

My Father's Suggestion

By Christopher Bean

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My arrival in Nyasaland in September, 1957, came as something of a surprise to me as, prior to my interview with the Crown Agents a month or so earlier, to my shame I have to confess I thought the place was in South America. It was only as I browsed through the brochures and literature provided in the waiting room at the Crown Agents on Millbank, London, that I discovered Nyasaland was actually in Central Africa.

I hastily breezed through the brochure entitled the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland And presented myself shortly after that to the Crown Agents, sketchily briefed on Nyasaland. Obviously I knew enough to impress them and soon afterwards found myself on a huge plane, equipped with four propellers, on my way to Africa.

I had left my parents and sister on the station platform in Doncaster, Yorkshire, the day before, with hardly a backward glance. In fact, I was then going into what really was darkest Africa and I learned later that they never expected to see me again. In fact, I never did see my father again, as he died when I had been in Nyasaland for about eighteen months.

He was the reason for my joining the Colonial Police after he attended a course for senior police officers at Ryton-on-Dunsmore in Warwickshire.

On the course he met a number of young men from the Colonial Police who were attending the course whilst on their long leave. They all drove brand-new motor cars and related tales of a wonderful life in their own colonies. He returned home and mapped out a career for me, first as a cadet in the West Riding Police, then into the military police for my national service and then as a probationary constable in the West Riding before trying for the Colonial Police.

I followed his suggestions, with slight variations. I enlisted as a regular soldier, not as a national serviceman, I did three years, not two. For more than twice the pay and leave and a much better choice of posting. I stayed in the UK for my whole military service, since I intended joining the Colonial Police as soon as I could.



After serving only one year as a probationary constable in the Riding, I became quite bored and impatient and decided one week to apply for the next posting advertised in the Police Review which was where colonial police jobs were advertised. It turned out to be Nyasaland and I stuck in for him willy-nilly. It could have been anywhere, so I could never claim to have decided to go to Nyasaland.

In truly selfish pattern for most young men, I never gave a thought to my parents' feelings on the subject. After all, it was my father who started me on this course.

I can honestly say that I had never seen a black man in my life, apart from Prince Monolulu, a well-known tipster whom I used to see each year at Doncaster Races. So my first experience of Africa and Africans came on my way out when we touched down at Khartoum in the Sudan. I went into the toilet block to shave and saw his tall black chap in a khansu and wearing a red fez. I had no idea how to address him or treat him, but this was the first African face I saw.



We spent the next night in Salisbury at the Meikles Hotel and I took the opportunity to walk around the streets close to the hotel. I was truly amazed at the vast number of black faces and I had never given a thought to this prior to my arrival. What an innocent I was.

I think that most other expatriates I had a little difficulty fitting into my new way of life. I never gave any thought to the fact that we had servants to do all the heavy or

menial work. It was as it was.

Communications with my friends and family back in the UK were simply letters, which took two or three weeks to arrive and again, it was the norm and nobody thought anything about it. The only occasion I really felt the distance was after I received a telegram saying my father had died suddenly and I tried to phone home. I had to book an international call and then stand at the counter in the Charge Office at Mlanje Police Station and listen to the local operator call first Blantyre, who connected with an operator in Salisbury who in turn connected to Nairobi and so on until eventually I heard my mother, speaking as from the bottom of the barrel somewhere. She asked if I could come back to England for the funeral, etc., and it was very hard to say it was impossible.

The distance and the cost alone was out of the question in those days. I suppose I could have got compassionate leave, but other factors made such a trip out of the question. Compare that with today when one can simply pick up the phone and dial virtually anywhere in the world, and a few years later I flew from Blantyre to Heathrow in eleven hours and in fact was in my home in Doncaster little more than thirteen hours after leaving my home in Limbe.

When I married at the beginning of 1959, my parents had never seen my wife other than in photographs I sent, and of course they could not attend the wedding in Blantyre.

When I attend our annual reunions of the Nyasaland Police Association, I am struck by the fact that without exception, everybody says without hesitation that their years in Nyasaland were the best years of their lives. I can only agree and say how lucky we were. Those times past, never to be repeated, and in fact are only the tiniest blip in the long story of Africa. I went to Nyasaland by chance and was thus extra lucky.