

BDOHP Interview Index and Biographical Details

Gillian Bennett, OBE MA FRHistS

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RECOLLECTIONS OF GILLIAN BENNETT OBE

RECORDED BY SIR STEPHEN WRIGHT KCMG

AND TRANSCRIBED BY ABBEY WRIGHT

SW: This is Stephen Wright recording the recollections of Gill Bennett and her career in the Diplomatic Service. It's Thursday 9 May 2019.

Gill, would you like to start by telling me how you came to join the Foreign Service?

GB: Yes. I'm a historian, and my entire career I've been a historian in government, and principally in the Foreign Office, so it was through that route that I joined. I did a degree in history. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do afterwards but through a connection at my old university I learned that there was a position open as a Research Assistant in what was then called the Foreign Office Historical Section, and I applied for it. Initially, the first time round, I didn't get in. The Historians have specialist recruitment, you don't take the main Civil Service Exams, you have to fulfil certain criteria and then you do it by interview. It's rather more formal now. I'm ashamed to say that when I joined in 1972 it was still the case that the then Head of Historians, Rohan Butler, used to ring up Oxford and Cambridge women's colleges and say "Have you got any suitable gels?" We were all 'gels' then, he didn't believe in taking on boys because they might want to be promoted, and we couldn't have that. Things have changed a lot since then. But, as I say, I didn't get the job the first time, but a few months later I was contacted to say they had another vacancy, and was I still interested? So I got the job as a very lowly Research Assistant.

Research Assistant Grade II (now Grade B3), December 1972

Research Assistant Grade 1 (C4), December 1977

Assistant Editor (C5), January 1983

SW: And you spent a number of years in that role?

GB: I did, moving up through different grades. Initially, it was working on the official documentary history of British foreign policy, *Documents on British Foreign Policy 1919-1939* (DBFP). When I started we were still on the inter-War series of documents, and then

later moved on to the post-War series. I gradually moved up through the ranks and became an Assistant Editor and ultimately an Editor. I hadn't anticipated staying that long in the Foreign Office, but I found the work very interesting, and the years just passed.

SW: And professionally satisfying as a historian?

GB: Very satisfying. In those days, and in contrast to what happened later in my career, the Historians were completely a backroom organisation; we rarely interacted with the more senior officials in the Office and certainly not with Ministers. We contributed to pieces of advice. The two main roles, which is still the case for the FCO Historians today, are first, to produce the official documentary history of foreign policy, and second to offer what is called historical advice to senior officials and Ministers, which can be absolutely anything. When I was younger my work was concentrated on the documentary work, then later on as I became more senior one could have more input into the advice side of things.

SW: You worked for two bosses in your early years, in particular Professor W. N. Medlicott?

GB: Yes. He was the Senior Editor of the series and a tremendously eminent historian who came to the Foreign Office after retiring as Stevenson Professor of International History at the London School of Economics. I owe all my training to him. There are many things that he taught me that I still tell younger people now. He was really a great figure. He was not easy. He was very demanding but once he'd decided that you were 'alright' in an intellectual and a professional sense you got an awful lot of autonomy, which is what made it so interesting.

SW: So having started in 1972 on this project of the Documents on British Foreign Policy in the inter-War years, you published ten volumes in the years 1975-85. So you were working on that for more than ten years?

Editor, 1985-1990

GB: Yes, a very long time. Then Professor Medlicott retired, and I moved on to the post-War series (*Documents on British Policy Overseas*) working closely with Margaret Pelly, previously Margaret Lambert, who had also been in the Section for a very long time and was now an Editor; she became head of the Historical Section when Dr Roger Bullen died in 1988. I carried on doing that for the next five years from 1985 until 1990.

SW: And then you took a break?

GB: Yes. There were, as the children's books say, 'a series of unfortunate occurrences' which actually turned out to be quite fortunate for me though one doesn't know it at the time. In the meantime I had had two children, the younger of whom was and is very disabled. For a while I thought that this was just too difficult to manage, and I decided that I was going to leave the Office and do something more flexible. The Office was very accommodating about this. It was decided that I would spend a year working half-time, doing 50% of my time in the Office and 50% sorting out what I was going to do next. During the first six months I realised that this was a terrible mistake because, although I was offered lots of jobs to do in the way of teaching and I also did quite a lot of copy editing for publishers and that kind of thing, I found that freelance work was very uncertain, and it tended to either come all at once or not at all. I actually needed more childcare rather than less and I found it very stressful. Also I realised that I missed the work in the Foreign Office, so I decided that I didn't want to leave after all. But in the meantime my successor within the Historical Section had been appointed so I couldn't just go back to my old job.

The Foreign Office didn't want me to leave altogether so Richard Bone, who was then the head of our department, said "I'm going to find you something else to do, it will be good to do something different", which was quite true, and he sent me off to a unit called The Strategic Planning Unit which was actually drawing up the first Foreign Office Information Systems Strategy. Of course it was a different world from what we think of as information systems now, but it was a multi-disciplinary team of mostly technical people, and a couple of diplomatic people. I remember going to see the overall Head of Department, who was a man called David Wright. I remember saying to David rather weakly "I really don't know much about information systems". And he said in a very Foreign Office way, "What's that got to do with it? I'm an Arabist". So that put me in my place.

SW: Before we move on to that, which is definitely quite a significant change in your career, I'd be interested in your view with hindsight, and with your experience now, of the place of the *Documents on Foreign Policy* in the historical record, as a base for and as a source for so much other historical work. How do you see that?

GB: Yes. I still think it's really valuable. I know it's a subject of some controversy and there are some people who say "Why bother? You can get hold of it all easily". But actually the thing about those documents, even the volumes that were produced fifty years ago, they don't go out of date, they don't go off. The material is still relevant as an invaluable distillation of

a vast archive. A colleague of mine, a historian who is currently writing a book about the 1930s specifically, said he absolutely has relied on those documents. He lives in Scotland so going to Kew regularly is not an easy thing, but he says “It’s all in there” in the published documents. And I think that is still true. The added value that the Foreign Office Historians bring to that process is obviously their judgement in selecting documents and setting them in context and looking at a huge amount of material which most historians haven’t got the time or resource to do, and choosing what really tells the British story. Personally, as you can gather from what I’m saying, I think it is an important resource. I’m not saying you couldn’t do it differently possibly, but I think those volumes remain very valuable, and I always felt that.

SW: The documents are there and in the right order?

GB: Exactly.

Strategic Planning Unit ISD(R) (C5) April 1991-September 1992

SW: You moved on and made quite a change. So what did you actually make of Information Systems Strategy, what was that role?

GB: It was a very steep learning curve. What had happened was that they had got this little group of people who were all very expert in their field. But what they were finding it hard to do was to translate their findings into a form that the Foreign Office Board of Management could understand and accept. They tended to use jargon – I remember not long after I got there, their writing in a document, intended to be seen by the Chief Clerk, “this system has a harsh interface for the naïve user”. I remember saying “Look, I don’t really quite know what that means but I jolly well know that the Board are not going to want to be called naïve users”. My job was to write it in Foreign Office terms essentially. In my first week I had to distil an 18 page document on radio communications into a couple of paragraphs for a summary document. I thought that radios were things that you turned on and off, so it was a very steep learning curve. But from the point of view of my future career, the importance was that it involved going all round the Foreign Office talking to different sections and people in different jobs, to make sure that what we’d represented as their requirements in the final strategy were actually right and that we were explaining them properly. In Historical Branch in those days, partly because we were based in Cornwall House in Stamford Street, part of which belonged to the Foreign Office, we didn’t very often go round departments in

Whitehall, we didn't often go to King Charles Street and we didn't really interact much with the rest of the Office.

The Strategic Planning Unit very useful for me. I also went on quite a lot of training courses. I moved into a different kind of mind-set and it was very useful.

SW: So this was your first introduction to FCO Departments and to mainstream diplomats. What was your first impression having worked as a professional not so far away?

GB: One of the reasons why I've been a historian in Whitehall for well over forty years is that I find it fascinating to see policy making from the inside out and not from the outside in. Clearly in that particular job I didn't get to talk about policy a great deal, but you did realise there were huge differences in the types of people who did these jobs. As soon as you met them you realised that there were people who had a tremendous grip on things and knew exactly what they wanted to do, and there were also people who really were rumbling along hoping to retire quietly. There was always a range of people and if you are thinking about the people who were actually involved in the making of foreign policy it's interesting to see those different types and see how it actually worked. Obviously I didn't get to know everybody.

In those days the Foreign Office was really grappling with technology. Throughout my tour there had been this tension about how much you do yourself and how much you get outside experts in to do it for you. Then we were still in that period where we were much too secret, much too sensitive, "we have to devise our own systems". In fact the Strategy Unit spent quite a lot of time saying "Actually this is much more expensive, it's not likely to work as well, you would be better to buy some off the shelf systems and just tweak them". It still is a bit of a problem. But there were still then, I don't suppose there are so many now, senior people, heads of department and assistant heads, who even though they might have a computer on their desk would have died rather than turn it on. They wanted their secretary to turn it on and look at it and print out for them. They didn't want to give up their old ways of working and that of course has changed radically. We don't have secretaries anymore; everybody is their own typist and sends their own emails and so on. But in the early nineties it was a completely different mind-set and part of the work of the team I was in was to try and get people to realise there were advantages in changing the way you worked. And that was useful.

SW: And in the technology of the time, this is pretty much before the internet when Microsoft was just getting going. What kind of technologies were you looking to bring into the Foreign Service and how far ahead were you looking?

GB: That was a question of some controversy. Initially there were two main strands. One was the question of what we now think of as email, which seems normal to everybody but in those days the idea of sending electronic messages was really embryonic in the Office. You had to have a lot of involvement from the Communications Electronic Security Group at Cheltenham as to what you could or could not do. So that was one thing. The other was having some kind of word processing facilities that could be shared. We did have word processors before, but the first 'proper' computer used the Aramis System, originally called SOAP which stood for Standard Office Automated Processing until somebody actually wrote in a document "we have no room for slippage on SOAP", at which point it was deemed that this was not a suitable name!

SW: Yes, I remember Aramis and the green screen. So your final product in this exercise was a strategy document and I would guess you had a hand in editing that?

CB: Absolutely. There were a lot of very long days. Luckily the team were good fun and we worked well together, and I was glad to have done it. But by the time we got to finishing off the strategy I was thinking 'what next?'

SW: And what kind of reception did you get from the Board for your paper?

CB: Reasonably good. The trouble in technology is that everything moves on so fast. Another difficulty was that then there was this huge organisation called Information Systems Division (ISD). There was an ISD(R) and an ISD(P) and ISD(O), there were different parts and they all fought one another. So it was never going to be a smooth ride. But it was very interesting and it was good for me.

SW: And it helped the Board to make real decisions?

GB: Yes it did. It got people to accept that actually being connected with each other electronically was a good thing and we really needed to make big strides towards doing that.

SW: Revolutionary?

GB: Absolutely.

SW: So there you are in 1992. What were your options? And what were you thinking?

GB: I was still thinking, is there anything other than the Historians in the Foreign Office that I was suited for, but then while I was still thinking a friend of mine, Patrick Holdich, who is now the Head of Research Analysts but in those days was the Research Analyst on the Canada and North America Desk, was going on a posting to Ottawa and he said to me “If you’ve come to the end of what you’re doing, why don’t you apply to hold my job down while I’m on a posting?” Historians and Research Analysts have always worked closely together so I understood what it was all about, and it was agreed that I could do this and I moved into Research Department to do this North America and Canada job.

North America and Canada Desk, Research and Analysis Dept, Sept 1992-July 1993

Again I was fortunate because it was a really interesting time. It was the time of the US Presidential campaign leading up to the election of Bill Clinton first time round. The work I had been doing in the Strategy Unit was not entirely irrelevant because Clinton, in his campaign, started introducing a number of things that now seem normal but in those days were revolutionary. What he used to call ‘Town Hall Meetings’ were virtual, they were electronic. There was a whole emphasis on the use of technology in his campaign, which was really the first time. So I did have a little bit of insight into what that meant and, of course, any American presidential campaign has its excitements, and I was able to follow that first one. It was more a question of keeping an eye on what was coming in and what people were saying. It was also the campaign in which Ross Perot was coming up as a rather peculiar outsider so we had to produce material about that. It was interesting. I was supposed to stay there three or four years while Patrick was in Ottawa, but again fate intervened, if you want to look at it that way. But I did find that an interesting experience and quite enjoyable. And of course Clinton was elected, then there was the question of his coming over for a visit which also always involves a huge amount to do at the London end, and of course for Research Analysts.

My little story from that time is that John Major was then Prime Minister, and when Clinton was coming it was a question, as it always is, of “What present can we give him?” John Major, whose constituency was in Huntingdonshire, happened to know that at one point there had been a William Clinton who had owned a lot of land in Huntingdonshire. There was absolutely no connection to Bill Clinton whose birth name originally wasn’t Clinton anyway, but nevertheless No. 10 said they thought it would be good to explore this connection and see

if we couldn't give Clinton a present that related to Huntingdonshire. So I was sent off initially to find a map, which I did, a rather expensive map, of course I didn't have to pay for it (I think it was 18th Century), which showed William Clinton's lands and it also showed his coat of arms. It was also decided that there should be a fancy framed representation of the Clinton coat of arms to present to Bill Clinton when he came, but we needed to find out what all the different things on the coat of arms actually meant. I was despatched to the College of Heralds, in fact the only time I've ever been in there which I found a very strange experience. I had to go and see Mr Rouge Dragon. Sitting in Reception I remember the receptionist ringing up saying "I've got a lady for you Mr Rouge Dragon" and it was all I could do to keep my face straight. However he explained, pointing out that there was absolutely no connection between the Clintons, what each bit of the arms meant and this was eventually done. It's immaterial but it's something that has stuck in my memory because it was such a bizarre episode.

SW: And you made that important contribution! The question I'd really like to ask you is more related to policy and what kind of contribution you as a Research Analyst were making on North America? And I have in mind the constant challenge of everyone working on the United States in particular, namely everybody knows everything, or thinks they do.

GB: I wouldn't claim to have made a substantial policy contribution. I remember that the Head of the Research Department was at that time Basil Eastwood. I remember him saying "We really need a good paper on the Clinton campaign's use of technology". Now it's not really significantly affecting policy, but it was something that was thought to be important in understanding how his campaign was operating and there were one or two other similar pieces. I would say it was more about providing background and also sifting through the huge amount of information that came through every day, to keep an eye out for what might just be important in terms of Anglo-American relations if he were elected, or straws in the wind about the global context. I wouldn't claim to have made a major contribution but I think I added some footnotes to what was being thought of elsewhere.

SW: How much did Canada figure?

GB: Canada figured rather a lot. There was at that point quite a lot going on with regard to Quebec, and I also wrote a number of papers about Quebec. I did work closely with North America Department, so I used to go to their meetings and talk to people who were working in the Department. On the Canada side there were also negotiations on the North America

Free Trade Agreement which were going on. So Canada actually figured rather more in terms of policy, and in some ways there was more going on than on the America side where you've got any amount of information. Canada was very interesting. I didn't really know a great deal about Canada. I did some work on the triangular relationship of Britain, Canada, and the United States in strategic terms and things like nuclear policy, really looking back from a historical view point which was clearly within my area anyway. I remember going off very often giving a number of talks at conferences and other places on the triangular relationship, what had formed it, what had happened during the War, and how it worked out afterwards. So I did do quite a lot of work on Canada, yes.

SW: Then we are in the middle of 1993 after you'd been doing that job of Research Analyst for almost a year and you were promoted and you moved again?

Performance Assessment Unit, D6, July 1993 – June 1995

GB: That wasn't really something I was looking for although the promotion was very important to me financially and so on.

SW: And in terms of status?

GB: Yes, from all those points of view. What we used to call Grade 6 and Grade 5 that was always the kind of key jump at that level. I'd been a bit disappointed that I couldn't do that in Research Department.

SW: For the record, that is to D6 in modern speak?

GB: Yes, that's right. I was approached actually by Edward Clay who was then Head of Personnel, and this is a very Foreign Office kind of thing really. They had this thing called the Performance Assessment Unit which was a unit that produced on paper a summary of an officer's career by looking through all their reports and recommendations for or against promotion into a higher grade. This unit was staffed by former Ambassadors. They were all men, they were all white and they were all retired Diplomatic Service officers. There'd been quite a bit of protest—after all there were many Home Civil Service officers in the Foreign Office and quite a lot of women. There'd been a lot of union trouble and unhappiness about this and that it was such an unrepresentative unit. They were obviously casting around for somebody—I was a woman, I was a Home Civil Servant, I was also a specialist, and there are lots of specialists in the Foreign Office and they obviously thought that I was a good person

to put in the mix. So he asked me if I would consider moving to that unit on promotion. That promotion both from status and financially was something I couldn't say no to. And so I did.

SW: And this unit, my impression is that it was very powerful in its effect on people's careers?

GB: Oh yes, absolutely.

SW: And very un-transparent?

GB: Yes. At that time Boards got our assessments to base decisions on about postings and promotions. I wondered at first about how I'd get on, but I very soon found there was not very much difference between the way we worked there and the Historians' work. Because essentially you got a person's personnel file, and you went through it in its entirety and then you summarised it, just as you would a historical file. If you read the file carefully you'd pretty soon get a good feel. There were security reports on people and performance reports all through their career. It was un-transparent in the sense that people didn't get to see it, but it was also done on a very egalitarian basis in the sense that you were not allowed to report on somebody who was a higher grade than you. But in practice we all did the same work. There was a big pile of cases coming up and whoever was next on the pile, you took it. We all did the same thing. There was a lot of care taken to make sure we used the same criteria and we used to have big discussions about difficult cases. Everybody could chip in. So it was actually quite scrupulous even if it wasn't entirely transparent, and sometimes we took unpopular decisions – unpopular for the person you were reporting on. But on the other hand it was quite a rigorous process.

SW: So your method of work was that individual members of the unit took the lead on individual cases?

GB: Yes. There was a form you had to fill in but then you would talk about problems with the other members of the unit and you would discuss your final verdict before it went forward. You would also talk to the grade managers, as they used to be called, of the officers. That was quite common. So if you were not entirely clear about someone or you couldn't quite see what the file was getting at, you could go and see the grade manager and discuss the person concerned, and that was useful too.

SW: So there you were, representing diversity?

GB: Yes as I say, if I'd had a wooden leg it would have been even better.

SW: What difference do you think you made?

GB: I think I did bring a different outlook. The other members of the team had obviously been labelled as dinosaurs, but they were absolutely not dinosaurs, they were all very acute and capable and very good company as well, which helps a lot if you're doing that kind of work. But I think I did bring a different aspect. I had come from a different professional background and I was a woman, not that I think that makes that much difference. They didn't really know many specialists, they hadn't come across them in their professional careers nor did they often have much experience of working in home based jobs. Equally I didn't have direct experience of ambassadorial posts, so it was a good mix, I think it helped. I learned a lot, I did quite a lot of training in that post because at that point I didn't think there was any prospect of going back to the Historians, and Personnel (HR as we say now) were keen to get people in the Office professionally qualified in personnel work at various levels. They asked me if I would consider doing a professional qualification. I was thinking "well, maybe" and that this might be a way forward in career terms. I didn't just want to do a certificate in Personnel, that wasn't my kind of thing, but an MBA in Human Resources, which was on offer, is obviously a much more high powered qualification, and if I was going to do one I thought that would be more useful to everybody. The Office had offered to pay for it and also to give me the time to do it on a part time basis. I even got as far as applying to do this course at City University and indeed being accepted, but again events took a hand. Although I would have done it and maybe I would have loved it, but I think I've done more useful work in my own field than I would have done in that.

SW: At that stage in your career did you feel you'd been bobbing about a bit ...

GB: Yes. I felt that I needed to consolidate, I needed to move up. By that time I had two small children one of whom was seriously disabled and my partner had died in 1994. I must just say something about that. During 1994 when I was working in the Performance Assessment Unit it became clear that my partner could not recover and that he was going to die. There was always a Head of the Unit who was a serving officer, and would be posted in and out so to speak. He said "I think you are needed there more than you are here. Why don't you work at home for a while?" There was no way that I could work at home, but also I could not have afforded to take unpaid leave. Because, as I've said, everybody did the same job in the unit, what those members of the unit did was actually just to close ranks and absorb

my caseload for a couple of months, and I was able to nurse my partner until he died. They didn't make a fuss about it, nobody said much about it. It was not an official arrangement. They used to ring me up occasionally for my advice to maintain the fiction that I was working at home, but actually they just did it to help me out. I am eternally grateful for that. And they did it in a completely... nobody mentioned it, they just did it. When I came back after he died they just opened up again and I just slotted back in. Again, they didn't make a fuss and they were sympathetic, but they didn't go on about it. I've always thought it represented the absolute best of what you can get in the Diplomatic Service and the way that they behaved over that.

This meant that I was thinking about what to do next and how I was going to cope with all of this. While I was thinking about MBAs, I had an approach from Richard Bone who had moved over and was now in charge of the Historians. He said he thought the Historians needed a revamp. As he put it "there is an awful lot going on but not much coming out the other end". My long-time colleague and friend Heather Yasamee was moving more into the management side of things and was going to be in a senior management role in the Department. It was at that period when the whole Office was forever being bench-marked and turned into business units, drawing up service level agreements, people from Capita were everywhere. Everybody was reinventing themselves. She was involved in the management side and Richard said "Would you consider coming back in charge of the Historians?" And I thought "Yes".

Chief Historian, Records and Historical Department, June 1995

SW: At that stage when you were about to become Chief Historian and re-think the role to some extent of the Historians, were you in touch with the Board level members of the Service and of the Office, the PUS, the Chief Clerk and other Deputy Under Secretaries?

GB: At Board level in the sense that the Head of Personnel, PMD, was on the Board and sometimes with the Chief Clerk and occasionally the PUS, but not a great deal. But it was clear that what I'd been urged to do, and which I'd done, was take a number of courses, usually at the Civil Service College who used to do these really wonderful senior management courses, and there was also a course they used to run for women in senior management, and I'd done all that. So the poor Historians, I arrived back determined to shake things up and sort things out, and obviously I wanted to do the job in the way I wanted to do it.

SW: An important step. So you were really championed for this by Richard Bone. Were you given a mandate as to what he wanted or what the Office wanted the Historians to do and how they wanted it to change?

GB: One thing was that there hadn't been any volumes of the documents published for quite a long time, and there is always the danger that if you don't actually produce the goods, what are you there for? Richard made it quite clear that the future of the Historians could be in doubt if something didn't start coming out the other end. But he also wanted the Historians to play a more active role in contributing to policy advice, and it was not, at that point, exactly clear how that would work. In between, several things had happened which made a difference. One was what we now call the Waldegrave Initiative, named for William Waldegrave when he was Minister of State in the Foreign Office, although Douglas Hurd had championed it too. It was an informal mechanism whereby scholars could ask any department in Whitehall for access to papers that were not already open. This was before Freedom of Information or Data Protection legislation was enacted. The Waldegrave Initiative was valuable because it encouraged lots of people to ask for information, which indeed they got, and there was a lot more discussion about papers that had come out and so on, on a whole range of issues. There was more discussion about openness, embryonic at this stage, but there were discussions about that going on. It was felt that in a climate where the emphasis was more on making the information available the Historians could play a part in this. The other part of it of course is that in the late eighties and early nineties the various pieces of legislation had come through which had put the Intelligence Agencies on a statutory footing. You were now allowed to acknowledge that the Agencies existed, and name their Heads, after having for years and years never been able to mention them, never mind anything they did.

The Historians had never really had any contact with the Agencies, although we've always had full access to FCO archives. If you wanted to know whether there were some papers that might exist in one of the agencies which might help you, you could funnel a request through various channels and they might or might not tell you something. But I'd had no direct contact, in fact nobody had in the Historians. And that was about to change although I didn't know how much before I came back into that job. I think it was a time when, from the Historians point of view, it was make it, or risk being abolished. Change the role, step up or step off.

SW: Use it or lose it?

GB: Exactly.

SW: What were your principal aims when you started?

GB: Initially, having just been on this big management course, I'd adopted a strategy they advised there where you had a meeting with everybody in your team, and you went round the table asking everybody to say what they really enjoyed about their job and what they disliked about their job. It was very revealing. One person said they weren't enjoying any of it and a couple of people said they were really enjoying things that I didn't think were taking us anywhere, so I thought "hmmm".

The first thing was to sort out what was happening with the volumes. Certain volumes were in preparation but had basically got stuck for a variety of reasons. Some I shut down altogether because they had gone wrong early on and I thought it was too difficult to put them right. But the other part of it, and again this is linked to the Waldegrave Initiative and Douglas Hurd wanting to look ahead, was the idea that you might publish documents that were not open to the public, documents that were not open under the thirty year rule, documents that only we were allowed to see. We had permission to do that and so we started. I commissioned the Historians to start work initially on two volumes concurrently, edited by me and my colleague Keith Hamilton, I did Britain and the Soviet Union 1968-72 and he did Détente 1972-75/76. They were quite revolutionary volumes because obviously they were based on closed material, but also my volume, for example, for the first time ever contained PUSD material. The Permanent Under-Secretary's Department was responsible for liaison between the Foreign Office and the Intelligence Agencies, and their records had always been regarded as intelligence-related and therefore not open. But I asked and got special permission to publish the documentation from PUSD files on what was known as Operation Foot, which was in 1971 when Britain expelled 105 Soviet intelligence officers, still the biggest ever expulsion. I argued successfully through the PUS to the Foreign Secretary that if we didn't cover that episode in a volume dealing with Anglo-Soviet relations we would lose credibility. What happened was that the story began in the normal Foreign Office files and then it went into a rabbit hole and disappeared. That was quite a big decision to publish PUSD material, and it was a volume that was revolutionary. We haven't done much of it since then, though occasionally. I interspersed the documents with editorial passages explaining the context, which was also a new departure.

Going along with all this was the problem, which has never been resolved, of how much it costs to produce these volumes. The publishers, it used to be HMSO but subsequently when HMSO disappeared, we had to negotiate a contract with a commercial publisher. These volumes are not going to 'stack em up' in the airport. If any commercial publisher is willing to bear the cost of producing these volumes, they're going to be jolly expensive. So we were trying to make the volumes smaller, thinner, less expensive if we could. That hasn't been entirely successful but that's a different story. But at that point this was the first one of a new breed of document based on closed sources, shorter, and containing much more editorial content than previously. It may not sound like a big departure but actually it was.

SW: When were they published?

GB: The first two were both published at the end of 1997. At the beginning of 1998 we had a big meeting, a seminar in the Locarno Dining Room, which was really quite ground breaking. The PUS, then John Kerr, chaired it and of course we had people alive then who had been part of it. We had James Callaghan, Denis Healey, George Walden, Julian Bullard, John Killick, we had people who had been involved in the episodes we discussed in the volumes and we had this big seminar about basically dealing with the Russians. In fact the Russian Ambassador was there. This was really very high profile. We were in the press, we were interviewed, the various Ministers were interviewed and it was in the papers the following day. The Historians were, well not on the front page, but they were in the press in a different way. It wasn't just a review of the volumes, it was more a discussion about the whole process.

SW: And the volumes had some public impact?

GB: They were very well received and are still well regarded, indeed the PUSD material you still can't get. Some PUSD material has now been released but not in the sixties and seventies. And we had a very good reception from the Office as well. By this time you were talking about a different Government and that, as it turned out, changed our role even more.

In May 1997 there was a Labour landslide and a new Government. The election was on a Thursday, and on the Friday I had received a call from Francis Richards who was the DUS, saying I might be called into the Office over the weekend. But before I talk about that I think I should go back to the beginnings of Nazi Gold because otherwise it doesn't make sense.

In 1996, a year after I took over as Chief Historian, Greville Janner had written to Malcolm Rifkind, who was then Foreign Secretary, saying “It is a scandal”... he was always saying things were a scandal ... “It is a scandal that we have got these secret documents from the American archives about things that had happened in the War, about the use of property that had been stolen from Jews and which had been hidden by neutral countries and you are still sitting on all this secret information. We demand it’s opened now”. Greville Janner had been involved in a major exercise going on at that time in the United States, funded very generously by some Jewish organisations and by Edgar Bronfman who was a Canadian business tycoon who was very interested in all this. They had been putting in multiple Freedom of Information requests in the States and they had got hold of this little set of documents marked ‘Secret’. So Greville Janner had written to Malcolm Rifkind saying, “These are secret documents and you are sitting on them, what about it?” At this stage I knew nothing about it. Malcolm Rifkind’s office, quite understandably, asked SIS “Do you know anything about this?” They said “nothing to do with us, mate”. So Rifkind wrote to Janner saying “We have no knowledge of this” and there were immediate accusations of cover-up and so on. While all this accusatory correspondence was going on somebody in the Private Office thought it might be a good idea to ask the Historians, and these documents, or copies of them, landed on my desk. As soon as I saw them I recognised them from what they were. Yes, they were marked Top Secret, but that was because they dated from the War and anything being sent across the Atlantic tended to be highly classified, but they were Treasury documents. They were documents exchanged between the United Kingdom Treasury Delegation in Washington during the War and the Foreign Office. More importantly, these documents had been open at Kew in the National Archive since 1972 so any idea of a cover up was completely ridiculous. But of course it was too late by then, the whole thing had taken on a life of its own.

SW: These documents dealt with? ...

GB: They were talking about neutral countries, the Swiss in particular having laundered Nazi funds. There are two strands to this. One was the Nazis actually appropriating the central banks of countries that they invaded. But what was really fuelling this was the appropriation of Jewish property in particular, bank accounts, and also the related issue that had been discovered that in Switzerland there were still many, many dormant accounts that had belonged to Jews, and the owners had never been told about them. So there was money there which was owed to people held back by the famous Gnomes of Zurich secrecy. So there

were lots of issues. One was the conduct of neutral governments during the war, money laundering as we now might call it, and trading in gold that had been looted by the Nazis both from individuals and from organisations and banks. It was a real can of worms. It was more a matter of opening up something that nobody really wanted to look at, not necessarily because there was anything terrible behind it, but because it was a period of history that people didn't want to look too closely at. A lot of these countries had been neutral, Spain, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland, they weren't particularly keen to discuss their war time conduct in the 1990s. With these accusations that we were covering up, the Foreign Secretary did what Foreign Secretaries have done on a number of occasions; they stand up in the House of Commons and they say "I have ordered a full investigation". When you hear that, you know that's you if you're Chief Historian. We were charged with producing a report on Nazi Gold from the British archives in a very short period of time in 1996. We were told that we could have access to what might be in intelligence archives and it was really the beginning of my working closely with people in the Secret Intelligence Service. Actually they were no help on Nazi Gold, because they hadn't been lying when they said it wasn't anything to do with them, it wasn't. However, for the sake of this report you had to have looked at everything, so I began to work with the Agencies. We produced a report which was published in September 1996 and actually had an enormous impact. The report itself was very small but the Americans hadn't done anything like this yet, and the State Department immediately got very antsy and said "We must commission a report too". And there were other countries who felt that if we were going to start talking about it, and obviously we talked about other countries in this report, they needed to get their own story out. It was like a small pebble that set off an avalanche.

A personal small story about that, if I'm allowed, is that I'd written this report based on what I'd found in Foreign Office and indeed in Treasury archives, open archives, and various other things. It went up to the Foreign Secretary and there was going to be a press conference on publication. I'd said to our then News Department person who dealt with the Historians, "Do I need to be there?" And he said "No, I don't think so, don't worry about it". On the morning of the press conference, beforehand, I got a call from this same person and he said "Actually, Nigel (Nigel Sheinwald who was then Head of News Department) thinks it might be a good idea if you come to the conference and sit at the back just in case anybody has a difficult question that you might be able to answer". I confess I nipped out of the Office and went down to the Army & Navy Store and bought a shirt because I wasn't terribly smartly

dressed that day. It was just as well. There used to be that room where they had press conferences on the side of the courtyard. When I came into the back of there, Nigel swooped upon me and said “I’ve come to the conclusion that you will be far better off up there than I am”. And the next thing I know, I’m up at the front with a lot of press in front of me and basically I was it. I realise this is how Nigel operates but I didn’t know him quite so well in those days. I think I learned at that session, what has stood me in good stead ever since, that even if you get asked things that you don’t know or are difficult, on those occasions you always know a lot more than the people in your audience and you’ve just got to remember that. So that was a bit of a baptism of fire. There was quite a lot of reporting in the press about the whole thing and then we heard from the State Department that the Americans were setting up a big research project into looted gold with my counterpart, who was called the Historian of the State Department, Bill Slany, whom I already knew. Bill was going to be in charge of it, although he had much bigger resources than we did. But that began a whole programme of work. And then the Swedes had a commission, the Portuguese, everybody set up a commission to look at all of this.

SW: Including the Swiss?

GB: Yes including the Swiss. There began to be international conferences and it began to be a big thing. In the Office, Western European Department had the policy lead and obviously I worked very closely with them on this, and that was great. They were very supportive when I had a bad moment. In this first report there was a typo which I hadn’t noticed because it was all done in a bit of a hurry, but even so, I should have noticed. There was a particular figure, I can’t exactly remember now, whether I put Swiss Francs or it should have been in dollars or vice versa. Anyway the Swiss had a complete meltdown because the mistake I’d made implied that the amount of money they had concealed was hugely greater. What could one do but apologise and reprint it, but at the time it was all really difficult. I can remember sitting at a meeting in Anthony Layden’s room, he was Head of WED at that time, saying “Is it the gun or the poison?” But they were supportive, and we passed on from that.

SW: And there’s more to the story?

GB: This was all happening in the autumn/winter of 1996. We come round to 1997 and the advent of the Labour Government. I got a call from Francis Richards saying that I might be asked to come into the Office over the weekend after the election. I was thinking “What on earth?” Anyway I was asked “Could you come in and see the Foreign Secretary” on the

Sunday after the election, it was Robin Cook obviously. I had to get somebody to look after the children, and when I arrived in the Office I drove in, parked in the Courtyard, which was a lot easier in those days, I went up to the Private Office and John Coles was PUS. He said “What are you doing here? I don’t think you can be required”. He was never much good to Historians I have to say. After a certain amount of time, it wasn’t just me, a few of us were called in, including Francis. Robin Cook said, he didn’t mention an ethical dimension, but he talked about wanting to deal with foreign policy problems in a different way. He said “One of the issues I think we need to take a lead on is this question of appropriated property, Nazi Gold has become a loose umbrella term for all these issues, and I’ve decided we should take a lead and we should have an international conference on this subject in London at the end of the year”. He looked at Francis, basically saying get on with it. It was quite exciting because there was a real sense of excitement then after such a long period of Conservative Government. Whatever people’s political views were, there was a feeling that things had changed and there was a different approach. Obviously new Ministers come in and they want put their stamp on things.

Organising an international conference, as I’m sure you know, is a big thing. But we did it, and we had it at Lancaster House at the end of 1997. In the meanwhile there’d been more and more international conferences and meetings. The Swedes also decided that they wanted to be quite proactive so there were quite a lot of meetings in Stockholm. I spent a lot of time travelling in that period. On a number of occasions I went to Washington for a meeting and came back the next day which I know diplomats do all the time, but it’s actually quite tough. I don’t know that the conference made any huge differences, but it brought a lot of things out into the open, and more and more countries were feeling that they should look in their archives. As part of all this, the House of Representatives Banking Committee in the United States decided that they were going to hold a special session on this question in the summer of 1997. They invited countries to send representatives. John Kerr was still Ambassador in Washington then, and the initial decision was that he must appear before the Committee. But he sent a telegram back to London saying “There is no point in my appearing because Gill is the person who knows about this and she should be the one to speak”. This posed a constitutional issue because officials are not supposed to do that kind of thing without special permission, and John Coles was not terribly inclined to give that. However John Kerr is a forceful person too and it was eventually decided that I must be the one to represent the British Government on this particular issue. It was quite a formulaic thing. You had to

produce a short paper, you had to produce a longer paper and you had obviously to make remarks. It was an interesting experience.

SW: Was this a hearing or a conference?

GB: It was a hearing of the Committee and you were summoned to it. What happened was that they'd asked a range of countries and neither the French nor the Germans went. The Germans said they couldn't afford to send anybody. The French said they hadn't got anybody who knew enough about it. Now if they thought this was going to go down well they were very much mistaken. The Swiss did send somebody, in fact somebody I knew because he'd been to all these conferences with me, a very nice man called Antoine Fleurie, whose English was good but not good enough for this particular exercise. The Portuguese had a very good chap. The end result was that I go to Washington, I have to go and be briefed in the Embassy, a certain amount of performance about this, but eventually I'm called to the hearing. You make your prepared remarks and then you take questions. The chairman of the Committee was a man called Jim Leach who I think was a representative of a southern state, I forget which one. When he was holding this hearing he, purposely (because I discovered later when I sat next to him at a meal and it was quite different) used a very broad southern accent. My poor Swiss colleague just couldn't understand sufficiently. I can't do the accent, but he talked about "Göring" in a way that was very difficult to understand if you were not a native speaker.

Leach read out at the beginning the background to this issue and said "We invited the French Government but they said they didn't know enough about it and the Germans said they couldn't afford it". It really looked bad, so we gained a certain amount of credit just from being there. It also went quite well in the sense that I got cross which turned out to be a good thing. When I was being cross-examined, I'd obviously never been to a Congressional Committee before and I was fascinated by it. It was a bit like Parliament, there were not many people there but then somebody would arrive and as soon as they took their seat they'd be given a microphone. It was a sort of grandstanding. It was all on public broadcasting. So they'd come in, say their piece and then they'd go again, so it was slightly confusing. In this cross examination I was asked why it was that at the end of the War in 1946 when the British Government were asked by the Americans to impose tariffs, basically sort of sanctions, on the Swiss and other countries who were not cooperating, why didn't we do it? I had to get cross, I don't mean that I lost my temper but I said "Well the reason we didn't do it is that

under the terms of the Anglo-American Loan Agreement of December 1945 when the Americans had made us a loan, we were specifically forbidden to impose tariff restrictions on anybody”. There was a silence after this. I didn’t realise it at the time but later when there was a reporting telegram coming from Washington it was generally thought that I’d done well. It didn’t make the issue go away, but it was certainly an interesting experience.

SW: And it was a significant diplomatic first for an official to appear before a US Congressional Committee

GB: Yes, I don’t know if it had ever been done before but I know from the amount of fuss that was made about it that it was regarded as being unusual. And if it hadn’t been for John Kerr ... but he was right because otherwise it would have been like those meetings where you sit behind them and whisper to them, and that really wouldn’t have had the same impact.

SW: And I know that he regarded it as one of his more successful decisions! Is that it for Nazi Gold because it’s a great saga?

GB: Yes, it goes on and on.

SW: I was aware, for example, that the Under Secretary in the State Department, Stuart Eisenstadt, took a great lead on this ...

GB: Yes, he was fanatical.

SW: So let’s tell the whole story if there’s anything you want to add?

GB: It didn’t stop there. Gradually we published two reports and then I drew back from it because we weren’t really breaking any new ground and it all became tied up with the idea of having a Holocaust Day. I drew back from that because I felt “they don’t need me for that” and other people moved into that area. The trouble with all this issue is that it’s so emotive as soon as you get into certain areas. Clearly it’s unpleasant, some parts of it. But you could sit in front of an audience anywhere in the world and have an entire session talking about Nazi seizure of Jewish property with nobody ever mentioning that there was a war on. Why wasn’t this stopped? Well actually during the War there was no way of stopping it.

Another big issue had meanwhile come up which was Zinoviev, so I think we perhaps leave Nazi Gold there.

In 1998, one of the jobs the Foreign Office Historians have always had, and still have, is to deal with controversies that never go away. Throughout my career, since I joined the Office in 1972, there have been some things that have never gone away, and one of them is the Zinoviev Letter, which we are just about to talk about, another is the question of the Irish Nationalists and Roger Casement and his diaries. There are a whole set of them including the Katyn Massacre. It doesn't matter how many times you go into it, deal with it, it comes back.

The Zinoviev Letter is a classic case of what we now call disinformation, political dirty tricks. It was a letter supposedly written by the head of the Bolshevik propaganda organisation in 1924 to the British Communist Party encouraging them to greater revolutionary effort, but significant because it was used during the 1924 General Election Campaign to smear the Labour Party. We'd just had the first ever Labour Government and it was used by the right wing press essentially to damage the Labour Party. They were not going to win anyway, for other reasons, but it left a scar on the Labour Party which remains to this day nearly 100 years later. It was almost certainly a forgery and a lot of people in the Labour Party thought it had been forged by – you name it – British Intelligence, the Civil Service, Conservative Central Office, White Russians, Red Russians. It was a complicated issue and it had always come back.

It came back again in 1998 when a book was published by Nigel West, the intelligence historian, and a man called Oleg Tsarev who was a former KGB Colonel, called "Crown Jewels". Crown Jewels had been the codename in the Soviet Union for material that they had obtained from British traitors who had taken material to Moscow, including of course Kim Philby. This book was published early in 1998 and it included a chapter on the Zinoviev Letter purporting to give the truth on it from Russian intelligence files. This book actually had a bit of an impact when it was published in Britain, provoking a number of Parliamentary Questions, on the lines of "Why are we having to read about British history from traitors' material?" "Where are the British files?" "Why is it still secret?"

At this point Robin Cook did what I described Malcolm Rifkind doing earlier – standing up in the House of Commons saying "I've ordered a full investigation". They never tell you that beforehand, you always find out afterwards, and I was commissioned by him to look into this. Initially, Robin Cook interestingly thought the whole thing was ludicrous because the Zinoviev Letter was 1924 and who's going to care in 1998? He soon found from his postbag, so to speak, that it was still very much a live issue in the Labour Party at large and indeed in

Parliament, so he conceded that something must be done about it. His first reaction was “This is old stuff, open the files” until he was pounced upon by the intelligence agencies who explained why it was not a good idea to open the files. He made a statement in Parliament in February 1998 about understanding why SIS files are never opened because of the undying commitment to the people who give information to the Service not to reveal their identities, and that statement was very important and is still quoted today when one is dealing with the question of SIS archives. Therefore when it came to “I’ve ordered a full investigation” it had to be, for any credibility, on the basis of full access to the archives in the intelligence agencies, which indeed I had. Not long after beginning work on it I began to realise that it would not be credible either if I had not at least tried to look in the Russian archives where this material was supposed to have come from. In the summer of 1998, it was a busy summer, I went to Moscow with my old friend the late Tony Bishop who had been the FCO’s principal Russian interpreter – he had interpreted for every Prime Minister since Macmillan.

Tony was very keen to get involved in this. It was agreed by the PUS that we should go to Moscow. It was fortunate that that time was a period when we were on quite good terms with the Russian Government, there was quite an open relationship and they were perfectly amenable about all this, and indeed the then Russian Ambassador in London, a gentleman called Yuri Fokine, I had come across once or twice on these Nazi Gold conferences and so on, and he’d taken a bit of a shine to me. I don’t think I’m betraying any secrets by saying that. Anyway, he was very well disposed to my searches and the arrangements for us were all helped, we didn’t have to struggle to do it. We went off to Moscow. I don’t speak or read Russian, but of course Tony did, although it wasn’t as much of a disadvantage as I’d feared because when we got to looking at the Politburo Archives for the 1920s a lot of them were in German because all those major Bolshevik figures had been in exile in Germany and a lot of them conversed and wrote in German, so I could read that. It was a very exciting trip. The Ambassador in Moscow at that point was Andrew Wood, he was very helpful to us. Then there was Kate Horner who’d been a researcher and she was also serving in Moscow. We were given a lot of access, they made it easy for us. We even had a very exciting visit – I was invited to the Press and Public Affairs Bureau of the SVR, the Foreign Intelligence Service which was somewhere in Moscow. One of the SIS officers serving in Moscow at the time was very miffed because he’d never got there. Tony and I were invited and we were taken into this room. I don’t know what it’s like now, but the usual set up for meetings with them was that there would be a table heaped with cakes and sweets. Tony said “you don’t eat, this

is for show”. After a while the door opened and Oleg Tsarev came in, one of the authors of the “Crown Jewels”. This was a surprise. He was quite a figure. He swept in and went down on one knee and kissed my hand. He was very, very charming and at the end of our quite brief conversation I said to him “Well tell me, do you think that what you have written in this book “Crown Jewels” about the Zinoviev letter – is that the truth?” He said “Madam, it is one version of the truth”. In my professional memory I think that was a high point. He took my copy of the book and wrote in it “To a comrade in arms” which I thought was a bit cheeky, but it was quite an occasion.

We didn’t find the answer but we found a lot, if you like, of corroborative evidence to confirm in my mind that it definitely was a forgery. It’s quite clear when you look at the Russian archives that when the British note of protest about this unwarranted interference in British politics was sent to Moscow, initially, they hadn’t the faintest idea of what we were talking about. Of course it’s become even more relevant because they said “We don’t really quite know what the British are complaining about but we will adopt a proper strategy for such occasions”. Firstly, you deny everything and secondly you say that the British must have done it themselves. I think in 2019 all that still has a resonance as a kind of tactic.

In 1998 we were treated extremely well and we were given a lot of access and I couldn’t complain about it at all. If we didn’t find anything it wasn’t because we were prevented, I think it was because it didn’t exist, and that was a very helpful thing.

SW: Zinoviev was originally supposed to be a what? A member of the Politburo?

GB: Yes, he was a member of the Politburo but he was also the head of the Comintern which was the Bolshevik propaganda organisation. In those days the Soviet Government used to maintain the fiction that the Comintern was nothing to do with them, but it was clear that it was. But it was also at a time when Stalin was on the up and trying to sideline old Bolsheviks like Zinoviev. Indeed when I’ve written about it subsequently, I don’t think so, but I couldn’t rule out absolutely that the whole thing wasn’t cooked up by Stalin as anti-Zinoviev. Who knows?

SW: Your admirer Fokine, was he an SVR officer or ...

GB: No, he had been an academic, and that’s one of the reasons he was so interested in the whole subject. Tony and I generally got the impression all along that if there was something to find out the Russians would like to find it too.

It took the rest of the year for me to finish going through everything. The report was published and announced by Robin Cook in February 1999. He wrote an article in the press about it and there quite a to do and there was a press conference. Famously, and I show this when I talk about this subject, on the actual day of publication, there were two headlines in the Times and the Guardian, one was “MI6 did write the Zinoviev Letter” and the other headline said “MI6 did not write the Letter”. That was quite fun. There was a lot of interest in it even though I was unable to be categoric - there had been a big investigation in the 1960s by a lady called Milicent Bagot, who’d been in MI5 and indeed I drew a lot on her work. She said what I later agreed with, that she was pretty sure it was a forgery, but impossible to say definitively who forged it. I took the view in 1999 that there was no evidence of an institutional conspiracy in the intelligence agencies to do this, which I think is inherently unlikely anyway, but you could not rule out the fact that one or two members of the agencies, I don’t mean they forged it, but they might have sped it on its way. It is very difficult to prove partly because so many people of an anti-Labour cast in the 1920s had an interest in basically doing down the Labour Party, the list of culprits is potentially very long. But there was more to bring out so the report was well received and indeed has remained very popular. The Foreign Office Historians still send out lots of copies, it’s downloaded a lot of times.

In 2018 I published a book, again about the Zinoviev Letter and including a bit more information even though again I can’t be definitively sure. Paradoxically, when I came back to it all many years later, I actually think that the account of it in “Crown Jewels”, some of it’s not right, but I think that the person they finger as a likely culprit, Ivan Pokrovsky who was a former Tsarist officer who was known to be tinkering around in the Baltics in a kind of clandestine way in the 1920s, he’s as good a candidate as any. The interesting thing about the Zinoviev Letter – even now – is its topicality. During the EU Referendum Campaign it was in the press, during the 2017 election campaign it came up again and you can be quite sure when we have another general election, the Zinoviev Letter will come up again. I keep an alert on Google on the Zinoviev Letter because it’s always interesting to see where it comes up. It’s kind of emblematic of dirty tricks and also of those people who suspect the establishment basically for whatever reason. It’s become something of a sort of shorthand for disinformation or political chicanery. It never quite goes away and it has certainly occupied quite a lot of my time.

SW: And we have so much more experience of fake news now that we did then.

GB: Exactly. But when you look at it now there is nothing new about disinformation, what's new is the way it's disseminated, electronically and so on. One of the things that comes out is actually how a lot of the tactics that the then Bolshevik Government used in the twenties are very much the same tactics that are adopted, not just by Russians, but a lot of people now. So it does have a current relevance and I don't think that is likely to stop.

SW: Before we finalise your initial period as Chief Historian, let's talk about Tony Bishop. There are many colleagues who have contributed recollections of their involvement in Soviet affairs and Tony often figures in the margins, but never to my mind has anybody done him justice.

GB: His obituary, which a lot of us contributed to, is pretty good but it is hard to do him justice. When you say he figured at the margins, that is exactly where Tony would have wanted to be. He is always the figure at the back of the room who hears everything and understands everything and later briefs quietly. Tony originally did a degree in, I think, French and Italian. His National Service came up and during it he was asked if he would learn Russian. He was taught Russian by one of these former White Russian people up in Scotland. He had been in Research Department and he became a Russian specialist. Tony's Russian was just his other half, his other side, and it was completely natural to him. Over the years, in addition to his work in Research Department where obviously he learned a huge amount, he also became what they called the Principal Conference Interpreter, and he interpreted for so many Ministers, the first Prime Minister he interpreted for was Macmillan, and he interpreted right through to when Tony Blair and Putin initially had rather a good relationship. Tony was the man in between, interpreting. So his knowledge of Russian history, language, politics, culture, was encyclopaedic. He was also an extremely nice man, very keen on music. I'd come across him over the years in the Office, I didn't know him well but I'd had dealings with him, so when we went on this trip he was the most marvellous person to go to Moscow with. First of all, when we got on the plane to fly to Moscow he produced a piece of paper from his pocket which was a series of useful Russian phrases that he'd prepared not long ago for Michael Portillo, with a phonetic pronunciation so you that could say please and thank you, nice to meet you, do have another drink and that kind of thing! Going to Moscow, everywhere you went Tony knew where it was, what it was, the history and he had a funny story about it. He had been present at Margaret Thatcher's first meeting with Gorbachev and had a lot of insights on that relationship. Lots of Ministers and officials and ambassadors, if they had to go to Russia or to deal with Russians here, they all

said the same thing, which is exactly what I found in my small way, which is that you go into a meeting, Tony interprets. Then you come out and when you are on your own, Tony tells you what it was all about. And not just the language. You could be sitting waiting to go into a meeting and you were in an outer office, and the number of telephones on the Russian official's desk is important, and the way that certain phrases were used by your Russian interlocutors is important. He would say "He said this, but what he really meant was this". Tony Blair used to say he got more out of a debriefing by Tony than he ever got from anyone else. He was an absolute expert in his field, very perceptive and a lovely man.

SW: And consequently the Russian attitude to him was rather equivocal and uncomfortable?

GB: It was. And particularly later on in Putin times. Tony used to say that the trouble was he knew where the bodies were buried. I mean not literally: he had known Putin when Putin was in the KGB so, without going into this too much, it did create difficulties, and certainly he had some very bad times although up until not that long before he died he was still doing some interpreting for senior figures. It did, in the end, have a negative effect upon him.

SW: And I think it was also sometimes touch and go as to whether he would get a Soviet visa?

GB: Absolutely. During the Cold War he did serve in Moscow but he was expelled. Not for anything he was doing but as part of a tit for tat thing but in the days when that kind of thing was difficult he'd had problems with visas. Later when travelling with Prime Ministers or very senior figures clearly that's not in anybody's interest. He had a long, long history with Russia. He had some good friends in Russia. Tony was a very religious man and he had some very close friends in the Russian Orthodox Church and so he had a lot of information from non-official circles as well.

SW: Thank you. That's a wonderful pen picture of Tony Bishop, it means a lot to me and I think it will to other readers of the archive.

Let's return to your role as Chief Historian. You've had this international exposure on Nazi Gold, this Labour Party political exposure on the Zinoviev Letter, what else did the role consist of in the initial four years, I think there's a step change later on?

GB: Yes. In between all of this I was editing the volume on Britain and the Soviet Union which took a good deal of my time. There were other things where one was offering advice

and so on but I would say Nazi Gold and Zinoviev were the two big issues in the first four years.

SW: It is 15 July 2019 and we are resuming from 1999 when the post of Chief Historian was reviewed and upgraded in the Foreign Office. Gill, would you like to resume the story from there?

GB: This is after the publication of the Memorandum on the Zinoviev Letter. There was quite a lot going on about that time in 1998/99. The Historians were working very closely with the then Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook, and then even more so with Jack Straw when he took over as Foreign Secretary. We used to get called on a lot both by the Private Office of the Foreign Secretary and also by the PUS and his office, so we were always being drawn into various controversial matters. We have talked about the Nazi Gold questions and so on, and there were still some hangovers from that, various questions, Holocaust Memorial questions, and questions about records that might or might not be available, so that took up quite a lot of my time.

Even though the Freedom of Information Act had not yet been passed there was a certain amount of work going on in the Foreign Office in preparation for that legislation which the Historians were involved in, and indeed with the Data Protection Act which had been passed.

The Data Protection Act resulted in a huge flood of applications to the Office often with an avowedly hostile intent. There was one occasion when huge number of Tory MPs all put an application in, all at one time, in order to try and gum up the system. But there were certain cases, data protection applicants, where there were sensitivities to do with their previous lives or careers or their positions, and the Historians were called on a lot to look back. Everybody had to try and find out everything that was in the Foreign Office about whichever the person was, going back however long it was applicable. There could be considerable sensitivity in people's earlier dealings with the Government or with the Office. I'm not going to mention the names of these people because I think that even now it could be problematic, but there were some very high profile cases and we were more and more drawn into this, partly because quite honestly we were rather good at going through the files and finding these references. Then we were involved with a kind of review procedure, to decide were you going to release this information or if you were not going to, what grounds would you use to withhold it. There were quite a few very difficult cases and it did take up quite a lot of my time. In the end, it was the reason that I decided to leave, because the whole question of open

government, Data Protection and Freedom of Information, became very dominant while of course one is still trying to do all the other jobs that are going on at the time.

Also in 1999 as a kind of a result of the work I'd done on the Zinoviev Letter, one of the rather shadowy figures who I'd come across a lot was Desmond Morton, a man who had been in SIS but later, during the Second World War, he was Churchill's personal Intelligence Adviser. I kept tripping up on him, in all kinds of contexts and I got quite interested in him. Because I'd been doing a lot of work with SIS on Zinoviev I asked if I could be allowed access to the records in order to try and write a book about Morton. Because this obviously would be done with privileged access there were formalities, so it had to be commissioned as an official history because if you have privileged access, that's how it works. In those days the Official History Programme was still running, it's dormant now, and the Cabinet Office agreed that it would be commissioned. It was put to the Cabinet and the Cabinet agreed that it would be commissioned as an official history and that I could go ahead. That was a private job, it wasn't part of my official duties, but clearly I was working on it at the same time and from the point of view that I had to consult closed records, obviously I had to do those alongside my other work. But that was really quite interesting.

SW: So you say private, you were commissioned?

GB: Yes I was, and it wasn't strictly speaking part of my job.

SW: Extra?

GB: Yes, extra.

SW: It sounds from your description that the job was becoming rather process driven and without too many visible results if you were handling all these ...

GB: Yes, those data protection cases were very stressful because you were always being leaned upon by Number 10. I'm not saying that was wrong, they were naturally very anxious about the outcome of some of these cases and what would be the consequences. Because the whole thing about open government, open access, was that if it's something recent, for example later on if people were asking for the legal advice of going into Iraq everybody knew how it had to be handled, it was obvious what that was but if somebody asked for access to records that were ten or twenty years old, that's a different ballgame because nobody in a department on a desk is going to know what that meant unless it was something really

obvious. Why would people be asking for this? Where were the bear traps? What are the awkwardnesses? There might not be any, but there's usually a reason why people say they want to know. I'm not saying that wasn't interesting or important but it was actually quite nice to have a more straightforward historical job to do as well.

SW: So back to Desmond Morton.

GB: I began work on Morton gathering information from all the intelligence agencies, Cabinet Office, all over the place. I began to regret my decision a little when I discovered that Morton was an only child who'd never married and burned all his papers, as well as having been an intelligence officer. I began to realise that this would not be straightforward. However it was interesting and it also kept me in good contact with the intelligence agencies which was important for other parts of my official job. For example in 1999 there was another big thing that happened which was the publication of the first volume of the Mitrokhin Archive. I had been, if you like, admitted into that secret because Professor Christopher Andrew, who was an old friend of mine anyway, had been brought in to work with Vasili Mitrokhin in order to publish two volumes, in the end. Perhaps I should say a little bit about Mitrokhin.

SW: He was an extraordinary case. Please do.

GB: He was. He had been an archivist in the KGB, long serving. Over many years he had taken little bits of information home by dint of writing them on scraps of paper which he concealed in his shoes and later buried in milk churns under his dacha. He had over a number of years amassed a huge amount of material. Eventually he decided he wanted to offer this material to the West. He did actually approach the Americans first who didn't take him on. He then approached the British and was indeed brought out safely to this country. Then there was the question of what you did with this material which was incredibly dense. It had taken a long time but by 1999 the plan was to publish the first of these volumes which was about the KGB and the West, particularly Europe. Later there was the KGB and the world, but the first one was about Europe and the United States and it revealed a lot of detail about KGB activities throughout the Cold War, naming names, not only people in official capacities who had cooperated with the KGB but of course names of people who were KGB agents.

There had been quite a lot of inter-departmental discussion about clearance before the volume was published, which was to be at the end of the summer in 1999. Also in 1999 the CIA, who had this organisation called the Centre for the Study of Intelligence which was a kind of an academic think tank attached to the CIA, they put on a conference in Germany at the beginning of September 1999 about Berlin, about the kind of intelligence role of Berlin. It was agreed that I should go. SIS did not want to send anybody but on the other hand it would have looked very odd if the British did not go. A few British academics were going but anyway I was 'it' so to speak in official terms. I went to this conference, it was very hot, and it was held at the Teufelsberg, a kind of man-made mountain on the outskirts of Berlin, where the allied listening posts had been with huge receivers, a quite surreal site which has been opened up as a museum. But when we were there, there were big railings around it. We were bussed in, there was a conference room but it was all rather surreal, which is what I'm trying to indicate to you, because that is part of the story. Chris Andrew was there as well, who was the author with Mitrokhin. The Mitrokhin book was supposed to be serialised in the press from a Monday but of course all the media had been tipped off about it beforehand and suddenly on the Friday before, an American news channel broke the embargo and put out some information about it. There had been a major panic in London and the Times decided that instead of waiting until the Monday, they were going to start their serialisation on the Saturday. This is all while we were in Berlin. In this huge book, the thing that people had picked up on was the question of this person called Melita Norwood who was later known as the Spy who came from the Coop, but who had been a long standing Soviet agent working and still living in Kent and it named her as a spy. This was a very small detail on one page, but it got picked up. And of course nobody had briefed Ministers that early publication was going to happen and certainly they hadn't briefed them about Melita Norwood. Jack Straw, who was then Home Secretary, was door-stepped by reporters and he knew nothing about this. As you can imagine he was not best pleased. He still says, actually, that Mitrokhin gives him a bad feeling. He's still resentful of it. There had been a press group preparing a briefing on what was in the book but it had not covered this. Anyway, we were in this sealed compound up a mountain and when we came out of one of our sessions we were surrounded by the world's press at the railings. "Can you tell us about this?" "Can you tell us about that?" We did have mobiles, they were not like they are now, but I did have a phone. I had News Department in one ear, if you like, and some of our intelligence colleagues on the other saying "What the hell is going on?" And instructing me as to what I might say if asked. It was very exciting but it was also quite ludicrous the way it all worked out.

SW: Were the American hosts displeased?

GB: Not really because it wasn't actually their problem. If it had been a spy in their country I dare say it would have been a different matter. This little old lady was in her eighties and of course she'd been found by a diligent reporter and discovered to be completely unrepentant. So there were going to be lots of questions about what you do about that, but fortunately that was not my business.

One of the odd things at this conference, was that American intelligence organisations, of which there are very many, are very careful about telling each other anything. They are quite good at telling the British things but they are very sensitive about giving away information to each other. That came up a bit at this conference. They'd say "We can't talk about that because these other people are here". Chris Andrew and I still laugh about this episode sometimes. I was involved in the aftermath of dealing with that issue for a while.

SW: But Mitrokhin overall was a considerable success ...

GB: Oh yes. Because there is the evidence, here it is in black and white, this is what was happening. They published quite a lot of it. There are two volumes and subsequently a great deal of the raw material has been transferred to Churchill College Archive where obviously it's all in Russian. There were various other side publications. But my part in it was firefighting.

SW: It becomes clear from your account how your role as Chief Historian was developing and broadening out especially in relations with the intelligence world but also in Whitehall bureaucracy through this DPA work ...

GB: Yes. I would say now that one of the reasons for that was the way that Whitehall operated at that period. Obviously this was the first Government led by Tony Blair when there was an extremely efficient coordinating operation run by Number 10. Clearly some people felt that that was intrusive, they always wanted to know what you were doing and to tell you how to do it, but I have to say that in the Foreign Office Historians we found it really helpful because we knew that if you were going to be working on something, putting out some information that had a possible wider interest, they wanted to know. You knew you would get a sensible response as long as you said "This is what we're going to do". They would say "Right. We just want to make sure that nobody else is going to say anything that is at odds with that". I've never known Whitehall to be as well coordinated. Some people

say it was control freakery, I think it was sensible coordination because, as you know, getting all departments across Whitehall to work together is absolutely not an easy thing to do.

SW: It was also in the spirit of the times that old stories were being told and secrets were being revealed?

GB: Yes, the Government had made a thing of wanting increased openness. Well, if you are going to have increased openness, the view of Number 10 was that you manage it, you manage the perception, and you manage the way it's put out. I didn't have a problem with that, but it meant that as the Historians we got drawn into it much more than we had been previously.

SW: And you had two supportive Foreign Secretaries in succession?

GB: Yes, very supportive. Both Robin Cook and Jack Straw were keen on the idea of using history to support government policy.

SW: And how about the rest of the Office?

GB: Generally speaking, yes. Obviously, everybody has their own policy priorities but we never had any problem with the rest of the Office as long as you did your homework and you explained what it was you were trying to do. There was a little phrase that was current at that time which was called "proactive disclosure" which means that sometimes you may not have to reveal something, but actually it can be a very good thing to do so. If you say "We don't have to release these particular records but we're going to do it in the interests of open government", it's a managed thing. And there was a proactive disclosure group in the Office in different directorates. They weren't called directorates then, but representatives of different departments, and for a while it was flavour of the month and that obviously involved the Historians in quite a lot of work.

SW: While we're talking about the Office and before we move on to your next project, you passed the ADC in 2000. How was that for you?

GB: It was an odd thing because it was a bit like we talked about before when I went to work in Personnel, that there was a feeling in the Office that the ADC was only for fast stream diplomats and that specialists didn't get a look in. People thought it would be a good idea if I went in for it. The Assessment and Development Centre was a several day series of tests which took place, mine was at Wilton Park and the Conference Centre, where you were put

through a varied number of tests, things you had to do, situations you were put in, role playing scenarios, that kind of stuff.

SW: Relating to leadership, management?

GB: Yes, all kinds of things, and the kind of firefighting you have to do in the Diplomatic Service. A few specialists had taken it but they hadn't passed and it was thought it would be a good thing if I had a go. Because of the kind of things I'd been dealing with for the past few years, well you learn to stand up and deal with what's thrown at you. So actually I did not have a problem with it. Also, and this was really an odd thing, at that time, we're talking about 1999/2000, although we did have computers in the Office, the use of a personal computer all the time in one's daily life was not universal, not everybody was used to it all the time. I've always been a person who likes using computers and word processors and I'm a touch typist. This may seem facetious but actually when you are given a task – "Imagine you are the head of X organisation, there's an international conference that you are at and you've got to make a speech in the next 30 minutes explaining the importance of whatever it was". Actually I can do that. It was an interesting experience. There were twelve people in the cohort, six passed, four of whom were women including Deborah Bronnert and Vicky Treadell who are both very senior now, and a girl called Caroline Hall who left the Office a while ago. I'm not saying the men weren't good, but actually we had some difficulty because sometimes you are put in little groups of two or three and still, even then, I suppose it's a while ago now, more than twenty years, when you were sent off to plot a strategy or whatever it was, the men always wanted to say "What we will do is". So you had to say "Hang on a minute". The men were really keen to take the lead. So it was a subject of some satisfaction to us ladies in this cohort that we actually out-performed statistically the men in passing this test.

SW: Did it enhance your standing afterwards in the Office?

GB: I think it did. My Personnel person, my grade manager said "If you want to, I'll put you forward for any Senior Management job you like". They were quite encouraging about the idea of moving into a more mainstream job and I thought about it, but in the end I thought what I like best is doing this history stuff and also I thought where I could give the best service.

SW: Well, that's a very good account and I'm sure it will be of interest to the readers of the archive because not many people have talked about the ADC process.

GB: Interestingly enough, a good friend of mine in the Office, considerably younger than me, she did it the week before me. Of course you are not allowed to say what you did because they do face a similar set of scenarios. She passed. She rang me up after she got the result to say "Obviously I can't tell you what we did but all I can say to you is that you've brought up two boys on your own, you'll wing it". I knew what she meant in the sense that multi-tasking and dealing with a lot of things being thrown at you, I'm quite good at that, on the whole.

SW: Back to your projects. This was a time when Poland and Anglo-Polish history was becoming a live issue?

GB: This is one of those cases where history becomes involved in current policy. The context was that Poland was then joining NATO and keen to join the EU and keen to rehabilitate itself as a big independent player. They used to say "We lost our history for so many years during the Cold War". That's an important part of the context of this. The then Polish Prime Minister wrote to our Prime Minister and said "Polish intelligence has never been given credit for its contribution to Allied victory". Well, that was not actually true, but it didn't matter really whether it had or it hadn't because they said "We know that you have got a lot of secret information about Polish activities which is not open". Our Prime Minister wanted to encourage the Poles. They said they wanted to see SIS archives; well, that was not going to happen, so the end result was that we set up an Anglo-Polish Historical Commission, on the British side with Tessa Sterling, who was Head of the Cabinet Office Records and me, and that I would have access to the agency archives and I would report back and then the Poles would look at their stuff. That was the deal. The Poles had many more people than we did, we had a very small group. This went on for the next few years and we used to meet every six months alternately in Warsaw and London and report on progress. The difficulty from my point of view was that there was very little material that wasn't already available, despite what the Poles felt. They were very suspicious. Because the trouble is that if you've looked in the archive on such and such a subject and haven't found anything, they would either say they didn't believe you or would say "That is not an acceptable answer". There was a lot of politics in this, and it was quite tricky and we had some quite difficult meetings, but it was the kind of thing that the Historians are there to do, so for the next few years we worked on this. The irony of it is that in their search the Poles actually found a whole load of

material that they didn't know they'd got which helped them to produce their part of it, whereas we had very little. There were some, not many, quarterly reports from the Second World War in SIS which kind of summed up reports. During the Second World War, after Poland had been overrun, part of Polish Intelligence initially moved to France, and then when France was completely occupied they moved to London and SIS had a section which was specifically for dealing with the Poles and for giving the Poles facilities, transmitters, and handling intelligence. There had been a lot of information but at the end of the War it had been destroyed because it was over, so the idea that we were sitting on cupboards worth of documents wasn't true even if we couldn't persuade people that was the case. But we found bits and pieces, and in the end a big fat book was produced combining our two reports, and that was quite political as well because there were various chapters and it was a question of who wrote what. But it was a big job and we did it.

SW: Did that touch on more political issues between the British and the Poles, for example about the outcome of the Yalta Conference?

GB: Up to a point, but what they were more interested in really was in the recognition, for example, of the activities of Poles who were involved in the Resistance in France. There were a lot of very prominent Poles who were working with the French. Or in the kind of intelligence that various Polish agents were sending back and so on and the value of that. And of course the other side is Enigma and the Bletchley side. It was more that than the political, which we'd done quite a lot of work on in other contexts. I wouldn't say, from the British point of view, that we were contributing anything that was hugely new. But it was a big exercise and required quite a lot of diplomatic skills especially at the meetings in Poland, which were quite interesting.

Almost at the same time there was another question about a current political context using a historical issue, and this was the question of Sir Roger Casement. A quite different subject but in a way it's the same kind of problem. This was after the Good Friday Agreement when implementation was still being discussed, and there were some quite tricky talks going on at Hillsborough involving both parts of Ireland and the British Government. I wasn't involved in Hillsborough but as a part of that the Irish Prime Minister, Bertie Ahern, wrote to Tony Blair and said "We know that you've still got material that's not been released on Roger Casement and it would be very helpful to our future relations if ...". So the same kind of idea as with the Poles. The Irish organised a conference to be held in Dublin at the Irish Academy

at which they wanted the whole subject of Casement and his legacy to be discussed. Roger Casement was a very prominent colonial civil servant who had been knighted. He had made his name in Africa and up the Amazon in exposing the human rights abuses of multinational companies in the Amazon and the Belgian Congo in the late 19th century. He was also a committed Irish Nationalist, and when it came to the First World War he went off to Germany to try and raise an Irish Brigade, and he was involved in the planning for the Easter Rising and the Germans helped him come back to Ireland before the Easter Rising. He was intercepted, arrested, tried for treason and hanged in 1916. There was no question about the treason, the evidence was quite clear, but after he'd been arrested a search was made of his rooms in London at which half a dozen diaries were discovered which gave graphic accounts of homosexual encounters quite often with young teenage boys during his Colonial Office career. At the time there was one particular person in the police who leaked the existence and some of the detail from the diaries and it became a scandal. But of course the Irish Nationalist camp said this was done specifically in order to smear somebody they regarded as a national hero, and indeed accused the British of having confected the diaries and that British Intelligence must have forged them. That's the context.

Number 10 put out an instruction to all departments to say "If you've got anything on Casement that's not already in the public domain, bring it out". By luck the Metropolitan Police had some information that hadn't been opened and we persuaded them it could be released, and that meant I could have packs of copies for everybody when I went to Dublin to represent the British Government at this conference. When I give talks about my career, I tell them about this one because it was quite an experience. Normally as a historian, you do not stand up at a conference and say "I've not found any evidence" and have half the audience stand up and shout "Rubbish". But anything negative you said about Casement was going to provoke a particular reaction and at that time there was still a lot of trouble about whether or not these diaries were genuine. Later that was defused when they did some rather sophisticated scientific testing of the diaries which established that they could only have been written at the time they were in fact written. But that comes after this conference which was really quite explosive. Christopher Andrew, again he was speaking, he said "Casement was a paedophile", well you can imagine, they nearly lynched him for that. There was a group of academics on the front row all heckling me while I was speaking. Meanwhile Martin Mansergh, who was involved in the Hillsborough discussions, turned up at this conference and he wanted to be photographed with me. I had to go on the radio in Dublin. I definitely

knew that this was playing into whatever talks were going on at Hillsborough so I had to be very careful about what I said, even though I was only talking about history. It was one of those cases when you know that history is part of a much bigger current issue. But it was quite funny in some ways. It was also quite gruelling, but I knew beforehand that there were going to be people who would not believe me whatever I said. For example they would say “Roger Casement would never have used some of the words that were in the diary”. Well, you’d say “What kind of words?” “Pantaloon” they offered. I said “Even assuming that British Intelligence had ever wanted to do this why would they forge six diaries, a couple of letters would have done, but in any case what purpose would it serve?” They would stand up and say “To support Britain’s post colonial philosophy”. You can’t win in this kind of thing, you just have to say “this is the evidence”, but it was one of the more testing episodes. Casement came up again in follow-up conferences although I wasn’t involved in such a prominent way until some years after that, and once the scientific evidence was accepted it took a bit of the heat. However, in 2016 it was the centenary of the Easter Rising and I was asked to go into a meeting in the Office, in a Minister’s office, where people were talking about various events planned in Ireland in which the name of Casement came up. I’m not going to say too much about this but I had to inject some historical facts which affected people’s perspective of how one might deal with it.

SW: In 2001 there was an interesting proposal for you to change your job somewhat?

GB: As a result of all this work I had been doing on intelligence for some years, and at the time when both SIS and MI5 were starting to look forward to their centenaries. 1909 was when the Secret Service Bureau had been formed which then for a year contained both domestic and overseas elements, and then in 1910 they split into what was to become MI5 and later MI6. So both agencies were looking forward to how they were going to deal with their centenaries and also facing this question about how you cope with not giving away information that you’d not want to give, but with the open government agenda how you could be more open. SIS did have people working on this but there was some discussion about whether SIS might use more of a historian role, a more public facing historian, and whether indeed I might be that person. The proposal was made that I might actually move over and do that. I was quite attracted by that idea, slightly feeling that it was time for a bit of a change and that sounded quite an interesting idea. However, the then Permanent Under Secretary John Kerr was not at all keen. He said “No, they just want to get hold of you and I want you to stay here. But I won’t stand in your way”. In fact Jack Straw was keen on the

idea, but it took some months to work up a proposal and there was a submission about how this might happen, but before the submission could actually be signed off and a decision taken 9/11 happened, and all bets were off then because nobody wanted to pay attention to that. But also everything, the whole focus, naturally enough, was changing.

As with a lot of things in my career I feel that I have been so lucky that things, which at the time didn't seem what I wanted, have turned out to be absolutely a blessing in disguise in many ways. I think it was not the right time for me to make that move, I think I was able to do more good staying where I was at least for that time. But there was a feeling in the Office, I know, that I'd been treated slightly shabbily, because the whole thing went off the boil and people in Personnel said "Is there nothing you would like to do instead?" This is now well into 2001. And I said "Well, I'd really like to do more work on my book on Morton" and they said "Why don't you take an academic year to write it, obviously paid?" And I was offered a visiting fellowship at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge for the academic year 2002/2003.

SW: A hypothetical question. When you look at how the two agencies did actually handle their centenaries, do you think you could have made a significant difference, a contribution to that?

GB: In fact I did, but not in the way I'd originally envisaged. In fact, I did in a way that I'm much happier with. We haven't quite got onto the question of the actual SIS history, which is a different issue, but I was consulted by the then Director General of the Security Service about the writing of their history, not for me to do it, but on who might do it and how it might work and I was able to have some input over the period. And when the SIS history came, I had a lot of input. It wasn't in the way that was originally envisaged but I think actually, from my point of view, it ended up being far more satisfactory.

SW: So you take your year at Corpus Christi?

GB: Yes. In the meantime from 2001 through to October 2002 there was still a lot going on in Historians. There was all the Polish stuff still going on and various other things. The Freedom of Information Act actually passed in 2000, although the access regime was not going to kick in until the beginning of 2005, but we were involved in preparations for that. We were also drawn in to – there was a lot of discussion, Lord Lester was involved in this, in pressure for increased scrutiny of treaties. I cannot remember now how we got drawn into

this but we did, in helping with submissions on Parliamentary issues. It was a busy time and then it was exciting to be going off to Cambridge.

SW: Was the choice of Corpus Christi important for you?

GB: That was Christopher Andrew, he was the President, and he said “Don’t think you are going anywhere else.” Cambridge was the place to go for intelligence studies, slightly less now, especially with Chris’s retirement, but it had the most wide-ranging teaching in intelligence matters, intelligence history, and there is still the Intelligence Seminar which meets on Fridays in term time which is something that attracts speakers from all over the world and is very well known. There used to be, I think they’ve dropped it now, a paper on the secret world in the undergraduate degree, so intelligence history was a big thing at Cambridge and it was a good place for me to go from that point of view.

SW: So you were going principally to work on your book?

GB: Yes, to write it because I’d got most of the information by then. Part of the deal as a Visiting Fellow is that you give talks and advise students, and that was fine. There was a bit of juggling because my elder son was still at school and I relied a lot on friends for feeding the cat, dealing with my son, helping out a lot, and it meant I couldn’t stay there all the time. I used to come home quite a lot, I tended come back home at weekends at least, so I was slightly up and down, but nevertheless it was a very enjoyable experience.

SW: And did you break the back of your book?

GB: Yes I did. The other thing that was going on in the Office and turned out to be very well timed was that we had been recruiting another senior historian, and we managed, just about the time I was going away, to bring in Patrick Salmon, my successor as Chief Historian, we’d got him into play. He was still finding his way at that time, but we’d got him in. We’d also been working closely with Research Analysts on a big history note about the Katyn Massacre, taking it right through from 1943 to 2003. Although I wasn’t there, I still sometimes went to meetings and which involved a certain amount in contributing to things that were going on while I wasn’t there.

SW: When did you publish on Morton?

GB: It didn’t actually come out until 2006. I didn’t finish it entirely while I was in Cambridge but I’d broken the back of it. Then, of course, it had to be cleared by everybody.

That was quite a process because I'd used a lot of closed material, and then it had to go into the press, so it wasn't actually published until 2006.

SW: And you were satisfied with the final product?

GB: Oh yes. By that time Sir John Scarlett had become Chief of SIS. He and I had known one another for a long time, partly because we had sons at the same school, and we are contemporaries. He was very keen on the Morton project and arranged for a rather magnificent launch at the Cabinet War Rooms which was very good fun. The trouble is, of course, that official histories tend to be quite expensive, which limits sales, but it's still the book that I'm proudest of, to tell you the truth.

SW: So you are at Cambridge until the summer break of 2003, and you were promoted?

GB: There had been this system of re-evaluating jobs, and that happened while I was away. I knew that was on the cards and because I'd passed the ADC I was already in the position for it, but that was very satisfactory. So I went back to the same job but at a different grade.

SW: And then you had two further years in that post. What were the highlights of that?

GB: I think the highlights I'm really pleased about – one was this question of persuading the Foreign Secretary that they should open some of the Permanent Under Secretary's Department archive. As you know PUSD, the acronym, was the department which was actually formed under that name in 1948 and the department, in the Foreign Office, that dealt with liaison with the intelligence agencies, specifically SIS, but all of them. Because it's a Foreign Office Department, but the records are intelligence related, they had always been retained and had never been opened. We argued that the earlier papers should be reviewed, and where possible released. Jack Straw did agree to that but it was a huge amount of work to prepare them, partly because some of them were loose, some in boxes, they were all over the shop, they were not in proper files, the early ones. Later on they were more organised but the early ones - we found one box, which was filed in the fifties and contained papers from the 1880s. With my colleague Russell Pullen, between us we sorted them all out, put them into proper files and the first tranche was opened at the National Archive in 2005, just as I was leaving the Office. But I was working on it for the previous couple of years because that was because they had to be reviewed by all the stakeholders, it was a big job but it was interesting and I was really pleased that we got permission for that.

Meanwhile we are moving into FOI territory and at the end of 2004 it all kicked off. Massive. Hundreds and thousands of applications. Obviously the Historians weren't involved in all of them but there were an awful lot of ones that did involve us. A lot of these applications were from people who were avowedly hostile. I found that I was spending a huge amount of my time on this and Ministers were naturally very involved so it was really very full on. I began to think after a few months of 2005, this is how it's going to be. I spent all my time firefighting and, it seemed to me, not doing any normal history work. At the same time other things were going on. By this time there were discussions about whether there should be an official history of SIS for the centenary, which John Scarlett was very keen on and driving forward. There was the consideration that I might be asked to write that. And also, not unrelated, there had been a pressure for cuts around Whitehall and the Office had been asked to cut however many posts it was at SMS level. There had been a round of offering what was actually a very good deal to retire early. You didn't have to actually go but you had to say you would. I had accepted a deal when I'd looked at the figures, but I was going to go later, I was going to go at the end of 2006. But with all these other things going on, the FOI, I wasn't enjoying myself at all and I thought that with the possible prospect of doing the SIS job it might be time to go. I made an enquiry as to the financial aspects of this and it was clear to me that I wasn't going to lose much by taking it early, so I decided to go early in May 2005. In fact you can tell how big the FOI thing had been because when I left they took my job and created two D7 jobs out of it and appointed two people, one to do the History and one to do the FOI. That gives you an indication of what kind of pressure it had been.

As it turned out I didn't get the job to write the SIS history which at the time was extremely disappointing, not least because it wasn't handled well, but I'm not going to go into that. However, the person who did get the job was an old friend of mine, Professor Keith Jeffery. At this stage, as I left the Office, I was busy finishing up the bits for my book, the final stuff to get it to the publisher, putting it altogether, doing the index, so I had quite a lot to do. When it got to 2006 Keith approached me and said "I know this is difficult, but would you be prepared to come and join the team?" Obviously he had a lot of help from people working within the organisation, but he said he wanted somebody who understood how the SIS interface with Whitehall worked over the years. And that's what I did.

Keith invited me to contribute on a part time basis as part of a team working within SIS to do the history. My job was principally to look at the Whitehall context, how SIS interacted with

Whitehall, how instructions were given, requirements placed, that kind of thing. And to gather material indeed from the PUSD archives, which I'd been working on, which were relevant to the history. I have to say we had a ball. Very sadly Keith died in 2016. He was a very, very nice man and a great scholar. Chris Baxter, who had been my Research Assistant in the Foreign Office, moved to the Cabinet Office and helped the team as well and we had various people, former officers who were involved, all I can say is that it was a good deal of fun as well as satisfactory. I worked on that, on and off, for the next few years until the history was published in 2010.

At the same time I was approached by Gus O'Donnell, then Cabinet Secretary about a different archive. The question actually went back further, his predecessor Richard Wilson had really pushed this forward. The archive, called the S&P papers, which means the Cabinet Secretary's Secret and Personal papers, used to be in the basement of No. 70 Whitehall. It was a kind of glory hole where over many, many years successive Cabinet Secretaries had thrown papers that were in the "too sensitive, too difficult, put it in a deep hole and hope it doesn't come out" box. And it was full. Richard Wilson had said partly "because it was full we must do something about this" and partly "because there must be stuff that should come out". And by the nature of things there was obviously going to be intelligence material. It was Gus in the end who said "we need to either get it out so that some can be destroyed if it's of no value at all, or we need somebody to go through this who has the right level of clearance and knows what they are seeing when they see it". There had been a previous attempt a few years before by somebody to go through it, but that person didn't have any background in intelligence and really hadn't quite known what he was looking at. So I began to do that on a part time basis in parallel with the SIS project. In fact it worked out well because when I was looking in this S&P archive, particularly at the earlier papers, the wartime papers and so on, I found material which was useful both to Chris Andrew, writing the official history of MI5, and indeed to Keith. For example I found a whole set of big balance sheets, the monthly accounts of SIS from the wartime years which were the only copy. SIS didn't have a copy because they'd been written out by hand by the financial officer, Percy Sykes, what all the operations were for, how much money - beautiful, and they were all down there. That was quite exciting. We found all kinds of interesting stuff and it fed into the two official histories, but also we were preparing to see what we could put out and what not.

At the same time, the third strand, I was also working with my Foreign Office hat on (so I had three, if you like, consultancies, in the sense that they were fee paid daily rates) because Patrick Salmon had got in touch with me in about 2008 to ask “would you still do something for us, particularly in dealing with intelligence things”. So I was on the books there, and I was involved in preparing the second tranche of PUSD archives and they tied in very well with these Cabinet Secretary’s papers, not surprisingly, because if you are looking for authority for operations to go ahead, the Cabinet Secretary would be consulted. In 2013 we opened both the first set of the Cabinet Secretary’s Secret and Personal files in parallel with the second set of PUSD, both going up to 1951. And I feel, blowing my own trumpet, that this was a tremendous achievement because the material in both cases is quite intractable, but it was really valuable to be able to do them both at once because you could see how they played across. Historically, many Cabinet Secretaries had previously been Permanent Secretary to the Treasury and quite a few of them had brought stuff over with them, papers relating to the financial authority for operations for intelligence activities, and again, they had all gone in this deep hole. So I was really busy going on through this period. I was doing the SIS history, I did a day a week on the Cabinet Office Secretary’s papers, a bit intense, and the Foreign Office as well. Meanwhile I had a contract to write another book on decision making in British foreign policy so I was pretty busy.

SW: To take this apart, you say it was a great achievement in getting both the PUSD papers and the Cabinet Secretary’s personal papers, first tranche, open, so they went into the National Archive?

GB: Yes, that’s right

SW: Has there been a response from the academic community?

CB: Yes, it’s been quite slow. It always takes people a while to realise what’s there so there was a period when people were writing into the Office saying “Why can’t we get hold of that?” and us replying “Actually it’s there already”. But now they are being made much more use of and there have been some radio programmes, it has been a great success.

SW: Will the work continue to release further tranches?

GB: Yes. I stopped doing what I did at the Cabinet Office in 2016. I decided enough was enough but somebody else has taken over from me and they have released some more. They

are into the sixties now. PUSD has not gone any further largely because of resource for dealing with it, but there are plans to do some more.

SW: And the SIS History was published in?

GB: 2010. The MI5 one in 2009.

SW: How do you think they both stand up as works of history?

GB: Very well. The MI5 History goes up to a much later period and it is very comprehensive, and on certain subjects that have not been much written about is absolutely definitive. I think it's a magnificent achievement on Chris's part. It was not easy. Again there was an inter-departmental clearance process. Of course over the period of doing these things, the same thing happened with Mitrokhin, sometimes you find things that are not sensitive when you begin the book but are sensitive by the time that you get to it, and you have to deal with all that.

The SIS History covers 1909-49, and in terms of those forty years I'm very happy with it. I wish it were more than forty years but that's just how the decision was. I'd hoped we could have fifty years but we couldn't. There is a lot of stuff in there, particularly on the wartime coverage that you are not going to find anywhere else, so, yes, insofar as I played my part in either of them, I am very happy with them.

SW: So in many of your functions that brings us up to date but what other things play out since?

GB: Since 2008 I have been doing things for the Foreign Office again, and I am still doing a certain amount, it varies, sometimes it's more than others. I did actually edit another one of their volumes, which I hadn't intended to do. But Patrick wanted a volume on the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan, which is something I knew quite a bit about anyway and so I did that. And that was also helping to train one of the younger historians at the same time. That was enjoyable but a bit too much like hard work. But mostly I advise when things come up that I know about. This year it will be 47 years since I joined the Foreign Office so there's a fair amount of institutional memory in there and sometimes it's useful just to remember that this came round before, we've been round this roundabout. There are still issues relating to Polish wartime things, Katyn, many of the same conspiracy theories or questions still come back. I say that I'm like the little old lady in the corner with the Samovar, occasionally

somebody asks me a question ... From my point of view I like still being plugged in, and over the last months I've also been in touch with the Open Source Unit at the Counter Disinformation side of the Office, learning what they do and helping them if I am able to do so. For the moment I'm not inclined to stop because it's useful to me and I hope it's still useful to them.

SW: And along the way you published a book "Six Moments of Crisis"?

GB: Yes. That was published in 2013. That was trying to look at British foreign policy-making from the inside. I always got fed up with people saying "If only Ministers knew more history then we wouldn't get into the trouble we do". The other remark that makes me mad is "Of course Ministers don't have any power, it's the officials that take the decisions". So those were the two things that were the basis of that book: one is that it's Ministers who decide, it's Ministers who have to carry the can, and the second is that it's never as easy as it looks. It's a book with six scenarios, six particular decisions, but based on a particular meeting where you look at the persons round the table, metaphorically, and say – this is the Chancellor of the Exchequer, this is what he was worried about, this is the Minister of Defence, this is what they were worried about at the time – and sometimes I've done a few role playing exercises with postgraduate students on this. I give them all a different role, "you are so and so", "you are so and so" and then when I get to one I say "and you are Prime Minister and you are responsible for absolutely everything", they do actually find it quite sobering. This is a simple thing. Prime Ministers have got everything, they've got defence, they've got domestic issues, they've got farmers, they've got the Navy, they've got everything on their plate and they have to try and take decisions as well as thinking about the next election, splits in the party. So it's not arguing that governments always make good decisions, it's saying that it's always complicated and that actually in my experience over all those years on the whole Ministers are very hardworking and do the best they can in difficult situations. Some are better than others but to think of them all sitting around doing nothing is absolutely not the case. The Historians took the publication of this book for one of their "Learning from History" seminars. Jack Straw came and spoke, and we had Lord Howell, Laurie Freedman, Stephen Wall, Gus O'Donnell and Robin Butler, as well as Peter Hennessy. So we had quite a few Ministers and senior officials there. It was a good discussion session about this question of decision-making in foreign policy.

SW: Just to round off, we ought to look back over your career and what emerges from it. My sense is that you were fortunate, as you keep saying, in that you were developing your skills and your career at a time when interest in history and unrevealed history was growing, and it hasn't stopped growing, so that gave you a very fertile field to plough with a lot of active Ministerial interest in what you were doing. Are we now in a different world in terms of secret information, official information?

GB: I don't think we're in a different world. I think that government appetite for openness has diminished somewhat but I don't actually think it is a door you can shut. People are still applying under FOI and there are more and more archives being opened, so I don't think it's gone backwards. I think Ministerial priorities are different. It's always been true that some Foreign Secretaries are more interested in history than others. For example, you would expect that Douglas Hurd who himself is very interested in history and has published books himself would take a particular interest. Well, he never interacted with us at all, or at least very little, it just didn't register on his radar. So it's always been slightly up and down from that point of view. Malcolm Rifkind was keen, as were Cook and Straw. You're quite right that the period from the mid-nineties onwards was a period of thinking "it's better to get it out". But history is just as important now and we still have current policy issues all the time coming up, facing whichever government it is, which require you to understand the historical problems behind it. Sometimes Ministers are better at taking that on board than others, but part of the argument I would make is actually that in the end yes, you can give them a nice little distillation saying "these are the bear traps to avoid" but if they don't want to take any notice of it there's nothing you can do about it. But you have to at least tell them. You have to offer. And, of course, we are in a period of considerable international instability in all sorts of ways for all sorts of reasons so that I would argue that history is even more important now.

SW: And one other question. The work of the historian is dependent on the archive and yet the nature of the archive has changed. I would refer to it loosely as "the death of the file" but we don't write things down any more, it's electronic. Do you think this is going to be a problem?

GB: I do think it's going to be a problem and I'm rather thinking that I'm not going to get into writing anything more that relies entirely on electronic archives. I have worked where there is a kind a hybrid, some paper and some electronic, but it is very difficult and I can see

the Department's problem because there are huge amounts of information all the time. It's next to impossible to get busy people to register electronic documents onto a file. Every amount of carrot and stick has been tried, it doesn't work. Departments have been very good at working up systems to capture information, much less good at developing the right technology to search and retrieve. For historians it's all out there in a gigantic data sea and you can't actually catch a fish. Fortunately this is not my problem, but I do think it is going to be very much more difficult. Having said that, young historians are well accustomed to dealing with it. What I think you lose, but there's no point in being nostalgic for the old files now, is the progression of thinking that you can trace through a file, how it starts, who chips in, what goes on. You've usually got in an archive multiple copies of the same thing and it's quite hard to know which is the operative one or how it started, and usually hard to find what you're looking for. So it is a problem, but it's a problem that people are working on though I'm not going to be one of them.

SW: Gill, thank you very much, that's fascinating. I'm sure that your recollections will cast a light on the work of many other senior diplomats in the archive. And I know that Churchill will be pleased to have it.

GB: Thank you.