

Alan Kluckow

Alan's father was born in Rhodesia in 1919. Alan was born in Rhodesia in 1946. Went to art school in South Africa in 1964 for three years. After returning to Rhodesia, joined the Territorial Army until he left Rhodesia for South Africa in 1972. Later moved to the USA, visiting Zimbabwe once per year. Eventually moved to the UK.

This is Doctor Sue Onslow talking to Mr Alan Kluckow in Sunningdale on Friday, 5th June 2009. Alan, thank you very much indeed for agreeing to talk to me. I wonder if you could begin by saying, please, how did you and your family come to be in Rhodesia in the 1960's and 1970's?

My father was born in Rhodesia in 1919, so we were quite an early family, but they'd come via South Africa like a lot of us. My great-grandfather was a German from near Berlin; he came to Africa in the late 19th century, married an English girl, had nine children - seven boys and two girls - and the seven boys crossed the border to settle in Rhodesia.

All seven of them?

Yes, so the name Kluckow, which I believe is a Prussian name, is quite well known in Rhodesia. I was born in 1946 just after the war. There were three of us children, my brother, sister and I grew up in what was then Salisbury.

Which particular suburb of Harare did you live in?

When my father came back from the war, having served in the Royal Air Force, they'd put up emergency homes for Air Force people and we lived in a suburb called Belvedere and the roads were all named after wartime aircraft. We lived in Lancaster Avenue and everybody on the street were all ex-Air Force, including a couple of Polish pilots who had taken their families out there after the war. There were about thirty homes on the street, and they were all ex-servicemen. When I was about 9 or 10 we moved to a new suburb called Strathaven, which is near Avondale.

Did this enclave stay as quite a tight community?

Yes, very much so. Lots of little post war children being born to a variety of different families. A lot of them were born and bred Rhodesians like my father, but as many as half I would say, were UK people who had come to Rhodesia after the war and then, as I said, there were a couple of Polish families as well.

So your six great uncles, they were all living...?

They were all over Rhodesia. My grandfather was involved in both farming and mining. Before the war my father had wanted to be an electrical engineer and then the war intervened. He came back and, because things were what

they were after the war, he decided to go and get an electrical diploma (or whatever the qualification was) and then he set up an electrical contracting business which was called Kluckow's Electrical.

My father also got involved in politics in the very early days and I can remember as a child having to go with him and put up posters for the Mayor of Salisbury.

For Frank Clements?

No, for Charles Olly. My father was helping with his election campaign, and would go out and tie electioneering posters around lampposts. At that time my father was also involved in the Dominion Party, the precursor to Rhodesian Front. He and Ian Smith were friends from their Royal Air Force days and remained so all their lives. Mr Smith was a regular visitor to our home; the family knew him very well. My father then joined the Rhodesian Front party. He was very active in the party and towards the end, in the last days of the Rhodesian Front, I can't remember exactly when, he became the chairman of the party. His name was Geoffrey John Kluckow. In fact at one stage I think that of the four provincial heads of the Rhodesian Front, two of them were Kluckows, the other one being my father's cousin. So we were involved in politics from a very early age, but my own political views changed when I went off to University.

In what way?

Racism started to worry me in my late teens. I saw a lot of things happen that I didn't like.

Such as?

Various incidents of whites using their racial superiority towards blacks in a bullying manner. For example, I was involved in an incident where I had intervened on behalf of a black man, I remember one incident very clearly - I was a bit older, I must have been about eighteen, when a black man was knocked off his bicycle by some young white chaps driving a car. He jumped up after having had the skin taken off his elbows and knees and his bicycle bent and battered. They, the white boys, had clearly been in the wrong because they had come straight through a stop sign, but they then proceeded to accuse the old man of being in the wrong by saying something like "you stupid black bastard, what do you think you are doing?" Without thinking I stepped in and said, "What are you're saying? He's in the right and you're in the wrong. This man was riding down the road, and you came out of the stop street", to which all three (I think three or four of them) turned on me saying, "I think we're dealing with a white kaffir here". Being called a white kaffir was a very derogatory thing to be called in those days and it was said to antagonise. The interesting thing was that intervening on behalf of the injured black man was the last thing he wanted. All he wanted to do was get away from there as quickly as possible with his broken bicycle and his cut knees and elbows. He didn't want any confrontation with white people. So I had stepped in on his

behalf, but found myself right in the middle, and neither side was happy that I'd stuck my nose in. He said to me "Please bwana, I don't mind that my bicycle has been broken" and I said to him "you don't mind – I mind". Now, all of a sudden, I'd put him in a difficult position, which he was very uncomfortable about, to say the least.

He hadn't asked for that

He had not asked for that. What he really have been happy to do was to just walk away, say sorry to the white bwanas, and go on his way, but one bwana decided to intervene and make trouble for him.

And that was in the Sixties?

Yes, that was in the late Sixties.

Did you talk to your father about this?

Very much so, he called me his "liberal son".

Break in interview

Alan, you were talking about discussing race issues with your father in the 1960's.

His thinking was very much 'on the right' – he was very much a white African who was part of a very conservative Second World War generation. I don't think my father was a racist in the traditional sense, but he did believe in the separation of the races, and he didn't believe that black people were ready to govern. I remember him being very fair, and even kind to black people, but his attitude towards black people was more like a father to child relationship.

I was going to say, was it paternalistic?

It was a paternalistic relationship. But when I challenged some of the views and pointed out where I thought there were injustices, his response was a typical one for those times, "Oh he's a liberal, he's gone off to art school and has got all these liberal views now. Universities give them liberal attitudes".

How much were your attitudes also framed by your schooling? You're talking about this very conservative, paternalistic attitude coming from your parents?

I suppose the schooling had something to do with it, but it came mainly from my parents.

Particularly your father

My Father, and my Mother. Rhodesian schools, and by that I mean white schools, were for the most part all, what might loosely be called 'right wing'. At least that's the way I remember them.

Little 'empire builders'?

Yes, little empire builders. It was the only world I knew at the time, but I only really started to think differently when I went to art school in South Africa.

When did you go to South Africa?

I went in 1964.

After Sharpeville

Yes, after all of that. In South Africa I found that the separation of the races was much stronger, more in trenched. My father once said that he thought that the South Africans had made a mistake by forcing their black people learn Afrikaans. We were encouraged to speak black languages and his view on that was that you can't understand the people if you can't speak their language. So most white Rhodesians were encouraged to speak a black language. We spoke a pidgin black language to our servants, and we very seldom conversed in English and I think that enabled us to 'connect' in a better way with our black people than the majority of whites in South Africa. Black South Africans were often very surprised that a white person was talking to them in the way we did in Rhodesia, I think it was much more friendly. South Africa was very different and I found a type of racism there that I hadn't known in Rhodesia.

So you spent how long down in Cape Town?

I spent three years in Cape Town

And when you came back, did you look at your country with new eyes?

Yes, I think I did

Because it was across the divide of UDI by that point, if you went there from '64 and came back...

Yes, that's right. I remember when UDI was declared and the great euphoria in South Africa and people saying that Ian Smith had done the right thing and to hell with the British and all that sort of thing. I was a very confused young man at this stage, because I loved my family and all my friends, but I was slightly out of step with what was happening. Soon after I got back I was conscripted into the army though, and another chapter began.

You went straight into the Army when you returned?

Yes, you were required to sign up the moment you returned. I did have an option, like the young Americans in the Vietnam days, to stay outside, to get a job in South Africa and not go back, but if I'd decided to do that my father would never have spoken to me ever again, so when I got back I 'damn well did my duty' and went into the army.

Well, was there a war?

Yes it had started in around 1966, but my first real experience was with Operation Cauldron, which happened sometime in 1968. I did my Army training in 1967 in Bulawayo first, and then we were sent to Kariba where we patrolled the border along the Zambezi river. There were earlier incursions, but things really started to liven up by '67, '68, when there was the first big crossings from Zambia. I remember arriving back home one evening and my Mum had put a note on the telephone saying "you've got to be at KGV1 barracks by 4:00am tomorrow morning", and before we knew it we were on lorries taking us to the border. There, for the very first time I saw dead bodies. We were told that 'this is a real war, people get killed' and it really was an eye opener and very shocking. As a territorial soldier I wasn't involved in the real day-to-day fighting, but a lot of my friends were. A lot of boys I knew joined the regular army and as a result saw a lot of action, and some were killed doing so. I stayed in the army as a territorial until 1972 when we left to go to South Africa.

But what did you think you were fighting against?

Fighting against black liberation, against the 'gooks' or 'terrorists', against communism, against Harold McMillan's 'winds of change'. Communist was a word that was used all the time. Anybody who was anti-government was regarded as a communist, so in other words, anybody who was anti the war could be accused of being a communist.

That shuts down space (for political discussion)

That's right. So in other words, he who disagrees with what Ian Smith's doing must be a communist. But the word was used without knowing what communism really was. It was a buzz word and the liberation armies had been trained in communist countries like China and Russia. The eastern border only started to become active with Mugabe's people. The war, during the time I was involved, was really a Zambian border war and it was only after the Portuguese had left that the other border war started and everything got much more intense, but by then I'd left to live in South Africa, so I missed the 'real war'. My young family and I visited Rhodesia regularly once or twice a year after we'd left in 1972 and it was very interesting to see how the war had affected the day-to-day lives of people and how they'd learnt to live with the war. The men were in and out of the army all the time, so women became much more active in running things, as they did here in England in World War II, because the men were away fighting the war.

How much do you think the Second World War was that huge reference point for Rhodesian society?

Yes I think it was, very much so. Most of our leaders had fought in the war and many of their fathers had fought in the Great War, and Ian Smith had been a fighter pilot during the war.

You've got the "war leader"

That's right, Ian Smith was the right man, but we still felt very passionate about the Queen, the flag. My father was very much a royalist.

Even after the Republic was declared?

Even after that, he thought the Queen was still 'okay'. Funnily enough, I suspect that Robert Mugabe might still think the Queen is 'okay', even though he's 'at war' with Blair and Browns Britain. Somebody once said that the whole Zimbabwean problem could have been solved if the Queen asked Robert Mugabe to tea, and I think there's a lot of truth in that. In the end he's a colonial boy as well. Growing up in colonial Africa with the Union Jack flying, the Queen, the school uniforms, all the British pomp and circumstance. Robert Mugabe has never been very keen on the Labour Party and I think he views them as somehow 'second class', as apposed to the Conservatives, who are the party of the aristocrats, the Queen and all that, all that was great about Britain. I'm sure he, like most Rhodesians, didn't trust the Labour Party.

Deviant, decadent?

Yes. On the one hand there was Harold Wilson, who we were led to believe was a conscientious objector, versus Ian Smith, fighter pilot and war hero. White Rhodesians were mostly united behind Ian Smith and it was thought that Britain had 'gone to the dogs' in the post war years, and particularly under the Labour Party. Ian Smith was also a hero to a lot of Britons and I think to some of them he represented what was best about 'old Britain', Great Britain. He was a spitfire pilot and embodied a lot of what the war generation felt had been lost in the post war years. Post war colonial Rhodesia was peopled by men and their woman who had fought and experienced the World War. They were the generation who had won the war and were proud of it and all the other Commonwealth nations. But as the post war years passed and Britain joined the European Union, and the Commonwealth became more and more 'black', my father got very disillusioned. He also had issues about Britain's relationship with America because he said that he thought it would take them down the wrong route. He thought that their (Britain's) real friends, their blood relatives if you like, were Australians, New Zealanders, South Africans, and Rhodesians off course.

The Dominions

The Dominions.

A white Dominion

Yes, a white Dominion.

Britain had lost its way and the Labour party under Harold Wilson was a butt of many jokes and my father would say things like, "I mean, look at him, the Prime Minister of Great Britain, he's the leader of that great nation, he's somebody I would not open the door to". So there was a real issue about Britain and the feeling that it was no longer 'great'.

But that also suggests class attitudes

Oh very much so

Class divisions

Very much so, we regarded ourselves as a cut above the rest. Most of our schools were run like English public schools. Our uniforms came from England, we wore straw boaters made in England. I have an old photograph of my brother and myself standing in our garden with our uniforms on, in our grey flannels and our blazers, and our boaters, ties and white shirts, and if you took out the background, we could be mistaken for little English schoolboys. We were little England. Our police force was called the British South Africa Police, but to us the 'proper police' were the Metropolitan Police, the English bobby. People would talk about 'going home' and they meant going to England.

But for your father, Rhodesia was "home"

Rhodesia was home

And for you, surely?

And for me as well, but there was this mother nation which was Great Britain which exerted a huge influence on all of us. At school a lot of masters had come from England and some were ex-public schoolboys who decided to come out and do a bit of teaching in Africa. The school I went to was a government school, but it was run like an English public school. We had prefects and the prefects had 'fags' and most of the boys were given nicknames. We played cricket and rugby and squash and we did all the things that English public schoolboys did. If I compare notes with contemporaries of mine here in England who might have gone to Eton, Harrow, or any of the many public schools, there's not much difference in our experience of our school days.

And the interesting thing is, of course, the values that you're being inculcated with. What it is to be 'a good man' are very similar.

They're very similar, and they were very much as you've pointed out, classist. So we were being raised to have the values of public school Britain, not working class Britain.

But the interesting thing of course is that many of those who'd come from Britain in that great surge of post-war immigration...

Yes, were working class.

Were working class

Yes, but they quickly changed. I'll always remember a little boy: his name was John Humphries and he came from Liverpool. He arrived, him and his brother, at our junior school (prep school) with skin as white as a sheet and long hair. It was obvious he'd come from England and there we were, all little sun tanned boys. He had these long shorts and long socks. We had short shorts and short socks, brown skins and very short haircuts. I remember the teacher introducing him, telling us his name and that he'd just arrived from England.

Poor little tyke!

Yes, poor little tyke. He's asked to stand up in class and the teacher says 'Boys and girls, I want to introduce you to a little boy who's come from Liverpool in England, his name is John Humphries, say hello to him', 'Hello John we all said in unison. But we thought, wait until we get him on the playground. There he had to go through a sort of initiation which took the form of a game whose purpose was to throw a tennis ball at the individual who happened to be 'on', trying to inflict as much pain as possible in the process. The moment the game started little John from Liverpool became the main target of the stinging tennis ball. He was extraordinary, he took it all without any fuss, but the most amazing thing was that the following day when he pitched up at school he had cut his own shorts to the regulation length, which was very short and within a couple of days he'd also had his hair all cut as short as all of ours. In a week or two, he was totally integrated. His accent changed from what we called a 'pommie' accent and in no time he was 'one of the boys'. I went right through school with him...he was very popular.

This is interesting because what made 'a good Rhodesian'?

I think like a lot of those things, identity and again, in that sense...

That's pretty malleable from what you've said?

Yes, very much so. In Salisbury a lot of English immigrants would start out living in a suburb called Mabelreign, but after they had been in the country for a while and assimilated, they moved out of Mabelreign and into other suburbs where real Rhodesians lived.

I've seen it happen here in England with South African families for example. They arrive and within no time they've begun the transition. Their children go to school and their accents change, and slowly the Africa bit...

Blurs

Yes, and after initially being very apprehensive, and understandably so, they slowly assimilate and feel quite happy to admit that they like living in England.

But where's "home"?

They don't know, like me. I'm reminded every day, or virtually every day in my art gallery, when people come through the door and after a brief conversation almost always ask where I'm from. I then have to explain, so I'm reminded every day that I'm a foreigner because of my accent.

Don't worry, I'm English and people ask me where I come from!

Sometimes when I'm asked where I'm from, I'm not quite sure what the answer is and I say, I was born in, and I lived in, then I moved to, it's all very complicated.

But it's interesting. You construct where you're from by your journey.

I suppose that's right, but in the end I'm a white colonial African, and we're a dying breed. It's also complicated because the world we grew up in has changed so dramatically. Colonial white Africa has given way to post colonial black Africa and as a result I for one feel a bit disconnected with the new Zimbabwe, and for that reason I find it difficult to talk about, or give opinions on the events taking place there.

I sat next to quite well known writer at a post art exhibition dinner in London not long ago and he couldn't wait to chat to me about Africa and its politics, particularly my opinion on Robert Mugabe and what I thought the future of South Africa might be. I told him it was very difficult for me to talk about the subject because I was a white southern African and if I expressed any criticism of black Africa, I could, or would be accused of being racist. I could say good things, and that was acceptable, but I mustn't say anything bad, because I ran the risk of being accused of being a white racist. On the other hand there are people black and white, with whom you can discuss and criticise the failings of the new Africa, but I would have had to establish before hand that my views were not based on any lingering racism from my past. For example I'm quite happy to talk to Ian Macpherson, or chat to you about my experiences because I feel confident that my views are not going to be misconstrued.

But that's safe space

Yes, and I need a 'safe' place to talk about these issues, because some of it's not very pleasant to talk about, and very complicated.

And it has to be unpacked

I think it's a good idea to try and unpack it. I'm quite happy to talk about some of the horrible things that happened. I have conversations with South African's and sometimes the subject of life in the apartheid years gets raised and you can sense them not wanting to talk about what happened, and what life must have been like for black people in the old South Africa.

Having lived in Europe now for seventeen years, and being interested in history and particularly racism in Nazi Germany, I've had a number of conversations with Germans of my age about living with the legacy of the holocaust. They're naturally reluctant to talk about their parent's involvement in the war in the same way that we are about what happened in Southern Africa. I have a good friend who grew up in post war Austria and she says the war was never discussed.

It was papered over in Austria

She once asked her father if he'd been a member of the Nazi party, and he said that he had to be a member of the Nazi party to survive. In post UDI Rhodesia you 'had' to be a member of the Rhodesian Front, if you weren't, you were the 'enemy'

Were you really?

In a sense you were. Ian Smith's RF Party dominated the political landscape of the time.

But what about the Centre Party?

The Centre Party were seen as appeasers, the RF where the 'party of the people'.

A mass movement

Yes a mass movement, 'we'd been betrayed by Britain' and Ian Smith was going to stand up and fight the communist hoards.

That implies the Rhodesia Front was almost fascistic?

Not in the German National Socialist sense, but there was a strong feeling that we'd (Rhodesia) had been betrayed and that we were fighting the world.

This is 'laager' mentality

That's right, sanctions were imposed, Rhodesia was kicked out of the Olympic Games, Rhodesian's couldn't travel, except to South Africa and the Portuguese territories, and as a result there was a laager mentality. The threat that Rhodesia might become just another black country, another black failure,

was something that was too awful to comprehend and was very much worth fighting to avoid, so it became us against them.

Rhodesians (white) felt abandoned by the rest of the world and many felt that it had been agreed amongst the western powers that the whites in Africa were expendable. In the same way that the Nazis thought that there was a Jewish conspiracy to take over the world, Rhodesians were sure that communists in high places were quite happy to see them defeated. My father used to say that he thought Harold Wilson was a communist.

Were the Jews the enemy in Rhodesia?

Well, Jews like Catholics were outsiders of a sort. Rhodesia was mainly a protestant country if my memory serves me correctly.

An example that comes to mind is that at our school morning assembly, Jews and Catholics filed in after all the Protestants and sat at the front of the assembly. They remained there for most of the proceedings, but before we sang our morning hymn, they were all required to file out.

Second class citizens?

Ish. Wouldn't you say so?

Ooh, you're not part of the club

In the case of the Jewish people, I think it's true to say that they were regarded as different, albeit in small letters.

After we moved from Belvedere to Strathaven we had German neighbours on one side of us and the father had served in Wehrmacht during the war, and on the other side were a Jewish family and I can remember a lot of anti Jewish rhetoric, silly comments like 'the Jews killed Jesus', and in retrospect it must have been very hurtful. I can't remember us being anti German, or calling the German boys Nazi's for instance, so there was a sort of affinity between us gentiles.

Affinity?

Affinity might be the wrong word.

I remember lots of wonderful Jewish families, and Jewish boys at school who on the face of it were fully integrated, but I think it was known that they were Jewish, and that made them different.

Their difference was underlined everyday at our school assembly.

It's the stigmatisation that went with that

Yes, exactly.

So, from what you've talked about, the reference points for Rhodesian identity were very much British, imperial, colonial reference points?

Yes, we were Rhodesians, but I think most of our reference points were 'British', even if we didn't realise it.

The Second World War, the role of the leader, Ian Smith as the latter day Churchill?

Yes definitely, the flag and all that.

Yes, the flag. How much did the bush war also create that sense of identity?

Very much so, I think. The idea of being a Rhodesian took on a new meaning and we were fighting for the survival of a way of life.

So that's what you were fighting for?

We were fighting for a world that we believed was worth fighting for. We were fighting to protect our way of life and the values we'd learnt 'on the school playing fields'.

Fair play

Fair play as we saw it. We were fighting to protect the colonial way of life, protect the 'master race'.

But you used those words, I didn't

Yes, but I mean...

But in that construct - because it is a constructed and maintained, self referencing world - there's also, it seems to me, a sense of we're also fighting for "our" Africans, although we haven't actually asked "our" Africans what they want.

That's exactly right, but 'we knew what was best for our African's'. The rest of the world didn't understand what was best for Rhodesians, black and white, or so we believed. Integration was taking place in some schools, swimming pools were opened to all races, and the government had a lot of African leaders who supported them, including many of the tribal chiefs.

But the chiefs were also government employees as well.

They were government employees and because they supported the government they were regarded as 'good blacks', but those who didn't were called 'bad blacks'.

And communists?

And communists, yes.

Our relationships with Africans was very complicated and I remember with great fondness most, if not all our servants, and many other Africans who I'd known as I grew up. In the post independence years there was a lot of confusion amongst some black Zimbabweans about why Ian Smith gave up power and handed it over to a black government, and I can remember a conversation with a man I know since I was very young who worked at the local petrol station. He couldn't understand why a leader would give up power, it was an anathema to him because to him 'once a chief, always a chief' applied. Robert Mugabe is applying that principal of leadership, the African way in Zimbabwe 'as we speak'.

A different construct of leadership

Totally

That's what you're suggesting?

Yes, I don't think the idea of voting a leader out of power was really understood by grass roots Africans. Democracy has been imposed on Africa by the West and even today its difficult to have free and fair elections in Africa.

My fathers post independence story was very interesting to me because although he was always saying the country had 'gone to the dogs' his relationship with Africans was for the most part warm and friendly. He closed his electrical business and bought a hardware store and his neighbours were both black Africans one of which was an African woman, and it amused me to hear her call him by his first name, and to see how much he enjoyed chatting to her. His transformation from white bwana to just another shop owner whose business was next to black people's businesses was fascinating to me, and very encouraging.

And he bought into it, hook, line and sinker

Bought into it and was seemingly quite relaxed about it all. His African lady neighbour was very caring and I remember because I arrived with him one day after he'd been ill and not in his shop for a couple of days. As soon as we arrived she shot out of her shop to enquire about his health, telling him that she thought he should take it easy.

My father even ended up having an African WOMAN doctor (GP) and my mother said she was the only doctor my father ever listened to, and this all happened relatively soon after independence.

How soon after independence?

I would say in the late eighties, so six to eight years after, about?

After Independence a lot of whites must have breathed a sigh of relief to know that the whole thing was over, the war, and the threat of black reprisals never materialised. Robert Mugabe made all the 'right noises' and life in the new Zimbabwe was very good for everybody on the surface. I think the same thing has happened in South Africa as well, they are back in the real world and things don't seem so bad, for the time being!

But your father's neighbour?

As far as I know she and my father were friends right up until he decided to sell his store and retire.

Soon after he bought the hardware store he became friends with Zimbabwe's first president, Canaan Banana. The ex-president would visit the shop by buy bits and pieces and my father invited him to what was then a regular once a month lunch at the shop and my Mother recalls seeing Ian Smith, Pieter van der Byl, Canaan Banana and my father having lunch together; it must have been an extraordinary site.

Its hard to believe, three Rhodesian Front stall wards and the first black president 'chewing the cud', amazing!

But before then, before independence, would your parents have welcomed socially...?

No, that would never have happened.

Another interesting friendship my father (and Mother) developed in the years after independence was with a former British Consul General, I think that was his position, who had gone to Zimbabwe on a posting in the early 80's. His name was Alec Broadfoot and I'd met him in Johannesburg in the mid to late 70's, and when I told him I was a Rhodesian he said that if the situation changed he would love to get a posting up there. When independence came he did get a posting there and happened to meet my father at the then Salisbury Club and the first I heard about the meeting was from my Mother who told me that they'd met the Broadfoot's and what lovely people they were. The amazing thing about the friendship for me was that the two men couldn't have had more opposite views on politics, Alec Labour and 'left', and my father Rhodesian Front and 'right'. I think my parents saw a lot of them before he was sent back home to the UK and every time my Mother mentioned it, it brought a smile to my face.

So what were your brother's political views?

My brother was pretty much in step with my father and still is to this day. So we have...

Ying and yang

Yes, ying and yang.

But Alan, going back to your own experiences in the Seventies, when you did your time in the TA

Yes

You then went down to South Africa to set up as an art dealer and then from there you went to the States?

Artist initially, and then went to the United States.

You went back to Rhodesia frequently you said?

Yes, regularly, once a year or something like that.

And obviously had intense political discussions with your father?

As he got older, my mother used to say “Don’t argue with your father” and as I got older and wiser I took her advice and didn’t argue with him. I was a bit of an enigma because I was an artist and in the art world and he used to say to me “hello, son, how’s your art?” He didn’t really understand my world at all.

He had no window on your world

Absolutely none whatsoever, so we couldn’t talk about any of that. Just before he died I remember having some very nice chats with him. He was old and very ill and he was never going to change - I think he respected me for my views but he didn’t understand them, so we just begged to differ. There was not any way we could have had any constructive discussions about the Rhodesian years, because he didn’t have much of a sense of humour when it came to politics.

Did he feel that you had betrayed the cause by going down to South Africa and then going to the States? After all, that’s ‘taking the chicken run’.

Yes I think he must of, but I was always a bit out of step and he never made me feel guilty about moving to South Africa. We were always welcomed when we made our regular visits home, but when we moved to America he would sarcastically call me a ‘Yank’, because he always had ‘issues’ with America.

What about Ian Smith’s extraordinary, well, monumental, statement on the 25th September 1976, “black majority rule in two years”. How did your father cope with that?

I think it must have been a big shock for him, but I think he understood that ‘the game was up’.

Did you talk to him about it?

Not much, but he talked a lot about what he saw as South Africa's betrayal in the whole affair.

Did you feel that South Africa had betrayed you?

I personally didn't think I'd been betrayed, and I think even at the time I understood that the resistance had run its course.

On the surface most Rhodesians were saying that they could continue the fight if they continued to have South African support, but there must have been many who saw the 'writing on the wall'. However, the prevailing feeling was that they hadn't lost the war, but had been defeated by outside forces.

I think most South African's (white) felt Rhodesia had been betrayed as well and as you know there was huge popular support for the Rhodesian cause, which was illustrated by Ian Smith's visit to Pretoria for a rugby test when the whole crowd stood and applauded him when he arrived to watch the game. I'm sure you know the story?

Yes

South Africans at the time would say to me, it's a disgrace. He should be our leader, they would say. There was huge popular support, and a real camaraderie between white Africans, so when South Africa 'abandoned' Rhodesia it must have been very emotional for them as well.

Hugely so

Yes

You never went back to live there?

No, I've never lived there ever again. My family and I went back to visit regularly, but I never ever contemplated living there again.

Leaving South Africa was also partly based on racism and my fear the country was going to go up like a bomb at some point in time. I thought it was a powder keg waiting to explode, and I never thought it would be resolved in the way it was, whites relinquishing power without a fight, Nelson Mandela, truth and reconciliation, amazing!

When we lived in South Africa it felt like a police state and before deciding to leave I'd said to my wife many times "we can't raise our children in a country like this".

It's interesting, you left Rhodesia and you've described it as a civil war and you went down to South Africa where, what you're implying, that was a race war. Did you make that distinction at the time or is that after the event?

I think at the time I might have thought of them as one and the same thing. South Africa was also at war with black nationalism, it was supplying arms and support, and even soldiers to Rhodesia, but I always felt there was more racial tension in South Africa, you know what I mean?

I do, but I'm just wondering about the level of atrocities, the level of violence, the brutality committed by all sides in Rhodesia. Did you think at the time there was a racial element to it? Do you remember articulating that at the time?

Yes, I think there was a racial element to it, but I'm not sure I ever articulated it at the time.

There were so called 'good blacks' and 'bad blacks', the bad ones were 'communists'. As the war progressed and the violence intensified I heard more and more stories about violent acts on both sides, but the information I got all came from the white Rhodesian soldiers I knew.

In South Africa it never ever came to that.

Well it happened in the townships.

Yes, but what I mean is that there was never a 'proper' border war in the same way that there was in Rhodesia. In South Africa the Africans were much more contained than they were in Rhodesia.

Well, there were the tribal trustlands where they were contained...

That's right, Africans had to have passes to move around, but to me the enforcement of the law in South Africa always seemed more brutal. In Rhodesia there always seemed to be more dialog between the races than in South Africa, but my South African experience was urban, and then only in Johannesburg, so maybe race relations were better in the rural areas.

But you've just described your life in Rhodesia, in fact being very white

Yes it was very white, and most of the black people we encountered were servants, or labourers. In retrospect I would have liked to have known black people on another level, some of those for example who were studying at the University of Rhodesia. I had a few school friends who went to that University and they tell stories of a different type of black person, but unfortunately I never had that opportunity.

Somebody who did get that opportunity, although not through the University, was a friend called Miles Anderson, somebody I'm sure you'd enjoy interviewing. His father was head of the Rhodesian armed forces just before UDI.

Oh, Major John Anderson

Miles's father decided to resign rather than go along with Ian Smith's plans for UDI and then ended up head of the Zambian army. Miles's brother John joined the British army and Miles left after school to study acting at RADA. His mother wrote a wonderful book on her experiences in Rhodesia called 'Toe Rags', well worth a read if you can find a copy. In the last year of his schooling in Rhodesia after his father had resigned and been branded a traitor, Miles had to endure the torture of his fellow schoolboys. You'd find him interesting to talk to.

Thank you, yes he would. He would give a very different view.

Yes, and having initially been a supporter of Robert Mugabe, he is now one of his harshest critics, and very disillusioned about the future of a country he still feels very passionate about.

Alan, just to wrap up, looking back on the UDI period, do you think that war was worth it?

No, definitely not, I'd be surprised if anybody thought it was.

Well it's interesting, Spike (McKenna) said he wasn't sure but he felt it bought time

It's a pity it couldn't have been settled over a conference table before all the bloodshed. Once UDI was declared there was an inevitability about the war in a way and Ian Smith was surrounded by a lot of 'hawks', like Lord Graham, William Harper and P K van der Byl.

And Lardner Burke

Yes and Des Lardner-Burke.

Did your father ever think that war wasn't worth it?

I'm not sure, I never asked him the question, but towards the end of his life he was still going on about...

'Standards' and...

Yes, he would complain about dropping standards, pot holes in the roads, school playing fields being dug up to plant maize, and endless other things that frustrated him.

He was very disillusioned in the end and he said to me more than once, that he didn't think there was a place for Europeans in Africa any longer and that I'd made the right decision when I decided to leave Africa.

I'm experiencing some of that same disillusionment with the many South Africans I see who have left, or are contemplating leaving, droves of them.

One point five million

It doesn't surprise me, is that the figure?

Since '94

Well there are a lot of them in this area.

Its quite sad really, because in most cases they are the most wealthy, or the most qualified people. I had a conversation with a former South African ambassador to Great Britain a few years ago and he said that the people who were leaving were the ones the country could least afford to lose.

Young South Africans who go abroad to study, or further their studies, decide not to return home, but settle in other countries because they are not at all sure about the future of their country.

It's interesting, those Africans who've gone to university in China tend to return.

Is that so?

Those who've gone to university in the States or Western Europe tend to leave.

That's interesting

I haven't got the exact statistics but that's a very interesting...

That doesn't surprise me because of their colonial heritage, they don't have any historical ties with China, and as a result they don't have any affinity or common DNA if you like.

Thinking about your DNA, when you did come back to this country to settle, how far did it seem very familiar, but also strange?

A combination of both I suppose. Very familiar and also very strange.

In what ways? I mean you made reference to the public school shared attitudes

Lots of common ground, I've got lots in common with somebody like Ian McPherson who grew up in India, and then went to an English public school. If we 'compare notes' we find that our school days were very similar, the schoolroom behaviour, sports, attitudes to things in general.

This is going to be my next question, this is very much empire building

Very much so

It's far closer to everyday practices and experiences of empire.

Very much so, yes, bands and bugles and pipe bands, they're all those things that we loved, we grew up loving...

But then, how connected do you feel with other British people who haven't had that colonial past?

That's more difficult than connecting with those who have, but I suppose it really depends on the person.

I immediately connect with colonial Britons, I can almost pick them if they've grown up in Kenya, India or other colonial outposts. I think I also connect quickly with British people who have lived abroad, because that gives them more understanding about 'differences' and that makes it easier.

I think because of our 'common schooling' I do find it easy to get on with public school people and they seem to have sympathy, or affinity with colonials. If I meet somebody who went to Eton or Harrow and they ask me where I came from originally, and I tell them Zimbabwe, on most occasions the reply will be, you mean Rhodesia.

But as you say, it also immediately, with that one word 'Rhodesia', gives you such a...almost a colour chart of coding people

That's right, it is a sort of colour chart for coding people, if never heard it put like that, but that's exactly what it is.

But it's also part of this fluid white population movement around empire

It is, yes and we...

And then, again, like a Diaspora

Yes, and we shared a common bond with English speaking South Africa schools because they'd also used the English public school model as well. The Afrikaans speaking schools were not the same, because their colonial experience has been a very different one.

A different world

Different world, yes

Alan, thank you very much indeed

End of interview