# THE LIFE AND WORLD OF FRANCIS RODD, LORD RENNELL (1895–1978)

## Geography, Money and War

Philip Boobbyer

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Cover photo: Rodd in Sicily, 1943. Imperial War Museum.

This title is also available as an e-book.

To

Rodd's grandchildren and great grandchildren

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# ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---|---|
| ACC | Allied Control Commission |
| AFHQ | Allied Force Headquarters |
| AMGOT | Allied Military Government of Occupied Territories |
| ANB | Austrian National Bank |
| BIS | Bank for International Settlements |
| BOAC | British Overseas Airways Corporation |
| BUF | British Union of Fascists |
| CA | Credit-Anstalt |
| CCAO | chief civil affairs officer |
| CFA | controller of finance and accounts |
| CORB | Children's Overseas Reception Board |
| CPO | chief political officer |
| DCA | Directorate of Civil Affairs |
| DMI | director of military intelligence |
| EEF | Egyptian Expeditionary Force |
| GHQ | general headquarters |
| GOC | general officer commanding |
| G(R) | sub-branch of MI(R) |
| IAI | International African Institute |
| KBE | Knight Commander of the British Empire |
| LRDG | Long Range Desert Group |
| MEW | Ministry of Economic Warfare |
| MGS | Military Government Section |
| MI(R) | Military Intelligence (Research) |
| MRA | Moral Re-Armament |
| OETA | Occupied Enemy Territory Administration |
| OG | Oxford Group |
| OTA | Occupied Territory Administration |
| RAF | Royal Air Force |
| RFA | Royal Field Artillery |
| RGS | Royal Geographical Society |
| SCAO | senior civil affairs officer |
| SHAEF | Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force |
| SOE | Special Operations Executive |

# A NOTE ON NAMES

The subject of this book was known as Francis Rodd until he was nearly 46 years old. His full name was Francis James Rennell Rodd. His father, who was called James Rennell Rodd, was given a peerage in 1933, and he took the title Lord Rennell of Rodd. He died in July 1941, and the title then passed to Francis. From then on, Francis was known as Lord Rennell or Francis Rennell. In the main text of this book, I have referred to Francis as 'Rodd' throughout, for reasons of clarity. In the references, I have adopted a different approach. Most sources of an official or public character authored by Rodd from late 1941 onwards are cited under the authorship of Lord Rennell. But with sources of a more informal or personal nature, Rodd is often retained as the designated author, even after 1941. In the text, Rodd's father is generally referred to as 'Rennell Rodd'. Rodd's mother, Lilias, and wife, Mary, along with some other family members and friends, are referred to by their first names.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The School of History at the University of Kent, where I have been based since 1995, has been an excellent place for working on this book. Stefan Goebel and Gaynor Johnson read the text in manuscript and made many thoughtful suggestions about how to improve it. I turned to Timothy Bowman and Mark Connelly whenever I needed advice about British military history. Andrew Cohen, Karen Jones, Aparaijta Mukhopadhyay and Juliette Pattinson shared insights on a number of issues. I feel very lucky to have had such expertise around me. From beyond Kent, I am indebted to Charles Withers for reading a draft of the manuscript and stressing the importance of seeing Rodd in a wide-enough context. Saul Kelly's knowledge of the British exploration of the Sahara proved helpful, while Henrietta Butler was a source of knowledge about Tuareg culture. Martin Horn checked the chapter on Rodd's life as a banker. In addition to those mentioned, I would like to thank James Bruce, Peter Clarke, John Dickie, Edward Flint, Erik Goldstein, Richard Hammond, Catherine McIlwaine, Helyn Parr, John Pollard, Phyllis Rodd, Charles Spicer and Jane Wellesley for helping me with various details or providing assistance. Thanks are also due to photographer David King for his help in preparing some of the illustrations. I also benefitted from talking with members of my family, particularly my mother, Juliet Boobbyer, and my aunt, Mary Daniell: they were a precious source of information about the history of Rodd's family. My cousins Joseph Blythe, Francis Dunne and Jemima Lord offered thoughts and help. I would also like to thank Roddy Edwards for prompting me to think about the nature of Britain's legacy in the world, and Ken Noble for his encouragement. Finally, I must express gratitude to my wife, Laura, for putting up with my moments of uncertainty about bringing this work to completion and for her enduring care and support.

# A PERSONAL NOTE

For an academic work, this book is unusual in the sense that I have a personal relationship to the subject. Francis Rodd was my grandfather. Up until recently, Russian history and twentieth-century religion were the main areas of my research. But I have long been aware that there were topics closer to home, in my own family, which would be of great interest to a historian such as myself. For many years, Rodd remained a relatively obscure figure to me. My knowledge of his career was limited to what could be gleaned from obituaries, short summaries of his life or family anecdotes. A chance discovery changed everything. Poking around my mother's house one day, I stumbled upon a file containing Rodd's wartime correspondence with his wife, Mary. I have always found letters intriguing, and this collection was no exception – it opened up a story largely unknown to the family. As I did further research into Rodd's life, his career and character came into sight like a submerged ship being raised out of the water. It turned out that Rodd was close to the action during a number of big events during the past century, and a worthy subject for a book.

I knew Rodd personally but not well. He died in 1978 when I was 14. I met him during family holidays at his home in Herefordshire. My memory of him is largely confined to personal, essentially trivial details – like the fact that he blew his nose loudly, came down to breakfast late and read the paper, and sometimes got angry at the barking of my grandmother's dogs. I was occasionally asked to mix him a pink gin – he liked a drink and took snuff. Then there was the large saddle of roast beef served on Sundays, and the fact that meals were cooked and served by employees from the locality – this was a milieu with a clearly defined class structure. In the family he was sometimes called 'Bompa' – one of his grandchildren once called him 'Bompa' instead of 'Grandpa' and the name stuck. My older cousins remember him for being interesting, affectionate and good company. The man I knew was declining in energy and not so easy to relate to. But to all of us, he appeared 'important'. We knew that he had had a big role in the war. Moreover, he was a 'Lord': he inherited a peerage in 1941.

Inevitably, the writing of this book has been personally interesting for me. While looking at Rodd from an academic perspective, I often found another pair of eyes – the eyes of a grandson – watching in the wings. In a sense, researching the book involved Rodd and I going on a journey together, in which he – through the medium of primary sources – introduced me to his life and world. In this process, at an imaginative level, I got to know him in a way I had never done in life. In spite of these things, this is meant to be a scholarly work. We know that no one in life is just an observer. This is certainly true in the case of people writing about their relatives, although the point could equally apply to

anybody working on the recent history of their own country. Moreover, there is always a creative, literary dimension to the writing of history. For all that, there is value in trying to maintain a sense of critical distance, to stand back from the material and arrive at a more detached perspective. That has been my approach here. I hope Rodd, himself an admirer of the ideal of the unprejudiced study of life and nature, would have approved.

Canterbury, September 2020

# INTRODUCTION

Fierce, restless and with a rich portfolio of interests, Francis Rodd was always looking for a new project to feed an insatiable curiosity for life. Different worlds intersected in a career packed with activity, sometimes combining easily and at other times jostling with each other for attention. The two world wars in a variety of ways gave shape and purpose to his life, with military intelligence and military government being important areas of focus. In between the conflicts, and after the Second World War, much of his time was devoted to geography and banking. Along the way, he made friends with Lawrence of Arabia, talked with Benito Mussolini, spent time with Charles de Gaulle and fell out with Anthony Eden. He inhabited that privileged echelon of British society satirised by novelist Nancy Mitford – his sister-in-law. The high point of his career came in 1943 when he was given the task of heading the first military government in Allied-occupied Europe – he was chief civil affairs officer in the organisation known as AMGOT (Allied Military Government of Occupied Territories). He proved a controversial figure. He had obvious leadership skills and a good knowledge of Italy, but some thought him difficult or eccentric, and there were those on the left who feared that his pre-war business activities had brought him too close to the Italian regime. Nowadays he is little known. This book is a study of his life, with particular reference to his involvement in geography, banking, intelligence and military government, and his political convictions and religious beliefs.

Rodd first came to public attention for his travels to the south-central Sahara in the 1920s. He had been at Eton and Oxford before the outbreak of the First World War, after which he spent a year on the Western Front. Wartime duties in Italy, North Africa and the Middle East followed. An interest in the desert was awakened in these years, which then found expression in expeditions he made to the Aïr mountains in the French colony of Niger in 1922 and 1927. An outcome of the first of these was a study of the culture and history of the Tuareg, *People of the Veil* (1926), his most influential work. For his journeys and publications, he was awarded the Founder's Medal of the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) in 1929. After the Second World War, he was president of the RGS (1945–48). In this role, he worked to popularise geography and demonstrate its importance to education. Geography, in both its academic and romantic guises, was one of his enduring loves – perhaps the most consistent of them. Rodd's life in geography, hitherto unrevealed in any detail, deserves attention for what it tells us about both the British penetration of the Sahara and the revitalisation of the RGS after 1945.

Rodd's love of geography was often connected with an attachment to particular places, notably Aïr, Western Australia and the English–Welsh border. The first two were

characterised by a combination of remoteness and relative emptiness, the latter also by a remote quality but in the more congested setting of Britain. Something connected with either the size or the solitude of these places appealed to him and stirred in him existential reflections. This was the experience of many British explorers encountering lonely and little-known parts of the world. Rodd was also aware of how natural history is shaped by the impact of human migration and settlement. He knew – as contemporary geographers point out – that places are not just containers.[1] The natural environment elicited from him a scholarly response: an aspiration to calculate, contextualise and historicise. In the case of the Sahara, there was also a more overtly political dimension to his interest. Knowledge of geography has always been indispensable to the conduct of war. But the First World War made geographers more aware than ever of the military relevance of their discipline, particularly by demonstrating the importance of maps for addressing battlefield questions. Rodd was fascinated by the caravan routes of the Sahara and quickly saw their relevance in the event of a new military conflict in North Africa arising. In seeing and reporting on desert road systems from a military point of view, his thinking fed into what has been called the 'militarisation' of the desert.[2]

Rodd grew up in a diplomatic milieu. His father, James Rennell Rodd, was a senior diplomat who served as ambassador to Italy during the First World War. Rodd followed him into the Foreign Office in 1919, but left after five years to become a stockbroker. In 1929, he moved again, this time to the Bank of England to work as an advisor to its chairman, Montagu Norman. In career terms, banking would become Rodd's core activity. In 1930–31, he was seconded to the newly formed Bank for International Settlements (BIS) in Basle. This meant that he was at the epicentre of events during the Austrian banking crisis of May–June 1931. He got on well with Norman and shared his vision of an international capitalist system free of nationalist influence. But in 1933, he moved to the British investment bank Morgan Grenfell & Co.[3] There was a family connection here: in 1928, Rodd had married Mary Smith, a daughter of one of the senior partners at Morgan Grenfell. From the vantage point of the Morgan banks, Rodd watched the collapse of the European order in the 1930s. After the German annexation of Austria in March 1938 (the *Anschluss*), he worked with others to maintain a transatlantic approach to dealing with Austrian debt, instead of allowing individual countries to make their own deals with Germany. But in the end, the Bank of England decided to approach the issue unilaterally.

As the Second World War approached, a new phase in Rodd's career opened up. In summer 1939, he joined the newly created Ministry of Economic Warfare (MEW). For

1. Doreen Massey and Nigel Thrift, 'A Passion for Place', in Ron Johnson and Michael Williams (eds), *A Century of British Geography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 292.
2. Isla Forsyth, 'Desert Journeys: From Exploration to Covert Operations', *Geographical Journal* 182, no. 3 (2016): 228. Michael Heffernan, 'Cartography and Military Intelligence: The Royal Geographical Society and the First World War', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 21, no. 3 (1996): 505.
3. The main work on Morgan Grenfell is Kathleen Burk, *Morgan Grenfell, 1838–1988: The Biography of a Merchant Bank* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

roughly nine months, during 1939–40, he represented the MEW in its dealings with Italy, pursuing a policy of using economic incentives to bolster Anglo–Italian relations and woo Mussolini. Whether or not the contentious term 'appeasement' is the right word to describe this approach, it was certainly one based on the assumption that the Italian leader was a man who could be negotiated with. The MEW has received considerable attention from historians, but no account of these negotiations has been written from Rodd's point of view. When the MEW's strategy failed, and Mussolini joined the war on Hitler's side, Rodd headed for West Africa with a position in Military Intelligence Research – 'MI(R)'. He set up an intelligence-gathering operation in Nigeria, with a remit to assess the allegiances of the French colonies and make plans for a possible invasion by Axis forces from the North. Although MI(R)'s work in sponsoring irregular warfare in East Africa at this time is well known, its work in West Africa, exemplified by Rodd, has received little attention.[4]

Rodd's work for MI(R) illuminates his connection with Ralph Bagnold, pioneer of the use of motorised transport in the desert and, in 1940, founder of the Long Range Desert Group (LRDG). Rodd was not personally involved in the LRDG, but he had input into its origins: he saw the military possibilities inherent in Bagnold's ideas and encouraged him to develop them. This book contains hitherto unknown details about Rodd's input into the LRDG's ground-breaking raid on Murzuk in southern Libya in January 1941. Here he was like many other geographers in finding that his expertise had a use in the Second World War.[5] For him the desert war also had a psychological appeal. It spoke to his notions of what constituted a life of adventure: discovery, courage and danger – here his conceptions of heroism were typical of many British soldiers.[6]

Rodd would love to have made the desert war his priority. But his skillset meant that he was drawn instead into the sphere of military administration. Following a Free French coup in French Equatorial Africa in August 1940, he became financial advisor to the new government in Brazzaville. Experience in this role meant that in early 1941, as the Italian empire began to fall to the British, he was well placed to assist with the takeover of the newly conquered territories – a task assigned to the War Office and run from Cairo and Nairobi. First as controller of finance and accounts (1941–42) and then as chief political officer in East Africa command (1942–43), he was a key player in managing what was initially called the Occupied Enemy Territory Administration (OETA). Importantly, he was chief military administrator of Madagascar for September–October 1942. He found all this work challenging and exciting, but also frustrating, especially when there were departmental tensions. In

4. On MI(R) in East Africa, especially Ethiopia, see Simon Anglim, *Orde Wingate and the British Army 1922–44* (London: Routledge, 2010), 102, 105–12.
5. For a wider perspective on this, see W. G. V. Balchin, 'United Kingdom Geographers in the Second World War: A Report', *Geographical Journal* 153, no. 2 (1987): 159–80; Trevor J. Barnes, 'American Geographers and World War II: Spies Teachers and Occupiers', *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 106, no. 3 (2016): 543–50.
6. See Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (London: Routledge, 1994), ch. 1.

Ethiopia, Emperor Haile Selassie was eager for power to be transferred to him swiftly, following the end of Italian rule. Likewise, there was pressure for a quick transfer of power from the British to the Free French in Madagascar, following the success of Operation Ironclad in 1942. In these situations, the Foreign Office – eager to deflect charges of colonial intent – was keen to see a quick end to British rule, while the War Office was more cautious.[7] Rodd's insights into these situations demonstrate the extent of the departmental differences.

Rodd's involvement first with OETA and then with AMGOT sheds light onto the way in which the British applied the doctrine of 'indirect rule' to military government. The idea of indirect rule – popular in the interwar period – seemed to offer a way of protecting African traditions from the inroads of Western modernity, and it could easily be adapted to local conditions. But by the 1940s, the paternalistic concept of 'trusteeship', which gave it legitimacy, was under threat from the idea of 'partnership'.[8] The war gave indirect rule a renewed relevance. The Allies did not want to get bogged down in micromanaging conquered territories. Indirect rule gave them a rationale for leaving some existing structures in place, even while changing the people at the top. Historians of empire writing about indirect rule normally overlook the legacy of the doctrine in military government. Rodd's thinking – its origins and application – brings this into focus. His advocacy of indirect rule and the pragmatic outlook of which it was a part help to explain key aspects of AMGOT policy. In preparing for Operation Husky – the invasion of Sicily – the Americans promoted the idea of replacing prominent fascist leaders with Allied soldiers. But British planners, Rodd in particular, thought the Allies lacked the personnel to rule southern Italy directly. Rodd played a key role in persuading Harold Alexander, the general in charge of Operation Husky, and Dwight Eisenhower, the supreme commander, to embrace a gradualist approach to this issue.[9]

One of the architects of the policy of indirect rule, British imperialist and colonial administrator Lord Frederick Lugard, famously argued that it was possible for Britain to work for 'progress' in the colonies while at the same time using the empire for its own economic benefit. He termed this combination of commitments the 'dual mandate'.[10] His vision had something in common with that of US geographer Isaiah Bowman, a

7. See Richard Frost, *Enigmatic Proconsul: Sir Philip Mitchell and the Twilight of Empire* (London: Radcliffe Press, 1992), ch. 10; Martin Thomas, *The French Empire at War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 148–49; Edward Flint, 'The Development of British Civil Affairs and Its Employment in the British Sector of Allied Military Operations during the Battle of Normandy, June to August 1944', PhD thesis, Cranfield University, 2008, 110.
8. On indirect rule, see John Cell, 'Colonial Rule', in J. D. Brown and W. R. Louis (eds), *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, vol. 4 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 237–43; Robert D. Pearce, *The Turning Point in Africa: British Colonial Policy 1938–48* (London, 1982), chs 1 and 2.
9. See on this Philip Boobbyer, 'Lord Rennell, Chief of AMGOT: A Study of His Approach to Politics and Military Government (c. 1940–1943)', *War in History* 25, no. 3 (2018): 304–27.
10. F. D. Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in Tropical Africa* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1922), 617.

key advisor to the American president Woodrow Wilson at the Paris Peace Conference (1919–20): Bowman tended to identify the global good with American interests.[11] Rodd was like Lugard and Bowman in having an international outlook, yet also being a servant of the nation-state; the need to defend British interests was always present in his mind. Yet, while he was a pragmatist eager to expand or consolidate British influence, he was often critical of British policy. He was also an idealist ready to attach himself to political causes. His advocacy of indirect rule partly arose because of a certain localism in his thinking, fed by his upbringing and exposure to African cultures. He had a high-minded vision for the task of administration itself. Under AMGOT, when the Mafia started to re-establish itself in Italy – a topic of controversy to this day – he tried to take a principled stand against organised crime.

Publicly, Rodd was a confident person with an often brusque manner. Privately, he was self-reflective and sometimes uncertain of himself. This difference is intriguing. There are plenty of good sources available for building up a picture of his inner life. He wrote diaries or summaries of his activities during both world wars; hence, it is possible to construct a detailed picture of what he was doing and thinking. In 1950, in the course of discussions about the nature of religion with Mary, he wrote out a narrative of his life in some detail, which tells us a lot about his aspirations and insecurities.[12] Another rich source is his correspondence. He was a prolific letter writer. A large number of his letters to his parents and Mary survive. Historians have rightly noted that subjectivity is best understood as emerging from connection rather than detachment; human beings generally experience themselves through their relationships, and the character of those relationships changes over time, as does personal identity.[13] Rodd's personal life illustrates this. His thinking was always in dialogue with others. He was sometimes worried about how others saw him and, particularly after 1945, about how his career had evolved. His eagerness to put his private thoughts on paper was in some ways reflective of a person whose thoughts crystalised as he wrote them down.

One of the advantages of biography is that it can enable us to see a person in the round. Institutional histories or works built around one issue can miss seeing the full complexity of people's lives. This book is structured around a number of key themes. This allows us to get a picture of the range of Rodd's activities and how they were intertwined.[14] A potential weakness in biography is that it can exaggerate human agency or the importance of its subject. Western culture, thankfully, takes the view that human beings should be answerable for their actions – our systems of law depend on that idea. But Rodd's importance should not be overstated. He left an imprint in the worlds of geography and military government in particular, but even there, he can be

11. Neil Smith, *American Empire: Roosevelt's Geographer and the Prelude to Globalization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), xi.
12. Rodd, 'Life and Reflections', 1950, Rodd Family Papers, AC.
13. Mary Fulbrook and Ulinka Rublack, 'In Relation: The "Social Self" and Ego-Documents', *German History* 28, no. 3 (2010): 269.
14. For a good example of this kind of study, see Jay Bergman, *Meeting the Demands of Reason: The Life and Thought of Andrei Sakharov* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009).

seen as a person caught up in processes beyond his control. In many ways, he reflected the values of time. That need not deter us; it means that this book can serve to help us understand British society at a time of great change. But Rodd's life is not only of historical interest. He grappled with many of the issues we confront today: traditional societies threatened by modernisation; conflicts between the great powers; a global financial system facing upheaval; the relationship of armies with local populations; and the dialogue between religion, science and the humanities. All this makes him an intriguing subject for a book.

# Chapter One

# FAMILY AND YOUTH

Rodd was born on 25 October 1895, at 10 Curzon Street, London. He came from a family shaped by empire. He was very conscious of this – he was always proud of his ancestral lineage. Importantly, from a geographical point of view, he was descended from James Rennell (1742–1830) – he was Rennell's great, great grandson. A cartographer who became surveyor-general of the East India Company, Rennell was responsible for creating a number of early maps of India. He also knew Africa well. He was elected an honorary member of the African Association in 1792 after he had compiled a map of the northern part of the continent, and he later produced maps of the routes taken in Africa by the Scottish explorer Mungo Park. Like Rodd, he had an interest in camels – he wrote an article on the rate of travelling as performed by camels.[1] He was also an early pioneer of the discipline of oceanography. Although he died before the founding of the RGS, he helped to promote its idea, and he was recognised in 1930 as one of its founders. Clements Markham – president of the RGS (1893–1905) and an influential promoter of geography – called him the 'first great English geographer'; he also emphasised the breadth of his qualifications, in the context of the fact that geographers had to be 'many-sided' in their abilities.[2] Rodd was always proud of Rennell's legacy and, like Markham, thought of geography as a multifaceted discipline.

Empire and exploration were also evident on Rodd's mother's side of the family. His mother was Lilias Georgina Guthrie (1864–1951), a daughter of James Alexander Guthrie, the fourth Baron of Craigie. Her grandfather on her mother's side was James Stirling (1791–1865), a Scottish naval officer who was the first governor of Western Australia; he was the founder of the Swan River colony and the settlements of Perth and Fremantle.[3]

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1. James Rennell, 'On the Rate of Travelling as Performed by Camels', *Philosophical Transactions*, March 1791; RGS Papers, 331411.
2. C. R. Markham, *Major James Rennell and the Rise of Modern English Geography* (London: Cassell, 1895), 9–11. J. N. L. Baker, *The History of Geography* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1963), 130–57. Andrew S. Cook, 'Rennell, James (1742–1830)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). A. M. Johnson, 'The Rennell Collection', *Geographical Journal* 148, no. 1 (1982): 38. For Rodd's comments on Mungo Park's journey, see 'Rennell's Comments on the Journeys of Park and Laing to the Niger', *Geographical Journal* 86, no. 1 (1935): 28–31. Based on Park's testimony, Rennell erroneously concluded that the Niger River emptied into an inland lake; see Charles W. J. Withers, 'Mapping the Niger, 1798–1832: Trust, Testimony and "Ocular Demonstration" in the Late Enlightenment', *Imago Mundi* 56, no. 2 (2004): 172–75.
3. Pamela Statham-Drew, *James Stirling: Admiral and Founding Governor of Western Australia* (Crawley: University of Western Australia Press, 2003).