

BOOK REVIEW

The Ambassadors

Robert Cooper paints portraits of statesmen in bold strokes

by Nicholas Dungan¹

The Ambassadors: thinking about diplomacy from Machiavelli to modern times. By Robert Cooper. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson. 2021. 563 pp. £25.00. ISBN 978 0 2976 0853 0. Available as e-book.

The Ambassadors is a splendid book, but it is not about ambassadors. It could have been called *The Diplomats*, in echo of Gordon Craig's and Felix Gilbert's *The Diplomats: 1919-1939* (Princeton University Press, 1953) yet its scope is wider. The most telling title might be *Profiles in statecraft*, for, like John F. Kennedy's *Profiles in courage* (Harper & Brothers, 1956), *The Ambassadors* constitutes a gallery of narrative portraits of great statesmen in history.

The author of *The Ambassadors*, Sir Robert Francis Cooper KCMG MVO, is not himself an ambassador but does epitomise the British foreign policy establishment. After graduating from Oxford, he joined the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (as it then was) in 1970. He had postings abroad but his principal career contributions centred on policy, as head of the UK Policy Planning Staff from 1989 to 1993 and, later, as a strategist at the European Union. His approach to his subjects in *The Ambassadors* is therefore unsurprisingly analytical and intellectual.

Those subjects begin with Machiavelli, move on to Richelieu and Mazarin, then Talleyrand, whom Cooper adulates. The chapter 'Two Small Countries: Denmark and Finland' recounts the remarkable achievements of Erik Scavenius and Juho Kusti Paasikivi in devilishly complex relationships with their onerous neighbours, Germany and the Soviet Union. The chapter on Ernest Bevin, George Marshall and Dean Acheson puts into shrewd relief Bevin's true status as a masterful foreign secretary. The Jean Monnet chapter reveals his networking talent. Cooper's chapter on the Cuban missile crisis exhibits the heroism of John F. Kennedy in using restraint rather than power. The chapter on German diplomacy provides historical sweep from Adenauer to Willy Brandt to Helmut Kohl. A moving and original chapter, 'Two Diplomats and the Holocaust', portrays the personal and professional risks taken by the British consular official Frank Foley and the Japanese vice-consul Chiune Sugihara to secure safe passage to Jews fleeing Hitler's clutches.

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But the masterpieces in *The Ambassadors* are the chapter on George Kennan—perhaps dear to Cooper as the founder and first head of the United States Department of State Policy Planning Staff—and, above all, the chapter devoted to Henry Kissinger, whom Cooper admires as a foreign policy thinker in spite of Kissinger's more controversial actions. With great perspicuity, Cooper links Kissinger's diplomatic philosophy back to his reflections on statesmanship in Kissinger's Harvard University doctoral thesis, *A World restored: Metternich, Castlereagh and the problems of peace 1812-22* (Houghton Mifflin, 1957).

In an interview with Rosa Balfour for Carnegie Europe (<https://carnegieeurope.eu/2021/04/21/of-diplomats-and-statesmen-conversation-with-robert-cooper-event-7611>) Cooper describes the outstanding characteristic of his subjects as 'imagination' and he speaks of the role of chance in their accomplishments; but there is more to it than that: most of them show character, courage and respect for reality; and they are therefore adept at creating trust, which is the wellspring of successful diplomacy.

Who is missing? Progressive commentators might regret the lack of women or non-westerners (except for Sugihara) but the choice of subjects is the author's prerogative. As a world-changing statesman and even at the risk of including too many Americans, Cooper might have added President George Herbert Walker Bush, using Bush's and Brent Scowcroft's *A World transformed* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1998) as his main source.

A few failings mar *The Ambassadors*. Cooper chooses to write most often using the historical present tense, which muddles the sequence of events and can cause confusion (cf passages on Marshall p.225). The Machiavelli chapter seems to have been added as an afterthought and results in incorrect chapter references (eg on p.254 'Chapter Six' should be seven and in footnote p.427 'Three' should be four). The index lists Georg Duckwitz as appearing on pp.133 and 437 but the correct pages are 123 and 427. On p.148 'Paasikivi becomes prime minister...' in 1944 but it is not explained that he remains president until 1958. One expects better editing from Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

Cooper ends the book with a superfluous afterword on 'Two Problems in British Democracy' which he identifies as the first-past-the-post electoral system in the House of Commons and the House of Lords itself. These off-topic musings might be worthy of greater examination (alongside the undemocratic referendum process so ill-fitting to British democracy) but they do not belong here.

Cooper does offer valuable insights of his own, for example on policy formation: '[new ideas] come most often when you have just failed' (p.239) and his conclusion regarding NATO, the European Union and the liberal international order. His bibliographical note and extensive bibliography list the essential volumes of an erudite diplomat's library.

In fine, Robert Cooper's *The Ambassadors* stands as a compelling, captivating book which is a joy to read.