

Diplomacy

Harold Nicolson reveals the principles of professionalism

by Nicholas Dungan

Sir Harold George Nicolson KCVO CMG was the product of a patrician Victorian and Edwardian background and upbringing. The son of a future ambassador and the grandson of an admiral, he was born in Persia, where his father, later The Lord Carnock, was chargé d'affaires at the British Embassy.

Nicolson spent his childhood, *inter alia*, in Tehran, Budapest, Constantinople and Tangiers. He went away to school in England and attended Wellington College before going up to Oxford to study at Balliol, from which he graduated in 1907. Two years later he entered the Foreign Office and after the Great War was a member of the British delegation to the Paris Peace Conference which resulted in the Treaty of Versailles and became the subject of his book *Peacemaking 1919*.

During twenty years as a diplomat, then as a journalist and a member of Parliament, he wrote prolifically throughout his whole life, including the official biography of King George V, which earned him his knighthood. He was married to the outrée and aristocratic Vita Sackville-West — both Harold and Vita engaged in affairs but Vita's were legend — and, despite the ups and downs of their marriage, they remained intensely devoted to and supportive of each other, as recorded in their quotidian correspondence and in their son Nigel's *Portrait of a Marriage*. They also created together the splendid gardens at Sissinghurst.

The diplomat writes Diplomacy

In 1939, Harold Nicolson published a short, highly readable, immensely informative and impressively authoritative review of the practice of international affairs, entitled simply *Diplomacy*. The book makes manifest Nicolson's colossal cultural capital — across history, literature and diplomacy itself — enthralling and edifying the reader.

Nicolson begins with an examination of the 'Origins of Organized Diplomacy', taking care to scrutinise the diverging and sometimes casual definitions of diplomacy, opting above all for the most official, 'the management of international relations by negotiation'. This initial chapter traces the history of diplomacy from ancient Greece and Rome through to modern times.

In a second chapter, 'The Development of Diplomatic Theory', Nicolson looks at diplomacy from the perspectives of international law, the influence of commerce, the role of morality. He continues this approach in 'The Transition from the Old Diplomacy to the New', incorporating the concept of a community of nations expressed initially in the Concert of Europe, the increasing importance of public opinion and the acceleration in means of communication. Not unnaturally, this gives way to a

focus on 'Democratic Diplomacy', including its shortcomings owing to divergent constitutional arrangements and its difficulties resulting from disorganised decision-making processes or the intrusive role of the media.

In the latter half of the book, as opposed to surveying properties of diplomacy as a whole, Nicolson treats distinct topics related to the diplomatic profession: 'Types of European Diplomacy', 'Recent Changes in Diplomatic Practice', 'Points of Diplomatic Procedure', 'The Foreign Service' and 'Diplomatic Language'.

A pivotal position for the ideal diplomatist

Between these two halves, Nicolson inserts a chapter which belongs to neither and to both: the characteristics of the 'ideal diplomatist', a detailed description of the perfect practitioner of the diplomatic profession. In this portrait he stresses that the characteristics he singles out also constitute those of an ideal diplomacy, in other words an effective foreign policy. Nicolson echoes the admonitions of the primogenitor of the explication of diplomacy, François de Callières, whose *De la manière de négocier avec les souverains*, Nicolson says, 'contains many wise and righteous precepts'.

Emphasising that the effectiveness of the diplomatist and of a diplomatic policy must be adapted appropriately to time and place, Nicolson identifies a handful of characteristics which apply at all times and in all places. First and foremost of these is truthfulness: contrary to legend, the diplomat's reliability and credibility depend on eschewing falsehood. Next is precision, both in speech and in writing; Nicolson underscores that much diplomatic communication is in written form, and the professional diplomat must be sure that his mode of expression is clear. After this Nicolson focuses on personal traits, the first of which is calm, unexcitedness, citing Talleyrand's exhortation '*Pas trop de zèle*' and extrapolating from that two ways in which calm manifests itself: good temper and patience. To all these Nicolson adds modesty, for one needs, says Nicolson quoting Callières, the ability to read the personality of the other. And lastly, Nicolson lists loyalty, adherence to one's bearings.

Life lessons from Diplomacy

It will quickly be appreciated that these attributes of a diplomat and a diplomatic policy apply not only to the conduct of international relations but to all professional practice and all professional behaviour in all professional situations. Nicolson appears to realise this, for, in ending his chapter on the ideal diplomatist, he writes: 'These, then, are the qualities of my ideal diplomatist. Truth, accuracy, calm, patience, good temper, modesty and loyalty. They are also the qualities of an ideal diplomacy. But, the reader may object, you have forgotten intelligence, knowledge, discernment, prudence, hospitality, charm, industry, courage and even tact. I have not forgotten them. I have taken them for granted.'