SIR ANDREW COHEN: AN OBITUARY

by David E. Apter*

It is hard to believe so restless and powerful a man is dead. He visited me the Friday before he died, his bulk filling the living room of our flat in Old Marston. He had just returned from Malta. He talked briefly of retirement - a retirement for further work. On an earlier occasion I had urged him to put some notes together for an autobiography. Now he said he had no time for that. He had not kept elaborate notes or files. Also the idea struck him as presumptuous.

It was of course characteristic. Andrew was a man of power and conviction. But it was his sense of virtue which gave him strength and not some narrow parochial pride. In this special sense, he was probably the most self-centred man I have ever known. He was restless always, searching for the best way to put his enormous talents to use. But he was also supremely modest, even a bit embarrassed with the role he had cast for himself in history. Without such modesty he could never have remained what he was all his life, a civil servant.

But he was not a modest civil servant. In a real sense, he was the last of the magnificent Victorians who staked out their claims in Africa in their various ways. Only he was the one who helped pull out the stakes. There is a remarkable consistency in the career which took him from the big Victorian mansion where he grew up, to the Governor's house in Entebbe, and to the workrooms of the Ministry of Overseas Development.

He was an architect of "decolonization", perhaps more than any other single non-African figure. The events he helped shape are, as is always the case with civil servants,

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disguised in other men's words and works, but when in 1947, Andrew, as youthful head of the African department in the Colonial Office, convinced the Government to follow two main lines of post-war African policy, basic reform of local government and a programme of economic development for African territories leading to responsible government, this was a turning point. Laid down in the Governor's Conference of 1947 and the famous Creech Jones Despatch of the same year, the objects were clear enough. Timing was to be ambiguous, left to the particular circumstances of place, nationalism, and other fortune, but it was clearly recognised, and at once, for what it was in the Colonial Office. There was much bitterness and anger. But Andrew carried the day and there was no going back after that.

The Uganda years were equally turbulent. His mere presence in Uganda was unsettling for East Africa as a whole. Despite the dramatic events in Kenya and the rather glossy liberalism of "multi-racial government" in Tanganyika, it was Uganda, with its stubborn provincialisms, its local separatism, and its sensitivities, which was literally created in the wake of Andrew's energy. The deportation of the Kabaka, the creation of an effective university system, the continuous emphasis on participation, all these had political effects, not only in Uganda, but in all the East African territories.

His final task, as Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Overseas Development, was in a certain sense the fulfillment of both original interests. The political side was reflected in the voluble testimony of a host of independent black countries. Now the main task was to help them in the form of development programmes, educational exchanges, and the like. He created the Ministry when funds were desperately scarce. Because his interests were never parochial and his approach was always unorthodox, he established an effective organisation where few others could have succeeded. Yet he always remained close to those who bore the responsibilities directly, particularly those African leaders who provided the motive power of political development. Where others felt threatened by new ideas and people, he was overjoyed when he found them. This, plus his great historical sense and shrewdness (he harboured few illusions), kept him alive and fresh in each undertaking. He was never remote.

His career was not without disappointments. The period as Her Majesty's representative to the Trusteeship Council frustrated him deeply, even though at times it was entertaining and he did it well. It was too far off the main task. He would pace up and down in his New York house, so vertically built that it caged him, impatient with what he regarded as a gilded exile.

And occasionally his swift and ready sense of what was appropriate served him badly. The hope that enormous developmental opportunities could be combined with progressive entry of Africans into political life led him to support Central African Federation. His role in that disaster has not yet been fully described. He came to recognise earlier than most that it was an error in political judgment of the first magnitude. (When he committed a blunder it was a big one too.) But it was part of his strength that he could admit his mistakes and go on.

When he died so suddenly at fifty-eight it was a shock to all. The Kabaka of Uganda was among those who attended the Memorial Service at St. Paul's (hopping gracefully into a London bus when it was over and gone in a flash in the crowd). There was mourning in Kampala, in the Parliament, Namirembe, and elsewhere. African parliaments, community development programmes, teacher-training schemes, the Institute of Development Studies, all these and many more are his monuments. The epitaphs are written on many a shining schoolboy's countenance and in many a man's work.

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