

The Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland 1953-1963: A Retrospective at its Unattained Platinum Jubilee.

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Notes on Contributor

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Seventy-years ago, an association of three colonies in what European imperialists then dubbed ‘British Central Africa’, came into being. The Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland (hereafter ‘the Federation’), a union of Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), Northern Rhodesia (Zambia), and Nyasaland (Malawi) barely lasted a decade before its collapse at the end of 1963 in the face of intense anti-colonial pressure.¹ Although this governance structure was short-lived, it was consequential.

Paradoxically, while the Federation initially consolidated white settler rule, its modest progressive reforms ultimately accelerated anti-colonial agitation. Federation brought a brief economic windfall to Southern Rhodesia that significantly transformed the skyline of Salisbury, the dual capital of that colony and the new political grouping.² It re-aligned Southern Rhodesia away from South Africa, the ‘white south’ and enmeshed its political life more closely with what white Rhodesians dubbed the ‘black north’, which made independence pressures more acute.³ However, in empowering local white settlers, the Federation simultaneously complicated Malawi’s and Zambia’s pursuit of independence. As the Federation marks the twin anniversaries of its founding and dissolution, this appraisal reviews its governance trajectory and takes stock of directions in its historiography.

¹ The most recent overview of this Federation is: A. Cohen, ‘The Central African Federation’, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*. 31 August 2021. <https://oxfordre.com/africanhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.001.0001/acrefore-9780190277734-e-421>. Accessed 30 March 2023.

² P. Keatley, *The Politics of Partnership: The Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), 366.

³ H. Franklin, *Unholy Wedlock: The Failure of the Central African Federation* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1963), 160; B. Marmon, “‘Bogey Bogey Stuff’: Gold Coastism, Federation, and White Backlash in Southern Rhodesia, 1951-56”, *The Round Table*, 111, 2 (2022), 214-226.

The Discord of ‘Partnership’

The Federation was inaugurated in September 1953, shortly after another historical anniversary, the centennial of the birth of the notorious British imperialist Cecil Rhodes, which was locally observed with great fanfare.⁴ The infamous phrase attributed to Rhodes, “equal rights for all civilized men,” was reflected in the preamble to the Federation’s Constitution, which professed a commitment to multi-racial ‘partnership.’⁵ Deliberations surrounding the extent to which the Federation’s white rulers were genuinely devoted to this concept are legion. ‘Partnership’ was apparently first used locally as a political concept by white settlers in Northern Rhodesia during the 1920s.⁶ It was seized upon with greater resonance in the post-war era to distinguish ‘British Central Africa’ from the Apartheid policies of South Africa. However, the Federation’s first Prime Minister, Godfrey Huggins, was reputed at the time as having stated that his vision for ‘partnership’ was along the lines of the relationship between a horse and its rider.⁷

Nevertheless, white liberals from Southern Rhodesia, including some generally well-respected individuals who lobbied for better treatment of the black majority, have retrospectively asserted that Federation, and a supposedly enlightened ‘partnership’, presented the best avenue for more equitable progress.⁸ While this political philosophy briefly enjoyed the backing of most white settlers and British diplomats with a post-war penchant for federations, it was soon

⁴ A. Shutt and T. King, ‘Imperial Rhodesians: The 1953 Rhodes Centenary Exhibition in Southern Rhodesia’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 31, 2 (2005), 357-379.

⁵ W. Beinart, ‘Cecil Rhodes: Racial Segregation in the Cape Colony and Violence in Zimbabwe’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 48, 3 (2022), 584; P. Mason, ‘Masters of Partners? Race Relations in the African Federation’, *Foreign Affairs*, 35, 3 (1957), 501.

⁶ T.R.M. Creighton, *Anatomy of Partnership: Southern Rhodesia and the Central African Federation* (London: Faber and Faber, 1960), 103.

⁷ K. Law, *Gendering the Settler State: White Women, Race, Liberalism and Empire in Rhodesia, 1950-1980* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 3.

⁸ In passim: H. Holderness, *Lost Chance: Southern Rhodesia, 1945-1958* (Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1985); D. Mitchell, *An African Memoir: White Woman, Black Nationalists* (No place of publication: Privately Published, 2021).

squeezed from multiple sides.⁹ Despite some existing colonial ties – economic migrants from Nyasaland had powered the Northern Rhodesian Copperbelt and Southern Rhodesian industry for decades, the association was unwieldy. Whites in Southern Rhodesia joked that it was a marriage of convenience between a wealthy bride, Northern Rhodesia, and a hard-working groom, Southern Rhodesia, with Nyasaland as the unavoidable mother-in-law to be tolerated in the matrimonial home.¹⁰

Black political leaders derided the concept. In the Federation's inaugural parliament, 29 of its 35 seats were effectively earmarked for whites.¹¹ Seventy-five percent of the total eligible Federal electorate were whites from Southern Rhodesia.¹² Ndabaningi Sithole, founding president of the Zimbabwe African National Union, dismissed the Federation's concept of 'partnership' as an unequal bond between senior and junior associates.¹³ Kenneth Kaunda, Zambia's first president, attacked the mantra as a regression from earlier proclamations of the British Colonial Office in Northern Rhodesia that native African interests were paramount.¹⁴ Right-wing whites also opposed the 'partnership' concept, concerned that it stimulated black political engagement and concentrated too much political power in Salisbury.¹⁵ Additionally, they pointed to the undemocratic origins of the Federation; the first British Governor-General gave their adversaries an advantage when he appointed Godfrey Huggins, Roy Welensky, and Malcolm Barrow, partisan political figures in Southern Rhodesia, Northern Rhodesia, and

⁹ Similar British colonial entities established around this time were the West Indies Federation and Malaya Federation.

¹⁰ L. White, *Unpopular Sovereignty: Rhodesian Independence and African Decolonization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 8).

¹¹ J.J.B. Somerville, 'The Central African Federation', *International Affairs*, 39, 3 (1963), 391.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ N. Sithole, *African Nationalism* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1959), 125.

¹⁴ K. Kaunda, *Zambia Shall Be Free* (London: Heinemann, 1962), 86.

¹⁵ G. van Eeden, *The Crime of Being White* (Cape Town: Nasionale Boekhandel, 1965), 36.

Nyasaland, respectively, to helm an interim federal government for three months before elections were held.¹⁶

The Federation Flounders

For the first half of its existence, the opponents of Federation and ‘partnership’ were generally on the defensive. A colony wide anti-colonial nationalist movement was not established in Southern Rhodesia, the Federation’s economic and political hub, until the second half of 1957. In Northern Rhodesia, the main political leader, Harry Nkumbula, tolerated a comparatively gradualist approach to black political advancement, but his political authority gave way to Kaunda’s after 1958.¹⁷ Nyasaland provided more concerted anti-Federation pressure. However, the Nyasaland African Congress also suffered from internal divisions in the mid-1950s when its two members in the Federal parliament refused to bow to pressure from party radicals to resign.¹⁸ The ruling Federal Party (known as the United Federal Party from 1958) faced virtually no white right-wing opposition in the Federal Parliament until the second general election in November 1958.¹⁹

From late 1958, the position of pro-imperial whites in the Federation deteriorated drastically. The government of Prime Minister Roy Welensky was unnerved by the All-Africa People’s Conference, convened by Kwame Nkrumah’s Ghana that December with black

¹⁶ G. Rennie, ‘The First Year of Federation’, *African Affairs*, 54, 214 (1955), 18-19.

¹⁷ G. Macola, ‘Harry Mwaanga Nkumbula, UNIP and the Roots of Authoritarianism in Nationalist Zambia’, in J-B. Gewald, M. Hinfelaar and G. Macola, eds, *One Zambia, Many Histories: Towards a History of Post-Colonial Zambia* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 20.

¹⁸ J. McCracken, *History of Malawi* (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2012), 337.

¹⁹ C. Richardson, ‘Moment of Truth in Central Africa’, *Africa Today*, 6, 2 (1959), 9-10; B. Marmon, ‘Settler Worldmaking: Reconfiguring the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, 1953-62’, *Itinerario*, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0165115322000201>, 7.

nationalists from all three territories of the Federation in attendance.²⁰ In the first half of 1959, states of emergency were declared in each of the three colonies comprising the Federation, although Nyasaland was the only territory in which the authorities then faced a particularly precarious security situation.²¹ This blatantly autocratic move mobilized domestic black and Western opinion against the United Federal Party.

In 1960, a British convened constitutional commission, chaired by Walter Monckton, canvassed the Federation, and found widespread opposition to the political structure.²² The Federation's constitutional review conference was held in London at the end of that year. It adjourned inconclusively. Thereafter, momentum swiftly transformed to territorial level constitutional conferences, which in the cases of Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland, led to elections with anti-colonial nationalist participation during the Federation's lifespan and independence within a year of its dissolution.²³ By early 1962, it was recognized that the Federation was on its deathbed. Right-wing whites in Southern Rhodesia boycotted the last Federal election that April.²⁴ That December, it was publicly announced that Britain would grant Nyasaland the right to secede from the union.²⁵ The same month, the right-wing Rhodesian Front swept to power in Southern Rhodesia's territorial election. The divergent trajectories of its three constituent territories were set. Zambia and Malawi drifted toward one-party states under their anti-Federal leaders, Kaunda and Banda, with the latter becoming Nyasaland's Prime

²⁰ B. Marmon, 'Neutrality of a Special Type: George Loft's Abortive Racial Reconciliation in the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, 1957-1960', *Safundi*, 22, 4 (2021), 426-429.

²¹ J. Darwin, 'The Central African Emergency, 1959', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*; 21, 3 (1993), 217-234.

²² No author, 'The Monckton Report: African Awakening in the Federation', *The Round Table*, 51, 201 (1960), 22-28.

²³ P. Docking, *Negotiating the End of the British Empire in Africa, 1959-1964* (Cham: Springer, 2021), 187-193.

²⁴ "Boycott by the Right." *The Rhodesia Herald*, 14 March 1962.

²⁵ F.M.G. Wilson, 'The Rhodesias and Nyasaland', *Current History*, 46, 271 (1964), 153.

Minister nearly a full year before the Federation dissolved. Independence and genuine majority rule did not come to Zimbabwe until 1980 when white intransigence finally crumbled.

The Federation's Afterlife

Fleeting, there appeared to be interest among the anti-colonial nationalists of the Federation in maintaining a regional alliance.²⁶ Their sentiments were shared by east African leaders like Tom Mboya and Milton Obote, who saw value in a union of the countries continuing as a means to apply greater pan-African pressure on South Africa.²⁷ Malawi's Banda was the principal anti-Federation leader who was most interested in reconstituting post-colonial regional borders.²⁸ However, the megalomania and conservatism of his administration, coupled with the threat of Barotseland's secession from Zambia and the regional/ethnic tensions in Zimbabwe's liberation movement greatly reduced prospects for any form of continued special political association between the three territories.

The Federation's collapse received significant attention at the time. 1964 alone saw the publication of a biography of its first Prime Minister, Godfrey Huggins and the memoirs of its second (and last), Roy Welensky.²⁹ The following year saw the release of a detailed first-hand account by the UK's High Commissioner to the Federation.³⁰ Salisbury-based foreign correspondents for major British newspapers like *The Observer* and *The Guardian* produced

²⁶ T. Ranger, 'Afterword', *Critical African Studies*, 4, 6 (2011), 115.

²⁷ Tom Mboya, *Freedom and After* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1963), 216-17; B. Marmon, 'Independence and Pan-African Diplomatic Contestation: Anti-colonial Nationalism and the Eclipse of White Legitimacy in 'British Central Africa', 1957-64', <https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2022.2137077>, 15.

²⁸ M.W.K. Chiume, *Kwacha: An Autobiography* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1975), 207.

²⁹ L.H. Gann and M. Gelfand, *Huggins of Rhodesia* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1964); R. Welensky, *Welensky's 4000 Days* (London: Collins, 1964).

³⁰ C. Alport, *The Sudden Assignment* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1965).

their own narratives of the Federation's last gasps.³¹ Historical accounts of the polity began to appear in the 1980s.³² Around that time, Federal records were microfilmed with assistance from Canada's International Development Research Centre.³³ Regrettably, most published works on the Federation have not utilised this collection, of which the originals are held at the National Archives of Zimbabwe.³⁴

Consequently, beyond the comparatively vibrant literature on black resistance to the Federation, scholarship on its governance has tended to emphasize external economic factors, such as the role of Western capital, or privilege the British imperial perspective.³⁵ Although the Federation is now a relic at what would have been its platinum jubilee, scholars of late British imperialism remain broadly interested in this wider 'federal moment'.³⁶ Deeper investigations of white settler projections of the Federation as "an African country sharing in a greater or lesser degree the common problems of other African countries," will add critical nuance to our understanding of the efforts of European inhabitants of 'British Central Africa' to navigate

³¹ C. Dunn, *Central African Witness* (London: Gollancz, 1959); C. Sanger, *Central African Emergency* (London: Heinemann, 1960).

³² P. Gifford, 'Misconceived Dominion: The Creation and Disintegration of the Federation of British Central Africa', in P. Gifford and W.R Louis, eds., *Transfer of Power in Africa: Decolonization, 1940-1960* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 387-416; R. Hyam, 'The Geopolitical Origins of the Central African Federation: Britain, Rhodesia and South Africa, 1948-1953', *The Historical Journal*, 30, 1 (1987): 145-172; J.R.T Wood, *The Welensky Papers: A History of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland* (Durban: Graham Publishing, 1983).

³³ P.C. Mazikana, 'A Joint Microfiling Project: Records of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland', <http://hdl.handle.net/10625/6229>, accessed 29 March 2023.

³⁴ An exception is: A. King, 'Identity and Decolonisation: The Policy of Partnership in Southern Rhodesia, 1945-62' (PhD thesis, University of Oxford, 2001).

³⁵ R. Power, 'The African Dimension to the Anti-Federation Struggle, ca. 1950-53: "It Has United Us Far More Closely Than Any Other Question Would Have Accomplished"', *Itinerario*, 45, 2 (2021), 304-324; A. Cohen, *The Politics and Economics of Decolonization in Africa: The Failed Experiment of the Central African Federation* (London: IB Tauris, 2017); P. Murphy, *British Documents on the End of Empire: Central Africa*, Parts I & II (London, The Stationery Office, 2005).

³⁶ M. Collins, 'Decolonisation and the "Federal Moment"', *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 24, 1 (2013): 21-40; M. Fejzula, 'The Cosmopolitan Historiography of Twentieth-Century Federalism', *The Historical Journal*, 64, 2 (2021), 477-500.

decolonization and maintain white privilege.³⁷ This is a vital task as their legacy still looms large over the region.

³⁷ National Archives of Zimbabwe, F209/C/204/02, 'Federal Representation at International Conferences', undated. The quote is from a memo by an anonymous bureaucrat in the Federation's Ministry of External Affairs.