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'Matrah - Proposal to make it Port of Call for B.I. steamers instead of Muscat'

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About this record

Correspondence discusses the merits of developing the port at Matrah [Muṭraḥ] as a port of call for British India steamers as opposed to Muscat. Correspondence notes that the British Residency wished to move trade away from Dubai; the development of Khasab was considered and the lowering of re-export duty in Muscat is also discussed.

A memorandum from Charles Wills of the Mesopotamia-Persia Corporation to Captain Stuart Horner, Secretary to the Political Resident in the Persian Gulf, sets out the case for the development of Matrah. A letter from Cyril Johnson Barrett, Political Agent, Muscat to Bernard Stuart Horner, Secretary to the Political Resident in the Persian Gulf, explains the winds and other advantages of Matrah to Muscat. A letter from Bertram Thomas, Financial Adviser to Major Cyril Johnson Barrett, Political Agent, Muscat, argues against the move. The correspondence notes that the proposal was dropped for the time being.

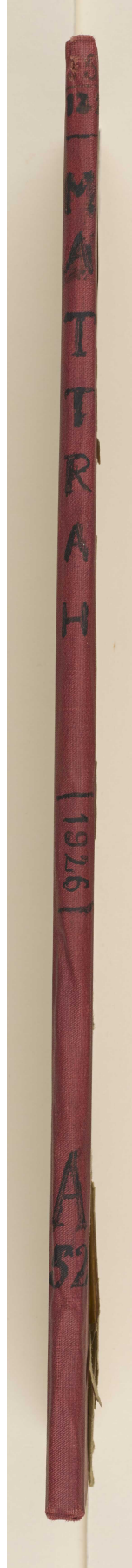
'Matrah - Proposal to make it Port of Call for B.I. steamers instead of Muscat'
[front] (1/56)



'Matrah - Proposal to make it Port of Call for B.I. steamers instead of Muscat'
[back] (2/56)



'Matrah - Proposal to make it Port of Call for B.I. steamers instead of Muscat'
[spine] (3/56)



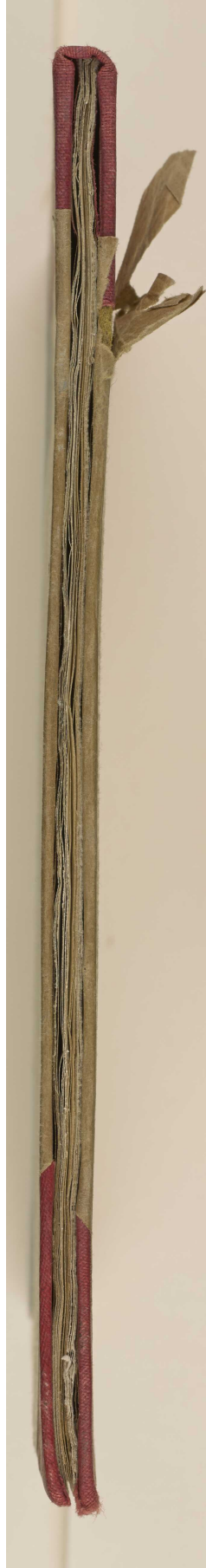
'Matrah - Proposal to make it Port of Call for B.I. steamers instead of Muscat'
[edge] (4/56)



'Matrah - Proposal to make it Port of Call for B.I. steamers instead of Muscat'
[head] (5/56)



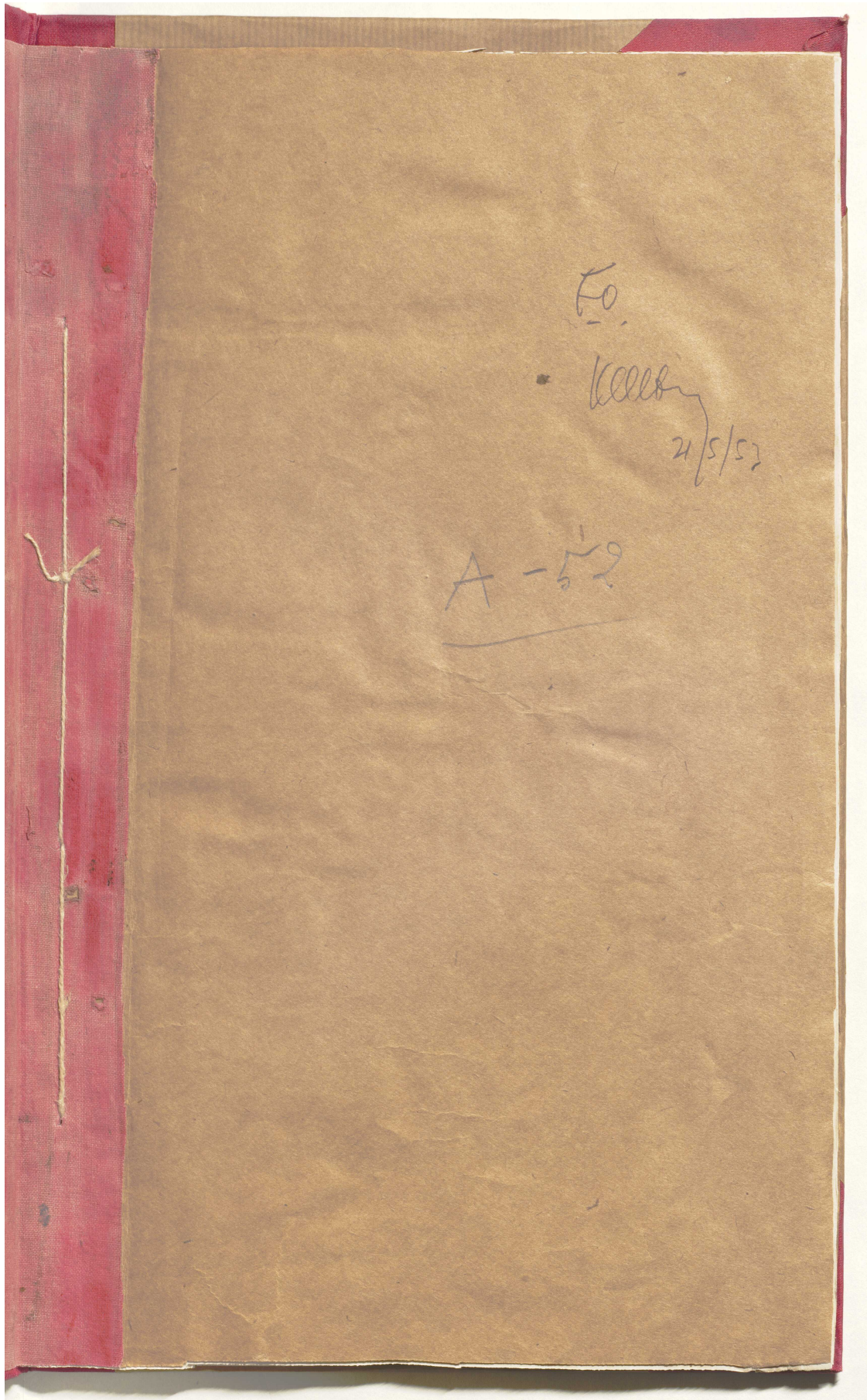
'Matrah - Proposal to make it Port of Call for B.I. steamers instead of Muscat'
[tail] (6/56)



'Matrah - Proposal to make it Port of Call for B.I. steamers instead of Muscat'
[front-i] (7/56)



'Matrah - Proposal to make it Port of Call for B.I. steamers instead of Muscat'
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'Matrah - Proposal to make it Port of Call for B.I. steamers instead of Muscat'
[i-v] (9/56)



'Matrah - Proposal to make it Port of Call for B.I. steamers instead of Muscat'
[1r] (10/56)

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1

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A-52.

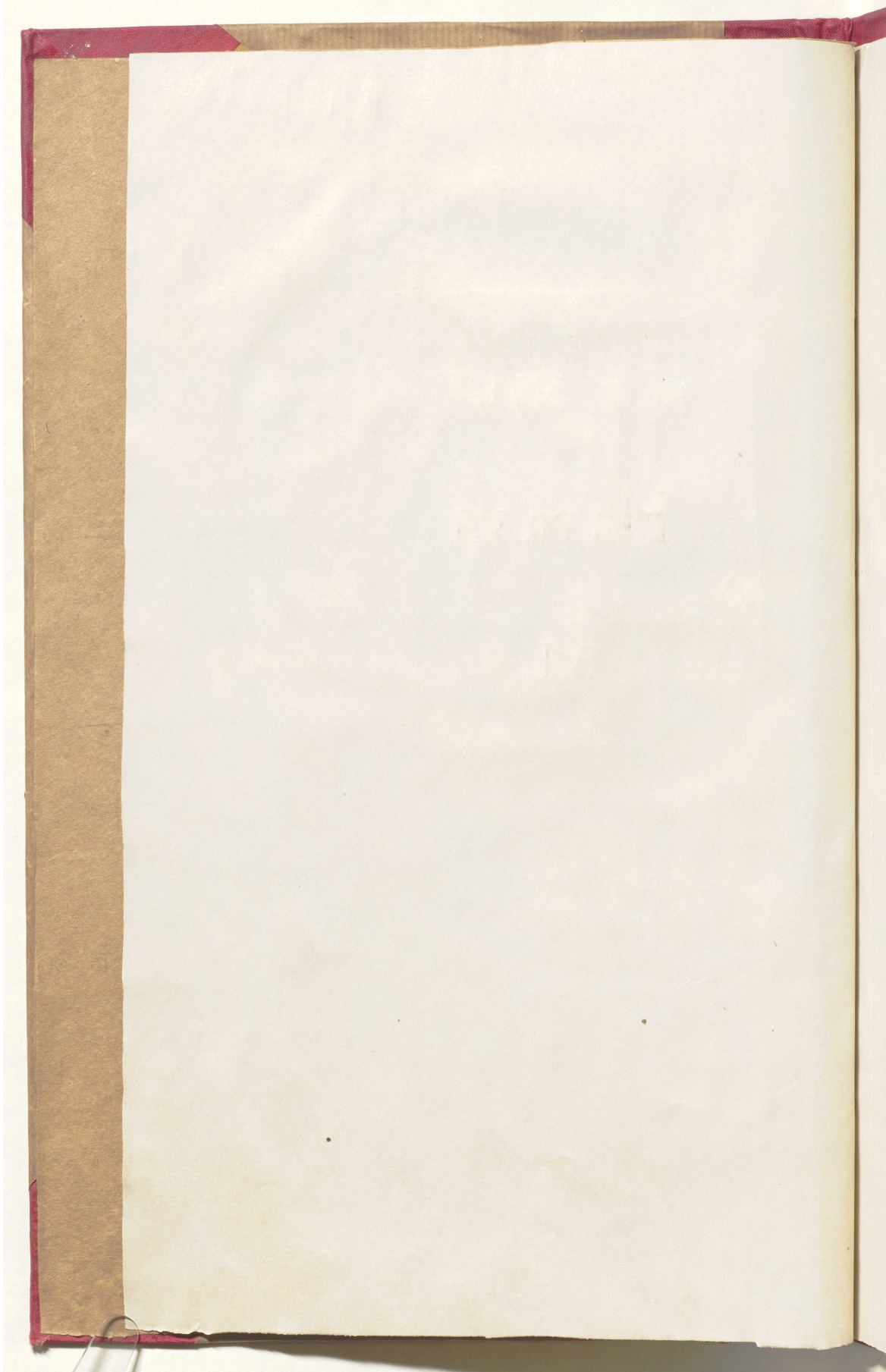
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MATRAH -

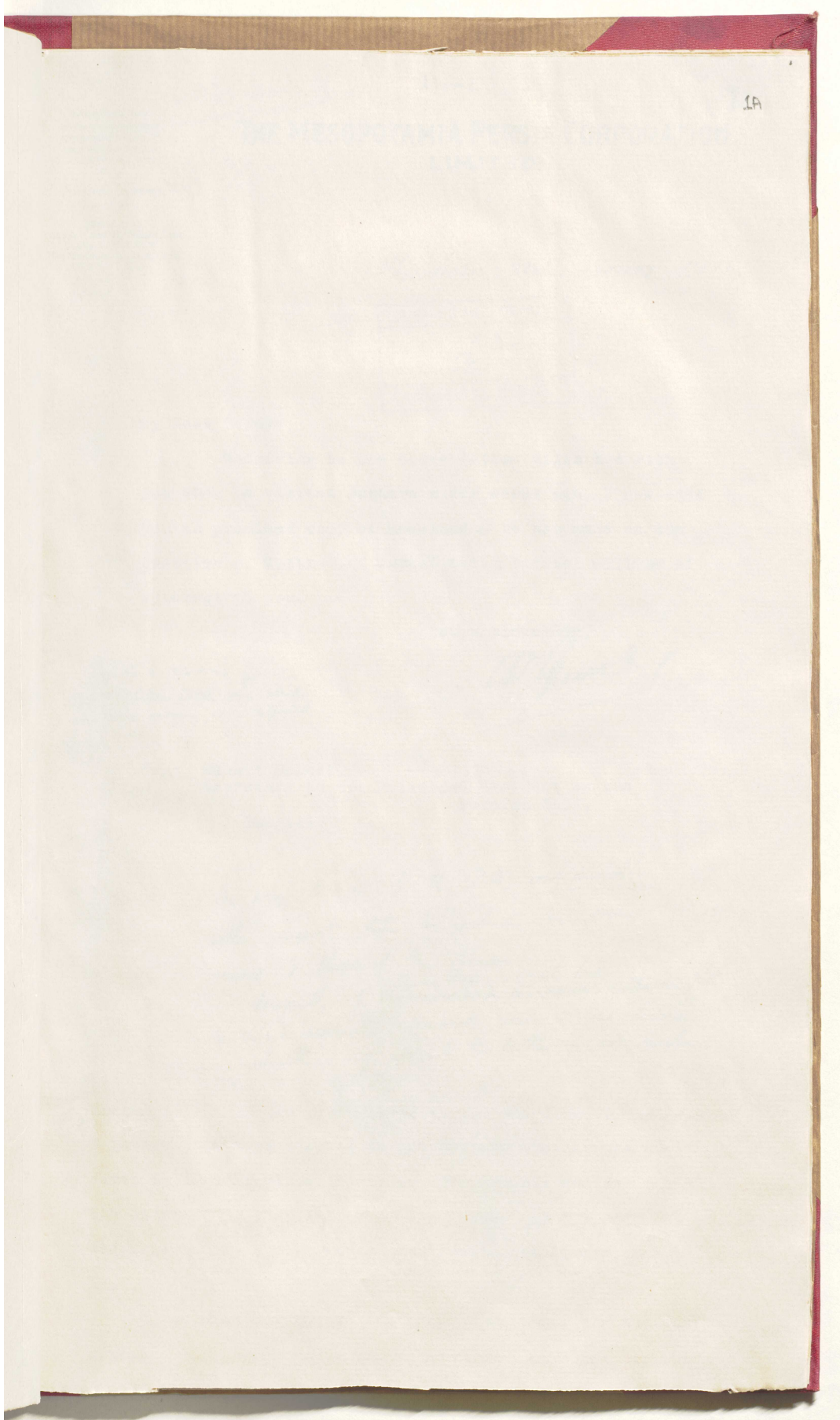
Proposal to make it Port of
Call for B.I. Steamers instead of
Muscat.

From: 22nd Feby. 1926
To: 8th June 1926.

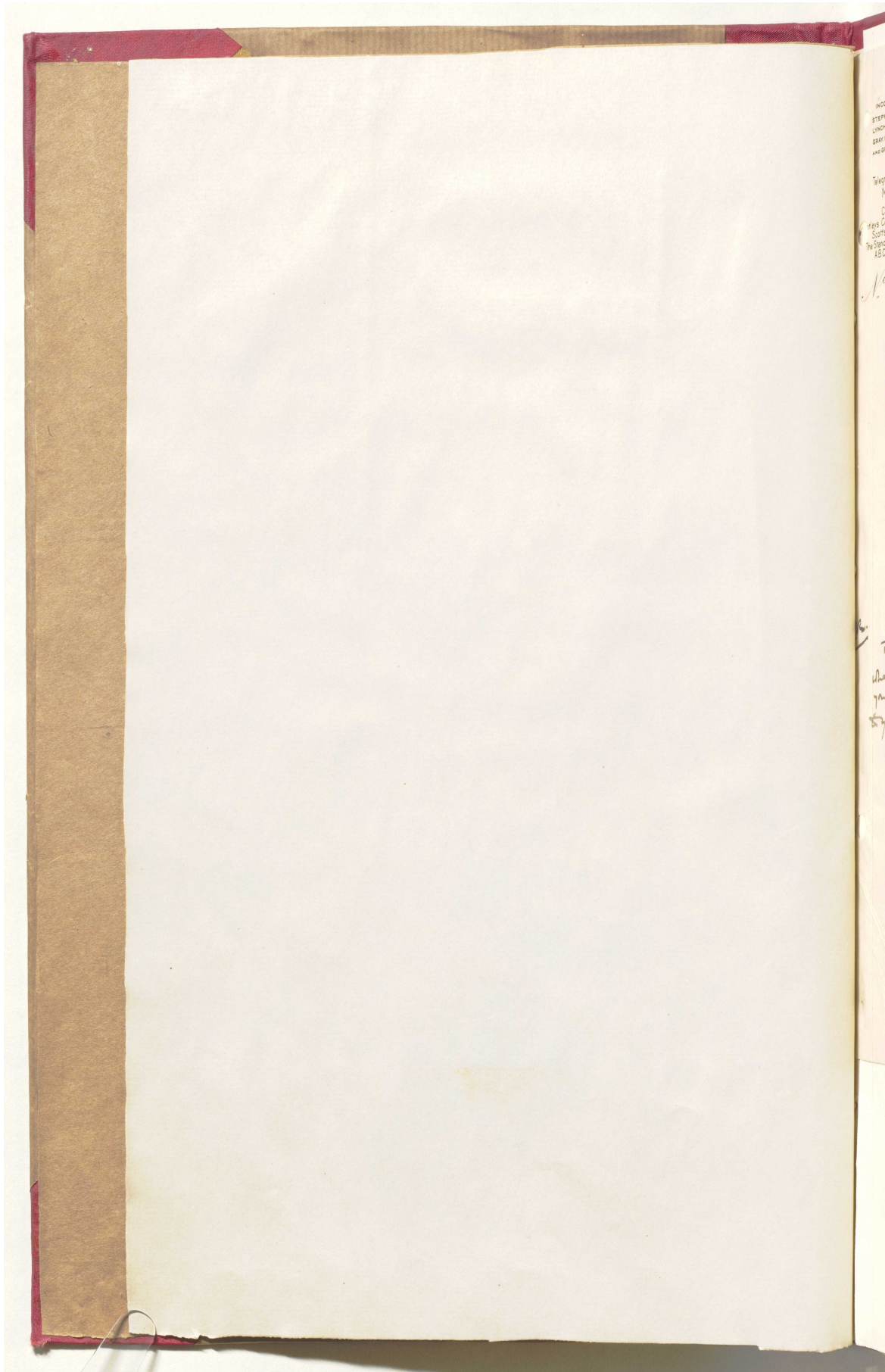
'Matrah - Proposal to make it Port of Call for B.I. steamers instead of Muscat'
[1v] (11/56)



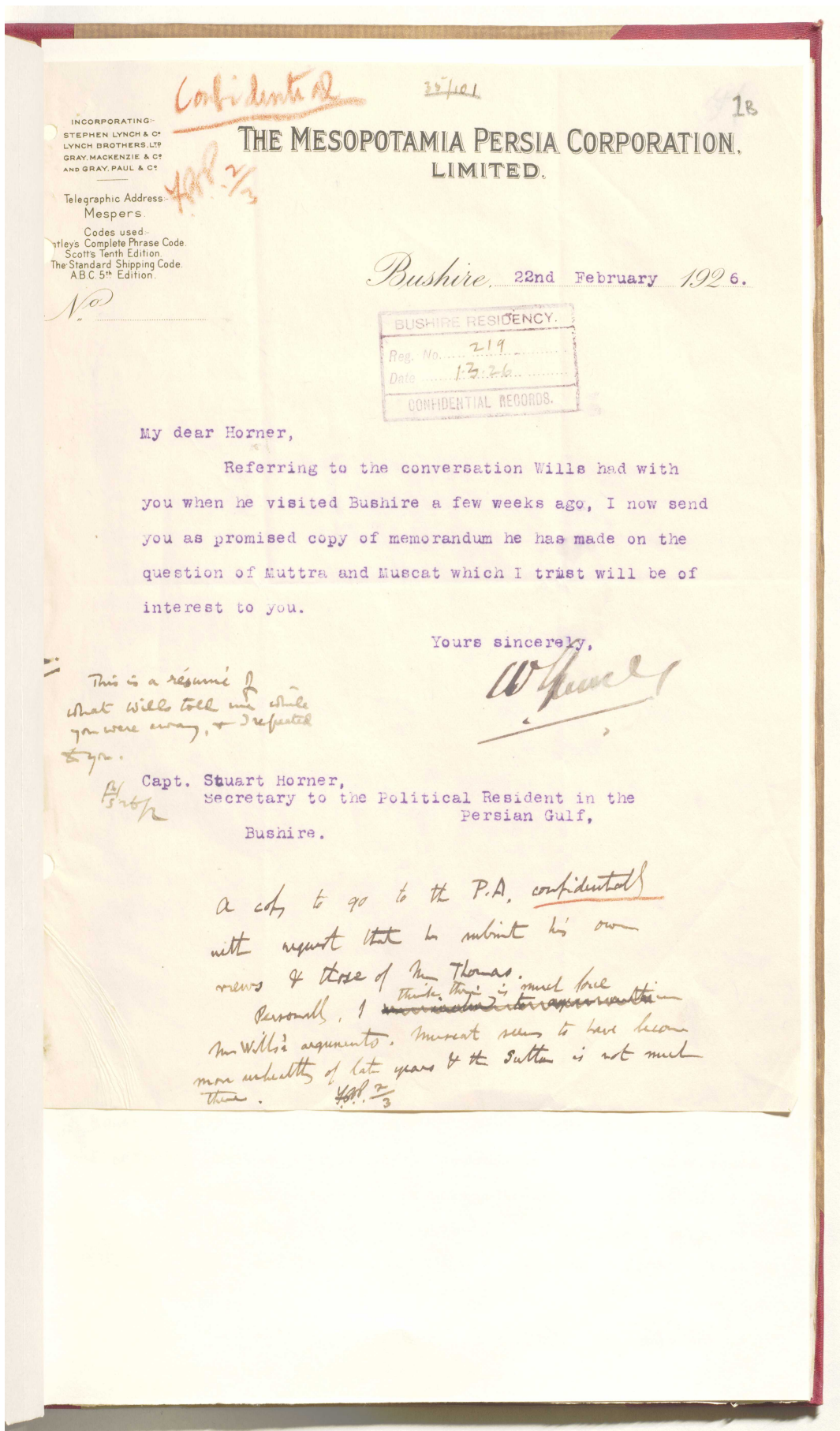
'Matrah - Proposal to make it Port of Call for B.I. steamers instead of Muscat'
[1ar] (12/56)



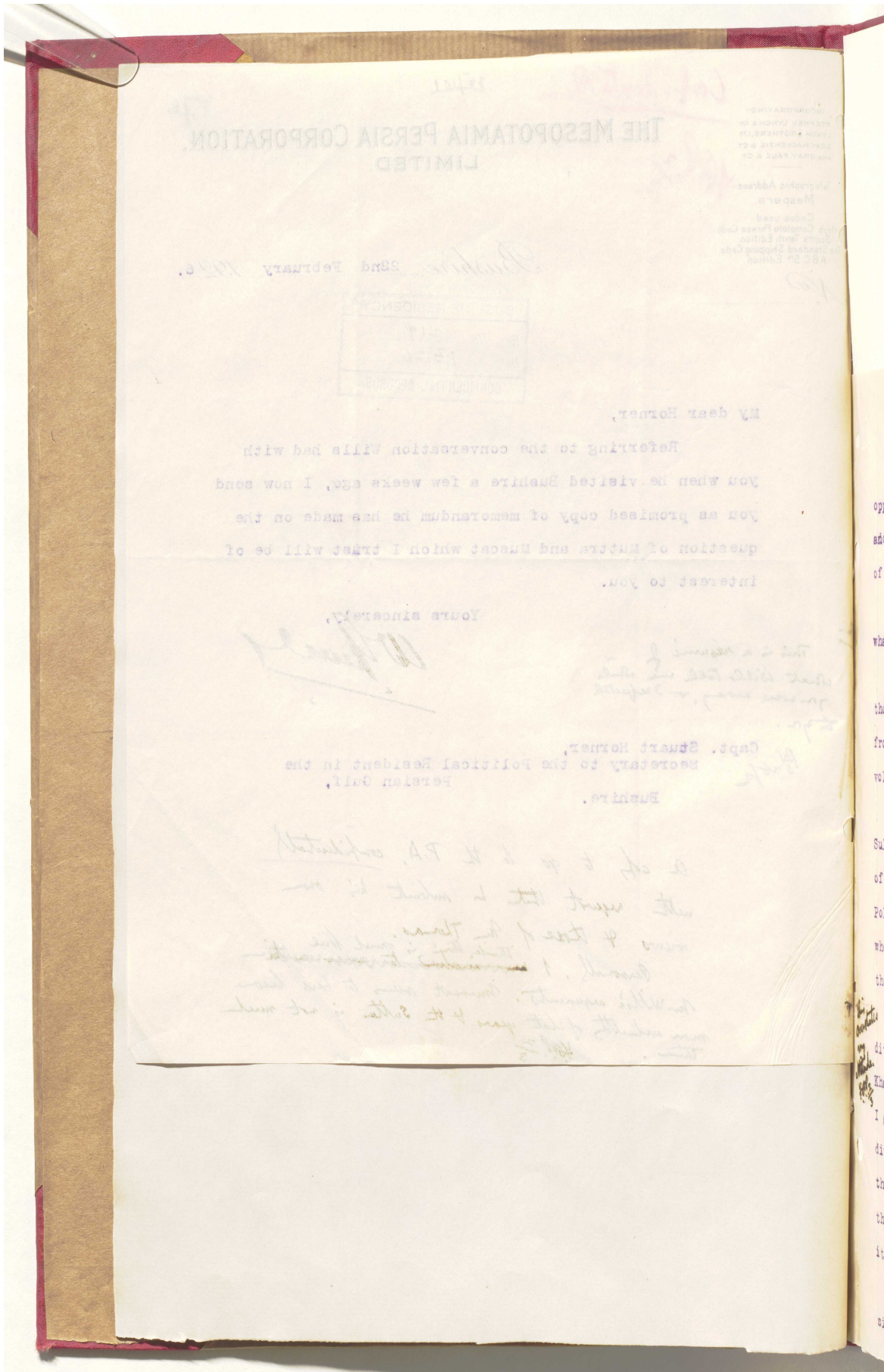
'Matrah - Proposal to make it Port of Call for B.I. steamers instead of Muscat'
[1av] (13/56)



'Matrah - Proposal to make it Port of Call for B.I. steamers instead of Muscat'
[1br] (14/56)



'Matrah - Proposal to make it Port of Call for B.I. steamers instead of Muscat'
[1bv] (15/56)



'Matrah - Proposal to make it Port of Call for B.I. steamers instead of Muscat'
[2r] (16/56)

MEMORANDUM re. MUSCAT AND MUTTRA

I had only a few hours at Muscat on my way out, but had an opportunity of seeing the Political Agent and the Director of Customs and during my conversation with the latter I gathered that the trade of Muscat was dwindling.

The town of Muscat is practically deserted, and no business whatsoever is taking place there.

All the merchants are trading in Muttra, and consequently although the cargo is landed at Muscat, there being no caravan route from there it has to be again re-shipped to Muttra by boats, involving a very heavy expenditure.

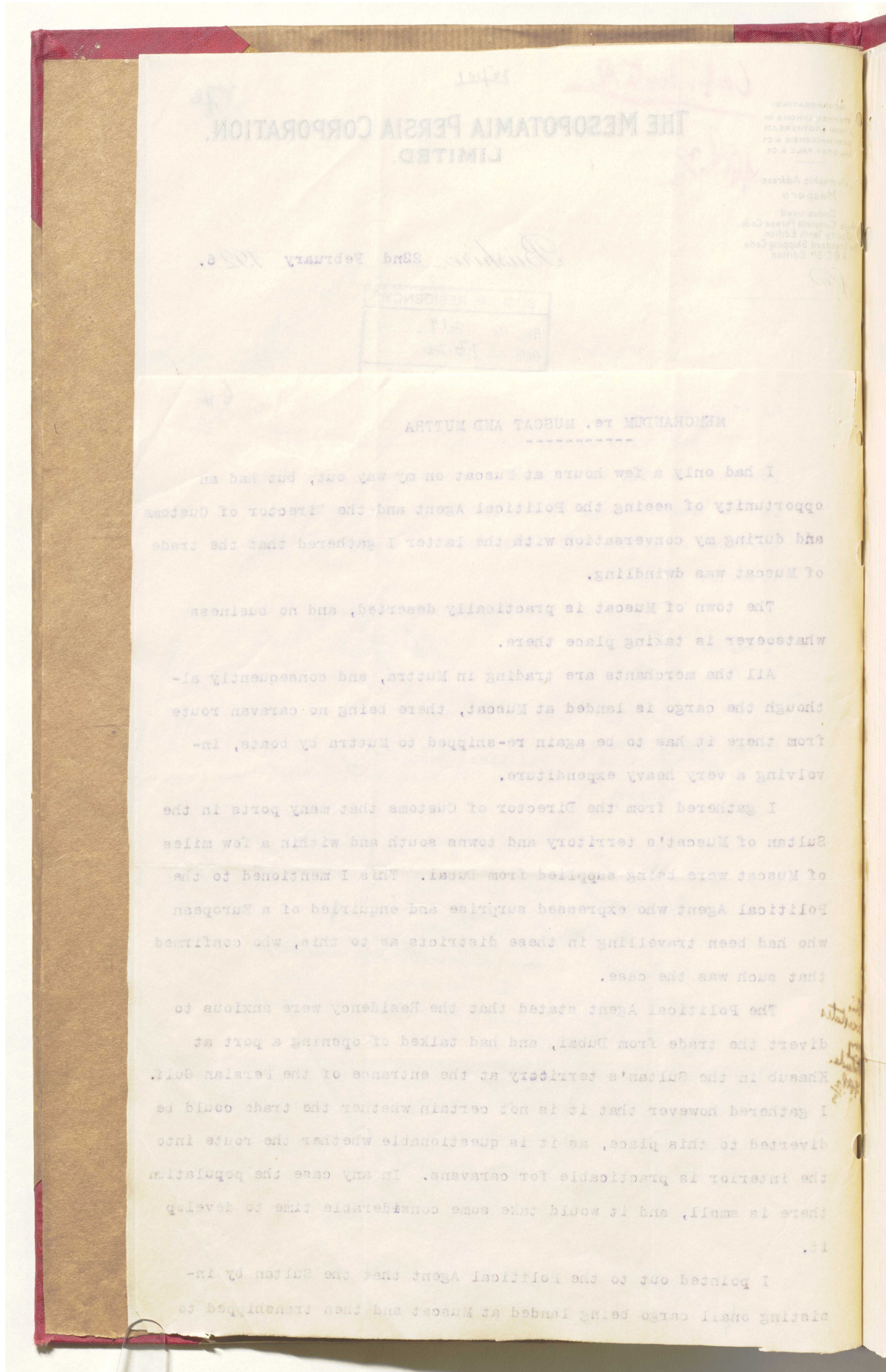
I gathered from the Director of Customs that many ports in the Sultan of Muscat's territory and towns south and within a few miles of Muscat were being supplied from Dubai. This I mentioned to the Political Agent who expressed surprise and enquired of a European who had been travelling in these districts as to this, who confirmed that such was the case.

He overstates my attitude.
4/11/56

The Political Agent stated that the Residency were anxious to divert the trade from Dubai, and had talked of opening a port at Khasub in the Sultan's territory at the entrance of the Persian Gulf. I gathered however that it is not certain whether the trade could be diverted to this place, as it is questionable whether the route into the interior is practicable for caravans. In any case the population there is small, and it would take some considerable time to develop it.

I pointed out to the Political Agent that the Sultan by insisting on all cargo being landed at Muscat and then transhipped to

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[2v] (17/56)



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[3r] (18/56)

- 2 -

Muttra was strangling trade and below I give a comparison of what it now costs to land 100 bags of Rice at Muttra under the present system of discharge at Muscat as compared to Dubai:-

MUSCAT

Landing Charges	Rs.18/12- 0 *
Boat Hire to Muttra	" 20- 0- 0
	Rs.38-12- 0
Duty 5% say	Rs.75- 0- 0
	<u>Rs.113-12- 0</u>

* Sultan receives 5% from the contractor.

DUBAI /

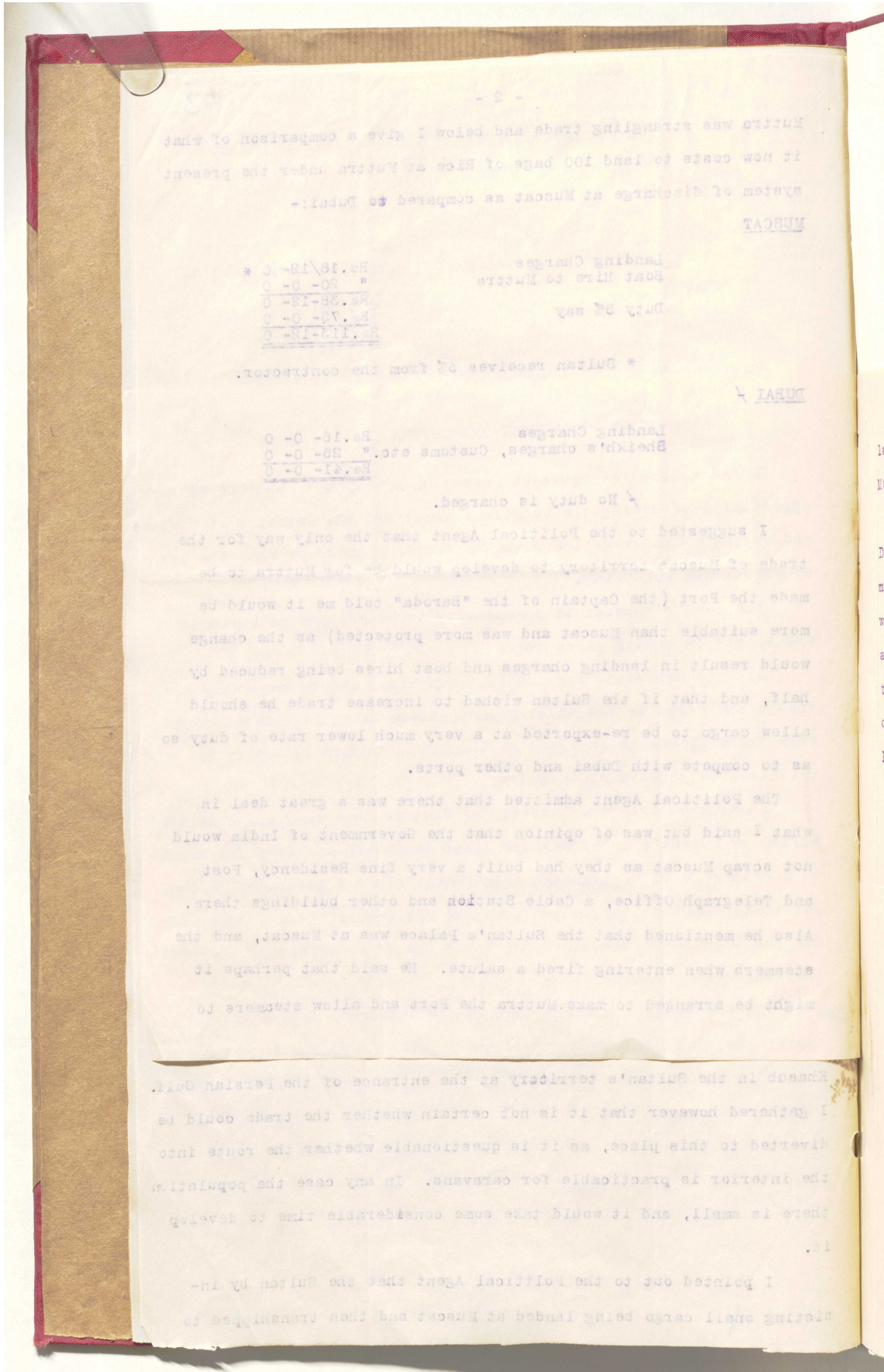
Landing Charges	Rs.16- 0- 0
Sheikh's charges, Customs etc.	" 25- 0- 0
	<u>Rs.41- 0- 0</u>

/ No duty is charged.

I suggested to the Political Agent that the only way for the trade of Muscat territory to develop would be for Muttra to be made the Port (the Captain of the "Baroda" told me it would be more suitable than Muscat and was more protected) as the change would result in landing charges and boat hires being reduced by half, and that if the Sultan wished to increase trade he should allow cargo to be re-exported at a very much lower rate of duty so as to compete with Dubai and other ports.

The Political Agent admitted that there was a great deal in what I said but was of opinion that the Government of India would not scrap Muscat as they had built a very fine Residency, Post and Telegraph Office, a Cable Station and other buildings there. Also he mentioned that the Sultan's Palace was at Muscat, and the steamers when entering fired a salute. He said that perhaps it might be arranged to make Muttra the Port and allow steamers to

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[3v] (19/56)



'Matrah - Proposal to make it Port of Call for B.I. steamers instead of Muscat'
[4r] (20/56)

- 3 -

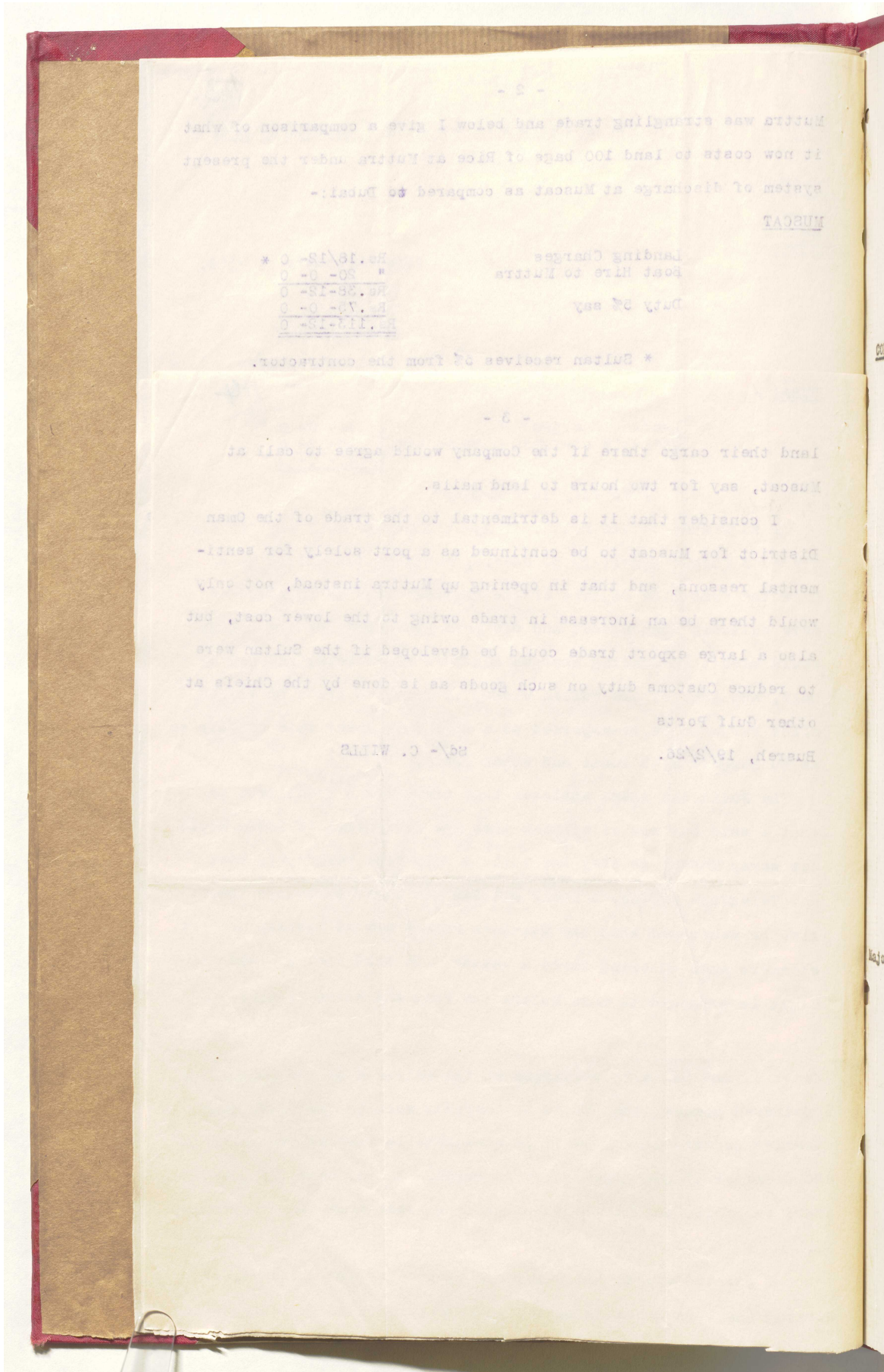
land their cargo there if the Company would agree to call at Muscat, say for two hours to land mails.

I consider that it is detrimental to the trade of the Oman District for Muscat to be continued as a port solely for sentimental reasons, and that in opening up Muttra instead, not only would there be an increase in trade owing to the lower cost, but also a large export trade could be developed if the Sultan were to reduce Customs duty on such goods as is done by the Chiefs at other Gulf Ports

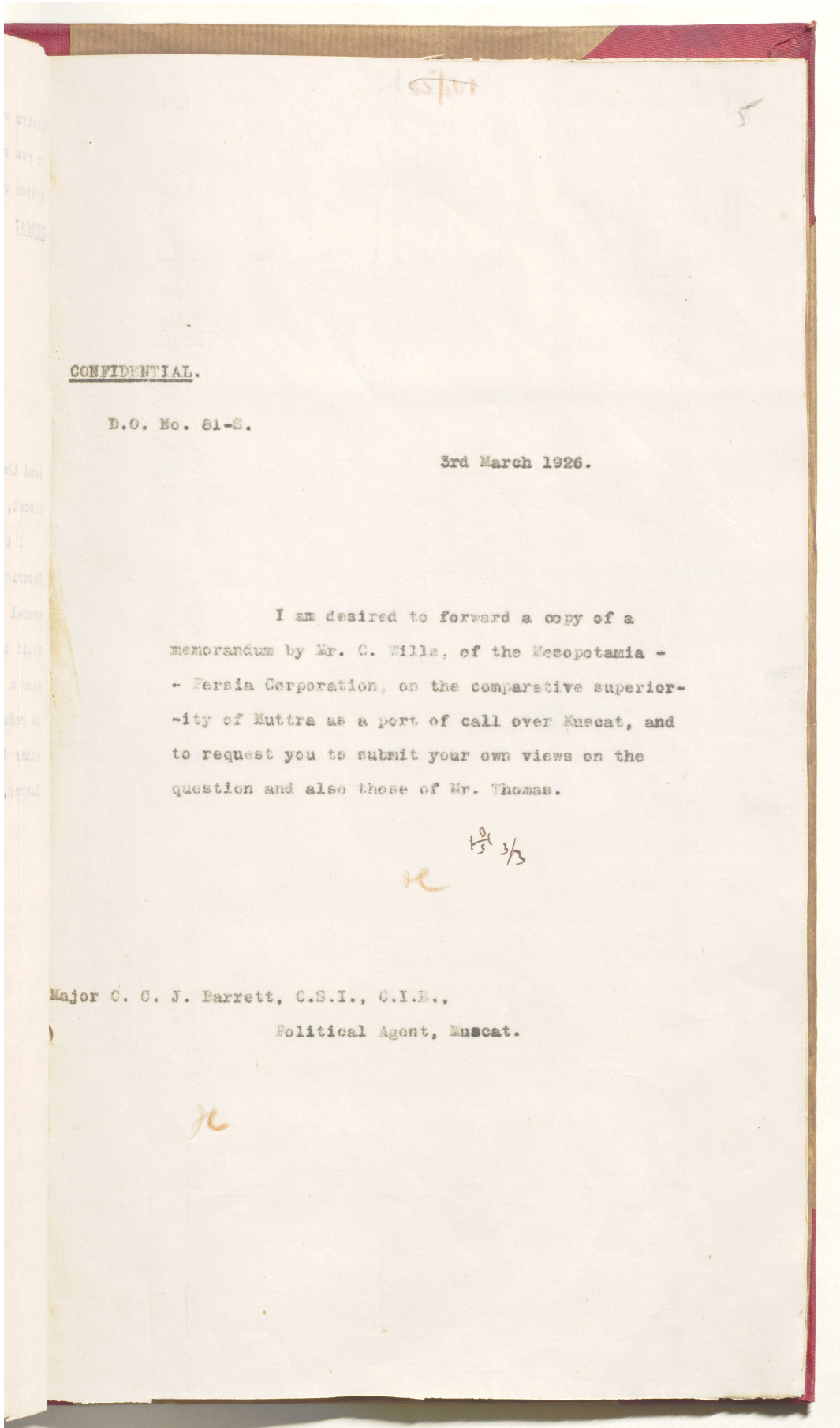
Busreh, 19/2/26.

Sd/- C. WILLS

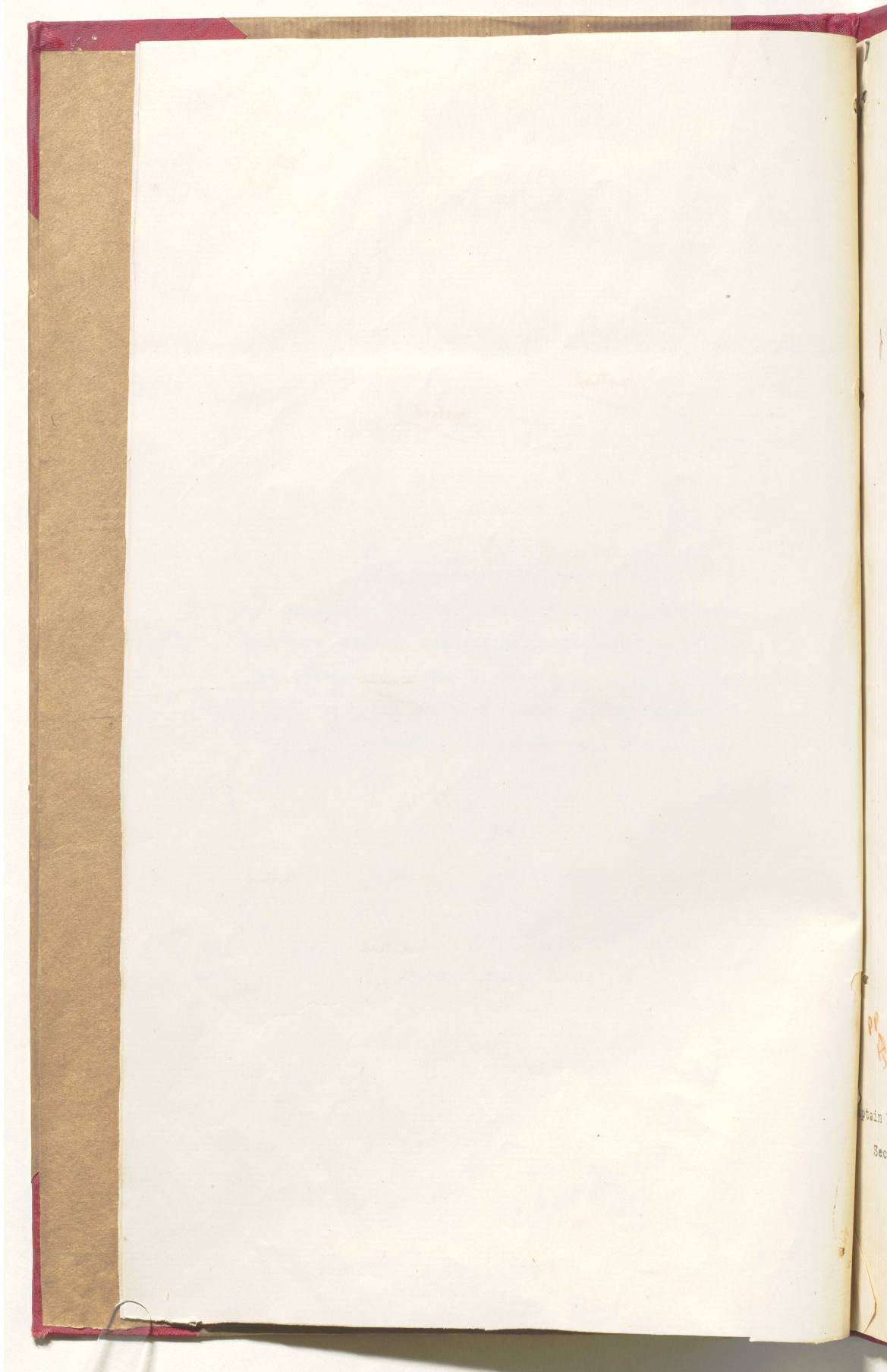
'Matrah - Proposal to make it Port of Call for B.I. steamers instead of Muscat'
[4v] (21/56)



'Matrah - Proposal to make it Port of Call for B.I. steamers instead of Muscat'
[5r] (22/56)



'Matrah - Proposal to make it Port of Call for B.I. steamers instead of Muscat'
[5v] (23/56)



'Matrah - Proposal to make it Port of Call for B.I. steamers instead of Muscat'
[6r] (24/56)

CONFIDENTIAL.

35/101

Political Agency, 6

D.O.No. 37.

Muscat, the 6th April 1926.

BUSHIRE RESIDENCY
Reg. No. 361
Date 18.4.26
CONFIDENTIAL RECORDS.

Dear Horner

I enclose a letter from Mr. Thomas which gives his views on a memorandum by Mr. Wills forwarded with your D.O.No. 81-S of 3rd March 1926.

J.H.

The merchants I have consulted are unanimous in their opinion that ~~Muscat~~ ^{matrah} would be a better port of call for B.I. steamers than Muscat, if the ~~Muscat~~ ^{matrah} Customs wharf were extended. At present it is far too small to admit of the landing and storing of goods brought by the Bombay and Karachi steamer.

The Muscat Customs House on the other hand is commodious and quite capable of meeting the demands made upon it. The majority of the merchants consider therefore that Muscat should continue to be the port of call for the Bombay and Karachi steamers for the time being. Apart from the lack of Customs house facilities however ~~Muscat~~ ^{matrah} is superior to Muscat as a port of call, as the harbour is protected from the Shamal and Kaus winds and open to the Nashi wind only whereas Muscat cove is exposed to both the Shamal and the Nashi winds. Muscat is moreover cut off from the interior by the hills which surround it whereas ~~Muscat~~ ^{matrah} is visited by all camel caravans. As a result all the biggest merchants live in ~~Muscat~~ ^{matrah}, which is the natural port of Oman. The only portion of the Muscat trade which does not pass through ~~Muscat~~ ^{matrah} is that which its merchants carry on with Kuriyat and Soor. This is comparative

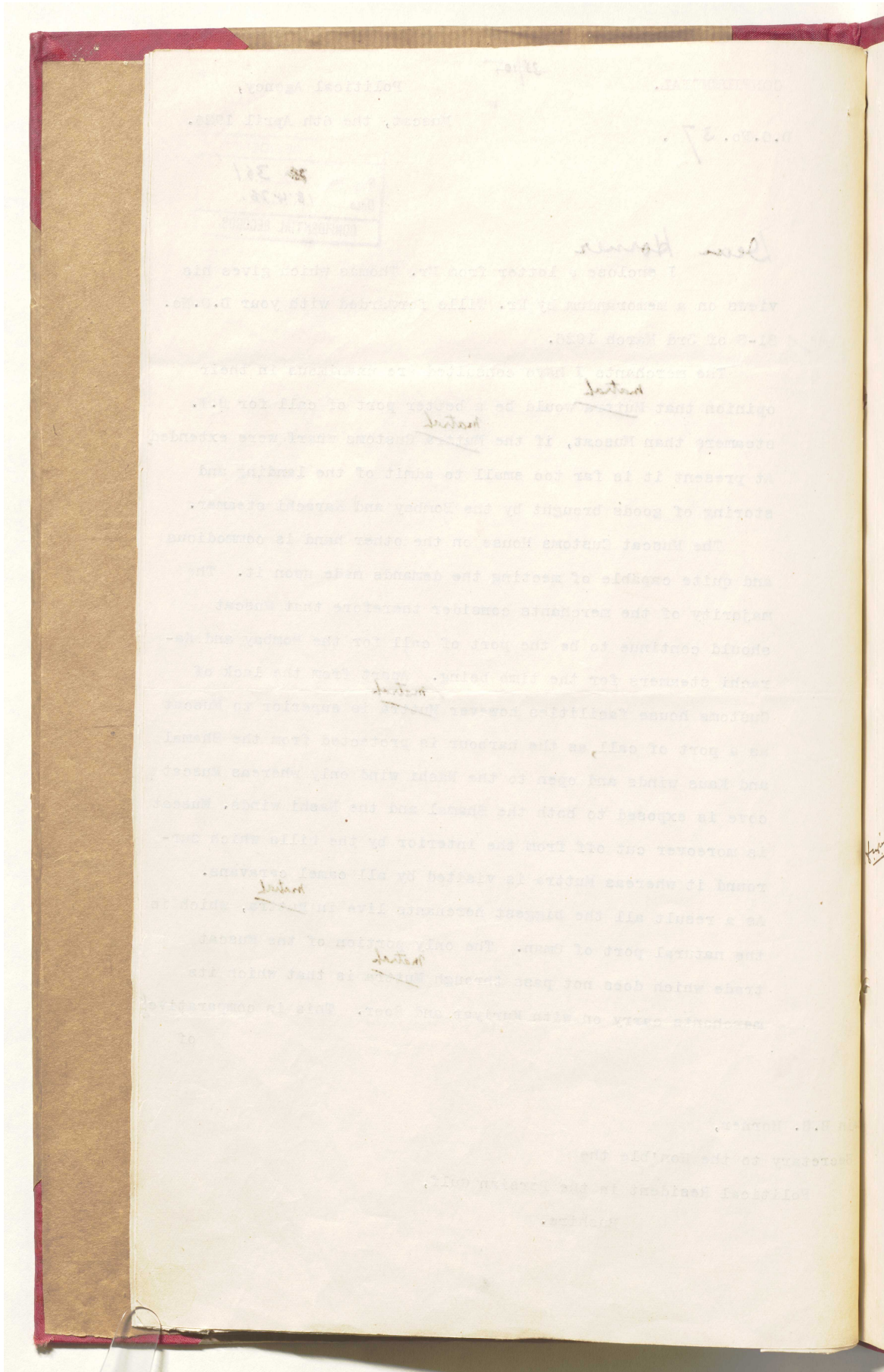
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B/17/4

of

tain B.S. Horner,

Secretary to the Hon'ble the
Political Resident in the Persian Gulf,
Bushire.

'Matrah - Proposal to make it Port of Call for B.I. steamers instead of Muscat'
[6v] (25/56)



'Matrah - Proposal to make it Port of Call for B.I. steamers instead of Muscat'
[7r] (26/56)

of small volume.

Muscat is kept alive by the presence of its Customs House and the British Telegraph and Post offices and by the artificial importance given to it as the place of residence of the Sultan and the Political Agent.

If the Sultan and the Customs House departed, the port would probably die a natural death.

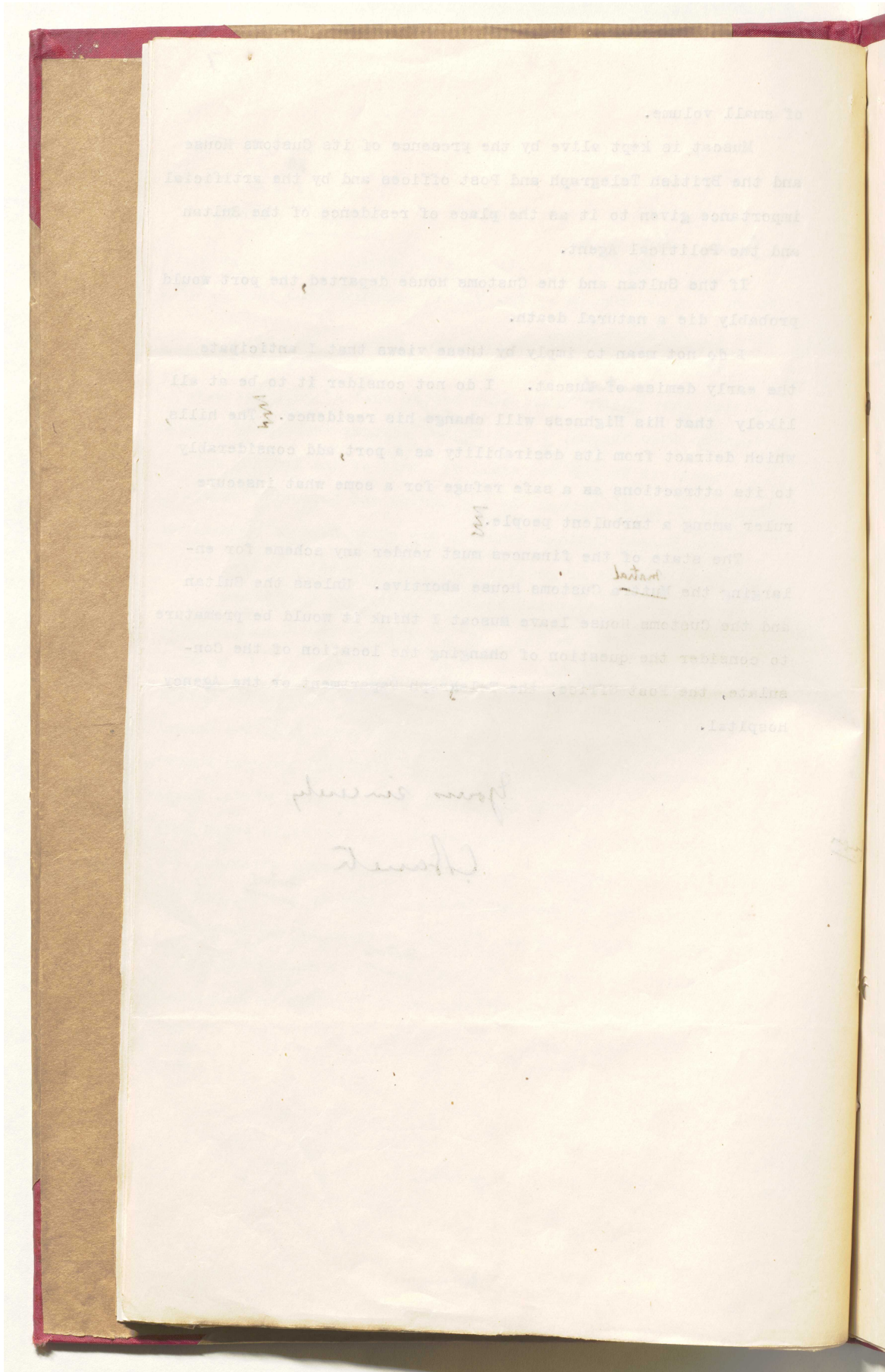
I do not mean to imply by these views that I anticipate the early demise of Muscat. I do not consider it to be at all likely that His Highness will change his residence. ~~Σ~~ The hills, which detract from its desirability as a port, add considerably to its attractions as a safe refuge for a somewhat insecure ruler among a turbulent people. ~~Σ~~

The state of the finances must render any scheme for enlarging the ^{Matrah} ~~Muscat~~ Customs House abortive. Unless the Sultan and the Customs House leave Muscat I think it would be premature to consider the question of changing the location of the Consulate, the Post Office, the Telegraph Department or the Agency Hospital.

Yours sincerely

C. Barnett

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[7v] (27/56)



'Matrah - Proposal to make it Port of Call for B.I. steamers instead of Muscat'
[8r] (28/56)

Ministry of Finance,
Muscat,

22nd March 1926.

Dear Major

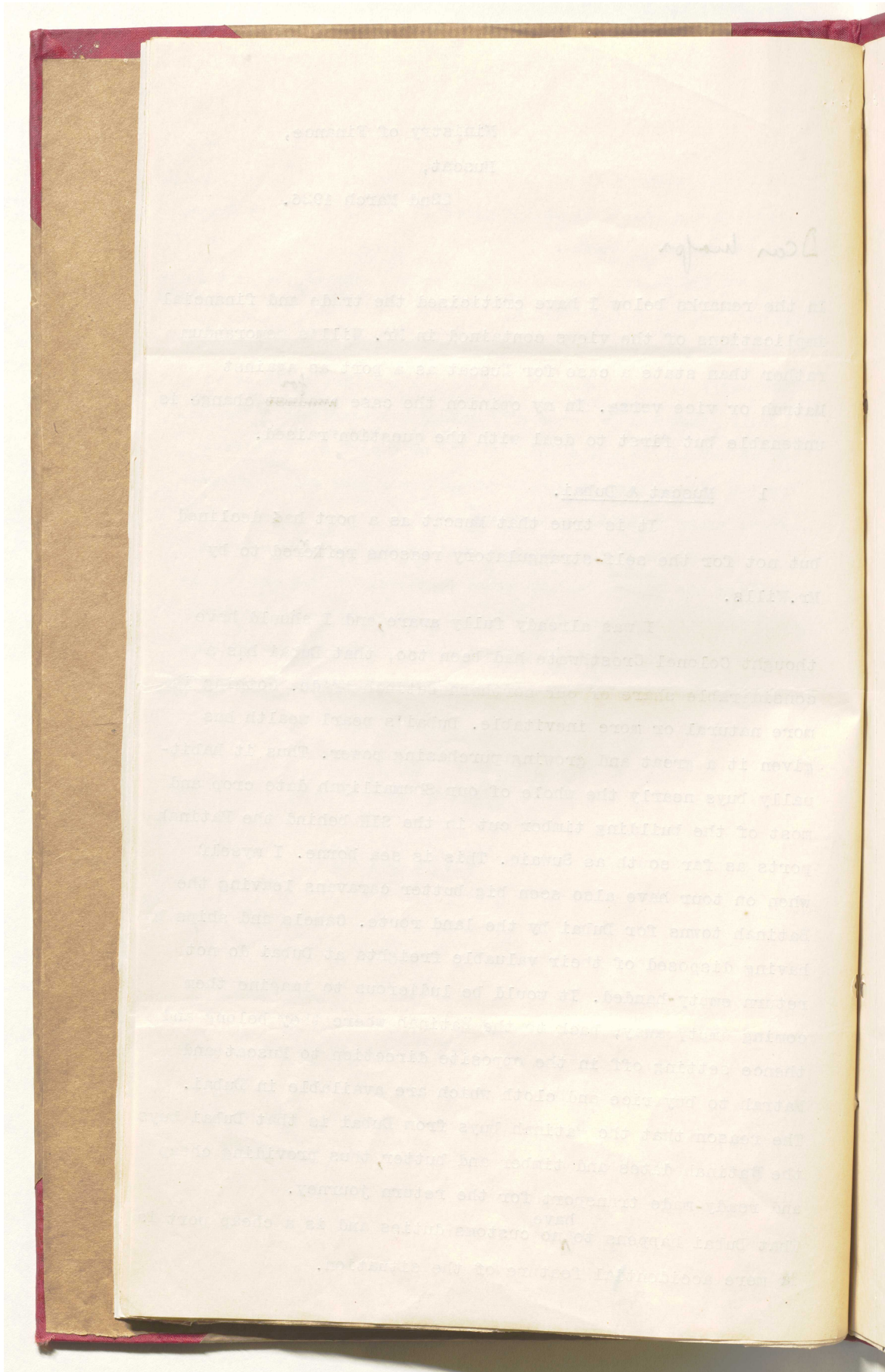
In the remarks below I have criticised the trade and financial implications of the views contained in Mr. Will's memorandum rather than state a case for Muscat as a port as against Matrah or vice versa. In my opinion the case ~~was~~^{for} change is untenable but first to deal with the question raised.

1 Muscat & Dubai.

It is true that Muscat as a port has declined but not for the self-strangulatory reasons referred to by Mr. Wills.

I was already fully aware, and I should have thought Colonel Crosthwaite had been too, that Dubai has a considerable share of our northern Batinah trade. Nothing is more natural or more inevitable. Dubai's pearl wealth has given it a great and growing purchasing power. Thus it habitually buys nearly the whole of our Shumailiyah date crop and most of the building timber cut in the SiH behind the Batinah ports as far south as Suwaig. This is sea borne. I myself when on tour have also seen big butter caravans leaving the Batinah towns for Dubai by the land route. Camels and ships having disposed of their valuable freights at Dubai do not return empty-handed. It would be ludicrous to imagine them coming empty away, back to the Batinah where they belong and thence setting off in the opposite direction to Muscat and Matrah to buy rice and cloth which are available in Dubai. The reason that the Batinah buys from Dubai is that Dubai buys the Batinah dates and timber and butter, thus providing cheap and ready-made transport for the return journey. That Dubai happens to ^{have} no customs duties and is a cheap port is a mere accidental feature of the situation.

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[8v] (29/56)



'Matrah - Proposal to make it Port of Call for B.I. steamers instead of Muscat'
[9r] (30/56)

2

7 35/10, 9

11 Dubai & Khasab.

Handwritten: Muscat 126.9, Vol. IV

As regards the proposed port of Khasab I have a guilty conscience about this as the Hon. Political Resident wrote and asked me to make a point of visiting it to explore its possibilities (1) as a port, (11) as a hill station. This I have not done though I hope to do so as soon as an opportunity offers. Without first hand knowledge of Dubai I fancy its trade conveniently divides itself up under these heads.

- (1) its natural Exports and Imports for self consumption.
- (11) its trade as a gateway to Najd and the Dhahirah i.e. the Interior.
- (111) its Persian Entrepôt trade.

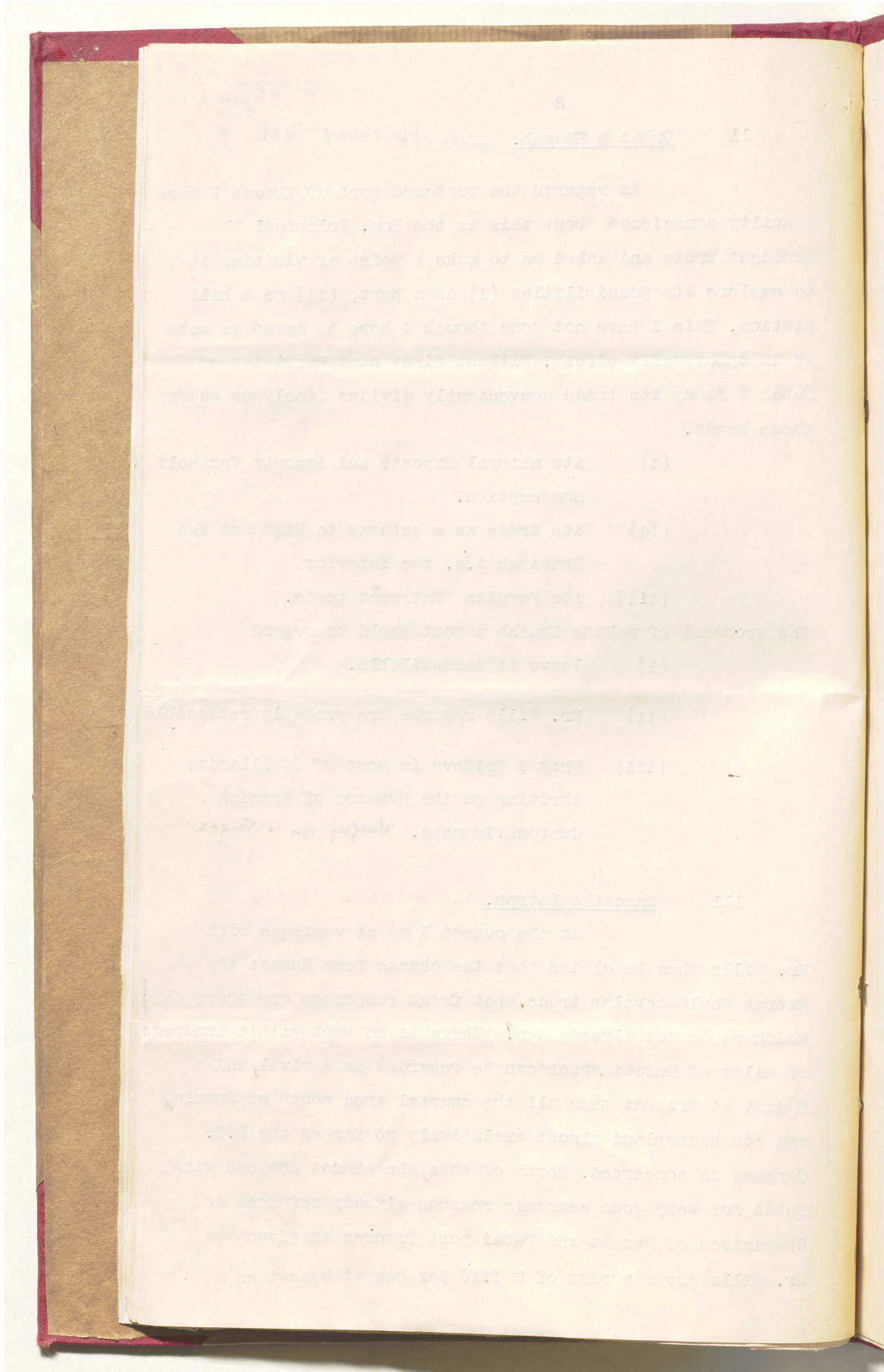
The proposal of making Khasab a port would as regard

- (1) leave it unassailable.
- (11) Mr. Wills remarks are probably reasonable
- (111) This I believe is most of it illicit, thriving on the Evasion of Persian Customs. Imports. *Handwritten: chiefly Tea & Sugar.*

111 Muscat & Matrah.

At the outset I am at variance with Mr. Wills when he claims that the change from Muscat to Matrah would develop trade. What fresh resources are there which we do not already tap? There is no port within hundreds of miles of Muscat which can be regarded as a rival, and Muscat at present taps all the coastal area south of Suwaid and its hinterland almost exclusively so far as the B.I. Company is concerned. North of this, she cannot compete with Dubai for very good economic reasons already referred to. Comparison of Muscat and Dubai port figures as given by Mr. Wills shows a cost of Rs 1.13 per bag at Muscat as

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[9v] (31/56)



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[10r] (32/56)

3

10

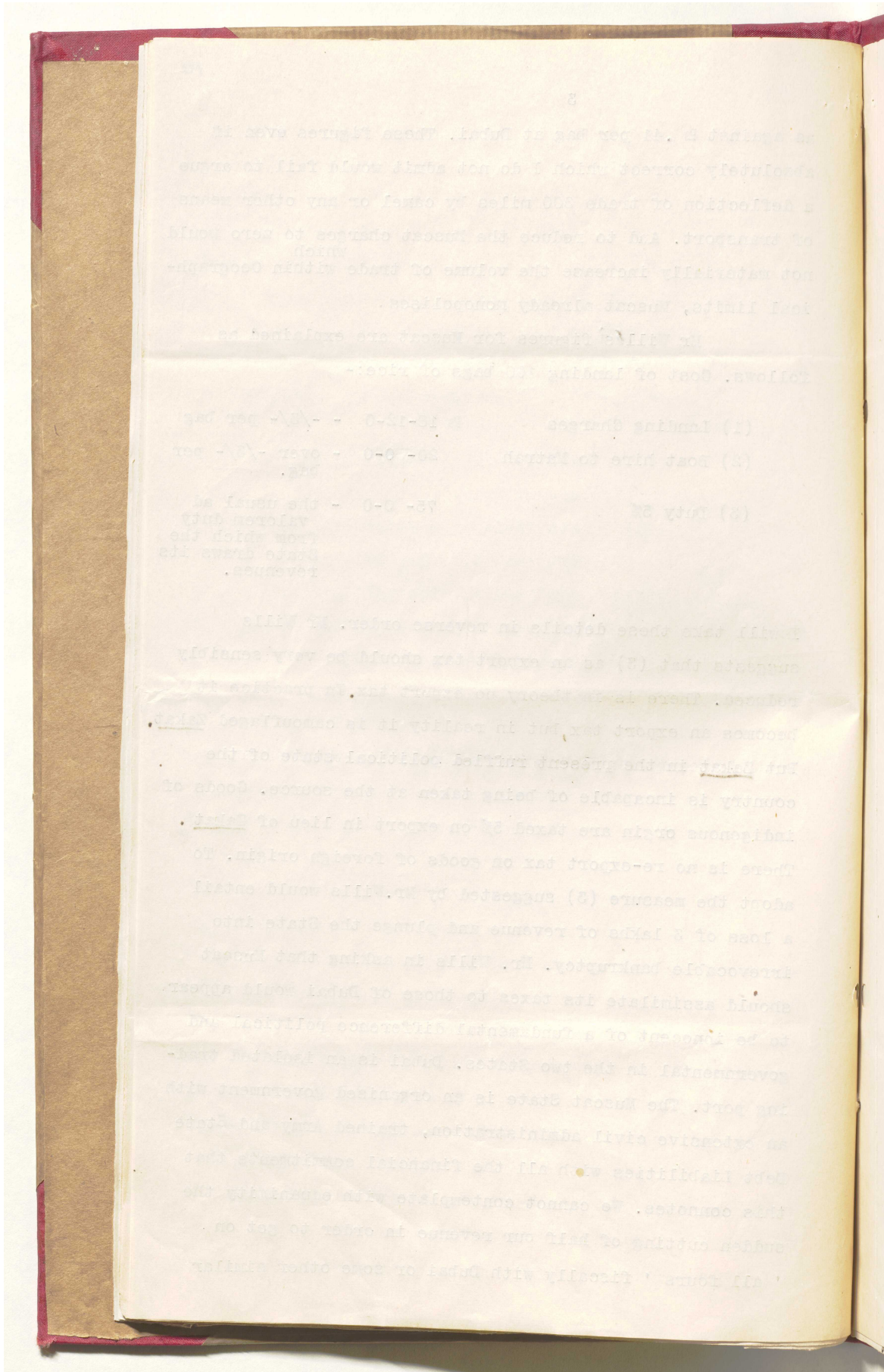
as against Rs .41 per bag at Dubai. These figures even if absolutely correct which I do not admit would fail to argue a deflection of trade 300 miles by camel or any other means of transport. And to reduce the Muscat charges to zero would not materially increase the volume of trade within Geographical limits, Muscat already monopolises.

Mr Wills' figures for Muscat are explained as follows. Cost of landing 100 bags of rice:-

(1) Landing Charges	Rs 18-12-0	- -/3/- per bag
(2) Boat hire to Matrah	20- 0-0	- over -/3/- per bag.
(3) Duty 5%	75- 0-0	- the usual ad valorem duty from which the State draws its revenues.

I will take these details in reverse order. Mr Wills suggests that (3) as an export tax should be very sensibly reduced. There is in theory no export tax. In practice it becomes an export tax, but in reality it is camouflaged Zakat. But Zakat in the present ruffled political state of the country is incapable of being taken at the source. Goods of indigenous origin are taxed 5% on export in lieu of Zakat. There is no re-export tax on goods of foreign origin. To adopt the measure (3) suggested by Mr. Wills would entail a loss of 3 lakhs of revenue and plunge the State into irrevocable bankruptcy. Mr. Wills in asking that Muscat should assimilate its taxes to those of Dubai would appear to be innocent of a fundamental difference political and governmental in the two States. Dubai is an isolated trading port. The Muscat State is an organised government with an extensive civil administration, trained Army and State Debt Liabilities with all the financial commitments that this connotes. We cannot contemplate with equanimity the sudden cutting of half our revenue in order to get on ' all fours ' fiscally with Dubai or some other similar

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[10v] (33/56)



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[11r] (34/56)

4

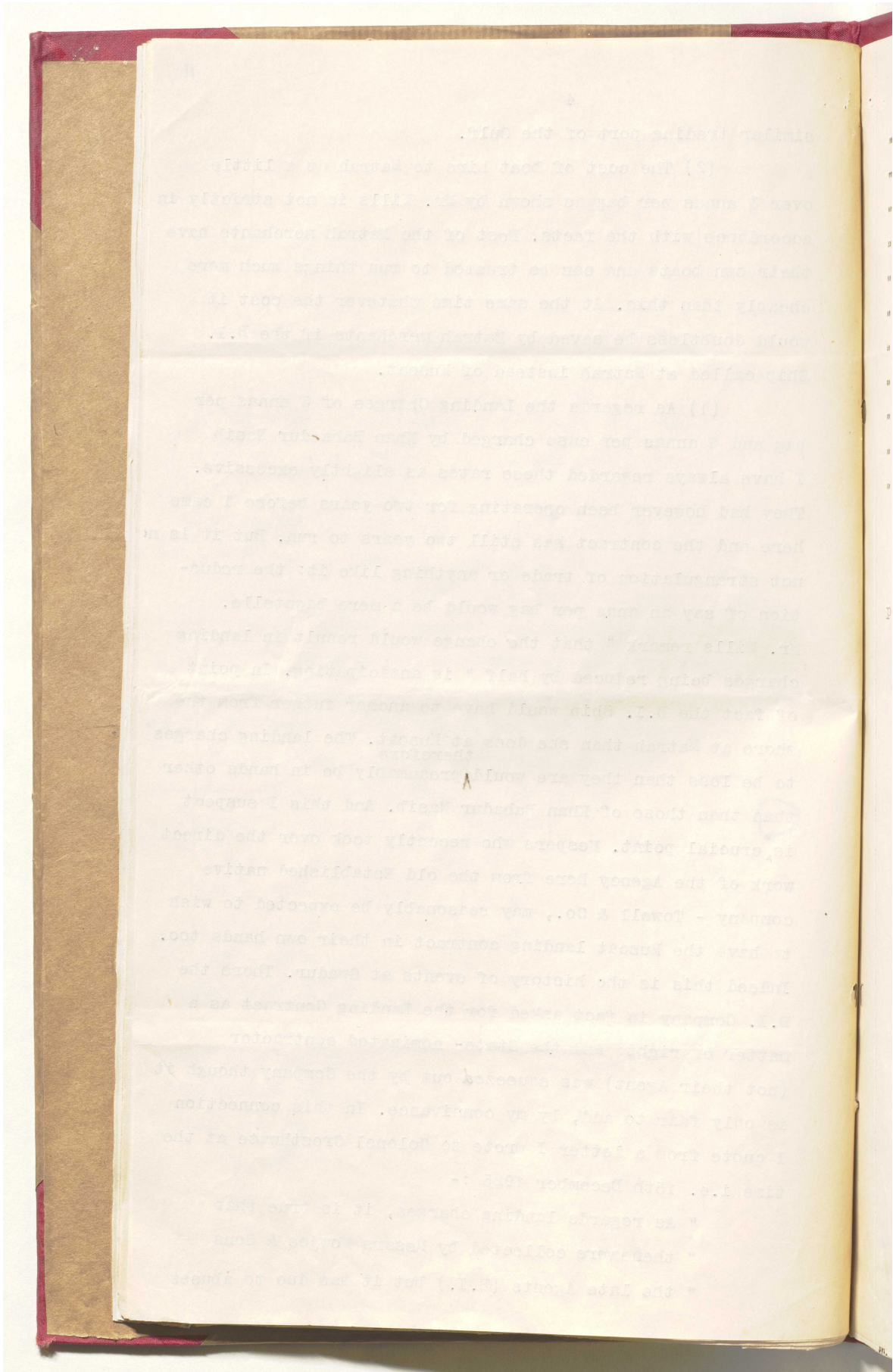
similar trading port of the Gulf.

(2) The cost of boat hire to Matrah at a little over 3 annas per bag as shown by Mr. Wills is not strictly in accordance with the facts. Most of the Matrah merchants have their own boats and can be trusted to run things much more cheaply than this. At the same time whatever the cost it would doubtless be saved by Matrah merchants if the B.I. Ship called at Matrah instead of Muscat.

(1) As regards the Landing Charges of 3 annas per bag and 6 annas per case charged by Khan Bahadur Nasib I have always regarded these rates as slightly excessive. They had however been operating for two years before I came here and the contract has still two years to run. But it is not strangulation of trade or anything like it: the reduction of say an anna per bag would be a mere bagatelle. Mr. Wills remark " that the change would result in landing charges being reduced by half " is anticipating. In point of fact the B.I. Ship would have to anchor futher from the shore at Matrah than she does at Muscat. The landing charges to be less than they are would ^{therefore} presumably be in hands other than those of Khan Bahadur Nasib. And this I suspect is a crucial point. Messrs who recently took over the direct work of the Agency here from the old Established native company - Towell & Co., may reasonably be expected to wish to have the Muscat landing contract in their own hands too. Indeed this is the history of events at Gwadur. There the B.I. Company in fact asked for the Landing Contract as a matter of right: and the State-nominated contractor (not their Agent) was squeezed out by the Company though it is only fair to add, by my connivance. In this connection I quote from a letter I wrote to Colonel Crosthwaite at the time i.e. 15th December 1925 :-

" As regards landing charges, it is true that
" these were collected by Messrs Mowjee & Sons
" the late Agents (B.I.) but it was due to abuses

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[12r] (36/56)

5

" arising therefrom and constant petitionings
" on the part of merchants that led to the change
" of system..... Mowjee & Sons frequently demanded
" excessive charges from merchants and on their
" refusal to pay detained their goods in the
" Customs wharf. This Mowjee " Sons could do
" , qua B.I. Agents, by withholding from merchants
" their " Delivery Order " without which of course
" the Customs Authorities could not release goods.
" The combination of the roles of the B.I. Agents and
" Landing Contractor was therefore not found to be a happy
one.

Comments I have to offer on the proposed change of
port from Muscat to Matrah are as follows:-

- 1 It would please the Matrah merchants and save them
the reshipment charges from Muscat to Matrah.
- 2 It would give the final coup de grâce to Muscat
as a port.
- 3 It would not increase trade.
- 4 It would impose upon the State the burden of
building a big Customs wharf at Matrah at great
expense and which we can ill afford.
- 5 It would involve the Muscat Treasury shifting to
Matrah and in turn other Government Offices.
- 6 It is opposed by the Sultan.
- 7 In any case there could be no question of reducing
Customs duties as asked for by Mr. Wills and by
means of which Messers would " work up a large
Export trade " (sic)

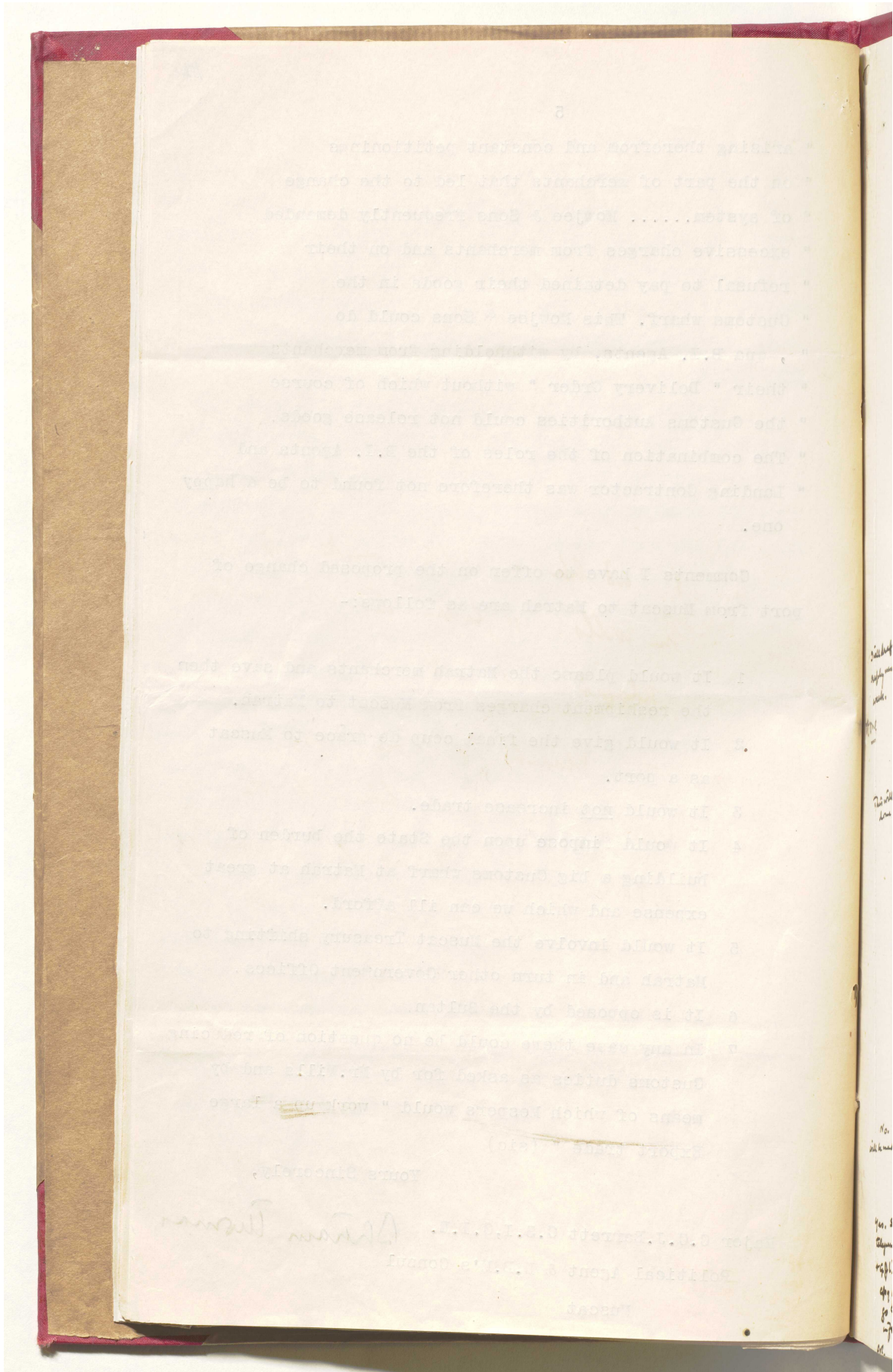
Yours Sincerely,

Major C.C.J. Barrett C.S.I., C.I.E.

Political Agent & H.B.M's Consul

Muscat

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[12v] (37/56)



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[13r] (38/56)

Majors Barrett's letter no. 37 2/4/47
re Matrah or Muscat as a B.I. Port of call.

I submit this in case you wish to discuss it
with Major Barrett before he leaves.

Mr. Thomas has made out a fair case against the
change, I think, but I can go into the various aspects of
the question critically, if you wish, later.

12/4/5-

1. I wd like a reply sent to
Mr Wills. If latter did not mention
Kharat, cut out Mr Thomas's.

Draft a
reply next
week.

Done

This will be
done.

2. The Kharat question may be
put into a new file. If the
A.P.O.C. reflects Ruus al Sabal
& the water there, it will
nearly come up again.

No. One
will be made for him.

3. Is not al Baruni on a separate
file? He is ^{been} regarded as a
foreign "suspect" are we awaiting a
reply from India still?

Yes. See me (copy in
Alqum (Jagah W),
+ G.P.O. & S.G.S (7/4/5).
copy of P.O.C. may not
go to P.A. Muscat &
in form etc. 12/4/5-

7.08.7.26

'Matrah - Proposal to make it Port of Call for B.I. steamers instead of Muscat'
[13v] (39/56)

draft - & Mr. Wills for approval; &
Mr. Spence was merely the channel of
correspondence, there seems no need to
send a copy to Mr. Wills.

It is for consideration whether a
copy of Major Barrett's letter is to
go to, if so, I suggest omitting
the sentence in red brackets.

Mr. Wills referred to Kharab
so Mr. Thomas's letter can go as it
stands.

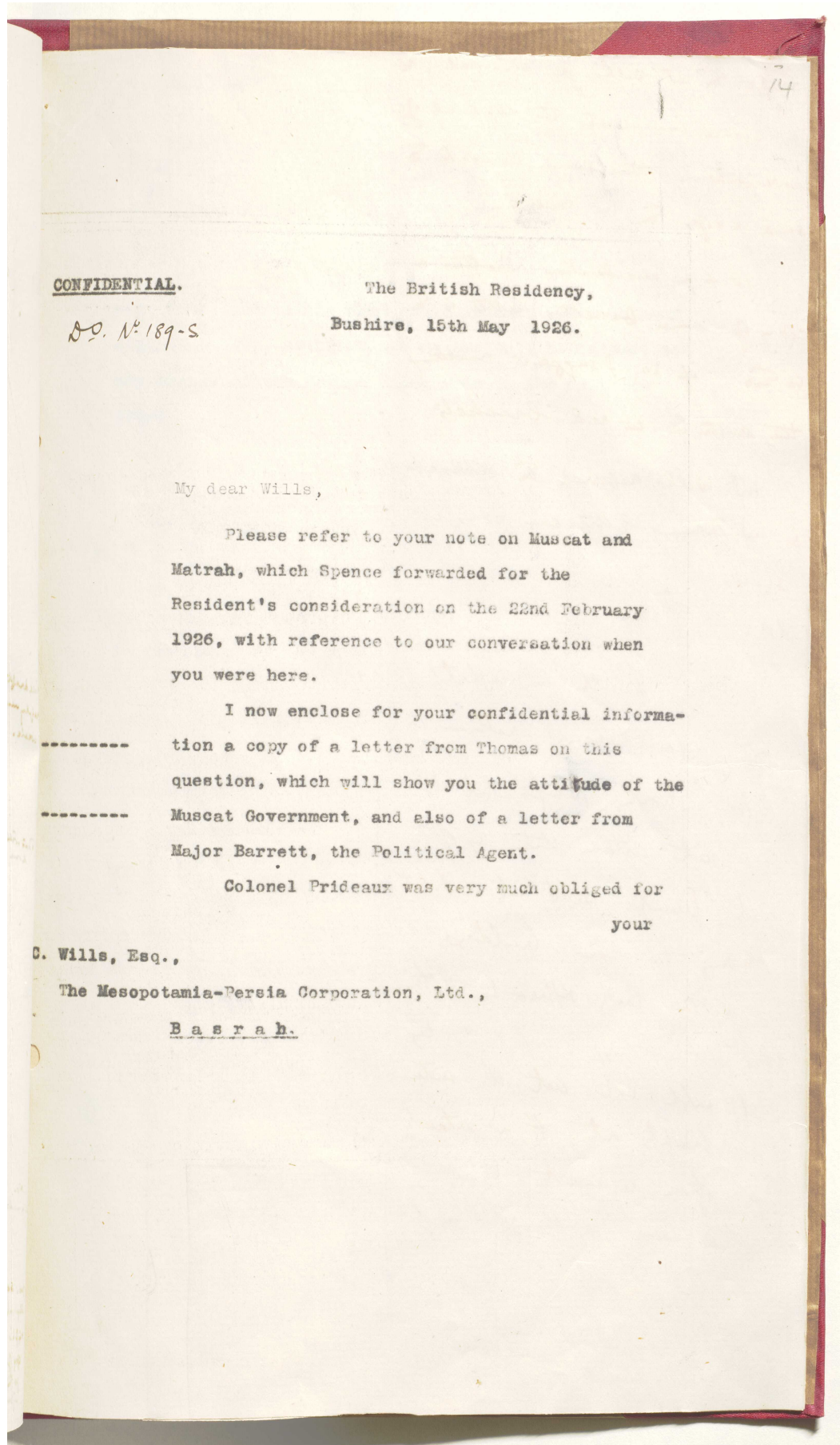
P.R. 15/12/50

Major Barrett has supported
the proposed change rather
too strongly perhaps, but it
is quite certain that G.O.I.
at present will not contribute
money for new buildings.

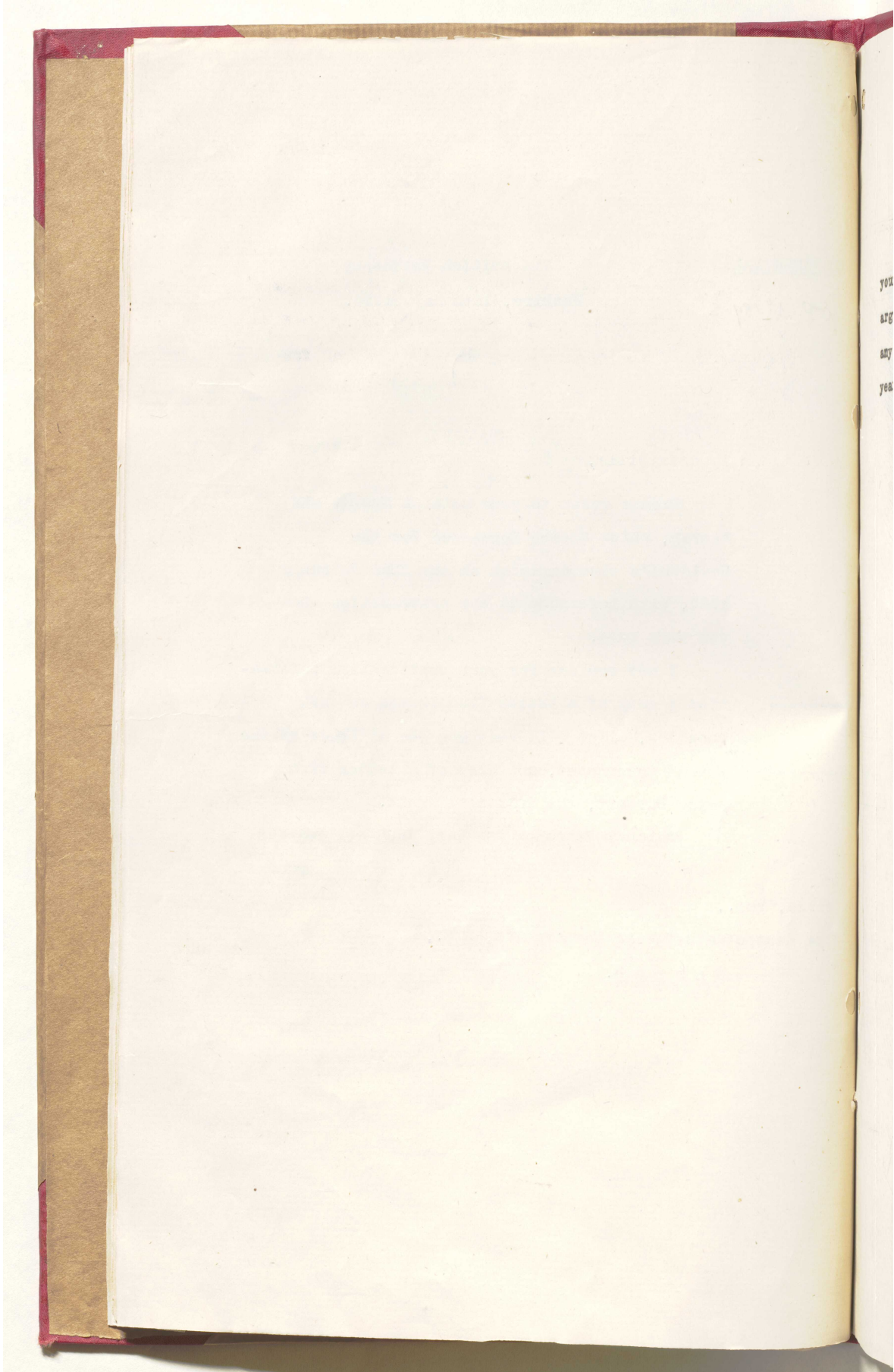
We can hardly suppress the letter
as it will go confidentially,
I will not cut the sentence
in brackets out. It is certainly
a strong argument.

So have in the reference to
Kharab. F.R.P. 15.6

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[14r] (40/56)



'Matrah - Proposal to make it Port of Call for B.I. steamers instead of Muscat'
[14v] (41/56)



'Matrah - Proposal to make it Port of Call for B.I. steamers instead of Muscat'
[15r] (42/56)

15

your note, and thinks ~~that~~ there is much force in your arguments, but, as things are as present, he does not see any chance of the change being made in the next few years.

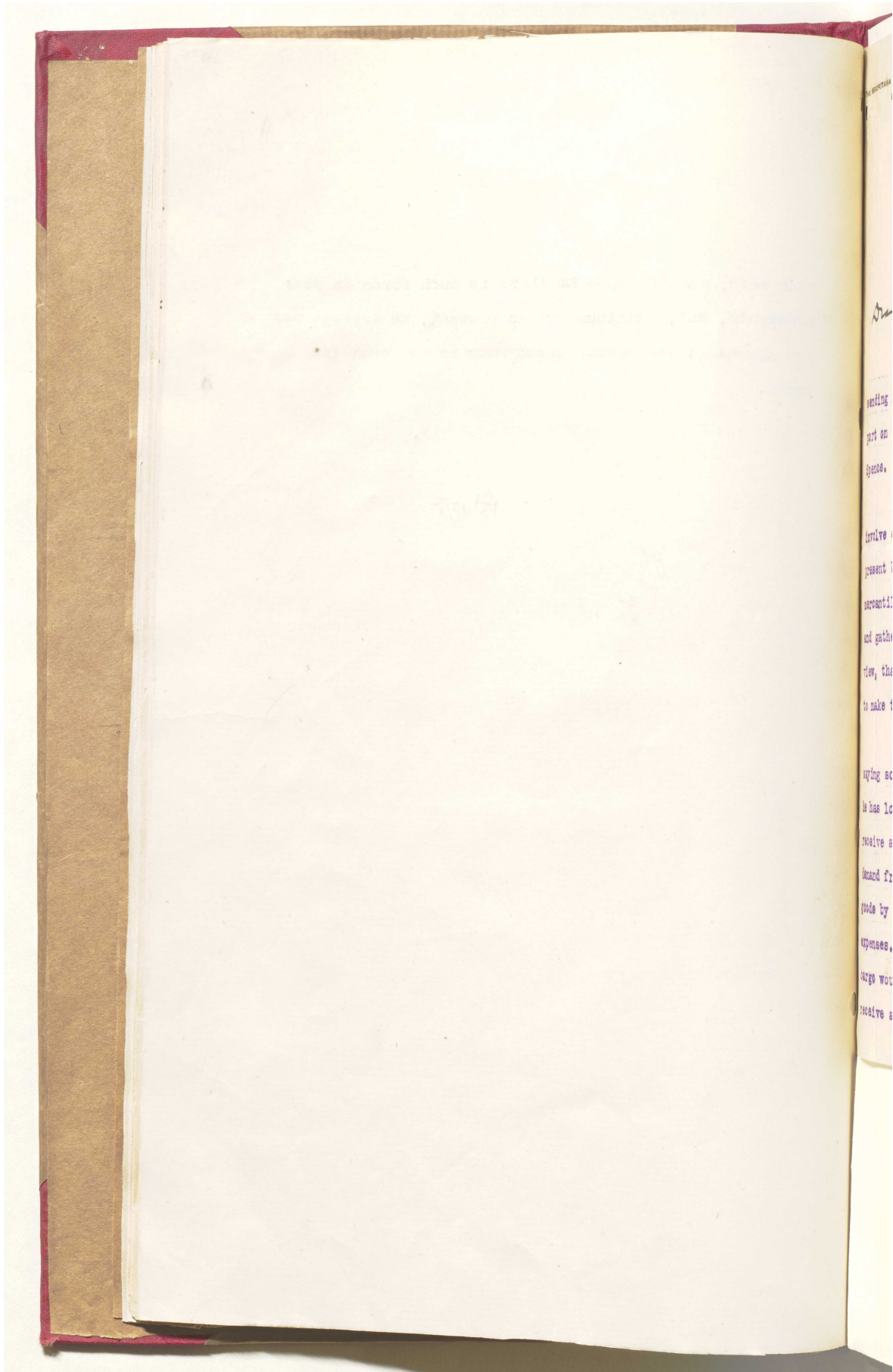
Yours sincerely,

15/15/56

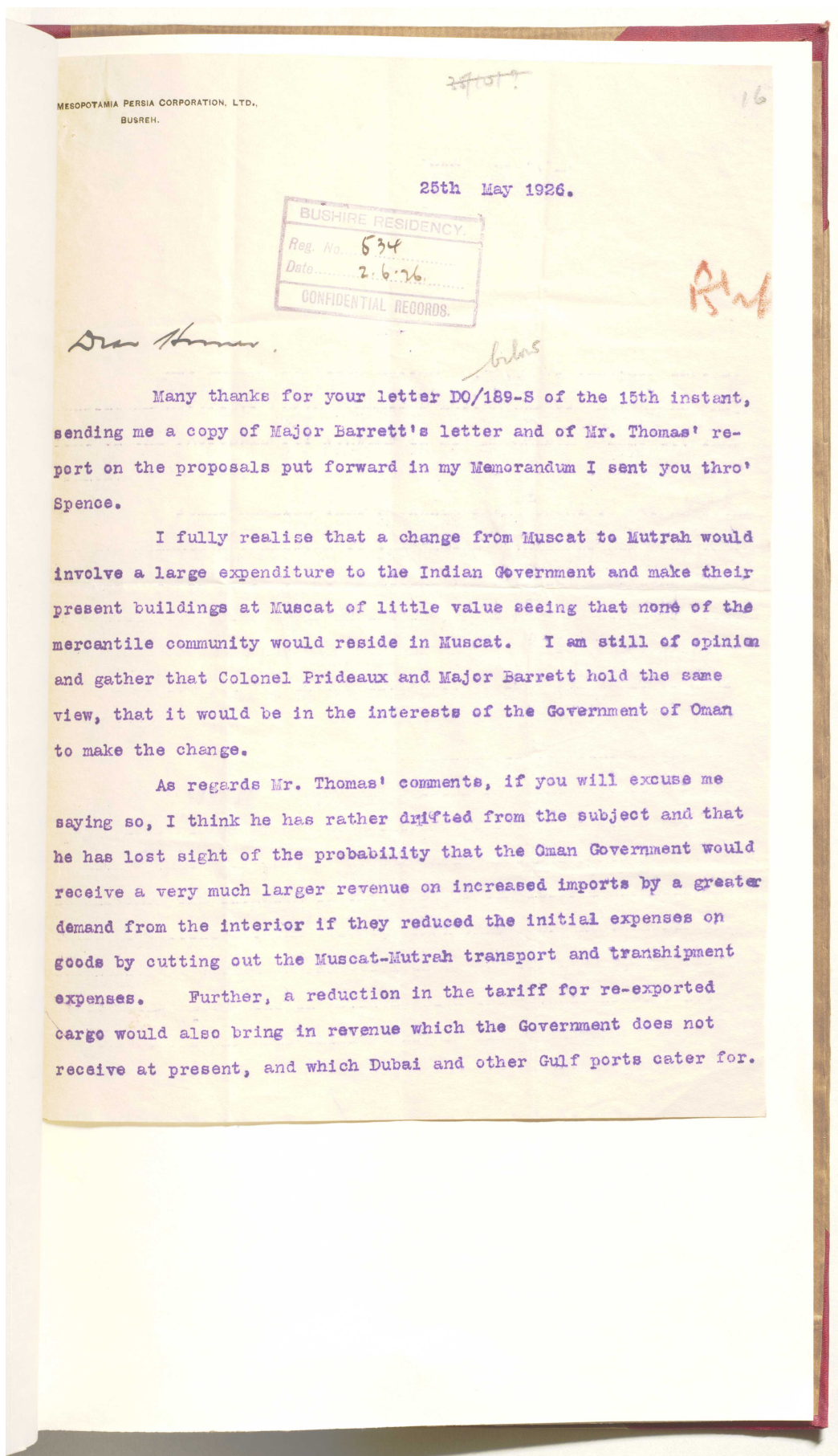
(Secretary)

0/c
02

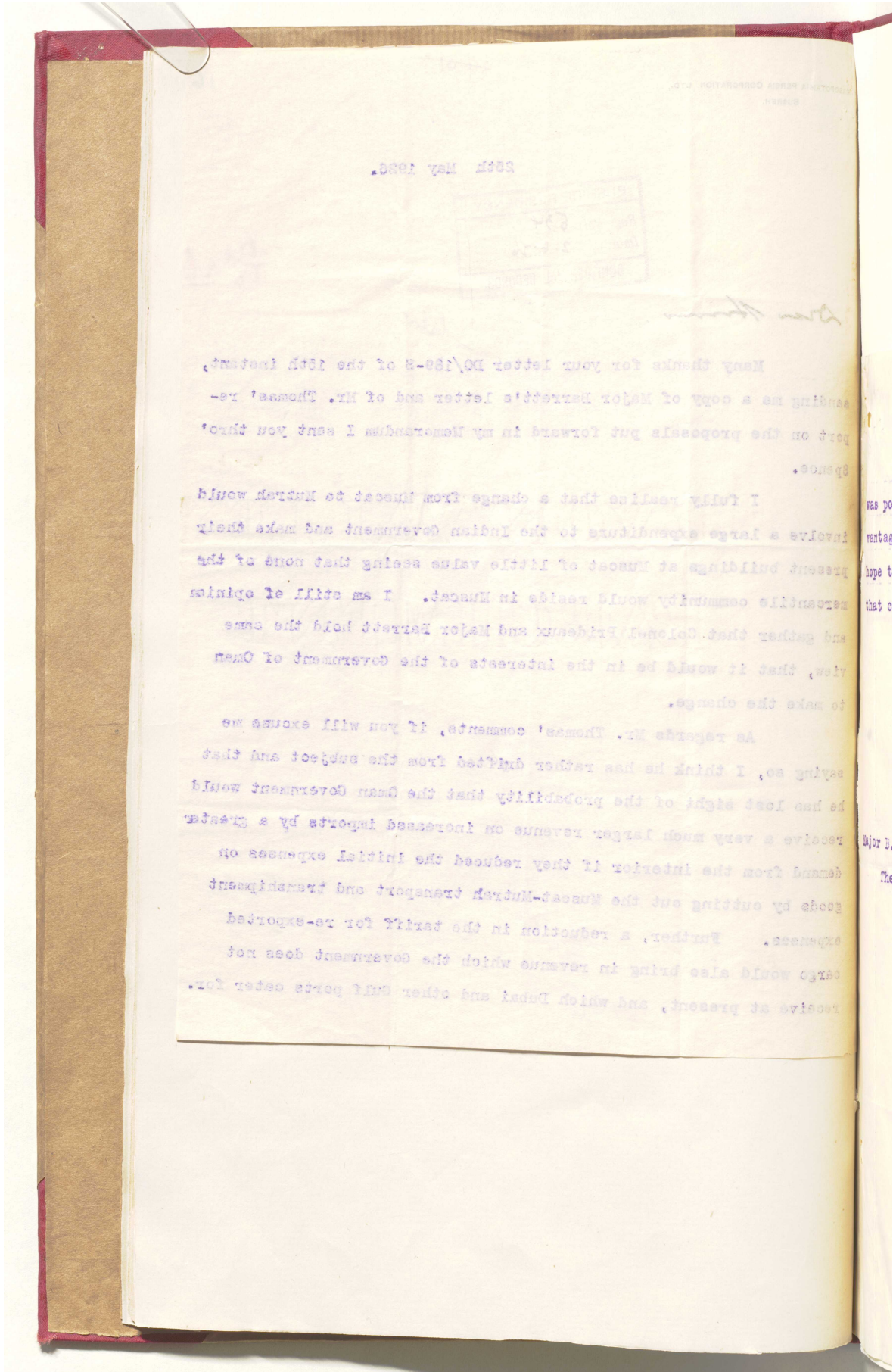
'Matrah - Proposal to make it Port of Call for B.I. steamers instead of Muscat'
[15v] (43/56)



'Matrah - Proposal to make it Port of Call for B.I. steamers instead of Muscat'
[16r] (44/56)



'Matrah - Proposal to make it Port of Call for B.I. steamers instead of Muscat'
[16v] (45/56)



'Matrah - Proposal to make it Port of Call for B.I. steamers instead of Muscat'
[17r] (46/56)

-- 2 --

17

I am sorry to see that Mr. Thomas thinks my report was possibly put forward solely with a view to Messers taking advantage of any improvement in the export trade. Naturally, we hope to but my report was put forward in the interests of Oman and that country's trade generally.

*John Smith
Dunbar*

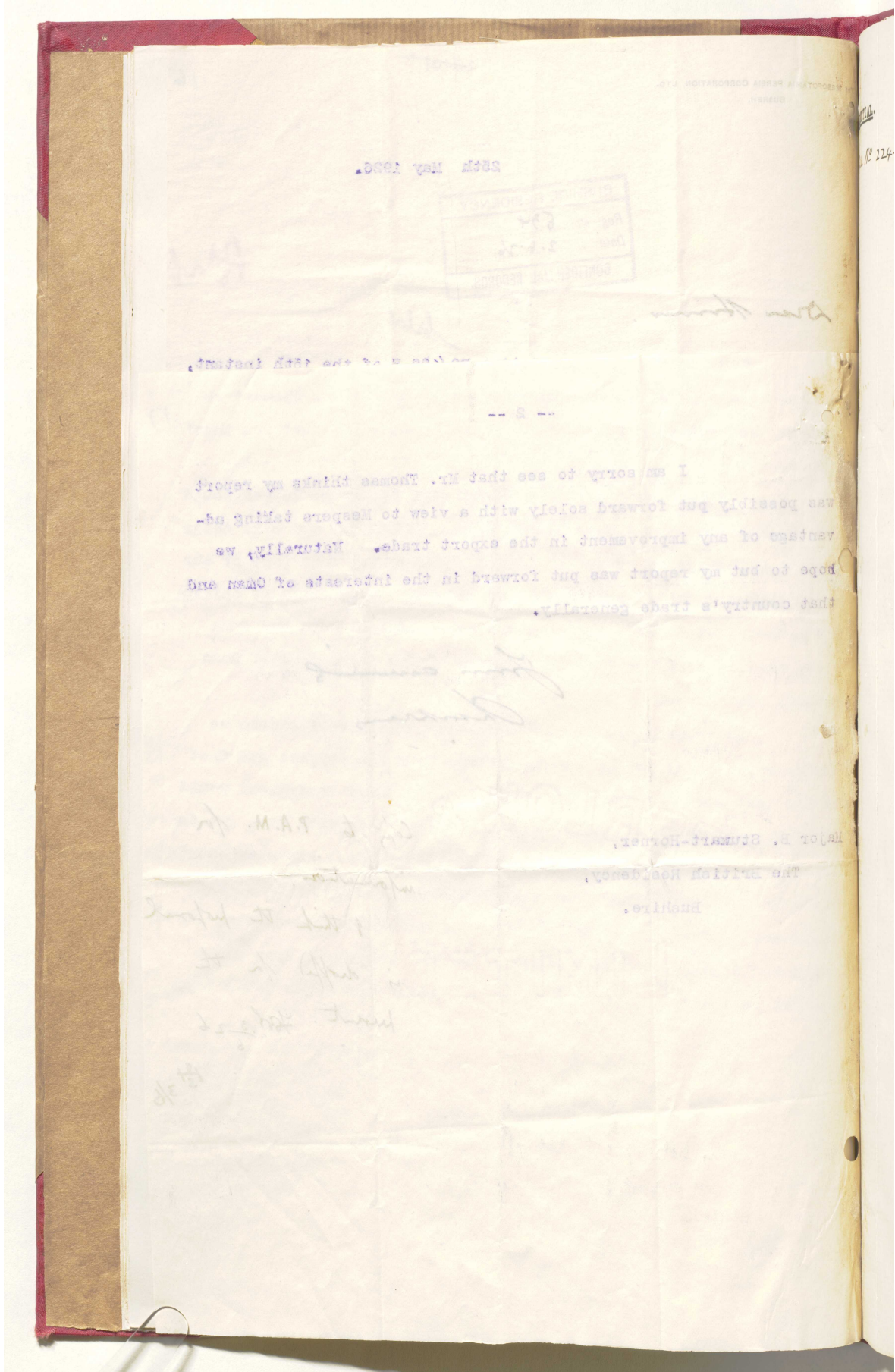
Major B. Stuart-Horner,
The British Residency,
Bushire.

*Copy to P.A.M. for
information.*

*I think the proposal
is dropped for the
present. 7/27 3/26*

15 3/6

'Matrah - Proposal to make it Port of Call for B.I. steamers instead of Muscat'
[17v] (47/56)



'Matrah - Proposal to make it Port of Call for B.I. steamers instead of Muscat'
[18r] (48/56)

CONFIDENTIAL.

د.و. № 224- S.

18
The British Residency,
Bushire, 8th June 1926.

Dear Barrett,

Please refer to your demi-official letter No.37, dated the 6th April 1926, regarding the possibility of making Matrah the port of call for B.I. vessels instead of Muscat. Colonel Prideaux desires me to forward herewith for your information a copy of a letter from Mr. Wills dated the 25th May 1926. He understands that this proposal has been dropped for the present.

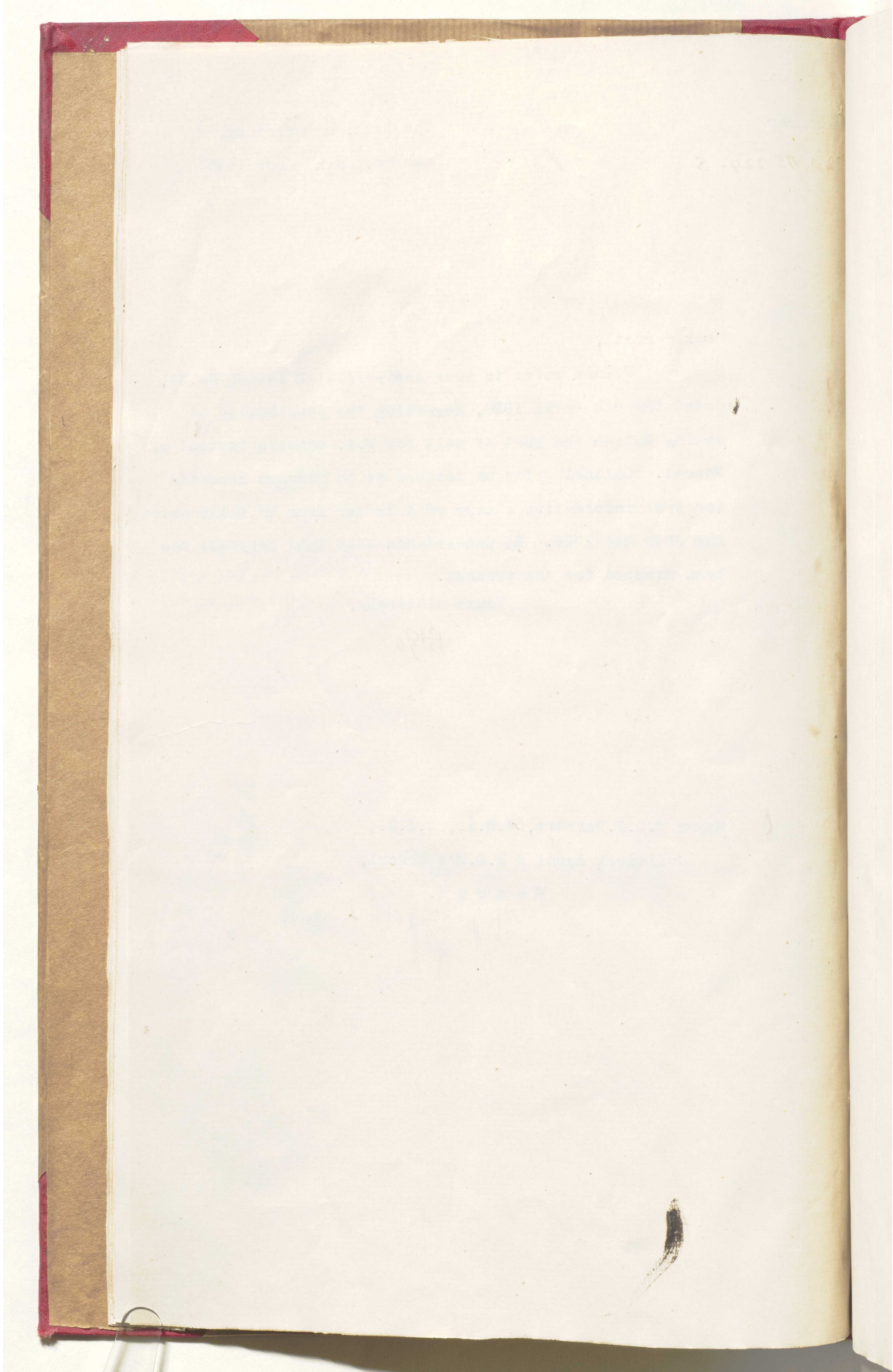
Yours sincerely,

15/6

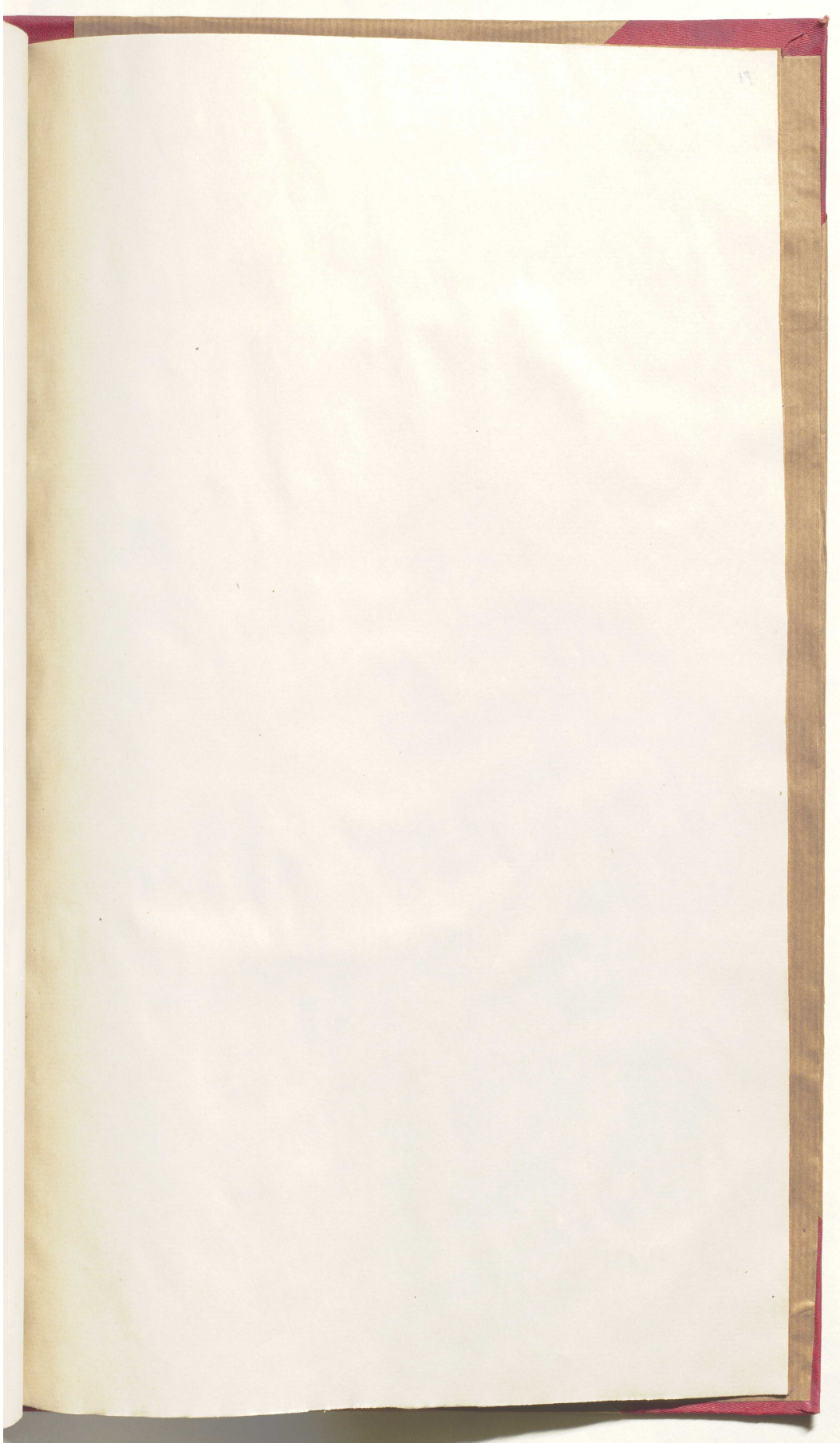
Major C.C.J. Barrett, C.S.I., C.I.E.,
Political Agent & H.B.M's Consul,
Muscat.

90.

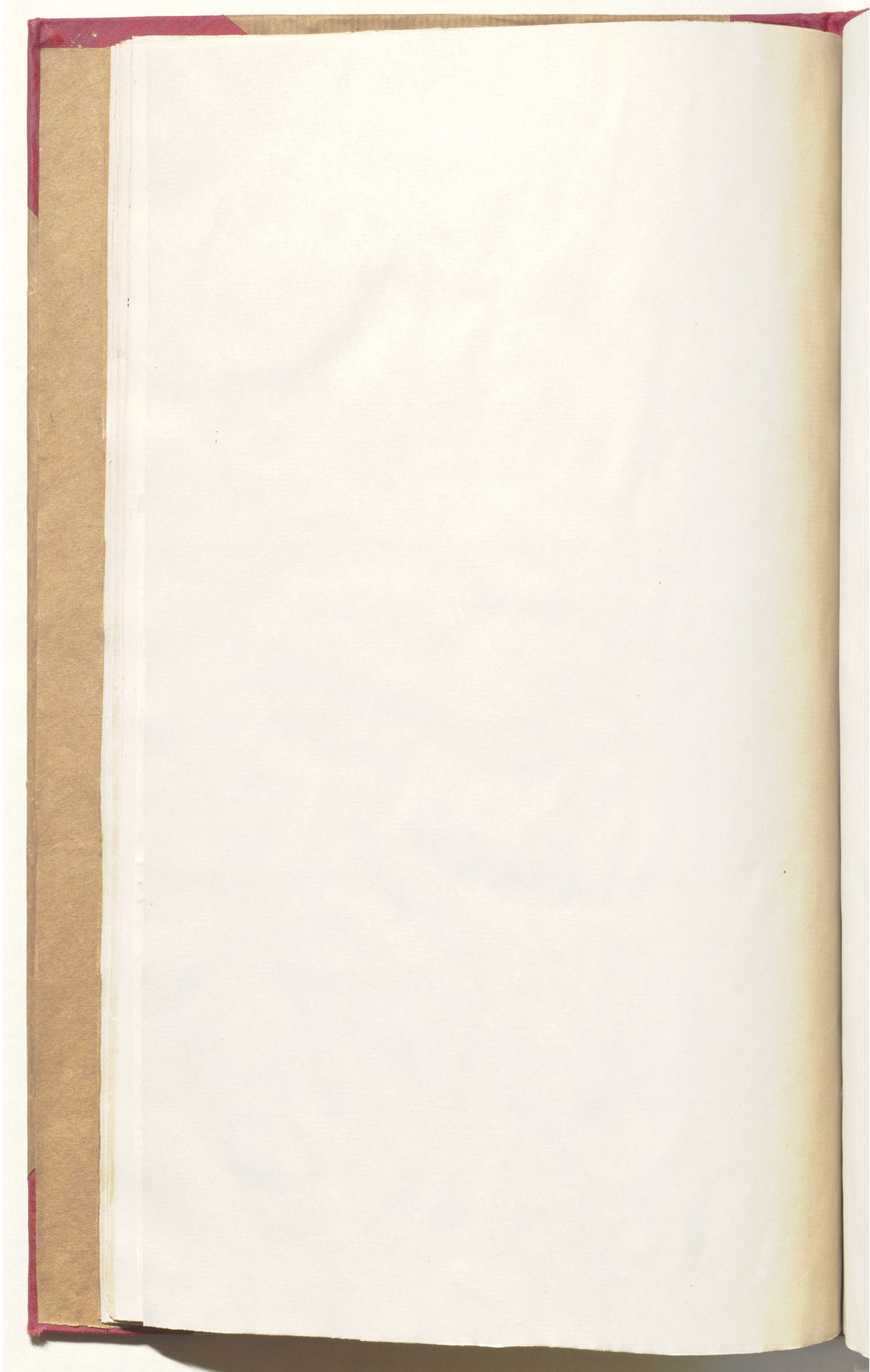
'Matrah - Proposal to make it Port of Call for B.I. steamers instead of Muscat'
[18v] (49/56)



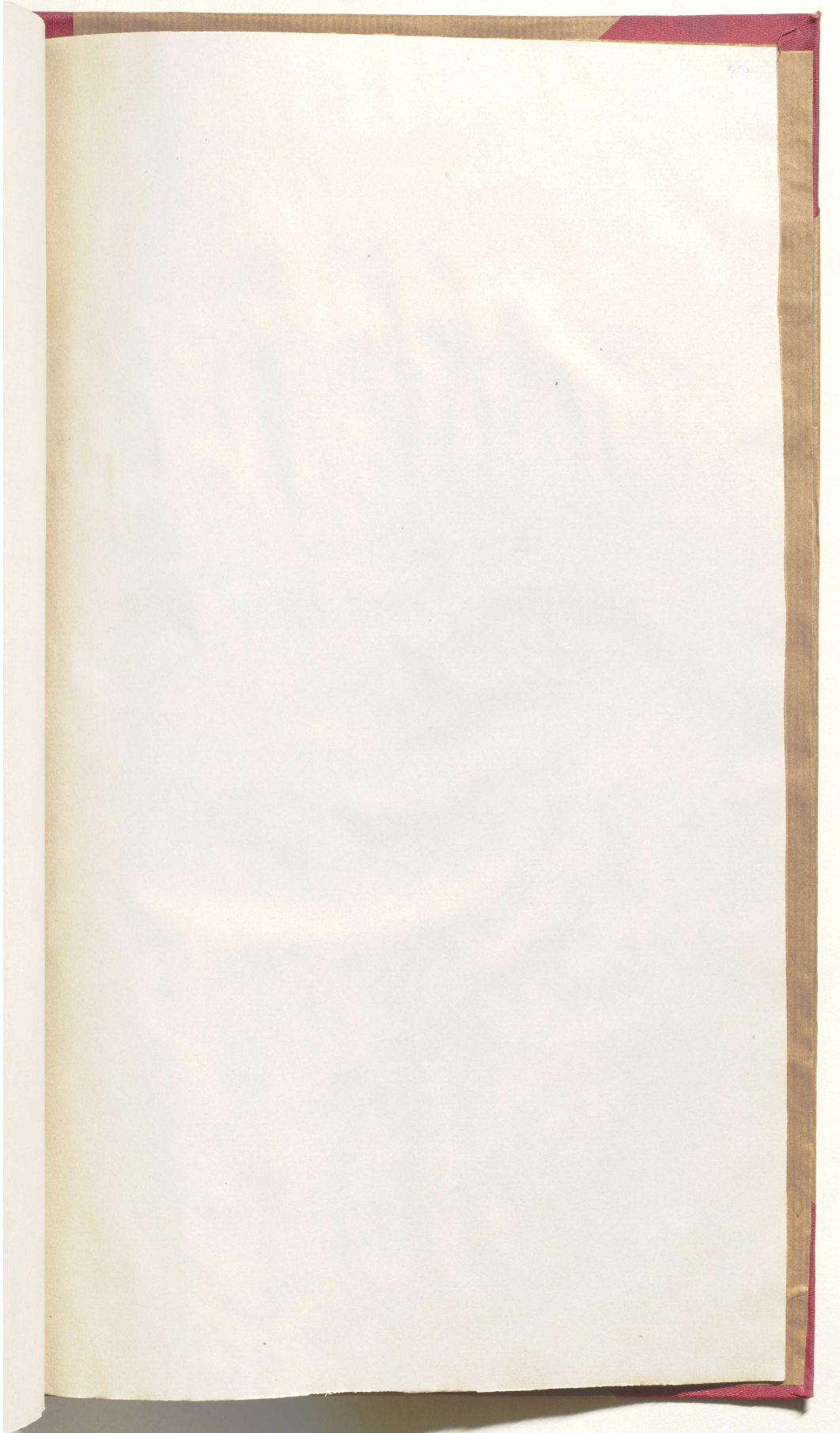
'Matrah - Proposal to make it Port of Call for B.I. steamers instead of Muscat'
[19r] (50/56)



'Matrah - Proposal to make it Port of Call for B.I. steamers instead of Muscat'
[19v] (51/56)



'Matrah - Proposal to make it Port of Call for B.I. steamers instead of Muscat'
[20r] (52/56)



'Matrah - Proposal to make it Port of Call for B.I. steamers instead of Muscat'
[20v] (53/56)



'Matrah - Proposal to make it Port of Call for B.I. steamers instead of Muscat'
[ii-r] (54/56)



'Matrah - Proposal to make it Port of Call for B.I. steamers instead of Muscat'
[ii-v] (55/56)



'Matrah - Proposal to make it Port of Call for B.I. steamers instead of Muscat'
[back-i] (56/56)

