CHAPTER 2

Missionaries and Nationalists

Scottland and the 1959 State of Emergency in Malawi

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Introduction

Just after midnight on 3 March 1959, a state of emergency was declared in Nyasaland (colonial Malawi). Responding to the growth of nationalist agitation throughout the country, the governor, Sir Robert Armitage, declared the Nyasaland African Congress an unlawful organisation and ordered the immediate detention of 208 of its leaders, starting with its president, Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda. In the House of Commons, British Colonial Secretary Alan Lennox-Boyd justified the governor’s actions on the grounds that “plans had been made by Congress to carry out widespread violence and murder of Europeans, Asians and moderate Africans; that, in fact, a massacre was being planned.” The massacre that took place that day, however, was of nationalists and was committed by white Rhodesian soldiers. Operation Sunrise began smoothly with the peaceful arrest of Banda and several of his closest associates, but at Nkhata Bay troops of the Royal Rhodesian Regiment opened fire on an unarmed crowd, killing at least twenty-eight people (the official figure was twenty) in what, in some respects at least, can be seen as a prelude to the massacre of sixty-nine others at Sharpeville, South Africa, a year later. In all, government forces killed more than sixty Malawians during the emergency, and thirteen hundred were detained without trial, many of them in oppressive conditions. Yet the end result was a massive boost to Malawan nationalism, as demonstrated by the release of Banda from prison on 1 April 1960 and his subsequent invitation to constitutional talks in London. Prior to the


2 Speech by Lennox-Boyd in the House of Commons, 3 March 1959, PRO (Public Record Office) CO 1015–1515.

3 The updated figures were supplied to me by Professor Wiseman Chirwa, who is conducting research on the Emergency in the Nkhata Bay area.
emergency, the British government had been adamant that the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland was a permanent institution—the one to which British sovereignty in its Central African territories would ultimately be ceded. After the emergency it was clear to all but the most myopic that the Federation was doomed and that independence for Nyasaland and Northern Rhodesia could not be delayed for long. What the future held for Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) remained another, deeply unsettling, matter.

Most discussions of the 1959 state of emergency have justifiably focused on its role in British decolonisation and on the rise of nationalism in Malawi.4 In this chapter, however, I turn my attention to another issue: the relationship between Scottish missionaries and the Malawian nationalist movement.5 Esther Breitenbach has argued persuasively that the impact of Scottish Presbyterian missions was broadly similar to that of other British Protestant missionary societies.6 However, the question remains as to whether Scottish missionaries abroad and church people at home tended to respond more sympathetically to the demand for national liberation in Asia and Africa than did fellow-Christians from England. In particular, how deep was Scottish support in the 1950s for the aspirations of Malawian nationalists?

As David Maxwell has noted, Christian missions and churches did not play a significant part in the decolonisation of Africa.7 Some missionaries, like Walter Carey in Kenya, during the Mau Mau emergency, “took up a line which can only be described as one of bitter hostility to current African aspirations.”8 Others, like Bishop Thorne of the (Anglican) Universities’ Mission to Central Africa (UMCA) in Nyasaland, retreated from enlightened paternalism into

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