# Review - Informal Ambassadors

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Informal Ambassadors: American Women, Transatlantic Marriages, and Anglo-American Relations, 1865-1945
By: Dana Cooper
Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 2014.

The scholarship on the transatlantic marriages that connected U.S. heiresses to British aristocrats has tended to focus more on the weddings than their aftermaths, much less on their implications for U.S.-British relations after the vows had been made. For the social and cultural historians who have pursued this topic in greatest depth, the main issues at play are money, status, romance (or its absence), and the wives' assimilation into British society (Montgomery 1989; Brandon 1980; Eliot 1959).

Though not immune to the appeal of such matters – to the motivating sentiments, the settlements, the titles, the social jousting, and the proximity to royals – Dana Cooper is more interested in the question that has caught the attention of foreign relations historians: how did these unions affect the special relationship between the United States and Britain? Foreign relations historians have long cited these pairings as evidence of Anglo-American affinities at the highest levels, yet they have tended to de-individuate the women involved, to reduce them to pawns who fell under their husbands' sway. Cooper's contribution is to treat the American-born women as more than just passive symbols whose loyalties followed their new citizenship. In her telling, these women were active agents, informal ambassadors who purposefully represented their two countries to each other.

After sketching out the general backdrop – including the documented 588 Anglo-American weddings involving U.S. heiresses and British peers, barons, and landed gentry between the Civil War and World War I — Cooper zeroes in on five case studies: the "Amazon attaché," Jennie Jerome Churchill; the "drawing-room diplomat," Mary Endicott Chamberlain Carnegie; the "devoted mediator," Mary Leiter Curzon; the "elegant envoy," Consuelo Vanderbilt Marlborough Balsan, and the "candid consul," Nancy Langhorne Shaw Astor (ix).

Cooper's first case study, focusing on Jennie Jerome Churchill, gets the cultural ambassador thesis off to a good start. Through her role as a society hostess and an intimate of the influential in London, Jennie Churchill worked to dampen the tensions of the 1895 Venezuela boundary crisis. She also attempted to foster tighter trans-Atlantic connections through founding a periodical, the *Anglo-Saxon Review,* aimed at rendering "the United States and Great Britain more intelligible to each other" (59). Though high in price, small in circulation, and short in lifespan, the *Review* revealed a purposeful effort to fill an ambassadorial role, as did Jennie Churchill's subsequent efforts to tap into expatriate networks to fund a Boer War hospital ship. Her influence over son Winston garners less attention, but Cooper does note that the Prime Minister eulogized his mother's efforts on behalf of Anglo-American amity.

Moving in chronological order, by marriage, Cooper turns next to Mary Endicott, who first met Joseph Chamberlain when he came to Washington on diplomatic business. Citing some of Joseph Chamberlain's remarks on Anglo-Saxon solidarity during their courtship, Cooper observes: "Clearly, his looming marital treaty was influencing his international diplomacy" (77). Following the marriage, Mary Chamberlain, like Jennie Churchill, had social access to the politically influential. She too advocated Anglo-American amity in elite gatherings as well as in family circles that stretched beyond her powerful husband to her stepsons, Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and Foreign Secretary Austin Chamberlain.

Cooper turns next to Mary Leiter, who married George Curzon in 1895. As her husband climbed the political ranks on his way to an appointment as viceroy of India, Mary "began exercising her soft power style as the wife of an influential political representative, whereby she influenced political decision-making as well" (99). Evidence for the exact nature of this influence, and indeed, evidence for purposeful representational efforts, is sketchier here than in the previous two cases. Cooper finds that Mary Curzon did not lean on her husband during the Venezuela crisis. Nor does Cooper muster much evidence for Mary Curzon's efforts to represent the United States while in England or India, though she does credit Mary Curzon with refusing to disparage her country of birth.

Next up: Consuelo Vanderbilt, pushed into an infamously unhappy marriage with the Duke of Marlborough in 1895. In the wake of that marriage, Consuelo dedicated herself to philanthropic activities that "did much to shape the perception of Consuelo specifically and American women overall as dedicated, caring, and focused individuals who had much to offer Britons, and women especially, beyond their fortunes as heiresses" (140). Her support for the American Women's War Relief Fund and a military hospital during World War I further advanced her popularity in Britain and help explain her postwar election to the London County Council. Whether Consuelo's constituents saw her largely in terms of her Americanness remains debatable, but Cooper interprets her philanthropic and political commitments as ambassadorial work.

Last lady: Nancy Langhorne Shaw, who married William Waldorf Astor in 1906. A renowned hostess, she fostered Anglo-American connections through her guest lists. In 1919 she won a seat in the House of Commons, where she advanced "transatlantic issues" as well as domestic reforms (168). More than the other women discussed in the book, she reached out to U.S. audiences as a spokesperson for Britain, thus reversing the cultural ambassador role. Her reputation plummeted on the eve of World War II when she became known as an apologist for the Third Reich. Cooper does not dwell on the ambassadorial implications of Nancy Astor's pro-Nazi leanings, however, perhaps because she construes the ambassadorial role as a positive one. Rather than pursue the possibility that not all ambassadors are praiseworthy, Cooper concludes that the disfavor that followed some racist remarks made in a visit to the United States meant that "Nancy's time as an informal ambassador had passed" (175).

As the velvet-gloved treatment of Nancy Astor's fascist sympathies and white supremacist politics suggests, this is a book inclined to celebrate accomplishments: the happy servants offering gifts of silver, the cheering crowds, the Indians who offer their love to the American-born vicereine, the accolades from "the British public as a whole" (54). Those looking for a history alert to anticolonial nationalism or a sustained analysis of the ambassadorial value of an unrepentant racist should steel themselves for gentler fare. And while Cooper does use the cultural ambassador concept to good effect, her interests lie more in applying theories spelled out by scholars such as Cynthia Enloe (1989), Catherine Allgor (2000), and Donna Alvah (2007) than in reflecting on the ways that her particular subjects – with their ambiguous nationalities and multiple loyalties — might take theories of cultural ambassadorship in new directions.

Cooper makes a solid case for the mediating roles her subjects played in elite circles and the frequently positive impressions they made on larger publics, as evidenced by favorable press coverage. But evaluating the importance of these cultural ambassadorships is trickier than establishing their existence. Cooper finds that her subjects' "every word and deed held significant ramifications for the emerging special relationship" (15). Perhaps, but the telling sometimes stretches beyond the showing. The latter reveals a more specific yet still valuable insight: that some American-born wives of powerful British men actively advanced the special relationship well after their honeymoons were over.

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