

“WHAT DIPLOMATS DO”
The Life and Work of Diplomats
Sir Brian Barber
Foreword by Sir Ivor Roberts

(Rowman and Littlefield ISBN978-1-4422-2635-7)

This is a delightful book. Its purpose, as the author puts it, “is to describe, through the daily doings of an imaginary but typical diplomat, 'Adam', a kind of diplomatic Everyman, what diplomats actually do, the pains and penalties as well as the rewards and satisfactions, and how the sum of what diplomats actually do contributes substantially to the country’s foreign policy”. It does not fail in the process to recognise the crucial part played by diplomatic spouses. “Eve” is rightly well to the fore.

That purpose is triumphantly fulfilled, thanks to imaginative and entertaining, as well as expert, exploitation of the basic notion. This is buttressed by plentiful “examples”, factual illustrations of what is at issue, drawn from the author’s own experience as a diplomat of near forty years of public service, including postings as Head of Mission in Ethiopia, Poland, Nigeria and Australia. In sum, a treasure trove of insight, comment and counsel, invaluable to diplomats in the later as well as the earlier stages of their careers.

What Diplomats Do prompts two semi-tangential reflections. First, it is light years away from the first guidance offered to new British diplomats. In 1949 there appeared an hilariously anachronistic compendium *Guidance on Foreign Usages and Ceremony, and Other Matters, for a member of His Majesty’s Foreign Service on His First Appointment Abroad*, written by the then Vice-Marshal of the Diplomatic Corps. Although it was a classified document, its content soon became the object of public derision. Ernest Bevin – that great man was currently Foreign Secretary - was not amused. Copies were eagerly sought, without undue regard to behavioural norms when it came to how they were obtained. I was soon parted from the copy issued to me, and not by any act of mine.

Human nature may not greatly change. But the most effective ways of managing complex business between comparative strangers are likely to do so in response to changes in circumstances, yet not in such a way as totally to disregard the accumulated wisdom of past experience. Continuity has its value. A conservative (with a small ‘c’) used to be defined as someone who did not think his father was a fool.

Secondly, *What Diplomats Do* forbears to spell out what it is that diplomats need with which to do it. Even by the time of the author’s retirement in 1994, the Diplomatic Service, for a variety of reasons, was seriously under-resourced. The situation became far worse in the ensuing fifteen years. This explains the salutary nature of the Report of the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee on *The Role of the FCO in UK Government* (HC 665, May 2011). Matters have improved considerably under the Coalition Government, thanks in particular to the work of William Hague. The Diplomatic Service owes him much. And the opening in early February of the FCO Diplomatic Academy, his brainchild, is a source of real

encouragement. But there is a long way to go before the nation can enjoy to the full what “Adam” - and “Eve”- and their successors have to offer.

Peter Marshall

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