

BDOHP Biographical Details and Interview Index

THOMSON, Sir John Adam (27 April 1927-3 June 2018)

GCMG 1985 (KCMG 1978; CMG 1972)

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[Note that Sir John Thomson died before this interview could be completed, so it does not include his whole career, but ends in 1964].

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BRITISH DIPLOMATIC ORAL HISTORY PROGRAMME

RECOLLECTIONS OF SIR JOHN THOMSON GCMG,

RECORDED AND TRANSCRIBED BY CATHERINE MANNING

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CM: This is 20 July 2016 and I am Catherine Manning recording an interview for the British Diplomatic Oral History Programme with Sir John Thomson.

John, you have always resisted doing a recording for the oral history programme up till now, but once a few years ago, I heard you giving an account of your first posting in Saudi Arabia in 1951, I think it was, and I was so struck by it that I have succeeded in persuading you to give us the story.

JT: Well, you're a charming persuader and you're persistent too.

CM: Before we go to your first post, perhaps it would be a good lead in if you would tell us a little bit about how you chose the Foreign Office as a career and how it was that you chose the Arab language.

JT: Those are unexciting answers. The answer to the first one, how did I choose it as a career, was largely because I was at Trinity College Cambridge and I really wanted to do historical research, but I thought that would be a presumptuous answer to a question that was put to me quite unexpectedly. What happened was this. There was a young man, a colleague of mine at Trinity who wanted to marry, I am sure, the elder of my two sisters, Clare. I got back from the long vacation, slightly late. I was ticked off for this; that I was doing some work in the Vatican Library was not regarded as an adequate excuse. At any rate, scarcely had I recovered from that, than this young man said that he would like to talk with me. I knew him well, no problem about that. I invited him to tea - you either invited someone to tea or to sherry in those days - I invited him to tea and he quite quickly said, 'John, what are you going to do when you go down at the end the year?' As I've indicated I felt I shouldn't quite say that I was going to stay on and do historical research, so I said, rather on the spur of the moment, that I was thinking about going into the Diplomatic Service, actually I think it was called the Foreign Service in those days. He said, to my annoyance, in a triumphant voice, 'It's too late. You're too late.' I said, 'How can I be too late in the first week of our

last year? Anyway, how do you know?' He said, 'I know because I've applied and the application deadline was a week ago.' I was really rather annoyed about that. I thought it was very unreasonable that it should be quite so early before even the last year had started. So I went out next morning promptly to the Post Office and got a form to apply and filled it in, in the Post Office, and sent it off, because the Post Office told me that my friend was wrong: the deadline for the application was a week hence. So that's how it came about. Then I passed the exams and got appointed, and I thought it was too interesting a thing to pass up and maybe I'd go back to academia later, which, as I had a succession of interesting posts, I never did.

The answer to the second question about Arabic was something that was beyond my control. The results from the exams for the Home Civil Service and Foreign Service were not announced until some date early in June and by that time several of us had made engagements for things to do during the summer. I was engaged to go and do some archaeological work in Turkey. Johnny Graham was engaged to play the pipes at the Portree balls and Michael Weir also had some reason for not being able to join the Service until sometime in late September or early October. So the three of us were all sent to learn Arabic. It was sort of a punishment, we felt, as a result of our refusal to join on whatever date they suggested - I think it was the 1st July. Any rate, we all did interesting things over the summer; we were then appointed to go to the Arabic course.

CM: So that happened absolutely immediately? You joined the Foreign Office in October and immediately they sent you away to learn Arabic?

JT: In a sense, yes. Strictly speaking, not quite like that. What happened was that I arrived at Personnel Department by appointment in the middle of the morning one day, I think it was probably in the first week of October, and I was met by two distinguished gentlemen in a rather small room and they each had a big desk, so there wasn't much space around them. Adams, who was looking after me, rather grandly introduced me to his colleague, and said, 'Willan and I divide the world between us.' He took one half I suppose and Willan took the other half. I was told that my first Arabic lesson had been arranged for 2:30 that afternoon with a teacher from SOAS, I think it was.

CM: No test to find out if you were gifted for hard languages?

JT: Not at all. They might have discovered that I was not gifted because I never did languages at university. Any rate, that's how it started. But then it very quickly turned into a sort of disaster because I was brought down with jaundice about three or four days later. The result of that was that I was confined to bed at home. I was lucky that my father had a house in central London, in Kensington, and so I was put in bed and told not to move and not to eat various things. Yes, I could have some fish, and apples I think, but not much else. So I read a wonderful book probably the second greatest biography in the English language, Lockhart's *Life of Scott*, in about eight volumes, which has been a pleasure to me all my life. Eventually, it was judged that I was well enough to continue with some Arabic lessons, so I had the same teacher from SOAS, who came to see me for not very long. Then I was told we were to go to MECAS, the Middle East Centre for Arab Studies, at Beirut, actually it was in the hills above Beirut, and this was to be about the middle of January or maybe a little bit earlier.

CM: John, I ought to anchor this to a year.

JT: This was 1950 when I joined the Foreign Office and 1951 when I went to MECAS. Yes, that's right. It's as well to get the dates straight. It was January '51 and there were five of us from the Foreign Office on that course. There were the three that I've named, Johnny Graham, Michael Weir and myself, and then there were two others, who were of a more junior grade. Then there were three or four Army officers; one Navy officer, I think; two or three RAF officers; a British Council man, very good, John Muir; an Australian, also very good. About half of us, I think we were about twenty in total, half were married and lived in lodgings in the village nearby. The bachelors all lived in the central buildings at MECAS. I won't go on about what happened in that year in which one was supposed to learn Arabic. Michael Weir was a good linguist and he did learn Arabic. He had a bit of a start because he'd already learned Persian. The RAF had taught him that. Johnny Graham is good at everything, so he was good. I was rather poor and my interest was at first a little bit mixed, because here we were in Lebanon with lots of castles around and quite close to the part of Turkey, namely Cilicia and out to the Euphrates, where I had been working as a very amateur archaeologist, looking at castles. But to my surprise we were then given quite a lot of Foreign Office material to read. It came in hunks. Every two weeks, or something of that sort, we were given half a dozen dispatches, but they were important ones and interesting and I got really rather hooked on the problems they described.

Any rate, the course came to an end, I suppose approximately the end of November, maybe a week or two earlier, and everybody was receiving orders about where they were to go next. Some had known for quite a long time and others were just being told at that moment as the course was coming to an end, which I think was the case for Johnny and Michael. And there was nothing for me. One by one all the other members of the course departed Shemlan. Eventually, I was the only person left. I was in touch with the Embassy in Beirut through whom the instructions came and I went every other day down to Beirut to see what might lie in store for me, and time after time there was nothing. And I got used to it being nothing; then one day they said, 'Ah, your posting's come through.' I said anxiously, 'Where?' and they said, 'Jedda,' which was rather a blow because Johnny and Michael and I had quite often in the evening wondered rather idly where we would be posted and usually those conversations ended up with something like, 'Well, I don't care where it is, so long as it isn't Jedda.'

Third Secretary, Jedda, 1951

So to go to Jedda was rather a shock. Moreover, I didn't actually know at that moment that Cyril Ousman, the British Vice-Consul in Jedda, had just been murdered. Any rate, I was told to get there as quickly as possible and I made all speed to Jedda and was received by a very welcoming group of people on the tarmac of Jedda airport, some of whom were future colleagues, one or two of whom were their friends, who subsequently became my friends. I was told that the Ambassador, Mr Pelham, wanted to see me in about half an hour for a drink at his Residence. I was rushed to the block of flats that the British had. For Jedda, in those days and we are now talking about December '51, they were probably amongst the very best accommodation in the town. I remember I leapt into a cold bath because I was already pouring with sweat and was fascinated to observe a whole army of ants walking along the side of the bath.

Then I went to see the Ambassador and Mrs Pelham and began my career with a rather disturbing conversation. I was told as I left the Ambassador's residence that the other two bachelors with whom I would be sharing part of the accommodation were both out at parties that evening, but my servant would be there - I didn't know I was going to have a servant - and that he would give me dinner. Well, I accepted this. I knew absolutely nothing about the Diplomatic Service. I went and met my Sudanese servant who had no English. He gave me

brown Windsor soup, which I thought was a rather strange choice for the heat. It was December, but it is humid throughout the year in Jeddah. I asked him in my best Arabic for some bread and he couldn't understand what I was saying. At that point I began to learn that Syrian-Palestinian Arabic that we'd been taught was only one branch of the Arabic language and many very common words, such as 'bread', were different in other branches of the Arabic language. It was a bit discouraging.

Then it was explained to me that I was to have the grandest title that I've ever had, I think. I was to be the Oriental Secretary, which sounded really rather attractive, but that was to be delayed. I was not going to take up that post right away, because I was needed as Vice-Consul in the place of the murdered Cyril Ousman.

I began the next day. I was taken (I don't know how we got there - I suppose one of my colleagues drove me) from the block of flats to the Embassy, which was a famous building. It is the building that was described in, I think, the second chapter of *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* by Lawrence. And there was the bandstand that he describes in that book.

It was quite an eventful day for me, because I was then told that I needed to sign a huge number, I think it was over two hundred, documents which were required for British pilgrims, that is to say, pilgrims to Mecca for whom the British were responsible. That didn't necessarily mean that they had British nationality, but we were responsible for a whole lot of people, including a lot from the Hadramaut, what is now the Yemen. I then changed my signature. Up to then it had been John A. Thomson. I think I signed the first half dozen that way and then I thought, goodness me, this is going to take a long time, so I shortened it to J.A. Thomson.

Everything was strange to me. I had not had one single hour of instruction in the Foreign Office and I'd never even been inside the main building. I'd only been to Carlton House Terrace to see the two gentlemen who told me that they divided the world between them. As I say, everything was strange and presently Derek Riches, who was the Head of Chancery, was obliged to give me a little seminar and show me what a piece of minute paper looked like and what draft paper looked like, etc. He did that very well and I learned that quite quickly. But there were a lot of other things that were new to me.

The first thing was that we had a slave, who'd run away. It was indeed the case that a female slave had run to the Embassy itself, this building that Lawrence had described, since there was a tradition that if a slave could pass the threshold of the British Embassy, he or she would be freed, that is to say, not freed by the Saudi authorities, but freed by the British authorities taking that person away to a place where slavery didn't exist. Slavery was legal in Saudi Arabia at that point. This female slave presented rather a problem, because we had no suitable accommodation for her. So Derek Riches, who was a really excellent Head of Chancery, a very experienced Arabist, a good linguist, made an arrangement that she should be accommodated with the wives of the Governor of Jeddah and that seemed to work.

The next thing that happened - I am not sure that I am getting the order of what happened that day right. The next thing was that I was asked to draw up a list of people buried in the Christian burial ground at Jeddah, which was a burial ground that began in 1857 possibly 1858, as a result of the Indian Mutiny. The effect of the Mutiny had been felt in Jeddah and some British had been killed at that point, and buried there. There had been very little addition to it for decades after that, but we now had this event of Cyril Ousman and a strange sequence of deaths, which I'll come to in a moment. Scarcely had I finished doing the plan for who was buried at the cemetery, than I was asked to do a seating plan for the Ambassador's dinner party that night, which I needed a little instruction about, because I didn't know who any of the people were, of course. One was the French Ambassador, and one was ... et cetera. That was my first real day.

After that day, I was transferred more or less at once to the Vice-Consulate, which was at the bottom of this ancient Arab building. I say ancient because those buildings, built of mud brick - that was what Jeddah was built of in those days - disintegrated after a hundred or a hundred and fifty years. The Vice-Consulate had no glass in the windows. You could shut the shutters but that did not prevent the sand from drifting in when it was blowing hard. It was very genuinely Arabian.

There were a lot of people there and they all wanted something. I had a big desk, and I was rather conscious by that time that the last person who'd sat at that desk was Cyril Ousman. I found myself really rather out of my depth because first of all, my Arabic wasn't good, and secondly, in any case, even if it had been good in Palestinian Arabic, it wouldn't have done too well in Jeddah where we had an enormous range of people. I found I was also the Pilgrim

Officer; that was yet another title. The Pilgrim Officer was responsible for all the people that the British were prepared to protect and they were a lot of people. The Pakistanis had more pilgrims, and the Indians must have had about the same number as us. I think that we, the British, had the third largest number of pilgrims - it was a huge range of people. I particularly remember the Somalis, who were wonderfully quarrelsome and wonderfully funny, too. I suddenly found myself having to do all sorts of things that had never occurred to me were part of diplomatic life.

The next morning I was keen to get to grips with things and thought I would get into the office before other people, so that I could sort things out a little bit and understand what was what. That was defeated by a genial sort of semi-merchant, semi-ship agent, I think he was Lebanese, bringing a British sea captain in to see me. Nobody else was in the office at this point, so I had to deal with his request that he should register that his ship had been through 'boisterous weather'. I had no idea what this procedure was and whether I was entitled to do something about it. Any rate, I did in some manner or other register, to the satisfaction of the ship agent and the captain, that his ship had been in boisterous weather. Everything went on in that vein. Everything was a complete surprise.

I might just finish off the slave story by saying that a few days later, my opposite number in the American Embassy, Bill Crawford, who became a very good and close friend, together with his wife, Ginger, asked to call on me. Of course I readily agreed and he came round to the Embassy. After a short introduction, it turned out that the purpose of his coming to see me was not so much to make my acquaintance, although I think perhaps there was some element of that, but to ask whether we could see our way - that was his phrase - to releasing the female slave that I described earlier, because she belonged to the chief translator in the American Embassy, which I hadn't known before, and his work had sadly deteriorated ever since she'd left him. For the sake of the good running of the American Embassy, couldn't we agree to let her return to her master? Well, we couldn't. Finally, I think it took another two weeks or so before we were able to ship her out in a safe manner and return her to Hadramaut which is where she came from.

To come to what I believe is your main interest in this interview, namely the murder of Cyril Ousman, I must preface my story by saying that this is entirely recollection. I have not looked up any papers. I did actually try to, but for various reasons it was not practical in the

immediate days before our interview and I have not been able to talk to anybody else who was involved. And finally, I was not, in a way, personally involved, although I was greatly affected by the fallout. I was not in Jedda when Cyril Ousman was murdered. It was a great tragedy because he was murdered by one of Ibn Saud's many, many sons, Prince Mishari. This boy, who was very junior amongst the family, was probably, only nineteen or perhaps twenty one, but I don't remember the exact age. He had been a friend of Cyril Ousman and his striking wife, Mrs Ousman, whose first name I don't now recall. No doubt this had been brought about by the fact that Cyril Ousman had come originally from Yorkshire to Saudi Arabia at the direct invitation of the King himself, Ibn Saud. He was hired when Ibn Saud bought his first motor car to look after the motor car and I am sure, knowing the ways of the Saudis, it was soon not just one motor car, but several and from that he was turned to whenever there was a mechanical problem. I know that he looked after the clocks in the royal palace, for example. When the war came in 1939 the British Government very sensibly hired him as Vice-Consul, because he was efficient and sympathetic; he knew the royal family very well and his wife was frequently with the queens, so he had an access which was remarkable; his Arabic was also remarkable; he knew the customs; he was an invaluable person; it was a most sensible decision. He joined the Service as Vice-Consul in Jedda and he remained in that position until he was murdered in late November 1951.

What exactly happened? I can only depend on what I was told at the time. There were no guards on the building and people came and went and indeed even if there had been guards I don't think they would have done anything about the Prince coming to see Cyril Ousman, which he did frequently and so was well-known. There was a big disparity in their ages and I should think Cyril regarded him as an honorary younger brother or son or something of that sort. One evening, shortly after six in the evening ... six in Jedda in those days, 6pm, was whatever moment it was when the sun went down. People watched the sun go down beyond the horizon with their clocks in hand and adjusted them to six o'clock as the sun disappeared. That of course was the end of the day and the beginning of the evening and there was a lot of entertaining in Jedda, not with great variety, because there were fewer than a hundred Christians in the whole place and there was really no cross-entertaining between Muslims and Christians, that I know of, except perhaps in the case of the Pakistan Embassy.

The Prince knew from experience what the Ousmans' movements would be and knew that Cyril would be changing into Red Sea Rig, the standard wear for gentlemen in the evening at

that time, and probably having a shower too. Somewhere shortly after six, he came into the courtyard of this building where the Ousmans had a superior flat on the ground floor with a big terrace out at the back, ideal for entertaining in Jedda. Nobody really wanted to entertain in the middle of the day, so it was all at night. He went up to the window of the dressing room which Cyril Ousman was in, and shot him several times through the open window.

And that set off a remarkable series of events. I don't know what happened in the minutes after that. The Prince left and fled. I don't know what he did for the first twenty-four hours or so, but then he took refuge with one of his senior brothers, a very senior person, who looked after him, but delayed telling the King. Nobody wanted to tell the King, because, when he eventually learned it, he was absolutely furious. He knew Cyril well and liked him and the idea that a son of his would kill Cyril was just totally unacceptable. Eventually the young man was seized; there was a little bit of mediation between the Prince who was looking after him and the entourage of the King, so that the young man was not going to be shot on the spot. He was given up to the royal establishment and the King sent a message to the Embassy, to the Ambassador, saying, that if the Ambassador agreed, he would have the Prince's head struck off on the steps of the British Embassy on the following Friday, that being the traditional day for executions as well as being the great day for prayer. The Ambassador, very properly, declined to make the steps available for that purpose and the young man was then imprisoned in the famous castle in the middle of Riyadh, which is still there. Many people said he would never emerge.

I had to be rather careful. When I was in Riyadh negotiating in support of my Ambassador or Chargé d'Affaires, negotiating with the Saudis, I had some time off. I'd heard the King talking, not about the Prince who committed the murder, but about his youth and his recapturing of his ancestral capital with just fifteen men. It was a most dramatic story, including a great fight on the drawbridge, when the Governor of the Rasheedis, who'd seized the kingdom, came out in the morning. Once he was about half way across the drawbridge and couldn't quickly get back and shut the door, the fifteen rushed them. The fight took place on the drawbridge and, the King told me, a spear had been thrown at him and it had missed him, but it had lodged in the gate, the wooden gate of the castle. I went and looked at that, but they wanted to take me inside too. However, I felt I shouldn't do that in case it was thought I was checking up on whether they had done what they said. The Prince was released in accordance with custom when Ibn Saud died. The prison doors were all opened and I think

all prisoners, though I may be wrong about that, at any rate the generality of prisoners, were released and I've never heard of the young man again.

It led to a number of oddities, some with a slight edge of danger. Because after this event the Saudis posted every evening, not during the day, but every evening, two soldiers to guard the entrance to the block in which the British Embassy occupied all the flats. One had to be a bit careful because they weren't there when you left for a party in the evening, but they were present when you got back and they were nearly always both asleep, but holding rifles with fixed bayonets, and I didn't fancy being half way in between them when they suddenly woke up. You had to clap your hands and cough and so on until you got them thoroughly awake. Then it was all right to go in. That was one oddity.

Another oddity, and this may have had a bearing on what happened and why, is that I was told that I would find in the safe of the Vice-Consul - a capacious safe, which had some interesting things in it - several tins used for the collection of money from the general public on Poppy Day, November 11th. I suppose there were maybe seven or eight of these tins. I was told by one of my colleagues that in one of them I would find quite a lot of gold and it was my responsibility now to deal with these tins. So I opened them and indeed found that in one tin there were fifteen gold pieces. I can't remember now whether they were gold sovereigns, which might have been the case, because sovereigns were readily available in Saudi Arabia, or whether it was gold riyals, the currency, but sovereigns were very much accepted as currency. This money had all come, so I was told, from Prince Mishari. Well, I was given to believe that the reason for the murder was that the Prince had seen a very good-looking young wife of a junior officer in the Embassy and wanted to have her. He expected Cyril Ousman to arrange it, which Cyril declined to do. I think it was reaction to that which caused the murder.

CM: And where did the gold coins come into this?

JT: Well, this is just speculation on my part, but I think that the Prince may have thought that the gold coins were appropriate satisfaction for his desires being met. That is, of course, entirely speculation on my part, but I was told quite clearly by one of my colleagues that it was the Prince who had put the gold coins in and I was told that I would find them there before I counted them and, before I knew anything about it, I was told that I would find in

one tin a lot of gold. And that was true. I don't think that there was a gold coin in any of the other tins.

CM: Clearly, a terrible event like this must have led to a great deal of speculation among the British community about why it had happened. Was there any sort of official enquiry and was the account that you've given the one that was generally known and generally accepted?

JT: No, I was rather struck by the fact that there was never in my experience - but I didn't get to Jedda until, I don't know what, two weeks, maybe even three, after the murder - there was no discussion of it. The British community was very small. Apart from the Embassy there was an eye doctor, a very attractive man called Dr Longinotto, who did a lot of eye surgery, and there was a British banker and I think he had another one or maybe two other Brits on his staff. And I think there were one or two who were rather dubiously British citizens, ship agents and that sort of thing, and that was the whole British community in the town. There was an American community, which was basically the American Embassy and Aramco, which in those days was entirely an American company. Then there was the French Embassy and the Banque de l'Indochine. There was a very important Dutch bank, so there were some Dutch. The Spanish Ambassador had just committed suicide, and I don't think there were any Spaniards. I don't remember about Italians, apart from our garage mechanic. It was a very small community, as I say, under a hundred westerners and I would think that the British and Americans between them must have accounted for half of it. Yes, you would think that gossip would go round. Perhaps people didn't talk to me because of my position, but I don't think it was that. I think it was just not discussed. Although of course Cyril's widow was still there, living in the same flat. Everybody knew her; she was really in a way the queen of western society. She had been there so long; she was very good looking; she entertained very well; everybody knew her. It must have been a terrible shock for her. I don't think she could have known what to do, what her life would be after that. She wanted to sell me Cyril's tropical uniform; I was very poor and I am afraid I declined to buy it. It turned out I would never have worn it. I did see her a little bit, but I didn't know her at all well, and then she just disappeared, to me rather mysteriously. There was no big party, not that I was aware of at any rate, and I was on the floor above her so I could hardly have avoided knowing it. I don't believe that there was an official enquiry. Maybe there was, that I was unaware of.

CM: I suppose there was no mystery about who was the perpetrator. It wasn't as though one had to find that out.

JT: No, and it wasn't such a very strange thing, in a way. My beginning in Jedda was anyway strange because I buried something like ten per cent of the British community in the first few weeks I was there. When I say I buried them I didn't actually physically do so, but as Vice-Consul I had something to do with it. There was a British doctor, as well as Dr Longinotto, and the British doctor was shot through the head one night with a rifle that was said to have gone off spontaneously when laid on the top of a Jeep. It shot him through the head at a range of about thirty yards when he was at a campfire. Well, it's rather hard to believe that story. Then there were two British Locust Officers who were found dead in the desert. I think that was fairly clear: they'd lost their way and they hadn't taken enough water with them. I think, but nobody knows. And then there was the British bank clerk. I said there was a British bank there, the British Bank of the Middle East, BBME I think it was, who went swimming in the place we all went to, called the Creek, which was a bit north of Jedda, and he hit his head on a lump of coral when he dove into the water. And then there were the British contractors; yes, I forgot about them, who were building a road. The local head of the British contractors - because of course most of the labour was not British, I don't know how many Brits there were, very few - the head of it was a highly experienced man who was there with his wife. One Sunday after I had been there three weeks or so, they offered to drive me, because I didn't have a car at that point, to what was a big Sunday lunch thing out in the desert for the community. And I was rather scared. He drove along his new road - it wasn't surfaced at that time - at great speed and the following Sunday he did the same and turned over and he and his wife were dead. Who else? There was at least one more; I'm missing somebody. So death in the British community was not a terribly unusual thing. Nevertheless, there were no more deaths while I was there. That was my beginning at my first diplomatic post.

CM: A very, very dramatic one.

We are now resuming after a short break and we are talking more generally about your time in Saudi Arabia. You were there for two years after your dramatic initiation to the country and to diplomatic life. Is there anything else you'd like to say about the rest of your posting in Saudi Arabia?

JT: I found Saudi Arabia extremely interesting, in part because I'd been reading History at Cambridge, including a good deal of medieval history, and suddenly here was a medieval court. I would've put it, in terms of English history, at about 1100, Henry I perhaps. And I did see a certain amount of the court, because we had a strange episode about which a book has been written - I have the book somewhere, but I haven't actually read it yet - on the Buraimi Incident. Now that means scarcely anything to anybody, except to those people who are roughly my age and were in the Middle East at the time. This incident began - I would think it must have been in or towards the summer of 1952. Buraimi is a collection of seven villages, of which five belong, I think, to Abu Dhabi and two to the Sultan of Oman and Muscat. I may have it the wrong way round, but they were treated as a unit and they were definitely known in the atlases as the Buraimi Oasis. It's a place a little bit beyond the Ru'b al-Khali, the great desert, in the bit of the Arabian Peninsula which sticks up, with the state of Ras al-Khaima at the top of it, into the Straits of Hormuz. What happened was quite dramatic and doesn't reflect too well on a number of people.

First of all, we learned and did nothing about it, that the Saudis were thinking of sending an expedition to Buraimi, which we said belonged to Abu Dhabi and Muscat, and they said really belong to them. Aramco encouraged them to make this claim. The basis for the claim was that at some point, so they said, the tribes that occupied the oasis had accepted their money. In Arabia, it was sort of the reverse custom from western feudalism. In other words, the mark of feudal superiority was not putting your hands between the feudal lord's and swearing allegiance and then the lord could extract a good deal from the tenant and the tenant would hope to be protected by the lord. In Saudi Arabia it was felt that acceptance of money showed acceptance of lordship and it was partly for that reason that when the King or the Crown Prince came to town in Jeddah and drove in these huge black Cadillacs, to which special running boards had been added, that they had guards standing on the running boards with bags of gold, who scattered the gold to the crowd. That was the same idea, and the Saudis believed that the tribes occupying the Buraimi Oasis had accepted money at some point. We heard, I don't remember now how we heard, but it was in official documents, that the Saudis were planning to do this and I don't think that the British authorities in the Gulf did anything about it. But still, I may be wrong about that. And sure enough they did. A gentleman called Turki bin Abdullah al-Utaishan led a small group, perhaps twenty men or something of that sort, but all armed, across the desert and before we knew what had

happened they had seized all seven villages. I've never been there so I don't quite know how the villages are disposed.

This of course caused, very properly, the Sultan of Oman and the Sheikh of Abu Dhabi to say to the British, 'Hey! You said you were going to protect us and now look what's happened. You haven't done your part of the contract.' A perfectly fair point, I think. So the British did feel that something had to be done and the first attempt was to discuss with the Saudis: couldn't we get the Saudis to leave without force. I accompanied my Ambassador, Pelham, and when he was on leave, Derek Riches, the Chargé d'Affaires, on various occasions, several times, to talk to King Ibn Saud, a very great man.

He was a truly great man, but a medieval one, and as a result of that I came in a way to know him. He tended to tell the same stories, and I became familiar with those. What he liked talking about was war and Mr Churchill and, to some extent, his wives. He was looking back on life. I left Saudi Arabia soon after he died and I am very glad to have seen a great monarch in operation. His court, though, really consisted of non-Saudi Arabs who were thrown out of other places. This was quite sensible because it meant that none of them had any constituency in the country. Some of them had been thrown out of Syria by the French, others out of Libya by the Italians; and no doubt some Palestinians thrown out by the British. I am struggling to get the names beyond that of Yusuf Yassin, a Syrian, who was Deputy Foreign Minister, in effect if not in title. They were a very clever, highly competitive group of people, and not altogether co-operative with each other. The important thing, the crucial thing, was to have the King's ear, to be able to go in and see the King at more or less any time and for it to be seen by everybody that the King trusted you. You had power if you had that. They were a wily lot and good at negotiating. Then of course there were the people that the King knew better than anybody else, the tribal sheikhs. A good many of his marriages were dynastic marriages in that sense, and could be very short marriages, but it was to the honour of the tribe that a sheikh's daughter had been married to the King.

Going to see the King was quite a business. First of all, you couldn't go to Riyadh, which was where he spent nearly all his time, unless the King sent an airplane for you. There were no public flights to Riyadh. Of course, Aramco had its own airplanes and I am sure that Americans didn't have any problems about getting there, but other people did. In fact, it was a very restricted place, you couldn't go to Mecca, you couldn't go to Medina, and so you

were really hemmed in on the humid plain of Jeddah. But the King would send aircraft for us and in fact wanted to. This business of Buraimi was a big, big thing at the time.

There was a terrible moment on one of these trips when Derek Riches was Chargé d'Affaires and I was accompanying him, carrying the ciphers. Everywhere I went I had to carry two black bags. In one bag were the papers that were relevant to the problem and in the other bag were the one time cipher pads. And so I had to be trained a little bit in that. It was sort of ridiculous walking round everywhere with a black bag in either hand. There was one terrible time, at least I feared it was going to be terrible, when I felt extremely unwell because of the bumpiness of the plane. We were met by the Royal Chamberlain at the airport and put into royal cars and driven straight to the Palace and taken straight to see the King. The set up was that the King had a throne, not a very dramatic one, at one end of the room. Behind him, incidentally, was the upright clock, I'm not sure whether it was technically a long-case clock or not, because it was a grandmother, not a grandfather, clock that the British had given him, or Mr Churchill had given him. That was always just behind his throne. Then he would have an interpreter squatting on the carpet in front of him. There might be, when you arrived, two or three royal advisers round him. At the other end of the room were heavily armed guards, maybe a dozen, all squatting, all in proper dress with a considerable array of weapons. On this occasion I suddenly realised as I was about to shake hands with the King that I had the keys for the bags in my hand and I thought, good heavens, is he going to cry out, Treason! However, he didn't and that passed off all right.

Although it would have been serious for me if the King had cried out, more serious for the country was the crisis which caused us to be summoned – an occasion on which everything happened as quickly as it possibly could - normally we would never fly during the middle of the day because of the bumps. The King had been informed that a British soldier somewhere, it was never very clear where, on the edge of the Saudi territories, had got on the wall of an outdoor mosque and had shot the imam through the back while he was conducting Friday prayers. You can't get a more heinous event than that, and that was why we were summoned. Well, of course, it was all untrue and I think eventually we convinced the King that it was untrue. But the negotiation about this Buraimi thing was not at all easy and we had hours and hours of discussion on it, mainly with his advisers of whom the most wily and the cleverest was Yusuf Yassin, a very able man. He spoke English and he did most of the negotiation. He was not the only counsellor who was involved, but he was the lead man. I think he had

the title of Deputy Foreign Minister, but that was not the point. The point was that he was acceptable in the King's circle. I won't go on through all the twists and turns of the Buraimi episode, but at one point, I recall, that Mr Churchill, who at that time was in charge of the Foreign Office as well as being Prime Minister - this was because Mr Eden was on some long journey - Mr Churchill, as I understood it, ordered that landing craft were to be assembled for an attack. At any rate, it didn't happen, why I never understood. Buraimi was far from the sea; perhaps that had something to do with it. Eventually, quite a long time after I'd left, Buraimi was seized suddenly by the Trucial Oman Scouts, under British direction. Turki bin Utaishan was still in control there. The surprise attack was totally successful; no shot was fired. Turki said he couldn't go back to Saudi Arabia like this and would we please wound him. So an arrangement was made that he should be shot in a fleshy part of his leg. He rapidly recovered from the wound, but he had defended and been wounded in the process.

Also it was an important event for Oman because it bulked so large in the view of the ruler about his honour and authority with his tribes that finally the Sultan of Oman summoned his tribal army which hadn't been done for - I've forgotten now - forty years or something like that and they came. We stopped him. We told him he couldn't do this. He was very unhappy about this. From our point of view, it might have meant war with Saudi Arabia, but from his point of view it was a huge loss of face. He had assembled his army and then, in a Duke of York manner, dis-assembled it because the British told him to do so. He said, 'I'll never be able to do this again. People will not believe me.' He was probably right. The Buraimi incident was quite absorbing; I learned a lot from it.

I've already said the old King told the same stories. He looked on me with some approval because, having heard the stories before, I was able to fill in for him because I learned the names of the British officers who were fighting on his side. One of them was extremely easy to remember because it was Captain Shakespeare. I've now forgotten the others. British officers fought on both sides, both on the Saudi side and the Hashemite side, and of course T.E Lawrence was a tremendous supporter of the Hashemites. It was his standing that mattered to Ibn Saud above all. The most important thing was to win battles, but you must behave honourably. Now, that didn't prevent you from going to war with people. War was a proper occupation for a gentleman; war and love were the essence of life. It reminded me of the Border ballads.

CM: John, we're taking up the story again after a short break. You mentioned to me that you knew the elder Philby, St John Philby, was that his name?

JT: Yes, I suppose he's, rather sadly, known principally as the father of the spy. I think his full name was Henry St John Philby. He was a rather remarkable man whom I came to know quite well. Of course there was a huge disparity in our ages. I knew him in Saudi Arabia; I never met him in this country, still less in Belgium where he used to take his family on holidays on the Belgian beaches. He was a British civil servant. I suppose he was really an Indian civil servant, because in these days that I am now talking about before World War One, when his career must have started, the Gulf area, what we then called the Persian Gulf, was the responsibility of the Government of India, rather than of the government in London. Even when I was there, in Saudi Arabia, in the 1950s, Indian rupees were still acceptable in the Gulf and they had been the major currency, I suppose, for a couple of hundred years. Philby somehow or other was especially connected with the Gulf and Iraq in particular. I don't know in detail what the events of his earlier life were, but he was obviously a very clever man, and a very brave and determined man. He crossed the Ru'b al-Khali. He was the first known crosser and there must have been others before him, but no one knew who they were. Except the year before he crossed the Ru'b al-Khali – I get this confused - Bertram Thomas crossed the year before Philby. I think Philby was 1932, approximately, but they did it in different ways. One of them went roughly north-south and the other went east-west. So it was a first. He had two companions, I think, young Arabs. It was a very brave thing to do. Most Arabs wouldn't undertake to do it: it was too dangerous. It was a long way; you travelled by camel; you were very dependent on the camels; if anything went wrong with the camels, there would be nothing to do but walk, and you probably couldn't do that. I think, like several other deserts, it is not the case that there is no water at all, but you do have to understand where you might find water, if you dug. He was a major explorer as well as a civil servant. As a civil servant, I think he fell out with that remarkable lady, Gertrude Bell. They were both civil servants at the same place at the same time and Philby left and I rather suspect that it was because the authorities preferred Gertrude to Philby.

I had never met him until I went to Jedda. Then I did meet him quite a number of times. He had been, like various other Englishmen I've just been mentioning, Captain Shakespeare for

example, close to Ibn Saud. He had been very close, and in fact had been one of those who was on the inside and could always see the King. But he got involved quite early on in the 1930s in a plot which was not to overthrow the King, but to overthrow the Minister of Finance, I think it was. I don't remember any of the details now. As a result of that – it failed, and as a result of it, Philby lost political standing, but he never lost the King's friendship. So he was still able to see the King, but was not any longer a political force. Thank goodness, in a way, because as far as I understand he advised the King that the Germans were going to win the war which didn't make him at all popular with the British. Quite rightly. I think one of the many interesting things in that vice-consular safe I was mentioning earlier, was a direction to watch out for Philby and not facilitate his movements or activities in any way. So it was perhaps for that reason that when Philby offered to take me on what turned out to be his last major expedition – he was to explore the Tihamah which is the bit of Saudi Arabia that runs parallel to the Red Sea, very dramatic seen from the air with wonderfully different, deep colours - I was not permitted to go. I don't now remember what it was exactly that Philby was hoping to find in the Tihamah. I suspect that it wasn't all archaeological; I suspect that he hoped to find minerals or conceivably even oil. Any rate, I had to discuss with my Ambassador whether I could accept this invitation, and he said, 'How long is this for?' and I said, 'I think it might be about eight weeks.' And he said, 'No, you can't go.' I think he may have had in his mind this deep distrust by the British of Philby. Actually, Philby was away for three months.

Philby was in a way an unreliable person, but on the other hand he had strong loyalties, and one of his loyalties was to Trinity College Cambridge and so we had a considerable overlap of interests there. I knew, because of my upbringing partly in the College, before I was an undergraduate - my grandfather was Master – I knew some of the elderly dons whom Philby knew and so there was the basis for a conversation that had nothing to do with modern politics.

Philby took it upon himself to call upon me whenever he was in Jeddah, and I rather enjoyed it. First of all, he was the only person who ever accepted the cigars that I had mistakenly thought were a necessary part of a young diplomat's kit. He not only accepted the cigars, but asked for brandy which I had. In those days liqueurs were de rigueur. And he continued to be interested in county cricket. So we had quite a number of things to talk about. He had somehow attached himself to the Crown Prince as well as the King, the Crown Prince being

the King's eldest son and looking remarkably like him. He was the only one of the sons that I knew that really did look like Ibn Saud. So when the Crown Prince came to town, came to Jeddah, which he did from time to time, Philby came with him. After the supper that would happen every evening after 6pm in the way I have described, he would pretty quickly be round at my flat. My flat! That is perhaps a grand way of describing what I had. But I eventually did have a flat, because I inherited Derek Riches' flat on the top floor of this building, which had a nice terrace. I didn't smoke cigars; I did drink some brandy. We had very good chats. It was quite interesting to me because he would often come straight from talking with the Crown Prince. For example, he said, 'Do you know what the Crown Prince said to me this evening?' Of course, one didn't. He said - this was shortly after Nasser had overthrown King Farouk, and he said, 'The Crown Prince told me this evening that we manage things better here. If anybody raises his head, we cut it off.' And I could easily see that.

He was also a strange man in a way, and yet very English. He took an imperial attitude towards the local people. I don't mean towards the King and his senior advisers. For example, he offered, I think rather at my suggestion, to my Ambassador, who would never have asked this on his own, he offered to take Pelham and me on a tour of Diriyya, which is the ancient capital of the Saudis, destroyed by Ibrahim Pasha, in 1819 I think, which was not very far from Riyadh. So we did have a great tour. A huge area of ruin, I don't recall that there was a single building intact, standing. I do recall toiling round it in the heat, carrying these two bags. My Ambassador really wasn't much interested in it. But I was, and Philby responded to that. He had driven us there in official cars, which had at least four men, guards and chauffeurs. When we got back into the car to leave, it turned out the car was stuck in the sand. Of course, it was throwing up sand in piles behind. I suggested at this point that the three of us should get out of the back of the car to lighten it and make it a bit easier to push or to drive out. Philby vetoed this vehemently. No, he was not going to get out of the car, so all these four guards were on their hands and knees, scrabbling away like this, trying to get the sand away from the rear tyres. Anyway, we got out after quite a struggle. But I was impressed by the fact that Philby didn't think there was any point at all in lightening the task of the guards.

Another instance: he had a Saudi wife; but that didn't prevent him from continuing his English marriage. I remember his indignation in telling me that his Saudi wife had moved

into the only room in their house which was properly air conditioned. It was air conditioned because he needed that in order to make maps, so that when he was drawing on the maps, his sweaty hand didn't stick. And the idea that she should move in there struck him as most unprofessional. I don't know why he told me this, but he was indignant about it. So, as I say, he had a sort of imperious attitude towards at least some of the local people.

He was also a wonderful raconteur. He could really be very funny and told interesting stories. It strangely didn't translate into his written work. He gave us, meaning my first wife, Elizabeth, and me, as a wedding present, his thickest book which both of us found almost unreadable, but it was very useful as a door stop. I liked him, but I could understand why one might not trust him. I never talked to him about his son and at that point I didn't have any inkling that his son might be a spy. But he did go, as I think I said earlier, every summer to Europe and took his family to the same Belgian seaside resort. His English wife was based in England, not in Saudi Arabia.

Interesting people washed up in Saudi Arabia, when I say washed up I mean, probably rather few of them started off their careers wanting to be in Saudi Arabia. There were quite a lot of rather interesting people, some of them a bit disreputable, who were in the Desert Locust Survey, which was run by the British, the idea being that locusts bred, not exclusively in Arabia, but in large numbers in Arabia, and they had a gestation from egg to flying locust of nine days. By the time they were in the air they couldn't really be stopped, so the eggs had to be got at in those nine days. If they couldn't be stopped, they had a habit of flying across the Red Sea and eating up the crops of British East African territories and that was why the British were so concerned and why they paid for this team of about twenty men to be based in Saudi Arabia, not far from Jedda.

You had to drive about half an hour to get to their camp, which was permanent. They had an outdoor squash court, home-made. They set out from there and returned there on the many trips that they made. I've not quite fathomed how they ever got the information that eggs were being laid in a particular place, but they did, and they would go and destroy the eggs. One of my great moments in Saudi Arabia was the result of this. The feeling of the Saudi Foreign Ministry towards Britain was rather sharp, owing to the Buraimi crisis that I've mentioned, and they suddenly without warning and without any particular reason, that we knew of, slapped a notice on the Desert Locust people, saying that they were not allowed to

leave their camp more than five kilometres or something like that, without getting permission. So I went to see – I've forgotten his name – who was the head of the Foreign Office in Jedda, Syrian I think he was, or was he Palestinian? who had a limp, and was fairly clever, though not of the quality of Yusuf Yassin, nor Faisal, the Foreign Minister. It was a strange thing that a new Third Secretary could go and see the Head of the Foreign Office. Any rate, I went to see him to say that this was a step that would be dangerous to agriculture and dangerous to the livelihoods of various people whom he didn't know about who were all over the place. I asked him first of all how long he thought it would take to get the permission. 'Oh,' he said, 'About fourteen days.' So I then told him about the nine-day gestation period, which I don't think he knew about. I said, 'Could there not be some exceptions to this, while we tried to work out something for the longer term?' 'No, no, no exceptions. Once the Saudi government's decided something, that's decided and everybody has to comply with it.' I said, 'You mean, even if we learn that locusts are going to come down on the gardens of the Minister of Finance?' They were private gardens, which were not that far from the Red Sea, north of Jedda. He said, 'No, no exceptions.'

This didn't look at all good from the point of view of East Africa, but lo and behold, within a few days of that conversation the locusts came and ate up the whole garden belonging to the Minister of Finance! It was Old Testament stuff. They came to Jedda too. It was impressive. You could genuinely say that the sky darkened. It didn't become dark; it wasn't night, but they were huge things. So if they bumped into you, you felt it. And there were such a lot of them, and as I say, they ate up the whole garden and presumably they went on to East Africa and ate some more. Well, the order was rescinded shortly after that.

The Desert Locust team contained people that you felt might, in other circumstances, have joined the French Foreign Legion or something of that sort. One learned not to enquire too closely into what their previous careers had been. I think there was another set of Desert Locust people on the other side of the Peninsula - I don't know where they were because I never went there, but Michael Weir told me a story. He was appointed to Abu Dhabi when I was sent to Jedda, and Johnny Graham to Bahrain. Michael got married to Alison, I think her name was, and she, according to Michael, (and I heard the same story from her), thought there had been some fiddling of the accounts of the Desert Locust team on the other side, I think probably in Abu Dhabi, but maybe in Dubai or wherever it was, but it was a British protected territory, so no one was going to forbid the Desert Locust people from going out

killing the eggs. But there was a leakage of money in a way which caused the Desert Locust authorities in London to send out an Inspector. The Inspector came to stay there and lo and behold he died. She decided how he had been killed: it was a certain poison which was not detectable to the eye or the taste, mixed in with the Eno's Fruit Salts which they all took quite a lot of, because of the amount of alcohol that they also consumed. That was the end of that story. I don't think that was ever investigated.

CM: John, can I just ask something? You've mentioned the amount of alcohol that was consumed; you mentioned the brandy that you and Philby used to drink together. What was the status of the religious police and the ban on alcohol which we hear about nowadays? Was alcohol very closely supervised?

JT: Alcohol was totally forbidden in Saudi Arabia, as in some other parts of the Islamic world, totally forbidden, except to diplomats. You couldn't buy it in Saudi Arabia, it could only be imported. But diplomats did import it and legally, and of course, people in power were also able to import it, not least some of the royal princes. I think it was a drunken event at which people in the royal circle got killed that prompted the Saudi government to say that they would totally forbid it to diplomats, and they were not to be allowed to import alcohol. Wow! That had an effect on the diplomatic community in Jedda.

I became rather popular, because for a reason I can't put my finger on, I don't know why, I'd had a yearly consignment of alcohol sitting in the Customs for a month or two, because it was the middle of the summer and everything was so lethargic. It was easy to kill flies, because they could barely lift themselves off the ground. I told the head kavas to go and clear this consignment through the Customs. Why I did it, why I didn't leave it there, I don't know. But he did clear it through the Customs and about a week later came this edict, so few people had as good a cellar as I did after that. Everybody accepted invitations and it lasted until I left Saudi Arabia. But the ban was the cause of quite a lot of trouble and the French Embassy was particularly indignant, or so it seemed to me, and I think I was not alone in this. They protested and everybody protested, and said this was contrary to diplomatic custom, that you were allowed to import things, of course, only for the exclusive use of diplomats and certainly you didn't give it or sell it or dispose of it to anybody who was not a diplomat etc. and anyway drinking alcohol was our custom, though not of course yours. Goodness me, my Ambassador waxed enthusiastic on the subject.

There was a principled discussion at a very interesting dinner that I was at. Yusuf Yassin, whom I've already described, actually lived in a trailer in the Aramco compound and of course it was a very luxurious trailer. This was what was imported for the top people in Aramco. This meant that everything was looked after for him, and everything was paid for, and of course he could get the food the Americans had. Not alcohol. He did not drink, as far as I know. But it led to a dinner in his trailer in the Aramco compound that consisted of Yusuf Yassin and another senior royal counsellor, my Ambassador, Mr Pelham, and me. What was on the top of Mr Pelham's mind was not Buraimi, but the alcohol point. It was on the top of his mind, not just because he enjoyed pink gin, but because I think he was pressed by his diplomatic colleagues, the other ambassadors, to take the opportunity of having a meeting with Yusuf Yassin, who was not an easy person to see, to speak on behalf of the whole diplomatic community. And he did that. He spoke at some length; I've indicated the sort of line that he took.

Yusuf Yassin was not going to have any of it. But he told a little story. He said, 'What you tell me is quite understandable, but you know alcohol has an effect on people. Let me tell you we have a story in Syria about a holy hermit who was put inescapably in front of a moral dilemma. He was told that there was no escape from choosing between raping a virgin, murdering her father or drinking a glass of wine. He thought about it and chose the glass of wine. Whereupon,' said Yusuf, 'he committed the other two crimes.' That rather put an end to the discussion.

Sir John Thomson II

CM: This is 26 September 2016. I'm Catherine Manning and this is the second interview with Sir John Thomson for the British Diplomatic Oral History Programme. John, in our first session you told us about how you came to join the Foreign Office and your first posting in Saudi Arabia in 1951. Is there anything else you'd like to say about Saudi Arabia?

JT: Yes, I have read through what you produced as the result of our first interview. I have to admit I found it rather interesting. I felt, however, at the end of reading it through, that what I had done was to touch on the more dramatic points of my two years or so in Saudi Arabia and I felt that was not an entirely accurate description of what had happened during those two

years. Besides, things have changed so much that I feel I should say something about how it used to be. I have been in Saudi Arabia once since I left it. That was two years ago, and so I have seen how enormously the country has changed. When I went back two years ago for only a brief period and only to Riyadh, I was struck by the fact that I was briefed very efficiently by leading people in different departments and was told that there were now 1800 employees of the Saudi government who had American PhDs and that certainly came through in the briefings. I also found the briefings more realistic than I had expected given the general tendency of governments and I would add, Arabs in particular, to exaggerate. I easily came to the conclusion that many things in Saudi Arabia had changed.

And of course the built structure amongst them. I was in Riyadh back in 1951 or 2 when the very first concrete building was being put up. Before that it was all mud brick and not very well built. I recall being in the royal guest house which was sort of like a minor castle, and they had kindly provided air conditioning, which was more than you found in the British Embassy. But the air conditioning machine in my bedroom, blasting out cold air, was regarded as sufficient; no attention had been paid to the fact that there was a gap of about 8, 9, 10 inches between the floor and the bottom of the door.

After reading what you produced as a result of our last session, I did feel that perhaps what I had seen and heard was worth saying something about, because it describes a world which has so totally disappeared, or perhaps not totally, because people don't change very rapidly, but it is on the way to total disappearance. Certainly a non-Saudi would find it very difficult to understand, I think, what it was like in the early 50s. So I would like to say a little bit about people who were there. Inevitably, I am going to talk about non-Saudis, inevitably because it was very difficult to meet any Saudis who were not in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, or who were not important merchants in the town. Of course, I never met a single Saudi woman, at least not while I was in Jedda. You did sometimes see, if you flew in, you saw some very beautifully manicured ladies sitting in the airplane, but ten minutes before arriving they all disappeared under their black burkas and then you never saw or heard of them again.

I think I mentioned in my last session that, as Vice Consul, I had a big safe and in that safe I found the cans of coins collected on Poppy Day. I found a good many other things in that safe. It had surprising contents, some of which could have been seriously compromising to

some fairly notable people. I'm thinking of one big family in Jeddah, big in every way. They had a great deal of money; they were well known publicly; they clearly stood well with the Royal Family, but it turned out that they had taken the precaution of providing themselves with British passports. They were able to do this because of the British nationality law of 1948 which made it possible for people to opt for British citizenship if they had been citizens of a Commonwealth country that had become independent, and of course, that applied to India and Pakistan amongst others. I was fascinated to see all these British passports which were not to be disclosed, but were there in case the family ran into an emergency situation and had to leave rapidly. I think there were a number of people in Saudi Arabia who felt a little uncertain about their future: perhaps all foreigners did.

It was not a violent place in the sense that you might get mugged, not at all. But as I said in our previous session, people did get killed, and things could change in a twinkling, for reasons that might be obscure to you but that were probably clear to the senior princes who took the decision. I said you were not likely to get mugged. It was striking that, if you walked down into the souk, it would not be at all odd to meet a man with a baker's tray on his head. The baker's tray, I literally mean what you used to see in old-fashioned bakeries, made of wood and with sides three or four inches high, these baker's trays being carried from one place to another, I know not where, but I imagine starting or ending in a bank, were full of coins, often gold coins. It was perfectly reasonable and safe to put them on a man's head and send him off and nothing would happen. As I say, it was rather secure in that way, but you never knew what would happen next. Surprising things happened.

For example, I suddenly felt unwell had a pain in my tummy. I went to see the French Hospital. Now, this was not an official institution. It was a private clinic run by Lebanese. I don't think it had anything to do with France, but they spoke French, and that's why it was called the French Hospital. I was, surprisingly, examined by a lady doctor. It only took five or ten minutes or something like that, and at the end of this, a male doctor who was obviously her superior, came in and said, 'What's the matter with him?' But in French. They assumed that I wouldn't understand. And she said, 'I don't know, but he has a tummy pain.' And he said, 'Let's call it an appendicitis. It is, after all, the bread and butter of surgeons.' Well, I went back to the Embassy and told them what had happened and I was pretty relieved to be told, a day or two later, that I would be sent to the American University Hospital in Beirut.

That was a surprise that happened to me in a very small way. Yet it all connected up with the uncertainty that I spoke of.

I was friends with a much older man and much more experienced than I: de Précourt who was the manager of the Banque de l'Indochine in Jedda. I was puzzled as to why a man of such experience and such seniority was suddenly sent to Jedda to manage a bank that wasn't particularly notable. I learned, presumably from de Précourt himself, that people - he didn't say he did it - would load up an airplane with gold and fly it to India and that there was a significant profit to be made between the price you paid for the gold in Saudi Arabia and the price you got for the gold in India. I suspect the plane's cargo did not get inspected by Indian Customs. As we both know, gold is de rigueur more or less at Indian weddings and on other occasions too. De Précourt, as I say, was a friend, and I saw quite a lot of him, I being a bachelor at the time and he having an English wife who stayed in England. He didn't see her all that much because he paid a lot of attention to tax situations and so couldn't be in England more than so many days per year. He was a wonderful source of stories. I will mention one of them, a tiny bit cruelly perhaps. Among his many posts, de Précourt had been in Abyssinia, I presume Addis Ababa, back in the 1930s and he had known Evelyn Waugh, then a reporter. I mentioned the use Evelyn Waugh had made of his Ethiopian experiences in his novels, and he said, 'Ah, yes, ah, yes, poor Evelyn, he missed all the best stories.'

Having had my appendix out in Beirut, by which another tale hangs, but I won't go into that, I returned to Jedda some two weeks later. It was nearly the height of the pilgrimage, so there were huge numbers of people all over the place and little camps and camp fires, all very close to the town. (You still felt that the town was the area inside the old walls which had been torn down only in the late 40s. But of course people had been building houses here and there outside the walls.) There were no roads outside the walls, that is to say, there were no official roads, but there were tracks where cars went hither and thither. You had to be very careful if you were driving there, because between the present and the day before, somebody might have dug a ditch to put in a new drainage pipe for their new home and if you drove into the ditch, you might break your axle.

The day after I got back to Jedda, I did what I had done many times before, I went to visit de Précourt. Visiting de Précourt meant driving out of town to a rather nice villa, not entirely isolated, but still very separate, and not far the Crown Prince's huge compound. It was close

to the beach, so de Précourt and I sometimes had a walk along the beach; sometimes we just met on the extensive terrace on the top of the house. I drove there. I got out of my little Morris Minor and I thought, de Précourt's having a hard time, because the whole area was occupied by pilgrims. As usual, you could scent the presence of a lot of pilgrims, and somewhat to my surprise, the door to De Précourt's house was open. I was not totally surprised: that sort of thing could happen in Saudi Arabia. I walked in and, knowing my way around the house, I walked upstairs to the terrace on the top where I assumed he would be because it was around six o'clock. There were a number of people on the terrace, but no sign of de Précourt. All the people on the terrace were women. I was appalled. They looked at me. They saw me. I saw them. I turned round without saying a word and walked downstairs as fast as I could. And, amazingly, I met nobody on the stairs and I got out - I thought it would be imprudent to run - so I walked to my Morris Minor and drove away.

Well, it turned out that these ladies were part of the Crown Prince's harem. I found that out the following day. When I saw this rather grand house, I knew that this was not a minor family that I had intruded upon and I also knew that it was not advisable for a man to go and do what I had just inadvertently done, still less, for a foreigner. I said to de Précourt the next day, 'Why weren't you there? What had happened?' 'Oh,' he said, 'About a week ago an emissary came from the Crown Prince to say that he wanted my house and wanted it at once. He didn't tell me what it was for, but he wanted the house.' I said, 'What did you do?' De Précourt, whom I thought was a remarkably shrewd man, said that he would be delighted to meet the Crown Prince's request, but he would be even more delighted if the Crown Prince would meet his request to pay the Banque de l'Indochine what the Crown Prince owed it, a very considerable sum of money. It included - it wasn't just this - but it included well over a hundred new Cadillacs which had been imported for the Crown Prince and which were simply standing waiting to be taken over by his staff. Would they please take them over and please pay the bill. And indeed the other bills, too. And the emissary went away and came back and said that the money is being moved to your bank. De Précourt left the same day. That's the sort of thing I mean by life in Saudi Arabia could be full of surprises.

There was another surprise to me, well many others I have to add. I had a visit, when I say I had a visitor billeted on me, and I had to look after him. We provided a place for him to sleep. He was a senior lawyer, as I understood, in the British Treasury. Again, I wondered why on earth he'd come. Was he going to have official talks? However, I got to know him

and so he eased up a bit after a week of meeting frequently and having meals together and I learned that the problem he was dealing with was counterfeiting of British gold sovereigns. This was not a very surprising thing to happen. This was not the first time that people had tried to counterfeit gold sovereigns. This time the people who had been doing the counterfeiting who came from northern Italy, so he said, had actually got it very slightly wrong: they had put more gold into the coin than the real sovereign had. There was the famous case of 'Cicero', valet to the British Ambassador to Ankara during the War, Sir Hughe Knatchbull-Hugessen, who spied for the Germans, but was paid for his information with counterfeit coins. So I could see why there would be some anxiety about it. The Saudis loved gold and gold sovereigns were still being used. That was another surprise.

Yet another small surprise connected with gold sovereigns: I thought I might acquire a few simply for historic reasons. I went down to the British bank and said I wanted some gold sovereigns, if possible, George III sovereigns. Oh, yes, they said, they'd hunt for them, because the George III and George IV and even George II were all mixed up with current sovereigns. So a teller had to go through a lot of sovereigns to find the George III sovereigns and then they charged me an appropriate sum. It turned out to my surprise that the appropriate sum was less than if I had asked for George VI sovereigns, because the assumption was that over all these years the amount of gold in the coin would have declined by being battered here and there and hit against other coins. I was delighted to acquire some early coins, the most beautiful of which, in my view, is undoubtedly the young Victoria. I can see why it took so long for them to issue another Victoria coin, another sovereign which shows Victoria in her old age.

As you may gather, there were a certain number of interesting people in Jeddah. It has just crossed my mind that de Précourt said to me one day, 'You know who I saw today?' Of course, I didn't. He said, 'I was walking down the street' – I suppose close to his bank – 'and suddenly somebody rushed up and embraced me and when I stepped back and could see him, I recognised that he had been my cook in Asmara. The man said how pleased he was to see me, wonderful, and I said to him, "What are you doing here?" He said, "I'm cooking for the Crown Prince. If you want to know anything, come and ask me."'

Some of the people were really interesting in themselves, as de Précourt was, and some of the people were interesting because of what was happening to them. Amongst others, there was

Bin Laden, who was a big merchant in the souk, and who spoke English, and I suppose he spoke English because he originally came from the British protected area in what is now the Yemen. He was the father of Osama, whom we all know about. He had a concession from the Carrier Air Conditioning Company. This was not his whole business, like all the merchants, they would deal in anything that they thought they could sell. He also had good connections with Royal Family and perhaps for that reason he had the contract to supply air conditioning to this compound that belonged to the Crown Prince that I was mentioning. He said that (he didn't tell me this, he told my colleague who dealt with him frequently as a commercial matter) he had had a rather rough night, because he had been woken up by a call from the Crown Prince's compound, asking him to come at once and bring his largest air conditioning machine. Well, when you get that sort of a call, you respond to it. So he rooted out his chief mechanic and they put a large air conditioning machine on a truck and drove to the Crown Prince's palace. It then transpired that the Crown Prince had, unusually, given his favours to a young lady who had not been well accommodated by the people who organised his harem. She had been assigned a room in the attic and the Crown Prince got rather hot and said something had to be done about this, and hence the summons to Bin Laden in the middle of the night.

It was a strange place especially if you were a Vice Consul because hardly a single problem accorded with the Regulations. The Regulations assumed literacy, but few indeed of my clients could read or write let alone in English. Nevertheless, I studied them. I had had no instruction whatsoever. Nothing that I had experienced hitherto was of any relevance. Amongst other things, I paid attention to a book, a sort of a loose-leaf book as I recall, which was wider than it was high, which listed the places all round the world where British protection was extended to local people. It was primarily for people who issued visas. One day when two young men arrived at the Consulate asking for British passports, I was amazed to discover that they not only spoke English reasonably well, but that they had the forms required for new passports and they had filled them all out correctly. That was the first time I think that anybody had come in with correctly filled-in forms. These two came from the Island of Kamaran, as it is now called, in the atlases, but I think it really should have been called Kamarain. It's an island in the Red Sea, fairly close to the shores of the Yemen, and its name, as it was explained to me, means Two Moons, and that's why I say it should really be called Kamarain, which means two moons. I'm told that if you stand, at the right time of

the moon, on a peninsula on the northern end of the island, you see a moon reflected on either side of you, hence the name. I was pleased to meet these two young men and I had a good deal of confidence in them, because, as I'll tell you presently, I had met the man who ran the island. His name was, strangely, Major Thompson. So I issued passports to these two young men. It was amazing that I could issue passports apparently in strict compliance with the regulations. Before issuing the passports, I looked up this book that I was referring to, telling you about visas, and I saw that Kamaran was listed in brackets together with some other names after the Aden Protectorate, so it seemed to me that it was a proper place for the inhabitants to acquire British passports. I rather stupidly allowed my conscience to cause me to write to the Foreign Office to tell them what I had done, because nothing from Kamaran had come my way before. Well! That was the beginning of a lot of trouble. Because after a gap – it took them nearly a month to reply - but when they replied, it was in a hostile tone of voice, saying I should never have done anything of that sort. I had exceeded my powers since the island was not protected by the British. We then went into a tiresome correspondence. They had to admit that, yes, it was listed, but all the same it was wrong of me to have done this. I concluded with a letter saying that I would certainly recover the passports from these two gentlemen were I ever to meet them again, but I must observe that the Arabian peninsula was rather larger than the subcontinent of India geographically and that I couldn't hold out much hope that I would meet them again. I got no answer to that. But some time later, like three, four, five months later, I noticed that an Order in Council had been passed, annexing the island of Kamaran to the British Empire. So retrospectively I was made respectable and eventually we ceded it to Yemen.

The social life in Jeddah was rather restricted but very active, and amazingly we quite often played tennis in the middle of the afternoon. That was because you worked until one o'clock or one thirty and then you were supposed to have a siesta and then go back to the office at five o'clock or something like that. The gap in the afternoon was very hot and yet we did frequently play tennis. There were two courts. I can't remember who owned these; they must have belonged to Aramco, I think. Then in the evening there would be parties more or less every night. Of course you would see the same people at the parties. However, there were sometimes unexpected things. I was just learning what does a diplomat do, how do you behave and I was surprised, because I had been brought up fairly frugally, to discover that if you went to a party at the French Embassy you were given champagne. You might also, and

it happened to me once, you might also be in the middle of considerable turmoil. On this particular occasion, the French Ambassador's pet antelope had been insulted in some way or other and was leaping about the place, knocking over tables and smashing glasses. I think I mentioned last time the ban on alcohol. The French were up in arms about this and then shortly afterwards they had the delivery of a diplomatic bag by sea which was rather extensive. It was probably no accident that unfortunately the men working the cranes managed to drop this consignment on the dock. There was a lot of broken glass.

Champagne was unusual. Much more usual was to be invited to a party at Madame Andresian's Bush. Now, who Madame Andresian was I never discovered. I assume that she was the wife of an employee of the Dutch bank long ago. Even people who had been in Jeddah for quite some time, like Bill Peyton, didn't know who Madame Andresian was. Her name was perpetuated because in the scrubby desert round Jeddah there were lots of bushes which grew to about eight foot high, and they just popped up here and there. And if you were driving in the desert you just drove round them. There was one particularly big one, which must have had a diameter of fifteen feet at least and this was Madame Andresian's Bush. I think it was selected because there were so many bushes and that was the easiest way of identifying one. It was sometimes the case that we assembled for a party at the base of Madame Andresian's Bush and everyone knew where to go if that was the site of the party. On one occasion unfortunately, Ginger Crawford, whom I mentioned before, was bitten or is it stung by a tarantula. Once again I say Jeddah was full of surprises.

I acquired enormous respect for my predecessors in the job of Vice Consul and Pilgrim Officer, particularly the Pilgrim Officers. I don't think I could have done it. They were truly expert in the Arabic language and in Arabic customs and they were the people in the old Consular Service. Before there was a united Diplomatic Service there had been different consular services in different parts of the world. Some of these men were remarkably level-headed despite being in a situation where they could never expect to get very far forward. They could expect to get to the top of their service but that wasn't such a very grand thing, although it took enormous effort and endurance to become that expert. I acquired this reverence for them largely from reading the reports that they wrote every year on the Pilgrimage. I assume that the original Pilgrimage Reports were sent to the Government of India, because the risk had always been that pilgrims, huddled together very close at the height of the Pilgrimage, would get infected by some terrible disease and carry it

back to India. The authorities there would then be dealing with huge numbers of people getting the disease. Indeed that is why Major Thompson was at Kamaran. It had been the case for decades, I don't know for how long, that pilgrims going from India, and I mean, of course, a united India, had on their return journey from Jeddah been disembarked at Kamaran and kept there for a number of days. I am not sure what the doctors said was the required number of days to certify that they hadn't got cholera or whatever it was. I think it was five or six days, and then assuming that there were no cases they were put back on a ship and went back to India. That meant that the island had to be properly administered. I don't know how it was administered at its peak, but I did meet the current administrator, Major Thompson, because he came to Jeddah. He invited me to come to Kamaran, but that was never possible. But I would have rather liked to go, because apart from ascertaining whether the story about the two moons was correct, I thought its oddity was delightful. He explained to me that there were two roads on the island, which is not a very big island. The two roads met at a crossroads, like a St George's cross. I said, 'Was there a lot of traffic?' 'Oh,' he said, 'No, I'm the only person on the island that has a car.' Then he allowed that they put up the proper signs: Halt! Major Road Ahead. I would have liked to have seen this peculiarity.

CM: John, I wanted to ask you about the pilgrims and the Pilgrimage. Jeddah was the port for the pilgrimage and the pilgrims trekked inland to Mecca, is that right? What are the distances?

JT: Not huge. The distance from Jeddah to Mecca was about sixty miles by a proper road.

CM: That journey was made only by the pilgrims; foreigners weren't allowed?

JT: No, no, out of the question. Well, of course, Burton did it. Indeed, a case that I heard about, that happened while I was there, the crew of an American airplane arrived in Jeddah during the height of the pilgrimage. I guess they didn't check in with the American Embassy. Any rate, they took a car and drove down the road to Mecca and normally - though I never saw it myself because I never tried to do that; I thought it was just a silly thing to do - normally, there was a guard post so that people who were non-believers would be turned back, but because of it being the height of the pilgrimage, the guard post guards had gone on the pilgrimage and there was nobody there to stop them. Unfortunately for them, they drove right into the middle of Mecca. Then, of course, they were arrested and they were put in prison and nothing that the American Embassy could do would get them released. This

happened towards the end of my time in Jeddah. As I think I said before, Ibn Saud, the King died shortly before I left Jeddah and the prison doors were all opened, so the Americans got out.

CM: The Crown Prince became King?

JT: Yes, he was King Saud. The Crown Prince was for me a rather sad figure because he was the eldest son of the King and absolutely acknowledged as such and he looked like his father. As I think I've said already, he came from a different mother from any of the subsequent princes and for one reason or another none of the others that I met looked like Ibn Saud. They didn't have his huge frame, but the Crown Prince had a terrible disability for a king. He was almost blind, at least when I knew him. He could tell that somebody was approaching him, but I don't think he could tell who it was and he wouldn't have been able to tell whether they were holding a gun. I met him a few times and he was always very genial and very hospitable. We went to visit, we meaning my Ambassador, or was it the Chargé d'Affaires? I don't remember. We went to visit the Crown Prince by his invitation at his establishment near Riyadh. I expect that nowadays it is well inside the city limits of Riyadh, but in those days it was a significant way outside, three kilometres, maybe more. In Riyadh we had no British car, no British driver, nothing of that sort. So we were driven presumably by somebody sent by the Crown Prince, right across the desert, there was no road. I rolled down the window of the car and the Ambassador didn't complain about that, though I remember wondering whether he would, and why I mention this is that shortly before we got to our destination, I could suddenly sense that there was moisture in the air. Driving across the Saudi desert, it's all very, very dry. Suddenly there was moisture in the air and we drew up at a huge wooden gate, which was reminiscent of the gates of Oxbridge colleges, and it was a gate set in a mud brick wall, quite high, it might have been fifteen feet high, and of large extent. Suddenly, it was magical. The doors were swung back and we walked into a totally different world. Yes, there was moisture; there was greenery; there was flowing water. It was spoiled a little bit for me by the fact that in some of the flower beds, some of the flowers were neon and so you got lovely flowers and neon lights shining out from among them.

It revealed to me in a flash how the Assassins had operated. They chose a young man, who was to be what we would now call a suicide bomber and prepared him for martyrdom with a taste of paradise. He was told his reward for assassination would be life in such a delectable

garden. We didn't have any houris, but maybe the people who organised the Assassin squads did, I don't know. Then we were entertained by the Crown Prince in a pavilion, beautifully light and in some ways elegant, and yet in some ways not so elegant, because the cloth over the big table in the middle was oil cloth and we were provided, as so often, with Coca Colas out of a cabinet such as you would find in any American airport. The Crown Prince, as he was then, was very friendly and easier than his father, easier in the sense that you were really doing business with his father, but with the Crown Prince you might touch on business, but nothing was really done.

I'm rather glad I was in Jedda when Ibn Saud died. It is to the credit of the Royal Family that this is how it happened. The King had been taken to Taif, which is higher and cooler than Jedda. It was thought to be good for his health, but it was generally believed in the royal family and hence feelings seeped out to the souks and elsewhere, that the King was dying. So the family gathered and the King had not made a political will. He had not said who was to be his successor which I think was the proper attitude for a great tribal leader, because it would not necessarily, at least in historical terms, have been the eldest son who would succeed. It would have been a person, a man of course, whom the elders of the tribe thought was the fittest person to lead them, which would mean he would lead them, if necessary, in battle. So the sons all gathered round and still the King didn't say anything about the succession and finally after about three weeks, Saud went away. I can't remember why he went away. Then suddenly the King died and the second son, Faisal, who was also the Foreign Minister, was present. Word was sent to Saud, and he flew to Jedda with a small entourage and there was nobody to receive him when he arrived at Jedda airport. There were presumably the airport authorities, but there was nobody to say 'Your Majesty.' So they commandeered jeeps which they found in the airport parking lot and drove to the royal palace in Taif and didn't know what the reception would be. It must have occurred to Saud that Faisal was in the ideal position to say that I'm the fittest man and I'm taking over and you're under arrest. However, when they got to Taif, to the palace, Faisal was there waiting and said, 'Your Majesty.' It was a very interesting situation. Faisal succeeded Saud, and Faisal, of course, was murdered. I don't know what they did Ibn Saud's burial. I don't know where he's buried. I'm pretty sure it would be a simple Muslim burial. It's supposed to be no ceremony; it's supposed earth returning to earth, dust to dust, ashes to ashes. And I imagine that's what the King himself would have wished. However, as I say, I don't know.

I'm skipping around trying to give an impression of what life could be like in Jeddah and I'm not really succeeding because I am inevitably touching on episodes that I remember, rather than the daily grind. But I do remember being disappointed when there was a full eclipse of the sun, which we knew about. The BBC told us about it. It was not quite full, perhaps. It didn't get as dark as I expected it to get and there was no perturbation in the souk. I deliberately went out and went around and I thought it was going to be exciting, rather like the locust invasion that I mentioned, but everybody had been listening to the radio, I suppose, and there was no excitement at all. And it all passed in a matter of ten minutes.

What did happen from time to time were executions and cutting off of hands. You could buy photos of these events. They took place not every Friday, but from time to time, always on a Friday and always at noon and quite sensibly, I suppose, from a political point of view, so that the largest number of people could see it happen, they took place in the widest part of the main street, the street where a lot of the merchants had their establishments, and more or less right in front of the Dutch bank, which in my recollection was the biggest and most successful bank in Jeddah. When there was not an execution and I have to say that executions were not rare, but they were not common either, so there were plenty of Fridays when there were no executions or cutting off of hands or anything of that sort, the Dutch had a sort of open house for the European/American community. Their servants were East Indian from Dutch colonies and they made superb curry. I've never had, even in India, better curry than in Jeddah of all surprising places. They had the full works, and it was all done beautifully. I guess there were people who drank too much, but I didn't see a lot of that. Everybody was aware that they shouldn't be seen drinking. Sometimes you got into a ridiculous situation of which I was a part, and perhaps I was the cause of it. This happened very soon after I got there. I think there was a provision in those days that the Queen's Birthday could be celebrated, oh, no, it was still the King's Birthday, could be celebrated in certain climates not in the traditional middle of June, but in December. So my Ambassador gave a series of receptions, the first one was for local Saudis. I remember I was instructed by colleagues who said that, yes, so and so, and pointed out to me who, would prefer to have some gin in his orange juice, otherwise it was all orange juice. Then there was one for the Diplomatic Corps. In the gap between the two receptions I was sent down, along with somebody else, to bring up bottles from the Ambassador's cellar. I brought up what I thought I had been instructed to bring up, and then we had the reception and I was a little appalled to hear my Ambassador

saying to the French Ambassador, in a loud grand way, 'This is our national day, but we're drinking your national drink.' It did look like champagne bottles, but it was actually Pomagne cider.

I never finished saying why I so much respected my predecessors. Those Pilgrimage Reports are wonderful documents. My recollection of the reports - I'm talking about the Reports after World War I, and I can't claim to have read them all - were engrossing reading. Those I read were mostly in the 1920s. I don't know that I had access to any before the First World War. They were sort of twenty printed pages and you learned a huge amount about what actually happened in that pilgrimage. A lot clearly depended on the time of the year. As you know, the Muslim calendar is lunar and so the time of the pilgrimage moves by eleven days from year to year. The pilgrimage could be in the summer, as it was when I was in Jeddah, or it could be in the winter, when circumstances are rather different. The amount of trouble that these Pilgrim Officers took was really impressive, for example about sanitary conditions. You learned a lot, not only about that sort of thing, but also what the customs were and how people behaved and how the British pilgrims behaved in relation to the other pilgrims and so on. Indeed, I had practical experience of that latter point, because a lot of British pilgrims died - when I say a lot I mean, I think something like a few hundred during the pilgrimage the first year I was there, when it was in the middle of the summer. I was told by pilgrims the reason that there had been such heavy deaths in the British side was that, unlike anybody else, they'd queued up for water, and had not got it. There were riots, of course, frequent riots and you could hardly get together, particularly in the hot weather, such a group of people without there being quarrels of some sort. The way that a lot of people died, as always in the pilgrimage, was simply being crushed. Horrifying information that I sort of remember was the chemical analysis of the water in the Well of Zamzam, from which all pilgrims were supposed to drink. There were people who walked from Nigeria, right across Africa, and then heart-rending stories, as we hear now in the Mediterranean. Some of these people when they started walking from Nigeria, didn't know that Mecca was on the other side of a sea. They got to the Red Sea and were faced with an impossible problem. So when somebody offered to take them across the sea for a sum of money, they would scrape together the money. Then sometimes they weren't taken across the sea, they were just dumped on an island and told that they'd reached their destination. But of course there was no water on the island, nothing, and they were dead in a couple of days. Some of them, mainly people who

came by ship from Asia, brought carpets, which was a sensible thing to do, because they could use the carpet to sleep on when they were on the ship and then, it was like a traveller's cheque, they could sell it. I bought one or two in Jeddah. It was very impressive to see all these pilgrims coming with great faith. And huge numbers came. I was told that there were more aircraft landing at the height of the pilgrimage in Jeddah than there had been in Berlin at the time of the Berlin airlift. Of course, pilgrims could go to Mecca and perform the pilgrimage at any time of the year, but it was more meritorious to go at the particular appointed time, according to the Muslim calendar, than to go at any other time.

I would like to say something about one particularly unusual person. I think it was the day after I arrived in Jeddah in December 1951 that the Ambassador held a farewell party for the British Military Mission. You don't hear much about British Military Missions in Saudi Arabia, but there was a sizeable British Military Mission, headed by a Brigadier by the name of Baird, and he had, I don't know how many officers, but maybe eight, I venture at a guess. They were training the Saudi army. This would have been a very understandable thing at any time until after 1945, but by the time I arrived there the Americans were dominant and I don't suppose they wanted a British Military Mission. I'm sure the British government asked for some payment and the Americans probably offered something free, or more or less free. Anyway, the Mission was closed and the Ambassador was giving a farewell party and all the officers were to leave a couple of days later. Except for one, whose name was St John Armitage, who was indeed a remarkable man. I came to know him quite well because he stayed for several weeks in the little bachelors' mess shared by three or four of us. His Arabic was extremely good; where he had acquired it I'm not quite sure. I am not capable of saying whether it was faultless, but it was very fluent. He'd come to know members of the Royal Family well. The next I heard of him was that he had joined a new body being set up by the British on the Persian Gulf Coast, called the Trucial Oman Scouts. I thought how appropriate; they've got the right man. Here's a career Army officer whose Arabic is excellent, who'd served for a couple of years at any rate in Saudi Arabia, who knows how to deal with Arab troops. I was delighted to have got to know what I would describe as a soldier of fortune. I saw him as an incarnation of Waring in Browning's poem. I assume he had some involvement in the Buraimi affair. However that may be he became very close with some important members of the Royal Family and so was extraordinarily well informed on Saudi affairs. It says a good deal that Prince Turki, when he was Ambassador in London,

gave a special party for St John in the oriental setting of Leighton House in Holland Park. St John was a delightful companion and for me a romantic figure from a vanished world.

Every day I was faced with a sight which told why Jedda was there and also reminded me in a Conradian way of the impermanence of human endeavours and ambitions. That was the wreck of a steamer on a reef at the outer edge of the port. Jedda was where it was, not because of some wonderful facility on the shore or a river flowing down, but because there were so many reefs out there that you had to have expert local knowledge to navigate a ship in. There had often been raids by pirates over the centuries. It was a wonderful target, with a lot of people, mostly at the time of the pilgrimage. I think I mentioned before about a British captain coming in to report 'boisterous weather.' Well, another British captain, on a different occasion, came in to see me as Vice Consul, why I don't remember, but in the course of the conversation, he told me that he'd had rather a shock. He had cargo for Jedda and was under pressure from his owners to get a move on. But he found a considerable queue of ships waiting for a pilot to bring them into port. One of the two pilots, a genial fellow whom I knew, said to him, 'Well, you could do it quicker.' 'Oh, how?' he said. 'My son is excellent. He knows how to bring a ship in and if you employ him you could come in this afternoon.' He said, 'Yes, all right.' So a ten-year-old boy came aboard and needed an orange box to see over the rail of the bridge. The captain told me that he wondered how he would explain to his owners that he had allowed a nipper to wreck his ship. However, all was well.

Sir John Thomson III

27 March 2017

This is the third interview for the British Diplomatic Oral History Programme with Sir John Thomson, Catherine Manning recording, on 27 March 2017.

CM: John, in our two previous sessions we have been talking about your posting in Jedda in 1951 and the events of that time. Now you are going to talk to us a bit about some of the people that you knew there. Who would you like to start with?

JT: I'd like to speak about two people in particular: one is Bill Peyton and the other is Sidney Cotton. I'll start with Bill.

Bill was a person to whom I came to owe a lot. He taught me, not formally but by a process of friendship, a considerable amount about the Arab world. And he also did a signal service when I got married in the summer of '53 and brought my bride back to Jeddah. I discovered that the apartment that I had had – a rather nice one – in the block of flats that was entirely occupied by the British Embassy had been given to somebody else. Nobody had told me about this, so I arrived with my bride, Elizabeth, and found that there was no place for us. Literally no place. So we started married diplomatic life in the Ambassador's spare bedroom. I have to say that that is not the ideal way to begin. Bill, who was a friend from the first moment I arrived in Jeddah - he was part of the little delegation that met me as I came off the plane from Beirut in 1951 - was rather typically there. He was the only non-Brit there; he was American, but he always fitted in with wherever he was and it was generous of him to come at all. Perhaps there was an element of curiosity on his part. Anyway, it was very nice of him and we became good friends. When he discovered that Elizabeth and I were existing in the Ambassador's spare bedroom, he offered to take us in, an offer gratefully received by us, but I think probably also by the Ambassador and his wife. So we moved to what was the best house that I knew of in Jeddah, because Bill was in Jeddah as the representative of the Getty oil business. I'll go into that in a moment. Mr Getty also owned the Pierre Hotel in Manhattan and he dealt with the situation of having a representative in Saudi Arabia by telling the Pierre Hotel to do everything for his accommodation. Bill had a house on the road from the city centre, if you can call it that, to the airport – I'm sure it'll have disappeared by now – set back with a high wall and a small garden inside it, a very pleasant house. He had at least three servants, who were much better trained than most of the other servants. Maybe if you looked critically at his house there was a touch of the hotel about it, but basically it was so much more comfortable and everything, absolutely everything in the house down to the wash towels, was sent over from Manhattan. I was very grateful to Bill and eventually I became his best man at his wedding in England many years later.

Bill was a person who, as I've already said, was quiet, so he didn't make a big splash, but goodness, he was good at it. He came, rather surprisingly, from Kentucky. I don't know why I'm surprised at that exactly, but he didn't have a Kentuckian accent. I think he must have been in the War, right at the end of it; then he went to the Fletcher School and studied Arabic and International Affairs. I know he was then in Cairo for a bit and thus met a number of British diplomats who then came to Jeddah. At exactly what point Mr Getty hired him, I'm

not sure, but certainly he had been representing Getty for a few years before I arrived. The reason Mr Getty needed a representative in Jeddah, according to Bill, was simply to go once a year to deliver a cheque for a million dollars – I may have got this slightly wrong – one cheque to the Saudis and one cheque to the ruler of Kuwait, because Mr Getty had the concession for oil exploration and extraction in the neutral zone, which was by then well defined, between the two countries. I am sure that Bill also sent reports, but rather occasionally is my impression. Otherwise, he could do his entire job in a matter of a few hours. He was very *persona grata* to the Americans, not surprisingly with that background, and knew the people in Aramco well. He was also very *persona grata* with the British and, as far as I could make out, also with the Saudis. He used his knowledge and position very tactfully and was an important part of the community in Jeddah. I'm not quite sure why he left Jeddah or the exact moment, but he left, came to London and married Diana, who was then running an independent gallery selling early English watercolours. Bill developed a considerable skill, which he would always deny, in watercolours and antiques. Following Elizabeth Munro, he became the *Economist's* main Middle East correspondent. He didn't really enjoy that job, which was very poorly paid, but still it was good from the point of view of his CV. He was then in Shell in London for a fairly short time. They lived at Hayward's Heath in a sixteenth century house, very cold. Then he got sent by Shell to Muscat. For him that was probably the most satisfactory part of his career. He became not only important for Shell and as a source both for the British and the Americans, but he became very close to Sultan Qaboos. I never visited them in Muscat so I speak all on the basis of hearsay. But I have the impression that Qaboos trusted him and followed his advice in a number of ways. Only a couple of weeks ago, somebody was telling me how wonderful the situation was in Muscat and Oman and how modern, etc, and what a splendid school there was there. I was delighted to hear it, but I think it should be remembered that it was Bill Peyton who established the school. It was based on an English public school, modified in various ways, but was definitely for the upper class boys of the Sultanate. I am very pleased to hear that it has prospered. I'm not surprised and I'd like to conclude the bit about Bill Peyton by saying that if more Western representatives, and I'm talking not just about diplomats, but commercial representatives and oil company representatives, had understood the Arab world the way Bill did and had behaved modestly and subtly, as Bill did, we would probably have had less trouble in the Middle East. He was a quiet man, a very good friend and when you got to know him and what he did, impressive.

Now, I'll turn to a man of an entirely different stamp: Sidney Cotton. Sidney Cotton was, as I understand it, and I have never looked him up in books or tried to cross check what I'm about to say, but Sidney Cotton was Australian, the son of a wealthy Australian businessman - in what field he made his money, I don't know - who quarrelled with his father when he was about twenty one and was cast loose and very quickly made a fortune on his own in Australia. He was a man of great abilities, who had a high opinion of those abilities, but a justifiably high opinion. He crossed my ken because he came in his own yacht with a crew of fifteen, I think, representing thirteen different countries. He had a captain, but I think Sidney did the navigating himself. It was an extremely comfortable, well-appointed yacht. He apologised for having arrived a bit later than he had intended, because he had lent his yacht to the Windsors who wanted to cruise in the Mediterranean and they hadn't left the boat quite as soon as he expected. So he arrived in his yacht with this crew, very unusual; I wasn't aware of anybody else having arrived in a yacht. And there were many other things about Sidney Cotton that were unusual. When he arrived he was married to a youngish lady and Sidney must have been in his late fifties, maybe early sixties and I think she was twenty five, something like that, very good-looking, and managed a situation that might not have been an easy one, as far as I could see, very well. He also brought his daughter who was only about two or three years younger than his wife. And he brought a boatload of people. You might have thought, as I did when I first met them, that this was the set up for an Agatha Christie novel. I'm not going to remember them all, but I do remember that there was one couple, equally oddly assorted as regards age. He was a very strong, leathery-complexioned man who was the head of Dunlop Tyre in Egypt. He was tall and athletic and I should think he was not far off Sidney's age. He had the most gorgeous Alexandrian wife, who was, well, she was about the same age as Sidney's wife. Then there was the Fashion Editor for Vogue in Paris, whose name I've now forgotten, who was single. There were a couple of other people of whom I don't have a clear recollection. It was mysterious as to why Sidney Cotton had arrived at all, as I've already said, that was the first yacht we'd ever seen in Jeddah. And it wasn't a particularly wonderful time of the year. Very quickly I learned that his companions were equally bemused. They had signed up for a cruise in the Mediterranean and they had no idea that they were going to go through the Suez Canal and down the Red Sea. They were certainly very well looked after and they were seeing something they would have a story to tell about later, but they didn't know why they were there. And Sidney wasn't telling them. The plot thickened a bit when he stayed not just three days, as you might think,

to take on water and fuel. No, no, they stayed week after week and occasionally gave parties and, of course, were invited to parties in the Christian community in Jeddah. Nothing was further revealed, except that Sidney then flew in in his own airplane piloted by himself, and a rather grand car was also flown in. It was never, ever explained to me - it may have possibly been explained to my Ambassador, but he didn't pass it on to me - why Sidney was there. I had ample opportunity to reflect on it and I came to the conclusion that Sidney was there to try to get a concession to look for oil, probably in the Tihamah. I suspect that he was running into a lot of trouble with the Saudis, backed up by Aramco, who didn't want anybody else there. Eventually, Sidney gave up and left, taking the precaution to leave with the British Ambassador and his wife on board, a precaution that I thought was rather wise of him, because there might have been a number of people who might have been after him in one way or another. Any rate, I think he must have been there for about three months.

This is not exactly Jeddah, but I think it is worth saying something about Sidney. It shows not only a remarkable man, but also the idea of adventuring that was certainly always in the background in Jeddah. I am not sure where I got all this information. Some of it was from Sidney, certainly; some of it was from elsewhere. Most surprisingly, some of it was from my father who came to stay with me in Jeddah for a couple of weeks and attended at least one party given by Sidney.

Sidney, as I've already said, was a man of many parts. He invented the flying suit that the British RAF wore throughout the war. My father, who had been for the last part of the war Scientific Adviser to the Air Ministry, told me it was perfectly true. Sidney had apparently made friends with Göring who was, of course, in control of the Luftwaffe and as a result he flew a senior Luftwaffe officer in his plane, presumably to show off some piece of equipment or technique. Sidney's route took the plane over some strategic parts of Germany, notably the Ruhr/Saar. Unknown to the Germans, Sidney had fitted high-resolution cameras into the plane. As a result the RAF was supplied with important aerial photographs. I learnt subsequently that Sidney offered to fly Göring to London for last minute negotiations before war broke out. His was the last civilian plane to leave Berlin in peacetime. I don't know what else he did during the war, but after the war, when India and Pakistan were splitting up, there was a lot of questions about what the Muslim states in India would do - of course, Kashmir, I won't go into - but of the others, the biggest was Hyderabad. The Nizam and his people did not want to become part of India and there was a good deal of talk, I don't know

how much substance there was to it, about Hyderabad defending itself. Sidney was in on this and he became what you might call nowadays a gunrunner. He flew in weapons to arm the Hyderabad forces. Well, of course, it all came to nothing. There wasn't a war and I don't even recall that there was any fighting. I mention this because it illustrates the sort of swashbuckling, venturesome, risk-taking person that you expected to find around the Middle East in those times.

Damascus, 1954

CM: After a short pause, we're going to make a start on Damascus, which was your next posting. Can you tell me, did you go straight to Damascus from Saudi Arabia?

JT: I was meant to do so, as straight as you could, but in fact I got delayed, together with my wife Elizabeth, in Beirut. We were supposed to spend two days in Beirut and then drive on to Damascus and in those two days I had a slipped disc and suddenly was flat on my back in bed, unable to move, or at least, forbidden to move. It happened slightly dramatically, because I was walking past the American University Hospital, which is in the centre of Beirut. I had no business at the hospital, but my journey just required me to pass the Hospital. At that very moment the surgeon who had operated on me a year earlier, on my appendix, walked out of the Hospital. Suddenly, I felt as if a knife was driven into my back. I fell. There were convenient iron railings around the entrance to the Hospital and I fell against them and grasped them. My surgeon believed all this was for his benefit and was make-believe. I simply couldn't convince him that I really was in agony. The surgeon was an Arlen, the brother of Michael Arlen. There I was in the right place in Beirut, but I got absolutely no help. We were staying with Jock and Molly Taylor; Jock was a friend from Trinity days. They were suddenly burdened with us right through Christmas. Eventually, after something like three weeks, it was thought that if I moved carefully I was well enough to go. We were driven across to Damascus.

CM: This would have been in January 1954?

JT: Yes, January '54. I won't say very much about Damascus, because of all the posts I've served in, it was the one I liked least. This was to a large extent because of the personalities in the Embassy, so I think I won't expatiate on that. I have to say that, to my amazement, the same thing happened as in Jeddah. When Elizabeth and I got to Damascus, the flat that our

predecessors had had – and I had done a good deal of correspondence with them about it and about the servants and so on – we were suddenly told that no, it had been occupied by another member of the staff and, once again, Elizabeth and I were in the Ambassador's spare bedroom. We were very well looked after, but we set about looking for a house; I think the Ambassador was quite keen that we should do so. We found a house which belonged to a professor of physics at Damascus University, who was on a sabbatical. Any rate, his house was for rent for a year. It was a perfectly nice flat in a block of flats. There was a slight problem in that there was a sheikh in the flat below us who kept sheep tethered there for slaughter and that was occasionally disturbing. We had a rather strange situation: for some reason the professor's house was rented empty, so we'd got a building and rooms, but we had no furniture. This necessitated a fair amount of correspondence with the Foreign Office. The Foreign Office told us to go and rent furniture and rugs. Nobody in Damascus had heard of renting furniture or rugs. However, we discovered, I think with the help of Molly Taylor, that there was a place in Beirut that would rent furniture, but not rugs. So we did rent furniture from there and that was OK. The rugs were rather more complicated because the Foreign Office said you've got to rent rugs: right. So I go to the souk and I go round to several rug merchants. None of them is willing to rent me any rugs. So I said to the one that I thought was the best, would he be agreeable to selling me a rug on a basis that I paid for it in bits. I asked was this going to be OK with the Foreign Office, because at the end of it I would own the rugs. 'Oh,' they said, 'that's fine.' So I had three rugs that I bought but the Foreign Office paid for in instalments.

We had some interesting people come to the flat. I still remember Professor Creswell, the great architect/archaeologist, who produced some magnificent volumes on the early architecture of Cairo. The moment he put his foot over the threshold of our new living room, he stopped and looked around and said, 'Remarkable! Very square!' I said, 'Well, yes, it's square. But why is that remarkable?' 'Very rare,' he said, 'very rare to see a room that's perfectly square.' I have noticed subsequently that he was right.

Another visitor who was very impressive was Wilfred Thesiger, the explorer. Why he was in Damascus at that point, I don't really know, or don't remember, but we saw a certain amount of him. I particularly recall an occasion when he told us that his mother was coming out from Britain – Scotland, I think, but I may be inventing that – to visit him. He sounded a little apprehensive, so we said that we would love to invite him and her to lunch etc. So we did

and they came. She was a rather short but active lady, dressed in a purplish tweed, which is perhaps why I think of Scotland, very agreeable, much more talkative than Wilfred was. During the course of lunch we discussed Damascus and the places round about, which on the whole Wilfred knew a lot about, because he had been fighting in Syria during World War II as part of Special Operations, harassing the Vichy French, and his headquarters, if you could call it that, was somewhere in the Leja, which is a very wild part, volcanic, black basalt area, gloomy, near Dera in the south of Syria, but he knew Damascus.

As a result of this conversation, we determined that we would go after lunch to Saidnaya, which is one of the Christian villages a little bit north of Damascus where there was an Orthodox church and a monastery. I am sorry to say that I believe they've also put a terrible prison there, lately. In those days it was a small village, wonderfully concealed. You wouldn't know it was there, even though the main road from Damascus to Aleppo, running from south to north, passes only a mile away and the intervening land is flat. You could see the village for just a moment as you were going along the road, if you were looking at the right place. There's a gap, a cleft in the cliff. I suppose there had been a hollowing out through water behind it, so there was a bowl behind the cleft, and in that bowl was the village. Well, it was rather a rainy afternoon, so we drove out, me driving, Wilfred sitting next to me and Elizabeth and Mrs Thesiger sitting in the back. We got to Saidnaya with no trouble and the church actually had a parking lot which was tarmacked, so it was not the sort of place that you'd normally find in Syria. However, when we were parking there, Mrs Thesiger said to her son, a man who had lived amongst the Marsh Arabs and won the Gold Medal of the Royal Geographical Society and so on, she said, 'Now, Wilfred dear, don't get your feet wet.' He obeyed.

If I may have a little excursion for a moment, Wilfred was a very remarkable man, I think pretty intolerable in many ways and certainly one of his reasons for living the way he did was sexual, but he was a true explorer. It is worth reading the account of another explorer, Eric Newby, who happened to meet Thesiger in the foothills of the Hindu Kush (*A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush*, Eric Newby, London, 1958.) A long time later, when I was in India, our paths crossed again. He came to Hyderabad to write a book, I don't remember which one. He was one of two people I knew who left suitcases and trunks in this particular hotel and came from time to time. Then he came up to Delhi and so, of course, we gave him lunch. In the course of lunch I said to Wilfred, who was then living in East Africa, probably

Kenya, 'Wilfred, where exactly is your house?' Wilfred went, 'Haaa! House? House? You don't suppose I live in a house, do you?' I was taken aback. I said, 'Where then do you live?' 'Under a bush!' He was truly a great explorer and I'm not sure I've ever seen anybody with such piercing, deep-set, blue eyes. When you met him, you felt that it was the beginning of a John Buchan novel.

To return to Damascus for a moment: another person whom I met there, whom I liked very much, was Sir David Scott, who had been – again I haven't looked up any records – who'd been Chief Clerk in the Foreign Office, so he knew a great deal about personnel. For some reason or other, I don't know why, my Ambassador didn't look after him, so he and his wife spent quite a lot of their three or four days in Damascus with us and we took them round to various places. I've rarely met a more charming couple and I particularly remember that that was the time when there was a new biography of Lord Melbourne, which was very well thought of, and there were many reviews. The book was the second of two volumes. David Scott brought us as a present volume 1, which I thought was really thoughtful. He was absolutely right, yes, we had volume 2; volume 1 had appeared several years earlier.

There were a number of other interesting people, including Steven Runciman who taught me at Trinity. Steven came to look at the ground in preparation for writing his three volumes on the Crusades, including two or three of the castles.

I had better press on, I think. We occupied this professor's house very happily for whatever the term was, nine months, or twelve months and then we had to leave because the professor was coming back again. It was all perfectly reasonable; we'd only been able to get the house because he was away for a year. So we had to find another place. Of course, the Foreign Office had a limit on how much we could spend on this place and there was practically no coincidence between that and my salary. Eventually I found a splendid place. Geographically, it really couldn't be beaten. It was a top floor flat with a huge terrace around it overlooking the American Ambassador's garden and I think somebody else's garden too. It was within the Foreign Office price and had all the rooms that the Foreign Office required. Well, of course, there was a snag. The flat belonged to the brother of the recently overthrown dictator, General Shishakli. It wasn't quite finished, so the brother was delighted to have a diplomat in the flat; it made it, I assume, from his point of view rather less likely that it would be confiscated. Also anyway, he couldn't use it, because, as I recall, the water supply was not

working. All the window spaces were there, but no window frames. Then I had an embarrassing time going to see the young man who was in charge of permits for building houses, who'd been trained at LSE in London, and trying to persuade him that it would be all right for us to finish the flat etc, etc. I did find it embarrassing, because I knew that I was, in effect, arguing that the rules should be relaxed in this case. Well, they were in the end and we did have a very nice flat, especially when we had window frames in it. But it was quite a job.

Shishakli came into my ken a bit earlier. He was, if I recall correctly, the third military dictator in a row: in other words, he'd overthrown a previous military dictator, who hadn't lasted long, just a matter of months. Shishakli, who was a general in the Army, was more successful, but not wildly successful, so I think he'd been in power for about three years by the time we got to Damascus and then things were beginning to go wrong. I was very new to Syria, although I had travelled in Syria when I was in Shemlan learning Arabic. I never quite understood what was going wrong, but quite by accident one afternoon I was walking down the street near the first of our houses, the professor's house, when four big black limousines with darkened glass came by. I did recognise Shishakli sitting in one of the cars, despite the darkened glass. He was driving on the road to Beirut; he'd fled. I think he'd understood that it was better to get out with his life. I'm sure the cars were laden with gold. So he disappeared and as far I could tell took everybody by surprise.

Something must have been building up that way because there had been a number of bombs, which had gone off in the preceding two or three weeks. One seemed to go off every time I stepped into a bath. None of them killed anybody; they were all demonstrations that things could happen. Right, he fled and nobody knew what was going to happen. Various people saw an opportunity, I suppose. Presently, the next morning, firing broke out in the city and there was a memorable scene when my Ambassador in the middle of his staff, that is to say about six of us, with his hat on the side of his head, declared that there was nothing to be concerned about. There was no trouble at all. I think all his staff thought that was a rather optimistic judgment, to say the least. Presently, I was actually able to look out of the windows of the Embassy and see two people shooting at each other in the Umayyad remains on the plain below the Embassy building. Presently ambulances were shuttling backwards and forwards right past the Embassy which stood between the central square and the hospital. So it was fairly obvious that something was happening. The Ambassador said, no,

nothing was happening, so we didn't report anything, until the Foreign Office sent a telegram saying, 'Are you all right?' Clearly, they'd picked up from the BBC or the Associated Press or somewhere that fighting was going on in Damascus. At that point the Ambassador was compelled to reply, 'Well, there was some little local difficulty.' Fighting went on; I don't think many people got killed. It went on for about three days. I felt that things were dying down a bit, so I ventured out from the Embassy. Nobody else did, although I bet the Military Attaché had been out. I went down to the central square to see what was happening at the radio station. Indeed, there was a big crowd outside it and people were shouting, but there was nothing terribly untoward, no shooting in the central square. So I wasn't surprised to get the impression that in some way or other there had been some negotiation between the parties opposed. But I was really surprised when the following morning the newspapers appeared again. They hadn't appeared for about three days. Most of the newspapers, and I really do mean most, had headlines like *British Triumph*. It was generally believed that the Americans and French had collaborated, a rather unlikely situation, to support Shishakli and the British had found this intolerable and therefore engineered the overthrow of the dictator and were now in support of a civilian government. All this was complete news to me and, I may say, to my Ambassador, too. It was driven home because then the telephone started ringing. By midday or so a government had been announced, so there were maybe fifteen gentlemen who held portfolios in this government, and half of them rang up and wanted to come round and see the Ambassador. They all had the same question, 'What is it that you want us to do?' I was not included in the conversations, so I don't know how the Ambassador replied, but at any rate a civilian government was cobbled together.

Syria was a very interesting place; the most lovely place for a picnic that I've ever been - we did quite often, Elizabeth and I, have picnics at lunchtime. It had some wonderful architecture and a huge amount of antiquities. It was fun and it was easy to get to Jordan and Jerusalem and of course to Lebanon. So Syria had compensations. Nevertheless, I was quite happy, but astonished, when suddenly the Foreign Office ordered us home. I had not expected this at all, because it was known that the Ambassador, the Head of Chancery and me, the one political officer, were all due for home leave at almost the same time. I thought that the obvious thing would be that I would have to stay while the others went in relays. No, their solution was to take me. Elizabeth was, I think, seven months pregnant at the point we

went home. That would have been in '55. We must have gone home in May perhaps, something like that.

I'd just like to say that though there was a lot that I didn't enjoy in the Damascus Embassy, I did very much enjoy my time living there. We had a happy group of younger diplomats who met quite often in the evenings. They were all American, except Elizabeth and me, and Elizabeth was American, too, of course. I guess they all went on to ambassadorships or under secretaryships in the Arab world. We played 'The Game' incessantly, in the long evenings. That was fun. So we did have friends, but our friends were almost exclusively in the American Embassy. You could see that this was the end. And then came Suez and I thought this would be the end of British influence in the Middle East; it wasn't. I won't go on about that, not now.

Foreign Office, 1955; Private Secretary to Permanent Under-Secretary, 1958-60

CM: You returned to London in 1955 and worked in Southern Department on the Greek desk and in 1958 you became Private Secretary to the Permanent Under Secretary, Sir Derrick Hoyer Millar.

JT: Yes, I would like to turn to something quite different, which is to talk about some of the unusual, remarkable people I met in the Foreign Office. I'd like to start with a lady called Barbara Evans. Barbara Evans was a truly remarkable person with a very strong will. She wanted from an early age to be in the Foreign Office, but she didn't have a university degree. The only way she found to get into the Foreign Office was to join as a cleaner. So she joined as a cleaner, in I think it must have been approximately 1923 or thereabouts. But she didn't stay a cleaner long; she had talent. She'd learned shorthand before joining, and how to be a secretary. She became the Number Three lady in the Foreign Secretary's Private Office. Then, with a piece of luck, which I would say she fully deserved, the Number One lady resigned to get married. The Foreign Secretary, I think it was Austen Chamberlain (1924-29), didn't like the Number Two lady and said he wanted Barbara as his Number One lady. The Foreign Office said, 'You can't have Barbara; she's only twenty two,' or something like that. He said, 'I'm the Foreign Secretary and I want her.' So Barbara remained as the Number One lady in the Foreign Secretary's Private Office from then until 1948. In consequence of which she knew a huge range of distinguished people and she travelled. Each time the Foreign Secretary went abroad, she travelled with him and the rest

of his crew. So she was present at all sorts of international gatherings. She had endless, amazing stories which she said, if it hadn't actually happened it would be unbelievable. I wish I could remember them all. They were very instructive, and I think reliable. Barbara, in 1948, was persuaded - though I should think it might have taken quite some persuading - to swap being Number One lady in the Private Office for being Number Two Private Secretary in the Permanent Under Secretary's office. So she came downstairs and occupied the desk of the Number Two Private Secretary from 1948 until she had to give up because of cancer. She died while Douglas Hurd, who was my successor as Private Secretary, was in office, so it must have been in 1962 or something like that.

She therefore had a succession of young, fairly intelligent gentlemen being put over her as Number One Private Secretary, which she accepted, because it was the way things were done, but she didn't really approve of it. She was fierce about it. I couldn't at first believe how fierce she was prepared to be. She insisted that we took it in turns, when I became the Private Secretary, to go early lunch/late lunch, so there was one of us always in the office. And there was no fiddling around about it. If I was doing the late lunch, I wasn't given more than about three minutes after Barbara came back from her early lunch before I had to be out. The same thing in the evening: one of us was to go at six o'clock and the other was to stay on for however long was required. If I hadn't gone when it was my turn by six o'clock, there would first of all be a very black look and, if I didn't get that message, there would be a sharp comment.

Barbara had very strong opinions about people. She always thought, as she told me, that Michael Palliser would become Permanent Secretary; she was absolutely confident about that, and as usual she was right. She said, 'You know, John, sometimes, sometimes, I think you might become Permanent Secretary.' She also had a high opinion of Alan Campbell, and she had a very high opinion of the Permanent Secretary, William Strang. She thought he was the best ever Permanent Secretary and she'd seen by then a new one every four or five years. She never said any of them were bad, but she made it very clear as to which ones were good. Strang retired to the Cotswolds and she greatly respected him because after he became Permanent Secretary he started taking French lessons. He was remarkable, from all I've heard.

Barbara had a great deal of common sense. Sometimes things happened which were completely new to me, particularly intelligence things; Barbara knew absolutely which to pay attention to and which not to pay attention to. Derrick Hoyer Millar was our Permanent Under Secretary at the time – I'll speak about him separately later. He was a splendid man, a large, imposing presence, with total confidence. He would sweep in and out, always with very reasonable timing. He would announce that he was going to get his hair cut at Trumpers, or this or that. One day he asked Barbara to get him sandwiches to eat at his desk. Barbara came out of the office saying, 'Do you know what he said? He said he wants sandwiches! Sandwiches! The man's cracking up! I've got a good mind to send for his files when he was a junior officer and I'll show him what they said about him then. Sandwiches!' He got his sandwiches, but he never had sandwiches again in my experience.

I think she held Eden together in a way. She was with Eden of course a great deal and she was a very good mimic of Eden. They would go through papers, sitting in deck chairs outside sometimes, not in the Foreign Office, but wherever Eden was, I don't know. I remember lovely accounts of the wind blowing up and papers blowing away. 'Miss Evans, Miss Evans, there goes Locarno!'

I had a great respect for her. Despite her fierceness, she was kind. She lived at Ruislip which was quite a long journey and she once invited Elizabeth and me and our infant son, Adam, to tea there. We had a happy tea in the garden, little Adam crawling around on a rug. She was not an unapproachable, schoolmarmish lady. She also knew what was what and she knew everything about the Foreign Office. She could have run it; she could have been a perfectly good private secretary without any of these young men who came along. She didn't forget them. And they all remembered Barbara. I don't think I've ever known anybody quite like her. She was a wonderful advertisement for teaching girls early and getting them to university. She was a very, very competent lady with sensible, balanced views. With people like that, the Foreign Office ran smoothly.

Barbara told me that when Strang was approaching retirement, the short list to succeed him consisted of three strong-minded men: Gladwyn Jebb, Roger Makins, Derrick Hoyer Millar. The betting had been on one of the first two, but in the end Hoyer Millar was chosen. I had the luck to be appointed Hoyer Miller's Private Secretary at the end of 1958

and partly because of that came to know Jebb and Makins. I propose to say something fairly brief about each of the three. But before doing so I should note that I speak from a fallible memory and have done no research on any of them.

Gladwyn Jebb was Ambassador in Paris and I saw him quite often because he popped over. Derrick occasionally raised an eyebrow because Gladwyn didn't seem always to remember to ask permission to come, but coming from Paris, he took the night train. Of course, Gladwyn was completely at home in London as well as in Paris. On one occasion when there was some upset or excitement in Paris for which he was required, it was known that he had come to London and I was told to find him and get him back to Paris as quickly as possible. By then I had some clues as to where these great men habitually went. So I rang up the Head Porter at Boodles and, 'Yes, yes, Sir Gladwyn was staying.' 'Where is he? Is he there?' 'No, he went out about an hour ago.' 'Do you know where he went?' 'No.' 'Do you know where he might go, or where he's going to have lunch?' 'No, no.' I did some more ringing around and then I found somebody who said, 'Oh, yes, Sir Gladwyn's here.' He was having a chat with the Queen Mother in her boudoir, the very place he would have chosen to be found in. Gladwyn was a man very well adapted to crises, always cool. He was quick on his feet, thinking on his feet. He was very impressive in his grasp of political situations and he was also very impressive in his neglect or disdain for many ordinary mortals. He was extremely good at some things. For example, General de Gaulle held a traditional shoot every year for the diplomatic corps. I imagine some of the ambassadors were not much good at it, but Gladwyn, of course, was absolutely crack. So he was always given the very best place and, of course, he would regard it as absolutely natural that he would be in the very best place.

It's worth repeating a story Barbara Evans told me. When Gladwyn was new in the Diplomatic Service, he served in London for the first year or so and then was posted to Tehran. His mother, who was a friend of Austen Chamberlain's, was terribly concerned that poor Gladwyn was being sent to the outer world. She wrote to Austen to say that she was appalled to hear this; poor Gladwyn had very little experience and she didn't know how he would manage, so could Austen arrange that he would travel in the care of a King's Messenger.

He did a wonderful job during the war, particularly in getting the UN going. He was the principal adviser, together with the Legal Adviser, in the UK team which together with their US opposite numbers drafted the Charter. He was a very effective Ambassador at the UN. People at Manhattan dinner parties would recount how they had just heard on the radio the debate in the Security Council in which Gladwyn had bested the Soviet Ambassador.

Once Gladwyn invited me to stay with him in Suffolk for a weekend. I think he hoped that I might become a second Michael Palliser. Michael had been on Gladwyn's staff in Paris where he was extremely successful and Gladwyn regarded him as still on his staff even when he was the Private Secretary in No. 10 and would ring up Michael to demand to know this or that, or please do this or that, or maybe not even the 'please.' Then Michael became rather unavailable at No. 10 and Gladwyn thought I might substitute, though he was amazed that I didn't follow what happened in Europe every day in the way he did. He drove a Bentley and kept a loaded shot gun handy. He had a lovely garden and would throw up the window, whip the shot gun to his shoulder and fire and you'd have a dead rabbit.

He did something in Paris that I admired and tried to copy later. He understood that de Gaulle was a great man and in a different category from most French politicians. So when de Gaulle fell from power the first time and went to Colombey-les-deux-Eglises, he stayed in touch with him. I don't mean in a daily way, but he would go maybe twice a year to Colombey to lunch with the General and he would report on that. He was quite right; it was good for Anglo-French relations and it was perceptive of Gladwyn to see that de Gaulle might come back and might be a major force. I did rather the same sort of thing with Mrs Gandhi when I was in India.

Gladwyn could be fairly intolerable. He was always conscious of what he was doing. He was the only smart man about town that I knew – perhaps that indicates simply how few I knew - that would wear a light blue suit and brown shoes, which really caught attention. Of course, catching the attention was exactly what Gladwyn intended.

Brilliant though he was, Gladwyn was not the stuff of a good Permanent Secretary. He really wasn't very good with ordinary people and people junior to him. But upwards he was on a par with anybody. I remember his coming into my office, and Barbara's office too, of course, to announce that he was going to see the PM. So he went across the road, saw Macmillan and returned to our office, which he used when he hadn't got anywhere else to go. He said,

‘Oh, the PM’s being good enough to make me a peer. He said I could choose to be a life peer or a hereditary peer, but you know, Miles, (his son) has no ambition. So I chose hereditary.’”

Back in the days when NATO was in Paris, we had two very strong personalities there at the same time: one was Gladwyn and the other was Frank Roberts, who was Ambassador at NATO. Somehow or other they got into an argument and I no longer remember what the issue was, though it did have some relevance to both of them. They bombarded Derrick with angry telegrams about how they’d been thwarted by the other one. So Derrick sent for both of them and told me to arrange to put on the top of my desk, a roll-top desk with a flat top that was at a convenient height for reading papers, the latest telegrams from the two Ambassadors. The two arrived at 9:30 or some such time and I showed them in to Derrick’s office. About twenty minutes later they emerged. There were the telegrams. Derrick immediately looked at them and said, ‘Look, you chaps should stop doing this sort of thing.’ With wonderful presence of mind Gladwyn stepped forward, looked through the sheaf of telegrams, and said, ‘Ah, just as you might expect, two from me and five from Frankie.’

As I say, Gladwyn did irritate some people and amongst the people he irritated was another man who was very much of Gladwyn’s mould. This was Philip de Zulueta, who was Number Three Private Secretary to the Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan. Philip had much the same attitude to the rest of the world as Gladwyn did. They didn’t get on at all well, not surprisingly. They might have been splendid friends – though Philip was a lot younger – in civil life, but not competitively in the Diplomatic Service. This came to the fore when there was a famous meeting in Paris in 1960 of the three Western heads of government: de Gaulle, Eisenhower and Macmillan with Khrushchev and Bulganin. I was there because I was Derrick’s Private Secretary. You know the Embassy in Paris in a way that I don’t really, but the arrangements for the visiting Prime Minister and team were that they had a particular room (the Salon Vert) which was to be where the Prime Minister would do business. Philip took great care to see that Gladwyn was never included amongst the people whom the Prime Minister wanted to see. But he was sort of half-defeated by the fact that the entrance to Gladwyn’s bedroom was through this room. Gladwyn found occasion to go to his bedroom rather frequently. Presumably, he hoped that Macmillan would say, ‘Oh, Gladwyn ...’ which he didn’t do. So Philip rather triumphed over that.

Philip was extremely good himself, but he was of the same cast of mind. He offered me a job when Philip came with Macmillan to the funeral of JFK in Washington. I happened to be in Washington at the time and I remember at lunchtime one day, Philip standing expansively in front of the fire in the drawing room of the residence. I think he knew that Macmillan was going. Any rate, he had arranged a position for himself as a director of one of the merchant banks and he stood there, saying, 'John, look, you'd better come and join us.' He wasn't employed by them yet, but he assumed that if he said, it would be done.

Roger Makins was of a different stamp from Gladwyn, no less able, probably more effective in many circumstances, because he was more open, more friendly and more capable of running a successful team. He was fully qualified to be Permanent Secretary and, of course, did become so in the Treasury. He was jolly, smiled a good deal and was intellectually very sharp. I admired him for several reasons, particularly perhaps for the breadth of his vision. He wrote a very important influential paper in August 1951 with the title '*Some Notes on British Foreign Policy*' which I read a couple of months later in Shemlan. It convinced me that despite my struggles with Arabic at MECAS (Shemlan), I had chosen the right profession.

I assume the '*Notes*' were the result of internal discussion in the FO and bore in mind the Foreign Secretary's view, but all the same it was Roger's paper. In the old days, it would have been classified as a 'State Paper', standing alongside Eyre Crowe's. It took a broad view of British interests and prospects and reached a clear conclusion. Even at the time I wondered if we could do all Roger foresaw and in retrospect it is clearly over-optimistic. But it had many merits, including a stress, if I recall correctly, on the importance of developing the British economy. I believe the Foreign Office should produce a similar analysis every five years or so, but I don't recall that this happened. People thought all right, but they did not go through the discipline of writing.

Roger was a big man, like Gladwyn and like Derrick Hoyer Millar. They were all of them well over six foot and strong. Roger was possibly the easiest one to have a chat with. He was very good with Americans. I came to know him better a long time later, after I had retired. We were members of the same dining club and I met him in other people's houses in London. I liked him a lot; I would have liked to have worked for him; I am not sure that I would have liked to work for Gladwyn. I asked Roger once why his son, Christopher, who

succeeded me in Washington, had resigned from the Service. Christopher was exceptionally bright. The Makins family were Wykehamists and Roger had been whatever the equivalent of head boy was, just as Gladwyn was an Etonian and Hoyer Millar was the head boy of Wellington. Christopher was brilliant and opinionated and had many of the talents of his father - and obviously Roger was sad because had Christopher stayed in the Service, he could have gone right to the top. Roger's reply to my question was, 'Love.' Christopher married in Washington and never left.

Many people were surprised that Hoyer Millar was chosen. However, it was the right choice. He lacked the breadth of thought of Makins or Gladwyn's flashes of brilliance, but he had a wonderful understanding of people. He had been, I think, something like seven years as Private Secretary to the Ambassador in Paris very early in his career and then he'd been the Number Two Private Secretary to the Foreign Secretary and in that capacity he'd really been personnel department. It was before there was such a thing as Personnel Department, so he'd been in charge - I imagine he had to get the agreement of the Permanent Secretary and probably the Foreign Secretary too for certain appointments. But as a result of this he knew a great deal about individual people and was brilliant at it. During my time as his Private Secretary, the Head of Personnel Department was John Hennecker-Major, who was probably the best Head of Personnel Department there's ever been. But Derrick knew even more. From time to time he really irritated John by ringing him up to say, 'I see you're about to post x to a Middle Eastern post. Well, that's an interesting appointment. Do you think it'll be all right? I mean, you do remember that x had an affair with the wife of ...' Well, of course, the thing had to be changed then. He was absolutely right about it, again and again. A great many ambassadors in particular, and others too, passed through this office, so you saw a lot of people and you made up your own mind about a lot of them. I would trust Derrick's judgement above any of them. I've already told you the story about his sandwiches. He too was a member of Boodles, and he was very much a Scot. He retired and became Lord Inchyra and bought an estate in Perthshire. Derrick did everything right. He married the right woman, who was the daughter of a very distinguished Dutch ambassador, as I recall, who had a largish fortune. She was a delightful person, quite able to keep up with Derrick. Then while he was Permanent Secretary he had a big house in Eaton Square. When we went to Washington, I accompanying him, he would stay, not at the Embassy, but with his cousins the Glovers. The Glovers owned a big hunk of north-west Washington. If you left

the Embassy on Massachusetts Avenue and went up Massachusetts Avenue for another half a mile, everything on your left for a long way belonged to the Glovers. You drove in at rather grand gates off Massachusetts Avenue and there was a winding drive upwards to the top of the ridge, where there was a large stone house, the Glover mansion. Derrick knew all the leading American diplomats and also the leading politicians and had the right touch with them. The only time I remember him being a bit annoyed was when I appeared to lose his luggage. We flew with the Prime Minister to Washington and lo and behold everything was fine except that the suitcases for the Permanent Under Secretary and the Cabinet Secretary, Norman Brook, were missing. Derrick felt that I should have looked after that. I had to race around doing things and it turned out that those were the only two suitcases that had not been taken off the plane. The cases were found quite rapidly and restored to their owners who were then were able to concentrate on affairs of state. It was very illuminating sitting in the car with Derrick and Harold Caccia, driving back from Camp David, listening to their discussions. Not about high policy, but about how to run an embassy and whom they needed, what they didn't need, what was available. They understood how to make things work. I found that quite educational.

Derrick never seemed to be in a rush. He was ambidextrous in the sense that as Permanent Secretary he was equally good at politics and at the organisation and management of the Office. If he said something in either field was ok, there was a general feeling that of course he was right.

When Derrick gave a party in Eaton Square, it would be very grand, very friendly, but the people there would be as good a company as you would find in London, perhaps a tiny bit short on the intellectual side, but very strong in most other areas. I've spoken of the only moment when I remember Derrick being irritated. One of the moments on which he was pleased, in addition to this occasion I've already described between Frankie and Gladwyn, was when there was a photograph in, I think, the *Tatler*, or it might have been the *Queen*, at a time when there was a huge amount of popular discussion about the Establishment and what was U and non-U. This particular photograph claimed to be the definitive photograph of The Establishment. It was arranged as if it was a school photograph of the first eleven, or something of that sort. There were a lot of distinguished people; so they had a row at the back standing, then a row seated where you would expect to have the captain, and then a row sitting on the ground with crossed legs. Well, he didn't make a big fuss about it, or anything

of that sort, but I could tell that Derrick was really pleased to see that he was seated and Gladwyn was sitting on the ground. Derrick had wide interests; he knew a lot about pictures, for example. But then there was the occasion when he bought a Boudin from Agnew's. After about five months or so, consulting some of his friends, he concluded it wasn't a Boudin. Agnew's took it back.

One of the things that I so much admired about some of these people I'm talking about was that they were men of wide interests; they didn't regard it as anything extraordinary to have learned a lot of poetry or to have done something unusual. I don't remember any of them doing any particular geographical explorations, not in the Thesiger style, at any rate, but they were all people you'd say were highly educated, cultured and had special interests and were interesting to talk to, even on nothing to do with foreign affairs.

Interview IV with Sir John Thomson (corrected)

11 July 2017

Today is 11 July 2017. This is Catherine Manning recording an interview with Sir John Thomson for the British Diplomatic Oral History Programme.

CM: John, you've said that today you'd like to talk a bit about the period of Suez in the Foreign Office. I thought I'd start by asking you just to set the scene about where you were working and what you were doing in 1955 and 56.

JT: I got back from Damascus with Elizabeth, my wife, who was seven months pregnant at that point, in - I guess it must have been in May, because Adam was born on the 1st July. I reported to the Foreign Office. I didn't know my way around, so I had to be shown to Southern Department where I was under the belief that I was going to have the Spanish desk. I thought that was rather exciting. I got to the department, which had a very pleasant set of rooms looking out mainly on Downing Street, on the same level as the Secretary of State's offices, and discovered from Hilary Young, the Head of the Department, slightly apologetically, that no, I was not going to be in charge of the Spanish desk because a more senior person in the department already wanted it, so I was going to have the Greek desk. It

was an abrupt change in geography and expectations. It turned out accidentally to be a very good thing for me.

My colleague who went to the Spanish desk was extremely well suited for it. First of all, he looked every inch a diplomat. He was tall, handsome, dark-haired and, I think, spoke some Spanish. At any rate he wanted the Spanish desk. Soon thereafter, the Spanish Ambassador died. Surprisingly, he was given a state funeral. Why, I don't remember or perhaps I never knew. At any rate, there was a procession through the streets of London to, I guess, Westminster Cathedral and so my colleague who had the Spanish desk put on his uniform and marched in the procession in the correct place as described to him by Marcus Cheke. Now, Marcus Cheke was the long-serving Vice Marshal of the Diplomatic Corps, a rather pompous gentleman who knew his protocol inside out. All new recruits to the Foreign Office at that time were given a pamphlet - quite an extensive pamphlet, I think it might have been thirty pages - instructing young officers on how to behave in all sorts of ways, including about visiting cards and turning down corners of them and so on. Protocol was the centre of Marcus's life, as far as I could ever make out, which made a telephone conversation on the day following the funeral poignant. My colleague on the Spanish desk rang, saying, 'Marcus, I've just been looking at the splendid photo in today's *Daily Telegraph*.' It was a big photograph of the procession. 'I'm sorry, Marcus, but you know you were wearing your hat back to front.' Mortification ensued. It was quite a natural mistake, because it is a sort of fore and aft cocked hat. I might have made the same mistake as Marcus, had I possessed a uniform and marched. So it was just as well that I was on the Greek desk.

But I came to the Greek desk at rather a fraught moment. The first bomb in the Enosis (Reunion with Greece) campaign went off, I think, on the first of April that year. So the troubles had just begun. I dealt with this situation for three years or so and it became very tense. I can say something about that as we go along, but the reason for mentioning it now is that because of the Cyprus situation, and because it was quite a high profile business, with fairly frequent debates in Parliament and a lot of Parliamentary questions, I found myself in the thick of Whitehall politics. Eden had just become prime minister and was reluctant to give up foreign affairs. Not that any prime minister ever does, but Eden felt he had special understanding and grasp and so he insisted that he would personally deal with the big issues, such as relations with the US and the USSR or the formation of Europe. The result was that Macmillan, as Foreign Secretary, was rather excluded - he saw all the papers and so on, but it

was really the Prime Minister who was running foreign policy - so Macmillan was left with the lesser problems and Cyprus was one of the lesser problems. That turned out to be rather fortunate for me. I saw Macmillan frequently, sometimes briefly by myself, or as one of three or four people gathered to discuss Cyprus with him. I came to know not only Macmillan and the junior ministers, too, particularly Tony Nutting, but also senior civil servants, for example the secretaries in No. 10 and in the Cabinet Office. As a result of all that I think I was probably regarded as a promising young man who knew how to take a note. That was what, partly, brought me into the fringes of the Suez episode.

However, before I get on to Suez, perhaps I could say something about the Foreign Office as I saw it at that time. I am describing my views, my feelings; I am not being a historian here. I had enjoyed my time in Jedda particularly, and to a lesser extent in Damascus, for reasons that I have already explained, but I have to say that, on the whole, the quality of the people I was dealing with in the embassies, the British embassies and in the embassies of the Americans and the others that I came across, was not of the highest. They were often very able at their job, not always, but you didn't feel they were really totally top class people, though I did think that the American Embassy in Damascus did have first rate people, at least at the levels that I knew. When I got to the Foreign Office, it was a revelation to me, and an excitement, to discover that the quality of the people in the Office that I was dealing with, and in Whitehall more generally, was on the whole very high.

I'd like to make a few comments which perhaps are happenstance but do, I think, illustrate the atmosphere in the Foreign Office. First of all, the department, in my case Southern Department, was an important, close-knit body of - what? - perhaps eight men, something like that. There was the Head of Department, who was in this case first of all Hilary Young, succeeded by John Addis. He had a large room, handsome, all fitted up by the Foreign Office of course, so the furniture had been there a long time. Then there was the Assistant Head, who also had a room, but I think usually the assistant head had to share a room; some departments had two assistant heads. The rest of us were in what was called the Third Room - a phrase I haven't heard for a long time - and actually applied to two, three or four rooms collectively. There were some very interesting people in that category. I noted a little wryly that my room for two and a half years or so was Room 101, which if you recall *1984* ... Nobody else seemed to notice. There were two of us with our desks touching each other and we were sitting opposite to each other. I would observe an oddity - there were many

oddities in Foreign Office postings – who could possibly have told back in the mid-1950s that Room 101 would be the home for three successive High Commissioners to India: myself, Robert Wade-Gery and David Goodall. We were not all there at the same time, but I overlapped with both of them. It's too complicated to explain how all that happened, but it is a little odd. It tends to show the special feeling in the Diplomatic Service that you were in service and that you might or might not like the other people in it, but you were definitely colleagues and on the whole worked together very well.

I found it really exciting to have so much work. It wasn't that I had been idle in Jeddah and Damascus, but there wasn't a great pressure of work. I found myself in Southern Department with great pressure of work and it was all new to me. I had never seen a Foreign Office file before and I was quickly impressed by the filing system. It was really admirable. Of course, it's all long gone now and it all depended on people writing. Sometimes there was some typing on it, but basically it was hand writing. I'm going to describe it briefly. Every paper that came into the department was given its own cover, that is to say a paper cover that was slightly bigger than the standard Foreign Office telegram, which folded over it and on the front of it in the hand writing of the filing clerk was a description of what the paper was inside and then below it there was two thirds of the page left for comments. The comments could go on on the inside of the paper cover. The system was that the paper came first to the desk officer and the desk officer did what seemed to him the sensible thing to do and then submitted it to the next person who was likely to be the assistant who would then, if appropriate, send it to the head of the department. It went on up the chain until somebody put their initials on it. As long as any comment was signed, whatever your signature was, fully, it had to go to the next level. When initials were put on it, that's where it stopped and, of course, ultimately some of these papers did stop with the Foreign Secretary putting his initials on them, in red usually. If you had nothing to say, presumably because you more or less agreed with the comments which were there before it reached you, you simply signed your name and then it went on to the next level. But anybody at any level, my very junior level included, could comment; in fact I was expected to start with some comments and the comments were expected to be short. You were expected to have done your homework by pointing out that this was the second time, etc, or this linked up with something else. One of the great advantages of this system was that you knew what everybody had said and you could look back at it. Another advantage of the system was that the papers previous to the

new one that you were dealing with were attached by the filing clerk behind. Occasionally, on some boring subject, it would be a huge dossier, but that was rare. I do remember one case dealing with coal mining in Greece - why I had to deal with it I can't remember now - but it did have a big thick dossier behind it and you had to find your way through months, even years, of documentation. But the filing clerk put behind the paper that you had, any papers that were referred to in the paper that you had, right there, all tied up with pink ribbon, red tape in other words. I thought it was an admirably precise system. You got everything that you obviously needed. Now, sometimes you had to ask the filing clerk for more. He attached the paper that had been mentioned in the new document, but when you looked at that you saw that the crucial paper had been mentioned in the attached document and you had to ask for that. It was all very precise. I thought it was clearly saving a lot of time for the desk officers who took the responsibility of making the first comment.

It so happened that Cyprus became such an active subject that I was instructed usually not to send the papers to the Assistant Head, but directly to the Head and I saw him, often several times a day. Between his room and the Third Room where I sat, 101, there was a long narrow room where two ladies sat, the head departmental lady, who was really the secretary for the head of the department, and another more junior lady who helped her. I also discovered, to my surprise - nobody told me anything about this - that there was a typing pool. The two ladies sitting next door were very obliging. I'm not sure what their instructions were; I am not at all sure they were really supposed to help somebody as junior as I was, but they did, frequently. But they were also very busy, so I had recourse to the typing pool frequently, sometimes two or three times a day, because I was expected to produce drafts for this and that. I was fascinated by the young ladies who came from the typing pool; they had different systems. Some of them took dictation as one was led to expect from seeing films, with a notebook and a sharp pencil; some had a little machine on which they typed. How they turned what I was saying into something they could type, I never understood, but it seemed to work. If I may again digress, I really came to have a great respect for these ladies; they worked very hard, long hours. Often I found them extremely obliging. It was much harder work than it subsequently became, because if you needed to have three or four copies, that meant carbon paper, so any error or change meant a lot of work in getting it through to all the carbon copies. They were very dexterous at this. I found Hilary Young's lady, who was a bit more senior than the other, was extremely able and

fast. There were two or three occasions at least, that I can remember, I got into the Office at a fairly reasonable time, to discover that scarcely had I arrived before I was told that I was to go and see the Foreign Secretary in twenty minutes. Obviously he would be likely to take a decision which would have to be transmitted by telegram. So I would rapidly produce a draft telegram to submit to him for his decision. It would be my idea of what was a sensible decision, taking account of British policy.

I learned to dictate straight onto the typewriter and that was another very educational process. You really concentrated on what mattered. One lady I must say I was astonished by who was Jack Ward's PA – I'll come to Jack in a moment – a very senior lady, as befitted Jack's position as a Deputy Under Secretary. She was extremely good at short hand. She always had five or six sharpened pencils in her hand. The look of contempt on her face as she performed, and as Jack changed his mind, was profound. I don't think Jack ever noticed it. But sitting there listening to it and watching it, I was amazed. She never said anything of that sort, not to me; I'm sure she did to her lady colleagues.

All that sort of thing was quite exciting. As I said, suddenly I saw how the Foreign Office worked and then I began to see how Whitehall worked. I had quite a lot to do with both the Colonial Office and the Ministry of Defence, for obvious reasons. Cyprus was really the business of the Colonial Office, but since it involved Greece and Turkey, much if not most of the work was done in the Foreign Office, which isn't to say that my colleagues in the Colonial Office didn't work hard; they did. I remember that one of them got a CMG and his wife apparently said, 'What is that?' She was told, 'A Companion of St Michael and St George.' She said, 'Well, I wish he'd be a companion to me.'

I came across Lennox-Boyd, the Colonial Secretary, who impressed me a good deal. I saw him quite frequently. He was a very experienced, Conservative Member of Parliament, a big, ebullient man with a nice house and garden, I can't remember exactly where, but within walking reach of the House of Commons. I noticed quite quickly that Alan Lennox-Boyd never asked the advice or the comments of anybody in the Foreign Office without first plying them with a glass of sherry, which I thought was rather prudent. I also noticed his technique for dealing with questions in debates in the House of Commons. He wound up debates on Cyprus. He was a good debater and a good speaker and very experienced, as I've said. He would go into his winding up speech at a great pace and of course there would be

interruptions from the Opposition benches and he would wave them away. 'I don't have time; I don't have time.' And he would go on at a great pace; it was really very difficult to interrupt him. He was quite a generous man too. I remember one occasion I was summoned to see him; I think there was somebody else there too. There was a very nice Permanent Secretary in the Colonial Office who may well have been there. Lennox-Boyd attacked me, saying why had I ventured to ascribe to him a view which he would never have held? It was in some Foreign Office telegram or other; he was quite angry about it. I said, 'Well, sir, it was because you said so.' He said, 'I'd never say anything of that sort.' I said, 'Well, sir, you did.' Having been brought up as a Cambridge historian, I rather treasured archives. I carried this black bag around with me, with a lot of papers in it. I knew what papers I had and, fortunately, I had the black bag with me. I opened it up and I produced two or three pages, typewritten, and I just handed it to him. He said, 'Oh, oh, this is my typewriter; this is my private typewriter.' He read it and then he said, 'All right. I can see why you said that.' He was really generous about it. It wasn't sheer luck; I did do the work for it.

He was not the only person who wanted history to be as he said it should be, rather than as it was. Another debate in the House of Commons where the Prime Minister, Eden, was to open the debate and I was summoned to meet him in his room at the House of Commons half an hour before the debate started. I provided him with his speech, and I am sure he added bits, or his secretary did. He said to me airily, 'Well, I can say we consulted the Commonwealth, can't I?' I said, 'No, sir, you can't. We didn't consult the Commonwealth.' 'Why didn't we consult the Commonwealth?' 'Because you told me not to, sir.' 'Oh, very well then.' It did pay to have done your homework. Eden was a good speech maker, too, and also very experienced. He was a very good foreign secretary, but he was not a good prime minister.

Let me say one or two more things about life in the Foreign Office at the time. I remember Pat Hancock, who was the Private Secretary at the time. I would say the very epitome of the 1930s diplomat, a person who had done all the right things: his French was perfect; his German was perfect; and he had a wife whose clothes were amazingly appropriate and fashionable. He was also a kind and thoughtful person. At the time I was in lodgings for a few weeks somewhere not very far from Victoria Station, so I walked across the Park to the Foreign Office. My wife was having our first child and staying in Cambridge with my father in the Master's Lodge at Corpus Christi. Who should I meet as I walked across the Park but Pat Hancock, who by then knew me for reasons that are obvious from what I have already

said. I was rather struck by the fact that he was carrying a rush basket, seemingly incongruous with his well-cut suit. He saw me looking at it and he said, 'Oh, it's a fish.' Of course, it was a salmon he had caught. Exactly who he was taking it to, I'm not sure; at any rate he was taking it into the Foreign Office. Then I saw a bit of the Private Office also through my close friend and continued colleague, Johnny Graham, who was Private Secretary, number three or maybe number four. It was Pat Hancock and then Donald Logan as number two; then there was somebody else I think and maybe Johnny was the fourth one, until Macmillan brought in John Wyndham who owned Petworth and who was, of course, an outsider. John Wyndham was in charge of the Foreign Secretary's social side, his engagements. He had the most beautiful wife and he was a strange man in a way; drank too much. Harold made him a peer, eventually, saying that anybody who owned Petworth ought to be in the House of Lords.

CM: Did you have any particular impression of Macmillan himself?

JT: Oh yes, Macmillan (Foreign Secretary April-December 1955) was I thought the ablest politician I met. Now, I am not sure he would have come top in pure intellectual terms, but his intellect was considerable and he understood things without there being a lot of explanation. He thought things out and he had enormous experience too. His wartime experience, being close to Eisenhower, etc, etc, was very important. He gave me one of the most delightful instructions I've ever had. There was to be a tripartite conference, Greek, Turkish, British, held at Lancaster House. I've forgotten the exact dates but quite early on in my time, so I think it might have been the autumn of 1955. (Tripartite Conference on the Eastern Mediterranean, 6-7 September 1955.) Macmillan was hoping to get the two governments to cooperate over Cyprus. It was quite a big thing. There was an amusing cartoon in Punch about this conference with an apt quotation. The picture was of Macmillan sitting with a Greek lady on one hand and a Turkish lady on the other. The quotation was from *The Beggar's Opera*,

*'How happy could I be with either,
Were the other dear charmer away.'*

I was instructed by Macmillan to write a speech for him as chairman to open the conference. Like Alan Lennox-Boyd, he believed that things went better after a glass of this or that. The conference was to start, I think, at eleven o'clock and there was to be a grand lunch at one o'clock, which meant that the conference had to stop at a quarter to one or

something of the sort. Macmillan didn't want either the Greeks or the Turks to start an argument before they'd had lunch, so he instructed me that his speech was to be 'long, dull and pompous.' I thought I did it to perfection. I wrote this speech and it was accepted verbatim by the Head of Department and then it went to Macmillan. Then I was sent for to see Macmillan. He had the speech in front of him and his only comment was, 'Are you sure that Richard I did this?' Richard, you may know, dealt with Cyprus rather cleverly in connection with the Third Crusade and managed to sell the island twice. I am making it a little bit simple there. So Macmillan said, 'Did Richard really do this?' I said, 'Yes, sir, he did.' 'Cleverer man than I thought he was.' That was all. By then Adam was old enough to be scribbling and we had copies of this speech. I don't know how many copies had been made, something like a hundred, and there were about twenty left over which I took home and the backs – because it was very extravagant, only one side of the paper was used – so Adam grew up scribbling on the back of copies of this speech. It did exactly what Macmillan aimed to do. It didn't end until about 12.35 sort of thing. But then disaster! When we broke up, news came that there had been an attack on Ataturk's birthplace; a bomb had gone off there. That really made things very difficult. That was one of my various encounters with Macmillan, who as I say I admired greatly. I never saw him get into a flap about anything and he had plenty of reasons to do so. He was always in control of the situation. I never heard a conversation between him and Eden. I don't know quite how that would have gone. Of course, I did actually see them together in the House of Commons and other places, but I never was party to a conversation. Macmillan was always on top of the subject and understood politics, though his Private Secretary, when he became Prime Minister, complained that he couldn't ever get Uncle Harold, as he called him, he couldn't ever get Uncle Harold to get with the modern world and look at television. He thought that this was a big mistake, and it probably was.

A final Macmillan story perhaps. Long afterwards, when Ted Heath was Prime Minister and the accord with the EEC was to be signed in Brussels, I happened to be in Brussels at the time. I had nothing to do with that, but it was a big thing on television. We didn't actually see the man throwing the ink all over Ted Heath as he walked towards the great room where everybody was assembled to sign the document, but there was a long period when Ted Heath had to be taken away and a new suit found for him. Then he came back again and signed the document. It was all OK except that it meant that it went on for a long time and the

television people had a difficulty. It certainly wasn't in their script and how were they going to fill up some three quarters of an hour until the Prime Minister came back again. Macmillan was present; he had no role in it, but he was, properly, invited there. Everybody was wearing dark suits; so was Macmillan, but he was wearing a grey waistcoat and so the television kept picking him out, because there was hardly any variety otherwise. Later, I commented to him that this had been a very good ploy. 'I'm glad you noticed it, my boy. I'm glad you noticed it.' He often called me 'my boy' and once 'Derrick's loader', a reference to my position as Prime Secretary to Derrick Hoyer Millar.

I should add one more Macmillan story. I arrived, because I was sent for, early one morning at the Embassy in Paris, having travelled over on the ferry overnight. Exactly why I was sent for I can't remember now. Very soon after I arrived - it was quite early; the office wasn't open yet - I was in the Residence and I knew the private secretaries and to my surprise I heard people saying, 'How's the Secretary of State this morning?' I had never heard anybody say that before. Then five minutes later I heard somebody say it again. So I said why this? It was revealed that Macmillan had stayed up late the previous night, talking with Pat Hancock. Everybody else had gone to bed including Gladwyn, the Ambassador. Eventually, Macmillan decided that he too should go to bed. They got in the elevator and the elevator stuck between floors. They shouted and nothing happened; they couldn't attract any attention. But Pat Hancock was a resourceful chap. First of all, he suggested that he jump up and down to free whatever was preventing the lift from moving. Macmillan vetoed that idea. Pat, presumably connected with his fishing activities, was carrying a large pocket knife, which had a big blade. He cut a panel out of the side of the cage of the lift and crawled out through that onto the staircase, then went and roused Gladwyn, who appeared in a silk dressing gown. Somehow or other, I've forgotten exactly how, the Foreign Secretary was rescued. Twenty-four hours or forty-eight hours later, I don't remember, we were all saying goodbye to the staff at the Residence and as we went down the stairs I was slightly behind Macmillan and I heard him say to Lady Jebb, 'Well, this is a visit that will always stay in my memory,' obviously referring to the lift episode. Then it turned out that Gladwyn hadn't told her anything about it. She didn't understand and said, 'What? Why?'

It was a closed group of people, rather special people, who recognised that they were all together in this specialness. It's all long gone, I mean the days when - I was still a third secretary - when a third secretary saw the Foreign Secretary and the Foreign Secretary

recognised him and knew who he was. I saw the Permanent Under Secretary only once or twice. I think some of the Cyprus papers must have gone through him but he was not present at most of the meetings we had. That was Sir Ivone Kirkpatrick, a very able man who had done a great job in Germany and eventually wrote a history of Mussolini's Italy, as I recall. When I was being sent to New York to take part in a debate in the General Assembly on Cyprus which meant drafting a speech – Sir Ivone sent for me. It was rather like being summoned by the headmaster and I guess it was the first time I had ever been in that room. He sent for me, I think to see what sort of person I was. I remember his advice, though. He knew I was going to New York for this purpose and I was to write speeches and so on, and he said, 'Take a bottle of vitriol with you.' When I got to New York, I used the bottle of vitriol, metaphorically, and it wasn't at all acceptable to the Minister, i.e. the Deputy Permanent Representative. No, no, that's not the way we do things in the General Assembly. So I had to re-do it.

CM: After a short pause, John, we are going now to speak about how, through your work on Cyprus, you came to be involved in the Suez Crisis in 1956.

JT: Having spent five years in the Middle East at the beginning of my career, I had rather strong personal views about a number of Middle Eastern problems, certainly including Arab-Israel problems. I had formulated in my mind ways of dealing with some of these problems. I need hardly say that nobody asked me, but I found it extremely interesting, also difficult. Then came the nationalisation of the Suez Canal (26 July 1956) when I was back in London dealing with Cyprus, having the Greek desk in the Foreign Office. By 1956 I was feeling fairly confident. I had made the transition from being a non-Foreign Office person to an insider. I had worked hard, but I was beginning to feel that I really knew my way around and people did listen to my suggestions.

Suez took me by surprise, that is to say, first of all the nationalisation. I had no inkling of that, although when it happened I could see that it was a natural thing to have happened, given Nasser's dominance. He was the leader of the revolution against the King, but he was not the head, nominally, for a year or something like that, and then he got rid of the General (Mohammed Naguib) who was the nominal head and became the head of it himself. He had a rather able set of ministers, who were his ex-Army officers, with him. I could see the appeal of Arab nationalism with which I had some sympathy, but of course I also felt

strongly that I wanted the British to be successful, as they had not been really over Palestine. We, the British, did put a big effort into the Middle East. It was an important part of our military overall strategy. Going back to Cyprus for a moment, we established the two sovereign base areas in Cyprus, not really because of the Cold War so much, in my view, but because of the Middle East, and that was a very sensible place to do it. It was exactly what Disraeli had been after. The beginning of the episode that led to Suez was lively and interesting and rather crucial for Britain, or at least, rather crucial for British standing in the world - what we thought we could do and what we could actually do. As things developed, I was less and less convinced by the British claim that the Egyptians couldn't run the Canal themselves. I've already told you the story about the entry to Jedda port about the ten-year-old boy who brought in the ship. I thought it was likely that the Egyptians could run the Canal. At the same time I did see the crucial nature of the Canal. But now that we no longer had India, the reason for us being very concerned about the Canal was reduced considerably. It was almost more a matter of prestige rather than a matter of strategy that we wanted to remain in control of the Canal. By then I also had begun to have doubts about Eden as a prime minister. I liked Eden, though he occupied a world that was very different from my world. I did respect the fact that he had read Oriental Languages at Cambridge, so he did know. He had been a successful foreign minister for a long time, so he did know more than a great many possible alternatives would know. I think that he felt personally challenged by Nasser's move and I began to feel a bit uneasy for that reason. The process went on and, of course, there was a lot of feeling about the Americans in this too. I do think that John Foster Dulles didn't play a constructive role in this and got us into unnecessary trouble, but at the same time, I was extremely busy with Cyprus at that time and I did not know what Eden and Selwyn Lloyd, who was then the Foreign Secretary (from December 1955) ... Incidentally, Selwyn Lloyd was an interesting, able man. He was a QC, quite rightly so. He'd been minister of state in the Foreign Office, so he had some background, but he really wasn't quite ready for being Foreign Secretary when he suddenly discovered himself in that position, when Macmillan became Chancellor of the Exchequer and the post was open and Eden had to fill it. The person who everybody thought was going to be Foreign Secretary one day, but not yet, was Tony Nutting, who was minister of state and you could easily see why people thought Nutting might be, because he was so like Eden. He was tall, a little willowy, handsome, confident, socially excellent, hard-working, so he probably was a better minister of state than Selwyn Lloyd had been, but Selwyn was senior to him and there

was no question of Tony Nutting becoming Foreign Secretary at that stage, but everybody expected him to be Foreign Secretary in ten years' time.

I didn't see nearly as much of Selwyn as I had of Macmillan. I did see a bit of him. I visited him in his house two or three times, I guess. I was impressed the first time I went at the number of empty bottles there were in the fireplace, somewhere in Chelsea. It was clear that there was no woman in the house. I think he must have been giving a party for the 1922 Committee or something of that sort. He was an able man and when he had found his feet - but that took two or three years - he became a very good Foreign Secretary and he went on to be a most successful Speaker. At the time I first knew him he was not very confident, and certainly I don't think was in a position to argue with Eden who was, for the reasons I have just explained, the acknowledged expert. I do remember driving round Ankara, or being driven round Ankara, with Selwyn. Why he and I were the only people in the car, I'm not quite sure, but it all had something to do with a CENTO (Central Treaty Organisation) meeting perhaps. Dulles was there and I thought Dulles behaved very badly. At any rate Selwyn fell into conversation with me. He did know who I was and the only thing I really remember from that conversation was that he wanted me to know that he was capable of giving a good speech. Obviously he was aware that some of the speeches he'd given recently were not ideal. He told me that he had been President of the Union at Cambridge and he had given good speeches and he hoped to do so again. But he was obviously under great pressure. Dulles certainly didn't help. As I say, I doubt whether he felt he could really argue with Eden.

I had a slight side view of what was happening because, completely by accident, the very nice general who commanded the landing force in the Suez operation, Hugh Stockwell, actually was our close neighbour in London. Both our houses had tiny gardens behind them and then you went through the tiny private garden into the square. I didn't know him at all well, but he and his wife and his dog, I think, were quite often to be seen in the garden and you could have a word with him. Of course, I didn't know what job he was being given. I think hardly anybody in the Foreign Office did know. People who knew were certainly Sir Ivone Kirkpatrick, the PUS, and I imagine Barbara Evans knew something about it. I imagine that maybe the Chief Legal Adviser, Sir Gerald Fitzmaurice, would have had some inkling also because of the questions that would have been put to him. I don't think he would have been

told about the secret discussions. I think Pat Dean would have known, in fact I'm pretty sure he did.

CM: What was he at that stage?

JT: I think he was Deputy Under Secretary for Intelligence. I have forgotten what the title was exactly. The Private Secretaries must have known, particularly Donald Logan, who accompanied Selwyn - I think Selwyn rather depended on him - to the meeting in Paris, and I think maybe to other events, too. I didn't know Donald well, who was so much more senior and responsible than I was. I succeeded him eventually in Washington, but that was later. Otherwise, I don't think anybody in the Foreign Office knew, but I may be overlooking something obvious. So there was no real prior discussion in the Office. Yes, you could read about it in *The Times*, and so people might chat about it at lunch, but I had no inkling that there was this plot - and it was a plot - going on. Nor did Evan Luard who was sharing Room 101 with me. Evan was my entry and was at Cambridge at the same time as I was - I think he was at King's. We didn't really know each other at that point, maybe aware of the other's existence, but that was about all. Anyway, he was a very nice, kind and thoughtful person, quite private, but interesting.

The situation was getting worse and worse. I am afraid I haven't looked up the history books, so I really am rather vague about the precise dates on which things developed. Because the situation was getting worse and worse there were a lot of ministerial meetings and I am inclined to think that the Prime Minister continued to keep it very close. I have looked up, long ago now, so I don't feel that it is fresh in my memory, the Cabinet Minutes and I am rather horrified at what I have seen, because, if I recall correctly, Eisenhower wrote two long personal letters maybe four weeks apart, something like that. From these letters he knew that something of this sort might be possible. I have to say that Dulles was very, very difficult. It all started with the Aswan High Dam. If I recall correctly, and I may not be getting it right, the Americans, that is to say Dulles, but he must have had the agreement of the White House and probably the Treasury, were backing big loans to Nasser to build the High Dam. Then Dulles changed his mind and suddenly withdrew the offer of loans. This took the British by surprise and no doubt Nasser as well. As I've just said about this meeting in Ankara, there was tension with Dulles all the time. He certainly wasn't very favourable towards Britain. To go back, Eisenhower clearly

had – I don't know through what sources, whether it was only through Dulles, but I suspect there were other sources that he had – Eisenhower was clearly worried that the British and maybe the French too, but of course I've only seen his letters to Eden, were going to do something unilateral and violent. He wrote, I thought, two very good letters to Eden. Eisenhower's letters were addressed to Eden personally; the two men had known each other well in the course of World War II. When I read them, I thought the letters were couched in the right spirit and appropriate language. They were long and well argued. So far as I know, Eden did not send reasoned replies, though there must have been some assurance that the letters had been received and read. Unfortunately, Eden kept them to himself, though I assume the Cabinet Secretary and Selwyn Lloyd must also have read them. When the Cabinet met, if I'm correct, Eden merely told them that he had been in correspondence with the President. He did not circulate the letters, as I understand it, and didn't really tell his colleagues what the contents were. Nobody appears to have cross-questioned him about that.

There was an element of Anglo-American relations very much embodied in this whole Suez episode. Eden made it so rather and the press loved it. A crisis is always good copy. And it was a crisis in the summer of 1956 and into the fall, with successive ministerial meetings, not just Cabinet meetings, but meetings of ministerial committees and of senior civil servants. The result was that the Cabinet Office was very hard pressed to prepare these meetings, to attend them and to record them. By that time people in the Cabinet Office had come to know me because of all the meetings on Cyprus. So, although Cyprus was by no means over, I was asked to come and help, not preparing the meetings, except in the most mechanical way, but in recording them. I got involved in listening to some very interesting meetings, not as a matter of course; I wouldn't go to the meetings unless the Cabinet Office rang me up and asked me to go. The Head of my Department did not object.

CM: Was this after the actual invasion?

JT: I can't remember the date of the invasion. It must have been October.

CM: I'm just looking at Wikipedia. 29 October 1956.

JT: That's roughly what I remember. The great drama for me was in late October, Evan Luard and I heard late one afternoon, that Kirkpatrick, the Permanent Under Secretary, had

sent for the Ambassadors of Egypt and Israel at half-hour distances; one was to be at 5.30 and the other at 6, something of that sort. I remember walking home that night, that is say from Holland Park tube station up Lansdowne Road to my house, thinking this is splendid. Kirkpatrick will be saying to the Egyptian Ambassador, 'If your government wants us to intervene militarily and prevent the Israelis from attacking you and seizing the Canal, we are ready to do so; but we won't do so unless you ask us.' I thought this was a very strong position, so that if Nasser said, 'Yes, I want you to,' - because we generally assumed that the Israelis would defeat the Egyptians - then the British forces, which I knew had been augmented in Cyprus, would immediately intervene and it would leave us more or less in control of the field. And if he said, 'No, we don't want you to intervene,' I thought the Israelis would go ahead and would defeat the Egyptians, and I didn't quite know what the terms would then be, but clearly at that point the British and the French would intervene and say, 'Enough's enough.' So I thought it would leave us as the arbiter of the situation. I thought this was a very interesting development. By the time we came in next morning, to my immense disappointment, that was not what Kirkpatrick had said and we realised that it was war and not at the request of the aggrieved party.

For about two and a half, maybe three days, Evan and I did very little work. We spent all the time talking about the situation. We approached it from rather different points of view. I approached it from my Middle Eastern background and from what I have just told you about how I could see that we could turn all this to our advantage. Evan, who didn't have any Middle East background, but was devoted to the idea of the United Nations, looked at it from a different point of view, namely that we shouldn't be doing this without a Security Council resolution. So we had lots of discussion. It was of course fruitless in one way, because there was nothing that either of us could do, nor were we asked to do anything. The work on our in-trays just piled up. Eventually - I give him great respect - Evan said that he was going to resign. So he went to see John Henniker-Major, the Head of Personnel Department - I wasn't there, of course, but I think I understand pretty well what happened. Evan said to John Henniker-Major that when he had applied to join the Diplomatic Service, it was on the basis that Britain was a signatory of the UN Charter and indeed had been, to a significant extent, its author. What the government was now doing was inconsistent with the Charter and Evan felt that they were breaking a contract which was of fundamental importance and therefore he couldn't support the government. John behaved admirably, I thought. He accepted the

resignation, having made sure that it was not a flash in the pan, and by the end of the week Evan had a fellowship at Oxford as a result of John Henniker intervening with Alan Bullock, I think it was. So Suez to me was sort of summed up in these two and a half days of discussion. Evan went on later to become Labour MP for Oxford and eventually became Minister of State in the Foreign Office. In that capacity he stayed with me in India.

CM: John, can I just ask, you were having those discussions with Evan after the Americans had basically pulled the plug on the operation?

JT: No, before that. I was very disappointed that this unusual situation was being used in the wrong way, from my point of view, from my Middle Eastern background. Then, as you say, the Americans pulled the plug and this was through Macmillan, as Chancellor. It was the financial side and Macmillan represented this to the Cabinet. It was something that one couldn't argue with. It was going to ruin the pound.

CM: What was your personal reaction when the news came about the Americans?

JT: Well, I felt the Americans shouldn't have done this, at that point. At that point I hadn't read the Eisenhower letters. After I had read them, quite a long time later, I felt that Eden should have behaved in a different way. I felt rather devastated, and personally, wondered about my career in the Middle East. I assumed I would be going back to the Arab world. It was quite an exciting time. Lots of things were happening. Tony Nutting, who by then I knew a bit, had a very able, very strong-minded private secretary, Derek Dodson, who later became ambassador to Turkey among other places and who was clearly devoted to Tony Nutting. It must have been fun being his private secretary, I think. Tony Nutting then resigned, to the absolute fury of the Tory Party, who felt that this was the deepest ingratitude. He had been promoted way beyond his age and experience by Eden and here he was biting the hand that fed him. Nutting was doing it for much the same sort of reason as Evan Luard, namely on the UN, and he never recovered. He would have been a good Foreign Secretary. I heard some of the senior ladies of the Conservative party on one particular occasion discussing him. Wow! They could hardly consider anything as bad as what he had done. Tony Nutting had marital problems at about this time. I remember that I had to go and see him in lodgings off St James's Street, a small apartment. I suppose it was his marriage rather than his resignation that caused him to be there. I had a lot of respect for Nutting. He understood foreign affairs.

CM: Did you feel the event, particularly the American part of the crisis, did you feel it as a national humiliation?

JT: Yes, I think the answer is yes, but one wasn't prepared to admit it.

CM: And you said you thought you would be going back to the Middle East. What were your thoughts about that in relation to Suez? Did you feel that this had damaged British reputation in the region?

JT: Yes, I did think that I would be picking up the pieces from the smash. I had in mind a Greek vase being broken and then picking up the shards - I don't know why I had that picture in my mind, but that is what it was – perhaps for the rest of my career. In fact, it didn't turn out that way. It was not nearly as damaging to the British in the Middle East as I had supposed it would be. What really was damaging to us was our own economic situation.

CM: May I ask you one more question? In Anthony Beevor's book about the Ardennes, he describes the very difficult relationship between Montgomery and Eisenhower and he puts forward a hypothesis that the result of Montgomery's being so difficult and unreliable as far as Eisenhower was concerned in 1944, was that twelve years later at Suez Eisenhower had a residual resentment or memory of the British not being good colleagues and subordinates in his push through Europe. Did that ever appear as an element in American behaviour?

JT: No, it never occurred to me. More important, I should guess, was Eisenhower's personal experiences during the War with Eden and especially with Macmillan.

CM: It is rather personalised perhaps, as an explanation.

JT: No, I do think that personal feelings do influence decisions, certainly they do. I think that Montgomery would have been a difficult person anyway. It never occurred to me that Eisenhower's attitude over Suez was influenced by the War, I don't think so. There may be evidence to the contrary. Certainly, what I don't know really is what the British Army felt about it. It was a terrible blow to one's expectations.

CM: Were there any other resignations?

JT: No. I know that there were some people, some of them fairly well known, who later said that they had resigned because of Suez, and maybe they did, but I don't think anybody else resigned at the same time. I didn't hear of it, apart from Evan.

CM: Did you know Evelyn Shuckburgh?

JT: Yes. I did.

CM: I remember reading his book *Descent to Suez* which was published I think in 1986 because of the 30 year rule in those days. It was obviously a trauma for him.

JT: Yes, it was. It was for a many people, I think. Evelyn wrote a diary every night. Eden was a very dominant force by then in the Conservative Party. The Party was with him, I think. Nutting was not. It was a very courageous move on Nutting's part, but it was a disaster for his political career. But also Eden was not well.

A couple of my recollections here. First of all one rather entertaining story that I heard from Lord Salisbury, Bobbety as he was known in the Tory Party, who was Lord President of the Council. I don't think he had a departmental role. He was regarded as the quintessence of the reasonable Tories. He resigned on a very odd point. He resigned eventually when we released Makarios from the Seychelles, very odd. I was involved and that took me completely by surprise. Because of all this turmoil I happened to see him a bit, and he told me one morning, it must have been a Monday morning, the official car had come to the great Cecil house, Hatfield, and it had not been the usual Daimler. It had been a smaller car, an Austin or something of that sort and he had said to his usual driver, who was driving this car, how much he approved of this - because there was petrol rationing - of this decision to get rid of the Daimler for this purpose only to meet a reply, 'Yes, my lord, but this Austin has a double carburettor. It uses more petrol than the Daimler.'

There was an occasion when Eden was ill, as he was throughout this period, ill enough to be in bed. So the Cabinet met, not in Downing Street, but in the Lord President's rooms looking out on Whitehall parade ground. I was there. It began with his saying he had been to see Anthony on his sick bed already - this was held in the morning - and Eden had said to him he would be prepared to get up and come down and address the 1922 Committee, because there was real worry, so the Chief Whip, who was Ted Heath, had said, about the line the government was taking. I can't remember the date I am talking about, but I think it would be December. So the discussion was almost as much about domestic politics, mainly about how the Conservative Party would take what was happening, or was about to happen, as it was about international affairs. It was about the mix of the two. It went all round the table, with

Bobbety presiding at one end and Ted Heath, the Chief Whip, sitting on his right-hand side. Everybody was saying complimentary things, how brave of Anthony, how splendid, until it got to Ted Heath, who, with great courage, said that if Anthony did get up and address the 1922 Committee as suggested, they might say that they were ready for a new government. At that the conversation changed entirely and not another word was said about Anthony's bravery. They went off in a completely different direction. That was quite a revelation to me. It was a big thing to listen to fifteen men saying one thing and then changing like that.

Then there was another event, again I was there because the Cabinet Office had asked me to be there. This was in the House of Commons. There was a debate on wherever we were in the Suez episode. Suez absolutely pushed everything else off the front page. There was a division. I was together with Burke Trend who was the deputy Cabinet Secretary at that point, and one of the secretaries from No. 10, or was he from the Cabinet Office? Somebody senior. It was odd that I was there. They all knew me by that time. I can't remember what the actual substantive position was, but I was tremendously struck by the fact that when the division occurred Rab Butler, who incidentally is a cousin of mine - but that I did not disclose - who was acting in Eden's place, (Eden was still Prime Minister) came and chatted to us for about three-quarters of an hour in a very genial, very Rab-ish way. He wasn't talking about Suez in particular. He was largely talking about how to conduct foreign affairs in general and how to manage Parliament and international affairs. It was a monologue. I think occasionally Burke might have put in a word or two. It must have gone on for ten or fifteen minutes, something like that. Then there was chit-chat. I contributed little or nothing, but I found it fascinating. I've never understood why Rab was there. Perhaps there is some arrangement that the mover of a resolution doesn't have to go through the Lobby, because it's obvious that he is going to vote in favour of his own resolution. I just don't know enough about Parliamentary procedure. But it was a very tense time, but Rab was very calm about it.

Then came Eden's resignation (January 1957) which, in a way, was a surprise, but of course, but not a surprise in one way because we'd all been told for some weeks that the Prime Minister was ill, but one kept on assuming that he wasn't very ill, but then he resigned. By chance, my wife was away with the children somewhere and I was being a bachelor for three or four days and I invited George Richardson, one of my oldest friends from Aberdeen days, to dinner and I was going to make the dinner myself, which was a rather foolhardy thing to

do. At any rate I did it, and I remember chatting with George in our kitchen about this surprising news and who was going to succeed Eden. We easily narrowed it down to Butler or Macmillan. I think we were both in agreement that it should be Macmillan. The Cabinet met, as I understand it, immediately after Eden's resignation and Bobbety and somebody else, maybe it was the Chief Whip, were appointed to find out what the members of the Cabinet felt about it and they each came before these two gentlemen to say who they thought it should be. And every one of them, except one, was for Macmillan. Now that's hearsay; I wasn't present; I didn't have anything to do with that, but I think they probably made the right choice. So Rab had every other job you can imagine, but just not prime minister. Rab was an extremely clever man, but he wasn't a very clubbable man. It was not that he was grumpy or anything of that sort, he just didn't have a particular flair for getting on with people. I don't know how to describe it quite. Whereas Macmillan, possibly helped by the fact that his wife was otherwise occupied such a lot of the time, was very clubbable. Years later in what I assume was a brilliant stroke of intuition, Rab was appointed Master of Trinity College Cambridge. He did it genially with insight and great success. So much so, that the Fellows petitioned the Crown to extend the appointment.

Perhaps I may be allowed to illustrate Rab's personality with a personal story. Soon after I was appointed High Commissioner to India, I dined at the Trinity High Table as a guest of Jim Butler, the Regius Professor of History. I was seated on Rab's right hand and opposite me was the new Conservative candidate for Cambridge, Robert Rhodes James. Rab talked with me and Jim throughout the meal, welcoming my appointment. 'It's good to have India back in the family.' (He was born in the Punjab and his father was a Governor of at least two provinces.) All he said to Robert Rhodes James, at least in my hearing, was 'Please pass the cabbage.'

Interview V with Sir John Thomson

18 September 2017

Today is Monday 18 September 2017. This is an interview with Sir John Thomson for the British Diplomatic Oral History Programme. Catherine Manning recording.

First Secretary, Washington, 1960-64

JT: We've agreed that I will speak in two sessions about Washington in the '60s, especially the early sixties, when I was there. I want to do two sessions because I want to do justice to America in that period. A lot of things happened then. Some of them weren't new things at all; they were an intensification of trends that had already started or they were things that were doubtful and then got confirmed during this period. It was a period of freshness and excitement and I'd like to give one or two examples, outside the requirements of my professional job, which certainly were fascinating to me.

I'd like, for example, to speak about the status of women. The changes in that, positive changes in my view, began during the War I would say. I don't want to denigrate what happened between the two wars either, but the War did do a lot to put women in positions in which they did jobs that men otherwise would have done, and did them very well. That all greatly enhanced, I think, both in the eyes of the men and of the women, what women could do and should do. I think the change that had begun during the War continued during the Eisenhower years, but rather gently. The US and Eisenhower were still distinctly conservative, which isn't to say they weren't also progressive, but the majority of the country, including I think a lot of the women, would have always been tending to go to the conservative side. Under Kennedy, it became clear that liberation was working. By the end of the decade, I would say that a large proportion of American men accepted that and that did a lot to make the position of women a bit easier and secure promotion for them. It was interesting that at the beginning of the decade you might have thought, as I did, that the women's movement and the black movement were about on a par. Both were moving forward, but gently, as I've said. I expected that both of them would move further, but suddenly it seemed that the women's movement shot ahead. I can't help suspecting that part of the reason was because there were a number of people who didn't want to be against both blacks and women, and found it easier to choose the women. That's not said on the basis of any statistical study. It is interesting that, if true, it was true, even in the decade when the blacks made the huge step forward, that is they crossed the Congressional bridge and secured a legal position for themselves and their movement and the necessary steps, rules about elections for example, to carry them forward. Yet, here we are, half a century later, and I think it is hard to believe that women won't soon be equal in virtually all respects, I'm thinking particularly of wages, with men, quite soon, whereas race has come back again as a

big issue, politically and socially, in the US. Now we have a situation where the battle lines of the Civil War are again relevant and being fought over. Something that may have helped both movements, was that the generation of politicians and public figures who did such a tremendous thing, first in creating the New Deal and then in winning World War II, was still in authority during the Eisenhower period, but in the '60s they were handing over the baton to successors, not necessarily successors they would have chosen themselves. There was a palpable feeling when Kennedy came in, in 1961 - that is to say, he won the election in 1960, but of course only took over in January '61 - of spring time, of things potentially growing, and certainly of there being an opportunity for change. I'll come back to that in a moment, but I want to stress that there was this strong feeling, at least on the East Coast, less so in many other places, though I would think California was much the same, and commentators were suddenly finding themselves having to re-assess the situation.

I mention this because commentators were very important to me - they were to many other people too. I came to know quite well three out of the four best. Walter Lippmann was still a very shrewd person; he still asked difficult questions, but he wasn't altogether happy in the new age. Joe Alsop was very much an insider in the new age, but then he couldn't cope with Vietnam. Then the same was more or less true of the one commentator I didn't know. I was amazed that I had four years in Washington and I never met Scotty Reston; I did later, but not then. Finally, there was Joe Kraft; he was a younger generation than any of the people I mentioned and I think he was a nephew of Katharine Graham, who owned and ran and was the inspiration behind the *Washington Post* in its great days. His column appeared in the *Washington Post*. He understood the new men and the new men felt comfortable with him. He died tragically early, at the age of 61. On the whole, I thought he was more acute than the others. He lived in Georgetown, like all of them. I think I could even find his house; his widow much later married Lloyd Cutler, the famous lawyer at Wilmer Pickering. The commentators said a lot of interesting things, partly because they had a very interesting situation to comment on, but I did find talking with them extremely useful. It greatly improved my understanding of America, and to some extent my understanding of international affairs, though of course the reason why I was able to talk to them was that they wanted to talk to me about international affairs.

I would like to make what I suspect is a pretty controversial statement, namely that the '60s, and not accidentally in my view, saw both the peak of effective US influence world-wide and

the climax of the Cold War. I expect that there will be many people who will raise an eyebrow, or maybe even two, at that statement. To them I would say, make comparisons, look again and weigh what actually happened. I accept, of course, that the US was in a more dominant position in the '90s after winning the Cold War than it was in the '60s, unbalanced with another nuclear superpower, but unhappily in my view Clinton didn't know what to do, and the opportunity was rather wasted. Also it is perfectly true that the Cold War continued long after the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Berlin Crisis of the early 60s, but not with the same degree of danger. Those two episodes and the whole attitude of the West, I think, convinced the Soviet Politburo that the West did mean what it said, even about the improbable circumstances of West Berlin, some 120 kilometres on the wrong side of the line and surrounded by the Red Army. Nevertheless we said we'd defend it and they believed it, or certainly had a large area of doubt that made it too risky. The Cold War after that continued at quite a rate and Gromyko in particular, never gave up trying to split the Western powers, break off the Italians or the French, but not even over the INF (Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces) the nuclear missiles in the '80s, did they split, though there were a lot of worries in the West that they might. So I think that the early '60s was the time when America actually had its biggest importance and influence, not its biggest potential influence, perhaps. It was the time when the Cold War moved from being a potentially fighting war in Europe to being a war in which we were trying to capture pawns, not rooks and knights, in the Third World. That was very, very important. I know that the younger generation, my children included, felt in the 1970s and 1980s that the Cold War was extremely dangerous, but to me, it never again got anywhere near the danger we had in the early sixties. I think it's perhaps a bit relevant, too, to remember that this was a period before the American reputation was stained by events such as My Lai, the whole Vietnam imbroglio, which was so sad and in the end so unnecessary and before Chile, which will forever, I think, burden Kissinger's reputation and before America got into the habit of supporting dictators.

Balancing that and outweighing it, was America's immense generosity and attempts to improve the world as a whole. For example, not only foreign aid as such, a huge programme probably greater than that of all the other countries put together, but improved food programmes, which I later saw the effect of in India; and in the Alliance for Progress, in which finally the US began to take Latin America seriously; and in the struggle, forcefully and subtly – I had great admiration for it – in which America managed to hold the number of

nuclear powers down to the original number, except for Israel, and at the same time prevented dissemination of nuclear weapons. It was a most important achievement. Kennedy was on record as saying that he supposed that unhappily there would be twenty nuclear powers in twenty years; that was his estimate. America did so much, also, to support UN programmes, which doesn't always get counted in, but Americans were the inspirers of many of the programmes; they ran many of them and they paid large sums for them. It was a time when the world admired and also envied America and, of course, American business greatly profited from this and so did American farmers and American banks and others. Rather sadly, I can't help comparing that with the situation today under President Trump. The decline is nearly all self-damage. That comparison only confirms me in my belief about what I've already said about the early sixties.

It was a great excitement to find myself involved in this. I saw an America trying hard to do good, not always producing the results they intended, but still, it was exciting that they had coherent policies. They reached their policies through a process of reasoning. The leaders were perhaps the most striking group I've ever met of intelligent, thoughtful people. They came to Washington with Kennedy and Johnson, so they were mainly Democrats, but many of them were more concerned with the common good than with party ideologies. They did their homework; they applied reason; they were optimistic; they enjoyed life and the influence they had and they were fun. I've counted myself lucky, and still do, to have been part of that. President Johnson, otherwise not a symbol of the Kennedy era, was addicted to a phrase – I hope I'm going to get it more or less right – a biblical phrase from Isaiah, something along the lines, 'Come let us reason together,' (Isaiah I, 18. *Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool*) which he quoted quite frequently and that symbolised much that was good about Washington at that time.

I would say that for Britain too, that it was a very important period, above all because of de Gaulle's refusal to accept us as a member of the EEC. Part of his reasoning, but only part in my view, was our close relationship with the US. That relationship was very close and very important for sterling, for us politically and in defence matters, especially nuclear ones.

Nevertheless, it was under Kennedy and Johnson that the US mired itself in Vietnam. The same people who I admired for their domestic and European Cold War policies arrogantly

misjudged the situation in South-East Asia and created a national disaster, the effects of which still reverberate.

I say this at the beginning of what I have to say about Washington in the sixties, because I want to give the impression of what the overall situation was and I fear that I may lose sight of that when I get down to the details.

CM: And it felt like that at the time?

JT: Yes. I'm not saying that it felt like that to all Americans, but it did feel that way to me and quite a lot of other people too. Like all political judgments, it has to be shaded and I will shade it in a moment or two. I'd like to start being more detailed by going back to the very end of the 1950s and the very beginning of 1960. I always thought that Eisenhower's apparent intellectual inadequacies, revealed in his press conferences, had quite an important effect politically in America. He was quite remarkably inarticulate. I don't know whether it was age, which I have to admit it could well be, but in his last couple of years as President, he did not inspire the country. The situation became notably worse in that particular respect with the Soviets' success with Sputnik. I went to Washington on two or three occasions in '59 and '60, and remember my hostess at one Washington dinner party stopping the party temporarily at 9:12, shall we say, so that we could all go out in the garden and watch Sputnik go over. There was much discussion about Sputnik and about how far America was falling behind and it was not just in rocketry and nuclear forces. This was taken as a symbol of national virility. Khrushchev was rather adroit at exploiting this feeling in his statements about Russian rocketry being able to hit a fly in space, which was not true at the time, but has now actually become true.

At least one of the occasions I went to Washington before I was posted there must have been in connection with all that. There was a meeting between Eisenhower and Macmillan which was due to take place in preparation, I think, for the forthcoming Summit which was to happen in Paris in May 1960. So this meeting might have been a few weeks earlier. Eisenhower received Macmillan in Washington, but it continued at Camp David, the President's official retreat near Gettysburg. For some reason or other, I don't remember what, I was helicoptered up there by myself. The rest of the party was already at Camp David. On arrival I found the situation not altogether happy. The President's staff had misunderstood his wishes and had arranged for Macmillan and a couple of supporters to

breakfast with him and that had not been, apparently, Eisenhower's real wish. A minor matter – but the medicine cabinet, a very standard piece of equipment, above a basin in the bathroom of one of the members of our group, fell off in the middle of the night and smashed the basin, so that was another subject of conversation when I got there. For me the most interesting part of that occasion was at the end, after the proper meeting had taken place. I was there, of course, as Private Secretary to the PUS, Derrick Hoyer Millar. He and Harold Caccia, then Ambassador in Washington, and I shared a car back from Camp David to Washington. The discussion in the car was a little bit about the meeting, but it was overwhelmingly about running the Foreign Office, who was to be promoted and what we should concentrate on. It was extremely interesting. I said not a word, but I took in quite a lot.

Then came the Paris Summit, which was a very big event and was billed all over the Western press and I'm sure all over the Soviet press, as a very big event. It was a four power meeting: France was the host under the great General; Britain and the US constituted the rest of the Western team, although perhaps it's wrong to call it a team. And then of course there was Khrushchev and Bulganin. Things had been going wrong for some time and they went dramatically wrong just as the Summit met – I don't remember the precise date (14 May 1960). I said they had been going wrong for some time and that was when Khrushchev and Bulganin came to visit London and Commander Crabb's headless body was then discovered. It was clear that the British had tried to do something, which the Russians fully understood because they would do the same, but the British had done it inefficiently. And worse, much worse, partly because it was at the Summit time, was the U2 episode when Gary Powers, the pilot of the U2 which was shot down, jumped out and was saved by his parachute. But again the West looked very much in the wrong. This undoubtedly was seen even by most Westerners as a provocation. So we started the Paris Summit under rather difficult auspices. I went as Derrick's Private Secretary; it was a useful step in my diplomatic education. When I arrived early in the morning; I was surprised and amused to find the senior mandarins of the delegation at the Embassy all talking about the extraordinary news that Susan Mary was going to marry Joe Alsop. Well, I later learned that it was rather extraordinary, but I didn't know anything about it at the time. I later met both of them and came to know Joe quite well. I felt I was beginning to understand a bit more about how things worked.

I was burdened with a huge, black bag which had a complete set of the briefs for the meeting. I was interested that nobody during the whole course of the meeting ever asked me for one brief. I don't believe that anybody referred to any brief. I had read them all, before arriving, and I did wonder why we needed some of them. That was another piece of education. That afternoon I was included in a meeting that took place in the US Embassy in Paris about the requirements for verification of a nuclear test ban. This was highly technical stuff. It was the province of Con O'Neill, one of the most intellectual diplomats I've ever met and a very sharp man, with nice humour underneath it. Really only Con O'Neill on the British side understood the subject. That meant – I wasn't told this until after the meeting started – that Con couldn't take the note. So who was going to take the note? Well, Thomson can take a note. My note was terrible. I never really understood it. I've never had a draft so tremendously altered as that draft later was by Con.

For me, the Summit began on a lovely May evening in the Quai d'Orsay, in a room which I suppose had seen a great deal of negotiation. I imagine it was where a lot of the negotiation between Clemenceau and others at the end of World War I took place. It had big windows opening onto a garden, the windows were open, and I was seated near one of them, not at the table of course, and it was almost a John Buchan scene, elegiac certainly.

The meeting was sort of getting under way, but the US Secretary of State wasn't there and then he arrived and I was really surprised. This very nice man Herter, who had been a Senator from Massachusetts, a Republican, very much in the Eisenhower mould, came in on two sticks, very cheerful, but he couldn't move without his two sticks. Couve de Murville, who was in the Chair, was less of a surprise; I had come across Couve before. He was, next to Gromyko, about the sourest foreign minister that I've come across. It was not entirely clear that France was going to support the US throughout this meeting, but neither was a rift certain. Doubts were created. I suppose, partly for that reason, the next morning there was a very early breakfast at the US Embassy to discuss tactics. There was just Macmillan and Eisenhower and some supporters, including my boss, so there I was too, but not in the meeting. For some reason or another, I was left there. Everybody rushed off to get to wherever the meeting was to be held, leaving me behind. I spent about two hours looking at the American Ambassador's wonderful collection of Corning glass. He (Amory Houghton) was in fact the owner of the Corning factory, so he had lots and lots of beautiful glass paper weights.

An agreement had been made, so I was told by those who were at the meeting, that as soon as de Gaulle, chairing the meeting, declared it open, Eisenhower would step in and make a conciliatory statement about the U2. But that's not what happened. What happened was that Khrushchev beat Eisenhower to the draw and de Gaulle recognised him as the first speaker. That didn't work very well. I don't know that it mattered, because there was no progress on anything. I think Khrushchev was just enjoying himself so much at the expense of the discomfiture of the West that he wasn't going to get embroiled in detailed discussions about force levels, etc. Then in the afternoon we were all astonished to learn that Khrushchev and Bulganin had been seen in an open car driving into the countryside, pursued by many, many cars carrying the press. Nobody knew where they were going or why. A variety of theories were suddenly produced, all of them turned out to be wrong. Suddenly Khrushchev had his driver stop and he held a press conference in a field. He announced there was no progress and it was all the fault of the West. That was the end of the Summit. So this enormous Summit for which we'd all worked so hard fizzled out into nothing.

Here I might put in one or two personal notes, because I was credited with extreme political foresight, quite unjustly. As the American delegation was leaving whichever of the Paris airports it was, my wife Elizabeth was arriving and she knew some of the people on the delegation. They said to her, 'How did you know to arrive at this moment?' The explanation was that I had made a deal with my boss, Derrick Hoyer Millar, that I would have leave from the end of the Summit until the next Monday, or something like that that, but suddenly, instead of it being a long weekend, as expected, it turned out to be five or six days, so Elizabeth and I toured Burgundy. We had great fun.

May I insert a couple of strange episodes? The first was setting out for the meeting at the Quai I have already described. There were four or five cars drawn up in the courtyard of the British Ambassador's Residence. Macmillan got into the first of them and the Secretary of State got in with him and then I don't know who got into the next one. Derrick Hoyer Millar, and therefore I and Tony Rumbold found ourselves in a car with an unsteady hired driver. We set off at a tremendous pace and hit Macmillan's car. Nobody was hurt; no real damage was caused, but suddenly crowds of people surrounded our car. By the time things were straightened out, the other cars had all gone on. I was surprised that the driver elected to turn left. I'd expected him to turn right. But my knowledge of Paris was very shaky, so I thought, 'Surely the Embassy knows how to get to the Quai,' which was where we were supposed to

go. But in fact they'd hired a driver who didn't know, so we drove on. Derrick had started his career with seven years in Paris, and Tony Rumbold certainly knew the city. I thought, 'They'll say ...' but they were deep in conversation. Finally, after we'd driven for five or six minutes, there was no sign of the other cars and I didn't recognise anything, I drew their attention to this. They were astonished. Then they took charge and told the driver what to do and we got to the Quai and it was not a tragedy. But best laid plans don't always work out.

Then, as I think I've said already when talking about Gladwyn, there was this rather comic situation over the conflict between him and effectively Philip de Zulueta, who was the PM's Secretary for Foreign Affairs. Gladwyn naturally wanted to participate in consultations with the PM and Philip was determined to keep him out. The problem was that access to Gladwyn's bedroom was through the *Salon Vert*, the room the PM used as his study. Gladwyn kept on popping in and looking around expectantly and everybody fell silent. Then he had to say he needed a handkerchief or something.

I've said all this as the background to my going to Washington in the summer of 1960 because I wanted to show that, although the US was far and away the strongest country and it turned out later that a lot of the things that were said about Russia being so far ahead in Sputnik and nuclear weapons were quite untrue, nevertheless, there was a feeling in the West, including in much of America, that things were not going well. This was crucial to the election campaign that took place in the summer and fall of 1960, which was Nixon, Vice-President, versus Kennedy.

I had always followed American politics closely, because I was brought up in an American political household from 1940 to '43 and had learned quite a lot as a result. I shared this view that things were not going very well, and I thought that Eisenhower, whom I later came to admire as a really good President, nevertheless, at the time I thought he was bumbling and incompetent. But I did note that Nixon had not been invited to the Summit, nor to the Camp David meeting. Nixon was Vice-President, OK, but he wasn't really part of policy making, so it seemed to me from the outside, but I was probably rather in favour of Nixon. I wasn't in favour of Kennedy when the primaries started, partly because of his father. I remember being taken by my grandmother in Scotland to see his father get an honorary degree at Edinburgh and I heard a good deal about him at that time and he didn't sound an admirable man. I thought Kennedy was a little young and brash. I came round in the course of the primary

campaign when his main contender was Johnson, though there were two or three others, to have more and more respect for Kennedy. When he won West Virginia, which was regarded as a bellwether, to test whether he, as a Catholic, could get votes from a Protestant state, I was impressed. I admired what I'd heard of Johnson's political skills, but I didn't particularly like him as a person, at that time. I was actually pleased when Kennedy won the nomination. Of course, it didn't matter one way or another whether I was pleased.

Then came the fascination of the four debates. They were extremely important, both in determining the result and in educating American public opinion. I give all parties a great deal of credit for agreeing to this and for agreeing to the format which produced real discussion, unlike most of the TV debates I've heard since then. I listened to all four of them, on the radio I think. The first I scored a narrow victory for Kennedy, the second a clearer victory for Nixon, the third, probably Kennedy, and the fourth more or less a tie. It was an even discussion. Well before the end of that, I very much hoped that Kennedy was going to win, no doubt helped by the fact that that was also my wife's view.

When Kennedy won the election, I gave Denis Greenhill, the Head of Chancery, a bit of a shock, because I arrived in the Embassy rather late, at least half an hour later than my usual time, and I met Denis in the corridor and I said, 'My goodness, isn't this close?' He said, 'What do you mean?' I replied, 'Cook County has still not reported.' He said, 'My God, I've just sent off a telegram saying Kennedy has won.' Well, then Cook County did what Cook County was supposed to do and Kennedy won. I'm inclined to believe the well-known story that when Kennedy got to the White House, there was a certain celebration and his great friend and important influence on him, Bill Bradley, who was the Editor of the *Washington Post*, was with him on his first morning, and Kennedy said, 'What do we do now?' I don't think that Kennedy had very much idea of what in practice he was going to do. His slogan, 'Let's get America moving' was effective - very like Mr Trump in a way, but there was a very different feel behind it. Then he made those great speeches, his Inaugural speech in particular, and that really rallied people and they believed that great things were going to be done and a lot of improvement achieved. In my opinion, on the day on which Kennedy was assassinated he probably did not have a majority of Americans with him.

I said something to the effect that JFK was failing to get the country moving at a dinner party given by Gil and Nancy Harrison, about a year after Kennedy was inaugurated. At the end of

that dinner, a big one for about twenty people, it so happened, that I was walking out of the dining room just behind Walter Lippmann and his wife, Helen Byrne Lippmann, a very acute lady, and I heard her say, 'Walter, you should get hold of that young man.' And lo and behold! a week later there was an invitation to lunch with Walter, which was the beginning of a long acquaintance.

I've tried so far to explain in general the excitement that I, at least, and I was not alone, felt about what was happening and not happening in Washington in the early '60s. I'd now like to move on to what I myself was doing. It was a bit of an accident that I was in Washington. I had actually been posted from Derrick's private office to the Consulate General in New York and Elizabeth and I had had the Consul General and his wife to dinner, etc. etc. I was not greatly thrilled by it, but it was OK. Then I was saved by a wonderful accident. The Foreign Office announced the appointment of some Consul General in America, and it turned out that they had neglected to get the agreement of the Ambassador, Sir Harold Caccia, who as a former Chief Clerk, was rightly incensed and knew how to take advantage of it. He jumped all over the Personnel Department and Derrick. You can't jump on Derrick, but Derrick always wanted things to be done properly and absolutely agreed with Harold that this was intolerable. Harold said he could only be reconciled to accepting this man, whose appointment had been announced, if the Personnel Department would send him as a First Secretary, either Philip de Zulueta, or John Thomson. Well, the chances that Philip could be prised out of No. 10 were nil, so Personnel Department, a little shamefacedly, changed my appointment from New York to Washington and Derrick said, 'That's much more appropriate.' I thought he might have said that a bit sooner.

The actual move to Washington was not as simple as it might have seemed. We were told to go by sea in either the *Queen Mary* or the *Queen Elizabeth* and that we could take as much luggage as we liked. We had three children and a fourth one on the way, and a nanny and sewing machines and things of that sort. I remember clearly that we had thirty four pieces of baggage, and that included, as I say, some very odd things. We got to Southampton and got on the ship and then it was announced that the crew had gone on strike. Everybody rushed to the public telephone. Eventually, I got in touch with the Foreign Office and told them what the situation was. They said they would let me know what to do. So we were left stuck there. The two branches that were not on strike were the photographers and the hairdressers and they very loyally and splendidly gave us some food. Somehow we got meals. We were

on the ship for about two further days. I remember that we had a problem because Nancy was one year old and she had to have food that required opening cans, but we didn't have a can opener. I assumed that the *Queen Elizabeth* could produce a can opener. So I went to look. It was a revelation. I went through huge kitchens. It was all spotless and fine but there was nobody there and no can opener. There didn't seem to be much equipment at all. Eventually, the Foreign Office told us to come back to London and they would put us on the plane from Heathrow to New York the next day. We went back to London and as the taxi was driving around Parliament Square, Richard said, 'Daddy, have we got to Washington yet?' The next day we were put on a BA plane, in the first class, absolutely amazingly. The poor Australian Solicitor General and his wife who were the only other occupants of the first class I am sure hadn't expected to be surrounded by the Thomson family. They were very good humoured about it.

Eventually we did get to Washington, via Elizabeth's family home in Pennsylvania. I had a week or so there by arrangement before I rang the Embassy and yes, I was to go next Thursday, or whenever it was. But when I turned up on the appointed day, there were rather black looks from my colleagues in Chancery. It transpired that the whole Embassy staff had been requisitioned to carry things from the old Embassy to the new and they had spent at least two days doing so, and why hadn't I been there to help? Well, I'd not known anything about it. The next thing that happened was an Open Day for the families of the contractors who'd worked on the Embassy. Lots of wives and children came pouring in, and I was appointed as one of the guides to show them round this building which I didn't know anything about at all. However, it was quite pleasant.

CM: John, can I ask you about new Embassy building? How was it regarded at the time, the layout, the architecture, as a working space? Were people thrilled to move into it?

JT: No.

CM: Did they think it looked nice?

JT: No. On the whole people didn't like the architecture. I did admire the coat of arms in brick. I thought that was very well done, but otherwise I rather shared their view. But it turned out to be a convenient building; for example it had reserved parking space for all the more senior people, which was absolutely crucial. I don't know what they did before.

CM: The old Embassy, the Lutyens Embassy, was very small.

JT: Yes, they had huts in the courtyard. The new Embassy was a convenient building, but it was quite different from what it is now. The crucial third floor with the Ambassador and the Chancery, was laid out with the Ambassador's suite as it is now, as far as I know, with the Ambassador and his ladies and his private secretary and then a speech writer – Harold Caccia had a very senior American journalist as a speech writer. Then you turned the corner and the corner office was the Minister and then the Minister's PA and the Head of Chancery's PA shared a room. Then came the Head of Chancery's room; and then a string of rooms, some twice the size of others, all along the front of the building, which were for members of the Chancery. That didn't quite meet all the requirements. There were about three on the other side, looking out to the courtyard, which was also the side where the safe was. Then was the big room for all the PAs for all the members of the Chancery. So everybody had his own room; no one was sharing a room. I had the great good fortune to find that the room assigned to me was next door to the Head of Chancery. It was a small room, perfectly adequate for me. By a coincidence, a week later, the new State Department was opened with the entrance on C Street. In many ways it was a rather similar building to the Embassy, the same type of building. Of course it was huge. There must have been some kerfuffle about Berlin that weekend which caused me to have to visit the new building while carpets were still being laid. Then rather oddly, continuing this business, I had to be there on Monday morning, and was able to point out to one or two people where their new offices were. It was a much more convenient building, I must say, than the old Foggy Bottom State Department.

Having plunged into the geography of the new Embassy, I ought to say something about the people in it. They were a really first-class group; not surprisingly, since Harold Caccia, who as I say, had been Chief Clerk, knew who was who and had staffed his Embassy over three years, or four, very strongly. There was the great figure of the Viscount Hood as Minister. Sammy Hood, with whom I worked very closely for a long time, was a remarkable figure in Washington. He knew everybody in society; he was a bachelor and very popular. He'd started in the Indian Civil Service and then gone shooting up in the Foreign Office, dealing with European affairs primarily. He knew everybody who mattered in Washington, played bridge with a lot of them, in winter wore a huge, heavy coat with a big astrakhan collar, and was a man who was never ruffled, imperturbable, and had the complete confidence of Harold Caccia, and indeed, of everybody else, so he was allowed to do

whatever it was he thought was appropriate, which suited me, working for him, very well. I thought his judgment was excellent. So much was he respected in Washington that when he left about two years after I'd arrived, to return to the Foreign Office, Americans gave a special honorary lunch for him at Blair House, right opposite the White House. I didn't hear of them doing that for anybody else. They were quite right. If Sammy had a view about something, the Americans paid attention to it. I've never forgotten the moment at a four power meeting with some great tensions going on in relation to Berlin. This was a constant thing. We British, rather led by me, wanted to meet the problems early, face on, in the approaches to Berlin, and the Americans didn't. I totally understand why they preferred to do things elsewhere, hit back at the Soviets in other places. Somehow or other this led one of the moderately senior Americans to question the readiness and ability of the Royal Navy to play a part round the world. The iciness of Sammy Hood's retort was something I've never heard the like of. There was no trace of anger in it, but never a word was ever said again of that sort. Often these meetings on Berlin went on late. We would drive back to the Embassy and then Sammy and I would speak for a couple of minutes and I would do a draft report or telegram. Sammy would go home – he lived in Kalorama Road – for dinner; he would come back after dinner and put at the bottom of the telegram a very elegant H and the telegram would go off. I had enormous respect for him and for his judgment.

He was succeeded by the Head of Chancery, Denis Greenhill, as Minister. A brilliant choice. I saw a lot of Denis; after all, I was dealing with a big subject and I happened to have the room next to him. For a period of about four or five weeks, Denis and I quite frequently discussed who the Foreign Office would send to replace Sammy. I never suggested Denis himself. We talked about half a dozen other people, whom we both knew. By then I knew a lot of people, having been Derrick's Private Secretary. One day Denis said, 'Guess who's got the job?' I guessed wrong. Denis was a very good Head of Chancery, Minister and Permanent Secretary. He and Angela Greenhill invited Elizabeth and me out to dinner at a Georgetown restaurant about two days after we arrived and it worked wonderfully. Denis was an extremely good raconteur. He was one of the best tellers of a comic story, possibly with a slight tinge of self-deprecation in it. I think he was in the London and North Eastern Railway just before the War, after Oxford. He told of wonderful things that happened that weren't supposed to happen on the railway. Then during the War he'd had a very interesting time in Cairo. I don't know exactly what he was doing, but obviously it was very tense

before Alamein. He shared an apartment with two other men, one of whom later became Chief of Staff and head of the Army. Denis had a very wide knowledge of people and very good judgment. He was never pushy and always sensitive and thoughtful.

There was a brilliant man, Charles Wiggin, who ended up as Ambassador in Madrid who was by inheritance a Spanish Marquis, not that you could have guessed that on meeting him. He'd already been in the Embassy a year or two when I arrived and he left a year or eighteen months after I arrived. He was the person who dealt with the Anglo-American nuclear arrangements, so very important. He went on to work with Sammy Hood in London later; not as closely as John Barnes did but nearly. Very able, very civilised and entertaining.

Then there was Tom Brimelow, who did the Intelligence and relations with the CIA, not that there wasn't also a MI6 man who I think was really the model for Smiley. I believe that I'm not the first person to say that. Alec Guinness modelled himself on this man. But Tom Brimelow was the person who was close to the CIA and others of that sort, so the moment Kennedy was assassinated Tom was asked, 'What is the state of readiness the US is going on to? What does the CIA think is going to happen?' Tom, like Denis, went on to become PUS.

There was Patrick Wright, another future PUS, who was the Ambassador's Private Secretary. There was my particular friend Michael Weir who did the Middle East. Then there was this rather strange man I've mentioned who did domestic internal, who was always fussing about his two German cars, trying to get the Embassy mechanics to deal with them. Judson was his name and a friend of Tip O'Neill. It was a remarkably strong group of people, including some I haven't mentioned, all of whom got on with their own jobs and could be trusted to do so.

Harold Caccia was very much in control of things. He used to play tennis regularly in a four, one of whom was Allen Dulles. He was extremely well plugged in. He was succeeded, to my amazement at first, by David Ormsby-Gore. I had known Ormsby-Gore in the Foreign Office. I'd seen quite a bit of him, but he wasn't a major part of my existence in the Foreign Office. I'd always thought he was maybe a little bit dependent on his relationships with important people in the Conservative Party, but he turned out to be a first-rate ambassador. I must say I had great good fortune with both Caccia and David Ormsby-Gore. I didn't see them very much, but they did read, I know, some of what I wrote. For example, when

Elizabeth and I were about to leave Washington, the Ormsby-Gores gave a small dinner party and the only other guests were Bobby and Ethel Kennedy and Arthur Schlesinger. It was a nice touch, I thought. Lady Ormsby-Gore was such a lovely person; she had a wonderful gift of making you feel that of all the people in the room you were the one she most wanted to talk to. They knew what was happening, both of them. And the Ormsby-Gores spent nearly every weekend of Kennedy's presidency with the Kennedys. The Kennedys' staff would arrange that some rich person lent their house, which happened to be two doors away from the house the President was going to for the weekend. They were really very close. I didn't know that when I was first rather amazed about the appointment, but when I discovered that, well, you could only say Wow! A few months after I arrived, I was greatly surprised to be asked to write the Annual Report for the Ambassador; it must have been for 1961. Having submitted it, I was told the Ambassador wanted to talk to me about my draft, so I went in to see him, thinking I would be asked why I hadn't included that or this. He said, 'It's fine, but I'm going to change your last sentence.' He crossed it out and he wrote in an elegant substitute, saying, 'This'll give you the hook in to your next Annual Report,' and then put his initials at the bottom. I really enjoyed working with those people. It was fascinating.

Interview VI with Sir John Thomson

20 September 2017

Today is Wednesday 20 September 2017. This is interview six with Sir John Thomson for the British Diplomatic Oral History Programme. Catherine Manning recording.

CM: John, we started on the 1960s this week. In our last interview you spoke a little bit about the '60s in general and today I think you are going to talk in more detail about your experience working in the British Embassy from 1960 to 1964, in the time of Kennedy's presidency.

JT: My job at the Embassy, as I was told when I took it up, was really in three parts, one part was dealing with European affairs in relation to America, in particular Berlin. I'll come to that in more detail presently. The second part was dealing with nuclear matters, that is to say proliferation, nuclear matters in relation to NATO and the Cold War, but not the big issues of the nuclear relationship between the US and the UK. Charles Wiggin did that. That was highly confidential, not that I didn't have the clearances for that, and occasionally when

Charles was away I dealt with it. The third thing was rather comic. I was told, 'One of the pleasures of your new job is that you'll get to visit the Caribbean twice a year, because you're responsible for the affairs of the US bases in the British colonies in the Caribbean as a result of the destroyers for bases pact in 1940.' Very important, those 50 destroyers were. In fact, I got as far as reading a brief about Chaguaramas, a name which has stuck in my memory, but if I spent as much as a day on the problems of the US bases in the Caribbean that might well be an exaggeration. I spent all my time during my four years at the Embassy, on the first two issues, especially the first in my earlier years, that is to say 1960, '61 into '62 and more the nuclear side in later years. I left in the summer of '64, by which time Mr Johnson had been President for nearly a year.

I think I profited from being a First Secretary, rather than a Counsellor. Had I been a Counsellor, I think I would have been regarded as too senior to be asked to take notes at meetings, but as a First Secretary – and there were no second or third secretaries in Chancery – who else could you ask? So I got involved in a number of things that might be surprising, but were very helpful to me – might be surprising in the sense that they didn't necessarily fit into what I've just described as my job. For example, when Kennedy took over in January '61, Macmillan, the Prime Minister, came to see him in the White House in early April. Macmillan came with a very strong delegation from London. Not only did he have Philip de Zulueta at his side, but also my former boss, Derrick Hoyer Millar and a lot of very experienced, senior people. We met in the White House, the first time I'd ever been there, in a big room with a long oval table in it. After a minute or two in which everyone was introduced, the President took the Prime Minister off to the Oval Office and the rest of us were left milling around. It so happened, perhaps not accidentally, that there were exactly the same number of British as Americans in the room. I was there as the most junior person, by a long way. I didn't feel that it was in my position to go and do anything about it, so I stood still and presently I saw that everybody had paired off. Somebody, perhaps it was Derrick, had got hold of Mac Bundy and all the British were very keen to meet this new team. Rusk was there and so was Governor Stevenson who'd been appointed to be the Ambassador to the UN, and so was Acheson. As I said, they all paired off which left one American free, so I felt it was my duty to speak to him, but I had no idea who he was. He was very tall, though, and he was a good deal older than I was, so I thought he must know my former boss, Derrick Hoyer Millar, therefore, when I went up to him I said that I had just ceased to be Derrick's

private secretary, etc. He didn't look at me; instead he looked all round the room, then said, 'Ah, yes, Derrick and I are the only ones who were there at the first of these.' I couldn't understand what he was talking about; then it suddenly occurred to me that he must mean the Atlantic Charter, Churchill and Roosevelt meeting in the bay in Newfoundland. Then I realised it probably was Harriman. That gave me an opening and we talked. After about twenty minutes the two leaders emerged from the Oval Office. We sat down, the Americans with their backs to the window and the British facing them, with the Prime Minister in the middle on one side and the President opposite him on the other and me, rather oddly, at the head – or perhaps the foot - of the table. In any event, it was a good position for hearing what was said. I was supposed to take a note.

The President was very warm and welcoming, but also a little wary. Who were these people? Each side was trying to feel out the quality of the people on the other side. The President amazed us, because he said that he would like to begin the conversation by calling on Mr Acheson to explain the Administration's policy. Well, Mr Acheson was well known to the British team and they knew a lot about what he thought. We heard Mr Acheson speak for an hour. He spoke very well, not surprisingly. He was an extremely able, amusing and intelligent man, but it wasn't at all what the British had expected. When he had finished – past noon, I think – the President then said that he would like Governor Stevenson to explain the Administration's policy in relation to the UN. Stevenson spoke for about half an hour. Of course, he also was well known to the British. When he'd finished it was time for lunch. The British delegation, in great puzzlement, tramped back to the Residence and had lunch. To me it was fascinating, because it was all new. I had never heard either Acheson or Stevenson speak before, although I was generally aware of what they had done, and thought, but the British delegation from London, didn't know what to make of this. Why had this brand new President handed over description of his policy to two gentlemen from the past?

After lunch we went back to the White House and resumed the meeting, which became at moments slightly comic. We got onto the question of the Congo, of which I knew practically nothing, but it was all in fairly general terms, with nevertheless some detailed discussion which involved the naming of places in Africa and it became clear that neither President nor Prime Minister was entirely clear where these places were. So the President told an aide to get a map which they could study. The aide went out and after ten minutes returned with a blow-up globe, not much larger than a football, provided by the National Geographic, which

was put on a little stand in the middle of the table. Nobody looked at this globe again. The conversation focussed on individual problems and went along well. By the end of the day, I think the British felt that, yes, there was quality on the American side in the new Administration. Mr Rusk was allowed to say something and so on.

The whole thing led in some way or another that I don't recall, eventually, to something of great interest and profit to me. This was in connection with Mr Acheson. He was very prominent in the first three months of the new Administration and I guess the White House told the press, 'Ask Mr Acheson.' At any rate, he was frequently quoted in the press and, I think, saw himself as the *éminence grise*, but not so *grise*, behind the new Administration. Then it became clear that the new Administration had their own ideas and they weren't going to follow Mr Acheson. Not that they necessarily deeply disagreed with him, as far as I could see, but they wanted to get on with things themselves. It suddenly became apparent that Mr Acheson was not going to be the way to find out what the Administration was going to do and think, and so he was open to invitations from me. He accepted an invitation to lunch with me at the Cosmos Club in Washington; he came and we had a very interesting, good lunch. We repeated this I suppose four times more and I think he enjoyed it. I was careful to make sure that he had at least two Martinis. He enjoyed that. I also always arranged that we should not have a table that was very visible in the middle of the main dining room, because I thought we'd be interrupted frequently and I am sure I was right. Amongst other things, he told me a lot that was fascinating, though it wasn't necessarily very relevant to the future of American foreign policy, but going back to his time at Yale. I think he was manager of the Yale crew and knew the Eight individually, I think only four of them actually survived the War. I may be wrong about that number. A lot of interesting things he had to say. Eventually, I said to him, 'Mr Acheson, I'm very interested in your comments, but I gather from what you say, that you think everything in the past was better than the present.' He said, 'Oh, my boy, no, vodka Martinis are better than gin Martinis.'

So Washington was very good for me in that I met a lot of extremely interesting people, learned from them and was not entirely restricted to the job I was supposed to do. That job was in fact fascinating and deeply influenced my thinking about foreign affairs ever since. My predecessor in the job was Donald Logan who was highly responsible, and rightly so. He was with Selwyn Lloyd when the latter went to the notorious meeting in Paris,

planning Suez. Donald never said a word about it that I know of. He not only was highly responsible, he also looked highly responsible. When I arrived at my first meeting of the Berlin Contingency Co-ordinating Group there were really audible gasps because I didn't look responsible. I was actually several years younger than Donald, but I looked a good deal younger than that. The people in the room really wondered what the British had done. That wore off very quickly; after a week or so they'd got used to it.

The people in the room were very interesting. They were either American or French. The reason for our meeting was that the Americans, British and French each had a sector of Berlin and the Russians had the rest; very roughly the Russians had half and between the three of us we had the other half. The Russians were pressing and wanted the whole and thought that we were very vulnerable, as indeed we were. The point of this Group, this tri-partite group, was to deal in detail with the problems of Berlin and how to counter the Russian pressures. The French were represented by Jean-Claude Winckler, who later became my French colleague in Delhi. He was a delightful man, very experienced – with also a delightful wife, I may add – perfect English, from an old Protestant family and I think represented France extremely well, but in a manner that was not antagonistic at all. Later he was provided with reinforcements, the most notable was Jacques Andréani. I think it is his son who also went into the Diplomatic Service, who is now well known in contemporary French affairs. Jean-Claude didn't need reinforcements; he was perfectly able to do it himself, except when we got to a crisis, which I will mention presently. On the American side, the leader was Marty Hillenbrand who knew Germany extremely well. I can't remember exactly which jobs he'd had, but he was head of the department in the State Department that dealt with Germany. He reported to Foy Kohler, who was well known to senior British diplomats; they'd worked with him during the War and who also knew Germany very well. There were a number of other Americans. Of course, we were on American home turf in the State Department, so there were always more Americans in the room during these meetings than any others, and sometimes more Americans than the other delegations put together - when I say that, that includes the Germans. I think it must have been an American initiative that Germany was invited to join this Group and had joined by the end of 1960. I'll jump ahead in saying that Germany – I don't recall all the names of the Germans who were members of the Group, but they included some very able people, of whom I would say the top one was Berndt von Staden, who became Ambassador in Washington later and head of the German Foreign

Office. One of the others, much more junior, even junior to me, I think, at that point, was Hans-Georg Weiss, who later became Head of the German Intelligence Agency. There were several others, but those are the two who stand out for me. Berndt seemed to me to have exceptionally good, stable judgment.

This Group was supposed to meet as necessary, depending on the situation in Berlin, or what was expected or apprehended about the situation in Berlin. I think that before my time they hadn't met very often, perhaps a fortnight would go by without a meeting, but this changed suddenly in late 1960 and, above all, in 1961. When we had the crisis, when it reached its climax with the Berlin Wall which was August 13 1961, we were meeting certainly once a day - that would be on a six day week - and sometimes twice and very occasionally even thrice. The number of meetings declined considerably in 1963 and '64, but continued. There were many changes of personnel, particularly on the American side. These meetings involved a tremendous amount of negotiation. We all knew that the essential thing was that there should be Western unity in the face of Soviet pressure. But on what basis was the unity to be achieved? That's what we had to thrash out. It was often very difficult. These were four countries with strong views, and all conscious of very considerable risks. At the worst we could have had a nuclear war. Even at the best, there was always the chance of somebody being shot at a check-point or kidnapped or some unilateral action taken that had an unforeseen consequence. We really worked hard at these details and we produced a Green Book, so called only because of the colour the State Department stationery people provided for this book - the cover was a darkish green. The book contained a lot of detailed information, and described contingencies that we thought might arise, for example that the Russians might close some crossing, the Russians might say that we were not entitled to bring this or that type of person, or this or that type of goods. (Russians were Soviets in those days.) We had to take account of the fact that there were air, land and rail communications between the West and Berlin. All of them were crucial to our operations. There were three airports; each of the three Western powers had their own airport in their sector, though I think one of them was rarely used. There was a railway, which the Soviets could cut at any point and there were roads which had go through Russian check points. So there were many, many opportunities for the Russians to put pressure on us. It became clearer and clearer that they were going to put pressure, that they did not really believe that we could be so stupid as to resist the Red Army, or even if it wasn't the Red Army, but it was 'volunteers' or if it was the

East German Army or something of that sort that took action. The importance of this crisis was that, together with the Cuban Missile Crisis, which came very shortly afterwards, the resolution and unity of the West prevailed and the Russians decided that the risks were too great.

CM: Can I just ask, John, was not the building of the Wall itself an acknowledgement that West Berlin was there to stay? Was it not an acknowledgement that they couldn't take over West Berlin, as they had tried to do at the time of the Berlin blockade in 1948?

JT: I didn't see it that way; I don't think any of us did. We always hoped that the Russians would accept, as indeed in the end they did, the continuation of the three Western sectors. But we didn't see the Wall – I'll come to the Wall in a moment – as an acknowledgement of that. We saw it as a much more aggressive move. We felt under threat the whole time and the Berlin Contingency Co-ordinating Group was the central point of the Western discussions on detail. The fact that it met in Washington was important; it really locked in the Americans. They had every opportunity to express their views. You couldn't get into a situation – or at least you could but the chances of doing so were reduced by meeting in Washington – in which the Pentagon said, 'You haven't taken account of our views properly, etc.' I'll just pursue that thought for a moment, because this Group produced this Green Book, which I suppose practically nobody read, but it was a great reassurance, so I learned, to duty officers, and Cabinet ministers over weekends. If anything goes wrong on Berlin, here is what you do. You just look it up in the Green Book. It was well set out and it had been thought out. We reported to a very senior group which was, I don't know what it was called, I suppose it was probably called the Quadrapartite Ministerial Group. At any rate, it was a group that met theoretically at ambassadorial level, but in the British case, such was Caccia's confidence in Hood, that Sammy was frequently the British representative. Caccia came occasionally. Sometimes Mr Rusk came, representing America, which produced an odd situation, so you might think, which led to Mr Rusk and me sitting in the middle of the table. This was the result of different protocols. The American side were led by their most senior person and went down from his left hand to their most junior person; the British side had their most senior person in the middle and then going out on either side. As I was the most junior person and sat on Sammy's left, if nobody else was there, this put me next to Mr Rusk, which didn't lead to any particular conclusion, except I have to say that he was very good at doodling. The Group was close knit, although we were also antagonistic,

because we were arguing our different points of view, as expressed by our respective capitals. We always met in the State Department, but not always in the same room. We may have met in about four different rooms, some of which had no windows. Yet in each room we sat always in the way we'd sat in the first meeting in that room, so that it was sort of accidental where we sat. It was always two of the four delegations sat on one side of the table, and two sat on the other, but we weren't always the same two and yet whatever room it was, we sat, the way we had sat at the first meeting. Curious! I suppose it was an instinct to preserve some sort of order and stability. At any rate I'm not sure that it had any importance, beyond underlining that the allies did not always divide in the same way, two against two.

I'd like to give you an idea of the sort of discussion we had and why it was so important. I take as an example the idea that Russians were going to interfere with our rail access to Berlin. As a group, we decided that we'd better study this more thoroughly than we had before. There wasn't at that moment an urgency, so we said that we would ask our respective foreign offices to let us have briefing on this subject and we'd meet in three weeks' time to discuss it. When we met, amazingly, we were totally unable to agree on the number of trains that ran to Berlin each day. There were four different answers from four different capitals. Well, we eventually did sort it out, fairly rapidly. Some had taken the summer schedule; some had taken the winter schedule; some had counted this or not counted that. It underlined something which was of great importance. It is very difficult to get international agreement if you disagree about the facts. A lot of the work we did was valuable in that it got the four countries to agree on what the facts were. Therefore it made it much easier to understand, first of all, what the significance of any Soviet action was, and secondly, made it much easier to agree on what to do about it. In the end we may have had four or five meetings on the train issue before coming to conclusions and put all that into the Green Book.

The Wall was, of course, the crucial thing. The Wall half took us by surprise. The East Germans were haemorrhaging people at such a rate by August 1961 that we knew that they were going to do something. We spent a good deal of time wondering what it was and thinking what they might do. We even thought they might build a wall; this was one of the possibilities. But the wall we thought they might build was a wall round the outside of East Berlin, on the grounds that anybody currently in East Berlin had such easy opportunity for escaping to the West that the authorities could trust the remaining people inside East Berlin

so they would just have to control who came in to East Berlin, and that would be quite easy for them. We did not consider the possibility that they would build a wall right through the middle of Berlin. That took us by surprise. Wow! It led to very concerned and instant agitation. I think it is to be noted that there was no panic, but we didn't have a plan for what we would do for this. We met urgently and at high level. The number of senior Americans who piled into the room was enormous. The Western powers, the Americans, the British and the French were ready to contemplate some fairly forceful action to make it clear that we were not going to be pushed around. It was completely kyboshed by the Germans. The Germans would not consider anything that was going to seriously increase the tensions over Berlin. We watched the Wall go up without doing anything about it. Lots was said; lots was briefed; but as far as I can recall there was no action taken, certainly no military action. We could have taken some military action. We had established by then an organisation Live Oak with a British General in charge of it. It was the sort of military equivalent of the Berlin Contingency Co-ordinating Group. It met, not in Washington; I think it met in Brussels at NATO, but at any rate, we had very good relations with Live Oak, who were not an executive body, but a planning body, and a place where information could be shared. We had to sort out a lot of things, and a lot of pressures from a number of senior people, who felt either that something should be done, or was too dangerous to do. So suddenly several members of the American Cabinet were diverted to dealing with this problem and the Secretary of the Treasury, as I recall, was made the chairman of a body on which I was to be the British representative, studying the economic threats presented by the Wall, and the possibilities of action, and what else the Russians might do and what we might do in exchange. I can't remember exactly, I think there were at least four subsidiary bodies – they were subsidiary I suppose, just to the heads of government, which were appointed to deal with this crisis. I couldn't be in two meetings at the same time. So Denis Greenhill sent for reinforcements from London. At least two very able first secretaries came out and we were then manned so that we could always have a British representative at the meeting. It was a very tense time. There were people like General Clay, who was an American former governor of Berlin, if that's the right title, and a leading general in World War II, who tended to think we should send armoured divisions down the road. You didn't really know what was going to happen next. I think what we did, and perhaps didn't do, was effective. I think, as I've already said, it did convince the Russians that we couldn't just be nudged out and made fearful and turn

tail. That, I believe, had an effect on the Cold War. In the end, the centre of actual action moved away from Europe and out to the peripheries.

I'd like to say something about one or two of the other people involved. I've already spoken about Harold Caccia and Sammy Hood, both excellent. They were joined by the Germans who were represented first by Ambassador Grewe, who was a nice man, but managed to annoy almost everyone, exactly how I'm not sure I can explain. He certainly meant well, but he somehow didn't express things the right way and I think that was the reason he was replaced, though he had been in Washington for some years already, fairly soon. Alphan, the Frenchman, was extremely capable, with beautiful English, very touchy, and I think always rather resentful of the British because of our closeness to the Americans and all the more so when Ormsby-Gore became the Ambassador. I am sure it was known to Alphan, though it was not known to the general public, including most members of the Embassy, that Ormsby-Gore saw so much of the President, as I've already said. Alphan was a difficult person. I was present at a dinner party given by Scottie, Scott Fitzgerald's daughter, at which Alphan felt that he was not properly seated and turned over his plate.

CM: I've never heard of anybody actually witnessing that! How amazing! What happened after that?

JT: Everything went on as if nothing had happened.

CM: And he refused the food?

JT: Yes. Well, I'm not sure he didn't get some food some way or other. Alphan was quite correct. He should have been placed next to the hostess's right but he wasn't. Although I think he was wrong to do what he did, he was 'correct' in quotation marks. I'd like mention another very important man, Paul Nitze, who had a most extraordinary successful career. He made a lot of money, I gathered, as a Wall Street banker and was able, by the age of thirty or so, to turn his attention to politics. He came in with the new administration. He was a Democrat and had a very sharp mind and looked ahead. He didn't say much, ever, at the Ambassadorial meetings at which he represented the Pentagon. He was Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs at the Pentagon. He was in charge of politico-military affairs and became crucial in the subsequent nuclear negotiations. I think he played a very, very important role in getting the American team into agreement. I have had a lot of

experience of relations between the State Department and the Pentagon and it is quite often very difficult to get agreement. This never showed up at the meetings of the four power team on Berlin. That was because Paul Nitze had sorted things out before the issue had to be discussed with allies. I give him very high marks for that. Then he rather modestly allowed everybody else to talk. I came to know him; luckily, he invited us to dinner parties. He had a very nice wife, whom I enjoyed talking with and I came to know Paul quite well for many years after that. He represented a small group of 'outsiders' – men who had made a mark in other walks of life – who came to diplomacy through political appointment and succeeded brilliantly. David Bruce was another.

I'd like to conclude talking about this bit of my job by saying that I felt then and feel very strongly still, that the Berlin Contingency Co-ordinating Group provided a model for how a lot of diplomacy should be conducted, particularly diplomacy between allies. It did, as I've tried to explain with my railway instance, a lot first of all to get agreement on facts. Secondly, it provided a framework for further discussion; the members of the Group knew each other very well, and also knew their bosses back at their capitals very well, and so were able to make sensible suggestions on their own likely to be supported by the capitals. In addition, they knew how to conduct affairs amongst themselves and provided a degree of confidence to each capital, first that its voice was being heard and second that agreement was possible. I have thought that quite a lot of discussions could be held on a range of different problems in rather the same way, with a group of reasonably intelligent, sensible diplomats, meeting regularly, getting to know each other, not taking final decisions, but in a position to get to an agreed allied position without misunderstandings. Very difficult to avoid misunderstandings, I have to say. I mentioned all this to Alastair Buchan, who thought that this model should be adopted more widely. I'd always hoped, but I don't think it actually happened, that he would write about it in a way that it was difficult for me to do as a serving member of the British Diplomatic Service, but I don't think he did. I still believe that it is something that could be done quite widely. It's easier to do it if the numbers are not very big. Now, it's hard to say that there is an ideal number, but I did something like that when I was Assistant Under Secretary in the Foreign Office in charge of Defence and Disarmament in forming what was eventually called the London Suppliers Group. I think we were seven countries, perhaps eight, and that was manageable. I served as Perm Rep at the UN on the Security Council with fifteen, which is about as big as I think really works to do this sort of

thing. We did it at the Security Council by having the intense and very argumentative discussions behind closed doors, in a small room, which had only space for the leader, ambassador, plus two advisers, and that's where the work was done, rather than in the big open meetings. By the time we sat down at the open meeting, unless it was a real urgent emergency, we'd sorted a lot of things out in a small room. I saw it at NATO when I was Minister there. By chance, in my day the NATO Council also had fifteen members. I thought that worked moderately well, because several of them, like Iceland, for example, or Luxembourg, rarely said anything unless it was a matter, like fish for Iceland, which greatly concerned them; most of the discussions in the NATO meetings were really between five or six countries. I wish that this could be done more often. The most important thing I did in diplomacy at the UN was to get what is now called the P5 (five Permanent Members of the Security Council) meeting together. That might be another story, but it was the same idea that you got people who, at least in supposition had a certain amount of good will for each other and were ready to work very closely and privately together. Of course, this also became unpopular at the UN because other countries felt they were excluded, as indeed they were, but if you're going to get things done, this was the way to do it. So I would like to say yet again that the Berlin Contingency Co-ordinating Group experience had a considerable influence on my thinking on how to conduct diplomacy.

Now we're at noon. I think I might have a short break and come back and talk about some nuclear matters, including Polaris.

Being partly brought up in New York, as a result I had friends there - not exactly relations. One of my two guardians after my mother died was Howard Goodhart, remarkable bibliophile and his daughter, Phyllis, a Renaissance scholar, who was married to a delightful man, John Gordan. I was feeling badly that I had been in America for over a year, and I hadn't been to New York and hadn't even got in touch with people with whom I was very close, and to whom I owed a lot. My family couldn't have managed without their financial help during the War when you couldn't send money from the UK to the US. So I was feeling badly about it and then the Cuban Missile Crisis came. By then I'd seen enough of government to be clear that we couldn't deal with two crises of that magnitude at the same time. So I went to New York, at very short notice, just me, leaving Elizabeth and the children in Newark Street for I think two nights. I remember being in a New York hotel, I can't recall which. It was old-fashioned and had a transom window above the door. I recall waking up

the morning after I arrived and hearing through the transom two voices, one male, one female. I surmised that one of them was the boot black and the other a maid. They both spoke English, but not perfectly, and they were discussing whether to leave New York at once, because of the risk of annihilation from nuclear weapons. The tendency of the discussion was that they probably better had. I have heard a good deal about the Cuban Missile Crisis, because I knew at least two people who were in the inner group with Kennedy who later told me things about it. It was remarkable. You could tell who was in the inner group, because all those in the inner group, a year later, when it was clear that it had been a success, a silver diary appeared on their desks. You couldn't turn the pages, but it was opened to the right dates, October 1961.

CM: You were going to talk about nuclear matters.

JT: I'd start by saying it would be very interesting to see a study of American-German relations in the 1950s and 1960s, perhaps we could say from 1945. It was one of the successes, many successes that the Americans had. Incidentally, it was a success in a way promoted by the Soviets, because it would not have been so easy, not that it was entirely easy, but it would not have so easy to get French agreement and to some extent British – the British would have agreed, but the French, mm ..., very dubiously – to bringing the Germans into the centre of the Western discussion so soon after the end of World War II. It was a necessity. They were quite right; we needed the German soldiers for NATO; we needed the German armaments industry; we needed the German economy and we had, fortunately, in Adenauer a very German leader, but with the right attitudes. I think it was quite remarkable how well the Germans adapted to this situation. I don't know quite how they recruited for their diplomatic service, but certainly the people they sent to Britain and the US, despite what I've said about Ambassador Grewe, were very successful. The Americans certainly found it easier to deal with the Germans than they did with the British or the French. I became aware of that in Washington. I mention this because it was the background to a problem that I spent a lot of time on, which was called the Multilateral Force, MLF. This was an idea put forward by a very clever, and rather odd, American diplomat, called Henry Owen who was married to a German, which probably had some influence on him. He was highly intelligent and somehow was in the State Department, but had never served abroad, as far as I recall. I don't know what the story is there. Henry Owen had the idea that the Germans would go for nuclear weapons and that that would be a bad thing. Simultaneously, he had the idea that the

Germans deserved to be in the nuclear circle, that they shouldn't be kept out. So the issue then was, how were they to be in the nuclear circle but not to be in control of nuclear weapons? Henry's idea, which surfaced, I think, in early 1961, but it may have been a little bit later, was that a multilateral force should be formed, which would be at sea, and would involve America, Germany, Britain, France and quite possibly others. I'm not sure that he didn't at one point mention the Dutch, for example. Each of the 25 surface ships would be armed with Polaris missiles and would have a mixed crew provided by the navies of these different countries. The ships would then all be controlled by some central command for this force. They would all be part of NATO, 'assigned to NATO' was the phrase. Henry was quite clever about it. He didn't put himself forward very much. He got the Pentagon to assign a delightful Admiral, a Rear-Admiral, called Squidge Lee to him and he persuaded some other people in Washington that it was a good idea, especially Gerard Smith and Bob Bowie. Henry thought that I could be influential in this. He talked to me many times, and invited me to lunch in his home to persuade me of the value of the MLF. I thought that it was definitely an interesting idea, but I didn't think it was currently workable. I reported all this to London, who, I think, were if anything more sceptical than I was. It was quite a difficult situation because it did seem as if this was an important American initiative. Indeed, in a way it really was, because Henry managed to make it so. He arranged for people arriving in Washington to be met by one of his acolytes and indoctrinated, etc. It was amazing how far his tentacles reached. I feel that it's an idea that is even more impractical now than it was then, but I think it was nevertheless one that was worth contemplating. One of the interesting things about it was that, to my knowledge, the Germans never lobbied for it. No German ever discussed it with me that I can recall. I think the Germans would have liked it, had it happened, but prudently didn't want to be seen to be pushing it. Of course, it would have had a significant effect on Soviet thinking, because if there was one thing above all others that the Soviets didn't want it was nuclear weapons in German hands. It was bad enough that there would be nuclear weapons in American or British hands in Germany. So it was a big idea which Henry managed to get included in the briefs for discussions with Prime Ministers and Presidents, until finally LBJ said, 'This is just getting in the way. It's not going to work. Why am I being asked to press something that I really know is not going to work? It only complicates the other things I want to do.' And had it stopped.

That was one element of the nuclear problems that I spent a good deal of time on. Another was the effect of the British nuclear policies. I go back to my time as Derrick Hoyer Millar's Private Secretary when I saw a huge number of papers, not all of which could I read but I did read all that came Derrick's way, on nuclear matters. I have to say that I didn't like what I was reading, largely. Not that I was in a position to do anything about it. I have done no homework on this subject, so don't think that what I'm about to say should be taken as reliable, but my recollection is that back in late '58 or perhaps early '59, the Americans suggested to us that we might be interested in a submarine nuclear force. I thought it was a very good idea. I was spending quite a lot of time at seminars at the Institute of Strategic Studies led by Alastair Buchan, and with Michael Howard as a very important element. This increased my interest in politico-military matters. To resume, I thought that the American idea, floated in our direction, was sensible. I rather disliked what I was reading in the way in which it was brushed off far too easily, because we had the V bombers and we wanted to continue their life. They were already the main way in which we exercised nuclear force. I felt a little bit disloyal in my thoughts because the V bombers were designed by my father's close, close friend, Adam's godfather, Sir William Farren. I was not convinced by the RAF studies by the Chief of the Air Staff which came across my desk, because I could see that these V bombers were much more vulnerable than a submarine. They were already getting a bit old. I can't remember exactly what the numbers were. So I was a bit unhappy about the eventual decision, which Macmillan supported, that the deterrent should be carried by the V bombers. The Americans had a scheme for that too, and that scheme was called Skybolt. Skybolt was an American-made missile, still in development, but with great promise which would be bolted on to the V bombers. The advantage of Skybolt was that the bombers didn't have to be over the target to release these weapons. The British decision at the top level was for buying Skybolt and keeping the V bombers going as long as possible. No discussion really, in my view, about what would happen thereafter. This was the situation – as I say, I was unhappy about it, but the Foreign Office signed off on it. I just thought it was the wrong decision. We never really explored the idea of a submarine force, at least at that moment, as far as I was aware. That was how matters stood when I went to my job in Washington. But this was Charles Wiggin's business, not mine.

Then out of the blue, under Macnamara, the Americans decided that they didn't need Skybolt. So wham! It hadn't been made; it was in an advanced stage of development, but it

hadn't been made yet. The British Government had announced that Skybolt was going to be the instrument carrying the British nuclear deterrent. A lot of prestige was involved in it. The CND campaign was high visibility and not everybody in Parliament was happy about the British deterrent. So Macmillan had quite a lot riding on this issue. When Skybolt was cancelled - I don't remember now, perhaps I was not privy to it, how much warning we were given of the announcement that the Americans were no longer going to develop Skybolt. They offered to let us go ahead with it on our own, 'Well, if you want to take on the development of this weapon, good luck to you.' But that was clearly impractical and it would have been British taxpayers' money going into what was really an American weapon.

When Skybolt got cancelled, it was a big thing in Britain. Macmillan himself felt it strongly. There were quite a number of people in Britain saying, 'You can't depend on the Americans. They lead you up the garden path and desert you.' So Macmillan felt a strong and urgent need to see Kennedy. From this sprang the Bermuda meeting and the Polaris deal. The Americans agreed to the meeting, but were far from enthusiastic about it. A strong lobby in Washington hoped to force Britain out of a nuclear force. That Kennedy agreed to put forward the idea floated to us in the Eisenhower period of a sea-borne nuclear force was due to the overall importance of the Anglo-US relationship rather than to strategic considerations. Ormsby-Gore played a crucial role.

Even so, it was a difficult negotiation because, as I said, there were a lot of Americans who didn't want to help the British. There were intense discussions about restrictions and whether the Polaris force was to be assigned to NATO. This agreement was reached in Bermuda. Ormsby-Gore as Ambassador was very helpful with Kennedy. I think it was Kennedy who said, 'yes, we're going to help the British.' They then all adjourned from Bermuda to Washington and we had some more tricky discussions. I can't remember all the details; I was very, very busy. It was a crisis in Anglo-American relations and Kennedy, to give him his due, and I think he was quite right to do this, said, 'This is ridiculous. How did we get into a situation where the British were so surprised and aggrieved at our cancellation of Skybolt and we didn't know that that would be their reaction, and we didn't tell them that we were going to cancel Skybolt.' So he asked Dick Neustadt to study this and Dick did study it - it took him about three months - and he presented a report to the President, by then it might have been even Johnson, I don't remember. It was then published and it is very interesting document. It was quite right, there was a misunderstanding. You would have thought it was

not possible, so close were our relations in so many ways. You just have to pay attention to such matters all the time, not just assume that is going to be OK. So it came out all right from the British point of view. It probably gave Macmillan more difficulty in justifying everything to Parliament, than if he'd been able to go on with Skybolt, because it looked as if we were under duress. He had to admit the Government hadn't anticipated Skybolt being cancelled, so it all looked as if the British nuclear deterrent policy was shaky. It was really hard for him, and I think that must have been part of the reason why Kennedy agreed. But it has been a success, a huge success, and the relations between the Royal Navy and the US Navy became closer than ever.

Perhaps I should add a footnote about my own position. When Charles Wiggin left the Embassy to return to the Foreign Office, probably in the spring of 1962, the subject of the British nuclear deterrent fell into my lap. It had never been altogether outside my responsibilities, but because of the American attitudes towards nuclear weapons in Europe, NATO, the MLF (Multi-Lateral Force) and my close links with civilians in the Pentagon, the future of the deterrent was seen in the Embassy as primarily as politico-military subject. However, the technical side e.g. how to fit British warheads to US missiles remained outside my sphere. And I was never privy to the Navy to Navy discussions.

According to Henry Brandon, the best foreign correspondent in Washington, it was a communication of mine in the summer of 1962, which first alerted London to the possibility that Skybolt might be cancelled. I assume I got this impression from my Pentagon friends, probably Harry Rowen. When Henry asked me to tell him the story, I denied that I had alerted London, only a few weeks later to find a communication doing just that. It seems appropriate to end this session with this example of the fallibility of memory.