**TNA FO 10/644**

**H.P. Anderson memorandum to Lord Salisbury (removal of Edward Bannister)**

**31 July 1895**

“With No. 2 to Capt [Robert] Arthur

Mr Bannister, the Vice Consul in the Congo, cannot return there. He was intemperate in his actions and injudicious in the tone of his correspondence with the authorities (though his intention was good) and the State Governor asked for his recall which was agreed to.

It has occurred to me that we might take the opportunity of sending out an intelligent soldier to act as Vice Consul, with orders to report on and visit his district which comprises the whole Congo State. He then could go up the river and find out what the Belgians and the French are doing in the direction of the Nile. There is a good man for the purpose who might be secured, Captain Arthur who was in Uganda with Sir Gerald Portal and has been to the Nile with Sir John Kirk – he is capable and has a considerable knowledge of Africa.

Mr Bannister, who has only held one post as Vice Consul, has little claim on us and need not, I think, for the present at least, receive any other appointment.

I do not see that the Congo State would raise any objection – an acting Vice Consul does not, indeed require our ??

July 31/95

HPA

I think it would be a good plan

S”

**Casement book (1st edition extract)**

The Englishman Edward Bannister now became the dominant male role model in young Casement’s life, whether he noticed or not, and one of two relatives to substitute as a father figure for the orphan. In an under-remarked way, Casement followed in almost every one of Bannister’s working footsteps. They appear to have had the same outlook on African life even though one was a modest person where Casement was wilful and somewhat vain. There being no genetic connection, it is quite plausible to argue that Casement was moulded by his uncle, or perhaps he simply adopted the views and concerns of the older man. His personality which was gradually maturing into a certain rigidity was thus being shaped by Bannister through his uncle’s experiences in the Congo and Angola. Both were to display a similar pattern of consular responses to Congo State excesses, driven by a humanitarian sensibility which was to transform itself into anti-Belgian feeling.

The main issue facing Atlantic consuls, aside from reporting to London on trade impediments and opportunities, was representation of British blacks who had gained employment in every port and country around that ocean. The Congo State recruited labour extensively in British West Africa and the Caribbean, and an ever-rising tide of complaints ensued. In 1893, from May to December, 1,851 such black British were enumerated (by Bannister) as arriving in the Congo while thousands more were scattered throughout the State, said mostly to be soldiers. These men, somewhat inaccurately termed Kruboys – Hausa from the Niger as opposed to the Kru coast were especially sought for heavy work and still so-called – were mistreated, in fact treated as the native Congolese were treated; flogged to death, imprisoned on a whim, pressed into military service then gaoled or executed for desertion, and if alive (and even after death) forbidden to leave the state with their earnings.

In consequence, London eventually decided to appoint a second, and this time dedicated, consular official in the Congo; the first appointed in 1888 had been diverted north to Old Calabar more often than not. In 1893, Edward Bannister who had had honorary consul experience in Angola on and off since 1885, and had operated as a trader in the Congo itself, was appointed vice-consul in Boma, the then Congo capital. This was soon after his nephew had moved out of the Congo to work in Old Calabar. There he took up the government employment that led him into the consular service. Five years later, in 1898, Casement was posted to the very same town of Loanda in Angola which his uncle had left to go to the Congo. By that time however Bannister was three years out of his Boma job.

Casement’s consular appointment at Loanda was interrupted by his South African War missions. In 1900 he again followed in his uncle’s footsteps, this time to the Boma posting, one now uncoupled from Loanda. Kinchasa, the present day capital, further up river and on the opposite shore from Brazzaville, was London’s preferred location for a consulate but one rejected by Casement. Despite being of different generations, uncle and nephew were to be only some five years behind one another in their Angolan and Congo appointments.

Unsurprisingly, Bannister was obliged to deal with many more of the abuses for which he was appointed. His despatches were moving and lengthy. Although well constructed and convincing, by being delayed many weeks in order to accumulate evidence, and thus dealing with series of incidents, they tended to lose immediacy and force. That of 17 June 1894 ran to thirty-three pages with seventeen enclosures. In it, he spoke of the acting Governor General Félix Fuchs (a man Casement would communicate with in his 1903 investigation) causing the death of seven recalcitrant Barbadians “by having them fired into, when huddled in a mass on board ship.” In a similar incident on the *Gretchen Bohlen*, Bannister had interposed himself, declaring, “You may send for your soldiers and fire but you will have to fire on me as I shall stand in front of these men.” He also told of the beginnings of State reprisals for his brave stand: “Fourteen Accra men were brought right in front of the consulate and I found them all chained. I cannot but think that this was done purposely to try and impress on me that my interference would not save them.”

Bannister excused himself at one point for his use of very plain language with the public prosecutor, and honestly admitted getting “very indignant.” An indication of an increasingly emotional involvement is his sarcastic definition of “Congo Free State dress”, as seen on a “living skeleton” of a prisoner. In classic Casement-style phrasing, he dubbed Free State dress – “an iron collar with a chain attached.”

Governor General Théophile Wahis whose “ungovernable temper and arrogance would not allow him to be even commonly polite”, when he did receive the British consul, kept him standing throughout the audience “with an expression of rage on his face.” Plainly the local officials could no longer tolerate Bannister. (Casement was later to concur regarding the Belgian official, although in more measured tones, advising London that Colonel Wahis, now en route to Brussels, was no “friend to, or admirer of those principles of free dealing and equal opportunity identified with our treatment of Colonial affairs.”) The Colonel’s earlier military experience had been with the Empress of Mexico, King Leopold’s sister, in the ill-fated Mexican Legion under her executed husband Maximillian. Wahis was to stay Governor General for twenty years from 1892 to 1912.

On the evidence of Baptist missionaries, a massacre ordered by a State officer of seven native carriers in the upper Congo, who had gone on strike until they were paid and allowed first to return home, to “enjoy a little rest with their relatives,” was also reported to the Foreign Office. In October 1894, Bannister repeated his serious concerns in a letter to the Governor of the Gold Coast (forwarded to London) about the Congo State hiring Accra men as labourers, only for them to discover they were now soldiers under military discipline; “fraudulent enlistment” as he stigmatised it. The consul asked at least that copies of employment agreements be sent to him. “I had hundreds of complaints, and am still occupied with grave charges of cruelty practised on these men by officers of the State who stop short of nothing in brutality under the guise of discipline” he added. His efforts, he said, were “met by remarks from the Governor-General…that it was not my business to interfere, I must confine myself to commercial questions, pure and simple.” That he added “did not deter me in the least, it simply had the opposite effect.”

If one did not know that this was the uncle writing it could easily be taken to be the work of his nephew. The length of his letters and his manifest dedication to core human rights bear an uncanny resemblance to Casement’s modus operandi, and official style, down to the use of a favourite archaism of his – anent (about). That the cruelty in the lower Congo was insignificant compared to what Bannister said was “perpetrated in the regions of the Upper Congo” was a fact also passed to London, laying the base for the wider investigation, ironically to be undertaken by his own nephew nearly a decade on.

London did put in place various restrictions on recruitment (agreed with the Free State), including a requirement that contracts should be executed in front of the British consul. Ultimately, despite Congo State protest, a ban was applied in late 1894 by the Gold Coast administration whose Governor reckoned Bannister was entirely accurate and reliable. In 1896 it was extended throughout all the West African colonies by Joseph Chamberlain, the Colonial Secretary. Promises of better treatment by Leopold’s officials were however joined by commercial pressures arguing that the prohibition tended to throw the Congo more into French hands. As a result the ban was amended later that year to allow for engagement of such labour by the Congo Railway company in which there was substantial British investment.

This reform was Bannister’s great achievement in Africa but by the time of its promulgation he was no longer in post. He had returned to England on leave, having been convicted by a Congo court of assaulting an official. Back home he was to suffer the ignominy of reprimand and peremptory replacement. The vice-consul was judged guilty of taking his set tasks too seriously – this despite the Foreign Secretary, Lord Kimberley’s order of April 1894, on reading an earlier Bannister report: “These abuses must be put a stop to.”

The incident that finally provoked Bannister’s downfall occurred on 2 June 1894 when he boarded the Akassa and demanded to see a list of its West African immigrant passengers and their terms of engagement. When the official declined his request he snatched the papers that revealed “unlawfully enlisted recruits from Sierra Leone.” For shoving the official “along the deck” he was provocatively charged with assault, fined and ordered to pay costs. This peccadillo occurred in a state where massacre and mutilation, if not official policy, were certainly widely tolerated.

Bannister apologised on 28 December 1894, offering his sincere regrets to the Foreign Secretary through his consular superior W. Clayton Pickersgill for the annoyance he had caused. He then proceeded to relate an earlier series of outrages that had culminated in a flogging for a headman who had complained to the consul about his Kruboys being denied repatriation. The State Captain on seeing Bannister’s card said to the old African “I’ll teach you to go to the Consul!” Fifty lashes were then administered. “He did certainly teach him – Congo Independent State fashion!” was Bannister’s ironic comment. The Governor’s further complaint to Bannister was that he was being seen to act “in favour of the blacks.” Having justified his actions with extra contextual detail, Bannister concluded by promising “I will endeavour to suppress my personal feelings in future for the sake of my position and my obvious duty as an officer of the government and not a private irresponsible personage.”

This letter was urged on him by Pickersgill, who did add in his enclosure to the Earl of Kimberley, “The incidents he describes are such as not to escape your Lordship’s attention although they cannot be regarded as offering him any excuse.” Such a self-culpatory yet self-justifying letter ensured Bannister would not be returning to Boma, but the process was opaque. Kimberley, after reading the Gold Coast Governor’s trenchant views, noted on 13 February 1895 that he did not entirely trust Bannister’s reports. He then contradicted himself by writing that there was “abundant reason” to proceed with the policy of stopping recruitment because of ill treatment. Brussels was duly informed and told that unless guarantees of proper contractual arrangements could be entered into, the ban would stay in place. The notion of a British diplomat being arraigned in a foreign court for attempting to protect the lives and liberties of British subjects, and then being sacked, is still hard to credit, especially as the Congo was subject ultimately to British (and other) control through the Berlin Act. The matter however seems to have gone unremarked at home which gave the Foreign Office a certain freedom to dispose of Bannister. By July 1895 officials were discussing who would replace him. H.P. Anderson who in March had minuted “Until the regime in the Congo is completely altered, it may be impossible for any Vice-Consul to hold his own” was three months later singing a quite different tune. Recommending to Lord Salisbury the name of an “intelligent soldier” as a replacement for Bannister, one who might go up river to discover “what the Belgians and the French are doing in the direction of the Nile,” he declared that “Mr Bannister the Vice-Consul in the Congo cannot return there. He was intemperate in his actions and injudicious in the tone of his correspondence with the authorities (though his intention was good) and the State Governor asked for his recall which was agreed to.” Salisbury concurred.

In one key respect this was untrue and it is surprising that Anderson’s minuted assessment, and the detail about agreeing to the Congo State’s wishes – let alone acquiescing with its actions on the consul went unchallenged. The geopolitical problems of the upper Nile may well have required reassessment of Foreign Office priorities and an opportunity having presented itself was duly taken to swap a humanitarian-minded consul for someone who would concentrate on Britain’s wider interests. But the notion that London should and did agree to Bannister’s recall on the say-so of the Congo State Governor is inherently unlikely, especially as the archives in Brussels give no indication of any such request, rather the contrary.

Dr Jules Marchal, a Congo historian and a former Belgian ambassador in Africa, suggests “Bannister as an older man could not adapt to the ways of the consular-diplomatic caste, could not refrain from calling a cat a cat. Having no esteem for the Congo authorities, he told them bluntly what he had to…This lack of ‘good manners’ was a cardinal sin in the eyes of the Foreign Office.” Whether he was simply “quick-tempered and possessed more zeal than tact” as has been suggested and was thus the victim of a ruthless Congo administration is one argument. Somebody however within the Foreign Office conspired, or at least deceived, to ensure the consul’s demission or transfer, by neglecting to tell the Foreign Secretary that King Leopold had actually disagreed with his Congo officials about Bannister. However it remains unclear who precisely, and why.

On 16 May 1894 the Governor-General had urged Leopold to ask for Bannister’s recall because he had written that the public prosecutor was a liar. The King replied that such a request was not appropriate especially as the prosecutor was himself unfit for the job. Later when Leopold learned of Bannister’s conviction, he ordered, on 30 July 1894, the remission of the fine, observing that the Congo justice system had been so maladroit, its proceedings could well lead to the establishment of the mooted system of British consular courts. In both instances Leopold faulted the Congo authorities and not Bannister whose defence of the interest of the black British he seems to have respected.

The Foreign Office, regardless of Leopold’s view in Brussels, laid the blame for the incidents solely on their own man and a note was sent from the Brussels embassy to the King on 28 September 1894 stating that his assault on the government clerk was clearly improper and indefensible. It did however ask for the fine to be abated as the conviction was contrary to normal diplomatic immunity, and ended by stating “the Vice-Consul will be censured, and will be warned to be more careful in the future.” The bemused Belgians responded by advising that Leopold had sent instructions to the Congo over a month earlier that the fine be remitted. What cannot have gone unnoticed was that the British were not backing up their man on the ground, ensuring the Congo authorities knew they need not worry about further pressure from London concerning treatment of their own, let alone British, Africans.

Oddly, in Casement’s extensive surviving correspondence there are no letters from his uncle or any mention of this remarkable affair or of his effective dismissal, and almost no references to him otherwise. When Casement came to be given the Foreign Office’s documentation on the Congo question prior to his 1903 investigation there was nothing about his uncle. The saga cannot have gone unremarked although Casement chose to ignore it in his writings. Nina, after 1916, recalled a family version of uncle Edward’s court appearance. In her somewhat embroidered account he had rescued an African put in a barrel by a Belgian official which was then thrown into the river. Bannister, in the process, hit the Belgian for which he was fined 500 francs.

Anderson further minuted to Lord Salisbury “Mr Bannister, who has only held one post as Vice-Consul, has little claim on us and need not, I think, for the present at least receive any other appointment.” This was inaccurate as he had had previous honorary consular appointments. In anyone’s book Edward Bannister was an unsung hero of the Congo story, a trail blazer who paid an apparently high and unheralded price for his courage and persistence. According to his daughter Gertrude, her father “retired” after his dismissal, as has been accepted. In fact this was not the end of his career.

From a cursory reference, by Casement, to his uncle having worked in Brazil, a sequel was to be uncovered. Writing from Rio de Janeiro in 1909 he had remarked to Gertrude how he often thought “of your poor father when he came here from Africa. No wonder he resigned and fled in despair.” Such a posting is to be found in the diplomatic list of the time which has Bannister appointed as vice-consul in the Brazilian capital in August 1895 – but only up to March 1896. The Foreign Office, perhaps because of the discreditable treatment it meted out (or for fear of Bannister making an issue of the matter), had had second thoughts about simply discarding him. He was sent to Rio de Janeiro, a more agreeable Portuguese-speaking territory than Angola, spookily prefiguring his nephew’s movements once again. Like Casement, he was reluctant to take up his new post, and was in September 1895 certified by his Liverpool doctor as unfit due to “catarrhal influenza.” The doctor added that he still needed a couple of months in Europe to complete his recovery. The Foreign Office granted the request but declined to commence paying Bannister’s salary.

Arriving in January “he showed unmistakable signs of illness that he was unfit for this post” and on 3 February he was so certified by Dr Raymundo Bandeira who added “Through his long residence in hot climates and having had a chronic and severe malarial infection in Africa he is in such a state of debility and weakness of his nervous system (neurasthenia) that it is impossible for him.” This medical description is eerily similar to one his nephew would obtain, some twenty years later, when he too, having also displayed an inability to settle in, or warm to, Brazil and unwilling to face further time in Rio de Janeiro, was to seek a medical retirement. Bannister resigned to seek “some other post in a cooler climate” and sailed out of Rio on 17 February 1896. There were to be no further appointments. He died in 1907.

Consciously or unconsciously Casement learned from his uncle’s fate that if one was going to survive in the Foreign Office (and be controversial) one needed to become political and have journalistic allies as well as political friends. Indeed Edward Bannister’s dedication and subsequent destiny taught him how to be a political consul and how to prosper as one. In part, this was how Casement’s future career path was decided upon.

British concerns over the administration of the Congo were to make Consul Casement, whereas they broke Consul Bannister. Under a Conservative administration, the Foreign Office chose to make Casement their trouble-shooter on slavery issues both in the Congo, and later when the Liberals were in government, along the Amazon. Even with an official licence to interfere he was, like his uncle, incapable of just carrying out orders. He expanded his role and acted in a partisan and political fashion in the controversies pertaining to both regions. It is a measure of the greatness of individuals that they can make systems bend to their personalities and needs. This Casement did. Operating wildly beyond his consular, and even his special reporting remit, there were to be remarkably few reprimands over the decade, despite his political activities coming to the attention of his superiors. He got clean away with it. Probably he was discreetly encouraged to cross the line by one wing of the diplomatic service. Bannister certainly was not.