

Letter from George Crombie to Arthur George Bottomley on the independence celebrations in the Gambia (25 February 1965)

Caption: In a letter dated 25 February 1965, George Crombie, British High Commissioner in the Gambia, sends a letter to Arthur George Bottomley, Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations, on the festivities held to mark the independence of the Gambia on 18 February 1965.

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THE GAMBIA: INDEPENDENCE CELEBRATIONS

*British High Commissioner in The Gambia to the Secretary of State for
Commonwealth Relations*

(No. 1. Restricted)
Sir,

*Bathurst, 25 February, 1965
Received 8 March, 1965*

Last week Their Royal Highnesses the Duke and Duchess of Kent represented Her Majesty The Queen at a series of ceremonies, receptions and other less formal entertainments to celebrate the attainment by The Gambia on 18 February of fully independent status as the 23rd Member of the Commonwealth of Nations. A copy* of the official programme of the festivities is enclosed.

2. From the moment that Their Royal Highnesses landed at Yundum Airport on the morning of Monday, 15 February, until their departure on Friday night, the proceedings moved with an almost clockwork efficiency. Most of the credit for this is due to the Governor (now the Governor-General) and Lady Paul and to the Independence Committee, consisting largely of expatriate Government Officers under the energetic chairmanship of Mr. Gore, the Deputy Governor, who managed on a tight budget and in spite of the difficulties of accommodation in a small city like Bathurst to organise most successfully a very comprehensive programme of events.

3. The celebrations followed the same general pattern as in other African Commonwealth countries which have recently achieved their independence. The main events were the presentation of a Royal Charter by the Duke of Kent on the morning of his arrival, raising Bathurst to the status of a city; the Mansa Bengo at Brikama on Wednesday morning when tribal Chiefs from the Provinces paid their respects to the Duke as The Queen's representative; the tattoo and flag-raising ceremony in MacCarthy Square the same night; the swearing in of the Governor-General on Independence Day, followed by the presentation by the Duke to the Prime Minister of the Constitutional Instruments in the presence of a huge crowd which included 3,600 schoolchildren; and finally the State Opening of Parliament on Friday, 19 February. Wednesday, Thursday and Friday had been declared public holidays.

4. Cloudless skies, the brilliance of tropical flowers, the flags and the other decorations, together with the bright red uniforms of the Field Force of the Gambian Police and the varied hues of the garments worn by the people themselves, combined to make all the important ceremonies most colourful and pleasing to the eye. The large crowds and the traffic were efficiently handled by the Gambian Police whose bearing and behaviour were excellent.

5. The presence of the British cruiser H.M.S. *Lion* (Captain E. F. Hamilton-Meikle, M.B.E., R.N.) throughout the celebrations contributed most materially to their success. The Royal Marines presented a drill display at the tattoo, and a detachment of the Royal Navy and Royal Marines with an excellent Royal Marines band took part in the flag-raising ceremony, thus providing strong support to the fairly thin contingent of the Gambian Field Force. Gambians and expatriates vied with one another to provide hospitality to the ship's company of 700 officers and men, which was amply reciprocated by a series of parties on board the cruiser, including one for hundreds of Gambian children. Before finally sailing away on Friday evening the ship did a short trip up river to James Island with the Duke and Duchess of Kent on board.

* Not printed.

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6. The Royal visitors carried out their heavy round of duties with a graceful dignity and charm which tuned in well with the relaxed and cheerful but somewhat restrained mood of the people themselves. At the main ceremonies when speeches were exchanged, the Duke's fine voice and excellent delivery impressed his hearers; while on less formal occasions the populace enjoyed the unaffected friendliness and complete absence of stiffness with which the Duke and his Duchess mingled with the crowd.

7. Although Their Royal Highnesses were given a most friendly welcome wherever they went, a newcomer to The Gambia could not fail to be struck by the quietness and seeming lack of any great enthusiasm on the part of the crowds which witnessed the celebrations. Even the floodlighting of the Gambian flag at the mast head at midnight on 17/18 February after the Union Jack had been lowered failed to raise a cheer. But those experienced in the ways of The Gambia point to a tradition of dignified behaviour and a dislike of noisy manifestations on big public occasions. Ministers and other prominent individuals have generally reflected this mood of restraint and it seemed that they had taken to heart the sober words of the Prime Minister when, speaking of the difficult path ahead, Mr. Jawara said: "Independence is not a magical formula which will transform your groundnuts into diamonds. It means facing the fact that we shall be on our own and that by our own efforts we must earn our keep." With so little Ministerial talent available in such a small country, The Gambia is at least fortunate in having Mr. Jawara to guide her during the dangers and difficulties of the early days of her independence. He seems a capable and level-headed leader and friendly disposed to Britain.

8. The British delegation to the Independence Celebrations was led by Mr. Cledwyn Hughes, Minister of State for Commonwealth Relations, supported by Mr. Eastwood of the Colonial Office and myself. Also from Britain came a quintet of former Governors of The Gambia, the most colourful of whom, Sir Percy Wyn-Harris, sailed all the way from England in his own small yacht. Among the delegates of the other 30 countries represented the most important visitors were Governor Mennen Williams from the United States, Sir Charles Davidson from Australia, M. Doudou Thiam, the Foreign Minister of Senegal, and a younger brother of the President of Mali.

9. I am sending copies of this despatch to Her Majesty's Ambassadors at Dakar, Conakry, Monrovia, Bamako, Abidjan, Lomé, Yaoundé, Brazzaville, Leopoldville and Pretoria and to the High Commissioners in other Commonwealth countries.

I have, &c.

G. E. CROMBIE.

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