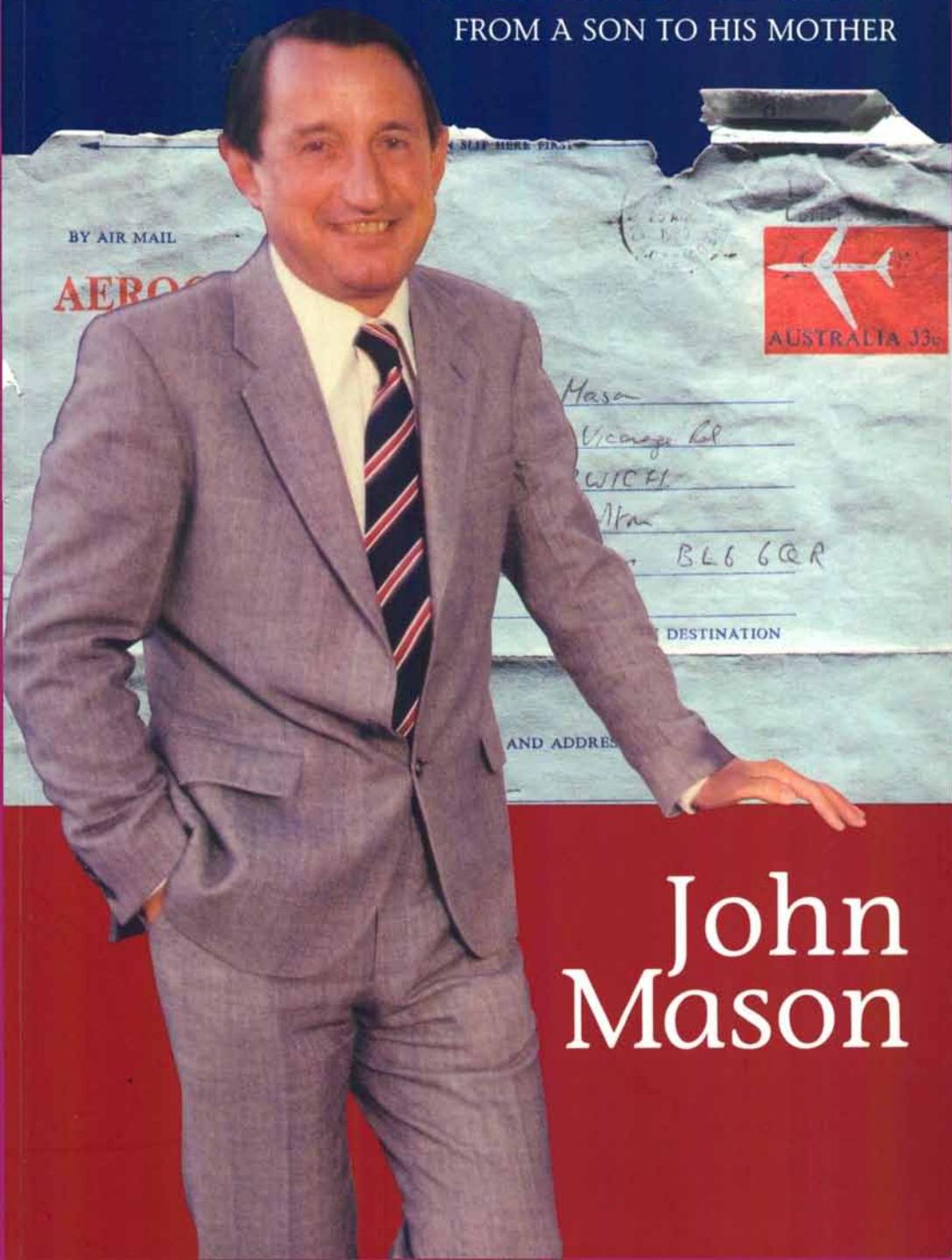


DIPLOMATIC DESPATCHES

FROM A SON TO HIS MOTHER



John
Mason

DIPLOMATIC DESPATCHES

FROM A SON TO HIS MOTHER

John Mason

With a foreword by
the Rt Hon. Sir Ninian Stephen KG, AK

National Library of Australia
Canberra 1998

Some content in this online publication may be in copyright. You may only use in copyright material for permitted uses, please see <http://www.nla.gov.au/copiesdirect/help/copyright.html> for further information. If in doubt about whether your use is permitted, seek permission from the copyright holder. In addition, please follow the links or otherwise contact the relevant institutional owners of images to seek permission if you wish to use their material.

Published by the National Library of Australia
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia

© John Mason and the National Library of Australia 1998

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry

Mason, John, Sir, 1927- ,

Diplomatic despatches: from a son to his mother.

ISBN 0 642 10797 1.

1. Mason, John, Sir, 1927- —Correspondence. 2. Soldiers—Great Britain—Correspondence. 3. Diplomats—Great Britain—Correspondence. 4. Korean War, 1950-1953—Personal narratives, British. 5. Diplomatic and consular service, British. 6. Diplomatic and consular service, British—Australia. I. National Library of Australia. II. Title.

327.41092

Editor: Julie Stokes

Designer: Beverly Swifte

Proofreader: Tony Twining

Printed by Lamb Printers, Perth



FOREWORD

Autobiographies all too often conceal the true essence of their authors, instead depicting them as they see themselves or, perhaps worse, as they would wish to be seen. Collected letters are sometimes little better, concealing from the addressee, and consequently from other readers, as much or more than they reveal.

John Mason's remarkable work is neither autobiography nor conventional collection of letters. From it there emerges a fascinating portrait of a man's development from 17-year-old soldier at the end of the Second World War to senior diplomat of some 40 years later; insights, too, into many of the events of the troubled second half of this century.

The letters collected here are those John Mason wrote regularly, for over 40 years, to his mother and, after her death, to his sister; recounting his remarkable and very varied career over those years. But they do not stand alone, each is followed by Mason's own comments and explanations of what would otherwise be obscure, made from the mature perspective of today. The comments contain incisive, and sometimes acerbic, assessments of events and of the innumerable individuals he has met, ranging from world leaders through ambassadors and politicians of all hues to simple citizens like the elderly Scottish lady exiled in the Northern Territory who consoled herself with the thought that the sun setting on the brick-red hills looked 'a wee bit like Scotland'. Never long absent from those comments is John Mason's characteristic sense of humour and the wit with which he gives it expression.

John Mason's letters begin as a very young soldier in the last months of the Second World War, and continue as he is in turn an intolerant, rather racist and still very young officer in the British Army in India in the last days of the Raj, a Cambridge undergraduate with long vacations spent as an escort to British tourists to the Continent, a front-line soldier in combat in Korea when recalled to serve in the Royal Ulster Rifles in 1950-52 and finally a career officer in the Foreign Office, first as a very junior, then a middle-ranking and, ultimately, a very senior British diplomat in posts around the world for 30 years from 1954 onwards.

Knowing John Mason only during and after his last posting, as British High Commissioner in Canberra, and as one of the most active and articulate representatives that Britain has ever sent to Australia, it is the development of the man, seen through his letters and enlivened by the comments of his mature years, that for me gives this work its very special quality. But as an account of the 40 years which the letters cover, letters written without thought of publication and, to their author's astonishment, emerging from the oblivion of his sister's files only in 1994, the book is a personal chronicle of much of the second half of this century, as seen and lived through by an acute and critical observer both of its events and of many of those who made them happen.

The war in Korea, bloody and harsh, with his own battalion suffering heavy casualties, is for many of us today an almost forgotten campaign; John Mason's account of it as seen by a front-line soldier brings it to life in all its bleak horror. The contrast in lifestyles when, as a young diplomat, he later takes up his first overseas Foreign Office posting as Third Secretary in the British Embassy in Rome is startling. It is also in Rome that he marries Margaret, who happily passes with flying colours his Ambassador's wife's careful scrutiny of the Third Secretary's intended, Margaret, the 'extremely attractive English girl' whom he first met and instantly fell in love with in Stresa in 1949 and who has since shared his life for over 40 years.

No less a matter of contrast was John Mason's next posting, in Poland's ravaged capital, slowly recovering from the harshest of its communist regimes and from all the disasters of invasion, brutal German occupation and post-war Russian domination. While there Britain and France's fatal Suez adventure, doomed from the start, takes place and we read his contemporaneous account of his own hostile reaction to it and those of his colleagues. We next find him in Damascus as First Secretary both before and after the Baath Party's seizure of power, in New York and all over the United States as director of the British Trade Development Office, then wrestling with Common Market negotiations in Europe, later as

Ambassador to Israel and finally as High Commissioner to Australia, where he now lives as an Australian citizen pursuing his habitual state of activity, unconvincingly disguised as retirement. Interposed in all this were years of a protracted but successful fight against lung cancer, long mis-diagnosed and somewhat mysteriously cured.

John Mason's years as High Commissioner cannot be described as years in Canberra for he was everywhere, visiting as many diverse parts of the continent as has the most travelled native-born Australian; he claims to have visited every city and town of 5000 inhabitants or more. His idiosyncratic impressions of Queensland and of Perth are as challenging as his remarks, as a Sydney resident, on Melbourne's weather. His impressions of the many Australian political leaders with whom he has dealt are no less challenging.

As a friend John Mason has always been as provocative in his views as he has been enlivening in his discourse. This book is a true mirror of the man as I have known him; his graphic and wholly personal accounts of the times and places he has known and of the people he has dealt with, often people of whom much has already been written, well reflect John Mason, as a critical, ironic observer of mankind whose sense of humour and intellectual curiosity have given him a life as full of incident as it has been rewarding in outcome.

The Rt Hon. Sir Ninian Stephen, KG, AK
February 1998

For the girl whose path I crossed in Stresa



CONTENTS

Foreword by Sir Ninian Stephen KG, AK	iii
Introduction	1
Soldier in training, May 1945–October 1946	3
India, December 1946–February 1948	19
Cambridge and Europe, May 1948–August 1950	39
Korea, August 1950–August 1951	59
Rome, March 1954–July 1956	83
Warsaw, August 1956–April 1959	101
Damascus, January 1962–January 1965	123
Cancer, January 1965–August 1968	137
New York, August 1968–September 1971	147
Tel Aviv, December 1976–February 1980	159
Canberra, May 1980–September 1984	177
Appendix: The Recipients	199



The letter card I wrote to my parents on the day I joined the army



INTRODUCTION

*Pte Mason J 14483721
No 4 Squad No 4 Coy
96 PTC, Bodmin, Cornwall
2 May 1945*

These letter cards have been issued free because the Sergeant has to hand in a chit to say we've all written home.

We've all been to the dentist and the doctor, and I have no problems.

Our room Lance Corporal is a grand bloke, aged 19, and our Sergeant is OK. We look like having a very good time, By the way, we don't get vaccinated for a fortnight. We get up at 6am! The food so far is OK. Fried eggs for tea. This is all for now, I guess. My civvy clothes will arrive next week in army paper at army expense.

Love John

I wrote this letter to my mother on the day I joined the army, aged 17, on 2 May 1945. I continued to write to her every week thereafter until her sudden death in July 1968, just as my wife and I—as members of the Diplomatic Service—were about to leave for a posting in New York. I continued to write regularly to my sister, Mary, who had lived with my parents and had therefore read all my letters to my mother.

In 1994 I was astonished to learn from Mary that my mother, and subsequently she herself, had kept all my letters over 40 years, and lovingly filed them. They were sent to me in Sydney, and of course they were an immensely nostalgic and compelling read. I offer some account of the original recipients of my letters in the Appendix.

Also in 1994, I received a suggestion from Sir Ninian Stephen, former Governor-General of Australia and the then Chairman of the Council of the National Library of Australia, that I might entrust my personal papers to the Library. My official papers had to remain in the Public Records Office in Kew, but I offered to make available my letters to my mother and sister if they might be of interest. The offer was accepted, and the letters,

though not all of them, are now housed in the Manuscript Collection of the National Library in Canberra, available to any interested reader. I am grateful to the Manuscript Librarian for his patience in reading and sorting the letters. He commented to me that after reading them he thought that he had got to know me rather well. He did not elaborate and I lacked the courage to invite him to do so.

I deliberated over a period of a year whether there was anything I could do to make what was a pretty unusual collection into a document of interest to others. I decided to select a few of the two thousand or so letters, or extracts from them, and add comments recalling what was actually happening or what my actual thoughts were at the time, rather than what I thought it appropriate to tell my mother. Thus, for example, when she thought that my cancer had been cured, and it very much hadn't, I did not disillusion her, preferring to wait until the facts—of my imminent death—could no longer be concealed. In fact I recovered, and until she died my mother never had to know that I had deceived her.

Chapters 5–11 cover my 32 years in the Diplomatic Service. During this period I did four stints in the Foreign Office, or Foreign and Commonwealth Office as it later came to be called. I have not used any of the letters written during these periods, partly because I might not have been allowed to write as freely of them by the authorities, who have vetted my script as the regulations require, but chiefly because it would all have been meaningless to my mother. Thus, while I could have written as much about life in the Foreign Office as in the whole of the rest of this book, I have stuck to the pattern of no letters, no narrative.

In writing my exegeses, I have not consulted any published sources or people to verify dates, facts, etc. What I have written is no more than my personal, and no doubt occasionally mistaken, recollection, from up to 50 years on, of what was happening or how I felt at the time. So if, as is probable, I have got facts and figures wrong, this is because I have not checked with outside sources. The only thing that will not be wrong is the dates, because the letters attest to these. In fact, the latter are better than a diary: I cannot fudge them because the National Library has the originals in Canberra.

To avoid, I hope, upsetting too many people, I have strictly limited identifications by name, as opposed to function. I emphasise that I have not been seeking to write history, but rather to describe what happened to a single person in a number of unique situations and circumstances over a period of 40 years.

John Mason
Sydney, February 1998



SOLDIER IN TRAINING May 1945–October 1946

These letters cover 18 months in England from my joining the army as a humble 17-year-old trooper to my emergence as a Second Lieutenant. They reveal a group of fit young men who grumbled at everything but in fact were having the time of their lives, playing with lovely toys like tanks of all sizes, guns, radios, trucks and motor bikes. We had no thought that we might ever be called upon to fight anybody. The sad thing was that we were marking time while the army decided what to do with us.

The intention was to train us to become tank officers, to fill the huge losses which had been foreseen in Europe. This did not happen, and we nearly all, to our disappointment, ended up as infantry officers, together with like-minded young men who had hoped to become engineers, gunners or signals officers. This was, as it turned out, a stroke of good luck for me.

Bodmin Camp, 5 May 1945

This will be a disjointed sort of letter, but I will try to tell you something of what we have been doing so far.

The camp is attached to the permanent barracks, and is just like any other camp, except that it is on the side of a hill. In the camp there is a NAAFI, a cinema and various rest rooms (these, however, are closed Saturday and Sunday evenings!). There are 30 of us comprising 4 Squadron in this hut, and three of us, who met on the train coming down, have already formed a sort of clique. The other two are Ronnie (from King Edward's School, Birmingham) and David (from King's College, Isle of Man).

So far our time has been occupied in lectures by the CO etc, and drawing all our kit. I have some very nice things. I have a khaki beret with a General Service badge. My best battle-dress and greatcoat are being altered by the tailor! Our boots are fitted with the utmost care—there is no limit to the number of pairs you can try on. We get three comfy shirts and four pairs of thick woollen socks, two pairs of cellular pants and a wool pullover. We have tons of webbing equipment, two capes and a very subtle type of new tin hat. We can send seven articles to the laundry each week.

Our main equipment trouble was our rifles, which were issued brand new and covered thickly with horrible grease inside and out. It cost me five hours and the loss of my equanimity to clean mine.

NAAFI stands for Navy, Army and Air Force Institute, which provided comfort to the forces, including canteens in camps everywhere, trucks to serve tea and buns at midday breaks on exercises and the occasional magnificent club. If it had not been for NAAFI canteens, many of us young soldiers would have starved to death. The reason I never took up smoking was that I could not afford to smoke and supplement the army rations with food from the NAAFI. I am sincerely grateful.

Bodmin Camp, 10 May 1945

Our programme this week has been rather disorganised by VE Day. All day Monday we did personnel selection tests, e.g. matrices, word tests, commonsense tests, a mechanical aptitude practical test, and a maths test which I could have walked through three years ago but which shattered me. I couldn't even remember how to do simple subtraction! I had to do it piecemeal instead of a column at a time. Honestly! I think I did about as well as I expected in these. On Tuesday [VE Day], we had all day off (and stayed in bed until 7.30am, a huge treat!) and were allowed out in the town until midnight. It was colossal fun.

In this town there is a thing called the Floral Dance, which goes on through the streets, and is very very energetic. It killed us completely, but we revived slightly on the free food and drink dispensed in the local YMCA. A great many people got very merry, but no-one minded in the least. In Cornwall they certainly take celebrations in a big way and with great energy. It was a unique experience and I wouldn't have missed it for worlds, if only for the floodlights on every large building.

Believe it or not, exactly the same thing happened on the next night. In the morning we had had routine parades, including a Morse aptitude test (fairly easy) and a visit to the dentist, who very very competently indeed filled two teeth and is going to do another. I have never had more careful treatment.

We started the night at a free YMCA dance, where the whole town seemed to be, but later got involved in another Floral Dance, which was just as energetic. Then there was community singing in the main square, and we finished the evening at the YM dance. Of course the trouble is that today we are very tired, because we got up at 6am. In the last 72 hours we have had 16 hours sleep.

Today we started our training in earnest. This is very hard work. We do actual parades from 8am till 5pm, but today cleaning etc has kept me busy from 6am until just now [9pm]. Each day we do one lecture, four periods

weapon training, two periods drill (which is very tough indeed—the pukka stuff) and one of P.T. I am stiff all over, and my feet feel as though they are falling off. But this will probably wear off.

Tomorrow we are being vaccinated (and doing P.T. and drill immediately after), being interviewed by the personnel selection officer, and getting PAID at last. So you can wish me luck.

Our squad is divided into three sections of 10 for weapons training. I am in the same section as Dave under Lance Corporal Thornback, our room NCO. Dave and I are fast getting the corporal under our thumb. What we say goes!

I am writing this in the Church Hut, which is a very nice place, with comfy armchairs, etc, just near our hut. Although there are 3500 men in camp, there are only about 20 in here. It's incredible.

I think I shall manage OK for cash. We shall not go out except at weekends (St Austell or Padstow this weekend probably) and the only money we spend is on food—we get good stuff, but not enough when you are working. But we are starting a system of getting cakes from our mothers—your turn will come in a week or two.

Could you please send me my other pair of civvy underpants? I sleep in them.

*I don't think that I need any mags except the **Manchester Guardian Weekly** (which is very valuable) because we get all the others in the Church Hut, the Reading Room or the YM in town.*

I doubt whether there are many firsthand accounts of VE Day in Bodmin which are as joyous and innocent as this. I can indeed remember the exhilaration of the traditional Cornish Floral Dances. And I doubt whether we drank anything, nor were we seduced by lonely wives, as our 19-year-old lance corporal was. Nor were we affected, as the older people must have been, by relief that the war with Germany was over.

For us, the end of the Nazi war meant little more than that the dummies with which we practised bayonet drill were now presented as Nips, no longer Huns. This letter illustrates, too, the significance of our all being volunteers, enthusiastic about everything, from the free lettercard on arrival to the skill of the dentist. Reluctant conscripts must have been harder to handle, destined as many of them were for more menial tasks than driving tanks. We were just glad to be there. I was the only one of my form at Manchester Grammar School who left school early to volunteer (so as to get into the Armoured Corps), the others waiting in the hope of being deferred or until conscripted. I remember the contempt and pity which I felt for them.

Bodmin Camp, 23 May 1945

This week has been very hard so far, but the sergeant says that the third week is always the worst and that by next week we shall laugh at work. We have all got foul colds and are terribly stiff. Moreover, they are really pushing us. Life would be grim if we hadn't got such absolute jewels of NCOs. We are all very well settled by now, and really know each other in the hut.

I have volunteered to represent the squad (four are needed) in the Company boxing tournament! Nobody knows much about fighting. We have to practise quite a bit, and I find it very hard work.

The money situation is just about OK. We are all trying hard to live on our pay. Since becoming a soldier, the chief changes in me are: (1) very clean and neat belongings (essential) (2) great care of the pennies and (3) ability to go to sleep at any time in any place in any position.

I had never boxed before and I never have since. But I remember clearly the sheer pleasure which I felt when, coached by my 'old soldier' second, I knocked out my larger opponent—a genuine count of ten. Otherwise, this letter illustrates a common theme in all my letters from the army in training: hard work and exhaustion. I cannot recall this now, and conclude that to some extent I was harrowing my mother's feelings for her poor hard-done-by son.

Farnborough, 13 June 1945

A very easy journey here to a very posh barracks. The great drawback is that I have been separated from my friends—I am the only one from my squad in this troop. This is rather annoying, but doubtless it will work out OK.

The great thing about this place is the spit and polish—it will be ghastly until we get used to it—a great change from our easyish time in Bodmin.

Otherwise, however, the place is superb. We are starting on 2½ weeks of general military training, after which there is just a chance I might get 60 hours leave, in which case I could slip home.

Farnborough, 17 June 1945

I am writing this in the sun by an open-air pool. We are just contemplating going in.

Life here is very busy, and the discipline is very strict. Moreover, the spit and polish is ghastly—we are occupied with it without a second to spare. The food is lovely—a smashing meal, decently served, four times a day.

I still vividly recall the culture shock of our transfer from Bodmin to Farnborough. The former, as we now saw, was a comfortable run-of-the-

mill operation, while the RAC Training Regiment, through which all RAC officers had passed, was a Guards-type operation designed to make or break. We had a hellish time, for example, bringing our boots up to the Farnborough standard of impeccable polish. But they were valuable property once the standard had been met. When we moved next, I put my boots inside socks in my kitbag lest the toe caps got scratched.

We were the last troop to enter Farnborough, it being disbanded once the need for cannon fodder had so sharply (and happily) diminished. I suspect, indeed, that I may have turned out to be the only one of an intake of 60 or more ever to see a shot fired in anger.

Farnborough, 28 July 1945

This morning we got back from our long scheme. It rained all Thursday and all Thursday night, and we were very wet and rather hungry because we had to cook all our food on open fires, which isn't so good in the rain. Moreover, it isn't so dry underneath a truck (our bedroom) when the rain is blowing in from the sea. Friday was a very nice day and we went on a scheme all day, returning to the same place (the seafront on Hayling Island) at night, where we had a lovely bathe in the warm sea. We also passed a comfortable night. We were up at 5.30am cleaning everything in sight. It was all really enjoyable but we were glad to see the barracks again.

What price the election? It was all very dramatic on Thursday evening, crouching in our trucks, with our aerials down (because of the lightning all round) listening to the 6pm news. It is absolutely fantastic, isn't it, to read the full results. And the completely tragic Liberal results. I am glad Labour got in, but I wish they had a smaller majority. I think Bevin is a good choice but I am not so sure about Dalton and Cripps.

This letter recalls the blissful time we had that summer, travelling round Hampshire in lovely summer weather in 15cwt trucks, with a (high tech, for then) wireless set in each, trying and mostly failing to talk to each other. The overnight exercise included a feature I did not report. The two troops were told to go out and 'find' each other. I was 'found' by two members of the enemy troop, one of whom sat on me while the other slammed his elbow into my nose, breaking it. As this came not long after I broke it playing rugby, the unhappy result has remained with me since.

The 1945 election results meant little to me then. I am surprised that I was prepared to make a judgement about three politicians. The comment about Liberals was because mine was a longstanding Liberal family. For my mother, who had once shaken his hand, Lloyd George could do no wrong, and I was brought up with stories invented by an aunt about his

childhood in Criccieth. They remained faithful to the end, my sister even standing as a parliamentary candidate three times and, to her credit, saving her deposit on each occasion.

Barnard Castle, 15 August 1945

Arrived here after a long and hectic journey—on VJ Day! What a life! Thank heaven that the war is over.

This place is very nice and modern. It is rather a shock however after the Farnborough barracks. We are in brick huts—rather overcrowded and very little locker room. Moreover the town is nothing terrific and miles from anywhere.

The washing accommodation is very good, so is the food, we think. There is a modern cinema, with plush seats, inside the camp. If we had come here straight from Bodmin we would have thought we were in heaven,

Barnard Castle, 19 August 1945

We are settling down here OK now. Main advantages are:

- (1) Tons of hot water and soap.*
- (2) Marvellous unlimited showers.*
- (3) Camp cinema.*
- (4) Rather less spit and polish.*
- (5) Super sergeant and lance corporal, almost as good as Bodmin.*
- (6) Lovely fresh air.*

Disadvantages are:

- (1) Miles from civilisation. It costs 3/- to get to Darlington and back.*
- (2) No longer all trainees of same age and background.*
- (3) Food not as good as Farnborough.*

I, in common with three-quarters of the others from Farnborough, have been graded as driver-operators, which is quite a decent job—the highest paid of the tradesmen in a tank. We don't know how long we shall train for, but it will probably be about 28 weeks, maybe less. We are starting tomorrow on a gunnery course.

Barnard Castle, 22 August 1945

*Thanks very much for two parcels and **Listener**. Apples and tomatoes very nice and most welcome.*

This place is settling down OK. Main disadvantages are supper only three times a week, and the fact that we've just had to hand in one pair of socks, so we've only got three pairs. Advantage is that the place is very slack after Farnborough, with little spit and polish and during working hours on the wing

we just muck about learning about half as much as we would have done at Farnborough. Not at all unpleasant.

We are doing a 3-week gunnery course, learning thoroughly the Besa 7.92mm machine gun, and the 75mm QF gun, firing about an 8-pound armour-piercing or high explosive shot. We have wizard times on the pellet range, where we are encased in proper turrets which are rocked in all directions by special engines, and have to fire on targets on a sand table. Gorgeous fun.

These three extracts encapsulate my life in a top bunk in a brick hut on a cold Yorkshire moor in the winter of 1945–46. If the worst disadvantages were supper only three times a week (I can't imagine why) and having to hand in a pair of socks (again, why?), I don't think that things were too terrible.

Our arrival was a shock. Reality struck home. We were downgraded from being an elite of potential officers, all of the same background, into the hurly-burly of a run-of-the-mill training regiment, designed to turn out troopers for the RAC regiments overseas. During our stay in Barnard Castle, the members of our squadron were gradually drafted overseas, mostly to Trieste, as I recall. At the end, two or three of us were left waiting to be summoned to WOSB—the test for proceeding to officer training—of whom I think I was the only one to survive.

The winter was not comfortable, but there were compensations, chief among them being, as appears from the above extract, the opportunity to play with toys. We were kept amused by the camp cinema, where every evening we paid sixpence to watch the latest releases in comfortable and warm surroundings. In Farnborough we would have been polishing our boots, and I find it difficult to judge, at a distance of 50 years, which in our hearts we would truly have been preferring to do.

The extremely cold winter, spent in crowded barracks in an army with little idea of what to do with us, was made tolerable, even enjoyable, by three factors:

- (a) the privileges pertaining to a member of the regimental rugby team, the CO being a rugby fanatic—these were that we played twice a week, travelled around the district, were excused fatigues and guard duties, and were paid 5 shillings per match (which about doubled my pay);
- (b) the NAAFI club in Darlington;
- (c) the fun of playing with trucks and tanks, especially the latter.

The drawback was the inability of anyone to decide when the potential officers would go before the selection board—the WOSB. I was made to hang on until March, when I could have gone any time from the New

Year onwards. It all made no difference in the end, but it was deeply annoying at the time, particularly as it interfered with leave, which assumed an importance which I now do not fully understand.

Barnard Castle, 31 August 1945

Our life here is perfectly outrageous. We are all changing over to peacetime training. If it was anything like this before the war, the Germans deserved to win.

Gunnery remains quite interesting. We are doing 77mm and 17-pounders now, and fooling around with indirect shoots, clinometers, range tables and things.

Barnard Castle, 3 September 1945

I'm afraid we are all rather escapist here. We read in the papers about the unpleasant economic outlook for the next few years and feel comfortably that the army, at any rate, will see that we get fed for a bit. But some of the blokes in the lower demob groups are beginning to get a bit scared. Returned POWs are beginning to look wistfully to their Stalag days. All this fantastic nonsense about paying dollar and sterling debts seems rather futile.

Barnard Castle, 28 October 1945

Wireless is now rather boring, except for the work we have to do on the innards of a set and the electrical theory, which are both quite interesting. Morse is a great burden. I nearly got thrown out of the class today because I only got 95% on a Morse test at 15 words per minute. But I can get the sense of a message at 20 words per minute, and can now distinguish quite a lot of the Morse you can pick up on the air from ships.

*We are going to Darlington tomorrow and will doubtless see a flick. Last night I saw **Pennies from Heaven**—quite pleasant, and on Sunday am going to see Lauren Bacall (the new sensation) in **To Have and Have Not**. The camp cinema is pretty good—this film was only at the big Darlington flickhouses last week, and of course it's only sixpence for a three-hour show.*

The dreadful winter of 1945–46 in Britain had little impact on us, except perhaps to make those of us due to be drafted overseas speak longingly of the Middle East. I am surprised that I was moved enough to comment.

The passage on gunnery was intended more for my father, who had been a gunner in the First World War.

Darlington is a half-hour bus ride from Barnard Castle, and is not a prepossessing city. But the NAAFI club in Darlington was a haven, providing a comfortable lounge and excellent food. It became our custom

to get there about 10.30am on a Sunday, have a huge lunch and then go to a cinema as soon as it opened.

Barnard Castle, 16 November 1945

Our driving and maintenance training is continuing very pleasantly. This week has been wholly devoted to the theory and care of the internal combustion engine. I have been setting ignitions, adjusting brakes, fooling around adjusting valves, pumps and carburettors all week. I think I could now discover the firing order of an engine with my eyes shut. Even the autovac is an open book to me, while setting a distributor is just too easy.

Barnard Castle, 18 November 1945

Today we started driving, on 15cwt Bedfords. It is of course great fun. They just sit you in the driving seat and tell you to get going. I found it was easier than I expected. The hardest part was judging how much to rev up when in neutral in changing down (especially on steep hills). They make us double declutch going up and down. Of course any sort of synchromesh is unheard of. It is all crash-type gearboxes. My reversing wasn't so hot. I was driving for about an hour altogether, for about 15 minutes of which I was allowed to stay in top, which was gorgeous. I got up to 40 mph before I got scared by the greasy roads.

Here I drove an internal combustion vehicle for the first time. If the circumstances in which we were permitted to drive heavy trucks on the public highway seem horrifying, they were nothing to how we comported ourselves when we got into light tanks. We emerged from this training with full army licences, which translated in due course into full civilian licences. Thus, I was licensed to drive a track-laying vehicle (and still am) before I had ever driven a private car. My father used to say that when I eventually drove his car I treated it like a tank.

Learning to drive tanks was a pastime which remains in my memory as the greatest fun, though uncomfortable and exhausting. Driving a tank in the desert must have been hell, especially as all concerned must have known that their tanks were inferior. The driver of a Second World War tank, in my case a Cromwell or a Comet, sat with his feet on the clutch and accelerator, which were raised like an obstetrical chair. Between his legs was the gear lever, and at shoulder level two levers which braked the right or left track, and by which the tank was steered. A gear change was necessary about every 10 or 15 seconds, and involved double declutching. It was very hard work.

Later we moved on to light tanks—Stuarts—which were comparatively easy to drive. Today a tank is as easy to drive as a car, with a steering

wheel and automatic transmission. I am pleased to record that when we visited the Australian Tank Depot at Puckapunyal, not only did I get to drive a Leopard tank, but my wife induced the Squadron Leader to sneak off with her while we were at lunch, and let her too have a drive. At that time she was the first woman to drive an Australian tank, and the then Chief of the General Staff threatened dire consequences if any photograph ever emerged. If one did, we never saw it.

Barnard Castle, 14 December 1945

We've been on tanks all week, driving and maintaining them. Driving a 35-ton vehicle is rather odd and frightening, but quite fun. One has to be incredibly quick in gear-changing, and have complete faith in one's instructor, who can see far more than you can. It is hard work maintaining them. After each day's run we have to carry about 60 gallons of petrol by hand and pour them into the tank. The Rolls Royce Merlin aero engines inside them use 2 gallons per mile. On Wednesday we had to remove a track and driving sprocket. These tracks (2½ tons each) have to be manhandled. It's quite incredibly hard work, but very interesting.

Barnard Castle, 21 December 1945

We finished tank driving today, after a couple of ghastly days of fog and icy roads, which really took it out of us. On ice even the best drivers can't be wholly reliable. Once I turned a complete circle in the middle of the village of Bowes—rather disconcerting. When a tank goes into a skid the only thing to do is to let go of everything and wait. It is fatal to try and pull out of it. But nobody has been killed—not even the odd civilian, who are justifiable expenditure. I can now drive pretty well on tanks, but I think that they are incredibly dangerous to other traffic, etc. Inside the tank is the safest place to be.

Barnard Castle, 23 January 1946

We are on tactical training this week—wizard fun. This week we are on a light tank (14 tons) called a Stuart. The Mark 5 has synchromesh, while the Mark 6, which I have been on so far, has a self-changing gear. There is no clutch and no gear lever. You just keep your foot on the accelerator and the thing changes gear itself when necessary. It is a joy to drive—45mph on the road. We have been doing cross-country over ground covered in snow and ice. It is fun because the tank may suddenly go through the ice and drop about 3 feet. It snowed again last night, but we are getting used to it.

A portrait of an entirely happy young man, playing at last with a most expensive toy, and no doubt frightening his mother to death, as intended.

I did not mention that on one snowy day I nudged my tank into the corner of the Post Office in Kirby Stephen, causing alarm but little damage. We certainly were a menace on the roads.

Barnard Castle, 30 January 1946

There is a ghastly purge of our squadron. We have to stand to our beds for inspection of selves and room nearly every night at 7pm, which of course mucks up one's evening. Tonight they could find no fault with the room or our kit (even the stuff in our lockers), and had to find fault with us. I got practically shot for having a button missing.

It snowed again last night and is very cold today. I do hope that it is a bit better for you, Mum. We are still fooling around with Stuarts. We hope to be back on Comets next week. Tomorrow we are taking the Stuarts to a place called Brough near Appleby, which will be quite amusing as the roads are in a terrible condition and Stuarts aren't safe at the best of times. I am the only person who really likes them.

A bloke we know who went to Italy a few weeks ago wrote to us the other day on a looted typewriter, saying his squadron was billeted in a 12-storey hotel in Milan. He has his own room with civvy bed, electric fire and private bathroom. He gets 75 free fags a week which he can sell at a shilling each.

I have never forgotten my missing button. Its absence was greeted with the enquiry: 'How dare you appear on parade looking like a fucking naked gipsy!'

The young trooper in Milan betrayed his innocence. In harsher circumstances, one lesson you learnt was never to try to liberate a typewriter, as it was very likely to be booby-trapped.

This is the last letter from Barnard Castle. I cannot recollect anything of it, but I must have passed the Selection Board, which lasted two days and required candidates to show leadership and initiative, by having logs hauled over imaginary rivers, etc. Routine stuff in later years, but then very newfangled. Whatever my remarks to my mother, which were a form of superstitious insurance, I never doubted for a second that I would pass.

In 1946 it took six months to turn a trooper into a Second Lieutenant—two months to turn us from other ranks into Officer Cadets, and four months to turn cadets into officers. The first part remains shadowy, and I offer few extracts.

Pre-OCTU, Wrotham, Kent, 7 April 1946

I have met thousands of people here I know from various sources. They all seem to think that pre-OCTU is pretty grim. Everyone I've talked to so far doesn't think it's worth the discomfort and wish they were back in their own units. Many of them, too, have been pushed into the infantry, and are as appalled as I am at the idea.

Wrotham, 10 April 1946

I am beginning to see how I passed WOSB. 80% of the blokes here have HSC, and about 45% have Oxford or Cambridge scholarships. Of the 12 in our hut there are three history scholars from Cambridge and Oxford besides me! It is rather disconcerting but a nice change to live with blokes with as good brains and as strong personalities as oneself. Most are from grammar schools and not boarding schools, which is interesting.

Wrotham, 29 April 1946

We are now beginning to see what sort of a joint this is. The discipline and spit and polish are absolutely terrifying. They are really out (as they admit) to show us all the tricks of the trade, so we'll be able to dish it out. On Saturday the company commander inspected us and told us what filthy swine we were.

Looking back rather hazily, I conclude that one purpose of these weeks was to get us used to being treated like adults, preparatory to being called 'Sir' when we got to OCTU itself. (OCTU stands for Officer Cadet Training Unit.) We were also given infantry training, which we found boring but evidently necessary. We were given some rein. I and three others, sent out to identify places from rhyming clues, deduced that the officer who had set the scheme would not in fact have bothered to go over the ground, but would have picked the places from a map. We found no difficulty in doing so as well. When he found us sitting at base, instead of being out, we told him what we had done. He took it in good part, giving us credit for it. It made us feel grown up, and we became his slaves.

Another illustration. Each cadet had to give a five-minute talk to his squad on a subject of his choice. I chose 'The Noble Art of Skiving' and spoke for five minutes on how, armed with a broom and a bucket, you could appear to be invisible, missing all sorts of uncongenial duties. This was highly acceptable, as it would not have been from a trooper.

OCTU, Trentham, 28 June 1946

This place passeth all understanding. It has none of the amenities we have been led to expect, with most of the disadvantages. After what we were led to

expect, it has been a nasty comedown. So far the food is no better than at Wrotham, which is rather distressing. The beds are very comfortable, which is good.

OCTU, 3 July 1946

I am beginning to get a bit used to this joint. There has been a colossal fuss about feeding, and we are now getting better food and being waited on, which is something. It has been a long time, too, since I went to every meal absolutely ravenous. This is because we work absolutely flat out. Apart from very hard physical work (drill is the hardest I've met yet, and I've seen some), we have to work very hard mentally. I think it is quite likely that I shall be relegated six weeks or so before the end of the course—33% are—but I don't think I shall be returned to unit.

We are getting used to running our own company. For the last three days of this week I am my platoon sergeant, which isn't very hard—largely taking parades of the platoon—the platoon commander does most of the dirty work.

Interesting to watch us being groomed by being waited on at table, even though the food was poor, by having Mess Nights and being addressed as 'Sir' by the Regimental Sergeant Major. We loved it.

*Despite my usual superstitious insurance, I was confident that I would pass out well, and would not have to work very hard to do so. This was because a lot of marks went on written tests. I used to come first in Military Knowledge because I had no difficulty in learning the *Manual of Military Law and King's Regulations* by heart. I used to reproduce them word for word in the tests and earned enough marks to ensure that I would pass out well. This meant that the officers did not find it necessary to test my officer-like qualities (the acid test) by giving me leadership roles on schemes, and I coasted along, eventually passing out in the top grade.*

OCTU, 31 July 1946

This week has been fairly easy so far. There have been a lot of blokes threatened by the OC with relegation, but as I haven't had to see him yet, I am hoping I shall get by this time. Perhaps the fact that I got top marks in the company in the Military Knowledge test on Saturday has something to do with it.

Yesterday we had a smoker after dining in. Contrary to expectations, it was absolutely first class and we all enjoyed ourselves a great deal, which was pleasant and unexpected.

Today has been pretty easy—I had to give a lecture on my regiment's history but that was OK as no-one knew any more than I did, so I made it up on the spur of the moment.

'My' regiment was now firmly fixed as the one I had applied for: The Lancashire Fusiliers, the tip-top Lancashire regiment. My time at OCTU was not hampered by the fact that our Company Commander was a Lancashire Fusilier himself.

The next letter is from Tokyo, the name given to the battle camp in remote North Wales where the Company did its final training, and on which depended the final decision whether one passed or not. Until six months previously, it had been called Berlin.

Tokyo, 6 October 1946

I am writing this by a hurricane lamp in my office after a pretty strenuous 24 hours.

We got here last night in the dark and the rain after a journey through Ruabon, Llangollen, Corwen and Dolgellay. We are on Square 1749 of the OS map, just off the Portmadoc and Criccieth sheet, but just on the Barmouth and Lake Vyrnwy sheet if you've got that one.

I had a very good night's rest, but have had a pretty hectic day, as I've had to take the blame for all the admin muck-ups which occur in a new camp. However I've put in a report to the OC which will make him sit up, I think.

The weather has been glorious today. It is glorious country and I should love it if it wasn't so important and such hard work.

I shall have to be up very early tomorrow calling everybody and checking up details for the day's work. I knock off after breakfast tomorrow, thank heaven.

Monday night

It's been another lovely day today—we've been in the sun by the sea at Tal-y-Bont. I could see all the Abersoch coast—it was a very clear day, and I felt very homesick for it. We have had a lot of fun firing all sorts of new and secret infantry weapons—very good sport and a good skive.

Life here is quite comfy—good beds and wash houses; but there is a lot of strain—they are weeding out blokes pretty strictly—one slip in conduct or discipline and it's 'return to unit' from now until the end of the course. We all feel rather depressed with this hanging over us.

Trentham, 15 October 1946

It is definite now that we shall be passed out by Lieutenant General Horrocks (GOC Western Command)—fairly uninteresting but it doesn't matter so long as we get passed out somehow.

Army Form 5,2805,
(REVISED)
MILITARY
IDENTITY CARD No. A 952170

Surname **MASON**Christian Names (and rank or designation at time of issue) **John Charles Moir**Sex **Male**Personal No. **3Y3004**Height **5 ft 7 $\frac{5}{8}$ ins**Colour of Eyes **Brown**Colour of Hair **D/Brown**Other Distinguishing Marks (if any) **Op. Scar Rt. of Abdomen****Scar Rt. Groin**Date of Birth: **13 May 27**Signature of Issuing Officer  **Capt** Signature of BearerDate **26 Oct 46****J. C. M. Mason**

3,2055-12/44



My identity card, in my own handwriting, issued on my first day as an officer

These were my last letters before I emerged on 26 October 1946 as a Second Lieutenant in XX the Lancashire Fusiliers. XX means the Twentieth Regiment of Foot, and was always used as a prefix by this regiment. I am surprised that my letters do not mention one of the fun things of our last weeks. Moss Bros descended on the camp to fit us out with our service uniforms, Sam Browne belts, etc—all of course at army expense. By the time you were allowed to order a uniform, it was clear that you were going to pass out, and we loved it.

My proud parents drove down for the passing-out parade, from which we all departed pleased as punch with our single pips on our shoulders, unaware that we were the lowest form of life where we were going—we were to be posted to the battalion of our regiment.

Finally, an apology for my ignorant and ungracious comment about the late General Horrocks. He was, as Commander of XX Corps, one of the most successful generals of the Second World War, and that I wrote of him as I did displayed the narrowness of my horizons.



*With a fellow subaltern (right), in the grounds of the ruined Residency,
Lucknow, 1947*



INDIA December 1946–February 1948

I am deeply ashamed of the following account of my life as a subaltern in a British battalion in India in the months leading up to, and following, Indian independence and partition. I made no attempt to step out of our wog-bashing, contemptuous attitude to the 'natives', still less to get to know any Indians or to understand their problems. I cringe at the thought of the wasted months. To say that I should have known better is to put it mildly. Worst of all, none of my fellow officers would have demurred if I had tried to learn something of what it was all about. It just never occurred to me.

*Officers Mess No 1 Battle Camp
Kington, Herefordshire
4 November 1946*

Today at 9.45am I strolled into the Company office and was told to be ready to take a platoon to Battle Camp in 15 minutes. We set off at 10.05. On the way I discovered that we were going to a place called Kington and that we were going for a fortnight! So here I am with a platoon I do not know to do work about which I know nothing. I don't think I've even got a sergeant to help me out. And this isn't the sort of place where anyone tells you anything. It is quite a nasty start to one's commissioned career!

It is a sort of permanent camp with one or two permanent officers. The CO has been on weekend leave since last Thursday and no-one knows when he will be back. The Adjutant (a Major) has 35 years commissioned service and was in Khartoum in 1906. The Assistant Adjutant, the President of the Mess Committee, the Messing Officer, the Transport Officer and the Military Training Officer are all one person—a lieutenant who has been put here as utterly useless. The Officers Mess numbers 10. It is honestly quite incredible. I really can't believe I am not dreaming. At the moment the Adjutant is telling the MO that 'even in '28 the whisky was two chips in Nairobi' but 'he knew the wog lingo pretty well' and the 'Askari of the 2nd/6th he found a damned fine soldier'. Honestly, that's perfectly true. Everyone is either a failure or very junior.

From 1 November 1946 until I boarded a troopship for India seven weeks later I was hanging around learning a little about the facts of life of being a junior subaltern. (I had clearly already learned the need for a sergeant to hold my hand.) I have included the above letter, written when I had been an officer for all of nine days, because of the world it reveals of Evelyn Waugh's *Officers and Gentlemen*. It's fascinating that I have not the slightest recollection of being sent to the so-called Battle Camp or of what it was like.

*On Board HMT **Highland Princess**
Southampton, 19 December 1946*

*Well, here I am on board at last, with the **Queen Mary** moored astern of us and the **Aquitania** moored at our bows. This is a diesel vessel—quite comfortable but overcrowded. There are a lot of officers' families travelling with us, and they have pinched all the cabins—still, it means that there will be children around on Christmas Day.*

We are all berthed together in a converted smoke room—very crowded. I've found one bloke I know, and the others seem OK. The food is very good indeed so far, and our Christmas dinner should be worth eating. It is snowing very heavily outside.

There have been no incidents yet, though several blokes have been brought on board under heavy escort.

*We are sailing this evening and expect to pass the **QE** on her way in.*

I suppose that I should have been feeling sad and homesick at leaving my Mum and home, but all I remember is my excitement at going overseas for the first time. We were a mixed bunch in our crowded bunkhouse—subalterns like me, wet behind the ears, and old lags in their mid-30s, delighted to have hung on to their commissions in the Ordnance Corps for a year or two more. I remember being shocked when one such took his bunk, remarking that he had just been with a prostitute and needed a shower and a change of clothes to get the stink of her off him. The ship was dry, but I didn't notice it much.

I wrote more than 50 pages on board, because there was nothing else to do. I described my friend's and my dalliance with delightful Church Army girls going out to Palestine to run canteens and, after the girls had disembarked at Port Said, with the mothers at our table, with whom we got on like a house on fire. I have resisted the temptation to reproduce this screed, except for the following revealing account of my first night ever on foreign soil in Port Said.

Suez Canal, 29 December 1946

We tied up in the harbour at 2pm. The moment we did so thousands of gully boys came out in their rowing boats and clustered round the ship, selling all sorts of leather stuff and asking outrageous prices and being beaten down. It was lovely to see the things I'd always heard about actually happening. It is quite unlike anything I have ever seen before.

At about 4pm we were allowed to change £5 sterling for £5 Egyptian and sent ashore until midnight.

The town is all verandahs and balconies and little bazaars—very dirty and an indescribable sort of garlicish smell hangs over the whole place. You walk along a street with four hawkers hanging on to you and people from all the little shops coming out and trying to persuade you to go inside.

There are one or two fixed-price shops but in all the others you haggle for hours over each thing. In the bookshops most of the books are either French or pornographic and the main trade is in 1943 newspapers or 1941 magazines. The only really decent shop is Simon Artz, where you can get anything—at a price.

After tea, Dennis and I, armed with the loathsome Egyptian notes—all tied together with string and smelling foul—went shopping. I wanted a suitcase and he wanted some shoes, and we were ready to buy souvenirs too. Several of us clubbed together to buy some bottles of Johnnie Walker to drink on New Year's Eve. Dennis and I went into nearly every shop in town. I haggled over thousands of cases. I got thrown out of one shop by the proprietor because I offered him 300 piastres for a lovely hand-made suitcase—'his life's work'. Dennis was nearly knifed for telling a venerable old crook that the Swiss stopwatch he was offering had been made by himself from sardine tins.

After this we went for dinner to the Officers Club where we got pretty well fed and had Egyptian coffee (very syrupy) in teeny glass bowls. Next we sallied forth again round the bazaars—all the shops were shut by now. In one bazaar I found a really huge leather zip bag which was just what I wanted. The price was 750 piastres (£7.10). After much haggling I bought it for 400 and I think it was worth it, though he probably made 100% profit. When I get to India I shall try to have it hand-stitched along all the seams.

About 11pm we got cheesed off with wandering around and returned to the boat. I offered my last 25 piastres to a hawker and said I'd take whatever he cared to give me. I got a villainous cosh, very nicely weighted—a valueless but interesting souvenir.

And so that was our first experience of native crookedness and wog towns. They say India isn't nearly as villainous as Port Said. I hope it isn't.

When I read with shame the above juvenile judgements, I comfort myself that the 'wogs' with whom we dealt must have been making such

a good living out of the likes of us youngsters that they tolerated our patronisingly superior attitudes. Worse was to come in India.

On a happier note, my leather bag lasted me, and my family, for over 30 years, while the cosh is in a drawer in my study.

I visited Port Said three times more, twice off a troopship and once, memorably, with wife, nanny and children over Christmas 1963. Incredible how much a man and his circumstances can change in 17 years.

1 Wing BBRC
Kalyan, near Bombay
10 January 1947

It is now 10.30am, and I have nothing to do. All we have to do all day is to report to an office at 8.30am and 1.30pm every day to see if anyone knows anything about us. Otherwise our time is our own except that we can't go to Bombay without permission, which is forthcoming only once a week. So all day we sit around in the mess or in our rooms. The mess is a long building with verandahs on either side, on the shady one of which I am sitting at the moment. In front of me is a small garden with a few English-looking flowers trying hard to exist.

In the afternoons we go swimming, as it's about the only way to become unsticky, or have a smartish siesta on the bed [these being charpoys, made with strips of canvas webbing slung across a wooden frame].

Of course the thing here is the absolute inevitability of the weather. It is just the same every day, and will be for about another three weeks, when winter starts to end and it begins to get hot.

Each morning we wake up to find it pleasantly cool, with the sun just starting work. By 9am it is getting hot and goes on getting hotter until midday and then cools until it's about the same at 4.30pm as it was at 9am. The sky is the same shade of pale blue all over, with no clouds to mar it. The air is very still and shimmers around. And when I say that 'trumpets ring out through the still air', that is really what they do.

Yesterday we all went to see the Posting Officer. Most of the others applied for all sorts of specialist jobs in various parts of India. I wasn't thinking much about the matter, however, and didn't think of applying for any wangle of that sort. So he said that I would go to my battalion at Lucknow. I've probably missed a good chance of seeing something of India through this lack of forethought, but it may all turn out for the best. So it seems that I shall definitely be going to Lucknow, probably in about ten days' time.

Kalyan was the vast staging camp, about 30 miles outside Bombay, to which all new arrivals off the troopships were sent. It was only a transit camp, but inevitably transit took a long time, given that no-one had any idea who was wanted where for what.

In this, the first letter from a young man exposed to the Indian climate at its most benign, the lyrical description of the sun and sky is uncharacteristic. I don't at all remember what inspired it—perhaps the reports of the appalling winter in Britain.

I equally have no recollection of having 'missed' the chance of some specialist posting. I later realised that my battalion must have asked for me, which was a compliment as the officers chosen for these specialist jobs were those whom established units were anxious to unload, to have 'ERE' or extra-regimentally employed.

*1 Wing BBRC, Kalyan
19 January 1947*

We are now completely in a rut of idleness. In the morning I generally spend about three hours in the swimming pool—it's nearly empty in the morning and you can float around on your back in the sun for ages and nothing comes to disturb you.

In the evenings I read a library book and often go to the flicks after dinner. On Wednesday night I went to a dance at the Kalyan Officers Club. A lot of the girls are Anglo-Indian. They are extremely pretty and it is often very difficult to tell that they are not white. The great giveaway is that they talk in a terrific Welsh accent for some reason. The standard story is that one of them was asked what part of Wales she came from, and she answered, 'I come from Swansea Cantonment'. They are all after husbands to take them to England. They sometimes catch Other Ranks, but they know that if officers get caught they are immediately posted away from that unit, so they are not quite so hopeful with us.

*I wonder if you can buy, or borrow from some library which won't notice, a book called **From Gerson to Grotius** by G.N. Figgis. Also I should like my copy of **Stubbs Charters** please, and of course R's new book.*

Lazing around the swimming pool sounds idyllic but I clearly remember the vultures which hovered above, in the hope that sooner or later they may find their supper. This image is reminiscent of the vultures hovering at the top of the Towers of Silence where the Parsees, an exclusive Indian religious sect of Zoroastrian background, deliberately placed their corpses for extremely hygienic disposal.

My remarks about the Anglo-Indian girls are of course quite unacceptable today, but I can only say that they were an exact representation of thinking among us at that time. Nor would the young women, or their mothers, have demurred at my account: they were hell-bent, and understandably, on making an advantageous marriage in the light of an uncertain future after independence. They might tell lowly suitors to return when they were promoted to sergeant, when the first who achieved this would win the bride. I should add that these young ladies, most of them Catholics, were entirely chaste, and very good company for those of us of whom they could nourish no expectations. And their marriages on the whole flourished. So it was not, perhaps, as unacceptable as it now sounds.

It is worth remembering that we young subalterns were also entirely chaste, virgins to a man—in fact if not in thought. In 1947 we did not know girls who would hop into bed—even if there were any, they would not have been interested in us—and none of us would have thought of visiting a prostitute, whom we could not anyhow have afforded. Shady wallahs used to come to our rooms peddling laughable pornography. I remember a series of pictures to which we were much attached, which had captions such as ‘Woman being pleased by tiger—and enjoying’. ‘And enjoying’ was the invariable phrase, and became a catchword in the mess.

As for the book orders, I am relieved to see myself displaying for once a slightly less philistine and more cultured face to the world. Both Figgis’ book and the indispensable Stubbs remain on my bookshelves today—only two months ago I had recourse to the latter to retrieve the Latin for the ‘shall not sell, deny or delay justice’ clause in the Magna Carta, with which to bemuse an audience of Australian lawyers.

‘R’s book’ was the superb *The Wind Cannot Read* by my first cousin, Richard Mason, which gave me the best idea of what India was like at the time, apart from Kipling’s *Kim*.

Kalyan, 21 January 1947

Since I’ve been here I have had three days in bed with a complaint which is quite common for new arrivals in India, and which you’d never guess in a hundred years. It isn’t at all serious and is all over now.

Today I’ve been in Bombay on the razzle with Dennis. We had lunch at the Taj Mahal again and did a spot of shopping. The only thing I bought was the collected works of Lewis Carroll. Eighteen chips (27 shillings approx)—rather too expensive, but I felt that I had to have it, as I’ve been longing for Alice and cursing that I hadn’t brought her ever since I left Southampton. After that we went to Breach Candy, the exclusive European bathing place, pool, etc. It’s really a lovely place—there weren’t many people there and I fear (I hate to

say it) that it was lovely to get away from wogs and Anglo-Indians (particularly the latter) for a while.

I enclose a [virulently anti-British] leaflet which is one of thousands which were dropped from the sky onto Bombay today. It is rather pathetic to see all the Forces roaring with laughter at them. When you get into a big town like Bombay where the Indians are more educated, you can feel how much they hate us. You know very well that if they thought they could get away with it, they'd knife you as they passed. It's a sort of atmosphere of hate that hangs over the place and neither side tries to dispel it at all. I feel very strongly that we shall have to get out pretty soon and leave them to it.

Not a pleasant letter. My only defence is that I cannot now recall feeling about Indians at all strongly, and certainly not in the terms used here. And I have personally no idea whether the British soldiers were as reviled as I make out. I can only hope that my memory is not at fault, and that I wrote as I did to impress my mother, for some reason.

The unpleasant complaint was piles, never suffered before or since. A sign of the times and upbringing, I suppose, that I did not feel able to tell my mother what had been the matter. Of course, she wrote back in a frenzy of anxiety, her imagination no doubt ranging from pox and clap (though I don't think so) to amoebic dysentery (which came later) and scabies. I don't think I ever did tell her.

*Officers Mess
1st Bn, XX The Lancashire Fusiliers
Lucknow, United Provinces
27 January 1947*

We set out from Kalyan on Friday evening for our respective destinations. We travelled all night. The first class compartments on Indian trains are fixed to sleep four and you sit in them during the daytime. We had breakfast at Itarsi. The system is that you get off at appropriate stations and have your meals in the European refreshment room, which is generally very good. Every Indian station has at least three refreshment rooms for each class to cater for various religions.

We spent most of Saturday being pushed by two engines through the jungly ravines and cuttings of Bhopal. Hundreds of small baboons, apes and monkeys came rushing through the trees and jumped up against the coaches scrounging for food and were extremely annoyed if they didn't get any.

I got off the Lahore mail at Jhansi at about 8pm, and learned that the next train to Lucknow was at 3am, so I went off into Jhansi to the flicks. When I got back I found that there was no reservation for me, so I had to spend the

night in the troops rest room. I eventually got on a train for Lucknow at 1.15pm. The great sight was the Ganges, where I saw the edifying spectacle of several funerals taking place at the water's edge.

At 8pm I at last arrived at Lucknow, and got a lift to the mess, where nobody knew anything about me. The mess is a magnificent white building which reeks of regimental tradition and pukka sahibs. This is reputedly the smartest battalion in India. We all wear grey blue shirts and khaki shorts with a cloth beret which has a yellow hackle (i.e. plume of feathers). The whole battalion is very very smart indeed.

I cannot remember anything about my intrepid journey across India, and wonder in retrospect how the mail from Bombay to Lahore was passing through Jhansi (the original of Bhowani Junction and a real hole). But I seem to have managed the various vicissitudes with aplomb.

Despite our outward attitudes, all the subalterns in the battalion were intensely proud of its reputation, which was entirely deserved. It was owed to the formidable Regimental Sergeant Major Price, who ran things with a rod of steel. I remember a Fusilier, whom I had told to deliver a message to the RSM, pleading 'Please sir, don't make me go up and speak to Mr Price'. He was known as Kitna (Urdu for 'how much') or Price. It was a privilege to serve in 'his' battalion.

Lucknow, 2 February 1947

I have got a pretty good bearer called Anand Lal. Here we really do get service. Anand dresses and undresses me—puts all my things away, has them dhobied [laundered], and does not allow me to do a single thing for myself. I change my shirt and underwear twice a day, not because it is necessary, but once I've taken an article of clothing off he'd never allow me to put it on again without it being washed.

The mess here is going to be OK, I think. The blokes all speak with strong Lancashire accents and they all come from Manchester Grammar School, Hulme GS, Wigan GS and schools like that. They are a very united lot, so of course it takes longer than usual to settle down with them, but it will be the more fun when I do, which won't be long.

Every Thursday is a formal dinner night. We have the band playing 'five minutes with Cole Porter' etc throughout dinner, ending up with the regimental marches. The table is loaded down with masses of silver—huge candlesticks and rose bowls and cups. Everyone has a silver tankard presented by some past member and a silver finger bowl containing a red rose. The whole regiment is pervaded by the red rose of Minden. On Minden Day all new subalterns have to eat a red rose dipped in rum and make a speech at dinner.

Though I naturally did not tell my mother, my comment about the other subalterns being a united lot was in fact really to say that they loyally kept to the old tradition that the newest subaltern was not spoken to for his first few months. So I was pretty lonely. Of course, eventually people changed and I became the life and soul of the party. I think that something similar happened to my daughter at boarding school.

It may be asked how, so soon after the war, the battalion had so much of its regimental silver to hand. The answer was that they had been in India since the mid-1930s, and it was their home base.

Minden Day was one of two regimental days, the other being Gallipoli Day, 25 April 1915, when the 1st Battalion so conducted itself at the Lancashire Landing that the survivors were awarded six Victoria Crosses to distribute among themselves as they chose. Hence the battalion's boast: 'Six VCs before breakfast'. This was a solemn day, when in Lucknow we trooped the colour, led by Mindy, the mule mascot brought out from Burma and the most cosseted mule in history. Minden Day was, by contrast, a saturnalia for all ranks.

Lucknow, 9 February 1947

I have been comparatively busy since I last wrote. On Friday we went for a 12-mile route march. We started about 7am, when it was still pretty cool but we found it quite warm towards midday as we came back, even though it has not yet got above 90 degrees. It was very interesting to get out into the surrounding countryside. It is a real art finding your way about on Indian maps with their few roads, myriad villages and complete absence of contour lines. We marched along narrow paths through the paddy fields and up the tracks of several mud villages, which are composed of 30 or so mud huts, where animals and people live together. As we go through, all the women flock to the entrances of the huts and peep at us while the kids are whisked away from the terrible soldiers. On the way back we came through one of the very few native bazaars which is in bounds in Lucknow. The larger part of Lucknow is strictly out of bounds and is really very dangerous if you are fool enough to wander into it. We also had a lot of fun crossing the Gumti (our local river—quite a decent-sized one—about 40 yards wide) on railway bridges where you have to tread on the sleepers because that is all there is between you and the water.

On Friday 7th I got your letter dated 24 January, Mum. I am most terribly sorry for you with these fuel shortages. We read in the paper this morning that the North West is about the worst hit and that factories may have to close down. We all feel guilty about sunbathing while you are shivering.

The purpose of our route march was of course to show the flag, our role in Lucknow, such as it was, being to act as 'aid to the Civil Power'. This meant being ready to put down mobs and riots when requested to do so, in writing, by an Indian magistrate. We all dreaded anything serious arising, but we only had to turn out two or three times during my time there.

A feature of these marches, especially as it got warmer, was that officers had to carry pieces of rock salt in their haversacks to hand out to the Fusiliers at regular intervals. If one was short of salt it was bliss to suck a piece, just as it was to drink heavily salted water at every meal.

Crossing the railway bridge on bare sleepers in fact destroyed my head for heights forever. On one dreadful occasion, at the top of the Leaning Tower of Pisa, I had to watch my wife and children sit with their feet over the leaning side of the tower while I cringed at the top of the stairs. Not a pretty sight.

Lucknow, 12 February 1947

I've just had to stop for a minute or two while the napi shaved me—I haven't shaved myself since I've been here and I don't think that I could put on my shoes and stockings by myself now, let alone tuck my shirt in!

This week I have been comparatively busy on a Court of Enquiry. It has been very instructive as regards life in India. The President of the Court is a major with service in India since 1928; my fellow member is a Sikh and we have got on very well. We've unearthed some of the fantastic corruption which goes on in all civilian offices run by the army. All the witnesses are Muslims, and they are trying to pin the blame for the loss of two typewriters on a low caste Brahmin who is a very junior clerk. All the awkward witnesses become ill when we want them, and one of the clerks has admitted that they have all been intimidated. On the second day we were all offered 100 chips apiece to put the loss down to the state. Since a typewriter costs about 500 chips here and half of the clerks stand to lose their jobs because of what we have unearthed (e.g. the Head Clerk had been 'on leave' in the week when the machines went, without telling anyone), their anxiety is understandable. I've learnt more about the confusion in Indian politics in the last two days than I ever understood before.

The napi was the barber who used to shave us—other ranks as well as officers. In India no soldier ever shaved himself. A napi wallah would correctly boast that he could shave you without waking you!

Lucknow, 23 February 1947

I look back on these last two months with very great pleasure and enjoyment. The month I've spent in Lucknow I regard as one of the pleasantest since I joined up.

I'm afraid that my halcyon life in C Company is not going to last much longer, as a Major Shaw from Oswestry is coming out to take over the Company, so the free and easy life I have enjoyed under Eric Williams will come to an end. I'm afraid that I'm going to have to go through a weapons training cadre for a few weeks when we get to Calcutta, but I am thankful that I have not landed the 12-week junior officers leadership course in the plains, to which the two subalterns junior to me have been posted.

Last Tuesday I summoned up energy to pay a visit to the Residency at Lucknow. All the area occupied by the besieged has been very carefully preserved as a sacred spot on which the sun never sets. There is rather too much Tennysonian atmosphere about the place, but the general effect is most impressive. You can walk through the ruins of the Residency and all the houses which formed the outer posts of the garrison. The houses are absolutely riddled with cannon ball holes and you realise very vividly what a time the garrison must have had during the five months they were besieged. I think that the reason the ruins are so much more impressive than similar ruined English castles is that they were ruined such a comparatively short time ago, which makes it all seem more real.

Major T.P. Shaw was a pre-war regular soldier, a bachelor, a dandy and a professional eccentric. His tippie was gin and warm water. I remained under his command, invariably addressed as 'Ensign Mason', until I was demobbed after our return to the United Kingdom. I ran across him many years later at a Palace garden party, he having been the Officer in Charge of the Regimental Depot. I remember him—now—with affection.

Eric Williams was my best mate, both in the battalion and thereafter. We have now sadly lost touch.

We never of course went to Calcutta after all, but stayed in Lucknow, to our relief, until independence. At the time, it was rumoured that the Indians planned to turn the Residency site into a housing development. Fortunately, the rumours were unfounded—the Residency has been carefully preserved, the only and understandable change being that the Union Jack no longer flies. It was hauled down by us at midnight on the eve of independence (not me).

Lucknow, 23 March 1947

Owing to the situation in the Punjab, there is a bit of tension in Lucknow. Yesterday we did a flag march through all the native quarter, which is normally out of bounds. A flag march is just a formal route march to impress the natives. It was rather a bind—six miles in the sun through the narrow stinking streets of the bazaar—but very interesting. There is a terrific row as the column approaches, and as we pass all the natives crowd onto their balconies and their shop windows and watch in absolutely dead silence—rather frightening. We had mounted police all round us clearing a way with the butts of their lances. There was no trouble at all. Today is Pakistan Day so the police have got a big flap on over what they think the Muslims will do to celebrate, and the Hindus to stop them. The result is that the whole battalion has to stand by at half an hour's notice, ready to move into the city. And I know nothing will happen.

My weapons training cadre starts tomorrow. I am hoping against hope that I shall get off it. But I shouldn't be sorry to lose T.P. Shaw for a bit—he's so clueless that he makes our work twice as hard. His mind is 1936 vintage, e.g. the other day he pointed to an aeroplane and said, perfectly seriously in his affected drawl: 'Is that a flying machine, Mason?'

I have no memory of showing the flag, but am relieved to learn that I did at least know enough to discern the significance of Pakistan Day.

I hope that my mother, older and wiser, realised that T.P. Shaw was 'taking the piss' out of his brash young subalterns. I recall that when we were back in the United Kingdom, and I was describing a young lady, one of several at the time, to whom I said I was engaged, he enquired whether there had been a notice in *The Times*. On learning that there had not, he sensibly dismissed the matter.

Infantry Weapons Training School
Saugor, Central Provinces
16 April 1947

Well, what of Saugor? Frankly, I think that 10 weeks of this will drive me insane. We don't work long hours, 6.30am to 12 noon, but the work is very tiring, because it is so very uninteresting and incredibly badly put over. I can't explain this because it involves a close knowledge of weapons training, but often we pinch ourselves to make sure that we are not in some nightmare. All the others feel the same. I regard the school as a criminal organisation in its present form.

Another nasty thing is the confinement. We are prisoners for 10 weeks in the cantonment. Our instructor has been here since June and hasn't been out

of this cantonment in that time. But the worst things of all are (a) no swimming and (b) the atmosphere caused by the fact that the instructors know, and know that we know they know, that our dearest wish is to get out of here.

I am regarding this as a purgatory for the purpose of strengthening character. I never thought that I should be homesick in the army, but I am homesick for the battalion all right.

It got worse. My next six letters are progressively more miserable. Apart from the unwelcome and incompetent teaching, it got hot. My letter of 21 May reports 119 degrees Fahrenheit, with 100 degrees at night. But I had a stroke of luck: I got a poisoned ankle from a cut from a branch while swimming in an obviously dirty river. Feeling below par one morning, I set off for the sick bay, and fell over three times on the way. The kind Indian doctor could not understand why I had a raging temperature, until I happened to pull down my sock and display my ankle. He instantly despatched me to the hospital, where I spent ten pleasant days.

Saugor, 28 May 1947

With great cunning on Monday morning I managed to get myself ensconced in the very comfortable cantonment hospital. I got in on the grounds that I had malaria and a septic foot. I could not keep up the malaria bit for long as they cunningly took a blood test and of course that showed I hadn't got it. But fortunately my septic foot caused my leg glands to swell most impressively and I managed to produce an infected throat to account for my fever, which in actual fact was caused by anxiety lest they would not admit me. My fever lasted only two days which was a pity because of course I could only have fluid food, which by influence I have made Nestles milk and tinned peaches. So I am pinning all faith on my foot; in England this would be nothing, but out here septic things do the job in style. My glands are swollen most impressively and of course perfectly harmlessly, and to my delight today an interesting rash has appeared. So I think I am safe here for another week at least.

This is a good thing, as I am very comfortable indeed. The hospital was built in 1822 by the East India Company, and has huge thick walls and is very cool. I have a luxurious private room without anyone to talk to, thank heaven. And the crowning blessing is the fact that the hospital library has the most marvellous collection of 1920–1930s thrillers and novels—Edgar Wallace, Sapper, Buchan, Oppenheim, etc. I am absolutely wallowing, getting through a steady five novels a day, and am in no hurry to leave.

The only drawback is that none of the orderlies speaks any English and my Urdu just can't cope. But they will insist on dressing my foot three times a day and it is rather painful. But the rest of the day makes up for it.

Supper is coming up now. I always have a fever relapse at supper time in order to qualify for Nestles!

Looking back, I think that I should have been less frank with my mother about my condition, which must have greatly worried her. On the other hand, I could have been a great deal more frank. I was really pretty ill. My whole left leg was badly swollen. Penicillin and antibiotics had not yet reached Saugor, although some M & B powder was hailed as a miracle. But in fact the leg was cured by the devotion of the Indian orderlies in applying scalding poultices to draw out any infection from the scratch (which was all that it was) three times a day.

Back at last in the battalion, I was rebuked by the CO for having achieved only an average grade. My comment that it must be the worst course in the world, on which his subalterns should not be sent, was ill-received.

Lucknow, 29 June 1947

Today the monsoon has at last arrived. Since this morning rain has poured down in unbelievable sheets and will continue to do so at intervals for several weeks. It is delightfully cool but the increase in humidity has brought prickly heat springing out all over us. When this first downpour stops and the sun comes out, the place will be steamy and we really shall become prickly.

I knew the monsoon was here yesterday when I found a cobra in my bathroom. They only come inside when the rain is due.

For the next few weeks we have to be very careful to keep snakes, frogs and lizards out of the rooms, as they all seek to congregate inside. All sorts of insects come in too, which is a nuisance.

There is no further news about moving, but the most popular choice is still Kenya. On 15 August [Independence Day], when we hand over internal security responsibilities to the Indians, we are going to have a terrific parade to haul down the Union Jack from the ruins of the Residency, where it has flown ever since the Residency was relieved in 1858. It is about the biggest British tradition in India. It is rather nasty having to do this, as we know the Indians are going to use the Residency and its grounds for a slum clearance scheme as soon as we have gone—one can understand their point of view, of course, as it is a monument to their defeat.

Anyone must remember their first monsoon. Even today, after a heavy shower anywhere, the smell of the damp earth takes me straight back to Lucknow. During the monsoon season the humidity makes one sweat unbelievably. If you get out of fan range indoors for 15 seconds you have to change your clothes. One had to be careful of heat exhaustion and

dreadful prickly heat. Heat exhaustion was preventable by drinking and eating masses of salt, which in turn ended up in one's pores—the cause of prickly heat. I used to summon up my courage every night to have a boiling bath (half an hour to get into), in order to open my blocked pores and release the salt in them, and have my back scrubbed with Asepto soap and then flayed with a towel. It was agonising but effective. I do not know whether it is as prevalent nowadays, or whether ways have been found of stopping one's pores clogging up with salt from sweat.

We did not have a vainglorious parade, leaving Lucknow well before 15 August, and going straight to a transit camp, thus missing the horrors of the post-independence bloodshed.

Lucknow, 22 July 1947

This will be my last letter from Lucknow. We have been very busy indeed this week and are hoping that things won't go too desperately wrong. Our address will be for some time XX the Lancashire Fusiliers, Deolali, Bombay, India Command.

The following item of news please don't breathe a word about to anyone at all until I say so. It is only because Roger has been working in Brigade HQ and happened to see the signal that I know it. He was sworn to secrecy and of course told Eric and myself, but no-one else in the battalion knows about it. We are leaving India about 15 November bound for the Middle East, which almost certainly means Palestine.

Five subalterns from the battalion have just been posted to the Preliminary Training Centre at Bury, but I was not one of the lucky ones. Nor were any of my particular friends. If you are disliked in the battalion you get these postings, which is very unfair.

I understand your worries concerning remarks about the Indians in my letters, and realise that you cannot understand our attitude to them, but when I say that I distrust and despise all but a very few, I am putting it mildly.

Roger's firm rumour from Brigade HQ sank without trace in a classical army manner.

I am surprised that I have no record of the five-day train journey across India which deposited the battalion in Deolali, the outward staging post for troops leaving India. Perhaps it is because I was very busy, and the journey, as I recall, went remarkably smoothly.

My mother had evidently written to rebuke me about my disgraceful comments about Indians. I cannot imagine myself feeling as I did, or why. No Indian ever did me any harm. I cringe at reproducing these letters, but believe that I must.

Deolali, 3 August 1947

Minden Day [1 August] went off quite well, though a bit organised by the regulars. Eric and I spent all day until 4pm drinking in the Sergeants Mess, where we have a lot of good friends. But the big event of the day was the Minden dinner, of course. It started at 8pm, when we sat down to table, and we finally arose at 11.15pm! This is how it went.

- (1) Grapefruit à cerisette (i.e. with a cherry)*
- (2) Tomato cream soup (really running in cream). Sherry*
- (3) Salmon au Minden*
- (4) Delice strasbourgeoise (pate de foie gras in aspic—wrong place for it of course)*
- (5) Canneton au pois (rather tough duck with usual trimmings). Champagne*
- (6) Peche Minden (ice cream with peaches and bananas)*
- (7) Toasts: the King and 'In solemn silence to all who fell at Minden' (absolutely dreadful port, more like prune juice)*
- (8) Dessert*
- (9) The band, which had been playing as usual in the ante room during dinner, now marched round the table playing the Minden March, after which the big drummer had to drink a tumbler of brandy neat, and then make a speech!*
- (10) Coffee and liqueurs (Cherry brandy for me to nerve me for the coming ordeal)*
- (11) Ten of us had to stand on our chairs in turn, eat a rose (rather like raw cabbage) and wash it down with a fingerbowl full of champagne (and the fingerbowls are big).*

On Saturday the Brigadier spoke to the battalion. He wouldn't tell us where in the Middle East we are going, but apparently it won't necessarily be Palestine. I hope not!! But he did tell us that we should be the last brigade to leave India, as we've got to guard the approaches to Bombay for all the other brigades to get out first.

As 15 August approaches, things are getting pretty tense. If we have cause to go into the bazaar or Deolali alone, we take revolvers, as they love setting on officers. Four Fusiliers of our rear party in Lucknow were stabbed one night, and Brigade HQ marched out with their bayonets fixed, on the Brigadier's orders. I think that we may have to do quite a lot of work guarding the railways for the other troops to come through, but I hope sincerely that we shan't. The majority are quite peaceful, but a good many loathe and detest us.

The name Deolali will, after all these years, elicit memories from thousands of British soldiers stranded there waiting for the boat home. There were wistful songs about it, sung in sergeants messes along with



*Minden Day, Deolali, 1 August 1947
The 'Four Musketeers' (me in front) preparing to
confront the goings-on in the sergeants mess*

the rest of the repertoire. It was a soulless place, full of rumour and uncertainty, and no-one ever left it with a second's regret.

The Minden Day dinner in the mess was worth describing in full. But on reflection I think that my mother, who came from a strictly teetotal Congregational family, must have been disapproving, worried that the demon drink had got her son in its clutches.

As usual, even the Brigadier's forecasts came to nothing. We were not required to guard the exit of our comrades and, indeed, if my recollection is correct, the new governments would have liked to retain us to cope with the dreadful bloodshed of the Hindu/Muslim confrontation.

I remember the Brigadier's visit. He dined in the mess and I stole the flag from the bonnet of his staff car. I still have it.

Deolali, 7 September 1947

This will be a short letter, but contains some quite good news. The battalion is not going to Palestine, but is going straight to England when we leave India. The great joy is that the regulars are being posted to other units out here, and only non-regulars are going home with the battalion. It will be a marvellous collection of blokes to go home with. It suits me down to the ground, of course, because it will give me a few months in England before I'm demobbed while I'm still earning a salary of sorts.

This news is helping me on with the welter of work I am landed in at present. I am so busy I don't know what I'm doing. Tomorrow I've got to carry out the biggest explosive job I've ever tackled in the army—blowing up a large area of solid rock to construct a grenade range for the Brigadier, and naturally I'm intrigued to see what will happen. The place is only about 300 yards from camp, so everyone is a bit interested. Great sport—if I've laid the charges OK and if my calculations re grain of rock etc are correct.

In retrospect, it was lucky for me that we did not go to Palestine. It would not have looked good on my record when I was appointed Ambassador to Israel 30 years later.

My explosion, I recall, smashed some windows, and I was not too popular. But the only good thing to come out of Saugor was my appointment as Weapons Training Officer, which included access to explosives to carry out various requirements. It also gave me independence, and a store to which I and my excellent sergeant could retreat. My chief explosives failure was to put an electric detonator and a very small piece of gun cotton on a beam in Eric's room, with a wired plate, in order to kill the rat which was plaguing him. Unfortunately, while we were at dinner, it died, but my little device was strong enough to blow it to smithereens all over Eric's room. How I laughed.

*MV Georgic, Port Sudan
3 November 1947*

This place, Port Sudan, is the main junction for Hell, and it is our misfortune to be stuck here for 24 hours, about halfway up the Red Sea, in a state of hot discomfort which will seem incredible to me in a fortnight's time, when the cold fogs of the Mersey Bar will strike fear into our hearts. I am now sitting in a deckchair on the boat deck with a wonderful view. In the foreground is an enormous gantry, then the large Shell-Mex colony, then about 100 miles of desert to the mountains round Khartoum. I will now retrace my steps and explain how I got to be at this place at this moment.

We came down to Bombay on Tuesday and set sail that night, very glad to see the last of India, even though I, for one, was very conscious of what a good time I've really had, especially in Lucknow. I think the months of February and March were two of the happiest I can remember.

The Georgic is one of the largest ships ever to run on the trip—28,000 tons, built as you will observe from the name for the Cunard White Star Atlantic run. She was converted for the East by Henry Kaiser, and is not really suitable for it. The boat deck is rather closed in and the ventilation is not too hot. On the other hand there is an excellent lounge.

To our surprise and delight we weren't relegated to a troop deck, but were put in a 16-berth cabin on A deck, which is too crowded, but that is inevitable. We also eat in the first class saloon. We are finding the food good but rather scanty, which I expect is good preparation for Blighty. The greatest snag is the shortage of fresh water for washing since we can't take any on before Malta owing to the cholera in the Middle East.

I have been knocking around with one Bill England. We spent the first day or two getting settled in and then naturally started to review the feminine talent on board. The situation was bad. All the first class passengers were either married or quite hopeless, it appeared. However finally we ran to earth three girls from ENSA, travelling home from Colombo, who appeared to be worth cultivating, so after having tactfully put in a heavy evening making up to their chaperone, we made their acquaintance. So Bill and I and another bloke whom we co-opted are the only three who have the delightful pastime of shipboard flirtation to occupy us, to the undisguised jealousy of all the other millions of subalterns aboard. It is my particular protegee's chair that I am sitting in at the moment, as she is down below washing her (and my!) smalls. It is very pleasant to be able to pass the moonlit evenings in the conventional way and provides a welcome distraction, besides keeping me off the bottle. Most of the ship think that we are rather daring to be going about with 'actresses', but to our slight consternation we find that they are rather less 'fast' than the average girl.

A charmingly innocent account, as were perforce our activities, although they led the Adjutant to require me to cool it a bit. In fact my acquaintanceship with 'my' protegee lengthened and deepened, and we spent the next 18 months or so sharing a bed whenever possible. An educational highlight was that Eric (who took over from Bill England) and I spent hilarious times accompanying the two sisters—they had a dancing act—on their weeks on the Moss Empire circuit, where we made the acquaintance of people such as Jimmy Edwards, Bill Kerr and Sid Field who were then fighting their way to the top. And we witnessed the demise of the old music halls, mostly in northern towns, where it was not unusual for the company to finish off the evening by singing 'Jerusalem'. The sisters, whom I remember with deep affection, were real troupers, working for ENSA, an admirable organisation which sent performers, of varying quality, to entertain the troops.

My mother was of course fearful that I and my dancer, who was slightly older than I in years, and many more in wisdom, were going to become permanently attached, as my devotion must indeed have suggested. When I occasionally brought the sisters home for a meal she was graciousness personified, bless her, though she couldn't manage warmth.

After we docked at Liverpool we had some leave and then Eric and I found ourselves, with dear old C Company, based on a deserted airfield in North Wales. We did nothing much, except, I fear, to lark around.

Wrexham, 18 February 1948

As far as I can see I shall be moving to York on Tuesday. I have filled in my release book and had my medical. I have to spend Friday and Saturday in Shrewsbury, settling in a guard we are mounting there over something or other. It will be quite a pleasant change.

I understand that I shall get some civvies at the Demob Centre. I can't make up my mind whether to get a sports coat and flannels, or a suit and waistcoat. I also get a mac, shoes and a shirt, I think.

A long way from my first letter from Bodmin, nearly three years before! I had, I think, grown up a lot, but not as much as I thought. I was still not yet 21. One thing that does not emerge is that as an officer, though a very junior one, I had acquired absolute confidence in handling those under my command. But I didn't always get it right. On one occasion I was seeking to quell a disturbance in a dance hall in Lucknow, when my company sergeant major quietly told me to make myself scarce and leave things to him. Sadly, but not untypically, when faced with the prospect of leaving behind in India his Anglo-Indian wife, if only temporarily, he went absent, and on return had to be demoted to corporal, after years of unblemished service.

Of course, my experience in general was absolutely typical of army life: short periods of intense activity between long periods of idleness. I do not know whether my mother thought that the army had improved me. I suspect not. For the next six years, until I got married, she must have been consumed with foreboding—she was a pessimistic lady—that I was going to the dogs. I am not the right judge, but I suspect that her attitude was a mixture of intense pride, worry and the increasing realisation that I had escaped from her sway, as my father, I think, and perhaps also my sister did not.



CAMBRIDGE AND EUROPE May 1948–August 1950

The army ceased paying me on 3 May 1948. Ten days later, I celebrated my 21st birthday with a quiet dinner with my parents in a Manchester restaurant, and one week after that I started work as a representative with the Polytechnic Touring Association—the ‘Poly’. The Poly was a Christian travel organisation run by the Studd family, who combined piety—grace before meals, etc—with very hard financial nous. The holidays they provided in the immediate post-war years, with their dedicated chalets throughout Switzerland, in my view knocked into a cocked hat what the competition—Thomas Cook, Blue Cars, Lunns, etc—offered. It happily requires an effort now to remember the joy for their customers of getting out of Britain for a week or a fortnight, even with only £25 in foreign currency, and relishing unlimited butter and cream cakes. It was excellent value for money. The Poly employed students, mostly just out of the forces, at low rates of pay—£3.10 a week—but with full board, to supervise coach tours from their centres and generally keep the customers happy.

I worked for the Poly in various European resorts in every long vacation while at university, and was working for them in August 1950, in Blankenberghe in Belgium, when I was recalled to the army to serve in Korea. I got the job at the Poly at the suggestion of my maternal uncle Campbell Finlayson, who was my mentor and guide until he died in 1967. My gratitude to him is enormous. I had the time of my life.

*c/- The Poly Chalet, Interlaken
24 May 1948*

Well, here I am at the end of a very long day, safely ensconced in my very comfortable room in the Poly chalet. I had a lovely easy trip across in a most comfortable plane. I wandered around Bale for a bit after lunch, and then got here by train about 7pm.

Interlaken is a lovely town, right between the lakes and with mountains towering all around it. The chalet is a bit out of the town and is like a very good hotel only alas rather chummier. The clients are mostly from Yorkshire

or Lancashire. The staff are extremely friendly, and I've already contacted two quite good types in exactly the same position as I, who arrived on Friday. At meals we each have a table full of cash customers, which is rather trying, but I suppose it's what we are paid for. I shall eventually spend my days leading excursions, but just for a bit I am to go around with others learning the ropes.

The food here will be excellent, I think. In fact comfort abounds, and if only there were no customers, it would be perfect. Commander Studd, the big boss, is meandering around here, which makes all the permanent staff a bit keen. He came up to me this evening and introduced himself, but luckily I caught on to who he was and licked his boots properly.

Interlaken, 26 May 1948

On Tuesday morning I was sent out on a bike to familiarise myself with Interlaken. It's rather a pleasant town with some fascinating shops. In the afternoon I was sent out on my first excursion as a pupil to the Blausee and Kandersteg. The guiding business is awfully simple: it just consists in knowing a bit about the trip and being able to blarney the cash customers. I am rather good at that, as you can imagine. In the evening the chalet had its weekly dance and we had to be present as taxi-dancers. This is really the grimmest part of the whole job, as most of them are middle aged, and none of them can dance.

Today I went again as a pupil to the Jungfrauoch. It was very pleasant up there (11,000 feet high) and I enjoyed myself rather a lot. Tomorrow I am going, again as a pupil, on the 'Alpine Village' tour round the French-speaking side. We get one trial trip of each excursion and then do them ourselves; it is dead easy.

Interlaken, 31 May 1948

I am really having a simply heavenly time here. I am terribly busy and sleep like a log every night, but I honestly don't regard it as work, and I am enjoying life to the full. The place is so lovely and the life is so congenial, plus the absolutely heavenly food and the very passable wines. I expect this feeling will wear off as the novelty of the job lessens, but I hope not.

I am probably particularly happy today because I have taken a party up the Jungfrauoch again in absolutely perfect weather. At the top the glaciers and the snow were incredibly lovely and the view was gorgeous.

Since there are no licensing laws, and since the local evening begins at the reasonable hour of 10pm and ends about 2am, we have very enjoyable evenings, and have established several very pleasant contacts in the local cafes and hotels. We don't get enough sleep, but as we don't have to get up until 8.45am, except when we are taking a whole day excursion, we can generally squeeze in six hours or so.

I have had a couple of very pleasant evenings with a South African girl touring Europe with her mother. I took them to the Kursaal the other night and helped them to lose a fortune (theirs, of course) at roulette.

My South African friend was the first of many agreeable girls taken to the Kursaal, especially for dancing. As it didn't close until about 5am, we frequently danced until morning. It was all very innocent—a good deal of what used to be called 'necking', as I recall, and indeed some occasional heavy petting. But no question on either side of slipping into bed. It was just not on the cards then. I think the ground rules began to change about 10 years later.

Interlaken, 27 June 1948

I am settling down to the routine of the work all right now. The trips are comparatively easy because you can pull the customers' legs like anything. For instance, they all firmly believe that there are Eskimos on top of the Jungfrau, who come down with spears in the winter and ravage the countryside. Also that the sign 'Credito Swizzero' outside the local bank is a monument to a Swiss patriot who died fighting the French in the seventeenth century!

Interlaken, 4 July 1948

We are very short of reps at the moment, and life is pretty hectic—we never get a day free from a tour apart from Sunday and we find it fairly hard.

You make me laugh, Mum, wondering how I can spend £3.10 a week. It goes nowhere here, with prices as they are. If we couldn't make a few francs a week on the side, I don't know how we should manage. Remember English income tax and insurance etc are deducted in London before we get paid.

If my remarks about the customers are patronising, I comfort myself today that the grown-ups probably knew well that we young lads were pulling their legs, and enjoyed it.

The Poly eventually disappeared into a sea of mergers. They, and the Studd family, were good to me—they offered me a permanent job when I got back from Korea, and I am grateful. My last job with the Poly was in the summer of 1953, when I took a month off from the Foreign Office and, telling no-one, spent a month doing my old job in Seefeld, near Innsbruck. No-one on either side ever found out, though I was petrified that my income tax return would somehow betray me. One morning in Seefeld, an irate customer threatened to report me to her cousin's son, who was, she said, in the Foreign Office. I did not enquire his name.

Hotel Bristol, Lugano, 29 July 1948

Life here is very different from Interlaken. I have three hotels under my charge—the three poshest ones, which is quite nice. Apparently John Brown [who came here a week before me] spread the story that I was rather a pukka sahib, so I am supposed to give these hotels tone. I am feeding at the Bristol, which is a very nice place, but at present sleeping in a small pension just down the road. I get on all right with the landlady. We have to converse in French, as she knows no English and I no Italian.

The town itself is large, and absolutely packed. There is tons of night life, so our only chances of sleep are really on our trips.

Today I made my first trip into Italy—a coach trip to Lake Como. In Italy the guides don't have to take packed lunches, as the hotels provide us with cooked ones. Today I had a marvellous meal, with a bottle of wine thrown in. Heavenly spaghetti, then a colossal steak, then some lovely Camembert and two enormous peaches. We visited the Villa Carlotta, which has some wonderful statuary, and also saw in Tremezzo the garage where Mussolini was shot—it is still working as a garage.

The spaghetti I mention was the first proper pasta, as opposed to Heinz spaghetti on toast, that, at the advanced age of 21, I had ever eaten. It was really the beginning of my association with Italy. My poor Mum was required to learn how to make it when I got home. She did valiantly, but it was never really her thing.

Mussolini was not shot in a garage in Tremezzo. He was shot against a wall further up Lake Como, and it was in a garage in Milan that he and his mistress, Clara Petacci, were strung up by their heels.

Hotel Victoria, Lugano

12 August 1948

The weather here has been shocking all week—tremendous thunderstorms. This morning a tram standard about 20 yards from where I was standing was struck by lightning—I've never been so scared in my life.

John and I have been going around with a couple of social science graduates from London University. Life here is very wearing both on stamina and money. If it weren't that we can about double our salary by commission etc, and 10% from shops we take clients to, we should be horribly in debt. The cost of living is terribly high here, especially with the night life we have been leading. I haven't been in bed before 1am, and rarely before 2am, since I got here. I reckon I can just about last until the end of the month, when I am coming home. It's a hard life, but it's only once in a lifetime and a good experience. But I much prefer Interlaken—the pace is too killing here.

We had rather an interesting experience the other night. We had a bit of a night out with a couple of Swiss blokes we met at the Patio, and next morning the patron, M. Biaggi, told us that they were the Duke of Liechtenstein and his brother! We thought that they had plenty of money. We don't actually go into Liechtenstein on our trips here, but St Moritz is quite near it. High life, what? Très Dornford Yates.

I do not know why I did not freeze my mother's blood by telling her that the lightning actually knocked me over and out. When I came to, I ran for 300 or 400 yards without stopping.

I fear that I may not have met the Royals of Liechtenstein after all. If I had, it would have been the Crown Prince and his brother, not a Duke. Oh well!

Lugano, 22 August 1948

Now that my last week in Lugano is coming up, I'm not as heartbroken about leaving as I thought I should be—it's a place that one gets a bit tired of, unlike my beloved Interlaken. Life is so hectic that one is almost too tired to enjoy it—if we couldn't get plenty of sleep on our trips, I don't know what we should do.

When I get back I'm going to have rather a hectic time as well, I'm afraid. Apart from seeing Winnie, I am committed to the South African girl I met in my first week in Interlaken. I think I shall arrange to hold a reception in South Africa House.

*I had quite a good day in Milan yesterday. One can get rid of the customers fairly easily, once they have gaped at **The Last Supper** and the Cathedral, which is just about the loveliest place in the world, inside.*

I still haven't the faintest idea when exactly I shall arrive in England. I'm trying to get a night in Interlaken before I leave, but it all depends on when my railway pass arrives.

I am surprised that I then had such a high opinion of the Duomo in Milan, which has not survived the years. I only go there now to greet my old friend St Bartholomew, whose statue portrays him carrying in his arms the skin which has just been flayed from his body.

These letters from Switzerland in the summer of 1948 describe perhaps the most carefree, innocent and idyllic time of my life, before or since: no responsibility, a wholly new world, and incredible joie de vivre. It was a far cry from the agonies of prickly heat in the hot weather in India 12 months before. I doubt, in fact, whether any idle, hedonistic, frivolous 21-year-old ever had such a good time, particularly in the context of Britain in 1948.

Our innocence, apart from our relations with these floods of girls, included total ignorance of the facts of life in the South Africa of nascent apartheid in which the girls who toured Europe, all Afrikaaners, had grown up. Odd to contrast this with my view of Indians a year before.

Innocence: shock horror throughout the Poly community because one of my couples turned out not to be married!

Peterhouse, Cambridge

4 October 1948

Well, here I am safely installed, just writing a short note to tell you that I am still alive.

The great news is that I have got a set of rooms of my own. They are small and rather dark, at the top of a rickety staircase, but the furniture is very nice. My windows in both rooms overlook the churchyard of St Mary the Less. The furniture is bleached oak (I think) and I have two very comfy armchairs. So I am better off than I feared I might be.

Tomorrow I have to see my Director of Studies and my tutor. I don't yet know who my supervisor will be.

I have already had lots of invitations to join lots of clubs and societies. I'm wondering whether to be extravagant and become a life member of the Union—it's 7½ guineas but cheaper than a term subscription.

Peterhouse, 13 October 1948

On Saturday I went to tea with Richard and some of his contemporaries. They were very hospitable but I felt rather out of my depth, and was rather squashed at times, especially by Richard, who gives me credit for no knowledge of people or institutions. It was all rather overpowering.

On Monday I saw my supervisor, a Mr Henry, for the first time. He is a decent bod, but one of the more hurt than angry type, which are always the worst. He expects rather a lot from an MGS boy, I fear. He gave me an essay there and then, which I am reading to him in a few minutes, and although I have been working frantically at it—I have been up until 2am the last two nights—I'm afraid he is in for a nasty shock.

Yesterday evening I went to the Union Debate—I have become a life member. The motion was no confidence in the government.

I am hoping that Nies will be coming up for the day on Sunday. I shall want a day off after a week's hard work.

I evidently bothered to tell my mother even less about my first year at Cambridge than other sectors of my life. This may be because there was not much to tell. In Peterhouse we lived rather an introvert life. It was the

smallest and oldest of the colleges, and none of us seemed to move much outside it, and even within we were cliquey. None of us had sporting Blues, or spoke at the Union, or cut a dash of any sort. (Incidentally, my life membership of the Union was a waste of money. Ironically, for one who in later life enjoys a reputation as a speaker, I never got on my feet there, and indeed found the debates rather childish. The only dividend is that I take people for a meal there whenever I am in Cambridge.) We stayed more or less in the college, or across the road in the college pub, The Little Rose, where there is still on one wall (or was last time I was there) a piece of cloth with the names of the 1948 intake embroidered on it by the landlord's daughter. When it was wrongly rumoured that I had been killed in Korea, I gather that there was much debate about how to recognise the fact on the embroidery. Denial of the news arrived before a decision was taken.

My supervisor, Leonard Henry, was a scholar and a gentleman, in an old-fashioned way. My letters are full of how harsh he was with me, but I cannot recall it now. If he was, he was right, as my work was jejune and superficial.

Nies, one of my South African friends, was one of a steady stream of girls whom I entertained during my first year, no doubt much to the relief of my mother, as this would, rightly, have made her realise that I was not about to marry Winnie, my dancer, nor indeed she I.

I am bewildered at being overawed by my younger cousin, Richard, for the first and only time in our lives, even after he became a most distinguished psychiatrist. I always treated him as a bit of a wet.

Peterhouse, 27 October 1948

I am one of the eleven lucky ones in the college who have drawn tickets for the Senate House on Thursday to see the Queen get her honorary degree.

Peterhouse, 30 October 1948

I had an excellent view of the Queen yesterday. I was within two yards of her for over five minutes. She looked lovely.

Peterhouse, 31 October 1948

Winnie and I enjoyed ourselves very much. The dinner dance was most successful as Winnie had an extremely nice new dress and my suit is an absolute wow.

It's incredible to think that it is two years this week since I was commissioned, and a year since I was in the Arabian Sea. What a two years!!

I did a very good essay this week, but it was on the Tudors, which is my supervisor's subject, so he pulled it to pieces, blast him. Most discouraging, so I suppose it wasn't as good as I thought.

On Monday I am matriculating, i.e. signing my name in the University Register in the Senate House.

I wonder if a faint hint of humility can be detected in my comment about my Tudor essay. Surely not!

I am relieved to be reminded that I signed my name on matriculation. For good reasons I did not attend to receive either my BA or my MA. Worse, if I ever received certificates of my degrees, which I do not recall, I have no idea where they are. I once had to tell an institution that the only evidence I could produce to prove that I was an MA was an entry in the University Calendar.

The dinner dance was the first time I had ever worn a dinner jacket, this one being tailored in Manchester from material bought in India. I well remember the hours spent on my first attempt at tying a bow tie. Even today, my wife prefers me to let her do it.

Peterhouse, 16 February 1949

I've just finished a very bad essay, which I hated doing and which Henry is going to hate more still. I had a pleasant tea there on Monday, and remembered to say thank you for having me.

Do you know or can Pop find out from somebody what joining the Regular Army Reserve of Officers (RARO) involves? If it doesn't involve any actual work, it might be quite a good thing. I should be most interested in details.

The enquiry about RARO was one of those things that change your whole life. I decided to join because in the event of World War III, which of course seemed not out of the question at the time, you were guaranteed a return to your own regiment, instead of being landed with some inferior mob. But it was because I was a member of RARO that I was picked out to rejoin the army to serve in Korea, with an Irish regiment of all things. But the point is that if I had not gone to Korea I would probably not have got into the Foreign Service, as it was the only thing which distinguished me from all the Olympic athletes and Fellows of All Souls who seemed to form the majority of the successful applicants. God moves etc.

Peterhouse, 21 February 1949

Yesterday I tried to work frantically hard but didn't get anything done. I was playing squash for the college in the afternoon, and got myself into the table

tennis team in the evening. They were having a knock-out comp to pick a team, and I went along when it was over and beat all four semi-finalists pretty easily, which inflated my ego considerably.

In addition to gracing the college ping pong and squash teams and playing rugby for the college in my second year, until I broke my ankle in the first round, I also distinguished myself at croquet, which in Peterhouse was played in the full traditions of *Potter on Gamesmanship*, then at the peak of its popularity.

Peterhouse, 4 May 1949

I've had quite an interesting week really, only marred at the weekend by the discovery that exams start a week earlier than I thought, i.e. on 25 May. I have decided that it's not worth trying to do a year's work in three weeks, so I am going to let events take their course. I saw Henry in bed today—he's not at all well and he wasn't very constructive about the exams. But my tutor told me that I might get a 2.2 if I got the right questions, which I think is a very fair estimate myself.

Peterhouse, 29 May 1949

Well, they're over, which is just about all I care about at the moment. Honestly, I've never known anything take it out of me so much before. The papers were foul, and I've the infuriating knowledge that I haven't even done as well as I might—because of exam nerves, which I've always had.

A degree course at Cambridge normally takes three years—known as the Tripos—with degrees awarded as First, Second or Third Class. The Second Class degree is awarded in two divisions, a 2.1 containing the relatively few who missed a First, and the much larger number of worthy 2.2s. Thirds were not much to write home about.

Having come out of the army and being in a hurry, I was permitted to telescope three years into two, and cut out the first year preliminary exams, taking only Parts 1 and 2 (normally completed in second and third years) in successive years. This caused trouble later with the Civil Service Commission, who suspected that I hadn't got a proper degree. Fortunately the university backed me up.

I cannot identify the writer of the letters about exams—I absolutely do not remember being exhausted or suffering from nerves. My recollection is that I just took the exams in my stride, getting the 2.1 which I am quite sure that my tutor expected me to get all the time.

Hotel Beau Rivage, Baveno, Lake Maggiore
25 June 1949

I am here on Lake Maggiore, at Baveno, and very satisfied with my luck. I am practically on my own, with a colleague, who is nominally my boss (an ex-Regular Army colonel), across the lake, with an Italian wife. As far as I can see, there is not much to do, and hardly any excursions. The big trouble at first will be loneliness, but that won't take long to adjust. No-one here speaks anything but Italian, not even French.

Baveno, 6 July 1949

I am enjoying life here extremely—I never realised last year, working with others, how very much nicer it is to be on one's own. The weather is absolutely perfect, and I am really doing so little that there's nothing much to write about. I sunbathe and swim in the intervals of work, take about two trips a week, and sample all the delightful local wines at night. I'm afraid that it's just too good to be true—but August will be frantically busy.

I had two nice letters from my supervisor and my Director of Studies, both being complimentary almost to the point of effusiveness—just shows what they must have expected, as I did!

The colonel who was my nominal boss became a great friend. He had been Town Major of Siena after it was captured, and had had the good sense to marry the charming young Italian nurse who had looked after him at one stage.

Every evening I used to cycle to Stresa, five miles down the road, to chat up my few clients there, and it was my proud achievement that I could do the five miles without touching the handlebars, providing that there was no oncoming traffic at one particular curve.

Baveno, 11 July 1949

Very glad to hear that you have tried to transfer here. I shall be looking forward to seeing you in a few weeks.

I am just as happy as the day is long here—it can't possibly last, something is bound to turn up to spoil it. At present I am not really doing much work. For instance today I meant to start after lunch at 3pm, and went for a bathe before I started. I fell asleep in the sun and when I woke it was 5.50pm!

With my usual good luck and attention to essentials, I have met an extremely attractive English girl who lives in Pallanza and works in Stresa. I spend most of my spare time with her. I certainly seem to fall on my feet, don't I?

I forget if I mentioned it, but will you send one of the May Ball photos to Winnie, so that Eric and she can see it?

Life is fairly hectic—lots of parties. I haven't been in bed before 2am for a week, but I manage to sleep a bit during the day.

The reference to my parents' change of plan referred to their earlier decision to go to Cadenabbia on a Poly tour in the expectation that I would be there, but subsequently changed to Baveno when I ended up there. This was a lucky decision as Baveno suited them much better.

This was the first time my mother, at the age of 57, had left British shores, in common with the great majority of ladies of her age and background who had never travelled. And she would not have done so then, but for my presence in Baveno. My father, on the other hand, had left Britain in 1910, after graduating as an engineer, to spend five years building railways in Argentina, to return in 1915 to become a gunner major and survive four years in Flanders. He had lots of stories about South America to tell us as children, but as an adult I never thought to probe deeper, nor to ask him about his army service. Like so many sons, I expect, I deeply regret this. But I remember being struck when I offered him a glass of vermouth in a cafe in Baveno to hear him say that it was many years since he had tasted such a drink. In my mother's teetotal family this was not surprising. Looking back, I wonder how consciously my father, the gentlest of men, allowed my strong-minded mother to rule the roost.

The May Ball marked the end of my relationship with Winnie, my dancer, to whom I shall always be grateful. On 29 June 1949, I was sitting outside a cafe in Stresa, at about 10.30am, in company with my friend Colonel Nicholls, when a staggeringly beautiful blonde walked past. She inclined her head to Colonel Nicholls and said, 'Good morning'. I said, 'Do you know her?' and he replied, 'Yes, she's English'. Without being mawkish or unrealistic, this was, as I now see, *the most important occasion of my life*. For years I used to say that my reply to my friend was: 'That's the girl I am going to marry'. What in fact I said was: 'She'll do me for the summer', as indeed she did.

My mother must have been relieved to meet Margaret, my 'extremely attractive English girl', as proof that I had discarded my dancer, in what I fear was not a particularly kindly fashion. She was not to know that the 'English girl', who had recently left her husband, would become my wife (we have now been married nearly 44 years). In the decade or so before my mother died, her disapproval of me, which she never lost, was only exceeded by her approval of my wife.

I hope that, in the following chapters, my love, gratitude and overwhelming debt to Margaret for all our years of happiness will shine through. But it was on that morning in Stresa that it all started.



Unable to believe my luck — Margaret, the week we met, Stresa, July 1949

Stresa, 17 August 1949

I am of course very much interested in any suggestion by Uncle Campbell about my future. The Diplomatic Service would suit me very nicely, but I'm afraid he overestimates my ability, as places in it do not, alas, grow on trees.

I am off on Wednesday, all being well, to Interlaken for a week. As far as I know we shall be staying at the Bernerhof, and a letter there would find me.

I had another very nice letter from my supervisor—it's strange to think that I shall be enveloped in that life again in three weeks. I am trying to discover enough money to buy a pair of Rugger boots—if I bust my nose again I shall have to have a silver whatsit put in.

The last letter from an idyllic and crucially important summer in Stresa. We return there nearly every year, and stay in the grandest hotel, which in 1949 we could not have imagined ourselves being ever able to afford.

The reference to the Diplomatic Service is the first I recall in my thinking. I owe the notion, as with my job with the Poly, to my avuncular mentor, who had such a beneficial influence on my life.

6 St Peter's Terrace, Cambridge

6 October 1949

Just to let you know that I arrived safely, and am comfortably settled in a large and very nice bedsitter, with two large windows facing west, hot and cold water laid on in a curtained recess, central heating, an electric fire, very handsome modern furniture, and my new posters already on the wall.

I've seen my tutor so far and I'm going to try to see my Director of Studies tomorrow. I expect that you have noticed that I have forgotten my ration book. There were no sheets or pillow slips in my trunk.

I cannot now recall how much of our still meagre rations were snipped out by the college, and whether we were allowed to keep some butter, sugar, etc for consumption in our digs. I don't recollect being much struck by the contrast between ration books in Cambridge and high living in India and on the Continent with Poly. But I do remember that ration books were still around after I joined the Foreign Office in 1952.

Cambridge, 10 October 1949

We have just finished the first match of the season, and I'm so tired it's not true, because it was a very hot day.

Today I had my first supervision from my new supervisor, who is also my tutor, a very different proposition from Henry, who was more the schoolmaster type. Denis hasn't a clue about teaching, but makes you feel about 3 years old. He implied today that if I often wrote essays like that he was surprised that I'd ever learnt to write at all and it had all been wasted anyhow. I don't think Part 2 is going to be very nice, as Postan's class also is right above my head at the moment.

It's very nice being second year and knowing your way about. No other news except that devaluation has at last made me change from bitter to mild, a resolution I fought against all last year.

I've registered myself with the Appointments Board, who straight away offered me £1000pa to start with if I was willing to work for 25 years in the Persian Gulf! I have managed to restrain myself from packing immediately.

I was right about the rigours of Part 2. I have never regretted taking Professor Postan's special subject—economics of the early twentieth century—because he was a brilliant teacher and it was from him that I absorbed what little economics I know. But it was a hard slog trying to make sense of the subject without really having either the background or the intelligence to cope.

Cambridge, 2 November 1949

Thank you very much for the John Lewis prospectus, which I read with great interest, because it's the first put out by a firm to attract graduates that I have seen. The prospects they offer seem very reasonable because, as you know, I don't want to settle down in an office in England as soon as I leave college—I want to work abroad for some years. Secondly, I deeply mistrust the good fellowship angle of such a firm, because they claim exactly the same thing in the Poly, and the actual state of affairs is as much the opposite as it would be possible to find.

Thank you very much indeed for your offer to supply the necessary [funds to enable me to stay here in the Christmas vac and work]. If I just cannot manage, I should be very grateful to take you up on that, but you know how much I hate the idea because I feel very strongly that at my age I should be prepared to suffer the consequences of failing to equate expenditure with income. If I do have to ask for a subsidy, you may be assured that I will spend it in Cambridge and not in London! Anyhow, although my expenditure has not decreased, for various reasons it is at present being spent less regrettably than for some time!

I am going to town on Saturday to meet M on her arrival. This is considerably the best thing that has happened since 1 October.

I must buzz off to a lecture now. I can only stand one a day, but I try to manage that. I have to go to the lectures on my special subject, because it's nearly all sums and my algebra isn't as good as it was.

A 'Job for Me' when I left Cambridge was a frequent theme in my letters, as was of course the perennial matter of my finances. The letters conceal a play between my mother and myself, she anxious to keep me in Cambridge or, better still, at home over Christmas, and out of the clutches of M in London, and me desperate not to incur a financial obligation which would in decency limit my freedom of action. In the end my mother, bless her, got the worst of the deal, with me spending Christmas and the rest of the vacation with M's sister.

Cambridge, 15 November 1949

I've had an easy week as far as work goes, because I found a forgotten sixteenth-century pamphlet in the University Library and copied my essay straight out of it. Denis thought it was very good, thinking it was my own work, and ascribed it to M's influence—he having been captivated at our party last weekend.

When this term is over two-thirds of my time at Cambridge will have gone—appalling thought. Denis is very kindly pestering me to stay on a third year, but I'm not going to fall, as I should find three years too much, I know.

I am going to one of Professor Postan's quite incomprehensible classes now, and after that a supervision with Denis, where I hope that the Scotch and hot water we shall have for our colds will make up for the cruel and justified things he will say about my essay.

Cambridge, 24 November 1949

M's sister has very kindly invited me to stay with them (i.e. husband and family) while I am in London. I have got a GPO job until Christmas Day, which I shall take unless something else turns up which would go on after Christmas.

You've been awfully sweet in not trying to persuade me home for Christmas, Mum. Please don't think I'm unnatural in not proposing to get home this vac—it's a measure of how secure I feel that I always know I've got a home, whether I'm there much or not. Please don't think that I haven't learnt how lucky I am in that respect, by seeing how other blokes have grown up.

I decided not to take the job at the GPO, because the college hinted very broadly indeed that I had better study some history. Their hints took the form of (1) providing me with tickets for the London University and British Museum Reading Rooms, and (2) giving me £10 to compensate me for what I would have earned at the GPO. I didn't need a row of houses to fall on me to see the merit of the college's suggestion, so I ended up not taking the Christmas job at the GPO!

Cambridge, 1 December 1949

By the way, thank you for the lecture re M, which on my past record was deserved, probably. M is in a different category, Mum, I promise you that, though at this stage you wouldn't want me to say anything more.

All the above uncharacteristic blarney from me was, of course, occasioned by the fact that I had not yet told my mother that M was married and seeking a divorce.

Cambridge, 1 February 1950

You have been taking such a kind and active interest in my efforts to learn more about the Foreign Service entry that I thought I would give you my view of the situation since my visit this week to the appropriate member of the University Appointments Board.

As we thought, I am too late to take this year's exam, but am eligible by age for the 1951 exam. A further condition of eligibility is that I should get

at least a second in my Part 2 this summer, which is of course still very much in the balance!

The chap who interviewed me emphasised that only about 1 in 10 candidates is successful, but added that out of every 10 at least 4 are obviously impossible—and he was kind enough to say that he did not number me among the 4. He also pointed out that only the best of the successful candidates went into the Diplomatic Branch, while the less good went into the Consular Service. He said that the candidates in the last year or two had not been of as high a standard as the Commissioners liked, but in his opinion this was largely due to their standards being based on the immediate post-war entry of colonels and majors whose wartime experiences made them more able than undergraduates can hope to be.

I have decided that I am going to take my 1 in 10 or 1 in 6 chance if I get a second this summer, and delay taking a permanent job until I have sat for these examinations next spring. This means taking another year before I settle down into a permanent job, which I would probably otherwise have spent doing a third year here. If I should be successful, the problem of a career is solved. If, as seems most probable, I am not, I shall then apply to the Appointments Board for a vacancy in any commercial or industrial undertaking which has sought their assistance.

The interviewer settled one point for me—what to do with myself until the exams are held, and then until results are published. I must obviously improve my knowledge of a foreign language as, apart from the actual language exam, the Commissioners state that the better aptitude you display for languages by your knowledge of a particular language, the better they like it. Therefore when I have finished with the Poly this summer, I shall either try for employment in France, preferably at a French university, or else take a 'Certificate of Proficiency' in French at Cambridge.

I hope you do not think that I am being reckless in proposing to spend a year on such a slender chance. But, as I see it, I shall gain anyhow an improved knowledge of French, and also the knowledge that I have tried for one of the most difficult jobs going. If I let it go by now, I feel I may in the future be tempted to delude myself that I could have got into the Foreign Service if I had tried.

I had forgotten that I had decided so early on to try for the Foreign Service, a suggestion initially from my Uncle Campbell, to whom this letter was written.

Ironic to think that, if I had weakened and stayed at Cambridge for a third year, I would not have been called up to go to Korea. No regrets.

Cambridge, 17 April 1950

Thank you for putting up with me during the vac. I hope that I wasn't more trouble than I was worth. Thank you too, once more, for being so sweet to M and me over Easter. It's difficult to say how much it meant to us.

This short extract brings back the painful memory of having to tell my mother that M needed a divorce before we could marry. It was easily the most difficult conversation I ever had with her—having avoided the need to tell her, 16 years later, that I was dying of cancer—and, I should judge, the most difficult I ever inflicted on her.

Since M was coming to stay over Easter, I judged that I could not let her come without my revealing our situation, which I did one evening over the supper table. My mother was of course absolutely shattered. It is difficult today to imagine the effect that such a prospect had on someone of her background and upbringing. Her various comments included: 'We shall be ostracised'; 'You should have come home for Christmas'; 'You will not be able to enter the Foreign Office'; 'I wonder how innocent your jaunt to Paris was'. To my mother's huge credit, despite this blow she treated M with every kindness, and told me after she had left that she was a sweet lassie. Again, I repeat my pleasure that my mother came to see that I had made the right choice, although I am sure that, understandably, she hoped my year away in Korea would remove my inconstant self from M's influence.

Cambridge, 17 June 1950

Telegram: Lucky again. Two one. Wacko. John

Charges to pay s. _____ d. _____	357A POST OFFICE	No. _____
RECEIVED	TELEGRAM	OFFICE STAMP
At _____ m	Prefix. Time handed in. Office of Origin and Service Instructions. Wards	17 JUN 50
From _____	8 306 2.55 CAMBRIDGE 6	To _____
By _____	ALTRINCHAM 078W	By _____
	LUCKY AGAIN TWO ONE WACKO JOHN *	
For free re- at office of	CT 078W WACKO JOHN + 1 IRY" or call, with this form and, if possible, the envelope.	Bor C

My last communication to my mother from Cambridge. I had achieved the top second I needed in order to contemplate the Foreign Office exam.

Hotel Trianon, Ostende, 23 June 1950

As I prophesied, I am now out of my usual first depression and can regard this place with a slightly more balanced eye.

First, the bad points. The obvious one about being away from M isn't really so terrible, because we have both shown quite certainly, even already, that we are sure enough of each other for distance and separation for a few months to have no effect on our feelings.

Second, the cost of living is very high, so I shan't be able to save anything. The only possible drink is beer, at 10 pence a half-pint!

The good points are, first, that I am staying in a 'family' hotel with magnificent food, and a nice family who will only talk French to me. Second, I think that I shall be pretty busy. Third, I have no responsibility like last year, which makes working harder seem easier.

I had a pretty ghastly introduction to this place, as I arrived in the middle of a week when a party of 91 from Bradford was dominating things! They were unbelievably ghastly, and I mean unbelievably.

Hotel de la Paix, Blankenberghe

30 June 1950

Well, I have been moved, but not very far—just 15 miles along the coast. Blankenberghe seems quite pleasant, and I am on my own in a very luxurious hotel. Tomorrow the season really starts and all the night spots open up. It is a very short season but they seem to exist on it. The family at the Trianon spend every winter in Nice!

Blankenberghe, 28 July 1950

I am having a busy week here, with about 80–90 clients. As we are on the coast we are not affected by the political situation, but in Brussels and the Walloon country, as you will have read, things are pretty serious. If Leopold stirred out of his palace he would be lynched or assassinated.

The political situation elsewhere isn't too pleasant either, is it? If a letter should come for me from the War Office, please open it straight away and wire me if it's about what it might just possibly be. I'm beginning to be sorry that I joined the Regular Reserve now! I'm the sort of person that Shinwell was talking about yesterday, only thank heaven I'm not a specialist.

At the time the political situation in Brussels was such that King Leopold, unpopular because of his poor war record, was under pressure to abdicate,

and was more or less besieged in his palace. He eventually abdicated in favour of his son.

I had forgotten that I had a premonition that I was going to be called up. My memory had been that a phone call from my father had come like a bolt from the blue. He told me that the War Office required me to report to the Adjutant, 1st Battalion, Royal Ulster Rifles at Colchester Barracks on 14 August 1950.

The reference to Shinwell was to the then British Minister of Defence, Emmanuel Shinwell, who had said that only specialist reservists would be recalled to the colours.

Blankenberghe, 30 July 1950

Just a quick note to thank you for ringing me up and giving me the news.

I expected it, and while annoyed I am neither too depressed nor too afraid!

I am leaving tomorrow for Italy, hoping to get a day in Rapallo with M just in case I get sent overseas, which I think will be highly unlikely. I hope to cross to England on Friday and arrive home Saturday.

See you soon. I hope you will not mind me being called up too much. I'd rather it was now than 12 months hence. I feel that they probably knew from the Ministry of Education that I was at a loose end.

I did meet up with M in Rapallo, but only after a hunt. When I enquired at her hotel, I was told that Cooks had fired her, and that they did not know where she was. I looked up my old friend Colonel Nicholls, who told me that he was meeting her for a drink later that evening. We were sitting in a cafe when she duly turned up. She had been fired for rejecting the advances of the hotel manager who, on seeing her return from a swim, had offered to lick the salt from her body. I am sorry to recall that Cooks, her employer, gave her no support. I had enough money to pay her fare back to her home in Pallanza, whither I accompanied her the next day, before returning myself to Ostende and thence to England.

Until I walked into the Adjutant's office 18 days later, to be informed otherwise, I remained convinced that my job would be to sit in Colchester and prepare proper soldiers for Korea.



*With my two sergeants, inspecting wrecked wireless sets
and discussing who knows what, Korea, April 1951*



KOREA

August 1950–August 1951

I am struck by three things about my letters before, after and during my time in Korea. First, my letters from Korea were crisper than those written at any other time. Accordingly, I have less to comment on: the letters stand on their own. Second, I am amazed how much I have forgotten of what I describe in these letters. It must have all happened, but a lot of it is a blank. So much the better to have the letters. Third, I am a little surprised that I went into so much detail about our clearly heavy casualties, which cannot have helped to ease my mother's already enormous anxiety. M says that it was because I needed a catharsis, while my letters to her tended to cover other matters.

The first letter is, as far as I know, the only one I ever wrote to my father and not to both my parents.

Colchester Barracks, 15 August 1950

I am sending this to the college because I want you to use your discretion whether Mum should know this just yet.

Briefly, this battalion is part of the brigade which is sailing for Korea in October, and naturally, as at present planned, I am going with it. A bit of a blow but what can one do?

Sorry about it, but nothing to do. I would like you to decide when to tell Mum. As you know, in the army there's many a slip twixt cup and lip.

It was of course, as my mother pointed out, a mistake to tell my father, who was much less able than she to bear the news. A sad but interesting example of how a reasonably grown-up son can so totally misread his parents.

Colchester Barracks, 19 August 1950

Well, I am back in the army all right, and I don't know whether I am coming or going. Quite a lot of us have been posted to this battalion, and we are busy

getting settled in. We are all from the Lancastrian Group, but I haven't seen anyone yet that I know. It is funny being in the midst of a lot of Regular Irishmen.

On Sunday we are moving up into Norfolk for a month's manoeuvres. That is certainly plunging into it fairly quickly, but it should either kill us off or make us remember about being soldiers again.

I have managed by now to settle down to the idea of Korea. I have been lucky enough to get a job as the Assistant Signals Officer, which means a jeep of my own and a finger in a bigger pie than a platoon commander. I don't have so much walking to do, and the wireless part is all quite interesting. My batman is my driver, and yesterday we drove from Colchester to our camp in Norfolk and back—130 miles—which I enjoyed.

As I would have expected, the army seems utterly surprised to find any reservists back. We can find no trace of our pay or any arrangements made on our behalf. Still, I expect it will all get stabilised.

This letter does not begin to describe the confusion caused by the descent of perhaps a couple of hundred Other Ranks reservists, and perhaps 15 subalterns on an exclusive rifle regiment. The ORs on the whole accepted their fate philosophically; after all, they had been paid throughout their reserve time. There were one or two hard cases: one man brought his three-year-old daughter, because, he said, he had no-one to leave her with. Whether he was genuine or just trying it on, like a lot of others, I never discovered.

Among the reservists, I was lucky to discover, and to take as my batman, a South Staffordshire coal miner, who not only looked after me with amused affection but could also dig a slit trench in seconds.

In the Officers Mess it was a different story. The senior officers, even more horrified than we to have to face actual fighting, stayed at home, away from the Mess, and the subalterns regarded us as yobbos, while we regarded them as toffy-nosed snobs. I was particularly suspect because I was a graduate, perhaps the first one some of them had ever met.

Perhaps fortunately, few of the reservist subalterns were any good, and I think I am right in saying that by the time we got to Korea there were only four of us left, the others having fallen by the wayside here and there. By the time I left we survivors were wholly accepted.

Norfolk, 1 October 1950

I am quite enjoying myself here. M is staying in Watton, a village about six miles away, and I spend my spare time there.

On Friday my batman and I had our yellow fever and cholera jabs, and are now ready for the fray. The battalion sails from Liverpool at 5pm this

afternoon—my trunk is with them, as I am allowed only 65 pounds on the plane. I don't think we shall leave before the 12th.

Before we left for Korea, my batman told me that he had been using a truck to flog left-over coal round the neighbourhood. Of course, I couldn't have done anything about it then, but he didn't have to tell me, and I was pleased that he thought fit to do so.

The fact that M was staying in a nearby hotel sent my mother into paroxysms of anxiety. M and I visited the hotel for old times' sake a couple of years ago.

Colchester, 8 October 1950

Forgive me for not ringing tonight, but I said goodbye to M this afternoon and I didn't feel like inflicting the resultant depression on you. I had a very pleasant weekend in London—M and I can't grumble, we have had nearly four weeks together.

Our route is Malta, Habbaniyah (Persian Gulf?), Karachi, Colombo, Singapore, Manila and Japan—eight days altogether.

M is going back home and will probably spend the winter there—I certainly hope so.

I recall that on our last night in England we were billeted in a huge transit 'camp' in the network of unused Tube tunnels under Goodge Street Tube Station, which could, and no doubt from time to time did, accommodate some thousands of men. I am sure that it is still there.

Sasebo, Kyushu, Japan, 21 October 1950

Japan is not unlike England in countryside, except that there are paddy fields instead of corn. The towns are more westernised than I expected—only about one woman in a hundred wears a kimono. But I don't like the people, and our impression is that the Yanks have spoilt them.

We are getting used to living with Yanks. This is my first big contact with Yanks, and I can't honestly say I like it very much. They seem so childish in many ways, though always most obliging and polite.

Taegu, South Korea, 28 October 1950

We left Japan last Monday, crossed over to Pusan in a Japanese troopship, and came straight up here, about 70 miles, by train. On Monday we are moving to Suwon, just south of Seoul, where we shall remain until the battalion catches up with us, and then move up north of Pyongyang somewhere.

Korea is just as bad as everything you have read about it. It's incredible that any country could be so unattractive. It is dirtier and smellier than one would think possible, the people live in unbelievable squalor, and we are not allowed to touch any local products or local water that hasn't been sterilised. We are billeted in Taegu secondary school, fortunately with camp beds, and are living fairly primitively. There is enough food, which we eat out of our mess tins, and we get some hot water once a day. It is a full-time job trying to keep clean. This is a city of about 100,000 inhabitants, and there is no sewage plant of any sort. Dust settles inches thick on everything, and the rats are so enormous they have driven out the cats! We have nothing to do here—just filling in time till we go to Suwon. Each morning we walk out to the hills to get some fresh air, but there are still a few guerillas about, so we go armed. The weather, fortunately, is not bad, cold at night but warm in the daytime.

Our train journey to Suwon, only 150 miles away, may take anything from two to six days!

I don't know what the immediate future holds for us. We get no news of any sort here, as we have no access to radio, but I understand MacArthur has said that British and US troops will not occupy North Korea. In that case the reservists may get home fairly quickly. About March would suit me best, as I hope to have paid off my overdraft by about then.

Suwon, South Korea

11 November 1950

The battalion arrived on Monday and we have been busy settling in ever since. We don't know when we shall be moving north, but we assume that it will be some time in the next month. I shall be quite happy to stay here, as we shan't get such a good billet in North Korea, I'm certain, and as things are at present, it looks like being a slit trench somewhere. It is still fairly warm here, and I shan't be cold, because my trunk with all my warm clothing has arrived safely. I have also acquired a magnificent tank suit, which is a vast overall of waterproof with wool lining, and the ability to zip all over me.

It is strange having the battalion here after swanning around for a few weeks, but I'm getting used to it again. Now we aren't in a single mess, but in company messes, so I am messing in Battalion HQ, which is good, because there are better people there than in the rifle companies. The Adjutant is the only bloke I don't get along with at all. Still, in my practised way I am organising a movement against him socially, though I haven't got around to doing it officially yet!

There is an air of deckchairs on the Titanic about this and following letters. We assumed that the war was virtually over, and could not imagine that within two months we would have suffered some hundreds of casualties.

And I thought that I would be protected against the cold! We didn't know what cold was.

Munsanin, 26 November 1950

I am very lucky being with Battalion HQ, for we are in a school building, while the companies are in slit trenches on the sides of hills. They are about five miles from us in various directions. Our chief trouble is our inability to take baths, or to take all our clothes off at night—but meanwhile we have DDT! Our great drink in this weather is cocoa, which keeps body and soul together. Everyone gets up at 6am for stand-to, and since my watch is 4–6am today, I have to make sure that the Colonel gets a cup when I wake him.

The days pass very quickly here. Although we are up early, we go to bed about 8pm, and the day passes in doing odd jobs, repairing telephone lines, retuning wireless sets, feeding and (once a day) washing, the biggest ordeal of all.

A comparatively idyllic existence into which reality was about to intrude.

Pyongyang, 3 December 1950

As you will see from this address, and will probably have gathered from the news, we have been on the move the last week or so.

What a week it has been! Last Monday we were rushed up with two hours warning to form a Corps Reserve at Sinanjin. We drove up from Kaesong in 2½ days, through snow and frost and unbelievable dust. No sooner had we arrived than we began to take part in the great withdrawal, which it appears will take us out of North Korea altogether. It has been rather a smack in the eye for us after the optimism of last week, but in case it isn't clear at home, this is very much an orderly withdrawal, not a running retreat. At present we are holding a bridgehead at Pyongyang, while all troops remaining north of us withdraw through us. This done, we shall blow the bridges and depart ourselves and, we believe, become Corps Reserve again south of the 38th Parallel.

I suppose there is a certain cachet in having written a letter datelined Pyongyang, where not too many people have been, even 47 years later. My chief memory of our short stay was visiting the local brewery, being saddened at the vats full of rancid beer, and resisting the temptation to blow the place up. During our withdrawal, my worst experience was driving a jeep with two trailers all one night through blinding snow. On another night my jeep, which had lost its brakes, was towed all night, with my only means of control being to keep the clutch out and let it in to use the engine as a brake when necessary.

Onjong-ni, 10 December 1950

All this week on the western front, the Chinese have been advancing, and we have been steadily withdrawing to the 38th Parallel. In the last two days our only trouble has been from Communist villages in our area—we had to burn two this morning because they had sniped at us during the night. Sometime today I am leaving with an advance party to recce our next stop, which will be south of Kaesong and once more back in South Korea. We are all hoping very hard that the Chinese will not cross the Parallel.

We had a wonderful treat yesterday. This particular village, outside which Battalion HQ is at the moment, has a hot sulphurous spring, and a Japanese bath-house in it. So we all had wonderful natural hot baths inside a huge communal bath. It was a glorious experience—the first time I had seen my knees for a fortnight or more.

A local brought us a chicken yesterday because he thought we were going to shoot him. The next village to ours had all its young men shot yesterday by retreating South Korean police (unfortunately a common occurrence), and the remaining inhabitants thought we were Russians, and told us that we had come just too late. It is a Herculean task trying to stop the police shooting the locals, and vice versa. If we stop them, they do it the second we've gone, and we could never make them understand why prisoners should not be shot.

I hope that the papers have not been too lurid about us. One of the chief Korean troubles is too many war correspondents with not enough to do. They write absolute tripe to keep their jobs. I shall never believe a war correspondent again.

I am warm enough, thank you. I wear vest, pants, shirt, leather waistcoat, pyjama trousers, battledress trousers, thick pullover, two pairs of socks, a muffler, my woollen stocking cap, and my tank suit zipped up over everything. The temperature often goes below 0 degrees Fahrenheit, but it is only when the north wind blows that we really suffer. The worst night was when we evacuated Pyongyang. I nearly died of cold that night, but it is warmer now we are further south.

I've just had half an hour's notice to move, so I must be off. I've a feeling there's going to be a bit of trouble in our area tonight, so I'm glad to be getting out of it in the advance party.

This reference to the hot springs does not do them justice. Later I wrote a story for the *Manchester Guardian*, which with their permission I reproduce in this chapter, as I do another story about life in general during that time.

North of Seoul, 22 December 1950

We are still in the same place as last time I wrote, and if we can stay here for Christmas we shall have a very passable time, I think. Our fear is that, Christmas Eve being a full moon, the Chinks may decide to attack, and spoil it all.

This last week our life has been revolutionised because we have acquired a big tent to use as Battalion HQ Officers Mess. So we now sit down to our meals and our letter writing, and, above all, we have a stove round which we centre our lives. We are going to cram in all the officers in the battalion for Christmas dinner, and we shall have a great many good things to eat, and much to be thankful for, including three bottles of Scotch per officer! We are hiring an ox and laying on a sledge and a Father Christmas.

*The weather remains cold, and there is a lot of snow. We got down to -10 degrees Fahrenheit the other day, which is our coldest day so far. We have got very used to the cold already. But I did think it a bit steep when my jeep, containing 70% glycol (antifreeze) in its system, froze up **while I was actually driving it**. When this happens we light a fire under the engine until it unfreezes again.*

We are rather annoyed at the moment because the 'cease fire' delegation seems to have packed up for Christmas, but probably that is the prejudiced view we take owing to our situation here.

A bit further north of Seoul

2 January 1951

A very happy New Year. I'm sorry I've been a bit longer than usual writing, but we've been a bit pushed the last three days since the Chinks started their offensive, and I've been pretty busy.

Since I last wrote my responsibilities have increased somewhat. Ken is now OC HQ Company, and so I am in sole charge of the Signals Platoon. It is a captain's job, but I doubt very much whether I shall be made a captain, or even get paid as one, which would be the main thing. I don't welcome the change, because I've got a hell of a lot of responsibility, for the safety of the battalion may well depend entirely on my efficiency. Anyhow, 55 bodies, 76 wireless sets and all the transport and telephones are quite a responsibility.

We have moved out of our three-week-long rest area and are back in tactical conditions—no lights, no fires, and bags of digging. At the moment there is nothing between us and the Chinks. We are right in the front line, but fortunately we have been given a day's grace and can now give them a hell of a fright.

Near Chonan, 9 January 1951

I'm afraid this letter is rather late because, as you may have read in the papers, this last week has been rather hectic and tragic, and we haven't had much fun.

Just about a week ago we went into action near Seoul, and had a pretty heavy day's fighting before withdrawing south through Seoul and Suwon to Chonan, where we are now. I'm afraid our losses in the battalion were heavy—over 200 casualties, of whom I fear we shall not see more than about 50 again. We have lost our CO (evacuated), 2 i/c and company commander, the mortar officer and two subalterns. It was very tragic and no fault of our own, for the blokes fought magnificently.

We are now waiting to be taken back into reserve to replenish our strength, and ironically it has grown suddenly warmer, and the rains have come! We are floundering about in feet of mud and are pretty soaked. We are up every night at present, and have to sleep as we can during the day. In fact, life is fairly miserable, but we are thankful to be alive.

I'm sorry to paint this black picture, but I've no doubt the papers have done worse, and I believe for us personally that it may be the darkest hour before we get out of this hopeless morass of wasting lives for no apparent purpose. It is certainly bringing out the best in the men, who are suffering considerable strain and discomfort magnificently.

Forgive a slightly emotional letter, but this has been one of J's toughest weeks to date.

The action I describe involved only our battalion. Advancing north in a column at night, we were ambushed by a strong and well-organised force. They split us in two and concentrated on the forward half. We in the rear half were ordered to break contact and proceed south—in transport—into the arms of a waiting American regiment. So the rear half escaped virtually unscathed, while the forward half was badly mauled fighting against hugely superior numbers. The casualties were not as high as at first feared—something over 150. Months later, when we advanced again, we were able to recover many of our dead, some still frozen where they fell. That night killed forever our hitherto slightly patronising attitude towards the Chinese enemy.

I cannot think what I thought I was doing, inflicting on my mother the contents of this letter. As M says, perhaps I had to tell somebody.

Chonan, 18 January 1951

You will be glad to hear that I am writing this in a real room, sitting by a fire, on a sofa! The battalion has established a rest centre at its 'B' Echelon (the QM's base) about 15 miles from the battalion, and an officer and a few men take it in turns to come down here for 48 hours for a bath and a good rest. The CO very kindly said that I should be the first officer from Battalion HQ to take a rest. Don't think this is because I performed marvels of heroism in our

recent spot of bother—actually, I had a very easy time, comparatively—but the Signals Officer has a more continuous responsibility than most, and as I am still doing the work that Ken and I did between us, I was a bit tired. There is talk of my being given an Assistant Signals Officer, but the difficulty is finding anyone junior enough! I don't think there's much chance of my getting a third pip, though the extra money would be welcome. Thank you very much for not worrying about me—I saw a silly cutting from the **Daily Mail** about the 'Valley of Death' which annoyed us. The reporter kept even further away from us during that time than the other correspondents. The best bloke, funnily enough, is the **Daily Mirror** man. Continue not to worry about me, because I have the safest job in the battalion. Knowing me, you can imagine how I'm playing up the idea that the CO has got that I'm 'tired out'!

I have to write my 'next of kin' letters now—it's my first time at it.

It's been lovely to write this in front of a fire, in peace. I feel better already, after only a few hours here.

I have to laugh at the thought of my mother writing to say that she didn't worry about me.

A point about 'next of kin' letters. Every officer, of course, has to write to the next of kin of any of his men who have become casualties. Not easy, but rewarding because of the nature of the replies that one receives.

Sonjongnin, 25 January 1951

We moved 20 miles northwards yesterday but are still not in the front line. We are keeping the roads open behind 25 Division as it advances, by constant patrolling. For this the battalion is split up into two, 12 miles apart, which is absolute hell for the Signals Platoon, as we have to keep line and wireless communication going separately in each half, and also between the halves. Signals are always on something of a shoestring, and I can never afford to stop worrying about what's happening. The worst part is getting woken up in the middle of the night when things go wrong. If anything is wrong, I am expected to be ready to tell the CO why and when, and also how soon it will be repaired. I must also have alternative means of communication to every bit of the battalion, and also to all the buckshee gunners, tanks, mortars, ambulances, A-A guns, etc which we lug about with us, as well as back to [the higher echelons].

Osan, South Korea, 8 February 1951

We have been having a nice rest here since I last wrote, waiting in reserve. We are going back in the line in about 48 hours, to relieve the American brigade which is advancing up the main road to Seoul. They have had a good innings,

and we rather suspect they have done most of the hard work. I sneaked away the other day and spent a very pleasant day with their forward battalion, enjoying a battle in which I had no responsibility. We aren't at all worried this time by the prospect of going back in, because for the first time we feel that this advance is being run by someone who knows what he's doing.

Our artillery is giving the Chinks absolute hell—our own 25-pounders have been firing 100 rounds a day each for the last 10 days.

In the line somewhere north of Ichon
17 February 1951

I'm sorry if I haven't written for a bit, but we have been pretty busy. A week ago we were suddenly switched over to the central sector north of Ichon to relieve a Yank regiment. We are operating in the mountains where vehicles can't get, and all our supplies have to be brought up by gangs of native porters. You will imagine that this doesn't make life any easier. We are advancing slowly across the mountains, and have to be on the alert the whole time, as Chinese patrols have a habit of getting left behind. The other day Battalion HQ had to go out and clear a village—an unheard-of thing!

My biggest headache up these hills is of course supplying batteries and cable. I am just off on the trek to jeep head to see about it. I don't mind it, because there are no snipers that way, and we don't have to go carefully. Actually our casualties are very very slight—only a few wounded or captured since we started. We have had news of our missing of 3 January. Most of them were captured, and are still alive and being treated fairly well, but only because they are British—the Yanks get hell. All my platoon missing are still alive.

Osan, 3 March 1951

The chief event of this week is that I asked the CO for advice about getting released before the Foreign Service exams next winter. He told me to write him a letter and he would forward it to a friend of his in the Military Secretary's branch of the War Office, which apparently deals with these things. He was very decent about it, and seemed to think I had a pretty good case. I asked for release in August to give me time to study. At any rate I have indicated that I'm not just content to hang on and be forgotten.

My new toy this week is a brand new .45 automatic which I got from a Yank in exchange for a buckshee .38 revolver I had acquired. It is a very pleasant weapon, but I am not carrying it about as I hope to sell it to some sucker, since it is brand new and has never been fired. I carry a .38 about with me always, as we have to, and a .30 carbine when I think that there are any Chinks about, as it has a range of 300 yards and is light to carry. Otherwise my 'armament' consists of three grenades in the locker of my jeep.

I was of course enchanted that the traditional magic spell of someone knowing someone in the War Office was going to work in my case, as it did really very quickly.

The .45 automatic continues to weigh heavily on my conscience. I eventually exchanged it on the ship going home for an Omega watch which was army issue but could not be identified as having been liberated. It gave me many years of excellent service, and I still have it. But my conscience is uneasy because the other party to the transaction was a French officer, and I often wonder to what the use the .45 may have been put in the 1950s and 1960s.

Ichon, 18 March 1951

Yesterday, St Patrick's Day, was the battalion's big day—like Minden Day in the Lancashire Fusiliers. We had a church parade, a football match, a concert party, and in the evening an Officers Dinner, at which I, in common with everyone else, got extremely intoxicated—my first time since I came back into the army. Afterwards I went to the sergeants' party, where my two sergeants ganged up on me and made me paralytic, with the result that today, fortunately devoted to recuperation, my head feels as though it is blowing apart.

This letter gives me the opportunity to write about what it is like to serve in an Irish regiment, and what I learned about the 'Irish Question' as a result.

Our first Lancastrian problem on arrival in Colchester was that we couldn't understand a word any of the riflemen said, in their broad Belfast accents, nor they I imagine us. With a lot of goodwill on both sides, it took some weeks, if not months, to sort this out. But by the time I left I could speak perfect Ulster, and still can.

The first fascinating discovery was that I couldn't tell who was Catholic and who Protestant, until they all divided for church parade, respectively under the Church of Ireland padre, who lived with us, and the Catholic padre, who lived next door. Of course they all knew instantly which was which, for example, from the street in Belfast where they lived. Most of the riflemen were from Belfast, but during my time with them I never heard a hint of sectarian dissidence.

The officers, if Protestant, were mostly Ulstermen; if Catholic, from the South. At Mess nights they would sing 'Kevin Barry' and 'Come Back, Paddy Reilly, to Ballyjamesduff' with equal gusto. This led me to realise how extremely uninvolved ordinary Irishmen, and particularly ordinary Ulstermen, feel themselves to be in 'The Troubles'.

My mother never told me that they received the following letter from my friend and company commander, Ken Neely. I expect that she was reassured by its contents.

Capt K Neely
29th British General Hospital
Kure, Japan
22 March 1951

Enclosed are a few snaps which John asked me to send to you. As you may know, when the battalion first came to Korea I was Signals Officer and John was my second in command. At Christmas I took over command of HQ Company and John deservedly got command of the Signals Platoon. Although I say it myself I have always considered Signals Officer the most important job in the battalion, for without good and reliable communications a commanding officer cannot fight his battalion. In all sincerity I would like to say that John has been absolutely first rate and he has done a really magnificent job and still is, despite the many and varied difficulties that have had to be overcome.

When I left, John was in usual good form, cheery and looking very fit. He is, of course quite naturally, just living for the day when he can get out of the army.

Happily, Ken and I met up again, in 1970, when I was in New York and he, a brigadier, was Defence Adviser in the British High Commission in Ottawa.

On the Imjin River, 5 April 1951

The battalion is now sitting on the Imjin river north of Uijongbu, waiting for the expected Chinese counter-offensive, part of which will almost certainly come through our sector, which has always been the spot chosen before. It is rather a dodgy business, sitting tight and waiting for the crash to come. It isn't so bad for me, because in a static position I can cut my work down, but it is horrid for the rifle companies. Also for us, really, because in this sort of war there is no front, and we have to dig in in our little valley here just as much as the forward positions a mile or two in front. We know that they will cross at night if they do, and it is always a relief to wake up in the morning and find we are still here. But you will imagine that it's a bit wearing on the nerves.

We cook all our own food, because they don't bring cooks as far forward as this. In fact our whole equipment is based on the assumption that we might have to get out on our own two feet. I send my jeeps back a few miles every night.

This was our first introduction to the Imjin, which was to figure so largely in our lives until 25 April, when we finally withdrew at the end of the

Battle of the Imjin, running for our lives, strictly as ordered, to escape the fast-encircling Chinese.

Waiting as we were for what we knew was to come, one feels a continual tightening of one's stomach, and constant foreboding. Whoever says he does not is not normal. When the shooting begins, one is frightened in a more immediate way, but the waiting is perhaps worse.

Yongdongpo, 26 April 1951

Just a hurried note in case the papers have been spreading flaps about our brigade, to say that I am safe and sound and once again have got out without a scratch. Our brigade held up two divisions for four days, until we were finally cut off and had to get out as best we could over the hills. We had a fairly hectic day yesterday getting out. I reckon I covered 15 miles in four hours up and down the mountains on my feet! The battalion has at the moment 10 officers and 194 men wounded, killed or missing—about the same as last January. Both my batman and my driver are missing, and eight men more from my platoon. I pray that my batman and driver may yet turn up, but I'm not very hopeful, as we were being fired on pretty heavily all the time.

Ken rejoined us today, looking a lot better. It is lovely to have him back, but I don't expect he will stay in HQ Company now we are 10 more officers down.

There is a party going on all around me at the moment, so I can't really write. I do hope that you haven't been worrying—perhaps the newspaper censorship has been kept up.

Sosa-ri, 29 April 1951

This is another quick letter subsequent to my last, which was really only intended to offset the effects of what the newspapers have been printing. The brigade has taken a very hard knock, because it had to withstand the force of the whole offensive, but we held them up for a good time and got out when we were cut off. In a way, I'm glad that I've seen it at first hand. I know what it's about now!

Now the offensive has spent its first momentum, and we are awaiting the next push. But our brigade now has a comparatively easy job on the Kimp'o peninsula, which is flat and good fighting country from our point of view. We are living in the pleasantest surroundings yet in Korea. The officers are living in a European house, undamaged, with real rooms and windows and a roof and picture rails.

I miss my batman and driver most frightfully, and I dread writing to their wives even more than to the others. Only one of my missing was unmarried.

I am about to be made a captain, and Ken a major, but don't address letters to me as such until I confirm it. We lost every company commander killed or wounded in the last week.

The Battle of the Imjin has been well documented and my account of the last day, when everyone was told to make his own way south, has been told elsewhere. In Battalion HQ, at 8am on the 25th, we were told to move as soon as possible. Some decided to go down the road, riding with wounded on tanks, but they were ill-advised: they just failed to beat the Chinese swarming over the ridges from the west, and were badly mauled. Although I cannot clearly recall the sequence of events, I elected to join those remaining, perhaps 50 of us, seeking to gain the top of the ridge to the east, with the intention of moving south along it. Any reluctance on anyone's part to climb the ridge was quickly dispelled when machine-gun bullets began to stitch up the track along which we were retreating. I forced myself to stand up, where the next line of stitches was about to arrive, the better to bully the reluctant men to get up and climb into cover further up the ridge. Talk about 'Why the hell did I have to be an officer?'

It subsequently occurred to me how relatively unusual it was to be targeted personally. We normally thought of Them trying to kill Us. On this occasion I was sure that there was a particular Chinese machine gunner trying to kill me, standing a few yards ahead of where his last burst had landed.

Making no attempt to keep a coherent group together, and with the medical sergeant and myself bringing up the rear, we all accordingly legged it as fast as we could towards the south, where we knew American troops were holding a line. The trick was to get to them before the Chinese got to us, as they had to our comrades on the tanks. I think that we were all very conscious, as we ran up hill and down dale over very rough country, that so much as a twisted ankle would be disastrous. Happily, if my recollection is correct, all our group beat the Chinese to the tape. As in January, as stragglers came in, our casualties proved to be less than we had feared. My batman was taken prisoner, but my driver escaped.

Sosa-ri, 8 May 1951

This is to bring you the glad news that I am going to Tokyo on leave for five days. I am going with a Second Lieutenant who has recently got the Military Cross. I get on with him pretty well. Now that I am practically on the way there, I am madly looking forward to it. The thought of not having to do anything about communications for five whole days is too enticing to be true.

Now that I know that I am going to be able to relax for a while I feel most terribly tired and stale. But leave will be lovely.

Kimpo, 17 May 1951

I feel so ashamed because I never once wrote to you from Tokyo, whence I returned today after five most wonderful days. We lived in utter luxury, with marvellous food, drink, and fairly goodish nightclubs. And people were charming, asking us out for meals, etc. We went to a cocktail party at the British Embassy, and in quick succession thereafter asked out the daughters of practically every diplomat in Tokyo. My birthday was quite literally celebrated by nearly every member of the British community in Tokyo. Our hotel was just a continuous party the whole time on the 13th.

Kimpo, 22 May 1951

I had a very welcome letter from the War Office the other day, saying that my application for release in August had been approved! So I am daring to hope that I may soon (two months, I guess) be leaving Korea. I was given no definite date, but they said that I would hear 'in due course'. You will imagine how delighted I am about this, but the next month or two will go so so slowly.

We have had a very quiet week here on the Kimpo peninsula. The war seems to be going quite well. Our corps here on the west is advancing and we are hoping to hook round behind the Chinese, who seem to have been stopped in the east. When I say 'we' 29 Brigade is not actually moving, but as we saved the corps a month ago we feel it is their turn now!

Our leave in Tokyo was indeed as wonderful in recollection, 47 years on, as it is in my letters. My companion, who turned out to be as sturdy a drinker as myself, and a very good bloke, and I lived on Lobster Thermidor and brandy and ginger on the rare occasions when we were not being entertained, and even today consumption of either brings back the memories. It remains possibly the best five days of my recollection, though I must admit that my birthday celebrations had passed from my memory. I was 24. Of course the news from the War Office put the cream on the cake.

South of Imjin, 2 June 1951

We have moved back into the line since I last wrote, and are oddly enough occupying the same position as the Gloucesters fought their battle on, overlooking the Imjin. But it is rather different now, since the whole brigade is occupying the Gloucester front, so we are now about three times stronger than we were. And 28 Brigade is occupying our old battalion position.

I went up our own valley the other day, and found my jeep in a horrid mess. We have found a good many of our blokes, but unfortunately they are now unidentifiable in most cases.

M seems to be coping with her job all right, though I think it's frightfully hard work. She was involved in a genuine earthquake in Milan the other day, but didn't get hurt at all.

South of Imjin, 10 June 1951

We have had a very quiet week here, fortifying ourselves with mines and wire against the next offensive, which seems to be forecast for the next week or two. But we feel that the Chinese will suffer rather heavily if they come along our way this time.

I had a very satisfying day on Tuesday. We put two companies across the river on a probe, with strong support, and since I was controlling it by wireless from this bank, I had the satisfaction of 'shooting' the regiment of 25 pounders, a troop of heavy mortars and a half-squadron of tanks, all off my own bat. I made a lot of bangs and I think I distressed quite a few Chinese, and luckily hit none of our own blokes.

I've been thinking a lot of Peterhouse this week—May Week will be starting today, and it seems a long year since I left. But I've spent my third year more valuably here than I would have there, although it's been very difficult.

I cannot for the life of me remember why I was allowed to 'shoot' the guns, mortars, etc. I can only suppose that either everyone else was busy or there was so much wireless involved that I didn't trust anyone else to do it.

I was indeed happy to know that M had an interesting job. It involved taking coach loads of tourists from Milan to Lakes Maggiore and Como, and back, six days a week.

Seoul, 1 July 1951

Since last Tuesday I have been away from the sharp end—for good, I hope. I am down here at our rear echelon attending courts martial. I have been a member of a court till now—trying a bloke for manslaughter and, for the last three days, 11 men who are up for mutiny—you will probably read about it. When they are finished, 'my' case [in which I appeared as a witness] comes up, and when that's over, I can be off! I reckon by next weekend if all goes well.

I think I can safely ask you to stop writing to Korea, unless you hear from me to the contrary.

This was my last letter from Korea, and who knows who was more relieved, I to send it or my mother to receive it. I think probably she, because she had been a spectator at long distance while I did have some control over my life.



*In my preferred uniform, shortly to be banned
by the Brigadier, Korea, 1951*

When I left, I was proud: proud that I had proved myself to myself and to others; that I was the only reservist officer to be promoted; and that the CO invited me to take a regular commission in the Rifles, the greatest compliment that it was in his power to offer.

I was, of course, extremely glad to leave—to get away from the danger and discomfort of an activity to which I did not feel committed as a regular officer would or should. I needed to be home to take the Foreign Office exams. I longed to see M.

But also during my last weeks I had begun to do some counting. The establishment of a British infantry battalion, if my memory does not deceive me, is 37 officers. I recall that when I left, there were only nine of us remaining who had served uninterruptedly from the start. I did not like the odds.

Of course, the other 28 had not all been casualties. Happily, as is often the case, the early estimates of our losses had been exaggerated. During my time the battalion's losses were some 95 killed and missing, plus I don't remember how many prisoners—better than I had reported to my mother, but nevertheless an extremely high percentage, out of 600, in some nine months. Most of the 28 had in fact disappeared by attrition—incompetent officers quietly got rid of back to the base in Japan; others who found billets for themselves behind, not fancying the sharp end—as who in their right senses would? Some got nasty and persistent diseases.

British Base, Kure, Japan

8 July 1951

*Well, I am out of Korea, but I am afraid my journey home is going to take longer than I hoped—there is a fearful shortage of planes and it looks as though I have to wait for a boat. I am to sail on 19 July on the **Empire Pride**, which reaches England on 27 August.*

I am staying here in a very luxurious Mess, which is perfectly delightful, but most of the people permanently here are pretty poor types, as one would expect, and I don't get on frightfully well with them. Still, I expect I can keep myself company for 10 days without dying of loneliness!

To say that the people in the mess were not my type is putting it mildly. They had holed up there very comfortably, with never a thought of setting foot in Korea, let alone going near any battle action.

It may be that I missed my chance of a flight home because when, on arrival, still in my filthy jungle greens, I lounged into the office of a Major immaculately dressed in tailored battledress, I may have made too obvious my contempt for him, when presumably, I hope, he already felt guilty enough. Anyhow, it was then the ship for me.

My second visit to Tokyo was as splendid as the first. I remember that I got into the society press, and played squash with a Third Secretary in the Embassy. I felt as though I was already in the Foreign Service!

*SS **Empire Pride**, between Formosa and China*

20 July 1951

This is a small ship, about 9000 tons, but she isn't too bad at the moment as she is empty—only 250 odd on board, instead of the 1600 we shall end up with after Hong Kong and Singapore. I'm the only captain on board, so I have to look after the only troop deck which is occupied at the moment. This entails just enough work to keep me from being utterly bored—about 2½ hours a day. The rest of the time I sleep and sunbathe and read, and realise how very tired I really am. I can feel myself forgetting all the strain of Korea, and relaxing day by day, and taking for granted sheets and plates, and generally approaching a human life again.

Most of the officers are National Service Second Lieutenants, going home to Oxford or Cambridge, who remind me very much of myself coming back from India, and make me feel about 100. But they are nice blokes, and considerate for my great age and eccentricity in being engaged.

We duly disembarked at Liverpool on 27 July. My reunion with my parents took place on the quayside where our troopship docked. I recall

my father illegally running up the gangplank, while we were waiting to disembark, to hand me a sheaf of letters from M. This was a pretty generous gesture from my parents.

The next day I proceeded to the depot of the Lancashire Fusiliers in Bury, became once again a Lancashire Fusilier for about two seconds and, thus cleansed, immediately became a private citizen again.

The tedium of the voyage was alleviated by my having picked up in Hong Kong a copy of *Teach Yourself Italian*, which I studied assiduously, writing letters in Italian to M, the style and content of which were limited because I knew only the words in the book.

Funny about the strain. I don't know about the others, but for several years I used to wake at night, alongside M, and reach for the carbine by my bed.

I went for a time with my parents to our pad in North Wales, then sorted out arrangements for the exams in January, and finally hightailed it for Italy, where I stayed with M's parents until the New Year, living off my unspent uniform allowance and dramatically improving my Italian. My chief teacher was the son of the local butcher, who had already lost the ritual two fingers of his trade. I learned much from him about the Italian way of life.

I returned to England in January 1952, and sponged off my parents while taking the three Foreign Office hurdles until I passed in March. I then asked the Foreign Office to let me start work as soon as possible, as I was broke. I duly did so on 18 August 1952.

Manchester Guardian
 Thursday, 21 February 1952

A Party in Korea by J.C.M. Mason

Even before the eggs arrived, the unprecedented spaciousness of our home had filled both of us with social ambitions. We had lived in other hovels in other villages as we advanced from valley to valley in the bitter cold of last February, the whole battalion willing the Colonel and the higher formations to advance in a day only so far as would bring us to another village. We had had other homes with the wonderful Korean chimneys that pass under the floor, unbroken rice-paper windows, and electric light worked off wireless batteries. But never before had we had a palace eight by six by five feet high, from which a connecting door led to the west wing, six by six by four and a half, in which our batmen slept and cooked—the whole comprising, as they say, a desirable family residence. Never before had we had a house big enough to admit a guest when once we, like Pooh on a cautious visit to Rabbit, had squeezed our padded selves in through the narrow window-cum-door which is a standard fitting in Korean houses.

But even if we asked a guest to supper, what had we to offer him? Certainly we had fruit-juice by the gallon, tinned peaches by the stone, and tins without number of those scourges of the digestion, ground meat and spaghetti and beans with Frankfurter chunks. So had every other soul in the battalion and, as far as we knew, every man in the entire Eighth Army. Of those rarest delicacies, bread and

potatoes, we had none at all. Our hopes rose for a brief moment when my batman produced a tin of bully beef and a packet of the beloved British 'hardies', but fell again as we counted: a guest, two hosts and two batmen into one tin and a packet of biscuits would not go.

Then came the miracle. With minds obsessed by bread and potatoes, we had not thought of eggs, until Ken's batman crept through the door, opened his windproof jacket and drew forth lovingly a tube of rice-straw. On his Belfast face was the look of one who has seen and spoken with the Star of the County Down.

'Not eggs?' breathed Ken. For answer, his batman parted the straw and, hardly daring to hope, we looked and saw the ten small eggs within the bundle. 'But do you mean they let you have eggs in February?' asked Ken incredulously, because for months past not an egg nor a chicken had been seen in any village; not even in Suwon, where they still used money. 'How on earth did you persuade them?' The two batmen looked at each other, as two old soldiers who shake their heads sadly over a new recruit, and Ken and I asked no more.

With ten eggs in our possession we need worry no more about what to offer a guest. Indeed, our problem now was to find a man worthy to share our riches. Our guest must be appreciative; we were not minded to give of our hospitality to one who might be

more accustomed to good living than were we, which ruled out the Command Post and higher formations for a start. Our guest must be available: a friend from a peak fifteen hundred feet up and four miles away could not be asked to walk home after the party, and in those days there was no question that he might stay the night. He must like the people we liked and hate the people we hated, because, as elsewhere in the army, gossip was our only conversation. Finally we decided on the Padre, who fulfilled all these requirements, was a great friend, and had been the host of one of us at B Echelon two weeks before.

We sent the invitation, which was received with suitable protestations of unworthiness, the Padre being a man who knew what was what on these occasions, and all that remained was to decide the menu. In this we were rightly subordinate to our batmen, who would have to supply, cook and serve the meal. They decreed that we should start with issue rum and pineapple juice, followed by C7 biscuits (so like and yet so much better than C6), spread with peanut butter. The main course would be American 'Bread-type units'—deceptive name for yet another type of biscuit—and slices of bully beef fried in margarine, the whole crowned by fried eggs, two each. For sweet, there would be sliced peaches and clotted cream, which my batman swore he could make from evaporated milk.

The Padre arrived punctually on the hour appointed. We could not have had a better guest. He never tired or faltered when required to express wonder and surprise at the marvels shown him by his

house-proud hosts: the kitchenette where our cocoa simmered during the small hours, awaiting our return from the 3am stand-to; the arrangement of nails on which our outer clothing hung, in such a way as to enable us to get dressed in the dark without mislaying anything; the maps fixed on the wall so that we could maintain, over the wireless or the telephone, an air of being completely in the picture without having to leave our sleeping-bags. The least envious of men at normal times, on this occasion he realised that envy of our comfort, so far from shaming us, would gladden our hearts, and therefore gnashed his teeth in rage and frustration that such a palace was not his. His becoming reluctance when offered a cocktail was truly artistic, but no more so than his delighted amazement at the peanut butter which he himself had given us two days before. Ken and I looked at each other and hugged our secret. 'Wait till he sees the eggs,' we thought.

As the main course was served, amid joyous cries and beaming faces, I remember thinking: 'If this were a story, instead of actually happening to us, we would just have been sitting down with the eggs, bully beef, and fried biscuits in front of us, when a call would have come from the C.P., with the warning order, to tighten our stomachs and snatch away our appetites: 'From Seagull to all companies, Sigs Offr, M.O., Warning Order. Prepare to move tonight. O Group at 2115 hours. All inform.'

But life is not so cruel as that: I had half-finished before the telephone rang.

© *Manchester Guardian*, 1952

Manchester Guardian
Thursday, 24 July 1952

The Unfriendly Village by J.C.M. Mason

All villages in Korea, north or south of the parallel, have pretty much the same names, and we soon gave up trying to remember them apart. The only reason the Intelligence Officer remembered the name Onjong-ni when he saw it in the Corps Intelligence Summary was that, of all the villages we stopped in up and down Korea, this was the only one where the natives were unfriendly. Onjong-ni is a large village, with, I suppose, about two thousand inhabitants. We had passed through it one December evening and bivouacked the battalion on a small hill just outside. No contact with the enemy was reported, so that, although we were well inside North Korea, we lit fires and tried to get some sort of a meal going. In those early innocent days we still kept our cooks' three-tonners with us and meals were cooked by companies instead of individually. This being so, the batmen of Battalion Headquarters had instructions to buy eggs at every stopping-place, to supplement what the cooks considered to be an adequate meal.

It was against the egg-party that hostility was first displayed. They came back and reported that they had been stoned from a group of houses, and one of them indignantly showed us where his hand had been grazed. 'This is a very peculiar place, sir,' he assured us earnestly, and we agreed that it seemed so. The Intelligence Officer, determined to stand no nonsense, strode off to

the village, but returned within ten minutes, eggless, stoned, and with a vocabulary better fitted than the batman's to describe his experience.

The next morning Ted and I, escorted by the regimental police, set off to tour the village. In the schoolhouse we found the mayor, sitting on top of a safe. Through our interpreter we asked him what was in it and where were the keys, but he refused to answer. This was short-sighted, since Ted is inquisitive and as an Intelligence Officer in enemy territory it was, he said, unquestionably his duty to impound the safe and open it any way he could. He sent back one of the police for transport and labour to remove the safe to our area.

Our next discovery we had to treat with great secrecy. We found that the village was blessed with a natural hot-water spring, over which a bath-house had been built, with baths fifteen feet square and filled to a depth of four feet with water which was filthy, stinking of sulphur, but beautifully hot. Since none of us had seen our knees for six weeks, a hot bath represented paradise on earth. While the police were drawing lots to decide who should stay outside and guard the jeep, Ted and I slipped into the bath-house, stripped off our layers of clothing, and descended into the heavenly hot water. We had not dared return to camp for towels, for fear of having to share our discovery, and luckily we had some soap in the jeep.

I shall never forget the bliss of sinking into that disgusting water, and of feeling circulation start up again in extremities which had seemed lifeless for weeks. I remember we just drifted about, soaping ourselves again and again, and murmuring ecstatically, 'Gosh, isn't this marvellous?' and 'I say, this is something like'. It was the first thing we had found in Korea of which we approved.

A couple of hours later we hauled the police out of one of the other baths and returned to camp. Our cleanliness was so obvious that in no time at all the word was round the battalion, and since it was a rest day we who had bathed were soon the only people left in camp. All things considered, this was just as well, because when we tried to open the safe by igniting a one-ounce primer by the keyhole, into which we had stuffed a stick of '808', the safe disintegrated and large steel chunks rose forty feet in the air and came down all over the camp. We had evidently discovered the village ammunition cache, and the mayor's silence was not so short-sighted as it had appeared to be. We decided that he too must be classed as unfriendly, but we knew it was no good going down to tell him so, because he would be out when we called.

The manifestations of unfriendliness came to a head that night, throughout which we were sniped at from the village,

fortunately without suffering any casualties. One company reported that grenades were being thrown at it, but it responded by dropping smoke bombs into the middle of the huts, which kept things quiet for the rest of the night. Nevertheless, we felt that the villagers had gone too far and we were going to be cross with them in the morning, but as it turned out we had to move on soon after dawn, and departed full of regrets for the bath-house and of bewilderment at the villagers' hostility.

As I said, we remembered the name, and when Ted saw it in the Intelligence Report a few weeks later it caught his eye. It was in the 'gossip column' they always printed at the end of the report. Apparently, a captured North Korean staff officer under interrogation had said that when his regiment entered Onjong-ni forty-eight hours after we had departed the villagers wanted to know why they had been liberated by strange men in green hats instead of by their own fellow-countrymen. When he was asked why he used the word 'liberated' in this context, the prisoner explained that the villagers had mistaken us for Russians. This explained a lot and we all forgave them, but Ted and I will always feel that the mayor, at least, should have made quite sure who was confiscating his safe.

© *Manchester Guardian*, 1952



With my parents at Monte Cassino, Italy, September 1955



ROME

March 1954–July 1956

Between 1952 and 1984 I spent four periods of varying length in the Foreign Office, and elsewhere in Whitehall. But my letters to my mother during these postings concerned only domestic matters, and I made no attempt to inform her of what went on in the Office. Just as well, as I might have let off more steam than I was inclined to do when overseas. Pity, as one stands or falls in the service by one's performance in the Office, which is a rat race of extremely bright and intensely ambitious people. Extremely stimulating and huge fun if you can stand the pace.

I joined the Foreign Office as a new recruit in August 1952, and in March 1954, to the incredulous envy of my colleagues, was posted to Rome as Third Secretary and Private Secretary to the Ambassador. My good fortune was owed to the fact that the Ambassador, newly arrived, had stipulated an Italian speaker and a bachelor. I fitted the second category, and did not think it necessary to tell anyone that I hoped to change that condition as soon as I could. I was the only Italian speaker around, having calculated that the standards for Italian in the Foreign Office exam would be lower than for French; that I could learn Italian while living with M's parents in northern Italy; and that the examiner was a colleague of my father at Manchester University, and the author of the admirable textbook *Teach Yourself Italian*, which I had studied from cover to cover on the troopship coming back from Korea.

I found the Ambassador a hard taskmaster. But the late Sir Ashley Clarke, not to mention my older colleagues in the Chancery, must have found me much harder to bear—I was brash, conceited and over-confident. I remain eternally grateful to Ashley Clarke for showing me how an ambassador of the old school should behave—an apprenticeship which not too many of my contemporaries enjoyed. One of the best moments of my career was when, at our farewell party, the Ambassador said: 'I could not have believed that anyone could improve as much as you have while you have been here.'

Rome, 24 March 1954

I had lunch today with the Clarkes, who are both charming. I wore my new best suit. The Embassy is magnificent, and covered all over with footmen and butlers. Lunch for six of us today was served with each plate based on a different silver plate, with the most exquisite cutlery, and we had to pass through three salons between the dining room and the salon in which we actually took coffee. The Clarkes are, however, quite informal and awfully nice. Lady C looks very young to be 37 and just the sort of person to confuse circumference with diameter. But no fool by any means. Nor of course is he.

The people in Chancery all seem very nice, and I am pleased with my lot. I have an office to myself, which is bliss after working with five others.

The 'circumference' bit is worth explaining. Impending arrivals were expected to ask the Ambassadors whether they could bring out anything for her. Kindly, Virginia asked me to bring her a pot of Pond's cold cream 'six inches in diameter'. Any sensible, or married, bloke would have known that she meant circumference, but I panicked and she, poor lady, had to write and explain that she had got it wrong.

Rome, 6 April 1954

I am finding work very hard at present, as everything takes me longer while I am learning the job. A lot of my time is spent answering letters from cranks and loonies. I got about 50 forwarded from Buckingham Palace yesterday, and they all have to be answered.

Rome, 11 April 1954

I have had quite an eventful but interesting week. The most important bit was yesterday, when I took a flat. It was the 26th one I saw. It is in Parioli, the classy suburb of Rome, and is on the top floor of a block which isn't modern, but isn't old—just getting on. It has a hall, salotto, dining room, study, two double bedrooms, kitchen, maid's room, maid's bathroom, and two bathrooms for me, which should be just enough. The chief drawback is the furniture, which is pretty hideous in an old-fashioned way. I am hoping to inherit the maid who goes with the flat.

The flat turned out well, though the landlady, a General's relict, was a troublesome feature of the landscape.

Rome, 25 April 1954

M arrived on Wednesday and left on Friday morning. She was thus able to see me in the flat and to offer a few constructive suggestions about making it less

hideous. I find it comfy, I must say. My maid seems to be a treasure—she's intelligent and hard-working and seems to be honest.

Yesterday I had to go to the airport to meet the Minister of Transport, Lennox-Boyd, and his wife and two sons. I found them a charming and extremely forceful family, and we got on quite well together.

Rome, 1 May 1954

It has been a busy week at the Embassy because I've had to do a lot for H.E. [His Excellency]—he is beginning to trust me quite a lot. Our forthcoming trip to Venice takes a lot of planning. We are flying up, plus Lady C, and staying in the most expensive hotel. Fortunately it is only for three nights.

You will probably have heard that I had Professor Wortley to dinner. I had to throw him out early and go along to help entertain guests after dinner at the Residence. I got landed with the Foreign Minister's daughter, but as she's quite attractive that suited me quite well.

Last night there was a cocktail party for the President of the Board of Trade, who struck me as an awful twerp. Today I've been chasing round after Lord Salter, who received an urgent telegram from Baghdad and wanted his hand holding. All this in addition to coping with H.E.'s engagements and doing all my ordinary work into the bargain.

The trip to Venice marked the beginning of Ashley trusting me to get things right—sometimes—which I tried most earnestly to do, partly because I feared his displeasure, but mostly from pride.

Going to the Residence after dinner, known as 'coming in with the toothpicks', was a feature of residence life which I never came across elsewhere, nor in any other Embassy in Rome. We didn't care for it.

Lennox-Boyd's visit was in connection with the first mysterious and tragic disappearance of a De Havilland Comet passenger plane, subsequently attributed to metal fatigue, which set British aviation back years, and allowed Boeing 707s to take over the world's jet traffic.

Although I didn't tell my mother, Lord Salter gave me a deserved set-down. When I delivered his cipher telegram to him in his hotel, I added a pompous lecture about security, to which he replied: 'I am a Privy Councillor, you know.' Collapse of J. Mason.

Rome, 8 May 1954

An extra letter to let you know that M got a decree nisi on Tuesday, or rather had one awarded against her. Only six weeks to the absolute, and you can guess how we are feeling. I expect you are too.

Rome, 14 May 1954

I still can't believe that all the frightful fears of the last five years that maybe we never should get free are now really over. I wake up every morning and feel so happy because now we are at last like other people who want to get married. Our tentative target date is Christmas, but I don't intend to approach H.E. until September.

I have to clear lots of things up before Wednesday when we fly to Venice. I find H.E. pretty exhausting. He's charming, but not all the time, and he likes to take it out on me. He expects everything to be just so, and though I keep ahead of him most of the time he occasionally blasts me—especially if he is in the wrong. I don't know how we shall get on in Venice, though I think having Lady C there will help. I think that he quite approves of me, though, because if he didn't he wouldn't expect so much. I had a tremendous argument with him today about a begging letter which I said he should ignore. I think we both finished up feeling the other was a fool.

I don't think I've met anybody very exciting this week, except perhaps Norah Swinburne—Esmond Knight's wife—and Lady Moira Lyttelton. Also, briefly, the Colonial Secretary at the airport. I thought he was a stinker, and I gather that his Private Secretary did too.

It was unusual for me to air my emotions so freely to my mother. But the relief was enormous: we knew that if M's ex had dug his toes in, from malice, there was nothing we could do.

This letter provides an indication of how Ashley Clarke trained me in old-fashioned niceties of diplomatic life, and also kept me on my toes. I believe that no-one of my generation had better training, while I regard Ashley as being the boss of whom I was most in awe in my life, followed closely by the late Sir Con O'Neill, for whom I worked in the Foreign Office.

Rome, 23 May 1954

I hope you got my postcard from Venice. I didn't have frightfully much to organise, as the consul had done it all beforehand, but I had to hang around ready to fetch and carry and tip and entertain the minor members of people's entourages. I went round with H.E. on all his official visits—to the Patriarch, the Admiral, the Mayor, etc, and met all the Venetian notables who live in conditions of unexampled magnificence inside their outwardly dingy palaces. The first time I've lunched at a private house off gold plate, with silk tablecloths and napkins, and where the footmen wear swords!

The hotel was extremely luxurious and I enjoyed my brief spell of luxury. I loved Venice itself, but I suppose I saw it the easy way—e.g. being shown round St Mark's by the Cardinal—though unfortunately not round the Palace by the Doge!

On Saturday I got rid of them early and spent a pleasant day with M. On the Sunday I came down in her coach to Pescara, and then by train to Rome, where I arrived about midnight, very tired.

I was properly in the doghouse for abandoning the Clarkes at the door of the hotel, instead of seeing them safely on to their train for Rome, my wish to catch up with M taking precedence over duty.

This first official visit to Venice was a milestone for the Ambassador, who after retirement devoted the rest of his long life to the preservation of that city. Although I did not realise it at the time, the highlight of the trip was the meeting with the Patriarch, Cardinal Roncalli, later Pope John XXIII. He was immensely impressive, combining saintliness with worldliness. I have for many years marked him and Chou En-lai (or Zhou Enlai) as the two most remarkable men I ever met.

Rome, 11 June 1954

I seem to have done everything since I last wrote. On Friday evening we had a cocktail party for a party of RAF officers visiting with some Canberras, and then in the evening a dance at a 'palais' in town for the sergeants. On Saturday I had three RAF officers to lunch, all such babes that I felt agonisingly old. Sunday morning was a posh wedding at the Aracoeli—a Cardinal and all the trimmings. Monday evening was a dance for 300 at the Residence. I was very much on duty trying to make things go, which they did until 1.30am. I am now becoming quite a bit of a power behind the throne, and it's 'John, be an angel and do this' from L.C. and 'John, why haven't you done this?' from H.E. all the time on these occasions!

Thursday was the Queen's Birthday and a garden party for 2300. My job was to stand on the terrace to do the first welcoming (in my morning suit) and direct the guests to the lawn where Their Excellencies were. So I didn't have much recreation, but I can now claim to have shaken hands with all the Italian Cabinet!

Queen's Birthday parties—QBPs—are engraved on the memory of all members of the Foreign Service. All local notables and all registered British subjects were invited, and standards of behaviour varied. In Rome, on one occasion, I unearthed a family in Virginia's bedroom going through her drawers!

Rome, 31 July 1954

H.E. just came charging in, having discovered that 16.20 is not, as he had supposed, twenty past six. He panics easily, and has to be calmed down. Also

one has to be very careful to get his initial on everything, otherwise he will argue until he is blue in the face that he said the opposite to what he did. I prefer him to be wrong because it doesn't matter to him, whereas it does to me if I am.

I am not much looking forward to this trip, as he shows signs of being difficult. Still, I expect I shall be able to soothe him. If I get H.E. in a very good mood on the trip I might approach him about the wedding, but on the whole I think I'll let it wait until after his leave.

I cannot now recall all the *va et vient* of my relationship with the Ambassador, which perhaps he himself never noticed, taking me for granted without recognising my desperate wish to get things right.

One thing which does not emerge from these letters of my first summer in Rome was the frantic social life I lived as a bachelor, when not engaged on official evening duties. Many of us from the Embassy would go out night after night to eat and dance, and I was very much in demand as one who could dance better than most. The unmarried girls in the Embassy were, I conceitedly fear, taken aback when I suddenly got married to someone they had hardly met. But I was most deeply relieved to surrender my bachelor status.

Rome, 12 September 1954

Last Sunday, the week started off badly for me. At 1.15pm I met Nigel Birch and two other MPs at the airport, and for five hours on a blazing afternoon had to take them sightseeing. It was ghastly, because none of them were gents. On Monday I had to cope with Princess Margaretha, who is quite pleasant. On Tuesday I had to spend an hour and a half at the airport looking after Walter Elliott, who is a sweetie, so no complaints. All this in addition to the ordinary office work, which is heavy. On Thursday I suddenly dashed up to Florence to find H.E. to get his instructions about Eden's visit. Next week we have got not only Eden and Monty simultaneously, but also students from the Imperial Defence College and five Lord Mayors.

One bright spot. I consulted the Head of Chancery about getting married and he said he was sure that H.E. would raise no objection. So now it only remains to catch him when the rush has died down a bit.

Rome, 18 September 1954

The Secretary of State had a successful time here, but he certainly kept me running about. The last straw was having to dash out to the market just before he left to buy him some figs for his plane journey—he adores figs. He looked very well and fit.

*On Wednesday I spoke to H.E. about getting married. He said that it was perfectly OK but, since M has been married before, I should tell Personnel Department before putting it in the **Times**. He said they wouldn't raise any objection though.*

My time can't have been as much taken up with visitors as this and other letters make it appear, but I knew that all my hobnobbing with minor royals, Cabinet Ministers, etc would be meat and drink to my mum.

Until mid-November my letters were understandably taken up with our wedding. The hurdles were numerous, but easily surmounted because everybody was, I think, so anxious to see me safely married off. The fact that M had been married before also created some problems. The Ambassador felt obliged to ask for a reference from M's father's employer, while Virginia asked M to tea to look her over. M of course went to tea with her heart in her mouth, but H.E. reported to me that Virginia had liked her very much and that we could proceed.

Rome, 15 October 1954

*I hope that you saw the **Times** on Tuesday and the **Guardian** on Wednesday. We are both naturally awfully happy to have got ourselves into the papers at last. We are now planning for the wedding. With very real regret, and after much heart-searching, we have decided that we cannot afford to come to England during our honeymoon. As it is, we now plan to be married in Rome, in the lovely Campidoglio, on Monday, 15 November, and to spend the three weeks I am to be allowed touring in Italy.*

We have today given formal notice of our marriage to the Consul. Since Consuls in Rome cannot, by old Vatican law, marry people, we are getting married at the Town Hall by Italian civic authorities.

I had an enjoyable but most exhausting time in Milan. It is not everybody, however, who has seen a gala performance at La Scala from the President's box, and it was all very impressive. I adored Margot Fonteyn but even more Ninette de Valois, who struck me as being one of the most remarkable women I have ever met.

Rome, 30 October 1954

We have somewhat altered our plans because Alan Campbell, the Head of Chancery, has kindly offered to put on a show for us. We have therefore given up the lunch at the hotel and Alan is giving us a buffet lunch instead for about 15 guests.

*This has been a busy week. On Saturday night, having struck up a warm friendship with Frederick Ashton, the co-director, I watched **The Skaters** from*

*the wings of the Opera House, and then **Checkmate and Homage to the Queen** from Ninette de Valois' box. All most interesting. On Monday night I saw Margot Fonteyn dance **Swan Lake**—absolutely breathtaking and nearly drove the Opera House mad with enthusiasm.*

Wedding preparations were going smoothly, in spite of the authorities' deep dislike at the thought of two foreign Protestants, one divorced, planning to marry in the Rome municipality. They revealed only at the last minute that because M had been married before, she had to produce evidence certifying that she was not pregnant. The Consul and I, two days before the wedding, spent all day in the registry office fighting to get the necessary forms stamped. Our marriage certificate is eight foolscap pages long!

My time with the Sadler's Wells ballet company was a revelation to me—I was there as the interpreter/factotum for the company. I should add that Freddie Ashton and I, once he had established that I was 110% heterosexual, had a great time together.

Pallanza, 23 November 1954

Our wedding was very easy and very simple, in a palatial room lined with red silk, performed by an official with a tricolour round his waist, and consisting of reading to us the Italian civil code about marriage, after which we signed the register. All this was over by 10.15am. As our lunch was not until 1pm, we had to put in time having drinks, after we had got M's new passport from the Consulate.

The lunch was delightful—a buffet for 19 people; and we had a wedding cake—a great surprise. It was all ice cream, covered in cream with little decorations. H.E. made a very nice speech proposing our health and welcoming M into the Foreign Service. I replied with a speech which people said was very good—I meant it to be! It was so sweet of the Campbells to give us such a splendid send-off, and in the circles in which we move it means a great deal to have the Ambassador give his public blessing.

On the Tuesday we drove up to Piombino, opposite Elba, and the next day to Portovenere, near La Spezia. The only untoward incident was that in Portovenere I ate some baby octopus to which I must have been allergic, because it brought me out in my celebrated nettle rash, which spread itself from my tum to my hands and toes for 36 hours of considerable discomfort, and then disappeared as I knew it would.

Our wedding could not have been nicer, the only slight snag being when M, who had not studied the civil code, learned that she had to support me if necessary, as well as all the other things. Ashley said that, after hearing



*The happy couple, married five minutes beforehand,
the Campidoglio, Rome, 15 November 1954*

my speech, he knew I was going to be an ambassador one day, something which I had never doubted. Forty years later, M and I revisited the room we were married in, and sat in exactly the same red high chairs as on our wedding day, while a kind official took a photograph of us.

My octopus poisoning was dreadful. This was before the days of antihistamines, and I just had to sweat it out. M had to observe her husband of two days sitting up with a whisky bottle writing thankyou letters because I could not sleep. Happily, we had a good deal of previous evidence, spreading over a long period, that it was not she to whom I was allergic. I did not tell my mother this, though I suspect that she must have feared the worst, for a long time. Hence her remark to me when we telephoned after the wedding: 'Are you safely married at last?'

There is a hiatus until the next letters because there was little to report, except the usual round of visitors. M quickly settled in as everybody's favourite wife, in demand for interpreting, advice on dressmaking, organising charity bazaars and dances; in short, learning the part which

in due course made her such a marvellous ambassadress. After one of our parties the Head of Chancery's wife told me that I was a lucky young man. I did not need to be told.

Rome, 18 March 1955

Denis arrived here yesterday by tourist plane, having lunched in Cambridge. He has not changed in the least, and we are glad to have him here. He is writing a book on Garibaldi.

The other arrivals yesterday were the Morrisons. He gave a brilliant lecture—in English—on parliamentary democracy yesterday evening. She is sweet—completely at sea, but getting away with it with Lancashire common sense, adjusting things to her world instead of trying to adjust herself. A strong Lancashire accent. We got on very well together, when I told her where I came from, and egged her on to saying what she thought of having to live in the south of England. She says she finds the social life a strain, but has 'joined a couple of golf clubs in the village', where she feels more at home.

Rome, 29 April 1955

Back home this evening to find a puppy waiting for me. She is already quite at home, and is definitely going to be M's dog. She is absolutely delightful, but a little bit lost still, poor lamb. Naturally puddles all over the place. She is exactly like a woolly black lamb—I think it is still a toss-up whether she will not turn out to be a bear, but I am not allowed to say so.

I hope you received my two postcards from Sirmione and Verona. I flew up to Turin with H.E. on 21 April, and the following morning we visited the Motor Show there. After giving a lunch to the Show authorities we drove down in the Rolls to Genoa, where H.E. gave a lecture. The next morning early we drove to Milan, and went round the big Trade Fair there, giving lunch again to the authorities. In the afternoon, after H.E. had dragged me round a picture gallery, he met Virginia and I met M, and we parted. They went to stay at the Villa Taranto, and we drove to Lake Garda. We had a lovely hotel with a lakeside room. On Sunday and Monday morning we lazed, and on Monday afternoon M drove me to Verona, there to meet our Consul from Venice and await Their Excellencies' arrival next morning. Meanwhile, we all did the usual things—official calls, meals of unparalleled splendour, lectures, etc, in Padua and Verona. Fortunately both are lovely cities, which made it easier.

We are all rather regretting the new Italian President—we would have preferred the other main candidate, Merzagora.

Denis was my tutor at Cambridge, and the leading Italian scholar of his generation by far. When he stayed with us in 1955 his Italian was far from

fluent, and when I visited him at All Souls 30 years later I was envious to see him writing his latest book *in Italian* on his word processor. Forty years ago my Italian was pretty good—interpreter standard—but I never aspired to such an achievement. And my Italian has now disappeared.

The trip to Turin etc was notable because it was the first time that Ashley gave a lecture in Italian—read of course, but perfectly well done. Later, like my tutor, he far overtook me in the language.

The puppy, a poodle called Flip, came to dominate our lives, though having in the end to compete with two children in Warsaw and Damascus, and being put down when we left Damascus, as we could not face another six months of leaving her in quarantine, which she had to endure after we left Warsaw.

The disliked Italian President was Gronchi, who had an undeserved reputation as a left-wing bogeyman who would drive Italy towards the communists, which he did not. My belated apologies to him.

Rome, 22 May 1955

I had a pleasant three days in Naples, in lovely weather and the usual luxurious hotel, but it was nice to be back home again, with no more trips in prospect until the autumn. M has been busy being Virginia's secretary all week, doing invitations for the society garden party next week (about 600) and the Queen's Birthday one (about 2000). She earns golden opinions because, unlike the other wives, many of whom are a bit clueless, she is, says Virginia, quiet, quick and competent.

The enclosed brochure, about the work of the Save the Children Fund, struck home, as that organisation's work in Italy causes me almost more trouble than anything else I deal with. They are well meaning and useless, and are always appealing to us—I haven't actually had to distribute blankets myself, but I shall have to start one day. The Salvation Army also cause me trouble, but only because they won't take no for an answer—they are alert, intelligent, determined and resourceful female shock troops.

Rome, 29 May 1955

Letter from Moll saying that she had met two Americans who were touring Europe, and given them our address, and told them to get in touch with us if they were in difficulties or felt they would like to see us! One doesn't like to seem ungracious, but we sometimes wish that people wouldn't give chance acquaintances our address! I think that people do it so as to seem to be in the swim by having friends in Rome, done without thought of how busy we are here.

This letter describes two crosses to bear. First, well-meaning but thoughtless friends handing out our address to strangers. My comment was partly a rebuke to my mother, who was a regular offender, and had to be written to sharply on more than one occasion round the world, the disease also being prevalent elsewhere. Second, it seems strange at this distance in time to remember that the charities of which I wrote were not collecting funds from rich Italians, but distributing aid to very poor Italians. I was involved because, as the junior member of Chancery, I was landed with Department Two of the Foreign Ministry, which had charge of relations with the Vatican and therefore, by a transfer of thought, all Protestant organisations in Italy—churches, charities, pilgrims, the lot. And to please the Vatican they made themselves as awkward as possible to these worthy people.

Rome, 5 July 1955

We had a lovely weekend up at Siena. The whole of Saturday was given over to the Palio, which is a magnificent spectacle. The 17 districts of the city, after parading in the main square in medieval costumes of tremendous splendour, compete in a bareback horse race round the square, on which Le Mans has nothing. We were able to watch the horse of our district, where we were staying, being blessed in the local church, and then escorted to the parade and marched around. The whole thing started about 2pm and ended at 8pm, and then the winning district, not ours, swooped around the city in triumph for most of the night.

Today we were both given an excellent lunch at the Grand Hotel by the Nigerian Minister of Labour, who is passing through on his way home from a tour of Europe. He is a most charming man, fanatically pro-Cambridge, and plainly very happy to be dealing with Third Secretaries after a month of VIPs. We much enjoyed the occasion.

Rome, 30 October 1955

Tomorrow our Gold Coast attache arrives, and we are having him to dinner with the Head of Chancery and his wife tomorrow evening. A lot depends on what he is like, as he is going to be in my pocket for six months, sharing a room, etc.

I have had a nice letter from the Queen saying that since the reports on my 'Industry and Fidelity' are so good, she has decided that I can qualify as Trusty and Well Beloved, and therefore as an officer of her Foreign Service. Decent of her to write.

The 'Gold Coast attache' was one of a number seconded to embassies to learn about how to operate the Ghanaian Foreign Service after their

forthcoming independence. We became fast friends, and to our delight we spent much of the six months of his stay in each other's company. He never confided his hopes and fears for Ghana's future under President Nkrumah, but, having found himself Permanent Secretary of the Foreign Ministry shortly after independence, he fairly quickly found himself a job in the United Nations and, as far as I know, never returned to Ghana (with which country, incidentally, I had much to do in the early 1970s, to my dismay). We last met in 1961 in New York and I well remember, on my first innocent visit to the United States, my shock when, coming to a party in my honour to which I had invited him, he was shown up the back stairs and through the kitchen. By then a senior UN official, he took this in good part. One guest told me how nice it was that I had been so obviously pleased to see my old (=black) friend.

The letter from the Queen was no more than a certificate confirming the end of my probation. But it was duly signed by Her Majesty, and I am sure that Mum was impressed.

Rome, 8 December 1955

We had a very successful and highly exhausting week in the north, eating and drinking too much, perforce, and meeting millions of people. It went off very well, thanks to hard work by all concerned. I think the highlight was probably lunch on Sunday at the fantastic country house of Count Marzotto, who is a textile king, certainly the richest man in Italy, and a most terrifyingly electric personality. It was a private lunch, so we were accompanied by all his strange family—little old women in black and his not very forceful sons.

We have definitely decided to go to Amalfi for Christmas, just for two nights. The Clarkes' Christmas party is on 23 December, which means a lot of hard work for me. This year we are doing charades—God help us.

Apart from this curious lunch, my more vivid memory of Count Marzotto was as a passenger in the Rolls when it blew a front tyre on the autostrada between Chiasso and Milan, then the only one in Italy. Excusably, he screamed like a stuck pig, while Ashley and I maintained English stiff upper lips, thus happily displaying the difference between the national temperaments, the Italian one in my view being preferable. It emerged that Rolls had fitted the wrong size tyres, a remark from which I hope the *Statute of Limitations* will protect me if my recollection is faulty.

For our Christmas charades, the group I was in had to do the Abominable Snowman: A-bomb, inn, Abel, snow, man. The Gold Coast attache and I wore pilots' helmets and zoomed around dropping an A-bomb with great gusto. I persuaded him to wear a white moustache while I wore



*Grand ball at the Palazzo Barberini, Rome, December 1955
My first-ever excursion in white tie and tails — shades of **Top Hat!***

a black one, which he did with good humour. The Head of Chancery told me later that he would not have dared to suggest it, but by then I knew my man.

Rome, 2 January 1956

*The big event of last week was my first incursion into film acting. Wait with bated breath next autumn for a film called **London calling North Pole**, starring Dawn Addams and J. Mason, though we don't actually appear together. My big scene, about a minute long, is as a British officer in charge of a firing-squad. The film company asked the Embassy for someone to go along to do it, so I did. I was dressed up in an authentic uniform and made*

up, and everything. Some shots from the making of the film are appearing on Italian TV tomorrow evening. M is madly jealous of course, but I shall try to find her a small part in one of my future films.

The film never saw the light of day. I had to satisfy myself with my career, and Dawn Addams no doubt with being Princess Massimo.

Rome, 8 January 1956

We had a pleasant New Year. I am depressed to say that we have got to organise another Welfare Committee dance in February—a ghastly bore, and the sort of thing I hate doing—but I am pretty well ordered to do it again. The only consolation of doing the organising is that one can stop the thing from being too frightfully hearty and complicated.

I had a moderately tedious job on Saturday morning rescuing Dr Summerskill from the airport and looking after her for a few hours before she caught her onward connection. She is pretty much of a tough, and unpleasant in the particular way MPs always are, but apart from that inevitable professional blemish, much better than I had expected. She was much endeared to me because she has a son of 28 who is at the Commercial Bar, and fortunately her conviction that he is going to make thousands and then have a brilliant political career saved her from too dangerous a jealousy of my obviously much higher standard of life than his.

Earlier in the week, I had to cope with one of our Parliamentary Under-Secretaries, who was even more unpleasant in the other way MPs are. In my experience, of I suppose about 50 MPs, only the very nicest Tories are nicer than the nastiest Socialists, individually, and no Tory of ministerial rank ever gets near a similar Socialist for niceness.

Organising Christmas parties and dances was a traditional responsibility of the Private Secretary. I remember promising myself that when I had a Private Secretary, I would see that the tradition was strictly observed. Several gentlemen can testify that I kept my word.

I wonder how many people today remember Dr Edith Summerskill. She was a fairly unpopular Minister of Health in Britain, being an assertive lady, though not disliked, as was another female ministerial contemporary throughout the Foreign Service for her habit of trying to treat us like servants, and for turning on tears at the drop of a hat, in the hope that it would melt our male hearts.

A further highlight of this period was a quite extraordinary encounter. Our bath waste pipe was blocked, so we dutifully called a plumber, who found an eel, 6 or 7 inches long, in the pipe. We can only suppose that it

came in as a baby, could find no way out, and just grew and grew, feeding on our nourishing waste until it died.

Rome, Good Friday 1956

We now know our fate—Warsaw. We have to be there in August, so will probably leave here at the end of June, have some leave in England and then go by ship via Danzig probably. It is horrid to think of leaving here, but Warsaw is a very fair posting after Rome, and we can't grumble. I shall be in the Chancery again—No 2 to a Counsellor Head of Chancery. It is a fairly restricted post, naturally enough, being Iron Curtain, but there are no travel restrictions and you aren't followed about much. Since all contact with the outside world is through a weekly RAF plane, it means that M will be able to get free trips to England on it from time to time, and we shall both occasionally be able to get to Berlin.

I am writing these comments on Good Friday 1996, 40 years later! Looking back on my apprenticeship in Rome under Ashley Clarke, I am struck by two things: how the confident young captain of only three years before became an anxious young man seeking to do only what his master wanted; and second, how my marriage after seven months in Rome transformed not only my life but the attitude of everyone else towards me.

Pallanza, 22 April 1956

I had quite a good trip with H.E.—two days in Milan, at the Trade Fair there and then two days in Turin to attend the opening of the Motor Show. We had in tow Toby Low, the Minister of State at the Board of Trade, who was fortunately a good type, so we all enjoyed ourselves more than might have been the case. Low was very civilised for a Tory MP—he is the Member for Blackpool North and was a brigadier during the war at the age of 30, Chief of Staff of one of the corps in the Italian campaign. He made some quite good speeches in a Tory sort of way, and generally seemed to me the least objectionable Tory Minister I have come across so far, with the exception of Lennox-Boyd.

Rome, 1 July 1956

The great news this week is that we have sold the car. I got a very good price for it from a girl who has newly arrived at the Embassy and doesn't know the state of the market. I feel a bit conscience-stricken because she has paid a good deal more for it than I would have, but at least the dear thing is in very good condition, except possibly for the engine, which has got a bit of a knock, but she won't be able to hear it and therefore won't worry about it as I did.

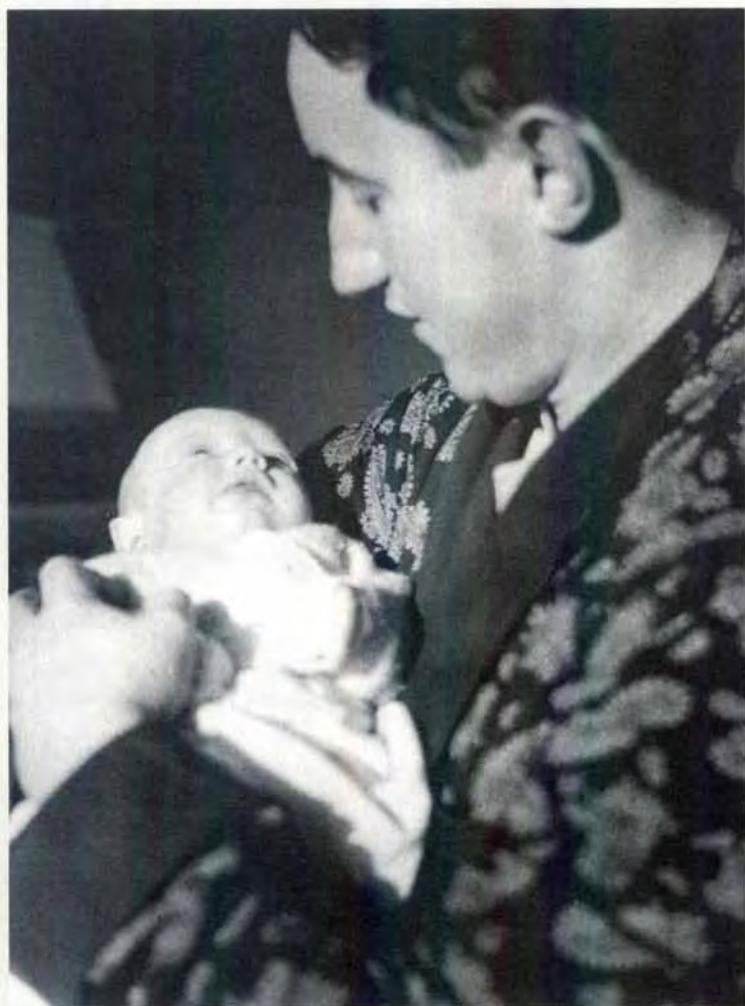
So next week we bid a sad farewell, and set off for England. We shall have two first-class sleepers which seems very extravagant for two people and a dog.

My conscience about the car was in due course assuaged. Four years later, I saw the self-same car, with its original UK number plates, sitting in the Foreign Office courtyard. I was delighted and surprised, but did not hang around to congratulate the owner, if it indeed was the girl to whom I had originally sold it.

Rome, 7 July 1956

This is the last letter that you will be getting from Rome. I am writing it on the terrace under our umbrella, while the packers raid the flat for all our possessions. Tonight we move into Martin's flat, and hope for a few quiet nights. Our own farewell parties were very successful, and not too ruinously expensive, considering we had about 120 people. We had a wonderful farewell party at the Residence swimming pool yesterday—20 guests chosen by us. On Tuesday evening a colleague is giving us a final party at which all the Embassy will be, and then at 13.30 on Wednesday we climb aboard the train, with two first-class sleepers all the way to Calais. It is quite the most expensive method of travel in the world, I should think. We get to London, all being well, at 19.50 on Thursday, and shall hope to ring you up that evening.

I recall the train journey as being trouble-free, and indeed pleasanter than the trip from Venice to London which, 40 years later, we took on the much-vaunted Orient Express.



Doting father with one-month-old Caroline, Warsaw, 1958



WARSAW August 1956–April 1959

Warsaw, 19 August 1956

Many thanks for the letter which was waiting to welcome us to our new home.

Our journey to Berlin was entirely easy, and we much enjoyed our day's rest there. It is a remarkable city, and shows one very clearly the tremendous gulf in living standards between the two sides of the Curtain.

Our journey from Berlin to Warsaw last Wednesday, which we awaited with some trepidation, was accomplished with great ease—we got here by 5.30pm after a 400-mile trip, during which the car behaved perfectly. Our only moments of anxiety were at the East German frontier where the Russians showed a slight inclination to be awkward, and on the road from Poznan to Warsaw when we ran over a chicken which changed its mind in the middle of the road.

We got here to find two of the Embassy wives busy in the flat tidying up, which was a heartening sight. The flat itself is pleasanter than we had been led to expect, and it has adequate though shabby furniture. We are in a tree-lined road on the outskirts of the city, with a ploughed field at one end, and no traffic, so that Flip can run about all day, both in the garden and in the road.

Warsaw itself is unbelievably shabby, with shocking roads and a generally unrelieved air of grim utility. The people are rather better dressed than I had expected but the gloomy weight of the regime is to be felt everywhere. However, we are told that the terror of a year ago has been lifted, and people no longer go in fear of arbitrary arrest and imprisonment without any sort of trial. Consequently they are much more outspoken than they dared to be before. We ourselves have not yet, to our knowledge, been followed.

We have a nice and apparently willing maid called Franczeska, with whom we at present communicate by means of her 20 words of Italian, our German and our Polish phrase-book. I am starting Polish lessons this week, and meanwhile the maid says that I have a good accent!

We haven't yet met many of our colleagues socially, though M is going to a tea-party on Tuesday to meet the Embassy wives. My work is going to be much more like the Foreign Office than Rome, mostly sitting at a desk, but there is apparently nothing else to do here except work.

The Ambassador departed as we arrived, amid universal relief, and the new one is due from Denmark on 9 October. Meanwhile the Chargé d'Affaires is the Counsellor and Head of Chancery.

Could you very kindly send us, through the bag, a carpet-sweeper? If it is to come through the bag, it will have to be despatched without the handle, which we shall hope to be able to improvise here.

I must stop now and try to mend the bathroom geyser because of a leak—a broom now has to be called into service when we want to light it.

Our first impressions are more optimistic than we had expected and we see no reason why we should not settle down easily and happily.

This letter told it like it was more so than many which followed. As to our journey, I now shudder at the sang froid with which we—a junior diplomat, wife and poodle—set off for the long journey from Berlin to Warsaw. The great protocol problem was that we had to get from East Germany into Poland without permitting the frontier guards to put any sign, like an exit stamp, in our passports because, for us, East Germany did not exist. It was made clear to me that failure in this would be a capital offence. I remember finessing it all right, though I still suspect that the guards knew I had a problem, and decided to let me off, perhaps because Margaret looked pleadingly at them. But we then had a long journey on deserted roads, except for the occasional horse and cart, completely dependent on the reliability of our car, with no hope of succour if we broke down. Forty years on, I would have many more forebodings, but that is often the case with the benefit of hindsight.

To find Embassy wives cleaning the flat when we arrived pointed immediately to the difference between a big post like Rome, with all sorts of outside interests, and a smaller one like Warsaw, where the staff survived on keeping together, meeting after work in the little bar in the Embassy, and relying on the weekly bag to bring urgent supplies from loving relatives. Thus our letters became shopping lists, which my mother unflinchingly met, helped by my father's superb packing skills.

Shabbiness was unavoidable, but even so we were hugely better off than the Polish friends whom we gradually got to know. My predecessor became famous by reporting to the Administration that the only piece of 'representative furniture' in our flat was a bottle-opener screwed to the top of the dressing table in his (later our) bedroom. In the Foreign Service, one's diplomatic rank was usually reflected by the standard of one's furniture—the higher the rank, the grander the furniture!

Our optimistic first impressions of life in Warsaw were confirmed. Despite various vicissitudes, including parenthood, my forecast was correct: we did enjoy our time there.

Warsaw, 2 September 1956

The Chargé d'Affaires has gone away for the weekend, leaving me in charge of the Embassy, so I have been hoping war will break out or something so that I can send lots of dramatic telegrams. As a matter of fact we are celebrating by my not going into the Embassy on Sunday morning, for the first time since we got here, and we are going off in a few minutes for a picnic. We are taking a very good portable radio which I have on loan from the Embassy to enable me to monitor BBC transmissions whenever we go out. The reason is that jammers which obliterate broadcasts inside Warsaw only have a fairly small range so that outside the city it is often possible to hear the London broadcasts in Polish quite clearly, and it is useful for the BBC to know about it.

Later

We are now back from the picnic. We went about 30 miles out and lunched in a wood all by ourselves except for a million insects. Insects are unfortunately the thing in Poland, especially fleas—I have already suffered quite badly, but am better now that I scatter DDT over my clothes each morning.

We went for a walk afterwards in a meadow by the Vistula, and discovered the most enormous hare I have ever seen. Unfortunately Flip was elsewhere, so missed seeing her first hare ever, but we made her smell where the hare had been lying and she nearly went mad. We are all now having baths to wash the insects out of us. It has been nice to get out of Warsaw, however, and the weather has been the nicest since we got here.

The picnic was notable because in our early days in Warsaw the UB, the secret police, had not yet homed in on us. Later, I was followed everywhere by an ancient Warszawa, the Polish copy of the Russian equivalent. It was clumsy and slow, and we knew that the UB, like other secret police behind the Curtain, mourned the loss of their excellent, fast Citroens, which had been judged ideologically unacceptable. Anyhow, on subsequent picnics our Warszawa escort was always parked within sight of us. They tried to pretend that they did not exist, so it was no fun to tease them by offering them coffee or a sandwich.

We took the radio because one of my tasks was to monitor the success or otherwise of the Poles in jamming the BBC Polish service. At home I had to record the outcome on a primitive tape-recorder early each morning, and return the tapes, which generally contained only a jamming noise, to London.

Warsaw, 9 September 1956

There is a lot to do this week, as the so-called Polish Parliament is having one of its infrequent sessions. I was in the office all this morning drafting despatches. It is a change from Rome, because here all the political reporting without exception is done by me. You can imagine how much I know about Poland.

I spent yesterday afternoon under the car, trying without conspicuous success to adjust the brakes. They seem specially made so that only a Ford dealer with special tools can get at them. I also tried some experiments with the ignition to try and cope with the effect of the poor petrol which we get here. It is British army petrol specially flown in, and it is miles better than Polish petrol, but even so it isn't too good; on the other hand, it costs us only ten pence a gallon.

Next week I am going away for a couple of days with the Assistant Air Attache for a tour of the north to see what there is to be seen. We shall be going in his official car which has seats that let down to form beds, so we don't have to bother about a tent. It should be very interesting and I am looking forward to it. I am sorry not to be able to take M but I hope that when I have seen what the form is I may be able to do the odd future trip with her as co-driver. We have to leave in the middle of the night without telling anybody beforehand, otherwise our maids would tell the police and we would be followed.

It is salutary to remember that even our petrol had to be flown in, though I don't recall why. Later on, when the weekly RAF flights were withdrawn, we cannot have loaded petrol onto KLM Airlines. Perhaps we found that the Polish petrol was safe to use after all. A slight example of the then prevailing paranoia! Another example: my wife sketched some western shoe designs for a visiting Soviet Professor to take home to his wife, and he subsequently sent us a kilo tin of caviar. My request to the Foreign Office to be allowed to keep it was refused, by which time we had already consumed it.

Warsaw, 16 September 1956

I had a very interesting two-day outing during which I saw most of northern Poland, besides which Warsaw looks like Paris. We covered 900 miles in 2½ days, so it wasn't really a joy-ride, and I was jolly glad that we were using one of the Embassy's Vanguard cars instead of our car, as roads outside the main arteries are more or less just tracks, and we gave the car some fearful punishment. We slept in the car and did our cooking on a petrol stove. It was good to get out a bit, especially in what used to be East Prussia, where there

are some lovely lakes and forests. We also visited Danzig [now Gdansk] and Gdynia, which aren't bad cities. We had good weather, which was lucky as it is really extremely cold and horrid today in Warsaw. It will take me some hard work to catch up on the two days' work I have missed, but on the whole it was worth it.

The trip with the Air Attache was for him routine. It was what Service Attaches did behind the Curtain, and indeed all that there was for them to do. It consisted of travelling around the country to look at 'targets' suggested by the now long-defunct Joint Intelligence Bureau, trying to identify anything which might help to fill in our picture of the Soviet Bloc economy. It was known in the trade as 'coke-oven counting', not that most of the participants would have known a coke-oven from a blast furnace, through binoculars at long distance. This was the only such trip I undertook, but it was an enjoyable little holiday with a congenial companion. I fear that the Attaches varied in the seriousness with which they approached their tasks.

Warsaw, 17 September 1956

A rather sad postscript to say that poor M, who we had gathered was going to present you with a grandchild, had a miscarriage on Sunday evening and had to be taken off to hospital. Happily however she is now all right, and is coming home tomorrow, though naturally she will have to spend a few days in bed. Our nice doctor, in whom we both have much confidence, tells us that it was just bad luck (she was about two months pregnant, which I understand is quite a tricky moment) and that there is nothing to make one suppose that she won't have better luck next time. When she is better, we will have her looked over to make sure.

This is a sad disappointment, but only, we hope, a temporary one, and the great thing is that M is OK. She has been very good about it, bless her, though naturally it was rather frightening at the time for us both; much better that it should have happened now than later, anyhow. Please don't worry, as it has now all happened and is over.

P.S. [18 September] M is now home and in good spirits. She says 3 yards of my usual underpant elastic, please.

This brief note, designed to allay anxiety, does little justice to the trauma we both experienced. Remember we were newly-weds who were ignorant of such things as miscarriages. Of course, we very soon discovered that almost every wife of our acquaintance had had one. But at the time it was the end of the world.

M had a comprehensive haemorrhage on the Sunday evening, and I shall never forget her lying there, pale, frightened and bewildered, with my face no doubt mirroring hers. The nice Polish embassy doctor came straight round, and summoned an ambulance, which took M to the local public hospital.

The hospital was appalling—dirty, crowded and disorganised. Happily, M was quickly given a curette and then put in a bed in a corridor. In the morning, I found her, understandably, in deep misery and discomfort. My first task was to take her some reasonable food and drink, which I did, and then to get her home, which I also did that evening. M bore up extremely and typically well, though it was not for me, then or now, to speculate on the effect of the miscarriage on her physically or mentally. But she seemed to recover quickly, bless her, thus relieving at least some of my trauma, if not her own.

We emerged sadder and wiser, conscious that M had received privileged treatment by local standards, perhaps almost as good as a Party member would have got. And we were certainly better equipped to face the further miscarriages which were ahead.

Warsaw, 14 October 1956

We have just got back from our weekend in Krakow, which we found very interesting and a nice change from Warsaw. We had been told that it would be very cold, so M took her fur coat, but in fact it was warmer than Warsaw. Nonetheless M had the satisfaction of christening her coat, which certainly looked very nice. On the way back today we called at the monastery of Czestochowa, which is the religious centre of Poland, being the home of the Black Madonna. Since I had some books to deliver to one of the monks, we were taken round the whole place, which was seething with the crowds that go there every Sunday, partly out of religious fervour and partly to show the regime what they think of it.

Yesterday we went to visit the Youth Palace at a place called Stalinogrod (its real name is Katowice) and were shown round there. It was surprising how little reference there was to communism, under the new ways of thinking, and at one stage they actually apologised because there was a poster about Russia left over from the old days.

It was nice to see southern Poland, which is quite different from the dull plain in which we live here. There are actually hills and valleys and no ruins. The main roads are much better surfaced than we had been led to believe, though they are narrow, but that doesn't matter as there is no other traffic worth speaking of. The result is that one can average 50 miles an hour with safety and ease.

Dick Joseph is coming to supper tonight so that I can talk to him about the latest news of the Poznan trials. I have to write a despatch tomorrow summing up what they are all about, and up to the present I haven't the faintest idea what I am going to say. This week is going to be a stinker anyway because the Central Committee of the Party is having one of its Plenum sessions—the first since I got here—they always give a pointer to what is happening. On this occasion I imagine that they are going to decide which way to fiddle the elections which are to take place in December.

We enjoyed our trip to Krakow, after the gloomy ambience of Warsaw. The hotel there was the scene of an incident which I recall with pleasure. We used to travel with one of those old Sparklet siphons, which one activated by screwing in a bomb to provide the fizz. While we were unpacking, I asked my wife if she had remembered the bombs. In those days, we could be certain that our room would be bugged, and we have always wondered whether my enquiry had caused consternation.

Bugging was part of our lives. Our homes were frequently swept by technicians. Nothing was ever found in our flat, though that does not mean that there was nothing there. But I remember with satisfaction marching into the Ambassador's office bearing 14 microphones pulled out of the bedroom and living room of one of the Service Attaches.

Surveillance of every sort became part of our lives. Most of the husbands experienced, if a wife was away, having a blonde arrive of an evening at the front door, in the hope of obtaining some blackmail opportunity. We knew that our maids, and especially the Polish barmaid in our Embassy club, were under orders to report on us. Happily, although there had been an earlier minor episode, during my time in Warsaw no-one succumbed to blandishments or threats from our hosts.

The student demonstrations in Poznan in July 1956, mild by western standards, were unprecedented in Stalinist experience, but could not be concealed because they were carefully timed to take place during the Poznan International Fair, when many western visitors were in town. They subsequently proved to be the catalyst for the student demonstrations in Budapest on 23 October 1956, setting off the tragic Hungarian Rebellion, which coincided with the Polish toppling of the Stalinist regime, and with Suez. Had I known this at the time, my very tentative report on the trials in Poznan would have had rather more bite!

Though I wrote disparagingly of the Plenum in my letter, it turned out to be the historic meeting of the Party Central Committee which reinstated Wladyslaw Gomulka as First Secretary and consequently the ruler of Poland, subject of course to Soviet wishes. This produced tremendous

euphoria, we now know to have been as premature as it was eventually ill-judged, as the years caused Gomulka to clamp down in the same way as had his Stalinist predecessors. But for the moment all was gas and gaiters. Happy crowds filled the streets—one participant obligingly tearing down the street sign *Aleja Stalina*, which was fixed to our Embassy railings. I was able to retrieve it and retain it as a trophy. Our street was given back its proper name: *Aleja Ujazdowskie*, the Road to the City.

Warsaw, 29 October 1956

We are still in the midst of a great pile of work occasioned by the aftermath of our crisis, though we are very glad not to be in Hungary at the moment.

To add to all our work, we have had a very social week culminating on Saturday when in the morning we had to dress up in uniform to go along with the Ambassador when he presented his credentials [to the President]. The ceremony was well organised and went off without a hitch.

On Saturday evening we went to a fancy dress party, which was also highly successful. We looked wonderful [as Alice and the Mad Hatter] and should have won a prize, but there's no justice. Tonight we are going to a Turkish reception and then a Polish journalist is taking us to dinner at the Press Club, which will be interesting.

There is a gap of a fortnight between letters here, because in the intervening days we had the crises of Gomulka's return to power and Khrushchev's visit, to threaten him with armed intervention. For two days, around 19 and 20 October, we did not know whether the tanks would rumble into Warsaw, as they did a fortnight later into Budapest. Had they done so, the carnage would certainly have been greater. But thankfully Gomulka persuaded a reluctant Khrushchev that Poland would remain a reliable ally, and equally of the consequences of intervention. So Khrushchev departed, the Politburo was remodelled in Gomulka's image, the Soviet tanks (which our Military Attache had been clandestinely tracking—they came within 20 miles of Warsaw) returned to their base in Silesia. The crisis had passed, though it came near to returning when the Soviet tanks entered Budapest two weeks later. The hordes of western journalists vacated my office, where they had camped out during the crisis. Thankfully, to their deep shame, the Poles for the first time in their history had let their heads rule their hearts. They said: 'The Hungarians behaved like Poles, the Poles behaved like Czechs, and the Czechs behaved like swine.'

The late Sir Eric Berthoud was Ambassador throughout our time in Poland. Many, perhaps the majority, of his staff and others found him difficult:

crotchety, unreasonable and quick to get hold of the wrong end of the stick. I have not mentioned many by name in these comments, but I name Eric because, despite what others thought, I got on with him very well. He gave me my head, in circumstances of opportunity rare for a Second Secretary. At our farewell dinner, I am glad to recall that I thanked him before my colleagues for this, predicting, correctly as it turned out, that I should never have similar scope again. I said I was grateful, and I remain so.

Warsaw, 7 November 1956

The news this week [of the Suez crisis] has been so dreadful that I have almost envied A. Nutting his money, which enables him to resign. The news this morning is a bit better, but I don't think that we shall really be able to talk again until we have got rid of you know who, whom I blame for this ghastly mess—and I don't mean Nasser. The news from Hungary has been tragic too, and we were very frightened here last Friday and Saturday because we thought that the same thing was going to happen here. However now the immediate danger seems to be past, though the Poles are still holding their breath.

The winter is now on its way. It freezes every night and the car gets quite cold when we are out to dinner. Fortunately the days are crisp and sunny, though we had our first snowfall last week.

It is interesting that I was more concerned about Suez than Hungary, which was if anything an even greater crime, and nearer our door. But, like a great many others, and universally in the Foreign Service, I was deeply shocked by the Suez adventure. I asked the Ambassador whether it would be proper to resign. He said no, because no-one would notice, not even if he resigned, which he said he was also tempted to do. The one consolation was that only two people in the Foreign Office had known what was afoot.

I do not know how close Khrushchev came to trying his luck, by returning with his tanks to Poland, as he did in Hungary, where, when all had seemed settled, he got away with it because of the fortunate diversion of Suez.

Warsaw, 16 December 1956

There is just a chance that we may be able to go to Berlin for Christmas. The Embassy will be closed from Monday midday to Thursday morning, so H.E. has more or less ordered us to get away from the country for a few days' change. Personally I love it here but it is true that after a few months one does long for a change of scene, and it would do M a lot of good too. Although we can't really afford it, we shall go if we can arrange visas etc in time. A RAF

plane leaves here on 22 December, so we may be able to get a free ride to Berlin, though we shall have to come back by train.

Anyhow, it was civil of H.E. to offer it to us. He seems improved since he got back from London—perhaps the Queen told him that he had got to be nice to us. The Counsellor departed on leave on Friday, so I am now the boss—in due course I shall get a bit of extra money for it.

As usual every evening next week is booked up, but for once we are going out twice as guests of Poles, which makes a change from the Diplomatic Corps or entertaining at home. I think the rush may die down a little after the New Year. I hope so, as with the [local] elections on 20 January we shall be pretty busy. I shall have to think out a complicated scheme whereby we can cover as many polling-stations as possible to see how fair the elections seem.

I am becoming quite an expert on Polish politics and my despatch on the electoral law is becoming quite a classic (modesty!) and people from other missions and foreign journalists come to ask to borrow it. I eat sleep and drink politics here, with an occasional attempt at economics for a change. Both are run completely on 'through the looking-glass' lines.

We did get to Berlin for five days over Christmas, and shall never forget the bright lights of the Kurfurstendam after the drabness of Warsaw. Even 40 years later the recollection of delighted surprise remains—and we had been in Warsaw only six months. But of course I would a million times rather have been in Warsaw at that time than in boring Berlin.

We led a fairly frantic social life in Warsaw. Because there was little else to do, diplomats danced and drank until dawn. I look back in amazement at our stamina. Perhaps the intense cold helped, as did certainly the huge amounts of vodka we consumed. M and I were more fortunate than nearly all of our colleagues because Polish friends occasionally invited us into their homes. I do not know what sacrifices they may have had to make to provide wonderful Polish food, with of course gallons of vodka, but their parties were liable to go on forever. One started at lunchtime on a Friday and dispersed on Sunday evening, by which time I was seeing little dogs in the corner. But up with the lark and off to work on Monday morning.

My conceited comment about my report on the mechanics of Polish elections was I think justified. The resident correspondent of the New York Times took my despatch home with him to read in bed. Briefly, there was only a single list of candidates, with the Party's favoured candidates in order of priority at the head of the list. Of course no voter would be so bold as to vote for someone lower down the list, but (and this was the innovation) they were permitted to meddle with the order in which the Party's favourite sons were listed—such an indication of preference had

not been allowed in Poland since before the war. The trick for us was to discover how many such preferences had been exercised. In the outcome, there were some, but not many.

Warsaw, 13 January 1957

Last week we had a couple of the old aristocracy to dinner—she, besides being absolutely sweet, a former Princess. They have both reconciled themselves to the new ways and, while staying out of politics, get along all right as they are both artists, and therefore well thought-of by the regime. She was so terribly touched by the sight of the candles on our table because they reminded her of the ‘old days’. Her husband was more appreciative of the liqueurs, and nearly finished a bottle of Drambuie on his own. They were a nice change from some of the communists we occasionally have to cope with. On the whole, however, nearly all the Poles we entertain we like very much.

Warsaw, 22 January 1957

I am writing this letter on Tuesday, not Sunday as usual, because on Sunday I was out all day visiting polling-stations. I had to stop at 4pm, because I was picked up by the UB and I didn't like to embarrass the polling-station officials by walking in followed by the secret police. I tried hard to lose them but they were a very clever lot and I couldn't shake them. But it was very interesting to visit the stations before that and watch all the people vote the straight ticket, without deletions, as they had been told to do. It was disappointing in a way that they should have been so uniform, in the freest elections ever held behind the Iron Curtain (though not all that free), but the result is certainly the best thing from every point of view. If the voting against the Party candidates had been heavy (as it would have been had other things been equal), the consequences would have been disastrous.

*I hope that the **Guardian** has been explaining the way in which the elections have been held—the single list with alternative candidates. Guy Hadley has been good on the BBC, and also Pelczynski in the **Economist**. I have been swamped all week by visiting journalists, all wanting a ‘fill-in’ on the situation. We had lunch out today with Will Forest of the **News Chronicle** and Nick Carroll of the **Sunday Times**.*

*A great advantage of this post—apart from it being one of the most interesting in the world—is that we don't get pestered by politicians, only by journalists, who are on the whole less unpleasant. The pleasantest of the current bunch is the bloke from the **Express** (largely because of his charming French wife), but he is so stupid it's hardly true.*

The account in the letter about the elections is really all that need be said. Once again, thank God, the Poles had behaved like Czechs.

Warsaw, 23 April 1957

After an anxious week, I am delighted to report that the news is better. M went to see Professor Bulski this afternoon, and he says that the baby is apparently still all right, and that M should be also, provided that she can get through the next month. He doesn't want to see her for a month, which sounds good, although she has to go on having injections and taking things very easily. The fact that M is under this Polish specialist means that she will be able to have the baby here too, which we are both very pleased about.

M's decision to have the baby in Warsaw was regarded as a milestone. Previously wives had left for Berlin or London six weeks before the due date, it being felt that Polish facilities could not be trusted. She elected to stay, and have the baby in a nursing home run by nuns, where Dr Bulski and his wife sent their patients. We believe that our daughter was the first British baby to be born in Warsaw since the war.

The pregnancy gave rise to a marvellous example of how language is not always a sure guarantee of effective communication. When M thought she might be pregnant, she went along to the local clinic, where the nice nurse spoke about as much English as M spoke Polish. She explained that they needed a specimen of M's urine to inject into a female rabbit, this being a pregnancy test in those days. So M duly returned the next day with her specimen in a brown paper bag. The nurse said: 'Dobrze, kochanie, ale gdzie króliczka?' ('That's fine, darling, but where's the rabbit?') It had never occurred to her that M would not know that she had to provide the rabbit! M went off to the market to purchase a female rabbit, and the test was happily positive.

Warsaw, 5 June 1957

We have had a fairly busy social week and are lucky to be at home this evening. We have an MP called Tilney and his wife coming to dinner later in the week, and the usual crowd of Poles—journalists, deputies, etc. I had the President of the Journalists Association to lunch today, and with any luck as a result I think I am going to be made a member of the Press Club. I am keen on this partly because no other foreign diplomat has ever been elected before, but chiefly because the food there is the best in Warsaw and it will be nice to have somewhere to go out for meals occasionally.

I held a unique position in Warsaw at this time. Probably because I was suitably junior, and from a suitable embassy, and was known to mix and entertain widely, Poles of all complexions seemed to decide that if they wanted to get a piece of information, or an opinion, out to the West, I was

a suitable and reliable channel. They assumed, correctly, that what I was told I would pass on to western journalists in confidence, or to visitors, or even to the Foreign Office if hard pressed. In particular, I had a channel to the BBC Polish Service by means of a weekly letter, which the Ambassador allowed me to send, giving them odds and ends of gossip which they would then broadcast. This had the object of showing Polish listeners that the Polish Service was really on the ball, and my informants that I was a valid channel.

In addition, of course my Polish contacts enjoyed coming to M's delicious lunches in our flat. My election to the Press Club was, I think, regarded by its members as a proper recognition of my privileged position, and I was made very welcome there. I certainly revelled in taking visitors there as a member.

My standing in Warsaw, among my diplomatic colleagues as well as Poles, contributed to what was in retrospect the most fruitful year of my career.

Warsaw, 18 June 1957

We have had a gruelling week. On Thursday was the Queen's Birthday party, which went off very well, with lots of Poles. Afterwards I had to assist H.E. to take the Inspectors and a couple of MPs out to dinner and then on to a nightclub. H.E. was highly pleased as I was able to organise things, knowing my way around, and took them to typical and highly expensive joints, which showed the Inspectors how dear everything is.

*Yesterday we had a reception for the Oliviers and the **Titus Andronicus** company. M and I had quite a talk with the Oliviers, who are chums of the Clarkes. She is very like Virginia—a mass of nerves, but pretty and charming. He is very pleasant and not like an actor. Tonight is the first night but we decided to wait until tomorrow when we can have a box and take some friends, and bring them back to supper here afterwards.*

We have had a ghastly onrush of MPs during the last week—one nice, one passable, and three ghastlies. MPs really do make one despair of the human race.

The Inspectors are teams from the Foreign Office who visit embassies to examine organisation, staff levels, allowances, etc. The Ambassador was well pleased to have given a successful 'National Day' party and followed it up by taking them to an extremely expensive meal—I had made sure it was the most expensive in Warsaw—to show how much our allowances needed to be raised.

Titus Andronicus was a roaring success, offering Warsaw audiences a performance of a standard rarely seen before. God bless the British Council. Despite attempts in earlier years by the *Daily Express* to damage it, I have always held the highest opinion of the Council. My comments on the Oliviers must take a prize for being patronising, even by my standards.

I have censored my letter, cutting out the names of the MPs. But one of the nice things about serving overseas in the last few decades has been the enormous improvement in the behaviour of MPs when abroad. In the 1950s their main preoccupation all too often was to drink themselves silly and offensive, and to embarrass the embassies charged with looking after them. Over the years, much has changed and, with exceptions, it is now a pleasure to welcome MPs. The same is not yet altogether true of Ministers, to whom the rule generally applies: the more junior, the more demanding and overmighty.

Warsaw, 8 October 1957

I hope you haven't been too worried by the wholly exaggerated BBC and Times reports of the incidents here during the last week. I was around at all the demonstrations, and though I had to move briskly at times to avoid the police they were not violent by continental standards, and certainly there was never anything to justify the importance attached to the incidents in the British press. There was never any likelihood that they would get out of hand. Poor M, sitting at home listening to the fireworks (literally) was much more disturbed than I, who could see them being set off. The trouble was that both the BBC and the Times had temporary correspondents here who wouldn't know a riot from an H-bomb explosion, and both rather panicked.

Tomorrow we are giving a literary dinner party including the President of the Polish Writers Union, Anton Slonimski. It will probably be a bit above our heads but these writers know a lot of gossip, and we can always hand round more drinks if it gets too highbrow.

I went into some soothing detail in my letter about the 'disturbances' because the British press had gone to town about some student demonstrations which were not much more than high spirits. I joined the demonstrators, calculating that I could run as fast as they if the riot police decided to charge. When they did, it was no occasion for brandishing my diplomatic identity card, and I turned and fled with the rest. Unfortunately, as I ran the elastic on my underpants broke, hobbling me. I had to take quick refuge in a nearby doorway, and crouched there while first the demonstrators and then the riot police surged past me. When all was quiet, I emerged and went home.

The literary dinner, as I recall, went all right. What I did not explain in my letter was that the Writers Union was a front, found in all communist countries, which gave writer members the chance to show solidarity with the regime and thus stay out of prison. So our guests were not entirely respectable, particularly Mr Slonimski, who is one of those portrayed as a stooge in Czeslaw Milosz's book *The Captive Mind*. Milosz subsequently earned fame, and a Nobel Prize for literature, as a poet and novelist, but these essays—*à clef* about Poland after the war—are as good as anything he ever wrote. My treasured copy was stolen from me many years ago, but I still remember who the characters were.

In December 1956 I wrote to my mother that I slept, ate and drank politics, with a little economics thrown in from time to time. In my letters from November 1957 to our departure in April 1959 all this changed. One would have thought that throughout those 18 months nothing happened in Poland. It is true that much less did than in the previous 15 months. But the real reason was that on 18 November 1957 our daughter, Caroline Jane, was born, and thereafter my weekly letters are full of nothing else but more or less clucky accounts by an infatuated father of his daughter's progress. These were no doubt welcome to my mother, but are quite unsuitable for reproduction to a wider audience. So the letters after November 1957 are less numerous than those before, and I have severely limited the number of baby anecdotes. My son in due course received less adoration. But there is a saying in our family: 'We hold this now a fact unmistakable, the second baby is much less breakable'.

Warsaw, 20 November 1957

It was lovely to be able to tell you the good news on Monday morning. Mum and baby continue to do very well, and Caroline Jane evidently absorbed 20 grammes of something from her Mum today, so everybody is very pleased with everything.

Miss Mason almost took us by surprise. On Saturday evening the doctor told M that another week would be the form. On Sunday evening we went to the cinema, and then to bed. At about 2.30am M began to feel rather strong and regular pains, so we telephoned the doctor and moved round to the clinic at about 3am. I stayed with M until 6am, and then went off in the car to fetch the doctor and the paediatrician. At 7.30am C.J. was born, and the paediatrician took an immediate blood test, which showed that fortunately our conflicting blood groups had not caused any damage.

Caroline is very like M, with her nose and mouth and bright bright blue eyes, tiny flat ears (!) and a little mouseyish hair. She has all her fingers and toes, and uses the former to grip my little finger very satisfactorily—and,

M swears, a full set of teeth, judging by the present considerable pain she causes when feeding.

M was naturally pretty exhausted, and had to have a few stitches, but recovered very quickly. She is now moving about, but we do not yet know when she will be allowed home. Fran [our Polish maid] is thrilled, and does not mind doing all C.J.'s nappies. I wonder how long this will last. Flip of course does not know what has happened. I have started her sleeping in our room now, as she will in any case have to be ejected from the nursery where she has been sleeping until now.

The clinic is good—clean, kind and efficient though rather old-fashioned. M has a room to herself and I can visit her whenever I like. It is jolly convenient being only 100 yards or so from our flat. I am writing this in M's room, and C.J. has just been down for her supper. I don't think she really knows who I am yet, though she raised her eyebrows very meaningfully when I talked to her.

We have at last found a shop in Wigmore St which sells sterilisers, and I have sent them an order. Could you very kindly send us four cotton white overalls, long-sleeve button down the front, for use by M and an eventual nurse?

Be sure that both Mum and baby are all right. Hope you like having a second grand-daughter in addition to Flip.

I was not of course present at the birth, that not yet being the thing in 1957. In addition, M did not want me, saying that when she was having a baby she was being inefficient, and she did not like me seeing her being inefficient. So my first sight of my daughter was in a nurse's arms, she saying: 'Pan ma córka' ('You have a daughter'). I think I felt more interested than overwhelmed with emotion. My concern was of course more with M. When the obstetrician took me to see her, M was moaning and I suggested that she should be given an anaesthetic, only to be told that she was in fact well under.

The request for cotton overalls was typical of the shower of demands we made in every letter for items to be sent through the bag. This was permitted as there was no other way to get supplies unobtainable in Warsaw. My mother, father and sister performed miracles in meeting our requests.

Warsaw, 28 January 1958

Life here is very hectic. We had a buffet for 12 people last Saturday before a dance at the Embassy, are having people to lunch or dinner almost every day this week, and on Saturday are probably going to a ball where we shall have to wear tails—the first time in Warsaw since the war. We shall spend Sunday

visiting polling-booths, as that is the day when the local elections are being held. We are also pretty hard-pushed in the office, having had a hard week tactfully convincing H.E. that his annual review of Poland would not do, and re-writing it without actually appearing to do so.

It is bitterly cold—about -5 degrees Fahrenheit. The flat is fortunately warm, but my office which has an open fire and no central heating is not quite so good. Whatever the temperature, Caroline is bunged outside for three hours in the morning and seems to survive all right. M is in excellent form, and even more beautiful than before Caroline (the opinion of friends, not only me). She must be about the most popular foreigner in Warsaw.

The ball was held to celebrate the re-opening of the restored Opera House in Warsaw, illustrating the determination of the citizens of Warsaw, even in the worst Stalinist days, to rebuild their city as it had been before it was destroyed. They had to put up with Stalinist monstrosities, such as the Palac Kultury, but they rebuilt the Old City (the Stary Miasto) most beautifully while we were there. The Opera House was restored splendidly.

The ball, a truly remarkable affair, with diplomats indeed turning out in white tie and tails, was the scene of a memorable incident. Flora Lewis, the celebrated journalist, was rightly awarded the prize for the best dress—a black and white crinoline—and with her husband, *New York Times* correspondent Sydney Gruson, got into the finals of the waltz competition. She was summoned on stage and, not seeing her husband, asked me to escort her. We were horrified to learn that, with another couple on the stage, we were to dance the finals of the competition. Waltzing is not my forte, so with Flora crying for her husband, we went through the motions, with me hiding behind Flora's crinoline. We came second, and Sydney, who had been observing us with relish, was most soundly rebuked by both Flora and M.

Warsaw, 28 July 1958

We had a very good journey back, limiting ourselves to about 200 miles a day, starting at 9am and getting in before 5pm. We spent the first night in a little hotel at the top of the Mandola Pass near Bolzano, where it was very cool and refreshing. The second day we drove over mountain roads to Villach, where we stayed at the same nice hotel as on the way out. They gave us a large suite and enormous bathroom for about £2. The third day, to Vienna, was marred by Zofia being very travel-sick, but we managed to buy her some pills which kept her well on the next day's journey through Czechoslovakia to Katowice.

We were much more expert in coping than on the outward journey, and got to a fine art the business of evening nappy washing and morning soup and

milk cooking for thermos's for C's lunch and supper. C behaved splendidly on the journey back. Her new folding push-chair was a boon, as it made her more mobile at picnics and for little walks. She slept so well at night that we were always able to leave her while we went out for a meal.

This letter is a reminder of travelling across fairly lonely bits of Europe with a small child and a Polish nanny, although Zofia would have been very useful as an interpreter, had frontier guards wanted to know why we were smuggling a Polish defector into Austria. But nobody turned a hair, and Zofia very clearly enjoyed all the new experiences. My most vivid memory is of transporting three adults, a baby and a dog, as well as four full jerricans on the roof-rack, in a car which by then was getting a bit worn down by Polish roads.

Zofia was like all her compatriots: to be Polish was the most important thing in the world. This is what has enabled them to survive over the centuries, living with no natural frontiers between the Germans and the Russians. It was what enabled Gomulka to stand up to Khrushchev; a dedicated communist, he was first a Pole. I once asked a Pole which people they hated most, the Germans or the Russians. He replied that although they hated the Germans, they were more afraid of the Russians. If the Nazis took someone, you could always find out what had happened to them. With the Russians, it was as though the victim had never existed.

It was interesting to discover how quickly the Stalinists disappeared from the scene. They became as rare as an Italian who had been a Fascist or who had not served in the resistance. One of the more difficult of our experiences was to have former Stalinists crying on our drawing-room sofa at their desperate shock and rage that they had been so deceived, as had now been revealed by Khrushchev at the Twentieth Soviet Congress. It was worse than losing religious faith.

There were exceptions. One day a young Polish girl called at the Chancery. She told me that she loathed everything I stood for, but her baby son was in desperate need of Vitamin C, and she had come to beg, she said to her shame, for some oranges. I gave her some bottles of the excellent concentrated orange juice which the National Health Service used to hand out, and which formed the base for the gin and orange drinks in the Embassy club. I hope her son survived. Born in that year, he would almost certainly have become a good capitalist.

A Postscript. The previous November, a personable young Third Secretary from the Soviet Embassy, speaking excellent English, had made a dead set at me, obviously on instructions. We got drunk together on a couple

of occasions, and he had a meal with us just before Christmas. On that occasion he alarmed me by confiding that he had told his Counsellor boss that he was beginning to think it was Soviet troops, not German, who had after all murdered most of the Polish Officer Corps in the forest of Katyn. The Russians of course, to everyone's disbelief, continued to blame the Germans, until finally, after the fall of the Soviet Union, they admitted the truth. I told George that I thought he should be very careful what he said on the matter, both to his boss and to me. Some time after Christmas I tried to contact George at the Soviet Embassy, only to be told that there was no-one there of that name.

Warsaw, 11 August 1958

Tomorrow we have four guests for dinner—the Indian Chargé and his wife and mother and our new doctor. Sunil—the Charge—caught a pike on Sunday and presented it to us, so Fran has cleaned it today and M is going to cook it in some special way for us tomorrow. I don't know what it is, but I know it takes a bottle of white wine to do it! An expensive gift the pike will be, as that sort of gift often is. When H.E. shot some duck and invited himself to eat one of them with us, it cost us more in the end than if we had provided everything ourselves.

*On Wednesday the summer holidays really come to an end as the Ambassador returns, and we shall have to get down to some hard work. When he is away we just report the things that interest us (generally me) and don't bother with anything else. We are having a big anti-German exercise at present, trying to put some sense into Her Majesty's Government's policy towards Germany (**confidential**, do not repeat). Less hopeless anyway than trying to do ditto re Middle East policy. I am really happier here at present where I find myself more or less in agreement with our policy, than in some post where our policy is demonstrably potty.*

A visitor this week was Fenner Brockway, who isn't by any means as ghastly as you would think, in fact rather nice considering he is an MP. Also Adlai Stevenson, who is a sweetie. They, plus a flaming row we are having with the BBC about their broadcasts on the Church in Poland, have kept us reasonably occupied, by which I mean that we all get home by 6pm and don't work on Sundays. That will all change with H.E.'s return, worse luck. No more of us all approving each other's despatches so that our own will go through—they will all again have to be tailored to fit H.E.'s (sometimes infuriating) prejudices. Thus is history made, ha ha.

The practice of kind people bringing us trophies for M to cook culminated in the Ambassador's gift of a hare he had caught, and a request that M produce a hare pate. She duly did, at the cost of buying twice as much

pork to make it as the hare provided meat. As Mr Jorrocks said when given a horse (or was it some hounds?): 'Save me from presents wot eat'.

I cannot remember what aspect of our policy on Germany we were reviewing, still less why it had to be confidential to my parents, or to which bit of our Middle Eastern policy I was taking exception, let alone why we were cross with the BBC.

Warsaw, 15 March 1959

*The news this week is that I have pretty certainly sold the car, so I shall probably be coming back with M on the plane on 5 April. Can you cope with us all flooding in at once? I am afraid my initial visit will be **very** fleeting as I must get down to London as quickly as possible to get things moving.*

We have so much to do in the next three weeks that I just don't know how we shall survive. Apart from our own party on 25 March, to which we have invited 170—though not all will come—other people's farewells for us are beginning to mount up. In addition in our last week we shall have the packers in to do all their fell work. Moreover I have a great deal to do in the office, a huge memorandum to write on the Polish Western Territories as well as a despatch on the Party Congress.

I had a brief but extremely interesting trip to Moscow, and was able to see a lot in the short time there. Moscow seems a very old city compared with Warsaw, which has been completely rebuilt, whereas most of Moscow is mid-nineteenth century. The Kremlin is absolutely out of this world, and worth going to see alone.

The report I wrote on the Western Territories was the first such study ever done in the Foreign Office, largely because the area had been closed to us. The Western Territories are the eastern portion of Germany into which the Russians had pushed several million Poles, ejecting a similar number of Germans, while at the same time ejecting more Poles from eastern Poland to make room for Russians. A colleague and I visited the ex-German territories to see how extensively the Poles had settled the area. They had changed the German place names to Polish equivalents. Thus Hirschberg, which means Deer Hill in German, had been changed to Jelenia Gora, which is Polish for Deer Hill.

There was much talk at the time of the fate of autochthones (the people who live where they were born). How many millions had been evicted? When I asked the Mayor of Wroclaw (formerly Breslau) about them, he pointed out the window at a group of children and said that they were the autochthones. A fair comment, I thought. Anyway my report was greeted with rapture by the researchers, who loved my hitherto

unavailable statistics, not realising that I had pirated them from a publication which apparently only I knew about. Perhaps a fitting climax to my generally slightly high-handed reporting from Warsaw.

Warsaw, 7 April 1959

You will have been waiting anxiously for news. I am so sorry that all our arrangements have to be upset.

The situation now is this. On Wednesday morning, the day I phoned, M had a slight haemorrhage and was put to bed. She stayed there till Sunday, and the bleeding unfortunately continued. On Sunday it got a little heavier, so the specialist decided to put her into the clinic where she had Caroline. She is still there, and very comfortable. She has not yet miscarried, but the specialist thinks the pregnancy is probably dead. We shall not know definitely until Thursday. If it is, it will of course be removed and we shall come home on Sunday 12th or Wednesday 15th. If there is still hope for it we shall have to stay here a little longer.

This is very sad and upsetting, and has no doubt been caused, as was the first one, by the strain of moving. M is being very good, but is naturally anxious to know one way or the other.

I have had a full week, as I had to deal single-handedly with the packers. All the stuff is now safely away in 21 packing cases, and we are now living out of suitcases. Flip went on Tuesday, and I believe the strain of seeing her off may have been the last straw for M.

A sad way indeed to leave Warsaw after 2½ happy and productive years. Once again, we had no idea that M had conceived. With the pregnancy over, M, weak and deeply upset, had to steel herself for a journey to her in-laws with a streaming cold and a teething daughter. And I had to leave her almost as soon as we arrived, to go house-hunting in London. I have never asked her, but I think she would probably agree that this was a low point in her life, and I could do little to help. I must say that I wasn't too uppish either.

We have never been back to Poland, and we soon lost touch with Zofia and our Polish friends. Caroline, who is a Polish subject by birth, has never wanted to go back there, even now that she is guaranteed against call-up.



The four of us on our enormous terrace (it took 600 guests!), Damascus, 1963



Caroline and David with their nanny, Hazel, Damascus, 1962



DAMASCUS
January 1962–January 1965

Postcard, SS Esperia, Naples, 4 January 1962

Here for the afternoon after a very comfortable first day's voyage. Lovely warm sunny weather—shirt sleeves only. We have all been for a walk in Naples, and have come back aboard for tea.

Having been posted overseas again, to our enormous relief after 2½ impoverished years in London, we set off to visit my parents-in-law in northern Italy, and thence onto a boat in Genoa en route to Damascus via Naples. We were a party of five—M, me, Caroline aged 4½, David aged 8 months, and Hazel, our new nanny aged 19, who quickly became part of our family, and has remained so. She is now the widow of the late Sir David Roberts, who served with us in Damascus. Finding her was one of the greatest pieces of good fortune we ever had.

I left behind a mother happy to have seen her grandson christened in her own church, sad at seeing us go so far away, but pleased at the prospect of being able to act as a supplier of needs, as she had done when we were in Warsaw.

My new job was as First Secretary (Commercial) in an embassy which had only just become one again, having for a time been a Consulate-General during the spurious union between Syria and Egypt, recently dissolved—to the huge relief of the Syrians.

Damascus, 12 January 1962

We got here on Tuesday, after a pretty easy journey and moved straight away into our joke flat. Think of our flat in Rome and multiply by three and you will be getting near. The distance from one end of the dining room, through the hall and the drawing room to the end of the terrace is close on 100 yards. All in marble with joke light-fittings, fountains (which don't work) in the hall, and bathrooms with all conceivable fittings (except baths) including a miniature-sized loo for a thrilled Caroline.

Our first impressions of Damascus are definitely favourable—much nicer than Beirut, which was altogether too noisy to live in. Here the people seem pleasant and friendly—except our concierge, who is giving trouble—and the Embassy, although very small, is very pleasant also.

I cannot begin in one letter to tell you all about Damascus—either it will emerge in letters or M will have to write. It is very much as I expected, though nicer if anything. Across the street from us is a mosque—the muezzin (canned) gives forth every morning at 5am, calling the faithful to prayer, but after the first night we have slept through it. Arabic is of course quite incomprehensible, but lots of English and French are spoken.

I say that the Embassy staff were pleasant, but I was shocked by its torpor, headed by a Chargé d’Affaires who had been Consul-General during the spurious union with Egypt, and was to depart on my arrival, while I impatiently awaited the arrival of an Ambassador to get the place moving. It was dominated by an Administration Officer who tried to put one over on me, for example by suggesting that our flat was unsuitable for us, and had to be put firmly in his place, which to his credit he very quickly accepted.

I was horrified to find that there had been no reporting for months on what had been a volatile situation. On my very first day in the office I drafted a despatch on the Syrian economy, based on an IMF report I had read on the boat, which the Chargé signed without a murmur, though where he imagined I had learned so much so quickly I shall never know. He seemed a prime example of the officers who were known as ‘a good work-horse for Paraguay’.

We decided to keep our joke flat because it was ideal for entertaining. In other ways, as time revealed, it had its drawbacks. It was on the top floor of a modern three-storey block. The ground floor was occupied by the Turkish residence and chancery, and the middle one by the owner, a potentate left over from the Ottoman Empire by the name of Khaled-el-Azem, also known as the Red Millionaire because of supposed democratic leanings. His family had founded the Azem mosque, the most magnificent in Syria, and had consequent undisputed power and influence. He will appear several times in this chapter—as Prime Minister, and also as a huge friend of our daughter. The latter connection did not harm my position in the city.

Damascus, 17 January 1962

I hope that you received our first communication from Damascus. Our impressions since then have continued favourable, and we are now beginning

to get settled in, as far as we can without the bulk of our heavy baggage. We have had a quiet week, but are about to get involved in the social round, as our cards have now been sent round. But the diplomatic community is very small and most of our entertaining will be with Syrians, which is encouraging. The Syrians we have met so far are forthcoming and pleasant.

The weather is gorgeous. Long, warm sunny days and marvellously clear fresh air. With such a perfect introduction it almost seems a pity that it has—by report—to get so hot in the summer.

I am settling easily into work at the Embassy, though looking forward to the arrival of the Ambassador and acceleration of the tempo and standard of work into a pace more fitted to my habits and inclinations.

I find it difficult to describe Damascus, perhaps because it is very much as I had pictured it. It is remarkably free from squalor and dirt by Far Eastern or even Egyptian standards, and has none of the extremes of wealth and poverty, and the air of conspicuous consumption that makes Beirut rather unattractive. The souks or bazaars are fascinating but also surprisingly utilitarian. The educated Syrians are friendly and self-possessed, and the uneducated venal (I judge) but not servile. During our first week there were a few riots—a window in the Embassy was (accidentally) broken, but everyone assumed that they were provoked by bribes and no-one took them to heart.

M has had tea with our immensely wealthy landlady, who lives below in a flat most beautifully furnished with French and Italian eighteenth-century furniture.

Looking back, I was being pretty patronising about the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world, and its proud inhabitants. I gradually came to understand the reality of Greater Syria, which in Syrian minds stretches from the Mediterranean to the Euphrates and beyond, and south into the Empty Quarter. This is why the existence of Lebanon as an independent state has always seemed in Damascus to be a rather poor Anglo-French joke, while Iraq is for them a British trick to control oil supplies, without having any pretensions to statehood.

The broken window in the Embassy was nothing. On another occasion, I was much more frightened. The army had kindly sent a detachment of soldiers to defend us against, as I recall, a not very unruly mob. The soldiers entered our building and took up positions with their rifles poking out of our windows, thus trespassing on British territory. With much misgiving, I knew that I must demand their departure. I did so through an interpreter, and to my relief they obeyed. My heart had been in my mouth.

Damascus, 24 January 1962

We are continuing to enjoy lovely Damascus. On Sunday we made a short excursion—all of us—to a village 40 miles away, the only place in the world where Aramaic is still spoken, i.e. the language Jesus spoke. It is tucked away in the mountains, and has the oldest monastery in the world. We have also seen the Street called Strait, and the gate from which St Paul was lowered in a basket.

We are getting immersed in the social round. We like the Syrians we have met, and the Diplomatic Corps might be worse. Tomorrow we are giving a farewell drink to the Chargé d'Affaires for the staff of the Embassy, which will be pretty disorganised as of course nothing has arrived from England yet in the way of glasses etc. He leaves on Friday, after which I shall be Chargé for a few days until the Ambassador arrives sometime next week. I just hope they don't have a revolution in the meantime.

The interesting thing about the street called Strait—that is, narrow—was that it had not apparently changed in 2000 years, and we got so used to shopping in it that in time we forgot why it was special. But just outside the East Gate, on the right, a particularly special place remains: the balcony from which Ananias and his friends lowered Saul in a basket, assisting him to escape from his enemies within the city and start his journey to Jerusalem. I continue to hope that one day we may again be able to follow Saul's footsteps: down the valley—today past the international airport—to Quneitra, over what will be the open lower part of the Golan Heights, along the shores of Lake Galilee, right at Tiberias, across the valley of Megiddo—Armageddon, where the last battle of biblical history is to be fought—and down into Jerusalem through the Damascus Gate, so called today as it was when Saul walked through it. It is now the main gate for tourists entering the Old City, with a large carpark just outside it.

Damascus, 2 February 1962

We are slowly getting round and about here. Last Sunday I was taken out to visit farms. I enjoyed this, but M had a hard morning at home, as the Prime Minister summoned me at short notice, and M didn't know where to find me. By the time I got back it was too late. No harm done, but poor M was worried!

H.E. arrived on Monday, and everybody likes him as much as I told them they would. It is a very different cup of tea from Warsaw, or indeed Rome. He dined with us on his first evening, and we all got on together very well. On Tuesday we both spent a couple of exhausting hours with the Prime Minister. On Thursday H.E. presented his credentials—in lounge suits in this democratic state.

Our other First Secretary is not arriving until April, so until then I've got to be Head of Chancery as well as Commercial Secretary. Rather more work than I want, as I hoped to concentrate on economic and commercial affairs.

M and C went to visit the Great Mosque on Thursday. C was very excited at having to take her shoes off, and is now confirmed in her wish to become a Muslim. She reckons mosques are much better value than churches. Better warn the Cradle Roll at Hale Congregational.

I must go and read four poems to C—the evening ration. She has very much favourites, and some of the poems never get a look in. Her favourite at present is 'Wherever I am there's always Pooh'!

The Ambassador, Sir Thomas Bromley, was a joy. A widower, whose children had also died, he was desperately lonely and fitted instantly into our family, joining us on all our expeditions. He contributed greatly to our time under him, and we like to think that we contributed to his. Happily, he married again after his retirement.

Damascus, 15 March 1962

A quietish week, chiefly dominated by servant problems. We engaged what seemed a very good cook, who started last Tuesday, but he walked out with a sick headache at 1.28pm, two minutes before guests were expected, and did not return (luckily for him). Georgette is under notice from the end of the month and, as far as we can gather, has been telling all and sundry what ghastly employers we are.

We had a pleasant day in Beirut last Friday. We did some shopping, and H.E. gave us a splendid lunch at a posh hotel. On Monday we had a splendid lecture from Angus Wilson, and a big party afterwards. Our Syrian acquaintance was refreshingly widened from the usual run of businessmen and officials into university circles.

I long for the day when our Head of Chancery arrives. I have done little this week but negotiate the sale of a piece of land which the Ministry of Works owns here. Enormous and terrifying complications spring up at every turn.

Neither we nor anyone else solved the servant problem. The only reliable ones were the Embassy kavasses who waited at cocktail functions. M ended up doing all the cooking, often for over 100 guests a week. I had reckoned her hard-done-by in this respect in Warsaw, and she would say that it was worse later in New York; but reading the Damascus letters makes me cringe with shame at the burden she shouldered there. Georgette, by the way, stayed with us until a week before we left, importing her sister to help her.



Margaret and I on the Damascus social round, 1962

The land sale was typical. Even 40 or so years after its collapse, remnants of the Ottoman Empire still appeared below the surface at every turn. While I would argue that the Empire's demise was one of the strategic disasters of this century, its bureaucracy was not one of its finest legacies.

Damascus, 28 March 1962

This particular letter may reach you quite late. As you will have heard, we are in the middle of a coup d'état, and the frontiers etc are closed for the moment. This is all boring, as it means everything getting upset again, but this is the usual way of proceeding in this part of the world, and there is no disturbance or bloodshed or anything like that. But it means that business confidence will decrease again, with consequent setbacks to my efforts to increase sales of

British goods here. The new regime seems to be more left-inclined than its predecessor, which the merchants will not like.

I am writing this in the office, as I may be a bit preoccupied this evening. We are trying to get telegrams off, but there is no outgoing traffic, so we are trying to think of other means of communication with the outside world.

Our party went off OK yesterday, considering that everyone knew something was in the air. It was a cocktail party—7–9pm—and about 150 people came. Our landlord was not among them, as he is a politician and is temporarily under arrest by the army.

I have to go on a week's course to the Centre of Arabic Studies in Beirut in May, and we rather hope that the whole family may come down, and spend the week in a house by the sea, which we may be lent. It would make a nice break for them.

I am expecting a visitor, a textile machinery exporter trained at Manchester Tech. I told you, didn't I, about the Syrian I met whose three children were born at 69 Central Road, West Didsbury?

The coup was indeed the mildest of several we experienced while in Damascus. I cannot remember now what set it off, but I expect it was a slight adjustment after the end of the union with Egypt. In hindsight it was probably a dry run for the later, more serious, coups which brought the Ba'ath Party to power.

It is worth recording for posterity our extremely primitive means of communication with the Foreign Office back in London. We had nothing like a cypher machine. All telegrams, incoming and outgoing, had to be coded and then encyphered by two people working together, using what were known as One Time Pads. At weekends all hands except the Ambassador were mustered to clear the backlog. I insisted on seeing the first lines of incoming material and, if it seemed uninteresting, I did not allow the decyphering to proceed. The encyphered material, in the form of five-figure groups of digits, was collected at or delivered to the local post office, and received in more or less garbled form according to the diligence of the post office staff. So, as I told my mother, when the post office and frontiers were closed, we could not communicate.

The gentleman from West Didsbury gets a mention because his house was three doors away from where I was born.

Damascus, 4 July 1962

We had a gorgeous time in Cyprus—everyone was extremely kind to us and we had only one meal to ourselves the whole five days! But we didn't mind, as we found the people who asked us out very congenial. The UK pavilion at the

Trade Fair looked very nice. The reason I went was to look at this, as it is coming to us for the Damascus Fair in August. We spent quite a lot of time at the Fair, but managed to get out and about around the island as well, and have some bathing in the gorgeous warm sea. Nicosia was rather hot and quite sticky and humid, so that although we had air-conditioning in our room, we were glad to get back to Damascus again. The children and Nanny all got on splendidly without us, as they always do, fortunately. I don't suppose that we shall be going away again for a bit, as I have a lot of work to do with the Fair and a technical assistance agreement which I am trying to negotiate.

The British Pavilion at the Damascus International Fair, which was to take up much time that summer and the next, was financed by the Central Office of Information, at a cost of about £25,000. It was thus not a traditional pavilion, for British firms to show off their wares—there was not enough business in prospect to justify the expense. So the goods on show were supposed to demonstrate British technical skills. There was a diorama of a prototype Harrier jet, a large full-size yacht which was more trouble than it was worth, a drinking fountain, etc. The pavilion was packed throughout opening hours, mostly by destructive small boys. I always had grave doubts about its cost-effectiveness, but it was, I suppose, important to be able to show the flag.

One aspect of the venture tragically revealed a darker side of Syrian life. The contract to erect the pavilion had to go out to tender. I wanted to award the tender to a friend, whom I trusted, and quite wrongly persuaded to submit a second tender, lower than the others. The tragedy was that he was publicly hanged on the day I left Damascus (the timing was coincidental) for allegedly spying for the CIA.

Damascus, 25 July 1962

The shirts are excellent, thank you very much. I was wearing one for the first time to the office today, and was unexpectedly summoned to talk to the Prime Minister, and felt quite smart enough to do credit to the guard of honour you go through when you visit him. I'm glad he didn't ask me where I got my shirts, as of course Marks & Spencer is anathema because of the boycott of Israel. One of our favourite tricks for Christmas will be to give M & S presents to our Syrian friends.

The Arab boycott of Israel was a bore. Any firm found to be trading with Israel was boycotted throughout the Arab world. Because the British Government strongly disapproved of the boycott, we had no contact with the boycott office in Damascus, except that I was allowed to go there

clandestinely, not revealing my status, and plead the cases of British firms that we felt were being wrongly included on the dreaded list. I am not sure that my approaches did much good, because the office was so inefficient that they did not necessarily know whom they were boycotting in the first place.

Damascus, 11 October 1962

I managed to last through the frantic trip last week to Aleppo, and have been trying to take it easier this week. Perhaps from reaction, I have got a bit of a liverish turn and have had to cancel a dinner engagement tonight—just as well as we have no other free night this week and it gives me time to write a letter, for once.

We were lucky to get in our big parties at the beginning of the month as the weather has now turned cooler and our terrace is no longer suitable for evening use. We have had some rain this week, and although we may get another warm spell, it looks as though summer is really over.

C is apparently settling down well at school. She has a very pretty pink overall for her uniform. On Monday, the first morning, she was up and fully dressed in it by 6.40am, ready to set off. She has a ghastly old-fashioned French reading-book, but otherwise the place seems very civilised, and she obviously likes it. M has seen one or two of the classrooms and reports them large and cheerful. We don't know how much French she hears, but we suspect that the nuns' English is improving rapidly. All our friends with girls there have told them to look after C, and there are two other English girls in her class. One nun, nothing to do with C's class, stopped M, with C, yesterday and said: 'Ah, vous êtes la maman de Caroline! Je la connais bien: c'est un très brave numéro, celle-là' ['So, you are Caroline's mother. I know her well: she is a real bright spark, that one!'], which amused M. Since the pupils are 70% Muslim at least, we think that C will be fairly safe from religious indoctrination. The school is huge: 1000 pupils, and 300 applicants refused this year. All Syrian girls of good family enter at five and emerge, generally straight into wedlock, at 18.

I had to visit Aleppo frequently, as very much the second commercial city of Syria—more Christian and less Arab than Damascus. The journey involved 230 miles each way by car on not a bad road, through the trouble spots of Homs and Hama; or a perilous flight on a Syrian Arab Airlines DC3, which followed the road up at a height of about 500 metres. My favourite story, to the truth of which I swear after more than 35 years, is of a morning flight from Damascus which, we were told, would be delayed because the pilot was not satisfied with the performance of one of the engines. However, after only 20 minutes we were summoned to board.

Enquiries elicited that they had not changed the engine or the aircraft, but merely the pilot.

I had much to do in Aleppo with the disposal of the famous Altounyan Hospital, recently expropriated from its British owners. It was a private hospital owned and run by a wealthy Armenian-British family, among whose claims to fame was that they were the Walker family in Arthur Ransome's *Swallows and Amazons* children's books. My role was to get compensation for the family for the nationalisation of the hospital—a thankless task.

Caroline earned golden opinions from the nuns because she was fun to teach compared with her stolid Syrian classmates, but the opposite because she was 'turbulente' and disruptive. 'I love her dearly, but at the end of the day I could strangle her.' Her parents knew what the nun meant.

Damascus, 7 February 1963

All the family, touch wood, is in excellent health except for me. Caroline is enjoying school greatly, and David is advancing quite quickly with his talking. He natters away all day, mostly unintelligibly, but seems to have an even greater urge to convey information than C did. C dressed up as the Queen of France in a recent do at school. She much enjoyed this, but the role hardly pleased her father in the present state of his views on France. We have decided to start speaking only English to the French Embassy here.

It looks as though my jaundice is going to be fairly mild and non-contagious, thank heaven. I have had no temperature for a week and the signs are that my bile-duct is returning to normal duty, and I think the tide of yellowness has turned. During this past week, I have been mostly in bed, getting up for an hour or two each day to do a little work, but I am now getting up—though not dressing—for meals and for several hours a day. I hope to be back at work, all being well, in about 10 days, which will be very good and quick if it comes off. Meanwhile I am eating my non-fat diet with determination and appetite, if not much keen enjoyment.

My fury at France was of course because of the General's veto of our Common Market membership, which I am sure had much to do with the jaundice I described. It is over 35 years ago, but the iron has not grown cold.

Of all the foolish things described in this book, the nonchalant way in which my Syrian doctors and I treated my jaundice is the worst. I am convinced that it sowed the seed of my subsequent cancer, and the perilous years which ensued until about 1970. Nowadays, of course it would be called hepatitis and alarm bells would ring. My recreation while

I was briefly abed was to write a new edition of the Board of Trade booklet *A Businessman's Guide to Syria*—I didn't mention health risks.

Damascus, 27 February 1963

We are off to Aleppo tomorrow for a few days, driving up the 230-odd miles. On Friday I hope to drive out along the Euphrates to the site of the new dam.

We shall probably have to have a pretty gay time in the evenings, with all our friends in Aleppo anxious to entertain us, and it will make a nice change for M after a rather wearing 1963 so far. Now that Ramadan has ended, our social life is beginning to blossom once more. Last night we were at a small party downstairs at the PM's—quite fun, except for some rather dreary films.

I am more or less recovered now, and feeling much stronger now that I am back to a normal diet, except for alcohol and spices.

The Euphrates Dam was the great Syrian attempt to harness the flow of the Euphrates, to provide water for the Hauran, the Syrian wheatbelt. The Turks, upstream, did not mind, but naturally everyone downstream did.

Perhaps a word about our relationship with our downstairs neighbour, Khaled-el-Azem, who was Prime Minister for some months in 1963 before being violently deposed, to his and our great inconvenience, he having to seek asylum in the Turkish Embassy below his apartment, leaving us isolated above. We never ceased to thank the Turks for being there: otherwise we might have had him for months. Anyhow, in happier times, we all got on very well. He used to flirt with M at parties, and C used to pop down the back stairs to have tea with him on her return from school. I remember that they made a joint birthday card for M one year, and he gave C a three-foot doll for one of her birthdays.

For myself, I benefited hugely from conversations with this Arab-Turkish potentate, who made the Ottoman Empire come alive for me. He told me how, as a youth, he had seen General Allenby and Emir Faisal enter Damascus as the heads of the army that conquered the Turks, Allenby handing the city over to Faisal. Remembering the impression Lawrence gave in *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* that he had personally organised the capture of the city, I asked Khaled Bey whether he remembered seeing Lawrence too. 'Oh,' he replied, 'was Lawrence there? I didn't know.' This gave much pleasure to a Lawrence non-believer like myself.

Damascus, 14 March 1963

I hope that you have not been too worried about us, and have discounted the odd press story about our being shut up in our building. We are perfectly OK.

We are still surrounded by soldiers and armoured cars, but we are allowed to go in and out. The only thing is that they don't let people in unless one of us is with them. This isn't a bad thing. There were a few fairly friendly mobs in the first few days, and some lower windows were smashed, and the two Azem cars, though I was fortunately out in mine, but no sign of anything for the last day or two. C goes normally to school. We don't know how long the soldiers will be there—the coup is by no means settled yet—but they are no trouble to us, and we welcome protection against the odd demonstration.

As you can imagine, with the Head of Chancery sick, it has been a fairly busy week for me, as for what little staff we have. Not only all the reporting, and the negotiations about recognition [of the new government], but seeing journalists and getting stranded Britons out, all take a lot of time and energy, particularly when the whole machinery of government is disorganised, as it tends to be after a coup. Nobody knows what sort of government will finally emerge, with what sort of programme.

This was the coup which changed Syria, with the Ba'ath Party taking over from the old conservative regime. Briefly, the Ba'ath aim was a pan-Arab socialist state but its philosophy was so woolly as to be incomprehensible to the likes of myself, although the next Head of Chancery, David Roberts, subsequently wrote a book on the subject, to my great admiration. In practice the Ba'ath ideals attracted the young officers and academics, to whom 'democracy' did not appeal. Their idea of government was a typically Arab blend of theocracy and brutality, but of course on nothing like Iraqi standards, which the Syrians rejected as they rejected everything else Iraqi.

The coup was in fact a bit more frightening than I told my mother. On one evening we had a mob of several thousand surrounding our building. Happily, the soldiers and armoured cars guarding it evidently had strict instructions not to let the mob prevail, and in due course they dispersed, for which we were duly grateful. (I was also grateful, for my mother's sake, that the *Times* correspondent in Beirut, accurately reporting that the mob was threatening the Turkish Embassy, did not add what as a frequent guest he well knew, that we were living two floors above.) Nor did I tell my mother that C was frightened by the machine-gun fire around our apartment, and disliked loud noises for a long time after. And that I only just avoided having my windscreen shattered by bullets when rescuing her from a friend's house. We were, I think, never in actual danger, for example from having our apartment building torched to smoke out Khaled-el-Azem, but the possibility was there. He stayed in the Turkish Embassy for some months before he was quietly allowed to leave for Beirut, where he died shortly afterwards.

Damascus, 21 March 1963

We are moving into new offices over the weekend. They are modern and more convenient, but the move involves a good deal of extra planning, as you can imagine.

Moving the chancery was a beauty. We had to move from our old, beautiful but unsafe classical Arab mansion—we could only move round the edges of the rooms, because the centre was unsafe to walk on. It made sad sense to move to a new apartment block, quite without character, but where Embassy staff could occupy the apartments above and below. Moving all the furniture and files up three flights of stairs was bad enough, but the climax was horrendous. Our security room, for the cyphers and secret material, had to be guarded by a huge steel door, similar to those one finds in a bank. While lifting it into place, the workmen dropped it, at the same time shearing off one of the bolts on which the door was to rest. The consequence was that one of us had to sleep across the doorway until the damage could be repaired.

Damascus, 10 April 1963

Politically, the situation is still completely unsettled, and we do not place much faith on what may come out of the Cairo talks. The fate of Syria, and indeed of our Embassy in case of union, is very uncertain, and our only hope is that chaos will not degenerate into bloodshed as it always does in Iraq. No sign of that yet, fortunately, but I shouldn't like to say where we shall be in six months' time.

I have to spend Easter in Aleppo with two of the staff of Rochdale Technical College, whom we are hoping to persuade to run the Textile Training Centre we are planning there.

The Textile Training Centre in Aleppo was a well-meaning folly on the part of the Overseas Development Administration in London. It was duly stocked with admirable equipment for teaching textiles, and I imagine that eventually the Syrians made something of it, though I left before any results could be seen. But the two teachers from Rochdale were understandably out of their depth. I think that their main reason for accepting the job was that it meant they could afford new cars, free of purchase tax, for the first time in their lives. Unfortunately, they had bought two of the worst cars ever produced. But they could not come to terms with Syrian ways, at work or outside, and in the end I had to send them home.

But it was educational, even for me, to meet two such good-hearted, but really typical Lancastrians. At lunch on Easter Sunday in a rather grand

Aleppo apartment, one of them, on being asked by the butler what aperitif he would prefer, replied, bless him: 'Thanks, a cup of tea will be all right.' One of their wives endeared herself to me by a splendid joke. She said that she had been unable to understand how the lamb was so fresh, until she had seen a three-legged lamb outside a butcher's shop.

Damascus, 24 October 1963

You will be glad to hear that my allergy has disappeared. We suspect that it may have been due to a bedside rug. My amoebae are still present, but not too inconveniencing, and the doctor thinks that they will respond to drugs, and that I shan't have to go into hospital for the full treatment.

I am very much occupied at present with an £8 million railway contract here, which is making me very glad that I am not in business, as some of the dishonesty and perhaps even more particularly the inefficiency on display is almost incredible.

The malaise that accompanied me, from jaundice through until my cancer operation in April 1965, featured not only dreadful allergies and amoebic dysentery, but a neck ailment which required me to wear a collar for some months. Hard on everybody.

The contract to rehabilitate the Hedjaz railway degenerated into high farce. The plan was to rebuild the railway from Maan in southern Jordan to Medina, the holy Muslim city near Mecca. The railway ran north through Jordan to the Syrian border at Deraa, but the Maan to Medina section had been destroyed by Lawrence, trapping 25,000 Turkish troops in Medina in 1917. The purpose of rehabilitation was to facilitate the transport of pilgrims to Mecca. A Syrian consortium interested some British entrepreneurs, supported by steel manufacturers interested in selling rail. The railway was not entirely derelict, and flying over it one could still see the locomotives derailed, and the culverts and bridges destroyed by Lawrence, who I recall claimed to have destroyed 29 bridges. But the plan lacked both a sensible scheme and finance. The project literally ran into the sand, and the culverts and locomotives, as far as I know, remain as Lawrence left them.

One day in 1964 members of the Syrian consortium gave me a silver tray inscribed 'To commemorate the recommissioning of the Hedjaz railway'. This may be the only remaining relic of a ludicrous venture, and it sits in our drawing room with our silver coffee service on it—a source of great joy.



CANCER

January 1965–August 1968

Bournemouth, 11 February 1965

My own future is a bit obscure. The local TB specialist, predictably, I suppose, said that the Damascus doctors were a lot of quacks, and that their X-rays and reports were worse than usual. I must admit that the X-ray his people took was a million times better. He said that his X-ray showed no sign of TB, that he would bet 100–1 that I hadn't got it, and that I'd probably had bad whooping cough! I thought that at this stage I'd better stop letting him try to come the busy specialist, and I asserted myself a bit, after which—and after I'd established our common Lancastrian origins—we got on better. I asked how he accounted for my high sedimentation rate, my daily temperature, my cough and my exhaustion. He said that these certainly required clearing up, and took a blood test to find out what my sedimentation rate 'really' was. He then sent me away for two weeks to get my family settled in. I suppose really he wants me settled down here before his own examination starts—from scratch, all Damascus reports having been discounted. It is therefore conceivable that I may still end up in hospital.

Having reported to the Foreign Office when I got back from Damascus and been told that I had been chosen for the plum job of Political Secretary in the Chancery in Paris, I saw the kind and excellent Foreign Office medical adviser, Dr Victor Medvei, in whose debt I shall always be. Having ascertained that we proposed to take a flat in Bournemouth near M's parents, he put me in touch with a specialist close by.

I realised only later how vastly relieved my mother must have been to learn that I did not have TB, not so much because of the dangers of the disease but because in her circles there was something socially disgraceful in a family member contracting TB, almost as bad as getting a divorce, I think. TB carried implications of poverty, lack of hygiene, poor diet, uncaring mums, etc.



M's favourite photograph of me, inserted at her request to improve the general tone

Bournemouth, 16 February 1965

This is really just to say that the specialist has summoned me into hospital for 'a few days tests and observation'. This news was conveyed by a health visitor, who shared our surmise that the blood test I had last week has presumably shown that there is at least 'a case to answer', and that it cannot all be ascribed to whooping-cough.

I stayed in that dozy but pleasant hospital for five weeks, while everyone in sight tried to find out why I was anaemic, had a very low haemoglobin count, and raised a temperature every evening. Apart from daily blood tests, the only unpleasant treatment was a test for, I think, leukaemia, which involved having a nice female doctor kneel on me and screw a device into my breastbone to extract some bone marrow. All this I faithfully reported to my mother in a series of letters, also describing how I occupied myself—chiefly by reading books in French, including De Gaulle's insufferable memoirs, playing scrabble with myself and watching television.

I did not mention to my mother that in the room opposite mine there were two married women in their mid-30s, who cheerfully and persistently tried to get into my bed, one standing by the door of an evening while the other made advances. They must have been in practice, as they sneaked off at lunchtime to entertain some builders working in another part of the hospital. I didn't like to ask why they were in hospital, and was glad that my evening temperature provided me with an excuse for suggesting that my performance, if tested, would be inadequate.

Bournemouth, 30 March 1965

I saw the specialist again today. The kidney X-rays show that while my right kidney is happily perfectly healthy, my left is in poorish shape. No stone, but cysts, perhaps infected, and the kidney may not be functioning at present. The specialist has returned my case to our Foreign Office doctor. So I now have to await, I imagine, a summons to a London hospital.

We shall never know why it took so long to discover that my kidney was the source of all the trouble, nor whether the specialist, talking of cysts, really suspected that I had a tumour. The problem of course was that tumours, however large—and mine was the size of a small cauliflower—do not show up on X-rays.

Bournemouth, 20 April 1965

I am going into Bart's on Thursday morning. I shall not be cut up before the beginning of the following week, but am needed for X-rays.

My operation was to have my infected kidney removed. Mr Badenoch, the eminent urologist who had operated on Macmillan, gave one squeeze round my kidney, and said that it was on the cards that it would have to come out.

Bart's, 22 April 1965

Just to let you know that I am satisfactorily settled in what appears to be a very pleasant ward. I seem to be the only patient who has not already had his op. One of my neighbours had his kidney out a week ago and is full of beans. The chap next to me is a bit chatty, but I shall no doubt train him—he's definitely not a reader!

1965 was of course firmly in the old era, when it was unthinkable to mention cancer if it could be avoided. The chart at the foot of each patient's bed said only 'Ca bladder' or 'Ca kidney', this being a urological ward—and my recollection from wandering round is that the majority of us had cancer, and that most of us had a poor prognosis. I made friends with a charming man who knew, I think, that his bladder cancer was terminal. He just wanted to get home to his own bed so that he could listen to what he described as the 'dawn chorus' of the birds.

Bart's, 4 May 1965

I am progressing extremely well and, as M will no doubt have told you over the phone, already look a lot better than I did before I came in. I certainly feel better in myself, and rejoice to have lost my daily temperature—they can't get it above normal nowadays. I hope to lose my drain today or tomorrow, and the stitches at the weekend.

The only snag is that my stay is going to be rather more protracted than we had expected. I do not know whether this will greatly surprise you, but in fact my kidney had a tumour in it. The surgeons think that they made a good job of cutting the whole thing out, but, as is now usual in these matters, they are going to take the precautionary measure of giving me deep X-ray treatment 'round the edges', as it were. This will last a month, starting as soon as I have recovered from the op, in two or three weeks' time. Since the X-ray treatment is pretty tiring, I shall stay in hospital for it, going home at the weekends.

M asks me to apologise to you for not having explained the situation over the telephone, but we thought it would be clearer to put in a letter. We are taking the view that while this is bad luck, I am extremely lucky to have been caught in an organ which is removable, and has been removed. All we need now is some more patience to make sure that it does not happen again.

Meanwhile, I am extremely comfy here. The nurses are absolute angels and the hospital is most efficient. My admiration is unbounded.

M ran into my Damascus doctor in the street yesterday! He is here on a chance visit. He asked after my lungs! She asked him to visit me but I have a feeling he won't!

All for now. It is about time for our physiotherapeutic P.T. in the ward. Agony, but good for us, I suppose.

I never discovered whether my mother had suspected cancer. It was probably more socially acceptable than TB! I was told the news by my surgeon, who, the same age as myself, became one of the world's leading urologists and a good personal friend. He was accompanied, for moral support, by an ENT consultant with whom I had been at kindergarten 30 years before, and who had been alerted to my presence in Bart's by the kindergarten mafia. Words, happily, were not minced. I asked about the prognosis and was told 'Not too bad', and about the effect on my career, and was told that it should not be affected. Understandably, I was not told that metastases in the lungs were a not uncommon follow-up.

M was told the news, unforgivably, by a young jackanapes of a resident doctor whose name I remember well but shall not reveal. He met her at the ward entrance on the morning after the operation and said, 'You know it was cancer, don't you?' M, who had had no idea, said that she nearly fainted. He and I were destined to meet again.

I am baffled by the reference in my letter to radiotherapy. I do not recall that it was ever suggested. What happened was that a couple of days later I was told that the tumour had been 'encapsulated' and that I could go home. It is idle to speculate whether radiotherapy would have prevented the subsequent drama. So, for the moment all was well. I was fully restored to health, there was no suggestion that this was not the end of the matter, and on my birthday a week later I consumed three pints of Worthington E in a pub in the New Forest. We then made love for the first time for months.

The main repercussion of my illness was that my posting to Paris had to be cancelled, very sensibly as it turned out, the doctors and the Administration not being prepared to let me out of their sight, they knowing what might happen, and indeed did. Instead, I was appointed Assistant Head of the Economic Relations Department in the Foreign Office, a job which suited me down to the socks. As with Korea, it turned out to be all for the best.

Harvard Business School, 10 July 1966

A moment of leisure after an extremely busy week. We literally are kept at it from 6am until 11pm during the week. They deliberately give us more work than it is possible to do, but it does become absorbing and, so far, we don't seem to mind. I am impressed by a good many of the chaps on the course, although naturally one or two are not so bright.

The atmosphere is very much that of a Cambridge college, with the same sort of accommodation. I live in a room in an ivy-covered colonial-style building on the beautiful 'campus'—lawns and trees and no traffic—very pleasant. We eat in a cafeteria, and the food is reasonably good, though we may get a bit bored with it in six weeks, I suppose.

The worst part for us all is being away from our families. We were all pretty miserable the first day or two until we got engulfed in work. Our instructors are extremely competent, and I think we all agree that we are getting good value.

I was writing from the Harvard Business School as a member of a group of British businessmen participating in a six-week course on marketing in the United States. The Foreign Office had been asked to supply a candidate and, being in a position to do so, I made sure that it was I. Understandably, the others on the course could not understand what I was doing there, but I was accepted, and indeed ended up drafting the project report of my syndicate, which came second out of ten.

The course workload was crippling—I think the hardest sustained grind I have ever experienced. But what I learned stood me in good stead when in due course I got to run the British Government Trade Promotion operation in New York.

But it was on the last Saturday of the Harvard course that the blow fell. I was sitting in the lecture theatre when I coughed in a way which was alarmingly familiar, and I knew instantly that I must get to Bart's as quickly as possible.

I shall reproduce almost no more letters for the next two years, because they were routine family ones, and we never mentioned to my mother the anxiety which ruled our lives during that time. I argued that if, as seemed probable, I had only a short time to live, the time to let my mother know was later rather than sooner. Living alone with my mother, my sister, whom we had told of my situation, found it difficult to accept that my mother should not be told. But she finally accepted our plea.

Through Mr Badenoch, I got an early appointment with the urological clinic at Bart's, and showed up for a chest X-ray. The young doctor who saw me was the one who had so upset M 15 months before. But he had matured, and I could not object to him. I must confess that I wished my surgeon had seen me, and I have always wondered whether he had funked it because he suspected what extremely bad news I was about to receive. Anyhow, my young friend came clean. He stuck the X-ray on the screen and there, all too obviously, across both lungs, were seven circular patches, varying in size from the old half-crown to a shilling (or in Australian terms, 50 cent and 10 cent coins). My enquiry elicited that

these were indeed cancerous lesions, which could be expected to spread, fatally, if left alone. The lesions were too widespread for surgery or radiotherapy, and the only remaining hope was what the young man described as 'a trick up our sleeve'—chemotherapy. Thirty years ago chemotherapy was not as advanced or as hard to take as it is today, and in my case it consisted of a new drug, which I was told could do me no harm. Its purpose would be to change my hormone balance, help my immunological system to eradicate the lesions, and cure me. It was made clear to me that if the new drug did not work, I could not expect to survive more than a year, eventually dying of lung cancer.

For the moment all I could do was to tell my wife, the Foreign Office medical adviser, who was of course kept informed by Bart's, and my departmental head. I also had to tell the people who worked for me, telling them over departmental tea, a great Foreign Office institution, that my cancer had started up again, and that for a few months I would be finishing work at 4pm, instead of the usual 7pm. They behaved most properly, but I was subsequently told that when two years later I was finally allowed to go overseas, they contemplated running a book on my chances of survival.

For M, of course, the ordeal was far greater than mine. I had the cancer and could do little about it, except nurse an increasing fury at my own body for presuming to muck about with my cells. M had to face the prospect of bringing up two small children on her own. I remember one evening when we were doing the washing-up, I was rabbiting on tactlessly about various things I had done to safeguard her future when she suddenly flared up, saying, 'I don't want to hear any more. You've got to have a future.'

I started on a routine of visits to Bart's, first weekly, then fortnightly, then monthly, for a chest X-ray and subsequent visit to the urologists. (I should explain that no lung person ever saw me: once with the Urology Department, who had removed my kidney, there I stayed.) I remember vividly the periodic journey from my desk in the Foreign Office, on the Tube from Westminster to Blackfriars, up past the Old Bailey to the X-Ray Department to see whether I was going to live or die. There was no 'if' about it: unless the lesions got smaller, I would die. These Tube trips were fairly trying, but the ordeal was helped by the fact that the hospital allowed me to carry my notes and the wet films of my X-rays from department to department. I would go into the second-floor loo, which had a window, stick the latest X-ray against the window, and have a good read. Thus I always knew the latest verdict before my doctors, and could keep abreast of the latest correspondence. I remember one less than

cheering letter from the admirable Foreign Office medical adviser which said: 'This is a very tragic story. Please do what you can.' My own fault for looking where I was not supposed to!

But the extraordinary thing was that, to the unconcealed surprise of the doctors, and I sometimes think to their chagrin at having been proved wrong, the lesions did get smaller with each visit. On the first one, my maladroït friend said: 'They've got smaller. I'm glad about that.' I indicated equivalent, or perhaps even greater, pleasure. So the next step was to put twopence in a phone slot and tell M: 'They've got smaller!'

By the end of 1966 I must, I think, have been considered out of danger. I know this because when I was first told the bad news I said to myself, entirely characteristically, that it would save me having to buy a new suit. In a New Year letter to my mother I reported that I had had a tax refund which would enable me to buy a new suit. QED.

I suppose that an odd feature of all this was that I did not have to give up smoking, as I had never smoked in my life. I did not start when I joined the army, preferring to spend any spare cash on extra rations from the NAAFI, nor did I start in Korea. Forty-seven years later, it seems incredible that every soldier in Korea received a free vacuum-packed tin of 50 cigarettes every day!

If the immediate danger was over, there was of course plenty of aftermath. For the next five years or so, though diminishingly, I would panic every time I thought my ankles had swollen or there was an imaginary lump under an armpit. For years I had to carry a certificate in my passport saying that I was not allowed vaccinations, for fear of upsetting my immunological balance. This caused trouble in the old days when smallpox certificates were as important as passports. In fact, what the certificate really said was: 'We don't know why he's alive, but we're not taking any risks.' For the same reason, I still take the new drug that was tried on me as a sort of last resort, nowadays without the slightest thought why I am taking it. The doctors don't know if it helped save my life, but they are not going to risk stopping it. Incidentally, the drug is Provera, medroxyprogesterone acetate, based on a female hormone, useful in preventing miscarriages. In the latter case a pregnant woman might be prescribed, if I have got it right, 10mg a day for perhaps a month. I, on the other hand, have been taking 300mgs a day for over 30 years. The doctors used to enquire after my libido, to which I would reply that if it started to be affected, I would stop taking the drug.

The medical profession are united in their view that I should not be alive, and may indeed be the only person who has survived metastases in both lungs after hypernephroma, always described as a particularly nasty

tumour. My surgeon used to carry X-rays of my lungs, before and after, to show his colleagues when on overseas visits. While staying with us on one occasion, he extracted some of our medical guests from a cocktail party to hold a short viewing in his bedroom. His audience emerged looking incredulous.

People have remarked from time to time on my sanguine view of life. It may have something to do with the circumstance that, to put it dramatically, I have been dead for over 30 years. I recount my experience as widely as possible, to convince cancer patients and others that 'miracles can happen', particularly to the least deserving, and that to be angry may be the best medicine.



In home-made leopard skins at our beach house, Captree Island, New York, 1969



NEW YORK
August 1968–September 1971

One afternoon in July 1968 my mother was entertaining a friend to tea and suddenly, with a cup to her lips, said, 'I don't feel very well,' and died, at the age of 78. My father, also 78, had died a year before as he got out of bed in the morning. I dearly hope that heredity will do its stuff.

Of course this was a dreadful blow to us all, made worse by our impending departure to New York, leaving my sister on her own, having lived with our parents most of her life. We were very conscious of, and sympathetic with, her situation, which of course, being a woman of courage and determination, she handled magnificently.

From August 1968 we spent three happy, fruitful and I hope useful years in New York, living in Manhattan in a splendid apartment on Park Avenue. But my letters during this time are not as rich a seam as the earlier ones to my mother. This was because:

(a) Not needing to use the bag services from New York, we used the ordinary post and, lazily, airmail letters, which by their nature tend to be shorter.

(b) I had not yet accustomed myself to the different style and content appropriate for letters to my sister. My sister's concern was to learn what we were doing, but not to worry about it, and with a greater understanding.

(c) During this period, we were preoccupied with boarding school problems, which were not serious compared with those of some other parents, but which occupied all the space in our letters for most of 1970. My sister laboured mightily on these, and we shall always be deeply grateful. I might add that our children caused us few problems after school, and are now happy and successful. There is thus a hiatus which the principle I have adopted in this book of 'No letter, No narrative' has made it difficult to fill.

(d) Finally, my work in New York was quite unlike that in an embassy—both more difficult and less interesting to describe.

My position in New York was Director of the British Trade Development Office, responsible for the British Government's trade promotion services, not only in New York but in 16 other offices, most of them working out of the various consulates. I had no contact with diplomats, the United Nations mission or the British Embassy in Washington, except occasionally with the Ambassador. I had almost complete freedom to run my own show, in cooperation with the Export Departments of the Board of Trade in London. As my instructions, which I had a significant part in drafting, were to put a new face on the whole operation, I had a ball, making myself popular and unpopular in about equal proportions. Our task was to help British businessmen seeking to export, or to increase their exports, to the United States, to save time and money by obtaining our advice and assistance. Of course, we ran up against the ingrained belief that diplomats could not possibly know anything about export trade, and we had to put up with a lot of initial hostility and disbelief. We countered this by demonstrating that my local staff were, in fact, expert in their various product categories, and that the senior staff understood the United States market better than our clients did. It was for this reason that I insisted that the Director (myself) and his two deputies should have attended an American business school.

We helped individual clients by pointing them in the right direction, by insisting, for example, that a clothing manufacturer should not take off for Steamboat Landing, where he had heard about a particular boutique, but should spend his days traipsing up and down Eighth Avenue, where the American rag trade is conducted. Before he left Britain, we would ascertain that a manufacturer of high fashion ties knew that whereas in Britain stripes on ties go from right to left, in America they go from left to right. We inculcated Mason's Principle: since everything in the world is produced somewhere in the United States, you will sell your product only if it is better designed, better manufactured, better packaged, better priced and better marketed than the local competition.

Our main contribution was in organising groups to visit the countless trade fairs that take place throughout the country, but predominantly in New York. We organised participation in men's, women's and children's clothing shows, which were held seasonally in hotel rooms up and down Sixth Avenue (and full of the smell of pot), and the shows held in the vast Coliseum: hardware, toy, pet, boat, machine tool shows—you name it. They were hard work but exhilarating, because we knew that we had brought our clients where they could meet their potential customers.

Then there were store promotions, where we contracted with department stores to buy British goods in great quantity for a given period; in

exchange, we would provide advertising support, from parades to real live Beefeaters. To mount a store promotion in Neiman Marcus in Dallas was quite something. I personally did not regard these promotions as particularly cost-effective; but they were the fashion in London at the time. Even less useful were the so-called British Weeks, when a whole shopping area in a city would be inundated with Beefeaters, so that a small outfitter would buy a couple of lengths of Harris Tweed.

I have no doubt that we not only revolutionised British methods of overseas trade promotion, but also became the envy of, and the model for, many other countries.

New Canaan, Connecticut, 30 August 1968

I am writing this on a weekend holiday at the summer 'cottage' of a colleague—a large house in the country in Connecticut, about 1½ hours by train from Manhattan. It is lovely to relax in the warm summer weather after a very busy first week in New York, where the pace is exhilarating but hectic.

Our apartment is very lush, but somehow not quite as big as we had pictured. But it is difficult to tell until all our stuff is in it. I hope M will like it.

New York is just as exhilarating and exciting as I remember it. The pace of life is fantastic. Next week I have to cope, at our huge Macy's promotion [Macy's being one of the biggest department stores], with a Minister of State and his wife, the Ambassador and his wife, Lord Mountbatten, the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland and his wife, and Lord Caradon and his wife, all separately. The following week the family arrive.

The excitement of living in Manhattan never left me, and never has. It was an incomparable feeling to step out of our apartment block onto Park Avenue in the morning, and know that you were in the centre of the world.

Drake Hotel, 7 September 1968

*End of another flashing-by week. High spots of last week included a visit to Yale, as part of a store promotion in New Haven. Bliss, almost as splendid as Harvard. And being televised at one of the British stands at the National Pet Food Trade Show **eating** yeasty, vitamin-plus, non-fattening chocolate tidbits for doggies. [Happily, they tasted just like a chocolate laxative.] Also a lot of Lord Mountbatten, who is much as you would expect. This morning I have to bear-lead the Minister of Transport round Macy's store here, and on Monday I am flying up to Albany for the day (a) to call on Governor Rockefeller, and (b) to help the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland to open a store promotion*

there. On Tuesday I have to try to get our heavy baggage into our apartment and on Thursday, somehow, I have to find time to meet wife and family.

970 Park Avenue, New York
20 September 1968

This is being written in an aircraft on the way to Washington, whither I am bound to spend the day at the Embassy, returning in time to go out to dinner with two of the entourage of the Lord Mayor of London, called, I am pleased to say, Brigadiers Clapham and Popham. The shuttle service between New York and Washington is just like a bus. You walk onto the plane, buy your ticket on it, and if the 8am plane is full they have to put on another one, even if you are the only passenger.

The family are fast settling down, David has started at school—five blocks away—and seems to be enjoying himself. The great thing is that they get taken in a bus every afternoon for ‘field’ (games) in a park across the river, so at least get away from city streets daily. They put us through a tremendous palaver for the privilege of paying \$1500 to send David to the school. Three hours of tests for D, and long conversations with us. They scared us into thinking D was some sort of mental defective, or at least very backward (a ‘mixed dominant’, i.e. uses right leg and left hand, etc) and then said that they didn’t think that they could rate him higher than the middle of the group a year older than himself. So he is in the 8–9 class (third grade) of what is supposed to be the academically toughest private school in New York! It will do him the world of good to be stretched a bit in a class of 15 boys.

Alison has settled down very well so far—much more grown up and responsible than in London. We have introduced her into a younger set and she has had two evenings out on her own so far. She was much incensed to receive a letter of good advice from her mum.

David’s school was a success. His only problem was patriotism. When given ‘The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere’ to learn, he refused to recite the line saying ‘and the Redcoats fled’. A slight chore was that all the mothers wanted to have him to tea so that their sons might acquire his cute English accent. He acquired no trace of an American one.

Alison is the charming daughter of a first cousin, who went with us to New York as an au pair, and naturally as part of the family. She was great company for us all. When David left for boarding school she got a job with the United Nations, where she remains to this day, 30 years later, having married a New Yorker.

New York, 1 November 1968

We got out of Manhattan in our car for the first time last Sunday—to a sunny picnic on the New Jersey shore—great fun. On Sunday we are lunching with friends in Connecticut, swimming in their heated indoor pool before lunch, and then being taken beagling—all part of the American way of life.

We gave a cocktail party for 70 or so UK leather sellers—tanners—on Tuesday, and M has been sent a navy-blue skin as a present, to make up a leather waistcoat she spoke about.

D had a great Halloween. He dressed as a skeleton and 'tricked or treated' all round three buildings.

Weekend picnics became an important part of our lives, either up in the National Parks in winter or on the magnificent beaches in summer.

I am horrified now by the burden of entertaining which I casually laid upon M. There was no thought of resident help, although Alison was a great help while she was with us, but M had to cook meals and prepare cocktail eats for hordes of guests every week. She told me subsequently that she had never worked so hard in her life, but of course there was never any complaint, even the mildest, bless her. Looking back, I am much ashamed.

I continued to have regular checkups at the vast King's County Hospital in Brooklyn, whither I had to travel by various complicated subway routes. The head of the urology unit, who was an Englishman not much older than I, had 230 urological beds at his disposal, compared with the 28 at Bart's. Their service was excellent, and my lesions continued to get even smaller.

New York, 29 November 1968

On Sunday I took D out to an Atlantic beach for a picnic, which we both enjoyed. He has had his first school report—best at history, worst at maths—a 'delightful boy who would do better if he worked harder'. Chip off the old block.

The big Thanksgiving parade, for which we had privileged seats, was fabulous—2½ hours passed very quickly, perhaps helped by a flask of vodka which we prudently took along.

New York, 9 January 1969

Letter a day late because we had Alison's dance last night until 2.30am, to round off a hectic week. Out to dinner on Monday, buffet for 28 on Tuesday, a quick trip to Ottawa on Wednesday and Thursday, a dinner for economists on Thursday. A cocktail party for 100 on Monday, and then almost a week off.

Ottawa was dullsville. Extremely cold, -5 degrees and a foot of snow, full of stone manse-like houses, and a total small-town atmosphere made more odd by the forced Welsh-type bilingualism—French—Canadian is a vile language anyhow.

New York, 25 January 1969

A busy week. I left in the middle of a large cocktail party we were giving on Tuesday evening to fly up 400 miles to Rochester, on Lake Ontario in northern New York State—the home of Kodak and Xerox. Next morning a live TV interview at 8.30am, followed by two speeches, three more TV interviews, and a radio programme, plus visits to firms, the reason for the visit. Gratifying to be recognised subsequently in the street—never happened in Syria! Rochester wealthy but provincial. One chap I met had just given the local university a Christmas present of \$26 million, from his own pocket—that sort of thing.

Trying to get home yesterday, all airports closed by fog, so I hired a car and drove 400 miles right down New York State, in rain and fog, arriving home at 2am. Not funny.

We have taken a 'beach house' right on the water, on a tiny island—13 dwellings—off Long Island, for 7½ weeks in the summer. Some fresh water, bottled gas cooking, fridge and lighting, flush loo, hut-like only bigger and better. Kids will adore it. Sea six feet from the living room window, use of a boat. Daren't tell you the price—would buy the hut twice over, but that's what it costs here. Daily commuting distance for me.

The Rochester visit was typical of the visits I used to make to cities where we did not have an office. They were fairly sticky going, as I did not often have anything very specific to offer, but it served to remind companies and the public that Britain was still in business. One not so gratifying episode of the Rochester visit followed a television interview where I advanced the view that the new SRDs (special reserve deposits) might be a useful device in the world of international exchanges—a headline in the next day's Rochester newspaper read: 'British diplomat slams gold'.

Our beach house was one of the greatest successes of our lives. We spent two blissful summers there, and would go back tomorrow. It played an important part in making New York such a happy place for us.

New York, 15 March 1969

Busy week here—we gave four dinner parties—hard work, but fortunately enjoyable as they were interesting people. But four in a week is really too much, especially as we were out the other two nights as well. March is our busiest month—a whole succession of trade shows, fashion shows, trade missions, etc, all of which take a lot of organising.

We are looking forward to the week after next and C's arrival. I have to be away the day she arrives—I have to speak at a lunch, again at a dinner, and in between do a half-hour broadcast, and a post-graduate seminar. I hope my adrenalin is up to it.

New York, 22 March 1969

*Frantically busy—this is by far our busiest month. Hope April will be quieter—tempers are getting a bit frayed, particularly in our relations with the **Daily Express**, with whom we are mounting a huge women's fashion show next week.*

New York, 4 April 1969

We had an excellent picnic last Sunday at our beach house, lighting a fire in the living room and feeling very cosy. We hope to go for a picnic tomorrow, with another British family we know, if the weather's OK. His firm has just gone public and he finds himself with \$2 million—a nice feeling. The kids seemed to enjoy their day camp, which had essential visits to zoos, swimming, barbecues, etc.

On Tuesday we are going to a great ball for the Salvation Army—as guests, fortunately, as it's one of those \$100 a ticket do's.

New York, 12 April 1969

I was away on Thursday and Friday at an IBM seminar. Quite fun. I was asked to solve this: man on tower, 102 feet high, in a vacuum drops a ball. How far will the ball have travelled each tenth of a second and how far away from the tower at the fifth bounce? I managed to programme the computer to do it.

Today was a gorgeous spring day so we've been on a sunny picnic in Bear Mountain National Park, 60 miles or so away. Warm enough to build a dam in a stream, watched critically by a beaver.

The IBM seminar presented the famous Bouncing Ball problem, which figured in seminars for many years. The point of it was that you received a print-out showing the curves of the bouncing ball. This was still in the days of hexadecimal language. It was a further stage in my precocious interest in computers. Shortly before I left for New York, I wrote a paper for the Foreign Office entitled 'The use of computers in the Diplomatic Service', being principally about information retrieval. It caused much alarm at the time, and after my departure it was given a decent burial, until the subject finally became inescapable about 15 years later.

Versailles, Kentucky, 3 May 1969

This will arrive a bit later than usual, as it is being written 800 miles from New York.

We are having a splendidly relaxed weekend here with the Finneys. Alas Mr Finney's health—heart—has not been good enough to enable us to get into the Derby crowds, but in compensation we've been taken on tours of the Blue Grass stud farms, seeing more beautiful horses close up than you would think possible. Quite something to pat a horse worth \$5 million!

The country here is marvellous—very green and grassy—though not noticeably blue. Makes a change to hear birds instead of sirens, but will be glad to be back in New York tomorrow evening. I have to fly to Washington on Tuesday am, back that evening for a cocktail party we are giving, back to Washington on Wednesday am, and back again that evening to New York. On Thursday the great celebratory dance on the QE2, on her first appearance in New York. Should be fun.

Our host for our visit to Kentucky Blue Grass country was a septuagenarian Old Mancunian, son of the vicar of Rawtenstall (a Manchester suburb), who had amazingly become the President of the American Bloodstock Association, and the biggest buyer of racehorses in the United States (though for others, not himself). Mr Finney died soon after our visit. His career must remain the most remarkable of a boy from Manchester Grammar School in the 500 years of the school's existence.

The party on the QE2 was memorable. I have to say that our subsequent experiences of the QE2 have not been quite as splendid.

New York, 24 May 1969

Los Angeles and San Francisco were well worth seeing—Hollywood as tawdry as you would think but Los Angeles not as bad as they say. San Francisco absolutely super—it could be my favourite city, quite easily. But the travelling, TV, etc was fairly exhausting and I am glad to have an easy weekend. We picnicked today in pretty English sea-coast weather.

Relieved to hear that the pressure on you is easing up a bit. Can't say the same here, but I feel better than for years. New York suits me—perhaps I just like a high standard of living.

My first good impression of San Francisco did not survive many subsequent visits, perhaps because my duties there were not particularly congenial.

New York, 4 July 1969

Today 4 July, and a holiday. I spent the morning in the park and at the zoo with D.

Bermuda wasn't really my favourite at all—a filthy sticky climate and incredibly conservative. I was glad to get back to New York.

We are looking forward to C's arrival next Friday and then off to the beach house. I'm not looking forward to the commuting, but otherwise it should be great.

My visit to Bermuda arose because, incredibly, like the Bahamas, it lay within my empire. The opportunities for trade promotion were diminished because the locals had no good word to say for any British product or service. This was because they expected a degree of feather-bedding which I could not, and would not, offer. Not a happy visit, including my stay in the stuffy (literally, no air conditioning) Yacht Club. I only visited Bermuda once again, at M's insistence, because she did not believe it was as boring as I had depicted. She agreed that it was.

*Aboard American Airlines to San Francisco
6 September 1969*

I write this in a sad mood, having just parted from M and the kids, who leave tomorrow for London.

We packed up the beach house sadly last Monday—a really successful place. The kids are in good form. D of course doesn't comprehend what boarding school will entail—he is just excited at the thought of flying the Atlantic and seeing his friends at Lakeside again. I feel guilty at having to leave M to see him off on the train by herself, but it can't be helped.

I shall be a full week in San Francisco doing a job I don't want to do in uncongenial company, so I am only looking forward to next Friday when I shall be flying back.

After M had seen D off on the train with all the other new boys for his prep school, she went home and drank half a bottle of vodka. I subsequently told D that that day, and those following, are the worst, hopefully, that he will ever have to experience. School problems occupied a great deal of our time in the ensuing year. Not having been at boarding school myself, I am not a judge of what we inflicted on our children, but I am confident that in our circumstances we had no alternative, and that the children probably benefited from the experience.

The job in San Francisco was to cope with the incompetent and arrogant representatives of perhaps the worst trial inflicted on us by our masters: the British National Export Council, which received taxpayers' funds to employ unqualified people to second-guess our operations, and make a nuisance of themselves, following the traditional and erroneous belief

that 'businessmen' *must* be more competent than civil servants. In the end, their incompetence became obvious, and the fashion changed, and the BNEC was replaced by a sensible organisation, the British Overseas Trade Board, which has since provided helpful advice to the Board of Trade and overseas posts, without employing a separate gang of layabouts.

New York, 4 October 1969

I am probably going back to Harvard for four months in early 1971, to take the top management course there. The Foreign Office has asked me to go, and if I get a place I shall, not being able to resist the temptation, much though I am sure that I shall hate it.

New York, 18 October 1969

The weather is cooler here and I have an early cold. Better this weekend than next, however. We are out to a black tie premiere of the Battle of Britain film on Sunday, we have a large cocktail party on Monday, I'm in Washington on Tuesday, then back for a dinner party we're giving. Philadelphia on Wednesday for a British store promotion, and actually taking M with me. The first day back in the office I have to speak to an audience of 600 in Queen's at lunch, then we're giving a black tie dinner in the evening.

New York, 31 January 1970

I'm off to Texas on Tuesday to start what promises to be a super-busy month. Texas will be warm but exhausting, I fear.

At the New York Boat Show I weakened and ordered a 9-foot, very light, British dinghy, with sails (two) and outboard which I shall collect in July in England, and bring back after summer use as luggage on the QE2. It weighs only 70 pounds, so should be reasonably mobile. Self-indulgence, though I pretend it's for the kids.

I found Dallas to be as horrible as I had expected. It was sinister and greedy, and seemed the inevitable place for the shots to have been fired from the book repository.

Very few letters from 1970 have been included—we were away from New York for three months on mid-term leave, during which we were in constant telephone contact with my sister.

New York, 11 October 1970

Lovely weekend in northern Connecticut, right in the middle of the unbelievable autumn colours. Only contretemps, their dog ran foul of a skunk the first evening we were there and couldn't be allowed within a mile of anybody, poor

thing. I didn't mind her as much as the others, but when she rubbed against my leg no-one would come near me until I had changed my trousers.

Busy life again—lots of visitors. I am fighting a proposition that the Prime Minister should address all UK staff in New York (353 of them) in my offices a week on Tuesday. I want him to do it somewhere else, preferably where I don't have to listen, still less be seen to participate.

I did manage to have the Prime Minister shifted elsewhere, though I cannot remember why I was so opposed to even listening to him.

New York, 21 November 1970

Annoying hitch in my plans. For reasons so far undisclosed the Foreign Office has cancelled my place at Harvard in February, typically without so far telling me why. I assume it is because I have to be in New York this spring when far-reaching reorganisation may be in train, but it will be nice to be told the full story in due course.

My computer week was great fun—a real mind-stretcher of systems design and programming in four computer languages, which has left me computer-saturated.

New York, 10 March 1971

We have been on our travels since we were last in contact: New Orleans, Houston, Atlanta, Ottawa, and next week Miami and, for me, Puerto Rico.

New Orleans was just as advertised, and splendid: boat trips down the bayous, lots of alligators, dinner at Antoine's. Houston was a very rich Texan oil town. The Consul-General, whose daughter was at C's school, lived in a splendid house, surrounded by mansions with every luxury except servants, the latter not being quite the thing—presumably undertones of slaves and the Confederacy. He used to cook a Sunday lunch curry, quite new to Houston, and the millionaires vied for invitations. Not to be patronising, that is exactly how a Consul-General should behave.

Atlanta, on the other hand, was still deep south. We ate in Pitti Pat's kitchen and you could almost hear the tread of Sherman's troops throughout the city. Yankees were still unwelcome.

New York, 10 July 1971

Yesterday I received an indication, which I cannot ignore, that we may be returning in September or early October. Typical Foreign Office, and nothing definite but my guess is that this will, rather than won't, happen. M naturally

furious at the possible prospect of having to pack up and return from our beach house, and the prospective ruin of our plans for an autumn holiday in Barbados with the Roberts. Will keep you posted.

New York, 4 August 1971

On 1 October, after a two-day handover, I become Head of the European Integration Department, the Foreign Office's peculiar name for the department which deals with the Common Market negotiations. All very prestigious and honour-making, but of course terrifying to one who has never even read the Treaty of Rome.

Indeed, my appointment to the European Integration Department caused a good deal of amusement among the old Common Market hands in the Foreign Office, who had been dealing with the minutiae of the negotiations for years. Almost none of them knew me, and they must have been indignant to have an ignoramus put into this vital slot. Anyway, I apologised to my new department that they would have to carry me for a while, and thus endanger their deserved reputation as the best department in the Foreign Office. However, by dint of working like stink I mastered the subject quicker, I was told, than anyone would have believed possible, and by Christmas was in confident control. But I did not enjoy the job, as the Brussels atmosphere was not for me, nor the management methods of my immediate superior, who, brilliant though he was, could only drive, not lead. So I bided my time until the Treaty was signed, and then seized an opportunity which arose outside the Foreign Office. My colleagues thought I was mad, and the Administration described me as a wrecker, but it all turned out for the best.

New York, 17 September 1971

Last letter from New York. We are heartbroken to leave the fleshpots for the poverty of Weybridge, although I am ready for a change of job. This is actually the first one in which I've done more than three years.

*We are now all packed up, car sold, gerbils farmed out, and the apartment cleaned. We move into a hotel on Monday for our last three nights, and are hopefully looking forward to a real rest on the **France**.*

Call us on the evening of 28 September—I don't suggest calling you because you are generally out.

As far as I can recall, the *France* was very pleasant and well run. We look back with deep pleasure on our years in New York, and try to return every year to keep the memories alive.



TEL AVIV
December 1976–February 1980

Windlesham, 13 November 1976

We had a good and hitchless day at the Palace, and a kind chauffeur took such a good photo of the four of us in the courtyard, that we are going to use it for a Christmas card/calendar for the family.

All the other CMGs were old friends so we enjoyed ourselves, though the wait around after was a bit boring. The family all had lunch at the Athenaeum which the kids enjoyed.

Our new plans have now crystallised to the extent that, while we cannot yet say where we are going, we plan to leave, with the kids, by air on 14 December, together with Bartholomew. We are extremely pleased with our fate.

So I have thankfully surrendered my Foreign Office job and am now being briefed for the next, always with the inhibition of not saying outside the Office where I am going. The news should be out within a couple of weeks. Meanwhile, frenzies of shopping, trying to let the house, dispose of the cars, pack up our stuff, etc.

Windlesham, 22 November 1976

Not sure if you read a national daily, but if you do there should be something in it on Thursday about my being appointed Ambassador to Tel Aviv.

We are of course enchanted—a real plum post, over which the Prime Minister agonised for weeks before deciding he could risk me.

All in a whirl. Packers tomorrow, three weeks before departure date. Loads of appointments face us, including of course an audience with the Queen if she can fit us in.

Euphoria abounding. I was delighted to be released from my horrid Foreign Office job. As Assistant Under-Secretary of State (Economic), for most of the year I had been the official leader of the British delegation, within the European Community delegation, to the Conference on International Economic Cooperation, or the North–South talks. This entailed absence in Paris for 5½ days a week, plus six weeks in Nairobi in

May, engaged in the most futile exercise of all time. Within the European Community delegation, the Commission did all the talking, while the national delegates spent their time on so-called Community coordination. The experience turned me from being a Community enthusiast to one who preferred to avoid direct involvement in their deliberations.

For less than a year, before I departed because I could no longer tolerate my immediate superior, I had been Head of the Department which was the engine-room of our negotiations to join the European Community, and consequently understood and supported why it was essential for us to join. But as the years passed my views changed. The requirement remained, but not the joy. A distinguished predecessor in Canberra told me that it had taken him three years there to make him realise that he was European. I replied that it had taken two to make me realise that I was British.

The Prime Minister's doubts about appointing me to Tel Aviv arose partly from a doubt whether, as an economic expert, I would have the political skills to cope with the wily Israelis. Happily my recent experiences in Paris were thought to have revealed a certain political skill. But any Prime Minister must always pay particular attention to the choice of incumbent for Tel Aviv, because of the very large number of Jews in both Houses of Parliament, who along with the rest of Anglo-Jewry tended to regard the Ambassador in Tel Aviv as their property. It used to be said, exaggeratedly, that the Ambassador was the only one anywhere who could, by some egregious error, bring down a British Government.

Happily my upbringing made me a very suitable choice. Manchester Grammar School used to offer 60 scholarships a year to a catchment area half the size of England. The 60 scholars, of whom to universal surprise I was one, were arguably among the 100 brightest boys in England in any particular year. It followed that a third of them would be Jewish. So with a third of the boys in my form being Jewish, I took the strong Manchester Jewish community for granted. In my form, 20 boys would go to Christian prayers, 10 to Jewish prayers. That was the way it was.

My school association had two advantages. First, when we got to Israel, I found that I knew a lot of people. For example, the chief political correspondent of the Jerusalem Post and I had languished together at the bottom of the same maths set. Second, the powerful Sieffs, founders of a British retailing empire, who tended to seek to direct the Ambassador, held no fears for me. They and their fathers, like mine, had all been at MGS, and I knew, and they knew, that when we had all been 15, we had been scruffy boys together in the same form. This rubbed off on other potentates, such as the Wolfsons and the Clores—also British retailing



*Presenting my credentials to the President of Israel, December 1976
My first step in an ambassadorial career!*

moguls, and generous donors to Israeli causes—not to mention all the Jewish members of both Houses of Parliament. I was entirely at home in Israel, and made to feel at home, from the first day. On the other hand, as I used to say, while four years in Damascus had made me pro-Israeli, some years in Israel tended to have the opposite effect. No-one in the Foreign Office ever accused me of having been brainwashed by the Israelis, as had happened to some of my predecessors.

Our entourage now included Bartholomew, our much-loved Airedale—big, soft and bouncy. M acquired him as a puppy in 1973 as a surprise for me on my return from a trip abroad. He travelled with us to Tel Aviv and subsequently to Canberra, and continued to be part of the family once we retired, but died a few years later.

Tel Aviv, 19 December 1976

Just to say all is well—indeed excellent. We gave our children's party yesterday, with some success, and have 100 staff in for drinks on Wednesday. I present my credentials in Jerusalem on Tuesday, and give a reception there thereafter.

First impressions very good. Our three Finnish maids are OK, though we look forward to the arrival of our English cook. Weather mild and sunny—we lunch in the (splendid) garden each day. Bartholomew survived the journey and is settling down. He has escaped twice, but came back each time. Today we are off on a picnic down the coast and then I have to go to Jerusalem, an hour away, to see the Foreign Minister.

The picnic down the coast was in fact past Gaza, where we ate on a beach alongside the twisted remains of guns left over from far-off battles. Only three years after the Yom Kippur War, no-one was paying much attention to what went on south of Gaza.

Tel Aviv, 15 January 1977

The kids went back at the beginning of the week, to their and our regret. They took off after Christmas for Sharm-es-Sheikh, right at the southern tip of Sinai, and had a blissful four days diving and snorkelling in the clear sea and hot sun. C hopes that she has got a job there at a diving school for the vacation.

We are settling down to our extremely busy and pleasant life. I have been getting lots of publicity in the local press, including an article about Manchester Grammar School, which has caused Old Boys to pop up all over the place.

Being an Ambassador is so far great fun, if wearing. Certainly we find the Israelis extremely congenial, if a little overwhelming en masse. But absolutely no complaints.

The beach at Sharm-es-Sheikh became an important part of our lives. Once the parents of our children's friends realised that for a £100 fare they



*Lunch at an orthodox seminary in Jerusalem with my host, Rabbi Horowitz, a fellow Mancunian, March 1973
No doubt clarifying some tricky points of the Talmud!*

could get their little dears to an improving holiday at the Embassy in Tel Aviv, we tended to be overwhelmed. One Easter I realised that we had 12 young people staying with us. I paraded them on the lawn, gave each the (very cheap) return bus fare to Sharm, plus a minimal amount for rations, and sent them off. They had a blissful time, sleeping on the beach, walking miles for food, and eventually straggled back in time for their flights. Not, I fear, what the mothers of the girls had hoped for from a stay under the wing of the British Ambassadors.

I learned that the Israelis plant a tree at any opportunity. On one occasion it fell to my lot to plant one, in the rain, to mark the 100th anniversary of the publication of Daniel Deronda. I made an impassioned speech about how it was not enough to be Jewish, one had to be a Zionist as well. Roars of applause, and afterwards a little old lady came up to me in floods of tears. I asked if I had upset her, to which she replied that I had been wonderful. She was crying because of the waste. 'Mr Ambassador, you shouldn't have been an ambassador, you should have been a rabbi.'

Tel Aviv, 29 January 1977

A great variety of eating out, including lunch with the Chief Rabbi, and a masonic dinner on the same day last week, and hundreds of calls, of which Golda Meir was the most interesting.

During a call on the Minister of the Interior, a rabbi who had held the job since the state was founded, I commented on the cosmopolitan appearance of people in the street in Tel Aviv. He replied: 'Exactly, very few people here look typically Jewish, except for yourself, of course, Mr Ambassador.' No wonder I like them so much.

Tel Aviv, 5 March 1977

We had our first house guest last week—Peter Shore [Minister for the Environment]. I've always had a lot of time for Peter Shore and he probably would have become Chancellor if the Prime Minister had shifted Healey. I get on fine with Owen, for whom I was directly working during the second half of last year. At a meeting he once said to me: 'The chap over there has got a perforating ulcer'—sure enough the next day he collapsed.

We had a member of the [European] Commission here last week, so as the President I had to give a Community lunch for him and all my colleagues. This coming week we've got a British orchestra, a concert and a reception to which we shall be escorting the Head of State and his wife.

Made a speech at a very orthodox Jewish academy last week. All the rabbis come from the north of England. The wife of the head one was from Bradford Grammar School, so orthodox that she couldn't shake hands with me, but was

of course perfectly sweet apart from this. I keep getting letters from MGS Old Boys inviting me to their kibbutzes.

M has started doing two hours of Hebrew a day. I haven't yet started lessons, and don't know if I shall, as everyone speaks beautiful English. What I say is that the First and Second Secretaries have to learn Hebrew, because they have the glittering prospect of one day being Ambassador in Tel Aviv. For me, no such hope.

Foreign Secretary David Owen was not popular with the Foreign Service, being known as Lochinvar. But we always got on well together and, as will emerge, he did me a service for which I will always be in his debt.

Tel Aviv, 24 March 1977

The kids are back. I am taking the day off to go up to Lake Galilee to launch our boat, and test it before we go down to the Gulf of Eilat for a long weekend, possibly leaving one or both of the kids there for a week or so. Spring seems to have arrived, but there is a strong wind blowing here. If it is blowing on Galilee as well we may have to stay ashore, as we all know what happens when a storm comes up on Galilee.

Last week I had to land on an oil-rig out to sea, in a tiny helicopter, in a blinding storm with a wind speed several knots above the permitted maximum for landing. We had to land, as there was nowhere else to go. Terrifying!

Quite a lot of interesting guests—the New Philharmonia Orchestra, all very pleasant. Six 'distinguished' novelists, including Iris Murdoch, Melvyn Bragg and Fay Weldon, all very un-primadonna-ish, because, as one of them said, they are all established and don't have to worry. Then yesterday the Moderator of the Church of Scotland, all lace and breeches, plus wife, daughter, chaplain, etc.

Tel Aviv, 9 April 1977

We are enjoying Easter weekend in lovely warm spring weather. We have had a peaceful Passover week, after an awesome start with Seder with the Chief Rabbi—6½ hours round the family table with poor food and no proper drink. Still, Gentiles who have had Seder with the Chief Rabbi of Israel must be fairly few in number, so we feel it was worth chalking up.

Otherwise the usual round, enlivened by the Prime Minister's resignation and growing activity in what by UK standards is an extremely dirty election campaign.

There were of course two Chief Rabbis—this one, Ashkenazi, and the Sephardi one. Israel was founded by the European Ashkenazim, but in 1977 the Sephardim were becoming more influential with the influx of

migrants from North Africa. They were nationalistic, and provided support for the expansionist policies of the Begin government. Recently, with the arrival in their turn of hundreds of thousands of migrants from Russia, the tide has begun, I think, to turn back in favour of the Ashkenazim.

Rabbi Goren paid me a valued compliment on one occasion. One of our Finnish maids had taken up with a young Israeli, and wanted to convert and to marry him. Rabbi Goren, quite rightly, was very hard on such young women, who were required to serve a strict apprenticeship before he would convert them. So Katrina, for example, despite the fact that we ourselves kept a kosher kitchen (for which we were celebrated), had to have her own cutlery, etc. One day Rabbi Goren telephoned me about Katrina. He asked if I thought she was now ready to convert. I protested that as a Gentile I could hardly be a judge, to which he replied: 'John, if you say she is ready to convert, I will convert her.' I said that I thought that she was, and he did.

Tel Aviv, 19 June 1977

The new Israeli Government takes office tomorrow, and we shall have a whole new scene.

M's birthday went well. We went to a charity ball (cancer) she has been working on, and it turned into a sort of birthday party for her—at the country home of one of those extremely rich British Jews who also have large houses here.



*Prime Minister Begin and Mrs Begin (right) at our party to celebrate the Queen's Silver Jubilee, Tel Aviv, June 1977
Begin proposed the Loyal Toast — a new experience for him!*

Tomorrow a farewell party by the outgoing Foreign Minister. We had Dayan, his successor, to dinner last week, so our feet are reasonably well under the table—just as well, as Her Majesty's Government are certainly going to disoblige the Israelis in the fairly near future, I fancy.

I shall be sorry when my period in the Presidency of the [European] Community comes to an end in two weeks' time, and I revert to being the junior Community Ambassador.

As I predicted, the new right-wing government under Begin was on the whole no more disobligeing, and no less, than their Labour predecessors, and life continued much as before, except that as individuals we liked the new ones rather more. M in particular became more and more immersed in charitable works, which went down very well. I fear that, presidency or no presidency, our hard work at our jobs did not endear us to our colleagues. Having discovered that no predecessor, or indeed any other ambassador, had ever made contact with Menachem Begin while he was Leader of the Opposition, because of his undoubted terrorist record, I did so and was invited to lunch in the Knesset. He was quite humourless, and deeply pro-British. I suspected that his English may have been better than his Hebrew, a language which I am told he could not write—and who should blame him? He apparently listened to the BBC World Service every morning. I felt no qualms about meeting him, remembering Kenyatta, Makarios et al.

I could write many pages about my relationship with Begin, both before and after he became Prime Minister. He was a disciple of Jabotinsky, who in the 1930s invented revisionism, whereby Polish Jews were supposed to emerge from the ghetto and behave like Polish gentlemen, clicking heels and kissing hands, etc. On one occasion Begin said to me: 'Come on, it's after 6pm, let's have a man's drink,' whereupon he poured two miniscule glasses of sweet vermouth.

He took a shine to me, and used to talk about all sorts of things. Once, when he said that to invite President Sadat to Jerusalem was the most difficult decision of his life, he added that the second most difficult had been to order the hanging of the British sergeants in the orchard north of Tel Aviv. But, he added, after that the British hanged no more of his people in Acre gaol.

Of the three terrorist organisations—Palmach, Irgun and the Stern gang—the Irgun, Begin's mob, was nastier than the Palmach but not nearly as nasty as the Stern gang, led by a very nasty man, Yitzhak Shamir, who became Prime Minister in the 1980s. But even members of the gang had their good points. One evening I sat enthralled while two former members

told me how they had so damaged the structure of the British Embassy in the Via Venti Settembre in Rome, without causing any casualties, that it had to be pulled down.

My close relationship with Begin, as Prime Minister, greatly annoyed my colleagues, who used to have to apply to see him, while I could walk into the room of his Chef de Cabinet at any time. But this was also due to the fact that the Chef de Cabinet was an exact Manchester contemporary, who had been at the Central High School at the same time as I was at the Grammar School.

I liked Begin in a strange way. I once stuck my neck out and tried to defend him to Mrs Thatcher, and got blown up for my pains. As with her predecessor, you could sometimes leave her presence feeling your neck to see if your head was still firmly on your shoulders.

Tel Aviv, 6 November 1977

We had a pleasant time with the Wilsons last week—Harold very relaxed and easy, not talking totally about himself; Mary in splendid form. Lots of high-powered meals for them—on one occasion I was sitting at a table with four Nobel prize-winners, only two of whom I had ever heard of.

Next week Edward Heath and Tim Kitson [his Private Secretary], after which I shall be in London for five days with Begin. Just one day at Chequers and then doing Anglo-Jewish things.

Tel Aviv, 23 November 1977

As you can imagine, life has recently been busy. Mr Heath and Sir Tim Kitson were pleasant guests, and it was nice to know them better. Dinner at our house on the 17th saw me, the Deputy Prime Minister, and the Foreign Minister all queuing up in the study to talk to the Israeli Prime Minister, while I spoke to the Foreign Office five times during dinner. But I suppose being at the airport to greet Sadat was the most historic moment at which I have ever been present. The sense of atmosphere was extraordinary.

Even today, meeting Sadat on that evening remains the single most 'historic' occasion in my experience.

Tel Aviv, 7 December 1977

I had an interesting but chilly week in London, in attendance [with Begin] all the time. I quite liked, I must say, sitting on the Prime Minister's right in the Cabinet Room for the meetings, with the Foreign Secretary demoted to his left. I also enjoyed being at the top table at the dinners, with such as Owen, Heath, Wilson, etc sitting below the salt. The Prime Minister and the Secretary of State

were both unusually affable to me—absence clearly makes the heart grow fonder. But I've had enough of Begin for a bit. However the visit will make my life a bit easier here.

A friend wrote to say that M and I were seen on TV in the Knesset during Sadat's visit. Only thing, it wasn't M, but Dayan's wife, who looks like M, as well as being her very close friend.

Tel Aviv, 21 December 1977

Funny story about Begin's visit. I was waiting at the bottom of the stairs at No 10 on one occasion when the Prime Minister, bringing Begin from the front door, pointed in my direction and said: 'There's a familiar face,' even though I'd been in both their company three hours before. Begin went on about 'Indeed a familiar and friendly face. Always nice to see the Ambassador,' etc. The Prime Minister: 'I didn't mean him, I meant that bust of Disraeli.'

My recollection is that Begin really behaved himself on this trip, his first official visit as Prime Minister, and I rather think perhaps even his first to London. He hugely enjoyed, in his role as a dedicated parliamentarian, all the ceremony and tradition.

Another favourite Begin story occurred about this time. The Jerusalem Prize is presented annually, amid much ceremony, to a distinguished Jew. In 1977 the Prize was awarded to, in my view, by far the most appropriate recipient—Sir Isaiah Berlin. In his first year in office, Begin wanted the prize-giving to emphasise the new, nationalistic face of Israel, an aspect which Berlin detested. When he rose to accept the Prize, Berlin's first words were: 'I am British, Russian and Jewish, in that order.' Begin's face was a mixture of astonishment, incredulity and dismay. I shall never forget it, adding as it did yet another reason for me to revere the speaker.

Tel Aviv, 3 March 1978

We had a pretty hectic couple of days with the Owens and their entourage, but we survived and are now getting ready for an Old Boys supper on Sunday, some 50 souls, and a smaller dinner for Peter Mason [the former Highmaster of MGS] on Thursday.

Being known to run a Kosher kitchen was a help with the entertaining, but one potential guest rang my secretary to ask about arrangements for dinner. She explained about the kitchen, but he asked if it had been blessed by a rabbi, to which she reasonably if irritably replied: 'For Christ's sake, they're Christians, you know.' He said that he would not be able to accept our invitation.

The strictness of observance in dietary and other matters varied enormously, from my extra-particular schoolmate to the majority of our friends, who ignored the rules. I got into slight trouble on a radio programme, when asked if I missed pork, shellfish, etc by replying that I did not, as we often used to eat in the houses of our Israeli friends.

Tel Aviv, 21 March 1978

The Peter Mason week was interesting, though he's a pretty demanding sort of chap. He left, thank heaven, the morning of the terrorist raid. We flew into the nearby tiny local airport in the middle of it all, but were unharmed.

Tel Aviv, 8 April 1978

Your friend got the story wrong. The actual quote I gave Reuters [when asked what had been my reaction to a map of our house being found in a dead terrorist's pocket] was: 'We locked the doors and kept the dog hungry'—a comment which I am told went down well. Indeed a chap who was in the army with me wrote to congratulate me. Unfortunately, the reporter did not ask me the dog's name and why, in which case I was going to say: 'Bartholomew, because he skins people alive'.

This had been a slightly alarming incident. A group of three suspect Arabs had been apprehended, one shot trying to escape. He proved to have on him a sketch map of where our house was situated, and nothing else to indicate their intentions. But nothing further developed. Incidentally, it was always a bit dicey being guarded by Israeli security, because they gave the impression that they were more concerned to catch the miscreants than to protect oneself.

Tel Aviv, 23 September 1978

Sorry not to have written since we got back, but I've been a bit busy, what with Camp David and everything.

Respite from guests until we have the W. Churchills to stay in November—though I shouldn't be surprised if the Prime Minister pops out, as he presumably won't have much to do in the House of Commons.

My contacts with Begin's office during this time paid off handsomely, as I was able to tell London more than either Washington or Cairo about progress at the Camp David talks—summit talks between President Sadat and Begin, from which the Israeli-Egypt Peace Treaty eventually emerged.

Tel Aviv, 11 November 1978

M and I are going to Cairo, Luxor and Aswan for a week from 30 November, I at public expense and M not.

Most of the Anglo-Jewish community seems to be here at the moment, keeping us busy. But tonight a change: the US Marines 20th anniversary ball—the first time I shall have worn a black tie in Israel.

I was the first Ambassador to Israel from any country to visit Egypt. The Israelis found it very strange that we had spent four years in Damascus. We were constantly asked what it was like, they having been brainwashed into thinking that it was hell on earth. I once mentioned to the Israeli Chief of Staff that Syrian soldiers, instead of being blood-thirsty gangsters as they were pictured, in fact had three interests in life: staying alive, girls and football. He was much struck by this, and said that he would always make that point to his people when talking to them in future.

Tel Aviv, 9 December 1978

We got back from Egypt on Thursday. It was super. Upper Egypt—Luxor and Aswan—is out of this world, and I would strongly recommend a voyage up the Nile in a paddle river-boat. There seemed to be lots of English visitors doing this. It can't be too expensive—not like going from Tel Aviv to Cairo, which costs about three times as much as crossing the Atlantic.

I also did some business in Cairo and carried a secret message from [the Egyptian Defence Minister] to Jerusalem [to his Israeli counterpart], a fact of which I have omitted to apprise Dr Owen. The top Egyptians were nicer than I expected, but Cairo is a dismal place, and I am glad that I shall not have to serve there.

In M's absence [in London], I expect to have to cope alone with H. Wilson, who will come for Golda Meir's funeral. Happily I know him quite well. And the Prime Minister, who threatened to descend during the Christmas recess, will now not do so.

I cannot recall what message I was entrusted with, but it did me no harm in Tel Aviv to have been asked to convey it. The opposite would have been the case if the Foreign Office had ever found out about it.

The Meir funeral remains in my mind for two reasons. First, it was a filthy wet day and the cemetery was a sea of mud, right up to our calves. Second, the egregious Lord Kagan, who was trying to avoid extradition to face arrest on fraud charges in Britain, spent the day trying to sidle up to Lord Wilson, while the latter and I spent the day ensuring that he failed.

One of my quarrels with the Israeli Government was over their refusal to extradite Jews to Britain, especially as the crimes for which they were wanted were almost invariably fraud, speculation, embezzlement, etc. As a Jew, Lord Kagan could not be extradited, but in 1980 he went to Paris, from where he was extradited and subsequently sentenced to two years' imprisonment and stripped of his knighthood.

On his own, Lord Wilson was good company, thus again proving Mason's Law, that Prime Ministers improve greatly as soon as they stop being Prime Minister, and indeed become friends. While we were in Tel Aviv and Canberra every living British Prime Minister stayed with us at one time or another, and we always enjoyed it.

Tel Aviv, 11 March 1979

All a bit busy with President Carter, but not very directly involved. Makes a change after our own recent stream of visitors. The Whitelaws were very much better news than I expected, and I spent a lot of time trying to persuade him to be the next Foreign Secretary—a job she would like him to have but which he says he doesn't fancy.

Tel Aviv, 7 May 1979

I lost all my bets on the election, because I thought the majority would be less than 25. The appointment of Carrington and Gilmour [to the Foreign Office] arouses gloom here, as they are both rightly regarded as pro-Arab, particularly the latter. I shall have to tread carefully with both governments for a while, and try to deal directly with Mrs T, as I did successfully with Callaghan.

And of course our tenure of office here becomes less secure, if they decide on some general post. Fingers crossed.

It was amusing to see how Begin, despite misgivings about my new masters, greatly welcomed the advent of a Tory government, which he assumed would be a branch of the Conservative Friends of Israel. The opposite was the case and the cosy relationship which he thought, mistakenly, he had had with Callaghan was not reproduced with Mrs Thatcher. Communication was rightly re-established through the Ambassador, and not via PM-to-PM telephone calls, full of misunderstanding on both sides. I once got hold of the Israeli account of one of these, and was able to demonstrate the extent of the misunderstandings which Callaghan had hitherto refused to accept.

Tel Aviv, 27 May 1979

I am just back from a quick trip to London with Mr Begin. I took him to lunch at No 10, where it is fair to say that he and Mrs Thatcher did not hit it off—faults on both sides. I was also able to talk to her, Lord C and Douglas Hurd on my own, which was useful.

While home I discovered that we owe a great debt to David Owen. My loyal colleagues had recommended me for South Africa, and Owen, almost as he left office, put his foot down and said that we had to stay here, bless him. So although our tenure is not totally safe, we have at least been spared South Africa, and Lord C gave me no indication of other plans for us.

In fact, the lunch at No 10 was a disaster. At one point Lord Carrington asked to be excused, and Begin said to him: 'Lord Carrington, please have the goodness not to interrupt me when I am speaking to your Prime Minister.' Lord Carrington understandably went puce. There was also an interchange about why the allies had not bombed the railways into the camps, about which Mrs Thatcher had understandably not been briefed. Begin was, I think, her first visiting Prime Minister, and may have set off her celebrated dislike of her opposite numbers. A bright spot was that next day Lord Carrington spoke to me approvingly about Begin's Chef de Cabinet, and I was able to commend him on the ground of our common background. 'So he's a Pom, is he?' said Lord Carrington of a man who was subsequently Israeli Ambassador in London, and Canberra, the Israelis having a pleasant habit of pensioning off their London Ambassadors to a retirement post in Australia, where of course Yehuda and I met up again.

Tel Aviv, 11 November 1979

I have just got back from reading the lesson at the Remembrance Day service at the local [British] war cemetery—a beautiful sunny day and a large turnout. We now have a very full programme until the New Year and thereafter, but we will no doubt cope. The Begin government is slowly breaking up, but it may take quite a long time to do so.

I had to fit in three Remembrance Day ceremonies in quick succession, at the Commonwealth cemeteries in Haifa, Tel Aviv and Beersheva, the latter being more of an Australian occasion because of the men of the Australian Light Horse who lie there as a result of their historic capture of the city from the Turks in 1918. I always found these ceremonies intensely moving, with their high attendance of Israelis proudly wearing their British army medals, in absolute certainty that to have served in the

British forces was the right thing to have done. As I recall, the lesson I was given to read was always Ecclesiastes 3, presumably on the ground that it was safe for a Gentile to read to a Jewish congregation.

At one of these ceremonies I met the widow of a British soldier who had been shot in the back by an Israeli on Lydda station. She had come to visit her husband's grave.

Tel Aviv, 17 November 1979

Many thanks indeed for the super anniversary card. Next Thursday we are giving a grand dinner—black tie, unheard of here—for our Israeli friends, which means half the Cabinet, if they are still in office by then.

The party was to celebrate our silver wedding anniversary, which occurred on 15 November. Three further things occurred on that day to make it memorable, about none of which I could tell my sister. First, I was asked if I would accept a knighthood in the New Year honours. One has to send a telegram saying just 'Yes', as of course any leak before New Year's Eve would be fatal. Second, I was told that I had been appointed High Commissioner in Canberra. Third, I was told that I had been promoted at an extremely young age, 52, to the top grade of the Service. When I told M the news over lunch, her sensible reaction was to enquire whether we would be able to take Bartholomew, our Airedale, to Australia with us. It was a shrewder question than either of us knew. To get to Canberra, Bartholomew had to spend six months in quarantine in England, six months with our tenants in England, and then three months in quarantine in Australia, where for good measure he acquired heartworm.

But of course we could tell my sister none of this, nor indeed our children that their lives were about to change once again.

Tel Aviv, 1 December 1979

Winter has now arrived here, and we have the heating on. It always seems incredible in the summer that the moment will come, but we now have winter for three months.

Although the news is not to be publicised, this means that we shall not see spring here again. We are leaving at the end of February. Our destination cannot yet be disclosed, though it will be made known in early January. Meanwhile, we expect to be in London during March and April, not least in order to get the house ready to let.

We shall be exceedingly sorry to leave it all here, but three years is three years, and on we go.

Tel Aviv, 27 December 1979

*Sometime next week our move from here should be announced and perhaps also our destination. Since you have been visiting **Sunday Telegraph**—reading relations you have no doubt had your attention drawn to Kenneth Rose's speculative piece about Canberra.*

We plan to leave here on 25 February, leaving Caroline behind in Eilat. David will be with us for the Easter vacation, but we expect both of them to be in Britain or Israel during the summer, D to earn some money and C, I hope, doing so for a change.

*Happy New Year. If you want to know more about us than I can at present tell you, I fear it means glancing at the Court page of the Times for a bit, which as far as I know is as much publicity as ambassadors get. But I suppose the **Guardian** might carry one of the items.*

By the time she got this letter my sister knew of my knighthood, and actually telephoned to congratulate us. We agreed that although her husband, father and brother, in an unusual treble, had all been awarded CBEs, my mother would have been overwhelmed. How sad that she had not survived to the age of 87 to know about it. Imagination does boggle a bit at the thought of her at that age.

In Israel, we were at a New Year's Eve party at Teddy Kollek's, the Mayor of Jerusalem, when I walked Flora Lewis, the journalist with whom I had contested the final of the waltz competition in Warsaw, with news off the wire of my elevation. So the party turned into a shindig in our honour.

Tel Aviv, 9 January 1980

It was nice to hear from you on New Year's Eve. Thanks for phoning. I hope you inferred that we are in fact going to Canberra, probably towards the end of April. A long way away, but still one of our half-dozen most important posts and an unprecedented promotion at my age, which leaves my options healthily open when I leave there. Lord Carrington was High Commissioner there himself [in the 1950s]. This means perhaps an unwelcome supervision from him, but it's a very long way away.

We received many farewell presents. One we shall treasure is an earthenware jug inscribed in ballpoint: 'To Jhon and Margaret from M and Rachel Dayan. From Samaria c.1500 BC'. Moshe had repaired a crack in it—he had obviously removed it from some illegal dig. He had inscribed it in ballpoint (and incidentally misspelt my name) to ensure that we kept it, as of course we shall, with pride.

As I should have known, I did Lord Carrington an injustice when I feared that he might interfere. On the contrary, when I asked him for a final word of advice before I departed, he told me he would not bother me, just as long as I paid him the same courtesy. No departing envoy can ever have heard more inspiring words.

Becoming a Sir and Lady was not as strange as I expected, and of course now, 18 years later, it seems perfectly natural. Then, in Australia, a knighthood was necessary equipment, as there were 25 per cent more knights per capita than in Britain, some, I fear, not acquired entirely on merit. Now they have been abolished and we are a diminishing band, becoming curiosities. One problem is being addressed as 'Sir Mason' and not feeling able to correct one's interlocutor, for fear of being thought toffy-nosed.

This is one of my last letters from Tel Aviv, which we left with great sadness after three happy and, we think, useful years. Neither of us has been back, but we keep in touch with friends and occasionally get signs that we are remembered with affection.

Windlesham, 15 March 1980

David joins us on Tuesday for the investiture, for me a day of rest in a hectic series of visits in London. I am busy with minor repairs to the house. Our neighbours drop in to say welcome, and the village was delighted to see Lady Mason in their midst.

Australia sounds fun, but tricky, as we begin to learn a bit about it. Clearly I have a fairly hot seat, not least because Mrs Thatcher dislikes Fraser even more than she dislikes other Prime Ministers, which is saying something. The Queen will be in Canberra in May, but we do not have to do much for the Queen of Australia. She has very sweetly asked the wife of the President of Israel to tea, in response to my recommendation, and will thus give much pleasure.



Enjoying the fruits of office, Canberra, 1982



CANBERRA May 1980–September 1984

I set foot in Australia for the first time on 29 April 1980, as the British High Commissioner. Some explanation is required of my position and role, which was different from that of an Ambassador or a High Commissioner in most other places.

It is the convention that members of the Commonwealth exchange High Commissioners, not Ambassadors. But a High Commissioner in a country of which the Queen is also Head of State is not an Ambassador, as the Queen of England cannot send an Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to herself as Queen of Australia. She is indeed represented in Australia by her viceroy, the Governor-General, whom she appoints on the advice of her Australian Ministers. The High Commissioner is thus no more than the emissary of the British Government to the Australian Government. I presented no letters of credentials, but only a letter of introduction from Mrs Thatcher to Malcolm Fraser, the then Australian Prime Minister.

While Her Majesty's Ambassadors are very much Top Brits in countries to which they are accredited, I was perhaps Top Brit, but did not take precedence over all other Britons in Australia, including for example the British Prime Minister when on a visit. On the other hand, the British High Commissioner has a special position in the diplomatic hierarchy, arising from the fact that for many years he had been the *only* diplomatic representative. This created hangovers in my day, when they were indeed already out of date. Thus some Ambassadors resented the fact that at the Remembrance Day ceremony I alone got to lay a separate wreath, while the others just had to put theirs down somewhere. It was also resented, by the bureaucrats as well as the diplomats, that my car's registration plate was DC1, and my wife's DC2. So it was decided to call in the old diplomatic number plates, and reissue new ones to be drawn at random—to make it easier, it was said, for the police to identify the various embassies. The draw was of course perfectly fair, and it was purely chance that the number drawn for me was 69. How people laughed.

I soon perceived, as had my predecessors, though perhaps to a lesser degree, that there would not be much government-to-government work to do in Canberra. In any case Ministers were often away themselves—I once had to travel to a remote part of Queensland to see the Foreign Minister. So I decided, first, that I would spend as much time as I was asked in Sydney and Melbourne, where Australia actually happens, and not in Canberra, where it does not. Second, I would travel as much as possible, to let Australians see an actual average Pom (my preferred term) on the hoof. This was not difficult, as Australians have a huge appetite for visitors, from whom they usually require some sort of speech. I claim during my time to have visited every Australian city or town of 5000 inhabitants. This was not as difficult as it sounds. Count them.

Before we left London, Lord Carrington, who had himself been High Commissioner to Australia in the 1950s, told me that if we showed that we liked Australians, they would like us. That we have now been Australian citizens for 11 years shows that we did.

Westminster House, Canberra, 4 May 1980

We arrived safely on Tuesday and are now settled in. Everything excellent, and better and nicer than we expected. Also much more British.

Canberra is a beautiful and incredibly spacious city, with the leaves turning at present. Our house is in super condition, and the servants and M's secretary run it so that we don't notice. Our new car was waiting for us, looking very nice, and my official Rolls, thank heaven, is not the smallest sort, so there is more room than we feared.

My own huge staff are welcoming and pleasant, and apparently efficient. And the Aussies have been welcoming—I've seen the Prime Minister twice already, and the Foreign Minister, and we were received like old friends by the (Jewish) Governor-General and his wife. The press have been kind too. So all good.

Naturally we are deep into entertaining. But no house guests on the horizon yet. Our heavy stuff from Eilat is still in Sydney, awaiting my certificate, instantly despatched, that the garden tools were cleaned before packing and that the bamboo furniture contains no straw!

My huge staff did not last long. With active encouragement from London, within six months I had got rid of a Minister's post, five counsellors and a suitable number down the line. (This was no reflection on the incumbents at the time—there were just too many of us for the work required.) Although Canberra was regarded as an important post, it no longer required the top-heavy weighting of the old Commonwealth Office days.

I settled with the Foreign Office for one absolutely first-class flyer, to do the economic work, and the rest good and competent operators. I also had a large and helpful staff under the Defence Adviser.

Canberra, 24 May 1980

Life here continues along our first excellent impressions. We spent a couple of nights at our Melbourne flat, which is excellent, and we shall spend all of the week after next in Sydney.

I was up early this morning to greet the Duke of Edinburgh, coming in from Canada, and we both go out this evening to greet the Queen, coming in from London, for only five days, poor lady.

Their Majesties were in Canberra for the opening of the new High Court building, as were the Lord Chief Justices of England, Scotland and Northern Ireland, for whom we gave our first grand dinner party.

Interesting aspect of my relations with the Australian Royal Family. I had no responsibility for them while they were in Australia, and had to give no Queen's Birthday party, as did Ambassadors elsewhere, but I was permitted to greet them on arrival and farewell them. But at all times I had to be careful. On one occasion I annoyed people in London by reminding them that when the Royal Yacht was being used by the Queen of Australia, it would not be available for British committees etc wanting to use it for British promotions, as they did elsewhere. On the other hand, I also had constantly to tell Australians that they could not use me as a channel of communication to their Queen.

We were indeed lucky to have our two flats. They enabled us to give full value to our representational duties in both Melbourne and Sydney, which were, as I have said, in many ways more important than those in Canberra. I should add that it may have been the magnificent view of the harbour from our Sydney flat that first made us think Sydney might be the best place in the world to live.

Sydney, 12 July 1980

We are down here in our flat for the weekend—or part of it; we have a lunch in Canberra tomorrow, and then a whole week there, naturally of entertaining. Last week we were in Adelaide, staying at Government House, and sleeping in the Royal beds, and we look forward to Hobart next week.

Being entertained by the State Governors, and staying in Government Houses, was of varying fun. We never stayed with the Governors in Sydney

or Melbourne, where we had our own accommodation, nor in fact in Brisbane, but we had splendid times in Adelaide and Hobart, though not quite so much in Perth. In particular, we remember with warm affection the Burburys in Hobart, which was our favourite.

Sydney, 7 August 1980

We are here for a few days, after a flying visit to Brisbane again. Two days in Canberra over the weekend, then off to Darwin.

Our first impression of Brisbane was of a country city full of strange people, who thought of themselves as Queenslanders, not Australians, and were contentedly governed by a corrupt, gerrymandering State government, run at the time by a rather eccentric character. He and I had a passage of arms when I told him that he was mistaken in believing that he knew of a car which was run by a small reactor: you just poured water in, and the reactor turned it into hydrogen, which drove the car. He said that I lacked faith.

It was really a pretty uneasy place to visit. I fear that, much though Brisbane has changed for the better, I still feel some disquiet when I go there. Perhaps the ghost (not quite yet) of Joh Bjelke-Petersen still affects me.

Canberra, 24 August 1980

We have had a week at home, which I have spent in bed with flu, no doubt caused by a transition from 35 degrees in Darwin to 2 degrees in Melbourne within five hours. Off this evening for two weeks in Western Australia, then Adelaide again for two nights, ten days in Sydney, back to Canberra, then Melbourne, Sydney, etc. Should slow down, we are told, as summer approaches—at least we shall, after Perth, have done all the capitals for a year.

Signs of spring—daffodils, and blossoms on the trees here in Canberra—makes a change from crocodiles, water buffalo and orchids in Darwin, and no doubt even stranger things in north-west Australia later next week.

While Perth is not faintly alarming like Brisbane, it is nevertheless a city where I cannot comfortably spend more than a week at a time, before becoming a bit claustrophobic. In London before we left I met a postgraduate student from Perth. I asked where else in Australia she had been, and she replied: 'I've never been anywhere but Perth, and when I get back, I'm never going anywhere but Perth.'

A pleasant event in Perth was that in a speech I mentioned that my aunt had been Principal of Perth Presbyterian Ladies College in the 1920s, and

that one of the Houses was named after her—Finlayson House. The next morning the Premier delivered some material about Auntie Elsie to our hotel. The Kimberleys, in the north-west, were splendid and remote. In Kununurra, the ‘capital’, the administrator gave a party for us. It transpired that his recently widowed Scottish mother-in-law had lately come to live with his family, from a lifetime in Leamington Spa. When I commented that she must find it all a bit strange, she agreed, but said that when the setting sun shone on the brick red hills surrounding the town: ‘It does look a wee bit like Scotland’. Good for her.

Our two days in Adelaide on the way back from Perth were special. I was there as the lunchtime speaker at the opening of the Royal Adelaide Agricultural Show. I took the opportunity to remind my agricultural audience, who think of Britain as covered in cobblestones, that we produce 70 per cent of our temperate food, and as much grain and meat as Australia and New Zealand together. This was news to my audience, who were amazed.

But the joy of the occasion was that, sitting just below me, was Don Bradman! I told the audience that I had before me the man who had nearly ruined my childhood, causing me to go to bed summer evening after summer evening in tears because Bradman wasn’t out. I said that, as a good Lancastrian, I had only enjoyed his batting when Australia had been playing Yorkshire. When we got home, there was a letter from him, in his neat handwriting, giving all the scores he had ever made against both Lancashire and Yorkshire, and showing that he had made more runs against the former! We had a chat afterwards: a milestone in my life!



‘Hero worshipping’ — with Sir Donald Bradman (right), Adelaide, September 1984

I had the privilege of getting to know Bradman better. When in an earlier comment I said that Pope John XXIII and Chou En-lai were the most remarkable men I had met, I was keeping Don Bradman in a different category, where he fits by himself.

Canberra, 11 October 1980

We are now settled in the south-east for the summer. It seems to work out at 40% Canberra, 30% Sydney and 30% Melbourne, which suits us. We had a pleasant time with Princess Alexandra, who was as super as ever, and are now awaiting the elections a week today. I am public speaking even more than usual, as institutions thrash around for speakers at functions, there being no politicians available. Australians have a passion for speakers even greater than Americans or Israelis, but fortunately 20 minutes is their attention span, which makes it very easy.

If I achieved any distinction as High Commissioner, it was as a public speaker, chiefly perhaps because of my ability to dispense with notes. I have explained to people that the trick is to have building bricks in your mind, to stick to those and let the words that fill each brick take care of themselves. Happily for me, in my retirement I still get asked to speak and lecture, or chair seminars, and am now able to charge a fee.

Ten days before this letter M and I had attended the Australian Rules Grand Final in Melbourne, together with some 100,000 rabid Melburnians. We were in the Governor-General's entourage, though separated for lunch and indeed by a barrier for the game itself. I scandalised the other guests by kissing M across the barrier, an unheard-of act of recognition towards a mere woman. Fortunately I intercepted M's knitting as we got out of the car: if she had taken *that* into the ground we would have been deported to New South Wales. The Governor-General and I, accompanied by our wives, then had to make our way in his aircraft to attend the annual dinner in Sydney of the Order of St Michael and St George. This involved changing in mid-flight into full white tie and tails, with gongs. Even with the help of Sir Zelman's valet, this was not exactly Lesson One.

Melbourne, 2 November 1980

We are down here for the great Melbourne horse-racing weekend, culminating in the Melbourne Cup on Tuesday, which rates a public holiday here in Victoria and a general work stoppage elsewhere in Australia. A social must at which, rightly enough, we are treated as the cream of the cream. All very nice—morning suits and smart outfits, except for the fact that the weather, as so often in Melbourne, is absolutely ghastly—wet, cold and windy.

Being fond of horses, M loved these occasions, while I found them boring, especially the long waits between races. While such admissions are verging on treasonous, I discovered my feelings were shared by the then Governor-General, and his successor.

One of the enjoyable functions I attended while in Melbourne was the annual St Andrew's Night dinner. A tribal expatriate occasion full of haggis, athole brose and Burns verses, the dinner is taken extremely seriously by the membership, for which there is a long waiting list. The toast to Scotland was brilliantly given by High Court judge Sir Ninian Stephen. The address deeply depressed me, as I had been invited to give it the following year, and he seemed an impossible act to follow. Sir Ninian Stephen subsequently became an outstanding Governor-General and, together with his wife, our close personal friends. I must have survived in following him in 1981, because I was subsequently invited to speak at the two following dinners, an honour of which I remain very proud.

The President of the Melbourne Scots in 1980 was Malcolm Fraser and, being a giant, he presented an awesome figure in a kilt, with his huge thighs appearing under it like oak trees. In his sporran he carried the most delicate of lace handkerchiefs. I discovered this when he kindly gave me a lift back to Canberra in his aircraft.

Sydney, 4 December 1980

Summer seems to have arrived—I swam today in the Harbour water, two minutes from here, but the temperature variations are extraordinary—15 degrees Celsius in a day, or between cities. The British picture of Australia as always sunny is quite illusory. The advent of Christmas however seems strange—summer coming and snow in the shop windows! Now is the great holiday season, and Australia is virtually about to close for six weeks.

Canberra, 27 December 1980

We have had a splendid Christmas so far, the kids in great form and enjoying the sun and the pool. Also two other young people [Carol Thatcher and an air hostess daughter of an old Peterhouse friend], who have added to the pleasure. For Christmas lunch we had a huge barbeque round the pool, and cancelled Christmas dinner.

Last letter of 1980, after a splendid first eight months in Australia. As is always the way, we were probably more spontaneous than in successive years, when we were often repeating what we had done before. Perhaps we were already beginning to toy with the idea of retiring early and living in Sydney. I cannot remember.

Canberra, 20 February 1981

Recent highlights: M driving a tank, to her great delight, me buying a single-seat kayak for use in Sydney Harbour, various yachting days on very posh yachts indeed. To come, unveiling the new model Rolls in Sydney next week (my own new, posher, one is still being built), taking the salute at a tattoo in Melbourne, greeting the Prince of Wales and dealing variously with him, the usual round of speech-making, stretching as far as the eye can see—full up until June.

The party we gave recently for the Halle Orchestra in Sydney was splendid. The manager was a contemporary of mine at Manchester Grammar School—naturally.

One further highlight at this time was the visit of Jim and Audrey Callaghan—old friends and a delight to have around. They were made greatly welcome by Australians, and added much to our image and prestige.

Sydney, 15 April 1981

Here in Sydney (as usual), on this occasion with Prince Charles. We lunched with him here yesterday, and the day before in Canberra, and are seeing him open the Royal Sydney Show this afternoon, after we have been the guests of honour at lunch. He is in good heart, and going down extremely well.

We had a houseful of admirals and their wives last weekend, for a very good naval seminar in Canberra.

I cannot remember why we were permitted such close contact with His Royal Highness on this occasion, which was perhaps the happiest of our time with him.

The problem with having admirals to stay, especially when there were three of them at once, was that our admirable Hong Kong Chinese butler, George, was a Chief Petty Officer steward in the Royal Navy, and would drop me like a brick to look after any admirals in the house. However, I always welcomed admirals to Canberra, despite losing George's services temporarily, because we were trying to flog conventional submarines and an aircraft carrier to the Royal Australian Navy. It was a stroke of good luck that we failed to sell the 2400 sub which turned out, I understand, to be a dog.

Canberra, 16 May 1981

All continues well and busy here. It looks as though David has got a July–September construction job at the Shell refinery in Geelong, and will be here end of June. Geelong is about 700 miles away, but I expect that we shall see

him occasionally. Caroline is trying to get an August–January job at the Marine Biology Institute in Sydney. And Bartholomew comes out [of quarantine] on 25 June, so we may all be united for Christmas.

A suspected letter bomb was blown up in our Sydney letterbox a few days ago, but our dinner party inside continued nevertheless, and it almost certainly wasn't suspicious. I'm being followed everywhere by a police posse, but I hope they'll ease off soon.

The bomb turned out to be the school report of the boy who lived in the flat below. The Special Branch and the bomb disposal squad enjoyed the practice, but I could have wished that the television cameras had not shown quite so clearly where we lived.

Our son's job, which involved designing and constructing drains and bridges in the muddy and cold Geelong winter, was excellent practical experience for a budding civil engineer. But it confirmed David in his determination to become a television producer, which he now most successfully is.

Canberra, 24 May 1981

Last evening I attended a gruesome occasion for me, fine for all the others. It was a dinner in Melbourne kindly given by a club whose raison d'être is to sing. They walk into dinner singing, sing throughout the meal, and individuals are required to sing solos. As you will be aware, the latter is beyond my capacity, so instead I was permitted to tell a story. My choice was quite unsuitable—through nervousness—and I departed under a cloud. All my fault, but I instructed my Private Secretary that under no circumstances was he to entertain another invitation from these kind people.

I include this excerpt just to remind myself of what I recall as my most embarrassing experience during my time in Canberra, perhaps indeed in my whole career.

Canberra, 12 July 1981

We are off to Queensland and the Northern Territory this afternoon for two weeks, including actually a weekend holiday on the Reef, at a very expensive place called Lizard Island, where they take only 20 guests at a time.

Apart from Lizard Island, the highlight of this trip was our visit to Gove, a mining town right at the tip of Queensland, hot and remote, where for example the golf greens are made of oiled sand. We got there during the Headingley test and, during dinner in our honour at the Walkabout

Motel, the waitress presumed to hand me a note saying that England were 64 for 4 in their second innings. This was not cheering. However, the next morning, when we got to the airport, things had changed with Botham scoring 149 not out. The waitress of the previous evening now turned out to be the Hertz rental rep. She came up to me and said: 'Sir John, I am most dreadfully sorry. I will never do such a foolish thing again.' I forgave her. We arrived in Darwin to hear England's win on the radio. It happened during a government lunch in our honour. When it was clear that England was going to win, I kindly told the Chief Minister that he might turn off his tranny. I was very nice to everybody.

When the Ashes were finally secure, I wrote a letter to the *Australian* offering to go double or quits on the next encounter with all the many Australians who owed me a bottle of something. It is too dated to be worth reproducing here, but I was gratified when, on the tenth anniversary of the letters page, mine took pride of place in the listing of best letters over ten years.

Canberra, 30 August 1981

David leaves the day we greet the Queen and start a feverish fortnight of Commonwealth Heads of Government in Melbourne, my job being specifically to act as Mrs Thatcher's lightning conductor. She's very 'off with their heads' about civil servants at present, and I, who have nothing to fear re career etc, will be expected to suffer hourly executions to protect her entourage.

Melbourne had drawn the short straw for hosting the biennial CHOGM meeting—red-neck Melburnians interpreted CHOGM as 'Coons here on government money'.

Canberra, 11 October 1981

So back in Canberra after a pretty wearing fortnight of CHOGM. Happily, both when she was staying here with us last weekend, and during the ten days we were together in Melbourne, Mrs Thatcher was perfectly easy with us. I spent several evenings with her until the small hours fighting over her various speeches, which is how she likes to work, and was much better treated than her own staff. She commented ruefully, but not narkily, that Carol was obviously much more at home in our house than hers. Mr T was also in splendid form. Saw less of the Carringtons, but entertained them at the flat a couple of times. But they are never any trouble.

Funny to be back for ten days in the old frenetic atmosphere surrounding the Prime Minister, and genuinely lovely to think that I shall never have to go back to it.

Malcolm Fraser cozened a number of the visiting Heads of Government into going to the footy finals. When I got to his box, he smartly handed over Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia to me for the rest of the afternoon. Aussie Rules is a fiendishly complicated game to those unfamiliar with it, and it is therefore with pride that I record that by the end of the match I had educated Mr Kaunda in understanding who had scored and for how many points.

At one private lunch, perhaps to keep the conversation going, Fraser mentioned to Mrs Thatcher that he had invited me to propose the toast of Scotland at the forthcoming St Andrew's Night dinner of the Melbourne Scots. He was beginning to have misgivings about his choice and did she think it was a good idea? Mrs T naturally got the point and they had a jolly conversation about how it was a disastrous choice, but since it was too late to change, Malcolm must hope for the best. I think that it was the only really cordial exchange which I recall hearing them have.

The Melbourne Scots dinner went off well. I had long been telling people that I intended to start by saying: 'Mr President, like God, I am an Englishman,' and then count the seconds of silence which would follow. There were not too many, so I proceeded for 15 minutes to make fun of everything Scottish. Then, to extricate myself in order to propose the toast, I confessed that my mother's maiden name was Finlayson, and that I was half-Scottish. This went down well and I was much congratulated. A relief, as I believe a predecessor got the ambience wrong and was booed into silence.

I had confided to Mrs T how I intended to start my speech, and asked whether it sounded like a good idea. She said that it did, so long as I said that I was like God, an English woman, which I perforce promised to do. But when the moment came, with all those brawny kilted figures in front of me, I couldn't do it. I confessed this to the final dinner which I addressed, but this is the first time I have recorded in print that I disregarded my Prime Minister's request.

Sydney, Good Friday 1982

As you can imagine, I have had a pretty hectic week, along with the rest of the Foreign Office, in my case devoted to persuading the Australian Prime Minister to do all the things we wanted him to do. He and the Cabinet have been tremendously helpful, so I am pleased with them.

I am furiously sick, of course, that Lord Carrington has had to go, slightly compensated by the departure of the Lord Privy Seal and his wife. But with Lord C gone, Mrs Thatcher is about my only remaining protector.



Pre-lunch drinks at home with British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and Denis Thatcher, Westminster House, Canberra, 1982

I do not understand why I wrote that Mrs Thatcher was my only remaining protector. I have no reason to suppose that I particularly needed a protector more at that time than at any other, nor that if I had it would have been she. I expect that I was just showing off. Curious.

The almost total Australian approval of, and support for, Britain's actions over the Falkland Islands was unusual, and gratifying for the British High Commissioner. It would not be unfair to say that the Australian 'default' attitude, to use a computer term, towards the Poms is habitually negative, an expectation that Britain will be in strife in one way or another, that things are going badly there, and with a certain *schadenfreude* that this is so. The attitude applies to some extent to all foreigners, but more so to the Poms because they are not regarded as foreigners. In the past, this may have reflected guilt at having deserted the Old Country, but now, I suspect, arises from a continuing and unnecessary insecurity among us, because we cannot believe that God is an Australian, as the Poms, against much evidence, continue to know that God is an Englishman.

The single manifestation of this attitude which most puzzles me is the frequent comment about Britain's 'class system'. I myself have never encountered this phenomenon and, when questioned, my fellow Australians tend to talk about private schools and Oxbridge as fortresses

of privilege. They are surprised to be told that only about 3 per cent of British children go to fee-paying schools, where the figure in Australia is nearer 30 per cent; and that you get into Oxbridge, as into Sydney University, because you are bright. And when I say that I regard Australia as less egalitarian than Britain, people are incredulous, particularly if they are members of the Melbourne Club. I am not sure where I or my wife are thought to fit into the 'British class system'. Presumably we are products, as are our Australian counterparts, of meritocracy, not birth or inherited wealth. I must ask someone sometime.

As an example of Australian public support, I have treasured a letter which I received, and which runs as follows, just as it came, in large block letters:

I AM TOTALLY AN AUSTRALIAN REPUBLICAN AND WILL BE FOREVER.
HOWEVER EVEN AN AUSTRALIAN REPUBLICAN CAN NEVER CUT HIS TIES
WITH ENGLAND. I SEE ENGLAND AS A BIG BROTHER RATHER THAN
HOME. ENGLAND IS PROBABLY THE ONLY TRUE FRIEND AUSTRALIA HAS
INTERNATIONALLY.

TODAY ENGLAND ALONE HAS HAD THE COURAGE TO DEFEND
FREEDOM ON BEHALF OF THE WHOLE WORLD. WORDS CANNOT
DESCRIBE HOW PROUD I AM THAT ENGLAND AGAIN LEADS THE WAY TO
FREEDOM.

AUSTRALIAN WORDS CAN NEVER REPAY FOR THE LOSS OF ENGLISH
LIVES BUT MAY GOD BE WITH YOU ALL.

When I arrived in Australia in 1980, straight from Israel, I was appalled at the pervasive, if casual, anti-Semitism which I encountered. 'I wouldn't buy a house which a Jew had looked at.' Although things are now better, I was astounded by the split between Catholics and Protestants in the New South Wales bureaucracy, with Freemasons an extra dimension. I am told that the 1938 cricket touring side to England was almost disastrously divided between 'Micks' and 'Proddy dogs'.

Later, 'wops', 'wogs' and 'slant-eyes' were given a hard time by white Australia. At the Commonwealth Games in Brisbane in 1982, when I commented to a very important Australian visitor that England had had a good day in the track events, he replied: 'But they are all a lot of blacks.' Things are improving, I think, but meanwhile Australia remains the most racist society in which I have ever lived. Shame on us.

At the Commonwealth Games in September 1982 I was responsible for 11 teams, while everyone else had only one. Thus I had England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, Isle of Man, Jersey, Guernsey, Falkland Islands, Gibraltar, St Helena and the Pitcairn Islands. I had to ensure that

they were all happy—highly unlikely—and kept in touch with the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh, acting for once as their Queen and not the Queen of Australia.

England actually won more medals than anyone else, but the Australians got one more gold, so insisted that they had 'won' the Games. It didn't matter. Each major team was allocated a local volunteer to help out—all charming young ladies who added much to the occasion. When I asked the English team's helper, a young mother of three, if she had ever been to England, she said that she came from the north of Queensland and had in fact never been to Brisbane, nor indeed ever travelled on a bus. The Welsh helper had indeed been to Wales, but she confessed to me that she had never met a 'Sir' before.

The Governor-General and I had to rush back to Canberra. We had to see the Queen off in Brisbane, and then hurry into his plane in order to beat her to Canberra to meet her there. We made it.

Canberra, 2 December 1982

I survived my second speech at the St Andrew's Night dinner of the Melbourne Scots, having the easy task of proposing the toast of Australia, but got into difficulties two nights later at a dinner of the Churchill Memorial Trust, where I had to speak on 'The influence of Churchill in world affairs'. Instead of playing safe and saying, as expected, that Churchill was the greatest thing since sliced bread, I said that Martin Gilbert, his biographer, and I agreed that it was too early to allocate him a place, and that the Younger Pitt might well turn out to have been a greater man. This went down very badly with the Old Guard, but some younger guests came up afterwards and thanked me for what I had said.

It all ended happily. I am now the National Deputy Chairman of the Churchill Trust, which I regard as the best organisation of its sort, and we are persuaded that we can treat the Churchill Trust in the same way as we treat Rhodes scholarships. People do not have to remember who Churchill was, as increasingly they do not. In 1999 we shall send 103 Fellows overseas.

Up until 5 March 1983, the date of the election which returned the Labor Party to power under Bob Hawke's leadership, there was not much to report to my sister, especially as I made full use of the High Commissioner's privilege of attending on the visiting English cricket team everywhere I could.

Canberra, 20 March 1983

As you may imagine, life has been fully occupied with election matters. It is always a bore having to spend three years getting to know one lot and then having to cultivate another, particularly as they are not in tune with Thatcherism, as were the Liberals. My public utterances are having to be toned down. But I know the new lot pretty well, and like most of them, except Hawke himself.

As usual, the Royal Tour will not impinge on us, except for greeting them and farewelling them at Canberra later this week. But I had to send the Prince of Wales' Private Secretary some fairly early briefing on the new government—a service which I strictly should not render to the heir to the Australian throne. Happily, he and the heir to the British throne share the same Private Secretary.

The despatch on the election result, ably drafted by the Chancery, was fairly straightforward: time for a change, plus Bob Hawke's undoubted populist appeal to the electorate. The profile of Hawke himself was more tricky. I rehearsed his career, correcting various misconceptions which had arisen along the way, and I commented on his abandonment of the bottle. But, having consulted people who had known him for many years, I could not find anyone to say a good word for him. One, who had known him well at Oxford, where he had a mixed career, said that the real Bob Hawke had never been seen since then. Another, equally qualified to judge, said that he was only a cardboard cut-out figure, behind whom his Cabinet behaved as they wished. From my own observation, I know this not to have been fair, but it was noticeable that his colleagues habitually spoke of him with despatch in private. Some others, like Mrs Thatcher, who had started off approving of him, perhaps for her as a relief from his predecessor, changed their minds.

For myself, although I did not know Hawke as well as I did his colleagues, he always treated me with courtesy and consideration, and I can have no complaint. But I found him less congenial than his predecessor, Malcolm Fraser, or his predecessor in the Party, Bill Hayden, or subsequent Prime Ministers Paul Keating and John Howard. My principal regret about our relationship remains that he frequently failed to pay up when he lost a bet, as he often did with me over sporting events.

Canberra, 10 April 1983

The new government keeps me very busy. I was correctly quoted [in the press] recently as saying that I am a Labor/Social Democrat/Thatcherite, which I really am, and a very sensible thing to be. No protests from Mrs Thatcher yet.

A light on the role of the British High Commissioner was provided at that time by Bill Hayden lunching alone with me. He of course would have been Prime Minister, had his loyal colleagues not dished him for Hawke, in the belief that the latter's populist appeal would ensure victory. Hayden maintained (and I agreed) that in the Australian vernacular 'a drover's dog' could have won the elections, and he was understandably bitter. The British High Commissioner was perhaps the only person in Canberra to whom he could pour out his resentment, which he proceeded to do. Any colleague or other friend would have been inappropriate.

Sydney, 18 June 1983

I can't remember whether I told you that we were going to accompany the Hawkes to London, but the timing of the election put a stop to it. Instead we are spending the money M's fare etc would have cost by going tomorrow for ten days to an island off Fiji, which accommodates only 16 people and which is supposed to be very good value. We already know seven of those who will be there, and I rather doubt whether there will be as many as 16. Should make a nice winter break.

My only real interest in the [UK] election is that I won a lot of bets, made in the UK, that the Alliance wouldn't get 30 seats.

Canberra, 3 July 1983

A foggy winter's morning in Canberra, a contrast from last Sunday on our super desert island off Fiji. It was quite fantastic—I cannot remember ever before going for eight days without wearing a watch, hearing a radio or seeing a newspaper.

We are off again on Wednesday for two weeks—our excuse to get away from the Canberra winter. To Darwin, where it is always hot, then Alice Springs, Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney—you will have gathered that we spend as much time in our establishments in the latter two as in Canberra, which isn't worth being in when Parliament isn't sitting, as it mostly doesn't.

Geoffrey Howe is a mate of mine of many years' standing, and I greatly prefer him to F. Pym. I'm trying to persuade him out here later in the year, but I don't suppose he will come. When I left to come here, Lord Carrington said to me: 'You don't bother me, John, and I won't bother you.' Works pretty well.

Even after 13 years Turtle Island still stands out in our recollections. But if we went back I have no doubt that it would have changed. We have never 'gone back', except to New York.

My admiration for Geoffrey Howe, the new Foreign Secretary, stemmed from when he piloted the Communities Bill through the House of Commons

when I was Head of the European Integration Department in the Foreign Office. He subsequently confirmed my respect by the act of a gentleman. One evening, to the incredulity of my colleagues, I had got him to agree to something that no-one expected him to. But the next morning the rats had got at him and he changed his mind. The gentlemanly act was that he caused me to go out to Northolt, where he was about to leave on a trip, so that he could tell me this himself, instead of leaving it to a Private Secretary.

Melbourne, 23 September 1983

We have been in Melbourne for ten days, though I've had to make several forays to Sydney and Canberra. Back to Canberra, via a lunch in Sydney, on Sunday to face visits from four Ministers—Havers, Whitney, Chalker and Pattie—within three weeks. They all come out for a jolly between their summer holidays and the party conferences.

Our visitors arrived one after another so the beds were never cold. Happily they were all highly agreeable and the Australians, in their different spheres, were very pleased to see them. Just what we needed.

Mrs (now Lady) Chalker aroused our admiration for her courage. She was due to fly to Sydney with us one afternoon for an evening engagement, and the airlines went on strike. Nothing for it but a tiny chartered four-seater plane. Mrs C confessed to being extremely nervous of entrusting herself to it, but we persuaded her aboard, and on arrival we took a photo of her, beaming in triumph, in front of the machine. She was a real trouper.

Canberra, 24 November 1983

*We were recently in Perth, and I am off to Brisbane tomorrow, while we are rarely in Canberra, Sydney or Melbourne for more than three days at a time. However, Australia is already beginning to slow down as the great Christmas summer holiday approaches—though our pre-Christmas will be enlivened by the visit of **Invincible** to Sydney.*

The visit of HMS *Invincible* and her task force occupied quite a lot of our time. We made a quick trip to Perth to greet her there, and all went well. But as she came round to Sydney it became apparent that she needed to go into dry dock for repairs to the frame supporting one of her propellers. The problem was that we could not 'confirm or deny' whether she was carrying nuclear weapons. The Australian Minister of Defence and I were convinced that if we let her into dry dock in Sydney, the unions would keep her there forever, or refuse to let her in in the first place. We prevailed, and *Invincible* proceeded to Singapore for repairs, but it cast

a shadow over what should have been a marvellous visit. Their Lordships of the Admiralty seemed inclined to blame the Australians for intransigence, whereas I made clear what I thought of them for sending one of their ships round the world in an unseaworthy condition.

Canberra, 27 December 1983

We are selling [our home in Windlesham]. I am going to retire early, next September, and we plan to settle in Sydney. I do not think I shall be short of employment. We are currently house-hunting, with prices so astronomical that it will take every penny we can scrape together to buy even a modest hovel, which is all we need now. So in nine months we shall no longer be living in reasonable grandeur.

I have reproduced comparatively few letters of the remaining nine months we were in Canberra. This is partly because M was in England for several months, clearing out and then selling our home, preparatory to moving to Sydney, and thus could communicate directly with my sister. It is also partly because I was preoccupied with matters other than diplomatic. I observe with some dismay how many of my lunch and other engagements were to further my post-retirement future. But it is also the fact, to my relief, in retrospect, that nothing much was happening, and we had extraordinarily few VIP visitors from Britain. I cannot now recall what the circumstances in Britain may have been to cause this.

Canberra, 18 May 1984

We recently had staying with us an old friend and his wife from Peterhouse days. I hadn't seen him for 31 years. He is an accountant in Bolton, and claims to know where you live.

On my birthday we took them to a lunch party given by a co-birthdayer, who was celebrating his 70th birthday by inviting 370 guests to lunch in his large garden in Mittagong. Catherine said that it was salutary to see how the other half lived, but I'm not sure whether she meant that party or us in general.

On Tuesday we are unveiling a sculpture in our garden [presented by the British Government to mark the opening of the Australian National Gallery in Canberra], which has set the taxpayers back £15,000. Oh well, I didn't ask for it but at least I was able to veto four scrap-iron suggestions before choosing this granite six-ton effort.

The British Government could not have done better to mark in this way the opening of the National Gallery, which has since exceeded all expectations. The designer of the splendid granite arch was British and



Bartholomew with his 'owners' at the unveiling of Archstones in his garden, Canberra, May 1984

Twice-christened 'Archstones' by Michael Foster

Having anticipated his mistress by a few moments and christened 'Archstones' in the grounds of the residence he shares with the British High Commissioner, Sir John Mason, and Lady Mason, Bartholomew sat down, back to guests, admired the view through the arch and ignored the whole ceremony.

Bartholomew is an Airedale, with his own papers and lineage, prepared to tolerate the intrusion of all the hupersons onto his patch in the cause of art, provided they understand his rights to reorganise proceedings, to investigate the visitors at will, to choose to rest in those places which would most inconvenience them and draw most attention to himself.

The Masons had invited a slew of Canberrans, and others including those

who helped quarry the Australian black granite stones and calculate the feasibility of the engineering, to the residence yesterday for lunch. They were also to view the arch, built by a British sculptor, John Maine, to mark the opening of the Australian National Gallery.

Lady Mason eventually unveiled a plaque, with whatever aplomb she could muster amid the laughter, including her own.

Their obvious intention of having an informal, easy function was usurped (maybe even enhanced) by Bartholomew's canine disregard for any other being. His disregard was understandable. It is, after all, his house.

© *Canberra Times*, 22 May 1984

the granite Australian, and we were extremely pleased with it. Margaret unveiled a plaque alongside it saying that she had done so, which is an improvement on the other plaques in the garden about planting trees. Our arch will see the trees out, and probably the house too. No-one is going to shift it in a hurry. This circumstance was not accidental. No fading tree for M's plaque!

We had a large, distinguished and congenial party to lunch for the occasion. Bartholomew rose to it by peeing on the arch just as M was about to uncover the plaque, to the amusement and approval of all present. I include above a sympathetic account of the occasion, reprinted with permission from the *Canberra Times*.

Canberra, 8 July 1984

[Our Sydney] house is now alas in our hands, after a blissful two months of not owning one at all. We hope to get the dreaded builders in as soon as possible, though we shall move our stuff in towards the end of September regardless. Funny to think that I am celebrating my retirement with by far the biggest mortgage in my life, with interest not tax-deductible here, either.

Great event last week was to have Torvill and Dean to lunch, watch them in the evening, and be entertained by them backstage afterwards. She hasn't much to say for herself, but he is a truly remarkable young man, very like David.

Even after almost 14 happy years in our Sydney home, the iron is still not entirely cold over the traumas of the move into it, especially for M. Buying it was bad enough: we insisted on a house with a garden, a pool and a harbour view. All available, if you had the money, which we didn't. But we got them in the end, after seeing every possible house in the Eastern Suburbs of Sydney. Then we commissioned necessary, extensive and expensive alterations, designed by an architect with whom M quickly came to violent disagreement. We now know that, by Sydney standards, our builders did a good if slow job. The trouble was that we were cushioned by living in residences where every repair or alteration was taken care of by others. As elsewhere in Australia, they told us that she'll be right, and in the end she was.

Canberra, 12 August 1984

A misunderstanding, I fear, about dates. I finish on 30 September, and will alas be in London for a couple of weeks while you are away. M will stay here, partly because of Bartholomew and partly to try to start getting the house in order. The builders are in, and causing chaos, and we just hope they'll be out

by the beginning of October, when we shall have nowhere else to lay our heads. Meanwhile, we have to face up to getting all our possessions from [Windlesham] and here into our tiny new premises. It is, as they say, a challenge; but if ever you hear of me committing suicide it will be because real estate prices in Sydney have collapsed. Talk about being over-extended! And I fear my pension won't go far in maintaining us here!

We are naturally caught up in a whirl of farewell visits. We were in Perth last week, Brisbane next, Adelaide, Sydney and Melbourne backwards and forwards. And 800 guests to fit in somewhere, plus a grand dinner for the Governor-General. The latter will be the last formal dinner we shall ever give in our own house.

Canberra, 23 September 1984

*We have now finished our round of giving and receiving farewell parties, except for the one the staff are giving us on our last night here, next Friday. Lost count of the others—we gave eight and received who knows how many. Highlight last Tuesday in Adelaide when, with my final speech in Australia, I presented a scientific medal, and at my instigation the vote of thanks was proposed by Don Bradman. You can't go out better than that, as he simply **never** appears in public nowadays.*

From now on address letters and postcards to our new Sydney address. The builders have so far taken two months over our extremely modest extension—though our architect conned us into making them a lot less modest, and hugely more expensive, than we had planned.

As usual, M drew the short straw. While I spent three weeks in London in October, clearing up with the Foreign Office and getting to know some of my potential new employers, M was stuck in one small room with the builders tearing the rest of the house to bits. When the builders quit for their three-week Christmas break, they had still not finished, and did not do so until February.

As soon as we were allowed, we—and our children, who to our delighted astonishment also decided to settle here—became Australian citizens, and thus dual nationals. But it was very far from straightforward. I never enquired who did what for us, but I have reason to believe that the matter was raised informally in Cabinet, and I believe I know who spoke up for me. But I would never embarrass anyone by asking. The decision to become Australian citizens was one which none of us has ever for a second regretted.



*Three years on. Receiving Australian citizenship
from the Lord Mayor of Sydney, Alderman Doug Sutherland, 1987*

A Final Note

That was the last letter in the series which had begun almost 40 years before. I repeat my thanks to my mother and sister for having preserved them. I am surprised that in all my letters there are only a few events which I do not recollect. Of nearly all the rest I have total recall, even to the words of conversations which took place 50 years ago.

As in the television series, this was indeed *My Life*, but only until 1984. We then abandoned our peripatetic lives and took up a fixed abode with our family in Sydney; and I exchanged the mysteries of diplomacy for the reality of business.

My editor kindly suggested that I might like to provide a self-assessment of how I had emerged from the 40 years. I suppose a graph of my progress might show an upward diagonal, a downward diagonal, a straight horizontal line, a bell curve or perhaps realistically a 'snakes and ladders' pattern. Not being one recklessly to stick my neck out, I politely declined.

However, if I was asked to describe myself in a single word, it would be 'sanguine', in respect to myself, other people and events. This is because Luck has been the consistent thread running through my life. I am amazed at, and grateful for, how fortunate my life has been. I am told that someone once said: 'The great thing about John Mason is that he always falls on his feet.' QED.

Sydney, February 1998



APPENDIX

The Recipients

It may be of interest if I say something about the three people who read all my letters over nearly 40 years. First, my mother, the protagonist, to whom my letters were mainly directed, in fulfilment of my promise to her of a weekly letter. Second, my father, until his death in 1967. Third, my sister, my only sibling, who lived with my parents until my mother's death in 1968, and to whom I continued to write weekly until my retirement in 1984.

My mother, Madeline Finlayson, was born in 1892, the second child of four girls and a boy. Her father was a prosperous importer, well known and respected in Manchester commercial life. They were staunch non-conformists, teetotal but broad-minded by the standards of their milieu. At the turn of the century my grandfather was able to maintain a household with five servants on, I am told, an income of £400 a year.

My mother's eldest sister was a classics teacher at Manchester High School, when in the early 1920s she upped and accepted the post—in Perth, Western Australia—of Headmistress of the Presbyterian Ladies College, where there is still a House named after her. The change of lifestyle from suburban Manchester to undeveloped Perth is difficult for me to comprehend. My mother's only, and younger, brother was the mentor to whom I refer in this book, a bigger influence on my life than my own father. The two younger sisters remained unmarried, perhaps because their potential husbands had been killed in the war. They lived somewhat eccentric lives.

My mother had a strong and determined personality. Much of my correspondence reveals her determination, and failure, to dominate me. However, it seems to me that she succeeded in dominating her husband, though in the most loving way. She was also a disappointed wife. She had, with reason, hoped for distinguished positions for her husband. That he did not seek them was, I believe, a source of frustration which perhaps led her to fix her ambition even more strongly on her son. She combined

a firm belief in a successful future for me with grave and constant foreboding about my current activities at any time, which continued until at last my marriage allowed her to relax. Sadly, however, we were never at ease in each other's company.

My mother was a pessimist, and I am not sure how much she enjoyed life. Her health was poor, but I think that just possibly she enjoyed that condition. She was also a snob, caring too much about what the neighbours might think, and fascinated by the doings of the *haut monde*. I wish that we had been closer, but that would have entailed my surrendering my independence. I do not know whether I would be considered to have been a good son to my mother. I hope that keeping my promise about weekly letters, which was not always easy, is a good mark. But I never confided in her.

My mother's forebears

My mother, being of Scottish descent, could effortlessly trace her forebears, and consequently mine, back to the eighteenth century. I think that my grandfather may have been the only merchant among them, the others having been non-conformist ministers or medicos of varying celebrity. By far the most interesting was Benjamin Campbell, a naval surgeon, who wrote to his wife from New Orleans on 15 September 1815, apologising for not having written for many months, because, among other reasons, he had been carried off by Indians as far as Arkansas.

Pleasant portraits of Benjamin Campbell, his wife Margaret and his daughter Georgina hang in our drawing-room in Sydney, a fancied resemblance in his to me helping to establish their authenticity. Below them is a charming miniature, painted on ivory, of a half-naked Indian lady. Its existence only came to my knowledge when I discovered it in an ancient sealed envelope among my mother's papers. The family had evidently been unable to bring themselves to destroy it, but felt it necessary to conceal it, thus displaying on the whole broad rather than narrow mindedness. For years I cherished the belief that the lady might have been my ancestor's mistress, only to be told quite recently that such miniatures were common in India of the day, the equivalent of saucy photographs.

My father having been of English stock, I know nothing of his ancestry. He was born posthumously in 1888, Charles Moir, the youngest of four brothers and one sister. (My son and I both have Charles Moir in our names.) His mother and my mother's mother were stepsisters, my parents consequently step-cousins, and I my own cousin. History does not relate the source of income on which a widow brought up five children, but they evidently lived in much the same circumstances in South Manchester



My last photo of my parents, 1964

as my mother's family. The only surviving record of my paternal grandparents in my possession is a silver tankard inscribed: 'Presented to Mr Thomas Mason as a mark of esteem for his past kindnesses. Mary Lindow, May 1864.' Naturally we shall never know who or why. I do not recall ever seeing a photo of either of these grandparents.

Obviously the two families, thus related, must have known each other well. I suspect indeed that my mother may have had her eye on my father from an early age. And he was a catch, being extremely bright, coming first, and the medallist, when he graduated in engineering in 1908 from Owens College (later to become Manchester University, where my father spent most of his life).

But now the picture infuriatingly fades. I imagine, like many sons, I never asked my father about his early life and, not being particularly extrovert, he volunteered little. I know that after graduating he went to Argentina, to build railways, and returned only to enlist as a gunner officer in the Royal Field Artillery. I am anguished to know nothing of his Argentinian life, where he would have been received into the large British community. Was he pious or dissolute, parsimonious or extravagant, or just a well-brought-up British youth? Did he get entangled with the fair sex, to whom he must have been a prize? I never asked him.



*With my sister Mary at Baalbek, Lebanon,
while she was visiting us in Damascus, December 1962*

Contrast this gap in my knowledge with the complete documentation of my own life in my weekly letters. If anyone wants to know what I was doing in a particular month in a particular year, they need only apply to the Manuscript Librarian at the National Library in Canberra!

Similarly, he never talked about his wartime experiences, comprising three to four years of survival in Flanders, as the commander of a battery of 18-pounders. And I never asked him. I told my mother more in my letters over a brief period in Korea than my father ever told of his years in France. Oddly, although the mildest of men, I am sure that he enjoyed being a soldier.

In 1920, home from the war, my father became a lecturer in the Engineering Department of Manchester University, and stayed there for the rest of his career. In 1920 he also married my mother. My recollection is that she was the dominating force in the marriage. For example, she

would do the ordering in a restaurant. I shall never know whether my father was content that this was so, or acquiesced in it for a quiet life. I never asked him.

My relationship with him was close and happy, and I enjoyed his company. But I would not have thought of seeking his advice, except over my maths homework at school, or of confiding in him. As the letters show, I did so once, and it was a mistake.

My father was a lovely man, without an enemy in the world. He was quite unassuming: when he was awarded a well-deserved CBE, I believe that he was genuinely taken aback, believing that such things were for his father-in-law, or brother-in-law, rather than for him. Happily for us, my sister and I inherited his brains.

My sister, Mary, three years older than I, leads a busy and useful life in Bolton in Lancashire, where she has lived since our mother died. She had a successful career in local government, principally in social services, combined with a host of other activities such as 30 years as a magistrate, and standing for Parliament on three occasions in the Liberal interest. She creditably saved her deposit each time, no mean achievement for a Liberal candidate at the time. In her my father's brains took the form of what I can only call an outstanding facility in such things as crossword puzzles and quizzes. She has not married.

It would be inappropriate of me to comment on my sister as I have on my parents. She will no doubt disagree deeply with what I have said about the latter, and I will not be so imprudent as to repeat my efforts with her. Suffice it to say that we have never drifted apart, while never being close, the fault no doubt being mine. I am grateful to her for her care of our children when they needed her. And I am grateful to her for asking me to keep writing after my mother's death and for keeping the letters. We still of course correspond, but not quite weekly.

DIPLOMATIC DESPATCHES

FROM A SON TO HIS MOTHER

John Mason

^B *'John Mason has always been as provocative in his views as he has been enlivening in his discourse ... a critical, ironic observer of mankind whose sense of humour and intellectual curiosity have given him a life as full of incident as it has been rewarding in outcome.'*

Rt Hon. Sir Ninian Stephen in his foreword to Diplomatic Despatches

When he joined the British army in 1945, at the age of 17, John Mason, now a distinguished retired diplomat, promised his mother that he would write to her every week. He kept that promise for 40 years, first to his mother and subsequently his sister, until he retired in 1984. The letters, some two thousand of them, are now housed in the Manuscript Collection of the National Library of Australia.

In his weekly 'despatches' to his mother Mason *diplomatically* told her what he thought appropriate for her to know of his life and activities, including withholding from her the devastating news that he had lung cancer with only a year to live—a prognosis that, 30 years later, has obviously proved to be mistaken!

Diplomatic Despatches is a fast-paced, engaging and revealing account by an observant commentator. Mason's letters follow a fascinating and eventful career, from his entry into the army as a teenager to his work as an experienced and accomplished diplomat, culminating in his appointment as British High Commissioner in Canberra. The book's piquancy derives from the commentary of the mature man reflecting on his life's experiences.

Diplomatic Despatches is also a tribute to Mason's wife, Margaret. Within the larger narrative, the reader will find a touching story of love and personal commitment between two extraordinary people.

Mason

About the Author

After leaving Manchester Grammar School at the age of 17 John Mason joined the British army, serving as a young officer in India during the final days of the Raj. While an undergraduate at Cambridge, he spent his vacations acting as a tour guide in Europe, a stint that was followed by an unexpected and unwelcome return to the army, in an infantry battalion which saw frontline action in the Korean War. In 1952 John Mason joined the Foreign Office as a new recruit, thus beginning a diplomatic career which took him to Rome, Warsaw, Damascus, New York and Tel Aviv, where he was British Ambassador, and culminated in his posting to Canberra as British High Commissioner. Sir Ninian Stephen, in his foreword, describes Sir John Mason (knighted in 1980) as 'one of the most active and articulate representatives that Britain has ever sent to Australia'.

While posted to Rome, John Mason married Margaret, whom he first met in Stresa in 1949 and who has shared his life for nearly 50 years. They and their family now live in Sydney.



9 780642 107978