15
Liberation and Beyond

I was in the advance party... [which] came off Jersey at about 1600 hours on Wednesday 9 May, 1945... The stone piers were packed with cheering people... Eventually... [we] landed... and it took perhaps a quarter of an hour or more to get through the crowds to the waiting cars. Our backs were beaten and our hands wrung... and the women kissed us again and again.

Letter home from Lieutenant-Colonel James Taylor, 18 May 1945

The ordeal was over, and the Islanders experienced their first thrill of freedom with a level of poignancy and elation that clearly reflected the stark contrast of this moment with the levels of privation and oppression which had been their reality for so long. In Guernsey, the reception for the first landing party was much the same as reported in Jersey, and Surgeon Captain Ron McDonald and Lieutenant David Milln described the scene as follows:

People... were throwing fireworks... We went up the [jetty] steps to an enormous reception... They were the happiest lot of people I have ever seen... we were... manhandled by the crowd, it was marvellous... [But] if anything, the Islanders were bemused... and... slightly stunned. If you actually... asked what had been going on they couldn't tell you, they couldn't describe it. They were free and you had this feeling that if you gave them a tot of whisky they would do an eightsome reel.

The face of Island life had changed at a stroke, and the difference was so great that it was difficult to believe that the much-longed-for event had actually happened. As Dorothy Pickard Higgs explained on 10 May 1945, in a draft letter:

to all our beloved ones [abroad]: This week has been so full of wonderful events, that it is impossible to write to each one of you yet. We have had...
no news . . . since March . . . last year, so you can imagine how our longing is tinged with dread of the news you may tell . . . Five years of dreadful isolation now seem like a nightmare – and almost as unreal – now we are alive and awake again . . . Some Islanders have suffered badly . . . but all that is past and so much forgotten that it is quite an effort to remember it.

The following week, Ambrose Robin comments on the enormous change in the food situation: 'This inundation of good news and . . . extra food has filled us to overflowing. The quantity of bread, meat and other things doled out to us today makes one nearly sick to look at it. The excitement . . . and abundant supply of food after the meagre rations of the past has produced a general reaction – no one can eat a good meal.'

**Island government**

Everything I heard led me to the conclusion that the Island officials had discharged their difficult responsibilities during the occupation in exemplary fashion and had succeeded to a remarkable extent in getting the best possible treatment from the Germans commensurate with the avoidance of any semblance of collaboration.

Herbert Morrison's War Cabinet report: 24 May 1945

At Liberation, a general feeling of euphoria seemed to pervade the Islands, encouraging an almost universal bonhomie, except of course towards the collaborators. In Jersey, all former grievances against the Island government were temporarily forgotten, and the Bailiff was cheered not just in the Royal Square when he went down amongst the people, but also when he made appearances with the British landing party. The *Jersey Evening Post* was also ecstatic in expression of its 'fervent, sincere gratitude' for the freedom for which 'we yearned intensely', paying tribute to the victorious Allies, and to those Islanders who had lost their lives in the battle for liberty. The article continues: 'In this connection we should not be unmindful of the debt that we owe to our Bailiff and to those under him who have stood between the population and the Occupying Authority and have so devotedly served the interests of the community in these difficult years.'

More praise for Alexander Coutanche followed soon after when the Home Secretary visited the Islands and expressed full appreciation of his 'sterling work, courage and integrity', to which he even added jokingly, that 'if anything he has done requires whitewashing, I will take care of it for him.' This was the ultimate stamp of approval for the integrity of the Island administration in general, and by Christmas it was fully endorsed by the granting of honours to many of the main players. However, it should be realised that recognition that the British had 'left the Islands in the lurch' seems likely to have been at least part of the reason for Mr Morrison's conciliatory attitude.