

Exercise: To Write about a Place

Dear Malawi,

Do you realise that I still love you, although I've often complained about your poor infrastructure? Looking back now things might have been worse, although you were under a Dictatorship. Dr Banda didn't tolerate any opposition, and many of your people were in prison or died mysteriously.

I worked in Zomba, the Old Capital, and Lilongwe, the New Capital, for nine years in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Your people were very friendly, but most of them had little education and were very poor.

I know that Malawians feel very strongly about Colonialism. I do not regard myself as a Colonialist as your country was independent before I arrived. The Government chose to recruit expatriates to help with its development programme. A Malawian colleague asked me several times about my 'colonial earnings'. I told him that I did not like that term as I was not a colonialist. I pointed out that Ireland was one of the first countries to break away from the British Empire.

I met my wife Irene in the Zomba Hostel in 1967. It was the place you stayed in until you were allocated a house. I told her that I recognised her accent! She grew up in Belfast and was working as a Stenographer in the Ministry of Works. Occasionally we drove about 100 miles north to Lake Malawi for some rest and recuperation. One day a former 'fiance' of hers arrived unexpectedly at my office in Zomba. I told him that Irene and he needed to sort out their relationship. I was not thinking about marriage at that stage. It seems that Irene chose me! A few years later we were married in the Presbyterian Church in Zomba. Our son Jonathan was born in Zomba, and our daughter Sally in Lilongwe two years later.

As you know one of Dr Banda's main priorities was to move the capital city from Zomba in the south to Lilongwe in the Central Region. He thought that a central position was more acceptable. South African money was available for the project. Many thought it would have been better to spend the money on transport or agricultural projects for example. So did I, but I knew better than to challenge the President! Most of us expatriates preferred the charm of hilly Zomba to flat and dusty Lilongwe.

As Irene and I returned from leave just before the date of the move to the New Capital, we were sent straight there accompanied by a lorry load of house furniture. For some weeks I was virtually the only occupant of a long new three-storey office block!

In 1975, after nine years in your country, Irene and I decided it was time for us to leave.

Dr Banda was voted out of office in the 1990s when aid donors forced him to hold elections. He died in exile in South Africa, and his vast fortune disappeared.

I understand that Malawi has a more democratic government now.

Dear Malawi, I want to say that I must go now, but that's not true because I can't let go of you. My mind is still with you, and you're a large part of my life. Who can forget the impressive Mount Mlanje rising out of the plain near Limbe? And Lake Malawi stretching for hundreds of miles down the country? And the struggles of several million subsistence farmers to feed their families and try to produce a surplus. They've made some progress in recent years in spite of rapid population growth. I hope this progress continues.

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