

Interview - Patrick Salmon

Written by E-International Relations

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Patrick Salmon is the Chief Historian at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) of the British government. He is closely associated with the massive archives of the FCO, writing its official history, and advising the FCO based on historical research. Patrick is also the author of several works on Nordic and Baltic international relations, including *Scandinavia in British Strategy during the Twilight War 1939–1940* (2012) and *Scandinavia and the Great Powers 1890–1940* (1997).

Before joining the FCO he was a Professor of International History at the University of Newcastle. As such, Patrick Salmon straddles the border between academic and practitioner, and between history and international relations – making for an interesting interview.

Can you explain your academic pre-history and how you found yourself in the position you are in now?

I taught European history at Newcastle University for about 23 years before joining the FCO in 2003. My research was mainly focused on Germany and the Nordic countries, though I picked up a good deal of knowledge about British foreign policy which I put to use in my current job. As a research student I was based in Cambridge but also spent several years at the Institut für Europäische Geschichte in Mainz. I have had fellowships at the Institute for Defence Studies and the Nobel Institute in Norway. My PhD was on Britain's Scandinavian strategy in 1939-40, and my main book on the subject was *Scandinavia and the Great Powers 1890-1940* (Cambridge, 1997). I recently published a book based on my PhD thesis: *Deadlock and Diversion: Scandinavia in British Strategy during the Twilight War 1939-1940* (Bremen, 2012).

Could you describe the work of the FCO historians' office, and how it supports the operations of the FCO?

We are a small team of four specialist historians and two support staff. In terms of our role and activities, the nearest comparator is probably the Office of the Historian at the US State Department – though they are about 10 times bigger than we are. Our core task is editing and publishing the official history of British foreign policy since 1945 in the series *Documents on British Policy Overseas* (DBPO). Many countries publish similar series, including the United States, France, Germany, Poland and Switzerland. We are members of the International Network of Editors of Diplomatic Documents.

Recent DBPO volumes have covered such topics as *German Unification, 1989-90*, and *The Brussels and North Atlantic Treaties, 1947-49*. We also provide historical advice and answer many enquiries from the FCO and overseas posts as well as from the public; we also have input into ministerial speeches. We add a historical perspective to current policy issues by organising seminars that bring together historians and policy makers, and we have contributed courses to the FCO's new Diplomatic Academy. We also act as a link between the FCO and the academic community through our publications and seminars organised in collaboration with organisations such as the Institute for Contemporary British History.

How do you think history can help improve policy-making?

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This has been much discussed in recent years (and most of the opportunities and challenges have been captured in this recent report by the Institute for Government: *What is the Value of History in Policymaking?*). At one level, it is useful to know if a particular policy (in foreign or domestic politics) has ever been considered before, and it might be useful to revisit that decision-making process in order to avoid duplicating work or repeating errors. However history never repeats itself exactly—analogy is rarely useful. But policy-makers do need to be aware of history and this is what the FCO Historians and Research Analysts at the FCO try to provide. For example we have run seminars to provide FCO policymakers with a historical perspective in current policy problem areas such as Afghanistan, Somali piracy, Iran, Yemen. The seminars placed these issues in their wider historical context, with speakers—usually comprising a historian with a specialism in the area; a practitioner (former policy maker or diplomat); and a research analyst or an operational officer—expanding on events at the time and in the present. The seminars do not deliver ready-made lessons but simply provide context, raise questions and provide a challenge function. Together with our Research Analyst colleagues Historians play an important role in preserving the corporate memory of the FCO.

How could history help us gain more insight in a complex conflict such as the Syrian civil war?

In foreign relations knowing ‘what went before’ is crucial to understanding the current state of bilateral relations between two countries or current problems in a particular region. History is often the key to understanding the motivations behind a nation’s behaviour or why events have turned out as they have. Given the long history of British imperialism, for example, many people remember encounters with the United Kingdom long after we have forgotten them. The inhabitants of Helmand Province in Afghanistan thought our soldiers were there to avenge the defeats inflicted on their 19th-century predecessors – defeats most of the British soldiers had probably never heard of.

There has already been a small controversy over the archives of the FCO, and particularly documents in it referring to unsavoury actions of the British Empire. What secrets still lie hidden within the FCO archives?

As an academic historian I used to imagine that the Foreign Office must be sitting on a mass of undiscovered documents which would reveal the innermost workings of government. Now that I am on the inside – a poacher turned gamekeeper if you like – I realise that the FCO is not deliberately withholding anything of importance. Many files are backlogged because of a lack of review resources. Others have been held back for very specific reasons to do with national security, intelligence and so on. All these reasons are carefully recorded, and most of the documents are eventually released when the original reasons for withholding them no longer apply. Of course the FCO is still in the process of reviewing hundreds of thousands of unreleased files and these will in turn be released in manner similar to the release of the controversial colonial collection a couple of years ago. But there are no crown jewels to be found, and many (though not all) are of little or no historical importance. It is hard to believe that an organisation can simply forget about or overlook documents on this scale, and much easier to believe that there is some sort of conspiracy, but that is what bureaucracies are like: all bureaucracies in all countries, not just the Foreign Office – but certainly no conspiracy.

It is also hard to believe that the 600,000 files recently listed as the FCO’s ‘Special Collections’ are not in some way special – but that is simply because the term raises false expectations. It would be much closer to the mark if they were labelled ‘Residual Collections’. The vast bulk of these documents are either copies of items already in the public domain, or printed material, or out-dated finding aids: indexes and lists which were the only way of finding documents in the pre-digital age but which are now completely redundant.

Even the colonial files – the so-called Migrated Archives – seem to have proved rather disappointing in terms of new archival discoveries, as recent conferences on the subject suggest. Of course there is a dark side to the story: these were files removed from former colonies to prevent the newly independent governments from seeing them, and they undoubtedly do contain sensitive material, for example on individuals who collaborated with colonial governments before independence. But they were removed, not destroyed. If successive governments had really wanted to cover up the history of Britain’s colonial rule they could have destroyed the collection at any point between the 1960s and the early 21st century, but they didn’t do so.

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Nevertheless, we can look forward to some releases that will be of great interest to researchers, including further batches of Private Office (i.e. Ministerial) papers, as well as papers of the Permanent Under-Secretary's Department (PUSD), which liaised with the intelligence services (class FO 1093 at The National Archives) and IRD (Information Research Department), the Foreign Office's secret Cold War propaganda unit (classes FO 1110 and FCO 95 at TNA).

How does the FCO historians office relate to the darker past of the institution it studies, particularly colonialism? Does it try to be critical of the institutions it studies?

Our role is to explain rather than condemn or defend the policies of past British governments. We do this mainly by publishing documents, organising seminars etc. We have generally avoided publishing documents on the history of colonialism because a major series on decolonisation already exists: *British Documents on the End of Empire* (BDEEP), published by the Institute for Commonwealth Studies in the University of London. But we don't avoid controversial issues. For example, I am currently editing a volume on UK-South African relations during the apartheid era. Our readers may find some aspects of British policy weak, others surprisingly robust. That depends on their reading of the documents, not my views. Of course I have to select only a few key documents from the thousands available: but I like to think I have sufficient historical judgement and integrity to make a representative selection.

A quick look at the content produced by the FCO historians makes it seem that there is a certain emphasis on middle-aged white male diplomats, have attempts been made to remedy this? For example more content on the role of women or people from former colonies?

You are probably right, but you have to remember that until very recently diplomacy was conducted mainly by middle-aged white male diplomats – and that is the history we have to deal with. And of course that would be true of almost every other country in the world, not just the UK. But recruitment to the UK diplomatic service has been far more diverse over the last couple of decades, and it is precisely those non-white and non-male diplomats who are now rising to the top of the tree. In our recent series of witness seminars on the work of British embassies and high commissions (you can find some transcripts here), nearly all the witnesses were male and white. But if we were to hold a similar series in ten years' time, I am fairly sure that we would have more women than men, and that not all of them would be white.

Your coverage of World War I was very much focused on social media, with for example excerpts from period sources being tweeted. How do you think social media can be useful to both history education and diplomacy?

It is about reaching out to different audiences. For instance @WW1FO was our project to tweet, in real time 100 years on, extracts from Foreign Office telegrams, despatches and letters leading up to the outbreak of the First World War. Over 400 tweets were sent over 37 days from 11 twitter accounts (reflecting key British diplomatic figures from 1914) to over 10,000 followers. People appreciated the fact that we were attempting to present a historic event, to a new generation on twitter, in a way that they found genuinely creative and exciting. But at the same time we held an academic conference on 'Sir Edward Grey and the Outbreak of the First World War', bringing together leading scholars to discuss Britain's part in the July Crisis of 1914 and the role played by the British foreign secretary. Their presentations were published as a series of podcasts – using social media again – but the papers will eventually be published in a more traditional form as a special issue of a leading academic journal, the *International History Review*. We are therefore covering the same issue but in different ways, to different audiences, whilst maximising our output from one area of activity.

What do you think international relations as a discipline could learn from history in its academic form?

For a long time the IR discipline has seemed not much interested in history, or even in international relations as practised by diplomats. On the whole, the reverse is also true. International historians don't have much need for IR theory and diplomats find it of little use in their daily work. I don't by any means reject theory myself. Earlier in my career I was strongly influenced by, for example, E.H. Carr's *Twenty-Year Crisis* or Graham Allison's *Essence of*

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Decision, and I still find some theoretical models useful as a starting point for asking historical questions. But no more than a starting point, because historical reality quickly reveals itself to be more complicated than any one theory can accommodate. So IR as a discipline could learn from history that international relations are too complex to be explained by any single theory, and that when several theoretical models are combined, as in *Essence of Decision*, the outcome is a historical explanation. But does IR want to learn that lesson? Take a look at William Keylor's recent H-Diplo essay for much more (and better) discussion of this theme.

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This interview was conducted by Tom Cassauwers. Tom is an Associate Features Editor of E-IR.