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HIGGINS, Desmond

(b. 22 Jan 1930)

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Desmond Higgins interviewed on Friday, 30 April 2010

by Malcolm McBain

Early life, education and appointment to the Commonwealth Relations Office, 1956

MM I see that you were born on 22 January 1930 in Dublin, but I don't have any note of where you went to school. Could you perhaps tell me a little about your early life?

DH I went to school in Dun Laoghaire in Southern Ireland, I then went on at the age of 11 to King's Hospital in Dublin which was, and still is, a well known school. At the time, of course, it was Protestant, but now in changing times it has all religions at the school. I was there until the age of 16 when, as a family, we migrated to Liverpool. My father was a teacher there, and I joined the Home Civil Service at the age of 17, in what was then the Ministry of Supply in Liverpool.

MM Did you have to do National Service?

DH I did National Service in the Royal Navy from 1947 to 1949. I spent most of my time on destroyers in the home fleet at the time, and with a ship's company of about 200, there were only two National Servicemen on board. That was an enjoyable time and it was with some degree of reluctance that I left the Royal Navy to return to the Ministry of Supply in Liverpool.

MM Did you pursue any further education?

DH Yes, because I had been educated in Ireland, the problem was that I didn't have any UK qualifications. So I had to start from scratch. I intended to get a degree and I started evening studies immediately after coming out of the Navy. The degree took me however about 6-7 years to complete, and at the end of it I came out with a BSc Economics degree with special studies in Commonwealth Affairs at the age of about 26.

MM And it was at that stage you joined the Commonwealth Relations Office?

DH I joined the CRO – I think it was in 1956 after I had got my degree. At the time the understanding was that provided I got my degree, I would be accepted in a transfer from the Home Civil Service to the Commonwealth Relations Office. So I moved to the CRO when I had achieved that degree qualification.

Posting to British High Commission, New Delhi, 1957

MM Where did you first serve overseas?

DH My first overseas posting was to Delhi where I spent two years. For most of my time there I was on the Information Services side and that enabled me to travel quite widely. We did such exotic exercises as going out in film vans and showing films on Britain to villagers in the Punjab, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh.

MM So you got a good impression of rural India in the period 1957-59. Did you come across any sort of resentment in India as a result of our invasion of Egypt in 1956?

DH I can't in all honesty remember anything of that kind. Bear in mind that I was there in the period not long after independence, when, if you like, the Brits could do no wrong. The Indians had got their independence so we were very welcome. Everywhere I went I was received, if you like, with open arms.

MM It's interesting that, isn't it? Can you explain why we had such an extensive information programme in India at that stage?

DH It was a huge organisation and my recollection is that we had over 100 Indian staff dealing with all sorts of aspects of information work. We produced our own British Information Service's leaflet every – certainly once a month – and it had a huge distribution list throughout the country.

MM In numerous languages?

DH In some languages. Strangely enough, primarily as I remember, in English, but it was not only the press that we were dealing with. It was the films. We had a huge range of

activities which certainly wouldn't be undertaken now. I think it must have been owing to the fact that we were in the wake of the Raj. We did not want to lose our influence in the country after independence, and this was one way, if you like, of pushing Britain and maintaining our relations which, generally speaking, were good, with the Indians.

MM So you were welcomed wherever you went?

DH Indeed. Indeed. I would visit newspaper offices in the Punjab, for example. These were tiny little outfits, but they were only too delighted to talk to somebody from Britain, and in fact someone who was able to provide them with material that they could include in their next editions.

MM But there were large numbers of vernacular newspapers published, weren't there, as well as radio stations?

DH Very large. For example in Jullundur which is in the Punjab, there was one delightful newspaper produced in Punjabi. It had a circulation of 5,000, if I remember rightly, and the editor was boasting about his correspondent in London who turned out to be just a railway worker, working for British Rail, as it was then, but he was very, very proud of his overseas correspondent that he had for his 5,000 readers.

MM What was your impression of the Punjab? Well, wait before we go on to that, could you describe briefly how you got out to India?

DH By ship. I remember vividly going out from Southampton on, I think, the name of the ship was the *Arcadia*, but I wouldn't be certain of that. But it was the time when a ship sailed out of port on the voyage to India there would be bands on the quayside playing the ship out with "Now is the Hour". It took two weeks to do the journey to Bombay. We called at some interesting ports, and of course we went through the Suez Canal, which had just reopened after the 1956 debacle. From Aden to Bombay was my first experience of the real tropics. For the family of course it was an eye opener as well.

MM So you arrived in Bombay, saw the Gateway to India and the Taj Mahal hotel and all that for the first time. They are still very impressive. Did you go straight from the ship to the railway station or ..?

DH No, we stayed overnight and I remember, I think it was at a hotel at Juhu Beach. It was a glorious beach. I remember seeing some beautiful Parsee women strolling along the beach areas. That in itself was a delightful sight.

MM Fully clothed?

DH Fully clothed unfortunately. But from there we went by train and it was an air conditioned train, a 24 hour journey to Delhi.

MM Any sights on the way?

DH I think I was so dazed with the transition that I had no real recollection of anything dramatic, apart from the vendors at the stations trying to persuade us to buy all sorts of Indian sweetmeats and what have you. We were of course advised by the High Commission people in Bombay to steer clear of all of that and confine ourselves to the sandwiches that they had provided at Bombay.

MM Of course disease and dysenteries of various sorts were rampant, were they not, in those days?

DH Very rampant and in fact as far as I was concerned I suffered quite a bit. I recall on one occasion I was visiting a village in the Punjab; it was rather inaccessible, but they very kindly sent an elephant to convey me into the village. To get on to the elephant, the idea was that you made a loop of the elephant's tail, put your foot in that loop and clambered on to the back of the elephant. Anyway, unfortunately the village provided lunch. The village didn't have any plates or anything of that sort, and the food was provided on a cabbage leaf, and I felt with this: "I'm in trouble", and indeed I was. I could not refuse food, but when I got back within 12 hours I was in the dispensary at the British High Commission in Delhi. I spent the next 48 hours unconscious with a saline drip keeping me alive, and with the medical people thinking that I actually had cholera. After that I took the advice of an old stager who said:

“Look. You must have a tot of whisky before you clean your teeth in the morning, every morning, to insulate your stomach”. That tot of whisky kept me in the clear for the rest of my tour of duty out there.

MM What about smells and generally the dirt and depression that you see?

DH This was one hell of a shock. The way of life is so different, from the dhobis – the washermen – you see banging your shirts against rocks to get the dirt out. You wonder how the shirts are going to survive – they do. Nonetheless the cleanliness is also remarkable, because when you enter so many of those mud huts, you will find the floor is absolutely spotless. It is maintained spotless incredibly by a mixture of clay and cow dung. It is amazing but the flies seem to steer clear of that flooring for some unknown reason and the clothes that the Indians wear, no matter how poor they are, are very, very clean. Nonetheless, that having been said, dirt does pile up, though there is the Indian joke about “What’s the difference about being an Englishman and an Indian?” An Englishman blows his nose, wraps it up in a cloth and puts it in his pocket. An Indian gets rid of it.

MM I know that I was greatly impressed by the personal cleanliness of Indians. They maintained very high hygienic standards compared with Europeans in those days.

DH I organised a little school for the children of the Indian staff and I was always amazed that youngsters, coming from such poor families, came to the school every day in spotless clothes. Absolutely incredible how they did it.

MM Very impressive. You also did a fair amount of travelling around Rajasthan as well as the Punjab. Were things different there?

DH Punjab-Rajasthan – poverty in Rajasthan much greater than in the Punjab. When I was there, the Punjab was one of the “wealthier” of the Indian States. The very vigorous Sikh population were very impressive in the way that they had recovered from the partition days. So many of them having lived in what was then Pakistan had been kicked out of the area, but they had recovered in the Indian Punjab.

MM But Rajasthan dirt poor?

DH Very, very poor, and that's where all the building workers – mostly female incredibly – would come from, and you would recognise them in Delhi by colourful clothes, working infinitely harder than their men folk.

MM That's right. What about the UP, Uttar Pradesh?

DH Uttar Pradesh – my memory of that is, travelling through it to the hill stations very often, I have visited places like Rishikesh, but Uttar Pradesh was and probably is still the major Muslim province or state in the Indian Union. I always found that perhaps the welcome to the Brits was greater in Punjab and Rajasthan, largely Hindu and Sikh, rather than the welcome one would get in the Muslim majority Uttar Pradesh.

MM What do you attribute that to?

DH I think that the Muslims of Uttar Pradesh felt that they had been neglected; that most of their co-religionists were living in Pakistan; whether it be West or East Pakistan at the time – now Bangladesh, and they felt perhaps in some way the Brits had let them down.

MM I don't quite see what the alternative was. You couldn't very well have another foreign state plumb in the middle of Hindu India.

DH Oh yes. It was an impossible situation, but it is easy to be clever in retrospect. I rather feel that further efforts might have been made to keep the whole of the sub-continent one entity, and certainly in terms of the loss of life that was encountered at partition, I don't think it could have been worse than trying to get the place stable, a federal country covering the whole sub-continent.

MM Perhaps at this point it would be a good idea to talk about Kashmir. You succeeded in doing a visit to Kashmir by road?

DH Yes. A most tortuous journey at the time because of course with the partition of Kashmir, it left the main road into Kashmir on the Pakistan side. The Indians had one hell of a job to cut a road over the mountains. Each mountain range had to be climbed over,

followed by a descent into the valley, then up the next mountain and so on. When I went I drove in. I was put at the head of a military convoy as the result of the argument that some of the bridges were going to fall down under the weight of the military traffic. We were going to have landslides, but at least the private car at the front would be able to go ahead. Some of the rickety bridges one crossed were a nightmare. You could hear them groaning as your car crossed over. One or two of the hairpin bends were so extreme that there was no way that you could get round it in one turn, but there was a kindly gentleman at the cliff edge with a big rock so that when you had to back-up to the cliff edge, he slammed the rock underneath the back wheel to make sure you didn't find yourself 6,000 feet below.

MM You are talking about the Banihal Pass, aren't you?

DH That area, yes. We went there. You've been through that, have you?

MM Yes, exciting.

DH But once you're into Kashmir then it is very true that "if there be a heaven here on earth, it is here, it is here".

MM Fabulous place, but Muslim.

DH Muslim, yes. But the welcome was enormous there because the reliance on tourism was so great. They really wanted visitors. I remember going along the row of houseboats and looking to decide which one you would like, and then once you had chosen that boat, you decided the location on the lake that you would wish to have for your week's holiday, and they quanted these houseboats out to these locations.

MM - What is that word?

DH Quanted – you know – these huge poles or punts like those used at Cambridge and Oxford universities. So they would quant you out there and the family who owned the houseboat was on another little adjacent boat always. They did the cooking on that and they brought it across to you in these most beautiful conditions. They always had the most magnificent Kashmiri carpets in the houseboat.

MM Do you remember what your houseboat was called?

DH Henley.

MM I can remember staying in Buckingham Palace.

DH Oh right. In fact I've got a picture of it there.

MM It is a wonderful place. Did you get any sense that the Kashmiris resented the fact that they had been taken over by India as opposed to Pakistan?

DH I think that was inevitable. There was huge resentment at the time, and a feeling that really Kashmir should have been part of Pakistan, and that the maharajah at the time should not have simply agreed to union with India. Yes, I think it is a great pity. Perhaps the Brits might have played a greater role at the time of partition in ensuring that Kashmir would have gone to Pakistan. Now, of course, I think it is more the case that the Kashmiris want their own independence.

MM Tragic. That such a beautiful place should suffer so much difficulty. Of course the maharajah was a Hindu. Did you have any contact with him or with any of the, I was going to say deposed, rajahs and maharajahs. But they weren't deposed: they were simply pensioned off.

DH Yes, there was a family that I had quite some contact with in one of the small Sikh states in the Punjab, and the history was quite fascinating. The maharajah in the pre-independence era was a supporter of independence, to the extent that the British decided that he should be deposed, and he was replaced by, I think it was his brother, who was rather more in favour of the British Raj. But independence came. The deposed maharajah assumed that Nehru and his cohorts would replace him on the Gadi – but he didn't do so and when I was there, there was this controversy going on as to who should be on the throne, but more importantly, who should secure the pensions that these princely rulers were receiving – should it be the chap who was deposed or the person who had taken over? Controversy raged during the period I was there.

MM What was the name of the princely state?

DH Nabha.

MM Yes the story of the maharajahs is completely different from the story of the development of India as an independent state.

DH Yes. So many of the families of the princes now do work in government. I have met them in the Indian diplomatic service. I met one or two when I was in Canada. I think they came out of it rather well in many respects, because they maintained their subjects' loyalty in a most incredible way, and also so many of their palaces have been transformed, and when I was there were in the process of being transformed, into hotels. I've stayed at a number of these. This was done well before India really started building hotels. Before formal organisations came in to build hotels many of these Princely palaces were converted and they were fascinating places to stay at.

MM I remember going to stay not long ago at a place with a lake, Udaipur, the Shiv Niwas palace hotel.

DH I've stayed at a fascinating place in Ajmer with a lake I remember, and there, there were no chairs, but you had marvellous carpets; cushions you laid back on. The view was of this glorious lake and it was a great place to stay.

MM Fascinating places in India. Did you also go into Pakistan?

DH Yes, there was virtually no access to Pakistan at the time, but by virtue of the fact that I was at the British High Commission, I was able to cross the border, and I had heard a rumour on the Indian side that the Pakistanis had changed over to driving on the right, but I asked the Indians and they said: "We don't know". There was very little contact between both sides. The story goes that the Pakistanis did try to switch to driving on the right, but the bullocks put paid to that. They wouldn't go on the right hand side of the road, and of course their sleeping drivers didn't know where they were going, so if there's any truth in that – probably not, but that was the story I heard.

MM What about conditions in Pakistan?

DH Undoubtedly worse than on the Indian side. The poverty. One of the criteria for, as I saw, for determining relative wealth, was the proportion of mud homes, to brick built homes, and generally speaking the proportion of mud homes on the Pakistan side was infinitely higher than on the Indian side. Very few brick built homes were to be seen. It's still to this day, I think, quite a good criterion to use when one travels round the sub-continent. Yes the poverty was very much greater. One exception to that was the Pakistan army cantonment near Lahore. That was the most immaculate of their establishments. Every stone practically was painted as were the roundabouts that people had to observe in theory. The properties were in excellent condition. The gardens were beautiful. Although the Indian cantonments were similar, they were nothing to compare with the Lahore cantonment.

MM It must have been left over from the Raj?

DH Yes.

MM You also did a visit to Nepal I believe.

DH Yes.

MM Did you go there privately?

DH No. I did the Queen's Messenger trip from Delhi to Kathmandu, flying from Patna. I vividly remember of course at that time the supplies; the food supplies and so on for the Embassy in Kathmandu, went in by courier, and I vividly remember the two huge sacks that I had to transport, and dared not leave anywhere – made for complications going into lavatories and things, I can tell you. But on the flight a stain appeared on one of these bags. I thought: "My God. What is happening. What on earth could be generating this?" This was in a period when one was not thinking of terrorists, or anything like that. But nonetheless I was very worried about this stain, so as soon as I got into Kathmandu and met the person from the Embassy, I said: "What is happening?". He opened the bag and said: "Not to worry. I'm sure that's the butter ration".

MM So they were really having difficulty getting ordinary supplies? What about butter in Delhi itself?

DH I must say I've got no recollection. I think we did manage to get supplies through the High Commission.

MM Do you remember anything about the flight into Kathmandu?

DH Hairy. When I went the airport hadn't been opened very long. The air strip was similar to that, if you like, of the deck of an aircraft carrier, with drops all round this single strip, and it was rather worrying because on either side you could see the debris of planes that had already missed their landing. We did land safely in this India Airlines Dakota.

MM I seem to remember that the Dakota had quite a job getting over the mountains into Nepal and the service was not very good. The pilots needed a clear day because they flew in at the maximum altitude of the Dakota and that was lower than the Himalayan peaks.

DH The flight was from Patna into Kathmandu. There was another rather interesting thing about the visit to Nepal. When I was there there were only a few cars in the place and I managed to hire a bicycle. I remember choosing one bicycle and the chap said: "Oh no. You can't have that". I said: "Why not?" He said: "There's no light on it". I said: "Look, I'm not worried about a light". "Oh" he said "You can't ride round Kathmandu without a light". And he was pretty horrified at the thought that I would contemplate breaking the law in this way. I thought, "My goodness me. They've so few cars here". Anyway I did eventually get a bike and rode through an area where I saw all these flags flying as if there was going to be a fete of some kind, and I stopped and asked a chap in my imperfect Hindi what was happening, but I didn't fully understand what his response was, but nevertheless I did understand him to say: "Come and have a cup of tea with me". I said: "Thank you very much". I went into his very humble mud abode and he very kindly gave me a cup of tea and we parted the best of friends. When I went back to the Embassy and told them what I had done, they said: "My God. Those flags – there's a cholera epidemic in that area, and those flags are there to trip up the cholera spirits as they come in to attack the inhabitants". Fortunately I didn't get cholera.

MM Narrow escape. Is there anything else that you would like to record for this interview about India?

DH I'll tell one delightful story. I was interested to see the Bhakra Nangal dam, which was the big development exercise in India at the time. It was about 200 miles north of Delhi. So I got in touch with the Indian authorities, and the Punjabi authorities, and said: "May I travel there?" And they said: "Yes. You're very welcome". So off I went and as I approached the township I was stopped by a policeman and he said: "Are you from the British High Commission?" I said: "Yes. That's right". He said: "Please follow me". So horn blaring, he cleared the road and I followed him. I thought this was a bit curious; why is he doing this? So I dropped behind and lost him for a while. He turned round and said: "You are from the British High Commission, aren't you? Will you please follow me." I had no option. We went through the township with his horn blaring. Everybody had to jump out of the way as we went through at quite some speed. As you know, there were an awful lot of people on the roads. We went out through the town to the other side and there was another policeman holding up the traffic ahead and my policeman stopped and indicated that I should do a right turn through this gate. I could see this very lavish, beautiful palace. I thought: "What's happening here?" I had driven a hundred yards into these beautiful surroundings to see that there was a Guard of Honour in front of me. They'd obviously expected the High Commissioner, not a mere member of the British staff. But nonetheless I was obliged to get out. I was introduced to the Minister and so it's the one and only time I've inspected a Guard of Honour. I felt actually that when the High Commission knew about it I would be on the next plane home, but nobody ever found out about it.

MM Now you've written this very successful book *In the wake of the Raj – Travels in 1950s India*. Can you tell me a little bit about this book and how it came to be published?

DH As I mentioned it saw the light of day in some form or other back in the 1960s, but permission was not granted.

MM Permission wasn't granted for it to be published?

DH Yes. So it rested on my shelves until I had retired and it was my son who said: "You really should be doing something about that". So after I finally retired a couple of years ago, I

was persuaded to do something about it. So I started to work on it. It took me many months to refine it into some form, and then the tedious business of approaching publishers etc. Of course, since its publication I have done quite a number of book signings at various stores, and, yes, it seems to have been of interest. A second edition is about to be issued in fact in May this year, when it goes out to the shops.

MM I have read it and it seems to me on the basis of my own experiences of India at about the same time, I am impressed by the degree of detail that you've succeeded in capturing in this book and telling readers in the UK about the life of ordinary people in India. I think that is extremely interesting. I think the book itself is a great success.

DH Thank you. I suppose you can say, I've always wanted to travel and, of course, as I said part of my degree studies was Commonwealth Relations.

MM When you left your spell in Delhi where did you go next overseas?

Posting to Nigeria, 1960

DH To Nigeria.

MM Contrast?

DH Quite a contrast, but nonetheless again, it was, if you like in the wake of the Raj, the Brits had just given Nigeria its independence, so the Brits could do no wrong, so it was a very pleasant time to be there. I was based in Lagos and again I was on the information side. Again I did quite a bit of travelling with film vans and that sort of thing, which enabled me to get out and see the country.

MM Were you confined to definite parts of Nigeria, or were you allowed to go at will through all regions?

DH No, in fact I spent some days helping out in the northern region, the capital Kaduna. I know that on one occasion I was asked if I would deliver a film van to Enugu, which was the eastern region capital, which at that time was about a two-day journey, and which I was only

too happy to do. So yes I was able to get around. I was able to travel to nearby Dahomey, which was interesting. I visited incredibly a Portuguese colony in Dahomey, which consisted of a tiny fort which was about 100 yards by 100 yards, manned by two unfortunate Portuguese military people, who must have done something very, very seriously wrong to have been posted to such a desperately lonely place.

One intriguing incident whilst I was there – as I say I was on the information side and my secretary, a Nigerian lass – came in one morning and asked if she could have the day off because her aunt had just died, and I said; “Yes, certainly. Off you go. Very sorry to hear it”, etc. But she came back in a couple of hours later, dressed up to the nines with a big smile on her face. I said: “What’s happened?” She said: “We’re having a wake this afternoon. Would you like to come along?” So always interested in these things I said: “Yes, okay, I’ll be along”. So I arrived at this slum only to be introduced to the dead lady whose arms were strapped to an armchair, and you had to shake the hand of this dead lady, which I had no option but to do, and then I was taken out – they had bribed the police to close the road so that they could have a band and dance in the road, and I was seated on a chair, the front legs of which were one side of the sewage ditch, and the back legs were the other side of the sewage ditch, so you had to be very, very careful, which made for difficulty because they plied me with beer, after beer, after beer. It turned out to be a rather interesting and enjoyable experience.

MM So much for Nigeria. Where else did you serve in Africa?

Posting to the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, 1962-65

DH I went to Rhodesia; to the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland as it was in 1962, and so I had three years there which, I must say, if you like, was the highlight of my diplomatic service. It was a fascinating time to be there. I was there during the dissolution of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, but nonetheless had the opportunity to travel to what is now Malawi and Zambia, but after the dissolution of course we were accredited only to Southern Rhodesia, when the Ian Smith regime was in power. I’ve entertained Ian Smith and his wife to tea. I was in charge of the British Pavilion at the Bulawayo Trade Fair, and some of the experiences there were quite intriguing. Because I had a lot of contacts with the black community, trade unionists and so on, being on the information side again, the High

Commissioner asked me if I would organise the first mixed-race cocktail party, and so I had this function at my bungalow to which both blacks and whites were invited. It was the first time the High Commission had ever countenanced a mixed party of this kind, and it went off very well, except that because of the diplomatic liquor, some people really made hay. One white Rhodesian at the end of the party fell down the steps of my bungalow and really made a mess of himself. He then disappeared. I had a phone call the next morning from another Rhodesian apologising for this fellow's behaviour. The intriguing thing was that this chap was black, so a black Rhodesian was apologising for the conduct of a white Rhodesian at my event.

MM It's interesting really that there is such a vast contrast between then and now. How did you find Mr Ian Smith?

DH A delightful chap to talk to. Obviously he was there for the trade side of things so that there was no question of talking politics. His wife was also a most delightful person, and very, very friendly and so on. To think of Ian Smith as a ruler of a country, I mean, is a bit difficult, because he didn't strike me as being of that calibre. He had the political power.

Posting to The Gambia

MM I believe you also served in The Gambia?

DH Yes, in The Gambia; a very small diplomatic mission. There were just three of us, and I was more or less a jack of all trades. I was dealing with technical assistance; again it was immediately after independence, and The Gambia really and truly had nothing to develop, if you like. I remember talking to the Minister of Finance, a friend of mine. I said: "Look, why don't you think in terms of tourism. You've got the sun, you've got the sea and you've got the sand. You haven't got anything else, but you can do something about it". So I remember trying to interest British firms in the idea, and there was no response, so I suggested to the Gambians that they try the Swedes and the Norwegians, and the Swedes took it up in a big way. Once the Swedes came in, the Brits once again felt finally that there was something in this. So it was a fascinating time. When we arrived there I remember there were 24 tourist beds in the country. Now of course it's up to about 5-6,000 beds. But it was the start, and it was tremendous in that you had to think in terms of training waiters for restaurants and hotels.

You had to think in terms of taxi drivers, and if you got taxi drivers you need garages, and you want local bits and pieces; basket making and things of that kind which tourists want. It was fascinating to try and organise all this training as part of technical assistance and on the capital side you had to extend the runway to receive larger planes and so on. So it was a tremendous time. I remember when everything was very, very relaxed. I used to play golf with the Prime Minister, and he didn't even have any security. It was as relaxed as that when I was there, but it was an intriguing time to see, if you like, how a tiny state could or might develop with the help of some considerable funds from Britain at the time.

MM Essential support really. Okay, so that's The Gambia, and finally you went to Canada. Where did you go in Canada?

Posting to Canada

DH I was based in Ottawa and initially I was on the military procurement side, trying to persuade the Canadians to buy British military equipment. I don't think it was too successful an exercise. With all due respect, I think that British diplomats are not geared to be salesmen particularly, and I felt that we should perhaps be somewhat more aggressive there. Anyway it was felt that I should move again to the information side and so I spent about half my time again on the information side. Obviously Ottawa was quite a contrast in living conditions, from Bathurst – one of the world's hottest capitals to one of the world's coldest, and certainly the snowiest, with about 20 feet of snow every year, but it was a delightful, very civilised way of life.

MM Indeed. One of the choice postings in the CRO?

DH Yes, very nice. It was the way of life rather than the work that was quite intriguing there. During the summer time, we would rent a place on a lake and during the summer the family would stay there and I would go out for the weekend. We had our own little boat and a swimming raft, that sort of thing. It was very pleasant. And of course in the winter time you had your ski-ing and I used to skate sometimes to work. There was a long stretch of canal about four miles long and we happened to live fairly close to it, so you would choose a day when there were clear skies and no wind – that was the important thing – and my wife would

drop me at the canal. I would put my skates on and skate the four miles down the canal, get off, put my shoes on and walk into the nearby High Commission offices.

MM What a remarkable difference. A green solution.

After that you decided on early retirement?

Early retirement and Canada Life

DH I was adamant that what I didn't want to do was a 9 – 5 job, and somebody suggested to me – why don't you go into financial services? Well, I laughed at the thought but agreed to think about it. I talked to a number of financial companies and three or four actually offered me an opportunity to come on board. I chose Canada Life. I'll tell a story. You can delete it if you like. Canada Life were looking for people but they had an age limit of 54 at the time, and I was 57 by this time, so I decided to adjust my CV to make me under 54. I had to eliminate one child from the CV completely otherwise I would have had it at about age 14. Anyway, they took me on and all went swimmingly, then after about six months they said "Would you like to join our pension scheme?" I said, "Yes. I would". They said: "Let's have your birth certificate" - so I sort of postponed the whole thing and some months later they came back and said: "Look. Do you want to join the pension scheme or not?" So I thought "Oh well, I've got to admit this", so I went to the manager and said "I've got a confession to make here. I'm not really the age you think I am". I waited for his reaction. He roared with laughter. He thought it was a huge joke, and he said: "Don't worry. I'll fix it with head office". And he did. It may have had something to do with the fact that I was doing rather well and he wouldn't have wanted to lose me anyway. So yes, I was with Canada Life for 13-14 years. They're a very ethical company. They are very good. They don't look at the small print to try and avoid obligations. This isn't relevant I suppose, but I'll tell you. There was a chap in the FCO who blew the gaff on the big Iraqi guns. Do you remember that? And the poor chap eventually had to leave the FCO, but he became a client of mine. When his marriage broke up, he was left with very little funds, but he said: "I want to make sure that I've got some life insurance". So I said: "That's fine". But he would fall behind with the premiums. I felt sorry for this chap and so every so often I used to look at his affairs to make sure he was up to date and phone him up and say: "Look. You're behind with your payments", and he'd get things organised. Now I went on a long trip, a world trip, at

one stage and I was away for about six weeks. When I came back and I thought I'll just check if this fellow's all right, and he wasn't. He was two months behind with his payments. Well if you're two months adrift the policy is cancelled, so I thought "Right. I'll get on to him". I got on the phone and a female answered and I said: "Can I speak to so and so?" "I'm afraid he's dead". He had – it's a bit of a mystery this one – he had allegedly fallen off his flat balcony and killed himself. I thought: "He's adrift. He's two months adrift. It's not valid now". I got on to head office and I said: "Look, these are the circumstances, but I'm quite happy to pay the premium so that the money will be paid out". The head office reaction was "That's all right. That's okay. We understand the circumstances. We'll pay". So, I just tell this as an incident.

MM What a splendid company.

DH So people said: "Why don't you publicise that?" So that's what I said to head office, and they said: "If we publicise that we'll only be accused of paying out in order to get the publicity". I've had similar sorts of incidents. They are a very ethical company. Anyway, there we are.

MM Thank you very much indeed for that.

Transcribed by Evie Jamieson

Word count 6,830