It was perhaps unfortunate that in early 1939 Sir Percy Loraine left Turkey. The diplomatic staff had suffered another serious loss in the previous summer when Colonel Woods retired. It also remained no larger than it had been when at the beginning of 1937 Loraine complained that he was so short-handed he could not be expected to produce the embassy’s annual report on time. The mission contained seven diplomats: a chancery of five, which included two Levant Service officers with local diplomatic rank; and a commercial section of two. This put it on the same level as the embassy in Tehran and significantly beneath the one to which Loraine had been moved at Rome. The air attaché, the laconic Wing Commander Thomas Elmhirst, was alone among his service colleagues in not having side accreditations. Contact between the Ankara and Istanbul posts was impeded by the fact that the telephone connection was bad and in any case tapped. Building work on the new ambassadorial residence at Ankara had only just been started. Beyond Istanbul and Ankara there were now consular posts at only Trabzon, Mersin and Izmir.

However, the embassy’s position on the eve of the outbreak of the Second World War was not altogether a weak one. Alarmed by the international situation, the Foreign Office lost no time in appointing a new ambassador, so ensuring that he arrived before Loraine departed and enabling him to “pick his brains”. The new chief of mission, Sir Hughe Knatchbull-Hugessen, may not have had a commanding presence but—like all his recent predecessors—he was highly intelligent, witty, well-schooled in his craft, and a diplomat of considerable experience. Like them he had seen service in Turkey earlier in his career, if

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1 TNA, Oliphant to Loraine, 21 Jan. 1937, FO1011/40.
2 It also had a chaplain, an archivist, another clerical officer, and a press attaché.
3 Telephone tapping became “standard international practice” in the decade before the Second World War: Denniston, Churchill’s Secret War, p. 23; TNA, Saffery (Telecommunications Dept., GPO) to Dunlop (Head of Communications, FO), 30 June 1944, FO850/128.
only very briefly. ‘Snatch’, as he was universally known in the service, brought with him the reputation of being a safe pair of hands. He was also well liked by his colleagues and staff, and enjoyed much sympathy, having been severely wounded in August 1937 when, during his last posting as ambassador at Peking, his car was strafed by a Japanese fighter. It was just a pity that, on the old argument from social class that was rapidly losing ground, he was opposed to the amalgamation of the diplomatic and consular services. Potentially worse, while convalescing in 1938 he was made one of the three diplomatic service members of the Foreign Office committee then considering this question, and just a month before going to Turkey had been deputed to express their opposition privately for fear that its inclusion in their minority report might cause embarrassment.

Perhaps Knatchbull-Hugessen continued to conceal his role in this sensitive affair on arriving at the embassy, which would have been just as well. After all, James Morgan—whose continued presence was another thing that the embassy had going for it—remained formally a humble consular officer despite the fact that he had been chargé d’affaires in each year from 1931 until 1938 and was to stand in for Knatchbull-Hugessen himself in 1940. “His long experience and close knowledge of Turkey were of immense value,” the ambassador wrote later, “and his unruffled, soothing way of looking at things in general stood me in good stead in many anxious days”. It was also no doubt a relief to him that the new commercial secretary, Stanley Jordan, an Australian and himself a former Levant Service officer, brought with him an impressive curriculum vitae; in any case, though ‘retired’, Colonel Woods

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5 In The Churchill War Papers, vol. III, p. 419 (n.1), Gilbert says that K-H acquired this nickname only after discovery in 1944 of the ‘snatching’ of some of his secret papers by ‘Cicero’ (see p. 201 below). This is neat but untrue; see its use in TNA, Oliphant to Loraine, 1 Feb. 1939, FO1011/44, and Dilks (ed.), The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan, p. 509 (30 Jan. 1943).
7 Eden, Facing the Dictators, pp. 533–4.
8 Platt treats this episode with the contempt it deserves and reprints K-H’s private letter to the permanent under-secretary in an appendix, The Cinderella Service, pp. 115–16, 240–2. There is no mention of this business in K-H’s memoirs.
9 K-H, Diplomat in Peace and War, p. 182.
10 This included over four years service in Constantinople during the armistice period. In 1930 he transferred to the Trade Commissioner Service (DOT) and thereafter worked exclusively in commercial diplomacy.