

## The Story of *The Last Imperialist*

Back in 2015, I made a remarkable discovery: Africa's most famous anti-colonial hero, the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe, was actually not anti-colonial for the most part. I wrote an article on my discovery, "Chinua Achebe on the Positive Legacies of Colonialism" that was published in the academic journal *African Affairs* in 2016. During the research for that article, I stumbled across a book written in the comparatively late year of 1957 offering a full-throated defense of colonialism. I was intrigued. Who was this "Sir Alan Burns" who wrote *In Defense of Colonies*? How was he so bold as to challenge the anti-colonial ideas then spreading like a bush fire, especially in the United States and Europe?

A quick search revealed some basic biographical details, born in the West Indies in 1887 and died in 1980 after a colorful career in the colonial civil service, but nothing more. Could it be true that the life of this most prolific of British colonial officials - a former colonial governor of the Gold Coast and representative at the United Nations who had authored no less than 10 books describing and explaining various aspects of British colonialism - had disappeared, so to speak, from the historical record?

Youth came to the rescue in the person of Emily Delves, the great grand-daughter of Sir Alan Burns. Emily is a keen genealogist and had published some family trees on a genealogical website. A quick email and the world opened up. "Why are you interested in Sir Alan?" she reasonably asked. I explained the Achebe work and how it had led me to her great grandfather.

And so it began: a five-year odyssey into the life and times of Sir Alan Burns: scourge of anti-colonial politicians, defender of a humane and liberal colonialism, fondly-remembered governor of many far-flung colonies, brother to one of Britain's leading communists of the Cold War era, an easy target for postcolonial intellectuals the world over, and a gentleman of an age now past.



With Emily Delves

This book is dedicated to my dear cousins Rob and Coral, whose love and hospitality during my years at Oxford and friendship since then always made England feel like a second home to me. I was glad to share with them my plans for the dedication just months before Rob was called home. In many ways this book is an ode to the Britain that they brought to life for me.

My deepest thanks, meanwhile, go to the extended Burns family which has been so generous with its time in sharing memories, mementos, and documents from the life of Sir Alan Burns. My first in-person contact after reaching Emily was with Robin Burns, Sir Alan's nephew, who by chance lived not but a few hours from me in Vancouver, B.C. Robin and his son Alan shared first-hand memories and photos that fired my enthusiasm at an early stage. My next visit was to Sheila Bhattacharya, nee Burns, Sir Alan's niece, and her son Robbie in England. Sheila like her brother Robin, brought to me an immediate sense of the importance of this life and the many complex issues it entailed. Sitting listening to Sheila, whose first-hand experiences of Sir Alan were most extensive, was humbling.



*With Sheila Bhattacharya (nee Burns)*

My next stop was Ireland to meet Chris Barrett, Sir Alan's grand-daughter. Chris's perceptiveness about the difficult personal choices made by a colonial civil servant and her empathy for this life overwhelmed me. I felt like he was in the room when we chatted on a rainy afternoon overlooking the Irish countryside. And finally to the main archive, Sir Alan's boxes and boxes of personal items under the care and stewardship of his grandson Alan, Emily's father, and granddaughter Laura. On two trips to Alan's home, I sat on a living room floor with boxes everywhere, quite a mess. We



*With Chris Barrett*

all shared and discovered. What was this? Could anyone read this? When was this written? What on earth is this?

Somewhere in the midst of these trips a final critical clue fell into place. I had long been surprised that such a prolific author had apparently published his last book 14 years before his death. Surely he must have written on what was happening in the former colonies in the 1960s and 1970s, grim tidings that vindicated most of his warnings about social and political collapse, the "sea we fear" of Kipling's poem. As it turned out, he had indeed written a final manuscript, *Colonialism: Before and After*, that was in the hands of his grandson Andrew. My interest encouraged Andrew to resurrect a plan to type up the manuscript and put it into the public realm. We talked by Skype, emailed, and found a place for it at the Cambridge University library.



With Alan Dixon and Laura

My only problem with this whole project was that a lot of work would be needed in the archives and libraries of Britain. As luck would have it, Andrew's sister Sarah, Sir Alan's granddaughter -- who had many endearing memories of him from when she was a child -- inherited the family's literary inclinations and became a chartered librarian. After sharing her own trove of Sir Alan memories and memorabilia, Sarah offered to help. A more perfect research partner could not be imagined.



With Sarah Pavey

In all, dear reader, you will see why I consider that the ghost of Sir Alan, whose own affairs in life were so scrupulously planned and executed, ran this project

from the start. Or more plausibly, this larger-than-life man with a great generosity and sense of history had passed those traits to his family which rallied to the cause of a proper biography.

Despite its vast armada of academics and scholars on colonial issues, Britain has failed to produce a life of Sir Alan Burns. Sitting in distant Portland on many a winter's morning, I wondered why Britain had failed this man. I realize that much of it has to do with a polite embarrassment about his pro-colonial views and a need to "maintain a distance dear boy". The American academics who have written of Sir Alan dismiss him as a dinosaur and reactionary while British academics fall into an irritating muffle about "a sad figure in a losing cause". Britain no longer celebrates its colonial achievements and the men and women who made them possible.

Yet here is my point: Sir Alan was neither sad nor a dinosaur: he led a passionate, worthy, and fulfilling life and would not have a single regret today. His view that decolonization happened too fast and should have been more carefully managed - which all along was part of his liberal, humane, and progressive outlook -- was right, or so I argue in *The Last Imperialist*. Working with Emily at first, and then with Robin, Sheila, Robbie, Chris, Sarah, Andy, and Alan, and then excavating the documents and archives, has made it plain that this is a colonial life of importance. So this book is in the end a tribute to Sir Alan himself, an outsider of the British elite who was one of the few to remind them of what Achebe called the "great human story" of colonialism. It is a story that needs to be told.

■ Bruce Gilley, Portland, Oregon, July 2020