A Brotherhood of Britons? Public Schooling, *esprit de corps* and Colonial Officials in Africa, c.1900–1939

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Abstract

Historians have tended to suggest that Britain's colonial officials demonstrated an *esprit de corps*, and that this is testament to the efficacy of public schooling in generating social cohesion. Examining Britain's officials in seven different colonies in sub-Saharan Africa, this article will argue that differences in working conditions, approaches to work and officials' backgrounds, such as conflicts between officials from 'military' and 'civilian' backgrounds, all caused deep fragmentations in the colonial services. Most significantly, officials were irreconcilably torn between a need for company as a means of maintaining morale, and a desire for freedom from the constraints of colonial society. Living in insular communities driven by gossip and marked by the need to keep up appearances for fear of ostracism from their peers, officials felt unable to experience an 'authentic' Africa and live out the romanticized dreams of individualism that had motivated many to leave for Africa in the first place. This sense of feeling trapped bred resentment towards one's fellow officials. Consequently, public schools were unable to surmount other factors in shaping how officials regarded one other.

The relationship between Britain's public schools and empire has come under a great deal of scrutiny in the last thirty years or so. As J. A. Mangan has demonstrated, public schools consciously deployed the playing field and the classroom as mechanisms of social cohesion.¹ Masters sought to bind pupils to a number of communities: a local fraternal community of the house, sports team or school itself, a racial community of 'Anglo-Saxons', and a national community of England or Britain. The author and Old Harrovian Harold Vachell wrote that his *alma mater's* songs 'make for something greater than entertainment. They are redolent with the public school spirit, an injunction to work and play with faith and courage . . . to sacrifice self,

¹ It is acknowledged that Mangan focuses more on how far athleticism and militarism were instilled into public school pupils than any sense of collectivist camaraderie; nevertheless, amongst other works, see J. A. Mangan, *The Games Ethic and Imperialism: Aspects of the Diffusion of an Ideal* (Harmondsworth, 1986).

if need be, to the common end.² Commentators of the day felt that such processes were important because they made 'as much as possible of the side and as little as possible of the individual'.³

The emphasis upon collective endeavour was not, of course, the only behavioural ideal to which public school students were exposed. Metropolitan attempts at emphasizing teamwork ran up against images of determinedly idiosyncratic imperial heroes. All British imperial heroes, from the supposedly quintessential muscular Christian General Gordon to the colder, martial General Kitchener, were recognized as individuals who made their marks on the empire because of their *sui generis* qualities.⁴ In the inter-war period in particular, popular cultural works also increasingly depicted the archetypal good imperialist as a rugged individualist striding purposefully across the African landscape, responding to nothing bar his own instinct.⁵ Nevertheless, Mangan argues that the educational emphasis was upon working and playing as a unit, and that it is likely that the frames of reference created for public school boys served 'to a greater rather than to a lesser extent as successful agents of socialization, of social control and of social cohesion'.⁶

Schoolmasters and educationalists have left behind plenty of evidence as to their intentions. It is harder to determine the attitudes of a sizeable enough body of ex-pupils to be able to transcend impressionistic accounts of what they took away from school. It is for this understandable reason that Mangan notes that his conclusions must remain tentative.⁷ One hitherto underexplored way of testing Mangan's hypothesis is by assessing the attitudes of a sizeable corps of ex-public schoolboys, namely colonial officials. This article will consider those officials who worked in sub-Saharan Africa. These were the men on the spot, the administrators charged by the Foreign Office or the Colonial Office with the governance of regions of Africa. Invariably known as District Commissioners (DCs) or District Officers (DOs), these officials took on an expanding range of roles that included tax assessor and collector, treasurer, town planner and surveyor, amateur ethnographer, overseer of public works, conflict mediator, superintendent of police, prison warden, judge and executioner. This article does not consider officials in all of the British colonial possessions in sub-Saharan Africa. The focus will be upon officials in Nigeria, the Gold Coast, Sierra Leone and the Gambia in West Africa, and Sudan, Tanganyika and Uganda in East

² Quoted in Mangan, *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School* (2000) [hereafter Mangan, *Athleticism*], p. 180.

³ B. Darwin, *The English Public School* (1929), p. 27.

⁴ D. Johnson, 'The Death of Gordon: A Victorian Myth', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, x (1982), 285–310; K. Surridge, 'More than a Great Poster: Lord Kitchener and the Image of the Military Hero', *Historical Research*, lxxiv (2001), 298–313.

⁵ For example, E. Wallace, *Bones of the River* (1923); Wallace, *Sanders* (1926); Wallace, *Again Sanders* (1928).

⁶ Mangan, *Athleticism*, p. 206.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

Africa.⁸ To include colonies with sizeable white settler communities – Kenya and Southern Rhodesia – would have been to add one extra complicating factor too many to an article of this length.

Historians are split on whether the way officials acted in the colonies was conditioned by their upbringing and training, or a pragmatic response to what they found ‘on the spot’.⁹ Nevertheless, when looking specifically at how far officials bonded with one another, the consensus is that any individualism exhibited by colonial officials in Africa was not sufficient to surmount an *esprit de corps* rooted in their experiences of public schools.¹⁰ For A. H. M. Kirk-Greene, once a would-be colonial official

enters the post-Arnold world of public- and progressively of grammar-school into which he was likely to have been propelled from a middle-class . . . family of professional parents, he has become socialized and homogenized in accordance with the prevailing code of expected behaviour, at once accepted internally and admired externally.

Inculcated with a common sense of purpose irrespective of their social background, they felt united with officials from other colonies across the world, and they worked effectively alongside those from within their own colony.¹¹ Because officials got on with one another, they were better able to face Africa, more confident in the knowledge that other officials would not let the side down administratively (with esoteric ideas) or racially (‘going native’). Any rivalries were ‘harmless’, ‘foolish snobbery’ at worst, caused by what Kirk-Greene obliquely refers to as the ‘occasional nuanced post-prandial incident’.¹² Kirk-Greene writes as a historian who was once a colonial official in Nigeria himself, so one might argue that his own post-war experiences fuelled this vision of pre-1939 Africa. However, all of the admittedly few historians to have focused on officials in Africa between the end of the ‘Scramble for Africa’ and the Second World War have made arguments similar to Robert Collins’s claim that a collective ‘devotion to their mission embodied in themselves transcended whiskey gossip’.¹³

⁸ Although it was a condominium, for ease of reference here Sudan will be referred to as a colony.

⁹ For some examples of diverging attitudes to this question, see J. W. Cell, ‘Colonial Rule’, in *Oxford History of the British Empire: Volume IV – The Twentieth Century*, ed. J. M. Brown and W. R. Louis (Oxford, 1999), pp. 232–54, here p. 233; C. Dewey, *Anglo-Indian Attitudes: The Mind of the Indian Civil Service* (1993); K. Tidrick, *Empire and the English Character*, 2nd edn. (1992), p. 216.

¹⁰ N. Gardiner, ‘Sentinels of Empire: The British Colonial Administrative Service, 1919–1954’ (PhD dissertation, Yale University, 1998), p. 294; L. Gann and P. Duignan, *The Rulers of British Africa, 1870–1914* (1978) [hereafter Gann and Duignan, *Rulers of British Africa*], p. 185.

¹¹ A. H. M. Kirk-Greene, *Britain’s Imperial Administrators, 1858–1966* (Basingstoke, 2000), p. 12; see also Gann and Duignan, *Rulers of British Africa*, p. 203; Kirk-Greene, *Symbol of Authority: The British District Officer in Africa* (2006) [hereafter Kirk-Greene, *Symbol of Authority*], pp. xx, 236.

¹² R. Heussler, *Yesterday’s Rulers: The Making of the British Colonial Service* (Syracuse, NY, 1963) [hereafter Heussler, *Yesterday’s Rulers*], p. 39; Kirk-Greene, *Symbol of Authority*, p. 236.

¹³ Heussler, *Yesterday’s Rulers*, p. 83; Gann and Duignan, *Rulers of British Africa*, p. 203; R. Collins, *Shadows in the Grass: Britain in the Southern Sudan, 1918–1956* (1983) [hereafter Collins, *Shadows in the Grass*], p. 75.

Besides a public-school emphasis upon collective endeavour, there are further reasons why it is reasonable to presume that rank and file officials got on with one another. Firstly, most officials came from a remarkably narrow social stratum. The overwhelming majority were sons of upper middle-class professionals such as doctors, lawyers and parsons.¹⁴ It is feasible that such similarities made it easier for officials to relate to one another. Secondly, colonial officials had a difficult job. Officials had to deal with the often-divergent interests of those higher up the British administrative chain both in Africa and London, as well as industrialists and other capitalists, missionaries and, of course, the indigenous Africans they were supposed to govern or supervise. As Stoler and Cooper note, officials were consequently engaged in a joint endeavour to define the appropriate relationship between self and other that was made difficult by continual interference from 'outsiders'.¹⁵ In times of difficulty came unity, perhaps?

Nevertheless, there is an issue with those studies that argue that officials worked together as well as any public school First XI or XV, namely the sources such studies use. These tend to rely on officials' memoirs for source material, rather than the diaries and private letters created at the time of service, such as those deposited at Rhodes House in Oxford and the Sudan Archive in Durham. Might the reliance on a retrospective testimony, smoothed and calmed by the passing of time, have distorted our understanding of the everyday experience of being a colonial official?

Before we address this issue by looking at intra-colonial relations, we turn first to the relationship officials had with those working in other colonies. This relationship was not one of fraternal happiness. In 1931, retired elite official Herbert Goldsmith wrote to the Governor of the Gold Coast, Alexander Ransford Slater. Goldsmith proposed creating a West African Association that, by replacing the existing colony-specific dinners with functions open to all who served in West Africa, would promote inter-colonial camaraderie.¹⁶ Slater thought it a good idea in theory, but doubted whether the 'rank and file' would agree to it. The Director of the Gold Coast's Medical Services, Dr W. J. D. Inness, provided the reason, stating that 'those officers who have served in one Colony only do not care a hoot in hell about the other . . . in fact they generally have an active dislike for people coming from another

¹⁴ Gann and Duignan, *Rulers of British Africa*, p. 185; Heussler, *Yesterday's Rulers*, pp. 24–5, 35, 188; Civil Secretary's Office, *Sudan Political Service 1899–1929* (Khartoum, 1930); J. M. Coote papers, Rhodes House, Oxford [hereafter RHO], Mss.Afr.s.1383(1).

¹⁵ On some of these difficulties, see A. L. Stoler and F. Cooper, 'Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda', in *Tensions of empire: Colonial cultures in a bourgeois world*, ed. A. L. Stoler and F. Cooper (Berkeley, 1997), pp. 1–56, here p. 20; for a specific case study examining such interference, see H. Kuklick, *The Imperial Bureaucrat: The Colonial Administrative Service in the Gold Coast, 1920–1939* (Stanford, 1979).

¹⁶ H. S. Goldsmith to A. R. Slater, 8 Sept. 1931, Public Records and Archives Department, Accra, Ghana [hereafter PRAAD] CSO 25/3/61.

Colony.' Another senior Gold Coast official warned Slater that a similar association that existed in East Africa was full of infighting, which supports Margery Perham's claim of 1930 that 'officials [in that region] in general are almost all bitter about the administration beyond their own frontiers.' The scheme for a West African Association never got off the ground.¹⁷

Indeed, self-segregation and animosity often commenced even before arrival in Africa. Officials on board the ships undertaking the voyage to the continent were bored and often drank heavily.¹⁸ New recruits had relatively little opportunity to bond with their counterparts from other colonies, being encouraged by old-timers to stick to their 'own kind' from the first voyage out onwards. These colony-specific groups were then maintained on subsequent journeys, as demonstrated by both surviving signed menu cards and April 1919 photographs of officials returning to West Africa from Liverpool on board *RMS Elmina*.¹⁹ Observing these cliques, a doctor heading out on the *SS Mendi* to join the West African Medical Service in 1913 noted how officials 'from the Gold Coast condescended towards those from Sierra Leone, Nigerians were grave and dignified as befitted the largest colony . . . Officials from the other colonies thought Nigerians gave themselves airs more befitting an Indian pro-consul.'²⁰ On journeys to East Africa, officials were less segregated from each other, but they nevertheless tended to associate by territory.²¹ Officials invariably looked down on those from services they felt inferior to their own, and disliked those who in turn looked down on them. In the West African hierarchy, Northern Nigeria was followed in order by Southern Nigeria, the Gold Coast, Sierra Leone and the Gambia.²² In East Africa, the pecking order was more flexible, but Sudan tended to trump Uganda, whilst officials from both looked down on the Tanganyikan upstart.²³ Amongst other factors, this hierarchy

¹⁷ Slater to Goldsmith, 23 Sept. 1931, PRAAD CSO 25/3/61; Goldsmith to Slater, 17 Nov. 1931, PRAAD CSO 25/3/61; Slater to Goldsmith, 24 Dec. 1931, PRAAD CSO 25/3/61; W. J. Inness to J. P. Ross, [Oct. 1931], PRAAD CSO 25/3/61; M. Perham, *East African Journey* (1976) [hereafter Perham, *East African Journey*], p. 46.

¹⁸ *Hansard*, 5th ser., vol. 200, cols. 1940–2; D. A. Macalister to family, 12 Nov. 1901, British Library Additional Manuscript [hereafter BL Add Mss] 49357/2; A. Field, 'Verb Sap.': *On Going to West Africa, Northern Nigeria, Southern, and to the Coasts* (1913) [hereafter Field, 'Verb Sap.'], p. 50.

¹⁹ C. Walker, diary, [April 1919], RHO Mss.Afr.s.438/33–4; C. Woodhouse, diary, 13 June 1909, RHO Mss.Afr.s.236.

²⁰ P. A. Clearkin, 'Ramblings and Recollections of a Colonial Doctor 1913–1958', [1967], RHO Mss.Brit.r.4/1/27; see also B. Bush, *Imperialism, Race and Resistance: Africa and Britain, 1919–1945* (1999), p. 56.

²¹ R. Davies, *The Camel's Back: Service in the Rural Sudan* (1957), pp. 17–18.

²² G. Bell, *Shadows on the Sand: The Memoirs of Sir Gawain Bell* (1983), p. 16; E. J. Scott to father, 19 Feb. 1903, RHO Mss.Afr.s.1564/3; A. Milverton, interview with Kirk-Greene, 22 Feb. 1969, RHO Mss.Brit.Emp.s.368/13–6; 'Aide-memoire', 22 Aug. 1908, National Archives, London [hereafter NA] FO 881/10505.

²³ J. N. Richardson, 'Comparative Note on the S.P.S. and the Colonial Civil Service in Uganda', 28 March 1931, NA CO 323/1162/5; C. W. M. Cox, diary, 27 June 1939, SAD 673/4; J. Daniell, diary, c.31 Dec. 1937, SAD 777/13/19; Perham, *East African Journey*, pp. 45–6.

was based on an awareness of the relative size of the services, the seniority of each colony's governor and the domestic press attention each colony received (although no colony received much). Judging that they looked upon one other with 'equal contempt', the ship's purser knew never to put officials from different colonies at the same table.²⁴

Elites worked hard to foster intra-colonial camaraderie. For example, they spent large sums of money building social clubs, and they established regular sporting fixtures between neighbouring colonies, such as the annual cricket matches between the Nigerian and Gold Coast services from 1926 onwards.²⁵ Any animosity between neighbouring colonial services might therefore suggest that such elite, top-down efforts were successful (perhaps a little too successful). However, we will now consider whether this was the case by looking at four potential fault lines of intra-colonial conflict: regional and governmental diversity, officials' backgrounds, officials' different working priorities, and the tension between individualism and the need to socialize.

Officials within colonies often worked in very different environments. Here we will take officials who served in the north and south of Nigeria after the colony's unification in 1914 as an example. Broadly speaking, officials in northern and southern Nigeria were used to different systems of governance. Officials in the south were more accustomed to working with councils of African elites or groups of policymakers than with a single emir or paramount chief, as was the norm in the north.²⁶ A sense of administrative difference was compounded by the fact that unified Nigeria had three secretariats. As I. F. Nicolson has suggested, 'Easily the most remarkable thing about [Lord] Lugard's 'amalgamation' of Nigeria is that it never really took place.'²⁷

Those who worked in northern Nigeria felt sorry for, or hostile towards, those working in the south. Charles Walker was an official in the north with very limited experience of the south and its officials. In 1918, he wrote in his diary that

"You live in mud-houses in an atmosphere of dirt and dignity, you tie a horse to a tree and draw two and six a day – that is Northern Nigeria." I do not know who was responsible for the above but give me the "dirt and dignity" every time after what I have heard from

²⁴ Interview with S. Leith-Ross, quoted in C. Allen, *Plain Tales from the British Empire* (2008), p. 307.

²⁵ J. C. Maxwell to J. A. Ballantyne, 21 Feb. 1925, PRAAD CSO 25/1/62; Kirk-Greene, 'Badge of Office: Sport and His Excellency in the British Empire', in *The Cultural Bond: Sport, Empire, Society*, ed. Mangan (1992), pp. 178–200, here p. 187; C. Owen Butler to A. Duncan-Johnstone, 26 March 1934, RHO Mss.Afr.s.593/5/4/33A.

²⁶ M. Crowder, 'The White Chiefs of Tropical Africa', in *Colonialism in Africa 1870–1960*, ii: *The History and Politics of Colonialism 1914–1960*, ed. L. Gann and P. Duignan (Cambridge, 1970), pp. 339–40.

²⁷ I. F. Nicolson, *The Administration of Nigeria 1900–1960: Men, Methods, and Myths* (Oxford, 1969), p. 180.

Dew Hughes and Dodds about some of the persons and places in the Southern Provinces.²⁸

This was reciprocated in kind. Neil Weir had identified with southern Nigeria from the very start of his time in the colonial service in 1925. In 1928, Weir went on local leave to Zaria, where he 'had the opportunity to see the running of a big Northern Province Native Administration Emirate'. He was unimpressed. 'One noticed', he commented

how out of touch the administrative officer was with the native. He always seemed to be hob-nobbing with the 'big man'. I had the impression that an A.D.O. [Assistant District Officer] was quite satisfied with himself when he had satisfied the louder noises in the Hausa world. Naturally, the dignity, good manner and picturesque life is [sic] bound to inspire one and lead one into the happy opinion that everything is alright. I wonder if it is. The Admin[istrative] Officer seemed rather aloof from the details of Native Administration.²⁹

This animosity was such that elites new to the region were quick to pick up on it, whilst even civil servants back in London occasionally got involved and took sides.³⁰ This was not an isolated example. In 1929, Angus Duncan-Johnstone, who had previously worked in the south of the Gold Coast, went to Tamale in the north. There, he was surprised and dismayed at the number of officials completely distrustful of the purportedly meddling and misguided ways of the south, particularly an Accra secretariat that knew nothing about, and was consequently making a 'mess' of, the outlying parts of the colony.³¹ A similar point can be made of the so-called 'bog baron' officials of southern Sudan, who disliked the supposedly 'effete' ways of the north.³²

Charles Walker's complaint about 'dirt and dignity' suggests that a clash between northern and southern Nigeria was a product of localized pockets of socializing and gossip. However, it seems that this conflict was fundamentally rooted in a battle over what constituted 'authentic' Africa. Each official wished it was he who was having the most authentically African experience and, as part of this, each questioned the authenticity of others' experiences. This attempt was a constant, although the means by which officials measured authenticity differed. Those in the north chose to frame the south in terms of its urbanity. With its urban cinemas, neat avenues and governor's luncheons, the south was deemed over-civilized, even though many southern officials'

²⁸ Walker, diary, 13 July 1918, RHO Mss.Afr.s.437/36-7; see also Kirk-Greene, 'Forging a Relationship with the Colonial Administrative Service, 1921-1939', in *Margery Perham and British Rule in Africa*, ed. A. Smith and M. Bull (1991), pp. 62-82, here p. 69.

²⁹ N. Weir, diary, [1926], RHO Mss.Afr.s.1151(1)/33; Weir, diary, [1928], RHO Mss.Afr.s.1151(1)/47.

³⁰ H. Hesketh Bell to parents, 26 Dec. 1909, BL Add Mss 78721/86; C. Strachey note, 14 Nov. 1913, NA CO 96/538.

³¹ Duncan-Johnstone, diary, 31 Aug. 1929, RHO Mss.Afr.s.593(1)/12.

³² M. Daly, *Empire on the Nile: The Anglo-Egyptian Sudan 1898-1934* (Cambridge, 1986), p. 415.

experiences were just as rural as those of their northern counterparts. On the other hand, feeling that they too were living in an 'authentic' African environment, southern officials chose to focus upon the supposed political inauthenticity of their northern contemporaries' experiences, suggesting that such northerners were disinclined to engage with all levels of African society, thereby failing truly to witness the continent's rich variety.

A second source of tension was the type of officials recruited. From the end of the Scramble onwards, there was a clash of wills between colonial officials from civilian backgrounds and military officers. For one university-graduated official talking of the members of the West African Frontier Force, it came 'as a shock to see one with a newspaper in his hand: it somehow never occurs to you that they can read'.³³ In the words of one expert on colonial administration writing in 1914, military men were a problem to civilian officials because it did not occur to the former to 'think that the country is not administered so as to support the army, but that the army is kept up so as to support the administration', whilst the latter often treated the army as 'an overpaid extravagance'.³⁴

It was perhaps inevitable, then, that there would be tension between colonial officials from military backgrounds and those who came to Africa out of university. After having taken part in the 'pacifying' military operations of conquest in Africa in the last years of the nineteenth century, many became officials simply because they happened to be 'on the spot' when the dust of war began to settle. Against this, the number of civilian university graduates recruited as colonial officials grew sharply in the years immediately prior to the First World War.³⁵ Animosity between the two was driven in part by different approaches to the act of governance. Those from a military background were more likely to suggest that 'Truly the rule by force seems to be appreciated', and civilian officials tended to dislike this, instead preferring to rule by acquiring knowledge of the people they governed.³⁶ For Anthony Disney, a civilian Sudan Political Service (SPS) official working in Kurmuk in the east of Sudan, 'Up till about 1926, the administration of Kurmuk District seems to have consisted in [sic] a predominantly military regime and little was known – and still less recorded – about the tribes inhabiting it'.³⁷ In addition, civilian officials disliked the 'bellicose'

³³ W. Crocker, *Nigeria: A Critique of British Colonial Administration* (1936) [hereafter Crocker, *Nigeria*], p. 117.

³⁴ C. H. Stigand, *Administration in Tropical Africa* (1914), p. 5.

³⁵ The situation was slightly different in the case of Sudan, which was administered by the Foreign Office. For a fuller analysis of this exception, and of the changes brought in by Ralph Furse, see Christopher Prior, *Exporting Empire: Africa, Colonial Officials and the Construction of the British Imperial State, c.1900–39* (Manchester, 2013), ch. 1.

³⁶ B. Taylor, diary, 9 May 1906, *Gold Coast Diaries: Chronicles of Political Officers in West Africa, 1900–1919*, ed. T. Williamson and A. H. M. Kirk-Greene (2000), p. 67.

³⁷ A. Disney, untitled memorandum, [c.1931], Sudan Archive, Durham [hereafter SAD] 716/1/7.

atmosphere that military officials created.³⁸ The problem of the two types of officials not getting along was such that the ability of graduates to command the respect of military men loomed large in Edwardian London's recruitment decisions.³⁹

Nevertheless, even as graduate officials eclipsed officials from military backgrounds, the notion that there were two monolithic generations – one military, the other civilian – needs qualifying. For example, some who commenced service at the start of the 1920s felt it hard to relate to those who commenced service at the end of the 1920s.⁴⁰ The Great War also generated tension. There was, according to one Nigerian official,

a feeling that was extant when I came out [in 1928] . . . between those officers who had been in their [Imperial Institute] training when the war started, but who nevertheless were sent out in 1915 – and between those who served through the war and came out as ex-soldiers afterwards . . . it soon became apparent that to us the [sic] – very much juniors then – that there was a good deal of feeling. After all, the war-joiners had something like four, five, six years seniority over those of their same age who had come out after the war, having done war service. And there is no doubt, I think, that there was a great deal of ill-feeling as a result.⁴¹

Veterans of the Great War, such as James Elliot in Entebbe, also registered this ill-feeling. Elliot responded by rebuking those who had not served in the British Army by suggesting that 'the War had largely passed most of them over; they forgot that all the young men coming out to work in Uganda then had just been through a terrible War.'⁴²

The way officials went about their work, and their responses to how others went about theirs, created a third source of friction. As is well known, officials frequently came to see themselves as the 'father' of those in their districts, benevolent yet firm when the African 'child' was unruly. Officials attached a good deal of importance to what they thought was a reciprocal recognition of a father/son bond. For instance, officials took the indigenous names given to them by Africans as confirmation of their status as governor or overseer of a region.⁴³ Officials consequently came to verbal blows over the impact of neighbouring officials' actions upon their own regions. For example, in Tanganyika in 1930, Margery Perham witnessed officials clashing over how to deal with population transfers between two neighbouring districts.⁴⁴

³⁸ C. Dundas, *African Crossroads* (1955), p. 109.

³⁹ P. Gifford, 'Indirect Rule: Touchstone or Tombstone for Colonial Policy?', in *Britain and Germany in Africa: Imperial Rivalry and Colonial Rule*, ed. P. Gifford and W. R. Louis (New Haven, CT, 1967), p. 357.

⁴⁰ H. Pollock to mother, 19 Nov. 1930, RHO Mss.Afr.s.419/226.

⁴¹ T. Letchworth, interview, RHO Mss.Afr.s.2112/33.

⁴² J. R. Elliot, 'Notes and memoirs', RHO Mss.Afr.s.1384/1-2; see also Crocker, *Nigeria*, p. 200.

⁴³ Collins, *Shadows in the Grass*, p. 93; see also H. B. Arber, *Memoirs*, [c.1982], SAD 736/2/6, 10; G. Tomlinson to mother, 22 Aug. 1908, RHO Mss.Afr.s.372/81.

⁴⁴ Perham, *East African Journey*, p. 211.

At the same time, officials were fiercely defensive of their own actions. This was a natural consequence of the diversity of officials' preoccupations. What interested officials, and how they chose to interact with Africa, was varied. Some enjoyed overseeing road-building, some were concerned with bringing in revenue, whilst others were primarily interested in anthropological study.⁴⁵ For some of the time, this variety was not problematic, and officials later attempted to minimize the importance of such divergences.⁴⁶ However, differing priorities did cause problems. When tinkering with the political units of indirect rule, known as Native Administrations, one Nigerian DC noted that: 'most of the difficulties are caused by too frequent changes of staff, for everyone approaches the problem in a different way and from a different angle.'⁴⁷ The combination of officials' paternalism and such differences in interests meant that when they left a posting for pastures new, they resented others for working with 'their' Africans. Officials felt discrepancies undid their own efforts. On returning to Africa after leave, an official in south-east Nigeria was appalled to find that the DC who had taken his place 'paid more attention to the development of roads and buildings than to the ruthless suppression of disorders'.⁴⁸ Conversely, DCs complained about the state in which their predecessors had left districts. As a consequence, being posted to a newly created station frequently pleased officials because they were 'not bound by any predecessors' ideas'.⁴⁹

Robert Heussler has noted that: 'A place hummed or ticked over or stagnated according to the abilities of the man who was posted to it.'⁵⁰ Another fault line was how far officials applied themselves to their work. Castigating what one Assistant District Commissioner (ADC) referred to as 'those energetic blokes', some officials displayed laziness as a visible badge of pride.⁵¹ One official in Tanganyika in the 1920s reported 'with a smile that he never had less than a hundred [Treasury queries regarding accounts] a month and that he already had six months' supply in his drawer which he had not attempted to answer'.⁵² Overt or not, such 'wasters' who 'didn't care tuppence' for their work naturally secured the immediate disapproval of those who were more

⁴⁵ Weir, diaries, undated [1925], RHO Mss.Afr.s.1151(1)/1-2, 47; E. H. Macintosh, 'Note on the Dago Tribe', *Sudan Notes and Records*, xiv (1931), 171-7.

⁴⁶ Letchworth, interview, RHO Mss.Afr.s.2112/22.

⁴⁷ H. Childs, diary, 27 Jan. 1936, RHO Mss.Afr.s.1861/3.

⁴⁸ J. Allen, 'Nigerian Panorama', RHO Mss.Afr.s.1551/69.

⁴⁹ E. A. Balfour to mother, 28 Nov. 1934, SAD 606/5/4; C. Wordsworth to G. Young, 14 May 1905, RHO Mss.Afr.s.1373/30.

⁵⁰ Heussler, *British Tanganyika: An Essay and Documents on District Administration* (Durham, NC, 1971) [hereafter Heussler, *British Tanganyika*], p. 15 n. 9.

⁵¹ F. Dowsett to parents, 29 July 1932, RHO Mss.Afr.s.1276/77.

⁵² R. Alford, 'Travelling Hopefully' [hereafter Alford, 'Travelling Hopefully'], in *Glimpses of Empire: A Corona Anthology*, ed. A. H. M. Kirk-Greene (2001) [hereafter Kirk-Greene, *Glimpses of Empire*], pp. 291-3, here p. 292.

energetic.⁵³ Similarly, those felt too lax or too firm with Africans risked being labelled 'a public danger' by their peers.⁵⁴ Each official's belief that their attitudes to governance in Africa were right helped create an imperial system made up of a series of unilateral relationships between officials and Africans, rather than a collective European experience of governance.

Most significant in causing tension, however, was the clash between officials' need to socialize and their wish to be individualistic. From the very start of our period, new recruits knew they would be expected to do a certain amount of socializing with other Europeans. They took formal dress with them to Africa accordingly.⁵⁵ Most officials looked for some form of connection with other Europeans for their psychological well-being, and complained when personal differences prevented them forming social bonds. In 1906, one official in northern Nigeria felt he was at times surrounded 'by nothing but natives, at others by a few Europeans with not one of whom one has the slightest taste or sentiment in common'.⁵⁶

The opportunities to interact with other officials nevertheless both increased as their numbers rose and became more varied as more clubs and sports grounds were built. In urban areas, officials could increasingly expect a full social calendar. A DC working in northern Nigeria recalled that inter-war Kano – which contained around 140 Europeans – played host to

dinner-parties at the Residency and private houses, or invitations to the mess and drink parties at various places. At the club there was tennis and golf, and polo also was played three days a week – probably the cheapest polo in the world, and of quite a good standard. Race meetings were also held periodically.⁵⁷

One official critical of such forms of socializing suggested the bigger northern Nigerian stations were trying to recreate the atmosphere of Bexhill-on-Sea.⁵⁸ Even in stations that contained a handful of officials, tennis was often played nearly every afternoon after work.⁵⁹

However, the frequency with which officials sought company differed. Crudely, officials belonged to one of two camps. Firstly, there

⁵³ The quotes are at R. Surridge, 'Salad Days in Tanganyika', in *Glimpses of Empire*, pp. 283–6, here p. 283 [hereafter Surridge, 'Salad Days'], and Heussler, *British Tanganyika*, p. 15 n. 9 respectively.

⁵⁴ T. R. H. Owen to mother, 6 March 1930, SAD 414/2/40; Owen to mother, 10 Nov. 1930, SAD 414/2/48; Alford, 'Travelling Hopefully', p. 291.

⁵⁵ *The West African Pocket Book: A Guide for Newly-Appointed Government Officers* (1920), pp. 42–4; Field, 'Verb Sap.', p. 22.

⁵⁶ W. Orr to E. Levisseur, 27 May 1906, BL Add Mss 56100/34; see also Crocker, *Nigeria*, p. 195.

⁵⁷ R. Oakley, *Treks and Palavers* (1939) [hereafter Oakley, *Treks and Palavers*], p. 243.

⁵⁸ Crocker, *Nigeria*, p. 99.

⁵⁹ G. Ormsby to mother, 22 Aug. 1909, RHO Mss.Brit.Emp.s.287/88; A. Sheffield to mother, 31 Dec. 1930, RHO Mss.Brit.Emp.s.310/85; Oakley, *Treks and Palavers*, p. 43; G. Ormsby to mother, 22 Aug. 1909, RHO Mss.Brit.Emp.s.287/88.

were the 'bush' DCs. Bush DCs invariably rejected the pomp and pageantry of the secretariat wallah. When travelling to Kassala in 1910, one SPS official noted 'Absence of company delicious. Delightful being amongst men uncivilised enough to be natural'.⁶⁰ Coming to the end of his being stationed at a remote government station in northern Nigeria, A. J. Phillips noted ruefully in his diary that he was 'positively apprehensive about returning to Bauchi [site of the district's head office], and I dislike the notion of forcible intercourse with the other Europeans there. This is a great existence.'⁶¹ A desire to act as pioneer was particularly prevalent amongst those selected for service in Tanganyika. Some of these men had wanted to go to the mandate because its status as a more recent addition to the empire after the First World War led them to believe it would be 'wilder' than elsewhere in Africa.⁶² John Griffiths was selected as the sort of man able to survive in the remote Buha region. He liked occasional company, but was more vociferous in claims such as that talking to other DCs caused a 'nervous strain', and that after having travelled for '3 days without so much as seeing a white man', he was 'not very thrilled' finally to do so.⁶³

Some bush DCs were happy to have a certain degree of interaction with other Europeans out in the bush, particularly at the start of a tour, when advice was most eagerly sought. However, this changed once affairs settled into a routine. Bush DCs required 'just enough and not too much society and entertainment', but a visiting official could quickly turn into a guest who had overstayed his welcome.⁶⁴ Europeans were welcomed to a bush station for only as long as it took them to administer an invigorating reconnection with home by proxy, at which point they were rejected for breaking the 'rhythm of existence' of life as a pioneer, to quote Edward Lumley, an official in Tanganyika.⁶⁵ By providing an inconvenient reminder of those likewise engaged, the very presence of others detracted from an official's ability to act as an imperial frontiersman.

The second group of officials consisted of those who were more comfortable with socializing, and indeed viewed it as a necessity. Such officials naturally conceptualized their relationship with Africa differently. These were the officials who believed that 'living in solitude or in small communities for too long certainly warps one's mentality'.⁶⁶ In

⁶⁰ R. E. H. Baily to parents, 6 Jan. 1910, SAD 533/4/48.

⁶¹ A. J. Phillips, diary, 3 Sept. 1931, RHO Mss.Afr.s.803/24.

⁶² G. D. Popplewell, 'Random Recollections', RHO Mss.Afr.s.2156/1.

⁶³ J. Griffiths, '210: Snuff Taking and the Use of Nose Clips in Buha, Tanganyika Territory', *Man*, xxxiv (1934), 185–6; Griffiths, diary, 23 Aug. 1931, RHO Mss.Afr.r.180/30; Griffiths, diary, 19 Jan. 1932, RHO Mss.Afr.r.179/5.

⁶⁴ Childs, diary, 12 Aug. 1933, RHO Mss.Afr.s.1861(1); Childs, diary, 1 Jan. 1934, RHO Mss.Afr.s.1861(2); C. A. E. Lea, diary, 9 Feb. 1932, in Lea, *On Trek in Kordofan: The Diaries of a British District Officer in the Sudan, 1931–1933*, ed. M. W. Daly (Oxford, 1994), p. 217; E. Lumley, *Forgotten Mandate* (1976) [hereafter Lumley, *Forgotten Mandate*], p. 46.

⁶⁵ Lumley, *Forgotten Mandate*, p. 46.

⁶⁶ Duncan-Johnstone, diary, 9 Sept. 1928, RHO Mss.Afr.s.593/1/8.

the letters and memoirs of such officials, social events were recalled at length, and illness or disability created frustration when it meant officials were unable to interact with their surrounding European community.⁶⁷

It could be that references to tennis or polo were inserted into private correspondence as a means of reassuring family and friends that officials were maintaining as 'civilized' an existence as possible. However, one Nigerian DC later wrote that the 'plain truth is that a Political Officer's job is his life in whatever country it may be his good fortune to be placed, and his life is his work. He is never away from it; there are no set hours; he is never free from it.'⁶⁸ As an indicator both to oneself and to others that one was not like the poor pen-pushers of home, this feeling could be worn as a badge of pride. Nevertheless, activities such as social drinking were seized on with gusto because this was the closest officials could get to a retreat from Africa.

Many officials consequently resented their social spaces being altered in ways they could not control. One important change was the increasing number of wives who accompanied officials to Africa after 1918. Whilst they remained relatively few in number across the period under discussion, the wives who did go out attained a high degree of visibility because they were living in what was invariably judged to be 'a man's country'.⁶⁹ Unsurprisingly, those whose wives came to Africa tended to believe the move was beneficial. These officials reinforced their emotional justification for their spouses' presence with a rational one, namely that this ensured that men took better care of themselves.⁷⁰

Wives could prove useful to officials, particularly to those men new to a district. Charged with 'maternal' roles, they did the entertaining and provided much of the initial advice that helped new arrivals get a sense of how to negotiate their social environment.⁷¹ Nevertheless, married officials underestimated (or played down) the amount of opposition they faced from those who did not bring spouses to Africa.⁷² Behind the need for polite social relations that presumably impelled some single men to hold their tongue on the issue in public, there was frequent hostility to the presence of women. For one southern Nigerian DC writing home in the 1920s, 'At the bottom of my heart I think that other people's wives are rather a bother in the bush.'⁷³ Unmarried colonial

⁶⁷ Balfour to mother, 12 Dec. 1934, SAD 606/5/10; Balfour to mother, 28 Dec. 1934, SAD 606/5/13.

⁶⁸ Oakley, *Treks and Palavers*, p. 8.

⁶⁹ Jeffries, Annotated comments on 'Vacancy Form', 22 Nov. 1927, NA CO 536/145/14; W. Tripe, diary, 14 Sept. 1929, RHO Mss.Afr.s.868/1/125; H. Callaway, *Gender, Culture and Empire: European Women in Colonial Nigeria* (Basingstoke, 1987), pp. 4–8.

⁷⁰ A. C. G. Hastings, *Nigerian Days* (1925), p. 127.

⁷¹ Callaway, *Gender, Culture and Empire*, p. 56.

⁷² Surridge, 'Salad Days', p. 284.

⁷³ Tomlinson to mother, 28 Nov. 1923, RHO Mss.Afr.s.372/188; see also Miller-Stirling to father, 21 Nov. 1911, RHO Mss.Afr.s.2051/73.

officials often advanced the Kiplingesque belief that female company would prove a distraction and 'dull the edge of their husband's visions'.⁷⁴ According to such unmarried men, the presence of wives merely encouraged more women to visit Africa, with the resultant 'domestication' of colonial social life reducing officials' contact with, and consequently their regard for, indigenous populations. The rise in the number of officials' wives on the continent therefore generated a concurrent increase in animosity against their husbands. One SPS man noted bitterly that the married, newly domesticated officials of the 1920s 'went home to their charming houses on the river with their well irrigated gardens and trees while their [African] subordinates were relegated to dismal rows of houses in the dusty back parts'.⁷⁵

More important than this, however, was the impact of colonial society upon officials' sense of self. As we have already seen, officials went about their everyday work individualistically. There are therefore clear limits to how far peer pressure standardized officials' actions. An increase in socializing nevertheless generated feelings of constraint. With the growing routinization of social life came the gradual accretion of the 'proper' ways of doing things. For example, upon arrival in a new place, cards had to be left and books had to be signed, starting at the residence of the most senior official in the station, followed by all other Europeans' homes in diminishing order of superiority. There were conventions governing seating arrangements at dinner, what one wore to social occasions, and so on. Helen Callaway has demonstrated that in its 'elaborate rules and formal rituals, the Colonial Service articulated its symbolic order into every aspect of daily life for those within its ranks'.⁷⁶ Norms of acceptable white behaviour were adhered to in part because they helped maintain the barrier between ruler and ruled.⁷⁷

The prevalence of gossip meant officials knew such social norms were policed rigorously through informal means. Although often neglected by scholars, gossip was crucial in defining officials' relationships with their peers. Some commentators attempted to discourage it. According to a guide for those new to West Africa, gossip was 'the cause of as much trouble as fever' and therefore to be avoided.⁷⁸ Officials did indeed seek to steer clear of regions that had a particularly bad reputation for intrigue and infighting. One DC tried to avoid being posted to Mbulu District in northern Tanganyika in the 1930s because 'a lot of

⁷⁴ D. Newbold to G. Moore, 25 May 1939, in K. D. D. Henderson, *The Making of the Modern Sudan: The Life and Letters of Sir Douglas Newbold* (1953), p.111; see also Bell, *Shadows on the Sand*, p. 12.

⁷⁵ Baily, 'Early recollections', SAD 533/4/28.

⁷⁶ Callaway, *Gender, Culture and Empire*, p. 56.

⁷⁷ C. Cockey to J. L. Stewart, 4 Oct. 1936, RHO Mss.Afr.s.1138/17-8; Stewart to Cockey, 9 Oct. 1936, RHO Mss.Afr.s.1138/19; Callaway, *Gender, Culture and Empire*, pp. 69–72.

⁷⁸ Field, 'Verb Sap.', p. 82; see also F. Lugard, 'Northern Nigeria: Discussion', *Geographical Journal*, xl (1912), 164.

backbiting goes on there.⁷⁹ However, once on a station with limited outlets for social interaction, it was very hard to avoid getting drawn into the gossip.⁸⁰ This was often powered by heavy drinking, another practice that elites and metropolitan commentators tried, and failed, to control. With officials' social lives invariably revolving around 'sundowners' with a small group of people, insularity and a taste for enlivening scandals naturally led to prejudice.⁸¹ The aforementioned guide noted that the 'honeysuckle English village has its scandal, Anglo-India has its "gup," but the Coast has an ear-burning talk of its own.'⁸² '“Everybody else” seems to be the engrossing topic of conversation out here', wrote one northern Nigerian official in 1911.⁸³

Officials consequently felt they were living in the midst of a society given over to an extreme form of self-surveillance. DCs were well aware that they would be the subjects of gossip were they to transgress accepted norms, which would only serve to make their lives uncomfortable. Those felt to have 'gone native' attracted the most opprobrium. Whilst respected as a scholar, the Gold Coast anthropologist R. S. Rattray was one such example.⁸⁴ However, most watched their behaviour very carefully. Some doubtless used their memoirs to exaggerate how far they openly displayed friendship with Africans as a means of retrospectively demonstrating impeccably modern credentials.⁸⁵ Testimonies from the time nevertheless attest to the problems such interactions could cause. When he went out to Sudan in 1931, Gawain Bell felt there was a need to maintain a certain distance between himself and those whom he governed. His belief that voluntarily choosing to associate with Sudanese peoples was not 'normal' diminished the longer he remained in the Condominium. However, Bell's residual aversion to doing so in the presence of other Europeans was due less to fears about a diminution of his prestige in the eyes of Africans than to worries about how such actions would be perceived by his peers.⁸⁶ In addition, even if they did not want to, officials had to turn out for colonial social occasions and follow an established 'normal' way of acting for fear of being ostracized, not merely by one's peers, but also by one's boss. If a Provincial Commissioner disliked a new recruit, he could make life unpleasant. In Tanganyika, one Provincial Commissioner circulated sarcastic letters about an incoming ADC by the name of LeGeyt, which

⁷⁹ Lumley, *Forgotten Mandate*, ch.7; Lumley, diary, 9 April 1935, RHO Mss.Afr.s.785/61.

⁸⁰ R. K. Rice to mother, 5 Dec. 1914, RHO Mss.Afr.s.1511/3.

⁸¹ Walker, diary, 15 Sept. 1915, RHO Mss.Afr.s.433/103-4; Weir, diary, [c.1929–30], RHO Mss.Afr.s.1151(1)/57; Hastings, *Nigerian Days*, p. 38.

⁸² Field, 'Verb Sap.', p. 43.

⁸³ H. Mathews to parents, 6 June 1911, RHO Mss.Afr.s.783/1/1/26.

⁸⁴ A. F. Robertson, 'Anthropologists and Government in Ghana', *African Affairs*, lxxiv (1975), 51–9, here p. 54; see also J. Kenrick to parents, 16 June 1937, SAD 647/5/60.

⁸⁵ H. A. Nicholson, *Memoirs*, [n.d.], SAD 777/11/passim; T. H. B. Mynors, *memoirs*, [March 1982], SAD 777/8/8.

⁸⁶ Bell to parents, 17 Oct. 1931, SAD 697/4/35; Bell to parents, 27 Jan. 1933, SAD 697/9/16.

led another to note ruefully that 'It's awfully important to keep in with one's Provincial Commissioner.'⁸⁷ All in all, as one DO complained, 'you have to keep up a great deal of appearances.'⁸⁸ Such complaints signified both officials' frustration with their environs and a feeling of impotence in their inability to change this. Officials needed the company of other Europeans, but resented the constraints that this company placed upon them.

We are now in a position to reconsider what actually shaped colonial officials' behaviour. One might initially assume that those men who went out to Africa were precisely those most affected by the frame of imperial reference created and drilled into them at public school. Colonial officials were the men most enthused, perhaps, by the idea of perpetuating the homosocial bond of life as part of a team of triumphant Britons, be that on the playing field or as a group of pioneers in the 'dark continent'. The prevailing historiographical tendency has indeed been to stress the essential unity of the official corps across Africa. This article has demonstrated that there are a number of difficulties with this argument. Any sense of a community of British colonial officials in Africa was fractured along a number of axes. Officials' divergent backgrounds, working environments and attitudes to work sparked intra-colonial tension, as did officials' unending struggle either to avoid other Europeans or to live out their lives in the company of others without feeling fettered by such company. That colonial social groups were hothouses of discord fuelled by alcohol and gossip generated feelings of constraint, for officials felt they had continually to watch their backs. Not all potential sources of tension became real. For instance, there is little evidence to suggest that national or religious identities became a source of animosity or a root of intra-corps factionalism.⁸⁹ Nevertheless, the ruptures that did exist are testament to the failure of public schools to transcend the role of provider of advice on appropriately British behaviour by actually shaping patterns of behaviour.

In response to this argument, one counterclaim, concerning the types of source material this article has used, needs to be considered. Some retired officials admitted that when writing memoirs there was a 'general tendency among all of us to pinpoint congenial recollections and to overlook the rest'.⁹⁰ Furthermore, memoirs' emphasis upon collective nouns is at variance with sources created at the time, which more frequently constructed colonial governance as an individual act. 'I' only

⁸⁷ Tripe to parents, 21 September 1929, RHO Mss.Afr.s.868/1/130-1, 135.

⁸⁸ Miller-Stirling to mother, 17 June 1910, RHO Mss.Afr.s.2051/29; see also D. Cameron to J. H. Oldham, 26 July 1925, RHO Mss.Lugard.9/1/1.

⁸⁹ See, for instance, the testimony of Maurice de Courcy Dodd, a colonial official in Nigeria; de Courcy Dodd to mother, 22 Feb. 1898, RHO Mss.Afr.s.1995/1; de Courcy Dodd to mother, 3 July 1898, RHO Mss.Afr.s.1995/43.

⁹⁰ L. M. Buchanan, memoirs, 10 April 1979, SAD 797/8/6.

became 'we' later. The natural response to this would be that whilst historians who have used sources created upon retirement have found harmony, a heavier reliance on sources created at the time may lead one to exaggerate the importance of conflicts that were, in actuality, only fleeting concerns. After all, some officials did indeed form long-lasting friendships. Perhaps, then, letter- or diary-writing was the very act of exorcism that allowed a basic underlying *esprit de corps* to be restored?

After all, respected biologist Julian Huxley noted that even the European who visited Africa only briefly found it difficult to escape a certain intellectual climate which 'enfolds him, and because almost everyone he meets tacitly makes the same general assumptions, he very often falls into the current way of thinking'.⁹¹ One ex-Nigerian official, who was highly unusual in his public condemnation of the colonial service upon retirement, believed it 'disconcerting to observe how and to what extent even within two or three years some of the youngsters assimilate themselves to the dominant atmosphere'.⁹²

However, it needs to be borne in mind just how trapped officials felt. Behind any show of unity lay simmering resentment. Opinions different from the established norm, such as those held by official Robert Greig in Tanganyika among many others, were hidden away for fear of recrimination.⁹³ The very existence of a single 'correct' way of doing things impinged upon the idea that imperial endeavour was an act of independence, of making one's mark on the continent. Discord between officials therefore owed something to the metropole. Attempts to instil future officials with the belief that imperial governance was a collective experience were up against the more exciting visions of idiosyncratic imperial heroes such as Gordon and Kitchener. Ultimately, these visions created tensions that could not be resolved. Officials' need for at least some social contact with other Europeans was granted in an environment governed by conventions that hampered their pursuit of the romanticized individualism indelibly associated with life on Britain's imperial frontiers. Officials pursued that which they could never have.

⁹¹ J. Huxley, 'Racial Chess', *Cornhill Magazine*, lxix (1930), 537–50, quotation from p. 538.

⁹² Crocker, *Nigeria*, p. 201.

⁹³ Even so, despite realizing it was problematic to do so, Greig could not prevent getting into occasional arguments with some of his colleagues; R. Greig diary, 14 March 1934, RHO Mss.Afr.s.2319/43.