**Chapter 6. An American Mass Observer among the natives: Robert Jackson Alexander in World War Two Britain**

**Lawrence Black**

The archives of Robert Jackson Alexander (1918-2010), a Professor of Latin American trade unionism and the global non-Soviet left, might not seem propitious sources for social and political historians of Second World War Britain. But Alexander wrote letters galore about his life as a General Infantryman (GI) in Britain as Group Operations Clerk to the US Air Force’s 95th Bombardment Group between April 1943 and June 1945. He was stationed in Suffolk, then Cambridgeshire and from July 1944 at Horham airfield in Suffolk. By dint of his administrative position, Alexander did not cross the channel or see direct combat, but travelled extensively within Britain. He documented these trips as a tourist-cum-flaneur - observing cities, cathedrals, architecture, people; a visitor to party conferences and HQs, meeting an international mix of political operatives; his cultural life - in regular, lengthy, prosaic, mostly typed letters to his parents in Leonia, New Jersey. His father Ralph, a Columbia University marketing Professor, was a truck driver in World War One, although also saw no direct conflict.[[1]](#endnote-1)

And these were palpably reports as much as missives - *aides mémoires* for whom he had met, where, when, a bank of contacts, ideas and opinion. While stationed in Britain, Alexander read Charles Dickens’ *American Notes*, about Dickens’s 1842 tour of the US, and reflected on the nations’ respective situations. Dickens had found Britain better resourced, more technologically advanced and civilised compared to the violence and slavery of the US. By 1943, all that remained of Dickens’s vision to Alexander was that Britain was older and felt superior towards US culture.[[2]](#endnote-2) Like Dickens, Alexander turned his attention to national cultures, with a dash of the political voyeur. He was also something of an amateur Pevsner - commenting on architecture, making pilgrimages to cathedrals and devoted to heritage. He offers historians a non-indigenous perspective on British society and politics – if you will, an American Mass Observer.

Alexander was not the only American so engaged. Anthropologist Margaret Mead arrived in England in July 1943, two months after Alexander. Mead was tasked by US and UK authorities with researching and facilitating cultural understanding between the growing numbers of American GIs and their hosts. For Mead it was an opportunity to test theses, displaced as she was from the South Pacific, on a different set of natives and cultures. Like Alexander, Mead travelled around the UK, with an eye for the everyday. Mead focused on the different scale of the two countries, how diminutive Britain had developed complex and intricate hierarchies; on the American slouch and tendency to talk big; on differences in dating practices between the social GI and more intimate, reserved Britons; on how Britons looked to history and deferred to authority where Americans were more forward-looking and self-confident; and how GIs were focused on getting home rather than understanding their allies. For Mead, these differences were not just intercultural, minor matters of national character, but heightened by their apparent shared qualities and mutual knowledge. They were not to be denied or dismissed, but acknowledged, as Mead contended in radio broadcasts, films and articles on ‘The Yank in Britain’ and ‘What is a date?’[[3]](#endnote-3)

There is no hard evidence Alexander read Mead (or encountered Mass Observers), but he read the army press (*Stars & Stripes*, named after its World War One equivalent, was his favourite) which reported Mead’s activity. Alexander’s more amateur observations focused on similar topics to Mead (politics aside – and as a reader of political runes he was, like many 1940s’ commentaries, frequently off-beam). He was forever contrasting the US and UK. There were clear resonances of Mead’s thinking in Alexander’s, and evidence of the percolation of social-scientific terminology. These intersections show the shared interests and concerns of the legions of amateur and expert social scientists at large in Britain.[[4]](#endnote-4)

The US wartime diaspora was as social and cultural as military, Blower contends; only sixteen percent of US military personnel saw combat.[[5]](#endnote-5) Alexander was an exemplar of this, and of the Meads, Mass Observers, Gorers and other social scientists honeycombing British society. That he wrote in such quantities marked him out as an incessant recorder, archiver and diarist of his own experience. A 1942 survey found enlisted US soldiers were less likely to see a movie, read a book or write letters from England than when in the USA, but more likely to drink alcohol, play cards or date.[[6]](#endnote-6) Alexander was over here and left a rich archive, but was neither over-sexed nor idle. Even in a unit as active as the 95th, the first to bomb Berlin, there was spare time on base and as much as eight consecutive furlough days off it.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Alexander’s letters thus contribute to the history of World War Two, a subject of perpetual academic interrogation and popular re-narrating.[[8]](#endnote-8) The GI ‘occupation’ of Britain – the shock troops of Americanisation, an ongoing presence - has been the subject of in-depth histories.[[9]](#endnote-9) GIs were imprinted on local memory (the 95th clubhouse is now a museum[[10]](#endnote-10)) and popular histories.[[11]](#endnote-11) As early as 1946 William Bostick illustrated an account of *England under G.I.’s Reign*.[[12]](#endnote-12) Schrijvers has compared the GI experience across Europe and other GI missives have been collated to this end.[[13]](#endnote-13) They were a portal through which to examine race, gender and sexuality as the occupying forces brought a segregated military and an influx of men.[[14]](#endnote-14) Other trends have focused on military bases; emotional histories in the medium of letter-writing; veterans, masculinity and psychological impacts.[[15]](#endnote-15) Alexander was akin to a forerunner of Thorpe’s trawl of local archives of political *Parties at War*.[[16]](#endnote-16) But Alexander makes no appearance in these studies. The uses of his army letters for historians are less in new interpretations of the war than in American perspectives of the British home front – offering multifaceted coverage and, like several other chapters in *Democratising the Discipline*, depicting how social-science minds intersected the banal and the macro.

**Alexander’s Army**

Before his deployment, Alexander was working at the Board of Economic Warfare and on a PhD at Columbia on Chilean labour relations. His politics were anti-communist, before the cold war. Radicalised by the Depression and a school trip in 1936 to Spain, Vienna and London, he had joined the New Jersey Young People’s Socialist League, a youth section of the Socialist Party (SPUSA). At Columbia from 1936 he was influenced by economist, former Wobbly and Mexican scholar, Frank Tannenbaum. The SPUSA split with an electorally-minded social democratic group in 1936. Not that the party was beholden to communists. In 1937 it purged Trotskyists because, in Alexander’s words, ‘Bolshevism… had completely lost whatever passing attraction it might once have had.’ He quit the YPSL in 1940 over its opposition to US entry into the war.[[17]](#endnote-17) From the 1940s he wrote for the *New Leader*, a socialist paper which had adopted a liberal anti-communist position. In Britain, Alexander presented *New Leader* journalist credentials – a letter from the managing editor, Daniel Bell.[[18]](#endnote-18)

He found army life banal: both peripatetic and static, last-minute plans made for a febrile atmosphere of ‘rumor, intrigue and backstabbing’. So, not unlike politics. ‘There’s a song we… used to sing for the benefit of the Communists, “The line has changed again”’ and Alexander concluded it ‘should be the theme song for the army.’ Hierarchy was at odds with his democratic instincts and Orwellian sense that the wrong people were in charge.[[19]](#endnote-19) If Eisenhower, Patton and Montgomery ‘get the war over with before the infantry catches up with me’, Alexander admitted, ‘that suits me just fine.’ Although he felt it would enhance his scholarship: ‘to “absorb” different experiences... I’ll be a better historian and… teacher for having spent some time in the army.’[[20]](#endnote-20) He was no shirker, spending September 1944 in Preston as a ‘stevedore’ (his term) preparing to establish allied airfields in Soviet Ukraine (‘Operation Frantic’).[[21]](#endnote-21)

For Alexander, the problem was the calibre of his fellow recruits. The Mass Observer in their midst was alert to their ethnic, religious, regional and educational backgrounds. His Communist radar was triggered by one vocal New York Jewish recruit full of ‘definite ideas.’ ‘Payday’ was for most ‘a sign for wine, women and gambling.’ He also had a high opinion of himself: ‘I’ve got a better education than almost anyone – officer or enlisted man’.[[22]](#endnote-22) The routine ‘humiliations’ of military life offended Alexander’s sensibility - ‘stupid people make me mad…. I don’t remember any such emotion in civilian life.[[23]](#endnote-23)

He was too active to slouch and neither dated (or wrote about it) nor drank much. Once after he’d ‘got “oiled”’, he wrote “Beer is horrible stuff. I don’t know what people drink it for”. One lengthy epistle was penned on Valentine’s Day. Alexander admitted to ‘little interest in the Piccadilly commandos’ as the denizens of the red light district near Piccadilly Circus and the American Red Cross Rainbow Corner Club were known, but ‘a great deal of interest in the future of the British Labour party and the beauties of Canterbury Cathedral.’[[24]](#endnote-24) Although in summer 1943 he confessed to making a swift exit after being ‘given the glad eye by one of the ladies referred to here as “Piccadilly commandos”’.[[25]](#endnote-25) Not that any other outcome would have been reported to his parents!

Similarly, Alexander’s political interest marked him apart from the average GI. Like Kowol’s *Blue Jerusalem*, his worldview centred politics and revealed a more diverse, active political culture than in many accounts. Albeit Alexander was applying and honing a social democratic outlook. His observations *on* rather than from *within* national political assumptions made for a granular political ethnography in the vein of the Austrian journalist Egon Wertheimer’s *Portrait of the Labour Party* (1929) or Retellack’s study of German social democracy.[[26]](#endnote-26)

One reason Alexander’s social life, tourism and political travelogue were foregrounded was that military matters were kept out of letters home. Even the weather was an ‘official secret’: nonetheless he reported ‘shivering’ in mid-summer 1943 despite sleeping under ‘4 blankets’. One method Alexander devised for navigating the censor was the egregious prolixity of his letters. One finished by admitting he was ‘afraid I have driven the censor mad with this letter’ and he was mostly ‘able to get friendly officers to sign the letters, indicating they had censored them, without their actually bothering to read them.’ [[27]](#endnote-27)

Towards the end of his tour Alexander summarised GI’s grievances, in Mead-like terms. The British were ‘behind the times’; their government was ‘aristocratic, dictatorial’; they were ‘dirty’, ‘grasping’, ‘unfriendly’, ‘inefficient’; their weather ‘deplorable.’ Alexander caveated this by wondering, ‘how would New York have reacted had a million of its homes been wrecked in six months?’ But he feared war had bred xenophobia. Vansittartism – the idea that Nazism built on inherent German characteristics – concerned him.[[28]](#endnote-28) He opposed a punishing peace for Germany; despite ‘all of the horror tales… we cannot condemn unborn generations to a life of slavery.’[[29]](#endnote-29)

After talking with a British soldier in a London churchyard late in 1944, Alexander mused: ‘Having been brought up in close proximity to such ancient works of art and evidences of history, it is inescapable that the British should get the feeling that these things belong to them… We have no such monuments… unless you put Mount Vernon and Arlington in this category… we have no such deep roots in the past… If one understands this… it is much easier to understand… the slowness with which the British tend to adapt themselves to changes. They have a greater feeling for the accomplishments of the past and are not quite so enamored of the future as we are.’[[30]](#endnote-30)

Alexander also noted a unity and patriotism to military life bred through diversity.[[31]](#endnote-31) Notwithstanding army segregation (officially ended in 1948), he believed ‘that racial prejudice is not ingrained.’[[32]](#endnote-32) He didn’t see much of black GIs, but did see World War II in racial terms: ‘victors in this conflict realize that the day of the white man’s domination of the world is over.’ ‘Are the white people such poor souls that they cannot hold their own against… other races without sitting upon them…? I have more race pride than to think so.’[[33]](#endnote-33) When he met the Home Secretary in 1943, Herbert Morrison articulated anxieties about relations between GIs and hosts, but his, ‘major problem was that of clashes between white and negro members of the US armed forces.’[[34]](#endnote-34)

Alexander rarely reflected emotionally. He combined gregarious qualities with the ability not to give too much of himself away. His interior life was not so much private as preoccupied with others. The ‘reaction of most of the fellows here’ to VE Day was ‘a sober one’.[[35]](#endnote-35) It was ‘funny not to have to be “sweating it out”’, particularly for the British relieved of the ‘physical presence of war, the galling restrictions on activity, the eternal danger lurking.’ This relief was ‘extraordinary, because… the British are undemonstrative… not addicted to public mass demonstrations in the way we are (a Sinatra craze here… is unthinkable.)’[[36]](#endnote-36) Alexander routinely applied words like ‘tolerance’ and ‘sane’ to Britons, and whilst Americans did not always ‘get’ the British, who were in turn ambivalent about the presence of the expeditionary forces, ‘we get along here, amazingly well’.[[37]](#endnote-37) Most GIs were sustained by a ‘belief in return home’, and Alexander was himself keen to resume his studies.[[38]](#endnote-38)

**Social Observer**

Civilians exhibited the homing instinct. On a train to London, Alexander met returning evacuee children and noted that even residents of Dover had gone home. Britons ‘don’t like to move from their native habitat’. Train journeys were rich sustenance for his anthropological, mass observational propensities. Typically he found civilian as well as military occupants. ‘Conversation will lag at first. Everyone… will pretend to be busy… cigarettes will be offered… weather, train times discussed… then… questions… what part of America he comes from… what part of the country he’s been stationed… British and American ways of doing things.’ It was not always cordial. On one trip, Alexander experienced ‘the most definite anti-American feeling I’ve yet heard’. A woman taken for a ‘commando’ was ‘bantered at by GIs’ and retorted that ‘there were too many here’. Reflecting, poignantly, on his methodological belief in conversation, for Alexander the ‘rail car’s peculiar mixture of familiarity and unfamiliarity’ was like ‘a book which one will never see again – that little bit of life is completed and though it can be brought back in memory, its actual threads are lost forever.’[[39]](#endnote-39)

Alexander recorded how he was ‘surprised with the English countryside’, its ‘hedges… neatness’ and ‘historicity’. Children ‘gasped at us’, the food was ‘pretty good’ and citizens ‘cordial’. He was, above all, ‘struck with the oldness of the country’. Within a fortnight he had acquainted himself with the nearest ‘quaint’ small town (Framlingham) and the early Tudor ceiling in its church.[[40]](#endnote-40) In his first venture off base, he found in Great Yarmouth the ‘narrowest streets I think I’ve ever seen with the possible exception of Venice.’ Cambridge captivated him with the ‘old buildings one finds in every city and town on this island’. ‘We have very few houses in the entire US which are older than’ 1640, he wrote, ‘yet here it is by no means an exceptional house’. ‘Everything is old here’, even the ‘little red post boxes’, of which Framlingham had an 1856 example.[[41]](#endnote-41) Like many US visitors Alexander seemed fixated on Britain as an old country.[[42]](#endnote-42)

Alexander’s first London trip in July 1943 packed in Madame Tussaud’s, Trafalgar Square, Fleet Street, St. Paul’s, the changing of the guard and a glimpse of the Princess Royal. Tussaud’s held an ineffable appeal, but offered discounted entry for the military and waxworks of 14 US presidents, plus a future one in Eisenhower.[[43]](#endnote-43) There was some more Alexander-level culture in performances of Shaw’s *Arms and the Man* and Ibsen’s *Master Builder*. His next London trip included the Royal Albert Hall to hear the BBC Symphony Orchestra and dinner with free French and Belgian forces at what would become a favorite haunt, one of several impromptu French eateries in South Kensington, most likely Chez Rose.[[44]](#endnote-44) Alexander had money and time to spend on London’s vibrant wartime cultural life.

Alexander was reconciled to his cultural mix. ‘No matter how highbrow I may be about reading and other entertainments, I have just no sophistication… when it comes to movies.’[[45]](#endnote-45) At a pantomime (a Vaudeville survivor, he surmised) he was impressed by Tessie O’Shea, a ‘big, wholesome looking woman, full of pep, vim’, whom he mis-identified as Irish. The Prime Minister and his wife and daughter were also there, and Alexander ‘saw Churchill himself laugh heartily.’[[46]](#endnote-46) But rest assured reader, Alexander’s reading in Britain included Zola’s *Nana*, Kropotkin’s *Mutual Aid*, Maurois on *Disraeli*, Drucker’s *End of Economic Man*, Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon*, Bronte, Mencken and Gunther.[[47]](#endnote-47)

Alexander’s passion, besides politics, was cathedrals. ‘Lovely’, he wrote of Canterbury, along with a description of its exterior, interior, choir, screen, cloisters, tombs (imperial wars, the Black Prince) and Beckett’s ‘Corona’ after a tour with the Canon. He found ‘in a number of these towns’, ‘an air of a period about them’. Chester was medieval; York, Roman; Durham, border warfare; Winchester - which he toured with the verger - Anglo-Saxon. It was as if Alexander were describing an alien vision, alien to the US in any case, by dint of their age.[[48]](#endnote-48) ‘Ely… is, I think the most beautiful’, but ‘I still haven’t seen anything to beat Durham.’ York Minster was ‘beautiful’, but its setting less impressive.[[49]](#endnote-49) As for cathedrals of learning, Oxford he ‘liked… better than Cambridge’. He was ‘lost to the twentieth century’ in Christ Church’s Cathedral-cum-Chapel, although he disliked its Victorian segments. He also noted Oxford memorials to German First World War dead as an ‘amazing comment on the tolerance of the English.’[[50]](#endnote-50)

Alexander was not uncritical, finding Westminster Cathedral ‘garish’, like a mosque with Byzantine minarets.[[51]](#endnote-51) Lichfield’s chief quality was that it had no building works; Birmingham’s was ‘strange’; Manchester’s left him unmoved.[[52]](#endnote-52) Alexander’s interest was grandeur -- architectural not spiritual. He attempted to attend Geoffrey Fisher’s anointment as Archbishop of Canterbury, but ‘for once I found the British quite unbending, no ticket, no entry.’ But the ‘outlandish’ military and millinery displays wowed him to believe that this ‘ceremony dating back many centuries… must have been overwhelmingly impressive.’[[53]](#endnote-53) ‘Holyrood Palace was… a disappointment’; Stratford, too full of ‘shakespeariana’.[[54]](#endnote-54) Blackpool had the ‘crowds one sees at Coney Island or Atlantic City.’ Liverpool was ‘the most cosmopolitan city… large numbers of obviously foreign people’ and ‘chop suey joints’. Lancaster reminded him of Montmartre, with… ‘a sacre coeurish building on the top of the highest hill.’ Cardiff had the ‘nicest civic centre in Britain… it reminds one of Washington.’[[55]](#endnote-55)

Alexander habitually compared British and American characteristics. Print media was healthy, despite paper recycling (‘salvage’) - ‘if you’d see the toilet paper here, you’d know what I mean’. He admired Penguin’s bargain pricing, ‘Everyman’s Library’, Gollancz’s Left Book Club which was like the US Book of the Month (and he noted the Right Book Club too). There were more bookstores than in the US, but public libraries were more poorly stocked.[[56]](#endnote-56) ‘With their attachment to things as they are’, the British ‘haven’t gone in much for chain stores’. In Great Yarmouth, ‘the retail establishments were of the regular British variety, Victorian, dark, and not too attractive.’[[57]](#endnote-57) However, Lewis’s in Manchester was ‘as modern and up-to-date as any American emporium… like being back doing my Xmas shopping in Macy’s.’[[58]](#endnote-58)

The House of Lords he found like the Supreme Court, all ‘robes and wigs’, ‘and to an American, a bit ridiculous.’[[59]](#endnote-59) At the Lancashire assizes in Lancaster Castle ‘one of the solicitors (English for lawyer) was a women and there was an element of humour in seeing a woman dolled up in 18th century men’s garb.’[[60]](#endnote-60) Alexander found himself ushered into the visitor’s gallery of the Commons (convened in the Lords chamber, he later glimpsed the blitzed Commons) by a non-serving uniformed Conservative MP (and ex-British Union of Fascists organiser) Jocelyn Lucas. He found the conduct ‘pompous’ and ‘funny’, but also ‘more polite’ (no spittoons, newspaper reading, back slapping) than in Congress.[[61]](#endnote-61)

Radio news was different. That it was at set times on the BBC meant that ‘when Mussolini fell it took an hour to announce it’. This struck Alexander as ‘characteristic of the two nations. The Americans like a bustle and want their news hot.’ Language and dialect were frequent barriers. There was ‘more variation in the spoken language on this “tight little isle” than the whole of the US’, he reckoned. Some vernacular rubbed off on Alexander. He noticed that he had started ordering the date 12 February rather than February 12. ‘I was going to write “queuing up”’, he admitted in 1945, but ‘you wouldn’t understand that.’[[62]](#endnote-62)

Alexander was conscious of happenstance, vignettes, a regular collocutor. At his usual London hotel in September 1943 he found the proprietor discussing the war with guests, shopkeepers and businessmen, or ‘“black-coated workers” as the English would have it’, a term signaling Alexander’s sociological nous. One ‘rampant imperialist’ told Alexander that America was ‘a wonderful place for gadgets… and that’s all.’ A woman in the Auxiliary Territorial Service Alexander found ‘more-or-less disillusioned.’ ‘In view of the liberal flow of liquor, someone must have an inside track on the black market.’ But a liberal temper was maintained and ‘it all went off with great aplomb in spite of the mixed company.’[[63]](#endnote-63)

He began to display a Mass Observer’s eye for the micro-differences of class. Visiting *Observer* movie critic Caroline Lejeune in metroland Pinner, he compared it to Scarsdale and Englewood. Her house was ‘modern (except for central heating – the English just won’t have this)’ – ‘definitely upper middle class though’, with books, alcohol, space and near a golf course. This was different from the ‘professional middle class’ surroundings of a family friend in Neasden, which he compared to Leonia.[[64]](#endnote-64) Breakfasting in Sunderland he encountered two ‘black-coated’ (white-collar) clerks who ‘illustrated… the English tendency towards caste… which is more emphatic here than in the states.’ They apologised to Alexander not for the queue, but for it being a ‘workingman’s café’, which Alexander found ‘nice, clean… not at all déclassé.’[[65]](#endnote-65)

For Christmas 1943 Alexander requested Hershey’s jelly and Nestle candies, and he distributed thirty-six candy bars and two of three toothbrushes.[[66]](#endnote-66) Kids would miss the GIs ‘no matter what the British adults may think of the American soldiers… soldiers always did arouse the juvenile imagination.’ And especially the ‘kids who practically live here’, largely for the airbase food.[[67]](#endnote-67) At Christmas 1944, he ‘couldn’t help but feel a little guilty, knowing how hard it is for Britishers to get a decent meal.’[[68]](#endnote-68) Something he was partial to. In a London Indian restaurant, ‘gentlemen with dark skins went around with towels wrapped around their heads – for all I know none of them may have been Indians.’ Amidst ‘exotic interior decorations’, Alexander consumed ‘positively the hottest thing I have tasted… they should have served fans… with it’.[[69]](#endnote-69)

**Political Observer**

One can read Alexander as having a box seat in the final chapter, ‘London, 1942’, of Rodgers’s *Atlantic Crossings*: pre-occupied with the war’s geo-political portents, conscious of Britain’s uncertain edging towards a full-blown welfare state, of growing American global power, of the politics of race and end of empire. He was a ‘North Atlantic progressive connection’ in practice, even by family background (which he researched in the 1970s) related to AV Alexander, the Co-operative politician and Attlee’s Defence minister. And he was also part of the progressive North Atlantic’s ‘unravelling’ as his anti-communist Cold War trade union politics took him to Latin America.[[70]](#endnote-70)

In August 1943 the Churchill Club opened in Westminster Abbey’s Dean’s Yard, in seventeenth-century Ashburnham House, part of Westminster School. The Club occupied the ground floor, in part to disguise the RAF communications station above. It became Alexander’s London base – ‘I don’t know what I’d have done without it’ – a club for US (chiefly) and Commonwealth military personnel with a degree, serving food and hosted talks - Alexander was member 355.[[71]](#endnote-71)

In November 1943 he saw the author discuss the *Beveridge Report.* Beveridge was ‘sanguine’ about its prospects, suggesting that ‘public pressure would force its passage.’ The Club was no liberal sanctuary. A month later Alexander was pigeon-holed by a wren who contended that ‘Eastern peoples… need to be looked after’ and that Anglo-Indian bonds were ‘spiritual and the Bengal famine evidence of the risks of self-rule.[[72]](#endnote-72) Other Churchill Club speakers Alexander heard included Geoffrey Crowther of *The Economist*; Cambridge political scientist Denis William Brogan; and Oxford imperial economic historian Keith Hancock.[[73]](#endnote-73) In 1944 Common Wealth MP Vernon Bartlett, Labour’s Jennie Lee and the *Sunday Express*’s John Gordon discussed the options for post-war Germany. Alexander interjected against Gordon’s irredentism in favour of a democratic Germany. Lee thanked him and asked him to contact her at the Labour party conference.[[74]](#endnote-74) Nor were Club talks only political. In 1944 Alexander sat on the floor to listen to Vaughan Williams, William Walton and Malcolm Sargent in a ‘Musical brains Trust’ - quite anti-American, he felt, sparing in praise for Gershwin and ‘not too sympathetic to jazz’.[[75]](#endnote-75)

Alexander had catholic political interests, but the left was his native milieu. Armed with his letter from Daniel Bell, at the London Labour Party HQ Alexander met Donald Daines, LCC member for Kensington North and acting secretary of the London Party. Daines introduced Alexander to LCC leader Lord Latham, General Secretary Jim Middleton and in August 1943 the Home Secretary. Their meeting was ‘not prolonged’, but Herbert Morrison impressed Alexander.[[76]](#endnote-76) ‘If there is ever a Labour government formed, chances are that Herby will be the guy to lead it… one of the few with really vigorous ideas.’ He also admired Aneurin Bevan, whom he met at the *Tribune* offices in November 1943. The ‘stormy petrel of English politics’, Alexander found ‘charming’, if ‘nervous… for during our conversation he… paced backwards and forwards.’ Morrison wanted the coalition government to continue. Bevan advocated a free vote on leaving the coalition for Labour MPs, increasing their leverage on reforms in the meantime.[[77]](#endnote-77)

With a letter this time from ‘my friend’ Bevan, Alexander met Archie Lush (Bevan’s agent) in Tredegar. Tredegar ‘did not look as run down as I had expected’, its ‘houses… neat and clean’. Lush reckoned ‘a good Communist candidate like Pollitt would pull about 10,000’ votes, but Alexander sensed that ‘Bevan is the Labor Party in this area.’[[78]](#endnote-78) ‘To learn more about the politics of the Midlands’, Alexander ‘hunted up the office of the Manchester Labour party. There was no one there.’ Instead he met Trades Council Secretary Jack Munro, and his soon-to-be-successor, Horace Newbold. Both were ex-communist trade union bureaucrats, sustaining the organisation by the book. ‘I played a little dumber on things than I actually was’, Alexander admitted, ‘to get their straight reactions’, having thus far encountered the Morrison and Bevan view.[[79]](#endnote-79)

In Edinburgh, this time furnished with a letter from Daines, Alexander met John Taylor, Secretary of the Labour’s Scottish Council, who was caustic about Scottish nationalists as ‘sentimentalists… the “Scots wha hae” variety.’ In Glasgow he met the Scottish Independent Labour Party’s (ILP) Secretary and Chair, Dan Carridice and David Gibson. The ILP took him ‘back to the days when I worked in the SPUSA and the YPSL,’ although in Gibson he felt ‘there was no trace left of the idea of the “dictatorship of the proletariat.”’ In London, he tracked down the widely admired Secretary of State for Scotland, Tom Johnston. Johnston believed a Scottish Parliament would happen and was focused on bringing hydroelectric power to the Highlands.[[80]](#endnote-80) Intrigued by Scottish nationalism and just after Robert McIntyre’s 1945 Motherwell by-election victory, Alexander met with the SNP’s first MP and future leader. Alexander found McIntyre ‘mild-mannered’. He wanted full independence, tariffs and argued once the SNP had a majority of Scottish MPs, they would secede and declare themselves the Scottish parliament.[[81]](#endnote-81)

Meeting Air Minister John Strachey, Alexander observed: ‘once you are tarred with the brush’ of extremism, as Strachey was, ‘it’s the devil’s own time shaking it off.’[[82]](#endnote-82) In 1945 via an alley in Covent Garden Market he entered the ‘not exactly spacious, but… ample’ office of Communist Party leader Harry Pollitt. Beneath portraits of Lenin, Stalin, Voroshilov, Tomoshenko and Pollitt himself he asked about his dismissal as leader in 1939 and heard him dismiss the ILP and Common Wealth, but support Scottish Home Rule. Alexander was ‘impressed with how typical an Englishman Pollitt seemed to be in everything except his political ideas’. More sarcastically, he noted Pollitt’s ‘rather sloppy clothes, not unexpected in a Communist secretary’.[[83]](#endnote-83)

The Fabian Colonial and International Bureaus were regular Alexander ports of call. The Colonial Bureau’s secretary Rita Hinden connected him with the West African Students Union (WASU) at Africa House in Camden. The WASU had been a vanguard of anti-colonial activity in London since the 1920s. Alexander was impressed by their ambitions, organisation and educated debate: ‘had it not been for the accents… I could easily have conceived of myself as talking to a group of American negro students – their talk and reactions were so much the same’. He noted that male students dominated political debate. Women at WASU tended to be in charge of music, food and dancing, not that such sociability was insignificant. ‘I’d never thought of there being any educated and politically advanced West Africans’, Alexander candidly unpacked his own baggage. But he had not entirely shed it. ‘There is nothing of the primitive or the voo-doo about them’ he felt, they were ‘westerners to the enth degree.’[[84]](#endnote-84)

KamKan Boadu was Alexander’s closest WASU contact. Boadu was a delegate at the 5th Pan-African Congress in Manchester in October 1945. He also met Joe Appiah who was training as a lawyer and later married Stafford Cripps’s daughter, and Bankole Akpata, a member of the West African National Secretariat set up by Kwame Nkrumah after the 5th Congress.[[85]](#endnote-85) Convinced that ‘prejudices are not iron-clad’, Alexander took his Southern friend ‘Tiny’ (‘a Mississippi farm boy’) to WASU to ‘soften his traditional prejudices on the race question’.[[86]](#endnote-86)

In 1943 Alexander took Boadu to the Churchill Club, when Colonial Minister Oliver Stanley was speaking. In Alexander’s opinion, Stanley was ‘interested in the welfare of the colonies and… a pretty good Colonial Minister.’ Boadu was the ‘first negro ever to grace the halls’, which ‘caused a mild stir’, hinting racism might have sources other than the GIs.[[87]](#endnote-87) In 1945, with Boadu and Appiah, he attended ‘Race and the Color Bar’ organised by the Missionary Societies. The new Archbishop of Canterbury seemed to Alexander to defend racial pay differentials because ‘natives’ did not understand money. The cathedral was more to Alexander’s tastes than the Archbishop. ‘Tory MP’ David Gammans, whose pre-parliamentary career was in the Malayan Colonial Service, ‘denied entirely that there was any exploitation of the colonies by the British. ‘Self-governing colonies’, Alexander understood Gammans to be suggesting, were ‘baloney’ whose problems would not be resolved by writing constitutions. Alexander ‘didn’t know that such people really existed anymore’. Arthur Creech Jones, Chair of the Fabian Colonial Bureau and Colonial Secretary under Attlee, emphasised the ‘economic and social development of these colonies.’ Though, Alexander felt, still ‘did not lay enough stress… upon self-government.’[[88]](#endnote-88)

Alexander was a consummate radical cosmopolitan. He met George Padmore (pseudonym for Malcom Nurse), a mentor to the WASU activists. Born in Trinidad, he became Head of the Negro bureau of the Red International of Trade Unions (Profintern), with a seat on the Comintern Executive. In London from 1934 he split with the Comintern over the popular front. His own mentor was London-based Trinidadian CLR James, like him an ILP member. Alexander spotted Padmore (so much for the pseudonym) in a London bookstore in May 1944, checked his vision with the store staff and chased after him. British colonies were ‘bitterly resentful at the treatment they and their countries are getting at the hands of the democracies’, Padmore explained. ‘If the white man wants to avoid the most cataclysmic wars in the world’s history’, Padmore told Alexander, ‘he will have to admit the darker races to full equality.’[[89]](#endnote-89)

A month later Alexander headed to Cranleigh Street in Camden, where Padmore ‘greeted me like a long-lost brother.’ ‘Mildly surprised’ to meet Padmore’s ‘white wife’, domestic partner Dorothy, what followed was six hours discussing empire and race, with Alexander defending Burnham’s *Managerial Revolution*.[[90]](#endnote-90) When they next met in April 1945, the relaxation of milk and sugar rationing chilled their political passions. Padmore suggested an ice cream at a Moo Cow Milk Bar. When Alexander went to the Churchill Club later that day he noted, ‘they’ve just been allowed to make ice cream here again, such as it is.’[[91]](#endnote-91)

London was full of governments in exile, social democrats, journalists, writers – grist to Alexander’s networking and sociability. Chief amongst Alexander’s contacts was journalist Freidrich Scheu, who reported for the *Daily Herald* (and others) from 1930’s Vienna. Scheu left Austria in 1938 and founded the Anglo-Austrian society in 1944. He wrote an early account of the Beveridge report.[[92]](#endnote-92) Scheu and Alexander dined in London regularly.[[93]](#endnote-93) And through Scheu Alexander connected with exiled Viennese journalists Oscar Pollak and George Gedye. Pollak was editor of the Austrian social democrats’ *Arbeiter Zeitung* (and again after the war) and *de facto* leader of London’s Austrian socialists (living at Henry Brailsford’s). Gedye was the *Daily Telegraph* and *New York Times*’s central Europe correspondent.[[94]](#endnote-94)

Another émigré former *Arbeiter Zeitung* editor Alexander encountered was Julius Braunthal. Braunthal was an editor of the Left Book Club’s *Left News* and of the *International Socialist Forum*, the journal of the Labour and Socialist International, the remnants of the 2nd International, dubbed the 2½ International. He told Alexander he had no intention of returning to Vienna after its anti-semitic traumas. Braunthal remained in the UK as the first Secretary General of the International and compiled a three-volume *History of the International*.[[95]](#endnote-95)

At Horham airbase, Alexander met Michael Karolyi, President of Hungary at the end of World War One and President of the Free Hungary Council in Britain.[[96]](#endnote-96) He sought out other relics. In October 1944 ‘for the heck of it’, Alexander travelled to Criccieth (visiting the Castle as well) on the Northwest Welsh coast, where Lloyd George had moved a month earlier. Alexander ‘got the impression the populace thereabouts literally worships Lloyd George.’ He ‘talked for just a very few minutes’ to the former PM. He ‘no longer has the intellectual verve and keenness which were once his’, Alexander recorded. Still, in a tribute to his own method, ‘it’ll make history mean a great deal more now’.[[97]](#endnote-97)

Alexander wangled his way into the main 1944/45 political conferences. At the 1944 Trades Union Congress meeting in Blackpool, in the press gallery, he noted (as he usually did) the layout of proceedings. On the stage seated behind two rows of tables were, amongst others, General Secretary Walter Citrine (who spent his time defending Bevin from militants) and AK Pillai from the Indian Federation of Labour. Alexander met other Indian delegates more interested in the upcoming World Trade Union Congress. Ellen Wilkinson gave the fraternal address. Wilkinson ‘belongs to the non-trade union as opposed to the trade union section’ of Labour and told Congress the party was not subject to its ‘minute oversight’. They should not look at Labour as a ‘poor relation’ (although it was both). Alexander thought it a ‘penetrating address… bearding the lion in his den.’[[98]](#endnote-98)

He witnessed a ‘witty… brilliant speech’ by Liberal chair Violet Bonham-Carter and deputy leader Percy Harris, who was ‘caustic… about Brother Brown’ (Ernest Brown, National Liberal leader). Debating the Beveridge Report, opened by its namesake, the deepfelt unease amongst delegates about state interference in private liberty impressed Alexander. He suspected that the case against ever-growing government bureaucracy ‘is going to have some weight.’ How harmonious Liberal debate was compared to Labour struck Alexander, and that ‘the vast majority’ of Liberal delegates ‘were grey-haired’, middle-class and female. Alexander found this ‘surprising… since nothing discussed during this session was peculiarly of interest to women.’

The Liberals gifted him a ticket and Labour ‘let him in for love’, but Alexander had to tout a balcony ticket from a delegate to the Conservative conference. ‘I don’t know whether it is so real under the surface as it appears on top’ the sceptical GI observed, but there was ‘complete unanimity’ at the conference. A dozen resolutions were ‘unanimously’ passed, with ‘little for temper or temperatures to get roused about’ – other than a few Young Conservatives, notably Peter Thorneycroft, urging the party not drift too right in its rallying call of ‘away with controls.’ Attacks on bureaucracy, nationalisation, socialists, unions or Co-Ops ‘won loud applause’. Keynote speakers loomed larger than debate. Churchill congratulated his coalition partners, but insisted that ‘the nation was headed for perdition should the socialists win.’ Deploying all the ‘old bogeys of financial instability’ from 1929 and ‘aliens’ from 1924, the prime minister dampened the prospects for any continuation of coalition. Still, Alexander was rapt - ‘Churchill’s oratory has twice the lasting effects of the more excited kind of speaker.’ [[99]](#endnote-99)

Labour’s conference in December 1944 he found more strained. Debating post-war Germany revealed some of the Vansittartism that bothered Alexander. Will Lawther in particular delivered a ‘violent and rather ignorant speech.’ The Greece debate was an ‘explosion’ and the party aired its differences with Beveridge. These all raised the difficulties of Labour remaining in coalition, but differing on policy. The ‘greeting given Aneurin Bevan was as tumultuous as’ Alexander could ‘imagine any English audience can get… he knows how to work up his audience.’ Other speakers impressed him, notably Sukhsagar Datta from Bristol in the social security debate.[[100]](#endnote-100)

Alexander brought a social democratic outlook to Britain, but had it informed by his sojourn. His first post-war pamphlet (authored with longstanding Stalin critic David Shub, an introduction by Norman Angell and Attlee’s 1945 address to Congress) asked, *What do you know about British Labor?* His second, *Labour Movements in Latin America*, was published by the Fabian International Bureau and Gollancz in 1947.[[101]](#endnote-101)

**Conclusion**

As an academic (he completed his PhD in 1950), Alexander’s distinctive method was honed as he schlepped around Britain. He meticulously filed records of meetings, talks, speeches and interviews; he networked, absorbed opinions, collated paraphernalia - a scholarly entrepôt by journalistic method. This was in-the-field research, a firsthand observer bordering on participant, relying on interests and prejudices as much as any sample. It was knowing in inducing subjects. ‘I’m not as naïve as these questions sound’, he wrote after one 1943 interview, ‘but I thought the questions might elicit interesting answers.’ He took no notes during interviews but typed them up immediately.[[102]](#endnote-102) His approach was not without critics. Iber sees Alexander’s writing as a political intervention as much as a scholarly one. Alexander admitted to the charge of little interest in archives.[[103]](#endnote-103) He was his own archive.[[104]](#endnote-104) One from which historians can derive insights into both wartime Britain and the social-science mind(s) surveying it.

Alexander became entangled in progressive anti-communism during the Cold War; spending long stretches in South America such as Bolivia in 1957 and Chile with the Agency for International Development in 1968.[[105]](#endnote-105) He undertook six trips in the 1950s for the American Federation of Labour’s Free Trade Union Committee. Founded in 1936 by Jay Lovestone, the FTUC reported to the CIA by then. Alexander alleged he ‘hadn’t known… that money for his trips in the 1950s came from the CIA’, but it ‘wouldn’t have bothered him if he had.’[[106]](#endnote-106) He returned to the SPUSA national executive from 1957 to 1966. Alexander returned to the UK six times to 1991, mainly for research, occasionally to reminisce. By the 1990s, other Americans, including those in ‘grungy London universities’, were reporting back to left US magazines on journalism, New Labour, and Americanization.[[107]](#endnote-107)

1. **Notes**

Thanks to John D. French for alerting me to Alexander’s archive and Fernanda Perrone for archival guidance.

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2. Robert Jackson Alexander Papers (Rutgers University Archives & Special Collections, Box 297), 22 & 27 June 1943. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. P. Mandler, *Return from the Natives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), pp. 101-3, 106, ch.3; M. Mead, *The American Troops and the British Community* (London: Hutchison, 1944). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. 8 June & 13 April 1943; P. Mandler, ‘The Language of Social Science in Everyday Life’, *History of the Human Sciences,* 32, 1 (2019), 66-82. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. B. Blower, Americans in a World at War(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), p.7. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
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7. 3 November, 2 & 14 February 1944. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Recently, D. Todman, *Britain’s War: A New World, 1942-1947* (London: Penguin, 2020) or the ‘People’s War’ forum, *English Historical Review*,138 (2023), 594-5, 1063-1164. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
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10. https://www.95thbg-horham.com. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
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15. See recent work by Rebecca Herman, Frances Houghton, Susan Carruthers, Michal Shapira, Martin Francis, Helen Parr. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. A. Thorpe, *Parties at War, 1939-45* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. 25 December 1942; 18 August 1943; R.J. Alexander, *Yank’s Eye View* (hereafter YEV), i; R. J. Alexander, *International Trotskyism, 1929-85* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), pp. x, 899. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. 27 June, 21 July 1943. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. 21 March, 22 October, 5 April 1943, 4 June 1942. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. 25 March 1945. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. 10 September 1944. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. 5 April, 10 November 1943. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. 14 February 1944. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. 10 November 1943; Longmate, *The GIs*, pp. 232-233. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. 18 August 1943. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. K. Kowol, *Blue Jerusalem: British Conservatism, Winston Churchill and the Second World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024);E. Wertheimer, *Portrait of the Labour Party* (London: GP Putnam, 1929); J. Retellack, *German Social Democracy Through British Eyes* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022). [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. 16 & 22 June, 15 August, 4 November 1943; YEV, iii. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. R. J. Alexander, ‘The problem of Zenophobia’ (n.d.) with letter of 6 January 1945. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. 12 November 1944 (YEV, 338). [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. 3 November 1944. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. 13 July 1942. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. 3 November 1944. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. 6 January 1943, 29 May 1945. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. 4 August 1943. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. 8 May 1945 YEV, 488. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. 21 May 1945. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. 14 February 1944. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. 9 August 1943; YEV, 42. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. 18 August 1943; 27 December 1944; YEV, 380. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. 14, 18, 27 May 1943. St Michael the Archangel’s church. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. 16 & 27 June, 4 September (to grandfather) 1943. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. P. Mandler, ‘How Modern Is It?’, *Journal of British Studies* 42:2 (2003), 271-82. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. 5 Jul 1943; Longmate, *The GIs*, p.226. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. 21 July 1943. D. Kelly, ‘Mapping Free French London: Places, Spaces, Traces’ in D. Kelly and M. Cornick (eds.), *A History of the French in London* (London: Institute for Historical Research, 2013), pp. 300-301, 326-7. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. 21 April 1945. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. 2 February 1944. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. 13 April, 27 May, 22 July, 21 October, 7 December, 26 August 1943. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. 4 November 1943; 14 January 1945. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. 31 May 1945; 3 November 1944; YEV, 310, 2 February 1944 (YAV 176). [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. 6 January 1945. He did not specify whether it was the Rhodes House or New College memorial. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. 1 January 1944. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. 13 April 1945, 12 September 1944. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. 21 April 1945. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. 2 February, 4 July (YEV, 250) 1944. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. 10 & 20 September, 4 October, 3 November 1944. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. 22 November 1943. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. 27 May, 16 June 1943. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. 10 December 1944. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. YEV, 199 (c. March 1944). [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. 4 October 1944. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. 21 October 1943, 3 November 1944. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. 14 October, 8 June 1943; 12 February, 21 April 1945. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. 19 September 1943. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. 18 August 1943. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. 2 February 1944. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. 28 December 1943. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. 18 April 1944. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. 27 December 1944. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. 11 January 1944, YEV, 138. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
70. D. T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1998), pp. 504-7, p.504; Alexander, *Four Families*, p. 21. [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
71. YEV, 199. c. March 1944; 19 September 1943. [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
72. 4 November, 3 December 1943. [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
73. 17 November 1943, 1 January 1944; 13 April 1945. [↑](#endnote-ref-73)
74. 3 November, 17 December (YEV, 365) 1944. [↑](#endnote-ref-74)
75. 22 February 1944. [↑](#endnote-ref-75)
76. 21 July, 4 & 18 August 1943. [↑](#endnote-ref-76)
77. 21 July, 17 November 1943. [↑](#endnote-ref-77)
78. 3 November 1944. [↑](#endnote-ref-78)
79. 1 October 1944. [↑](#endnote-ref-79)
80. 2 February, 18 May (YEV 229-30) 1944. [↑](#endnote-ref-80)
81. 21 April 1945 (YEV, 472). [↑](#endnote-ref-81)
82. 21 July 1943. [↑](#endnote-ref-82)
83. nd. YEV, 451. [↑](#endnote-ref-83)
84. 4.11.43; M. Matera, *Black London: The Imperial Metropolis and Decolonization in the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), pp. 101, 230. [↑](#endnote-ref-84)
85. 1 January, 27 June 1944, 31 May 1945. [↑](#endnote-ref-85)
86. 11 January 1944 (YEV, 138), 7 December 1943. [↑](#endnote-ref-86)
87. 1 January 1944. [↑](#endnote-ref-87)
88. 31 May 1945. [↑](#endnote-ref-88)
89. 18 May 1944. [↑](#endnote-ref-89)
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93. At least 9 times, August 1943-May 1945. [↑](#endnote-ref-93)
94. 21 October 1943, YEV, 75. [↑](#endnote-ref-94)
95. 3 December 1943 (YEV, 116); 3 May (YEV, 219), 3 November 1944. [↑](#endnote-ref-95)
96. 4 July 1944 (YAV 250). [↑](#endnote-ref-96)
97. 11 October 1944. [↑](#endnote-ref-97)
98. 18 October 1944. [↑](#endnote-ref-98)
99. 4 February 1945. YEV, 451. [↑](#endnote-ref-99)
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104. V.G. Devinatz, ‘Robert J. Alexander's U.S. Left-Wing Interview Collection and Archaeology of Dissident Communism,’ *Working USA: The Journal of Labor and Society,* 15 (June 2012), 153-175. [↑](#endnote-ref-104)
105. Alexander, *Four Families*, pp.157-61. [↑](#endnote-ref-105)
106. Iber, ‘Imperialism of Liberty’, pp. 103-4, 117, 129-30, 133-4, 254. French, obituary of Alexander, pp. 163-164. [↑](#endnote-ref-106)
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