

The Culture of Diplomacy: Britain in Europe, c. 1750-1830

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Jennifer Mori has written a stimulating and engaging study which deserves to find a wide audience. Historians of diplomacy and international relations will learn much from it but it should also be read by those more generally interested in questions of politics and identity in 18th-century Britain. Mori's aim is to explore the social and cultural aspects of being a diplomat and to cast light on the practical difficulties that diplomats frequently faced. She is concerned to show the more mundane aspects of serving one's country abroad and to indicate how diplomatic life was much more than a whirl of audiences and parties.

The method that Mori adopts to achieve these aims is to interrogate closely the surviving correspondence of around 50 diplomats and their families from across the period. This technique of 'thick' prosopography enables her to look at the ways in which diplomats and their families engaged in self-fashioning and the construction of identity. The study of diplomatic families is particularly fertile in this respect because they were susceptible to several sorts of social pressure. On the one hand, there was a need to maintain the social norms that they brought with them from Britain but it was also necessary to go through a process of adaptation and assimilation to cope with the new societies and contexts in which they found themselves. Details of the names, educational background, ethnicity, career progression and familial status for all the diplomats mentioned in the study are included in two useful appendices.

Mori regards herself as a proponent of 'new diplomatic history'. She draws a distinction between traditional works dealing with national interests, even when informed by analyses of the impact of religion and the press and 'more imaginative treatments of perception and self-fashioning in international politics, many dealing with issues of gender and scandal' (p. 3).

Her aim is to rescue 18th and 19th-century diplomats from assumptions about the ‘modernity’ of their aims and practice and instead of seeing them as ‘individualistic public lobbyists’ view them as ‘corporatist private networkers’ (p. 5). In so doing, she seeks to situate diplomacy in this period between the competing cultures of the baroque court and the enlightened public sphere and explore the ways in which the pull of the latter slowly became stronger than the former. As in so much else, she sees the French Revolution as a turning point, where a culture of court reportage slowly gave way to new notions of the importance of bureaucratic representation.

The book is split into the three parts. The first considers the social history of the diplomatic service, the second looks at the practice of diplomacy and the third seeks to place diplomacy within the wider context of activities that diplomats engaged in while abroad. Mori begins by tackling the basic question of why people would join the diplomatic service in the first place. The answer is far from obvious. As D. B. Horn remarked it was, unlike parliament, neither profitable nor fashionable.⁽¹⁾ Indeed as Mori puts it, foreign service was ‘tantamount to exile’ (p. 21). For some, particularly the Scots and Irish, it might be a way of representing loyalty to the Hanoverian dynasty, especially if familial behaviour and connections had previously tended towards Jacobite sympathy. Yet this could be a double-edged sword because patterns of exile frequently meant that Scottish and Irish diplomats met members of their own families abroad who had chosen different political paths and ties of blood and service came into conflict with each other. Inconvenient relatives were not the only problem that diplomats faced. Diplomatic service was often costly in terms of both money and time. The boundaries between public and private were unclear in diplomatic households. Taking responsibility for housing, feeding and training younger officials and having a stream of hungry young Englishmen on the Grand Tour at your door posed strains on resources. This was not helped by the fact that, as with most branches of government service, pay was frequently in arrears and being able to sustain personal credit was an important aspect of diplomatic life. There was some prospect of social advancement through service, although connection remained important for both getting a start and subsequent promotion, as was a general adherence to court Whiggism and, from the early 19th century onwards, Toryism. Castlereagh’s post-Napoleonic reforms, with a greater emphasis on higher standards of public service, met with some hostility, not least because diplomats felt that they were already subject to considerable scrutiny and delay when it came to their expenses.

In terms of social and religious attitudes, Mori suggests that the turbulent decade of the 1790s marked a watershed. Previously diplomats had tended to display a rather generic Protestantism and sense of providentialism. After the French Revolution, they tended to become more judgemental, reflecting, to a certain extent, the changing mood at home.

In 1816 Castlereagh sought to formalise the rather unsystematic training that had existed previously by attaching young men who wanted a diplomatic career to one of Britain’s principal missions abroad and giving them a small public allowance to enable them to learn the trade. Previously, acquiring diplomatic skills had been a rather more haphazard process. Reading widely in history, diplomatic memoirs and international law was one suggested course of action, as was keeping an eye on contemporary affairs through periodicals and newspapers. Knowledge alone was not enough, however. A clear written hand, good French and a track-record of discretion were important for those who wanted to advance themselves. In addition, a respect for existing social hierarchies could also be useful. As Mori notes, when describing the (relatively unsuccessful) career of Francis Peter Werry, he ‘had no natural talent for subservience, a skill that ambitious men without money or friends were well advised to cultivate’ (pp. 45–6). Mori does note some attitudinal shifts, however. By 1800 there was a growing distrust of the ‘courtliness’ (and dissembling) associated with writers like Abraham de Wicquefort and a shift away from an emphasis on ceremonial to cosmopolitan civility. Yet there was also a growing sense that French civilisation might not represent the pinnacle of human achievement and an increased national self-assertiveness, with pride in British manners over European culture.

Mori’s chapter on ‘Family, sex and marriage’ is one of the most revealing in the book. She charts the difficulties that diplomats often had in securing suitable partners, as well as the financial and emotional costs

that the diplomatic life entailed. Her discussion of the case of Emma Hamilton in Naples highlights the extent to which British women abroad were frequently more concerned to maintain domestic codes of class and virtue than their husbands. Sir William was keen to marry Emma but was concerned about the likely reaction of British tourists. He was able to secure George III's permission on the basis that Emma would not take on the rank and privileges associated with being a British diplomat but a British sense of propriety was overtaken by events – Emma rapidly became a favourite at the Neapolitan court and enjoyed increased status and power on that basis. A number of other diplomatic wives were discomfited by the courtly culture that they encountered on the continent but for rather different reasons. The stiffness of the ceremonial, particularly in relation to presentations, was a source of bafflement and anxiety. The number of diplomatic wives with any experience of court life in London was declining so their new situation seemed all the more alien. Another development related to the necessity, or otherwise, of diplomats being married. Whereas a wife was initially seen as a useful support for a man's career, by the 1780s it was becoming increasingly important for those mid-ranking men wanting to rise further and by 1815, it was a virtual necessity for achieving a senior post. Mori explains the shift on the basis of the perception of diplomacy being seen as an increasingly stable profession with the added benefit of living abroad.

When considering diplomatic practice, Mori makes clear that she does not subscribe to the view that British interest in Europe was declining in the second half of the 18th century because of increased imperial commitments. She points out that trade missions were rarely given to career diplomats and that there was no inherent contradiction between the promotion of trade and an interest in European great power politics. Her discussion of diplomatic etiquette shows how important it still was, although the slavish adherence to all aspects of diplomatic protocol was slowly declining. One of the reasons for this was the disregard that the new republics of the United States and France had for what they perceived to be the vestiges of monarchical tyranny. Mori's previous expertise in the history of British reactions to the French Revolution is put to good use in showing how badly the British diplomats took the violation of diplomatic immunities.⁽²⁾ In Washington, Elizabeth and Anthony Merry found Jefferson's preference for 'pell mell' informality disconcerting. Although Napoleon tried to restore diplomatic etiquette, the Vienna settlement brought a simplification of protocol. This was in line with a general domestic trend, whereby British men were less concerned about the maintenance of 'face'. Yet, as Mori points out, the formal rules could be help, as well as a hindrance, because of the navigational tools that they offered to men and especially women in unfamiliar environments.

One of the other trends in the second half of the 18th century was the slow transformation of the diplomat from courtier to bureaucrat. Traditionally, much of diplomacy had been devoted to observing the habits and preferences of monarchs. This might entail attending glamorous court occasions but it also meant spending lots of time waiting around for audiences. Indeed, the life of the courtier was increasingly seen as corrupting. Although the French might have airs and graces, in contrast to the bashful Briton, this was not usually seen as behaviour to be emulated. Some diplomats, such as Andrew Mitchell in Prussia, could become very close to the monarchs they had been dispatched to observe. Others, such as James Harris in Russia, found themselves won over by flattery, despite their best efforts to resist courtly wiles. Again the Vienna settlement inaugurated change. Castlereagh and Metternich favoured meetings of foreign ministers and monarchs to settle issues so diplomats lost some of their autonomy and increasingly dealt with other officials, rather than directly with monarchs.

Access to information and assessing its accuracy was one of the perennial problems that diplomats faced. Life at court might throw up a variety of stories and sources. There was also the question of how valuable information derived from the press might be. In addition, diplomats often sought to develop correspondence networks of their own to furnish them with information. Yet again, the arrival of new players on the international scene was disruptive. The direct attempts of French diplomats to win over the Americans to the French cause in 1793 were viewed as overstepping the mark of acceptable behaviour. Yet the line between encouragement of opposition and working directly against the government of the host state was always going to be a fine one.

Mori's discussion of the wider experience of diplomatic life forms the final part of the book. She begins with

an informative chapter on the Grand Tour. Having explained the original motivations behind undertaking it, she shows how, over time, it became increasingly formulaic (for example, by 1791 it was possible to buy letters of introduction from the Foreign Office without the need for direct supplication to the Secretary of State) and served to reinforce a Whiggish way of looking at the continent. With the growth in the European art trade, diplomats, especially those in Italy, were increasingly involved as local negotiators and shippers of acquired goods. Nevertheless, the expectation that diplomats would play host to visiting tourists could impose considerable financial strains. One solution for those without substantial independent means was to take a country house for the summer and thus ensure that one was not around to be eaten out of house and home.

William Hamilton and John Strange were not just diplomats but also *virtuosi* whose antiquarian and scientific interests helped shape British attitudes towards the Italian peninsula. Mori illustrates how both were active members of the republic of letters and helped transmit knowledge about Italy's ancient past and geological present back to Britain. Some of this activity was not dissimilar to the scholarly interests that any leisured gentleman might be expected to pursue. Yet Mori also argues that it was also part of a public persona that took cultural diplomacy seriously as well and was rather different from the notions of professional politicians and bureaucrats that were to emerge subsequently.

The discussion of Hamilton and Strange leads into a broader consideration of diplomatic contributions to the republic of letters in Mori's final chapter. She is concerned to highlight diplomats' contributions to ethnography and the Enlightenment more generally. British diplomats published interesting studies of Russia, China and Turkey, discussing, for example, what it was that made a country 'backwards'. Diplomats were often inclined to publish memoirs of their time abroad, although this process could be fraught with difficulties, such as by reopening questions about their own abilities and conduct and reviving partisan tensions. Nevertheless, the early 19th century witnessed an increased confidence in Britain's global role and responsibilities, in contrast to the more circumspect accounts of earlier ethnographers.

Mori's study manages to capture the slow and sometime uneven process through which British attitudes towards Europe were transformed in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Her constant attention to the interaction between domestic customs and foreign experience is welcome and her social and cultural history of the British diplomatic service is highly suggestive. The use of endnotes, rather than footnotes, does, however, make it harder for the interested reader to track her arguments easily. Interestingly, although the questions she asks have been very much informed by recent scholarly developments and much of her criticism of older diplomatic history is well made, the method that she adopts is much more traditional. This work is a telling example of the continued utility of prosopography. Sir Lewis Namier would be proud.

Notes

1. D. B. Horn, *The British Diplomatic Service, 1689–1789* (Oxford, 1961), p. 85.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Jennifer Mori, *William Pitt and the French Revolution* (Edinburgh, 1997).[Back to \(2\)](#)

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