

## The development of recordkeeping systems in the British Empire and Commonwealth, 1870s–1960s<sup>1</sup>

Alistair Tough\* and Paul Lihoma

**Alistair Tough** is a Senior Research Fellow in the Humanities Advanced Technology and Information Institute at the University of Glasgow, United Kingdom.

**Paul Lihoma** is Director of the National Archives of Malawi and has recently completed a PhD at the University of Glasgow, United Kingdom.

*This essay demonstrates that initiatives in the imperial periphery, not least in Western Australia, played a significant role in the development of recordkeeping systems in the British Empire and Commonwealth. Local circumstances, including the adequacy of local revenues and the availability of skilled staff, played their part in shaping the systems. Nonetheless, there are overarching patterns. The need to maintain security provided a potent driver for the creation of confidential registries. The need to carry out basic functions influenced the design of recordkeeping systems far more than any shared 'imperial imaginary'. The diverging work patterns of colonial capitals and of district administrations tended to produce distinct recordkeeping systems. The development of integrated registry systems may have played a part in the development of the Secretariat as an institution of colonial government.*

**Keywords:** registry; secretariat; classification; security; filing; empire

### Introduction

This essay is concerned with official recordkeeping systems in the British Empire and Commonwealth, excluding the Indian Empire, which is a subject in itself. We assert that there was considerable scope for initiative in the imperial periphery, both in the colonial capitals and at more local levels of government. Given this scope for local initiative, this essay cannot provide a definitive account. We hope that what follows is interesting, precisely because it points to many variables and variations.

### Recordkeeping in the imperial periphery

There are a range of themes that need to be addressed, in relation to recordkeeping in the overseas territories of the British Empire and Commonwealth. These themes include the following:

- a shift from handling individual papers as discrete units towards the aggregation of papers through files,
- the development of confidential registries, staffed by trusted personnel,

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\*Corresponding author. Email: [Alistair.Tough@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:Alistair.Tough@glasgow.ac.uk)

- the development of intellectual constructs in the form of classification and indexing schemes,
- a divergence between the needs of the colonial capital and the district administrations,
- the development of 'The Secretariat' as a characteristic institution of British colonial rule, and
- the belated interest taken by the British Government in colonial recordkeeping after 1945.

Tim Lovering has written, in his study of recordkeeping in Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland, that:

Recordkeeping in twentieth century colonial states has been ... regarded as a result of a monolithic process of migration of metropolitan practices. ... This comparative study ... reveals ... an absence of centralised advice, and a consequent dependence upon individual innovation.<sup>2</sup>

Our study confirms the importance of innovation in Britain's overseas territories. Before moving on to address our main themes, however, it is necessary to say something about metropolitan practices and controls and to provide some historical background to colonial administration, so that what follows may be intelligible to the general reader.

### **Imperial control over recordkeeping systems**

The Dutch empire provides a prime example of centralised control over recordkeeping systems. From the very beginning – the Charter of 1602 granted to the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC or Dutch East India Co) – recordkeeping was recognised as important. The standard contract of employment for staff introduced in 1616 made stipulations about recordkeeping and confidentiality. And from 1643, the content of the main record series (daily registers) was prescribed in detail.<sup>3</sup> Thus, a Dutch way of doing things was established. The maintenance of a daily register was an absolute necessity of deep sea navigation. Without such a record, accurate navigation was not possible. The registers (daghregister) served a secondary purpose, too, as sources of hydrographical information. Officials in the VOC offices in Amsterdam compiled guidance for captains, navigators and others who were undertaking long voyages to Africa, India and the East Indies from the daily registers of voyages previously undertaken. Delmas states: '... what was really at stake was not so much on the shelves of the Dutch libraries as on the oceans throughout the world'.<sup>4</sup> This statement emphasises that the recordkeeping had a basis in concrete reality, rather than just in the realms of the imaginary. To say this is not to deny that '... the process of creation and archiving of records affect their continuing use'.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, in this journal, Eric Ketelaar has demonstrated that the VOC's records, although based in concrete experience, were and are mutable and part of transformative processes.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, it is worth making the statement that the records with which we are concerned were not simply made up: they have a relationship to transactions, however complex and contingent they may be. The VOC was aware that hydrographical information in their possession gave them competitive advantage. So they were secretive in their recordkeeping practices and regarded central control as necessary. It is possible that the East India Company based in London was just as secretive as their Dutch counterpart, but we have no way of knowing, as nothing has been published on this topic. At any rate, we may confidently say that

recordkeeping in much of the British Empire and Commonwealth was open to local initiative.

Early British guidance to the governors of overseas territories was primarily concerned with the communications and information reaching the metropolitan centre. In 1837, the Colonial Department issued rules and regulations to codify guidance on these matters.<sup>7</sup> These referred to an annual 'blue book' to be compiled by the Colonial Secretary in each overseas possession and to be submitted by the Governor once completed:

The annual 'Blue Book' is a document containing specific accounts of the Civil Establishments; of the Colonial Revenue and Expenditure; and of various statistical returns ...<sup>8</sup>

In addition, the make-up and content of communications sent by governors was to follow predetermined patterns. Thus:

Each dispatch must be docketed. The docket to specify the date and place at which the dispatch was written; the name of the writer and of the Secretary of State to whom it is addressed, the subject of the dispatch, and the number of its enclosures.<sup>9</sup>

Dispatches were to deal with only one subject and were to be sequentially numbered by the sender. There is little in the 1837 regulations that impacts on the recordkeeping practices to be adopted internally within colonial governments beyond the specification of certain outputs, such as the annual accounts, which imply a need to keep records sufficient to generate the reports.

Although the Foreign Office was independent of the British Home Civil Service, nonetheless, it issued directions similar to those of the Colonial Department and Colonial Office to protectorates, where it was the department of state that was responsible for oversight. This situation arose because the Foreign Office was the British government's lead agency in the long-running campaign against slavery. For much of the nineteenth century, the abolition of slavery, and especially the suppression of the East African slave trade, was a core element of British foreign policy and was pursued even where it conflicted with Britain's commercial interests.<sup>10</sup> At different times between 1885 and 1922, the protectorates lying within the Foreign Office's ambit included the East Africa Protectorate, Egypt, Northern Nigeria, Nyasaland, the Oil Rivers and Niger Coast Protectorate, Somaliland, the Sudan, Uganda and Zanzibar. The Foreign Office instructions to Sir Harry Johnston – first Commissioner and Consul-General of British Central Africa, later Nyasaland – are fairly typical: 'to report to the Secretary of State in all matters of interest; ... and furnish accounts at regular interval, of receipts and expenditure'.<sup>11</sup>

### **Recordkeeping in the metropolis**

In the 1837 regulations, we can see key characteristics of recordkeeping practices in the metropolitan centre reflected. In essence, these are summarised in the phrase 'one letter, one subject, one reference'. A process of minute writing would take place in relation to virtually all incoming communications. Normally, a junior administrative officer would have the task of reading the item and suggesting a course of action. More senior officers would then consider the matter and, in due course, recommendations would be made to the Secretary of State, who would decide what should be done. The dockets referred to in

the 1837 regulations may be regarded as an indispensable part of the British Home Civil Service's standard operating procedures. When operated competently, this system was capable of delivering the consistency and respect for precedent desired in classic bureaucratic systems and implicit in the Northcote–Trevelyan report.<sup>12</sup> It also delivered a quality of fiduciary – of separation between the recordkeepers and those making decisions on the basis of the records.<sup>13</sup> However, as Barbara Craig and Michael Moss have observed, it was an expensive system, not least because it required the employment of a large number of reasonably well-educated and intelligent people in clerical roles. The nineteenth-century novelist Anthony Trollope lampooned the work of these clerks with a ditty:

My heart's at my office, my heart is always there –  
 My heart's at my office, docketing with care;  
 Docketing the papers, and copying all day,  
 My heart's at my office, though I be far away.<sup>14</sup>

The Colonial Office in London operated on the basis of 'one letter, one subject, one reference' from the eighteenth century until the 1920s.<sup>15</sup> As Secretary of State for the Colonies, Winston Churchill sought reform in the recordkeeping practices of the Office. Churchill had an active interest in recordkeeping, and he shared this with the Prime Minister, David Lloyd George. Lloyd George had made his reputation in peacetime by introducing Old Age Pensions and setting up Labour Exchanges and in wartime by reorganising the Ministry of Munitions at a critical juncture. Effective recordkeeping systems had been an essential component of success in all of these initiatives.<sup>16</sup> Churchill urged for the creation of a single centralised registry for the Colonial Office, in place of the large number of sub-registries.<sup>17</sup> There appears to have been resistance to change among civil servants. The mechanisms of the Whitley Council system – recently inaugurated by Mr Speaker Whitley, in the hope of promoting cooperative working in industry, but actually more readily adopted by the Civil Service – were given responsibility for recordkeeping.<sup>18</sup> In the Whitley Council for the Colonial Office, the Staff Side (clerical officers) met with the Official Side (administrative-class civil servants of the First Division). Thus, the concept of fiduciary was mirrored faithfully. Reference to the Whitley Council was an effective technique for delaying decision-making. An exception to the overall pattern of bureaucratic resistance was the Dominions Department within the Colonial Office. In the Dominions Department, there was a decisive shift from a 'one letter, one subject, one reference' form of recordkeeping to a 'one file, one subject, one reference' system. Change within the Colonial Office was supported by a Treasury expert.<sup>19</sup> By adopting subject filing – in other words, dealing with records in aggregate, rather than as discrete units – the Dominions Department created an opportunity to achieve economy. The staff of the Dominions Department also put in place one of the essential prerequisites for the establishment in 1925 of a separate department of state, the Dominions Office, by creating a recordkeeping system that was identifiably distinct from that of the rest of the Colonial Office.

### **The history and structure of British colonial administration**

For those who are not familiar with British colonial administration, some introductory notes may be helpful. What follows is based on the British Central Africa Protectorate, later known as Nyasaland and now called Malawi. Many of the features identified below would equally apply to other countries.<sup>20</sup>

In the colonial capital, much of government was housed in the Secretariat building. Here the heads of many functional divisions, such as agriculture, audit, forestry, medical services and treasury, worked in adjacent offices. They shared an integrated recordkeeping system in the form of two registries: one open and the other confidential. The registry used pre-action workflow: incoming communications were logged by registry staff and routed to executive officers by the head of registry, who was guided by the Chief Secretary, when necessary.<sup>21</sup> The senior technical specialists (Director of Agriculture, Director of Forestry, and so on) were led by the Chief Secretary, who was the head of the Civil Service. There was an Executive Council, which was made up of the Chief Secretary and some of the senior technical specialists. The Executive Council was chaired by the Governor and was charged with advising him. The Governor was the monarch's representative and combined ceremonial duties with many of the functions of an executive president. There was also a Legislative Council. This was responsible for legislation, and its membership consisted of official members – in essence, the members of the Executive Council – and unofficial members, which were appointed by the Governor. Although this administrative structure may sound sophisticated, it was of a modest size, in terms of the number of people involved.

These structures changed dramatically over time. The biggest single change came with the advent of elected unofficial members of the Legislative Council, particularly when indigenous members began to be elected. Sir Arthur Grimble – at one time, Resident Commissioner of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands, now Kiribati and Tuvalu – observed:

As early as 1936, long forward strides in the delegation of power to colonial peoples began to be taken ... the official blocs that had traditionally dominated ... local legislatures began to be cut ... and superseded by large majorities of non-officials. Wherever that has been achieved ... the Governor ... no longer operates as a celestial autocrat ... Apart from the exercise of his strictly bridled reserve powers ... the enormous majority of his business is confined to administering the government within the limits of local laws ... he now owes a two-fold loyalty. On the one side he is still the servant of the United Kingdom which appointed him; on the other, he is the servant of the community ...<sup>22</sup>

In Cyprus, developments of this kind had begun before World War I.<sup>23</sup> In the colonies of settlement – Australia, Canada, Newfoundland, New Zealand and South Africa – the transition to representative government had been largely completed by 1910, although, in some instances, a residual responsibility for indigenous peoples was nominally retained in the United Kingdom. A similar 'home rule' scheme for Ireland was passed through the Westminster Parliament in 1914, but World War I began before this could be implemented, and the Easter Uprising of 1916 wrecked the scheme. From a metropolitan perspective, the transition to representative government in the colonies of settlement might be regarded as having been completed by 1925 with the creation of a separate Dominions Office, hived off from the Colonial Office. So from 1925, the colonies of settlement were free to do as they pleased, in relation to recordkeeping systems. Visiting Ottawa in the 1920s, Sir Ralph Furse learnt that the Prime Minister of Canada did a great deal of his own filing. Furse commented: '... few things struck me more in Canada, and five years later in Australia and New Zealand, than the inadequacy ... of the Civil Services of the Dominions'.<sup>24</sup>

It would be a mistake to focus on the colonial capital to the exclusion of district administration. If the central administration was on a modest scale, the district

administration was tiny.<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, to the vast majority of the population, government was represented by the District Commissioners (also known as Residents, Administrative Officers and District Officers at different times) and their local collaborators.<sup>26</sup> For the sake of completeness, it should be mentioned that, in most territories, between the District Commissioners and the Secretariat stood an intermediate tier of government led by Provincial Commissioners, who communicated ideas from the District Commissioners to the Secretariat, while endeavouring to ensure that the District Commissioners carried into practice the policies that were enunciated at the centre.

There was a distinction between the methods of recruitment to the Colonial Administrative Service (CAS) and to the Indian Civil Service (ICS), which would appear to have a direct bearing on recordkeeping. British recruits to the ICS were appointed on the basis of patronage only until 1853. After 1857, they were appointed solely on the basis of a competitive examination. Critics of appointment by examination argued that the system produced administrators who were excessively focused on reports and recordkeeping and who scarcely possessed the riding skills necessary to travel around their districts or the physique, inter-personal skills and physical courage required by their position.<sup>27</sup> This criticism has relevance when we consider that the CAS was appointed on the basis of patronage. Sir Ralph Furse justified this, by arguing that a system that did not depend on examination-enabled appointments to be made on the basis of '... character, personality, physique and habits'.<sup>28</sup> In other words, the CAS, which provided both District Commissioners and executive officers for the Secretariat, was not made up of people who were, by their nature, bureaucrats. As Alistair Tough has written elsewhere, 'The insistence on meticulous recordkeeping, including detailed quarterly and annual reports, was widely resented by district and provincial officials'.<sup>29</sup>

### **The shift towards the aggregation of papers through filing systems**

A key figure in the shift from handling individual papers as discrete units towards the aggregation of papers through files is Sir Frederick Napier Broome (1842–96).<sup>30</sup> Broome was Colonial Secretary in Natal from 1875 until 1878, Governor of Mauritius from 1878 until 1883 and of Western Australia from 1883, until he moved to Trinidad. In 1892, Broome issued regulations for official correspondence and business as the Governor of Trinidad.<sup>31</sup> Copies of these regulations were circulated to governors of other colonies, at the same time as Broome submitted them to the Colonial Office, seeking their approval. His decision to circulate before seeking permission may have been shrewd, as the Colonial Office declined to give their approval. The Colonial Office minutes on Broome's dispatch state: 'The Governor is fully aware of the value of self-advertisement' and is '... terribly prolix'.<sup>32</sup> These comments suggest that Colonial Office officials were irked by local initiative. However, they did nothing effective to prohibit local practice from diverging from that of the Home Civil Service. Despite the withholding of official sanction, Broome's regulations seem to have been influential. Broome provides an interesting account of the background to the 1892 Trinidad regulations.

Shortly after I entered the Colonial Service in 1875, as Colonial Secretary of Natal ... I acted as Chairman of a Committee on the organisation of the different public departments. The other members of the Committee were Major-General Sir George (then Colonel) Colley, afterwards killed at Majuba Hill, and Lieut.-General (then Major) Brackenbury ... Colonel Colley suggested the introduction of the 'Jacket System.' The regulations I then



prepared were found very useful ... In Mauritius ... I introduced an adapted, but very much the same [regulations] ... by the help of them, I got through my daily routine work ... in about three hours, whereas it had been a saying of [my predecessor] ... that the ordinary work of the Governor of Mauritius ... occupied eight hours a day. When I went to Western Australia, in 1883, I introduced ... these same regulations ...<sup>33</sup>

The regulations required heads of department to use the 'jacket' system when communicating with the Colonial Secretary.<sup>34</sup> Originally, this was a double foolscap sheet of paper, inside which correspondence was placed on the right side, minutes on the front cover and, when necessary, attached inside the front cover on the left.<sup>35</sup> It is explicit that several items of correspondence and reports might be placed in a single jacket and that it should be as complete as possible, so as to enable good decisions to be made.<sup>36</sup> The essence of a filing system is clearly present here, and, in due course, stout card folders replaced the paper jackets, which became easily torn when they were well-filled and heavily used.

Under Broome's 1892 regulations, jackets could be used by heads of department to communicate with subordinates when it was considered expedient.<sup>37</sup> Those sent to the Colonial Secretary's office would be returned to the originating department with a minute indicating the governor's decision.<sup>38</sup> Once the necessary action had been taken, the jacket (and its contents) was to be returned to the Colonial Secretary's office.<sup>39</sup>

Although filing is referred to as only taking place once all business is completed,<sup>40</sup> this system looks like a refined variant of pre-action workflow, complete with the necessary registries and with the significant innovation of proto-filing. In reality, Broome's system probably represented an interim stage on the road towards fully articulated filing systems. A clue to this may be found in the reference to the use of jackets by heads of department, so as to communicate with subordinates. Herein lies the confusion between the jacket as a file cover and the jacket as a minute paper: this was to persist for many years to come.

Broome's explanatory note on the Trinidad regulations emphasises the considerable advantages of his system in terms of efficiency, especially saving time for the Governor, when undertaking routine business. If implemented properly, the substitution of a filing system for one in which individual documents were handled as discrete units should have also delivered substantial economies in staff costs.

A careful comparison of the regulations for the conduct of official business and correspondence issued in Western Australia in 1883 shows that the Trinidad version of 1892 is based upon them.<sup>41</sup> In terms of underlying design principles, the Trinidad regulations that Broome shared with the entire colonial service are indistinguishable. The text regarding the object of the jacket system and the handling of urgent and confidential communications is identical. Even small details, such as the colour of ink to be used in the Colonial Secretary's office for writing reference numbers, are the same. A superficial appearance of difference arises, because the sequence in which the paragraphs were presented was reordered and the words Perth and Fremantle were replaced with Port-of-Spain.

By 1914, there is evidence that a fully articulated filing system had been adopted in Zanzibar: the classification and filing system in use was printed.<sup>42</sup> The introduction states:

Each subject is allotted one file and one number. Inward and outward letters belonging to a particular file bear the number of that file, the date being the distinguishing feature.

A separate card index is used ...

To keep track of correspondence a daily register is kept of all incoming and outgoing communications and a main register of the files ...<sup>43</sup>

These are the unmistakable hallmarks of a fully-fledged, registry-based filing system. Unfortunately, the published classification provides no information regarding the context of its production or its relation to external influences. Zanzibar is known to have had links to the Bombay Presidency in India, as well as with the British colonies in East Africa, so there are a number of possibilities.<sup>44</sup>

The unevenness of development is illustrated by the regulations for the conduct of official correspondence, which were adopted in Nyasaland in 1922.<sup>45</sup> As Lovering has observed, the jacket system was in use, but this did not constitute a filing system, as it was documents, rather than files, that were registered.<sup>46</sup> This point may be underscored by quoting one paragraph from the regulations:

... [each] letter will then be placed in a Minute Paper, in the form attached ... should the letter received bear directly on previous correspondence, the previous Minute Paper must be obtained and linked up, the number of the new Minute Paper being entered on the previous Paper ...<sup>47</sup>

These regulations were incorporated into the Nyasaland Protectorate General Orders and remained in force, with some amendments, until after 1945.<sup>48</sup> However, the evidence of Barbara Carr (quoted below) suggests that some form of subject filing system was in use by 1940.<sup>49</sup> Zohar Aloufi has demonstrated that the British mandate administration in Palestine adopted the same outmoded 'one letter, one subject, one reference' system as Nyasaland.<sup>50</sup>

Unevenness and local initiative continued to be characteristic in this field, at least until the British Government began to take a direct interest after World War II.

### **The development of confidential registries**

A confidential registry is provided for in Governor Broome's regulations. In his Western Australia regulations of 1883, it is stated that:

Communications marked 'confidential' should be kept separate, and under lock and key. They should not be entered in the general register of the office, but a confidential register should be kept by the head of the department, to whom only they should be accessible, and by whom the envelopes should be opened and the replies written.<sup>51</sup>

In Broome's Trinidad regulations of 1892, an identical text appears.<sup>52</sup> While confidential registries are not unique to colonial governments, there are some aspects of their existence that deserve attention here. In particular, these revolve around the degree of trust that could, and should, be placed in staff and the comparative cost of running separate confidential registries or integrated registries.

As a general rule, departments of the Home Civil Service in London could assume that those who were recruited to their clerical staff were capable, loyal to their country and could be relied upon to maintain confidences. Given that official records were not open to the public, only such subjects as foreign affairs, military equipment and defence planning required special precautions.<sup>53</sup> The Foreign Office, in contrast to the Home Civil Service, has long operated on the basis that foreign staff working in its embassies overseas may be spies or simply vulnerable to pressure from their own governments



and that, therefore, they must be denied access to confidential records and the areas in which they are kept.<sup>54</sup>

Colonial governments had to consider the possibility that some of their clerical staff might not be loyal to them or might be vulnerable to bribery and intimidation. In the very early days of colonial government, this challenge might be overcome, at least in part, by housing the relatively small quantity of records in the sleeping quarters of senior personnel. There is photographic evidence that Arthur Claud Hollis adopted this approach in the Secretariat of the Kenya Government in Nairobi.<sup>55</sup> In the 1930s, the Government of Palestine dealt with these challenges by setting aside certain posts for British staff only. In a dispatch to the Colonial Office, the High Commissioner for Palestine wrote of some posts:

... as being suitable only for non-Palestinian incumbents ... [and that] ... it is considered desirable that they should be excluded from the clerical cadre so that British and Palestinians shall not be ... competing for them.<sup>56</sup>

It is worth adding that, in this quotation, the term Palestinian is used to refer to both Arab and Jewish people. As is explained in detail below, the developments in Palestine had parallels elsewhere.

A detailed description of developments in Nyasaland, now Malawi, illuminates some of the issues and complexities involved in relation to confidential registries. In 1920, Governor Sir George Smith asked for a memorandum to be prepared on the working of the registry in the Secretariat. Smith had been Colonial Secretary in Mauritius between 1910 and 1912, so he would have been exposed to Broome's way of doing things, which was introduced in Mauritius in the 1880s.<sup>57</sup> It is possible that Smith had recently had a filing system set up in Government House and was looking for similar changes in the Secretariat.<sup>58</sup> In response, William J Roper – First Class Clerk in charge of the Registry – produced a long and detailed memorandum. Among other things, he stated:

There is I understand a Confidential series under the charge of the Chief Clerk about which the Registry is not supposed to have any detailed knowledge, but which is closely allied to the work of the Registry. If this is correct I beg to suggest that this series should be transferred to the Registry for safe-keeping.<sup>59</sup>

This, and Roper's other recommendations, were strongly supported by two of his colleagues. One of them, Mr Barlow, made explicit the implications of Roper's suggested reorganisation by saying that, in future, there should be a single integrated registry staffed by four European clerks and 'a good native typist ...', supported by indigenous messengers.<sup>60</sup> One implication was that as the functions of government increased, the expense of maintaining the registry – especially if it was to be staffed primarily by Europeans – would also grow. Another implication was that some indigenous staff would have access to confidential records, albeit only when typing them. On 17 April 1920, the Governor visited the registry and made careful notes on what he was shown. He may have been inclined to take Roper's advice particularly seriously, because the latter had served in the Home Civil Service and held a commission in the army.<sup>61</sup>

By this stage, it is likely that Sir Hector Duff – Chief Secretary to the Nyasaland Government and Governor Smith's right-hand man – was becoming anxious, lest the future of the confidential registry (which operated under his control) should be jeopardised. Duff had a particular reason to be concerned. In 1915, information about

the Government's intention to deport John Chilembwe had been leaked, thereby giving Chilembwe the opportunity to start an armed uprising before he was arrested.<sup>62</sup> This episode had a near-traumatic impact on Duff.<sup>63</sup>

No further action was taken in relation to the Secretariat registry, until Robert Rankine replaced Duff as Chief Secretary on 31 October 1920. Rankine, who had been transferred from Fiji, then asked the Government of Fiji for full details of the system used there.<sup>64</sup> These took three months to arrive by sea, being received on 7 March 1921. Three days later, Rankine and Roper met to discuss draft regulations for the conduct of official correspondence. We do not know what was said at that meeting. However, we do know that the draft regulations contained the following:

Separate registers for Secret and Confidential and ordinary correspondence, respectively, must be kept, and Secret and Confidential correspondence must be kept and filed separately ...<sup>65</sup>

Then followed a further period of inaction, until Governor Sir George Smith departed on leave in early October 1921.<sup>66</sup> On 17 October 1921, Rankine, as Acting Governor, prompted the Acting Chief Secretary to bring forward the draft regulations for the conduct of official correspondence, previously produced by Roper and himself. Rankine then used his temporary authority as Acting Governor to promulgate these.<sup>67</sup>

A consequence of Duff and Rankine's successful defence of the confidential registry was that, thereafter, two separate registries developed and co-existed in the Secretariat. The confidential registry was staffed by Europeans, who were locally recruited. One of them was Norman Carr, later renowned as a game warden, originator of community based conservation and walking safaris.<sup>68</sup> Twenty years later, the staff of the confidential registry in Nyasaland had changed: where three men of British origin had been employed prior to World War II, by 1960, four women, also of British origin, were employed.<sup>69</sup> The size and complexity of the confidential registry had increased and serious operational problems had emerged, apparently because all of the clerks were attempting to deal with all areas of business – a situation that arose primarily because there was no clear functional analysis or business classification scheme.

Contrasting evidence is available in relation to Special Branch registries in the Far East. Special Branch was the part of the Colonial Police Service that was responsible for monitoring possible illegal political activity and terrorism. In the early stages of the Malayan Emergency in the late 1940s, it would appear that there was hardly any recordkeeping system for the Special Branch in Singapore or Kuala Lumpur. The advice given on the creation of a registry, with large nominal indexes at its heart, included an emphatic statement that it was essential to recruit from both the Indian and Chinese ethnic communities.<sup>70</sup>

The final years of decolonisation posed particularly difficult questions in relation to confidential registries and the security classification of records. This was an especially thorny issue in Kenya, where unofficial ministers (African politicians) with close links to Mau Mau served during a period of internal self-government, prior to full independence. There was grave anxiety that reprisals would be taken against those who had acted as clandestine supporters of the British authorities if their identities became known to Mau Mau sympathisers. A four-tier scheme of security classification was adopted: top secret, secret, confidential and restricted.<sup>71</sup> This was further elaborated by the addition of three further markings: 'Watch' – for material relating directly to Mau Mau and other sensitive matters that must not be shown to African police personnel;<sup>72</sup> 'Delicate source' – for

some intelligence reports;<sup>73</sup> and ‘Guard’ – for material that must not be shown to citizens of the United States of America.<sup>74</sup> It was explicitly recognised that the implementation of this depended upon the availability of trustworthy British clerical staff: ‘The point of this is that Misses White and Waddington, not ourselves, are responsible for running 2 parallel series ...’<sup>75</sup> Barbara Carr made a critical assessment of those who carried out this work and the impact that it had upon them. Writing about staff undertaking confidential records work in the Secretariat in Lusaka in the 1950s, she said:

The girls here were real career girls and were on the permanent and pensionable staff with all the perquisites of that elevated state. They were so used to dealing with people’s lives on paper that they seemed to have lost contact with the world of reality. They were pillars of discretion and models of secrecy. They ... were embedded in their loyalty to such a degree that they seemed to have lost the power of ordinary speech, as if they were afraid that they might say something they shouldn’t.<sup>76</sup>

Next door to Kenya in Uganda, the attempt to apply similar security precautions may have had a paradoxical effect. The transition to internal self-government with unofficial ministers had commenced peacefully in Uganda in 1955. As a part of this transition, African politicians in office had access to confidential records. In 1961, this practice was officially reversed, and access was supposed to be withdrawn, with records being transferred to Government House from ministries where an unofficial minister held office.<sup>77</sup> How, and to what extent, this reversal of policy was implemented is unclear.

At the end of colonial rule, often while internal home rule was already in place and African politicians were serving as cabinet ministers, there was a substantial purge of confidential records. Many records of the police Special Branch were destroyed, and some files which were deemed to be sensitive were moved to the UK. Recently, a legal action brought by former Mau Mau detainees has given the migrated records a remarkably high profile, albeit tinged with controversy.<sup>78</sup> The migrated records are currently being transferred to the National Archives of the UK and much of the preceding paragraphs are based on them.

### **The development of classification and indexing schemes**

There is only limited evidence available on the topic of intellectual – as opposed to security – classification in the era before Home Civil Service Organisation and Methods (O and M) experts began to homogenise practice from about 1945 onwards. The Zanzibar classification scheme of 1914 provides some interesting insights. Superficially, this has the appearance of having been influenced by the Dewey Decimal System of classification for libraries. For instance, the three main sections are internal economy, external relations and trade and commerce. A careful reading, however, reveals that function and department are the key factors in the design of the scheme. The ‘internal economy’ section includes a subsection titled ‘Administration General’, which, in turn, includes significant segments devoted to Crown Agents (District Commissioners) and Public Officers (the human resource management of British personnel). The ‘internal economy’ section also includes headings for the following departments: administrator general (of judiciary), agriculture, attorney general, Crown property, education, electricity, medical, police, port service, post office, prisons, public health, public works, shipping, stables and transport and treasury. Similarly, the external relations section incorporates a consular subsection, with one file heading for each country represented by a consul in Zanzibar, from Austria–Hungary to the US.

A similar pattern is revealed by Governor Sir George Smith's notes on the registry in Nyasaland in 1920. He inspected the subject index in the absence of a classification scheme and file plan. In the index, he found headings for departments such as agriculture, police, prisons, medical, postal and so forth. He details subheadings for the medical department – staff, hospitals, drugs, epidemics, vaccination, sanitary and public health, research and lunatic asylum. Of these subheadings used in Nyasaland, only one – staff – is not present in the Zanzibar file plan (presumably because it is subsumed in the public officers section).

Kenneth Bradley provides evidence from a different perspective, which is also of some interest. Bradley was a District Officer in Northern Rhodesia and, as such, was liable to be pressed into service as an executive officer in the Secretariat in the colonial capital from time to time. Following the conventions of the 'minuting up' procedure, executive officers received files, read the most recent items and then offered advice to the heads of technical services: these were clustered in the Secretariat. Thus, the Director of Medical Services had no specialist executive officers with domain-specific knowledge of health services. Nor did the Director of Education have support staff versed in educational policy issues. Instead, all the directors received advice from a rotating body of District Commissioners acting as temporary executive officers; in fact, many of the latter would have been happier if left in remote outstations in the bush. When Bradley went to Livingstone in the 1920s, he was responsible for about a thousand files in a sub-registry dealing with agriculture, education, police and a wide range of miscellaneous matters. The sub-registry was staffed by two European women and one African clerk. Bradley described the sub-registry thus:

Susan looked after the files and put them up to me in impeccable order. I put them up in my turn to the next level in our little pyramid of power, sometimes with comments and suggestions ... and after a few days down they would come again with instructions to write letters, draft despatches to the Colonial Office, or to find that bugbear of bureaucracy a 'precedent'. Edith did the shorthand and typing.<sup>79</sup>

Given the staffing complement described, this was almost certainly a subsection of the confidential registry: Bradley offers no account of what the unnamed African clerk did. Bradley's comments serve to underline the lack of technical knowledge available, in relation to the design of recordkeeping systems at the intermediate level of colonial service bureaucracy. Interestingly, Aloufi has demonstrated that the system of minuting was adopted by municipalities in Palestine, as well as by the Mandate administration.<sup>80</sup>

In the materials available to us, it is difficult to discern the influence of what some scholars have called the 'imaginary': the influence of Buchan, Kipling, Rider Haggard and many other writers of colonial and imperial fiction. Stoler states that:

Both Gonzalez Echevarria and Richard Thomas follow Foucault in treating the imperial archive as 'the fantastic representation of an epistemological master pattern'. For Thomas that archive is material and figurative, a metaphor of an unfulfilled but shared British imperial imagination.<sup>81</sup>

Barbara Carr's use of quotations from Kipling as chapter headings in her book, *Not For Me the Wilds*, and the appearance of 'A man among men' on the gravestone of Jack Archer – former Superintendent of Prisons in Nyasaland – may be regarded as confirming that the shared British imperial imagination had an impact in remote places.<sup>82</sup> However, we could find no evidence that it influenced the filing plans and indexing schemes of imperial recordkeepers.

### **Divergence between the needs of the colonial capital and the district administrations**

Recordkeeping at the colonial district administration level developed over time with the development of colonialism. For administrative purposes, colonies were divided into administrative districts. British District Commissioners headed the district administrations and performed multiple functions.

Appreciating that a British officer single-handedly administered each district during the early colonial period<sup>83</sup> gives us an idea of what recordkeeping might have encompassed during that time. The following account from a British District Officer in Northern Rhodesia indicates the nature of the early colonial district administrators' functions:

But the work here is essentially one of a Jack-of-all-trades, and not half of it is done in the office. Among other diversities, I have vaccinated some hundreds in a week. I drill the police, build bridges, and make roads, but the general work is the administration of the district, tax collecting, transport, accounts, and generally gathering information about the district, hearing of native cases among others.<sup>84</sup>

The nature of the recordkeeping that emerged during the formative years of the colonial administration reflected the nature of work which the district officers performed. The needs of district administration compelled the administrators to carry out more than half of their work in the field, where they interacted orally with the local people. This would appear to have been true, not only in African territories, but even in Cyprus.<sup>85</sup> Harvey, a former District Commissioner in Nyasaland, tells us that as late as the 1950s, 'office administration was somewhat primitive and the spoken word probably counted for more at that time'.<sup>86</sup> Given the prevailing work environment in the district administrations, 'British officers [that is, district officers] became so immersed in conducting official business by oral means ... [that some officers] ... either refused to keep any records or kept only the bare minimum'.<sup>87</sup> In the office, the District Officers were assisted by native clerks and messengers, who are said to have been devoted, honest and tolerant.<sup>88</sup> District Officers' reliance on their native clerks' good memories for 'turning up something from many months, or even years, earlier'<sup>89</sup> and on the district messengers as helpful 'guides, philosophers and friends with memories which were worth of books and files'<sup>90</sup> would seem to suggest that elaborate filing systems in the early district offices were uncommon. Given that the clerks and messengers came from an oral culture and were accustomed to remembering facts rather than writing anything down, this should come as no surprise.

These practices sharply differed from those at the colonial capital, whose needs demanded that written documents were generated and maintained, which explains the adoption of efficient recordkeeping systems right from the beginning of the colonial administration. For instance, as the highest representative of the Crown in the colonial periphery, the Governor's primary responsibility was to answer to the Colonial Secretary in London on all matters concerned with the colonial administration.<sup>91</sup> For this reason, the colonial capital maintained correspondence in the form of dispatches with the metropolitan authorities. As the central government office, the Secretariat oversaw a myriad of functions, such as external relations and colonial administration, besides many other subject matters, all of which resulted in the generation of formal records, which required proper maintenance. This was also true for other central government specialised departments, which were located at the colonial capital.

Although the circumstances in the district administrations forced the officers to conduct most of their official business orally, the District Officers were required to maintain district books or political notebooks, in which they were required to record tribal histories, notes on population and vital statistics, succession and inheritance, native beliefs and customs, health and sanitation, economics, labour, natural history and metrology.<sup>92</sup> Additionally, other records, such as reports, judicial files, correspondence files and tax returns were maintained. Until the early 1920s, no specific guidance on district administration recordkeeping appears to have been in place for the District Officers to follow when dealing with their records. On the basis of the Colonial Office's observation in 1939 that district notebooks in the Belgian Congo were 'more systematically maintained than many of the British district note-books',<sup>93</sup> it would appear that Broome's 1892 regulations did not have the same effect on district administration recordkeeping as they did on the Secretariat's.

As a result of this, district administration recordkeeping depended on the competence and interest in recordkeeping of individual officers who were in charge at a specific time and those who succeeded them.<sup>94</sup> Extreme examples of a District Officer who 'never bothered to file anything, preferring instead to answer important letters by writing on the back ... and throwing everything else away',<sup>95</sup> and another District Officer at Thyolo *boma* in Nyasaland, who cleared all the files by burning them when he was posted to another district office,<sup>96</sup> are pointers to either a lack of record-related regulations for district administrations or officers' disregard for those regulations. Consequently, recordkeeping practices varied from one district office to another, even within the same colony. For instance, 'the Residents, Administrative Officers and District Commissioners in charge at Dowa created and used a relatively sophisticated record keeping system', while 'Residents, Administrative Officers and District Commissioners in other districts were not all equally enthusiastic about record keeping',<sup>97</sup> in Nyasaland. In the same Protectorate, the District Commissioner (DC) for Mzimba compiled notes on filing and office routine and, from time to time, updated and circulated them to his staff and ensured that all the staff adhered to the notes in their operations. When news of the efficient recordkeeping system at this district spread in the Protectorate, some other DCs consulted the Mzimba DC on how to improve filing systems in their respective districts.<sup>98</sup>

Citing Nyasaland as a case study, we are able to see the development of recordkeeping in the colonial district administration. Up to 1922, district offices lacked a uniform system for filing correspondence. When the Secretariat released the regulations for the conduct of official correspondence in 1922, all government establishments, including the district offices, were required to adopt the Minute Paper filing system. However, the DC for Chintheche found the new filing system difficult to use and sought permission from the Provincial Commissioner (which was granted) to be allowed to apply the Minute Paper system 'only to letters from the Secretariat, Provincial Commissioner and Treasurer and to any letters from Departments which [appeared] to warrant the use of Minute Paper',<sup>99</sup> but to maintain the practice of settling 'a very large proportion of District correspondence' by one letter and a reply. The DC for Mzimba wrote to the Chief Secretary to find out if the new filing system was also to be adopted by District Residents, expressing the view that the regulations applied 'to Departments only and not meant to apply to outstations in charge of Residents',<sup>100</sup> to which the Chief Secretary responded by emphasising that the regulations applied to the districts as well. A year after the regulations had been issued, the District Resident for Kasungu informed the Provincial Commissioner (PC) that he had not adopted the filing



system which the regulations had recommended, but had continued with what he described as the 'pilot file' system, arguing that the Minute Paper system was not appropriate to his office.<sup>101</sup> In response, the PC emphasised that the Chief Secretary's instructions were quite definite – that all stations were required to adopt the Minute Paper system – and since the Kasungu District Resident could not be exempted, he was advised to institute the new system from 1 January 1923.<sup>102</sup>

By 1932, the filing system in the district offices based on the 1922 regulations had proved problematic, basically, 'thoroughly bad and in need of overhauling'.<sup>103</sup> The DCs from the Northern Province expressed their collective frustrations with the system. The Provincial Commissioner concurred with the DCs, by observing that there was 'too great a variety in different systems in use with the result that it [was] often extremely difficult for an in-coming officer or filing Clerk to follow the system used by his predecessor'.<sup>104</sup> These problems led the PC to issue a new standardised filing system and index, which were developed with the assistance of Captain Bingham, DC of West Nyasa District. All DCs were requested to adopt the new system with effect from 1 January 1934.<sup>105</sup> The standardised system required that DCs submitted lists to their Provincial Commissioners, detailing all the subjects which they dealt with. In turn, the PCs prepared lists of all subjects in general use in their provinces and assigned a number to each subject, which would be retained indefinitely.<sup>106</sup> This meant that the subject number was the same in every district, and, instead of numbers, the subheadings were represented by letters.

Although by around 1937 the DCs had reported continuing difficulties with their filing systems, no serious attempt was made to remedy the situation until 1958. Then a review of the Provincial and District Administration carried out by the Organisation and Methods Department recommended the institution of new recordkeeping practices in district administrations throughout the country.<sup>107</sup>

### **The development of 'The Secretariat' as a characteristic institution of British colonial rule**

In Nicosia and Lusaka, there are buildings that bear striking resemblances to each other. They are both two storeys high with long central corridors running through each storey. They both have red pan-tiled roofs. And each possesses (or used to possess) a pair of imposing carved-stone imperial lions on either side of the main entrance. These buildings housed the Secretariat, in Cyprus and Northern Rhodesia (Zambia), respectively. Similar structures can be found in former colonial capitals around the world. Not all Secretariat buildings were as imposing, especially in their earliest iteration. The original Secretariat in Livingstone, predecessor to the grand building in Lusaka, was described by one of its occupants as '... a ramshackle row of tin-roofed wooden offices at the back of Government House ...'.<sup>108</sup> For a time, part of the Secretariat in Nairobi, Kenya, was housed in tents.<sup>109</sup> Nonetheless, all Secretariats functioned in a similar way.

These physical structures, and the organisational principles that they embodied, became so much a part of colonial administration that it is possible for us to state, as we have done above:

In the colonial capital, much of government was housed in the Secretariat building. Here the heads of many functional divisions, such as agriculture, audit, forestry, medical services and treasury, worked in adjacent offices.

However, this had not always been the case. It had once been normal for departments to have separate offices. Governor Broome's 1892 Trinidad regulations make this explicit:

In the office of each department there shall be kept a register of documents received.<sup>110</sup> ... and ... each department should transact its own business and conduct its own correspondence; and it is by no means desired to centralise correspondence in the Colonial Secretary's office ...<sup>111</sup>

Despite Broome's emphatic assertion to the contrary, by the end of the Edwardian era, it had become the norm to centralise a large portion of official correspondence in the Colonial Secretary's office (or Chief Secretary's office in protectorates). An examination of the distribution of department heads in the Northern Rhodesia government in the 1920s and 1930s is informative. Those that were based in the Secretariat and shared integrated recordkeeping systems included: agriculture, audit, customs, European education, government printer, health, income tax, posts and telegraphs, public works, stores and transport and veterinary, in addition to the office of the Chief Secretary, who was responsible for logistical and administrative support to the Executive and Legislative Councils.<sup>112</sup> There were separate registries in several other locations. In most instances, there is a specific reason for their separate existence. These separate registries included: Government House – for the benefit of the Governor; the police – whose main barracks remained in distant Livingstone; African education – co-located with the teacher training institution in Mazabuka, where the Director of Education was a key member of staff; and the High Court. The fiduciary separation of the judiciary from government, enshrined in the British Constitution, was a principle that many judges held dear, and the distinct High Court registry was a mechanism that enabled them to distance themselves from government and, thereby, to hold government to account.<sup>113</sup>

There is an intriguing possibility that recordkeeping systems played a significant role in the move towards integration based on Secretariat government. Broome's regulations point to a possible – if partial – explanation. They direct that jackets (files) sent to the Colonial Secretary's office would be returned to the originating department with a minute indicating the Governor's decision and that once the necessary action had been taken, the jacket was to be returned to the Colonial Secretary's office.<sup>114</sup> Even in Nyasaland, where the transition to a fully articulated filing system had not taken place, the 1922 regulations – which were in force for over two decades – stated that: 'When original papers are sent to the Secretariat [by departments outside the Secretariat], a copy should be kept ... as papers sent to the Secretariat are filed there ...'<sup>115</sup> The implication is that departmental heads who were located in the Secretariat building were at a significant advantage, because they had access to the entire integrated recordkeeping system, while those departmental heads who continued to be in separate locations had to sustain a great deal of tedious copying, in order to have oversight of their own department's activities.

An additional, and conceivably more important, factor is acknowledged by Governor Broome: 'Personal conference between heads of departments should be frequent, where possible, and may often obviate or shorten written correspondence'.<sup>116</sup> In other words, to be able to speak to key colleagues, by virtue of being co-located in the corridors of power, may well have been a major attraction of Secretariat government for the top tier of technical officers.

In the 1930s, the Royal Commission on Palestine heard trenchant criticism to the effect that the Secretariat had become overdeveloped at the expense of district administration and that an excessive enthusiasm for recordkeeping was a part of this pattern:

... this administration [is] so over-centralized and over-departmentalised. A reversion to a more primitive type of government would be more effective, better understood and less

expensive. The Secretariat has accumulated such a vast staff that every administrative official is anchored to his desk answering queries. Touring in the proper sense of getting to know the people and their troubles is discouraged by this continual demand for pace and paper.<sup>117</sup>

Secretariat government gradually came to an end after World War II. The increasing scale and scope of public administration was the first factor. Departmental offices became a necessity, because so much business was being transacted that domain-specific knowledge among the executive officers became increasingly valuable. In addition, there was simply not enough office accommodation in the Secretariat building. A further factor was the introduction of ministerial government. As formerly dependent territories moved towards national independence, so it became the norm for ministers drawn from the legislature to hold specific portfolios. The ministers usually wanted to have distinct departmental headquarters, with their own separate registry systems.<sup>118</sup> However, the Secretariat often had a continuing existence as the foundation upon which the office of the Prime Minister (and then, the President) was built. There were other significant developments that impinged on recordkeeping after 1945.

### **Developments after 1945**

On 22 July 1946, the Secretariat of the Palestine Government, located in a wing of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem, was destroyed by Zionist terrorists, who placed bombs in the basement and detonated them at a time apparently chosen to maximise casualties among the Secretariat staff. The Palestine Gazette of 6 August 1946 listed 68 members of staff as having been killed.<sup>119</sup> Among them were 20 Palestinian clerical and secretarial staff (including both Arabs and Jews), along with a number of British assistant secretaries. It is likely that some of the latter were responsible for the confidential registry.<sup>120</sup> The confidential registry was destroyed in its entirety, and all of the staff died. Overall, three quarters of the Secretariat staff were killed, and six out of seven open sub-registries were destroyed.<sup>121</sup>

It may seem odd, but events in Jerusalem in 1946 appear to have had little impact outside that territory. The openness to attack of the Palestine Secretariat had been commented on before the bombing,<sup>122</sup> but similar premises elsewhere continued to be either lightly defended or entirely unguarded. Lawrence Durrell's description of the Secretariat in Nicosia suggests that at the outset of the EOKA (Ethniki Organosis Kyprion Aghoniston [National Organisation of Cypriot Fighters]) emergency, the building could easily have been seized and destroyed, rather than merely having a small hole blown in one external wall.<sup>123</sup> The explanation, or a partial explanation, of the lack of security precautions may lie in the attitude of the Colonial Administrative Service, who saw themselves as serving, rather than imposing, their rule on indigenous peoples. Within Palestine, the events of 1946 form an understandable backdrop to a systematic removal or destruction of records that might have been of use to the state of Israel.<sup>124</sup> Yet, even in these circumstances, the scope for diversity and individual initiative that was characteristic of British practice manifested itself. In 1948, the records of the Land Registry in Palestine were left behind intact, and, as a precaution against their being destroyed in the conflict following the end of British rule, they were microfilmed. The microfilms were duly transported to London, where the Colonial Office spent almost £400 on having them developed.<sup>125</sup>

Until 1945, successive British governments had shown relatively little interest in the internal administration of the colonial empire. In the postwar years, this changed. The change was not wholly without antecedent. The passage of the Colonial Development Act in 1929 pointed towards a growing interest in the promotion of economic growth in the Empire.<sup>126</sup> Equally, the experiences of wartime may have been significant. The copper, coal, tea, sugar and other primary products of the colonies sustained both the war effort and the home front. In addition, colonial troops played a significant role in the conflict. They participated in the Ethiopian campaign – the first Allied land victory – and subsequently helped guard a quarter of a million prisoners of war.<sup>127</sup> In Burma, colonial troops distinguished themselves by fighting a much more formidable enemy.<sup>128</sup>

The contribution that the colonies had made to victory created genuine goodwill. As one commentator put it: 'Vigorous state action to promote colonial development and welfare ... [had become] ... the new orthodoxy'.<sup>129</sup> This was epitomised by the ill-fated, but altruistic, British Overseas Food Corporation and its groundnuts scheme.<sup>130</sup> In addition, the economic circumstances in which Britain was placed in the immediate postwar era gave a particular importance to the colonial empire. In tackling huge debts to the US, Britain benefited from the dollar income generated by Malayan tin and rubber, West African cocoa and edible oils and Central African minerals. This was of especial importance during successive Sterling crises, between 1945 and 1952.<sup>131</sup>

In seeking to improve administration, including recordkeeping systems, in the colonies, a leading role was taken by the Treasury's Organisation and Methods (O and M) Department, which had been set up in 1919, in order to carry out this function in the Home Civil Service.<sup>132</sup> The Treasury's inputs took a range of forms. Colonial officers on leave in the UK attended courses or simply dropped in to have a talk. Duplicated guidance notes were given out on these occasions and were sometimes sent through the post to officers overseas. Occasionally, Treasury O and M experts went overseas on short postings to deliver training and oversee the implementation of change. During the 1950s, the full-time equivalent of approximately three experienced O and M officers was devoted to support work for the colonies and newly independent countries. Treasury officials were well aware, however, that these efforts were imperfect. In 1954, Mr Milner-Barry wrote:

... while we have given the Colonies quite a lot of help in one way and another, and have no doubt made a useful contribution, it has all been rather 'ad hoc' and that we have probably only been scratching the surface ... We have also from time to time put a number of Colonial Service officers through the Treasury O and M training course ... I doubt very much whether this has been a remunerative way of spending our – and their – time. They have mostly gone back to remote districts where there is very little ... scope for preaching or practicing O and M, instead of to headquarters where they could make their influence felt.<sup>133</sup>

Mr Milner-Barry may have been thinking of an episode in 1952, when Mr Turner and Mr Okoh from the Gold Coast (later Ghana) attended the Treasury O and M training course, but: 'The UK man was taken off O and M and the effort collapsed'.<sup>134</sup> Probably more effective was the secondment of JW Foster to West Indian governments for two years in the early 1950s. Foster moved between Barbados, Grenada and Jamaica from 1951 to 1952. However, his reports stress the limitations faced when seeking to upgrade public administration in territories where public revenue was low.<sup>135</sup> Notwithstanding the various frustrations and limitations experienced by the Treasury's O and M staff in delivering services to the colonies, they do seem to have had an advantage, of which

they may have been only dimly aware: because they were based in the Treasury, they could walk down the corridor to speak to colleagues about their projects and plans. This ability to use informal methods to speed up the processes by which expenditure was approved probably gave them a capacity for flexible and comparatively rapid action.

The Treasury occasionally expressed exasperation with colonial governments that sought expert advice elsewhere, but they could not effectively prevent this. For instance, in July 1952, the Government of Cyprus engaged Urwick, Orr and Partners to undertake a survey of departmental organisation, including work on their registry systems: fees totalling a sum of £6,300 were agreed upon. A similar, but much larger and more thorough, job for the Government of Singapore was expected to last three years and cost £80,000.<sup>136</sup> The Colonial Office seems to have taken the view that the Treasury did not possess the capacity to undertake all of the work that was needed, so recourse to the emerging private sector was appropriate. A circular despatch to governors referred to: '... the shortage of qualified officers capable of advising Colonial Governments on the replanning of their office systems and administrative organisation' and added that the Colonial Office would be happy to liaise with the British Institute of Management in seeking suitable consultants.<sup>137</sup> The Treasury's contrasting view was well expressed in a letter to Chief Akintola, Minister of Health, in Nigeria:

We doubt whether the employees of these firms would have any very thorough understanding of the problems of Governments and the methods of public administration in general, or of an African Government in particular ...<sup>138</sup>

The views expressed by Treasury staff may have been influenced by experience in wartime. Lyndall Urwick had been a temporary civil servant in the Treasury from 1940 to 1942, and when his proposals for organisational change were not agreed to, he complained to various Members of Parliament and others outside the Civil Service.<sup>139</sup>

Increasingly, it became common for British O and M officers to be recruited by colonial governments to serve overseas in one territory alone. In 1958, the Nyasaland Government formed its own O and M Department, which was staffed by two British officers.<sup>140</sup> This department devoted a good deal of time and effort to recordkeeping systems. The strength of the association in the official mind between office administration and recordkeeping may be illustrated by events in Northern Rhodesia (Zambia). In 1947, the Northern Rhodesia Government recruited Mr JE Coombes from the UK to work as Registry Supervisor in the Secretariat. In July 1958, he attended the Treasury O and M course,<sup>141</sup> and, by the year's end, he had moved on to become the head of the recently established Northern Rhodesia O and M Branch.<sup>142</sup>

The Treasury was not the only influential institution. Both the Metropolitan Police and the Central African Archives played a role. So did the Colonial Office, albeit essentially as an intermediary. In Malaya during the Emergency, the Commissioner General of Police requested the services of a registry expert from the security services in the UK.<sup>143</sup> Interestingly, the Colonial Office took the view that the '... quality of Special Branch Registry work in this country [the UK] left much to be desired'.<sup>144</sup> In the event, Chief Inspector Coveney was dispatched from the Metropolitan Police to the Criminal Investigation Department Headquarters in Kuala Lumpur. He found a Special Branch Registry with a staff of nine, which was struggling to cope with the maintenance of nominal indices for suspected Communist supporters in the Chinese ethnic community alone. His report stressed that a much more comprehensive coverage was essential, if

the Registry was to be effective, and urged that staff from both Indian and Chinese ethnic backgrounds must be recruited to work in the most sensitive of confidential registries.<sup>145</sup> As discussed above, this advice was in direct contravention of the established custom and practice, which required that only staff of British origin should be entrusted with confidential recordkeeping duties, as outlined above. Similar arrangements for a police expert to be seconded to Palestine were also made.<sup>146</sup>

The Central African Archives (CAA), of course, was not part of the metropolitan initiatives in improving recordkeeping practices and had a limited geographical scope. It may be regarded as an early instance of what a later generation would call South–South cooperation. It is particularly significant here, because it represented a contrasting version of records management. Whereas the UK Treasury was focused on the design and improvement of current recordkeeping systems, the CAA was primarily concerned with the economic management of records that had ceased to be current. As Alistair and Yvonne Tough have written elsewhere:<sup>147</sup>

The now-defunct Central African Archives [CAA] had a major impact on the development of Records Management practices in Botswana, Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe and even Kenya. The CAA existed as an inter-territorial service responsible for public sector archives and Records Management services in Southern Rhodesia, Northern Rhodesia, Nyasaland and Bechuanaland in the 1940s and early 1950s. Eventually it became a federal service, under the short-lived Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. In the mid-1950s two CAA members of staff visited the USA. There they observed best practice in the US federal government and elsewhere. The CAA adopted a division of responsibility favoured by the US National Archives and Records Administration [NARA] with Treasury Organisation and Methods experts being responsible for the design and implementation of current record keeping systems whilst the maintenance, use and disposal of non-current records became the responsibility of the archives. So the CAA's focus was on retention and disposal scheduling and records centres. They developed highly effective and efficient systems, with rapid file retrieval and delivery times. In 1962 the CAA's records centres delivered annual savings on office space and equipment worth £250,000 whilst the total CAA budget was just £46,000. Their system depended on the design principles that (1) records remained the property of the creating department and (2) storage boxes were used as both physical and intellectual units. The system depended on two key forms – the records transmittal list and the box label. Records transmittal lists were to be created by the transferring department, annotated in the Records Centre with CAA reference numbers and an annotated copy was sent back to the depositor. Box labels were produced in triplicate with one stuck on the box, one filed by box number and one filed by the action date (for destruction or transfer to archives). This system is still in use and it is very simple and effective. However, it removes any possibility of using information as a shared resource across the public sector. It depends crucially on pro-active staff to push forward destruction of rubbish, which in turn depends on existing schedules being renewed and new schedules being prepared and agreed. A major drawback of the CAA system is that ministry staff can easily withhold records that ought to be transmitted for the archives and send only records they regard as low-grade stuff. The CAA system is recognisably based on the principles enunciated by Schellenberg.

### **After independence**

The British Government's interest in the promotion of good recordkeeping in the developing countries of the Commonwealth did not come to an abrupt end as the former colonies became independent nations. A Department of Technical Cooperation (DTC) had been set-up in July 1961 to support development work and the technical and scientific advisory functions of the Colonial Office were transferred to this department. The Colonial Office ceased to exist in 1966. Treasury staff with an expertise in O and M work,



including recordkeeping, were transferred to the DTC in October 1964, which was then renamed the Ministry of Overseas Development.<sup>148</sup> The guidance on recordkeeping that was issued to the public service in Zambia in 1967 may be regarded as representative of the continuing influence of the DTC or Ministry of Overseas Development.<sup>149</sup> In 1968, the Civil Service Department was created as part of the public service reforms instituted by Harold Wilson's Labour government. This seems to have had a significant and adverse impact on the flexibility and relatively quick responses that had been a feature of O and M work (including work on recordkeeping systems) in the previous two decades. A primary function of the Civil Service Department was to determine the pay and conditions of large classes of permanent full-time public servants. Dealing promptly with a proposal that one O and M officer currently seconded from the UK Ministry of Pensions and National Insurance to the Government of Tanganyika should be transferred to Southern Rhodesia, where he would work on behalf of the UK Treasury, had been feasible under an earlier administrative structure, but became difficult once the Civil Service Department had come into being.<sup>150</sup> Effective work in the O and M and recordkeeping fields seems to have been further impeded by the internal structures adopted by the Overseas Development Agency, after it ceased to be a distinct department of the British Government and became a subordinate division of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. In 1971, the Technical Assistance Program had five subject departments. These were:

- (1) science, technology and medical,
- (2) natural resources and voluntary organisations,
- (3) universities and technical education,
- (4) schools and teacher training, and
- (5) administrative and social affairs.

The fact that departments' three to five were grouped together as an education division seems to have resulted in further marginalisation of registry and recordkeeping work.<sup>151</sup>

In the 1980s, both international development and 'back office' functions were subjected to hostile scrutiny by the UK Government, and direct bi-lateral aid, in respect of recordkeeping, fell to a very low level. Key personnel moved into the private sector.<sup>152</sup> It would be possible, however, to view the subsequent contributions of the International Records Management Trust as representing a rebirth of international development support for recordkeeping professionals in developing countries, albeit in a multifaceted and multi-lateral form.

## **Conclusion**

We believe that the evidence presented above demonstrates that initiatives in the imperial periphery, not least in Western Australia, played a significant role in the development of recordkeeping systems in the British Empire and Commonwealth. Local circumstances, including the adequacy of local revenues and the availability of skilled staff, played their part in shaping the systems that were devised. Nonetheless, there are some overarching patterns that can be discerned. The need to maintain security provided a potent driver for the creation and maintenance of confidential registries in colonial capitals. The practical day-to-day need to carry out basic functions influenced the design and working of recordkeeping systems far more than any shared 'imperial imaginary'. The diverging work patterns of colonial capitals, which had to maintain written communications with

the imperial metropolis, and of district administrations, which had to function in oral cultures and often while on tour, tended to produce different recordkeeping systems at different levels of government. In addition, the development of integrated registry systems may have played a part in the development of the Secretariat as a characteristic institution of British colonial government. Finally, we hope that our work demonstrates that 'diplomatic' research of this nature has a rightful place within the historical sciences and, that, accordingly, those who wish to understand archives will find it rewarding to spend some time and effort on research in archives.

## Endnotes

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