

A Life Dismembered

1: November 1973

I was nearing the end of a six-month TEFL teaching contract at a language school in Bournemouth (of which more next month), with no idea what I'd do next in my life, when the office phone rang. "Do you remember applying for a lecturing post in Lesotho a few months ago? Well, the person we appointed has pulled out; are you still interested?"

So, pausing only to find out where Lesotho was (an independent mountain kingdom within South Africa, the former Basutoland Protectorate), and how it was pronounced (Lersootoo), I started packing.

I was supposed to fly by British Airways to Johannesburg, but ended up on a South African Airways flight. SAA had a unique approach to smoking onboard. Every other airline had the smoking section at the back of the plane, but on SAA the smoking section was on the right side of the cabin, non-smoking on the left. So every non-smoker sat within a couple of feet of billowing cigarette clouds, across the aisle.

Before Johannesburg the plane touched down in Salisbury Rhodesia, so my first sight of Africa was of the city's white residents who had come out to marvel at the 747, sitting on the rooftop bar of the airport terminal being served cocktails by black waiters in white jackets and red tarbooshes.

The university (now the National University of Lesotho) is located in Roma, a village established by the Oblate Fathers of Mary Immaculate, about 20 miles from the capital Maseru. More about my life there another time.

A few weeks after my arrival I received an envelope containing a gold-embossed card: His Excellency the British High Commissioner requested my presence for lunch at his Residence in Maseru on the 11th. Why should I be so honoured? I asked around and discovered that it wasn't a mistake. The newly-appointed High Commissioner, Martin Moynihan, had a personal tradition: he would invite all the British subjects in the country he was stationed in who were named Martin, to have lunch with him on St Martin's Day. But how to get there? There were no buses or taxis and I had no car - the main mode of travel otherwise was on horseback. Then I remembered that the University Registrar was an Englishman who was also called Martin; I asked him and he agreed to give me a lift.

That lunch, fifty years ago, was the first and only time that I encountered an old-school diplomat, of the type who embodied the best of the British Empire; both now long gone. Not unlike Neville Chamberlain, in fact: see below.

Moynihan treated everyone, from high official to lowly lecturer, to his own servants, with equal respect. He would jovially mock the colonial stereotype: I remember him declaring over the hors d'oeuvres, "I'm starting to learn Sesotho. I have this textbook; it starts with Chapter 1 – the imperative: 'Come! Bring! Go!' That's my sort of book!" It was funny because it was obviously an act (I bought the same textbook but a friend borrowed it and never returned it). I later learned that he wrote poetry in Sesotho in praise of the Basotho King Moshoeshoe I.

After lunch he took us out to the garden which stretched down to the Orange River; this formed the border with South Africa. He pointed at a small rowing boat moored on the

bank. "If ever there's a revolution in Maseru I'll be able to row across to safety in the Orange Free State!"

He was a very cultured yet modest man – I recommend reading this obituary:

<https://alt.books.inklings.narkive.com/zda4u04b/obituary-of-martin-moynihan>