



**John Dickie.** *The British Consul: Heir to a Great Tradition.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2008. xiii + 261 pp.p Plates. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-70017-7.



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## **The British Consul: From the Cinderella Service to Our Man in Havana**

The management and administration of foreign affairs is a subject of particular interest to diplomatic historians. A study of the British Consular Service is all the more welcome because of the extent to which consular functions tend to be ignored in favor of the duties of diplomats. Indeed, the somewhat slighted position given to consular matters vis-à-vis diplomatic ones reflects the long-standing discrimination that for years existed on both a professional and a social level, giving rise to the title of D. C. M. Platt's book on British consuls, *The Cinderella Service*, written almost forty years ago. James Dickie, after many years the diplomatic editor of the *Daily Mail*, has written *The British Consul*, prompted by his experiences meeting consular officials and seeing them in action while in the course of his journalistic duties, as he accompanied various foreign secretaries on their worldwide travels. Dickie was regularly impressed with the efficiency and inventiveness by which numerous British consuls solved problems, eased awkward situations, and expedited the progress of the foreign secretary and his entourage of newspapermen.

Dickie also saw how the consuls served British subjects abroad, whether the victims of accident or crime, in hospital or in jail, or in the face of natural disaster or terrorist attack. In short, Dickie saw the British consul as something of an unsung hero, and his book is an attempt to relate the impressive history and valuable current role of the consular office.

Dickie begins with a brief examination of the commercial origins of British consuls in the sixteenth century. Merchants trading in the Mediterranean originally selected someone to represent their interests and to provide information that they could use to promote their own commerce. Cargos, ships, and crews needed reliable documentation to expedite credit, taxation, and transportation and the consul could authenticate the paperwork. The somewhat awkward link between these consuls and the state began to be formalized by Oliver Cromwell but was not completed until the middle of the nineteenth century. During these years some consuls continued their business enterprises, some received their income from fees, and some were paid by the state.

The distinction between consular and diplomatic roles was maintained even after the people appointed consuls were no longer individuals with any commercial experience. While the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw a steady growth in the documentation and commercial work of the consuls, in many cities, removed by distance from the legation or embassy in the capital, the consul also began to take on something of a diplomatic role as well. This was particularly true in the Middle East and in Asia, where the British Consular Service reached an enviable level of accomplishment among the international community by training its personnel in exotic languages so that they could function more effectively in the posts to which they were appointed.

As the twentieth century unfolded, the duties of the consul gradually changed. The enormous amount of paperwork authenticating documents for ships and their cargoes gave way to responsibilities concerning first, emigration, and more recently, tourism. With millions of people travelling abroad every year the focus of consular activity has shifted dramatically toward serving the public. In keeping with these changes, regular attempts have been made to end the distinction between consular and diplomatic roles and the social status attached to those

roles. Dickie points out that these efforts, and the desire to create a single, united Foreign Service that embraced diplomatic, consular, and commercial functions, have not gone smoothly. Nevertheless, Dickie expresses great praise for the dedication and efficiency of those people who serve as British Consul.

Dickie relates the history of the Consular Service with great detail and illuminating and entertaining anecdotes. It is clear that the book is based on wide reading and extensive research in the Foreign Office papers at the National Archives at Kew. The trials of British consuls since 1945 in places from Communist China to Iraq are carefully outlined. Unfortunately Dickie provides no sources or documentation for any of the many quotations and references in the text. There is a slender bibliography, although it lists only a few of the primary source materials mentioned in the book and none of the manuscript papers from Kew. The book was originally published in Britain in 2006, so it is something of a puzzle why a distinguished academic publisher like Columbia University Press would agree to produce such a book without any scholarly apparatus. Indeed, scholars will have to return to Plattâs *The Cinderella Service* for specific references to the sources of the history of the British Consular Service.

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