

# Sir James Craig

Diplomat renowned for his mastery of Arabic and dealing with hijackers

When James Craig approached the last days of his final posting as ambassador in Saudi Arabia, at the end of a stellar career, he sat down and wrote the customary valedictory dispatch to his boss, the foreign secretary Geoffrey Howe.

It was a confidential document and Craig, regarded as the foremost Arabist of his time in King Charles Street, knew that he could more or less say what he liked. Indeed, for a diplomat, he had something of a reputation for being prepared to speak truth unto power.

On one occasion he was asked by the Israeli prime minister, Golda Meir, during a visit to Jerusalem in 1973, who had started the Six-Day War in 1967. It was a rhetorical question, but Craig answered unflinchingly: "You did, prime minister." It was a response that led to a stand-up row.

In his final dispatch from Riyadh in 1984 Craig, who rose from humble beginnings in Liverpool, described the overwhelming role of Islam in Saudi society, and went on to give some forthright opinions. The Saudis were reluctant to face the truth and then act on it; their characteristics included incompetence, insularity and ignorance of the modern world.

Two years later, by which time Craig was the director general of the trade body the Middle East Association, he was shocked to discover that a former Bank of England employee had leaked his dispatch to the *New Statesman*. Fearful of the consequences for British-Saudi relations, the government tried to prevent the newspapers from publishing the story, but failed.

It was ironic that a man regarded as one of the best friends the Saudis had ever had in London, should be at the centre of a diplomatic firestorm between the two countries. After a formal apology from London, the affair subsided. Many years later Craig recalled what he described as the "great fuss" over his valedictory. He said that the Saudis admitted privately to him that they were far less put out than London feared. Visiting Riyadh a month after the furore, in his capacity as a board member of the Saudi British Bank, Craig dropped in on the finance minister and his colleagues.

"The conversation obviously turned and I said, 'You've all obviously seen the dispatch.' They said, 'Oh yes, it's going round in Riyadh and we have had some discussion.' And one of them said, 'We thought that your criticisms were for the most part right, though a little severe.' It was all very friendly."

Craig had been posted to Saudi for the first time as counsellor and head of chancery in Jeddah between 1967 and 1970. When he returned as ambassador nine years later he walked straight into the row between the two countries over the 1980 television documentary *Death of a Princess*. The film told the story of a Saudi princess who was executed for committing adultery with her common-law lover. The Saudis were furious that the British government had not been able to stop the broadcast of a film they regarded as an attack on Islamic law and their culture and traditions.

Craig did his best to try to heal the damage, and personally delivered a letter of apology to the Saudi foreign minister, Prince Saud Al Faisal, but to

no avail. He was informed that his presence in the country was no longer required. At the same time the appointment of a new Saudi ambassador in London was cancelled. Five months later, when tempers had cooled, Craig resumed his posting and spent much of it repairing the damage of the affair.

Throughout his career in the Arab world Craig enjoyed almost legendary status, not least for his extraordinary facility with Arabic. He not only spoke fluent classical Arabic, but mastered dialects in a way that could amaze and delight his hosts.

Aside from his diplomatic work, Craig developed a speciality as a hijack crisis co-ordinator. He played a key role in managing the response to a Palestinian hijack of a British Airways VC10 during a refuelling stop in Dubai in 1974. The hijackers were eventually released into Tunisian custody even though they had killed a German bank



The ambassador to Saudi Arabia in 1980

manager. Afterwards Craig was given a permanent role in hijack response — as he put it, he became the Foreign Office's "hijacker-in-chief" — on the basis that future incidents were likely to be perpetrated by Arab terrorists.

His affinity with the Arabs — he was the first British diplomat to meet the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) — exemplified to critics of the Foreign Office's Middle East policy what they regarded as its pro-Arab agenda. In a 1991 interview with the *Financial Times* he was asked whether it was fair that he should always remain suspect on this score in the eyes of Jewish organisations in Britain.

"That was the case, but I think it has changed now," he said. "In the middle of my career I think people outside would have gauged my sympathies were pro-Arab. I would have contested that and said that my sympathies were pro-British, and that those sympathies led me to support the Arab case in many aspects of the problem, not in all."

Albert James Macqueen Craig was born in Liverpool in 1924, the eldest of four children, one of whom died in infancy. His father, also James, was a joiner from Perth. His mother, Florence (née Morris) was from Liverpool. Her father — John Morris, a journalist — was a key influence on Craig and imbued in him a passion for language.

After attending a local Church of England primary school, Craig won a

scholarship to the Liverpool Institute High School for Boys, where he came under the guidance of a succession of inspirational teachers who nurtured his natural ability. Encouraged by his parents, he won an exhibition to Queen's College Oxford where — in between taking a break to serve in the army — he read Classics and then switched to Arabic and Persian, graduating with a first in 1947.

After working at the Foreign Office's Middle East Centre for Arab Studies in the Lebanese village of Shemlan, Craig joined the Foreign Office proper. His first job in London in 1958 was on the Sudan desk, where he learnt the ropes without any training whatsoever. He remembered being called to Downing Street to act as interpreter when the crown prince of Libya was visiting. As Harold Macmillan led his guests up the stairs to dinner, Craig recalled him saying: "These are all the photographs of my predecessors as prime ministers," and I translated. Macmillan added: "A rather scruffy lot, don't you think?" but I didn't translate that."

In 1961 Craig went out to Dubai to be political agent to the Trucial States (now the United Arab Emirates), where he revelled in his complete authority over the various rulers who used to address him in "glorious terms". He was fearless in settling local disputes and on one occasion walked across no man's land between two squabbling armed factions, the better to organise a settlement.

He became head of the Foreign Office's Near East and North Africa Department in the early 1970s, and then took up the first of his two ambassadorial posts in Damascus.

He married twice, first Margaret Hutchinson in 1952, with whom he had four children who all survive him. Jamie is a lawyer who volunteers for the Citizens Advice Bureau; Andrew worked as a producer for the BBC World Service; David worked for the Institute of Optometry, while Brigid was born with Down's syndrome and is cared for in a home. Margaret died in 2001. In 2002 Craig married Bernadette Lane, who survives him.

After he retired, Craig indulged his love of reading and threw himself into village life in Standlake in Oxfordshire, where he was a mainstay of the Lower Windrush Valley Historical Society.

In recent years he battled Parkinson's, but died of old age. With his thick black eyebrows under white hair in later years and a pipe in hand, Craig was every bit the mandarin. Witty, erudite, precise, he loved language above all and alongside his great facility in Arabic and its many dialects, studied Persian and spoke French, and could rub along in German and Turkish. He was once fittingly described as a "pyrotechnic linguist".

"Language is the great love of my life," he said. "I would die for grammar, for the subjunctive. I love etymology, the history of language, comparative language. It is the greatest achievement of mankind."

Sir James Craig, diplomat, GCMG, was born on July 13, 1924. He died on September 26, 2017, aged 93