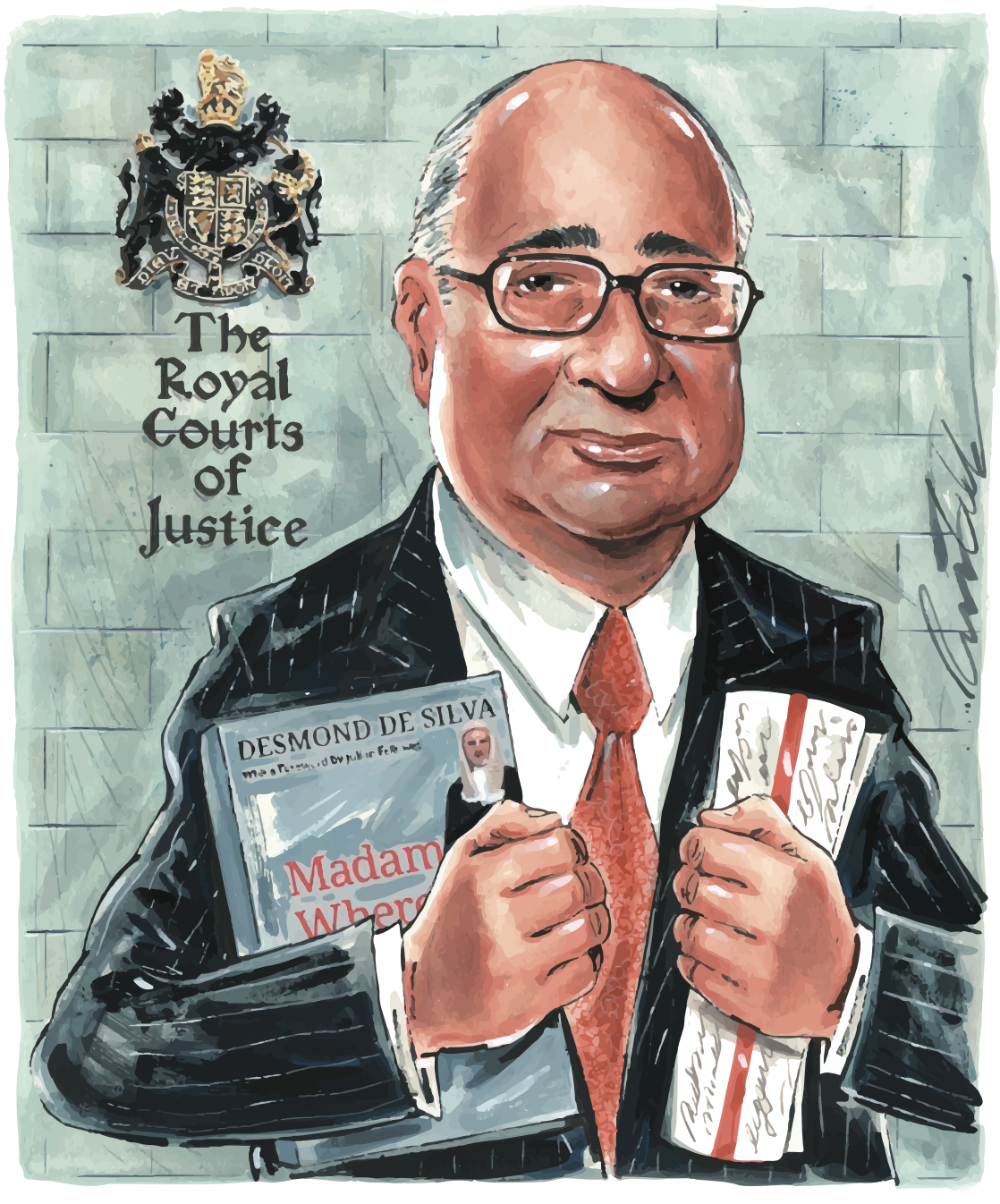
The Royal Courts of Justice
DESMOND DE SILVA

NINE LIVES

British lawyer and former United Nations chief war crimes prosecutor in Sierra Leone, Sir Desmond de Silva has released his memoir, *Madam, Where Are Your Mangoes?*. The *Journal* talks war crimes, murder attempts and a knighthood

FRANCESCA LEE-ROGERS

"I've had a house in Belgravia for 40 years and also have a house in the country, but Belgravia, to me, has always been my home," Desmond de Silva tells me, when I meet him at The Carlton Club. The prominent British lawyer and former United Nations chief war crimes prosecutor in Sierra Leone, has recently released his autobiography, *Madam, Where Are Your Mangoes?* It's a fascinating insight into his life and took him almost a decade to pen. "I decided to start writing it about 10 years ago, but I left it to one side for a while. I do hope people enjoy reading it."

Born in what was then known as Ceylon – now Sri Lanka – during World War II, de Silva details how he travelled by ship halfway across the world when he was 11 years old to attend Dulwich College Prep. He says of the journey: "It took three weeks to get from Colombo to Southampton, but it was all great fun." Did he know, even as a child, that he wanted to work as a lawyer, I ask. "Since 1828, there has been a whole succession of barristers in my family. It was inevitable – I was born into a sort of genetic prison from which I couldn't escape," he jokes.

There have been many attempts on his life, including when he was working on a case in The Gambia

His memoir provides a fascinating insight into his career, which includes what de Silva describes as his "most important case from a legal point of view" in bringing the former Liberian president, Charles Taylor, to justice for war crimes. "He was the first head of state to be convicted for war crimes since 1946 – that's something that I can't beat."

During more than 50 years of legal practice, de Silva has lived through IRA bombings and been imprisoned and shot at – "one heard the shots hitting the wall around one" – and there have been many attempts on his life, including when he was working on a case in The Gambia in 1981, when he realised – luckily, thanks to turning a light on – that when he poured a glass from his half-finished bottle of brandy, it had changed slightly in colour: "soft lead had been poured into it." He tells me these stories somewhat matter-of-factly, but he does go on to say he's been "very lucky and grateful to have survived it all".

As well as working on war crimes, spy trials and murder cases, de Silva has defended household names such as footballer John Terry. "A false allegation of grievous bodily harm was made against him and if he had been convicted, he would have gone to prison for a long time. But he was vindicated and went on to captain both Chelsea and England."

In 2007, de Silva received a knighthood for 94 services to international law, an honour of which he is "extremely grateful and proud", and he was sworn in as a Member of the Privy Council of the United Kingdom in 2011. "Most people receive these accolades at the end of their careers, but I'm still practising law and, nowadays, I spend most of my time advising governments, which is very rewarding." Finally, I ask, when he's not working, where's his favourite place to relax in our neighbourhood? "La Poule au Pot is a wonderfully romantic restaurant, where the food is exquisite and totally delectable." After all, even the greatest legal brains must, on occasion, satisfy their stomachs. ♦

Madam, Where Are Your Mangoes? *(£25) by Desmond de Silva (£25) is published by Quartet Books, quartetbooks.co.uk*

Illustration by Russ Tudor