

IF CONRAD LAURENCE CORFIELD AS POLITICAL ADVISER WAS REMAINED UP TO THE END OF BRITISH MONARCH ERA IN INDIA, TO DAYS POLITICAL PROBLEMS, CONFLICTS AND PAST MISTAKES WOULD NOT BE FACED IN INDIA AND PARTICULARLY IN MANIPUR.

Sir Conrad Lawrence Corfield, the most famous Corfield in recent times was Political Adviser from 1945-1947 to Lord Wavell, the second last Viceroy of India; and for a short time in 1947 to Lord Mountbatten, the last Viceroy. As such Sir Conrad was the last official head of the Indian Political Service, which had, for the best part of 100 years advised, organised, encouraged, cajoled, manipulated and guided over 560 Princely States which formed about 2/5th of the area and under a quarter of the population of the British Indian Empire. The rest of the subcontinent was directly controlled by Britain as British India. To fully understand Sir Conrad's career, it is best to examine what was expected from a Political Officer as defined by the Indian States Committee in 1929. This was a role which Sir Conrad fulfilled to the utmost, especially in the last years of the British Raj. He is now best remembered for the part he played at this time in constantly reminding those in charge of granting India its independence and Pakistan its beginnings, of the legal and moral obligations the British Crown had to the Indian Princes and their subjects. For this, some commentators depict him as conservative, and reactionary." But one, rather more aware of Sir Conrad's integrity and affection for India as the result of many hours of interviews, called him 'the last shepherd of India's Princes', understanding Sir Conrad's motivation as an influence for good government among the hereditary rulers, wherein lay, with all its faults and follies, the richness of true Indian civilization.

The prospect of the partition of India was for Sir Conrad, and many others who served India all their lives, a recipe for disaster, and therefore anything that could be done should be done to give the earlier proposal of a Federation a chance. In this Federation, the Princely States would, in the one great Indian nation, form a third force on equal footing with the Congress Party and the Muslim League among others. Nehru and Jinnah however were sure that this arrangement was the recipe for chaos. Sir Conrad's career in India was set against the rising power of Indian political parties bent on independence, and **his personal loyalty to the Princes whose existence largely depended on the consent of His Britannic Majesty's Secretary of State for India in London's Whitehall.**

Conrad had been born in England in 1893, the only one of Egerton Corfield's children who had not been born in India. His early years spent in India greatly influenced him and by his own admission, they determined his time in India. With the outbreak of war in 1914 Conrad enlisted

promptly. He was soon promoted to Captain and awarded the Military Cross. Conrad was also twice wounded and finally evacuated due to trench fever contracted after the second battle of Ypres in 1915. At the end of the First World War Conrad was in a reserve battalion where he met Sir Theodore Morrison who had been a member of the Council of the Secretary of State for India. It was he who encouraged Conrad to apply for the Indian Civil Service (ICS). Conrad took the exams and was appointed to the service 16 February 1920, at a salary larger than his father's income.

His first appointment, on his return to India after 20 years absence, was as Assistant Commissioner, Punjab, 5<sup>th</sup> May 1920. He was stationed at Lahore, a posting related to the family connections in the area. The Punjab was in turmoil, as a result of General Dyer's action in Amritsar, and the war with the Afghans to the north. In May 1921 Conrad was promoted to Assistant Private Secretary to the Viceroy (Lord Reading), a post he held until December 1922. In 1922 Conrad performed in Jack Point at the highlight of the Simla amateur dramatic season. On 22 December 1922, he married Phyllis Bertha, daughter of Lewis Evans Pugh KC.

Conrad like all who served in Baluchistan, enjoyed the period noting that 'the tribesmen greeted you with the smile of an equal', an observation which says as much about Conrad as about the Baluchistanis. The family remained in that province until going on leave in 1930. While in England, son Michael was placed in a preparatory school; Phyllis and June remained in England; and Conrad returned to India for his next appointment, Secretary at Hyderabad. However, the intrigues in the Nizam's Court were too much to bear and Conrad gladly moved to Rewa, just 150 miles south of Allahabad in the Central Provinces. By now Phyllis and June were back in India.

His tugs of war with the Maharaja of Rewa over the next two years were clearly a great apprenticeship for the young political officer. Towards the end of this assignment, Phyllis had a hunting accident at Ootacamund and it was necessary in mid-1932 for Conrad to accompany her back to England for treatment, June being left in Calcutta with relatives. Phyllis Corfield died as a result of the accident on 28 December 1932 at Virginia Water, Berkshire. Michael was placed with friends and June; now also back in England, with Conrad's sister. Conrad himself, who briefly played hockey for England, returned alone to resume service in Rewa, transferring in 1934 to the Political Department at Simla and Delhi. In February 1937 he was appointed CIE Order of the Indian Empire at which time he was Joint Secretary to the Government of India in the Foreign & Political Department. The next appointment was as Resident at Jaipur, for a year 1939-40. By the end of 1940 Conrad had arranged a transfer to Quetta as Political Agent to get better schooling for her daughter. But by his own admission, he had become restless there and pressed for a return to the States writing my heart was with the future of the Indian States'. In

consequence from 1941 to 1945 he was Under-Secretary for the Punjab States, based at Lahore, on a salary of 4000 rupees. The Punjab States, with a population of 6½ million, covered an area of 49,521 sq miles, and Conrad travelled extensively over this territory which was later to form part of Pakistan. Charles Chenevix-Trench best explains the work and attitude of Conrad in those years: "The survival of the States, through some form of Federation, was a cause to which Corfield was passionately devoted. In Rajputana, just before the war, he had put great pressure on the princes to accept Federation, and with some success. Corfield was less successful in persuading them to impose checks on their own autocratic powers. Long and hard he argued that they would have a better chance of survival if they did so."

In April 1945 Conrad, after 3½ years in the Punjab States, was summoned by Lord Wavell who had taken over as Viceroy from Lord Linlithgow in October 1943. On 13 March 1945 Wavell had written to Amery, the Secretary of State for India and Burma: "I am glad you have agreed to my selection of Corfield to succeed Wylie. The choice was not an easy one, and I had another look at Corfield... he is certainly not too young - at 51 most men are probably as good for practical purposes as they are ever likely to be - and he has extensive experience in the States. I do not think I could have properly passed over him for an outsider."

In his memoirs Conrad vividly described his interview with Wavell, a man of straightforward views and total integrity. Corfield found in Wavell a colleague interested in keeping India as one country, a federation of states, not dissimilar to how it was under the Raj, but an independent country. Such a nation would, in Conrad's view, give full meaning to the 300 years of British influence and power in India.

Lord Wavell appointed Conrad, Political Adviser and gave him home leave. It was the beginning of the end of his career of 27 years in India. The post carried a salary of 5,500 rupees a month, almost a quarter of the Viceroy's salary; and half of a State Governor. He was thus one of the most senior men in the Indian Service. He would be known as 'the doyen of 20th century British political officers, but the last years would bring him great sadness.

Conrad arrived in London in time to enjoy VE Day with his son who he had not seen for seven years, and who was then studying medicine. It was not until his leave was nearly over that Conrad was informed that he was to have an audience with the King. He remembered it well: "As my flat was so close to the Palace I decided to walk across on the appointed morning. Halfway there I began to wonder whether I ought not to have arranged to arrive in a car.

However, it was too late to make a change, so I arrived at the gates on foot. The policeman on duty showed no surprise and as soon as I gave my name waved me on..."Conrad was knighted by the King, and immediately the King, pointing to an easy chair near the fire suggested they

have a talk. Conrad wrote 'I felt so relaxed and at ease that I nearly sat down before he did.' It was 26 July 1945 and the Court Circular explains why Conrad felt so honoured to be given half an hour of the King's time on that particular day.

It was a fateful day for India and the new Sir Conrad in another way. Churchill whose ringing oratory included the sentence '**I have not become the King's first minister to preside over the dissolution of His Empire', was replaced by Attlee who had long been committed to granting independence to the members of the Empire, including India.**

Although Conrad says little in his memoirs about Wavell, Wavell is not so reticent. He found Sir Conrad's work 'sensible and reasonable' and when he received a critical note from the Secretary of State about Sir Conrad, he detected in it the hand of Stafford Cripps. The Secretary of State confirmed Wavell's suspicion, but the Viceroy firmly defended Sir Conrad's refusal to discuss behind the backs of the Princes, the amalgamation of some of their states.

It was clear to the more perceptive of the Princes that the British Government was very much influenced by Gandhi, Nehru, Patel, Jinnah and Ali Khan, and to put it in a nutshell there was no place in their new India for feudal Kingdoms.

For two years Wavell relied much on Sir Conrad for dealing with the States, and the Princes, trying to persuade them to accept and deal with the rapidly changing situation. But the Viceroy found the political demands first of Churchill and later of Attlee very difficult to blend in with those of Gandhi, Nehru, Patel, Jinnah and the Princes.

In March 1947, at one of their weekly interviews, Lord Wavell showed Sir Conrad a letter from Attlee sacking him (Wavell) and giving the job to Mountbatten. Both men knew how much duplicity had preceded this decision and were clearly not very enamoured by the way it was done. Sir Conrad, diplomat to the end, commented: 'the reason for the change was because Lord Wavell was firmly opposed to wrecking the unique achievement of the British Raj in creating a unified India'.

**When Mountbatten, the new Viceroy, arrived in India on 22 March 1947**, he and Sir Conrad were not strangers. Their paths had crossed at the Viceregal Palace in Delhi in 1922 when Sir Conrad was on the Viceroy's staff and Edwina Ashley and Mountbatten announced their engagement when guests of the Viceroy. They had met subsequently during the War when Mountbatten was Supreme Head of Southeast Asian Command (SEAC).

**Mountbatten was sworn in on 24 March 1947** and began interviews with the main people concerned with the politics in India. The sixth interview and the first with a non-Indian, was with Sir Conrad on 25 March, giving a clear indication of the importance Mountbatten attached

**to the Political Advisor. In his capacity Sir Conrad was entitled to attend any Cabinet Meeting at which anything affecting the States was to be discussed. As such he reported directly to the Secretary of State for India, who worked in London.**

On 22 April Mountbatten noted ' I put the arguments in Sir Conrad Corfield's letter very forcibly to him [Nehru] and to my surprise, he admitted their validity.' Detractors of Sir Conrad then alleged he went off secretly to London to, in effect, get the support of the Secretary of State against Mountbatten and the demands of Attlee. But those early judgments have been disproved by the later release of other documents. Not least the Secretary's letter to Mountbatten dated 9 May, 'hoping to have a good talk with Corfield tomorrow about States' matters'.

**Mountbatten would have been fully aware that Sir Conrad's first duty was to report to the Secretary of State.** Conrad returned to India on the plane that was immediately to fly back to England with Mountbatten, so the two men missed seeing each other. In the absence of the Viceroy, the Political Advisor proceeded with the arrangements he had cleared with the Secretary of State. Whether Mountbatten saw this as some sort of undermining of his authority, or whether both now realised that their agendas were totally at variance is not clear. What is clear however is that the Political Department was not kept fully informed of the latest developments by the Viceroy.

Flying in the face of all the comments written in the 1960s and later, is part of Mountbatten's letter to the Secretary of State dated 1 May 1947. "Nehru has recently been taking a keen interest in the future of the Indian States, especially from the point-of-view of the people of the States, and in a recent letter to me he complained that **the Political Department worked in secret and no one knew what it was doing.** I think much of the trouble has been due to the fact that although Lord Wavell offered to arrange a meeting between Corfield and Nehru at which the fullest information would be exchanged, Nehru never followed this up and has developed a slight sense of grievance, although I think the fault was undoubtedly his. In the last week, however, he has had a very full talk with Corfield covering such matters as the representation of the States in the Constituent Assembly, the working of the Political Department. Corfield reports that the meeting was held in a very pleasant atmosphere and that Nehru had no critical comments to make".

By the end of June however, Nehru had formed another view. According to a note made on 30 June 1947 by the private secretary of Auchinleck (Commander-in-Chief of the Indian Army): 'Nehru wants Corfield, the **Political Secretary to be sacked and disgraced as he considers him an enemy of India. Nehru has taken away the State Department from him'**.

Sir Conrad having seen what was to happen and having distinct reservations about some of the founders of the new India and Pakistan, had ordered that **the personal records kept by the British on the Princes and their families over the last century be burnt, and other historically important material be shipped to England.** It was this that enraged Nehru and others. However, Sir Conrad had, in his view, kept faith with the Princes, and also managed to secure anonymity for the British sources of information.

Much later, jumping on the bandwagon of Sir Conrad's demise was Sir F V Wylie, Conrad's predecessor as Political Advisor, and Governor of the United Provinces in the closing years of British India. He wrote to Mountbatten on 12 August 1947 in very disparaging terms about Sir Conrad, one part at least was untrue: 'Lord Wavell did not want to put Corfield in [as Political Advisor] for the very reasons that Lord Linlithgow had emphasised. Wavell in the end decided to give the post to Corfield.'

Michael Edwardes, writing in 1963, said that 'Corfield was packed off to England by the Viceroy.' But no other commentators agree with this. A footnote in 'Transfer of Power' reveals another aspect well before Mountbatten's decision to bring forward the date of Indian Independence to 15 August. On 9 June Mountbatten wrote to Lord Listowel 'that Sir Conrad wished to leave **India on 23 July as his** daughter was being married in London on 5 August. It was therefore proposed that Sir Conrad should take leave preparatory to retirement as from 23 July'.

This makes the actual circumstances of Sir Conrad's leaving or removal not very straightforward. Most agree that Sir Conrad resigned on a matter of principle, best put by Paul Scott, author of the Raj Quartet, in 1976. In the Times Literary Supplement, Scott laments the meagre memoirs that Sir Conrad wrote noting that there are less than two pages on the Wavell period. More pointedly he had seen an earlier longer manuscript and noted some deletions. Sir Conrad's memoirs, published in 1975 by the Indo-British Historical Society in Madras are clearly heavily edited, perhaps because many of Sir Conrad's views were unpopular with the historians of that time, and his memoirs could have surely shattered a few substantial reputations. Paul Scott, well-aware of this undercurrent, concluded his review with this judgement of Sir Conrad's character and motives: "Pressed by Mountbatten to call a conference. Rulers at which he intended to persuade them to accede, Corfield, obeying orders did so. He set the date **for July 25. On July 23, determined to have** nothing to do with it, he packed his bags and flew home unregretted in Viceregal House but not I should think, by history, in which men of firm opinion and adherence to principle are not all that thick on the ground".

In the closing pages of Scott's 'The Jewel in the Crown' one of the characters comments bitterly on the partition of India in a letter, in which she concludes by saying that she is going to stay

with 'Sir Robert Conway who is advisor to the Maharaja'. Scholarly opinion of Scott's work has Sir Robert based on the real-life Sir Conrad.

The 25 July Conference was the one and only meeting Mountbatten had with the Chamber of Princes and was for all intents and purposes the abrogation of the long-held agreements between the British Government and the Princely States: and thus their end was sealed. Sir Conrad wrote: "So ended my 22 years as a political officer and all my hopes to preserve for India the best aspects of indigenous rule, the absence of communal fraction, a stable social structure, an atmosphere of security and a personal loyalty based on local history and culture".

Sir Conrad was unable to find a British publisher for memoirs with such sentiments. Clearly his uninhibited memoirs would be provided a unique view of India of the Princes and the Rajas. Conrad had realised from the first years of his career in the service that as the son of a **missionary-teacher he was different to many others in the service who were 'born to rule'**. It never seemed to harm his career, except ironically at the end with the high-born Mountbatten and Nehru. Early on he formed the view, somewhat at conflict with his status, that by and large, the good Princes ruled their part of India rather better than the British did British India. It is clear from his memoirs that from very early on in India he was struck by the style of ancient Indian civilisation which was then preserved by the Princes and their Courts. It was obviously a lifelong attraction.

Sir Conrad concluded his memoirs with a postscript on the complexity of balancing good government with the democratic principle of 'one-man one vote'. He felt, from his long experience, that some individuals should have additional voting power based on their proven educational standards, their achievements in arts, sports etc. and the amount of tax they paid. He was not hopeful that universal suffrage was a secure foundation for democracy. 'No-one would suggest,' he wrote, 'that the qualifications for each additional vote would be easy to frame or administer. They could perhaps only be worked out over the years by trial and error. But I do suggest that the effect of these additional votes might save democracy from further disillusionment.'

**Sir Conrad returned to England and a week later, 30 July 1947**, just two weeks after he had retired from the Indian Political Service. Conrad's interest in India remained throughout his long retirement, and he wrote to The Times on the Indian States (12 February 1949) and again on Christianity (26 April 1956). Conrad spent years working on his memoirs, the first public note of them being made in Sir Terence Creagh Cohen's *The Indian Political Service*. A year earlier he had contributed to a symposium entitled *The Partition of India*, with a paper on 'Thoughts on British Policy and the Indian States 1935-47'. Sir Conrad was active in retirement becoming Vice-President of the **Governors of St Lawrence College**, his old school, and Director of Yatelev

Industries for Disabled Girls. He also considered standing for Parliament. He lived at High Ground, Finchampstead, Berkshire, and was an executor to the Will of his uncle Claud Corfield. In 1966 he planned to retire to Jersey but remained at Finchampstead. The couple helped many authors with their books on India. Lady Sylvia died 8 March 1977 at Court St Etienne, Belgium. Sir Conrad died 3 October 1980 at the Warren Lodge Rest Home, Finchampstead.

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