

# Minutes and the Man: J.E.W. Flood and British Imperial Economic Policy at the Colonial Office in the Interwar Years

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**Abstract:** Archival sources, especially correspondence between officials, have been critical to the reconstruction of the history of colonial territories. Minutes, confidential comments that informed the decisions transmitted in official correspondence (known as dispatches), though important, are often neglected. This paper highlights the value of minutes and demonstrates their optimal utilization through the lens of the career of J.E.W. Flood, a prolific middle level career officer at the Colonial Office. His minutes on various issues across the interwar period shed light on the undercurrents and debates among officials at Whitehall that shaped aspects of British imperial economic policy during the period.

**Résumé:** Les sources archivistiques, en particulier la correspondance entre fonctionnaires, ont été essentielles à la reconstruction de l'histoire des territoires coloniaux. Les comptes-rendus et commentaires confidentiels qui ont éclairé les décisions transmises dans la correspondance officielle (appelés dépêches), bien qu'importants, ont souvent été négligés par les chercheurs. Cet article met en évidence la valeur de ces comptes-rendus et montre comment les utiliser au mieux au prisme de la carrière de J.E.W. Flood, un administrateur prolifique de carrière de niveau intermédiaire au Colonial Office. Ses comptes-rendus sur diverses questions pendant l'entre-deux-guerres permettent de mettre en lumière les courants sous-jacents et

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les débats entre fonctionnaires de Whitehall qui ont façonné certains aspects de la politique économique impériale britannique au cours de cette période.

## Introduction

Archival sources, especially correspondence between officials in the colonies and the metropolis, have long been the mainstay of scholarly research into the history of colonial territories.<sup>1</sup> Archival sources include reports of commissions of inquiry, annual and quarterly reports on administrative units and departments, intelligence reports, Blue Books, gazettes and gazetteers, Hansard (proceedings of meetings of legislative councils), and official correspondence among colonial officials, known as dispatches. Dispatches, the cream of colonial records, consist of letters and supporting documents, known as enclosures and sub-enclosures. Enclosures and sub-enclosures are numbered and arranged chronologically, and they consist of correspondence, reports, geological surveys, newspaper cuttings, photographs, and samples of exhibits.

Officials make comments (or reply to them) in the margins or at the end of each correspondence, or arrange the comments together in a section at the beginning or end of a file. These notes or comments are known as “minutes,” an invaluable resource that is often ignored or read casually by researchers.<sup>2</sup> This underutilized resource, the spice of colonial correspondence, is highlighted in this piece for its potential value and optimal utilization by users of colonial archives, and for the light they shed on the world views of career civil servants. This paper, based on colonial-era correspondence in the British archives, explores aspects of imperial policy through the lens of an influential, controversial, and prolific bureaucrat at the Colonial Office (also known as Whitehall, where it was housed in London). It highlights the contribution made by writers of minutes, such as the subject of this piece, to policy formulation, and underscores the importance of context as well as the content of official correspondence in historical research.

## Features of Minutes

The Colonial Office was a department of the British government headed by the Secretary of State for the Colonies, a Cabinet Minister in charge of Britain’s overseas dependencies. Unlike other members of the Home Civil

<sup>1</sup> The author gratefully acknowledges the helpful comments of reviewers and editors of *History in Africa*, and dedicates the essay to the memory of his junior high school (and most influential) History teacher, Michael Ojo Fajugbagbe of Ikoro-Ekiti, Nigeria.

<sup>2</sup> The value of minutes is highlighted by me in Ayodeji Olukoju, “Engaging with Colonial Archives: Reflections of an End-User,” *Vestiges: Traces of Record* 2 (2016), 7, without much elaboration.

Service, its staff worked in Whitehall all their lives “on the affairs of remote territories which most of them had never seen, never expected to see and did not particularly want to see.”<sup>3</sup> In 1925, the Dominions Office was carved out of the Colonial Office to take charge of the self-governing dominions of Australia, Canada, Newfoundland, New Zealand, and the Union of South Africa. The Colonial Office henceforth administered Britain’s colonies, protectorates, protected states and trust territories. The Secretary of State and officials at Whitehall “looked after the London end” while Colonial Governors governed the dependencies.<sup>4</sup> From 1925, the Colonial Office comprised eight Geographical Divisions, including two each in charge of East and Central Africa, and West Africa, and one General Department.

Officials in Whitehall and the Colonies exchanged correspondence, including minutes, on various subjects. Minutes were occasioned by any matter requiring a policy decision both in the colonies and the Colonial Office.<sup>5</sup> A superior officer usually solicited comments that would inform his recommendation to higher authority or decision on a proposed policy. A file was usually opened on a subject under consideration and passed from desk to desk either laterally, among officers of coordinate status, or vertically, up the chain of command. Each official commented on behalf of his unit or department, providing facts, analysis, and an informed opinion on the subject. Writers of minutes took their time to reflect on any matter before making a contribution to what often became an in-house debate among advisers. Their views could reflect the interests of their departments or units, their expertise, or professional experience. They also used the medium to disseminate information obtained directly or indirectly from external sources, such as contacts in the business community. Such information, including gossip and rumors, could be anecdotal or tangential.<sup>6</sup>

The minutes varied in length from a sentence to a multiple-page memorandum.<sup>7</sup> They were either handwritten on the originating correspondence

<sup>3</sup> Jack Charles Edward Greig, “Decision-making in Educational Administration: A Comparative Study of the Gambia and Malawi during the Period, 1925–1945,” PhD dissertation, University of London (London, 1978), 9; and A.H.M. Kirk-Greene, *Britain’s Imperial Administrators, 1858–1966* (London: Macmillan Press, 2000), 23–56.

<sup>4</sup> Greig, “Decision-making in Educational Administration,” 12.

<sup>5</sup> The discussion in this section draws on the author’s experience in British and Nigerian archives.

<sup>6</sup> National Archives of the United Kingdom, Kew Gardens, CO 554/107/14, “West African Currency Board – Counterfeiting and Forgery Attempts, 1937,” Minute by Flood dated 19 July 1937. Flood acknowledged that he had sought the opinion of local bank managers.

<sup>7</sup> Given the issue at stake and the intensity of the debate, Flood wrote very long minutes on the UAC mega firm scheme of 1929/30. His minutes running into several pages dissected the UAC draft agreement clause by clause, and countered various submissions: CO 554/83/2, “The United Africa Company Ltd.,” Minutes by Flood, 11 March and 30 November 1929; 9 January, 1 April, and 30 August 1930.

or typewritten on additional pages. The authors identified themselves by appending their signatures, initials, or offices. Minutes could pose a challenge for the modern user of the archives if they were recorded in cursive or illegible handwriting, or were smudged through poor handling or storage. Moreover, some initials are not self-explanatory and the researcher is compelled to cite them as written, with a question mark added to an informed guess.

Minutes covered issues in relations between Whitehall, on the one hand, and colonial governments and the business community, on the other; developments in the colonies; global commercial and political developments; domestic developments in the United Kingdom; and relations with foreign powers in war and peace. They provided information on various subjects, an official's opinion on a contentious issue, data on local or global trade, fiscal policy, shipping, population and related matters, and comparison based on similar issues within and across colonial and imperial boundaries. From the perspective of British imperial policy, the minutes were in most cases informative, authoritative, perceptive, incisive, and analytical.<sup>8</sup> Generally, they provided informed opinion on sundry issues, such as evolution of particular policies on political and economic matters (taxation, customs duties, shipping freights, and foreign competition), and local and world market produce prices, often over the long *durée*. They primarily filled gaps in knowledge, adding breadth and depth, especially for a new Secretary of State.<sup>9</sup> In all, the minutes were merely advisory but constituted weighty interventions.<sup>10</sup>

The tone of the minutes varied with the issues and circumstances, and the hierarchy of participants in the exchanges. The language, though polite and deferential towards higher authority, could be blunt, trenchant, paternalistic, racist, sarcastic, censorious, opinionated, combative, and condescending, depending on whether the issue pitted one department against another, or pertained to the colonial subjects, the commercial community,

<sup>8</sup> Flood consistently supported his submissions with facts obtained from relevant sources. For example, in CO 554/107/14, Minute dated 29 June 1937, he stated that there was "now over £14m alloy coin in circulation. With notes and nickel the total circulation is over £18m."

<sup>9</sup> In CO 554/18/16, "United Africa Company. Late African, Eastern Trade Corporation & the Niger Company," Minute dated 11 March 1929, Flood provided a comprehensive account of the amalgamation of firms from the previous decade to the "recent amalgamation of the African and Eastern Trade Corporation [AE&TC] and the Niger Company." He noted that even the AE&TC was "itself an amalgamation of a large number of firms," including F & A Swanzy, Miller Brothers and the African Association. The last named had been "an amalgamation of about six other firms."

<sup>10</sup> Flood concluded his minute (CO 554/83/8, "Joint West Africa Committee," 13 June 1930) with the rider: "the reply (to the JWAC) ought to be merely that the proper procedure is for the Accra Chamber of Commerce to take up the matter with the Colonial Government, and that until the Secretary of State has been furnished with the views of that Govt nothing will be done by him."

foreign powers or a threat to the colonial order, such as currency counterfeiting or produce adulteration. While writers of minutes differed on many issues, they often formed a common front against the idiosyncrasies of particular individuals, business lobbies or unfriendly foreign countries. Some individuals, such as Sir Waley Cohen and Lord Trenchard of the United Africa Company (UAC), were the butt of critical, often sarcastic, comments by Whitehall officials as will be shown in subsequent passages. A significant feature of minutes was that they remained confidential and restricted to a close circle of top officials in Whitehall.

### John E. W. Flood: The Man Behind the Minutes

Secretaries of State for the Colonies relied on many advisers, several of whom served across the tenures of different political heads. In addition to formal meetings, they received advice through memoranda and minutes exchanged within and across Divisions in Whitehall. One of the most prolific and influential writers of minutes during the interwar period was J.E.W. Flood, Assistant Under Secretary of State at the Colonial Office.<sup>11</sup> Not much is available by way of a biography or career profile of Flood, but he was variously described across the interwar decades as “Assistant Secretary, Colonial Office,”<sup>12</sup> “a Colonial Office mid-level staffer for the West African desk,”<sup>13</sup> a “veteran of the West African Department,”<sup>14</sup> an assistant secretary of state for East Africa,<sup>15</sup> and “Director of Colonial Students.”<sup>16</sup> His vast and varied experience across both East and West Africa, and the volume of his minutes, make him an interesting subject of scholarly analysis for the light that minutes shed on the process and dynamics of policy making in the Colonial Office during the 1920s and 1930s.

<sup>11</sup> Other notable commentators of this status were O.G.R. Williams, A.J. Calder, and Alex Fiddian, whose careers await scrutiny by other scholars.

<sup>12</sup> Margaret Gannon, “The Basle Mission Trading Company and British Colonial Policy in the Gold Coast, 1918–1928,” *The Journal of African History* 24 (1983), 512.

<sup>13</sup> Jonathan Moore, “The Transformation of the British Imperial Administration, 1919–1939,” PhD dissertation, Tulane University (New Orleans, 2016), 57. Although Moore’s work focuses on Ralph Furse and his career in recruiting, it contains copious references to Flood, with whom Furse duelled and maintained an acrimonious relationship beyond their service years.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Basu, “N. W. Thomas and Colonial Anthropology in British West Africa: Reappraising a Cautionary Tale,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 22 (2016), 87.

<sup>15</sup> Helen Tilley, *Africa as a Living Laboratory: Empire, Development, and the Problem of Scientific Knowledge, 1870–1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 420, note 162. Fiddian was his counterpart for West Africa in 1932–33.

<sup>16</sup> A.J. Stockwell, “Leaders, Dissidents and the Disappointed: Colonial Students in Britain as Empire Ended,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 36 (2008), 487–507.

The personality and world view of Flood can be gleaned from a number of secondary sources and official correspondence. Described as “one of the most prejudiced officials in Whitehall,”<sup>17</sup> he was clearly a conservative depicted as a “senior Dinosaur” by Ralph Furse, a younger rival at the Colonial Office, with whom he had “personal and ideological differences” during the 1920s.<sup>18</sup> Flood was distrustful of the engagement of anthropologists in colonial administration.<sup>19</sup> After meeting two anthropologists at Cambridge University in 1920, he minuted as follows: “They seem to attach an altogether undue importance to ethnology [actually, anthropology], in fact, they both are crazy.”<sup>20</sup> He submitted a withering minute on N.W. Thomas, a controversial colonial anthropologist, in the aftermath of the anti-tax protests in Aba, Eastern Nigeria in 1929, often dubbed the Aba Women’s War:

Mr. Northcote Thomas was a recognised maniac in many ways. He wore sandals, even in [England], lived on vegetables and was generally a rum person. I can quite imagine that the people in Nigeria did not want to have an object like that going about and poking into the private affairs of the native communities, partly because he was calculated to bring a certain amount of discredit upon the white man’s prestige, partly because the old residents felt that from the practical point of view they know a good deal about native habits and organisation.<sup>21</sup>

Flood was also an English bigot who opposed the employment of Irish Free State medical graduates of the Trinity College, Dublin in the colonial service. Arguing that their political loyalties could not be guaranteed, he stated that “the service is better off without them,” not least because they came from a disloyal country, rendering them “totally unsuited for any service under the crown.”<sup>22</sup> In the same vein, Flood subordinated the private life of the colonial civil servant to imperial service. This accorded with the prevailing

<sup>17</sup> J.G. Akitola-Wyse, *H.C. Bankole-Bright and Politics in Colonial Sierra Leone, 1919–1958* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 40, cited in Basu, “N.W. Thomas,” 88.

<sup>18</sup> Moore, “Transformation,” 57. “Dinosaur” was Furse’s contemptuous depiction of the conservative ideas of Flood and Fiddian.

<sup>19</sup> For a study of this imperial policy, see A.E. Afigbo, “Anthropology and Colonial Administration in South-Eastern Nigeria, 1891–1939,” *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 8 (1975), 19–35.

<sup>20</sup> CO 877/1, “Tropical African Services Course,” Flood to Amery, July 31, 1920, cited in Tilley, *Africa as a Living Laboratory*, 423, note 23.

<sup>21</sup> Basu, “N. W. Thomas,” 88, citing CO583/176/9, Flood to Fiddian, 19 December 1930.

<sup>22</sup> CO 877/3/51477, Minute by Flood, 19 November 1925, cited in Anna Crozier, “The Colonial Medical Officer and Colonial Identity: Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania Before World Two,” PhD dissertation, University College London (London, 2005), 81.

ethos of the imperial civil service.<sup>23</sup> Hence, he opined that “there is no doubt that most young officers would be hampered by wives in their first years.” He asserted that “a lad from 22 to 26 ought not to be thinking of marriage at all as his pay is not enough and his prospects too uncertain.”<sup>24</sup> Flood’s paternalism was also betrayed in his reference to a young man of 22 to 26 years as a “lad.”

During the inter-war period, Flood offered advice on several issues, which influenced policy towards the colonies, their governors, officials, and subjects.<sup>25</sup> However, this article is limited in coverage to the crisis of currency counterfeiting and the activities of European commercial firms, two issues of economic and monetary policy in British West Africa which engaged the attention of the Colonial Office. Although other Whitehall officials contributed minutes, our focus shall be on Flood’s flood of minutes during the interwar period. We shall see how and why he commented on the stated economic issues with a mixture of passion and expertise. However, his views were often expressed in trenchant and censorious language.<sup>26</sup> Flood, a writer noted, expressed his views in “his characteristic tetchy tone.”<sup>27</sup> Flood’s career and views were set in a wider context of the interwar period and overarching British imperial policy. First, the period was dominated by economic crises climaxed by the Great Depression of 1929—33.<sup>28</sup> Second, big firms consequently sought to cope with the economic crises by merging with and acquiring smaller firms, and resorting to economic jingoism. Third, the British government adopted economic nationalism (protectionism) in foreign trade and fiscal conservatism (belt tightening) in managing government finances.<sup>29</sup> Fourth, in the face of economic adversity, some desperate Africans took to currency counterfeiting, which threatened the integrity of the commercial and monetary systems of British West Africa. Finally, all this took

<sup>23</sup> A recent study of this is Ayodeji Olukoju, “‘The Service Had To Come First’: Leave and Ocean Passages of British Officials and their Dependants in Inter-War West Africa,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies/Revue canadienne des études africaines* 54 (2020), 541–556.

<sup>24</sup> CO 554/79/1, “Passages, Etc. of Officers’ Wives,” Minute by Flood, 6 November 1928.

<sup>25</sup> Basu, “N.W. Thomas,” 88, citing G.W. Stocking, *After Tylor* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 377, noted that “Flood’s comments have been taken as being representative of the colonial authorities’ view.”

<sup>26</sup> Basu, “N.W. Thomas,” 88, noted “Flood’s vituperative remarks” against N.W. Thomas, noted above.

<sup>27</sup> Wilson C. Jacob, *Working Out Egypt: Effendi Masculinity and Subject Formation in Colonial Modernity, 1870–1940* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 135.

<sup>28</sup> A.G. Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa* Second Edition (London: Routledge, 2020).

<sup>29</sup> Roger Middleton, “British Monetary and Fiscal Policy in the 1930s,” *Oxford Review of Economic Policy* 26 (2010), 414–441; Michael Kitson and Solomos Solomou, *Protectionism and Economic Revival: The British Inter-War Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).



place in a social climate of racial paternalism which pervaded the worldviews of British officials at Whitehall and the colonies.

### Flood on Currency and Counterfeit Currency

The counterfeiting of colonial currencies engaged colonial governments, especially those of Nigeria and the Gold Coast, and the Colonial Office in the interwar years. One of the countermeasures promoted by the business community, sections of the British press and economists, was the introduction of silver coinage to replace the alloy coins that appeared easily susceptible to forgery. Flood condescendingly dismissed such arguments in a minute to the Secretary of State: “I have seldom seen and heard so much idiocy talked on any subject as on the alloy coins.” He expressed disdain for the “pathetic ignorance” of the likes of the highly regarded Professor Sir Charles William Chadwick Oman, who had written a long letter to *The Times* of London on the subject arguing that making silver coins 500 fine was debasing the currency of England.<sup>30</sup>

Flood argued professorially that the cheaper the token coins the better they were. “In Jevons’ criteria of coins,” he asserted, “it is nowhere said that the token coin ought to have an intrinsic value.”<sup>31</sup> Rather, it had to be “hard-wearing, distinctive, acceptable, and not too easy to counterfeit.” He emphasized the need to focus on the profit accruing from the seigniorage, the difference between the face value of alloy coins and their intrinsic value when delivered in West Africa. If the cost of minting the coins was kept low, greater profit would accrue from minting them. Flood stated sarcastically that his own views were “platitudes,” that is, common knowledge to the average person, but they were “not understood by the ‘Bankers,’ by the ‘Chambers of Commerce’ or anybody else except Mr. Baddeley.”<sup>32</sup> In another intervention, he excoriated the business lobby from The Gambia with a sarcastic comment: “‘merchants’ and ‘bankers’ lust after silver. They don’t know why but they do.”<sup>33</sup>

As a corollary, Flood was unsparing of the colonial establishment, including the judiciary. In a celebrated case, where one T.B. Amissah, a convict in a counterfeiting case in the Gold Coast obtained acquittal on appeal on the basis of a technicality,<sup>34</sup> Flood could not resist the temptation to crucify the

<sup>30</sup> CO 554/71/10, “Return to Silver Coinage, 1926,” Minute by Flood, 20 May 1926.

<sup>31</sup> Flood was referencing the famous British economist, W. Stanley Jevons, and his *Money and the Mechanism of Exchange* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1875).

<sup>32</sup> CO 554/71/10, Minute by Flood, 20 May 1926. F. M. Baddeley was the Officer Administering the Government (OAG) of Nigeria.

<sup>33</sup> CO 554/71/10, Minute by Flood, 7 June 1926.

<sup>34</sup> Details in Ellen Feingold, “International Currency Counterfeiting Schemes in Interwar West Africa,” *Journal of West African History* 3 (2017), 77–101.



colonial judicial system. “[T]here is, I think,” he stated, “something wrong with the mentality of the West African Court of Criminal Appeal or with the Gold Coast Law on the subject of attempts, or both.” While acknowledging that the colonial courts in the past had proven to be “very sticky in the degree of proof” required in counterfeiting cases, he postulated that “they have been too meticulous in this one.” In short, Flood was unhappy that a convict had taken advantage of loopholes in the system to escape justice. He opined that the courts should have dispensed with technicalities to uphold conviction.<sup>35</sup> It is significant that a Whitehall colleague shared Flood’s contempt for the colonial judicial system in a supplementary comment: “I gave up understanding the methods & motives of the legal profession long ago.”<sup>36</sup>

It is not clear what expertise Flood had in currency matters. But, as stated above, he obtained professional advice from bankers, traders, and stakeholders in their respective spheres. This explains the authority with which he tackled various interest groups, including colonial governors and the merchants. Hence, on the issue of countering counterfeiting, he took a position on two contentious issues, the return to silver coinage and the addition of a gilt edge to coins. However, his position on silver changed in the course of the inter-war decade.<sup>37</sup> Whereas he was skeptical in the preceding decade, he supported a return to silver in a minute of November 1936. “I think myself,” he stated, “that we shall have to go back to silver sooner or later. It can’t be done soon, because the Mint is full up with orders that it could not execute an order for the (West African Currency) Board’s £10m or so currency... The conclusion is that the situation is serious but not yet quite desperate.”<sup>38</sup>

On the second issue, he strongly supported the introduction of a security edge coin to tackle counterfeiting in British West Africa.<sup>39</sup> He had asserted that the “‘security rim’ ... will effectively prevent counterfeiting by the use of moulds, which is the favourite method of coiners all over the world. If you try to mould a coin with this rim on it the mould breaks.”<sup>40</sup> He took the

<sup>35</sup> CO 554/95/7, “West African Currency Counterfeiting and Forgery Attempts,” Minute by Flood, 26 September 1934.

<sup>36</sup> CO 554/95/7, Minute by Flood, 26 September 1934.

<sup>37</sup> That Flood was amenable to a change of mind was exemplified by his stance on the need for universities in colonial Africa. Whereas in 1933, he had written that, “I do not want to see it,” in 1937 he criticized the Treasury for making inadequate provision for a college. See Apollon Nwauwa, *Imperialism, Academe and Nationalism: Britain and University Education for Africans 1860–1960* (London: Routledge, 2013), 103, note 78, citing CO 822/83/11, Minute by Flood, 23 December 1937.

<sup>38</sup> CO 554/102/7, “West African Currency Board: Counterfeiting and Forgery Attempts, 1936,” Minute by Flood, 28 November 1936.

<sup>39</sup> A study of this subject is Ayodeji Olukoju, “No Silver Bullet: Currency Counterfeiting and Countermeasures in British West Africa during the Later 1930s,” *The Numismatic Chronicle* 179 (2019), 357–371 (plus Pl.46).

<sup>40</sup> CO 554/107/14, Minute by Flood, 3 May 1937.

opportunity to attack the business community, as represented by the Joint West Africa Committee (JWAC) of the London, Manchester, and Liverpool Chambers of Commerce.<sup>41</sup> He dismissed its submission with characteristic vitriol: “The Joint West Africa Committee are, as usual, a bit foolish. They ought to know, in fact they have been told, that the question of dealing with counterfeit coins has been under consideration and they ought to realise that the wit of man is not confined solely to the Committee.”<sup>42</sup>

On the related issue of circulation of currency notes, Flood cited bank managers’ unanimous opposition to the introduction of a five-shilling note. Higher denomination notes (£1 and 10s) had been “merely tolerated – no more – and [did not] ... circulate largely among the native population. Hence the steadiness of the amount in circulation (about £¾ million) till the shortage last year.” The 5s note would circulate “a bit in the large towns” and the Europeans “would like it to buy goods in shops, but it would not go at all in the bush.” It was discovered that colonial subjects preferred 1s and 2s notes “because they were used to dealing in those units.” He doubted whether commercial banks and traders were making “any effort” to promote the circulation of currency notes. “They are very conservative,” he opined, “and the trader would rather pile up a hoard of coin so as to be able to beat his rival by paying coin for goods than help to encourage notes of mutual agreement.”<sup>43</sup>

Flood’s minutes on currency and currency counterfeiting appeared to have influenced policy decisions in the Colonial Office. Although the final decisions on these issues were made by successive Secretaries of State in consultation with their advisers at Whitehall and even colonial governors, they largely tallied with recommendations in Flood’s minutes. First, there was no return to silver after the change to alloy coinage in 1920. This was in the face of advice to the contrary by respected specialists, including academics, and business lobbies. Second, the adoption of the security-edge alloy coin in 1938 to counter counterfeiting was another initiative that Flood (and others at Whitehall) canvassed. In all, the Secretary of State’s dispatches generally aligned with the content of minutes by Flood and other advisers.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>41</sup> The JWAC is studied in Ayodeji Olukoju, “The Pressure Group Activity of Federated Chambers of Commerce: The Joint West Africa Committee and the Colonial Office, c. 1903–55,” *African Economic History* 46 (2018), 93–116.

<sup>42</sup> CO 554/107/14, Minute by Flood, 20 May 1937.

<sup>43</sup> CO 554/107/14, Minute by Flood, 19 July 1937.

<sup>44</sup> Ron Harris and Michael Crystal noted that after Flood had submitted a minute on harmonization of laws in British East Africa, “[a] letter was accordingly prepared” in line with his recommendation. See, Harris and Crystal, “Some Reflections on the Transplantation of British Company Law in Post-Ottoman Palestine,” *Theoretical Inquiries in Law* 10 (2009), 569, note 30. On Flood and the security edge coin, see Olukoju, “No Silver Bullet.”

## Flood and the Business Community

Flood had a touchy relationship with the business community. He traded tackles with the JWAC when it clamored for trial by jury in the colonies. If the firms in the business lobby were serious, he opined, they should prove it by releasing their local representatives in the colonies to serve on the juries, which he knew they could not afford to do. "The tendency of the [European] ... firms," he asserted, "is always to govern from this country, and one of their fixed delusions is that the Governor of a Colony stands to the Secretary of State in the same relation as their local clerks do to the Head Office." Flood stressed that such "delusion needs to be fought."<sup>45</sup> On another occasion, when the JWAC requested a meeting with the Colonial Office on unspecified requests relating to the Gold Coast, Flood, remarked as follows: "As usual the Joint West Africa Committee are rather vague as to what exactly they want to talk about and have not given us very much in the way of notice. The only thing to do is ... to let them talk." He anticipated that one of their requests would be the Co-operative Societies Bill which was causing them "much anxiety." Such anxieties, he opined, were "needless" since "most of the things which they object are common form elsewhere in similar matters." He expected that the Gold Coast Governor, Sir Ransford Slater, would provide the ammunition to deal with them.<sup>46</sup>

Flood had noted in an earlier minute that the JWAC's opposition to the Bill was self-serving. The JWAC had couched its opposition in the altruistic garb of defence of public interest. It argued "that it was wrong to use public funds to subsidise a co-operative movement," and that it amounted to "Government trading in competition with the merchants." Their "real ... fear," Flood opined, was "that the co-operative societies would begin to deal direct with purchasers in Europe or America, and it would therefore oust the merchants."<sup>47</sup> Flood added that the Ordinance in question was based on similar ones "all over the world," citing the example of Ceylon. He dismissed the points raised in the merchants' memorandum as being "simply put forward for debating purposes." Flood's antipathy towards the JWAC was shared by other officials. In a dismissive comment, a Whitehall official stated that the Committee "has the peculiar impression that it always knows better than the experts; it knew much better than the Consulting Engineers how to drain Bathurst, and now apparently the Mint produces coins expressly designed to help counterfeiters."<sup>48</sup>

<sup>45</sup> CO 554/83/8, "Joint West Africa Committee, 1930," Minute by Flood on "Special Jury," 13 June 1930.

<sup>46</sup> CO 554/83/8, Minute by Flood, 17 June 1930.

<sup>47</sup> CO 554/83/8, Minute by Flood, 13 June 1930.

<sup>48</sup> CO 554/117/9, "West African Currency Board Counterfeiting and Forgery Attempts, 1939," Minute by J.E. Manham (?), 28 July 1939.

On the issue of competition among commercial firms and the effect of cartelization on African producers, Flood maintained a critical stance towards the European merchants. As the Great Depression intensified and big firms took to squeezing out local and foreign competition, he disagreed with the tactics and rationale of the British firms, who regularly resorted to economic jingoism to attract official support. In 1929, he reported the speculative practices of British firms as follows: “an Agent at Kano, Northern Nigeria walked into the Office of the Niger Company and offered to buy 10,000 tons of groundnuts at a certain price and having got an option on the quantity for three days walked across the road to the office of W.B. McIver and Co, and sold them the same nuts at £2.10/- a ton profit.”<sup>49</sup> He cited that episode to illustrate the irrational competition, leading to speculation and profiteering by the firms. In the same vein, he also disputed the British merchants’ claim that Syrian competition was unfair and undesirable because it was being promoted by the French with heavy state subsidies. “The fact,” he submitted, “is that the English firm is beginning to ‘feel the drought’ of Syrian competition.”<sup>50</sup> He praised the “enterprising” Syrians for taking advantage of expansion of markets and the infrastructure that accompanied colonialism to pursue legitimate enterprise, satisfied with even a small profit margin and enduring conditions that their European competitors considered “unacceptable.” The Levantines, he contended, were only interested in making money to retire to their Middle East homeland.

In the face of the deepening economic crisis that culminated in the Great Depression, the UAC attempted to “reorganise” West African trade by cartelizing it under its control. This led to a wide-ranging conflict that pitted the firm against the government, shipping lines and commercial firms. The “great shipping war” that ensued divided officials in London and West Africa.<sup>51</sup> In this connection, Flood initially supported UAC’s plan but changed his mind as indicated in two minutes. In the first, though he expressed reservations about the proposal to create a mega firm controlled by the UAC, he minuted as follows: “I do not, however think, there is any particular objection to the establishment of this gigantic concern, even though it will to a very large extent monopolise West African trade.... In short, I am inclined to welcome the change, as it may at any rate do a great deal to

<sup>49</sup> CO 554/81/16, Minute by Flood, 11 March 1929.

<sup>50</sup> CO 554/81/16, Minute by Flood, 11 March 1929.

<sup>51</sup> The conflict was dubbed a “shipping war” because of the central role of the Elder Dempster shipping company. Details are in Ayodeji Olukoju, ‘Imperial Business Umpire: The Colonial Office, United Africa Company, Elder Dempster, and the “Great Shipping War” of 1929–30,’ in Falola, Toyin (ed.), *Africa, Empire and Globalization: Essays in Honor of A.G. Hopkins* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2011), 167–189.

stabilise things in West Africa, while the overhead charges ought to be considerably reduced.”<sup>52</sup>

But, in a *volte face* after details of UAC’s plan emerged, Flood, deplored the “uncontrolled competition” that had ruined trade but condemned UAC’s plan to create “an absolute monopoly.” The UAC proposal “would be an unmitigated disaster. ... The whole thing [amounts] ... to an attempt by the [UAC] ... to use the shipping lines (via low preferential freights) as a weapon to crush their competitors. ‘Be mine or I will kill you’ is the cry.”<sup>53</sup> His subsequent comments on the UAC were no less hostile. The first is worth quoting in full:

[UAC] may do good by reducing competition and in the end be able to pay more reasonable prices to the producer. I would, however, say in the words of Shakespeare, “It is excellent to have a giant’s strength but it is tyrannous to use it like a giant,” and what the UA is trying to do is not to ‘rationalise’ the trade by amicable agreement and extension of its activities, but to bludgeon its competitors out of existence. ... I am not at all sure that we could trust UA, either to give a reasonable price to the producer, or to let him have goods at reasonable rates. A matter of danger is the overpowering influence of one big concern in control of the policy of government.<sup>54</sup>

In another minute, he remarked that the UAC had “a favourite hobby” of continuing “to press that the people of the Gold Coast should be put in a dangerous financial position in order to enable [it] ... to get a closer stranglehold of products in the Gold Coast.”<sup>55</sup>

Flood punctured UAC’s appeal to economic jingoism when it claimed that if it did not take over, the Germans would exploit competition to stage a comeback after their ouster during the First World War. Flood stated sarcastically that “if the German competition begins to get serious we shall be faced with the beating of the Imperial drum, and demands to know why Germans are allowed to trade in a British Colony and take the bread out of the mouths of deserving Englishmen.” He dismissed UAC’s pseudo economic nationalism as a ploy to “drive the small firms out of business and get a stranglehold on the shipping companies.” Instead of working against British interests, the possible return of the German firms would frustrate UAC’s plans. In any event, a UAC monopoly “would mean the ruin of West Africa, of its people, and its various Governments, until in the end the inevitable ruin of the UAC followed, and it would be better if there were no monopoly.”<sup>56</sup>

Flood gave short shrift to UAC plans to control shipping, trade, and banking. In a lengthy minute, he provided a clinical analysis of the UAC

<sup>52</sup> CO 554/81/16, Minute by Flood, 11 March 1929.

<sup>53</sup> CO 554/81/16, Minute by Flood, 8 November 1929.

<sup>54</sup> CO 554/83/2, Minute by Flood, 9 May 1930.

<sup>55</sup> CO 554/83/8, Minute by Flood, 13 June 1930.

<sup>56</sup> CO 554/81/16, second Minute, 8 November 1929.

proposal, highlighting how the company masked its self-interest while purporting to be protecting British economic interests.<sup>57</sup> He described the draft agreement that UAC attempted to foist on shipping and commercial firms in West Africa as “one of the most amazing documents that I have seen for some time” and proceeded to reveal the booby traps hidden in it.<sup>58</sup> A colleague of his agreed that the draft agreement was indeed “a most amazing document” and feared that it would be “very difficult to prevent Sir R. Waley Cohen becoming a Dictator in West Africa in so far as commercial matters are concerned.”<sup>59</sup>

As indicated above, Flood was a British nationalist who ordinarily supported British Business provided it played by the rules. Yet, he was opposed to the self-serving economic nationalism of British firms which found it convenient to appeal to the home government in foreign markets. A striking example was the crisis faced by British merchants when the American government was considering an import duty on Nigerian palm oil, palm kernels, and palm kernel oil exports to the United States. The Niger Company consequently lobbied for retaliatory tariffs against the United States automobile exports to Nigeria.<sup>60</sup> Flood provided a reasoned response based on statistics of imports and exports. “These figures though indicating a high proportion of US vehicles,” he explained, “do not show that there is any formidable weapon against the US to be found in taxing their products. In any case there is no doubt about it that the US lorry is a better thing for the roads in the Colonies than the British.” He added that the US was “perfectly entitled to put what tariff it likes on imported goods.”<sup>61</sup> In a later comment, he concurred with the Board of Trade that retaliating against the US was impracticable. “The idea of Nigeria, or anybody else, producing any kind of effective threats to the USA in regard to anything connected with their tariff,” he asserted, “is very much like attacking an elephant with a pea-shooter.”<sup>62</sup> That was the end of the matter.

Patriotism did not blind Flood to economic realities, which he acknowledged in issues relating to foreign competition and inter-imperial relations in the colonies. As indicated above, he was pragmatic enough to counsel against challenging American sovereignty over its fiscal policy and to acknowledge the futility of engaging it in a tariff war. He was also objective in acknowledging that American lorries were more suitable for the colonies. In the same vein, he opposed attempts to stop the circulation of French coins in Nigeria. “I have doubts,” he argued, “as to the necessity of stopping French coin in Nigeria. There is a healthy trade in money

<sup>57</sup> CO 554/83/2, Minute by Flood, 9 January 1930.

<sup>58</sup> CO 554/83/2, Minute by Flood, 1 April 1930.

<sup>59</sup> CO 554/83/2, Minute by S.H. W[ilson], 3 April 1930.

<sup>60</sup> CO 554/81/12, “United States Import Duty on Palm Oil,” Edgar Sanders, Director, The Niger Company, London to Flood, Colonial Office, 27 February 1929.

<sup>61</sup> CO 554/81/12, Minute by Flood, 1 March 1929.

<sup>62</sup> CO 554/81/12, Minute by Flood, 22 April 1929.

changing in Sokoto and other border places, and I do not see why it should be handed over to the Banks.”<sup>63</sup> In a subsequent submission, he opposed “a drastic prohibition of the importation of foreign coin in view of the trade across the Northern frontier of Nigeria.” Alluding to the existence of “a regular business of money changing in Kano, Sokoto and elsewhere,” he pointed out the danger of applying the law against “a French subject who was on his way home after changing his money into French coin.” Equally absurd, in his opinion, was the scenario of making a Nigerian returning to the colony from French territory to obtain permission before bringing in 20 francs.<sup>64</sup>

Flood’s position on the foregoing economic policy issues broadly reflected the dominant conservative views at Whitehall. There was official bias against the overreaching practices of the UAC and the economic jingoism of the British business lobby (JWAC). The decisions of the Secretaries of State on these issues understandably accorded with the minutes submitted by Flood. However, his opposition to the attempt by the UAC to crush competition in British West Africa was also the orthodox position of the dominant faction at Whitehall that the Secretary of State backed.<sup>65</sup>

## Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated the value of minutes as an invaluable archival resource in historical research and scholarship. By focusing on the deluge of minutes written by a long serving Colonial Office bureaucrat in the inter-war period, the paper has unveiled the following:

First, official correspondence (dispatches) cannot be fully understood or contextualized without the surrounding minutes which encapsulated advice from senior bureaucrats to the Secretary of State and the colonial governor. In effect, dispatches were largely the distillation of minutes but neither dispatches nor their supporting minutes can be read in isolation of each other without losing context and perspective.

Second, Colonial Office advisors, such as Flood, were well educated and informed, with a grasp of issues across disciplines, such as economics and literature. Flood, for example, often cited authorities such as Shakespeare and Jevons to buttress his submissions, and even took on respected authorities, such as Professor Oman, in stating his position in policy debates.

Third, there were in-house debates and cleavages among advisers, as epitomized by the division over the attempts by the UAC to control West African trade. The division reflected the extent to which the officials

<sup>63</sup> CO 554/69/5, “Circulation of French Alloy Coinage in West Africa,” Minute by Flood, 26 June 1926.

<sup>64</sup> CO 554/69/5, “Circulation of French Alloy Coinage in West Africa,” Minute by Flood, 29 July 1926.

<sup>65</sup> This is detailed in Olukoju, “Imperial Business Umpire.”



interpreted the application of laissez faire ideas to colonial West Africa. However, most officials were critical of the activities of British firms, especially the UAC in commerce and Elder Dempster in shipping in British West Africa.

Finally, the opinions expressed in the minutes revealed the world views, personal biases, and ideological leanings of their writers. Such prejudices were expressed in official language that was often laced with racism, nationalism, sarcasm, and condescension.

In all, contributors of minutes were important to the process of decision making and policy formulation both in Whitehall and the colonies. Although their views were taken into consideration, and often adopted almost wholesale in the dispatches to and from London, the ultimate version of all correspondence was the responsibility of the political head in London and West Africa. Yet, if the quality of government policy reflected the quality of both leadership as well as the in-house advisers, due credit should be given to writers of the minutes that informed decisions, such as J.E.W. Flood. As has been demonstrated in this piece, policy decisions were the products of the individuals involved and the processes leading to them. In effect, it takes a reading of the minutes, such as those produced by Flood, to capture the context and undercurrents of policy in interwar British West Africa. Such insights avert a simplistic reading and interpretation of colonial dispatches, and a superficial understanding of the policy making process in colonial Africa and the policies emanating from such processes.

Flood was a typical old-guard Whitehall bureaucrat, steeped in the culture of imperial officialdom. Yet, for all his abrasiveness, hubris, hectoring style, bigotry, paternalism, and conservatism, Flood was a realist. He stood his ground on contentious issues, but shifted ground in the face of evidence-based realities. He was fiercely independent, taking a position where others waffled or declined an opinion. A gadfly, Flood was a product of his times, which he reflected in his views, and a creature of the imperial civil service, to which he was unwaveringly committed to the end.

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