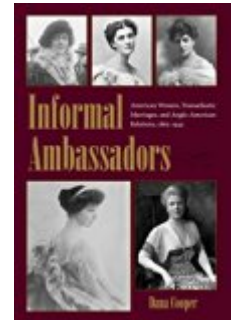


**Dana Cooper.** *Informal Ambassadors: American women, Transatlantic Marriages, and Anglo-American Relations, 1865-1945.* New Studies in U.S. Foreign Relations Series. Kent: Kent State University Press, 2014. 288 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-60635-214-4.



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In *Informal Ambassadors*, as Dana Cooper attempts to make the argument that transatlantic marriages were a crucial element of “soft diplomacy” between 1865 and 1945, she reveals the startling statistic that she was able to trace 588 marriages between American women and British peers and members of the gentry. What might have had the makings of an interesting prosopography becomes something much more predictable and traditional: an argument about the centrality of transatlantic unions to Anglo-American cultural diplomacy, based on five well-known American women to have married British politicians in the time period under study.

Cooper is no doubt correct that, like most wives of politicians, Americans who married into British families had an impact both on their husbands and on their husbands’ social circles. Feminine influence is hardly a newly identified feature of British politics; such historians as Esther Simon Shkolnik (*Leading Ladies: A Study of Eight Victorian and Edwardian Political Wives* [1987]) and Julia Bush (*Edwardian Ladies and Imperial Power*

[2000]) have outlined women’s second-hand participation as political wives and their captaincy of organizations designed to spread the gospel of imperialism. In 1980, Ruth Brandon wrote *The Dollar Princesses* which travels much of the same ground as Cooper’s book. The major difference between the two books is that, reacting to the emergence of scholarship about “soft” diplomacy, Cooper argues that the dollar princesses were, themselves, vital to the field of transatlantic diplomacy.

Cooper’s attempt to make that argument is hampered by the decision to tell this story in five disconnected biographical chapters, outlining the backgrounds, marriages, careers, and deaths of Jennie Churchill, Mary Chamberlain Carnegie, Mary Curzon, Consuelo Vanderbilt Marlborough, and Nancy Astor. This treatment does not enable the reader to really judge the extent to which any or all of the women had a significant influence on the course of events during particular diplomatic crises. To give one example, the Venezuelan Boundary Dispute of 1895 is mentioned in the

first four biographical chapters, but of the three women, only Churchill is shown to have had any influence on keeping the United States and Britain well-disposed to each other during the conflict, and even her influence was confined to having reassuring conversations at dinner parties. It is not convincing to claim, as Cooper does, that having an American wife gave Joseph Chamberlain an “ability to know, understand, and work with the Americans to find an acceptable diplomatic compromise” without also using diplomatic papers to show that this is indeed what happened (p. 83).

Cooper also asserts that the five women in her sample served as “cultural ambassadors” for the United States, but certain factors that she cites complicate this picture. As Cooper herself shows, American women who married British men lost their citizenship. All of the women mentioned brought their children up in Britain, and kept any divided national loyalties that they may have felt under wraps, so as not to torpedo their husbands’ careers. The last woman in her sample, Astor, is not even properly an American woman who married a British man, since her husband, William Waldorf Astor, was born in the United States and moved to England as an adult. As Cooper admits, the British public never completely endorsed the notion of Anglo-American unions, seeing them, particularly after 1895, as episodes of moneygrubbing from the British side, and status grubbing from the American side. And the American public showed such distrust of heiresses who crossed the Atlantic to marry that they were dismissed as practically traitorous.

The author’s evidence does point to other interesting conclusions that she might have expanded. Based on her small sample, American women of the nouveau riche class, excluded from America’s old money social set, potentially had more opportunity for engagement outside the home once they married British men, since aristocratic women had long had significant roles as philanthropists. Churchill oversaw a hospital ship; Marl-

borough helped to found the American Women’s War Relief Fund; Astor had the opportunity to enter Parliament even before American women could vote in national elections. Cooper also demonstrates compellingly that American transatlantic brides helped to solidify the notion of an “Anglo-Saxon” ruling race.

The book’s historical subjects also show a surprising lack of agency. Churchill and Marlborough were forced to live in sham marriages with husbands who disliked them; Lady Marlborough was prevented from marrying her true love. Curzon was forced to follow her husband to India after his appointment as viceroy, to continue a punishing round of entertainments even as her health languished, and to endure repeated pregnancies in the hope of perpetuating her husband’s family line. The social ostracism surrounding divorce ended Marlborough’s career on the London County Council almost as soon as it had begun. Although Cooper argues that the Churchill, Chamberlain, and Curzon marriages were all love matches, substantial parental settlements on the marrying couples were involved, forming part of a transfer of hundreds of millions of dollars from the American economy into the British economy, of which contemporaries were well aware. The one woman in Cooper’s non-random sample who clearly exercised agency, Astor, gained a reputation for obstreperousness, and although she was an accomplished parliamentarian during the 1920s, by the 1930s she had made the first in a series of egregious political miscalculations that thoroughly marginalized her.

Although *Informal Ambassadors* displays some shortcomings, it functions well as light biographical narrative, and perhaps this was Cooper’s intention, with chapter titles like “Candid Consul” and “Elegant Envoy.” The lives of the five women whom she chronicles are inherently interesting, and Cooper has a breezy, gossipy style, sharing tales of alcoholism, syphilis, and Astor’s dinner-table minstrelsy at Cliveden. It is absorb-

ing enough to cross over to a general audience already fascinated by Julian Fellowes's *Downton Abbey*, whose American-born Lady Grantham embodies the dollar princess type.

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