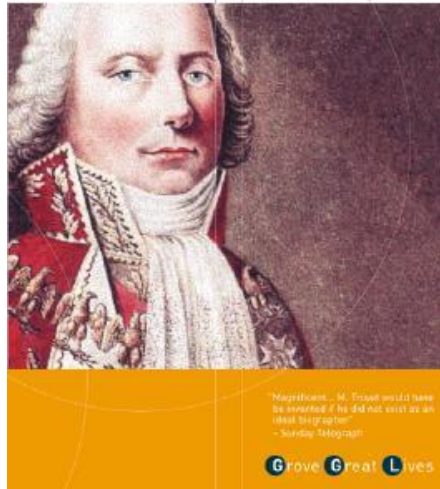


Talleyrand

Duff Cooper



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Talleyrand

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Talleyrand Duff Cooper

Unique in his own age and a phenomenon in any, Charles-Maurice, Prince de Talleyrand, was a statesman of outstanding ability and extraordinary contradictions. He was a world-class rogue who held high office in five successive regimes. A well-known opportunist and a notorious bribe taker, Talleyrand's gifts to France arguably outvalued the vast personal fortune he amassed in her service. Once a supporter of the Revolution, after the fall of the monarchy, he fled to England and then to the United States. Talleyrand returned to France two years later and served under Napoleon, and represented France at the Congress of Vienna. Duff Cooper's classic biography contains all the vigor, elegance, and intellect of its remarkable subject.

Talleyrand Details

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From Reader Review Talleyrand for online ebook

Kim Loughran says

A British diplomat writing about one of the greatest of the ilk. Talleyrand emerges more altruistic than in other contemporaneous studies — in the Vincent Cronin biography of Napoleon, for instance, he is villified. But the style is fast without being hurried and the characters are alive. A further insight into the role of mistresses and courtesans in a time when clever women were barred from professional life but had strong influence.

Lea says

2.5

For a biography about a man as interesting as Talleyrand, it is rather boring, I'm afraid.

Kelly says

Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, the renegade, married Bishop of Autun, Prince of Benevento, Prince of Talleyrand of largely infamous renown. His name, where it is still known, is likely to call up images of what some thought to be his spirit animal, the snake, or perhaps just the snake charmer. He is best known as the remarkable survivor of five straight French regimes, and not the relatively kind ones where you got to rusticate in the country when you fell out of favor. These were the years of Louis XVI, Danton, Marat, Sièyes, Fouché, Napoleon and the Ultras, and aside from the two years of the Terror which he largely spent abroad in England and America, he was rarely out of government service the whole time. By reputation, he was considered a man without honor by many, the untrustworthy minister who was nonetheless recalled and recalled again to serve the French government, whomever might be at its head. His most famous and unambiguously triumphant episode: the astonishingly favorable outcome of the Treaty of Paris, followed by the Congress of Vienna, at which, despite the return of Napoleon and the slight.... interruption of Waterloo, he was able to obtain for France a *still* almost unbelievably favorable settlement and return her to the status of a Great Power. This allowed the completely exhausted and occupied country to maintain her borders and visited punishment largely only on the conqueror, rather than on the people who had supported him (again, incredibly, even after the Hundred Days!). Later on, through his time at the London Embassy, he was also a large player in ensuring that the question of Belgium, one of the major mistakes of the Congress, was peacefully fixed and resolved, and helped ensure that war did not break out once more.

And yet, despite these amazing feats, his negative reputation remains. The clever Talleyrand, certainly. But more importantly, the man who stood for nothing- who changed his opinions and advice to suit his masters, who was just as happy serving the good king as the ambitious conqueror. The man who who was only out for himself and his own survival- oh, remarkably good at it, one must give him that, but still, not one that anyone, in fact, from *any* faction would trust farther than they could throw him.

But why? Surely whatever faults he may have had, his accomplishments and many years of government service (and remember this is centralized France we speak of) must outweigh them. You would think this

would especially be the case as passions faded and the practical results of his work became more evident, especially as his memoirs were released and the Second Empire came to a close, that it would be time for the revisionist biography. But, as of 1932, that had not occurred.

Cooper's reasoning for writing this biography lies there. At one point in this biography, Cooper reminds us of the politics of historians in France. At least into the early 20th century, they tended to fall into one of three camps- Republican, Royalist and Bonapartist. Perhaps even more so than most countries, the story of France's 18th and 19th century history depends on where your sympathies lie- whether we can hear tears over the wheels of the tumbrils or only the iron march of justice or perhaps only a faraway prophecy of the Savior to Come. Talleyrand was the firm disciple of none of these camps and thus, points out Cooper, he has not "yet found his defender in France." Duff Cooper, a diplomat, politician and historian himself, takes up his sword here to become his defender in their place with what seems to me to be a great deal of sympathy towards one that I believe he considered a colleague of sorts that he had a right to analyze like he would analyze the work of any other counterpart, based on his own experience in the field. (I would like to do him the credit of saying that Cooper states his bias straight out as he remarks that he is *"an Englishman who believes that Talleyrand was a true patriot and a wise statesman to whom neither contemporaries nor posterity has done justice"*.)

Thus, Cooper dedicates his history of Talleyrand to refuting, or at the least complicating the negative reputation that generally attaches to Talleyrand. His major means of doing this is through defending him from the biggest charge made against him: that he was a man of inconsistent or non-existent principles who cared only for his own survival and acted accordingly. He does this by stating, consistently, that he argued, from 1789 to the 1830s for a policy that was marked by moderation, conciliation and the desire for domestic and foreign peace. He believed in constitutional monarchy and freedom of the press and in reconciling the old guard and the new revolutionary spirit, and said so on many occasions.

Cooper admits that Talleyrand would not die for these principles. He was willing to state them, argue them, make the best case possible for them. But he would not fall on his sword if they were not obeyed. But nonetheless, he maintains that each time he was asked for his advice or given the opportunity to state his views, he held to these same principles, whether in the last days of 1789 or throughout Napoleon's mad expansionist period.

An example is an episode where he is rather prophetic about the fates of both Prussia and Austria which were to eventually follow later in the century, in part due to their crushing treatment at the hands of Napoleon . As a demonstration of Talleyrand's policy of conciliation, peace and moderation, he accurately analyzed the weakness of the Austrian empire and wrote Napoleon, after both Ulm and later Austerlitz, that *"Such a power is necessarily weak [Austria], but she is an adequate bulwark against the barbarians and a necessary one. To-day, crushed and humiliated, she [Austria] needs that her conqueror should extend a generous hand to her and should, by making her an ally, restore her to confidence in herself, of which so many defeats and disasters might deprive her forever... To-day more than ever I date to consider it the best and wisest policy."* Napoleon ignored his advice, and ignored similar advice given about the likelihood of the lessons that Prussia was likely to draw from their treatment in defeat and indeed, his blunt statement that so crushed a country could never be an ally. Talleyrand attempted to rein in the worst of Napoleon's excesses, and various statesmen attest to him being the voice of reason at this time. In addition, within a year he resigned from the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, unable to bear supporting Napoleon's endless ambition and ever-changing policy, especially when he would no longer listen to his advice. Therefore, in actuality, we have a man who consistently spoke his unpopular truth to a man who many considered the modern Caesar and was ready to argue away some of Napoleon's desire for the spoils of victory.

Beyond his defense of Talleyrand's consistency in arguing for moderation, conciliation and peace, one interesting feature of the biography is that his defense is remarkably tailored to the audience he seems to have in mind- that is upper class Englishmen with some experience with government. Thus it is no surprise to find that Talleyrand is endowed with all the virtues that that audience could be counted upon to appreciate, and many opinions that were likely to endear him to that particular crowd. For instance, one argument that returns again and again is that Talleyrand was an Anglophile. Indeed, beyond that that he always believed that France and England were natural allies. He points out each time that Talleyrand strove for an Anglo-French alliance (which he maintains was one of those "consistent principles" that was nearly as important to him as general European peace) and spends a great deal of time on Talleyrand's time as Ambassador in London. He further more reports the favorable impression that he made on various famous English of the time, men and women his audience would have recognized-Aberdeen, Lord Grey, Lord Holland and Wellington himself. It also probably did not hurt that he intimates that the French never recognized Talleyrand's worth, but Englishmen were smart enough to do so- so hah!- those ungrateful, wrong French need to be tutored by England once more. In addition, he takes every opportunity to position Talleyrand as a graceful, aristocratic survivor of the 18th century, a species which was thought of at the time in England with nostalgia by many in the upper class: the time before the storm and the scare, when conversation was an art and the rabble hadn't a thought in their heads of such horrid things as revolution and demanding their rights. There are a legion of anecdotes contained here that serve no other purpose but to illustrate Talleyrand's inborn class and grace and his ability to strike the sort of pose that aristocrats liked to believe that aristocrats have always struck. Finally, he makes frequent off-hand asides that his audience is meant to understand with a small smirk and a knowing nod of the head. You know, the sort of joke that comedians make that starts, "You know how when..." except rather than detailing a character from the metro, the characters he expects us to recognize are types that you are likely to see about an embassy or an upper-class drawing room- or at the very least in a book that anyone sitting in either of those locales would have read. He expects his audience to have the same base that he is working from. Again, it is a defense of a colleague (I don't care how long in the past it was- this is a man who could blithely write that "*Pitt received him and was as stiff as only Pitt could be,*" of the English Prime Minister of two centuries previously- as if he had just gone to his house for tea the previous day).

Indeed, to that end, it was interesting to me how much of his defense ultimately rested on the fact that Talleyrand was, after all, incredibly good at his job. Reading this from modern-day, it sounds as if Talleyrand would have made an incredibly successful consultant of the Booz Allen type. Another major way that Cooper defends him is to state over and over again that Talleyrand gave the best advice to whoever asked it of him, whether royalist conspirator or Napoleon himself, whether to members of the Directory or to the restored Bourbons. For example, when he was asked if the Empress should leave Paris when the allies were marching on it before the formal capitulation of the government- he said no, that it would indicate the surrender of Paris and "*throw away the game with good cards in hand.*" He said this despite the fact that he supported the royalist cause at the time and had done for some time. This advice was ignored and the Empress left Paris, but nonetheless he gave the best advice possible at the time for Napoleon's position. Cooper writes:

"When he was asked afterwards why he had given advice, which, if it had been followed, would have proved injurious to the cause which he already secretly supported, he replied that his credit at the time stood so low that he knew that he had only to advise one course for the opposite to be adopted. This was an ingenious explanation of his conduct, but it is permissible to believe that in giving it he was doing himself, as not infrequently, less than justice. He may have doubted whether his advice would be followed, he certainly wished no good to the Napoleonic regime, but when required to deliver an opinion on a question of policy, he probably preferred to give the opinion which he really held, and which also was the wisest counsel in the circumstances. All through the previous year whenever Napoleon had asked for his opinion he had given it

honestly, advising the Emperor to make the best peace he could, although with little expectation and less desire that such advice would be followed. Although his conscience troubled him little, there exists such a thing as professional pride, and it must have afforded him some consolation to feel that the advice which he had given was always sound and that those who refused to follow it were the architects of their own misfortunes."

Now tell me: Hand this to a bunch of career diplomats and government servants and politicians. How many of them do you think can maybe recognize some part of *that* scenario?

In the end, then, it is a fairly able defense. His writing is remarkably authoritative, his narrative runs smoothly for the most part, and his general insights about politics, in-depth analysis of each political situation Talleyrand deals with and finally his determination to point out what seems to be fairly obvious bias on the part of many of Talleyrand's contemporaries makes the reader apt to want to believe him. However, I should point out a few flaws: For those looking for a particularly scholarly biography, you will not find it here. You will cringe with his frequent, lordly assumption of how people "must" have felt (with sometimes little textual evidence to support it) or how Talleyrand must "doubtless" have proceeded due to some motive that he never wrote down. Also, while his citations of primary sources are frequent and impressive, they are embedded like anecdotes in the narrative and there are no footnotes or endnotes to be found where we might go look up a quotation for ourselves. In addition, despite his indignation about the biases of Talleyrand's contemporaries, he does not hesitate to assassinate the character of many of Talleyrand's accusers himself. There is a general tone of "Well this mean old man said this horrid thing about Talleyrand, but he was a mean old man who was just jealous of him anyway," about a lot of his refutations of others. And due to his lack of citations or in-depth review of the history of many of these people he mentions, I am unable to judge whether Cooper is making this up as he does how Talleyrand "doubtless" must have felt on several occasions. Finally, during what were actually Talleyrand's surprising amount of years away from the center of power, Cooper has a tendency to wander about quite a bit with his narrative and go out of his way to point out Talleyrand's relevance by taking us through a sequence of barely related anecdotes about interesting personages he met along the way. Sometimes amusing, but I think lengthened the book unnecessarily for what seemed to be the purposes of providing character witnesses for Talleyrand.

Ultimately, I think of his biography in the same vein that I do Nancy Mitford's biographies. The tone is nearly the same. The writing is just as divinely sure of itself, his advice and opinions as magisterial as only an English politician and diplomat who grew up under Victoria's empire and owned a quarter of the globe could be. There is no suggestion that he might not know something, not a hint of qualification or ambiguity. Where Cooper defends Talleyrand, he has his back 100%. Where he is willing to condemn him, he says so straight out and wastes no more than a few sentences on it.

And his writing- I really cannot emphasize enough how excellent his writing is. Aside from that wonderful tone I mentioned above which just makes me smile every time, he is really a master of character sketches. I met many characters here I had never heard of before, and after usually less than one page of description on Cooper's part, I never felt the need to read another word about them again. One of my favorite examples:

"A brave and loyal messenger was needed who would carry through the line defended by Napoleon's army to the allied statesmen and if possible to the Bourbon Princes themselves... Such a man was available in the person of the Baron de Vitrolles, one of those faithful and fearless supporters of the old order, whose belief in the righteousness of their cause was as sincere as their religion, and whose services were as valuable in moments of crisis as they were embarrassing after the victory was won. The Baron had already fought for the cause, but this was his first introduction into the world of high politics and he has left us in his memoirs the impression that it produced on him. He was naturally alarmed at the prospect of negotiating with

statesmen whose names were already famous throughout Europe, but the more he saw of them the less he thought of them, and it appeared to him that both Talleyrand and Fouché were rather lacking in intelligence as neither of them seemed to have a clear idea of exactly what he wanted. Politics are indeed a simple science to honest souls like the Baron de Vitrolles, who believe that all solutions of the problem save their own are wrong and who are prepared to die for their cause."

(Aside: On top of everything else that's great about it, does this remind anyone of a certain bombastic PM-to-be? Come on! Get way harsh about it. Put WWI center brain. People could still be snotty about Churchill in 1932- and were. It probably isn't a comment, but it totally could be, right??)

Cooper also takes periodic time out to express his own views on various subjects, usually, again, in a pleasing and interesting fashion. There is a lovely and somewhat astonishing- when considered in its parts- description of time passing in England that he gives just as Talleyrand arrives in the country to begin his ambassadorship in 1830:

"It was a very different country that this lover of England was revisiting in 1830 from that which he had left in 1794. Never perhaps have thirty-six years effected so complete a change in the outward aspect and inner mind of a whole nation. It is hardly too much to say that the complete process of alteration from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century had taken place in that period. He had known the London of Horace Walpole and he came back to the London of Charles Greville. When he was last there Pitt and Fox had been at the height of their powers; now the young Disraeli was already older than Pitt had been when he became Prime Minister and the young Gladstone was coming of age. He had left the London of knee-breeches and powdered hair and he returned to the London of frock-coats and top-hats. White's Club, down steps of which he would have been kicked as a rascally Jacobin in 1794, elected him an honorary member. The famous bow window had been built over the steps in the interval and had already seen its greatest days, for the brief reign of Brummel was over and the dandies of the Regency were no more. Boswell had been alive when he was last in London. The whole life-work of Keats, Shelley and Byron had taken place during his absence and this, the year of his return, the first publication of Tennyson saw the light. Those who were alive at his first visit could remember the reign of Queen Anne, those who were alive at his second could live into the reign of George V."

In the end, whether Cooper offers the best factual account of Talleyrand's life or not- and really for a biography published in 1932 I don't know how we can't expect a certain amount of his facts and interpretations to be quite dated, as indeed they are- he is really just, I must say once more, a pleasure to read. Think of it as a well-written collection of sometimes amusing, sometimes quite serious short stories, a "based on a short story" tale written by someone with a sure hand who has taken up his pen to defend a friend. On this basis, I have no flaws to find or criticism to offer. Eighty years later, still a job very well done indeed.

satej soman says

An American high school-level understanding of French history isn't sufficient to keep up with the events that shaped Talleyrand's life, so I found myself consulting Wikipedia to clarify events and the identities of people.

Overall an informative biographical sketch. Cooper's primary goals are a) to rehabilitate Talleyrand's reputation from the harm it suffered under the popular re-appraisal of the Napoleonic era and under the pens

of his enemies, and b) to draw a mirror image of himself in Talleyrand's role as a defender of the Anglo-French alliance (hence the exaggeration of similarities between Talleyrand's and William the Pitt's desired foreign policy.)

Given that it is a sketch, there are a couple of gaps in detail. The greatest omissions are related the tactics used in the Prince's greatest negotiations at Vienna and in the early days of the Directory. (How was Talleyrand able to convince Barras to employ him?) The tactics used in other negotiations that were important to the Prince's life are explored in some detail, but their importance to Talleyrand is not always commensurate with their importance to history. Additionally, the formative events that provided Talleyrand with the ability to synthesize the best aspects of the old order with those of the liberal reforms are glossed over (though his thoughts on theological training as a solid foundation for diplomacy provide clues). Finally, Talleyrand's opponents are reduced to cartoons, while Talleyrand's own faults are taken to show depth of character. Arguably, the portrait of Fouché is an exception but only because he provides a natural contrast to Talleyrand in almost every aspect of his life.

The questions that linger with me: Who is today's Talleyrand? Almost as importantly, who is today's Madame de Staël?

Noah Goats says

Talleyrand was a fascinating character. He was a highborn aristocrat but also one of the key players in the French Revolution (until he had to run for his life at any rate). He managed to serve the Bourbons, the Republic (in its various iterations), Napoleon, the Bourbons again... always at the highest level and always without losing his head. He was corrupt and slippery, shifting his allegiance more often (and ultimately with more success) than Alcibiades and always demanding bribes like a Tammany mayor. But at the same time, Cooper argues, he always worked, well, not hard exactly, but with his brains and wit to help his country and to help Europe. He was disloyal to his political leaders, but ultimately loyal to France.

Napoleon famously said that Talleyrand was a "turd in silk stockings," and this is an easy judgement to make, but Cooper is very sympathetic and gives a more nuance portrait of this important statesman. Very good.

Richard Thomas says

I first read this at school as part of the background reading necessary for the European History A Level syllabus and found it both immensely useful in giving context to the diplomacy underpinning European history from 1815 until 1914 and a pleasure to read per se. I re-read it a couple of years back and still found pleasure in both the subject and the writing.

Warwick says

Talleyrand was the greatest statesman of his age, and his age was one of the most dangerously eventful in Europe's history. Such was his renown as the archetypally cunning diplomat that when his death was reported in 1838, the reaction of Metternich, his Austrian counterpart, was: 'I wonder what he *meant* by that?'

The story is probably apocryphal, but it's revealing. No one knew how to read Talleyrand, and history's verdict on the great man is still not in. Above all, he was a survivor: almost the only person to make it through France's numerous state shake-ups in one piece, from the French Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century, through the days of the Directorate and then the Consulate, the Napoleonic takeover and the proclamation of Empire, the Restoration of the Bourbons, and finally the July Monarchy in the 1830s. None of these regimes was known for its leniency towards predecessors, and yet Talleyrand didn't just survive every coup and revolution (he was behind several of them), he actually maintained a steady rise in power and influence.

So people cannot decide what to make of him. *Either* he was a brilliantly adaptable politician whose skills and experience made him impossible to ignore, even by those who would have liked to exclude him from power; *or*, he was the worst kind of opportunist – 'a byword for tergiversation', in Duff Cooper's wonderful phrase – who ditched his principles time and again in order to save his own skin.

This biography is broadly sympathetic – indeed when you read it, it's impossible not to like the man. No fan of hard work, Talleyrand looked down on younger, more zealous colleagues, and took the view that a diplomat's main job was to develop a refined sort of laziness and to excel in conversation. He was a product of that extraordinary French eighteenth century, when 'such conversation as was then audible in Paris had never, perhaps, been heard since certain voices in Athens fell silent two thousand years before'. Talleyrand was always the wittiest and most intelligent man in any room. One contemporary describes him as

lounging nonchalantly on a sofa...his face unchanging and impenetrable, his hair powdered, talking little, sometimes putting in one subtle and mordant phrase, lighting up the conversation with a sparkling flash and then sinking back into his attitude of distinguished weariness and indifference.

He emerges from this book as a sort of aristocratic French Blackadder – witty, brilliant, dissolute, and quite prepared to be unprincipled if necessary. But this is unfair. Talleyrand may not have been willing to die for his principles – 'nor even suffer serious inconvenience on their account', as Cooper says – but he did have them. Cooper argues convincingly that there was a set of core beliefs to which he held throughout his whole career, beliefs which often made him unpopular with those in power. Prime among them were a desire for peace rather than conquest, and a commitment to constitutional monarchy. The former explains why he abandoned Napoleon. The latter is even more interesting, because it provides – if you're so minded – a justification for his other changes of allegiance: he supported the Revolution because the monarchy was not constitutional, and he supported the Restoration because the revolutionary government had shown that it did not have the 'legitimacy' of monarchy. (Hence his lifelong admiration for Britain, where he thought the perfect balance had been struck: a legitimate king whose power was held in check by a healthy parliament.)

All of this meant that he often acted for the interests of a peaceful Europe even when this ran counter to the wishes of the French government that he was currently serving. Sent by Napoleon to negotiate with Alexander I of Russia in 1806, Talleyrand simply told the tsar to refuse all of Napoleon's demands: 'Sire, it is in your power to save Europe [...] The French people are civilised, their sovereign is not. The sovereign of Russia is civilised and his people are not: the sovereign of Russia should therefore be the ally of the French people.'

Talleyrand was first published in 1932 and doubtless modern historians have moved the scholarship forward somewhat; nevertheless, it's very difficult to imagine this being done any better. Cooper writes beautifully,

with a flair for efficient throwaway remarks of the kind modern historians shy away from now: he credits his readers with the intelligence to understand when he is speaking in generalisations for the sake of advancing an argument. He has a great turn of phrase, too. When Fanny Burney and her friends get to know Talleyrand during his exile in London, Cooper summarises the experience like this:

Prim little figures, they had wondered out of the sedate drawing-rooms of *Sense and Sensibility* and were in danger of losing themselves in the elegantly disordered alcoves of *Les Liaisons dangereuses*.

The idea cannot be captured more perfectly or economically. So I liked *Talleyrand* very much, and I liked Talleyrand very much too. He was the man still standing when the smoke cleared, the man not guided by stern morals but by practical genius and a love of the joys of civilisation that only peace can provide. 'To the gospel of common sense he remained true.' And although the few principles he *did* stick to were not always popular, they've become crucial to the Europe of today. Talleyrand may have played the long game, and enjoyed himself along the way, but in the final analysis he got it right.

(Dec 13)

Scott Lewis says

This very charitable memoir requires the reader to have a good understanding of the history of revolutionary and post-revolutionary France. The prose is quite striking and the subject would approve of its quick flourishes and decisive wit.

Olga Trueshine says

Talleyrand is not a name as well known as Napoleon. Yet, this man lived in a very politically unstable time in France, surviving five straight regimes, securing an influential position for himself in various times of turmoil and travelling to various parts of the world to logically influence emperors, kings and politicians. This diplomat, whom I consider to be a genius, was able to win the hearts of his enemies partly through charisma, but mostly through wisdom, clemency and good humor. This is a man who orchestrated the rise and fall of the Napoleonic regime, as well as other significant political events. Yet, he always remained true to himself and followed his original ideals to the end, i.e. peace in Europe, freedom of press and lighthearted appreciation of life. Kant once said that "science is organized knowledge, but wisdom is organized life." Talleyrand exulted this conviction throughout his long and saturated life.

This book is a gem to anyone who wishes to chart the systematic decisions influential people make, anyone who wants to get to know the real orchestrator of French politics before, during and after the revolution, anyone who wants to absorb himself in the daily life of a great man. This book is written with flair, similar to the French fashion of the time, and ease to make you, the reader, wish you knew this man. It truly changed my perspective on life.

Karen Wellsbury says

I read this as much for the author and the age it was written as for the subject matter, and I was not disappointed.

Talleyrand was brilliant, creative, sarcastic, adaptable, lazy and politically flexible. Cooper paints a sympathetic picture of a politician whose career spanned five regimes at a very brutal time in french politics. Fascinating

Mick Maye says

Diplomatic services of the late 18th and early 19th century are not much different from today. This was a topic that I thought would be boring, but Duff Cooper has written an excellent book. The man in question has probably helped make this exciting, but a good job well done by Cooper. I would highly recommend this book.

Marsali Taylor says

This book came across as a partial but authoritative biography of a fascinating character - Talleyrand, born an aristocrat, ordained a bishop under Louis XVI of France, a leading member of the Revolutionary rulers, Napoleon's chief adviser, the restored Louis XVII's chief adviser, then ambassador to England, and, finally, on his deathbed, returning to the Church he'd left sixty years before. It was written in the 40s, but recently re-issued, and I got it because I'd seen a programme on French TV about Talleyrand which made me realise how ignorant I was.

I enjoyed the way the book was written, with different points of view (and their bias) clearly signalled, and quotes from Talleyrand and his contemporaries, though I think I'd need to read another couple of books on the period to be completely convinced of Duff Cooper's thesis that Talleyrand worked always for what he saw as the good of France and of Europe. I felt the author concentrated on the politics - his aim in the book - to the expense of Talleyrand's private life, which was racy enough to shock even his contemporaries - which, in an era where Napoleon's sister was living openly with five men, took some doing. Every so often a child or former lover would re-appear and I'd be saying, 'Hang on - where did she come from?' His gambling was rather glossed over too.

I felt too that the prose was enjoyable, and beautifully clear - there was a huge amount of information packed into every paragraph, but I never had to read anything twice.

Highly recommended - but I don't know enough to assess how true a portrait it was.

Manray9 says

Talleyrand is Duff Cooper's much-admired look at the life of the legendary French diplomat Charles-

Maurice, Prince de Talleyrand-Perigord. Cooper's book is not an academic biography; it is best described as an extended biographical sketch which makes the most of Cooper's broad knowledge of French history and mastery of stylish English prose.

An excerpt from near the end of the book provides a testament to Talleyrand's life and work and a fine example of Cooper's writing style:

The French have long memories; for them politics are the continuation of history. Royalist, Bonapartist, Republican – most French writers belong to one of these categories. Talleyrand belonged to none of them and has therefore never found his defender in France. Yet it is not for the French to decry him, for every change of allegiance that he made was made by France. Not without reason did he claim that he never conspired except when the majority of his countrymen were involved in the conspiracy. Like France he responded to the ideals of 1789 and believed in the necessity of the Revolution; like France he abominated the Terror, made the best of the Directory, and welcomed Napoleon as the restorer of order and the harbinger of peace: like France he resented tyranny and grew tired of endless war and so reconciled himself to the return of the Bourbons...Constitutional monarchy, the maintenance of order and liberty at home, peace in Europe, and the alliance with England, to these principles he was never false – and he believed that they were of greater importance than the Kings and Emperors, Directors and Demagogues, Peoples and Parliaments that he served.

Sir Harold Nicholson wrote "If biography is to be defined as the history of an individual conceived as a work of art, then Mr. Duff Cooper's book would serve as an exhibit." I concur and award Cooper's *Talleyrand* a strong Four Stars.

Larry says

Though this biography of Talleyrand is more than seven decades old, it is still readable and has lessons to teach us. Though Talleyrand was a wily schemer, he did hold all of his career one constant diplomatic principle--that peace in Europe was beneficial for Western civilization (of which France was a part.) In keeping to this principle, he betrayed Napoleon by telling the Russian emperor what the French emperor was going to do--and how to check Napoleon's diplomatic manipulations. At the time Talleyrand was Napoleon's foreign minister. It took amazing gall and courage for Talleyrand to betray his master but he knew that peace in Europe depended upon amazing acts. Napoleon was no longer waging war for any greater reason than that he enjoyed it. The French emperor had to be stopped. Talleyrand undermined Napoleon from within his government.

Talleyrand teaches that principle is sometimes greater than nationalism. This lesson is no less timely now than it was in his lifetime.

Finally, it was difficult tracking Talleyrand's love-life. Like many important men of his time he had mistresses and a wife. It was at times a strain to understand the French culture of this time that mixed mistress and wife. The idea of commitment and fidelity seemed alien to this age.

Jim Coughenour says

An almost effortlessly excellent biography by an author you've never heard of. Duff Cooper, an English aristocrat and diplomat in the 1920s, first published *Talleyrand* in 1932. Charles-Maurice, Prince de Talleyrand, was the most gifted statesman of his time – surviving Louis XVI, the French Revolution, Napoleon, only to dominate the Congress of Vienna. He was also a rogue, a club-foot, a connoisseur of wealth and women, and a great wit. Cooper does him justice, telling his story with verve and imagination.

You can't help feeling that this biography was a labor of love – by a brilliant amateur admiring a master. If you have a feeling for European history, or a taste for lost classics, pick this up. Grove Press did us a great favor by giving *Talleyrand* a second life.
