

Matey's Memoirs

By Robin (Matey) Martin

In his above titled book Robin Martin includes the time he spent in the Nyasaland Police in chapters 3, 4 and 5. Courtesy of his daughter, Anne Blackman, these chapters are available on the Nypol website. They are broken down into a number of parts and appear in serial form from month to month until fully available.

Chapter 5 ~ Part 4

Dedza continued

A Tobacco Scandal

Tobacco was one of the important cash crops of the country and was grown by European settler farmers and native farmers alike. Other important crops were tea and to a lesser extent cotton, tung (a small Asian tree, the nuts of which produce a quick drying oil used in paints), maize and groundnuts. The economy of the country was not very developed and these cash crops did not provide sufficient export income, together with local taxes, to sustain the running of the country (*Note 1*). The extra income, necessary to balance the budget, was provided in grants-in-aid by the British Government. As regards tobacco the settlers were more or less left to grow, cure and auction their tobacco themselves which they traded at the auction floors in Limbe, the southern town: but to ensure a fair price for



native grown tobacco the government had enacted a Tobacco Ordinance. The Ordinance constituted the Native Tobacco Board, later to be called the African Tobacco Board, to control the growing and conduct of the purchasing of native tobacco: for given a chance, Europeans - be they British, Italian, Portuguese or Asians, would, in many cases, cheat the native growers if they could get away with it. However, on some occasions the settler-farmers would offer a little

more than the Tobacco Board and then the natives would take their tobacco to them, especially if it saved a long journey. The Board complained as they were losing custom by this and so the police had to take some action to stop this illegal tobacco buying. The investigations had to be done by African detectives who mingled with the native sellers to observe what was going on and take very careful notes of names, amounts of tobacco bought and other details necessary for prosecutions. I was very agreeably surprised by what my detectives achieved in this matter, which resulted in several successful prosecutions. This activity may all seem a little mean and petty, but up and down the country this illegal selling meant that the Tobacco Board lost £1000s in revenue, not something that government bodies can afford in colonial territories. Unlike the nationalised, post-war industries in the UK, which had recourse to the Taxpayer for support, such concerns in the colonies resulted in large deficits that could not be tolerated and would mean the dismissal of the officers responsible.

The Tobacco Board markets were staffed by Europeans and at the one at Linthipe, between Dedza and Lilongwe, a mean swindle was organised by three officials, all British, to cheat the native growers. These markets were supplied with large amounts of money to pay the growers on delivery of the tobacco. The swindlers controlled the scales at the weigh-in points and arranged to short weigh, by two pounds, each of the natives as they delivered their tobacco. Several hundred sellers passed through the market each day and at the end of the day they calculated how much tobacco, had been accumulated, unpaid

for, and shared this amongst them. At the weekend the market was shut and the staff when to Lilongwe for a little recreation at the hotel there. One evening the leader of the team got drunk and started to brag of his affluence and then, to demonstrate the point with dramatic effect, he lit a few pound notes to light cigarettes amongst the customers at the bar. When someone remonstrated with him at this act of folly he replied by saying that, to those employed by the Tobacco Board money meant nothing, they could get as much as they wanted.

Soon an investigation into this state of affairs was set up. One of the young men implicated became ashamed of what he had taken part in and said that it had been on his mind for some time. He had not spent a penny of his share of the money and handed it over to the investigating officer. Subsequently, he was dealt with leniently. Two others received sentences of more than a year but Meagher, the ringleader absconded and got clear away out of the country. My memory of this affair still rankles. Meagher had been to Dedza and deposited a little cardboard box at our African Lakes Corporation Stores and the manager, a decent and conscientious chap, informed me of this. I suspected that the box contained much of his ill-gotten gains and wanted to impound it when he came to collect it, and demand, as I could have done, an explanation of where he had obtained it. However, my Superintendent at Lilongwe forbade me to do this, saying, by way of explanation, it would be illegal. I had not been in the force that long and being Assistant Inspector and considerably junior to him I did not feel at that time in a position to contravene his orders. Nevertheless I often felt I should have followed my instincts, been more courageous and taken the responsibility on myself to challenge him. And I later found a section in the Criminal Procedure Code that would have supported me.

Reunion of Old Friends

News came to me that Alex Shand, an old friend from Palestine days who served with me in Jenin, was coming to Dedza to manage the Bus Company depot. A few days later I received a message that the vehicle of a friend of mine had broken down on the road about five miles south of Dedza and took Sandrum, the mechanic from the bus company out with me to meet him. There I found Alex with his wife and two little daughters. How glad I was to see him again for the first time after several years. We left Sandrum with the car and I brought the family to Dedza. He stayed with the Bus Company for a year or two and was then invited to join the Nyasaland Police. We, and our families, have maintained contact ever since.



Birth of a Daughter

During this time we were expecting an increase in our family and Elsie decided that she would like to go to Umtali in Southern Rhodesia for her confinement, to be cared for by a doctor there in who she had complete confidence and good friends, in the Methuen, family to stay with. So, in late August away she and Uncle, Col. Swift went by car. In due course I received a telegram from Col. Methuen "CONGRATULATIONS ON THE BIRTH OF A LOVELY DAUGHTER STOP BOTH WELL." What a relief that was for me, mostly the two words, "Both well." That my wife should be well was my main concern. People often asked if I wanted a boy or a girl, and I would always reply that it did not matter as long as both were well.



Elsie was away from me for about two months and although I missed her much, perhaps it was for the best, as at the time I was studying for a law examination. This kept me busy

while she was away and paid dividends, for I managed to pass with a creditable 70%, the top mark. In this I could count myself lucky for the previous year, apparently, too many entrants had passed so the year of my cohort the Attorney General himself had set the papers. It was whispered that he had set the papers almost at a standard for barristers, not humble policemen. However, I was very relieved when the results were promulgated, as without a law qualification there would have been little chance of promotion.

White Mischief in Linthipe

While Elsie was still away a tragedy occurred in the area north of Dedza. Along the valley of the River Linthipe there was a planter, Noel Pearce from New Zealand - it was said - of mixed race, to which in those days there was some stigma attached in the white community. He was a very likeable chap and quite a successful planter and cattleman. His sister was married to a local tobacco planter. Noel met and married a blond girl in Portuguese East and when he brought her home he came to me, as Immigration Officer, to get her passport stamped on entry into Nyasaland. He was delighted to be married and was proud and eager for me to see her. "I've married a real English lady," he said. She was a very good-looking girl with a lovely complexion and he was, as the saying goes, "walking on air" – absolutely infatuated. In due course a baby boy was born and Noel was a real proud father. He regularly called to see me when he came to Dedza and one day confided to me that he had taken out an insurance policy on his life for the sum of £30,000 – which, in those days, was a small fortune and he was pleased and proud of himself for taking this responsible position. Noel had engaged a young manager from Southern Rhodesia to help him run the farm. I later found him to be a very decent young man but he was also very good-looking and Noel's wife appeared to especially enjoy horse riding around the estate with this young man.

Then Noel became sick and our local doctor was called to visit, as it seemed that Noel was suffering from a recurrence of malaria, from which he had suffered earlier in his life. However, the doctor was doubtful and arranged to send Noel to hospital in Zomba. They set off on the journey of about 170 miles, on rough roads, in Noel's car with the young manager driving. There was no ambulance in the country at the time. Noel was very ill and the car had to be stopped several times to allow him to vomit. On arrival at the hospital he was just about unconscious and died shortly after. Birdie, our DC, was very concerned about this death and on discussing the situation with me I began to wonder if Noel had been poisoned. Together we went to the doctor and asked him what he thought was the likelihood that had happened. He had not considered the possibility, assuming that it was a case of malignant malaria, but the seeds of doubt were sown in his mind and he began to wonder – for he said he had been concerned about the state of the black vomit that Noel had thrown up. These discussions took place a few days after the death and I decided to go to the farm and make a few inquiries.

When I got to there I was surprised to find that Noel's young wife had gone and only the manager remained in charge. He had quite a tale to tell. The bank manager, who was executor to Noel's estate, had appointed the young man to carry on in charge of the farm. The wife had taken all Noel's clothes out onto the verandah and there sold them, by auction, to the estate workers which to me was not the behaviour of a distraught wife. The Noel's father-in-law had come and wanted to take all the money from the farm safe but when the young man had refused to allow him there had been a terrible scene. The manager went on to tell me that as Noel had lain sick his wife never went near him, leaving his care to his servant who had taken him food and nursed him until he was taken to hospital. The manager further added to my suspicions by saying that the wife had made amorous advances towards him. I asked him what he felt about the death of Noel and the possibility of the use of poison. He told me that he felt some concern because of the way

Noel's wife had neglected him during the illness and added that there was plenty of poison in the farm store – various sorts of weed killer and cattle dip – all well-known poisons. So here I was with all the ingredients of a murder and a motive of £30,000 plus anything that could be picked up from the estate. Opportunity was always present and perhaps an infatuation of the young, handsome manager offered the possibilities of pastures new.

I submitted a full report to Police HQ through my divisional office but my Superintendent had not been totally supportive, remarking to me, "Now, you have set a hare running!" The Head of the Criminal Investigation Division (CID) agreed with me that the circumstances were suspicious and that an exhumation should be sought. It can be imagined, then, how frustrated and irate I was to learn that the Legal Office would not support us, and our attempts to obtain justice for Noel, and without an exhumation and post mortem examination nothing further could be done. Jimmy Tennant, my superior did not have my experience and would not support my case, and the Crown Council too was inexperienced, being very young. I have often thought since then how easy it is to get away with such a murder in such an underdeveloped country with an embryonic legal system, where newly qualified lawyers are given a lot responsibility at too young an age, and were inexperienced and not competent enough to deal with such serious matters.

Epic Journey to Umtali and Back

As at this time in the country there was only about 5 miles of tarmac - between Limbe and Blantyre - so the roads were badly affected by the rains in the wet season, and all Nyasalanders had stories about nightmare journeys. By November our baby daughter Anne was now six weeks old and I was to drive through Portuguese East to Umtali to bring Elsie and the baby back. I had planned to turn west at the top of the Kirk Range, just north of Ncheu, and head due south for Mwanza at the border post with Portuguese East, before driving through Tete to Rhodesia, as this route would have saved me many miles, but unfortunately the night before I left there had been a very heavy downpour of rain. After I had gone 12 miles on the Mwanza road the car was down to the axels in mud, for it passed through a low lying swampy area, and the river had swollen in the rains, making the road impassable. There was really nothing for it but to turn back to the Blantyre turn-off and go via the Matope/Blantyre Road, adding six hours to my journey. I crossed the border in the early afternoon and managed to get across the Zambezi before the ferry shut down for the night. I then headed on to Rhodesia but had no hope of getting to Matoko at the frontier that night so I pulled over and rested for some hours by the Mazoe River. Next morning I again "hit the trail" and tried the, so called, "short cut" to Umtali, but the road was



so terrible that I am sure that I should have made better time if I had journeyed via Salisbury. However, "all's well that ends well" and I eventually arrived to find Elsie and baby Anne in good form, and what a thrill it was to see my daughter for the first time and cuddle her in my arms. A few days later we, and Col. Swift and his driver, were on our way back to Nyasaland. We planned travel in convoy, each car overtaking the other

every so often. We decided to stop at Matoko on the first day and spend a night in Barney Kaplan's hotel, before driving all the way, across Tete and up to Dedza the following day. The first part of the journey wasn't to plan and we were able to make it to Matoko in good time and so complete the first stage of the journey successfully, but the second part of the journey did not go so well.

Barney Kaplan, the Matoko Hotel owner, was one of the original settlers and an old man by this time, but he still had his sense of humour. He told me that some years before he had been in Glasgow where he had had a serious operation, which necessitated a blood transfusion. A friend had come to see him in hospital while he was recovering and Barney

told him about the blood transfusion. "By God, Barney. You Jewish by birth and Scottish by blood transfusion, no one will ever get the better of you from now on!"

We left Matoko early next morning and soon after Col Swift overtook us and we did not see him again till journey's end. We were about 20 miles from the Zambezi crossing at Tete, when I lost control of the steering. I stopped to get out and on looking underneath I saw one end of the steering-rod lying on the ground. The two bolts that held the idler arm had loosened, fallen out and were lost. Down in the Zambezi valley in rather remote, wild country was not a place to be broken down for long; lions and other wild animals wandered about there. We were below 1,000 ft above sea level and the temperature was now 108°F. I did not have the correct replacement bolts but I found some coach bolts that thought could be used on a temporary basis. However, I did not want to tighten them up too much, as I was aware they were damaging the threads at the ends of the idler arms. Working away in the exhausting heat, I was continually having to stop and rest. Then along came an American missionary, Mo (Morris) Williams, and his family, who were stationed at Dedza. His offered to take Elsie and baby Anne was gratefully accepted and I told Elsie to wait for me at the Border Hotel at Mwanza. I nursed the car along to Tete, hoping to get the proper repairs done there. Unfortunately there was no garage at Tete and the only thing I could do was packed out the coach bolts with washers. I worked away at these repairs, hoping to be ready to get across the ferry before 5pm, but when I had finished the job the engine would not start and I could not find the fault. While I was busy with the repairs I had noticed a small, light aircraft flying over me a time or two, but took no particular notice and having missed the ferry, I went to the local hotel to ask for a room for the night. I then asked two local mechanics if they could find out what was wrong but they had no more success than I, so I returned to the hotel and, feeling completely dehydrated by this time drank several pints of beer, which I seemed to lose again in perspiration.

I was, by this time, feeling pretty exhausted and dejected when into the bar walked two men and a girl. This was the time, I thought, to apply the old saying "Any port in a storm", so I walked over and spoke to them, telling them of my predicament. Then my luck



changed for they turned out to be the pilot and passengers of the small aircraft I had seen, and the pilot reassuringly informed me, "I am a certificated motor engineer, let me have a look at your car; perhaps I can spot what the trouble is." Outside we went and, good as his word, in a few moments he had found the trouble – a short circuit in the coil – and we put it right by inserting a little piece of wood

along the inside of the top of the coil to break the contact. Once we had done this the engine fired straight away. The pilot went on to tell me that the air traffic control people had given him the wrong wind speed and he had crossed the Zambezi below where he had planned to and had been forced to land in Tete. What a lucky thing this was for me, for otherwise, I may have been stuck for some time. The incident bore out my philosophy that if you get a bit of bad luck you get some good to compensate. I like to think it is the force of good that runs through the world.

I had an awful night in the hotel for the only room available was an interior one with no window, and the heat in the Zambezi valley was like oven. I lay there twisting and turning, and sweating profusely, so it was a great relief to see the dawn. I rose and showered in some evil smelling water, which I imagined had just been pumped straight from the Zambezi, and left as soon as I could. The car started first time and as soon as the ferry was open, about 6 am, I boarded the large ferry pontoon, which was towed across the considerable distance of the river crossing by two tugboats. I journeyed to the border without further mishap, checking the bolts on the steering from time to time to make sure they were still tight, and reached to hotel at Mwanza by mid morning. There I was much relieved to find Elsie waiting for me. She also had a tale to tell. The journey in the

missionary van had been very dusty and uncomfortable, and all had been thirsting for water, especially the children. When the van got to the border there was nothing to drink and the border officials refused them water. At this Elsie threatened to report them to "Mr Brazil, Head of Customs in Beira". They relented and the children got their water. When they reached to Hotel in Mwanza, Mrs Little had been most welcoming and helpful, taking the dusty baby away for a bath so that Elsie could have one herself, and making a bed for them in the bar, as all other rooms were occupied. Next morning we set off from Mwanza in good time and made Blantyre by lunchtime. I took the car in to CATCO where I had the threading on the ends of the idler arms re-cut and new bolts fitted. We made the final leg of the journey to Dedza, and back to our bush house, without further disaster.

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**Note 1: Revenue and Expenditure for Nyasaland**  
*Taken from the Year Book Guide to Southern Africa 1957*

|                                                             | <u>Est Revenue</u> | <u>Est Expend</u> |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| July 1955/June 1956                                         | £5,234,925         | £5,398,082        |
| July 1956/June 1957                                         | £6,458,036         | £6,665,470        |
| <i>Public Debt at 31<sup>st</sup> Dec 1953 = £5,369,587</i> |                    |                   |