Anthony Greene looks at the remarkably rapid 'end of empire' of Britain in Africa, and argues that perspective and objectivity can now yield a useful stocktaking.

Because it is a time-past, time-present hybrid, decolonisation exercises on contemporary historians the same kind of excitement of revelation as does, for example, the study of recent wars: not the Gulf War and perhaps not yet the Falklands Campaign both being too close for objective interpretation, and sadly no longer Gallipoli or the Boer War; but certainly the 'Emergencies', as they were called in post-war Malaya and of Mau Mau in the 1950s, and, of course, the Second World War. These all share an element of 'I was there', 'I remember', or, regardless of whether as actor or spectator, 'I often used to wonder why or how...'. As Lord Bullock has said, he considers himself to be in a uniquely fortunate position as a historian of the Second World War: not only did he live through the events and had access to many of the relevant documents, he has also lived long enough to gain the perspective normally granted to historians of earlier times.

The end of British hegemony in Africa and the decolonisation of the continent enjoys a paradoxical dual attraction: by definition a past event, it nevertheless remains a matter of recent experience, current interest and contemporary debate, however incomplete in the record, and ambivalent in its interpretation. Decolonisation excites our interest by manifesting the past in the present.

Much of this open-mindedness over Britain's colonial withdrawal from Africa can be attributed to the nature of the sources for its study. Because decolonisation was primarily an official phenomenon – revolving around governments and bureaucracies, ministers and constitutions, Whitehall and Westminster, with territorial counterparts in the Secretariats and Government Houses in Lagos, Nairobi and Lusaka, etc. – its primary evidence must lie in official files deposited with the Public Record Office: Cabinet memoranda, Premier's Office papers, Colonial Office minutes, and so on. Access to this archive is, of course, governed by the thirty-year rule.

Because the decolonisation of Africa reached its peak in the period 1960-65, with only two territories becoming independent before then (Sudan in 1956, Gold Coast in 1957) and being all over by 1964 – leaving only The Gambia and the three High Commission Territories of Bechuanaland, Basutoland and Swaziland to round off the story between 1965 and 1968 – the coming decade of the 1990s will witness the opening of the official records at Kew of the bulk of Britain's African Empire, including such giants as Nigeria (1960), Tanganyika (1961) and Kenya (1963), as well as Sierra Leone (1961), Uganda (1962), Northern Rhodesia (1964) and Nyasaland (1964).

The 1990s look set at least to double the number of studies of the transfer of power that spawned in the previous decade, both country case-studies (including, the short-lived yet long-argued Central African Federation, 1953-65) and the wider study of British policy, foreign, domestic, strategic and economic. It seems, then, appropriate, with so much research achieved and with much more about to be enabled through the progressive opening up of the official records, to pause and carry out a brief stocktaking.

For the sake of the argument, the technical differences so beloved by the Colonial Office's legal draughtsmen, ‘diarchical government’, ‘internal self- government’ and 'self-government' etc. must be left aside to allow us to concentrate on what, for most African nationalist leaders of the 1950s and
1960s, became the sole and unqualified aim of 'independence' pur sang.

If at the time African bureaucracies may also have thought in terms of the 'transfer of power', a later form of the Indian idiom of 'home rule', the term 'decolonisation' seems to have been more espoused by subsequent academics than by contemporary actors. John Hargreaves, in his The End of Colonial Rule in West Africa (1979), has an interesting reference to the growth of the term which he traces back to 1932, but is unable to locate in either the Oxford English Dictionary or the Encyclopaedia Britannica before 1975. Indeed, the last-ever Permanent Under Secretary of the Colonial Office, Sir Hilton Poynton, has resolutely denied its official use (Africa in the Colonial Period: The Colonial Administrator in the Age of Decolonisation, 1978).

Four areas of enquiry are covered here. First, what is the general picture of decolonisation so far as it has emerged from a score or more of the important studies that have appeared in the last decade? Secondly, given the fact that the public records are only very recently available for the inaugural case of the Gold Coast and the lead-up to Prime Minister Macmillan's milestone 'wind of change' reorientation of 1959-60, on what evidence have all these impressive interpretations drawn? Thirdly, as the PRO files now become accessible with the advent of the 1990s, what sort of knowledge might we expect – do we need – to learn from the official documents, so as to complete, confirm or challenge the present state of the art? Finally, what aspects of the study of Britain's withdrawal from its African empire will continue to stimulate scholarly interest even after the full decolonisation story, gleaned from the official record, has been digested?

Three conclusions may suffice for the first point, what is the picture twenty-five years since the publication of Rudolf von Albertini's Dekolonisation (which, in the event, many students find a better text on colonial rule than on the ending thereof) and of Henri Grimal's La decolonisation? First, it is generally agreed that the correlation between Britain's decision to abandon empire and the election of a Labour Government, with strong Fabian undertones, in 1945 is too simplistic any longer to be valid. Today there is no doubt, as the files now open make clear, that the Colonial Office was already beginning in 1939, in response to Malcolm Macdonald's gingering-up question of 'Where are we going?', and the consequent 'seething of thought' in Downing Street, to think seriously about the next steps in Africa. As early as 1943 CO files were even inscribed 'Transfer of Power': Lord Hailey's public statements of 1938 and 1939 and his secret report of 1940-42 (not published till 1979) had made sure of that. Secondly, whatever grandiose thinking on some kind of CO package for decolonisation may have inspired the original blueprint now identified as the Caine-Cohen Plan of 1946 (CO847), it is clear that, following the Accra riots in 1948, the Colonial Office felt it had no alternative but to revert to its traditional policy of an ad hoc politico-constitutional pace, territory by territory.

Like pre-war colonial policy itself, colonial governments, even if in adjacent territories, were once more not expected to conform or keep in common step. Arguably, this was in accord with nationalist wishes, too, as evidenced by, say, Nigeria's attempt in 1953 to pip the neighbouring Gold Coast to the independence post by 1956 or by Tanganyika's disinclination, for all Nyerere's one-time dream of a simultaneous East African Federation, to turn down, or postpone, independence when it was offered in 1961. Overall blueprints were out, piecemeal plans were back in favour.

In retrospect, it seems justifiable to credit the Colonial Office with a heightening disposition to plan for the transfer of power from the eve and not from just the end of the Second World War, even if Malcolm Macdonald was still talking in terms of 'generations' as the time frame. After the war, a sudden jolt was needed for the CO to shift to a higher gear of decolonisation: in West Africa the Accra riots, in East the scandal of the Hola prison camp, and in Central Africa the unparalleled (insofar as any British colonial territory was concerned) stigmatisation by the 1959 Devlin report of Nyasaland as a 'police state'. The final gear-change came in 1960 when, complementing his new Secretary of State's 'policy of the lesser risk', Harold Macmillan made his well-known 'wind of change' speech.

It was the grave misjudgement of the imposition of the Central African Federation in 1953 that
brought about the breakdown of the conventional bipartisan policy on colonial affairs in the House of Commons and continued throughout the 1950s. Significantly, the Macmillan-Macleod reversal of the Lyttelton-Lennox Boyd belief in their ability to control and contain the pace of nationalism, which had characterised the 1950s, witnessed the independence of every one of Britain's major African colonies (other than Ghana, independent since 1957) within the brief time-span of five years.

Although this is emphatically not a bibliographical essay (for which, for example, see 'A Survey of the Literature on Decolonization in Africa, 1957-1967', Royal Commonwealth Library Notes, n.s. No. 268, August 1990, and the exhaustive bibliographical essays in each of the Gifford and Louis volumes cited below), this might be the best point to mention a few of the principal books where these arguments and others can best he followed up.


The final point under this rubric is admittedly more of a personal conviction – even a crusade, though encouragingly shared by Professor D.A. Low, one of the few Africanist scholars able to contribute a major 'Indianist' comparative input – than a stocktaking conclusion. In their framework for a study of decolonisation set out in Gifford and Louis. (1982, supra), Ronald Robinson and Roger Louis advocate a three-level approach, calling for an analysis in terms of international influences, metropolitan initiatives and African imperatives. The last-named seems to me of particular importance. Under it is, of course, subsumed the role of African nationalism, which in the more recent literature seems to be downplayed in favour of the noble workings of the official mind in London. Perhaps dazzled by the richness of the debate in the Colonial Office files, younger researchers tend to see the whole pace, even the very programme, of the transfer of power solely governed by altruistic decisions in the metropolis. Such was emphatically not the case. Like a typical trade union negotiation, the process was a two-way affair, of concession in response to pressure. African nationalism was a force to be reckoned with, not an irrelevance, and as such must be evaluated as an integral factor in Britain's schemes and timing for the transfer of power.

Turning to the second point, the evidence for the firm filling-in of the historical outline by scholars when the official record has not yet been fully available, what impresses is the strength of the alternative, as well as the partial, sources. As A.N. Porter and A.J. Stockwell show in the second volume of their documentary collection, British Imperial Policy and Decolonization, 1938-1964 (1989), even if the Colonial Office files are not yet open to the end of the story, the policies on the transfer of power can be seen as being well in train. Pending that release of official documents covering the final years of the process of decolonisation, there has been no lack of authoritative alternative sources to draw on. They include the personal memoirs or official biography of the principal dramatis personae, whether politicians like Harold Macmillan and Harold Wilson, Lord...
Chandos and lain Macleod, or the topmost colonial officials, notably the critical penultimate or final governors such as Charles Arden-Clarke, James Robertson, Bryan Sharwood-Smith and Gawain Bell in West Africa or Edward Twining, Philip Mitchell and Evelyn Baring in East Africa. Further unpublishedyet crucial evidence can be gleaned from their private papers, and from those of othersenior officials – including nearly a hundred oral interviews – involved in the process of the transfer of power, so assiduously collected over the past thirty years in Rhodes House Library, Oxford (see the survey in African Research and Documentation, 33, 1983). Important additions in this respect of personal contributions are the record of two symposia on the role of officials, both Colonial Office and Colonial Service, one held at St. Antony's College, Oxford, in 1978 and the other at the Institute of Contemporary British History in 1987.

In this context, of personal testimony however, emphasis must be laid on the conspicuous absence of evidence from, as it were, the nationalist side. True, autobiographies of some of the leading African political participants in the transfer of power have appeared, including those of Nnamdi Azikiwe, Ahmadu Bello, Kenneth Kaunda, Kwame Nkrumah and Siaka Stevens, along with biographies of Julius Nyerere, Jomo Kenyatta and Hastings Banda. The coverage is incomplete, the objectivity questionable. In any case, the nationalist movements were in no way one-man bands, nor did they comprise the political class alone. Furthermore, the also-rans were often as important in the process as the eventual winners (J.A. Danquah, Oginga Odinga, Aminu Kano, Oscar Kambona, Harry Nkumbula, etc.) though their voice is understandably less loudly heard today. What researchers, British, French and African alike, have signally failed to do is to carry out an oral history project on the personal testimony of the African nationalist participants in the transfer of power. Without it, the record – and hence the interpretations and the judgement – runs the risk of remaining one-sided. It may already be too late: old men not only forget, they also fade away.

So, what more can we expect to learn from the official files as they are opened over the next decade which will reinforce or destabilise the currently received version of decolonisation? Naturally there will be a number of trouvailles and minutiae setting the record straight. It seems improbable, though not impossible, that we shall discover many skeletons in the Colonial Office cupboard. It is unlikely that we shall learn that, for example, the colonial administration colluded with Kenyatta to keep the latter in detention, so that one day – ten years later – he might emerge, unsullied and unscathed, and lead a united Kenya into independence; or that Nkrumah was in reality on the CIA payroll. It is more likely to be in the political party archives, as Philip Murphy has shown in his Oxford D.Phil. thesis, than in the CO files that much of the infighting, especially within the critically incumbent Tory party, on 'to quit or not to quit, that is the question', will be revealed.

What, among the many options in the eventual process of the transfer of power in Africa, will certainly not emerge from any official record is the rationalisation of colonial withdrawal so graphically proposed in George Orwell's mordant critique of colonialism, Burmese Days:

> In the end we shall simply leave them. Young men will not come out here any longer to work all their lives for insults and ingratitude. We shall just go. And when the nations come begging us to stay, we shall say, 'No, you've had your chance, you wouldn't take it. Very well, we shall leave you to govern yourselves.' What a lesson that will teach them!

On the other hand, there are count- less questions of substance which can be answered only when the public record is available – and not always then. How far, for instance, was the Colonial Office's endorsement of a vigorous policy of local government devolution not so much the prima facie nurturing of democracy, but rather a considered attempt to short-circuit the disruptive influence of nationalist demagogues? To what extent was the celebrated Swynnerton Plan for land consolidation less a shop-window blueprint for agro-economic reform among the Mau Mau-embroiled Kikuyu than a shrewd socio-political ploy which would create a rural middle class capable of, and motivated towards, acting as a bulwark against political violence and demagoguery? In what measure was the colonial administration of Northern Nigeria, in particular its top officials,
instrumental during the decolonising years in generating a sense of the region being different from (superior to) its Southern counterparts and thereby supporting rather than suppressing sentiments of ethno-political centrifugalism? What was the role – if any – of the government of Nigeria in seeking to make sure, as President Ahidjo angrily charged, that the electorate voted 'the right way' in the Cameroons plebiscites? Just what were (again, if any) the Cabinet and/or Colonial Office instructions to the final governor – hasten, hinder or hold? withstand, or win over and so leave them smiling? – and how far were these coloured by his predecessor's contrasting relations with the nationalist leadership or by political party priorities back in Westminster? In Tanganyika, for instance, did Turnbull change his mind after the cautious Chequers meeting of 1959 about the speed of the transfer of power once he reached Dar-es-Salaam and if so what caused the volte-face; or was he urged by Macleod and Macmillan? Was there such a fall-back position, as an academic like Cranford Pratt asserts yet senior officials deny, as a 'Grand Design' by Fletcher-Cooke in Dar-es-Salaam, to place Africans in the shopfront of bureaucracy and retain European officers in the backroom? Was the influence, as many nationalists believed in Tanganyika, of the Trusteeship Council and its Visiting Missions as decisive in bringing about decolonisation (the 'we would never have been independent so early without the UN' syndrome) or was it no more, as colonial officials maintain, than just one more factor to consider in assessing whether a territory was 'ready' for independence? How far will the Nyasaland experience have to be reassessed when we have the inside record of the unfortunate Sir Robert Armitage to set beside the public charge of the published Devlin Report? Given the clouds that bedevilled the brief life of the Central African Federation (1953-63), the mid-1990s promise to give birth to a whole bookshelf of fresh studies of that turbulent and topsy-turvy exercise in African decolonisation.

It is here that the British Documents on the End of Empire Project (BDEEP) comes into the picture. First publicly mooted by two uncolluding participants at a conference on the transfer of power in Africa held at Harare in 1985, and formally established under the aegis of Professor Anthony Low with generous grants from the British Academy and the Leverhulme Trust, BDEEP can be said to set out to do for the former British colonial empire what Mansergh's magnificent twelve volumes on Constitutional Relations between Britain and India: the Transfer of Power, 1942-1947 (HMSO, 1970-1983) and Hugh Tinker's two comparably detailed volumes, Constitutional Relations between Britain and Burma: the Struggle for Independence, 1944-1948 (HMSO, 1983-1984) did for those two examples of South Asian decolonisation. This documentary record – no less than eight volumes are envisaged for the first BDEEP module – will prove indispensable, and will almost certainly include some reassessment of the dissolution of parts of Britain's colonial empire (for a first-class description of BDEEP, see the article by Stephen Ashton in African Research and Documentation, 54, 1990). Yet for its African component two limitations are already recognised. One, the scope of Module I terminates with 1957, so that only the Sudan and Ghana feature among the African case studies. Two, like its South Asian counterpart project, BDEEP consciously does not set out to cover the history of local nationalism and politics: that history must be the responsibility of those countries themselves. The critical missing element in 'our' stocktaking remains 'their' side of the story – documentary rather than interpretative.

The fourth, and final, point in this historiographical review leads from the particular to the general. If BDEEP will be unchallengeably authoritative but not necessarily definitive in clearing our minds, as well as in tidying up loose ends, on the prelude (1925-57 is the time frame) to the decolonisation of the large majority of the new states in British West, East and Central Africa (no more than two of Britain's fourteen colonial possessions in Africa are fully covered in its Module I), there are a number of related questions on the transfer of power which will call for continuing study well into the twenty-first century. I have already entered a vigorous plea for an oral history project to interview the African participants in the nationalist movement; I fear it is too late. Again, there is a need to evaluate, as the Cambridge School of History has done so effectively for India, where the real impetus for anti-colonial protest lay and how far it was an elite-led, either urban or rural, or a mass-motivated movement.
At another level, the further Africa moves away from its era of colonial rule, the nearer is the time when there are no ex-colonial governors surviving in Tunbridge Wells or one-time District Commissioners drawing their pension in Cheltenham, and, with the greater the administrative decay and decline of the independent African state, the more likely will there be a resurgence of genuine intellectual interest in who the Colonial Service was, how they were selected, recruited and trained, and just how they managed to operate (Bruce Berman's Control and Crisis in Colonial Kenya, 1990, is the latest example of this sort of enquiry). Even today, few Americans can understand the stark absence of any deliberate inculcation of an ideology of imperialism in the training of Britain's overseas administrators. As Bob Geldof lamented, with all the money in the world for the most urgent of African schemes he could get nowhere in the absence of effective basic administration in Africa: if it was meagrely spread in the colonial period (Britain's so-called 'Thin White Line': African Affairs, January 1980), in the post-colonial period public administration sadly seems too often to have declined to the point of no return.

Of interest, also, to social historians is the question of what became of the thousands of one-time imperial civil servants when, with their careers prematurely terminated, they came onto the job-market? What contribution did they make to commerce and industry, diplomacy and academe, the BBC and the British Council... or simply to Employment Exchange and DHSS statistics? What were the involvement, views and effect of decolonisation on the big colonial trading firms, and thence on the new multinationals? How far was one institution's loss another's gain?

In sum, it is already time for the literature to move into two wider dimensions of decolonisation. One remains at the African end. This is not the all too-often nugatory kind of would-be profit and loss account (where Adu Boahen's African Perspectives on Colonialism, 1987, presents a far more convincing balance-sheet than Walter Rodney's impassioned rhetoric of How Europe Underdeveloped Africa, 1972, or Gann and Duignan's overstated Burden of Empire, 1967): for that, as the late Michael Crowder used to say, British and French imperialism in Africa will have to be as old (and as dull, I would add) as Roman imperialism in Britain before anything like objectivity can be achieved. Rather is it that, come the centenary of Africa's Year at the UN (2060), it will he interesting to see how far what look like being the three primary examples of the colonial legacy – the use of the metropolitan language, the economic global imbalance, and the retention of the colonial boundaries that today still form the legal basis of the independent states of Africa – have been perpetuated. The other lies at the European end. Pioneered by Miles Kahler in his preliminary Decolonisation in Britain and France: the Domestic Consequences of International Relations (1984), it is essentially an evaluation of the impact of the loss of empire on the former metropolitan countries, in its social as well as in its economic context. Reaching into the twenty-first century, I believe this could prove to he the major, as well as the final, theme in the historical study of Britain's twentieth-century decolonisation of its nineteenth-century empire.

If colonialism may be said to have been the most conspicuous feature of the historical and political map of Africa in the first half of the this century, decolonisation has already proved to be the most influential phenomenon of the world political economy in the second half: for is not the reverse face of the coin of decolonisation the emergence of the Third World? Third World countries seem destined to be 'with us' – with all that that conventionally implies – for a long time to come. They must not be marginalised or, in the imagery of the Kenyan, Salim Lone, in the Washington Post last August, he allowed to drift off the map of the world's concern.

As the Dutch historian of empire H.L. Wesseling recently put it, 'Decolonisation has finished. It definitely belongs to the past. Yet somehow it has refused to become history'. 