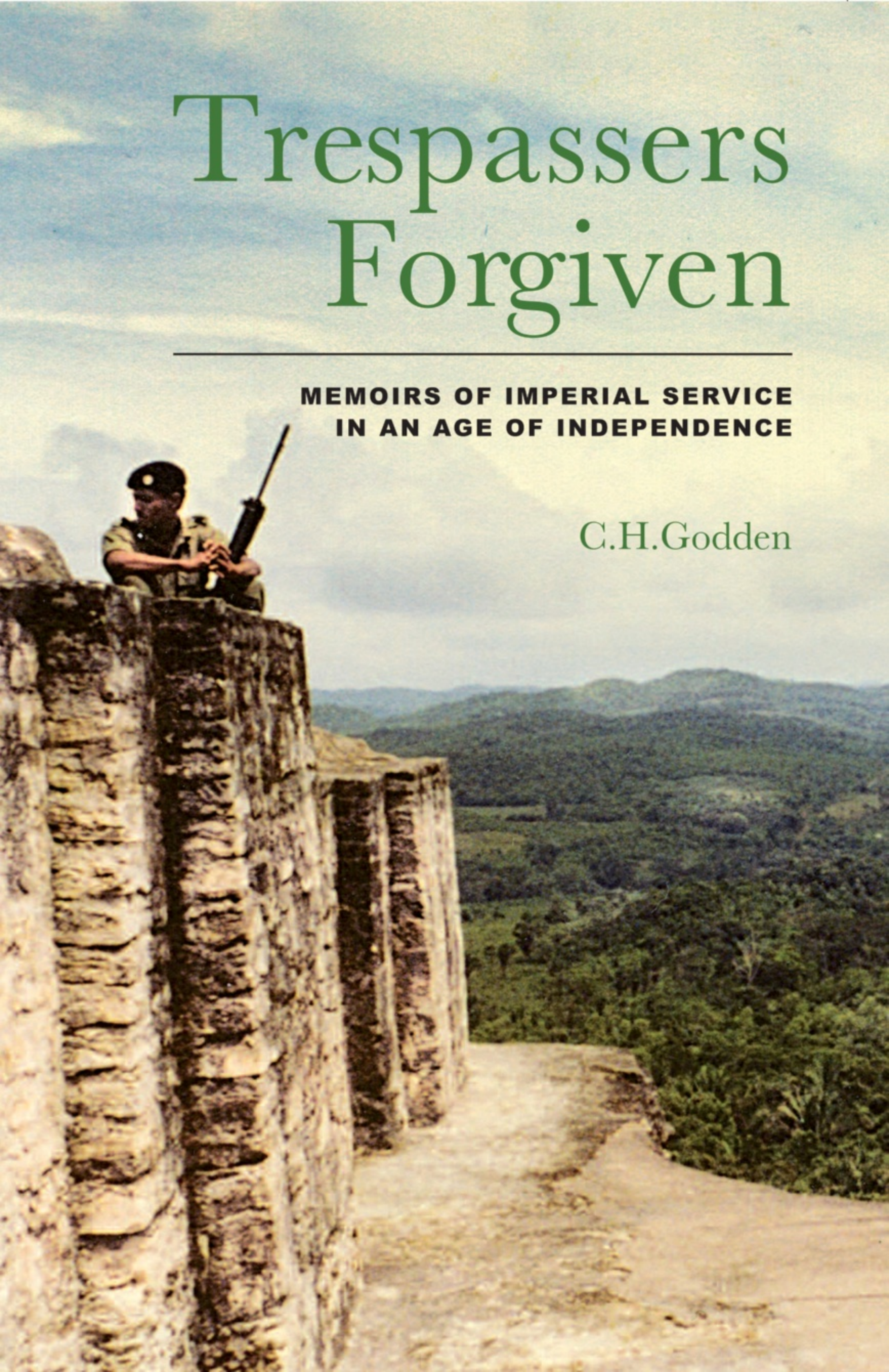

Trespassers Forgiven

MEMOIRS OF IMPERIAL SERVICE IN AN AGE OF INDEPENDENCE

C.H.Godden

TRESPASSERS FORGIVEN

Charles H. Godden led a long and interesting career in the Colonial Office and HM Diplomatic Service, beginning in 1950 following his military service in the Second World War. During that time he served abroad in Belize (formerly British Honduras) twice. He was also Secretary to a United Nations Mission to the High Commission Territories of Southern Africa, Private Secretary to FCO Ministers of State and held positions in Finland, Jamaica, Haiti and Anguilla, from which territory he retired as Governor in 1984. He was made CBE in 1981.

TRESPASSERS FORGIVEN

Memoirs of Imperial Service in an Age of Independence

C.H. GODDEN

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Dedicated, with love, to the memory
of Florence who also served;
for Jan and Sue, who shared the experience,
and Laura and James – successors

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

ADC	aide-de-camp
BHBS	British Honduras Broadcasting Service
CBE	Commander of the Order of the British Empire
CID	Criminal Investigation Department
CMG	Commander of the Order of St Michael and St George
COS	Chief of Staff
CS	chief secretary
CJ	chief justice
EST	Eastern Standard Time
FCO	Foreign and Commonwealth Office
FM	first minister
HMS	Her Majesty's Ship
HQ	headquarters
KCMG	Knight Commander of St Michael and St George
MBE	Member of the Order of the British Empire
MC	Military Cross
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affiars
MILO	Military Intelligence Liaison Officer
MLG	minister for local government
MV	Master Vessel
NAAFI	Navy, Army & Air Force Institutes (a store for service members
NIP	National Independence Party
OAS	Organization of African States
OBE	Officer of the Order of the British Empire
ODECA	Organización de Estados Centroamericanos/ Organization of Central American States
PUP	People's United Party

PWD	Public Works Department
RAF	Royal Air Force
RAMS	Royal Army Medical Services
RASC	Royal Army Service Corps
RD	Reserve (Officers') Decoration
RNR	Royal Navy Reserve
SJC	St John's College
SS	steamship
TB	tuberculosis
UCWI	University College of the West Indies
USAF	United States Air Force
USS	United States Ship

Acknowledgements

FOR THIS BOOK I owe my inspiration and encouragement to Florence to whom I am eternally indebted. On the many occasions when we reminisced about our days in 'BH' (British Honduras: now Belize) she would urge me to write down some of those experiences for Laura and James so that, some day, they might learn to their surprise that the two old fogies whom they recognized as their maternal grandparents had been around a bit and had led interesting and colourful lives. In due course, with Florence jogging my memory, I produced a first draft.

Subsequently, a family friend, Pat Reading (who with her late husband Don was a contemporary of ours during our service in BH) was good enough to read my efforts and to venture a few constructive comments and advice. In particular, she suggested that since I was in a key position to witness events from the inside, as it were, many of the significant ones that influenced or otherwise affected our lives in the early 1960s (for example Hurricane Hattie, the Guatemalan incursion, and the visit of HRH the Duke of Edinburgh) might be of interest to local and expatriate contemporaries who were not privy to the information available in official circles and on which decisions were taken. Perhaps, too, she added, an even wider and more modern audience might be intrigued by this brief glimpse of a bygone colonial age in and around Central America with its history, personalities and anecdotes. This led to an expanded draft and ultimately to these pages.

Others helped directly or indirectly to shape the historical sections. I therefore take this opportunity to thank the librarians at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office for making available to me the first and second volumes of the *Burdon Archives* and relevant colonial calendars. Similarly, I wish to express my thanks also to the librarian at Sussex University for allowing me access to Peter

Ashdown's impressive and deeply researched Ph.D. on political developments in British Honduras in the late nineteenth century, which added considerably to my knowledge of Governor Goldsworthy (Chapter 9). In particular, I am especially grateful to all the authors, past and present, listed in the Bibliography. Rereading their works served to refresh my memory, remind me of events I had seemingly forgotten or provided fresh insights into the history of the colony and region.

Special thanks are due to my family, Jan, Sue and Alan, not only for their support and encouragement but for facilitating the writing of this book by introducing me to the word processor and then teaching me some of its basic functions. Also to Linda Clingo who carried on the tutelage to a more advanced level and then, hey presto, performed what to me was the conjuring trick of transferring the book's typescript into a slim three-inch square of plastic to meet the requirements of the publisher to whom it was sent. The wonders of the modern world never cease to amaze me and probably many more of my generation.

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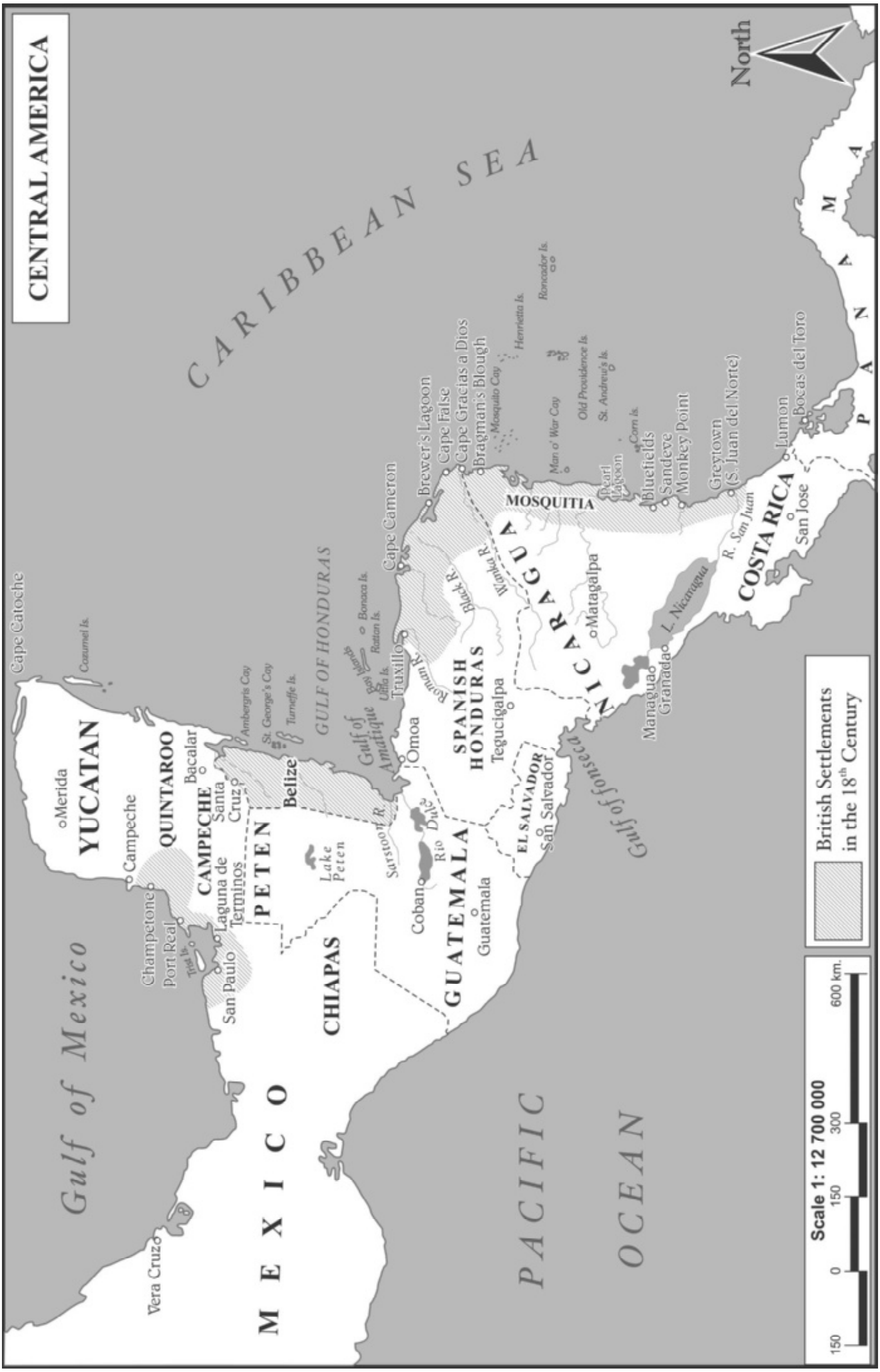
Finally I wish to record my thanks to my mentors in the practical field of colonial administration, the late Sir Peter Stallard, KCMG, MBE, and the late Michael Porcher, CMG, OBE, to whom I owe a lasting debt of gratitude.

Extract from Aldous Huxley's *Beyond the Mexique Bay* (1934)

IF THE WORLD had any ends British Honduras would certainly be one of them. It is not on the way from anywhere to anywhere else. It has no strategic value. It is all but uninhabited, and when Prohibition is abolished, the last of its profitable enterprises – the re-export of alcohol by rum runners, who use Belize as their base of operations – will have gone the way of its commerce in logwood, mahogany and chicle. Why then do we bother to keep this strange little fragment of the Empire? Certainly not from motives of self interest. Hardly one Englishman in fifty thousand derives any profits from the Britishness of British Honduras. But *le coeur a ses raisons*. Of these mere force of habit is the strongest. British Honduras goes on being British because it has been British. But this, of course, is not the whole story. We have been educated to personify the country in which we live. A collection of incredibly diverse people living on an island in the North Sea is transformed by a simple conjuring trick into a young woman in classical fancy dress – a young woman with opinions that have to be respected and a will that we must help her to assert; with a virginity which is our duty to defend and a reputation, which we may never allow to be questioned, for strength, virtue, beauty and a more than papal infallibility. To the overwhelming majority of British voters, taken individually, it is probably a matter of indifference whether British Honduras remains within the Empire or without. But the non-existent lady in fancy dress would be mortally offended that the place should be painted anything but red on the map. Red therefore it remains. The evidence of things not seen is too much for us.


CENTRAL AMERICA
CARIBBEAN SEA
Gulf of Mexico
PACIFIC OCEAN
North
MEXICO
CHIAPAS
YUCATAN
QUINTAROO
CAMPECHE
PETEN
GUATEMALA
EL SALVADOR
SPANISH HONDURAS
NICARAGUA
MOSQUITIA
COSTA RICA
PANAMA
GULF OF HONDURAS
Gulf of Amatique
Gulf of Fonseca
Vera Cruz
San Paulo
Port Real
Trist Is.
Champetone
Laguna de Terminos
Campeche
Merida
Cape Catoche
Cozumel Is.
Bacalar
Santa Cruz
Ambergris Cay
St. George's Cay
Turneffe Is.
Belize
Lake Peten
Sarstoon R.
Rio Dulce
Coban
Guatemala
San Salvador
Omoa
Bay Islands
Utila Is.
Rattan Is.
Bonaca Is.
Truxillo
Roman R.
Tegucigalpa
Cape Cameron
Black R.
Wanks R.
Brewer's Lagoon
Cape False
Cape Gracias a Dios
Bragman's Blough
Mosquito Cay
Henrietta Is.
Roncador Is.
Man o' War Cay
Old Providence Is.
St. Andrew's Is.
Corn Is.
Pearl Lagoon
Bluefields
Sandeve
Monkey Point
Greytown (S. Juan del Norte)
R. San Juan
Matagalpa
L. Nicaragua
Managua
Granada
San Jose
Lumon
Bocas del Toro
British Settlements in the 18th Century
Scale 1: 12 700 000
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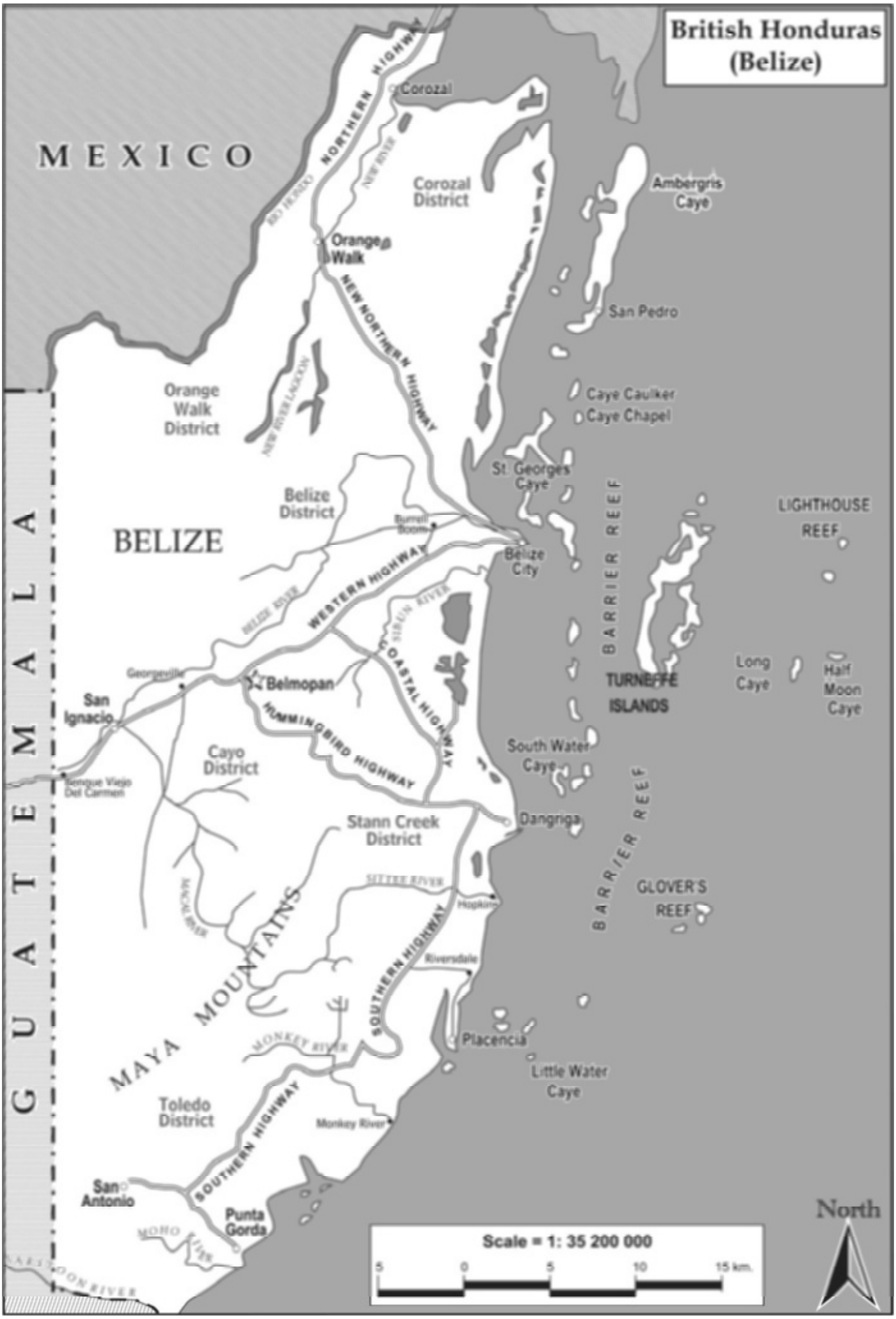
150
300
600 km.


British Honduras
(Belize)
MEXICO
NORTHERN HIGHWAY
Corozal
RIO HONDO
NEW RIVER
Corozal District
Ambergris Caye
Orange Walk
NEW NORTHERN HIGHWAY
San Pedro
NEW RIVER LAGOON
Orange Walk District
Caye Caulker
Caye Chapel
St. Georges Caye
Belize District
Burrell Boom
BELIZE
BARRIER REEF
LIGHTHOUSE REEF
Belize City
WESTERN HIGHWAY
BELIZE RIVER
SIBUN RIVER
Georgeville
Belmopan
COASTAL HIGHWAY
Long Caye
Half Moon Caye
TURNEFFE ISLANDS
San Ignacio
HUMMINGBIRD HIGHWAY
Cayo District
South Water Caye
Benque Viejo Del Carmen
GUATEMALA
Dangriga
Stann Creek District
BARRIER REEF
SITTEE RIVER
Hopkins
GLOVER'S REEF
MACAL RIVER
MAYA MOUNTAINS
SOUTHERN HIGHWAY
Riversdale
MONKEY RIVER
Placencia
Little Water Caye
Toledo District
Monkey River
SOUTHERN HIGHWAY
San Antonio
Punta Gorda
MOHO RIVER
SARSTOON RIVER
Scale = 1: 35 200 000
5
0
5
10
15 km.
North

Prologue

WHAT DID YOU do in the colonial theatre, grandpa? This, I hasten to add, is a rhetorical question of general application and not one my own grandchildren have ever addressed to me. That they have not done so is understandable. Whereas the world into which I was born, in the third decade of the twentieth century, was coloured with many symbols and other impressions of imperial glory that induced in me a strong feeling of pride at being a member of the greatest empire the world had ever known (not least of these created by my accumulated stamp collection with its heavy emphasis on colourful stamps of the many and widespread countries of the empire; and 'wireless' programmes or gramophone records heard in my youth featuring the then popular South Australian bass baritone, Peter Dawson, singing in his deep rich voice, patriotic ballads including those of a Kiplingesque nature such as 'Mandalay' or, say, 'Boots') my grandchildren were born at a time when the age of British imperialism had all but disappeared and the word 'colonialism' was likely to arouse angry passions or be shrouded in shame, guilt or apology. Such a question, therefore, was unlikely to occur to them without some form of prompting.

Had they put such a question, how would I have answered? As a strolling player, sometimes performing only bit parts, I would probably have said, 'Not much of any significance' – although I did make a modest contribution, initially in the Colonial Office and British Honduras (now Belize), to which I allude further below. But to put that in perspective and help their understanding of our colonial past and its implications, it is necessary to sketch out an outline of the relationship between Britain and her colonies in the immediate post-1939–45 period, and those who served there, adding a glimpse of early British activity in the Bay of Honduras in the first phase of empire spiced with a few personal philosophical musings on colonialism. The hub of that relationship was the Colonial Office, formally constituted as a separate and independent department of state in 1854, having developed from the Committee for Trade and Foreign Plantations that had, itself, evolved from the Committee of the Privy Council for the Plantations created in 1660 to handle the administration of colonial affairs. And so I begin.

In 1947, having previously occupied the building on the southeast corner of Downing Street, the Colonial Office moved nearby to what was intended to be temporary accommodation in Great Smith Street prior to the construction of a proposed new office building. The secretary of state and his junior ministers, together with the geographical and many other key departments, were located in Church House (leased from the Church commissioners) with the remaining supporting departments housed opposite in Sanctuary Buildings. There was also a small outpost at 15 Victoria Street incorporating the office of the Colonial (later Oversea) Nursing Association responsible for the recruitment of nurses and a section that catered for the welfare needs of colonial students in Britain.

The main office was identified by an inn or pub type of signboard that appeared above the front entrance to Church House. On a Cambridge blue background it displayed a golden crown and the words ‘Colonial Office’ and, like a pub signboard, it swung in the breeze and wind. The ministerial suites occupied the first floor. As the lift ascended towards the upper floors, the various geographical departments were identifiable by plaques bearing the arms of the colonies whose affairs were dealt with on that particular level. On the sixth floor, some of the offices were formerly the sleeping quarters previously available to visiting clergy, thus providing their current occupants with the added facility of their own private bathroom and lavatory. It was on that floor that the West Indian Department, in which I once served, was situated.

Spluttered around the office were various tangible links with the past of which I cite a few. Foremost, was the portrait gallery along the corridor to the conference room in Church House, irreverently known as the ‘Rogues Gallery’, with its pictures of secretary of states past and present ranging from the aristocratic first, the Earl of Hillsborough (subsequently Marquess of Downshire) to the last, Fred Lee, a former trade unionist and Labour Party member of

1. Fred Lee, the last secretary of state for the colonies, with his private office staff on the final day, author second from right.

parliament – an interesting contrast reflecting the social and political transformation that had taken place over that time. In the conference room itself was a small white plaster cast bust of Colonel T. E. Lawrence, Lawrence of Arabia, who joined the then newly formed Middle East Division[1] in the early 1920s before slipping off into the lower ranks of the Royal Air Force, ostensibly seeking anonymity by enlisting as 352087 Aircraftman Ross. In the secretary of state's private office was what appeared to be an antique tea trolley: closer examination would have revealed that it was once a depository for files or other documents, the upper and lower trays of which were divided into spaces for papers relating to specific colonies of the day.

One territory named, if memory is to be trusted, was the Swan River colony, funded privately in 1829, which collapsed as an economic venture and was subsequently incorporated into the state of Western Australia. The walls of several offices were adorned with framed prints depicting colonial scenes, and many desks and window sills often displayed native wooden carvings or other mementos brought back by travellers or left by colonial visitors over the years. For those seeking specific detailed history, the well stocked shelves of the Colonial Office Library in Sanctuary Buildings and advice of the knowledgeable librarians who staffed it were always available to them.

When I joined the Colonial Office in 1950, its Secretary of State was responsible to Parliament for the affairs of over fifty colonies, protectorates, protected states and trust territories (ranging alphabetically from Aden to Zanzibar) covering an area of about two million square miles and embracing all continents: their populations estimated to total something in the region of seventy-seven millions.

From this it seemed not unreasonable to assume that the Colonial Office had a shelf-life extending well into the next millennium. The architects' model in the foyer of Church House of the proposed new office building to be erected on the site of the old Westminster Hospital, opposite the Abbey, gave added credence to this. Yet within sixteen years or so the Colonial Office was no more. The once proud colonial empire, on which the sun never set, had all but disappeared save for a few isolated specks of red on the world map representing a handful of small islands of doubtful economic viability or territories whose sovereignty was the subject of international dispute. In a fast changing world the pressure for self-determination by colonial peoples had given rise to a faster pace of decolonization than most pundits had envisaged.

The office in those days was an exciting place in which to work. A constant stream of overseas visitors, many in their country's colourful traditional dress, crossed its threshold to confer with ministers or departmental staff on serious local issues or take part in constitutional or economic conferences. Delegations would often include colonial governors whom, as I recall, were invariably tall with builds like those of modern international rugby forwards. Debates on colonial issues in Parliament were lively, sometimes passionate, and, in general, well informed. Telegraphic correspondence between a department and a colony was sometimes confined to terse, apt biblical quotations or, perhaps, classical allusions.

Thus, a proposal from a governor at odds with Colonial Office policy might draw the simple holding response, 'St Luke 16:26' ('between you and us there is a great gulf fixed'), while a considered reply was being prepared. Or a query about whether a rumour affecting a colony allegedly circulating in London was true might perhaps be answered equally tersely but gracefully by, say, 'Rumour is a lying jade'. One governor seeking advice from the office when he would have been better served by using his initiative about the disposal of certain sensitive documents was simply advised to 'light the blue touch paper and retire immediately'. He probably had an uneasy night's sleep as he dwelt on the last two words of the reply. And so on. To add to a vibrant atmosphere, a parliamentary division bell installed at Church House would suddenly burst into noisy life at unexpected moments for staff, to be followed by the Secretary of State and any supporting ministers in the building rushing headlong downstairs to a waiting car, or cars, that would then screech off to the House of Commons where their occupants would arrive breathless at the division lobbies just in time to vote at their party's call.

There were occasional moments of deep shock, such as for example when news was received of the ambush and assassination by terrorists in October 1951 of the British high commissioner to Malaya, Sir Henry Gurney. Also, there were touches of humour, misplaced or otherwise. One instance of this was when our printing and stationery department, which produced the colony name cards displayed before delegates at conferences (these were narrow folded white cardboard strips on which the name of the colony was stencilled in black), inadvertently transposed two letters in the name of the colony of Montserrat on the card placed before its representative at one of the West Indian conferences. To his chagrin and embarrassment and the amusement of other regional delegates he sat behind a name card proclaiming 'Monsterrat' until the error was rectified. Nowadays such an incident would be leaked to the media, which would blow it up out of all proportion; questions would be raised in Parliament with the Opposition calling for the resignation of the relevant minister and all and sundry would be demanding a public enquiry. But in those days humour was a greater force than political correctness and the media were more restrained and responsible.

Then there was the rare entertaining diversion. For example, in the early 1950s when a very young David Attenborough, then early on in his to be sparkling BBC career, arrived at the office and thereby generated much interest and excitement. He was organizing a visit to one of the colonies to put together a wild-life programme for television and had called on the relevant geographical department for background briefing. Although British television in those days was still in its infancy, the young Attenborough with his infectious enthusiasm for the natural environment was already attracting a cult following. That he was to develop into a national institution in later life was to come as no surprise to those early audiences. But to revert to his visit, work slowed down as many members of the staff, especially the ladies, sought to catch a glimpse of so handsome a celebrity. However, as already intimated, this type of diversion was the unexpected exception rather than the general rule.

The demise of the Colonial Office took place piecemeal. By the early 1960s some of the staff had already been siphoned off to form the new Department of Technical Cooperation, which subsequently blossomed out into the Ministry of Overseas Development (now Department for International Development). But with policy makers closely scrutinizing Britain's changing role in the world, deeper fundamental structural changes affecting staff were now afoot. In 1964, following acceptance by the government of the recommendations of the Plowden Commission's Report on future overseas representation, it was announced that the Colonial and Commonwealth Relations Offices would merge as soon as practicable in the second half of 1965; and that, meanwhile, a new diplomatic service would be created comprising the Foreign and Commonwealth Offices and the Trade Commission Services. In the light of this, a circular was issued to Colonial Office staff outlining two options: apply to be considered for transfer to the new diplomatic service (applications to be considered jointly by the personnel departments of the Foreign and Commonwealth Offices) or seek transfer to other branches of the Home Civil Service. The majority opted for the latter and, until their transfers could be effected, formed, together with their colleagues who had applied for the new diplomatic service, a residual rump of colonial expertise within the expanded Commonwealth Office.

Inevitably, as is the case with most mergers, not everyone was happy. The Commonwealth Office had been openly reluctant to take Colonial Office applicants for the diplomatic service under its wing on the grounds that such staff members were 'tainted' with colonialism and likely to be regarded with suspicion by newly emerged Commonwealth nations that had just shed its yoke. A few eyebrows were raised at this for, ironically, these were the very persons who had been instrumental in facilitating the decolonization processes and had a unique practical, as opposed to academic, understanding of the problems still facing the newly emergent countries. So what price experience? Was there another reason? Cynics at the time concluded that the Commonwealth Office's concern was to keep out such experienced staff in order to maintain its current staff's promotion prospects. But that's now an incidental almost forgotten passing blip on the screen of history.

Over the next year or so most of those in the 'rump' had transferred to posts in other home departments; and when on 17 October 1968 the Commonwealth Office was formally amalgamated with the Foreign Office under one secretary of state, only a handful of the old Colonial Office staff, of whom I was one, was absorbed into the new diplomatic service. Thus, henceforth, the affairs of the remaining colonies would inevitably be dealt with within Whitehall by staff largely inexperienced in such matters. However, this was not too serious a problem for the reality was that the decolonization process had by now been virtually completed. It was rightly anticipated that even after the main remaining colony, Hong Kong, reverted to China in 1997, the long established overall policy (namely that if any of the remaining territories declared their intention to become independent HMG would not stand in their way, but if they wished to maintain the status quo their wish would be respected) would continue to prevail, at least for the foreseeable future, while recognizing that territories whose sovereignty was under dispute internationally (British Honduras, the Falkland Islands and Gibraltar) posed special problems.

So the British Empire that had entered the twentieth century with all the appearance of the proverbial lion went out before the *fin de siècle* like the proverbial lamb. Some felt that Britain had acceded too readily to the postwar clamour for independence. But this took no account of changing world attitudes towards colonialism, or of a country whose resources had been significantly drained by the impact of the Second World War and now had neither the capacity nor the will to maintain and defend those territories in a changing world order. In all this, the prospect of a closer relationship with continental Europe was now overshadowing events. For the traditionalists one remaining loose end remained to be tied up before the end of the century: due recognition of the men and women of the colonial service (since 1954 renamed Her Majesty's Overseas Civil Service) who had devoted their lives to the economic, social and political development of the people living in the countries in which they served.

On Tuesday 25 May 1999, a service of commemoration and thanksgiving was held in Westminster Abbey, in the presence of Her Majesty the Queen and His Royal Highness the Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, to mark the end of Her Majesty's Overseas Civil Service, the Centenary of the Corona Club and the Golden Jubilee of Corona Worldwide.

In his opening prayer, 'The Bidding', the scene was set by the Very Reverend Dr Wesley Carr, Dean of Westminster, with these words:

> For one hundred and sixty years, from before the beginning of the reign of Queen Victoria, through the height of Empire, to the era of today's Commonwealth, Her Majesty's Overseas Civil Service worked for the Crown and the colonies. Its duties concluded when Hong Kong was handed back to China.
>
> Today we gather at the heart of the nation, in Westminster Abbey where the permanent memorial to their service stands to recognize thousands of devoted people: those who managed this, the oldest of Britain's overseas civil services; those who worked in times of extraordinary change to sustain its tradition of loyalty to the crown and integrity in dealing with local governments; and the two clubs which were associated with members of the service – the Corona Club and Corona Worldwide.

> We mark two endings: Her Majesty's Overseas Civil Service and the Corona Club.
>
> Their commitments discharged, their memory remains in many hearts; we thank God for work well done; for duties borne bravely; and for friendships made and kept through the years.
>
> When you have carried out all of your orders, you should say, We are servants and deserve no credit; we have only done our duty.

It was perhaps fitting that one of the hymns sung that day was Rudyard Kipling's enigmatic religious poem, 'Recessional', which the author, some years later in a letter to a cousin, attributed to his Wesleyan heritage. As he put it, 'Three generations of Wesleyan ministers … lie behind me … the pulpit streak will come out.'[2] Angus Wilson is sceptical of this claim in his biography of Kipling when he sets it against the latter's lifelong agnosticism and little apparent interest in his ancestry; but, in recognizing that his 'preaching streak' was undoubtedly present in both his mind and writing, accepts there was a superficial inheritance from his Wesleyan grandparents in terms of the work ethic, a hatred of frivolity, earnestness in life's purpose and a readiness to use the language of the Bible.[3] All this, however, was secondary to the interpretation of the poem, for its words were to have a significant impact in the country, either reflecting or influencing the attitude of some of the nation's 'movers and shakers'. For, beneath the cladding of biblical language, Kipling was undoubtedly warning the public against a tendency towards arrogance in respect of the empire and reminding it of the unpalatable fact that empires decline and fall as well as rise.

This poem, perhaps the most famous of his poetical works, was written in 1897 in the heyday of the empire to coincide with the celebrations to mark Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee on 22 June of that year. It was seen by some as a clear and sharp corrective to the imperial euphoria that had gripped the nation at the time. Wilson argues that part of it reflected a late Victorian climate that stressed the need for humility, awe, simplicity and decorum in those charged with governing the empire.[4] It also seemed to prophesy, or at least envisage, its end. These sentiments colour the five oft quoted verses. Remember how they go?

God of our fathers, known of old,
Lord of our far-flung battle-line,
Beneath whose awful Hand we hold
Dominion over palm and pine –
Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,
Lest we forget – lest we forget!

The tumult and the shouting dies –
The captains and the kings depart –
Still stands Thine ancient Sacrifice,
An humble and a contrite heart.
Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,
Lest we forget – lest we forget!

Far called our navies melt away –
On dune and headland sinks the fire –
Lo, all our pomp of yesterday
Is one with Niniveh, and Tyre!
Judge of the Nations, spare us yet,
Lest we forget – lest we forget!

If, drunk with the sight of power, we loose
Wild tongues that have not Thee in awe –
Such boastings as the Gentiles use,
Or lesser breeds without the Law.
Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,
Lest we forget – lest we forget!

For heathen heart that puts her trust
In reeking tube and iron shard,
All valiant dust that builds on dust,
And guarding, calls not Thee to guard,
For frantic boast and foolish word –
Thy mercy on Thy people, Lord!

These words and thoughts were echoed and interpreted elsewhere. Kipling was persuaded to send a copy of the poem to *The Times*, which, on 17 July 1897, printed it with the comment that 'the most dangerous and demoralizing temper' into which the nation could fall was that of boastful pride in the empire.[5] *The Graphic* followed in similar vein, maintaining that the lesson the public should draw from the celebrations was that behind the rhetoric of empire was not only a sense of greatness but also of responsibility.[6] This reflected a significant movement that had been developing steadily throughout the Victorian period (initially inspired by a missionary zeal to propagate Christianity among perceived 'heathens' and subject them to Anglicized civilization, perhaps flowing from the anti-slavery campaign begun in the late eighteenth century): that of acceptance of a growing moral responsibility towards colonial peoples. However, in practice, it has to be admitted that morality unfortunately was to take a back seat to greed and power as British involvement in the European 'scramble for Africa', taking place around that time, began to have effect.

Despite this seeming ambivalence, the intellectual mood towards empire was undoubtedly changing. The jingoism that had greeted the start of the Boer War was to give way to moral revulsion at some of the methods used to bring about victory – for example, the setting up of concentration camps in which, as a result of poor conditions and mismanagement, more than 20,000 inmates (mostly children) died of disease or malnutrition. The country was anxious to restore its liberal image and old fashioned imperialism was in decline. 'Moral responsibility' was now on the agenda although implementation was inevitably slow.

This responsibility was to colour Colonial Office policy as the twentieth century advanced, resulting in the active stimulation of economic and social development in the colonies through, for example, various colonial development acts starting in 1929 with the creation of the Colonial Development Fund. Admittedly, it was not only enacted at a time of serious unemployment in Britain, but it was also tied to British trade and was no doubt conceived of as a means of helping to alleviate unemployment at home rather than general colonial development as such. None the less, it was to establish the principle of grants for development, which then led to the introduction and operation of the Colonial Development and Welfare Acts from 1940 onwards. Coupled with this was the guiding of colonial territories towards responsible and representative self-government to ensure that people had a better standard of living and freedom from oppression. These enlightened policies also influenced the attitude of those serving on the ground in the final phase of British colonialism: there emerged a newer class of conscientious, talented and humanitarian administrators whose task it was to implement them. This they carried out faithfully and effectively as history recognizes.

John Smith (chairman of the Corona Club) developed this theme obliquely by reading an extract from Sir Gawain Bell's book, *An Imperial Twilight*, which mused on the history of empire and how policy adapted to modern needs:

> The history of the British Empire can be likened to a great tapestry. Its panels show an accumulation of hues and colours, of shapes and designs, of individuals and incidents, some sombre in tone, some vivid, there is struggle and success, achievement and disappointment, and sometimes failure. And throughout the broad extent of the canvas there remains a single and unbroken thread. It is a thread that has marked the latter stages of empire as it runs towards its final patterns. It is the thread that represents social and economic improvement, it is the thread of education and enlightenment and it leads to national consciousness and to the conclusion of the work. Here in the last panel of all there is portrayed the ceremonial lowering of the Union flag and its replacement by bright newly designed standards symbolic of unity, of freedom, of prosperity.[7]

Could there be a more fitting tribute to those responsible in the postwar years for bringing about this comparatively speedy transition from colony to full self determination, imperfect though it may have been or seemed at times?

At the end of the service while those present were waiting to depart for various receptions, a distinguished senior civil servant sitting with his wife behind Florence and me, John Stackpoole, who was a contemporary in the Colonial Office, asked if I had noticed a significant omission in all the various tributes paid. 'You mean the lack of any mention of the Colonial Office?' I responded. 'Exactly,' he said. We agreed it was a pity that there was not even a nod in its direction. For, although those administering the territories on the ground were in the vanguard of the economic and social improvement of the indigenous populations, and in later years working themselves out of a job by introducing and implementing localization policies (that is to say, replacing expatriate officers with local equivalents in preparation for independence) the decolonization policies and timetables they were following were laid down by the Colonial Office whose equally dedicated staff (who, too, were working themselves out of a job although, unlike most of their colonial service counterparts, were invariably found alternative posts within the home civil service framework) had the delicate task of devising formulae that would allow government and opposition parties in the various colonies to accept the constitutional changes that were a necessary prerequisite to political independence. And it was, of course, the Colonial Office that introduced in October 1954 the transition from 'Colonial Service', a title that had been in use since at least the reign of William IV, to 'Her Majesty's Overseas Civil Service' and for the attendant provisions that would provide a measure of security for its members as their services increasingly came outside the old responsibilities of the Colonial Office.

Although too much should not be made of this omission, it does provide a convenient peg on which to hang a brief explanation of the structural hierarchy under which the colonies were administered. The Colonial Office and colonial service were two disparate strands of the whole colonial fabric. Sir Charles Jeffries (deputy under secretary when I joined the Colonial Office) described the former as 'nothing more or less than the Secretariat of the Secretary of State – the tool with which he does his work'. The colonial service, on the other hand, was the instrument responsible for administering the colonies on the ground. Colonial Office staff were members of the home civil service while those of the colonial service were in the employ of one or other of the various colonial governments.

Methods of recruitment and terms and conditions of employment were, therefore, different with the result that many colonial service officers in later years, as career prospects dwindled, felt that although swearing allegiance to the same sovereign, heirs and successors they were treated less favourably than their home service counterparts.

But could the creation of a fully integrated joint home and overseas service have worked? It would have required officers serving in the field in all the various disciplines to be subject to central control. Apart from other considerations, given a natural empathy towards those within their local jurisdiction, their probable inclination would have been to follow a different agenda to that decreed by Whitehall. Such a situation would inevitably have given rise to a conflict of interests, particularly if financial considerations involving United Kingdom subventions to the local economy and development were involved. From HMG's point of view it was important to retain control in such matters for, in the process of discharging its responsibility to Parliament, it follows that any payments to the local piper would require HM Treasury to call the tune.

This is not to say, however, that no thought was ever given to the prospect of creating a merged service. In the early 1950s, when career prospects in the colonial service were dwindling, coupled with drooping morale as the general movement towards decolonization gathered pace, together with the drying up of new candidates for recruitment, consideration was given in Whitehall to the possibility of amalgamating the administrative staffs of the Colonial Office and colonial service into one fused service. In the event, practical and financial obstacles proved insuperable; and the scheme that had been drawn up for what was provisionally described as a 'British Overseas Service', was finally dropped. None the less, the career insecurity and recruitment problems of the colonial service continued to be addressed, resulting in 1954 in the creation of Her Majesty's Oversea Civil Service, referred to above, which went some way towards their alleviation.[8]

Given that the occasion in Westminster Abbey was primarily to mark the end of Her Majesty's Overseas Civil Service (colonial service) the omission of any reference to the Colonial Office was, therefore, understandable, except in one important connection. The service was also to mark the centenary and ending of the Corona Club, the official link between the two services. Founded by the arch imperialist, Joseph Chamberlain – one of the leading advocates of that late Victorian dream (or delusion) in some quarters, an imperial federation and longest ever serving secretary of state for the colonies – it was open to anyone connected with colonial administration. A meeting ground for the staff of the Colonial Office, colonial service and Crown Agents for the Colonies and marked until later years by an annual dinner (a function described in the original constitution as a 'smoking conversazione') with the Secretary of State for the Colonies presiding. On these grounds alone a nod in the direction of the Colonial Office would not have come amiss. However, in highlighting the omission we were simply making an observation, not voicing a criticism.

Through my parent office I gained the opportunity to work as part of the overseas team during the period 1961–64, thus acquiring practical experience on the ground in the colonial theatre that was to become invaluable to me in my later career. In the 1950s it was recognized that certain grant-aided territories, namely colonies that could not meet their minimum needs from their own resources and had the deficit between revenue and expenditure met by HMG, should, wherever practicable, be given additional administrative assistance at outside expense through the secondment of Colonial Office personnel. British Honduras, Britain's only colony in Central America, which HM Treasury had been supporting financially since a devastating hurricane in 1931, was a case in point, for in addition to his normal responsibilities, its governor was required to deal with problems and other complications arising out of a territorial dispute with Guatemala in which the latter claimed sovereignty. So, in the later years of that decade, Ken Osborne was seconded to the colony to assist him. When his tour ended, I succeeded him. This, I may add, was not a one-sided interchange for the experience gained could often be utilized by the office when we returned.

Reference to British Honduras, a country about twice the size of Jamaica and roughly the equivalent of Wales, as being part of Central America invites a more precise definition of its geographical location. Bounded on the east by the Bay of Honduras in the Caribbean Sea, on the south by Guatemala, on the west mainly by Guatemala and partly by Mexico, and on the north by Mexico, it is in effect an English-speaking enclave in the midst of surrounding Spanish-speaking republics.

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It is against this general background that I have amused myself in retirement by recounting, in the anecdotes and reminiscences that follow, a few of my experiences in that territory in the hope that they may at some stage be of interest to my grandchildren should they ever pose the question with which this Prologue opened. In so doing, I have had recourse to some notes I retained, particularly in connection with some dispatches I initially drafted, but have relied mainly on memory – not perhaps the most reliable of sources drawn upon by some one now of an age where, for example, the purpose of entering a particular room is sometimes forgotten. In defence, however, these stories relate to incidents or events that are stamped on my mind, even though I recognize that in reciting them some of the detail may understandably have become distorted through selective memory, exaggerated or perhaps faded over the years. Interwoven with the situations and anecdotes are the occasional glimpses of earlier history to remind them, my grandchildren, and possibly others who may be interested in what I have recorded, of a now almost forgotten British presence in lesser known parts of the Spanish Main (defined here as the Caribbean Sea) and Central America.

At this point I should perhaps say a few words about terminology relating to semantics and political correctness. By the early 1950s the word ‘colony’ was beginning to carry a somewhat odious connotation for some people and it was common practice to substitute it with the words ‘overseas territory’. Be that as it may, the latter is a vague expression with no specific meaning whereas the former makes it clear that the country concerned is a dependency of a parent state. I have, therefore, in subsequent chapters, stuck to the word ‘colony’ simply to emphasize this point and not to provoke the reader.

Furthermore, in my time in British Honduras, some people in the colony referred to it as 'Belize', one of the names given to the early settlement and, as it so happened, the country's post-independence name – though the change in nomenclature actually took place earlier, in 1973. That said, its recognized name during my secondment there (since 1840, in fact) was British Honduras and Belize was the name of its capital city, so that is how I have generally referred to them during the colonial period. Also, the stories I tell and any historical references relate to events prior to the territory's attainment of political independence in September 1981. One other point needs to be made. As would be expected, some of the names in the following anecdotes have been changed to avoid possible personal embarrassment to any person or persons concerned.

In choosing a title for this collection of tales I was tempted, as a fan of Gilbert and Sullivan operas, to draw on Nanky Poo's popular rendering in *The Mikado*, of 'A Wandering Minstrel I', by adopting the words of the next line, 'A Thing of Shreds and Patches', for it would suggest a pot-pourri of personal tales relating mainly to my own experiences and observations. However, it was a temptation to be resisted because that was only part of what I had in mind. Underlying my autobiographical cum roving reporter attempt to cast a fleeting personal glimpse on administrative and social life in a narrow section of the colonial service in the early 1960s (supplemented by three later visits) in a small and unfashionable colony moving steadily towards political independence, lies a broader theme – the unusual and fascinating history of British Honduras. This is a little known tale and not without significance in the context of British involvement in Central America over the past few centuries. I have attempted to draw these two themes together and, to some extent, they are complementary – a subjective snapshot in time, if you like, as viewed through expatriate eyes and put in a wider historical context. Consequently, it seemed to me that a more relevant title was appropriate, one relating to the story of the country in its many forms from inception to independence within the imperial framework. In short, I needed a title that focused largely on the song, as it were, rather than the singer. But what should it be?

In thinking about this I remembered three messages on roadside properties, variations on a theme, I once spotted in a single day on a journey between Belize and Corozal on the northern road leading to southern Mexico. The first, scrawled with black paint on rough boarding behind a wire fence at about mile sixteen, proclaimed that, 'TRESPASSERS WILL BE PERSECUTED'. Inside a larger property about ten miles further on was an even more belligerent message painted in white letters on what appeared to be an old school blackboard, namely, 'TRESPASSERS WILL BE SHOT'. Finally, just as I was entering Corozal, I saw outside a small church a poster declaring that, 'TRESPASSERS WILL BE FORGIVEN'. Its New Testament message came as a ray of sunshine after the harsh impressions of the other two. And, in musing upon it, I drew a parallel with British involvement in the colony in particular and the region, or even the world, in general. If, as the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* claims, 'trespass' is 'the unlawful or unwarrantable intrusion of another's lands, possessions or other rights', then the words 'colonialism' and 'trespass' are to some extent synonymous.

By this definition, Britain had trespassed in many countries in and near the Spanish Main and worldwide for centuries, so let us not beat about the bush. The driving force was not missionary zeal but an expansionist quest for commercial or strategic advantage. Britain was not alone in this. Other European maritime powers also actively carved up the world in their acquisition of empire; new factors stimulated the expansion of their commercial and political influence outside Europe with attendant consequences for themselves and the people of the areas in which they operated.

It could be said that this emergent geopolitical order, to which the terms 'colonialism' and 'imperialism' are often applied, was initially attributable to accident rather than design. But, once the maritime enterprises of the medieval period had opened up the world it was an accident waiting to happen. The great voyages of discovery accessed new minerals, raw materials and agricultural products. They also increased opportunities to trade and market the products of the industrial revolution, and provided new lands on which to settle surplus populations. In the light of these perceived advantages, global self-interest in a setting in which the principal European maritime nations vied with each other for supremacy soon governed colonialism and empire building. As this situation developed, the British (initially the English), who began to 'bleed' the Spanish empire by robbing its treasure ships rather than creating their own, gradually emerged as the supreme colonial power and, in so doing, introduced their own special stamp on the world with a resounding impact that still lingers today in various forms, some of which are touched on below.

In short, this was an age of expansionism and, consequently, various degrees of exploitation. Thus, many people in the previously 'undiscovered' world undoubtedly suffered from displacement, imported alien diseases, forced labour or other forms of coercion or exploitation – to say nothing of cultural shock. Yet, it should be recognized that oppression takes many forms and that human abuse was not confined to the colonial theatre. For most people in the world at that time life was, as Hobbes put it, 'nasty, brutish and short'. Even in the 'enlightened' twentieth century, including the post-colonial age, barbarism, wars, terrorism, racism, human exploitation and suffering in all forms and guises were, and still are, very much in evidence. This is neither to condone colonialism and its various unwelcome legacies, such as the lingering impact of slavery on its descendants, the creation of ethnic tension, and the conflicts resulting from the arbitrary delineation of artificial territorial boundaries, nor to make excuses. It is simply to underline the point that, when reviewing events with the advantage of hindsight, it is important to recognize the need to weigh emotion against an understanding of what has gone on in the world at a particular stage in its history.

However, such understanding is not always forthcoming. Although there was no shortage of critics in the twentieth century lining up to condemn British colonialism and to impugn its motives, however justified some of these criticisms undoubtedly were, there were, alas, too few champions coming forward to present the other side of that picture. There is another more positive story to tell about moral responsibility. As far as one can generalize in colonial matters, the British authorities (thanks largely to the world policing activities of the Royal Navy) brought order and stability to many areas like the Spanish Main that had previously been the haunt of buccaneers – many of whom were admittedly British – and, with it, economic and social development. And, as the empire became established, this pattern of progress was replicated in other colonial regions. British funds paid for schools, hospitals, roads and harbours and, especially in later years, attempts were made to develop local natural resources to improve living standards or combat poverty. Local involvement in government was gradually introduced.

As a result, many British traditions pertaining to law and order, social justice, political tolerance and parliamentary democracy continue to be practised in several former colonies. Indeed, the introduction and maintenance of a dispassionate legal system added a particular moral dimension to British rule, especially where the indigenous population recognized that the system protected them from local despots who would otherwise prey upon them. Also, with English now the universal language, they have been given a head start in the sphere of communications. So the ledger is not all in debit. Taking the cue from the extract from Sir Gawain Bell's book recorded above it seems fair to say that there are solid entries on the credit side too. For this reason, I venture to suggest that although the British undoubtedly trespassed in pursuit of empire, their presence was not entirely devoid of positive aspects from which some inheritors of their colonial legacy have benefited. And, in their own and others' interests, they did have the grace and wisdom to leave without fuss when local self-determination demanded it. Moreover, while accepting the inevitability and desirability of independence, British colonial rule has not always been replaced by a more enlightened system of administration – witness, for example, events in Zimbabwe in recent years under the administration of President Mugabe.

This prompts a radical thought. Since it is becoming fashionable for nations to apologize publicly for their ancient wrongs and thereby indirectly seek forgiveness, it occurs to me that it would be a pleasing contrast if some of those who had been trespassed against in the colonial context could express their forgiveness, thus putting the focus on the future instead of a past that can never be recovered. The world has before it the example of that noble South African statesman, Nelson Mandela, who not only forgave those who had trespassed against him and his people but also did something practical about it when he assumed presidential power through the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This sort of response has the virtue of drawing a line under what is now a phase of history from which lessons have been learnt and for which the current generation, which has long since made a psychological break with the imperial past, cannot be held responsible. Of course, given the prevalence of an understandably negative attitude towards colonialism, there is virtually no chance of this happening, so it is undoubtedly a pipe dream. But before dismissing the notion out of hand as quaintly chimerical, it is worth considering, in isolation, how British Honduras fits into such a seeming fantasy.

As hinted at already, generalizations about colonialism need to be treated with caution for, in the acquisition of the British Empire, the history of each particular territory tended to vary widely to take account of different times and circumstances. The origins and development of British Honduras underline this fact and, in a colonial context, it might be described as *sui generis* or, as we are more likely to say nowadays, a 'one off'.

Basically, in the seventeenth century a small group of British pirates turned log cutters settled around what is now known as the Belize River in the Bay of Honduras to pursue their newly adopted lucrative calling in what apparently was an unoccupied region claimed but not possessed by Spain. Until the early years of the nineteenth century they were subject to military and other attacks from the Spanish who tried hard to dislodge them from the settlement. Over the years their numbers grew and the acquisition of African slaves, with whom many of them intermingled to create an early socially accepted hybrid class of citizens (Creoles), saw the size of the settlement increase to several hundreds. These numbers were further supplemented in subsequent years by the arrival of compatriots and their slaves evacuated from the Mosquito Shore of Nicaragua in 1786; a number of Caribs from St Vincent in the Windward Islands; the absorption of Maya Indians as local frontiers were pushed back further and an influx of Mexican Spaniards fleeing from Yucatán Indians in the so-called Caste War around the mid-nineteenth century. Thus, a multiracial society grew and developed.

The dominant input and culture, however, remained British, which is how the early settlers and their descendants saw themselves, although the accent was on the English connection with its pride in political liberties despite an infusion of nationalities from its Celtic neighbours. The late Dr Roy Porter has observed in this context that even 'non-English Britons had little compunction about calling themselves English when it suited'.[9] Accordingly, like most of their colonizing compatriots at the time who invariably set up new England's wherever they settled, the Belize settlement saw itself as an extension of the home country. So, long before Rupert Brooke immortalized the thought and words, here again was yet another 'corner of a foreign field that is forever England'.

Yet, despite numerous petitions to London in the face of Spanish attempts to drive them from the area, Britain was not disposed at that time to accede to requests for colonial status. It was, however, finally and reluctantly ceded in 1862 and upgraded to crown colony status nine years later. Thereafter, a multiracial population generally regarded itself as British. But this was to wane over the years once political parties committed to self-determination were created; their policies then had to take account of growing Hispanic and Amerindian influences in pursuit of that objective. This resulted in its political leaders maintaining in the second half of the twentieth century that the time had come to dispense completely with outside hands, however loosely applied, on the reins of local government. Such a contention was consistent with the mood of the times although international complications slowed down the actual decolonization processes. Once the longstanding territorial dispute with Guatemala had been resolved, full political independence was finally achieved in 1981.

Another aspect of this outline of history, as seen primarily from the 'white' settlers' angle, was expounded in the approaching twilight years of empire by the late Professor A. F. Newton in his introduction to the first volume of the *Archives of British Honduras*:

> The story of British Honduras is certainly to be classed among the lesser chapters in the development of the Empire, for the numbers of those engaged were always small and their adven-

> tures were little known even to their contemporaries. But it has many points of interest and in some ways it is of significance. Among British colonies with the exception of Newfoundland, Belize has seen a collection of Englishmen[10] managing to survive in spite of the attacks of their enemies and the neglect of the authorities at home until they could receive recognition, receive settled government and be provided with proper organization as a firmly established British colony. The struggle for existence lasted for nearly one hundred and fifty years and it was not until the last quarter of the eighteenth century that the colony was launched upon an unthreatened life whereas its inhabitants could put forward their energies without the fear that that they might be sacrificed to imperial interests elsewhere.[11]

The stoism, courage, resilience and determination of the early settlers, embodied in 'the spirit of the bulldog breed' as perceived in British folklore, was never in question. It was to find echoes in subsequent British history, especially in the epic Antarctic expeditions of Scott and Shackleton; the trenches on the Western Front during the First World War; and Dunkirk and the towns and cities in Britain during the Second World War to cite just a few examples plucked at random. But, in his criticism of the home government, Professor Newton seems to have taken insufficient account of the diplomatic nuances involved in dealing with the problem of sovereignty in the area and other international complications arising from it. Also, it is reasonable to assume that British foreign policy at the time related to a commitment to trade rather than colonization *per se* unless the two coincided. Furthermore, it should not be overlooked that practical help and protection was invariably given in times of need in those early years even before colonial status was achieved.

In reality, any theoretical trespass into Spanish land rights by the early British settlers became academic once Spanish sovereignty in the region was relinquished in the early years of the nineteenth century. In fact, there is no evidence to suggest that indigenous Amerindian interests were ever deliberately violated. But what do we know about the administering colonial power, Britain, once colonial