BDOHP Biographical Details and Interview Index

Sir Harold Smedley, KCMG 1978 (CMG 1965); MBE 1946.

Born 19 June 1920; son of late Dr R. D. Smedley, MA, MD, DPH, Worthing; married 1950, Beryl Mary Harley Brown, Wellington, New Zealand; two sons two daughters.

Education: Aldenham School; Pembroke College, Cambridge.

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This is an interview with Sir Harold Smedley, conducted at Ferring, West Sussex on 22 May 1997. My name is Sir Richard Best and I am also a retired member of the Diplomatic Service.

RB Harold, if I may, I'd like to start by asking you a little bit about your earlier and distinguished career in the Royal Marines. I see that you have an MBE (Military) which is quite an outstanding distinction. We don't see too many of them these days. I wonder if you could just say a little bit about this by way of background, and also perhaps say where you were born and where you were at school and university.

HS First, I was born in Worthing on 19 June 1920 so I am now living near where I was born. I went to school at a small public school called Aldenham in Hertfordshire and then went up to Cambridge on a scholarship reading Classics to Pembroke College, Cambridge. I took my Higher School Certificate, equivalent to modern 'A' levels, Greek and Latin in 1938 and in French and English in 1939. I won a scholarship the same year to Pembroke. The war was looming; I went up at the very beginning of the war in October 1939 and I enlisted then but my call-up was deferred until I had had one year at University. So after my first year I went off in September 1940 to the forces, initially to the Royal Artillery and then after I was commissioned in the Royal Marines in which I had served in the Cambridge Officer Training Unit. I joined an outfit called the Mobile Naval Base Defence Organisation which was designed to provide air defences to our ports overseas. We were deployed around Plymouth, Falmouth and Milford Haven and then sent via the Cape to Egypt. We moved to Malta after it ceased to be subject to air bombardment and then into Sicily in July 1943 with the invasion forces to provide air defence to the port of Augusta. Things quietened down as our troops moved into Italy and I responded to an appeal for volunteers to join the Royal Marine Commandos.

I came back to Britain in January 1944 to join a newly formed Royal Marine commando (No 48) which was being formed especially for D Day. I served in that commando from its inception at the beginning of 1944 through the D Day landings and the later landings in Walcheren in the Scheldt estuary and ended the war in garrison troops in Germany. I ended the war as a lieutenant in the Royal Marines and was given a Class B release which got me back to Cambridge at the beginning of the 1945 academic year. I continued my classical studies for a year and took the first part of the Tripos in which I got a First.

While I was in Germany I remember sitting at my desk in the Commando orderly room when the Adjutant of the Unit came in with a great wad of papers in his hand and said "this is just up your street". It was the documentation about the reconstruction exam to re-build the Home Civil Service. I applied then since I had no particular ideas on what I wanted to do after the War. I decided that the Foreign Office was not for me since I spoke only moderate French and no other foreign language; and I thought the Home Departments sounded desperately dull. That only left the Dominions Office, responsible for our relations with the then independent members of the Commonwealth. So I applied for it and the machinery worked and about the same time as I took my Tripos in 1946 I was told that I had been accepted by the Dominions Office. I asked if I could defer my joining until I had completed my degree and was told that that was not possible because they needed the services of all of us who had applied and qualified so I entered the Dominions Office in August 1946.

RB If I might just interrupt you, I notice that you left the Services with an MBE (Military), could you just very briefly say what this was about.

HS Well, I was awarded it after I had left the Services and I think it was for my general

work with 48 Royal Marine Commando during an intensive year of training and fighting.

RB Well thank you. I can see that you are extremely modest and I won't try to draw you out further on that although I would really love to do so on some other occasion. Could you now give some impression about what life was like and what you were doing when you joined the Dominions Office and went in as an Assistant Principal.

HS Yes, I joined the Office as you say as an Assistant Principal. I was posted to the Economic Department which filled me with trepidation because it spoke a language I couldn't understand and I really knew absolutely nothing about it but that was the first of many occasions in the Service when one found oneself in that situation. When I joined the Department all the senior members of it were deployed overseas. The head of the Department was away somewhere, where I never really discovered; his senior assistant was with Lord Keynes in America in negotiations about our finances so that the department was bare indeed and I was left to try to cope with what came in. The heaviest load of paper dealt with the World Trade Organisation, an organisation which, in fact, never got off the ground for another 50 years. I remember quite early on the word came down the line that the Secretary of State wanted a Cabinet paper prepared setting out his views on the economic issues as they affected the Commonwealth. I happened to be at the end of the line and I remember drafting a paper with great trepidation, I never dared look at my colleagues to see whether I had perpetrated some nonsense or other but anyway it seemed to please the Secretary of State and I was taken from my rabbit warren in to him to be thanked. It was the first time I had ever met the senior members of the hierarchy. I had a year in the department and after that I was then appointed Private Secretary to the PUS of the Dominions Office, Sir Eric Machtig. He was an old style Colonial Office civil servant and I don't think he ever went overseas, he certainly didn't in my time, to look at any of the posts and he concentrated on keeping the paperwork flowing at home. My job was to look after

the flow of papers and to keep his diary. It was a difficult time because my appointment coincided with Indian independence which led to the India Office and the Dominions Office being amalgamated into the Commonwealth Relations Office - it was to have been the Commonwealth Affairs Office but someone at the last minute realised "affairs" had other implications. There were two PUS's running the outfit. Division A which was the Dominions Office under Machtig and Division B, which was the India side of it, under Carter. Obviously that was a situation which was conducive to friction and I made it my job with Jean Bowker, the Private Secretary to Carter, to try and keep things going smoothly at departmental level. I was also the custodian of files which were judged unsuitable for keeping in the ordinary registry. These included staff papers but also private correspondence with Australian State Governors who were appointed on the advice of the Dominions Secretary. Most were still retired British service officers. I was also, with the Private Secretary to the Secretary of State, the liaison point for relations with No 10 and with Buckingham Palace. The job gave me an overall view of the office and made a very interesting introduction to my life in the Service. I had a year in the job and was then posted to New Zealand as a Second Secretary in 1948.

Travel in those days was a very gentlemanly affair. I had a month at sea travelling through the Panama Canal to New Zealand, all counting as duty. Our last call was at Pitcairn Island. The locals rowed out and climbed netting into the ship with what I thought were knives in their mouths but turned out to be First Day stamp covers. It never occurred to me that I might one day be their Governor (1976 - 1980). I remember when we arrived in New Zealand I went up on deck in the morning The hills around Wellington, our port of disembarkation, were brilliant with gorse. I turned to my neighbour and said what a wonderful sight. He snarled at me "you Pom, you're responsible for that, gorse is an absolute curse". I was more careful in future as to what I said because the same was true of rabbits and various other things which the New Zealanders wish we had never brought.

The High Commissioner there was Sir Patrick Duff. He was a former Private Secretary at No 10 and after that the Permanent Under Secretary at the Ministry of Works. He didn't drive a car much himself and the Office did not, in those days, provide a chauffeur so he took to taking me with him in the dual capacity as Private Secretary and chauffeur and I was able to see a great deal of New Zealand in my time.

I had two years in New Zealand. It was a very pleasant assignment in both a professional and personal way because I married there. My wife is a New Zealander. I had met her in London because she was working for the Prime Minister's Department in New Zealand and had come over to Britain to help run an exhibition designed to encourage emigration to New Zealand but we really didn't get to know one another until I got to New Zealand. We were married in March 1950. My main job was liaison with the small but growing New Zealand Ministry of External Affairs under its Secretary, Alister McIntosh and his deputy, Foss Shanahan. Many members became lifelong friends.

My next assignment was in Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia, as it then was, Zimbabwe nowadays. There was no British Mission in Salisbury and that was a great inconvenience to people at home because in theory the Governor was expected to keep the British Government informed of what was going on. In practice, it came low in his priorities and in any case it was difficult to expect him to comment on internal affairs in the way that a British diplomat could. So I was sent out in January 1951 as what we called, for obvious reasons, St John the Baptist, to open a Mission there. I had the great help of the local Trade Commissioner's office because they were established and I had everything ready for Ian Maclennan, our first High Commissioner. There were just the two of us there in the post at diplomatic level.

The negotiations for setting up the Central African Federation took place in my time but

these were conducted from London and I was not directly involved in the negotiations themselves at the Salisbury end. But I was acting High Commissioner when the Federation was installed. It was the one and only time at which I ever wore my blue Diplomatic uniform. The Federation was doomed to failure: the Africans wanted power more quickly than the whites were willing to yield it. I felt very sad as we had made good friends among the Rhodesians, mostly the whites, though we always tried to keep in touch with budding black politicians. We, like so many others, grew to love the High Veldt

RB And you then returned to London?

HS Yes, I came back at the end of 1953 to a job which was mainly one of contact with the Foreign Office in order that we could brief the Dominions on what was happening in the world. It was not always very easy to extract from the Foreign Office the material we wanted but, from my point of view, it gave me a good grounding in the work which was going on there. The job nearly ended prematurely. I was on holiday down in Cornwall when I had a call from the local police who told me that I was wanted at No 10 Downing Street. I found this somewhat surprising but naturally concurred and went up by train to London where I was told that the Private Secretary there, David Pitblado, himself a Dominions Office man, had it in mind to recommend me to Winston Churchill to be one of his Private Secretaries and I was told to await a call. I waited for day after day and eventually in the House of Commons I was summoned into the great presence and it was an experience to see this pink and white faced figure so familiar to the Press at close quarters. He looked at me and said "You come from the Department which translates oratio recta into oratio obliqua and sends it out to the Dominions"? I had some difficulty wondering how to reply when fortunately the Division Bell went and he went away looking as uncomfortable as I felt. A day or two later I was told that he had decided not, at that stage in his life, to change his appointments in the Private Office and was assured by the Private Secretary at

No 10 that it was nothing to do with me. It was all to do with the system. However, I went back to my desk and quite soon afterwards, and perhaps there was a link between the two, I was told by the PUS, Gilbert Laithwaite, that Lord Swinton, who was then our Secretary of State, had in mind to appoint me as his Private Secretary and I duly became the Principal Private Secretary at the Commonwealth Relations Office and later to his successor, Lord Home. Lord Swinton had the reputation of being a difficult man to work for and I approached my appointment with some apprehension. But one day I found him drafting a message of condolence to the NZ PM on the death of a former Minister. It was couched in warm tones and I ventured to ask Swinton whether he was aware the Minister concerned was an opposition member. "Oh", he said, "thank goodness I have a Secretary with political knowhow". After that our relations were more relaxed. Swinton had been a Minister on and off since the early 1920s, through three names (Lloyd Graeme, Cunliffe Lister and Swinton) and in one rail strike he asked me to get the Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Transport on the telephone. He lectured the very cautious Civil Servant on how he had handled the railways in the 1926 General Strike. Incidentally it was normal PS practice to listen in to official conversations but I treated them as personal to me and did not record what passed unless I had it direct from the Secretary of State. I remember my surprise when I was told that Lord Home was to be our Secretary of State in Eden's new Government and I found that even Gilbert Laithwaite, our PUS who was a fount of information on most things was also at a loss. All that we could both remember was how, as Lord Dunglass and Parliamentary Private Secretary to Neville Chamberlain, he had gone with him to Berchtesgaden and later was the channel through which the well known scrap of paper was passed to the Prime Minister. I met him, I remember, at the Travellers' Club and brought him over to the Commonwealth Relations Office. In those easy days we walked across St James's with no thought for problems of security. He was not a figure known to the public or for that matter to Commonwealth governments and I arranged interviews for him with local press and personalities and with the Dominion High Commissioners in London to make him more

familiar. I also arranged, for the long recess of 1955, a trip to some of the Commonwealth countries. We went to New Zealand, Australia, Sri Lanka, India and Pakistan taking in all ten weeks over it. It is remarkable these days to think that a Secretary of State could get away from Britain for as long as that but it certainly enabled him to get a real feel for what was going on in those countries and encouraged me to arrange a second trip the following year to Eastern Canada.

I left the service of Alec Home in mid 1957 with regret. He was a wonderful person to work for and on the travels one had an unequalled opportunity of getting to know him and Lady Home who travelled on most occasions with him. They both kept in touch with my wife and myself until their death. I had two major responsibilities apart from looking after Alec and his papers; one was to carry around a cushion which he needed to support his back; he had suffered from a tubercular spine in the war years and had made a remarkable recovery but still had some discomfort which the cushion eased. He joked that he was the only politician to have had his spine stiffened with his own bone. The other was a black book containing his assembly of jokes on which he relied to leaven his speeches. I think it was a great tribute to his story telling that even after I had heard them several times they still made me laugh.

RB So, after the Private Office you were then promoted and went overseas again.

HS Yes, I was posted to India in late 1957 with the rank of Counsellor. I went first to Calcutta which was one of our Deputy High Commission posts. There was still a great deal of British investment in and around Calcutta and my particular job was to keep in touch with the British community. There was not a great deal we could do to help them in their problems with the Indian authorities particularly on things like tax but at least if we could listen sympathetically to their problems it helped and I started travelling quite widely in the

area of the Deputy High Commission. After a year there I was moved up to Delhi to take over the job of Counsellor in charge of Administration and Consular Affairs. It was our largest mission after that in the United States and it was particularly active because we were building a new compound for the British High Commission. It was fairly controversial: on the one side it was certainly going to be a great deal more pleasant with reliable air conditioning, reliable plumbing and generally furnished up to western standards unlike many of the rented properties in which people had lived up to then. On the other hand, many people felt that they were going to be rather cut off from their Indian friends who might feel some reluctance to come into the property of the British Government. I think that experience suggested that that was not in fact a real worry. (Malcolm MacDonald won a reprieve for the move by appealing direct to the PM). There were British communities scattered all around India and I made it a point to try and visit as many of them as I could. The High Commissioner throughout my stay in India was Malcolm MacDonald. One story about him I remember with amusement at this distance though I was less amused at the time. He had a governmental Rolls Royce to take him around but he sometimes used it in ways for which Rolls Royces were not intended. He was a keen ornithologist and was writing a book about the birds of India and taking the photographs. He had a Chinese woman photographer who had helped him on books in the time when he was Commissioner General in Singapore and I remember one Sunday receiving a call from him saying that the Rolls Royce had broken down. I said I was sorry to hear this and would do my best to recover it. Where was it? Well, he said, you take the road to Agra and then, he went on and it was obvious that it was away in the middle of the bush somewhere and I pointed out later that Rolls Royces were admirable vehicles but not really intended for that and he would do better to take a Landrover. I fear that he continued to prefer the Rolls Royce.

RB Then after Delhi you returned to the Commonwealth Relations Office in London?

HS Yes, I came back in April 1960 to take charge of what was called Information Policy Department. This was the Department dealing with policy and financial control of our very large information services. These were run by a separate cadre of officers called the information class. My job included liaison with the British Council and the BBC. Duncan Sandys was Secretary of State and under his driving influence there was a substantial increase in the scale of our activities in British Council English language teaching, the information services themselves and support for the BBC in starting its programme of relay stations to improve the reception of the BBC external services. After about a year in that job I was moved to be Head of News Department. Up to then News Department was staffed by members of the Information Service but with Press interest focussing increasingly on the Commonwealth in the run up to the 1962 Commonwealth Prime Minister's Meeting which was to discuss British membership of the Common Market there was felt the need for an office more like that of the Foreign Office with someone at the head of it who had been used to dealing with the subject matters under discussion. So I found myself plunged in not long before the Prime Minister's Meeting in 1962 and exposed to the press of the world with very little to say to them. It was an experience which I wouldn't wish to have again but at least it enabled me to get to know the personalities. It was the first Commonwealth Prime Minister's Meeting held in the newly created premises at Marlborough House for the Commonwealth. The practice or tradition had been for meetings to be run by the British Government and therefore the spokesman for the British Government was the spokesman for the meeting. In practice the Commonwealth governments not unnaturally expected to put their own gloss on affairs. I tended to be left with the nuts and bolts.

Late in 1963 I was summoned one evening by our Permanent Under Secretary, Joe Garner, who said that the Secretary of State (Duncan Sandys) had it in mind to appoint me as High Commissioner in Ghana. I was flabbergasted because, although I had naturally been hoping for a good job I was certainly not expecting one at that level. The current High

Commissioner was Geoffrey De Freitas who himself was an unusual appointment since he was a Labour Minister and a Labour Member of Parliament but had been picked by Duncan Sandys to go to Ghana in the hope that he could exercise a restraining influence on Nkrumah. In fact that was not to be. I was never told the rationale for my own appointment but I always assumed that as a patently junior person compared with my predecessor Geoffrey De Freitas it was a fair indication that the British Government no longer placed the same importance on relations with Nkrumah as they had had before. Anyway, my wife and I welcomed the appointment and we prepared ourselves to go out to Ghana with our family. Still right at the end of the era in which we travelled by sea (Elder Dempster) we took our four children out along the West African coast. We had a modern residence to go to in Accra and we settled down there quickly. We had recruited a governess who would also double as Social Secretary with the emphasis on the latter as the children grew older.

I had quite a lot to do with Nkrumah in my time in Ghana. There was a fairly regular flow of messages, not of matters of direct importance to Ghana but which provided the opportunity for me to go and talk with Nkrumah. I always found him accessible although one had to run the gauntlet of his security arrangements which were increasingly strict as he feared more and more for his own safety. Nearest of all to his office was his loyal British personal assistant, Erica Powell. The general political attitude in Ghana was hostile to the west but in fact there was a total difference between the attitude taken by the Press and by the political advisers to Nkrumah, and the attitude of the average Ghanaian. I suppose that the first post as Head of Mission is always one which attracts or one is inclined to think well of but we felt very happy in our relationship with the Ghanaians because they are a very easy going and cheerful lot. Again, as in previous posts, but now with the extra authority of being Head of Mission, I focussed my attentions on getting to know Ghana outside its capital Accra. There was still a substantial British community in the country including

major investments in timber and in minerals, particularly gold and diamonds and manganese, and we made a point of visiting these in the course of our travels round the country. We also made a point of seeing the VSOs, over one hundred, in their frequently rugged accommodation of which they made light.

Life was not easy for the British expatriate community because they, like ordinary Ghanaians, were suffering from the economic difficulties of the country which limited imports. Looking back at my exchanges with Nkrumah, I remember that as part of my briefing I was told that I must learn all about communism because Nkrumah was a communist, but I rapidly decided that there was very little foundation for that. He regarded socialism or communism or whatever as convenient labels under which to package his views. But they really meant nothing in international terms. However, my Soviet colleague undoubtedly did have close access to many people in Flagstaff House or the castle at Osu (Christiansborg) where Nkrumah had his headquarters.

Nkrumah devoted a great deal of time, and Ghana's scarce resources, to developing his concept of African unity. This led him to invite the African leaders to Ghana for one of their summit meetings and for it Nkrumah built a special headquarters. One of the topics at that was going to be UDI, the Unilateral Declaration of Independence by Ian Smith's government in Salisbury. Nkrumah was very critical of the British Government's failure to use armed force against Smith but he was careful not to take his criticism too far. The Francophone African states on the other hand had no economic inhibitions about criticising the British Government and in particular calling on the British Government to break their relations with Rhodesia if they were not prepared to deploy military force, which we were certainly never willing to do. So we had an uncomfortable session at this summit meeting when it finally got off the ground in Ghana, and I was sent messages to get round to Commonwealth African Heads of State explaining the British outlook and to try and avert

any too damaging outcome. But the Francophone Africans succeeded in passing a Resolution calling on all African states to sever relations with Britain and Nkrumah felt that he had no option but to follow suit. So I found myself, at a week's notice, told to go, but we were able to leave behind a substantial section looking after the trade and other activities in the High Commission.

RB Can you tell me a little bit more about Nkrumah - the man?

HS Yes, he was as I said earlier, a charming man, and always whenever I saw him he showed the pleasant side of his make-up to me. He felt secure with British people. We had a substantial training team in Ghana to train the Ghanaian armed forces and I am sure he felt at ease with them there. One of the things he desperately wanted was a frigate. No doubt he would have used it as his private yacht to sail up and down the African coastline. But we had to persuade him that it wasn't as easy as that. It needed a backing of skilled people and was very expensive. But it interested him in matters naval, and I remember on one occasion we had a naval visit and he was happy to accept an invitation to come and steam up and down on this while my wretched defence adviser was a fairly willing victim of being taken from one ship to another at sea. The Imperial Defence College, now the Royal College for Defence Studies, tended to include Ghana as one of the countries in which their students visited in the course of their annual travel and I remember on one occasion I took them up to see Nkrumah at the Castle Christiansborg. He gave a little talk and then asked the general commanding the visitors if they would like to see round the castle. They said they would so he took us round. He had with him his own Chief of Staff, General Aferi, and as we walked down into the courtyard there was a grille over a hole in the courtyard and the British General said to him, "What is this?" Nkrumah turned to General Aferi who turned grey at the thought of having to reply. He obviously thought that this was a dig at him. It was, in fact, only a water storage area and had no sinister implications but I felt that

Nkrumah had an edge to his voice which I wouldn't like to have been the recipient of.

The day after I had been told by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that I was now persona non grata I received a message that Nkrumah wanted to see me. It seemed a bit odd given that I was persona non grata but I thought I might as well go. So I went along and we had a half an hour chat and I never discovered why he wanted to see me. I thought maybe he was changing his mind, but there was no sign of it, but as he walked to the door with me as I was leaving he said "How's the family". This was two or three days before Christmas, I said actually they were flying out from England to spend Christmas with me and Nkrumah said, "Oh well, tell them they'll be very welcome here. No problem for them", so I thanked him and left him and never saw him again because a few months later he went to North Viet Nam as a self-appointed emissary to try and find a settlement to the Viet Nam War and while he was there there was a coup against him and he never returned to Ghana.

I, on the other hand, much to my surprise, did! I was, as I said, told to leave Ghana before Christmas and I got back to London and went to see the Commonwealth Relations Office and said well here I am, what do I do? They said well you'd better go somewhere for Christmas and come back and see us afterwards. So I did and was told that I was to help out in the section dealing with the consequences of UDI which was something I could have done without, it having been the cause of my eviction from Ghana. I had some time there. I felt like a fifth wheel on the coach; there were too many people in on the act. But one day I turned on the news on the BBC and heard that Nkrumah had been ousted and I was asked whether I would like to go back again. I said that I thought there was a danger that some people might think I had been associated with Nkrumah but I thought on the whole that I could do a good job.

So I was re-appointed, going back to Ghana in April 1966 for another 18 months. I think I

was the first British Head of Mission to be reposted to my old post after relations were restored. It was an odd feeling because technically it was a second appointment to Ghana, for example in the pecking order which all diplomatic missions go by, I started at the bottom again. When I first went back there was a feeling of enormous relief in Ghana that Nkrumah had gone. People said the coup was like a general election but they hoped they would never need another like it. It's odd looking back on it, I don't think that he was really politically motivated in his actions other than by his belief in African unity and that all the labels of communism and socialism hadn't really much meaning for him. His real problem was that his feet were no longer on the ground. He thought that everything was going his way and he left the running of Ghana to others and too often that meant feathering their own nests so that the whole economic base of Ghana was undermined. That was the main cause in the end of his downfall. His own expenditure on buildings was comparatively modest but he must be blamed for unthinking cruelty to those who were interned.

RB So then, a totally different posting to Laos?

HS I remember I was out visiting the aluminium smelter works when a message came to me that there was an Immediate telegram marked to be decyphered by me personally. So I went to the Office later that afternoon with some nervousness and started decyphering it only to find the telegram had gone corrupt, as not infrequently happened on these occasions. I had to wait until the following morning until I got a version which I could make sense of. This told me that I was being sent as Ambassador to Laos. I think it included the word 'challenge' beloved of Personnel Dept. I knew virtually nothing about the area at all. The initial idea had been for me to go straight from Ghana. But when our current Ambassador in Laos, Fred Warner, discovered that my French was at best rusty I was given a few weeks extra in order to brush it up so that it wasn't quite such a rush.

Laos was a small former French colony and we had not found it necessary to focus on it much until it became a major issue in American politics at the election of 1960 when a conference was convened in Geneva which had the effect of leaving the Russians and ourselves as co-chairmen of a settlement which, it rapidly became clear, was going to be totally ignored and unreal. So, when I got there I found as before that the best thing I could do was to try to get to know as much as possible about the country. I was fortunate in that I had at my disposal a small plane provided by the services, first of all an RAF plane and then an army air corps Beaver, which enabled me to reach places which I could not have reached by land. The military situation was unstable but, normally speaking, the main headquarters in the countryside were safe. So I would fly to them and enjoy a drink with the base commander while he told me his story of the local scene and then I could fly back again before things became unsafe at dusk. The Lao themselves are extremely charming people though fairly feckless but they were welcoming to visitors and I was fortunate again in being in a country, like Ghana, where the locals had no chips on their shoulders.

Laos was a strange country. The administrative capital created by the French was Vientiane on the Mekong but the royal capital was at Luang Prabang, several hundred miles up the Mekong. The King was treated with enormous respect and all the diplomatic corps at intervals had to go up there to present their respects. My first visit was to present my credentials which was done very formally and I had great difficulty I remember over my speech: whether I spoke in the second person or the third person describing my references to the Royal Family. The King himself used to give audiences in the course of an enormous party at his residence. We would go there in the early evening and at about 10 or 10.30 at night the King would decide the time had come to start giving interviews/audiences and they might go on until 3 or 4 in the morning because if the American Ambassador was seen to have had an audience lasting three quarters of an hour then the Soviet Ambassador could not possibly have taken his leave any quicker so it was a very wearing occasion. The co-

chairmanship with the Russians was a fairly abstract idea but it did at least give me an excuse for talking with my Russian colleague which otherwise the state of the cold war would not have permitted.

Apart from politics we had a significant aid programme there, the main feature of which was the building of a radio station. But we also gave a certain amount of help on the agricultural front. There were also quite a few VSOs working there. We used to receive letters from our families in England or New Zealand expressing concern for our safety but in practice, as long as one adopted simple rules, the risks were very small. I remember too in Vientiane we had our teenage son and daughter out for the holidays and they wandered around in Vientiane by themselves in the evening and we felt confident that they would come to no harm. The Lao and even more the Vietnamese would be quite ready to take vengeance on their own nationals and relatives who misbehaved but they never vented their anger on foreigners, which was a saving grace. But it was a difficult post for the junior staff because, whereas I had the opportunity of travelling all over the country, they were basically stuck in Vientiane with an occasional visit down to Bangkok, which functioned as our main administrative base. In the same way we acted as a base for our Consulate General in Hanoi. They had a very tough time of it there. When the Consul General did come out we aimed to give him a reasonably relaxed time before he had to go back and face all the problems of Viet Nam.

RB So you then returned to London to take up an AUS Post, a very important job looking after sub-Saharan Africa, I believe, and an even more significant responsibility to follow?

HS Yes, I switched back to Africa again. My predecessor had had a very tough time because of the Nigerian civil war and the criticism that brought of British Government policy. I fortunately came in at the end of that but I faced some of the same difficulties

when General Amin of Uganda threw out the Asians. We were reasonably certain that the Asians would never be a burden on the British economy because they were very hard working people who had succeeded in making a livelihood where no one else could but, of course, the problems were not just economic, they were also political. While I was there I persuaded our Minister of State, Lord Lothian, to visit some of our posts in Africa and we went to Kenya and Tanzania, including Zanzibar. I remember looking at the cloves drying on the streets and said to the escorting officer was there not a risk of them being stolen. Oh, he said; no if anybody is caught picking up any of these bundles of cloves they will be shot. He went on talking about cloves and told the driver to stop, leapt out and seized a bundle of them and gave them to me. I said I trusted that foreigners were treated differently from the locals.

We also went to call on the Emperor of Ethiopia. I remember walking up the hall of audience with his chihuahuas yapping at our heels, wondering whether if I had the misfortune to step on one of these little beasts we might be thrown to his proverbial lions, but we escaped intact.

I managed to pay two extra visits to other countries, to Zaire and also to the Ivory Coast which he did not have time to go to. I was received by President Houphouet Boigny and treated to a 50 minute monologue on his views of Africa. It gave me a chance of seeing some of our staff on the spot. On my visit to Ivory Coast I managed to return across the normally closed Eastern Frontier.

The UDI and its consequences were not part of my responsibility which terminated with the Zambesi river but when Sir Alec Home, as he then was, had reached an interim settlement with Ian Smith, he wanted to assess whether the settlement he had reached was acceptable to the people of Rhodesia as a whole. To achieve that he and Ian Smith had agreed to the

setting up of a commission which would go out to Rhodesia and assess it in whatever way they thought fit. The Chairman was Lord Pearce, a highly respected retired Lord of Appeal. The other members were two ex pro-Consuls, Maurice Dorman who ended up as Governor of Malta, Glyn Jones who was Governor of Malawi, and David Harlech, a former Ambassador in Washington, who provided much political guidance. I was appointed the Secretary-General. This, I think, was probably the most interesting assignment that I had in my diplomatic life because I was operating on my own rather than under ministerial responsibility, and Lord Pearce and his colleagues were operating independently to form their judgement. I remember we all thought when we first got together that the problem might be that the African population would feel too nervous of their security and, dominated by the white Rhodesians, fearful to express their views but in fact it rapidly became clear that the problem was the other way round. There was no doubt about the 'no' coming from Africans in strident terms but was this a genuine judgement on their part or was it that they themselves were being forced to express a view which they might not feel in private? We had no doubt in fact that it was a genuine expression of view and in due course after a hectic three months we presented our report which said that the people of Rhodesia did not accept this settlement. It was to my mind greatly to the credit of Alec Home and although quite characteristic of the man, he accepted the report solely with a feeling of disappointment but no resentment at our failure to support his settlement. In fact he gave us all a dinner and sent us packing. It was an interesting time also. We decided that there was no scope for opinion polls or other sophisticated methods of measuring public opinion. We had worked through teams of commissioners who would assess the opinion by whatever means they thought fit in their own areas and for this purpose we recruited former British colonial civil servants who were delighted to have an opportunity to get away from the gas board into their shorts again.

From that I went back once more to my African duties and had added to them responsibility

for affairs south of the Sahara.   But it was not to last long as in late 1973 I was appointed High Commissioner in Sri Lanka.

RB No doubt you had some dealings with Ian Smith and I suppose Joshua Nkomo and other significant figures in Rhodesia.   Could you just say something about this, please?

HS Yes, I didn't see a great deal of Ian Smith in my first tour in Salisbury. In the days when I was posted to Salisbury, to Harare, he was a right wing back bench member of parliament and I certainly never looked upon him as a national leader.   He was very disappointed by our performance as a commission because he felt that we had been encouraging African resistance and that, if we had operated as he would have liked to get it all wrapped up before Christmas - which would have meant doing it in a few weeks, an impossible target - the result would have been very different.

I knew Nkomo very slightly when I was in Salisbury because we had tried to extend our social relationships outside the European community.   He never struck me as being someone, in the end, who was tough enough to come out on top in any struggle for public opinion. Nor would Ndabanindi Sithole the other main African politician.   Mugabe was still overseas.   On the other hand, I remember going with Lord Pearce to see Nkomo in the prison camp out on the Portuguese East African border and I was surprised in how moderate terms he talked about the problems of his country and, as he went back again to prison, he was chatting amicably with the prison warders.   He was essentially a likeable man, if not a great leader.

RB So you went to Colombo and you were also Ambassador to the Maldives?

HS Ambassador to Maldives.   They always made a great point about leaving out the

definite article for reasons which I could never discover. I went to Colombo in late 1973 without great expectations but again we were fortunate that the Ceylonese are an easy-going lot and we were received with all friendliness. I say Ceylonese because that is still used as an adjective in popular use to describe the islanders as a whole. In Sri Lanka itself only Mrs Bandaranaike, who was Prime Minister through my stay, ever talked about Sri Lanka; everyone else still talked about Ceylon, even the communists. Sri Lanka still had substantial British investments in the tea estates and, to a lesser extent rubber and coconut, but these were winding down because they were unable to operate economically in the conditions laid down by the Ceylonese authorities. I spent much of my time trying to help ease the problems of the community which were detrimental to the interests of the Ceylonese as a whole. During my years there the Tamil problem was fairly quiet although I remember before I left writing notes to my successor. I said that I think you will hear a great deal more about the Tamil problems than I did, which indeed was true.

I was also appointed Ambassador, as you say, to Maldives. The British interest there was in the island staging post at Gan, right down in the south of the country. This was an important base on our staging posts between south east Asia and London and I spent my first year there saying how important it was to our interests to retain this base and then found myself suddenly switching tune when we had decided to give up our forces east of Suez and in consequence we were closing down. The Maldivians never held this against us. They were not easy people to deal with, being secretive and suspicious, but when they wanted to be they could be very welcoming. I was taken by the Prime Minister on a trip to some of the outlying atolls and he was extremely hospitable. I was able to pay one visit to Gan when I went to present my credentials in a British frigate which was passing through the area, an interesting personal experience and a demonstration that we still had, at that stage, the power to back our words.

RB And then to New Zealand?

HS Yes, we were always given an opportunity in the Service to set down our hopes for our own personal future and I had regularly been putting New Zealand at the top of the list, both for its own attractions as I knew from my earlier tour and because it was my wife's country, but nothing ever came of it and I used to think of it as rather a sick joke. Then suddenly I was told out of the blue that I was to go to Wellington because David Scott, who had only recently been appointed to Wellington, was needed for the more important assignment of Ambassador to South Africa. So I accepted with great pleasure. It was a very different New Zealand in many ways that I met in early 1976 from what I had known in my previous stay there in the late '40s. Then, the New Zealand economy was still depending on its exports to Britain, now, exports of butter and lamb are still very important but they no longer dominate to the extent that they did 30 years earlier.

Our approach to European membership was a source of great anxiety to the New Zealand Government but they were able to rely on guarantees by successive British governments that we would do all we could to make sure that their interests were protected and in this respect New Zealand was much better placed than most of the other countries who had depended on trade with Britain, largely I think because it was self-evident that there really was no immediate alternative to the British market for New Zealand produce. There was also a change in the general attitude. Back in the 1940s most people talked of Britain as home but now in the '70s New Zealand was looking towards a much more assured future under its own name, although still regarding a visit to Britain as an important part of growing up.
We found we had a residence which went back to the early years of the New Zealand settlement, a wooden building but attractive to live in and excellent for entertaining in.

I haven't made the point earlier in this conversation but I do feel that personal hospitality in

the home is an enormously important part of the repertoire of a diplomat. It is frequently attacked as being out of date and wasteful, but there is no doubt that there was a strong desire on the part of New Zealanders to come to the home of the British High Commissioner, or members of his staff, and it is a very effective and economic way of promoting the British cause. I operated in New Zealand as in the other countries in which I have served and made a point of travelling widely. There was never any problem of an excuse because New Zealand has an enormous thirst for the spoken word. I have calculated that in my four and a half years in New Zealand I must have talked to every branch of the Commonwealth societies and to at least 40 or 50 Rotary clubs.

I had two jobs other than in New Zealand. I was also accredited to Western Samoa, this was for convenience because the former trusteeship power was New Zealand and New Zealand was still the country closest to Western Samoa and we were able to look to New Zealand to help us in any problems that arose. The other was Pitcairn. The decolonisation in the Pacific had virtually reached its course and even the most enthusiastic decolonisers hardly could argue that a country with under a hundred inhabitants could run itself. The problem is what to do about it, and there seems really no alternative to its continuation as a British colonial responsibility. One of the problems is its communications. There is no room for an airstrip on the island and there is no harbour so we relied for supplies on diverting a ship a little off course, on its way from Auckland to the Panama Canal, to offload supplies into what the islanders called longboats alongside. When I went I did exactly the same, in the same frigate oddly enough that had taken me to Maldives a few years before, so I was able to see the island and judge for myself that their wish to remain under the British crown, and running their own affairs, was genuine.

RB Well, thank you very much for this most interesting description of your career which is obviously bound up to a considerable and not exclusive extent with the Commonwealth.

You must, when you started off on your first posting in New Zealand, had a very different view of the Commonwealth and how it might develop, to what you were to see later on. Can you elaborate on this and can you say whether you had aspirations for the development of the Commonwealth as a younger diplomat and whether these were achieved, or not achieved, or whether things worked out as you thought they would.

HS Yes, when I joined the Dominions Office in 1946 it was responsible (at that stage) for our relations with Canada, Australia, South Africa and New Zealand, the Irish Republic, Southern Rhodesia and Newfoundland which, at that stage, most people had forgotten was not actually part of Canada, and the so-called High Commission territories of Basutoland, Bechuanaland and Swaziland. Of those only, for a long time, Australia, New Zealand and Canada were regular members; while South Africa and Rhodesia were out in the cold. I don't think any of us foresaw the speed of decolonisation but I found no difficulty in adjusting to it. It was not lack of power which led to decolonisation but lack of will to retain it.

The Commonwealth suffered, I think, from being promoted too heavily and in particular from attempts to build it up as an alternative to the Common Market. I was thinking back to the early 1960s when I was working on information matters with Duncan Sandys and we were preparing material on promoting the Commonwealth in public opinion in Britain. There were certainly people who saw in the new Commonwealth a replacement for the Empire, but this was never a realistic expectation. I believe, from my work with the Commonwealth, that it had a real role to play particularly in helping the smallest members, in the Caribbean and in the Pacific to cope with the complications of the modern world.

RB Do you think that Britain will continue to have a leading role in the Commonwealth as a matter of Commonwealth culture or will this be largely based upon our strength as an

economic power, admittedly not devoted primarily to the Commonwealth any longer?

HS At the height of the apartheid problems there was a tendency, particularly in some of the African Commonwealth countries, to say that Britain should be pushed out of the Commonwealth because she was not taking as forthright a line as they would wish on apartheid. That always seemed to me a totally unrealistic threat and I think now that a better balance is reached. We remain economically the most powerful member of the Commonwealth but it won't possibly be long before some of the Asian members catch up with us it terms of wealth per head. I think Singapore is already up to our level, so I would expect to see that it is both in British interests, and in our power, to support the Commonwealth.

RB And you see no objection to the continuing expansion of the Commonwealth through the admission of other countries, like Mozambique which admittedly always had a close link with South Africa.

HS I retired before Mozambique's admission and I have not really got anything valuable to say on that one but I am a bit sceptical.

RB It's a number of years since you retired yourself but you obviously had an interesting and successful career. Would you recommend to a young person looking to a similar career, in today's terms, to apply to join the Foreign & Commonwealth Office and become a diplomat?

HS Well I certainly enjoyed my career. I felt I had had enough when I retired after 34 years in the service. I had done what I could but it was a career which I enjoyed. I have to say that none of my children has shown any interest in following me into Diplomatic or Government Service. I think the answer is a qualified 'yes'. If people are really interested

in an overseas life and seeing other countries, and how they operate, then I think the Diplomatic Service is something they should consider, but I think, probably we had a better time of it than the average diplomat has now. There are all sorts of problems which were only just becoming apparent at the end of my career as for example the difficulties about the position of spouses, and finding a fruitful role for them. There was also the limiting effect on life at a post of security problems.

RB Well, thank you very much. I am most grateful to you for your time and encouraged to hear that you have such an up-beat view on the whole.