

## **BDOHP Biographical Details and Interview Index**

Sir Denis Wright, GCMG 1971 (KCMG 1961; CMG 1954).

Born 23 March 1911; son of late A. E. Wright, Hong Kong, and Margery Hepworth Chapman, York; married 1939, Iona Craig, Bolney, Sussex; no children.

Education: Brentwood School; St Edmund Hall, Oxford, Hon. Fellow 1972.

Career Details (with, on right, relevant pages in interview)

Vice-Consul on economic warfare, Constantza, Romania, 1939–41	pp 2-5
Vice-Consul-in-charge, Trebizond (Turkey), 1941–43	pp 5-9
Acting-Consul-in-charge, Mersin (Turkey), 1943–45	pp 9-10
First Secretary (Commercial), Belgrade, 1946–48	pp 10-14
Superintending Trade Consul at Chicago for Middle-Western Region of USA, 1949–51	pp 14-17
Head of Economic Relations Department, Foreign Office, 1951–53	pp 18-19
Chargé d’ Affaires, Tehran, on resumption of diplomatic relations with Persia, December 1953	pp 19-21
Counsellor, Tehran, 1954–55	pp 21-22
Assistant Under-Secretary, FO, 1955–59	pp 23-25
Ambassador to Ethiopia, 1959–62	pp 25-31
Assistant Under-Secretary, FO, 1962	p 31
Ambassador to Iran, 1963–71.	pp 31-39

## Sir Denis Wright

It is Wednesday, July 26 and this is Elizabeth Cox interviewing Sir Denis Wright GCMG on behalf of the Oral History Project.

**EC:** “Sir Denis, when you left Oxford, what were your particular ambitions? I can see you didn’t go straight into the Foreign Office, or even consider it at that point.”

**Sir Denis:** “My ambition then was to try for the Colonial Service, an Eastern cadetship in Hong Kong or Malaya. My father was in the Public Works Department in Hong Kong. 1932, when I came down, was about the worst possible year for jobs owing to the great economic depression. I did not get in but was told to try again in 1933 but I couldn’t afford to wait so I took the first job that came along which I got through the Appointments Committee in Oxford. It was in the research department of an advertising agency in London. I worked there for a couple of years. It was very much a family business and I realised I had no real prospects, so I moved from there to another advertising agency which was a splendid and successful firm, and from there to Gallaher and Company, the tobacco people, as Assistant Advertising Manager in 1937. In 1939 I was very anxious, for no reason, wanderlust I suppose, to get to the Black Sea, and managed to persuade my bosses to let me have three instead of two weeks, and I went off to Romania in August 1939.”

**EC:** “That was still as part of the company?”

**Sir Denis:** “Yes, I was still a member of Gallahers. I got out there, and the day I arrived in Bucharest there were placards up. Molotov had signed up with the Ribbentrop, you know, the Russo-German pact. I went straight round to the Legation. I had never been near a Legation or Consulate in my life before, but I had a note from a friend of mine in the British Council to the Press Attaché in the Legation. I went round to see him, and I said, ‘Look, it seems to me as if war is coming and I ought to get back to England right away.’ He said, ‘Oh no, old boy, it’ll blow over, don’t you worry.’ So I went off the next morning to Constanza on the Black Sea. I was on my own. I was half engaged to

my present wife but we weren't formally engaged (in fact I had ballet tickets to take her to Covent Garden when I got back in mid September). After three or four days it was absolutely clear war was coming, so I went round to see the Consul. I had a letter from the Press Attaché to the Consul and said 'I think I must get back immediately,' and he said, 'No, you must stay here. We can make very good use of you.' So the long and short of it was I was told to stay in Constanza, and I remained there until we broke off diplomatic relations with Romania in 1941."

**EC:** "And on whose payroll were you then?"

**Sir Denis:** "I was on the Foreign Office payroll. I was locally-engaged. I was paid about £20 a month, but the rate of exchange was extremely favourable. We were allowed to change our money on the black market; it was fully approved of by the Legation, so £20 went a long way. My future wife decided she wanted to come out. We got married out there and I stayed on until we broke off diplomatic relations, after a brief interlude, in Bucharest. It was a very exciting time there. I had always been interested in foreign countries. I had learned a little bit of Romanian, just for the fun of it, before going out to Romania, and one of the first jobs I had to do was to help ship the Polish gold which had come out secretly from Poland in a train. Well, not secretly; it had been bombed by the Germans. We shipped that in the middle of the night in early September. Then I got involved in economic warfare and things like that, and in fact had quite a lot of fun. The Consul became a very good friend of mine, but he was a rather muddle-headed character, so I found myself more or less running the Consulate because Kendall was, as I say, rather scatterbrained. He had a very shrewd Bulgarian wife who I think was partly responsible for telling him to keep me in the Consulate. I got involved in various things, but chiefly on economic warfare."

**EC:** "And what sort of relationship did the Consulate have with the Legation in Bucharest?"

**Sir Denis:** "Well, the Consul was on good terms with them, but he was on very bad terms with his superintending Consul-General in Galatz, Macrae who had no use for the

Consul, my boss; I think he was probably right. Kendall, was an unreliable, excitable man, but he took in the Military Attaché and others in Bucharest. He was provided with funds for various enterprises and so on. Once he came back from Bucharest apparently loaded with lei, the Rumanian currency, and when he got to Constanza it disappeared. He'd been robbed on the train! Things like that. I had to keep him in order, but we remained good friends until his death many years later.”

**EC:** “You say it was very exciting. Was there a lot of anti-British feeling, because in 1941 the Rumanians threw in their hand with Germany, didn't they?”

**Sir Denis:** “We were allies of the Romanians. Chamberlain had guaranteed Romanian integrity, but after the Germans had overrun Western Europe, Romanian morale collapsed completely and by June/July, 1940, the Romanian government was veering towards the Germans. Life for us became very unpleasant. The shops were loaded with German propaganda: we were not allowed to play tennis as the courts were close to oil tanks. We protested in vain. My wife and I managed to score a minor point against the Germans by drafting a bogus German High Command communiqué and substituting it for the official one, placed each day in a showcase in the main square. It caused quite a sensation at the time and infuriated the Germans.”

**EC:** “It sounds like a sort of John Buchan existence.”

**Sir Denis:** “It was quite exciting. I remember one morning in late December 1939 a young Romanian who provided me with information about the port came, very excited, to tell me that a mysterious fishing vessel had come in – he was sure that despite its Romanian flag and name “Marea Neagra” (Black Sea) its crew were not Romanian but German. I decided to go with him to look at the boat myself. It was bitterly cold and snowing as we went down to the port in a drosky. No one was on deck so we were able to scramble on board and have a good look round. In one corner we found the words “Ernst Gunther” on a discarded metal plate which had clearly been removed and replaced by the newly painted “Marea Neagra”. We also noticed a brass plate “Gott mit uns”. After thumping on the cabin door a blond well-groomed man appeared. We addressed him first

in Romanian, then French, neither of which he understood, then in German saying that I was a refugee from Poland and wanted to get to Palestine. The man, speaking in German, told us that they were fishing only in the Black Sea. Thus from the day of its arrival in port we were alerted about this German craft with a crew of four and complained to the Romanians about its activities.

A lot of skulduggery went on. There were plans to blow up the Iron Gates on the Danube. We had, coming up from Alexandria, two successive Sundays, on a ship to Constanza, a whole number of naval ratings, RNVR chaps, described as bargees, all wearing identical grey flannel trousers and sports coats bought in Suez or some souk in Port Said. These came through to man barges we'd bought up on the Danube. The plan was to sail up and blow up the Iron Gates, blocking all the shipping so the Germans couldn't get their oil that way. But so many people opened their mouths wide, the Germans knew full well we had a ship on the Danube unloading arms onto barges, and when the barges set sail, the Germans protested and demanded they be searched. They were searched and, of course, they were found, terribly compromisingly, loaded with arms. So these naval ratings, about 30 or 40 of them, were expelled and I had the job of helping them out of the country two or three weeks after they'd come in. That sort of thing went on."

**EC:** "So after you left Romania, did you go direct to Turkey? Was this an order from the Foreign Office, you were locally-engaged?"

**Sir Denis:** "The Foreign Office were looking for people to take jobs on. There was a possibility of going down to Cairo to join up, which I thought of doing, but nobody seemed particularly interested. There was a job going in Indonesia with the Foreign Office. There was another one in Trebizond on the Black Sea, so I volunteered for the Trebizond one, not knowing what a desperately lonely place it was. I went off there in February 1941, leaving my wife in Istanbul. She was going off back to England or South Africa. We'd been married a year, there were problems so we thought we would separate for a bit. I went on to Trebizond, via Ankara where I was briefed. It took me the best part of a week to get to Trebizond, it was very remote in those days."

**EC:** “How did you travel? By car, by train?”

**Sir Denis:** “By train to Ankara then by train to Samsun on the Black Sea, then waited for three days for storms to abate so that a motor boat could get alongside the ship to take me on. All the time I was there we had problems about communication. And having got to Trebizond, I was in a miserable, damp hotel, so I decided to move into the Consulate although I was only Vice-Consul. The Consul was based in Mersin on the Mediterranean and used to come to Trebizond in the summer months.”

**EC:** “You were the only person actually represented there?”

**Sir Denis:** “Yes, but what I didn’t know was that the Foreign Office had decided that the Consul was not fit to be back in Trebizond. He had taken to drink in a big way and was about to be retired. Trebizond, they thought, was going to be important because it was on the main road from the Black Sea to Persia, the old Tabriz caravan route. I suppose there were signs (I don’t know as I was not privy to the secret reports) that the Germans were getting cotton and other contraband via the Black Sea, which we couldn’t interfere with, then via the Danube and up to Germany, and vice versa, arms to Rashid Ali in Iraq and to the Persians to fight against the British. So I was there really to keep an eye on that sort of thing. But having got there, and moved into the Consulate, I realised I was in a corner of Turkey which was notoriously xenophobic, and where modern thought hadn’t penetrated. I found I couldn’t get even a woman servant as I was a man by myself, that sort of thing, so I bombarded my wife, who was still in Istanbul, with telegrams saying, ‘You just come here.’ She did. We spent the better part of two years there, very lonely, no other British, apart from a Maltese clerk who had never been beyond Istanbul.”

**EC:** “Any other consulates?”

**Sir Denis:** “There were German and Italian.”

**EC:** “Neither of which you were on speaking terms with.”

**Sir Denis:** “And there was a French Consul, but he had been sacked because he was a de Gaullist. He stayed on, rather an engaging old bachelor. But I had no Allied colleagues. There was a Turkish businessman who had a store in the bazaar, who was the Honorary Dutch Consul, a nice chap but wouldn’t dare give me any information at all. So I was literally on my own.”

**EC:** “And your job there was information gathering really, was it?”

**Sir Denis:** “Well, there’s information gathering and information gathering, and I realized I had to learn some Turkish pretty quickly because the Turks didn’t like what they called ‘tatli su ingiliz’ – sweet water Englishman, such as my Maltese clerk was. I had problems getting a teacher. I eventually had to go to the Chief of Police to find a teacher. I gradually learned some Turkish but it was always an uphill battle to make contact with the Turks. Very few dared come near us in the Consulate. The only brave ones were young teachers from the lycée, and the occasional businessman from Istanbul, all of them rather lonely in conservative Trebizond. I also picked up some Turkish by going down to the nearby beach in the summer where I was surrounded by curious young men and boys while dirty old men gazed at my wife who, alone among the women in Trebizond, dared to swim”

**EC:** “How did you communicate in the summer, by telephone, by mail?”

**Sir Denis:** “By mail, which went by ship and took a week at the best to reach Istanbul and Ankara. There was no inter-urban telephone: my ciphered telegrams were sent from the post office but in winter the lines were often down. It was very lonely.”

**EC:** “Did you have a code for communicating information?”

**Sir Denis:** “I had cyphers, yes. About once, every three or four months somebody would be sent up from Ankara with new cipher tables. I had to do all the cyphering

myself because my Maltese clerk wasn't allowed to touch them. That first winter, I put up a case for temporary transfer to Ankara. There was absolutely nothing for me to do particularly after Russia entered the war against Germany when all shipping across the Black Sea came to an end; there was no contraband to report on. So I went up to Ankara with my wife in January 1941 [?1942] and worked in the commercial department there for three months. It was very busy and very enjoyable in a way. The Germans were moving down into the Caucasus and by the spring of 1942, it looked as if the Germans might attack Turkey. I wanted to go back, because it was going to be exciting, but the Commercial Counsellor, a man called Jordan, an Australian whom I didn't like, wanted to keep me on economic warfare work in Ankara, but I was determined to get back to Trebizond. I had a great battle with Jordan, but I managed to persuade the Ambassador, Knatchbull-Hughessen, with the support of the naval and military attaches, that it was essential to get me back to Trebizond. So I went back in April 1942. That summer was quite exciting, because the Germans were getting closer and closer, and, whereas in the past we never saw an aeroplane (there was no airport), now far out over the sea we often saw German aeroplanes that had been bombing Batum and places like that. Twice Russian aeroplanes crashed near Trebizond, and as there was no Russian Consul, I acted for them. German aeroplanes crash-landed twice, I think, and the crews were interned. So there was quite a lot of excitement and I felt that summer was well worth my while being there. I did a lot of reporting on roads, because the military in Cairo and the Embassy wanted reports on roads thinking the Germans might invade Turkey from the Caucasus."

**EC:** "What you meant by economic warfare was that sort of thing, communications . . .?"

**Sir Denis:** "Nobody had any up to date information about roads, so I did what I could. I had no consular car, I used to go off by bus or rent a taxi, and I managed to get down the road that runs from the Russian border near Kars right down to the Black Sea. No sooner had I got back and reported all this, the Turks protested that I was travelling in military areas, so I got into trouble with the Turks, but the Embassy maintained I was Consul for Eastern Turkey and I had every right to travel within my Consular District.



After the Germans were stalled at Stalingrad at the end of 1942, there was again absolutely nothing for me to do in Trebizond. I started agitating to get away but was told I was doing an absolutely indispensable job, etc, etc, and must stay. I was determined to get away. My wife went off to Istanbul and worked for SOE. The embassy sent Ted Peck (now Sir Edward and my oldest FO friend) to spend Christmas 1942 with me, bringing cypher tables, a bottle of whiskey and English cigarettes (none of these being available in Trebizond) but was unable to persuade me to stay on. So I was duly summoned to Ankara in early 1943 and after talks I agreed to go to Mersin, the southern Turkish port, to take charge there. The career consul there had run foul of the Turks and was to be moved. Unlike Trebizond, Mersin was a hive of wartime activity and I had on my staff men representing the navy, the army, security and MI6. There were also stationed in Mersin 20 or 30 Royal Engineers, operating under the name of Braithwaite and Co., building roads for use should the Germans attack Turkey. The officers on my staff showed me the weekly reports they sent by bag to their respective bosses in Istanbul. They seemed to me all very similar and of no great importance, just local gossip. So I started sniffing around to find out about their sources. It didn't take long to discover that they were using the same sources under different cover names. When I was sure of my facts I wrote to the head of MI6 in Istanbul, Colonel Harold Gibson, and expressed my doubts about the intelligence being sent to him, and the naval and security chiefs in Istanbul. It did not take long to clear things up.

I enjoyed Mersin because there was always a lot to do. We had there a representative of the Ministry of War Transport shipping timber down to Syria for railway sleepers, and a representative of the UKCC (United Kingdom Commercial Corporation) pre-empting the Germans by buying up chrome and shipping it to the USA. Sometimes there was trouble over women with the Royal Engineers, Turkish men being very possessive. The Commanding Officer of the Royal Engineers, a regular colonel, became a great friend of mine. The REs were camped outside Mersin on the beach, now where the refinery is, and with his help we managed to sort things out. Luckily they had transport, they also had NAAFI supplies. I had no consular car at all, and when needed I could always rely on the colonel, Robin Best, to provide me with either a jeep or a 15cwt truck to go down the coast. It was quite an exciting time.”

**EC:** “It was quite a change from being a one-man band to being in charge of quite a large set-up.”

**Sir Denis:** “Yes, quite a large set-up with all sorts of problems. Luckily, I spoke fairly good Turkish by then, and the Governor there, unlike the Governor in Trebizond, was a man of character who liked the British and became a close friend of mine, and let it be known that Turks could visit the Consulate. So we built up quite a network of Turkish friends there, and enjoyed it from that point of view. An added attraction was the Mediterranean coast. It is now spoilt by tourism, but it was absolutely superb, with Roman antiquities all down the coast. Through Messrs Braithwaite, the Royal Engineers, we could go down and picnic and swim. It was a very agreeable life, and at the same time a very exciting and worthwhile job. I had no regrets about it.

After the war had moved from the Middle East by the end of 1944, I agitated to get home. I hadn't been home or had any leave at all, except going down to Cairo and Jerusalem, to see doctors and things, and I got permission to go home and give up my job in Mersin. I was still locally engaged and I had to decide whether to try for the Foreign Office. I spent two or three months in the Consular Department. The Embassy had urged me to try for the Foreign Office. I was interviewed by the Civil Service Board, and was offered a job as Vice-Consul in Detroit, with three years probation. So I blew up and said, ‘No, I don't want to go to Detroit, I want to go back to the Balkans where things are really happening.’ And anyway, I resented three years probation, after working for four years. I resigned in disgust and went off to the Ottoman Bank who offered me a very tempting job to be their man, eventually head man, in Turkey. And I went off to the Ottoman Bank but hated it the whole time I was there. There were questions in parliament about the Foreign Office having lost some of their people, so I swallowed my pride and phoned up Chapman Andrews, who was Head of Personnel, and said I would like to come and see him. I told him I'd made a mistake and should have stayed in the Foreign Office. The long and the short of it was that after a bit of houha-ing and so on, I was interviewed by Sir David Scott, who was a great figure in those days in the Foreign Office, and was

appointed Commercial Secretary in Belgrade, which I jumped at. I went out to Yugoslavia in April 1946.”

**EC:** “Was that without the probation?”

**Sir Denis:** “They may have said a year’s probation, I’ve forgotten now, but I’d got back to the Balkans which is what I wanted.”

**EC:** “Did you have problems with your security checks and that sort of thing?”

**Sir Denis:** “Never checked.”

**EC:** “So when you think, you’d been roving all around an area where you could have easily been recruited.”

**Sir Denis:** “When I was in Constanza at the beginning, there was rather an unpleasant British couple who ran the Mission for Seamen. It was a very busy port. They realised I didn’t take to them very much and put it around that I was a German spy. When it came to my ears, I was so hopping mad, I went and confronted them with this, and said that unless they withdrew this thing, I would take it up with the Bishop of Gibraltar who happened to be a relative by marriage of my wife. In the end, they crawled and apologised and gave me a piece of paper, which I made them sign, saying they had been despicable. But there was no security check. They could have been quite right. It wasn’t until years later when Burgess and Maclean disappeared that I had any sort of security check.”

**EC:** “So they sent you off to Belgrade. So another language.”

**Sir Denis:** “Yes. I tried to learn it. At that time, Tito and Stalin were still in cahoots, and we, in the Embassy, were isolated, like the Americans. We were “monarcho-fascists” and no Yugoslavs were allowed near us. I got hold of a teacher, a woman whose husband was at the university. I had about three lessons from her then she just

disappeared, and never seen or heard of again. The story was that she had also been teaching some Americans and had been paid in dollars, and somebody who had been trying to flee the country had been found with dollars. 'Where did you get these from?' And that was it. Whether she was bumped off, I never knew.

Then I got another teacher (again, I've forgotten how I got him), who was a schoolmaster, a bearded schoolmaster, an elderly chap. He was so anti the regime that it became almost embarrassing talking to him. One couldn't make contact with Yugoslavs so I gave it up in the end. But I enjoyed the time in Belgrade."

**EC:** "What was the main aspect of the job, because it was just after the war, wasn't it?"

**Sir Denis:** "The main thing for me was British properties. Tito had nationalised all British properties and we had some major interests, particularly the Trepca mines, which is now in the news, in Kosovo. Unilever were there, Shell were there and others. My job was really to try to get some sort of compensation for them. In the end, when the Yugoslavs had a 5 or 7-year Plan, they made it clear that they wanted to do business with us and were ready to negotiate some form of compensation. We had talks back in London in 1947. I had over four months in London (Harold Wilson was at the Board of Trade), and negotiated with the Yugoslavs. We never reached a full agreement in my time, but we did get talks going on compensation, and in the end the thing was settled, after I left. That was my main preoccupation.

I toured the country on one occasion with Dugald Stewart, who later became Ambassador in Yugoslavia, but was then Third Secretary, to see whether the Yugoslavs were starving, because they'd put in an enormous bid for assistance through UNRRA. Dugald and I spent over two weeks touring the country. We recommended in the end that there should not be any extra help.

By great good luck, I had a contact, a rare contact, called Dragi Avramovich, who took part in these talks in London. My mother-in-law then had a house in Victoria Square, not

very far from the then Board of Trade which was in the old ICI building on the Embankment, so I could invite some of the Yugoslavs in for a drink (they wouldn't dare come to my house in Belgrade). Avramovich was in love with a girl in the Foreign Office he'd met on some mission in Trieste (he'd been economic adviser) and I acted as a sort of link between him and the girl in the Foreign Office, whose name I've forgotten, but it did mean that I had this link with Avramovich. When it was announced that I was leaving Yugoslavia in December 1948, he came round to the Legation to see me. By then, Tito and Stalin had fallen out (in June 1948). Whether Avramovich came with permission or not, I don't know. He told me that the break with Stalin was deadly serious. A lot of people, especially the Americans, thought it was a put up job. I did quite a long report on what he told me. Charles Peake, the Ambassador, sent it to London. I've forgotten all the details, but I think the Foreign Secretary, Bevin, sent it across either to Attlee or to Stafford Cripps, Chancellor of the Exchequer, and said, look we must keep Tito afloat. That led to meetings in Whitehall and the decision to keep Tito afloat. Avramovich fell out with Tito in the end and went to the World Bank. He came to see us in Ethiopia when I was there and when I was in Iran."

**EC:** "Did he marry the girl from the Foreign Office?"

**Sir Denis:** "No. I remember him telling me he could not marry this girl and ask her to go back to Yugoslavia. He married a Yugoslav in the end. He retired to Washington, he left the bank. My wife and I had lunch with him outside Washington seven or eight years ago when we were there. When the dinar went sky high with inflation, he was called back to Yugoslavia by the then President, ?Milosevic, and he became headline news. There was a full-page in the 'Sunday Telegraph' or 'Sunday Times' saying how he'd saved the dinar. He became Governor of the Central Bank. He wrote to me about that time, the last letter I had from him. Later I heard he was on the streets of Belgrade demonstrating against Milosevic, and there was a report, I think in 'The Telegraph', saying that despite his years (he was then nearly 80) he was a potential man to take over from Milosevic. But I've heard no more about him, so I don't know."

**EC:** “I wonder what tempted him to go back from a comfortable life in America.”

**Sir Denis:** “Well, there had been a change. He was never a communist but a socialist, and I think the fact that he had a love for his country drew him back to help. But I would like to know what had happened to him because he did have the courage to go out on the streets and demonstrate against Milosevic. He was one of our very few contacts.”

**EC:** “And MI6 didn’t have anyone?”

**Sir Denis:** “Oh, the MI6 man wanted me to hand over my source when I left, but I refused to hand it over for fear of compromising him. Whether he had anybody worthwhile I never knew. I don’t think he did. I don’t think he had the means to get in touch with people. We were horribly isolated. The result was, of course, one made good lasting friendships with the members of the Diplomatic Corps. I’ve always tried to avoid my fellow dips in other countries and keep in touch with the local population, but there it was *faut de mieux*. But we did make some very good friends among the Americans and French and so on.”

**EC:** “You portray the Embassy in those days as being able to play quite an important commercial role, interceding for the various British companies, whereas nowadays British companies, or large companies or multinationals tend to do their own talking to government direct.”

**Sir Denis:** “Well, they do, but then they had no means. The government was a communist government, they organised things along communist lines, they had state enterprises. A businessman could go and talk to them, but on the whole it was through the Embassy. Getting compensation could only be done through the Embassy.”

**EC:** “So you left there with some regret, did you?”

**Sir Denis:** “Yes. I was quite sorry to leave, but I had put in what was a Foreign Office post preference form, I had put in ‘America’ on top.”

**EC:** “You’d had enough of the Balkans by then, had you?”

**Sir Denis:** “Well, it wasn’t enough, but I thought that if I was going to go anywhere (I was then a career member of the Foreign Office) I must know something about America. I put in ‘America’ at the top, and I think, I can’t remember, I did put ‘Persia’ as second preference, although why I can’t remember except that in Turkey I’d been at the other end of the caravan route to Persia. It may have been that. I thought Washington, but when I was home I was told I was going to Chicago. In a way I was disappointed, but in fact in retrospect I’m delighted. It was a fascinating place.”

**EC:** “You had no time in London in between. You were cross-posted.”

**Sir Denis:** “Yes, apart from a few weeks at home. My father was dying and I left for Chicago in January 1949 before he died. Harold Wilson was President of the Board of Trade and he announced that they were going to have a great dollar export drive and in order to do this it would mean four trade Consuls would be appointed to key cities, New York, Chicago, New Orleans and San Francisco. Each of these Consuls would be helped by a top-ranking British businessman. I went to Chicago.”

**EC:** “Who was your top-ranking British businessman?”

**Sir Denis:** “They couldn’t find him. It was just after the war and no worthwhile business could release people. So for months I was without a top-ranker. Finally, they produced a man, now dead. When I was up in Washington for some conference, somebody tipped me off he was a pretty big phoney. I wrote to the commercial minister in Washington, John Taylor, and said, ‘I’m told this chap isn’t much good’ and was more or less told to mind my own business. At any rate, I got this man and he went socialising with people and so on, but he was practically hopeless.”

**EC:** “What company was he attached to when you say he was a businessman?”

**Sir Denis:** “He had no company. He’d been swishing around on the general staff in Washington during the war. The other businessmen were equally useless except for the man in New York.”

**EC:** “So you had this man in Chicago.”

**Sir Denis:** “Yes. He was quite useless and he finally cooked his goose by producing for me what he called the major report he was doing on Chicago as the centre for mail order business. He produced this long report. I had a very good secretary, a GI bride from London, and she was his secretary as well and had typed this out. When she produced this report she said to me, ‘You know where it’s come from, don’t you? The Saturday Evening Post.’ So I went round to the local library and got back numbers of the Saturday Evening Post and found that he had just lifted his report straight off the paper. I sent it up with a letter to the Embassy in Washington and said, ‘It’s a valuable report by my commercial adviser which you will see corresponds very closely with the Post.’ That was not only his end, it was the end of the others, except for the man in New York. Soon after this the powers that be decided to dispense with the services of all but the New York businessman. When in 1995 Robin Cook spoke at a Labour Party Conference about appointing businessmen to help officials with exports I wrote to ‘The Times’ (20 October 1995) to remind readers of past history. ”

**EC:** “They never can afford the kind of money they need to pay if they want to get good people.”

**Sir Denis:** “Well, say you put in the Chairman of ICI, his job isn’t just to sell, his job is to be able to tell British firms who he should be in touch with and all that, and that can be done by an efficient Consul just as well as by a businessman.”

**EC:** “And do you think the Foreign Office made good use of the information you sent back to them? Was it well fed into the system?”



**Sir Denis:** “I got good marks I think from the business community back home because I did have two officers, called market officers, who were very good, and when businessmen came over and saw us, we could tell them who to go and see. There was a trade fair in Chicago in the summer of 1950 where a lot of British businessmen came out. We really pulled out all the stops for them and got a lot of good marks for that too. But I did have a very good team. It had been a pretty unhappy Consulate when I got there; the head man, the Consul-General, was pretty hopeless. I went up to Washington for some conference, and I was tackled by a man called Aubrey Morgan who was Oliver Franks's trouble-shooter. He'd been out there in the war and was known for his wide contacts, and when Oliver Franks was appointed to Washington, he insisted that Aubrey Morgan be pulled out to join his staff (he was farming up in Wisconsin in Washington State and married a rich American). I was tackled by Aubrey Morgan at this conference who said to me, ‘What’s wrong with Chicago?’ And I said, ‘If you really want the truth it’s the Consul-General.’ That led to Marlow going off to Paris as Consul-General and Chicago getting a splendid extrovert, not very clever, Berkeley Gage who went down very well in Chicago. They all loved him there. We then had a very good team. We had contacts at every sort of level, with the Press and so on. It was a very happy post, we liked it very much and were sorry to leave.”

**EC:** “It’s been an on-going question, you were saying, as to whether the Foreign Office should be more or less involved in commercial matters. The Duncan Report came out heavily in favour of trying to make it more the Office’s business.”

**Sir Denis:** “Well, you’ve got to be able to help. After all, as an island we are dependent on our export trade for our imports and things like that. We’ve got to be able to export. When I was back in London as an under-secretary, I used to lecture to new entrants and always made the point ‘You diplomats have got to realise that you’ve got to get into the commercial side of things. You won’t get anywhere if you don’t.’ That was my theme when I was under-secretary at the Foreign Office from 1955-59. I’ve always believed that it’s no good being just a diplomat dealing with the upper crust of society,

you've really got to deal with businessmen. I think the Foreign Office in the past had a reputation of being too snooty and not bothering about business."

**EC:** "It is a hard target though, isn't it."

**Sir Denis:** "Yes. That's why I'm very glad I had my baptism in business before the war. It stood me in good stead."

**EC:** "Then you went back to London to be Head of Economic Relations Department. That must have been a bit of a come-down, or a bit dull after all these exciting postings."

**Sir Denis:** "Well it was, but I was very surprised to be promoted. I was absolutely terrified of this job. I remember coming back on leave, going to some sort of weekend seminar at Oxford for the Foreign Office, and Robin Hooper, who was the then Head of Personnel, saying, 'I thought you were in Chicago. We've just sent you a letter calling you back.' I said, 'What for?' and he said, 'Head of Economic Relations Department.' I was terrified of this job because I knew it was a very tough department. I think my predecessor had a breakdown. At any rate, I managed to go back to Chicago to pack up. They didn't want me to do even that, but I came back after a couple of months in Chicago and took over Economic Relations Department which I enjoyed. It was a very busy department. One got to know Whitehall because it was dealing with all the departments in Whitehall, and every possible subject, and had very good staff, including Robert Wade-Gery. Douglas Hurd started life as a new boy under me. Wade-Gery was the first one I had as a new boy, next year it was Douglas Hurd, straight from Cambridge, and thirdly a man called Robin Johnstone, who left the Foreign Office later, who was very bright too and became Lord Derwent. I enjoyed it very much there, but I can't remember any particular things. One thing I didn't deal with was oil. Oil had been nationalised by Moussadiq and things were moving so fast that the then man on the oil desk (there was one man only dealing with oil), Peter Ramsbotham, who later succeeded me in Tehran in 1971. When I arrived on my first day in the office, he said, 'Look, do you want me to submit papers to you, or do what I've been doing and going direct to the under-secretary

(who was Roger Makins)?' I said, 'No, go ahead and do it.' So I was really left out of the oil business, but when Moussadiq was toppled in August 1953, I was chosen to go out to Iran, I assume because they thought I knew something about oil, which I didn't.

You asked me earlier whether I had been vetted. Well, Burgess and Maclean disappeared sometime in 1953, and then there was positive vetting. I was, sometime in that summer, vetted by the then Head of Security. My wife had travelled quite widely. After she left Oxford she'd gone across from Russia to China and then on to Tokyo, on her own, or rather accompanied by a friend of her mother's who was a communist, a WEA lecturer whose name I've forgotten. The security people said to me, 'Your wife went across Russia with so and so, has she been in touch with the lady since?' I said, 'Not as far as I know, she peeled off and went to join an ashram in India.' When Moussadiq was toppled, a month or two later, I was summoned by the Head of the Foreign Office, Sir William Strang, whom I never normally saw (one dealt with the under-secretary). I thought I was for the high jump because of my wife's left-wing connections. William Strang said to me, 'Moussadiq was toppled yesterday, we want you to go out and re-open the embassy. Will you do it?' I said, 'Of course I will.' He said, 'Well, you must ask your wife first.'"

**EC:** "So in fact you got out to Persia, or Iran, without a request. It was your second choice, you said, when you were going to the States."

**Sir Denis:** "This time I hadn't asked to go at all, no. I was sent out, I'm pretty certain, because my department dealt with oil, and the big problem with Iran was the oil and they thought I knew about it, which I didn't because it had all been handled by Peter Ramsbotham. But it was a very exciting assignment. I went out by chartered aeroplane with twelve other people, not taking wives."

**EC:** "And did you set up in a hotel there?"

**Sir Denis:** “No, we went to the Embassy straightaway. The Swiss had been in charge, and we camped out there. The Ministry of Works had got a local man looking after the place. It was very exciting. I didn’t know what sort of reception we would get.”

**EC:** “And what sort of reception did you get?”

**Sir Denis:** “Well, a very good one. I kept my head down. I had a No.2, a chap called John Fearnley, who had very good advice on how to handle things. The Swiss, of course, had greatly enjoyed being in charge because here we were, the Great Power, although not a great power, but in Iranian eyes we were still the Great Power, and we had this marvellous compound. And the Swiss Minister greatly enjoyed all this, and as we came from the airport, he told me he had arranged for me to meet the Press the next day and to haul down the Swiss flag, unscrew the brass plates and hoist the Union Jack and there would be photographers there. I decided this was not what I wanted and there would be no ceremonial hand-over. So we went very gently to start with.”

**EC:** “What was your reason for doing that?”

**Sir Denis:** “Well, we didn’t want to crow or humiliate the Iranians by making a splash.”

**EC:** “There was quite a lot of pro-German feeling still?”

**Sir Denis:** “Not necessarily pro-German, straight nationalism. Because of past history the Persians distrusted us. Because of this I felt that we should move cautiously and keep our heads down. It wasn’t until about ten days later, I went out skiing with Dick Franks, the Second Secretary, he and I went up to ski, on a Friday. My picture had been in all the papers, so I was recognised straightaway. When we’d finished skiing we went to get into the car, and a couple of young Iranians came up and asked us to go and join them in a large tent. We thought do we go or not? We decided we would do so not knowing whether there’d be a hostile or friendly reception. We got a very friendly reception, and from then onwards, I never had any doubts that if we played our cards carefully we were

going to be all right. We were made quite a fuss of in this tent, both of us, so that was a sort of initiation.”

**EC:** “And you dealt mostly in English, or did you have to have a translator?”

**Sir Denis:** “No, we dealt in English. Many Persians spoke very good English. Through the Swiss Minister, I was landed with a very difficult problem the day after my arrival. He had arranged for two emissaries of the Shah to see me. I said, ‘Well, who are they?’ and he said, ‘One is a Swiss who’s very close to the Shah, and the other is an Iranian.’ They came and more or less said to me, ‘The Shah wants you to deal exclusively with him on oil, through us.’ That was on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of December, 1953. I said, ‘I’ve come to deal with the Minister of Foreign Affairs. I will, of course, keep the Shah in the picture.’ Well, they came back again on Christmas Day when, with the help of drinks borrowed from the American Embassy, I was having a little party for my staff. They came back twice on Christmas Day, the second time with a *bout de papier*, about reporting to the Shah, and I was to deal exclusively with him on oil. So, I slept on it, and the day, Boxing Day, I telegraphed London and said that I’d had this proposition and I would like authority to tell the Foreign Minister, whom I had just met, on my second day and had taken to as a decent chap, and to tell him what the Shah is up to, because we had a poor opinion of the Shah in those days in the Foreign Office. So I got authority from Eden to tell the Foreign Minister what the Shah was up to. The Shah was furious. I didn’t see the Shah. I was only the *Charge d’Affaires*. But in the end it did me a lot of good, I think, and I eventually got on well with the Shah.”

**EC:** “You were there from 1953-55. In that time the Embassy was obviously set up and established.”

**Sir Denis:** “Yes. Roger Stevens came out as Ambassador. I was there two months in charge. My job was first to report whether BP could get back 100%. I made it quite clear that there was not a chance of this. Roger Stevens came as Ambassador in February 1954. It was great luck that we had Roger Stevens. The Shah had known Robin Hankey during the war (he used to play tennis with him), and he had let the Swiss know that he would

like to see Robin Hankey as ambassador. Well, Robin would, I believe, have been a disaster. People will tell you that he was more right-wing than Genghis Khan. Luckily, the Iranians said, when they were given a list of people coming out with me, that they didn't want anybody who had been in Iran before. So I had to drop three or four people from my team and went out with a clean slate, as it were, except Fearnley who came out with me and had before been in Commercial Department. Robin was dropped, and Roger Stevens was brought from Sweden at short notice. He turned out to be the right man for the job. But it's one of those cases where I am critical of the Foreign Office for not really getting the right man for the job. Whether they could have overruled No.10, probably not, as you know ministers decide on these top jobs, but in the light of what happened, I'm absolutely certain Robin, whom I knew quite well (he taught me to ski in Romania in the war), was not the man."

**EC:** "Because of his right-wing position?"

**Sir Denis:** "He would, I think, have played along with the Shah, whereas we took a slightly more different line."

**EC:** "Yes, a more independent line. How did you find it though from being Charge to No.2?"

**Sir Denis:** "I enjoyed it very much, although I had some trouble. You see, Roger Stevens was an old friend of my wife's family. Constance Stevens, his wife, was a tiresome lady, and developed a sort of folie de grandeur, as many ambassadors do, as you probably know, when they get into that position. I was delighted he was coming, I knew him, I knew he was a man of intelligence and charm and I was really delighted. But to my consternation, when I came back to London for talks on oil in June 1954, I was given a CMG in the Birthday Honours. John Henniker, the Head of Personnel, said to me, 'Roger said it would be a consolation for your disappointment at having to hand over to him.' I said it was untrue; I was absolutely delighted. I was furious at this, and when I went back to Tehran, I challenged Roger Stevens, and said, 'How dare you say this?' He said, 'Well, it would have been a natural reaction.' I said, 'Well, it wasn't my reaction, I

was delighted.’ But this was his wife, who was beastly to my wife, although they were old family friends, but she was, I think, partly jealous of us, and had developed this folie de grandeur which is so common. I have been blessed with a wife, thank God, who never developed that sort of disease.”

**EC:** “Then you came back to be Assistant Under-Secretary in the Foreign Office. Was that still to concentrate on the oil issue?”

**Sir Denis:** “No, we’d settled that. A consortium had been set up. Now, it was much more the European Free Trade Area. You know, we’d missed the bus in going into the European Community, which was a great mistake, but that had happened before I came back, although I’ve always regretted that I never took a more forthright line on Europe during my time there. The line laid down by Harold Caccia, who was the Deputy Under-Secretary who had taken over from Bob Dixon, was that we were to be guided by economic interests. And our economic interests, of course, were decided by the Board of Trade, by the Ministry of Agriculture, by the Treasury, and that was that we were better off with the Commonwealth and USA. So in the Foreign Office we didn’t push this at all, although there were young turks like Michael Palliser, and so on, who were pushing for going into Europe. But at the top, Kirkpatrick, Caccia, and myself below, obeyed the instructions that we were to be guided by our economic interests. Whether one could have done anything, I don’t know. The die had already been cast with the decision not to take part in the Messina Conference, although I was not involved in that decision.”

**EC:** “It sounds as though it’s the opposite now, with the Foreign Office being more pro-Europe than the rest of the government.”

**Sir Denis:** “Well, in those days, you see, the Conservative Party (Churchill, and Eden when he became Prime Minister) were anti joining a European Community and so were Labour, even more so. They would never have got it through politically. But in the light of history, it was a terrible mistake not to join in those days when we did carry a lot of weight. It’s too late now. Of course there is the other thing. I was in the Office at the time of Suez which was a terrible error. There were very few people in the Foreign Office

who were pro-Suez, very, very few. I used to have sleepless nights over it; how could we be so stupid, and so on.”

**EC:** “Was the Foreign Office as a whole then against Eden’s attitude on this?”

**Sir Denis:** “Well, it was all done very secretly. Eden had his little coterie. Kirkpatrick was head of the Foreign Office. He had been in Berlin before the war and had seen how Hitler had grown up, and he equated Nasser with Hitler, and had no comprehension, I think, of Arab nationalism and that sort of thing. I remember I was on holiday in Wales when the Suez thing broke, and I went to the telephone and got through to Paul Gore-Booth, my Under-Secretary, and said, ‘Do you want me to come back?’ He said, ‘No, come back on Monday as arranged.’ I went back on the Monday having first of all gone to the House of Commons and delivered a letter to our local MP for Marylebone, saying how disgusted I was by British government policy. Then I went to Paul Gore-Booth and said, ‘You should know that I’ve sent a letter to our MP saying what I think about it all.’ And he said, ‘This is what I’ve done’ and he showed me a minute he’d put up to Kirkpatrick saying ‘We Under-Secretaries are totally in the dark. What is happening?’ He told me there was a meeting at eleven o’clock in Kirkpatrick’s room which we both attended, when Kirkpatrick compared Nasser with Hitler. A few days later, Kirkpatrick summoned me and told me that Archie Ross, who was the Under-Secretary for the Middle East, had ‘run out of ideas’, and wanted to know whether I had any ideas about bringing Nasser down?’ He talked about sabotaging certain supplies for Nasser, poisoning the Nile, all sorts of wild things. I said ‘if you really want my views - we should drop a bomb on Tel Aviv (there were rumours that we were collaborating with the Israel), and sack the Prime Minister.’ Kirkpatrick quite rightly told me that this was none of my business. He never consulted me again.”

**EC:** “Did you not have any repercussions from writing to your MP? Although I suppose it was private, between you and your MP.”

**Sir Denis:** “British Airways used to have a top-level conference of their top people every year at Sunningdale. They invited Selwyn Lloyd, the Foreign Secretary, to go



down and address them on foreign policy, and I was told to go in his place some weeks earlier. It happened to be in Suez week, so at dinner at Sunningdale beforehand, I blew my top about what I thought about Eden and co; and in my talk, I've forgotten what I said but I think I made it clear that you can only be as tough in your foreign policy as you are strong economically (we were no longer in Palmerston's time). And about two days later, John Henniker phoned me up and said, 'You gave a talk at Sunningdale. There are going to be questions asked about it. Lord Reading is going to summon you.' But I was never summoned. I think ministers like Reading felt just the same. So I never suffered from it at all."

**EC:** "Were you also involved in the Hungarian uprising in 1956? It was during your time there, wasn't it?"

**Sir Denis:** "I wasn't involved."

**EC:** "Yes, and one can't think about anything else really, at the time. So, Eden fell in 1956 and Macmillan became Prime Minister, didn't he? Did that make any difference to Foreign Office policy? Was there a complete change of tack? That 'wind of change' was quite a bit later, wasn't it?"

**Sir Denis:** "Well, he was pro-European and he started the move to try to get closer to Europe."

**EC:** "Anyway, you went from there, on your own request, to Ethiopia."

**Sir Denis:** "Yes, well I had been three years in the Foreign Office on the economic side, I had been Economic Under-Secretary, and I knew that, unless I was very careful, I would continue on the economic side. There were two jobs I knew were most likely to come up, one was to be Economic Minister in Washington, the other was to be Head of OECD in Paris. I went to see the Head of Personnel, I think it was Anthony Rundell, and I said, 'Look I'm very happy in London, I've enjoyed it and am in no hurry to move, but when the time comes, there are two jobs I don't want. One is Economic Minister,

Washington, the other is the OEC in Paris.’ He said, ‘What do you want?’ I said, ‘Kathmandu, Kabul or Addis Ababa.’ No under-secretary had ever asked for these jobs.

Later at the end of the year, I went out to Addis Ababa for a conference (the Economic Commission for Africa) with John Profumo. It was his first job for the Foreign Office abroad, and we went straight to the Embassy. Before I went out, the then Head of the Foreign Office, Derek Hoyer-Miller, had asked me to sniff around and find out what was wrong at the Embassy, because he said he’d had the most damning report on the then British Counsellor at the Embassy from the Ambassador. He said, ‘Obviously, something is wrong.’ Well, we went out. Profumo and I were staying at the Embassy with the Ambassador, Geoffrey Furlong, and we both took a very poor view of him and his wife. When I got back to London, I was summoned by Derek Hoyer-Miller who said, ‘Tell me about Addis.’ I said, ‘About the conference?’ and he said, ‘No, about the Embassy.’ He said he’d already heard from Profumo who had come back with a bad impression. I said, ‘Well, it’s a pretty odd set-up. We don’t seem to be in touch with the Ethiopians.’ So he said, ‘Would you like to go to Ethiopia?’ And I said that I’d already put in a bid.”

**EC:** “So it hadn’t put you off, you were already enraptured.”

**Sir Denis:** “Yes. It was several months later, at the end of 1959 before I went. Furlong was retired early, but it was more Profumo’s report than mine which finished him, I think. But it was absolutely right. In fact, when I was going out, I met a member of the then British community, in London, and he said, ‘The British community won’t come near the Embassy. We just don’t like them.’ When we got there we had quite a tough time to win over the British community, who were a very odd lot. There were missionaries, there were Evelyn Waugh characters, you know Black Mischief, it was a pretty odd lot of people.”

**EC:** “What had he done that had so alienated the British community?”

**Sir Denis:** “He was just a cold fish. He was very bad with his staff. He had a rather tiresome wife, full of ‘folie de grandeurs’. She drove round with the ambassadorial flag flying.”

**EC:** “So you both went out there, and you were in Ethiopia for three years.”

**Sir Denis:** “Two and a half really. I was very sorry to leave it. We got there in December 1959. I came home on leave after a year and a half, and then went back out hoping for another stint there, but it didn’t happen. It was very exciting there because we were giving independence to Somaliland and to Kenya, so there was a lot to do. We had bad relations with Ethiopia over Somaliland. Under the treaty set-up immediately after the war, tribes we were responsible for in Somaliland had grazing rights in Ethiopia, and they used to march in with a protective police force so that they could get water and grazing for their camels. We had two British liaison officers stationed in the Ogaden with their own wireless and staff, much resented by the Ethiopians. When I reached Addis Ababa just before Christmas 1959 the Ethiopians were refusing to allow the Somalis to enter the country, saying there was no water. We, the governor in British Somaliland, threatened to use force if necessary to get to the wells. I was summoned by the Minister of the Interior, the Emperor’s son-in-law: when he realised that we were determined to reach the wells he asked me to hold off the Somalis for 24 hours so that he could send a man down there to see the situation for himself. I sent a ‘flash’ telegram to the Governor in Hargeisha. The Ethiopian, Assefa Lemma, returned from the Ogaden to say that there was water and our camels could water. So there was no shooting.

That was my baptism within days of arriving in Addis Ababa, before I’d presented credentials. But once we decided to give independence to Somaliland, the whole situation changed, and relations became very friendly indeed. My predecessor had just the same problem as I did, but I had the good luck to be there when we gave independence to Somaliland, and things there changed overnight.”

**EC:** “And did you get a chance to meet the Emperor?”

**Sir Denis:** “Many times. He was the only man you could deal with. I had no problem seeing him. He was easier to see than the Foreign Minister who was very evasive. I never got onto close terms with him. I’ve got a photograph of him downstairs taken by Profumo, when Profumo came out on another occasion on the question of British Somaliland after independence and what was going to happen. I took him to have tea with the Emperor to a little place he’d got out in the country, and Profumo took a very nice picture of him.

I was on good terms with the Emperor but you could never get informal with him.”

**EC:** “Did you discuss in English?”

**Sir Denis:** “In English, with an interpreter there, a man who had been at the Embassy at one time as our chief interpreter. He was a key figure at the Court and he would interpret. When I took Profumo to see him, after a bit the Emperor said, ‘You’re tired.’ We then conducted the talk in English with the Emperor, who could talk English, or it may have been in French, I’ve forgotten. We knew his family, and one of his granddaughters used to ride with us fairly regularly, so we had a link to the Court that way.”

**EC:** “I think, if I remember rightly, he was keener to have the French system of education, for example, brought into the country, rather than English.”

**Sir Denis:** “Oh no, far from it. English was the country’s second language. After the war the Emperor gave the British Council splendid premises in the centre of Addis Ababa and was very upset when in the 1950s, following an FO economy drive, the Council closed down. As a result of my predecessor’s efforts rather than mine we got it going again but in a far less imposing building. The Emperor’s grandson, Prince Alexander Resta, who had been educated at Wellington College, pressed hard for us to establish and run an English-style public school in Addis Ababa but the British Council, with experience of what had happened in Egypt and the Lebanon, were not prepared to do this. Instead we offered the Emperor help to finance and recruit staff from the UK for an

already established school, named after General Orde Wingate, responsibility remaining with the Ethiopian government. This proposal was accepted and the British Council recruited an excellent housemaster from Bryanston for the headship. I might add that we had other school and headmasters dotted all over the country.

**EC:** “Apart from the Somali question, what was the main British interest in Ethiopia?”

**Sir Denis:** “I think to keep it outside the communist world, to trade with it. By the time I left, Mitchell Cotts had developed a major cotton plantation there. We had various British trading firms, but there was no enormous great British trade interest there.”

**EC:** “Was there a lot of Soviet influence that you would try to counteract?”

**Sir Denis:** “Well, it was coming in. One of the arguments I used with Harold Caccia when he was Permanent Under-Secretary, was that we really should do more for Ethiopia in terms of aid and that sort of thing, because if not, the communists would come in. And they did eventually come in, but that was after I’d gone.”

**EC:** “Did you get a chance to travel around the country?”

**Sir Denis:** “Not an awful lot. We were a small embassy and we had this big problem of Somalia, and the Emperor would only deal with me. But we had consulates. We had a very remote consulate on the Kenyan border, at Mega, which was three days’ travel by Land Rover to get there. Iona and I went down there, a very rough trip. We had two Land Rovers, building up bridges and roads as we went almost. You had to go in the dry season otherwise the roads were impassable. We had a consulate in the Ogaden, in Harar which was in this controversial area. And we had a man in Asmara, in Eritrea, and so we went up there. On local leave, we rode mules to Lalibela at the end of November 1960.”

**EC:** “The monasteries. Were they then opened up?”

**Sir Denis:** “It hadn’t been opened up. There were no hotels or anything. We went with an American and his English wife. We motored to Waldie, camped there, then took to mules. It took three days by mule. We went up, I suppose, 12,000 ft, too steep even to ride. You had to lead your mules, zigzagging up. It was easy riding after that. We camped there, then we men, leaving Iona and the American’s wife behind in Lalibela, went on to Imraha Christos, a church in a deep cave.”

**EC:** “I couldn’t remember whether there had been any British money involved in opening up the churches at Lalibela. That was probably after your time.”

**Sir Denis:** “None at all, no. Wilfred Thesiger had been to stay with us. He’d been to those mountains and he urged us to go to Lalibela, so the first local leave we took was to go there in November 1960.

And, by the grace of God, as we were out of touch completely, we got back to Addis Ababa about two weeks before the coup against the Emperor. It would have been ‘Where was our man in Addis Ababa?’ but luckily I was back by then. The Emperor had gone off to Brazil, and I had just given the Crown Prince a large consignment of books from the British Council for the National Library. I left the Crown Prince, went back, got on my horse and did a bit of jumping and things in the compound in Addis, went to bed, and the next morning, 14 December, about 7 o’clock, before I got up, our black servant did the unthinkable; he came into our bedroom with a visiting card from the Emperor’s cousin, Ashrate Kassa, to say, ‘Can I see you. It’s very urgent.’ So I went out in my pyjamas to see this man, who was the Vice-President of the Senate, accompanied by the mayor of Addis Ababa and one of the ministers. They said, ‘Last night, the entire Royal Family was arrested, including the Empress,’ and asked me to send a message to the Emperor in Brazil. They gave me a long thing in Amharic. There was no sort of fax in those days, and I said, ‘I can’t send this, I must have it in English.’ They knew I had my own wireless, so I got them to give me the message in English, I put it into better English, and sent it off. That brought the Emperor back to Addis Ababa. It was quite exciting. My mother was spending Christmas with us. A lot of shooting went on, also some bombing. Many of the British community moved into the embassy compound and were

joined by about thirty Commonwealth students from West and East Africa who were studying in Addis Ababa. We put up tents for them – about 150 in all. On the first day my wife and mother went by car to buy food: we also had an embassy shop so were able to feed the refugees for a couple of days or so. Sir Harry Luke, a retired Colonial Governor was also staying with us and I put him in charge of the African students. Harry Luke's vivid account of this exciting episode appeared in The Times of 30 December 1960.”

**EC:** “So, you finished your time in Ethiopia. A natural end, or were you called back?”

**Sir Denis:** “No. I was hoping to have another full stint in Ethiopia. I was suddenly, in the late summer of 1962, told to come back immediately to stand in temporarily, for Roger Stevens who was then Deputy Under-Secretary for African affairs, who had been removed to work with RAB Butler on the Rhodesian problem. At the same time I was told that the Foreign Secretary intended recommending my appointment as successor to Sir Geoffrey Harrison in Tehran in the Spring. I returned very reluctantly as we were enjoying Ethiopia, and got to work straightaway. But after little more than a month Steven's job came to an end and he wanted his old job back, leaving me without one. Harold Caccia, the PUS, proposed sending me to the UN in New York in place of Sir Hugh Foot (later Lord Caradon) who had resigned over Rhodesia. I refused, knowing full well that once in New York I would probably never get to Iran. Instead I suggested that I should go to SOAS (the School of Oriental and African Studies) to learn some Persian. So I went off, and with the help of Nancy Lambton, got one of her assistants, a Persian called Haidari, to give me a crash course in Persian. I knew I'd never be a Persian scholar, but I wanted to be able to talk and read newspapers. I worked hard at Persian until I went off in April 1963 to be ambassador.”

**EC:** “I never asked you what subjects you did at Oxford. You weren't a linguist.”

**Sir Denis:** “Modern history.”

**EC:** “So this ability to pick up so many languages . . .”

**Sir Denis:** “Well, I’m not a linguist. I don’t pretend to be able to pick up languages easily. But I did learn enough Persian to impress people. One or two people have written memoirs and said I was a fluent speaker, which wasn’t true, but I could talk and hold my own. I didn’t talk to the Shah in Persian. He talked such good English. But when I went round the country, I could hold my own with local governors. When I was Dean of the Diplomatic Corps, I startled my chers colleagues by giving my oration to the Shah in Persian, a bit of a gimmick. But it stood me in very good stead, because I could go round without an interpreter. Iona, my wife, also learned Persian reasonably well too (she could deal with the servants in Persian). And that sort of thing goes a long way in a country like Iran where, on the whole, Europeans don’t bother to pick up the language.”

**EC:** “Mostly, the Foreign Office has been quite good in satisfying the things you wanted, or do you think you really had to interpose?”

**Sir Denis:** “No, I have no complaints about the Foreign Office, I’ve had a very happy life with them. I went to fascinating posts. They all had interesting problems to deal with. No, I have absolutely no complaints about the way they treated me. We were sad not to have children, but without children it never worried us where we went; we were able to concentrate on the job in hand.”

**EC:** “It means you could go to very interesting places without having to worry about other connections and things. So, you went out there to Iran. Who did you take over from?”

**Sir Denis:** “I took over from Sir Geoffrey Harrison, who later came a cropper in Moscow as you may, or may not, remember. The KGB planted a beautiful maid on him! He’d already got his GCMG, but it was not handed to him by the Queen. It was sent to him by post.”

**EC:** “Did you take over an embassy in a healthy state?”



**Sir Denis:** “Yes it was. There was a good staff, I had no complaints. Geoffrey Harrison himself was, in a way, a non person. He didn’t go down well with the Persians. It’s much easier to take over from an unpopular ambassador than a popular one, so I had no difficult act to follow. Nobody ever asked me about him, but they remembered Roger Stevens with great affection.”

**EC:** “Before you went, did you have a detailed briefing on the sort of thing the Foreign Office were interested in? How was that done at that time?”

**Sir Denis:** “I can’t remember. I must have had a briefing, but of course I knew my Persia from before, having been there, and had kept in touch with quite a lot of Persian friends.”

**EC:** “And was it a good idea to go back to a country that you knew already?”

**Sir Denis:** “I think it was a very good idea, because when I had gone there to reopen diplomatic relations, I got a lot of kudos for my part in the resumption of relations. It was a very different Persia then. It was a small group of people, and I knew everybody who mattered, and had a good reputation.”

**EC:** “Though it could be difficult to shake off what it was like previously to the new circumstances.”

**Sir Denis:** “Well, one just had to adapt. I was lucky in having one particular friend who was a great buddy of the Shah, one of the few people the Shah wasn’t jealous of. He was a very rich man, a great landowner, they womanised together, which comes out in his memoirs. The Shah told me, when I first got there, ‘I want you to see my Prime Minister regularly,’ and it was this man, Alam. So every Friday we used to ride together on the Shah’s horses outside Tehran. I had this direct access to the Shah through Alam. Iona, my wife, used to come and ride too. Occasionally, Alam would telephone and say, ‘Is Iona coming?’ and I would say, ‘Yes.’ He would say, ‘Better not’ and I knew he would

have his girlfriend, a British Airways air hostess, with him. 'You know, we men understand each other', etc, etc. It was a very useful link, although Alam was said to be very corrupt, which comes out in various books which have since been published. As far as I was concerned, he never asked any favours of me, except once. His daughter was sent down from Cambridge when he was the Prime Minister, but he didn't ask me to intervene. But he had this English girlfriend, and he once asked me whether I would invite her parents, whom he'd brought out, unbeknown to his own wife, to the Queen's Birthday Party. I was very happy to do so. As far as I was concerned, he never asked for any favours, and he was an invaluable contact."

**EC:** "I suppose it's too early at that time to worry about fundamentalism and the rise of the mullahs. Is that something that was at the back of your mind, or not?"

**Sir Denis:** "It was just rearing its ugly head when I left, but I was not aware of how important it was. I did, in my last despatch or two, certainly my last despatch, put up a marker (this was March/April 1971) that there was trouble ahead for the Shah unless he could come to terms with the left, the liberals, and so on, and the students. But it didn't cross my mind at the time that there was any threat from the mullahs. That's where one was a bit blind, and certainly my successors didn't pick it up either. I feel I ought to have put up a marker. Soon after I got there as ambassador, in June 1963, there were some serious riots in Tehran and elsewhere, with a lot of shooting and quite a lot of people killed. That was provoked by the mullahs, Khomeini and so on. After that I thought that the mullahs had been put under wraps and controlled, but by 1970/71 there were signs, looking back, where one should have put up a warning sign, but I didn't. Certainly my successors didn't, and they were closer to it than I was. I am on record as having said that there was trouble ahead for the Shah, but I never thought he would be flung out."

**EC:** "So what were the main topics of interest or controversy while you were there?"

**Sir Denis:** "Well, the big thing was oil, of course. The Shah always wanted higher oil production, so there was always pressure on me and the American Ambassador to put

pressure on the oil companies, and threats by the Shah to have demonstrations outside the embassy, and that sort of thing, and to cut down on his arms purchases. That was one problem running right the way through. And the second one, in my last two or three years, was the decision by the British government to pull out of the Persian Gulf. HMG decided to pull out of Aden by 1968, and announced that we would pull out of the Persian Gulf by December 1971. It was a Labour government decision, and then when the Conservatives got back in early 1970, after some hesitation, they decided to stick to Labour's original decision. The big problem for me was the long-standing Iranian claim to Bahrain and the islands of Abu Musa and the two Tunbs which we had always insisted were owned by the Arab sheikhs on the other side of the Gulf. After some difficult and secret negotiations with the Shah and his Deputy Foreign Minister and no one else on the Persian side, together with the help of the Secretary General of the United Nations we managed to settle the Bahrain issue. In May 1970 the Iranians formally abandoned their claim to Bahrain.

There remained for Heath's Conservative government, after their election victory in June 1970, the Iranian claim to the other islands. Alec Douglas-Home, the Foreign Secretary, was quick to seize the nettle: his first visit abroad was to see the Shah in Brussels in July. I flew there with him, his private secretary, Johnny Graham, and Anthony Acland, the head of the FO's Middle East Department. This visit I think convinced Douglas-Home that there could be no pulling back from the decision to quit the Gulf by the end of 1971 and that the Shah was determined, come what may, to have the islands.

I left Tehran on retirement in April, 1971 by which time no agreement had been reached over the islands though I was much involved until then and would remind the Iranians of our Protective Treaties with the Sheikhs which would involve conflict with us should they try to seize the islands.

Last May I read a paper entitled 'Iran and the problem of Bahrain and the other islands' to a seminar at St Antony's College, Oxford on the subject of 'the end of the Empire in the Gulf'. I'll give you a copy to accompany this oral history as it illustrates this topic in greater detail."

**EC:** “So that was the main strand of your work there.”

**Sir Denis:** “For the last two years, it was almost entirely on Bahrain and the other islands. We had had a very hostile press for much of the time in the last two years. Relations, by and large, were extremely good with Iran, and may never have been better in some ways. We were members of CENTO together, we were on very close terms with the Shah, we had many experts out there, CENTO experts and so on, and a lot of visitors. Relations were difficult, but never unpleasant. I never had any problems seeing the Shah, and I had this great good fortune of being close to Alam, the Shah’s great buddy, who was first of all Prime Minister and later Minister of Court. He saw the Shah every morning. The Prime Minister, Hoveyda, was a deadly enemy of Alam and I therefore never became as close to him as I did to Alam. I was on good terms with Hoveyda nevertheless. But I could always get to the Shah straight through Alam. It was an enormous asset.”

**EC:** “Presumably the British were the number one foreigners at the time.”

**Sir Denis:** “The Americans were the important ones, though in Persian eyes the British were believed to be behind everything in Iran. The Shah saw the British hand everywhere. If anything went wrong, the Shah’s first instinct was to blame the British for it. It made my position rather fun, because here was I, representing a second-rate power whom he thought pulled all the strings. But I got a lot of flak because of it. I did recommend, when we were having a bad time over the islands, that the Queen should not go to the great Persepolis jamboree in October 1971. I think it upset my successor, Peter Ramsbotham, but I’m very glad, in the light of history, that she didn’t go.”

**EC:** “I suppose that the way that the Shah ruled his country was not something that the British government would have been involved in in any way.”

**Sir Denis:** “No. We were not by any means happy with the way he was ruling but had no thought of interfering. The Americans, under Kennedy and Carter, did I believe speak

to him about human rights but we steered clear. I had instructions from the FO, with which I fully agreed at the time, not to get involved with the opposition. In the light of history this may have been a mistake but the Shah, being the man he was – difficult and intensely suspicious of us – would have got to know and would have lost any confidence in me. My job was to get on with the Shah and promote British interests.

**EC:** “And what was it like for a wife in Iran? At that time presumably it was still quite open as far as western women travelling around.”

**Sir Denis:** “Oh yes. We did a great deal of travelling, not only by Land Rover, but on horses and mules. We had a great friend, an Armenian-Russian, aged 93 now, who was in business. He loved horses. He had friends everywhere and he could arrange trips for us, usually by mule as it was too rough for horses. So we did a lot of fairly rough travelling, dossing down on floors of peasant houses, that sort of thing. I liked doing it and I think one got a feel for the country going around. Iona liked that sort of thing too, so we did a lot of that when we could. We were lucky because we were in Iran before the big oil money came in (the big show-down with the oil companies was in '71), so the bees weren't round the honey-pot and ministers weren't coming out every five minutes. My successors could never really get away for long, whereas we could get away and disappear for a week. I think I saw almost every corner of the country, and was certainly the most travelled of the diplomats in Tehran, and got a certain amount of kudos from the Persians for doing so.”

**EC:** “I know it's always difficult, but is there anything, with hindsight, that you would have done differently, particularly in terms of the way the oil situation panned out afterwards?”

**Sir Denis:** “I don't think so. I wish I'd been more aware of what the mullahs were up to, but I don't think there was a possibility of knowing that. I don't think anybody did know, and it was only just beginning when I left. You see, the last trip we did, Iona and I, was to ride across the mountains to the Caspian, from near Tehran. It was April, it was snowing, but we ended up in spring sunshine the other side of the mountains. It's the

only time I had an escort. There had been an assassination of police officers up on the Caspian, about a month before. This was the beginning of trouble. I told the Persians I was going, and they knew me well enough not to object to my going, but had never escorted me before. On this occasion they insisted on our having an escort, and we had two soldiers, who had a pretty rough time when it started to snow and had to doss down in fairly remote, muddy places. That was the beginning, and perhaps I ought to have been more aware of what was cooking.

I wish I had been more of a Persian scholar and had kept in touch with the intellectuals. I'm not an intellectual myself. I wish I'd had the ability in Persian, knowledge of Persian, to mix with writers etc but you can only do what you're capable of doing and I wasn't capable of moving in those sort of circles. But otherwise, I tried to keep away from the diplomatic round. As you know, there are always people who hang around embassies; we always tried to avoid them and be different. When we'd go around the countryside we met young Persian officials, and we'd invite them to come and see us at the embassy. We made rather an effort in that way to broaden our contacts, but it was not so easy. One didn't deal with the real opposition, but I had friends, from my first time in Tehran, who were very critical of the Shah. They were an older generation, senators and so on, and they used to come round and at times bore me complaining about what was happening. I think it was useful and kept me aware that things weren't always going smoothly in Iran. But I had to be very careful. If the Shah knew you were in touch with these people, you were in trouble. One example was the Chairman of Shell, a Dutchman, John Loudon, who was retiring from the chairmanship of Shell. He'd been one of the three chief negotiators in the 1954 oil agreement. I got to know him well then and he wrote to say he'd like to come and stay with me (obviously he didn't want to stay with his own ambassador for reasons I don't know). I said to him, 'What would you like me to arrange for you while you're here?' and he said, 'I'd like to meet the people we were negotiating with, the oil people, in '54.' Well, the ex-foreign minister, Entezam, was in disgrace, the chief translator and legal adviser, Rouhani, who became the first secretary-general of OPEC, he was in disgrace, and the chief negotiator, Ali Amini was also in disgrace. I knew if I had them to dinner and the Shah heard of this from others, I was in trouble, so I sent a message through my friend Alam, 'Please tell the Shah that I'm having these

people to dinner to meet Mr Loudon.' By having this link with Alam, I could get messages to the Shah and pre-empt his suspicions.

Another occasion, Sir Frank Lee, who was then master of Corpus Christi, Cambridge, and had been head of the Treasury and was an old friend of mine, was out staying with us. We took him down on Sunday to Qum, the holy city where the Ayatollah comes from. I think we were going down in my Land Rover, not in the Rolls Royce, and on the way down we were passed by car after car with bearded mullahs in them. I wondered what it was all about, and when we got to Qum, I learned that the Ayatollah Khomeini, the famous one, had just been released from house arrest. I knew if the Shah heard I was in Qum, he would immediately think that I was up to mischief, so again I sent a message to him that I was in Qum with Sir Frank Lee sightseeing.

**EC:** "Did you do a valedictory when you left? Is there anything else that you put in that, that you can remember, that was significant?"

**Sir Denis:** "I can't think of anything else. I have talked about the Bahrain thing, the islands, the Shah's suspicions of the British. I thought at first that these suspicions had been allayed, but they weren't at all, he was very suspicious of us.

I can't remember anything else except to say how happy I'd been, both in Tehran and the Foreign Office generally. We made very good friends. I'd come in as an outsider, but had never felt an outsider at all. I mean, I had come in through the back door, as I told you earlier, and made some very good friends there, at all levels."

**EC:** "You then came back directly to retirement."

**Sir Denis:** "I was asked before I left by one or two people to go on their board, but I said that I'd decide when I got back. I then went on the board of Shell, Mitchell Cotts and Standard Chartered Bank. But I made it a condition that I wasn't going to be sent out to tout around for business there. I have a great contempt for people who retire one week and go back the next to try to do business. I did go out once with Mitchell Cotts when

they set up a great scheme under Shell to develop agro-industry in the south. I went down to inspect their houses and so on, but not to negotiate. In retirement I have written a couple of books and several articles about Anglo-Persian relations, and have lectured about Iran in the USA, Canada and India both for the FCO and on my own account. In January 1979 I was one of some 20 observers sent by the FCO to observe elections in Rhodesia: and the following year went at the FCO's request to Nassau to tell the exiled Shah that HMG were unwilling to let him come to England.

I have also written my memoirs but have no intention of publishing them. In due time they will be available to students in Oxford, at both the Bodleian and St Antony's Middle East Centre."

**EC:** "Thank you very much indeed."