

On the Fringes of Diplomacy: Influences on British Foreign Policy, 1800-1945

Review Number:

1210

Publish date:

Wednesday, 1 February, 2012

Editor:

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ISBN:

9781409401193

Date of Publication:

2011

Price:

£70.00

Pages:

312pp.

Publisher:

Ashgate

Place of Publication:

Farnham

Reviewer:

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As a field, diplomatic history is not generally known for its conceptual adventurousness. To resort to stereotypes, if representatives of the historical profession were invited to a party, the diplomatic historian would be the stiff, bespectacled man in a suit examining his host's bookshelves in the corner while the cultural historians smoked weed in the kitchen. Those interested in theory (much of it borrowed from international relations) and methodological innovation have tended to badge themselves alternatively as 'international historians', sensitive, perhaps, to diplomatic history's roots in the 19th-century empiricist tradition associated with Leopold von Ranke, famously (and cruelly) caricatured by G. M. Young as the record of 'what one clerk said to another'.

This fusty – and highly gendered – image is difficult to shake off (it is incredible, but true, that the 24-strong editorial board of *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, a leading journal in the field, contains just one woman). Yet there are signs from the recent literature that diplomatic historians are, to reprise the earlier metaphor, ready to let their hair down. To take but two examples: Markus Mösslang and Torsten Riotte's 2008 edited volume, *The Diplomats' World* (1), offers a welcome exploration of the cultures of diplomacy in 19th-century Europe, conceptualising its subject as the product of multiple interactions between personal and collective identities, shifting institutional contexts, and changing international norms. Jennifer Mori's 2010 monograph, *The Culture of Diplomacy* (2), also takes 'diplomatic culture' as its central theme, carefully analysing the occupational identities, symbolic practices and normative behaviours of British diplomats and their wives from the mid 18th to the early 19th century.

Those looking to this new collection of essays edited by John Fisher and Anthony Best for further evidence of diplomatic history's growing conceptual ambition are likely, however, to feel somewhat underwhelmed. The volume is advertised as a study of the 'fringes' of British diplomacy between 1800 and 1945, which aims to shift the focus away from the 'usual suspects' (for which read government ministers and professional diplomats) and on to a range of alternative actors enmeshed in networks of influence acting upon the form and conduct of British foreign policy in this period. These include political wives, high financiers, foreign agents, religious missionaries, press correspondents, literary figures, imperial administrators and maverick politicians. Citing Donald Cameron Watt's famous 1965 essay on the nature of the foreign-policy-making elite, and Paul Kennedy's much-read 1981 work, *The Realities Behind Diplomacy* (3), the editors remind us that diplomatic historians have known for some time that their subject comprised a good deal more than the official business transacted by the Foreign Office in London or by Britain's missions overseas. These two 'seminal' works provide a point of departure for the volume's substantive chapters, which present case studies of individuals operating on the fringes of British diplomacy or of 'particular contexts which fringed with or impinged upon the conduct of foreign policy' (pp. 1–2).

These case studies are, for the most part, scholarly and informative; they draw attention to neglected or misunderstood episodes in British diplomatic history where 'fringe' actors can be seen in play. The inherent interest of the individuals or events elucidated is certainly not in question. To select but a few: John Charmley and Jennifer Davey's essay explores the intriguing role of Lady Derby, wife of the British Foreign Secretary, during the Eastern Crisis of 1876–8. She is presented here as an example of an 'incorporated wife', who took advantage of the access she enjoyed to ministers and foreign ambassadors to intervene in the shaping of Britain's response to the crisis, although ultimately at the expense of her husband's career. T. G. Otte's chapter reconstructs the 'private diplomacy' of the financier Alfred de Rothschild, who served as British delegate at an international conference on bimetallism in 1892 and later went on to facilitate a series of informal meetings between ministers and contacts at the German Embassy in the hope of speeding Anglo-German rapprochement. In neither case, Otte reveals, was Rothschild's role decisive (or even especially important), but it does offer a window on to the complex and tangled web of social, political and professional networks in which the business of diplomacy was invariably intermeshed. A final example is Hamish Ion's essay on the place of Christian missionaries in histories of diplomacy, which he illustrates through three case studies involving Presbyterians in Formosa, Anglicans in Korea, and the diplomatic fall-out of Archbishop Lang's public opposition to Japanese incursions in China in 1937. Ion argues for missionary activity in this region to be understood as the 'voluntary religious wing of British imperialism', and hence closely tied up with British diplomatic and military activity, including the collection of intelligence and its dissemination back to London (p. 206). But it was also its 'weakest link', Ion argues, with missionaries often becoming the object of anti-foreign resentments or, in Lang's case, misjudging their relationship with 'official' diplomatic authorities.

These and other contributions will doubtless be of interest to many specialist readers, but it is a shame that the editors did not encourage contributors to push their individual analyses beyond the level of the case study in order to ask bigger questions about how these various forms of 'fringe diplomacy' related to each other, about their typicality, and about their relative importance at different moments in time. Did, for example, the press and 'public opinion' become more powerful in the later 19th century, following the

extension of the suffrage and the growth of the mass media? How did the role of religious missionaries change over time? How typical were figures like Rothschild or Arminius Vambéry, the Hungarian polymath who, as Keith Hamilton's essay tells us, was intermittently seconded by the Foreign Office to promote British interests in the Ottoman Empire? Was the influence of aristocratic women, such as Lady Derby, on the wane by the end of the 19th century, with the decline of the political salon and growing power of middle-class – and eventually, working-class – politicians?

Part of the problem here is the lack of a coherent conceptual spine linking these very disparate themes together. The spatial terminology of 'fringes' is itself unsatisfactory, as it suggests distance from centres of power, whereas several of the essays depict their subjects as anything but. Lady Derby, as wife of the Foreign Secretary and regular correspondent with leading Cabinet ministers, was hardly distanced from power. And as David Brown himself acknowledges in his chapter on the mid-Victorian press: 'rather than operating at the fringes of diplomacy, the fourth estate was integral to the formulation and execution of British foreign policy and it is necessary to acknowledge this if the dynamics of diplomacy are to be fully understood' (p. 51). The 'fringes' framework is also rather undermined by the inclusion in the volume of an essay by Gaynor Johnson on Eric Phipps and Anglo-French relations in the 1920s; the essay is perfectly interesting in its own terms, but if Phipps, a career diplomat and second-in-command at the Paris Embassy, can be located as operating on the 'fringes' of diplomacy, one has to question the basic utility of this category. Finally, the chapter by Melanie Hall and Erik Goldstein on the contribution of literary and religious figures to the forging of closer Anglo-American relations between 1820 and 1914 also sits uneasily with the volume's analytical framework. Hall and Goldstein describe their subjects as forming a 'diplomatic substructure' and identify a shift towards the 'diplomatisation of culture', both fascinating ideas, but ones which needed more space to be fully elucidated, particularly as regards their relationship to 'mainstream' diplomacy and the formal recognition of cultural diplomacy as one of the foundations of Britain's external relations.

An alternative means of linking these themes together might have involved reconceptualising diplomacy as constituted, not by fringes and power centres, but by networks of information and knowledge creation and exchange. What connects many of the actors who form the volume's case studies is their role as informants or conduits, contributing alongside professional diplomats to a larger, dynamic system through which knowledge about international politics and foreign societies is generated, circulated, and eventually fed into policy decision making. Diplomacy, after all, is essentially about process; what this volume helps to illuminate is just how permeable and porous that process could be, even after the establishment of a professionalised diplomatic service in the later 19th century. Yet understanding and explaining this phenomenon requires more sophisticated conceptual tools and a more ambitious interpretive framework than is found here. On this evidence, diplomatic historians have clearly begun to loosen their ties, but are still some distance from the dance-floor.

Notes

1. *The Diplomats' World: The Cultural History of Diplomacy, 1815–1914*, ed. Markus Mösslang and Torsten Riotte (Oxford, 2008). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *The Culture of Diplomacy: Britain in Europe, c. 1750–1830* by Jennifer Mori (Manchester, 2011). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Donald Cameron Watt, 'The nature of the foreign-policy-making elite in Britain' in Donald Cameron Watt, *Personalities and Policies* (South Bend, IN, 1965); Paul Kennedy, *The Realities Behind Diplomacy* (London, 1981). [Back to \(3\)](#)

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/7867>