Preface

Empires usually die violently. They break into fragments when an Alexander dies. Or they are divided by the victors when a Napoleon is defeated and led into exile. Or they collapse and reform into fragile, perhaps unstable states after an Ottoman or a Hapsburg or a Soviet empire dissolves. That the British Empire ended differently, and with some grace, is due in large part to a group of colonial officials who were gifted with the more amiable skills of diplomats. One could even call them an age-group, for most of them flourished and did their work in a single generation: Lord Hailey, in India and then in Africa, was a few years ahead of Hugh Foot, Charles Arden-Clarke, Andrew Cohen, Dick Turnbull, Tony Abell, and Ralph Hone – to mention only some of those who play a part in this book.

Malcolm MacDonald was central to this group and to the process of turning the British Empire into a Commonwealth of more than fifty states with an enduring number of common values. When I was first asked to write this political and personal biography, I had first-hand knowledge (as Africa correspondent of the Guardian) of his feat in smoothing and speeding Kenya’s move to independence in 1963. I had also heard of his similar achievements as governor general of Malaya and Singapore from 1946. But I hesitated, wondering whether he was not merely the urbane agent of some earlier Cabinet minister who had curved British colonial policies on to a more enlightened path than the French, Dutch, Belgians, or Portuguese had followed. After only a little research, it became clear that he himself had been that Cabinet minister: as Colonial Secretary in
1935 and again in 1938–40 he set these policies — and then put them into practice later in Asia and Africa. His success came from a combination of inconspicuous hard work with informality, a lack of starchiness with a firm grasp of democratic principles.

He could also claim to have been the author of the first aid program — the Colonial Development and Welfare Fund, in 1940 — and to have shaped the first multilateral aid program, the Colombo Plan, in 1950. As well, he was a pioneer in other fields. As health minister in 1940–41 he began laying the foundations for Britain’s post-war National Health Service, and, through building over the years on a chance meeting with Zhou Enlai and Marshal Chen Yi, he helped bridge the gulf from Britain to China in the 1960s.

This is a longish book for several reasons. MacDonald was active on so many different stages — Ireland, Palestine, Canada, Southeast Asia, India, China, and Africa as well as in British politics — that the background has to be sketched to more scenes than is usual. He undoubtedly gained an early start in politics through his father, Ramsay MacDonald; he managed what few sons of a famous father seem able to do, to shine after the parental glow has faded. So, to trace his emergence from Ramsay’s shadow is important. Again, the books he wrote (mainly about his beloved birds, but also his best book, about Borneo), the paintings and ceramics he collected (and the pride he inspired among Westernised Chinese for their own art), and the friendships he made (and thereby some scandals) all deserve mention.

Needless to say, Malcolm was not a wholly admirable character. He was often insensitive to the problems of junior officials, having never worked on the lower rungs of a government machine. He upset (and, I think, enjoyed upsetting) a number of more traditional-minded colleagues, which harmed working relations. He was at ease with people of all races, but his egalitarian principles (like those of Ramsay also) were modified by his preference for colourful celebrities, from Beatrice Lillie to Jomo Kenyatta. Nor would anyone say he was an attentive husband and father. However, the vast majority of people who had dealings with him knew a warm, wise, interested, and amusing human being. Perhaps only secondarily would they underline his importance as a statesman — and Malcolm would have liked it that way.

Malcolm MacDonald wrote lengthy despatches, but he did not keep a diary. When in later life he came to draft an autobiography, the result (to which he gave the title Constant Surprise) was an unpublished manuscript that is extremely useful to a biographer, although lacking in lively, contemporary details. So, besides drawing
on *Constant Surprise* and his published books, I have made considerable use of the diaries of his sister, Sheila Lochhead, who as an adult lived with him until his marriage at the age of forty-five, and of Sir Walter Crocker, an Australian diplomat who served alongside him in India and Africa. Each of them followed the tradition of Samuel Pepys in mixing indiscretions with insights, and I am grateful for both, and to the University of Adelaide Library for help in searching the Crocker papers.