

I attended the local Zomba elementary school, following on from the kindergarden , when we returned from Salisbury in 1956, after the collapse of "Federation". (It goes without saying that it was an elementary school for white children - what we called "Europeans" -.)

In my early years at this little school, it was housed in a two-room building on the slopes of the Mountain. The Head was a formidable character called Johnny Walker, who had an even more formidable bulldog called Satan. He used to fart a lot (the dog, that is). There was one other teacher, a lady, and the whole school was divided into two classes - mixed ages. This suited me admirably - I was a horribly precocious child and enjoyed the opportunity of working with children several grades above me.

I remember a big, many week, project that we were set to do by Johnny Walker - his educational methods were ahead of his time, and brilliant. We were put in pairs - I was paired with Duncan Campbell, who must have been three years older than me. There was a hat, full of slips of paper with the paired names, and ours was first out of the hat - first pick of subject, from a list drawn up by Johnny Walker. I picked "British Seaports" to the pronounced chagrin of my partner, who wanted to do something about space.

"But there won't be anything about space in the library." I told him. "Trust me, We will be able to find masses of stuff on seaports - it will make it easy to do a great project." As I say, I was rather precocious - a management consultant in the making. Anyway, it was right that I should have chosen, because I ended up doing 90% of the work, with lots of photos of British seaports found in the library. And we won. I guess that winning was rewarding, but what I remember most is feeling the satisfaction in organising facts.

A word about that "library". The central institution of Zomba - of any significant colonial town - was The Club. In our case: the Zomba Gymkhana Club - a gloomy building dominated by a long bar and a deep verandah overlooking the playing field. Rugby, cricket, golf, a swimming pool and tennis. A 35mm film in the hall every Saturday, kids sitting on the floor at the front and samosas for sale where other cinemas might have popcorn. And a small room partly full of very tatty books - the Library; what people discarded as they moved on, mostly.

One more memory of the old Zomba school - Satan's legendary fight with a leopard. He didn't die - we saw him on the grass, half dead, when we arrived at school one day - horribly mauled about and bleeding. It seems that the leopard ventured on to Johnny Walker's khonde where some food scraps had foolishly been left out. Satan took offence and went for the leopard. He did what a bulldog does - got the leopard's throat in his teeth and locked his jaw. It must have been a gargantuan fight, but the leopard died; Satan did not. Johnny Walker later got a much-prized leopard skin rug. And Satan became a legend.

Before I left, the school was moved into purpose-built premises at the bottom of town, and given a name - Sir Harry Johnson School, for the first Governor of the Protectorate. It is still there - now private and mixed race - with the swimming pool, for which my mother raised funds and the fir tree planted by the then Governor's wife, Lady Armitage, in the middle of the turning circle.

Another project features in my memories of that new school. A class visit to the Nyasaland Cement Works, and a competition - to explain the cement works and its processes in prose. I won.ⁱ What a little swat!

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ⁱ The Nyasaland Cement Works played another vital part in the history of the Phillips family. My father was Musical Director for two Gilbert & Sullivan operettas in Zomba. The score of Yeoman of the Guard required a bell, unobtainable in Nyasaland. The Nyasaland Cement Works provided an oxygen cylinder, tuned by letting just the right amount of oxygen out.