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(David) Malcolm McBain LVO

interviewed by John Hutson at Edmeads cottage, Teffont, Salisbury, 27 April

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Early life and entry to the Diplomatic Service

JH: I'd like to start this interview by asking you what happened at the end of the war when you were approaching the end of your schooling. Did the career choose you or did you choose it? Did your National Service have an influence? How did things happen, because you didn't exactly join the service in the conventional way?

MM: I came from a not very well-off family of four children. We lived in a small house. I went to the local county school. We lived in Worcester Park, Surrey, not far from London and well within the daily commuter belt. We were there throughout the war. We were keenly aware of the war and I hadn't got any serious plans for the future while I was at school because I was only able to envisage having to join the army, or, much worse, being conscripted to go down the mines as a Bevin boy. My father was a civil servant in the Inland Revenue and he thought, given the terrifying consequences for the North East of England (where I was born) of the slump in the 1930s, that the best thing that I could possibly do was to join the civil service, become established and become eligible for a pension. I rather reluctantly took the civil service executive examination, found that I had passed and was sent to the Ministry of Civil Aviation. I entered the Ministry of Civil Aviation in October 1946 and a few weeks later, in January 1947, I was called up to do my National Service. I went into the army because that was the only service open to National Servicemen where it was possible to get an emergency commission without having to sign up for extra years. Getting an emergency commission was something I did want to do. I got an emergency commission as a second lieutenant and after a few months, on embarkation leave for the British Army of the Rhine, I was sitting in a first class carriage on a train coming from the north down to London and into my compartment walked what looked like an elderly gentleman. He must have been a little over forty. I recognised him because I had been in the Ministry of Civil Aviation; it was Lord Pakenham, the Minister of Civil Aviation. He sat down next to me and we got chatting and I told him that I was going to Germany. He said that there was one thing

that I needed to know and that was that the Government had become disenchanted with our former Soviet allies, and were concerned that there might be trouble between them and us. If that trouble broke out, the Government wanted Germany on our side. I was thunderstruck by this information. I knew nothing about anything, of course, at that age and I had believed all the wartime propaganda about our wonderful Russian allies and kindly uncle Joe Stalin. And here in February 1948 this saintly socialist cabinet minister, Lord Pakenham, (now Lord Longford, the man who campaigns on behalf of Myra Hindley) was telling me that we wanted our former enemies to be on our side against our former allies. I went home and told my father and he could hardly believe it either.

My parents were Fabian socialists and had been much in favour of disarmament and the peace movement in the 1930s. They were thoroughly tarred with the socialist brush, and so was I for that matter at that time. I went off to Germany and I found when I got to my unit there that I didn't really need to pass on the potentially dangerous message from Lord Pakenham, somewhat to my relief, because a) I was only a new second lieutenant and b) the British and the Germans were getting on perfectly well already. I was in the Ordnance Corps. The Ordnance was largely an industrial organisation with a thin military crust on top. We employed several hundred German civilians in our unit and I had quite a lot to do with some of them. It gave me a wonderful opportunity to improve my German and talk to them. Germany made a big impression on me. It seemed richer than the England I knew in terms of solid stone houses with central heating built in, for example. The roads seemed wider even if nearly all cobbled. The countryside near our officers mess was covered in fragrant pine forest. I found, somewhat contrary to my expectations, that the degree of devastation which we had inflicted on the Ruhr and Hamburg was vastly greater than anything I had ever seen before, and certainly made the bomb damage in the City and in our neighbourhood of South London look negligible. Also the distortions brought about by the division of Germany into different zones of occupation were a surprise to me. In 1948 one could still observe wretched looking refugees walking along the autobahn in search of sanctuary somewhere or other, ragged, dishevelled people in the depths of despair. I found that an education at any rate. I went up to Berlin privately, my very first flight, smuggled with the connivance of the crew aboard a Lancaster bomber, which had been converted to carrying petrol. The bomb

bays were full of the precious liquid, and I sat above this load going up to Berlin. In Berlin I saw at first hand the Russian forces and became aware of the desperate shortages of food and fuel. Berlin was not divided formally at that time, or at least not divided by a wall in the way it later became divided. I saw Russian soldiers stalking about our zone of Berlin in their alien rather forbidding uniforms, taking in the sights. That too made a big impression on me. Berlin was an uncomfortable place to be. Its survival was dependent on the airlift. The need for an airlift to supply the city was confirmation of the confrontation with the Russians that Lord Pakenham had foreseen before I came to Germany. What apparently brought it on was the decision of the British and Americans to introduce the Deutsch mark to replace the old Reichsmark and break with the inflationary pressures that accompanied the old currency.

Posting to FOAAT in Tripolitania, 1949-51

At the end of my time in the army (which in retrospect I thoroughly enjoyed) I went back to London, and the Ministry of Civil Aviation cast around for a suitable job for me. Instead of rolling out the red carpet, they gave me the impression that they had rather forgotten that I was on their books at all. After a delay of some days, an establishment officer wrote to me at my parent's home to ask if I would like to go to Libya as an assistant airport manager. The Ministry of Civil Aviation was responsible under the Foreign Office Administration of African Territories (FOAAT) for running the civil aviation facilities of Libya. Libya at that time was quite important to British aviation because piston-engined aircraft of the type that British Overseas Airways Corporation (BOAC) were operating (Avro Yorks, converted from military use) required to refuel frequently at points on their journeys to the Far East and Africa. Castel Benito airport near Tripoli, Libya, was an important staging point for taking on fuel, and, for BOAC's venerable Yorks, quite frequent engine changes. The British were still running Libya at that stage because the British Eighth army in its advance through North Africa in 1943 had left behind British military administrations and this had of course continued after the war until the newly created United Nations could decide what to do about Libya. Even after Italy had joined with the allies in 1943 it was clear that the Italian North African territories were not going to be handed back to Italy. The British had put Libya up for potential independence under United Nations

auspices so the FOAAT was merely a caretaker administration. This arrangement over the airport was part of the caretaking arrangement. When Libya became independent, the Ministry of Civil Aviation job finished; our responsibilities were taken over by a British company under contract to the Libyan government and I returned to the UK. This would be early in 1952.

Posting to New Delhi in 1953

About a year later, still with the Ministry of Civil Aviation, the possibility of going to India came up and I applied to go to New Delhi as an assistant to the civil air adviser. The civil air adviser's job was to negotiate air service agreements between Britain and India and other countries in the subcontinent, that is to say Ceylon, Pakistan, Burma and, I think, one or two others, minor countries such as Nepal. Once those agreements had been put in place the civil air adviser's job folded up and the staff in the commercial department of the High Commission in New Delhi (the British Trade Commission, staffed by the Board of Trade) took over residual responsibilities.

Incidentally, there is a remarkable story to be told about how the North Americans (the US and Canada) and the British laid the foundations for civil aviation throughout the world through the conclusion during the war of conventions which they drew up. Every state subsequently subscribed to the Chicago Convention and accepted the rules laid down by the International Civil Aviation Organisation established in Montreal.

While in India, in addition to negotiating the air service agreements, we also looked after the commercial aspects of civil aviation relations with India and other states in the sub-continent. Sales of aircraft and things of that sort. This gave me a great opportunity to get to know staff from the Commonwealth Relations Office (CRO), which provided the main administrative staffing for the British High Commission in India, and staff from the Board of Trade. I enjoyed the overseas life. I had by that time, whilst still a young man lived in Germany, Libya and India so it was a pretty good start, and it was really from that base that I moved into the Commonwealth Relations Office.

Transfer to the Commonwealth Relations Office, 1957

JH: Was that a recognised exchange scheme, a transfer scheme, or was it an individual initiative or ...

MM: It was an individual initiative. When I got back from India I decided that I needed to improve myself educationally, so I went as an evening student to the London School of Economics. I was studying international relations and then I thought the sensible thing to do was to try to get into the Commonwealth Relations Office where I had a number of friends. So I contacted them and asked whether it could be done and they said why don't you just apply. I duly applied. The Ministry of Transport and Civil Aviation (as it had then become) were astounded by this impertinence, but nevertheless passed the letter on to the CRO thinking that it would be treated with the contempt it deserved. But the CRO accepted me. I moved across to Downing Street. I was still doing the LSE evening degree course. It began to dawn on me that what I was seeing as a junior member of the CRO was more interesting than the things that I was studying as a student of international relations at the LSE in the evenings. The telegrams and despatches and so on that were circulated to the staff in the CRO were history in the making whereas history as recorded by the books we read at that time were second hand, in the sense of being historians' versions of what had happened. Donald Cameron Watt, who was the senior professor of international relations at LSE at that time was urging us to go and look at documents which were no different, apart from the time lag of a generation or so, from what was coming across my desk every day in the CRO. So when personnel department of the CRO rang up and asked if I would I like to go to New Delhi as private secretary to Malcolm MacDonald, who was then British High Commissioner, I said yes without hesitation and accepted a promotion as well. I gave up my evening student career and went off to India for the second time.

Posting to British High Commission, New Delhi, 1958-61

JH: Malcolm MacDonald is a name to conjure with, I think that was an opportunity ...

MM: Yes, it was.

JH: Especially if, as you say, you could accept promotion on those terms.

MM: Yes it was. It was a good move, on the whole. The downside was that I made some influential enemies in the Office, mainly as a result of appearing to get on well with Mr MacDonald. Oddly enough, I mentioned earlier that my parents had been Fabian socialists. They were of course strong supporters of the first Labour Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald, and they christened me Malcolm in the hope that I might emulate his brilliant son. I did at least become his private secretary. Malcolm MacDonald kept on cropping up at later stages in my career in Kenya and Brunei, for example. However, when I arrived in Delhi, he was a somewhat difficult High Commissioner and there had been problems for other potential private secretaries. When the CRO made this offer to me it was something of a poisoned chalice but I did get on reasonably well with Mr MacDonald ...

JH: He was hard to work for?

MM: Some people found him hard to work for. Some people in the High Commission, who had no real personal contact with him, and simply knew his public face, thought that he was a wonderful, charismatic man. Others, perhaps more senior, took a more jaundiced view, i.e. that he was good at giving away territories but not good at maintaining Britain's long term interests. However I think he did an impressive job in Delhi and he did succeed in forging good friendly relations with senior Indians even if it wasn't particularly intimate. MacDonald had previously served in South East Asia, among other places, and his preference was for Chinese people, and particularly Chinese ladies. MacDonald had a great eye for beauty, in its many forms: art, pictures, sculptures, furniture, china. His favourite Chinese lady friend was like a piece of delicate Ming porcelain, and sparkling witty with it. The Indians were Aryans, and less inclined to be physically beautiful.

The Indians under Nehru, the first prime minister after independence, were keen on going down the socialist route. They were accepting a considerable body of advice from the Russians and often rebuked Britain for not having provided India with heavy industries like steel, locomotives, ship-building; all the things that we ourselves had

been good at in earlier years but which were now giving us great difficulty. They had to learn that lesson in their own way, and they were very loath to accept input from us capitalist, colonial exploiters. But we did nevertheless have an extraordinarily close relationship and I think that MacDonald set good precedents that were followed in subsequent years. During my time there, the Indians had visits from the Chinese leader, Chou en Lai and also the Russians, Bulganin and Khrushchev, came and were given huge orchestrated welcomes from the Indian population. Peasants were bussed in to provide crowds to line the road from the airport. The peasants were also given flags to wave and were schooled in chanting slogans: 'Hindi Chini bhai bhai' (Indians and Chinese are brothers). When the Queen came in 1960 the Indians made no attempt to bus in people but there was a spontaneous reaction so it was a contrast with the artificiality of the government-induced response.

JH: I was going to ask you what being private secretary to the High Commissioner meant. Did it mean being a social secretary, or did it really mean handling or becoming aware of everything that he did? It sounds like the latter. It sounds like a very serious job.

MM: Well, it was fairly serious. I wouldn't put it higher than that because of the strange way in which MacDonald worked. One of my problems with him was that he wanted me around all the time but we communicated by means of little chits of paper. He would hand-write me notes. I treasure the memory of some of them. I soon discovered that those notes were to be treated as gospel. The wording was extremely precise. They couldn't be varied in any way. He wrote precisely what he wanted and all he wanted from me was a note back saying, yes, I have done this, here's a draft for that, or whatever it might be. We didn't discuss things. A lot of people found that difficult to understand. He wanted me to take him the morning telegrams to 2 King George's Avenue ...

JH: His residence?

MM: His residence, first thing and then he would look through them over breakfast and he might pick out a telegram or two and tell his driver to take him to the Ministry of External Affairs on the way to the High Commission, go in there, deal with it,

come into the office, dictate a reply to the CRO, copied to other posts, and then the completed papers would be handed on to the Political Counsellor, who was a Foreign Office man. This officer took himself very seriously and thought me seriously at fault for not preventing the High Commissioner from acting in this way.

JH: So he was able to go into the Indian Ministry of Foreign Affairs without an appointment?

MM: Oh yes.

JH: And see the top people?

MM: And see the top man, the Secretary General, Sir Raghavan Pillai (who still appended the letters ICS to his name). I think at that stage all, or nearly all, ex members of the Indian Civil Service let it be known that they were pukka, and were to be distinguished from members of the Indian Administrative Service, which was the Independent Indian successor to the ICS. The Indian civil servants who had been members of the ICS were proud of having been selected to join that elite corps. That's part of what I mean by a close relationship. As another little anecdote, when MacDonald went on mid-tour leave in 1959 I was at a bit of a loose end because my mid-tour leave didn't come round at the same time. The High Commission chancery deputed me to look after visitors. We had a constant stream of ministers coming out, one after the other non-stop, and they were nearly all put up as guests of the Government of India in the President's palace, Rashtrapathi Bhavan. The Indian Protocol Department were short of staff, and possibly a little nervous about senior British visitors dating back to the time of the Raj, and they asked the High Commission if we could help with looking after official British guests of the Government of India. The Protocol Department actually gave me a personal pass that enabled me to go into the Rashtrapathi Bhavan at any time. I think that in many ways was typical of the sort of thing we could do. They would send round to my flat a Cadillac with a partition between the driver and the compartment at the back and I would go and pick up Lord whatever it was, or Mr so and so and then take him on visits to the vice-President or the Prime Minister. I got to know my way into all those places. And the Indian ministers got to know me too.

[Added in 2011: I would like to add an explanation of how it came about that I started escorting the British guests of the Government of India on visits to senior Indian ministers. It is quite an important reflection of how things were at the time, and perhaps in some measure a reflection of the aura surrounding MacDonald himself. Malcolm MacDonald had gone off somewhere, and the Indian Government had invited James Callaghan to be an official guest while passing through India on the way from Australia to the UK. They had given him a tour round Delhi and the only thing they could think of doing with him for the weekend was to send him off to visit the Bakhra Nangal dam up in Himachal Pradesh. The Protocol Department had then realised, presumably after having entertained Mr Callaghan for a few days, and hauled in the fact that he was no pushover, that the arrangements they had made for his weekend at Bakhra Nangal, included sharing a sleeping compartment on the Frontier Mail for two nights, with an escorting officer. I can picture this realisation suddenly dawning on the Chief of Protocol (ex ICS). Jim was no doubt a bit of a handful. The arrangements planned were going to be a bit much for both parties but especially the Indian escorting officer. Indian Protocol asked if the High Commission could help them out by supplying a substitute? I was offered up and I seized the chance of getting to know James Callaghan with alacrity. He was at that time the Opposition spokesman for Colonial Affairs at Westminster. The Indians had identified him as a coming man. The first thing I did was to invite him round to my flat for supper before we set off on the first leg of the overnight rail journey. It was late on a Friday afternoon, too late to invite anyone else, so my wife and I had Callaghan to ourselves. He was intrigued by the fact that I was MacDonald's private secretary. We got on very well indeed when I told him that both my and my wife's fathers had been inspectors of taxes and knew of his earlier incarnation as a leader of the Inland Revenue Staff Federation. We remained in private correspondence for many years later. I wondered if I should remind him of my presence when he became Prime Minister and I was on a London posting. A wise friend in the Office advised against saying that while it might carry some immediate advantages, the system would get its revenge later. I am sure that was sound advice.]

JH: What would you say were the biggest problems in our relations at that time, ten years after independence, roughly?

MM: Nehru was still talking publicly about having kicked out the British (or thrown off the yoke of colonialism), so there were problems arising from the fact that we had many businesses which had been, in effect, expropriated (or "Indianised") and there was also quite a large British business community still in existence, especially in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. It was part of our job to try to bring them to terms with modern India or to intercede with the Government of India where it seemed likely that we had a case. An example of getting the British commercial community to recognise the change that had taken place was to get them to let Indians join exclusive British clubs in Calcutta, such as the Tollygunge club. I am sure there were other clubs like the Tollygunge where it really was necessary, and not easy, to get the British business community to come face to face with a changing world. We still had large British owned tea estates in Assam, facing real problems of reverse discrimination. So there were compensation cases and there were problems with immigration. The Indians had already started at that stage to take advantage of the concept of Commonwealth citizenship, which had been embodied in the British Nationality Act of 1948. There were the beginnings of a problem there. Mr MacDonald was greatly taken up with the Geneva accords, which regulated disputes over control in Laos and Cambodia. India-Pakistan disputes were always on the agenda, of course.

JH: Immigration is a problem, if I may interrupt, which obviously has loomed larger and larger up to the present day, and that was, would you say, something we did not foresee and take care of by a Citizenship Act in the early days of giving the Colonies independence?

MM: Yes, we did but ...

JH: We neglected it?

MM: No, not entirely. I think that to begin with the idea was that Commonwealth citizenship would mean that people could move freely from one Commonwealth country to another, or at least with relatively few restrictions. It was perhaps a way for the British to disguise the loss of Empire. To start with it was not envisaged that

there would be such a migratory flood of people and I think that took many people in Britain by surprise. They were also slow to realise what was happening.

JH: Except Jamaicans to drive the buses where they were very much wanted.

MM: Yes, but we didn't think that the Indian peasantry would be able to afford passages, originally by ship but later of course by aircraft, and so that was certainly a growing problem. There was some ill-feeling in India over the first Commonwealth Immigration Act when that came in and which sought ...

JH: Which was in ...

MM: 1961 I think.

JH: While you were still there ...

MM: Yes. The Indians thought that Act was rather infra dig although at the same time of course they were still revelling in kicking out the British. I vividly remember being attacked by an Indian woman diplomat about the Commonwealth Immigration Bill, then before Parliament, because, she said, rather condescendingly, you won't be able to staff your famous National Health Service hospitals if you pass the bill into law. One of the little ironies of life. I don't think I have too much more to say about India except that it was an interesting country and we did get to a number of places during the course of my first posting. In retrospect, I regret not having done more.

JH: Yes, I can certainly believe that, and where did you go, about a year after you ceased to be private secretary? What was your job then?

MM: There was an official visit from the Queen in prospect for 1961. Mr MacDonald had to leave the post because it was not thought appropriate for a High Commissioner with divorce proceedings in the air to be received by the Queen. MacDonald was succeeded by Sir Paul Gore Booth who later became head of the Diplomatic Service. I was sent down to the salt mines of administration to get to grips with the humdrum realities. I had never done a regular staff job in the Commonwealth Service since I

joined in 1957.

JH: A large post of course requiring a lot of administration.

MM: There was a Counsellor in charge of that.

JH: Nowadays, well I don't know about Delhi, there's probably still a Counsellor in charge of it, certainly in a place like Berlin now, Germany or France or Washington there will be a Counsellor in charge of administration. And then you came back.

London and the Commonwealth Relations Office 1961-63

MM: So then I came back to the CRO and was posted to the Information Department whose head of department had previously been the administration Counsellor in Delhi. My job there was helping to run the visitor programme from around the Commonwealth. We had a large programme, the practical administration of which was in the capable hands of the Central Office of Information. We would get groups of people coming to London and they would have to be taken up to see the Minister of State at the CRO who was then the Duke of Devonshire. They would also have to be entertained to a lunch in the House of Commons and then they would go off on provincial tours. I remember one week going for lunch in the House of Commons four days out of five, but that was unusual. It gave me a good deal of knowledge of the atmosphere of the House of Commons and the (very impressive) calibre of different Members of Parliament. The COI always chose a different panel of members to meet our visitors. Some of the visitors, some Nigerians spring to mind, were difficult and I sometimes wondered what was the point of spending large sums of money to show off Britain to some visitors chosen by the CRO.

JH: How long were you in that job? How long did you stay in the office at all?

MM: Only about eighteen months, or so. Maybe it was two years.

JH: In the works of reference you can't tell, it might be only one year, which is why I ask, but still, even two years is quite short.

MM: I didn't think there was any future in that job. It was interesting for me but it wasn't really getting me anywhere much so when an opportunity came up to go overseas again I seized it and we went thankfully to Kenya.

Posting to Nairobi, Kenya 1963-67

JH: In the case of Kenya you arrived in the same year as they achieved independence, rather than ten years later as in Delhi.

MM: That's right. We arrived actually eight days after independence and therefore saw the way it was beginning to work. When I first arrived in Kenya in December 1963, the Governor General, resident in State House was Malcolm MacDonald. He then became Governor of Kenya and shortly after that British High Commissioner for a few months. He then became a roving representative of the British Government in Africa. He remained resident in Nairobi but reported direct back to London. Sir Geoffrey de Freitas came next but after the Kenyatta incident, which perhaps we can come to later, he was replaced by a regular Foreign Service officer, Sir Ted Peck, who operated in the normal diplomatic way. Sir Geoffrey de Freitas was a former Labour politician. I think he had been Minister of Agriculture in one of the Labour governments, but he had been sent out to Kenya in the hope that there would be an East African Federation. The plan was that Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda should form a single unit. A common service organisation, known locally as 'The High Commission', but more formally as EACSO, had been set up in Nairobi. Posts and Telecommunications, Customs, Inland Revenue, Railways, the airline, the ports were all run centrally out of Nairobi by EACSO on behalf of the three East African territories and there were high hopes that this would be a successful and efficient system. However the first thing that happened after the grant of independence to Kenya was that there was a small revolution, started probably in Tanzania, but it spread rapidly with minor outbreaks in Nairobi itself and in Uganda. British forces were quickly mustered. An aircraft carrier appeared over the horizon at Mombasa. As far as I know our forces didn't actually do anything but the revolution promptly subsided, although not without having caused considerable bloodshed on the island of Zanzibar. Asian inhabitants of Zanzibar were killed in substantial numbers by native

Africans.

JH: Forgive my ignorance but was this a revolt against indigenous independent governments?

MM: Yes.

JH: They were all three independent were they?

MM: Yes, they were, Kenya was the last one ...

JH: And yet the revolt was, so to speak, joint in all three countries?

MM: Yes, it was probably fomented by communist powers, who were influential in some quarters. The Russians were adept at stirring up trouble and it was pretty easy to do it because the newly independent countries in East Africa did have the appearance of continuing the old regime. This was particularly the case in Kenya, which alone of the three territories had been in part a colony (and in part a protectorate) and where a large section of the administration was still in the hands of white men. I think initially it was very easy to see why Kenya had been an attractive place for white settlers. It was a marvellous country, the scenery was magnificent and the system of government was obviously clean, efficient, lacking in corruption, well organised, not highly developed; they hadn't got anything like the apparatus of the welfare state but they did have a good system of education, good hospitals (for the whites and Asians), good public health, malaria had been eradicated from the Highlands, and from Nairobi which was built on land that had originally been a malarial swamp. Everything was well drained, the roads were dirt surfaced but

JH: And this good government was for the benefit of the indigenous population as well as the white settlers?

MM: Oh yes.

JH: Because the white settlers had pretty well expropriated the local, possibly

nomadic, tribes and ...

MM: I don't think that's true. No, I think the original whites had settled effectively vacant land, which might well have been used by roaming herds of cattle or roaming herds of wild animals. When the whites first got there at about the turn of the twentieth century, Nairobi was nothing, there was no town there, nothing. On the day of our arrival in the port of Mombasa, we took the overnight train to Nairobi. The next morning when we woke up we looked out of the carriage window to be enchanted by the sight of wild animals grazing on the plains not far from Nairobi. There were giraffe, wildebeest, gazelles, zebra, elephant. It was a really exciting new world.

JH: Nairobi was a rail depot at the start, wasn't it?

MM: The white settlers built the railway from scratch. They got labour from India, offered them jobs that is, to come across and build the line. The indigenous people did not understand the need for accurate measurements. The Indians did. British engineers built the railway from Mombasa on the coast to Kampala in Uganda in order to export cotton for Lancashire, originally. Nairobi was developed as a suitable place to change locomotives before they commenced the climb up to the lip of the Rift Valley and then across to Uganda. So it was all recent. Nothing was old about Kenya. It was all done within a short period of time and of course there had been two world wars and the slump in the 1920s and 1930s so that wasn't a good time for developing new territories. I think the British settlers had achieved wonders by 1963, starting at the turn of the century.

JH: And certainly not to the disadvantage of the local people then?

MM: No. The two main tribes in Kenya were the Kikuyu, who were basically agriculturalist, and the Masai, who were the people who roamed the plains and kept cattle. What the white settlers did was to establish new industries like ranching, wheat production and coffee. The Kikuyu were left on land which they had originally occupied and the Masai remained on the plains, usually living in small fenced enclosures. One of the main effects of the arrival of the whites was that the regular slaughter of young male Kikuyu and Masai was prevented. This warfare between the

tribes had kept growth of the population under control. Stopping the inter-tribal wars meant significant population increase. So we did bring peace and a certain degree of prosperity. I remember that we tried to persuade Jomo Kenyatta, the first President of Kenya, Mzee as he was called, to accept the need for family planning to control population growth but he was much against that idea. He wanted his Kikuyu to outnumber the other tribes decisively. By the way, Jomo Kenyatta was otherwise an exceedingly impressive leader well meriting the honorific Mzee.

JH: So now, as in so many less developed countries, half the population is under the age of fifteen and the population is multiplying unsustainably.

MM: When we arrived in Kenya the population was around seven million. I think it was slightly less than that, but the last time I went there, which was in the 1980s, it was in excess of twenty two million. It was heart-breaking to see the crowds of unemployed in Nairobi and the way in which the floor of the Rift Valley, which had been open to wild animals in 1964 was by 1985 covered in small unviable shambas (smallholdings from which a decent living could not be realised). Anyway, in early 1964 we had this little revolution and then that simmered down. I was responsible for running the technical assistance programme. There was a Counsellor in charge of aid. Aid was a big thing. We had a major land settlement programme. There was a First Secretary in charge of land settlement alone. He was recruited direct from the Government of Kenya where he had been a senior civil servant. I did all the technical assistance and Bruce Greatbatch, who was the Counsellor, said to me, 'You just get on and get as many Kenyans on courses to London as you possibly can.' So I took that on. There were no effective budget limitations. We just went ahead and sent large batches of Kenyans to the UK. It wasn't terribly easy to do, by the way, because Africans were being recruited as fast as possible to take over jobs vacated by departing white civil servants. The incoming Africans were needed on the ground but they also needed training urgently. The training course in the UK almost became a rite of passage.

JH: There was some resistance from the potential trainers in Britain, I would imagine, especially as they were overloaded from all sorts of places.

MM: Yes, well the Kenyans were spread around the UK quite widely by a very efficient British Council operation in London. The instructions were that the trainees were to be flown by BOAC. There was a UK Treasury instruction to that effect, and I looked it up and I found out that they had to be booked to fly by BOAC, and be booked direct with BOAC, not through travel agents, unless there were good reasons why this should not be done. We were sending hundreds of trainees off to London with BOAC, paying full economy fares, and the local BOAC office, which worked a five day week, complained to me about this, saying it's Friday afternoon, we can't possibly suddenly put three people on the flight on Saturday. Send them next week. I found that if I went through a local travel agency, which was also a British company, they could get people on flights at the last minute and they would see them off at the airport and meet them on the way back, which reduced the burden on me quite considerably. So I did that. This went on for over a year. And then BOAC complained, sending an official from London to read me the riot act. He asked why was I infringing a regulation, which required direct booking through the BOAC office (and deprived BOAC of the 7% fee which they had otherwise to pay a travel agent)? If this practice was not revoked immediately he would complain to the Commonwealth Relations Office and I would get it in the neck. I said that he could complain if he liked but I felt I was justified and would not change. We were spending £200,000 a year on air fares and it had taken BOAC a year to find out that I wasn't following the instructions!

JH: It's very strange. But why did they have to be booked in at the last minute anyway?

MM: Well, because of the sudden availability of places in London or it was occasionally difficult to get available trainees, government departments were being Africanised, African heads of departments were coming in to replace Europeans so things became less efficient and there were more crises and panics and sudden decisions were taken, 'Yes, OK, we can send this group back to London,' with almost no notice.

JH: I was afraid that might be the answer but I felt I ought to ask. This is perhaps the place to ask what you think generally about our overseas aid programme? I suppose

that was your main experience of it, and perhaps that was a bit special but it obviously looked to you like a good thing in Kenya, in the services there at the time.

MM: Well, I can give you an answer to that which is not absolutely direct but it reflects the importance of aid at that time and in that place. When there was a change of High Commissioner, we had several changes of High Commissioner but I will come back to that, but when Sir Geoffrey de Freitas left, President Jomo Kenyatta wanted Bruce Greatbatch, who was the Aid Counsellor, to be the new High Commissioner. Bruce was that important to them. He knew every angle of the Kenya government because of the placing of experts within it, with the training programme, capital aid, land settlement, all these key things were really well and truly under the auspices of the Aid Counsellor in the British High Commission. Kenyatta knew that and he wanted Bruce to be High Commissioner. Perhaps I should add that UK governments were conscious that not enough had been done by the colonial Government of Kenya to prepare Kenyans to take over the administration of the state after it became quite plain that Macmillan's 'winds of change' speech in South Africa included Kenya, and was intended to include Kenya.

JH: Land settlement was obviously, I hope this isn't a tangent, but land settlement was obviously easier in Kenya than it has been for the last twenty years in Zimbabwe.

MM: Yes, I think it's largely because in Kenya the whites were more prepared to go. They were a relatively small proportion of the population, relatively insignificant in numbers and some of them were isolated in out of the way places. There had been the Mau Mau uprising in the 1950s so they felt exposed. They were resigned to the idea that the British government was indifferent to their interests. The local British population definitely ill-disposed to the incoming staff of the British High Commission at least to begin with. The settlers were actively encouraged by the terms of land settlement to take the money and run. A lot of them chose to go to South Africa and no doubt some went to Rhodesia as well. Britain lent the Kenya government the money to buy out the white settlers. One white settler who had been an employee of East African Railways thought up a splendid wheeze for getting out of Kenya without paying off what he owed to the government in arrears of income tax. He was believed to have insulted the famously anti-settler Minister of the Interior,

Odinga Odinga. This employee went up to Odinga in a bar in a hotel in Nakuru and said he looked like a dustbin tied up with a bit of string round his middle (a very curious thing to say, but memorable). He was escorted to the airport by the Kenya Police on the spot and deported to South Africa without having to pay what he owed in back taxes.

JH: It looks as if the mechanisms set up there were more effective than they ever were in Rhodesia. Whether the Zimbabwean government ever co-operated in setting up any mechanisms that really would have encouraged the farmers to go is perhaps a question. But I don't know; it's just the contrast between these two things that occurs to one because it's so actual now.

MM: Can I just go back to the change of High Commissioner? Geoffrey de Freitas was hoping to become the High Commissioner in an East African Federation but it became plain that this was not going to work because there were too many incipient rivalries among the territories. Jomo Kenyatta went on a visit to London, something that he did with some reluctance because he wouldn't fly and he could not easily afford the time for a sea journey. Nevertheless he sailed away from Mombasa, having arrived there from Nairobi by a train specially driven by a white engine driver. While he was walking down Piccadilly past some club or other with his official entourage a former white settler emerged from one of these clubs, rushed up to him and kicked him. The news of this came back to Nairobi on the BBC World Service and was received with great indignation by members of the Kenya parliament. They gathered in the bar of the Kenya House of Parliament over lunchtime and tanked themselves up on Tusker beer. They then came across the street to the High Commission, conveniently adjacent. Our office was on the 6th floor of Shell House and so they piled into the lifts and came up by lift load after lift load until the reception area of the High Commission was crammed with angry, slightly tipsy, African MPs. They demanded to see the High Commissioner. He decided against seeing them, remained locked in his office and sent them a message through one of the chancery secretaries saying so. Eventually they all went away and the word got round that the High Commissioner was a coward. I suspect that what motivated him was the feeling that if there had been some sort of comparable incident whereby he was kicked up the backside this would not do any good to Kenya - UK relations. Anyhow, it led to his

withdrawal from Nairobi. It's a strange illustration of the way relatively minor incidents can have more serious repercussions.

Posting to Thailand and Thai language studies, 1968-75

MM: When our time in Kenya came to an end, we returned to London by sea. I was told that I would have to take a hard language aptitude test and might then be sent to learn Thai. So I was sent to SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies) as a student of Thai. This was seen as part of the programme to integrate the Commonwealth Office with the Foreign Office. The method was to put CRO officers in FO posts and FO officers in Commonwealth posts.

JH: Three years roughly passed before you went to Thailand, you didn't spend three years doing Thai.

MM: I spent one academic year at SOAS doing the first year of the South East Asian Studies degree course with the Thai language option, then I went to Thailand and I did a further academic year there learning Thai to get the higher qualification. I was part of the Embassy to the extent that I had to go in to do my stint as duty officer at night but otherwise I was not an operational member of the embassy. Then I did the exam and came back to England for leave and found that in that time the Foreign Office had decided to close the post for which I was being trained, which was consul in Chiang Mai. I was a bit unhappy about that having spent two years acquiring this hard language qualification. But luckily for me the press attaché in the embassy in Bangkok had been complaining that he didn't have any knowledge of Thai and that it was necessary to speak Thai in order to fulfil his functions. So instead of teaching him Thai they posted him to London and created a vacancy for me. I returned to Bangkok in the early part of 1970, having in the meantime spent three months attached to the information section of the embassy in Vienna learning how an information section operated.

JH: In 1970. When you say returned ...

MM: To Bangkok, as press attaché. I thought it prudent to drop the title Director of

British Information Services. I discovered pretty soon that I didn't really need to know Thai as press attaché. All switched on Thai journalists seemed to speak good English and Thai opinion formers read the Bangkok Post.

JH: Really, I'd have thought it would be an advantage provided your Thai was really good.

MM: It did turn out to be an advantage in the end because it meant I was able to talk to local people and encouraged them to make little jokes, probably at my expense. The main pre-occupation of the Embassy at that time was preparation for the Queen's visit in 1972 and I found that I had to play an independent role in that event. The Thais made me responsible for the international press during the course of the Queen's visit.

JH: The Thais simply off loaded this responsibility on to you?

MM: They asked me to accept responsibility for the foreign press and I took this to mean the British press. They said they would look after the Thai press. We agreed to that, perhaps not fully realising how many non-British journalists would turn up. When the visit took place there were over 100 foreign press, including photographers, camera crews and television crews. The Americans and Japanese sent teams, as did the Germans, the French and the British of course. The most difficult potentially were the British. The others were pretty polite and well-behaved. I obviously had to take responsibility for the British press. What this amounted to was that I had to agree where the foreign press would be allowed to stand for photo opportunities or for filming at all the sites throughout Thailand where the Queen would go in a packed five days. It was all meticulously planned. The BBC Court Correspondent played a key role among the foreign press. The Thais were keen for international publicity for Thailand. The Queen's own press secretary was also keen that all should go well. The press and public relations implications of the Queen's State visit to Thailand were considerable. It turned out rather nerve racking.

JH: For the Thais.

MM: For me, for the Thais, for the embassy, for Buckingham Palace and for the press. It was one of the most important things that had happened in the reign of King Bhumipol and the Thais were determined that it should be a success. This vast international coverage was important for the growing Thai tourist industry, and to Thailand's image generally. The Thai authorities wanted to be sure also that the Thai population got the picture, saw their King associating with the oldest monarchy in the world, one which was highly respected by the Thais. Our Royals are the most respected royal family in the world, and the Thais wanted the visit well publicised among their own population. Thailand is surprisingly well supplied with radio stations, television channels and had hundreds of newspapers. It's an aspect of their system, which is perhaps little known about in the UK.

JH: The media are?

MM: The media; the Thai press is not regulated. It can be, of course, in extreme circumstances, and perhaps is, but there are so many newspapers and so many radio stations throughout the country that it's beyond effective formal regulation or control. It's vital for the government in Bangkok, whether it's a military regime or not, to keep an eye at least on this plethora of press and television stations and the newspapers, in several languages. In the Embassy in Bangkok, for example, we had at that time a Chinese translator working in two Chinese languages because there was a significant Chinese language press for Chinese speaking Thai residents. In addition we had a Thai translator who was a well-known poet and a literary figure in Thailand. He handled our translations into Thai. And we had specialists in information for radio and television and somebody dealt with ordinary reference inquiries about Britain. So it had been quite a big operation, self-financing incidentally. During the course of the Royal visit, the then Ambassador, Sir Arthur de la Mare, succeeded in generating pressure for the re-opening of the Consulate in Chiang Mai, the job for which I had prepared. Eventually he got permission to have it re-opened and so my wife, family and I went up to Chiang Mai at last. I asked what my job was going to be and the ambassador explained that he wanted me to go round the border areas and find out what was going on. The knowledge of the language was important for that. The Consul at the time the Consulate was closed in 1970 had already retired once but because he was a Thai speaker he was re-engaged. He had rarely set foot outside

Chiang Mai, claiming that as he had good relations with the US intelligence agencies, he did not need to. My job was to go round the border areas, fly the flag, discover what was going on in these sensitive provinces and report on it. When I first drove up to Chiang Mai I found that few foreigners had done that journey. A lot of the Northern road was unpaved, and such signposts as existed were written in Thai. The number of foreigners able to read Thai was even smaller than the number who claimed to speak it. It was a long journey, and the route at the Northern end was far from straightforward.

JH: So it wasn't a case of a large British community or large numbers of British tourists at that time going to the north?

MM: No, a small British community. Few tourists. There was quite a sizeable international community, including several hundred American assorted missionaries. They were spread out over the hills and in border locations where the writ of the Thai government scarcely ran. I talked to them and to provincial officials in the various provincial capitals. There were six provinces in the Chiang Mai Consular district, so there was plenty of ground to cover. The Thais themselves were adept at extracting military and financial aid from the western world through SEATO (South East Asia Treaty Organisation) and particularly from the Americans who were delighted by the propensity of the Thais to set up organisations like CSOC (Communist Suppression Operations Command). The Thais have a great sense of humour. The Americans were very concerned because of the military problems in Vietnam and Laos and the feeling that possibly Thailand was the next domino to fall.

JH: And this was presumably the main aspect of our own interest in doing this; the feeling that Thailand was vulnerable and Thailand, of course, led on to Malaysia and so forth.

MM: Yes, we had very substantial investments in Malaysia, less so in Thailand although we did have quite a bit of investment there and Thailand was a useful export market for us; quite a lot of British goods were sold there, and the Thais were well disposed towards Britain. I did all this travelling around and I did talk to a lot of people. I found there was no communist insurgency in the North as such. The Thais

themselves were claiming that there was insurgency because this released funds from the US but the unrest that did exist in this area was more likely a reaction on the part of remote communities to the imposition of Thai taxation and administration. The Americans financed a considerable military road network and supplied much military equipment and training. The result of building the roads meant that the Thai government's writ was extended right up to the border areas. And with it the duty to pay taxes, and of course people resented that and would shoot up government officials from time to time. The Americans had an efficient intelligence network throughout northern Thailand, extending well beyond my Consular district; it was sophisticated and well informed. I am sure the Americans in the field knew that the insurgency was really resentment against the Thai administration but I assume American field operators couldn't convince the American embassy in Bangkok. Let me give you an example of what things were like in the North. Our friend Kraisri Nimmanhaeminda, owner of a bank, was on tour in his car with his wife and a driver. The car drove round a bend in the road where bandits had sprinkled a two Baht packet of Daz after a shower of rain. The car skidded wildly and overturned into a ditch. The waiting bandits then emerged, clubbed the half dazed occupants of the car, jemmied open the boot, stole everything of value, especially Mrs N's gold and jewellery, and pushed off into the village, looking innocent. Kraisri told me he owed his life to the stout construction of his Peugeot, which did not crush him and his wife when it overturned. This sort of incident was not uncommon in rural Thailand in the 1970s.

JH: So for the people in Bangkok the importance of good relations with the Thais to some extent dictated their view of the dangers of insurgency and so forth.

MM: Well, the British Embassy in Bangkok knew from me that there was really no insurgency in the North. I told them that there was gun running, smuggling, drug production and export, all seemingly connived at by the Thai authorities themselves. They knew what was happening. But the Thais then changed their tack and said, 'there's no insurgency in the north, it's in the north-east,' which was outside my Consular district or, 'It's in the south, in Surat Thani.' So they changed their tack a bit. One has to admire the skill of the Thais in being able to pull the wool over the eyes of embassy representatives in Bangkok.

JH: But anyway, the Consulate was a reconnaissance post, it wasn't a conventional Consulate doing Consular work?

MM: No, we didn't.

JH: Living conditions?

MM: The best house I have ever had in my entire service. In fact the house and Consulate office was the finest property in Northern Thailand with the possible exception of the King's palace on the hill outside Chiang Mai. The consulate stood on the bank of the river Ping. The house had been built in about 1913 to house a Consul-General with extra-territorial jurisdiction. The office adjacent to the house was designed to be a court room, where the consul could dispense justice among any British subjects accused by the Siamese authorities of wrong doing. The consul-general went on tours of his district on elephant back and there were elephant stables in the grounds of the house. The consul, even in my day, had a lot of status: he was 'Tan Consul' to the locals (ie those of them who knew what a consul was) and ranked among provincial governors. The house stood on land given to the British Crown by the King of Siam. An important British interest in Northern Thailand in the early years of the twentieth century was the Bombay Burmah company which exploited the teak forests by planting new trees where mature trees were extracted. There is no native teak left in Thailand now, but they might get some from across the borders.

JH: And the Americans didn't have anything to match you?

MM: No, not in terms of the house. Plenty of other assets though, like the Air America Pilatus Porter and a direct telephone line to the State Department in Washington.

JH: Amazing.

MM: It was a wonderful place. And we felt sad to leave.

JH: You didn't feel in any danger yourself? Being shot up, for example, in mistake

for a Thai government official?

MM: Originally I was provided with a Land-Rover and I used to drive around in this thing with the union jack stuck on the front of it. To begin with I naively thought that the union jack would be my protection. But I then realised that any potential trouble maker wouldn't pay any attention to the flag. Nearly all Thai trucks were richly decorated with flags and pennants and exhaust pipes with rocket fins. A Land-Rover was immediately recognisable as a Thai government vehicle, especially a grey painted one like mine, so I succeeded in persuading the FCO to let me have a Range-Rover. I had the first Range-Rover officially supplied by the Foreign Office to an overseas post. I got it on the grounds that it was visibly different from a Land-Rover. There were only four of them in the whole of Thailand in 1973, and the King had two of them.

JH: You really felt reassured by that?

MM: I used to go down roads that the Americans said were unsafe. They had prohibited travel for their own staff on certain roads because there had been incidents. But I travelled on my own. I went down one of these roads in a bus. I discovered there was an ordinary civilian bus along this particular route so I bought a ticket, sat in the back and watched what happened. I found that along the route the bus would stop and armed soldiers would get on, or armed people would get on laden with guns and all sorts of equipment, bazookas, AK 27s and goodness knows what, and then they would get off and the bus would continue. I thought if the bus can get through I can. So I did one or two trips like that. I was on one occasion invited to go with the American Consul to a Shan army camp just on the border with Burma. We took Air America to the nearest landing strip and then we set off on foot by invitation from the Shan army to their encampment, which was reached through a narrow defile. We went through these rocks. It was absolutely, completely defensible against any military assault; it was a perfect natural fortress.

JH: Except from the air ...

MM: Of course from the air but you would have to find it from the air. We came

across these chaps with their uniforms and an amazing array of equipment, but they were basically smugglers, in my opinion. They were not insurgents. They might have been an armed trip-wire. Had there been an attempt by the Chinese for instance, to come over that border these guys would have got in the way. So word would have got out fairly early. There were lots of strange and unexpected groupings of sinister people in those hills, not just illicit drug smugglers. The KMT for example were there.

JH: Really?

MM: Yes.

JH: Not doing anything but just subsisting there?

JH: Do we need to say what the KMT were?

MM: The Kuo Min Tang.

JH: Kuo Min Tang, Nationalist Chinese?

MM: That's right, owing allegiance to Taiwan and opposed to the Chinese communists. The Thais themselves supported the Taiwanese, because of course they were getting money from the Americans and the Americans were pro-Taiwan and anti-Communist China. The Taiwanese had a large Embassy in Bangkok with whom we were not supposed to have any contact.

JH: Yes, the politics were quite complicated in that area, to some extent still are but the trouble may come more from Burma now.

MM: Yes, one of the sad events of the time I was in Chiang Mai was that we got very friendly with Sao Khun Suik, who would have been the King of the Shan state, a region of upper Burma, but then resident in Thailand since 1946. He had married a Thai lady (not a commoner). We (not sure who exactly) had promised the Shans that at the end of the Second World War we, the British, would give them independence

but the military officer who gave this undertaking was posted away leaving no trace behind. And we couldn't do anything for Sao Khun Suik, a splendid honourable man. Khun Suik wanted his son to go to Eton so that he could be brought up properly as a potential ruler, but the best I could prevail on the British Council to do was to get him into Bradfield College.

JH: Bradfield, less well-known. I've never heard of it.

MM: It's in Berkshire. A pretty good school, but not Eton.

JH: I see. That just shows some of the unexpected, highly interesting, things that you come across in a good foreign service career.

MM: Anyway, that came to an end and when I left Chiang Mai I thought the Foreign Office could not possibly fail to send me back to Thailand at some time in the future.

JH: Quite, because they had invested two years of your salary plus expenses to have you learn the language.

Return to the Foreign Office in 1975

MM: I knew many senior people including the Prime Minister and the Minister of Defence and it is only just two or three years ago that the last of my potential contacts, people that I actually knew something about, has faded from power. Including some subsequent Prime Ministers. Wasted knowledge. So, we went back to London, with some regret. I had been threatened with a home posting and I was told to report to Guidance and Information Policy Department. When I got there I found that Guidance and Information Policy Department had become important and had a tough new Head of Department, Anne Warburton. It was 1975 and GIPD included responsibility for passing the word about the British economy to posts overseas. James Callaghan was Foreign Secretary and he had made it plain that he wanted posts abroad to do their utmost to convey as positive an impression as possible about the state of the British economy. The state of the economy was dire. I found that I was going to be occupying the chair of the so-called Economic and Commercial Adviser

to the Department. Somebody had been occupying this post before me but he clearly didn't know how to do the job. He didn't know where to get the information or what he could usefully contribute other than information already published in *The Economist* or the *Financial Times*. The Head of Department was keen to have somebody new so, given my background on the borders of Thailand, the FCO thought I was the ideal chap to explain the British economy to foreigners. I arrived behind my London desk pretty unprepared, to put it mildly. I didn't even know what the job was going to entail until I set foot in the Department. I imbibed what I could from my predecessor and I found that the most important part of my job was to gather together the information to go into a classified letter from the head of department to heads of posts overseas. It did have to try to depict the UK domestic economic problems as favourably as possible, but accurately. So I thought about this for a time and I wondered what I would do if I had been doing this job in Bangkok and had been trying to find out from the Thais what was going on. I thought the thing to do is to go along and see the Treasury. I knocked on the Treasury press office door and told them what my job was. They were pleased to see me because, they said, they had been trying for years to get some sort of direct connection with the Foreign Office information departments so that accurate news about the British economy could be disseminated. Actually the Chancellor's press officer, Peter Middleton, the current head of Barclays bank, but then not quite so eminent, was in a very sensitive position. I found that the Treasury press office was humming with activity. They were passing out a great deal of information to the British press but not giving any to the foreign press. Foreign press correspondents in London had to rely on the *Times* and the *Telegraph* and the *Financial Times* for their news about the British economy. They were not able to get firsthand briefing from the Treasury.

JH: They just weren't on the list.

MM: They weren't on the list.

JH: Treasury wouldn't talk to them.

MM: No.

JH: Why was this press office so keen and so inhibited at the same time?

MM: They had trusted correspondents whom they knew and on whom they thought they could rely and they felt the Treasury press office was just not big enough to cope with the foreign press as well. Perhaps they felt the foreign press was a Foreign Office responsibility. Anyhow, I got quite a good reception there and this helped me to produce the kind of thing that was wanted for the guidance of posts. Eventually the Head of the Treasury, Sir Douglas Wass, wrote to Sir Michael Palliser, who was the Permanent Under Secretary at the Foreign Office asking if this co-operation could be made a permanent formal arrangement. The theory in Whitehall was that Private Secretaries corresponded with other Private Secretaries on behalf of their respective Secretaries of State and there was no lower linkage except through regular established departmental channels. There was a regular channel between the Foreign Office and the Treasury. It was the Financial Relations Department of the FCO. FRD had links with certain operational Treasury departments but there was no linkage between FRD and the Treasury press office. The Treasury press office had direct linkage to the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the other Treasury Ministers and the most senior Treasury officials. It didn't bother much with Treasury operational divisions. The letter arrived from the Treasury PUS in the Foreign Office and Palliser's office did what they usually did. They passed it down to the relevant Under Secretary. The Under Secretary superintending the Information Departments, Ronald Scrivener. Scrivener, sent for me and asked what I was up to. An unhelpful reply went back to the Treasury. The FCO decided not to endorse my direct link with the Treasury press office. Michael Palliser obviously could not have known what was at stake. It didn't look like a Foreign Office matter on the face of it although the Foreign Secretary had personally told the Head of my Department that a good economic story was an important requirement. It was a bit of a cock-up. My wife and I were invited to the Treasury press office Christmas party that year. Denis Healey and the other two Treasury Ministers, the Financial Secretary and the Chief Secretary, were there. The Treasury Permanent Under Secretary and the staff of the Treasury press office also attended. They told us that we were the only people from the Foreign Office who had ever been invited to the Treasury press office party. I did maintain links with the Treasury after the FCO had said it saw no need for any formal link. But I kept quiet about it.

JH: No, quite. Well, the office had been told once.

MM: I also found that I had the same sort of relations with numerous other departments; the Department of Energy press office, which was then under Bernard Ingham; the Department of Trade and Industry. The Department for Employment was of course also a useful contact for me because there were constant strikes in this period, and I was responsible for sending out guidance telegrams about these problems as well. There was a tremendous economic crisis in 1976. Chancellor Healey got to Heathrow on his way to Manila to attend an IMF meeting. He turned back at the airport having decided he couldn't risk being airborne for seventeen hours. He feared we might have to devalue and he had to be in London in case that became necessary. This was the nadir of our fortunes as a nation in the post war years. Britain, a founder member of the IMF, had to go cap in hand to the IMF for a loan out of funds intended to help the developing world. Fortunately, the British press did not for once seem to make too much of this catastrophe. We gradually emerged from that situation and the FCO interest in information about the economy also receded.

Transfer to Rhodesia Department, 1977

In 1977 I was asked if I would go to Rhodesia Department to take over the economic sanctions desk. A vacancy had suddenly arisen in that Department. I walked into Rhodesia Department, sat down at the desk, the phone rang and I picked it up. An unidentified voice said can I speak to Mr so and so, who was my predecessor. So I said, 'no sorry he's left.' 'Oh, I wasn't told about this, when did this happen?' 'This morning.' 'Who's that?' 'Oh, this is Tiny Rowland.' 'Oh, sorry, I can't tell you where my predecessor has gone.' Tiny was put out. I didn't hear from him again, but that gives you an idea perhaps about the level of interest in that particular job and the growing interest in Southern Africa. I actually soon found that despite the Chancellor's efforts to encourage British businessmen, the FCO's line on Rhodesia was simply to refuse to permit any activity that might be construed as lessening the pressure of economic sanctions on Rhodesia.

JH: Were you there for some time?

MM: No, I was only there for a short time. I had a pressing need to get overseas again because I had children at boarding school and children at university and I was being crippled by income tax, school fees, maintenance grants for the children at university and so on. It was an impossible situation, financially. I had to beg the FCO to send me anywhere. The personnel department didn't want to post me because of the Rhodesian job, which was thought to be important, but I had to insist, or go bankrupt. So they rewarded me by sending me to Brunei, which at least was in South East Asia.

Posting to Brunei 1978-81

JH: And indeed I suppose the people may be related to the population in some parts of Indo-China, though possibly not to the Thai part.

MM: No, no connection with the Thais whatever. The Bruneis are Muslims. They are Malays really.

JH: And the Malaysian and Thai languages are not close?

MM: Oh no, they are completely different. Thai is unique. Malay is the same language as is used in Indonesia and Borneo, so there is no link. We learned Malay while we were there and we had an interesting time but it was a peculiar place.

JH: I have heard one or two things about it, for example that our living conditions made us the poor relations compared with the chaps working for the oil companies there.

MM: Oh yes, I expect that is true in some ways but ...

JH: But not important really ...

MM: No, we lived up at the Brunei town end of the State, in Bandar Seri Begawan as it is called. The Brunei Shell people lived down in Seria and so they had virtually no

contact with us although I used to go regularly to the Panaga Club, which is the Shell club. When I first arrived all the main Brunei government departments were run by elderly officers of the former British Colonial Service. They had all got Brunei honours and titles and they were very close knit. The only foreigners in town were British, as I remember it. The old Sultan, Sir Omar Ali Saifuddin, had constructed the Churchill museum in Brunei town. It was full of bits and pieces of Churchill memorabilia, some pretty tatty but still a purpose built building had been erected to house this material. To go back a few years, the Bruneis had paid every penny of the cost of maintaining the British High Commission there. High Commissioners would turn up and find that they didn't have to put their hands in their pockets for a single thing. They just had to order what they wanted from the local Chinese store and the Brunei government would pay. The Brunei government would pay for the car, the driver, the servants, the electricity, the air-conditioners, whatever. Eventually of course this began to create some unease among high commissioners from the Commonwealth Relations Office. The CRO looked on Brunei as if it was a standard Commonwealth territory whereas Brunei was very keen to retain all the old Colonial Office practices under which the territory paid the costs of attracting and recruiting British officers. This left the Brunei Government with the whip hand and in charge of who came and went. CRO inspectors came out and found that high commissioners were able to pocket their salaries.

JH: Whoever fixed the allowances without reference to that would be a question indeed.

MM: Well, they probably didn't know that everything was being paid for.

JH: Possibly, yes. Were they originally CRO?

MM: Colonial Office, originally. CRO only later.

JH: Colonial Office, well perhaps they didn't inspect, period. Because a lot of their people, so to speak, lived off the country originally.

MM: By the time I got there, of course, all that had finished but the Bruneis were still

providing an official car and both the high commissioner's residence and mine were Brunei Government properties. The High Commissioner had to make do with a Daimler car. The Bruneis wanted to give him a Rolls Royce, he was number 4 in the protocol order of the State after all, but High Commissioners had repeatedly declined this offer, because to accept would have caused embarrassment vis-à-vis more senior High Commissioners in Singapore and Malaysia, who had to make do with the standard Daimler issued to heads of Class 2 posts. The High Commission Daimler with a silver crown for a number plate was the last remaining vestige of Brunei government patronage, except that we, both the High Commissioner and I, lived in Brunei government property. I lived in PWD 1 (Public Works Department) and it had a marvellous position ...

JH: A very nice house was it, as much as you expected ...

MM: No, it wasn't, it was a rather tatty house, really.

JH: You said it had a nice position ...

MM: Yes, a very nice position overlooking the Brunei river and sitting in the grounds of the High Commission. The old Sultan, Sir Omar, was well known to Malcolm MacDonald. MacDonald came out actually while I was there to see Sir Omar and get an update on the situation.

JH: MacDonald was still working for the government or retired?

MM: Yes, he was officially retired but the FCO paid his fare out so he was working ad hoc right up to the end of his life. He had mellowed considerably. Mr MacDonald had spent a lot of time in Borneo while Commissioner General in Singapore. He of course knew everyone who mattered and had unrivalled background knowledge of the area. We had the extraordinary situation where Brunei was in a kind of time warp. The Bruneis were striving to prevent the British government from withdrawing the Gurkhas and making Brunei fully independent. They were an independent Islamic Sultanate in treaty relations with the UK. That was the constitutional position, and it suited Brunei very well. Britain wanted to revoke the treaty of friendship and co-

operation and replace it with a new one, which would look more or less the same but would remove our liability for the defence and external affairs of Brunei. The Bruneis wanted to maintain the existing treaty to protect themselves from possible attack by other S E Asian states which lacked the oil and gas reserves located in Brunei and in the territorial waters.

JH: Because we had already retired from east of Suez, hadn't we?

MM: Yes. This was the difficulty. The Bruneis wanted us to remain there because in 1962 or 1963 there had been a minor revolt in Brunei itself against the then Sultan, Sir Omar, and the revolt had been supported by neighbouring states. The Indonesians had actually sent troops to attack Brunei and other North Borneo states with a view to taking them over. The British had come in quietly, with no fanfare whatever, and repelled them with casualties. There is a good book about the situation under the title 'The Secret War.' A VC was awarded to one of the British army Gurkhas. The British Gurkhas were the kind of reassurance the Sultan wanted because he feared that if we went away the Malaysians or Indonesians might encroach and seize the oil wells and the LNG plant. We were the only worthwhile guarantee he'd got. The presence of the Gurkha battalion was crucial to that. It was of course financially in our interests that we should continue there, but politically the British government had decided that they did not want troops or commitments east of Suez. The Ministry of Defence had a slightly different view of this while we were still responsible for Hong Kong.

JH: It was in our interest because of the oil?

MM: No, because of the management of Brunei's finances. Brunei had a large portfolio of investments, which were in the hands of the Crown Agents and were all safely managed in London.

JH: They were owned by Brunei but run by the City?

MM: Yes, run by the City, but through the Crown Agents. Of course, as you know, the City creams off commission on everything it does, so that was important to the

finance houses concerned. We had an almost non-stop stream of people from big investment houses and banks and so on, coming out hoping to see, not the Sultan so much as they knew that was hopeless, to see the State Financial Officer. The SFO was still a British civil servant, and his function in life was to ensure that there was a proper separation between the revenues arising from the Brunei Shell petroleum company and the personal expenditure of the Sultan and his family. While the Treaty of Friendship and Co-operation with Britain was in operation it was safe for him to do that.

JH: You say that was his function for the Brunei government. Did the Sultan want him to do it?

MM: The old Sultan, Sir Omar, wanted him to do exactly that. The young Sultan was then very much under his father's influence and agreed fully with the plan to keep the British involved. It was an interesting situation and one where we in the High Commission were slightly unenthusiastic about official government policy, although we had to follow it and do what we could. Nevertheless, many delays occurred over the simplest things. I used to go to the meetings of the defence executive committee, which was attended by the head of Special Branch, the Commissioner for police, the Mentri Besar (chief minister), the State Secretary, the State Financial officer, the commander of the Gurkhas, the commander of the Royal Brunei Malay Regiment and me. I was the official British government representative and due to give the committee advice on defence and external affairs. On instructions, of course, I gave them no advice whatsoever. I presume that's why the task was entrusted to me. The Gurkha commander would fly up to Bandar Seri Begawan in his Scout helicopter, land outside the British High Commission, pick me up and take me to the police headquarters where the defence executive committee convened. The real lack of any serious discussion at that meeting was typical of Brunei. All the time that this was going on at our end London were getting increasingly impatient and desirous of achieving the revised treaty. Eventually London did succeed in spite of all the entreaties and manoeuvres by the Bruneis to put off the evil day. The Minister of State from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office was forced to fly to Brunei to get the sultan's counter signature on a binding agreement to introduce a new treaty (presumably the Bruneis had refused to go to London to sign). The Minister remained

in Brunei for a few hours and then flew straight back to London. It was hardly gracious. His visit and the new treaty to come into effect in 1983 were regarded by the Bruneis as heralding the full independence of Brunei. In due course the full independence of Brunei came about. I had, of course, long since departed so I don't think I need to talk about that or perhaps any more about the extraordinary goings on in that wealthy small state, which regarded itself as the Garden of Eden.

[Added in 2011: Before we leave the Garden of Eden, may I add a wry little anecdote about reverse racial discrimination? There was an interesting little spat with the Overseas Development Ministry. The High Commissioner, Jim Davidson, wisely stood well back from it. It was well and truly on my plate. It blew up during my early months in Brunei. The ODM had been in the habit of recruiting teachers of English for service in Brunei for contract periods of three years, renewable. The contracts were popular in Britain; an escape from UK taxes, overseas allowances, paid home leave, boarding school allowances for dependent children etc. I was rung up one day by Abdul Rahman, the Brunei Director of Establishments, to complain that one of the teachers recruited by the ODM was unacceptable: he was a Pakistani. Brunei wanted English English teachers. If they wanted Pakistani teachers they could get them direct from Karachi at a much lower cost. I reported the matter back to the ODM who huffily explained that the teacher in question had certainly been born in Pakistan but he had immigrated to the UK and held a British passport. It was out of the question for the ODM to operate a system of racial discrimination to suit Brunei and if Brunei did not like that, they would have to do their own recruiting in future. The matter had been referred to Judith Hart, the Minister herself. I passed this message on to Abdul Rahman, a sensible, moderate man whom we knew and liked. His response was to say that Brunei would get the Crown Agents to do the recruiting in future. No doubt the commission costs were similar if not identical. I noted later that one of the first things the post 1983 Brunei High Commission in London did was to assume responsibility for recruitment of temporary contract officers for service in Brunei itself.]

Posting to Houston as Deputy Consul General 1981-84

I went on direct transfer from Brunei to Houston, which had the distinction of being

the centre of the world oil industry. It had oil, gas and money in common with Brunei but not much else. Houston is a large and dynamic city with enormous wealth and industry. It was the headquarters for many large American companies with world-wide investments and interests. Houston never seemed to sleep. I found Texas remarkable in many ways. One of the first things that happened to me was that Sam Wanamaker, the ... I was going to say well known, but he's been dead several years now, so perhaps not so well known, but he was a film actor who was the father of Zoë Wanamaker. Sam came from Chicago but took up residence in London and he conceived the idea of re-building the Globe theatre on its original site. He came to Houston to raise money for re-building the Globe. He was having a meeting at the Houston university and the Professor of English Literature thought it would be right and proper for a member of the British Consulate to come along to the meeting. Sam Wanamaker harangued us for hours on the importance of re-building the Globe theatre. When he had finally gone and reduced everyone to a general acceptance of what he wanted, I asked one of the American professors why they had agreed to participate in raising money for re-building a theatre in London. He said, 'If you British are incapable of looking after your own heritage then we have got to do it for you. Don't forget your history is also our history.' Of course, that is true, although we often forget it. We have more than the English language in common with the Americans. It helps in part to explain the generosity of Americans towards things in Britain. It was a graphic example of the special relationship, if you like to put it that way. The official purpose of our Consulate in Houston was to look after British commercial interests. Certainly that's the way it appeared to people in London and we were told that the commercial links were the important ones. When I actually got to Houston, however, and looked out at that vast scene from the 22nd floor of the tower block in which the office was situated, it looked rather different. When I began to look at commercial work from that level and from that geographical position all the perspectives altered very rapidly indeed. To begin with there were no obvious commercial interests that any British government official could actually serve. There was almost nothing that Britain made that wasn't marketed already in the United States. We had to accept that biscuits, knitwear and scotch whisky and Rolls Royce and Jaguar cars were already marketed. What else was there? Actually, almost nothing. As soon as somebody got an idea for a product then one looked at the local market and found that it was already available and was cheaper than it could be

produced by a UK company. My task was to forward British commercial interests, so how was it to be accomplished? I decided to concentrate on inward investment or investment by British companies in the United States. As far as British investment in the United States was concerned, the sort of people who have got the money to make investments in the United States rarely wanted, or needed, help from British officials. If they did, what they wanted was top level introductions. If, on the other hand, it was a question of investment by American companies in Britain then we were able to provide useful links with, for example, the Invest in Britain Bureau. Somebody else did the commercial work, strictly the British export side of things. I went round visiting US companies. I got the commercial staff to watch out for possible inward investment opportunities as well. I have to say that in three years I don't think I identified a single one. What I was able to do, however, was to warn the Invest in Britain Bureau against taking at face value applications by potential confidence tricksters. There were surprising numbers of slightly dodgy operators around. By that I mean businessmen with ideas but a lack of substance, detectable by going to their company premises or factories and having a look round. Some American entrepreneurs had heard about de Lorean and that ill-fated car manufacturing venture in Belfast and they were anxious to make a fast buck in the same way, if possible. I think we probably did succeed in squelching some of those endeavours. We were able to effect top level introductions for serious British companies either looking at investment in the United States or possibly commercial ventures in other parts of the world and this was I think of value to serious British businessmen. So, the justification for the existence of the Consulate lay in the fact that Texas and the other five states which our Consulate General covered formed an area the size of Western Europe and represented considerable wealth and influence. We were able to get around these states and we were able to make some public relations impact. We were constantly talking to clubs and societies, going on television, talking on radio, talking to the press and generally making our presence felt. Perhaps some people assume that nothing much happens outside Washington and New York. We made a useful impact in the South West region of the United States. The main credit for this has to go to Consul-General Richard Tallboys. He was a dynamo and indefatigable in attracting visits to our part of the United States by members of the Royal Family. Richard went out of his way to make sure that if they paid a visit to our cities they got some return for the investment of their time. He gave them programmes that they enjoyed and the

result was that they came back. We had, I think, three visits by Princess Anne while I was there. Princess Anne was a great success. We would tailor visits to places where we thought it would be useful commercially, and fitted in her special interests as President of Save the Children. This meant that whenever we wanted to contact the President of a large company, remember we were dealing with world companies like Esso, Shell Oil, AMOCO, CONOCO, Hughes Tool, Brown and Root, Kellogg's, and dozens of others in the energy field, we had ready access because American businessmen knew that if they got on good terms with us they and their wives could be included in some Royal visit occasion. Their wives of course were in favour of that. The Royal visit was an effective office door-opener. As ordinary threadbare UK civil servants there would otherwise have been no way we could get in to see some of these important US businessmen.

Then, of course, during my time there, there was the Falklands war, which meant that we were in constant demand to go and talk about the Falklands on television, radio, etc and that included me as well as Richard Tallboys. If he was up in Colorado, for example, the Houston television channels would come to me and I had several encounters with them, explaining our side of the Falklands dispute. Houston wanted someone local to appear, not some spokesman from Washington or New York.

JH: Quite, which needed doing, yes.

MM: And of course Northern Ireland was a constant source of interest and then there were numerous other topics during the course of our time there. So we did a necessary public relations job. I think there probably wasn't sufficient appreciation by British commercial interests in the UK for what the Consulate had to offer. We were making ourselves felt in a way that the Americans appreciated. It may not matter much in Washington what goes on in Dallas, Denver, Houston or New Orleans, but it certainly matters in those cities, and they appreciated very much that we were there. It would have been deeply resented if any attempt had been made to close or reduce the British Consular presence in the South West. We had actually had a Consulate in Texas ever since 1836 so older than the State. The consulate was originally in Galveston when that was the main port. It moved much later with the opening of the new ship channel to Houston and it is deeply embedded in the history of the State of

Texas. I think it is an important presence and one with big latent advantages to Britain, even if the Foreign Office itself is ignorant of quite what the opportunities are. Even if the British economy as a whole is unaware of these links they are nevertheless of very considerable benefit because it reminds important rich Americans that Britain exists and should be considered if they think of expanding into the European market.

JH: That's right, my own limited experience, which was in San Francisco, would certainly bear out what you are saying. Did you get any training for this 'commercial' work before you went?

MM: I don't think so. I think I went there pretty well straight from Brunei. I went to Houston via the British Trade Development Office in New York. I did meet them there. They had periodic conferences of so-called commercial officers from time to time and I would go to them and compare notes.

JH: You didn't do a tour of British firms ...

MM: Yes, I did. That's true, I did go round quite a lot of companies with interests in our consular district, and there were large numbers of them. One of the things that took place every year, at the time I was in Houston, was the so-called Offshore Technology Conference, which went on for, I think, probably a couple of weeks, I can't remember exactly but was a gigantic exhibition at which every important energy or off-shore supplies industry or company in the world would either be represented or would attend.

JH: Including those from the North Sea ...

MM: Oh, yes, they were there. I recall on one occasion counting the number of Scottish Development Agency related people at this Offshore Technology Conference and there were over 100 of them, all paid for by the British taxpayer, mainly under the aegis of the Scottish Development Agency but including people like the Grampian Development Agency and the Highlands and Islands Development Board. In addition, Yorkshire and Humberside, the North East of England agency, the Devon and

Cornwall development agency and the Welsh Development Agency were all there. We had investment staff from Northern Ireland stationed in the consulate. All these groups were sending out Ministers or very senior officials who had to be looked after by us at other times of the year. We couldn't possibly do that at the time of the Offshore Technology Conference because that was an all hands to the pump effort. We even supplied staff from our office to help man one or two stands. There was a British business community of around 200 people in Houston at the time I was there, including every major British bank. British Steel had a very large office in the same tower block as us. One of Richard Tallboys's first acts was to set up a British-American Business Association (BABA) with a secretary, an office, a list of members and the subscriptions that they paid. BABA's function was basically to look after local British businessmen in Houston and American businessmen with interests in the UK. It had the corresponding advantage to us, that if we had a visit by a Minister, for example, who wanted to talk to British businessmen we would ask BABA to organise a lunch at such and such a hotel on such and such a day. The members would pay for the lunch and we would get a substantial audience for the Minister. Occasionally, I think twice in my time, we succeeded in getting the British Ambassador down to speak. He was able to spare us I think about a day and ...

JH: Who was that?

MM: Oliver Wright; it was Nicholas Henderson to begin with and then Oliver Wright.

JH: Oh yes, the best two retired but recalled Ambassadors we ever had.

MM: That's right. When we announced that they were coming we were able to achieve audiences of probably 300. For an ordinary Cabinet Minister we would be lucky to attract 100. The prestige of the British Ambassador in a place like Texas is huge. And so is the prestige of the British Consul, not as great, obviously, but if you said that you were the British Consul, which was correct....

JH: So they assumed that you were the boss.

MM: And they assumed I was the boss. They didn't know who the Consul General was unless they knew him personally. In general they assumed that; somehow or other, he was less important than 'the Consul', so I had a little innocent fun out of that. Probably a few invitations too. The Ambassador was a really big noise, just about the biggest gun we could bring to bear on an audience in the city of Houston, which is interesting.

JH: It is interesting and it shows the importance of getting, not only a good man, but a PR man in the job in Washington.

MM: Vitally important.

JH: Anywhere, but especially in Washington.

MM: I was particularly grateful to Oliver Wright because he came down and gave an address to a large group of businessmen and inevitably somebody raised the usual Irish question. Oliver Wright brushed that aside in a few short sentences, mentioned that Gladstone had tried to solve the problem in 1869 by offering Home Rule, which had been rejected by the Irish MPs at Westminster. There had been a problem ever since and we were doing our best to reconcile differences among the interests in Northern Ireland and so on. It was effective with American audiences who had no idea about the history of the Irish troubles.

JH: Because he had been the Home Office representative in Northern Ireland, the only one in our service who had done that.

MM: Yes, so that was one idea I immediately pocketed for use on future occasions because it was effective with Americans. They really don't begin to understand ...

JH: They don't understand it at all, they think it's a colonial problem ...

MM: Yes, that's right.

JH: Oliver Wright always took PR seriously.

MM: He was very impressive as a speaker and a personality and the Americans appreciated him too.

Overall we had a wonderful time there. It wasn't quite so good for my wife because she was not allowed to work and so she was stuck in the house ...

JH: Of course, and with minimum help in America ...

MM: Well, that didn't matter so much. It was a nice house but everybody else's wife was out at work and she couldn't work because she was the foreign wife of a consular official.

JH: Yes, well we had our two younger children with us in San Francisco so my wife was occupied, in fact she was busy and entertaining was hard work.

MM: Yes, that's right, entertaining was hard work for her. Still we had a great time, made a lot of friends. I became a member of a breakfast club and I used to go there every Wednesday morning at 7 am to talk to them about what I was doing and it gave me a very wide range of contacts with all sorts of American businesses. I was on holiday in India not long ago and we met a chap in the backwaters of Kerala who was running a British personnel firm. We got talking and it suddenly turned out that his company had been bought out by a girl who was a member of my breakfast club in Houston. There is one little anecdote that I would like to mention briefly. British Airways ran an inaugural flight to New Orleans whilst I was there and in it were three VIPs, John Smith who was the leader of the Labour party, Lord Trefgarne who was junior Minister in Defence and Aviation and Lord Murray, the former Len Murray, secretary general of the TUC, and these three were asked by BA to meet Mr Edwards, the Governor of Louisiana, a man who rejoiced locally in the name of Fast Eddie, because of various dealings. Fast Eddie had his office in the state capital, in Baton Rouge, and I had to go down to New Orleans to pick up John Smith, Len Murray and Lord Trefgarne and take them in a police car up to Baton Rouge. We were chatting away in the car and when we got to the governor's office they all went quiet, and it was left to me to walk in first and do all the presentations, which is quite right but

there was I, a First Secretary, introducing the leader of the Labour party and explaining who he was. Then Governor Edwards gave a little talk and he was smooth, polished, urbane and elegant, his manners were impeccable and he was completely at ease with these British visitors. Then our three visitors spoke and I couldn't help feeling that they were really rather unpolished somehow, not really in the same league as Governor Edwards. Yet he was by no means a leading figure in American politics, just a completely different approach altogether.

JH: Even John Smith ...

MM: Well, John Smith obviously was a superior man but still learning about things, and just taking things in. He wasn't going to lead with anything of significance.

JH: Yes, yes, the American skill that a lot of people learned here during the Thatcher era, I think, was projecting themselves. In America if you can't project yourself nobody knows you are there, you're dead. People here don't realise that. As somebody said, the Americans are as fully sophisticated as we are, just in a different way. And there the Brit may be the bumpkin.

MM: Yes, it was a real eye-opener.

JH: You have answered all the questions that I was going to ask you about Houston, and very interestingly too, if you agree should we move on to your final post in Madagascar?

Madagascar as Ambassador, 1984-87

MM: Yes, I'd got the message about Madagascar before I was due to leave Texas but I was told that under no circumstances was I to reveal my destination to anyone. I didn't get any briefing about Madagascar from the Foreign Office, I later discovered, because they had got nothing from the post itself. There was no post report. I went to the American equivalent of the Stationery Office and asked them for the post report by the American Embassy in Madagascar. It was interesting about Madagascar, especially in the complete absence of any information whatever from our post. When

I got to London I asked the FCO for a briefing and they weren't able to tell me anything much either. The post had been closed in 1975. It had been re-opened in 1980. The officer sent to re-open had had to spend a lot of his time looking for a house to live in, looking for premises for the Embassy, then setting up systems. I don't really think that he had a great deal of time to get around much. The Foreign Office said that I should call in at the British Embassy in Paris on the way and get some briefing about Madagascar there. I called at the Embassy and of course they knew nothing about Madagascar. They took me along to the DOM/TOMs (Departments d'Outre Mer et Territoires d'Outre Mer). The DOM/TOMs were slightly quizzical about this. Why was I asking them for information?

JH: A French ex-colony.

MM: We had a good lunch on the DOM/TOMs and then continued to Madagascar. The next morning we flew in over Madagascar and we could see muddy river water flowing out into the Indian Ocean, pouring out mud and silt on the northern side of the island and then we came down lower and I could see what looked like devastated countryside below me with mud coloured houses and walls and so on, a very depressing sight. The first thing that happened when we got out of the aircraft was that the Chef de Protocol turned up with a camera crew to interview me, in French, of course. This was my first French speaking post. I hadn't spoken French since I was at school. I'd had a few lessons in London on the way and I'd always tried to keep it up, but it was a trial at first. I got through that and I was welcomed into the depressing house, the Ambassador's residence ...

JH: Your wife wasn't with you?

MM: She was with me. After Texas it was a come down. Still, I was the ambassador and that was a plus. I was told that I might have to wait for a long time before I could present my credentials, and that until I had presented my credentials I had to remain in purdah. But after about a day, it was certainly a very short period of time, the word came that I would be expected to present my credentials at 10 am the next morning. You had to go in a presidential vehicle with outriders, policemen, sirens and all that. I had taken the precaution of writing out a little speech in French beforehand so I had

an idea of what to say and how to say it. Then it turned out that the French Ambassador was also presenting his credentials but they put him in after me. This meant that in the protocol order of diplomats in Madagascar I was permanently ahead of my senior French colleague. We had both arrived on the same day, but I had landed first. The French ambassador was a student of Malagasy and he gave a speech larded with Malagasy proverbs but they gave each of us the same length on the television news that night. I think they actually went out of their way to try to encourage me and in some ways to make things a bit difficult for my French colleague. Of course his mission was the serious one. Madagascar was an ex-French colony and the French had an Embassy of 180 Paris-based and a bilateral aid programme at least as large ...

JH: 180 Paris-based staff?

MM: Yes and hundreds of co-operants in the field, a bilateral aid programme which was at least as large as ours to India, 100 million pounds sterling at 10 Francs to the pound, and they had four regional Consulates General in the island.

JH: With a population of what?

MM: 12 million as far as anyone knew. It was a vast undertaking on the part of the French and important to them because of their investments, the large number of French citizens still resident, la francophonie and the strong cultural links with Madagascar and the fact Madagascar was a large island surrounded by a number of small French territories, the island of Mayotte, Reunion, which is a Departement of France, and all sorts of other little islands in the Indian Ocean that we know nothing about, the Iles Eparses, for example. Any idea where they are?

JH: "Scattered islands", no.

MM: No, well I hadn't either but they are on the map there and they are French. So Madagascar is important to the French. It was also important to the Russians at that time, 1984. The Russians also had a large Embassy. There were about forty diplomatic missions, resident missions in Madagascar in 1984, plus numerous non-

resident missions and a large European Delegation. Ordinary bilateral embassies represented France, the Federal Republic of Germany, Italy, the Swiss.

JH: What was the basic interest of these western countries, apart from the French perhaps, in having a mission there? What was our own interest?

MM: The battle between the Communist powers and the West. The Americans were there of course.

JH: That was the reason we re-opened, I suppose?

MM: I am not sure what the actual reason was. I think we could not have afforded to remain out of a place that was regarded as so important by most of our European partners, and the most important countries in the world. The Chinese were there. The Communist Chinese were running an aid programme, and rebuilt the key road linking the capital with the main port. The Japanese were there, with some valuable aid. Also represented by embassies were the North Koreans, the Libyans, the Indians, the Indonesians, the Cubans and the Vietnamese. The ANC had a representative there, and there was a mission from the Sahraoui People's Republic, the Egyptians, the Yugoslavs, the East Germans, of course. It was a considerable diplomatic presence. I later discovered that Madagascar's position in the Indian Ocean potentially governing the shipping route down the Mozambique Channel was a lot more significant than I at first realised. All the very large crude carriers that carry the West's oil from the Gulf sail down that Channel.

JH: A very cold war operation ...

MM: A very cold war operation. Madagascar was, I thought, a depressing place but nevertheless the people themselves are charming and intelligent; they have their own unique culture, their own unique music system. They have an Indonesian based language ...

JH: Which I gather all the other inhabitants also speak, even though a lot of them are of Arab or other origin.

MM: Yes, nearly everybody speaks the main central language, Malagasy. They come from eighteen separate tribes and it's a big island. It's a thousand miles from top to bottom and four hundred and fifty miles across. We travelled all over ...

JH: About the size of Britain?

MM: Two and a half times bigger in area. I had one Ministerial visit, Malcolm Rifkind, the first Foreign Office Minister ever to visit in a relationship which dated back 160 years. I took him to see the President. I found out early on that if I wanted to get into contact with the President I had to follow Protocol and send a third person note to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but then if I wanted anything to happen I had to send a blind copy of the note to the chef du cabinet in the President's office and then he could say to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'What are you doing about this,' without revealing how he knew something was in the offing. Otherwise nothing would happen, because the Protocol Department would just sit on the note and do nothing about it. The chef de protocol was in the Soviet camp. So I got an interview for Malcolm Rifkind with President Ratsiraka and he sent an aircraft to pick us up at about 4 o'clock in the morning so that we could fly up to the northern part of the island where the President was in his beach retreat preparing a speech. When we turned up, the President wanted to talk French. Malcolm Rifkind wasn't comfortable in French, and I was definitely not comfortable in doing simultaneous interpretation. I could say what I wanted to say pretty well but interpreting was not on. We started off with a Malagasy interpreter translating from French to English but eventually the President said, 'To hell with this, we will speak English.' And he conducted the conversation in impeccable English. He had taught himself. It was a tour de force. It didn't get us anywhere but nevertheless much ground was covered. Ratsiraka wanted to know what he could get out of us and we explained that there was nothing doing. It cleared the air. There were other subjects, which were close to the President's heart. One was the expected visit by the Duke of Edinburgh as President of the World Wildlife Fund for Nature and the other was possibilities arising from a survey which was then being done by BP of coal reserves in southern Madagascar. Ratsiraka was hopeful that somehow or other BP could be induced to exploit this reserve. At the same time as the BP coal survey was being done, three other companies were

exploring for oil. There was AMOCO, now owned by BP but then an independent American corporation, there was Occidental Oil of California and there was AGIP, the Italian company. AMOCO and Occidental were spending vast sums of money. AMOCO spent far more than anybody else in exploration. I used to keep a pretty close watch on that. Because I had come from Houston, where AMOCO had its headquarters, I was accepted into the AMOCO camp. Ditto Occidental, which had actually a Scottish-born manager in charge. So I had a welcome when I visited their installations although I was given absolutely no insight whatever into the results of their highly confidential exploratory work. They keep all that absolutely close to their chests. It gave me a useful insight into the key investment possibilities in Madagascar. I suppose in a way it made life fun. I could go off and look at their things in the jungle.

In relation to the visit of the Duke of Edinburgh, I'd been told when I went to Buckingham Palace before I left London that under no circumstances was I to become involved in any way in the Duke's visit. It was entirely private and being run entirely by Geneva, the World Wildlife Fund for Nature. I wouldn't have a thing to do with it.

JH: Had they told that to the local Malagasy?

MM: As soon as I got there I found that the World Wildlife Fund had got a representative on the spot who was a Malagasy and he came to me and said, look, what am I going to do with His Royal Highness?' I said, 'Well, you'll show him the country, won't you?' So we went through the prospective programme and I went out to look at a couple of sites with the WWF representative and told him whether or not they were suitable, in my opinion. I ended up doing the programme. A fair amount of the administration rested with the WWF and the Duke, because he was going to fly his own aircraft. I did a lot of the groundwork for him. I had a meeting with the Prime Minister and the Minister of the Interior and I told them, because I knew this from other occasions, that the Prince wanted no formality. They said that at the very least they were going to have a band at the airport and they were going to have a parade of troops for him to inspect and a march past and then they would bring him into town with outriders, sirens, flashing blue lights all the way. I said they should not do that, and this caused difficulty. The Malagasy wanted all the formality and

ceremony they could get for a visit by the husband of the Queen of England. It was going to be a historic occasion for them. The Malagasy had had no official contact with the British crown since their embassy was received in London by Queen Victoria. The Minister of the Interior told me that he was responsible for security in Madagascar and if there was an attempt on the Prince's life he would be responsible, so I had no business to tell him that there should not be police outriders in front of the car. I said, please do not have them. He said to me: 'if there is an attempt on his life will you bear responsibility?' And I said that I would. I had to take a decision on the spot. So the Prime Minister then ruled that there would be no outriders, no sirens no flashing blue lights And there were none. In fact it was a far wiser decision than I knew at the time because at the end of the Duke's visit he addressed the entire Malagasy establishment. All the top people, all the Conseillers Suprêmes de la Révolution, all the Ministers, everyone was there except the President. The object of the meeting was the delivery of a report by Prince Philip on the environment. The punch line of his address was the statement that he thought Madagascar was committing suicide and that unless they did something drastic to prevent the continuing erosion of the land, Madagascar would die. The audience was aghast. They had had no idea that an important foreigner could come and say such unpleasing things. Nobody else in the world would have been capable of delivering such a message. You wouldn't have got an elected American president coming there and saying anything like that. Neither would a communist leader. It was absolutely unthinkable for any political leader to be so blunt. Only somebody with the independent status of Prince Philip could do it. So he delivered that message to gasps of amazement and surprise. That came at the end of the visit and the Duke flew off. There was of course no grand sending off ceremony. Nothing needed to be cancelled. He was just driven to the airport where there were suitable people to shake his hand and he went off back to Nairobi on his own private Andover, piloted by himself. Although the Malagasy didn't like this message, it was clearly premeditated to the extent that all the donor organisations like the World Bank, the IMF, the European Fund for Economic Development, the European Community delegation, USAID, all said to the Malagasy, look, you take notice of this message or no more aid, or, our aid will be geared to the implementation of steps to prevent erosion and degradation.

JH: And this was published in Madagascar? It wasn't censored or omitted?

MM: Oh, the message went out all right. It was published in full in the local press. I actually repeated it in my farewell speech. But only to the diplomats and officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It registered, and I think Madagascar has tried to do something, although whether it's been effective or not is hard to say. The Duke did say that he'd go back in ten years time to check on progress and he did do so. He went back in 1995 but the results of that are beyond my ken. It was a very impressive visit for that reason.

JH: And it sounds like a highlight, possibly the highlight of your time there?

MM: Yes I think it probably was. I finished my last six months as Dean of the Diplomatic Corps. And I was a highly acceptable Dean because by then the Malagasy had, I suppose, come to the conclusion that I could be relied on to tell them the truth. I think that telling them not to make a big fuss of the Duke on arrival was unpalatable but then once he had delivered his final message they realised that they had been very wise not to make a big fuss of it.

JH: So the main position in Madagascar at that time was that we should be seen to be playing our part in them not falling into communist hands.

MM: And in encouraging them to turn to the West. I tried also to encourage investment by western companies in Madagascar. I did have one success there. I encouraged a Canadian company which at that time was a subsidiary of BP Chemicals to invest in ilmenite and after I had retired they asked me if I would go and run their investment programme, but alas the ownership of that company changed. BP Chemicals was sold off to RTZ and so the whole thing went onto the back burner, but it's still rumbling away there and I think it might result in something.

JH: Well, that rounds off a very varied career, nearly all abroad and very vividly described, if I may say so. I wonder if there are any general things that you feel you want to record, about the service or about your own time or the most important or striking thing that you were part of before closing? It's a difficult question to answer.

MM: It was a huge privilege. There might not have been any money in it or any personal advantage beyond the satisfaction of doing a useful job but I think it was a huge privilege to be a British government representative throughout the time that I served overseas. I do hope that in future our representatives overseas will be supported and given credit for doing a vitally important job.

JH: Yes, it is an important job ... the trouble might be that it is not immediately missed if it is not there.

MM: Oh yes, that's true, and a lot of what goes on is hidden from public appreciation and that's why I've gone into a number of fairly minor petty things that are at least important to me and I think were important to people overseas, and not on the record anywhere.

JH: Yes indeed. The thing that is most ignored by the great British public is the amount of work and energy that goes into this job. They tend to think of us as laid back cocktail party goers and the press does nothing to disabuse them of that impression. Well, Malcolm, subject to any additions you want to make when you see the draft we'll close this interview for the present.

MM: Thank you very much.