

A Walk in His Shoes: A Fictional British Diplomat Gets Real

What Diplomats Do

Sir Brian Barber, Rowman & Littlefield, 2014, \$44.00, hardcover, 226 pages.

REVIEWED BY MARSHALL ADAIR

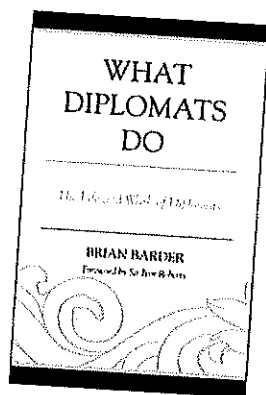
Many retired American diplomats wonder what can be done in our country to rectify the woeful lack of interest in and understanding of professional diplomatic service and its many contributions to the nation. We write books, lecture, lobby and generally proselytize, but we are still falling short.

What Diplomats Do, based on Sir Brian Barber's experience in the British Diplomatic Service, can make that effort more successful, and should be useful to universities and libraries, as well as interesting and enjoyable for the general public. It is a remarkably thorough account of the many dimensions of diplomatic work and life—not a turgid manual, but a simple story; not a novel, but almost a parable.

Sir Brian creates a fictional man, Adam, who applies to the UK Diplomatic Service just as he graduates from university. After going through a rigorous battery of tests and interviews, he is accepted and goes on to serve in a variety of assignments in Africa, North America and the Middle East. Along the way, he marries a woman, Eve, who is similarly new to international relations. Together, Adam and Eve work their way around the world and up Adam's career ladder, sharing their experiences and their "on-the-job" education with the reader.

We learn about the Diplomatic Service from Adam and Eve's experiences,

and from the education and advice that others (supervisors, friends, British colleagues and foreign counterparts) give them. This is very effective, because the author creates additional interest through the personality of the adviser. He



or she may be a clever character who is charming and compelling, or a boring and pedantic character who is ridiculous or shocking—but the reader remains engaged.

In addition, the author periodically takes the reader

aside and interjects his own actual experiences to expand the perspective of fictional narrative. Some of these asides are impressive, such as quietly talking the Ethiopian government out of bombing unauthorized relief convoys during the famine. Some of them are amusing, such as trying to explain to an Australian businessman in Sydney that as high commissioner in Canberra, Sir Brian is supervising the British consul general in Sydney, not working for him.

The book addresses most of the elements of diplomatic work and life: competing to get in and arriving at one's first overseas post; life and work in overseas posts; life and work at home; dealing with host country officials overseas; dealing with home country officials from overseas; consular and commercial work; entertaining; and the impact on spouses and children.

Though the author is talking about life and work in the British Diplomatic Service, the descriptions are remarkably similar to what one sees in the American

Foreign Service. The two major differences are size (the American presence is substantially larger) and the need to deal diplomatically with the Americans. Concerning the latter, Sir Brian is generally complimentary, though he has some critical—and sadly accurate—things to say about inexperienced and clumsy political appointee ambassadors.

Reading this, I sometimes wished that in my own career I could have crafted some of the clever and sophisticated word dances that he and his characters use to rebut accusations and still allow their counterparts "face" and the room to back off; or that I had his patience to achieve the mix of clarity and ambiguity necessary for multilateral consensus.

In *What Diplomats Do*, Sir Brian sticks to his subject. He describes the interaction of British diplomats with different parts of their own government, but does not digress into politics. He hints on several occasions that various reforms of the diplomatic service have not been improvements. And at the end of his career, Adam blasts private management consultants, perpetual reform, budget cuts, increased workload, responding to circulars and questionnaires, etc.

For prescriptive solutions—either bureaucratic or diplomatic—you need to go to Sir Brian's blog (www.barber.com/ephems), which also offers a 30-percent discount on the book!

Marshall P. Adair retired from the Foreign Service as a minister counselor in 2007 after a distinguished 35-year diplomatic career. He is the author of Lessons from a Diplomatic Life: Watching Flowers from Horseback (Rowman & Littlefield, 2013). He is a former president of the American Foreign Service Association (1999-2001) and current retiree representative to the AFSA Governing Board.