

Ironing the lawn in Salisbury, Rhodesia

From [Simon Hoggart](#)

Sat 9 Feb 1980 23.46 GMT

Government House in Salisbury is decorated and furnished in a manner which makes Versailles seem, well, middle-class. Amid the silken splendour of the chairs and the carpets which are so thick you could lose a cat in them, there are life-size portraits of the last few British monarchs. The Governor has added a homely touch with framed snaps of family and friends - in his case people like the Queen Mother and Winston Churchill.

The servants are immaculately dressed in white, with fitments - sashes, cummerbunds and for some reason fezzes - in bright green. This greenery is trimmed with gold according to the servant's rank, so that the head waiter looks like a gift- wrapped present from Neiman- Marcus, with a gold tassel on top of his head. The Governor has laid in a plentiful supply of champagne and Havana cigars (the wife of a visiting American congressman, thinking these were set out for the guests, tried to take one away as a present for Tip O'Neill, Speaker of the House of Representatives. Just as she took it, Lord Soames spotted her. "Put it back!" he roared.)

Obviously this magnificence is meant to impress somebody, to demonstrate the sheer power and the awesome prestige of colonial Britain (and, for the present month, Zimbabwe, or the British Dependency of Southern Rhodesia as it is officially known, is one of our very few colonies. The others include Belize, Tristan da Cunha, and one or two acres in the Caribbean). This wealth cannot be to impress the Africans, who, apart from the shimmering servants, barely get a look in. Joshua Nkomo is one who did, and got on very well with the Governor. This is not surprising. Nkomo also has a taste for the high life, and is the Lord Soames of Africa.

After a while, you realise exactly who the trappings are designed to impress: the Lost Race of Africa, the Tribe That Lost Its Head, the whites of Southern Rhodesia.

If you listen to the British officials who arrived in December on the great silver bird, you realise that they do see themselves as dealing with a backward and primitive people. They swap amusing stories about the childlike white folk they come across; a woman who thought Soames could cancel her parking ticket, another who complained because she did not have two votes in the election. One British official talks about the "Cheryl and Vomit" society, composed of women who wear their name on gold necklets, and young men on leave from military service who spend their weekends getting drunk in Salisbury and then throwing up in the street.

Even the British squaddies look with faint contempt on the Rhodesians (or "Rhodies" as they sometimes call them; military slang mushrooms overnight). One private explained to me his alleged success with the local women. "You see these Rhodies think they can snap their fingers and some bird'll come running. But us Brits give 'em a few cuddles and talk nice to them, and they've never had anything like that."

No wonder the white Rhodesians resent us. A woman who had, for that part of the world, very moderate views, asked what I thought of Soames. I said he had a reputation for arrogance. "But all you British are arrogant," she said, in genuine puzzlement, rather as if I had said he spoke English or had two legs. It was this wish to give the whites a whiff of the old colonial past which probably led to Soames's appointment. Another Foreign Office official explained that his deputy, Sir Anthony Duff, could have done the job standing on his head. "But he isn't Churchill's son-in-law."

The corollary of this is that the British are highly impressed by the blacks - possibly in some cases too much so. Many of the Patriotic Front commanders are men of high intelligence and expertise, their education started in mission schools in Rhodesia and frequently finished off in Moscow. This has helped them to run a highly successful guerrilla war and - for the present anyway - follow through politically. But to hear some of the British talking, you'd imagine that the entire physics faculty of MIT had just walked out of the bush.

One British officer in close touch with PF leaders on Nkomo's side blamed the press. "I thought this lot were all golliwogs with machine guns, but they are very, very different." And indeed they are, to an extent which would astonish and perhaps appal some white Rhodesians.

A more bluntly phrased view came from a British private who was talking to a PF commander at one of the assembly points. He asked what he had done to pass the time in the bush, and the African said that he had read - Marx, Lenin, that kind of thing. "I prefer a good western myself," the squaddie said, adding when the PF man had gone: "Here, he's pretty clever, innee, for a nig-nog."

Rhodesian women, black and white, tend to be remarkably good looking. The Shona women have high cheekbones and fine features which make them exceedingly pretty, to European eyes at any rate. The whites have golden hair, lovely toast-coloured skin, and because of the weather, few clothes. There is something particularly disconcerting about hearing those famous racist views expressed in that shrill mounting whine, coming from someone whose rounded figure is straining out of a thin nylon dress.

One such accosted us in a restaurant. "I heard you were journalists, and I've come over to tell you that Ian Smith is the greatest politician in the western world. He's so honest and straight. If the blacks could vote for him, they all would. He's the only reason we've had 14 years of civilisation."

Weren't there some people who disagreed with her, who thought on the contrary that Smith had misled them into a worse predicament than ever before?

"They're all turncoats and bastards and fools. You don't understand what savages these black people are. You've never lived here. Answer this, how many blacks are there in the British Parliament? They are all murderers, they just want to kill us. You wouldn't believe the disgusting things they've done." Surely, though, the whites had mounted some pretty fierce reprisals? "Yes, but that was in self-defence, that was justified."

She turned out to be a teacher of English Literature, a fact which might give pause for thought to those who believe in the humanising effect of great works. Education was exempt from sanctions, and all O and A levels were set and marked in London. "Now they are being provocative and controversial just to spite us."

"Last year we had Persuasion and King Lear. Now they've given us Alan Paton, The Comedians, which is full of nasty blacks, and Othello. I've got a big black buck sitting at the front of my class and I've got to teach him about Desdemona's murder, thanks to you British." A Rhodesian magazine recently prepared its readers for what they might expect with an end to sanctions: wall-to-wall carpets, blenders and digital watches; in fact when the starship Rhodesia is beamed back into the planet Earth, they can expect something much more worrying - exposure to the ideas and the received wisdom of the western world over the past 14 years. They may learn, for instance, that it is perfectly possible to believe that black people deserve the vote without actually endorsing the invasion of Afghanistan.

Because they see the war as invented and run by Communists, they tend to believe that their blacks were happy and content in a white-dominated society. The briefest chat with an African reveals this to be untrue, but then most Rhodesian whites don't have conversations with Africans, except to give them orders.

However, it is easy to see how they have got hold of this idea. Rhodesian blacks are startlingly docile and even courtly. This gentility can be surprising. There is possibly nobody in Rhodesia - black or white - who has not lost somebody in the fighting, the blacks rather more than the whites. Irish people in Ulster tend to relish these deaths, to recount the horrors with something near satisfaction, to draw comfort from each hideous detail.

Rhodesian blacks are the opposite, and speak in a deadpan and fatalistic way about the loss of friends and family.

I met General Debengwa, who is Nkomo's senior military leader in Rhodesia itself. Was he going back to his home town, Bulawayo? No, he said, there was no real point since he had no family there. His mother had lived there until a few years ago, but the Selous Scouts had discovered that she had fed a ZIPRA military column which was passing through. They had shot her immediately.

Debengwa described this incident without emotion, as if she had died from a heart attack - something sad but perhaps inevitable. I thought that, like Camus's outsider, he had found coldness his only defence against despair, or that being responsible for many deaths himself, had inured himself against the one which affected him. But later I found that nearly all blacks talk like this; they describe death as we discuss illness or a broken love affair, intolerable only if you let it prey upon your mind.

In a horrible way it matches the whites' unconcern with black mortality; among soldiers prestige can be measured by the number of dead "terrs" (or "floppies" - a description of how they fall when shot). "He and his brother have taken out 58 gooks between them," one troopie told me in admiration of a friend.

Curiously, it is hard not to be a little optimistic about the future for Zimbabwe (as nobody at all calls it yet, except in political speeches). The fear is not that there will be mass slaughter of the whites, followed by their flight to South Africa and the collapse of the economy, but that the need to retain white confidence may mean that the blacks are badly disappointed.

Certainly all the election manifestoes promise the earth (quite literally the earth - all imply that the land will return to the blacks without saying how, when or to whom). They promise new housing, better homes, real social security, secondary schooling for everybody. Yet even if all whites were expelled and their property divided among the blacks (whites are less than 3 per cent of the population) this wealth would be slow in coming.

Meanwhile the whites continue to live in a style unimaginable here, but all too familiar to the shop assistants, garage hands and dissatisfied bourgeoisie who have made Rhodesia their home. Around the average Salisbury bungalow are three or four acres of rich land, thick with shrubbery, flower beds, rolling lawns, arboretums: so much greenery you feel you need a platoon of Gurkhas to hack your way through to the front door. A team of servants irons the grass each morning as the sun rises over the sparkling pool. Later vast dragonflies zoom over the blue water like helicopter gunships as the host and his guests enjoy perhaps a "wine race" -

swimming a length backwards while drinking a glass of wine (Rhodesian wine probably, which is awful. It is the only alcoholic drink to give you bilharzia) - or just pushing each other into the water. Then maybe a few glasses of "hooligan juice", a large slug of brandy mixed to a slush with a scoop of vanilla ice cream.

This is what they call civilisation, and it is easy for us to mock: after all, they work hard and they have fought hard. It is impossible not to admire the way they have coped with sanctions, the way they have manufactured almost everything from tomato ketchup to armoured cars. Though the cause was perhaps not worth fighting - indeed did not need to be fought - we need not grudge them their mindless pleasures, pleasures we would hugely enjoy if we could. I recall one faintly pathetic note being struck 150 miles or so north of Salisbury. A young man, just out of the army, asked if there was any chance that the British would stay behind to help the white Rhodesians fight if the settlement went horribly wrong.

I said (fairly) that there was no chance at all, and added - unfairly - that they could expect to see Lord Soames mount the aircraft steps on March 1, write the name of the new prime minister on a scratch pad, throw it on to the tarmac, slam the door and take off for England with a screech of engines. "Ah, what style" said the young man. "When the British wash their hands, they use only the finest soap."