

***Government Publications relating to
African Countries prior to Independence***

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relating to the
Gold Coast, 1846-1957

Introduction to the
microfilm collection
by
R.J.A.R. Rathbone

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by
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Government Publications Relating to the Gold Coast 1846-1957

Introduction

The Blue Books and Gazettes of the Gold Coast tell us a great deal about the relationship between Great Britain and the territory we now know as Ghana. But they chart only the last and most intensive period of that relationship, from the mid 19th century until independence. This relationship had, however, an extensive pre-history.

Although the Portuguese had first made contact with the inhabitants of the Gold Coast as early as 1471, the first British voyager, Thomas Windham arrived as late as 1553. Intensive British contact lagged behind the early initiative of first the Portuguese and later the Dutch, who had by the mid 17th century driven the Portuguese from the Gold Coast, and received impetus only with the establishment from the early 17th century of colonies in the West Indies. The gradual concentration upon slave-cultivated sugar in these islands led to an enhanced demand for African manpower. The slave trade was thus the fundamental interest of the British in the area until the abolition of that shameful trade in 1808.

From 1618 to 1820 British trade with the Gold Coast was carried out by a series of companies acting under Royal Charter or set up by Act of Parliament. Opposition to Royal monopoly led to the passing of an Act in 1698 which opened coastal trade to all subjects of His Britannic Majesty. To compensate them for their loss of monopoly in part, Parliament granted the then Company the right to levy a duty of 10 per cent to pay for the upkeep of forts and castles and the general protection of British trade. The duty was, however, easier to levy than collect. The Company lost business to competitors but was still burdened with the upkeep of their establishments and consequently became less and less able to meet its commitments. In 1712 the Act was renewed but the Company remained in a parlous state. In 1730 His Majesty's Government voted an annual allowance to the Company of £10,000 for the upkeep of its establishments. In 1750 the Royal African Company's control of establishments was re-invested in the new-found African Company of Merchants by the Act of Parliament. Under Parliamentary direction the forts and possessions of the old Company were transferred to the new one and an allowance of between £10,000 and £15,000 per annum was voted to the new Company.

The new Company provided the nearest thing to an active British administration in the area. The leading official, the Governor, ruled from Cape Coast Castle which had served as British headquarters since 1662. Under him served the commandants of the various other British forts and the officials of the Company and the token military forces which defended the castles. This was a period of interaction between Britain and the coastal people of the Gold Coast. Around the castles grew up settlements with growingly plural populations drawn to the area by trade and physical protection. This interaction between the British and Africans led to the early growth of the coastal westernised elite Christianised and increasingly with a form of western education. Beyond this immediate pale lay African states with whom the British and their African agents traded and with whom intense business diplomacy was carried out. Beyond them lay the interior in which the African power, the Asante Confederacy, was growing and this power was far greater than that of the frail British settlements.

The abolition of the slave trade in 1808 and the animosity the Company had attracted during the anti-slavery campaign were probably less significant in its eventual fate than, developments in the Gold Coast itself. By the beginning of the 19th century Asante policy, previously satisfied with the exaction of tribute from neighbouring, weaker states, and the odd punitive raid to enforce its payment, turned more systematically to its southern flank. The small Fante states, the immediate object of Asante policy, turned piecemeal to the British for protection. The trading relationship was becoming increasingly political for the British found that trade and politics were indissolubly bound up in the region. Asante manoeuvring made trade with the interior increasingly difficult to prosecute. In 1806 the first of seven Asante wars broke out. The first three of these wars only marginally involved the British in physical confrontation though trade was seriously disturbed by the conflict between the Asante and the Fante states. In 1817 a treaty was enacted with the Asante who undertook not to invade the Fante states, in alliance with the British, without first attempting to settle matters through a complaints procedure involving the Company's Governor. The Company Governor subsequently failed to act upon receipt of just such a complaint and the Asante repudiated the treaty.

The tendency of the British government, as opposed to the Company, to drift into political as well as economic relationships in the area was reinforced in 1821 when the Government dissolved the Company. By Act of Parliament the Government assumed direct responsibility for the forts and settlements and they passed under the control of the Governor of Sierra Leone. In 1822 the Governor of Sierra Leone, Sir Charles McCarthy visited the Gold Coast and adopted a firm policy of cementing relations with the Fante states. This policy ignored the potent reality of Asante, and Asante statesmen interpreted the British steps as hostile. In a brief war a small

British force was attacked and defeated in 1824 and in the course of the hostilities the Governor himself was killed. In retaliation a defeat was inflicted upon the Asante force at Dodowa in 1826 by a much reinforced British contingent. But the deepening involvement in the Gold Coast affairs exceeded British policy wishes of the time and it was decided that British forces would be withdrawn and governance of the settlements was vested in a Committee of Merchants based in London who were to exercise this control through their own Governor based on Cape Coast.

This was not followed, however, by disengagement. The committee Governor was the imaginative Captain George Maclean who prosecuted a forward policy with energy. By 1831 he had made peace with the Asante. More significantly, perhaps, he had persuaded many of the Fante states of the wisdom of informal diplomatic arrangements with the British which exceeded anything that had preceded them. For example some Fante rulers agreed to abide by the decisions of British legal officers in a variety of disputes. Such rapport owed much to Maclean's personality and the degree of trust he personally evoked. But there was also a strong measure of mutual interest in the growingly complex web of understanding and compact, for trade increased and revenues for both African and British traders grew. But these were 'arrangements' only and were of doubtful legality. In 1843 the Crown, in one of its many changes of heart throughout the course of the 19th century, reimposed its authority over the British settlements on the Gold Coast.

By the British Settlement and Foreign Jurisdiction Acts of 1843-4 a series of treaties were enacted with eleven coastal states and these are more usually called 'bonds'. While the provisions of these 'bonds' were in many respects limited, serving largely to set out and regulate British Jurisdiction of a restricted sort over the eleven states, it is this set of diplomatic imperatives which formalised the British presence on the Gold Coast. Not unnaturally it is from this period that the Blue Books and Gazettes commence.

The Gold Coast Colony in this period consisted of no more than the 'forts and settlements'. The Fante states in treaty relationship with Britain were designated 'protected territory', a vague enough concept. Between 1843 and 1850 the Gold Coast colony was administered by a Lieutenant Governor based in Cape Coast who deferred to the overall control of the Governor of Sierra Leone. In 1850, however, the Gold Coast Colony came of age. It was declared a separate colony and its majority was ushered in by the granting of a separate Legislative Council. Two years later it was granted a further token of its maturity, a Supreme Court established by Ordinance.

This was, however, a period of absolute decline for the new Colony; Maclean's death in 1847 marked an end of his particularly successful personal diplomacy. Thereafter relationships with both Fante allies and the Asante ran into troubled waters. The causes of this decline were partly economic in origin. As one can see clearly from the Blue Books the problems of colonial finance had scarcely been considered. The British hoped to finance the new colony through customs revenue but of course did not, as yet, rule the entire littoral. Rather than ship out dutiable merchandise, or import it, through British settlements, merchants cannily used the still prospering Dutch and Danish forts which lay along the coast, nestling between the segments of this patchy colony. The new colony, with its 'protective role' as well as its administrative costs to finance was in serious trouble. The first remedial move was the outright purchase of the Danish but not the Dutch forts in 1850. This failed to improve revenues adequately and there followed a crude attempt at raising revenue through a poll tax which was strongly resisted by the colony's Fante allies. This deteriorating situation was fueled in 1863 by some inept British diplomacy with Asante in which certain 'fugitive offenders' were not surrendered to Asante. A further Asante war broke out and the slender British forces were incapable of resisting the invading Asante forces. British prestige as a successful trading nation and as a protecting power had suffered a considerable set-back.

These serious reversals in the Gold Coast were matched by growing doubts about the future of British involvement in West Africa by British politicians and pressure-groups. In 1864 the Colonial Office despatched a Special Commissioner to investigate. In 1865 a Parliamentary Select Committee was established to examine the situation. Its conclusions threatened the continued existence of the colony. While it conceded that absolute withdrawal was probably impossible, the Select Committee declared that 'all further extension of territory or assumption of government was' 'inexpedient'. British policy should henceforward be dedicated, the Select Committee recommended, to the encouragement of 'the natives' to the 'exercise of those qualities which may render it possible for us more and more to transfer to them the administration of all the governments with a view to our ultimate withdrawal from all except, probably, Sierra Leone. These proposals were serious and as a first step towards implementing them, the Gold Coast Colony was once again placed under the control of the Governor in Sierra Leone.

There are many reasons for the final non-implementation of these proposals for disengagement. Prolonged contact had created more ties than the proponents of disengagement had realised. There were many commercial, missionary as well as ideological opponents of abandonment of the Gold Coast colony. Moreover

the tide of imperialism, on something of a spring ebb in the mid 1860s, was now rising. Nationalism, the search for new markets, the need for investment outlets, the possibilities of cheaper raw materials and humanitarian and scientific interests proved potent adversaries for the proponents of disengagement.

This drift in the metropole was reinforced by happenings on the Gold Coast itself. The last loophole in the customs-based revenue system was closed when the Dutch sold their last settlement to the British in 1872, encouraged so to do by the declining profits resulting from almost continual war in the interior. The long sought-for monopoly situation was in Britain's grasp at last. But the very act of acquiring the Dutch establishments threatened and annoyed Asante and provided them with a further irritation and they embarked in 1873 upon another campaign. This time they were met with more resistance as the British had now resolved to end Asante control of the interior and Asante interference with trade. Sir Garnet Wosley, with a large body of British and West Indian soldiers pursued the Asante back from the coast, right into the heart of their Confederacy and administered the 'coup de grace' with the gratuitous razing of the Asante capital, Mumasi, to the ground in 1874. The peace terms at the treaty of Foemna were hard upon the Asante; they had to agree to forgo claims to states to the south of the Confederacy, to pay an indemnity, to maintain the road from the south to Kumasi open to commerce and to allow freedom of trade and to abolish human sacrifice, a neat example of the combination of 'philanthropy plus 5 per cent'.

The heavy commitment of men and 'material' in 1873-4, the possibilities offered by the prospects of permanent peace in the interior and the unchallenged control of the littoral with the departure of the Dutch led the British government to conceive of the colony rather differently than before. There was now a need for proper administration, for regular channels, for the development of an infrastructure. Thus in 1874 a new colony of the Gold Coast and Lagos was created. The 'Colony' was still the area of forts and settlements, swelled by the ex-Dutch areas but now the territory under British influence was formally declared a 'protectorate'. The geography of all this remained, until 1895, vague. The Legislative Council set up in 1874 had legislative power over an area imprecisely delimited. In 1886 when the separate Colony of Lagos was established the precise extent of British rule still remained unclear. In 1895 the use of the word 'protectorate' was abandoned and all areas of the Southern Gold Coast subject to British Law were redesignated as a 'colony'. This terminology persisted until 1957 with the Southern Gold Coast being referred to as the Colony, a region distinct from the later accretions of Asante, the Northern Territories and the mandated section of ex-German Togo that fell under British rule in 1919.

If British rule was consolidated in the South, relations with Asante were scarcely improved by the 1874 campaign. The shock defeat upon a confederation whose great days were in any case over, made for chaos as centrifugal forces threatened to tear it apart. British indifference to the plight of the ruling dynasty in Asante thoroughly embittered relations between the British and the Asante paramount, the Asantehene. It was largely French and German diplomatic initiatives with peoples to the west and east of the Gold Coast Colony in areas we now know of as the Ivory Coast and Togo that encouraged the British to extend their annexation to ensure that they were not to be physically boxed in by competing colonial powers. The Asante ruler was accused of violation of the peace treaty in 1874, and was urged to accept British 'protection'. Prempeh, the Asantehene, resentfully refused and once again British troops occupied Kumasi in 1896. The Governor demanded his submission and the payment of the indemnity, a clause in the 1874 agreement. Prempeh, and many of his subordinate chiefs were deported to the Seychelles. Asante fell under the direct rule of the British and was garrisoned by British troops. This was not the last stand of Asante by any means. In 1901 the Governor, Sir Frederick Hodson decided that control of Asante could never be fully achieved without British physical possession of the Asante's powerful symbol of divinely decreed nationhood, the Golden Stool. Accordingly Hodson, with considerable arrogance, demanded the deliverance to him of the Stool. Humbled in 1874, their capital burnt, subject to virtual civil war ever since, their leaders exiled, the Asante responded to this final insult by a last-ditch rebellion which was only controlled by a considerable show of force by the British and in the course of which Hodson, rather appropriately, was besieged in the Red Fort in Kumasi. The anomalous relationship between Asante and Britain was finally resolved in 1901 by an Order in Council which annexed Asante outright. In the same year the area to the north of Kumasi, known as the Northern Territories was declared a protectorate under the Foreign Jurisdiction Act of 1890. This final clarification of the extent of British rule had been preceded in 1898-9 by a final series of Boundary Commissions which had finally delimited the boundaries between the British territory and the neighbouring French and German ruled territories. From the eleventh parallel, with some minor deviations, southwards to the coast, bordered to the east by Togo and to the west by the Ivory Coast, the Gold Coast was by 1901 an established reality. The last and only physical alteration to this pattern was the addition of approximately half of the German colony of Togoland following the defeat of Germany in the 1914-18 war when the League of Nations placed the territory under British mandated authority. From this time until 1957 when Ghana became independent this section was administered within the overall administrative, legal and financial framework of the Gold Coast.

The Gold Coast was, therefore, a messy sort of colony. Even before the addition of western Togo there were three distinct units to the Gold Coast. South of Ashanti was a colony by settlement; Ashanti was a colony by conquest and the Northern Territories was a protectorate. It was not to be until as late as 1951 that all segments of this differentially acquired colony were to be administered as a whole. Although the Governor enjoyed the particularly large powers all British colonial governors were to enjoy, the system he administered was complex and differed both over time and space.

The Political administration was to dominate the colony throughout the period of British rule. The Governor had, responsible to him. Regional deputies, the Chief Commissioners of the Colony, Ashanti and the Northern Territories. Beneath them, and directly responsible to them, ruled the Provincial Commissioners. Their area of responsibility was over the Provinces into which each major area, the Colony, Ashanti and the Northern Territories were divided. The number and designation of provinces changed a number of times in the colonial period. Below the Provinces came the Districts, administered by District Officers, sometimes with the help of Assistant District Officers. Until 1951 with some minor changes the Southern Gold Coast comprised some 18 districts, Ashanti 8 and the huge but sparsely populated Northern Territories 9 districts. The criteria for delimitation of districts were always complex and factors of physical extent, demography, pre-colonial sociological and political reality were seldom accommodated without friction. Clearly the designation of this or that town as a provincial district head-quarters was a matter of intense political activity concerning as it did jobs, opportunities for education and improvement of infrastructure.

While it is hard to typify local administrative systems in so varied a colony as the Gold Coast one can say that the intention broadly was that rule became more and more 'direct' as one went north. This may have been the intention but the reality was far more dynamic, for the attempt to pursue a clear policy of Indirect Rule on the Lugardian model in Nigeria began to encounter all the resistance such a policy did all over Africa in a period of momentous socio-economic change. Consequently it was those areas most influenced by the rapidly advancing frontiers of the cash economy, education, Christianity and the new consequential forms of social organisation like co-operatives, churches, trades unions that began to resist the anomalous anachronism that Indirect Rule came to be even when it was successful at first. The long incorporation of much of the littoral and its immediate hinterland in a cash economy, the high degree of sophistication of its inhabitants after decades of missionary activity and the burgeoning of roads, schools and towns around and within it always made it likely that a Fante chief for example was going to have to be a decidedly 'untraditional' kind of politician to convince his community of his legitimacy, particularly when his delegated tasks like road construction and tax gathering were frequently unpopular. As in other parts of Africa, chiefless people were inappropriately given Chiefs and they too accorded them the low degree of respect their anomalous position commanded.

It was apparently the intention of the administration to extend the system of indirect rule over all of the Gold Coast. But such in Ashanti clearly posed problems with much of the legitimate aristocracy in exile. In 1926 Prempeh was brought home, not as Paramount, but as ruler of the central state of the Asante Confederacy, Kumasi. In 1935 protracted research and negotiation saw the Confederacy restored and an Asantehene restored as ruler of all Asante. It is probably correct to generalise that chieftaincy in Ashanti and hence rule through chiefs and their councils enjoyed a longer legitimacy amongst the 'people' than they did in Southern areas. In the North the peripheral nature of the territory, a labour pool for the south and central areas of the colony and the arcane nature of their traditional institutions coupled with thinness of population and economic and educational backwardness conspired to subject it to perhaps the most paternal regime of any area of the Gold Coast.

Until 1946 neither Ashanti nor the Northern Territories were legislated for by the Legislative Council but were rather legislated for directly by the Governor. In 1946 Ashanti sent representatives for the first time to the Legislative Council. Not until 1951 was the Northern part of the Gold Coast to have any representation.

The major changes in administrative policy and more general political reform strangely coincide less than they should have and indeed their disjunction is of some causal significance in the eruption of mass nationalism after the second world war which took too many of the Gold Coast's experienced administrators by surprise.

This is most acutely seen in the constant attempt by the British to discredit the growing voice of the urban intelligentsia who, not unnaturally, claimed to speak for the Gold Coast. This claim which had a slowly growing authority to it was constantly opposed by the argument that the Gold Coast's 'natural rulers' alone spoke with such a voice. This constant theme blinded administrators to the irony of this position. Just as the urban intelligentsia sought a wider share in the governance of the colony and opposed the constant emphasis upon chiefs as the 'proper' advisory figures, so too did the 'menu people' outside the big towns, increasingly literate, entrepreneurial and increasingly less happy to take direction from 'traditional' chiefs whose legitimacy was often in question. In 1925 under the liberal Governorship of Sir Gordon Guggisberg a major reform of the Legislature

was enacted whereby the membership of the Legislative Council was extended to include a few non-ex-officio members elected for the municipal areas. If this concession to the urban intelligentsia was far from cynical, it was to some extent misconceived for no such reform was extended to the rural areas. Ironically the first half of the 1940s also saw the combination of the concession of an African majority on the Legislative Council, manhood suffrage in towns *and the reinforcement* of indirect rule in the countryside under the Native Authorities Ordinance.

The major themes of the political development of the Gold Coast are not, I think, best seen through the Blue Books. The period in which Colonial officials recognised the primacy of politics is essentially begun in the late 1940s and by then the Blue Books have been replaced by the infinitely less informative *Colonial Report*.

But this is of course a more accurate picture of colonialism than one might at first concede. Fundamentally the concerns of Blue Books and Gazettes are with the legal-rational running of a modern state with minimal skills, training and finances. These are essentially mundane problems, given that colonial administrators were to a large extent denied the vision that allegedly is what great men have. The broad thrusts of colonial policy were decided in Westminster while tenancy of senior executive posts in the colonial service was usually too short to see even limited plans through to fruition. But even if the system itself reduced its many capable, humane and imaginative servants to a degree of banal "file-pushing" which frustrated them enormously it did so in a mean-minded way. As one sees clearly from the Blue Books the major concern, at least up to the 1940s, of all senior administrators is the Micawberish ambition of balancing the books. And yet this first requirement was to be fulfilled by men with virtually no training in economics or economic planning. The apportionment of funds, the fundamental discussion point in the Governor's Cabinet or Executive Council, was arbitrary, not in a mean sense, but because there was seldom any way other than common sense to arrive at the 'right' answer. Although the Blue Books provide us with a wealth of statistical data with which we can with hindsight and the leisure of scholarship detect trends, this mass of data, tables of amassed figures produced by colonial auditors and the rest, was never subjected to systematic analysis, for until 1949 the Gold Coast did not enjoy the services of a trained statistician.

Departmentalisation, another point which clearly emerges both from the concerns and the structure of the Blue Books and Gazettes, was itself a stumbling block on the way to concerted forward policy-making and was deeply entrenched in the system. The serious vertical division between the Political Administration and the technical services – public works, education, ports and harbours and the rest – which had social as well as professional overtones, reduced the possibilities of cross-fertilisation and co-ordination. The Executive Council, which could have acted as such a co-ordinating body, tended not to, largely because of its distributive functions which led to inter-departmental bargaining for scarce resources, more schools or more hospitals, more roads or more forest conservation and so on. Even the best aspects of departmentalisation, namely highly professional expertise of which there was no lack in any department of state in the Gold Coast, seems to have been almost wilfully diluted by the system itself. The rapidity of posting indicates clearly how frequently the man who had mastered local politics or local agronomic needs was promptly moved on to better, or in some cases, worse things. In the interests of equity it was thought unwise for any officer to build up too close an identification with the area in which he worked which led to particularism rather than the pursuit of the more general good. This equitable thinking had a serious defect in that it sapped vitally at any prospect of the systematic building up of experience in positive ways and engendered rather a system in which superstition all too often substituted for concrete knowledge.

These negative factors cannot be interpreted as the malign machinations of a deep-laid plot. Overall the Blue Books and Gazettes show how clearly the colonial administration of a colony like the Gold Coast was a day-to-day affair. Although much of the *ad hoc* decision-making happened under the umbrella of 'policy,' what we see in these documents is manifestly not the minutiae of a highly systematised bureaucracy operating along firmly established tramlines. Essentially the Gold Coast was, as Ghana today is, a highly complex state which was administered on a shoe-string by too few men, with too few resources and with only the most limited of objectives in mind. To be sure we might well find, fifty years on, that many of these objectives were paternalistic and sometimes mean-minded but this essentially is to use our modern values historically. It is more valid to see these events simply as historical events which happened and the Blue Books and Gazettes are valuable research tools simply because they help us to understand some of the reasons why they happened and the physical and intellectual climate in which they occurred. Taken as a whole they show the piecemeal thing that colonial rule in the Gold Coast was. For those seduced by the lure of conspiracy theories these documents will prove a sore disappointment. For those who want to know how a colonial administration muddled along there is, however, much that is rich in these pages.

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