Lord Inverchapel's relatively short tenancy of the Washington Embassy, from May 1946 to May 1948, is something of an enigma. At a time of highly significant developments in Anglo-American relations, as the Cold War began and the administration of President Harry Truman committed America to the ‘containment’ of communism, the British Ambassador appears a rather anonymous character, barely figuring in most historical accounts of ‘the special relationship’ in the period. *Time* magazine, indeed, described him as ‘the invisible ambassador’ and those who have made a judgement on his Ambassadorship tend to see it as a failure. Even Inverchapel’s friends, Harold Nicolson and Bob Boothby, rated him a disappointment in Washington. Nicolson declined to write a biography of Inverchapel after the latter’s death partly because of the problems of handling ‘the collapse of Washington’; while Boothby bluntly dismissed the Ambassadorship as a ‘great failure’, adding that ‘a glittering career ended in anti-climax’, partly because Inverchapel ‘was no good with the press’ and knew little about economics, both of which were vital for the American post. Donald Gillies, his biographer, also feels that ‘Inverchapel’s spell in Washington was not all it could have been…’. He ‘very soon became disillusioned and bored with Washington society’, while his dislike of the telephone and preference for writing with a quill were only two of the eccentricities that led him to seem an anachronism in post-war America. This chapter, however, will argue that, while certainly not one of the great British Ambassadors to Washington, Inverchapel’s brief spell was a turning point in Anglo-American relations and some of the credit for this should rest with him and his embassy staff.
Inverchapel’s appointment

The Washington Embassy was the pinnacle of a long diplomatic career that had had its controversial moments, but which had culminated in two postings, in China (1938–42) and the Soviet Union (1942–45), where the then Sir Archibald Clark Kerr had distinguished himself and moved to the top of the diplomatic service. Clark Kerr, however, was by no means a conventional civil servant in his personal tastes and habits, or indeed in his politics, which were of a distinctly intellectual, moderately left-wing bent. It was, however, the distinctiveness of his personality, often dismissed as ‘eccentric’, that probably contributed to his success in those two challenging posts in Chungking and Moscow. While proudly identifying himself as a Scot, he was actually born in New South Wales in 1882, where his maternal grandfather had several times served as Premier. Clark Kerr was posted to Berlin and Buenos Aires before going to Washington for the first time in 1911–13. He was the third secretary under James Bryce, whose liberal politics and personal eccentricities were an influence on his own attitudes. The Foreign Office (FO) refused permission for him to enlist when the First World War broke out, posting him instead to Teheran. He was finally able to join the Scots Guards in April 1918 as a Private, but did not make it to France. In 1919 he was back at the FO, in the Eastern Department, where he became interested in the Zionist Movement and was a friend of Chaim Weizmann. Next, he was posted to Tangiers in Morocco, where he developed a strong sympathy for the plight of the native peoples.

Clark Kerr first found himself close to the heart of imperial policy when moved to Cairo at the start of 1922. Too close, indeed: his connection to controversies surrounding the assassination of Sir Lee Stack, the Sirdar, and the resignation of Lord Allenby, the High Commissioner, gave him a black mark at the FO. His activities in Egypt did, however, earn him the admiration of some politicians, most especially Ramsay MacDonald, the Labour leader, and Winston Churchill. Churchill had supported his efforts to get to the front during the war and now saw him as robustly defending British imperial interests – though ironically the left-leaning Clark Kerr despised Churchill’s politics and imperialistic attitudes. There followed posts in Latin America, which he regarded as a kind of punishment. He disliked American informal imperialism in Central America, though he developed good relations with American diplomats on the ground. It was here that he married a Chilean woman, Maria Teresa, known as ‘Tita’, some 29 years his junior, with whom he had a tempestuous relationship. In 1931 he took charge of the legation