AT LAST SIERRA LEONE

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AMONG the commonplaces of our times one of the more persistent is the notion that all the dependent peoples everywhere in Africa are convulsed in a militant and irrepressible campaign against alien rule. In the more sensational journalese, this idea is expressed in "kicking the white man out of Africa". More sophisticated exponents portray the African nationalist phenomenon as the manoeuvres of a handful of Western educated 'extremists' to supersede 'White Imperialism' by 'Black Dictatorship'. African nationalism is accordingly seen purely in terms of race—black against white. In the Pan-African demands for 'independence', 'total liberation' and 'unity', only a rampant racialism is recognized as the essence of the African's agitation for freedom and self-determination.

A natural consequence of this sometimes uninformed, sometimes malicious interpretation of the ideas underlying Pan-Africanism is the snubbing of such colonial nationalist situations as are not punctuated by the now-familiar violent and counter-violent clashes between government and people. Events in countries such as Tanganyika or Gambia, for example, Nigeria or the Mali Federation, in which independence has been, or is being, achieved by negotiation, conciliation, and constitutional "bargaining" between the European colonial powers and the peoples concerned, make fewer headlines than events in areas where nationalist aspirations are being forced to find other, less desirable outlets. Tanganyika provides an illuminating example of a dependent territory where the nationalist approach to independence has taken the form of what might be described as "fencing-in", rather than "fencing-out", all inhabitants (regardless of race, skin colour, or national origin) who opt for a common Tanganyikan citizenship.

Yet, perhaps the most outstanding example of a colonial territory which has very recently negotiated its way to independence with hardly a show of any type of militant nationalism, is Sierra Leone, Britain's most "ancient and loyal colony" in West Africa. One of the last remnants of the Empire of George the Third, this 173-year-old 'Black Settler Colony' was literally *given*

its independence on April 20th last, even before the country's political leaders, assembled in conference with representatives of Her Majesty's Government in London, had submitted their formal application for it. Addressing the opening session of the conference, the Secretary of State for the Colonies (Mr. Iain Macleod) is reported by '*The Times*' of London to have stated that "the conference need spend no time converting the British Government to the principle of independence. That is agreed to now without further ado". The formal announcement of May 3rd that the date of 27th April, 1961, had been agreed upon by both the U.K. and Sierra Leone Governments thus served as a mere formality to confirm what had already been decided even before formal consultations began on April 20th.

That the British Government's act was not altogether motivated by considerations of moral magnanimity was clearly borne out in the Colonial Secretary's candid admission that "it is impossible to ignore the swiftly changing African scene where political developments, almost breath-taking in their speed, are transforming the African picture" and that "these external events must have their repercussions in Sierra Leone". It was a diplomatically correct understatement for what '*The Economist*', in its issue of April 30th, claimed bluntly to be Britain's uneasiness over "Guinea . . . Sierra Leone's vocal, *left-wing* and active neighbour". Yet the significance in Britain's voluntary offer of independence is not only to be seen in the light of "external" circumstances. Action so "precipitate", to quote '*The Economist*' again, reveals also the high degree of mutual confidence existing between Britain and Sierra Leone—a relationship that sharply contradicts the stereotype portrayal of racialism in revolt.

To what then, is one to attribute this somewhat unusual relationship which a colonial power and a dependent territory enjoy, especially as evidence is scant of any special treatment to which Sierra Leone might be said to have been exposed in the course of her long history under the Crown? The colony is often and variously described as "dignified", civilized", "well-behaved", "loyal" and "restrained". The '*New York Times*' recently called it "a country of temperate and civilized thought". Yet, in its level of material advancement, it is still widely rated as amongst the most backward and undeveloped of Britain's overseas territories. How is one to explain the obvious stagnation of a colony, the modern beginnings of which antedate the Philadelphia Convention? Indeed, its initial association with

Britain was not that of a colony at all, but of a "Negro State", a "free Commonwealth", conceived and fostered in the finest spirit of eighteenth-century humanitarianism; its very origin was proclaimed to be the provision of a centrifugal force which would "bring Christianity and civilization" to the darkest continent. Ghana, Nigeria, and even Guinea, Sierra Leone's one-time 'wards' and 'protegés', have outstripped her by decades in political, social and economic development.

A trivial answer to this question is the half-facetious quip by Britishers and Sierra Leoneans alike that both Britain and Sierra Leone have been too busy trying to find an answer to the problem to do anything about it. "History has not dealt kindly with Sierra Leone", declared Canon Max Warren, Secretary of the Church Missionary Society of London, during the centenary anniversary of the Anglican Church in Nigeria—a church, the foundations of which were laid by Sierra Leonean missionaries and Christian workers at all levels. "Yet", continued Mr. Warren, "its (Sierra Leone's) astonishing influence on the rest of West Africa remains a fact of history. Ghana and Nigeria owe Sierra Leone a debt. You cannot understand what has happened in Nigeria in the past century unless you know how vast a part has been played in its development by Sierra Leone. . . ."

Others less given to philosophic or sentimental speculations view the situation in Sierra Leone as one of wildly ill-conceived beginnings. The peopling of a colony by freshly emancipated slaves and prostitutes, none of whom might be said to have had experience of organized civic life, can scarcely be regarded as the best material for founding and building a nation. The naive expectations of the promoters that, given a fresh start in life in a land remote from the scenes of their previous degrading existence and provided with the structural framework of free institutions, this tombola of misfits and undesirables would address themselves to the job of nation-building quite naturally proved fantastic. Above all, the material means for implementing the idealistic designs of those who championed the scheme were nowhere forthcoming, so that the picture of a 'commonwealth' doomed to failure before it had even begun is easy enough to draw. Yet this is hardly half the explanation, of course.

It is some measure of the interest and concern over Sierra Leone's affairs which the Colonial Office has exhibited that, even after the original "Settlement" was formally placed under the Crown in 1808, not all the 150-odd years of supposedly systematic

administration since then appear to have done much to alter the "face" of this "ancient and loyal colony".

In a recent narrative of what he calls the "extraordinary story" of Sierra Leone as a possession of the Crown, the author, Ian Fleming (an editor of the '*Sunday Times*' of London), projects this picture of Freetown, the ancient capital city, known to house "the finest and most important natural harbour" along the entire South Atlantic coast of the continent, and largely regarded as the logical substitute for the formerly British Simonstown naval base in Capetown.

> "I had a bad attack of fever in October '54 and then went up to Freetown to look into the shambles. It was called Freetown at the end of the eighteenth century, when we populated the Colony with 400 freed Negro slaves and sixty white prostitutes from the English ports. Extraordinary story. . . . There are practically no other European visitors except an occasional commercial traveller putting up in the one hotel—the City Hotel—which has twelve bedrooms. It's not much of a town. One's almost ashamed of it's being an English possession. . . . At any rate, there's no doubt that Sierra Leone comes near the bottom of the pile . . . (of our) bits and pieces of scattered territory all over the globe."
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> "And Sierra Leone is littered with diamonds. . . ."[1]

One hundred and fifty years of British administration might be expected to produce somewhat better than that.

What is today the territory of Sierra Leone is far more than the mere 250 square miles of land acquired from the natural rulers of the aboriginal Sierra Leoneans in 1787. Further territorial acquisitions by Britain, almost exclusively on the basis of treaties of cession and friendship, led not only to an expected increase in the size of land thus brought under British jurisdiction and control, but also to a vastly increased population. Almost invariably compared in size with Ireland, Sierra Leone is two and a half times the size of Belgium, two and a quarter times the Netherlands, slightly less than twice the size of Denmark, and twenty-eight times the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg. Yet one of the principal reasons long held by the United Kingdom Government—be it Labour or Conservative—against Sierra Leone's capacity or fitness for independence was its alleged smallness in size and alleged poverty in natural wealth. A curious commentary on the territory's lack of wealth was recently

[1] Ian Fleming, *The Diamond Smugglers*, London: 1957, pp. 100ff.

provided by two important incidents, each within a fortnight of the other.

In the course of his opening speech to the constitutional conference on April 20th, the Secretary of State for the Colonies reiterated the view that "*Sierra Leone is not a large country, nor is it a wealthy one. It will have to husband its resources in wealth . . .* as carefully as possible if it is to play . . . a worthy role as a fully independent State". On this sore topic, the people of Sierra Leone had, as they have always had, a different idea. And this idea they effectively dramatized by presenting as a wedding gift to Princess Margaret an 18-carat diamond—the one item among the myriad gifts presented to her which made headline news in the press, on radio and on television in Britain, the United States and, possibly, beyond. The very same papers and radio news-agencies which had reported constitutional talks on small and poor Sierra Leone were now advertising the generous "diamond-rich" colony.

"Diamonds", as the Fleet Street weekly '*West Africa*' editorialised on February 20th last, might "still (be) trumps" in all calculations affecting the public welfare of Sierra Leone. But, diamonds are not the sole, heavy revenue-yielding natural resources in which the country is believed or already known to teem. Gold and iron ore apart, recent geological surveys have established the existence of huge deposits of, among other minerals, rutile, bauxite, molybdenite, sorundum, columbite, columbite tantalite, ilmenite and titano-magnetite, ilmeno-rutile, cassitirite, chromite, wulfenite, and platinum, as well as enormous quantities of salt.

Agricultural products also abound, constituting in their potential a quite new factor in the economic and commercial life of the country. Sierra Leone's economic foundations have, for the better part of the colony's history, been rooted in the palm kernel and its various by-products; while a rich variety of timber, rubber, copra, piassava and ginger has helped sustain the colony's economy. An even greater variety of agricultural products can be produced. Has the wealth of Sierra Leone ever been properly exploited? Would the colony come so near the "bottom of the pile" if it had been?

Sierra Leone, like many another African colony emerging into independence, can expect to experience the problems to which all new nations are exposed in the early years: the need of foreign capital for development, the necessity for the establishment of

alliances, political and economic, to provide security, skills, and loans (a trend in which young and small nations in Africa may well uncover suggestive implications for the Pan-African and smaller regional group movements to which the continent looks).

Economic development is clearly the country's first target. As '*The Economist*' article observed:

> "Sierra Leone (like every African state, but even more than most) needs development capital—and it needs £3 million *now*. . . . It needs more technical aid. . . . But as usual the prospect of the end of Colonial Office tutelage has found the Commonwealth Relations Office with no ideas to offer, except for a plummy establishment for a United Kingdom High Commissioner. . . ."

It will be Sierra Leone's misfortune if it is to find itself escaping from a Colonial Office (about whose indifference to, and neglect of the colony, students of West African constitutional history will find little room for disagreement) only to fall into the clutch of a Commonwealth Relations Office which, upon the confident assertion of '*The Economist*,' hardly ever has "ideas to offer" for a new Commonwealth member, is invariably unready to "face the new situations . . . presented by the accession of new States like Sierra Leone", and which, therefore, tends to undermine rather than to uplift the Commonwealth.

Sierra Leone achieves independence next April without violence or rancour. Its demand for self-determination does not spring from a passion of race. It asks to govern itself precisely in order to treat all its citizens alike and take from the earth for their good. Perhaps it will do no more for them than the British Government did over the years. Perhaps it will do much more. Whatever happens, it must be free to make its own mistakes. For nothing less is freedom, after all.