Allan Rowley

MI6 officer and expert on southeast Asia who played a pivotal role in the region after the war

Brave, worldly and excellent company, Allan Rowley was just the sort of man the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS), or MI6, was looking for as it began reshaping the organisation with which it had muddled its way through the Second World War. Rowley had developed notable leadership qualities, winning the Military Cross fighting in the jungles of Burma, and had acquired useful experience of southeast Asia.

Whether the Cairo roof party where he met the beautiful and vivacious SIS secretary Anne Cresswell, who was to become his partner in a long and loving marriage, was also the place where he was introduced to Claridge's, not unlikely. Rowley was ready for something new as a war wound had left him with a limp, continuing him to desk work in the army.

Early recognition of his potential was indicated by a posting to head the SIS office in Rangoon in the early 1950s. Burma, which is modern Myanmar, had left the Commonwealth in 1949 but the Westminster-style government had run into trouble.

The shrewd and charismatic prime minister in waiting, Aung San, had been assassinated by a jealous rival and the politically volatile peoples of the central plain felt themselves ill-used when their particular party failed to win an election.

Frequent changes of government and a weak economy provided fertile ground for penetration of the indigenous "Red Flag" (traditionalist) and "White Flag" (revisionist) communist parties by the rival agents of Moscow and Beijing. By his characteristically frank and friendly engagement with the relatively naive local communist leaders, and in co-operation with the Burmese police, Rowley was able to counter both penetration attempts — and keep the issues domestic.

He also attempted the ultimately disheartening task of trying to win over the recalcitrant hill tribes to the idea of being ruled from Rangoon. The tribes had loyally supported Britain during the Japanese occupation and mistrusted the men of the central plain for being soft and corrupt. They were also religiously at odds with the Buddhist majority as a result of being subjected to Christian missionary zeal in the 19th century and they proved impervious to Rowley's warm-hearted persuasion.

His grasp of Asiatic mores and pre-judices led to his secondment to the office of the British commissioner-general for southeast Asia in Singapore, Sir Robert Heatlie Scott, who had succeeded Malcolm MacDonald in 1955. It was a delicate time for British influence in the region with Malaysian independence on the horizon, expanding communist influence in the Indo-China peninsula, British influence in the region with Malaysian independence on the horizon, expanding communist influence in the Indo-China peninsula, stretching from Pakistan to Japan and beyond.

"China Town" (an educational technology company). Nicholas Rowley, the chief executive of "China Town" (an educational technology company). Nicholas Rowley, the chief executive of...