

US Consular Representation in Britain Since 1790

Review Number: 2358

Publish date: Thursday, 12 December, 2019

Author: Nicholas M. Keegan

ISBN: 9781783087433

Date of Publication: 2018

Price: £70.00

Pages: 340pp.

Publisher: Anthem Press

Publisher url: <http://www.anthempress.com/us-consular-representation-in-britain-since-1790-hb>

Place of Publication: London

Reviewer: Bernadette Whelan

The consular official has often been a derided figure in the historiography of foreign services, often seen as uneducated, involved in commerce, and corrupt, perhaps personified in the figure of ‘Charles Fortnum’ in Graham Greene’s spy novel *The Honorary Consul*.⁽¹⁾ Such criticisms were often levelled at consuls. Nonetheless, some scholars argue that the consular system of representation predated that of permanent ambassadors by almost 2,000 years. The modern consular system emerged after the Crusades, with the revival of trading relations—consuls re-appeared to assist merchants to conduct business in other places. In addition, they protected the interests of their compatriots, along with having diplomatic functions to protect their nation’s interest. As commerce expanded, and state ministers were appointed, the consular position lost its diplomatic character, and its wider importance. Courts and ports were two different places, requiring dissimilar types of men, with different powers. However, the consul regained some of its former prestige in the 19th and 20th centuries with the growth of international trade and intensified international relations. In the 20th century, most foreign services unified their diplomatic; and consular services and in the 21st century the consular role continues, but is much altered.

This work is divided into three sections. Part one covers the establishment and development of the US consular system in the colonial period looking at how, as weaknesses appeared, it underwent reform and professionalization. It was only in 1909 that the US government of Theodore Roosevelt finally initiated a major reorganization, leading to a unified service in 1924 under the Rogers Act. Subsequent administrative and legislative developments expanded the consular affairs division to cope with increased responsibilities and work. New insights are offered in this section relating to the role of women in the service. Predating 1922 when Lucille Atcherson became the first woman appointed to the US diplomatic service, Mrs H.S. Eggleston in Cadiz, Spain, and Mrs C.V.D. Chenoweth in Canton, China, respectively assumed their husband’s consular duties in the 1860s and in 1870. Some evidence of the resistance to women’s entry into the service can be gleaned from the views of William H. Gale, consul general in Amsterdam, who, having received notification that Pattie Field had been appointed vice consul, telegraphed the department on 3 September 1925; ‘A woman would not fill the requirements here and would be worse than useless’ (p. 40). Gale was overruled by Under Secretary Joseph C. Grew and Field remained in place until 1929, when she resigned to work with the National Broadcasting Company. Some attempt to analyze the reasons for women’s slow progress to reach the consular level, both before and after 1929, would had been useful,

particularly in light of Philip Nash and Helen McCarthy's description of the US foreign service as a 'world of elite masculinity'. (2) Moreover, the recent experiences of Elizabeth Ann Swift, who did not pass the oral examination for the foreign service in 1993 and subsequently was told by the chairman of the interview board that "we really liked you ... we'd really like to have you in the Foreign Service so why don't you marry a Foreign Service officer and you can become part of the Foreign Service that way" suggests the persistence of sexist attitudes, which require explanation. (p. 202). Nonetheless, the focus on women in the service and the consular family is welcomed and supports Glenda Slugga, Carolyn James, and Ann Marie O'Brien's arguments that the continued absence of women from a study of 'high politics' does not occur because they are 'not there'. (3) This study identifies the female consuls who acted as 'agents and subjects' and will allow other scholars to incorporate them into the historical narrative of US diplomacy and US-British relations.

Part two examines the US consular presence in Britain from 1790 to modern times. The first consular agencies in Liverpool, Dublin, and Cowes expanded into a network of 62 consuls in 1902, stretching from the Orkney islands in the north of Scotland to the Channel Islands, south of the English coast. Included in this section is the consular representation of the independent republic of Texas in Britain in 1842 and 1843 and of the Sandwich Islands (later Hawaiian Islands) between 1856 and 1900. Keegan then addresses the nature of the consuls' work and duties relating to the protection of US citizens' interests; the representation of their country; the promotion and protection of US commercial interests; and the oversight of political interests. While the circumstances of this work changed over time, as US marine and mercantile interests altered, the responsibility of providing services to American citizens in their locality remained unchanged, as did that of 'flying the flag'. Some of the greatest and most dangerous challenges faced by the consuls came during war time; particularly the War of 1812, the Civil War, the First World War, and the Second World War. Keegan notes that the latter conflict was a hazardous assignment for the consuls because the German *blitzkrieg* targeted ports and industrial centers, where consuls were based. The consulate general and the embassy in London received almost daily consular reports on air raids, on the frequency of air raid alerts, on the extent of death and destruction, and on the state of public sentiment; specifically British hopes that the US would soon enter the war. Consular engagement with political issues also emerges in the sections dealing with US consuls based in Belfast in Northern Ireland throughout the period known as the 'troubles' from the late 1960s to late 1990s.

Keegan then moves to part three and devotes the bulk of the book to detailing 15 consulates located in towns and cities throughout Britain and Ireland; Belfast, Birmingham, Bradford, Bristol, Cardiff, Dublin, Dundee, Dunfermline, Edinburgh and Leith, Falmouth, Liverpool, London, Newcastle upon Tyne, Southampton, and Stoke on Trent. Descriptions of the consulates, including opening dates, biographical information on the staff who served there, and the nature of their daily routines, are offered. This section is organized alphabetically and it might have offered stronger insights into consular work if a chronological or thematic approach was taken. In places there is a recitation of biographical facts, but it is enlivened by the description of the men and their families' lives, particularly when the inspection reports are utilized.

Contemporary references populate the work and are insightful but some—such as the 'militarization' of aspects of US foreign policy and Condoleezza Rice's 'Transformational Diplomacy'—appear at times peripheral to a study titled *US Consular Representation in Britain since 1790*; these perhaps would have fitted better into a different book. The narrative could also have been enhanced by extending the discussion of US-British and Anglo-American diplomatic relations after the American Civil War, particularly as much of parts two and three extend into the 20th and 21st centuries. Further analysis could have been offered in relation to the tension between the consular and diplomatic sides of the US Foreign Service both before and after amalgamation in 1924. The references on pp. 191–2 to possible difficulties between Consul General Robert John Wynne and Ambassador Whitelaw Reid in 1906 are tantalizing but not expanded upon. Similarly, the final chapter, 'An evolving adaptive service', focuses on the strengths and weaknesses of the consular service but does not deal with the central question; what do the changes and continuities in the evolution of the US consular presence in Britain tell the reader about the state of the US–UK diplomatic relationship from 1790 to the study's end date in 2018? In other words, do we have a better understanding of

the relationship after reading this book?

The concluding chapter might also have been used to explore further questions emanating from the text, such as: how US consuls extended their authority when dealing with naturalized citizens whose claim to American citizenship may have been tenuous; whether the consuls were subject to criticism from American citizens, the British government or local authorities; and, more relevant to the title of the book, whether trends can be identified from consular appointments and work relating to the changing nature of American diplomatic engagement with the British.

There is an occasional example of clumsy writing, where a cliché is resorted to, or the personal pronoun is used. Some repetition occurs between the text and illustration captions, and the narrative jumps in chronology within some sections (for example, moving from 1998 to 1861 from one chapter to the next), in an otherwise very readable work.

Certain themes are explored in-depth and help to provide an understanding of the practice of US diplomacy and to illustrate problems evident in the contemporary foreign service. There is the issue of cronyism, which was rife under the spoils system, and which led to the appointment of officers unqualified for their duties and often prone to corruption, as noted above. While the introduction of examinations and grades of appointment in 1895, combined with later reforms, improved the quality of appointees, presidential use of political patronage remains an issue today. For example, a political appointment is always made to the London embassy, with the exception of careerist Raymond Seitz (1991–4), and this prestigious post is still used as a way of rewarding party and political loyalty. The persistent reliance by US presidents, whether Republican or Democratic, on amateurs to conduct bilateral relations also sidelines the professional diplomat and the State Department from the decision-making process. An extension of this theme is the extent of unfilled posts under the Trump administration, with ‘dozens’ of State Department posts remaining vacant. Ironically, among those filled was that of assistant secretary for Consular Affairs. President Trump appointed Carl Risch, a Foreign Service officer with expertise in immigration enforcement, who stated that visa granting has ‘nothing to do with diplomacy’—which significantly alters the definition of the consular role as well as its place in the US foreign service(4)? Finally, this study highlights the survival of the consular role and network as part of international bilateral intercourse. Even the physical presence of the consulate building representing a foreign government can offer succor to citizens in distress, but can also represent a place of danger, as noted in the circumstances of the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi in the consulate of Saudi Arabia in Istanbul, Turkey, in October 2018.

Despite the issues raised above, this work is a substantial contribution to the history of US diplomacy from 1790 to 2018. It will be of interest to anyone interested in the mechanics of diplomacy—how the consular system was constructed in Washington DC and how it operates throughout the world, specifically in the context of Britain and its empire. This volume joins the small historiography on the US consular service in a specific region: Ruth Kark examines the American consuls in the Holy Land, 1832–1914; Francis Carroll treats the American presence in Ulster, 1776–1996; and Bernadette Whelan examines the consular service in Ireland, 1790–1913. The work is solidly based on consular reports, which are often an under-utilized source. Christoph Strupp, in his short study of American consular reports on Nazi Germany from 1933–41, describes these sources as ‘a treasure trove(5)? Additionally, they provide the scholar with a continuous and long-term American perspective on the domestic affairs of the host state. The author supplemented the relevant archival material with the oral history testimonies conducted by Charles Stuart Kennedy, former diplomat and Oral History Director of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training. The extensive bibliography will be of use to anyone further interested in the topic. All material is acknowledged and fully referenced.

The scholarly value of the work is enhanced by the detail on the individual consulates, which will make this book essential for anyone doing research in Anglo-American diplomatic relations, and—unusually—local history. As noted there are vivid biographies of many of the individuals who held the office of consul at 15 different locations in Britain and Ireland. The names and dates of service for the subordinate employees of

the consulates and the consular agents who served are listed. The book is handsomely illustrated with portraits of the most notable personalities discussed as well as invaluable images of the first female officers (for instance that of Pattie Hockaday Field standing, slightly detached, in a group photograph with 25 male colleagues taken in front of the State Department building on 5 June 1925 in their graduation year), and present-day views of United States consular buildings and the British Foreign Office's 'American Department' in 1885.

The work stands not only as an invaluable contribution to US diplomatic history in its own right, but provides scholars with new sources, ideas for future research, and perhaps less reason for concern about the current challenges to the use of diplomacy as a tool of US governments, as it makes clear that the consular service has been reinvented many times and survived many threats.

Notes

1. Graham Greene, *The Honorary Consul* (London, 1973).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Philip Nash, 'A woman's place is in the embassy: America's first female chief of mission, 1933–1964' in *Women, diplomacy and international politics since 1500*, ed. Glenda Slugga and Carolyn James (Oxford, 2016), p. 222; Helen McCarthy, 'Gendering diplomatic history: women in the British diplomatic service, circa 1919–1972' in *Women, diplomacy*, pp. 167–9.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. *Women, diplomacy*, p. 2; Ann Marie O'Brien, "'The special qualities and experiences desirable in diplomacy is less frequently found in women than in men": A study of the entry into and experiences of female diplomats in the Irish Department of External affairs/Foreign Affairs, 1919–86' (Unpublished Ph.D, University of Limerick, 2016).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Steve Straehley, David Wallechinsky, 'Assistant Secretary of State for Consular Affairs: Who is Carl Risch?', <<http://www.allgov.com/news/top-stories/assistant-secretary-of-state-for-consular-affairs-who-is-carl-risch-170726?news=860256> [2]> [accessed 6 November 2018].[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Ruth Kark, *American consuls in the Holy Land, 1832-1914* (Jerusalem and Detroit, 1994); Francis M. Carroll, *The American presence in Ulster: a diplomatic history, 1796-1996* (Washington, 2005); Bernadette Whelan, *American government in Ireland, 1790-1913. A history of the US consular service* (Manchester, 2010); Christoph Strupp, 'Observing a dictatorship: American consular reporting on Nazi Germany, 1933-1941', *GHI Bulletin*, no. 39 (Fall, 2006), pp 79-98. https://www.ghi-dc.org/fileadmin/user_upload/GHI_Washington/Publications/Bulletin39/79.pdf [3] (accessed 6 November 2018).[Back to \(5\)](#)

Source URL: <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/2358>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/299768>

[2] <http://www.allgov.com/news/top-stories/assistant-secretary-of-state-for-consular-affairs-who-is-carl-risch-170726?news=860256>

[3] https://www.ghi-dc.org/fileadmin/user_upload/GHI_Washington/Publications/Bulletin39/79.pdf