

Pattern, Puzzle, Peculiarity: Rhodesia's UDI and Decolonisation in Southern Africa.

On 18th April 1980, the Union Jack was finally lowered at Government House, Harare. Presiding over this muted piece of imperial theatre, Lord Soames, who had been appointed interim governor of Rhodesia at the end of 1979, was flanked by Prince Charles, with both men mustering the appropriate level of solemnity that befitted the occasion.ⁱ Ninety years after the pioneer column had raised the Union Flag, its lowering in April 1980 symbolised the formal end of British control in the country, the birth of Zimbabwe, and had so

lved one of the most intractable episodes in the history of Britain's decolonisation.

Some twenty years earlier, the British Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, had spoken of the 'Wind of Change' blowing through the African continent. 'Whether we like it or not', ~~he opined~~~~depined the Edwardian poseur~~, 'this growth of national consciousness is a political fact'.ⁱⁱ Despite this, however, one place that the wind seemingly skirted was central and Southern Africa. Just as Macmillan's speech received its second airing in Cape Town in February 1960, Walter Monckton commenced his tour of the Central African Federation being ostensibly charged by the British government to assess its health. Seven years after Federation had been inaugurated, it was becoming increasingly clear that the impulses that first simulated the territorial amalgamation between Southern Rhodesia, Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland were diminishing. Created as a 'counterpoise to Afrikaner nationalism' and promoted as a way to satisfy both white and black nationalism, Federation was theoretically supposed to bring 'partnership' between black and white within the three territories.ⁱⁱⁱ Yet, 'partnership' was 'purposefully vague, with its opacity lending itself to a variety of meanings'.^{iv} As leading African nationalist, Joshua Nkomo, recalled in his memoirs, 'Huggins . . . explained what Federation was really about. He stated that his aim was to create in Central Africa a new partnership like that of the rider and the horse. That was very honest. The white man was to ride, the black man was to carry him'.^v Finally published in October 1960, the Monckton Commission's report concluded that the only way to maintain Federation was through force. As Philip Murphy has demonstrated, while the British government were not prepared to commit themselves militarily to quell the rising tide of African nationalism, they were also not

devoted to perpetual white rule.^{vi} Consequently plans were set in motion to dissolve Federation, with Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland receiving their independence as Zambia and Malawi in 1964. As one contemporary newspaper columnist put it: ‘the Federation, conceived in sin and nurtured in neglect, now, unwanted, dies in apathy’.^{vii}

The precise fate of Southern Rhodesia remained unclear. The size of the white settler population (hardly more than 250,000) belied the power they wielded in the region, and indeed the emotional hold they occupied in the British public imagination.^{viii} There still remains controversy regarding whether or not British foreign secretary Rab Butler promised the Rhodesian delegation independence under minority governance at the Victoria Falls conference of 1963.^{ix} When Butler returned to parliament after the conclusion of the conference, John Strachey, MP for Dundee West, acerbically reminded him that ‘his success at the Victoria Falls conference was on the easier part of the problem and that the more difficult part, the future of Southern Rhodesia, still lies ahead of him.’^x

Events in Southern Rhodesia, particularly the results of the 1962 general election, also dramatically altered the course taken in the region, as the newly formed Rhodesian Front (RF) swept to power, led by tobacco farmer Winston Field. A definitive shift to the right, the ascension of the RF and the hardening of racial attitudes within the country put the white settlers on the ‘course to collision’, as the prospect of an illegal declaration of independence (UDI) from the Crown looked increasingly probable.^{xi} From 1964 onwards, Ian Smith, who replaced Field as party leader, chartered this path. The first prime minister born in the country, Smith was a decorated war hero, and had been involved in Rhodesian politics since the late 1940s. Continually underestimated in Whitehall as ‘a simple minded, politically naïve, and uncompromising character’,^{xii} the issue of Rhodesian independence was one that dogged the foreign policy agenda of successive British governments, triggering ‘the most protracted crisis of British decolonisation’.^{xiii}

Twelve days after narrowly winning the 1964 British general election on 27th October, the new Labour Prime Minister, Harold Wilson turned his attention to Rhodesia, warning Smith’s government that if it declared illegal independence from

the Crown there would be grave diplomatic and economic consequences. While this gave the RF reason to pause, a succession of abortive meetings between Wilson and Smith, Rhodesia's exclusion from Commonwealth meetings, and the results of the 1965 election emboldened Smith's government to declare independence from the British government on 11th November 1965.^{xiv}

Addressing the country via a radio broadcast on the 11th November, Smith's high flown oratory declared:

We may be a small country, but we are a determined people who have been called upon to play a role of world-wide significance. We Rhodesians have rejected the doctrinaire philosophy of appeasement and surrender. The decision which we have taken today is a refusal by Rhodesians to sell their birth right ... We have struck a blow for the preservation of justice, civilization, and Christianity.^{xv}

The reaction of the British government was swift. Wilson immediately condemned Rhodesia's actions, and imposed economic sanctions in the hope that this would bring the rogue settlers back to terms.^{xvi} While all sides of the House of Commons lamented Rhodesia's declaration of UDI, they did so for quite different reasons. Robert Turton, Conservative MP for Thirsk and Malton, proffered that 'in no country in the world is there more loyalty to Her Majesty the Queen', while Sydney Silverman, Labour MP for Nelson and Colne, pursued a different tack, asking Wilson directly: 'What would the right Hon. Gentleman's advice be to the 4 million Africans who presumably remain loyal and who are now in a state of emergency, who are refused the right to express an opinion, who are refused access to information?'.^{xvii} Tempting as it may be to cleave to the dichotomy that suggests that the Conservatives largely represented the interests of white settlers, while Labour MP's favoured those of the African majority, one thing is clear: Wilson thought that UDI would be over in 'a matter of weeks rather than months'.^{xviii} While historiographical speculation continues over Wilson's handling of the entire affair, it is difficult not to agree, at least in part, with Carl Watts' assessment that Wilson's handling of Rhodesia's UDI 'demonstrated a profound error of judgement'.^{xix} Although Wilson persuaded himself that UDI would be over quickly, a 'rebellious white population the size of Portsmouth' went on to

defy international condemnation, the waging of increasingly effective guerrilla warfare and the imposition of international sanctions for fourteen years.^{xx}

The impact of Rhodesia's decision to declare UDI was felt far beyond the country's national borders. In Southern Africa, Smith's regime enjoyed support from the apartheid state and Portuguese East Africa. This buttressing, however, did not last forever. When Mozambique gained its independence in 1975, Rhodesia lost the practical and psychological support afforded by the previous regime, whilst also becoming increasingly vulnerable to guerrilla incursion on three 'fronts'. In addition, although Pretoria continued to exert its power in the region (often to the benefit of the Smith regime), South African Prime Minister B.J. Vorster's policy of détente further weakened Smith's position.^{xxi} It was during the second half of the 1970s, therefore, within a context dramatically altered by the conflict in Angola, that regional and international diplomacy increased its efforts to find a political solution that would bring about a ceasefire and usher in majority rule governance.

It is now almost axiomatic to argue that Rhodesia proved to be one of the most complex episodes in the history of Britain's decolonisation since the Suez Crisis of 1956. The Rhodesian 'problem' however remained a thorn in the side of successive British governments. As Labour MP for Watford Raphael Tuck asked Ted Heath in 1973: 'why is the Prime Minister's approach to this problem so weak-kneed?' He went on further: 'does he think that his predecessor, Mr. Disraeli, would have been guilty of such spineless inactivity? Why does not the right Hon. Gentleman call a meeting of the Governments concerned and make clear to them this country's determined disapproval.'^{xxii} From Wilson in 1964 through to James Callaghan over a decade later, successive Labour governments, despite high-flown rhetoric to the contrary, did not ensure the coming of majority rule in the country. Only in the early days of the premiership of Margaret Thatcher was the puzzle of Rhodesia finally solved. As the 1970s progressed, white Rhodesia found itself with fewer international friends, alongside being embroiled in a deeply damaging and seemingly unwinnable civil war. The personification of belligerent and outmoded settler colonialism, by the late 1970s, Smith's misguided boast that he didn't 'believe in majority rule ever in Rhodesia—not in 1,000 years'^{xxiii} rang hollow, as he committed the country to the Lancaster House negotiations, where the details of Zimbabwe's independence were

finally thrashed out. Barely one month after Zimbabwe was born, Lord Soames, the last British governor of the country, remarked in a public lecture that: ‘from the beginning, Britain’s commitment in Rhodesia was hesitant and reluctant – the reverse of full hearted’.^{xxiv}

On 11 November 2015, fifty years since UDI had been declared, approximately thirty scholars from within and outside the Southern African region came together to further debate the legacy of Rhodesia’s UDI. Held, at the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein, South Africa, in what once was the heartland of the Afrikaner National Party, the conference ‘From the Second to the Third *Chimurenga*: Historical Perspectives on Zimbabwe’s Recent Past’, brought together both eminent and emerging scholars who grappled with, and debated the impact that UDI and Zimbabwe’s eventual decolonisation had on the region’s history.

~~Held over two days,~~ it became clear that many papers ~~presented at the conference~~ were based on a highly sophisticated and fresh reading of multiple source bases, and were thus opening up new and important avenues of historical research into the dynamics of Zimbabwe’s decolonisation. In particular, it became obvious that various papers on the role of finance and ‘big business’, and the regional and international actors involved in the country’s negotiated independence, were updating long held historiographical wisdoms, and signalling a revival in economic and diplomatic explanations for the country’s decolonisation. Furthermore, the articles in this special edition shed new light on the roles(s) played in the decolonisation of Zimbabwe by economic (private business) and political (liberation movements, Western and Southern African governments) actors that until now have been studied with very limited access to primary sources.

The first article by Tony Hopkins, the keynote speaker at the conference: ‘Globalisation and Decolonisation’, serves as a plenary, thereby opening up new ways to think about decolonisation. In particular, Hopkins’ wide-ranging article (re) examines debates concerning the divisions between formal and informal empires, and the position of the United States as an imperial power. Articles from Tinashe Nyamunda, Andrew Cohen and Rory Pilosof examine economics, and the role of multinational companies in the narratives of Zimbabwe’s period of protracted

decolonisation. Contrary to arguments that suggest Smith and his RF cabinet rashly declared UDI in November 1965, Nyamunda's provocatively argued piece suggests that UDI was a calculated financial risk, with the white settlers correctly assuming that the British government would not use force to bring their 'kith and kin' to terms. [Cohen and Pilosoff's expansive article details](#) ~~Concentrating on~~ the relationship between the managing-director of Lonrho, the (un) gentlemanly capitalist Roland 'Tiny' Rowland, and the editor of the magazine *Property & Finance*, Wilfred Brookes. ~~Examining, Cohen and Pilosoff's article examines~~ white settler mistrust of foreign capital, [their article provides](#). ~~In doing so it provides a major reassessment of the supposed homogeneity of white Rhodesian society, as well as shedding further sheds new~~ -light on the role of multinational companies in the processes of African decolonisation.

The article from Arrigo Pallotti examines the forces of African anti-colonial nationalism and the respective roles played by prominent individuals, such as Tanzanian President, Julius Nyerere. As Pallotti's finely observed article details, Nyerere as supporter of the Zimbabwean liberation struggle, was identified (from the Anglo-American perspective) as a potential bridgehead who could be utilised to enact their wishes. Yet as is demonstrated, Nyerere was neither a blind apparatchik nor a stooge of the West, ~~as He~~ constantly strove to navigate the politics of the middle in order to reach a settlement that was acceptable to the ever-expanding range of actors involved in bringing Rhodesia to terms.

Staying with diplomatic histories, articles from Timothy Scarnecchia and Sue Onslow further examine the dynamics of the negotiations over Rhodesia's decolonisation after the Geneva Conference and until the signing of the Lancaster House Agreement in December 1979. In particular, Scarnecchia's acute analysis highlights the tensions, rivalries and air of mistrust that dominated the negotiations over Rhodesia in the period 1977-1978, and indeed the enmity between Joshua Nkomo and Robert Mugabe as leaders of the Patriotic Front. Moving on to analyse the Lancaster House talks, at which Zimbabwe's independence was finally negotiated, Onslow's lucidly argued article examines the contentious issue of land resettlement. In particular, Onslow reviews the actions of the British government in the late 1970s in order to understand

if a parsimonious Treasury circumscribed British actions with regards to ~~the transfer of power~~the implementation of meaningful land restitution.

As scholarship on Zimbabwe is currently dominated by studies that seek to understand the ‘crisis’ in which the country has recently found itself, it is our hope that the articles within this collection will create further profitable dialogue between historians of the region and decolonisation as a whole. In doing so we hope that the ~~writings herein~~contributions to this issue will go some way towards providing a more nuanced understanding of the continuities and discontinuities between Zimbabwe’s colonial and postcolonial history, as well as examining the roles played by external governments and individuals in the decolonisation of Zimbabwe.

Dr. Kate Law, K.Law@chi.ac.uk

Senior Lecturer in Modern History, University of Chichester, UK.

Research Fellow in the Centre for Africa Studies, University of the Free State, South Africa.

ⁱ For more on the role played by Soames see Onslow, “The Man on the Spot,” 68-100.

ⁱⁱ “The “Wind of Change Speech””, South African History Online. Accessed December 30, 2016. <http://www.sahistory.org.za/article/wind-change-speech>. For more on the significance of Macmillan’s ‘Wind of Change’ speech see also the recent excellent edited collection by Butler and Stockwell, *The Wind of Change: Harold Macmillan and British Decolonization* .

ⁱⁱⁱ Hyam, “The Geopolitical Origins of the Central African Federation,” 145-72.

^{iv} Law, *Gendering the Settler State* 74.

^v Nkomo, *The Story of my Life* 59.

^{vi} Murphy, “An intricate and distasteful subject,” 746-777.

^{vii} Franklin, “Dying at the Falls,” *The Spectator*, July 4, 1963, 5. For a detailed discussion of the fate of the Federation see Cohen, *The Politics and Economics of Decolonization*.

^{viii} For more on population numbers see Brownell, *The Collapse of Rhodesia*.

^{ix} See variously, Butler, *The Art of the Possible*; Smith, *Bitter Harvest: The Great Betrayal*; Welensky, *Welensky’s 4000 Days*. For the most detailed account of the Victoria Falls conference see Wood, *So Far and No Further!*

^x HC Deb 09 July 1963 vol 680 cc1045-7 John Strachey to Rab Butler.

^{xi} Clements, *Rhodesia: The Course to Collision*.

^{xii} TNA: PRO, DO 183/293, ‘Visit of Mr I. D. Smith, prime minister of Southern Rhodesia, to London, September 1964’ as cited in Phimister, “Smith, Ian Douglas (1919–2007)”. Accessed January 5, 2017. <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/99253>.

^{xiii} Lowry, “Rhodesia 1890-1980”.

^{xiv} By far the best guide for the months leading up to UDI is Watts, *Rhodesia’s Unilateral Declaration of Independence*. Watts is particularly strong on Rhodesia’s role in the Commonwealth.

^{xv} Smith, “Announcement of Unilateral Declaration of Independence”, November 11, 1965. Accessed January 5, 2017. <http://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/1965Rhodesia-UDI>. See Lowry, “Rhodesia 1890-1980” for a detailed discussion of the symbolism surrounding UDI.

^{xvi} One must not overlook the principled stand taken by many newly decolonised African countries in attempting to force Britain not to abdicate its responsibilities in the region.

^{xvii} HC Deb 12 November 1965 vol 720 cc523-637, <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1965/nov/12/rhodesia-1>.

^{xviii} Wood, *A Matter of Weeks Rather Than Months*.

^{xix} Watts, "Killing Kith and Kin," 415. Broadly speaking, the historiography can be divided between scholars who are sympathetic to Wilson, and those who are not. For the former see Coggins, 'Wilson and Rhodesia,' 363-381. For the latter see Watts, "Killing Kith and Kin". Watts argues that Wilson made a tactical blunder in ruling out the use of force so early on against the white settler population. See also Facchini, "The Millstone Around Our Necks," 274-293. Philip Murphy's "An intricate and distasteful subject" should also be consulted. As Murphy argues, Wilson's decision to rule out the use of force against the white settlers was actually consistent with earlier British thinking. For a recent overview of the field see also Nyamunda, "More a Cause than a Country," 1005-1019.

^{xx} Coggins, 'Wilson and Rhodesia', 376.

^{xxi} See for instance: Hirschamann, "Southern Africa: Détente?," 107-126. For Smith's perspective on regional developments see *Bitter Harvest: Zimbabwe and the Aftermath of its Independence*, see especially chapter 14.

^{xxii} HC Deb 24 May 1973 vol 857 cc657-9

<http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1973/may/24/rhodesia-sanctions>

^{xxiii} As cited in Peter Godwin and Ian Hancock, *Rhodesians Never Die*, 152.

^{xxiv} Lord Soames, "From Rhodesia to Zimbabwe," 405.

Acknowledgements

The editor would like to thank Tony Hopkins, Daryl Gowlett, Philip Murphy, Ian Phimister, Stephen Howe and Daphna-Vardi Howe for their assistance in preparing this edited collection. The financial assistance of X and Y is gratefully acknowledged.