

BDOHP Biographical Details and Interview Index

Martin Robert MORLAND (born 23 September 1933)

CMG 1985.

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MARTIN ROBERT MORLAND, CMG

**interviewed by Malcolm McBain on 24th January 2006 in London
for the British Diplomatic Oral History Programme.**

Education and career choice

MM: You were educated at Ampleforth and at King's College Cambridge. You then joined the Diplomatic Service. What particularly gave rise to your decision to join?

MRM: I don't think my parents particularly pushed me. My father was a very reticent man who really gave very little advice about anything. I think they were very pleased when I did join. Why did I apply? I suppose having been brought up as a Diplomat's son and, for that matter, grandson, it was a natural thing to try for - it was very much a question of 'trying for' because it was then, and I think to some extent is now, a lottery, and you had to qualify to a certain standard; but after that some they take, some they don't and it isn't very clear what the criteria really are. What I did was I tried to get in towards the end of my three years at Cambridge, got into the intermediate or B grade which meant that I had to try again but I wouldn't have to do the whole exam. I then did two years' National Service in the Grenadier Guards and, from that, did the interviews and got in.

MM: Was there a written examination?

MRM: The second time round there wasn't.

MM: Just an interview?

MRM: I think there were two lots of interviews.

MM: And that would have been in when?

MRM: That must have been 1956.

MM: Suez!

National Service in the Grenadier Guards

MRM: Yes, I got out of the Army just as Suez was brewing; there was a rumour that all National Service men's tours would be extended but it didn't happen. And I was then given what turned out to be Hobson's Choice to learn Burmese, which I didn't particularly want, or another hard language which would have been worse. I was in Germany; it was before the days of e-mails and easy telephoning and I was told that all ten entrants that year, which was a rather small entry, had to learn a hard language. I was given the choice of hard languages - the first choice I think included Farsi and I said I'd like to learn Farsi. I certainly didn't want to learn Arabic. And, when I came to present myself in London, I was told I was going off to Burma, at which point I said, "For God's sake, can I learn Arabic after all!" They said no! It turned out to be extremely interesting, but I wasn't enthusiastic.

MM: Were you commissioned in the Grenadiers?

MRM: Yes. You go through a very unpleasant six weeks at Caterham and then you go to Eaton Hall, the Officer Training School, and then you go to a battalion. But I didn't go to Egypt or Cyprus, which one of the battalions did, so it was really peacetime soldiering.

MM: How did you get into the Guards?

MRM: Like most other things in my life, it's because you know somebody. One of my mother's cousins married the future Duke of Norfolk who was in the Grenadiers and, from their point of view, I think they quite like sort of reasonable young men to go into what sounds like a snooty outfit where you have to be rich, and Miles Norfolk, as he became, recruited me and my two subsequent brothers and we all did our National Service in the Grenadiers. You didn't actually need a private income - you just stayed away from nightclubs and didn't have a fast car.

MM: Like the others!

MRM: No they weren't all like that!

Branch A of the Foreign Service 1956

MM: So it was a good start. You went into Branch A of the Foreign Service.

MRM: Then I went into Branch A. And, as I say, was one of an intake which had to learn a hard language and I didn't want Arabic.

Hard language training in Burmese

MM: So where did you learn Burmese?

MRM: I did it for an academic year at the School of Oriental and African Studies and then went out to Rangoon as a language student to begin with, combined with being a Third Secretary. That meant three months' language training, some time in Chancery, and then another three months language training. Language training was not undertaken in the capital but in Mandalay where they speak an easier-to-understand Burmese.

MM: Is it a hard language?

MRM: Yes, it's a very hard language - and it's because it has never really been properly studied, so the only dictionary when I started was one done in the 19th century by an American missionary called Judson. It isn't a language that has had a lot work done on it. It is tonal. Not as many tones as some of the other tonal languages, such as Thai. Thailand is next door to Burma, but it's as different from Thai as English is from Chinese.

Posting to the embassy in Rangoon 1957-60

MM: So you ended up in the Embassy in Rangoon.

MRM: I was in the Embassy in Rangoon for just over three years. I drove back with friends from Calcutta to London in 1959 which, in those days, wasn't too difficult. It was impossible to drive out of Burma for political reasons; the India-Burma frontier was closed. My companions had driven in not long before. By that time my father was Ambassador in Japan, so I went and visited my parents on the

way back. It was a very luxurious time in terms of official travel. You were given five months for the journey and leave. The Embassy was large; there wasn't a great deal to do.

MM: The Embassy in Rangoon?

MRM: It was quite large then, what with one thing and another.

MM: Could we discuss that a bit? A large Embassy in a country which had become independent, rejected the link with the British through the Commonwealth and had gone its own way. Why had we still got such a large presence there?

MRM: Well, it's quite a large country. It has been so much out of the news in the last fifty years that people think of it as very small, but it's the size of England and France put together and now has 50 million people; I suppose it had about 30 million then. There was no reason, looking at it, why it shouldn't become as prosperous as Thailand has become. The fact that they spoke good English would have been a great help. It hadn't gone into its hermit-like existence. U Nu, the then Prime Minister, was quite a prominent member of the Non Aligned Movement and was prominent in the Buddhist world. And I think in those days Embassies were more generously staffed anyway, so I don't think that was surprising. From 1962, just after I left, until I returned twenty-five years later, it was downhill all the way, and became more and more isolationist.

MM: Did we still own Burma Oil?

MRM: I think Burma Oil was on its way out but it was still there when I was there, and a number of British firms were still there, but they were being squeezed out even before the military dictatorship took over. So far as I was concerned, it was a bit of a holiday. It was fun, but it wasn't absolutely clear what use I was; it was pleasant enough, but it wasn't a tremendously active embassy and later I got thrust into much more busy and active things, which I enjoyed more.

MM: Were you married?

MRM: No I wasn't. I didn't get married until I was thirty-one, some time later.

MM: That was your first introduction to Burma? Was it still the rice bowl of Asia?

MRM: Not to the same extent as it had been before the War because it was fought over twice during the War and much ravaged, and the insurgencies, which haven't entirely been extinguished even now, occupied much more of the central part of Burma then than they do now. You couldn't go across the Rangoon river to villages on the other side safely, and all that affected rice production.

MM: I know that, when I was in Thailand, one of the people I knew there was a Shan king. He was a wonderfully friendly contact to have in Northern Thailand.

MRM: Was he from Kengtung?

MM: I'm not sure where he was from but he hoped that his son would one day assume command of the Shans, and he reminded me that we had promised independence to the Shan states during the War, but then abandoned them when Burma became independent.

MRM: This is something also reported by the Karens but the Karens make more of a fuss. I don't think it's the case that whoever promised them independence had any right to do so. I think these were local promises on the whole.

MM: By military commanders?

MRM: Yes.

MM: That's possible.

MRM: And in fact I don't think it was possible for us, the way things turned out with a change of government in London, with the independence of the Indian sub-continent and then turmoil in India. This may not be an excuse for breaking promises, but I think it would have been simply impossible in terms of national will and national resources to start a war in Burma, which would have happened with the ethnic Burmese if we'd cut Burma in half, as they would have seen it.

MM: Did you form the impression that they were a militaristic people?

MRM: There's a great tradition of fighting, not the Shans so much - they have a reputation for being peaceful - but, rather like many countries, Burmese history in one of wars. They weren't tremendously effective in the Second World War, if you remember. The Japanese hijacked thirty promising lads and took them off to train them, and then brought them back with the Japanese invasion army and set up a Burma Independence Army. This was on the side of the Japanese to begin with and then changed sides half way through the war and claimed to have done a lot to help the British get the Japanese out of Burma. The British view is that they did practically nothing and were entirely ineffective in this regard. But since then they have become a potent, rather under-equipped army which it is said the Thai Army is terrified of. The Thais are much better equipped, but they're less used to fighting; the Burma Army is a real fighting army and has been for fifty years.

MM: Is that your impression?

MRM: Yes I think so. It's certainly what I've been told, not just by Burmese but by others.

MM: Thank you for that. So after you'd finished in Burma, you came back to the News Department in the FCO.

Return to News Department in the Foreign Office 1961

MRM: In the Foreign Office. It became the FCO a bit later on. It was interesting and much more extending than being in Chancery in Rangoon. I had contact with very bright journalists who, in those days, had an interest in coming for briefings at the Foreign Office. I don't think these days they're nearly so interested in that. But I met a number of journalists who became friends and stayed friends, and of whom I saw a good deal in my next job but two, the main strand of my career, which was on the European Desk. The News Department was fun; I think I was a little bit hesitant about it to begin with and was told to be a bit bolder, that sort of thing.

UK Delegation to Common Market negotiations, Brussels, 1962-63

But that hesitancy didn't last very long because one fine day I was on duty over the weekend and, on Friday evening, I was told I had to report to Brussels on Tuesday to the negotiating delegation for Mr Heath's attempt to get Britain to join the Common Market. I said, "No, this is too quick. Can I come ..." and they said, "Right, Wednesday!" So there I was ...

In Brussels I worked for Sir Pierson Dixon and stayed there until early 1963. Alas, I wasn't a great success there. I was too restless and did not pay sufficient attention to detail to please my master, who didn't say a lot at the time but gave me an absolutely stinking report when I'd finished. And I expect he was right really. But that was my first taste of really serious inter-governmental business, which I must say I have more of a taste for than bilateral diplomacy. One was lucky enough to get thrust into it again after a further failure as Private Secretary, but that comes later in the story.

MM: What was Pierson Dixon's function?

MRM: He had a double function: he was Ambassador in Paris and, simultaneously, he was the leader of what was then known as the Flying Knights. The way the negotiation was conducted was to have very senior officials from the Home Ministries, and of course the Foreign Office, in the shape of Sir Roderick Barclay, who spent two days in London preparing their instructions and then came to Brussels for weekly meetings. Meanwhile Bob Dixon did the same from Paris, or I think he did a sort of triangular move because he had to be in London as well. I was his Private Secretary in Brussels; there was another Private Secretary in Paris, Michael Jenkins. The remarkable thing about that delegation was that an awful lot of the really serious work was done by two First Secretaries, one called John Robinson and one called Christopher Audland, who were left to get on with it for most of the week while everyone was away in capitals; to the extent that the negotiations nearly succeeded, they have an enormous amount of the credit. John Robinson, whom I worked for later, was an extraordinary man - he died about ten years ago. The book about Britain and Europe by Hugo Young called 'This Blessed Plot', has a whole chapter about John Robinson who I was enormously influenced by. He was a ruthless and very difficult man but he did stick to one thing: he managed to get himself dealing with British entry into Europe for seventeen years straight, in different jobs. A most extraordinary fellow. Once we'd got in, he didn't really quite know what to do with himself. He was sent as Ambassador to Algiers but he sent dispatches back to say it was a perfect waste of time and please cut the Embassy in half. I next saw him in Washington when he was the number two to Nico Henderson. He then went to Israel which he didn't like, and retired early. But he was a phenomenon in his own right and certainly as far as my activities were concerned. That was when I first got to know him.

MM: Did you become a keen European?

MRM: Yes I did, and remain so. There are problems, but yes. I think my sentiments were related to the original purpose of the whole affair, which was to prevent war and to promote collective European strength, including British strength, in a world which was getting more and more competitive. And I think I still believe in that. But I got much more involved later, particularly with the referendum in 1975.

MM: So your period with Pierson Dixon was quite short.

MRM: And not successful! But extremely useful for me, giving me a taste of serious business. It was diplomacy, as much as anything, between government departments in this country, which again was much of what I did for my six years in London in the European Department. I think I'm naturally more of a Civil Servant than a Diplomat in many respects.

MM: Well, a great deal of diplomacy has to be practised in Whitehall.

MRM: Absolutely, yes!

Return to the Foreign Office, 1963-65

MM: So, from 1963 to '65 you came back to the Foreign Office and you were then a First Secretary?

MRM: Yes.

MM: And what was your job?

MRM: Well, I worked in what was called the Permanent Under Secretary's Department, which has been used as a cover for various things but included what is now called Defence Department. It also included what is now called the JIC (Joint Intelligence Committee), or the Foreign Office bit of the JIC, which was known as Heads of Sections. I was in what is now called the Out of Area Section. I was dealing with non-NATO defence business: SEATO, CENTO and so on. (Actually I think CENTO may have been another Department). Certainly SEATO, and then the Confrontation issue turned up, provoked by the Indonesians. I worked for very capable and competent people, but it was a quietish job really. In 1964 I got married to Jennifer Hanbury-Tracy, the daughter of an explorer who was also a painter, who was happy to embark on a peripatetic life.

MM: And the job had nothing to do with the Press?

MRM: It had nothing to do with the Press. One of the great skills you need to acquire in the Foreign Office is skill in drafting, and I did a bit of it. I hadn't had a chance to do any really in Rangoon, none at all in the News Department, none in Brussels and even Defence Department, where I started to put up drafts, wasn't tremendously effective in offering training in drafting.

Posting to UK Disarmament Delegation in Geneva, 1965-67

MM: And you were still in the Foreign Office at that time. But in '65 to '67 you went off to the UK Disarmament Delegation in Geneva. What did that entail?

MRM: Well, a fair amount of enforced idleness, oddly enough. There were pockets of it about, I think, in those days. Disarmament was meant to be tremendously important but there wasn't a great deal to apply oneself to. It was the Eighteen Nation Disarmament Conference which did, in the end a couple of years later, produce a very important treaty on non-proliferation. I was one of two speech writers and Sir Harold Beeley, who was the British representative, made a speech once a fortnight, and the Minister who came out, who was latterly Lord Chalfont, made a speech once a month. And there really was no hinterland of work besides writing the speeches. I did, I think, acquire that skill which was useful later, but we played tennis on at least one working afternoon with the Head of the Delegation because there just wasn't anything to do. And I was very much the bottom of the heap. Then there was a sudden flurry and change of personnel and, from being right at the bottom, I became the person who knew most about it for the last few months, which was a big change. It was a place where this treaty was being very slowly ground out, the main issue being that the developing countries in particular, who were non-nuclear-weapons states, didn't want to give up their right to possess nuclear weapons without receiving something in return. What they were given in return, which everyone forgets now, was the right to demand assistance from the nuclear-weapons states in developing peaceful nuclear energy. That is an essential bit of the treaty, which is relevant to questions like relations with Iran these days; always with the caveat that there must be foolproof safeguards against leakage from civil to military use. But I think people have forgotten that.

MM: Was there any sort of deal on inspection?

MRM: I can't remember now exactly how that worked. There certainly was a continuing process of negotiation, even after the treaty was done, on inspection regimes which continue to this day.

MM: So, it was really quite a pleasant interlude.

MRM: Yes, I mean Geneva is extraordinarily bland but I was married by then and had one small child and another one was born in Geneva. There wasn't really quite enough to do, quite honestly, except towards the end when changes in the Delegation meant that I got more responsibility.

MM: Did you have to use any foreign languages?

MRM: I improved my French but nothing else but French.

Private Secretary to Minister of State, Lord Chalfont, 1967-68

MM: Well, that disposes of that. Then in 1967 you became a Private Secretary again.

MRM: Yes, in spite of the Personnel Department quite rightly warning Lord Chalfont that I wouldn't be any good as a Private Secretary, he took me back to London where he was changing his role from being Disarmament Minister to being Minister for Europe. This suited me very well because I was already much more interested in that question than in any other aspect of foreign policy, but alas that didn't last very long. I wasn't disciplined enough to be a Private Secretary and, after a bit, in the politest possible way, he sacked me, which made me very downhearted.

MM: Did you like him?

MRM: On the whole I did like him. He's a strange character. He's still a friend and he has erased from his memory the fact that he sacked me! He's in his eighties now.

MM: He was an important figure at the time.

MRM: Well, he was really a Wilson protégé in a Brown Ministry, and regarded as such by the Secretary of State, George Brown; he was regarded as a spy in Brown's camp.

MM: George Brown was then ...

MRM: He was Foreign Secretary.

MM: Did you know Paul Buxton?

MRM: I knew him well. I took over from him, you see, as Private Secretary. Paul had been with Chalfont for many years, was much much better at it than I was and could control Chalfont much better. No, he's a friend - I haven't seen him lately.

There was then - I don't know if everyone remembers it now, but - the Chalfont Affair. Chalfont made speeches, and the point wasn't picked up immediately in the first one, hinting that, if we weren't admitted to the European Community, we might pull our troops out of Germany. It was generally believed that the Prime Minister must be behind this because Chalfont surely would not have dared do it by himself. It certainly wasn't something that George Brown wanted done and, after the third speech, it suddenly hit the headlines, and Chalfont had to come rushing back from Brussels to defend himself. There were several very uncomfortable days. Chalfont never admitted that the Prime Minister was behind it, but it seems quite likely that he might have been.

MM: He then left the Government, didn't he?

MRM: I don't think he left; he didn't resign over that. My memory's faulty, but I think he left only when they lost the Election, whichever election it was. I think he stayed on until the end.

MM: That would have been 1970.

MRM: Were they in till 1970? Then he must have left the Government. My memory is not good on this.

MM: I know that he left the Government, and I know Paul Buxton resigned from the Diplomatic Service to go into some kind of enterprise with Alan Chalfont.

MRM: That's right; which didn't work out terribly well.

MM: Your next job was as Assistant Head of the European Integration Department.

Assistant in European Integration Department of the FCO, 1968-73

MRM: Well, it wasn't quite that. I was in the third room in what was then called something else. The name kept changing in a sort of European direction. The European Integration Department was what John Robinson finally managed to get it christened after some changes. I was very much with my tail between my legs when I moved into that Department. John Robinson wasn't yet Head of Department but was a sort of special adviser to Con O'Neill, if Con O'Neill had already arrived; my timing may be slightly wrong because I was there until 1973 so I was a long time at it. And I wasn't very good at it to begin with; my drafting wasn't at all good and it was only when Robinson became Head of the Department, and used simply to tear up any draft I presented and told me to do it again, that I got to be quite good at it. But it was an increasingly busy Department as the prospect of actually getting somewhere improved.

MM: Yes that's right; we had a second veto, didn't we? Wasn't Britain vetoed a second time round about 1967?

MRM: That's right. That was when Chalfont was trying to get us in.

MM: And then round about 1972 ...

MRM: ... things began to happen. Heath and Pompidou met and things got better. There were terrible strikes, were there not, and electricity failures and that sort of thing; I can't remember which year it was.

MM: There were appalling strikes, yes, round about 1973 before the two elections of 1974.

MRM: That's right, but there were some strikes before that because, unless my memory's wrong again, I was still in the third room of the Department. We had an office party, which Christopher Soames, who was then Ambassador in Paris, came to, by candlelight. We had to buy some of the candles from clerical outfitters in the Vauxhall Bridge Road and others we got in the bag from Brussels! It was a Department of very high morale in spite of having a very savage Head because,

perhaps we were masochistic, but I think we quite enjoyed being beaten about provided one felt it was worth it.

MM: Your Head of Department was ...?

MRM: Robinson. And then Robinson was promoted to Under-Secretary and somebody called Michael Butler came in as Head of Department.

MM: I have interviewed him.

MRM: Have you? Yes. He became my sort of rabbi really; he sort of looked after me because we both shared an interest - or rather I learned from him to collect Chinese 17th and 18th century blue and white china. We used to go round shops at lunchtime collecting these things.

MM: Fascinating man, and a very keen European.

MRM: That's right, and he ended up on the economic side. Robinson was very difficult with his immediate inferior, and Butler had a terribly bad time. Fortunately, Butler didn't know a lot about the Common Market and I did by then, so I managed to work my way into a serious position of leverage.

MM: Anyway, those negotiations were successful, and eventually you were posted off to ...

MRM: Well, I was promoted young; I was promoted before I was forty, which, in those days, was remarkable. There wasn't any consultation or 'well done' or anything; I was just told one day, typical Robinson, that I was made a Counsellor, which I was delighted with, but praise was very sparing!

MM: He was by then an Under-Secretary.

Posting to Rome as Counsellor (Economic), 1973-77

MRM: He was by then an Under-Secretary. And off I went to Rome, which was a fairly new job; I had one predecessor, John Cambridge, as Economic Counsellor. It wasn't a very good slot and indeed, a couple of years later, it was abolished and combined with the Head of Chancery job, so I became Head of Chancery. As Counsellor Economic there was not a great deal to do except to learn Italian

and have a lovely time. But, in October 1974, I went to a lecture in town being given by an Italian member of the European Commission called Scarascia Mugnoza. He was asked what would happen to British membership of the Community and he replied that Heath would lose the coming election, that Wilson would then hold a referendum about continued British membership and the referendum would be lost. And I came out of that meeting feeling extremely gloomy, having put a good deal of effort as a foot soldier into this enterprise. I was very unhappy.

Secondment back to London as Head of EEC Referendum Information Unit, 1975

But then, in England as the referendum approached with six months to go, the cry went up, as it always will and has, saying, "Nobody understands what Europe is about. They must be taught. They must be educated." When the process of 'renegotiation', which Wilson had embarked on was complete, a detailed White Paper was to be produced and that White Paper would be turned into a popular document to be distributed to every household in the land. In order to achieve this, a Referendum Information Unit would be set up, which I was delighted to go back and head. It was a remarkable unit because it must have been the only information unit, which wasn't allowed to talk to the general public at all, except for this pamphlet which we produced. The pamphlet which I produced had a print run of 20 million; it was the largest print run ever done by the Central Office for Information. The first decision which had to be taken about it was what colour the cover would be! Silly story this, but the Government was being really mean; they said it could only be one colour plus black and white, and it couldn't be a political colour - it couldn't be red or blue or the Liberal colour - and there were very few colours left. One of them was turquoise, and this was put up to Mr Callaghan, the Foreign Secretary, who sent a Minute back, obviously having tried it out on his wife, saying, "I think the ladies will prefer turquoise!" So six tons of turquoise printing ink was ordered. Towards the end of this affair, the Government quite rightly decided that some popular journalist should be called in to give the finishing touches, so the draft I did was then very very skilfully tweaked by somebody called Sidney Jacobson of the Daily Mirror, who got a knighthood for it. But the Daily Mirror said, "Turquoise is hopeless! It's only used for hospital requisites. The Government will have to pay more money and have it in red, white and blue!" So, somewhere, six tons of turquoise ink may still be languishing!

MM: In the COI!

MRM: The COI or whatever it was! Anyway, all that was rather successful because I arrived back from Rome early in 1975 to be given an office more or less opposite the Cabinet Office in a building

which rumour had it harboured printing presses which would be used if there was a printers' strike restricting Government printing. Anyway, an anonymous-looking building. I had two PAs, a desk but no chair (because there was a strike of office workers) and I think four or five people. By the end of a few weeks, I had something like thirty people and twenty telephone lines, 10,000 sheets of writing paper because I wanted some writing paper and, in those days, it was impossible for a Government order to be fulfilled in less than 10,000 sheets! So it was quite funny.

More seriously, we did answer the telephone to journalists and we really set ourselves up as the research department for Peter Snow - must have been Channel 4 already, I think - who did a programme every day about the different aspects of the European Community, so that we fulfilled a useful purpose in helping the public to be educated in this indirect way. Michael Butler wasn't actually supervising me because I was in the Cabinet Office, but he was a Deputy Secretary in the Foreign Office by then and I really worked to him. We prepared fact sheets on different aspects of the Community, and we prepared a map showing all the foreign connections, because one of the assertions by the anti-marketeers was that the Community was terribly inward-looking, and we produced a map showing that it had relations of one kind or another with most countries of the world.

What was stimulating about producing the fact sheets was that you couldn't really use any previous paperwork because that was Heath's government's work and therefore not trusted by the Wilson government. So you really had to start all over again; whereas normally, if you're doing any work for the Foreign Office, you look at what's been done before. So that was quite interesting. I used to go home at night and write the fact sheets and then show them to Butler to make sure he was happy with them. I was notorious for a short time; I personally became a sort of mini-celebrity since I was interviewed by journalists from every newspaper from the Economist to the Times to the Guardian - not, I think, for my skill or beauty but because my position was precarious and they thought I was going to get sacked. The Danes had set up a similar outfit and the head of it was sacked within a couple of weeks for being too pro-European. So they thought this was a rather dangerous place and they might have to look at me before I went! So that was rather fun in its way.

MM: So there was a certain amount of stress involved.

MRM: There was a lot of stress. I left my family in Rome. That was one less worry. It was only three or four months. So I went back to a bachelor's life. Then David Gore-Booth, who was the brightest of a number of people who worked with me, made the mistake one day of telephoning the Guardian and

saying that they'd got something wrong; that the European Commission were right. And the Guardian went to town on this, saying we had absolutely no right to take such an initiative. One MP, Mr English, described this in the House of Commons that night as possibly the worst abuse of public morality since the Second Reform Bill, but fortunately it was 3 o'clock in the morning, so it was too late for the newspapers! It was great fun, the whole thing.

So that was a brief moment of glory. Goodness knows, we didn't cause it, but we were associated with a considerably important victory, and that was very good for morale.

Return to Rome

MM: And so after that ...

MRM: Then I went back to Rome; it was meant to be a three-year posting but, at the end of three years the Ambassador changed, the No. 2 changed and I was the No. 3. Michael Butler, my guru, telephoned from London saying, "I've got a good job for you. Come back soon." I said, "No, really it is difficult for the Embassy to do without me. It's lovely here and I'll do another year." Which was fun but bad for my career, I have no doubt. By that time there was a bit more to do in Rome, being head of the Political Section as well as the Economic Section. On the political side, the Communist Party of Italy was the main interest to London. Was it going to take power? So it was not entirely an idle choice.

MM: Were there not EEC-type negotiations?

MRM: Well, there weren't really. It was all done in Brussels, more and more. So Rome is a little bit of a backwater, funnily enough.

The other thing which I didn't really get to the bottom of in Rome is that the Christian Democrat Party was in power then and had been in power since the War. Whereas most of our interest was concentrated on what was going on in the Communist Party, nobody had really penetrated the Christian Democrat Party to find out what was going on there and what their relations with the Church were. Our mission in the Vatican didn't really bother about that side because it wasn't their business, and the Embassy to some extent didn't bother either because we thought that Church things were something for the Vatican Legation, so there was a little bit of a gap.

MM: Of course, we have a Mission in the Vatican.

MRM: Indeed, but it's very small and it's got much smaller just now, but it really concentrated on the Pope's attitudes to things like Northern Ireland or birth control and that sort of thing; it didn't really look at the Vatican side of the Christian Democrat-Vatican political relationship.

MM: What about the tendency of areas of Italy like Sicily to go their own way harking back to Italian history? Did any of that impinge on you?

MRM: I don't think it was regarded as a serious threat then. In fact it wasn't. Sicily was where the Mafia were and so on. I don't think that separatism was much of an issue.

MM: A very agreeable posting.

MRM: It was a very agreeable posting; and one could travel a lot within Italy.

Head of Marine Aviation and Environment Department of the FCO, 1977-79

MM: And then, when that came to an end, you came back to be Head of Marine Aviation and Environment Department.

MRM: Which was interesting. Environment hadn't really risen above the threshold then. There was one member of the Department who did it; I had very little to do with it. It wasn't a big issue at all. What I did manage to do was Aviation. All of these issues were really ones where the Foreign Office was not the leading Department of government, and the other Departments rather resented Foreign Office interference of any kind, so we had to employ a good deal of diplomacy to get anywhere. Relations with the Ministry of Defence are always easier than relations with any other Department in Whitehall, I found. You may have problems, but at least they acknowledge that you have a locus, whereas most other Ministries tend to regard the Foreign Office as irrelevant. This is not always the case with European Union matters but certainly for a lot of other things.

Aviation was then, and I think still is, much more bilateral than almost any other international area because air service agreements are negotiated bilaterally. And here there was a problem in that the main negotiator in the Department of Trade was somebody called George Rogers. Rogers was

tremendously macho and used to beat the other government down as far as he could, and regarded as completely irrelevant the fact that this might have an adverse effect on bilateral relations generally, and damage British interests in other areas; to the extent that he even regarded subsonic flight as a completely separate issue from Concorde, when at that time we were trying to negotiate supersonic air-routes, which caused special problems because of the sonic boom. He rubbed the Malaysians up the wrong way so much over subsonic flights that, when he went back and said, "Can Concorde fly supersonic over Malaysian waters (not even land)?" they said, "Not on your life! It might disturb the breeding habits of the fish!" And the Malaysians then came to England for bilaterals and the Department of Trade managed to find someone in the Scottish Office who was an expert on the effect of sonic booms on the mating habits of fish, but even that didn't do. And Concorde was barred from Malaysian air space. Whether that was the main reason why Concorde never got to Australia, who knows, but it was certainly relevant because there had been a hope at one point that it would go all the way to Australia. The Indians were also being difficult because they said, "If you're not allowed to fly supersonic over Cornwall, why over India?" That was an issue where the Foreign Office should have had more of a part to play than we did. We didn't get a chance to prevent the Malaysian problem from happening.

So that was one serious issue. Maritime: there was very little one got involved with really. But where I did go into action was in connection with terrorism and hijacking, because it was the time when there were quite serious hijacks going on. We did exercises of various kinds, and one scenario was the kidnapping of an ambassador. Sir Nicholas Fenn was doing nothing at the time, between different instalments of his very distinguished career, and wrote the scenario for this, which was several inches thick. The only problem was that we had to hire some outside talent and Sir Peter Hayman, an ex-ambassador, had just retired, so I hired him to play the part of the ambassador, before he was shortly afterwards revealed as having rather unfortunate tendencies, so I got a lot of stick for that!

MM: Who was to know?

MRM: But the other thing: I was one principal actor in the exercise and there was a Brigadier who was the other, and we went out together and generally collaborated. It was just after Mrs Thatcher became Prime Minister in 1979 and, in her programme, was an hour in the Cabinet Office listening to the traffic over the exercise - it was early days of satellite communication. She was meant to stay there for half an hour but she stayed for three hours because it was the kind of thing she liked. The scenario at

one point called for an appeal to Arafat to intervene and, as I did this, I thought, “What will Mrs Thatcher think of this?” But there it was in the scenario.

In the Foreign Office, there used to be a custom that the Head of Department had tea for the whole Department in his room and this custom seemed to have died away, but I bought a very large teapot and re-introduced it in MAED. I found it useful because, if one was very busy, one could simply go on working and you got used to working in a noisy environment in third rooms and, if you weren't busy, you could actually have a word with the different people who worked for you. It was a big department doing a lot of different things, and it was a good opportunity to make sure that you knew what was going on. I found that rather useful.

MM: You'd been suddenly translated from the Foreign Office to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office by then ...

MRM: That's right. That didn't really affect anyone's life much.

Posting to be Head of Chancery in Washington 1979-82

MM: But to be Head of Chancery in Washington.

MRM: Yes, that was an unfortunate event. My career has always been snakes and ladders and this was very much a snake. Although it was extremely useful to have a ringside seat, in the most important centre of political power in the world, so that from that point of view, it was valuable and interesting. What didn't work out was my relations with my Ambassador, and also the structure of the Embassy was a little difficult. The Head of Chancery is meant to have authority over the Chancery but, in the case of Washington, the system has been blown up to the extent that the Counsellor who happens to be Head of Chancery is one of three or four equals. And so there was no real question of co-ordinating their work, which was anyway done by the Minister. It was the custom in Washington for the Head of Chancery to be given some other area of work, and I was given Africa because my predecessor was an African expert in the shape of Bill Squire. As I'd never really set foot on the continent, I wasn't exactly regarded with respect by my interlocutors in the State Department. So that wasn't helpful. But the real problem was that Sir Nicholas Henderson, the Ambassador, was somebody who was very determined to get the people he wanted into his Embassy. If you remember, he'd retired from Paris and then was re-employed to go to Washington. In Paris, he got himself the kind of people he wanted -

a Head of Chancery he liked very much - and also the Assistant Administration Officer, who did battle for him with the Office in London very successfully. I think his request to the Office was to have both of these persons sent to Washington. Well, both were refused and I wouldn't be at all surprised if the refusal to allow the Assistant Administration Officer wasn't even more tiresome for him than Head of Chancery. Four different candidates were put up as Head of Chancery, all of which he turned down, and then I was put up and he reluctantly accepted me. He was somebody who was always prepared to do business with officials at whatever level they were if they knew what they were doing. He had in fact talked to me on the telephone from Paris when I was the Head of MAED in London. We talked quite a lot about the Airbus, which I forgot to say was one of the things I used to deal with. So he knew who I was but he didn't really want me. We both actually set out from London at about the same time; he went a few days earlier. I telephoned him in London and asked if we could meet, and he said, "No, I can't be bothered!" roughly speaking. So there was I, a Head of Chancery, who was meant to be close to the ambassador, given a little bit of a brush off before I even started. So it just didn't work out, alas and, when the 10% cut were imposed on all large embassies, we parted company with a sigh of relief, and back I came to London.

MM: How long had you been in Washington?

MRM: Two and a half years. So it was fairly respectable, and the return was genuinely due to a 10% cut; they needed to get rid of a Counsellor and it was obviously going to be me. And back I came; certainly more valuable to the Foreign Service for the experience because there's no substitute for actually working with the Americans. It's quite extraordinarily stimulating and very interesting, and I did actually manage to get involved with the African experts in the State Department

MM: Who was the Minister in the Embassy?

MRM: It was John Robinson to begin with and then John Fretwell.

Secondment to Hardcastle and Co Ltd, 1982-84

So back I came to London and they didn't know what to do with me because I was pretty well due for a promotion except for this little performance. The first idea was to send me off to be an instructor at the Civil Service College in Henley. And then a very odd thing happened: I had an old friend from Cambridge called Clive Hardcastle, who rose like a rocket in BP and was the head of the American

operation in his thirties, but he wasn't a big company man and never told BP what he was doing. BP had to send a special colleague to sit alongside him in New York and tell the management what he was up to. But he had a small firm in the City, Energy Consultants, and at that time - perhaps now too - it was customary to placate critical voices, which claimed that Foreign Office diplomats had no experience of real life, by sending some members of staff off on secondments outside. Most of the secondees were sent to very big companies – like BT or Unilever. Clive, my friend, quite liked mystifying people and I think part of the reason he hired me was so that, when there were PQs asking, “Which companies are the Foreign Office sending secondees to?” they could say BT, Unilever, Rolls Royce, and Hardcastle and Company, which gave him an air of mystery, and made him an unexpected member of the top echelon.

So I went off to him and the Foreign Office paid half my salary and he paid the other half, and it got me out of the way for a bit until Nico's wrath could be considered to have abated! And I had a lovely time.

MM: Doing what?

MRM: Well, this is it, you see. He had a group of consultants, one dealing with dealing gas, one dealing with oil and so on, and then any odd job, or odd proposition being hawked around the City that tended to come his way, because he was known in the City to be a soft touch for peculiar affairs. And the first thing I was told to do was to go off to Lima to try to rescue from sequestration by the Peruvian Government an aeroplane prospecting for copper with a slightly dodgy method called neuro-programmed cybernetics; this was one of the schemes which I think Giscard got mixed up in at one point, where you have a kind of black box on the aeroplane and you fly over the terrain and it shows up where the copper is. I met an engineer the other day who said that he did use this technique but that it was unreliable. Anyway, what had happened was that an associate company of Hardcastle and Co. had gone off to look for copper with the permission of the Peruvian Government, but Paul Branner, who invented this technique, took off in his aeroplane and went to another area where he wasn't allowed to look for copper. On his way back he crashed - not fatally - on the aerodrome, whereupon the Peruvian authorities took the aeroplane away. I was sent out as a kind of diplomatic figure to try to placate the authorities and get the aeroplane back. So that was my introduction to life of that kind.

MM: Did you get the 'plane back?

MRM: It got back a bit later. The Ambassador in Lima was entirely mystified by my arrival, but it did get back; whether my intervention helped ...

The next thing was much more straightforward. We got a job with the European Commission which I did a fair amount of work on, which was to look at the effects on exploration for oil within the European Union of the different tax regimes imposed by the different governments so that, if you had a prospect which perhaps straddled the northern/southern Irish border, for instance, that would inhibit prospecting. That sort of thing. It was really quite interesting, and I did some work on that.

But the next enterprise was pure Walter Mitty. Clive had worked for many years for BP and he was quite close to a man called David Erskine who'd also worked for BP and had been instrumental, while he was working for BP, in helping Japanese oil interests get access to crude oil in the Persian Gulf, something which the Japanese had been trying to do for many years. The Japanese middle-man involved in this was a billionaire - a rather eccentric man who had been a communist before the War and in Shanghai with Deng Xiaoping, who had been his friend. He kept on telling Clive Hardcastle that he was tremendously grateful to BP and, if there was anything that we wanted to do in China, he would arrange it; he would fix it because he had such good connections, particularly with an important Chinese outfit called CITIC. Anyway, for some months, we tried to get to the bottom of this. Here was a great opportunity in China but what did it consist of? Messages had to be sent to Japan and then on to China and back again, so there were two layers of oriental mystery in all this. In the end, a message came back that the Chinese were interested in defence sales, so I was sent off to the Ministry of Defence to look at it with the Colonel who dealt with defence sales to China, who by good chance had recently been Defence Attaché in Beijing, so he was a square peg in a square hole. I talked to him for a bit, and discovered roughly what the form was. It was not long after the Chinese had reneged on what was almost a completed deal with the UK on destroyers. This was regarded as untypically Chinese; they usually did stick to their word, but this time they pulled out at the last minute. So there we were, with this extremely dodgy opportunity.

Next thing that happened was that Clive and I were going to Brussels on other business and, in the departure lounge, we met Michael Butler, who was our man in Brussels. And I said to Michael, "Look, we'd quite like to get on to Lord Carrington" (who was then the Chairman of GEC), and Michael Butler said, "Well, he's coming to stay with me this weekend." So I said, "Well, could you just put in a word for us and see whether we can't come and see him?" So it was arranged that Clive and I would call on Lord Carrington in a week's time. We went to see him and we explained this

extremely improbable enterprise! And he said, “Well, I don’t know. I’ll try anything,” and gave us a letter saying, roughly speaking, ‘To whom it may concern: These people are in good standing with GEC and, if they say that they can provide British defence kit, they’re telling the truth.’ So we went home with this. Then we rang up Rolls Royce and said that we had the letter from the Chairman of GEC. So we got another letter from Rolls Royce, then we got another letter from British Aerospace. And off we went. As the second string to our bow, we had some hint that publishing might be involved and we couldn’t find a publisher, but we found a very big printer; or rather the Managing Chairman of a printing company. He’d never been abroad before in his life. The three of us then set off and had conversations in Beijing with defence experts from China and with the people from the China Printing Department. Percy Cradock, who was Ambassador there and for whom I went to work not long afterwards in the JIC, was marvellous. Many ambassadors would have said, “This is absolutely a total load of nonsense; I’ll not have anything to do with it.” But he had us to dinner with the quite respectable Chinese from CITIC, and did everything for us. The outcome was that we didn’t get anywhere with defence sales, but we did start a joint printing operation with the China Printing Corporation which went very well for some years until the English end of it was bought up by Maxwell and the whole thing collapsed. But it was a real Walter Mitty affair and an insight into the way things get done in the world outside the Civil Service.

Another unexpected angle was that Clive Hardcastle had been involved a lot with the Shetland Islands Council over the question of Sullom Voe. The Sullom Voe oil terminal was built there and involved an enormous increase in employment. The problem was going to be what to do with the labour force when the construction work finished. Clive was instrumental in negotiating a deal with the Treasury whereby compensation was paid by the oil companies to the Shetland Council without the Treasury reducing their own payments to the islanders, so Clive’s name was really tremendously important in the Shetland Islands. We went on a visit there and one of the things that they were having trouble with then was the Common Fisheries Policy, so I found myself, a secondee from the Foreign Office, ghost-writing letters to The Times from the Convener of the Shetland Islands Council, a man called Tulloch (known as the Ayah Tulloch!) pleading the Shetlanders’ case. I’m sure Personnel Department of the Foreign Office didn’t know I was going to be doing this sort of thing when they seconded me to Hardcastle and Company.

But, after a year of this just before we went to China, the Office rang up and said, “Really good news! You’re being promoted and you’re going off to be Ambassador in Kinshasha. It was just before the

China expedition so I said, "I'm terribly grateful to you, but I just wonder if just this once you might let me not accept this," so they snorted a good deal and I didn't go.

And so I did another year in various different affairs, including the film business. One of the things about the film business is that the details of ownership of a film are rather similar to the details of ownership of oil wells; both tend to be very split up. Clive, through an accountant he'd dealt with when dealing with oil wells, became involved in films. The idea arose of financing a feature film about the legendary king of Ireland, Brian Boru, which was going to be called Lion of Ireland, and the important detail was that the accountant involved had found a way, apparently, of getting American tax relief on pre-production finance. This was remarkable because you can usually get tax relief on production finance but not on pre-production finance. So this film was launched. I was sent off to Los Angeles to try to get the accountant to get a move on. I spent five weeks staying with him in Stone Canyon Drive outside Los Angeles, and it was a glimpse into another world. \$1m were raised and spent, and the film never happened. But again, the Foreign Office must have been a little surprised that this was what I was doing when I was meant to be learning about oil and gas.

MM: So that came to an end?

Secondment to the Cabinet Office, 1984-86

MRM: That was two years' work, and then I was given a good job in the Cabinet Office as Chief of the Assessment Staff, which was going through a fairly quiet period for the JIC. It was after the Falklands war and there wasn't anything really tremendous going on. Tony Duff was my first boss and then Percy Cradock, and I must say I took to Percy Cradock very much. He gave me a very good report at the end, and he suited me a lot. I found Tony Duff much more difficult to deal with. His reputation was far more bluff and hail-fellow-well-met, but I just didn't click. It was interesting job, but rather cut off from the action, as opposed to analysis. The only thing was, though I did actually get myself invited to the Permanent Under Secretary's morning meeting once a week which kept me up to date with Foreign and Commonwealth concern. Otherwise it was like working behind a glass screen; you took a lot of trouble preparing the reports which the JIC met once a week to discuss but didn't usually interfere with, and off it went and you never knew whether anyone read them except for the fact that the Prime Minister did, and that of course meant that other people had to as well. But you had no real relationship with other officials except the ones who worked for you, and I found it rather desiccated.

MM: So you came across from the Cabinet Office to the PUS's weekly meeting.

MRM: Well, he has a meeting every day but I came once a week. And, in a sense, the everyday meeting is what keeps the machine turning. It wasn't a special meeting. I was allowed in just once a week.

MM: You had a glimpse of what was going on on that particular day.

MRM: I just saw what they were all up to.

MM: Did you choose the day?

MRM: No I don't think so; I was simply told to come along. The agenda was whatever was coming up in the newspapers that day. *Yes, Minister* had just shown a programme about a military exercise in a dodgy part of the world for which the Foreign Office had given permission many many months ahead and then forgotten all about it. Then, something dreadful happens in the programme; and there was a great row because the FCO wanted to cancel and the MoD insisted on going ahead. And blow me down! The same thing happened in real life. The MoD had asked permission a year in advance to do an exercise, I think in Botswana, and terrible things were happening in South Africa. The Ministry of Defence never reminded the Foreign Office that they'd asked permission for the exercise a year before! And there it was happening next week! It was a lovely example of real life and the telly.

Chernobyl happened while I was there, which was interesting in the sense that nobody quite knew what to do about it. No UK ministry was responsible. I think we wrote a report, as well we might, but the first indication of Chernobyl, I think, was people coming out of a Swedish nuclear installation who were routinely screened, apparently were showing up as very highly radio-active.

MM: Practically glowing!

MRM: No, I don't think it was as stupid as that, but there was a great myth about Chernobyl.

I did manage to get a trip to the Falkland Islands because there was a 'VIP aeroplane' going to open the airport - Prince Andrew and all that - and I managed to get a spare seat. That was fun. Michael

Heseltine was on board and I must say I rather admire him anyway, but I did on this occasion because it was a very long flight via Ascension Island and the Air Force are notoriously mean. It was a VIP aeroplane but only the front two rows got anything to drink. And Michael Heseltine went back to have a look. I think he sensed that something was wrong, and went back to the crew and said, "Bloody well break open the rum rations!" And we all got something!

MM: So they did!

MRM: It was very bleak, the Falklands. Anyway, that came to an end, and off I went back to Rangoon.

Posting to Rangoon as ambassador, 1986-90

MRM: Again I was extremely reluctant to go to because as a military state it had been totally shut down for twenty-five years, and we saw no sign of its ever changing, just as there's no real sign of its ever changing now, alas. So I wasn't at all keen to go back and hoped for better things.

MM: There are people who say that maybe we should lift sanctions, and it was clearly what the ASEAN nations wanted. What's your view of that?

MRM: I come to that by a rather long diversion. When I arrived in 1986, there was no question of sanctions. The Government was just as dictatorial as it is now. The old Dictator, General Ne Win, ran the country as his private fiefdom and the UK, along with other countries, sucked up to the Burmese and tried to get them to accept aid. What changed my view of everything was that, in 1988 quite unexpectedly, the whole country erupted and nearly got rid of the military, and this extraordinary woman (Aung San Suu Kyi) emerged. She was the equivalent of Jack Kennedy's daughter in the sense that her father was the martyred hero of independence. She had lived abroad for much of her life. At the same time, she kept up her Burmese identity. And her emergence to take leadership of what had previously been a disorganised and leaderless movement, changed everything. OK, she's been locked up off and on for ten years over the last fifteen, but she is still the only hope for a free Burma. She is in favour of continuing sanctions, and I believe you should pay attention to what she says. If the 1990 election result had been accepted by the military, she would be Prime Minister. I think there are other reasons. If you did remove the sanctions, it would open up a lot more investment from the West. Of course, sanctions don't prevent investment from China and India and Singapore and so on, but nevertheless, if the West is pretending to be some sort of touchstone for human rights, to abandon it for

Burma, where they had what looked like proper elections and then simply disregarded the result, would be difficult to justify. If there was the slightest sign that the carrot of removal of sanctions would lead to some improvement in the way the Burmese military behave, then I'd be all for it, but there is no such sign; on the contrary, at the moment, things seem to be getting worse. The last time I saw Aung San Suu Kyi was ten years ago now, when her husband and I and a brother of mine who has been to Burma a number of times, and Jenny my wife, all spent a couple of days with her.

MM: Whereabouts?

MRM: In Rangoon, in her house. She was allowed to receive visitors. She's almost always been kept in her own little compound. But she isn't somebody who listens to other people much, and why should she listen to me? But it was at a moment when Tony Blair was already expecting to win the next election. His line in this country was "It's only a matter of time before I become Prime Minister. I shall start behaving like a Prime Minister now." And I simply suggested to her that she should take that line. She was at that time fighting every inch of the way with the military over small details - would she be allowed this, would she be allowed that; they weren't quite as oppressive as they are now. And I said, "Why don't you behave a bit more like Tony Blair and say, 'Look, I've won the election; it's only a matter of time before I take over; I'm quite relaxed. Let there be investment' and so on." And she simply said, "Burma's not like that!" Which is fair enough. And I expect, if she had taken a different line, she would have lost the support of the Burmese émigrés and probably of the US Congress. I don't think sanctions are terribly effective, but I think the act of removing them now would send a number of wrong signals.

The trouble about the Burmese Government is not just their cruelty but their incompetence. People compare them a lot with China and say that China's human rights are equally bad, and they're untouchable because they're so powerful, which is true, but there is movement in China, both economic improvement and also some change in human rights. It's the lack of freedom which I found so intolerable in Burma, which is not quite the same thing.

But, as it was, my time there was split in two. To begin with, we tried to get the Burmese to accept development aid. There was a project to get Hawker Siddeley to renew the railway from Rangoon to Mandalay and that sort of thing, but they refused.

MM: Who? Hawker Siddeley?

MRM: No, the Burmese. It was the Trade and Aid initiative. The idea was that you got a British firm to go in to the recipient country and the firm would receive a certain amount of help from HMG and the Burmese would get a soft loan. It was an interesting little problem; the railroad from Rangoon to Mandalay is over 400 miles long. With the present track and signalling system, the trains can't cover the distance in under twelve hours. If they could do it in under twelve hours, you'd need half the rolling stock because they could go and return in 24 hours. As it is, successive Burmese Governments were bribed by the French or the Chinese or whoever it was, and by more and more persistent Koreans, to buy sophisticated locomotives instead of spending the money upgrading the track. So that's what one did to begin with, until everything shut down after the 1988 uprising.

One extraordinary case that was waiting to be settled when I first arrived involved a British teacher arrested for murder. He wasn't in jail because my amazing predecessor, Nick Fenn, had managed to keep him out on bail. The teacher was a British Council-hired English lecturer whose wife died in mysterious circumstances in Burma, and the finger pointed at the husband. This case went on and on. He was finally put in jail and was then condemned to death. This occupied the Embassy a good deal because we had to keep visiting him in jail. In the end his sentence was annulled on appeal and he got away. But it did take up a lot of time.

MM: Those things always do, don't they.

MRM: Because there were so very few foreigners there.

MM: What did you think we could do? Was there anything?

MRM: I don't think foreigners can do a lot, frankly, but I think we can keep on trying.

I would like to say a word about the actual 1988 uprising. It was very strange really. In September 1987, General Ne Win, the old dictator, got a bee in his bonnet about inflation and decided the way to deal with inflation was to reduce the volume of money in circulation. So, at 11 o'clock on one Saturday morning, the radio made an announcement that all bank notes over the value of ten of the local currency - which was worth £1 at the official rate but 10p at the unofficial rate - were abolished. They were no longer valid. This was the kyat. So everything above 10 kyats was abolished. It was a largely cash economy; a few people had their money in banks and that was all right for them but

almost everyone else used cash. If you bought a house or a car, which cost roughly the same, you did it all in cash. So anyone who'd just that minute bought a house - the fellow who'd bought the house had the house and the man who had sold it for cash was wiped out. Nothing happened for six months or so, but the following July, when things were getting difficult, the old man suddenly got up and said he was resigning.

MM: Who was that?

MRM: Ne Win. Ne Win said he was resigning. He had run the country as his private fiefdom. Everyone was terrified of him; he was a real oriental despot. Then a few weeks later a general strike was called; unions were not allowed, assemblies were not allowed at that time, so to have a strike was quite extraordinary. The reason it took off, many people think, was that a BBC reporter called Christopher Guinness, a trainee reporter, happened to be in Rangoon, met some students and workers who told him there was to be a strike beginning on the 8th minute of 8th hour on the 8th day of 1988. The Burmese are just as superstitious as the Thais and the Chinese. Christopher Guinness left Burma and put the strike call out on the Burmese Service of the BBC, which was listened to by almost everyone in Burma. As a result of that, people knew about the strike call. If they hadn't, I don't think the strike would have happened. Anyway, gradually over the next few days, the strike spread around the country. There was some shooting to begin with but, after about a week, the authorities simply sat back and the whole of Rangoon for several weeks was full of marching crowds; and this happened in what had previously been a sort of Stalinist-controlled country, so it was very strange.

MM: And you reckon that was due to the Burmese Service of the BBC.

MRM: I don't know that it would have taken off if hadn't been for this piece of information. The BBC is very coy about the fact that this has become part of the history of the uprising.

MM: Is the Burmese Service still operational?

MRM: Oh yes, indeed. It operates a couple of hours a day only but, when I was there, it had 100,000 letters a year, which was more than any other service except the English and the Arabic Service. And it was peculiar that the Burmese authorities allowed the letters to get to London; they went through a post box in the British Embassy; very strange.

MM: So you saw them.

MRM: No, we didn't. It was a local Burmese employed by the BBC who actually passed them on; we didn't open them or read them.

MM: Did you have anyone capable of reading them?

MRM: Yes but we wouldn't want to open them. We could ask the BBC in London what was in them, which we did. It was the volume rather than the individual letters that mattered, and the general content. We had very good relations with the BBC Burmese Service, so we could find out what was going on.

MM: If you could trust what they told you.

MRM: Well, the Burmese Service in London were trustworthy. One of them there now was the Information Officer in the Embassy whom I was in quite close touch with.

MM: The Burmese Embassy in London.

MRM: No, the British Embassy in Burma. After I left in 1990, she was arrested and imprisoned, got out and came here as a refugee and is now working for the Burmese Service. I act as an expert witness for Burmese asylum seekers, which means I have to keep up with what's going on.

Anyway, the most extraordinary thing that ever happened in my life was to be present when this national uprising took place, and was then brutally put down. In spite of the tragic bloodshed, to watch a country which has been completely controlled suddenly break out into freedom was breathtaking. There were some journalists in Rangoon at the time who had been in Prague when that had broken free, and they said the feeling was just the same. But alas, it hasn't worked out.

MM: It is so sad.

MRM: Sorry, you were asking about something else at that moment, about Burma, when I interrupted you to talk about the uprising.

MM: I think we were talking about the currency, and that was the cause ...

MRM: It may have been the indirect cause; the main cause was the resignation of Ne Win which was such an event that nobody quite knew what was going to happen next. He continued to have enormous influence for another five or six years until he finally faded away and died.

MM: It's a mystery to me why people who were as obviously cultured and sophisticated as the Burmese should allow themselves to be ground down.

MRM: I know, it's extraordinary. And why did the families of the army officers not make more of a fuss? I think the officers themselves have a nice life. There's a lot of intense propaganda. It goes back to the events just after the War when the country did nearly fall apart and the Burma Army saved the state from disintegration; there's no doubt about that. But the army has kept on ever since then with campaigns fought against different ethnic insurgents, so it's been a proud fighting army who regard the civilian population as subordinate. That ethos continues even after the reason for it has largely disappeared. But I agree it is very odd. Buddhism as a religion encourages acceptance and doesn't, I think, encourage resistance.

MM: It's the same in Thailand, they're Buddhists as well.

MRM: Indeed, the same kind of Buddhists.

MM: And they have regularly revolted against the military, and got very excited about it, and they do have quite a good degree of democracy there. In fact their so-called military rulers were not military dictators at all; I mean, they were just civilians dressed up in military uniforms.

MRM: I think the fact that there has been fighting in Burma for fifty years and more is significant.

MM: But that's against the Karen.

MRM: It's against the various insurgents, but the ethnic Burmese are perfectly capable of regarding them as foreigners. They did have incursions by the KMT, you see, at one point. For many years the Army did have an important role to play, but there was no reason that they should rule the country.

MM: Did the KMT actually live in Burma?

MRM: Yes, they came into Burma at the top right hand corner, from China. They were driven out of China and a lot of them went to Taiwan, some went to north-east Burma.

MM: There were KMT villages in northern Thailand close to the Burmese border, but they were really quite small villages.

MRM: I don't know; I think they did maintain a presence. There was a definite military threat from the KMT at one point.

MM: A sad episode.

MRM: Anyway, that was my Burma lot.

MM: And from that you went to be ...

Ambassador and UK Permanent Representative to the UN and other international organisations in Geneva, 1990-93

MRM: I went to Geneva to be British Representative to the UN and other organisations there.

MM: And were there many of them?

MRM: Hundreds! Well, I don't know. No, there were more than a dozen. There were the UN or quasi-UN ones: two kinds of Red Cross, and various other odds and sods. It wasn't a tremendously active role because, for example, the Ministry of Health sent people out to deal with the World Health Organisation, and the Post Office dealt with the International Telecommunications Union, or others were sent to the World International Property Organisation. One got most involved with the Heads of these organisations. When a new Head was going to be appointed, you did lobbying to get a decent candidate appointed and that sort of stuff. The difficulty, oddly enough, was that a lot of the work naturally fell to one rank below or two ranks below the Ambassador; one felt a bit isolated. There was no natural place where the Heads of Mission met, as you would have for instance in NATO, or New York in the Security Council, so you picked and chose what you wanted to do.

MM: Were there many other ambassadors in a similar position?

MRM: I think most of them were.

MM: Most countries?

MRM: It's a huge affair; I mean, there are 150 or more. It mirrors New York really. It had refugees, it had the human rights circus. It had the GATT which was really the most serious organisation. The GATT on the whole used to be run from London and then the Department of Trade dealt with one of my two deputies who did most of the work involving the Mission, so I got a ringside seat but I didn't get involved much in that. Refugees and human rights were the two things I was most involved with. The Human Rights Commission met for three months at the beginning of each year, and for two years I was the Head of the British delegation; they had a lawyer from London doing it the first time round.

Rather by chance, I got made Chairman of the working party for the admission to the GATT of Taiwan, which went on for nearly ten years, because they didn't want to change the Chairman. Taiwan couldn't join the GATT until China joined, and China wasn't able to join until a couple of years ago, so I did nearly ten years. I used to go out to Geneva every six months for a rather formal meeting, until the meeting in Doha in 2001 when China and Taiwan both became members.

MM: You still went to that?

MRM: I was allowed to go to that - by that time everyone had forgotten me so I ended up going as a member of the Taiwan delegation, which was rather odd. At all these meetings there was a certain amount of interference by the China representative who was allowed to sit in although he wasn't a member of GATT yet, so while I didn't get much involved in the technicalities, I did get involved in the politics.

MM: What fun!

MRM: That was quite fun! Refugees were another problem. Refugees from Vietnam were trying to get into Hong Kong but were sent back. What was interesting about that was the importance of

traffickers because the British summoned their courage to send back forcibly a plane-load of screened out asylum seekers from Hong Kong ...

MM: It was the Hong Kong Government that actually sent them back.

MRM: Well, it was the Hong Kong Government, but the British Government had a great deal to do with it. London was very much involved. I think the Hong Kong Government left on its own would have behaved differently and more ferociously. Anyway, they did it once and there was a terrible fuss, so they took a long time before they got up the nerve to do it again. When they did it again in what must have been 1992 or so, back the refugees went. Before that aircraft took off, fifty or sixty refugees a week were coming in to Hong Kong; after that flight there were two or three in the next month. It was entirely effective in choking off the traffickers. They refugees mostly came by land almost all the way, and then swam the last bit. So one got involved in that, which was a fairly major affair. But, for the rest of the UNery, the main UNery was done in New York and one didn't really get involved in that; it was the specialised agencies.

But it was certainly a matter of interest, and it's a lovely place to be, particularly getting out of it to France and Italy.

MM: Did you have a nice house?

MRM: We had a lovely house the second time. There was a great fuss about security. I was given an armour-plated Jaguar which worked extremely badly and had to be shipped home by truck. I used to bicycle from my house in Coligny - it was a village the other side of the lake from the UN Headquarters - which was downhill. I would bicycle all the way over the bridge until the ground began to rise towards the office, when my armour-plated Jaguar would meet me and I'd put my bicycle in the boot. And then I'd bicycle all the way home. It didn't matter arriving sweaty at home but not in the office. At least it got me exercise.

MM: That's nearly the end of your official career.

Director of Public Affairs, British Nuclear Fuels plc, 1994

MRM: That's the end of my official career and then, because I knew the Chairman of British Nuclear Fuels, who was looking for a Head of Public Affairs, I found myself back in the Nuclear field of activity. I did that for two and a half years. It was like another foreign posting really because I was working near Manchester.

MM: So did you have to live up there?

MRM: Yes. They were extraordinarily generous. I was given a rent-free flat which I found in the outskirts of a stately home belonging to a friend of mine from the Grenadiers. So that was handy, and I could come back here (to London) for the weekend. It was uphill work defending the nuclear industry. I still do a bit of that because I'm a member of the committee of an outfit called the Supporters of Nuclear Energy. But the nuclear industry is very limp about defending its interests. I think there will be a revival of nuclear energy in most of the world, possibly in this country, but the actual infrastructure in the UK has more or less gone.

MM: How can we avoid allowing the Greens to dominate this question?

MRM: Well, looking at the television every night and looking at the Greens and so on, they're determined, if they can, to ...

MM: How many of them are there?

MRM: Well, it's interesting. One slightly alarming statistic - it is apparently the case now that public opinion according to the opinion polls is about 50/50, but somebody did a poll a year ago of Members of Parliament asking them what they believed the balance of opinion was, and they said 80% against, so you see MPs are getting lobbied like anything by the Greens.

MM: Oh, by the Greens, yes!

MRM: By the Greens. An ordinary poll discovered that the MPs' view was completely skewed. It's a little bit like Europe. You get two sides to an argument: one is really emotionally engaged and most of the other isn't, but the emotionally-engaged side likes to pretend that tremendous lobbying is going on

by the other. On the telly last night, the nuclear industry was 'lobbying like anything' for this, that and the other, but they're not really lobbying. They're doing very little. We were forbidden to do anything on the television; we weren't allowed to have television advertisements on the grounds that it was too political.

MM: Who ruled out television advertisements?

MRM: It's whatever authority controls television advertising. And I think Greenpeace can get away with it - it's an extraordinary affair. But I did get quite interested in that again. I don't think I did a particularly good job in it but I was extremely well paid, so part of the reason I still try to do something now is to reward them! But it wasn't an easy affair, partly that and partly because the Chairman and the Chief Executive were at each other's throats throughout, which isn't at all comfortable in a company.

MM: That is sad. Surely sooner or later they're going to have to face up to reality.

MRM: Well, I think so because there's a sort of evil alliance between the oil companies and the wind merchants. Wind power generation is tremendously subsidised - not nearly as much as nuclear used to be, but nevertheless very heavily subsidised now, and the oil companies can therefore afford to build windmills out in the North Sea and try to get green credentials for doing it. It's like going back to the bow and arrow after the invention of gunpowder, it really is.

MM: Well anyway, thank you very much.

Chairman of Prospect Burma

MRM: I don't think there's anything more I can do. I do a Burmese charity; I'm Chairman of a charity called Prospect Burma, which is helping to educate Burmese who have managed to get out of the country and found a place in a university, mostly in Asia, and we pay their fees.

MM: Where do you get your funds from?

MRM: Mostly from the State Department, believe it or not. They're the only Government prepared to give us money. Entirely by chance; somebody I sat next to at a dinner party in Washington about five

years ago. And then we get money from Aung San Suu Kyi's Nobel Prize fund, because it's worth a million dollars the Nobel Peace Prize. So there's interest from that trust. And then we get it from other foundations and private people. We got £10,000 the other day from the former Chairman of Hoare's Bank. It's got a certain appeal even above all these other competing charities of which there are so very many.

Transcribed by Joanna Buckley