise and so on but he would call me in at 11 o'clock in the evening, and it was about 20 minutes across Moscow, to discuss a draft telegram with me that could well have waited to the next morning but he'd seen the Deputy Foreign Minister about Laos and he wanted to send the news. But we adored Humphrey and Peggy.

And so back home. Arriving at Tilbury and unloading my car, Customs said "how long have you had this in your actual possession and use abroad?" It was actually 51 weeks, less than a year because it had been held up by the Russians for about four months between arriving in Leningrad, as it then was, and being delivered to Moscow. It was a brand new Ford. I explained all this but they said they had to charge me duty but I could appeal, and I did. I said I didn't see why I should be penalised because the Russians wanted to get all the details of a brand new Ford! – and the duty was repaid.

Foreign Office, 1963

So we got home and back to the Richmond Hill Hotel. We had decided that the time had come to strike a root and we would try to buy a house. We couldn't afford Central London so we thought we would look at the inner green belt – Hampstead, Highgate, Richmond, Kew, etc, and on our very first morning we went into an estate agent and we saw an adorable house which we fell in love with but we thought was too small; it was William and Mary. We spent three days frantically looking at everything everywhere – we'd been abroad for five years so had no basis for comparison – and on the third day we were coming back from looking at quite a large house on the Dulwich College Estate, and I said to Molli "you know just curtains and carpets there would cost almost as much as The Rosary", so we decided it wasn't too small after all and I rushed down the next morning and put a deposit on it and we were in it six weeks later. It was a charming house, it did turn out to be too small in the end, but never mind.

So my job in July 1963 was in Conference and Supply Department. It had been, ever since the War, a most curious department. It had two entirely separate halves and it was run by a retired Engineer officer with the rank of Colonel or Brigadier. This had been the case since war time and I don't know what had happened before that. One half of the department was the conference bit and it looked after conferences in London or our teams going abroad for conferences, looked after State Visits, dealt with Government Hospitality, all that sort of thing and its entire staff were on contract. There wasn't a diplomatic officer around. The

head of this was an Assistant to Brigadier Steel. The other half of the department to which I was to become the Assistant in charge dealt with all our accommodation, cars, and stationery. The cars and the stationery were looked after by perfectly competent people and I was basically in charge of the accommodation. I did have some actual members of the Service working to me.

Diplomatic Service Administration Office, 1965

This was the situation only up until 1st January 1965 when the merger started and the Diplomatic Service Administration Office was set up to serve the still separate Foreign Office and Commonwealth Office. As part of the new DSAO we had a new Accommodation Department. Charles Steel took charge and I was his number two. We did nothing but accommodation but we had taken over all the Commonwealth stuff, Colonial Office stuff and so on. Eventually I became the Head of this Department in succession to Charles Steel and was the first diplomatic officer ever to look after diplomatic accommodation!

It was a time of terrible cuts. We were of course very reliant on and constantly in touch with the Ministry of Public Building and Works who were responsible for all our Embassies, Legations, High Commissions and things and for furnishings for our post hirings. But the whole business of post hirings, accommodation allowances etc was my responsibility and of course the whole business of liaising with the Ministry of Works on our works programme, buildings abroad. We were subjected to cut after cut. It was the worst possible time budget wise.

One awful thing I remember was that in a reasonably civilised place staff would be left to find their own accommodation within a range of allowances, agreed by the inspectors. On one occasion I had to agree to a rent in Saigon which at that time was full of Americans and it cost me one-tenth of my budget for the entire world!

There were three places where works particularly interested me which I will record. One was Rome where a new Embassy had been designed by Basil Spence as architect. This had been put off and blocked by the Treasury time and time again, but I was determined we were going to get it through. I finally succeeded in this and got the Treasury to agree. But there was still the question of the plans and I was looking at these plans and realised that they were not really going to work. I spent an entire weekend with them all spread out on my kitchen floor

reworking them and then Spence's associate and I went through the whole thing and agreed the lot. Minor amendments but better communication within the building and this sort of thing. So I had a little share in designing the Embassy in Rome!

Then there was Brasilia! Brasilia was being built but this time the Ministry of Works had commissioned the Smithsons who, for instance, had built the Economist Building, to build as one edifice a residence and offices in Brasilia. Other accommodation was also being built there of course, for staff and so on. The Ministry of Works people back in London were getting very worried about what was happening in Brasilia and still more worried about the Smithsons' plans. They had more or less decided to produce a crocodile, a long building on a sort of bridge, with the Residence at the mouth and the offices in the tail. The basic problem was that you couldn't put these buildings together on the same scale. You ended up with the main reception room in the Residence looking like the saloon of a liner. It had a 10ft ceiling, an enormous space, but then the office bit kept losing useful space because it was the tail of the crocodile. So finally a party consisting of the chief Ministry of Works Diplomatic Architect, my immediate opposite number in the Ministry of Works, and me went over to visit Brasilia. We saw what had happened to the other accommodation. The Ministry of Works surveyors had, for some reason, taken plots for senior staff and officers, one plot back from the lakeside and built nice houses there but they were now being blocked from the lake by other houses which was rather annoying. A big block of junior staff flats was being filled with marble by the local architect in charge; and the number two house we reckoned was going to be at least adequate for the time being for HM Ambassador when he moved. So we pigeonholed the Smithsons' plans. The Ambassador was still in Rio of course and we broke the news to the poor man, John Russell. He was very cross about this and he'd always said of course that they wouldn't move to Brasilia until he could actually see the whites of the Ministry's eyes! Because the Ministry of Foreign Affairs didn't want to move there either! He had to go there eventually and I then had a long correspondence about the inadequacies of this building he'd been forced into, the hideousness of the furniture which was either too big or too small, the garden layout, and so on!

Then my other big problem was Baghdad. In my days in Baghdad the offices had been the Turkish Governor's place and the Residence next door, but this had all, in the meantime, been damaged. We still had the offices and we owned a large plot of land, undeveloped, except for the Church of England church on one corner. It was decided again that I, together with the

Ministry of Works chaps, should go and have a look at it and decide whether or not we were going to build a new residence, offices and staff buildings on it. The Americans had just done something of the same with offices, residence and staff flats. We looked at this and we thought it would be worth doing, quite a good location and the Americans said don't go any closer to the Palace because when the Iraqi Air force get tired of bombing the Kurds, they bomb the Palace! So we more or less decided we would go ahead with this development.

I've forgotten exactly what it was, it may have been Israel or something, but we broke diplomatic relations with Baghdad almost immediately afterwards. At that time because the Residence was no longer any use, the Ministry of Works had been hiring a large house by the riverside which had been built for the Iraq Petroleum Company. It was a ridiculous building because to start with it was hidden from the river largely by the flood bank, only the top floor could look out and actually see the river, and on its southern side it had an enormous glass window stretching right up through the floors. The result was that the air conditioning in this place was like battleships' engines. This glass window made the whole thing like an oven. It was appalling and so with a sigh of relief we had cancelled the hiring. Shortly before I left office we resumed relations with the Iraqis and the new Ambassador went out and I said to him "Well you're going to have to find a residence but whatever you do don't touch that bloody place." Todd Hall we called it, because it had been built for a Mr Todd. Finally I had a telegram saying "There is nowhere remotely possible, may I take this residence again?" and I had to say yes, which broke my heart really.

The other main point in this effort was that all sorts of new countries were developing in Africa at this time. When this happened in a former French colony our Consulate General simply stuck up a new sign outside and it became HM Legation or Embassy. But in British Colonies the former British colonial properties were handed over to the new governments and the Commonwealth Office now in charge of colonies had built on the most lavish scale for the new High Commissions. Palatial accommodation compared to what our people were in. We realised that something was going to have to be done about this. At this time unfortunately, John Diamond, Chief Secretary at the Treasury, had a hatred of the Diplomatic Service. He was determined to cut us down to size particularly on accommodation standards. We were very vulnerable, particularly on all these Commonwealth properties. He was trying to insist that no diplomatic officer serving abroad should have a house better than he would have as a civil servant serving in London. This was

coming to a point of conflict when it was decided that a Parliamentary Committee should be sent to have a look at the situation on the ground.

By this time I was Head of Department and it fell to me in London to be the chief victim of their inquisition but as they were going abroad to be baggage master, philosopher and friend! And chief tour operator! We had various sessions in London and at the end of each session the nice elderly trade unionist, who was in the chair, would pull out his pipe and say “Now Mr Cloake about this trip of ours ...”. I laid them on a magnificent trip which was going to look at a lot of our problems. It was going to look at Islamabad, which had a new building, to Baghdad, and all sorts of places. Came the moment at the end of a meeting when the chairman pulled out his pipe and said “Mr Cloake, Mr Diamond says we can’t go, we’ve spent too much already and he says we can have an economy return fare to Beirut, what can you do for us with that?” Well, what I did for them on that was Rome, Nicosia, Beirut, by car to Damascus and back, and Istanbul, Athens all on the return airfare to Beirut. They were absolutely delighted so I was their friend from then on.

I should say that it wasn’t just Mr Diamond. The Treasury were mean and silly over many of their attitudes at this time. The chap I dealt with who would gladly spend millions on a new aircraft would insist that every single air conditioner for a hiring in the Gulf had to be authorised by the Treasury.

So we set off on our trip and it all went well until we reached Athens. We had done a very little bit of sightseeing in Rome and not much else but by the time we reached Athens the Chairman said “now we’re not going to leave Athens without doing some sightseeing”. The first day we met with the staff and the Ambassador and it was laid on that next morning we were all going to get up early and the Admin Officer would take us on a guided tour of Athens and then we would go back to the office to have the formal session with the Ambassador. We were staying in the Athens Hilton Hotel and I put in for an early call and an order for breakfast. I woke up, no call. I rang room service, no reply; and again, no reply. Eventually I called the manager who said “I’m very sorry sir but the army has taken power during the night and only about a third of our staff are in, we’re serving breakfast downstairs”. I pulled my curtains and looked out of the window, there was a flat roof underneath my room and there was a machine gun nest on it and at a distance there was a tank sitting at the crossroads.

Having duly made sure all the members of the committee knew of this disaster we went down and had our breakfast and were confined to the hotel for the rest of the day. We sat around the swimming pool. At about 11 o'clock the Admin Officer got through with supplies of the previous day's Times and bottles of whisky and said the Ambassador was going to try and get through. The Ambassador, who was my old friend Ralph Murray, turned up and told us what he could about the situation. That evening we had a little sweepstake on how long we would be there. Our trade unionist chairman had gone up to his room and pulled out a little Basque beret and said "I wore this in the Spanish Civil War and I'm going to wear it until we get out of here!" I was getting ready for bed. I quite literally had one foot in the bath when the telephone rang and it was the Counsellor at the Embassy who said "We've just heard that there is a British Airways plane at the airport that's going to go first thing tomorrow and do you want to be on it?" I said I was sure we did but would check with the Chairman. We were the first people out of Athens after the coup and were greeted by all sorts of excited journalists when we got back to Heathrow.

As a result of all this tripping we got an extremely good report from the Committee and a lot of criticism about Treasury attitudes which was helpful.

AW: Did you actually have to sell any houses, any residences during that period?

JC: No it didn't get to that stage and as far as I can recall we just had to leave all the colonial properties even though they were far too grand. The moment I heard about all these colonial properties I did say to Charles Steel "I think I should go and look at what we have in Tonga!" and he said "if anyone goes to Tonga, it will be me!"

Counsellor (Commercial), Tehran, 1968-72

Towards the end of my time in this department, I was told that I would go to Tehran next as Commercial Counsellor. Well this was quite pleasing. I hadn't thought of going there but I had seen Tehran when I was in Baghdad, I'd gone there on local leave, and it was a very interesting spot, and at this moment it was bubbling with development. It hadn't gone mad yet but it was a very rapidly developing place with very large commercial opportunities and I was to be Commercial Counsellor, number three in the Embassy.

I found out that this gave me an enormous advantage because I could tour with the Ambassador. He would leave the Political Counsellor in charge and I would leave my First Secretary in charge. The Ambassador was Denis Wright and he and his wife Iona were two of the nicest people I ever came across. We adored them. Denis had been there already for a long time, in the end he did eight years as Ambassador and he stayed until he was 60. The story went that the Office had wanted to promote him to Grade 1 and make him High Commissioner in Delhi but that the Shah had protested and said "If you take him away, I'll break diplomatic relations!". He knew the country very well, he spoke quite good Persian, was very close to the Shah because he had been the Chargé d'Affaires who had negotiated the return of the oil consortium after the Mossadegh business. Very frequently the Wrights and we went off together on various tours. I usually had to find some sort of commercial excuse which was rather mean as I would be visiting a factory whilst they would be visiting tomb towers! And we had a lovely time.

We saw a great deal of the country, not quite every bit of it but nearly everything. Oilfields constantly, we flew around them in helicopters. The oil business was going quite well at that time, we didn't have big problems. Occasionally there was some minor crisis which would affect the Ambassador.

Both Molli and I learned as much Persian as we could, on the spot. On one occasion the Wrights and we were supposed to be doing a trip up into the Northwest to Kurdistan and Azerbaijan. At the last moment Denis had to stay behind and said he would meet us up in Azerbaijan later. Molli and I found ourselves staying with the Governor of Kurdistan who spoke nothing but Persian and he treated me to an hour's lecture on everything that was wrong with the country to be relayed to Denis Wright, because he trusted him.

We found the Persians to be very nice people but they could be infuriating. They could drive you up the wall and across the ceiling and down the other side, but they did it so nicely! We made many friends not only in Tehran, but in the provinces too. It was quite noticeable that there the women still wore veils, though the practice had been abolished in the city and a young daughter coming home from being educated in England rushed off to marry the first young man with a job in Tehran that she could find, to be able to shed the veil.

AW: And the Shah's rule? How solid did that appear during this period?

JC: He was, I think, a genuine benevolent despot in 18th Century terms. He thought that everything he was doing was for the good of his country. I will tell you a story about Lord Walston, a man with big agricultural interests in East Anglia and the West Indies, but who had been a Labour Minister in the Foreign Office, I think it was. On one of the Shah's visits to England, not a State Visit, just an ordinary visit, Lord Walston had been asked to show the Shah his farms in East Anglia. He told me this story: that as they were driving back he had said something, and the Shah turned round and said "You mean to say, you are a socialist minister", Walston had said "yes" and the Shah said "Well that makes two of us, I'm a Socialist too"! But he ran his country on a very tight rein through a quite brilliant network of senior civil servants, who were supposed to turn themselves to any job within the range of top management so that a chap that I'd known one day as Head of the University of Tehran, would next day be Governor in Mashhad, Keeper of the Shrine. Somebody else would be Head of The Plan Organisation and the next day Governor of the Central Bank. The Shah kept shifting them around in these jobs. What they lacked, and it was very clear, the Shah himself said it, was middle management. They had very good technicians down below, they had brilliant foreign trained (all these people had degrees from MIT or Cambridge or whatever) top civil servants, but middle management was poor. And the Shah said once to our Defence Attaché that if you gave him three wishes what he would want would be good junior officers, good warrant officers and good senior NCOs. This was true throughout the entire complex of industry or anything else. So there were bright people at the top, good people working at the bottom and practically nothing in between.

The Empress had a considerable role and her role was art and culture. She was doing what she could to westernise, without losing touch with the essential Persian background ideas, and setting up new museums and a great new ballet with a British Director, where we were delighted to see Margot Fonteyn and Nureyev dancing to Yehudi Menuhin playing the fiddle! They were there on separate engagements but they got together one night!

This was all very encouraging and one felt that this was a country which was going to be very soon one of us. Nobody thought about the mullahs. Nobody noticed the mullahs. Basically they were a joke at this time but we were wrong to some extent and there were signs which we should have noticed. I can tell you one particular story. Qom is a holy city south of Tehran and it was generally recognised that it was just as well not to drive through it.

Mashhad was the other great holy city with a shrine up in the North East. My wife got in with a group of American scholars and they all decided to go off on a trip together to the North East, taking my car and driver! One of them was an Islamic art expert, one an Islamic architecture expert and the other one was a scholar of Islam and actually had been given a place at Mashhad University. Off they all set and I planned to go up and join them for a long weekend, which I did. My harem of four young ladies!

Almost the first thing I did was to go and call on the Governor who had been my friend in Tehran when he was Head of the University. He was now Governor of Mashhad Province and by virtue of that, he was also “Keeper of the Holy Shrine”. Molli knew him of course, he didn’t know the other American ladies, but he said that he would show us the shrine the next day. We all turned up at his place, he fitted us all up with appropriate clothes. There was one particularly tall American girl and he produced a complete kaftan, almost a tent for her! And then there was his wife, who was bright with lipstick and only the smallest veil which rather shook us, but off we went. We came to the outside of the shrine and then he said “I think perhaps we’d better not go in”. And so we walked round the outside, came back, and that was it. Now he was the Governor, the Keeper of the Shrine, and when it came to it he didn’t want to take us in.

Then on a later occasion when I was up in Mashhad on business and had seen him and he said “Is there anything we can do for you?” I said “Well I know the shrine is delicate but perhaps I could have a look at the Mosque next door?” “Oh, of course,” he said and called a minion to arrange for Mr Cloake to look at the Goharshad Mosque the next day. I said I would be leaving on the 1 o’clock plane on the Monday. I heard nothing. At noon on Monday they rang up to say “We can take you this afternoon”! I said “Thank you very much, I said I was leaving on the 1pm plane and I am”!

It was an indication that even the Persians in very high office were a bit worried about offending the religious people. At that time we could go into any mosque or shrine in Tehran and all you did was tip the caretaker. It wasn’t a problem as long as you were properly dressed and behaved yourself. In fact Molli and I wrote an entire book on the monuments of Tehran. It never got published. By the time we left the mayor said he would do it, but he eventually was killed. It was taken over by the Empress and was last seen by one of my

colleagues on the Empress's Private Secretary's desk but it was a victim of the revolution. I still have the draft which I share with the British Institute of Persian Studies.

AW: And did you have just the one Ambassador, Denis Wright, for the whole of your posting?

JC: Denis Wright eventually left at the age of sixty and was succeeded by Peter Ramsbotham who had been in my original entry to the Office. In the entry competition there were two classes, younger and older, and he was top of the older and I was top of the younger, though we didn't actually meet then. He came as Ambassador and for quite a long time after he arrived, Donald Murray, who was the Political Counsellor, was on home leave and so I was doing the political job. One of the things we did at this time was to prepare a despatch on what happens if the Shah gets killed (which we thought was a probable thing – assassination) or even if he should simply die. We were fairly convinced that the strength of the army and the armed forces would be sufficient to hold the position until the young prince could take over. And again nobody thought about the mullahs. But what was becoming only too clear was that the Shah was becoming more and more megalomaniac. We had the great 2500th anniversary of the Persian monarchy. We had to explain to the Palace that they shouldn't expect more than a lovely country picnic. We had Prince Philip and Princess Anne, not the Queen, and it was done splendidly well. Imagine doing a coronation on Salisbury Plain! That was more or less what it amounted to. They had I don't know how many heads of state, people all in these wonderful tents with the food flown in from Paris. Afterwards Molli and I got to see it all. Not at the time because at the time only the Heads of Mission were invited and they were kept in hotels, it was only the actual State guests who were in the tents. It was done magnificently with hardly a ruffled protocol feather which said an awful lot for the Persian organisation. But the Shah got worse and worse until by the end of our time there he was upsetting everybody and we did think that there was quite a chance there might be some sort of revolutionary movement led by the middle classes and the academic world basically trying to go back to the constitutional monarchy set up in the early 20th century. But we never thought about the mullahs.

That is about all I have to say about Iran except that Molli and I fell in love with the place, the country, the people, the language, the art, the architecture. The moment I retired Denis Wright who was Head of the British Institute of Persian Studies roped me into the Committee

and a year later made me Treasurer and for the next ten years or so I was really deeply involved.

AW: And so to the next move?

Fellow, Centre for International Studies, LSE, 1972–73

JC: Yes, I'd been there for four years. Donald Murray was also leaving. I did suggest that I might take over as Political Counsellor but the Office thought that I should have a Sabbatical and we negotiated this and to my pleasure, as we had our house in Richmond, they put me into the Department of International Relations at the LSE. Somebody in the Personnel Department said that they thought I should study the theory of international relations. I said I wanted to do something practical, probably in British/Iranian relations. But they asked me to have a crack at the theory for the first term. So I did and I came to the resounding conclusion that there was no such thing. It's a lot of American gobbledygook. But there were two things that impressed me and which I've been very conscious of ever since.

One was the importance of communications. This really revealed itself much more in an historical context. In olden days if you wanted to send some comment to a British representative in Persia it sailed via South America, because of trade winds, back to Bombay and then up to the Persian Gulf, about nine months. And the reply would come back the same sort of route. This was not immediate reactions! It was no wonder that relations with Iran were run from India. But of course the great difference came with the invention of the telegraph. But the other great thing was the importance of perception. How different people view exactly the same event and their interpretations would be different depending on the way their minds had been brought up. I had a fascinating discussion with the Bulgarian Foreign Minister about all of this at one time later on. Jumping on to Sofia, for a moment. I had a very dear friend in the Italian Ambassador who had been there for about six years and didn't speak a word of Bulgarian. He used to stand beside me at the great manifestations and ask me about banners and what they said, like "Forward with Socialism". His perception of what went on must have been quite different from mine.

After doing a term on international relations, I did get the Office to agree that I should get down to some actual research work in British/Iranian history, and I took as my topic the Azerbaijan crisis just after the War when the Russians wouldn't get out of the north and set

up a puppet government in Azerbaijan. I finally had to leave it, totally incomplete, because British records were not yet available for the end of this period. I worked on the American records, which were published already and one of my themes was going to be the difference in perception between the British and the Americans on this. I thought I would get back to it later but I never did. But a good Persian friend Dr Fereydoun Ala, son of the Persian Ambassador to the USA and the UN during the crisis, who now lives in Twickenham, gave a lecture fairly recently to the Iran Society on the Azerbaijan crisis as seen through his father's eyes and he now has my entire draft, as far as it went, has typed it all up and I'm hoping to get him to finish it. He came to England at the time of the Revolution and now is retired but he does spend quite a lot of time in Tehran still.

One other thing to mention is that having returned from Tehran and acquired all these books, and pots and things, it became apparent to us that our lovely house really was too small. Our family had not grown, we only had one boy but half our stuff was in storage so we thought if we looked around with no pressure and found a house with character in a good location and a bit bigger, we would consider moving. We found this house falling down, absolutely collapsing. I rang the office and said "Look, I don't know what you intend to do with me after this sabbatical year but we have a house which we are thinking of buying in Richmond and it's going to need a great deal of work. If you are going to post me in London we'll buy it, if you're going to send me abroad, we won't". They said "hold on for a bit" and rang me a few days later to say I could have a department in the office if I'd like, coming up in November. So we bought the house, we didn't move into it for 18 months after we'd done all the work. As a result I became, from November 1973, Head of Trade Relations and Exports Department.

Head of Trade Relations and Exports Department, FCO, 1973–76

There were two sides of Trade: one was the Exports, in fact we were the sort of "mother hen" for all the commercial departments overseas working with the DTI (as I think it was at that time - it kept changing its name), sending out instructions and such. I did a lot of visiting and going to conferences of commercial officers in countries that had a lot of posts. They used to have annual conferences and I would attend them, in obvious places like Germany and France and some less obvious ones including Tokyo on one occasion. At this time Tehran was going mad, just after I'd left actually. The Shah had played his red card and succeeded in pushing up the oil price and the amount of revenue coming into Iran. The result was that

the pot was boiling over and a great mass of English carpetbaggers were rushing out to try and earn some petrodollars. The Commercial Department was in despair. Their good Persian Commercial Officers had all left to become managing directors of new companies. I was told by my successor that to hire anybody who had a slight knowledge of the English language they would have to pay them twice as much as the Commercial Counsellor. The poor UK staff that were there never got out of the office any more, there were queues in the waiting room. So on my way back from Tokyo I arranged to drop in to Tehran and see what I could do to help and discuss it all with my successor. We more or less decided on a level of staffing that wasn't going to be quite adequate for the time being but might look after the future. That was one real crisis on that side of the office.

The other side was Trade Policy where there were two main themes: one was export controls, the Foreign Office input on controls of arms, etc, working of course closely with the DTI. One thing that amused me, I think it was North Korea that wanted Rolls Royce cars, armoured of course! But the other thing that was not so funny was that, I think it was Hawker, wanted to sell aircraft to the Chinese. I forget now what it was, whether it was the new short landing aircraft, something like that and our bosses said "Well, obviously it's good business if you can do it, but we must keep the Americans on side and get Kissinger's clearance." Kissinger at this time was somewhere in China and so I had a job trying to chase him through the Peking Embassy and ask him if we could sell these aircraft to the Chinese. And eventually we got an OK.

The other thing that occupied a lot of my time was commodities. Commodity trading worried us quite a lot because it was so volatile. I was taken to see the London Metal Market, fascinating, people screaming at the top of their voices across the room, how on earth they made any sense! In the end I thought "Why don't we try to aim for an international agreement on commodities similar to the international organisation on world trade". I drafted a paper. Donald Maitland by this time was the Deputy Under Secretary in charge of the economic departments and he was very taken by this and put it up to Harold Wilson, more or less I think as I had written it. Wilson was quite taken with it too but then in the end nothing happened. My idea of trying to have an international organisation on commodity trading I still think was a good one if we could have backed it up.

AW: So we approach the autumn of 1976 and your next move?

Ambassador to Bulgaria, 1976–80

JC: Yes, after three years in Trade I was told I could have my own post and go off to Sofia, Bulgaria. I knew nothing about Bulgaria except that it was at the southern bottom right hand side of the map of Europe and our friends knew even less, one of them told her husband that “John had been appointed to Belgravia”!

AW: And how was it when you got there?

JC: I found it quite curiously like Iran in many ways, developing at the same sort of pace, equally nice people who could be equally exasperating! Bulgarians had a great sense of humour. They also had a great love of music and in a country of nine million people they had nine professional opera companies, one in each regional capital, which tells you something.

Going back to the sense of humour, they would even tell stories against themselves, against the regime or against the Russians. Even Todor Zhivkov, the President, whom I personally heard telling this one. They tended to be quite often short of food, because they exported a lot. He said that the Patriarch came to see him one day at the Central Committee to give him a present. He had said to the Patriarch “But this is the Central Committee of the Communist Party” and the Patriarch had said “Yes I know but in 35 years you have done what the Christian Church failed to do in 2000 years, you’ve stopped the people from eating meat!” He told this story to the West German Foreign Minister on a visit.

Similarly the great Party newspaper which was called “The Workers’ Thing”, it’s the best translation I can think of! Every week it had a little humorous column and quite typical was the tale of a manager of a state business talking to his deputy who said he was “having terrible trouble getting my son into university, can you help?” And the boss says “Have you tried everything? You’re fired! I thought you had connections”. It was the sort of place where ties mattered.

Now of course it has turned into a mafia dominated situation. You could sort of sense this coming because there was quite a spirit of free enterprise and it was a communist country where private ownership of land was permitted. Any family could have a plot in the country outside the town, in addition to their house in the town, and they could build another house

on it if they wanted to and a lot of them did, gradually. You weren't allowed to employ people but you could use a friend to help and the cost of "a friend" went up and up. On a Sunday evening if you went out of Sofia, cars would come streaming back into town all laden with vegetables, eggs, whatever all on the back seat and as Andrei Lukanov, the Deputy Prime Minister in charge of Foreign Economic Relations said to me "It's our green economy, it never gets into the records but we couldn't live without it".

As I mentioned, the Bulgarians loved opera and music. They send choirs to Eisteddfods and win all the prizes. We had a lot of friends in the opera. In particular we got to know a mezzo soprano called Nellie Boshkova. Nellie and Molli became best friends. Nellie had Monday afternoon off and they would spend it going round Sofia together, in tea shops and gradually Molli teaching Nellie English and Nellie teaching Molli Bulgarian. Their common language was French, as opera singers tend to have. Nellie had a boyfriend who was a bass and we got to know them well. About half way through our time in Bulgaria Nellie got a job in the Opera in East Berlin and we managed to visit them, and later on in our retirement she was doing all sorts of festivals in Western Europe and ended up in the permanent company of the State Opera in Vienna where she died two or three years ago. She was a lovely woman with a lovely voice. And we had all sorts of other opera friends too. It was easy and they were nice people and they didn't worry about me being the British Ambassador and that sort of thing.

There were a few people, usually older ones, who had been through the nasty purge days of the forties and fifties who were still shy of coming to our house but I must mention a dear friend who was, by the time we were there, a retired Director of the Sofia Opera but had been the son of a Tsarist minister in London before the War. He had known the Christies at Glyndebourne before it was a festival and went back frequently to produce operas at Glyndebourne. He said to us, when he invited us to go to dinner with him and his wife, "Please don't come in your car, we're only 200 yards away from your Embassy, just walk it". Just a bit shy that the British Ambassador's flag shouldn't be seen outside his house.

I must admit that I looked on Bulgaria through rose-tinted spectacles. To start with we had the best house in the Balkans. It had been built by the British Government in 1912. They had built three new houses in the Balkan States, just in time for the Balkan Wars, Sofia, Bucharest and Belgrade. In both Bucharest and Belgrade those houses were now the offices

and the residences were in nasty suburban villas. In Sofia for some reason just before the War the office element had outgrown the Residence (these houses, of course, originally were largely residence with an office wing), and we had apparently rented somewhere nearby. Because the Bulgarians ended up on the wrong side, that rent was of course given up. The Residence was in the charge of the Swiss or Swedes or somebody during the War and the moment the Russians arrived in 1945 with a British Military Mission attached, the Mission liberated the Residence and requisitioned the little block of flats next door. Come the peace treaty, we thought it was convenient to have the flats and we continued to rent them and that remained our offices and so the Residence remained the Residence.

We also had a wonderful Bulgarian staff. One of the world's great butlers, a man of my age and very nice who had worked in the Embassy since the War, originally trained by a British butler, then as a footman and had been in the Residence the whole time since except for about three years when he went out to be the manservant to the Defence Attaché. We had the best cook in Sofia and so we really did very well and I also had a very nice young chauffeur to drive my official car. My private car was the very first Range Rover to be seen in Bulgaria! It caused enormous excitement wherever it went, followed by young lads admiring it. I think I finally persuaded the Foreign Minister to buy one! When I left it was acquired by our wonderful "Mr Fixit", our Assistant Administration Officer who was a Bulgarian lawyer with an English wife and who believed in teasing the authorities as much as he could and I think he thought having this Range Rover would add to his teasing! My British staff, my office staff were also excellent.

AW: And how were our bi lateral relations at this time?

JC: Well, we didn't have much to do with trade, let alone political influence but we had the Secretary of State for Trade out on a visit once. I took him to call on Todor Zhivkov who said "You do know that the Soviet Union is a colony of Bulgaria?" We said "Do tell us", he said "Well you see, they are a secure source of supply of all the raw materials we need and a captive market for all our manufacture, what could be more colonial than that?" The moral being there was very little commercial cake to share out between our western countries and there wasn't much trade to be done there.

It became evident that the main thing to do was to put an emphasis on cultural relations. We had a proper agreement, which I helped to negotiate, on cultural exchanges. We put on a lot of exhibitions of Shakespeare, Turner, etc. We had concerts. We had a wonderful concert with a Scottish orchestra who came the week after we'd just had an East German orchestra and my friend the retired opera director said to me "the wonderful thing about the Scots is they can play fortissimo quietly, unlike the Germans!" And a big triumph, we had the Ballet Rambert. One of the great things about our house was that it had a very nice garden and it had a swimming pool which the staff could use and while the Ballet Rambert were there we invited them to come and use it all the time and we got to know them very well. They were a great success.

Molli and I were trying to learn Bulgarian. Practically no other Western ambassador even attempted the language but we were there for nearly four years so we saw at least two generations, sometimes three, of other colleagues. Two of our American colleagues spoke Russian but the Bulgarians didn't like people to speak Russian although it was practically the same language. But any good Bulgarian would tell you that Russian was just a modern variant of Slavonic which was the origin of the Bulgarian language. The fact that we actually made an effort and tried to speak to them in their own language was a big thing. Every year Todor Zhivkov had a party for the Heads of Missions in a different provincial capital, take us off for a couple of days or so, overnight in a hotel with outings to various sites, useful factories, and always some country dancing. Todor Zhivkov always used to pick on Molli because not only did she dance well but she could talk to him. So they got on awfully well.

It's a nice countryside, half of it is rolling downs and the other bits are mountains. We enjoyed touring a lot. Whenever you went anywhere and needed a hotel, you had to do it through the Bureau for Diplomats so they always knew where you were but apart from the closed border areas where Bulgaria bordered on NATO countries, there was no limit on where you could go and we covered pretty well the whole country and that was good.

Molli and I shared a great interest in monasteries and the remains of the Orthodox Church and in icons. In Bulgaria it was the Orthodox Church that had kept the concept of Bulgaria and the Bulgarian language alive throughout the Ottoman occupation. This was important and it was recognised. It was in fact probably the East European country which had the best relations between State and Church. Bulgaria had only recovered its Patriarch under the

Communists. The Patriarch was always given great honour, for instance on New Year's Day when the whole Diplomatic Corps assembled to greet the President, the Patriarch always came first, and then the Diplomatic Corps.

There was certainly a religious sense amongst the people and many of the Communists would at least make certain that they or their parents were buried according to Christian ritual because they might upset relations if they weren't. Todor Zhivkov's favourite exclamation was "My God". Things went on quite nicely and I actually thought I was getting to the point when I might get the Foreign Minister visiting and then came the awful Markov case when the nastiness of it all showed.

Now to my belief, this was all rather like Thomas a Becket. Here was this man infuriating Zhivkov, not so much on the BBC Overseas Service, where he worked, but mainly on Radio Free Europe, talking about the beastliness of Zhivkov in the forties and fifties, hands covered in blood and so on. I was called in several times, not by my usual contact, but another Deputy Foreign Minister to be told to stop this man making these broadcasts. I would do the usual protests about the BBC being independent. Then suddenly he was assassinated. It's my belief that it was probably Zhivkov sounding off "who will rid me of this turbulent priest" and some general or other thought he would earn some brownie points and went ahead. They later reckoned that they had solved it all when the general in question committed suicide, but it was unfortunate because it dislocated what had been a nice development of relations.

It never had any effect on me personally. They remained absolutely as pleasant as ever towards me but prospects of Foreign Secretaries' visits went straight out of the window.

Zhivkov was a great admirer of Margaret Thatcher and when I paid my final call on him he said how much he admired her and how they were both extremists but had the love of their country and the support of their people.

One of the things that was interesting and slightly curious was that we achieved for the first time a British Naval visit. This had been put forward, I'm not sure which side had started it, in the "spirit of Helsinki". It was quite obvious as preparations developed that the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was all in favour of it and the Bulgarian Ministry of Defence absolutely hated it, loathed it, but Foreign Affairs won out. Finally we had two frigates

sitting in the Black Sea waiting to come in to port at Varna, where I had gone up to meet them. Even then the Bulgarian Navy kept them waiting about eight hours before letting them in just to show. The visit went off quite well, there were no nasty incidents or anything. They had a football match where it was very obvious which team was which because our team had several black players on it, and the Bulgarians who were very, very racially conscious quite obviously shuddered at the idea of playing black people. We had a lunch at which I said something to the admiral enquiring when they would be returning the visit and he turned quite purple. My Defence Attaché whispered “He ain’t got a ship he can send”!

There is one other thing I want to mention. I was always conscious throughout my time that the Soviet bloc wasn’t very bloc-like any more. It was disintegrating. To start with not only was Bulgaria probably the most relaxed country in Eastern Europe, there were no Soviet troops, there was a constant flow of tourists, the Greeks used to come up in buses to hear the lovely music in the Orthodox Cathedral at Christmas and Easter, the West Germans used to flock to the Black Sea coast because that was the one place they could meet their East German friends, families and colleagues, the Turks came charging through on their way to Germany and of course it was a good place for cheap school excursions, skiing in the winter, seaside in the summer, trade unionist parties, all on the cheap but quite reasonable accommodation. It felt relaxed. There were no policemen on our door but we were watched from a flat opposite and my security officers got to know them. One of the watchers came in to get a visa to be chauffeur in London for the Bulgarian Ambassador!

On the whole it was a good relaxed atmosphere and we could enjoy it and we made quite a lot of friends, not only in the opera but in the artistic and academic worlds as well. Some of our friends, knowing our interest in Islamic art, had said to us “You must remember that the Bulgarians spent 500 years under what they call the Turkish yoke and so don’t go on too much about your Islamic interests.”. We hadn’t been there for more than a month or two when a British historian turned up to give a lecture. We all gathered after the lecture in the office of the head of the Institute of History and Molli asked him what was his interest, he said “Oh, the Islamic period in Bulgaria”! We became great friends. About two and a half years later he was nominated to be the Bulgarian Ambassador in Athens. We often used to go down to Athens for the weekend and on one visit I telephoned the Bulgarian Embassy and speaking in my best Bulgarian asked to speak to the Ambassador and they put me straight through. He came rushing round to see us, greeting us with open arms and treated me as if I

was a Bulgarian colleague telling us all about the shortcomings of his staff. A very nice chap and a bit later on, after we had retired, led a delegation of Bulgarian Parliamentarians to London.

Shortly before we left the signs were that even the Communist economic system was beginning to collapse. There had been some signs in Hungary. Then the Bulgarians introduced what they called the New Economic Movement. This was quite startling. They abolished nearly all the state controls and the production targets. They said what mattered was not how many things you made, but how much profit you made. Not long after this I was talking to the Minister for Heavy Industry who said “Things haven’t changed much, all the heads of factories are still coming to me saying if you can’t tell us what to do any more, advise us”. They had no experience.

But I think it all went bad when the Communist regime finally gave way which was some years later. I had always maintained that if there had been free elections throughout Eastern Europe at the time we were there, Bulgaria would have been the one place that returned a Communist majority. They had never had it so good. It had been a peasant country, never really industrialised, they hadn’t ever been part of Central Europe in the ways that the Hungarians, Poles and Czechs had been, even the Romanians had had much more contact. They had never had much of a middle class. A sort of middle class began to emerge at the end of the 19th Century, with one or two industrialists who made cloth and materials for the Turkish Army, tobacco manufacturers and officers and one or two senior civil servants and that was it. In Sofia if you arrived and wanted to set up a new Embassy, you had to go into a flat. There were about six Embassies that had their own buildings, we were one of course, the Americans had theirs, the Turks had one. The Italians had one that had been the Germans’ before the War, the Austrians had one and the French had one. Everybody else was in flats. While Bucharest, by contrast, was full of middle class villas, none were to be had in Sofia. It really was true that they had never had it so good. Every family had a car, telephone, television, refrigerator; they were comfortable and quite prosperous. We spent a fortnight visiting Romania and were struck how totally poverty stricken that country was compared to Bulgaria.

I fear that it actually went wrong probably because at the time of the collapse of the Berlin Wall when all the Communist regimes were collapsing all over Europe, the Communists in

Bulgaria changed their name and returned to power, but not the old regime, the younger ones, the ones I had found easy to talk to and who had understood how the West worked.

Mladenov, who had been the Foreign Minister, was President; Lukanov who had been the Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs was Prime Minister, but something went awfully wrong. I don't know what it was originally that started it but there was a demonstration and Mladenov lost his head and said "Turn out the tanks" and that did for them. The whole lot were wiped out after which we had a series of nonentities running the country and the then former Tsar came back to be Prime Minister for a time.

The first King of Bulgaria had been put on the throne by the Russians who ten years later decided to throw him off; which left the Bulgarians without a prince and they sent a delegation off round Europe looking for one. They picked a spare Saxe Coburg. Very nice Royal Family actually. I met some of them after we were back here, when the Bulgarian Ambassador to London after the communist time was really an English businessman with a Scottish wife, who had been the son of a former Minister pre-War in London, invited us quite often. He had managed to find his father's old uniform to present his credentials and how amused the Queen was when he told her that! He invited us along with most of the young children of the former Tsar, who were a nice bunch, mostly Spanish these days.

One final story. Every four years Sofia held a 'Young Opera Singers' competition. One was due in May/June 1980. I told Personnel Department that I wanted to stay for it as the British Council were supporting a strong British team. There were eight young British singers in the team – and another who came under his own steam. We made them very welcome. At a first introductory party at the Residence we invited them to use the pool at any time they wanted and to use the drawing room (with a grand piano) to rehearse. Molli attended almost every one of the concerts in the first two qualifying rounds, which were held in the mornings and afternoons, and I managed to get to some. Then the finalists were announced – each had to sing a full principal role in a complete opera with the Sofia opera company. Of the sixteen finalists, five were our British friends. We went to every one of their performances. In the end, though of course the 'laureate' prize went to a Russian, we had both gold and silver medals for sopranos (Rosalind Plowright and Marie Slorach) and the prize for best song to baritone Peter Knapp. We had a splendid party to celebrate. It seemed a fitting end to my diplomatic career.

So that more or less finishes what I have to say about Sofia. I had reached the point where I could have had another post but I had already got my full pension entitlement with all the time I had spent in Baghdad and Saigon in the old days, and I didn't think I was going to get any more promotion in the Service, Molli wasn't going to become a Lady, and so I had a hankering to get back to my real hobby, the history of Richmond. So I decided to take what was then much on offer. They were trying to thin out the congestion at my point of the people who had come in after the War and were offering very generous terms for early retirement and so I took it. I had no sooner got back here than I was distracted from Richmond history by my friend who was head of the National Army Museum, who got me to write my biography of Field Marshal Sir Gerald Templer, and before that was finished I was deep in Richmond history, setting up the new museum and one thing and another and I never looked back.

AW: Returning briefly to Bulgaria, you've talked about the politicians who became "reconstructed Communists": was there any sign of any young dissidents who might later become members of the UDF etc?

JC: No not at the time, it all happened later of course. But I do remember a certain air of some "independence", whilst attending some parliamentary assemblies etc. There was a lovely old general, former cavalry general who was now the head of their Olympics Committee, who was an MP and who used to get up and ask awkward questions from time to time. There were one or two independents. The head of Sofia University, who was a friend, was also an MP as an independent and I think he actually was, he wasn't a card-carrying Communist, but one never saw any sign of any organised dissent. We had a very good friend who was certainly a dissenting artist. He was a cartoonist and also did little sculptures. We met him soon after we arrived because he was a friend of our Mr Fixit who took us along to an exhibition at which he was actually being allowed to show cartoons and caricatures. I have a nice poster of an exhibition of his later in 1990 which being translated reads "Exhibition of Caricatures, Essays on Authoritarianism - we have overcome". I think he was briefly locked up, two or three weeks, for being too friendly with the Austrian Ambassador.

AW: But you weren't aware of people being sent off?

JC: Not at all, I think he was the only one we were aware of anything happening to; and there was absolutely no sign of any organised dissent at all even in the University, and that's saying something.

AW: John, thank you so very much.