



Daughters of Britannia: The Lives and Times of Diplomatic Wives

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"The reverse of stuffy" is how one British reviewer characterized Katie Hickman's portrait of English diplomatic wives. Unstuffy it is.

Hickman, whose writing is graceful and sprightly, describes the unusual and often difficult lives of Foreign Service spouses. Tracking these feisty transplants from the 17th century to the present, she shows how these very significant others coped with everything from tropical epidemics to kidnappings to small household budgets.

Warm-weather reading.

Daughters of Britannia: The Lives and Times of Diplomatic Wives Details

Date : Published July 8th 2011 by Flamingo (first published 1999)

ISBN : 9780006387800

Author : Katie Hickman

Format : Paperback 352 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, Biography, European Literature, British Literature, Historical

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From Reader Review Daughters of Britannia: The Lives and Times of Diplomatic Wives for online ebook

Redfox5 says

I really struggled with the first half of this book. It's taken nearly a week to read because it just made me feel so sleepy and yawny. I usually finish books within 3 days! However this book does get a lot more interesting and readable after 'Social life' So best to stick with it. It makes it quite hard at first because there are so many names and dates to remember. At the end of the book Katie Hickman asks the question 'Would you find this kind of life exciting?' I honestly don't think I would. I wouldn't want to have to deal with the pettiness of it all. Forever hosting dinner parties, changing location every couple of years etc. I think it would be horrible!

Megan Spilker says

Another book I couldn't put down and one of the biggest inspirations for becoming an Ambassador or someone in the realm of diplomacy. The real-life stories of these incredible women are utterly gripping. The accounts of incidents overseas are completely amazing that one would almost assume that the whole book is a work of fiction. A fantastic read for both genders.

Eloise says

This could be a little dense at times but it's a great anecdotal snapshot of those who've "married in" to the British Diplomatic Service and the social roles and expectations of women, in the Empire and more recently. The narrative focuses on a few key historical figures (who I would be delighted to read more about) and the more recent and emotive topics focused on the correspondence and experience of family, friends and the author herself.

I did feel that the later chapters dealing with what it meant to be a modern diplomatic spouse (including the pressures on diplomatic husbands), and the experiences of embassy families in conflict (particularly The Troubles) could have been expanded on, perhaps in their own book.

Kate Millin says

As the daughter of a diplomat, Katie Hickman is well-situated to write about the lives of the women who, from the 17th century onward, have traversed the globe as partners of Britain's ambassadors. These women are more than simply bored socialites, they are indispensable companions, intrepid travellers and, in many cases, exemplary ambassadors for their country. Hickman details the lives of the female ambassadors, from flamboyant characters such as Vita Sackville-West, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and the "bolter" Emma Hamilton, to lesser-known contemporary stoics like Jane-Ewart-Biggs, whose husband, the British Ambassador to Eire, was killed by an IRA car bomb in 1976, and Veronica Atkinson and family, who cowered in the basement of the British Embassy in Bucharest during the 1989 uprising that overthrew the Romanian dictator Nicolai Ceaucescu.

What frequently unites Hickman's wildly different subjects is their loneliness--drawing on letters, diaries and

memoirs, she portrays women who had to discipline themselves to adapt (often ingeniously) to unfamiliar cultures, far away from friends and family--many, in particular, were separated from their children, who would be sequestered at boarding school back in Britain--while maintaining an unimpeachable public image. "I shall be obliged to travel three or four days between Buda and Essek without finding any house at all, through desert plains covered with snow, where the cold is so violent many have been killed by it", wrote Lady Mary Wortley Montagu of her treacherous journey to Constantinople in 1716. Almost 300 years later, in 1996, Stephanie Hopkinson wryly itemised the "bizarre qualifications" necessary for daily diplomatic life in a Sarajevo under siege: "Ability to ... apply make-up in the dark; aptitude for bathing in a cold teacup and keeping one's hair/self/clothes clean and uncrumpled as long as possible ... vivid imagination which converts tinned frankfurters, bread and rice into smoked salmon/steak and chips...".

I found this a fascinating read - it reminded me of stories my Grandma told me about when she was living in the East with her father who was a military policeman - including her mum finding a servant straining peas through a sock! She also liked curry having been kept quite by her Ayah letting her suck on a finger with curry paste under the nail!

Kelly says

Katie Hickman seems to have three major points here: trying to redeem the neglected "women's work" that countless female diplomatic partners have done supporting their husband's career, exploring the ways in which the helpmeet role of the spouse has changed (or not), and fighting the perception that diplomacy is just a bunch of overpaid, to-the-manor born snots going to balls. All while, seemingly, trying to give us a sense of the history of the service, and the many different kinds of women and families that participated in its way of life.

That's a whole lot to take on.

So perhaps it is no surprise that after starting out with all of that, this book doesn't come out as very fulfilling. It reads more like a collection of notes and stories, organized by a vague theme, and perhaps meant to be read as separate essays in a magazine. It needs some polishing, some editing, and an professor to write in red ink all over this "Focus, focus, focus!"

As the author is herself the child of diplomats and seems to have a lot of contacts with important people in the service and their wives, I wish that she had stuck to what she knew. The best chapter in the book was the one entitled "Children," where she clearly has extensive personal knowledge, knew many people with something to say and/or had a ton of archival research about people with something to say, and could present all sides of the experience of parents and children in a coherent fashion that really made you think about the effect that the diplomatic life had on families. But instead she insisted on wandering all over the place, trying to give us a full historical picture from 1660s Istanbul to what was her present day (1990s), with the result that it just feels rambling and unwieldy, and the audience feels as if they've been gypped with every short, incomplete story that she tells. I wanted her to either introduce me fully to these women, give me a picture of all their lives as much as possible, or treat them completely impersonally as examples, and she didn't really do either. She would tell you this very touching story about a woman who you hadn't heard about before, with no background, then the woman would totally disappear. It was very unsatisfying storytelling and certainly not a very good history, if that's what she meant to do.

What it was, however, was a helpful guide for someone whose family may be entering the foreign service

(even if it is based on the British service, one imagines things aren't done too differently over here). It really does present to you the full breadth of problems that you might be likely to encounter, shows you horrible things happening to couples and families and how they dealt with it, and makes you think about the material costs and benefits of living the diplomatic life. As I said, "Children," was the most striking chapter, but it is followed closely by "Contemporary Spouses," and "Rebel Wives," which talk about people who lived (and live) outside of the stereotypical mode of the diplomat and the supportive, smiling, spouse, the very real pressures to conform and the despair of watching your life be completely consumed by someone else. This profession seems to be unique in the modern world in that it is not only considered acceptable, but preferable, for the non-diplomat spouse to not work (especially as one gets more senior at an embassy) and support the work of the diplomat.

This could certainly have been much better. I hardly even think that this qualifies as a book, just a hodgepodge collection of Notes From the Edge. But if you're willing to mine for it and wait for it, there's definitely things to be got out of this.

Cassandra Kay Silva says

The book was very well researched and had some absolutely amazing stories embedded in it. The grandiose moments in court coupled with the desperate hardships of traveling and living in Remote outposts like Persia and Brazil during these times was very compelling. It spanned mostly from the late 1800 up until the present day although the focus was fairly heavily on the early and mid 1900's and had a collection of some of the most fascinating and intriguing stories of the lives of the wives of Ambassadors from Britain overseas. It included so many women and so many different outposts though that at times it disconnected you from some of these women and put them as another on a list. I think the author would have done a little better to focus a bit more on some of these women themselves instead of flitting between each subject and encompass all of the women at once. Although I must admit her approach did help the reader to draw conclusions as a more holistic perspective of what these ladies collectively went through. Overall a very enjoyable jaunt. You get camel rides in the desert with harems, dinners in the court of France, and you also get a feel for the trials and hardships of this life. Plagues, war, loneliness, the costumes in the weather, the detachment from children and family, physical pain and disease. A very powerful read.

Dinah Küng says

Along with a similar book, *Women of the Raj*, a fantastic tribute to the courage, imagination, energy and sheer perseverance of British diplomatic wives in putting the best face on what were in many cases, impossible situations. In these times, when globalization is the byword, it's hard to appreciate when it was absolutely a question of personal and professional survival to remain true to a particular culture and upbringing in the face of enormous challenges and physical dangers. Loved it.

Katharine says

I enjoyed reading this book so it should probably be 3.5 stars but it was in some ways a little unsatisfying. The purpose of the book was to show the role played by the wives of British diplomats from the 17th century until the end of the 20th. These women were unpaid but expected to take a huge part in their husband's jobs. All of this was very interesting and we were introduced to some fascinating and often heroic women, most of whom could have been the subject of a book on their own. The problem I had was that the author chose to present the material thematically rather than chronologically to point out the similarities and differences across a 300 hundred year period. This didn't really work for me and I wonder if it might have been done chronologically, focusing on the story of a specific women from each period rather than the more scattergun approach the author adopted. An enjoyable read but might have been stronger.

BAM The Bibliomaniac says

Audiobook #173

Fiorella Mauro says

Ambassador, you spoil us.

3/4 history, 1/4 memoir of a British diplomat's daughter. The historical research and the insight into the lives of British diplomatic wives is entertaining and not at all dull. Some of the anecdotes are laugh-out-loud funny. The memoir aspects are more dependent on your tastes. Overall, a wonderful book to have with some Ferrero Rocher.

Nandakishore Varma says

In the Indian epic *Ramayana*, there is a poignant scene: Rama, the prince of Ayodhya, is forced to renounce his kingdom and go to the forest for fourteen years. His young wife Sita insists on accompanying him, against his better counsel. As they step out of the palace, Sita asks: "How much further to the forest?" It is said that at this, Rama's eyes moistened for the first time.

I think most of the the so-called "Diplomatic Wives" mentioned in Katie Hickman's *Daughters of Britannia* would have sympathised with both Sita and Rama.

England, as the pioneering marine and trading power, must have been the first country to understand the need for diplomats. Even before the country started sending official envoys, the East India Company was posting its employees at strategic points around the globe to safeguard and further their commercial interests. These postings were isolated, difficult and many a time downright dangerous – according to the maxim of those days, "no place for a woman". However, the wives of these diplomats had little choice – they were forced to follow their husbands into the wilderness, because "it was a wife's duty to be at the side of her husband".

It would have been bad enough if these poor souls were forced move out of a sane, civilised country to savage barbarian lands (in their viewpoints, at least) – they were also expected to fulfil an unpaid official function: that of the diplomat's wife. It was an exacting task, emotionally and physically draining, especially a couple of centuries back when the world was not the known and familiar space it is now. These ladies had to make official visits to Sultans' harems, host diplomatic dinners for hundreds of people and sometimes attend official functions along with their husbands without making a faux pas in a totally alien culture. And most of the junior diplomats' wives had to put up with cranky, eccentric "ambassadors" (the ambassadors' wives) who treated them little better than slaves in a rigidly enforced social hierarchy.

Lady Isabel Burton, wife of Sir Richard Burton

There were also the physical dangers. Before the aeroplane was invented, the journey to the "posting" comprised terrifying treks across inhospitable mountains and death-defying voyages across stormy seas. Most of the host countries (especially the tropics) were home to a number of diseases which were potentially deadly to the English physique. There were even scourges like the plague to be encountered! And this is apart from the very real dangers of captivity, rape, torture and death which were always present in the turbulent climes these ladies inhabited.

Yet most of them bore it all with true British fortitude (stiff upper lip, Jeeves!) and many wrote poignant and amusing memoirs, full of underplayed English humour. Katie Hickman, herself a "diplomatic daughter", has researched these extensively and produced a fascinating book, drawing upon her mother's reminiscences and her own childhood memories too in the process.

The swashbuckling Lady Anne Fanshawe

These diplomatic wives span across the years from 1661 to the present. Forty-six of them are credited as "principal women"; however, a number of others are mentioned in passing so I suspect the number may exceed a hundred. Sixty-two books have been credited in the bibliography, apart from various magazines (the main ones being various issues of BDSA [British Diplomatic Spouses Association] and DSWA [Diplomatic Service Wives' Association] house journals). The amount of research is extensive and exhaustive.

The organisation of the book is also excellent: instead of presenting the stories chronologically or sequentially, Hickman has chosen to divide the book into chapters which explore the various facets of the diplomatic life. Thus we have chapters on "Public Life", "Social Life", "Hardships" etc. to name a few. In each of these chapters, the author explores the experiences of her protagonists separated across time and space, emphasising the similarities and differences alike – so what the reader gets is a continuous narrative, a feeling of solidarity among these poor daughters of a colonial power, forced to bear the standard of their country in hostile atmospheres – mainly out of necessity, not out of choice – yet doing it in grand fashion, most of the time.

Victoria Sackville-West

Some of the wives stand out as special characters. Isabel Burton, wife of Sir Richard Burton, following him wilfully into the jungles of Brazil; the swashbuckling Ann Fanshawe; Victoria Sackville-West, whose stain of illegitimacy is washed away in the diplomatic arena; Emma Hamilton, who climbed the ladder all the way

from prostitute to princess (well, metaphorically)... and many more. As I read this book, I was filled with admiration for these daughters of the empire – all the more so, because as an expatriate, I know the cultural shock of adjustment even in these modern times.

A very worthwhile read.

The ravishing Lady Emma Hamilton

Review also on my [blog](#) .

Linda says

The level of detail and depiction of hardships were intriguing, but I only made it through half of the book. These women worked as hard as pastors' wives, and with as little support, but their goals in supporting their husband's vocation seemed rather insubstantial. The level of 'why' was missing in the narrative - why should the readers care that the wives had to put up with lack of servants, or the constant juggle of family life mixed with business, or the constant backbiting mixed with intrigue? What did all of this sacrifice accomplish? By the time I read through pages depicting the self-centered, condescending, and snide Vita Sackville-West and her politics-mad husband Harold, I wanted to re-read early chapters like 'The Posting' and 'Partners', with the much more uncomplaining and stalwart Mary Shiel and Ann Fanshawe. If the author's point was that diplomatic wives were exposed to immense hardships, merely for the sake of meaningless convention that required a great deal of effort and smooth speeches meaning nothing much, and an incredible outpouring of time in making visits to which there was no real purpose, then I think Katie Hickman made her point. What she perhaps forgot to include was a reason why her readers ought to labor through this meticulously detailed account of women and households posted in foreign lands.

Romily says

This is an excellent addition to books about social history, especially those which resurrect the neglected lives of women: in this case the diplomatic wives, who from the seventeenth century, accompanied their menfolk to postings around the world. Katie Hickman, herself the daughter of a diplomat's wife, has written a lively, highly anecdotal account of the experiences of these women: their public and private lives, hardships and amazing experiences. The author has used first hand sources, such as letters, memoirs and diaries and organised the mass of material into thematic chapters, combining accounts from across the centuries. I found the earlier accounts the most interesting, as the women really were casting themselves into unknown territory. Often pregnant or mourning the death of children, they had to confront the ordeals of travelling to countries with customs and ways of life they knew little about beforehand. I was struck by the ability of these women to endure the physical and emotional hardships of their situation. Even the wives of later periods had often to confront physical danger . All the women were constrained by rigid protocol and there were clear expectations of their role as supporters of their husbands and upholders of British values. There were some rebels, but in most cases these women thrived on the novelty of moving from place to place and experiencing different cultures, and took on the supporting role with efficiency and cheerfulness. Although the book is full of interest and marvellous characters, the anecdotal approach makes for rather disjointed reading. From one paragraph to the next the reader is jumping centuries and countries. It has left

me with a desire to follow up some of the women's lives myself - which is perhaps a good thing.

Gail Carriger says

This is a fun read, and factual, so far as I can tell, but the information is not organized chronologically. More this book talks about the experience of being a diplomat's wife. So a paragraph on packing might include three different women in three different places and times: one 1780s Paris, one 1950s America, one 1870s China.

As a alt-history author, I tend to need information about travel to a specific place at a certain period of history, well organized, and easily assessable. This book is utterly useless for that. It rarely explains historical words or terms and has a undersized index and glossary.

It read a little bit like someone's PhD thesis gone wrong. It was a comfortable read for non-fiction, and I enjoyed it, but as a researching author I mainly found it frustrating. I ended up going through her bibliography and ordering a primary source instead.

Ape says

Light historical read on the institution of the British embassy wife - that will say women who were married to men employed by male embassy workers. These women were never employed or paid by the embassy, and yet simply because of the marriage, their lives were considered that of the embassy. (Hickman herself points out at the start that women who have worked in embassies are beyond the scope of this book, so they don't come in). Having read this, it's not a life I could have taken to.

This is a history book/biography of the role rather than individuals, and as Hickman's taking about three centuries worth of experiences from the globe, it won't come as a surprise to say people's experiences were very different. Although all the way through there is the emphasis that every waking moment is to the role and as they are representing Britain, they can't be themselves. In certain countries, there was a lot of pomp and ceremony with elitist types thinking themselves above the rest of the world (I wouldn't have been able to stand that), rules on how to dress, regardless of temperature, that a wife shouldn't speak up with opinions as this would reflect on the husband etc etc... These women made enormous sacrifices without being asked (they were told) and without being thanked. They were away from friends, family and their native land for years if not decades, often had their children sent away to boarding school, had to deal with famines, plague, revolts and revolutions, kidnappings and assassinations.

As the book is focused on the role rather than individuals, it's split up thematically into various aspects (travelling to, private life, public life, setting up, children, dangers, husbands etc). During the book I sometimes wondered if I would have preferred it broken up in another way - perhaps per personal experiences (although I think she draws on the lives of too many women for this to have worked), or time period or even country or region of the world. But overall I think it was probably best as it is. Although this does mean I don't remember who experienced what and when in a lot of cases. Some figures stick out, and I'd actually like to read more about them, in particular Ann Fanshawe (swashbuckling heroine of the early days of embassies), Isobel Burton, Elizabeth McNeill and perhaps the Tullys who were in Algeria during some dreadful plagues. Hickman herself is the daughter of a diplomatic couple, and she's lived all over the

world with her parents, sadly including a posting to Ireland during the troubles so the ambassador at the time was assassinated whilst she was living there. This personal experience is included in the book and gives it another angle. There's a few photographs in the centre, including a sweet photo of her mother writing letters with the pet cat curled up asleep in the crook of her arm.

It was good although of Hickman's books I've read so far, I probably enjoyed the history book on Courtesans a bit more. Her fictional book *The Aviary Gate* is also worth a look.
