THE JOURNAL OF THE SOCIETY FOR HISTORIANS OF AMERICAN FOREIGN RELATIONS
DIPLOMATIC HISTORY

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BOOK REVIEW

Diplomacy While Distaff: Profiling Women's Lives in the Foreign Service

Roger Kirk, ed. *Distinguished Service: Lydia Chapin Kirk, Partner in Diplomacy, 1896–1984*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2007., xvi + 273 pp. Pictures, index. $22.95 (cloth).

Jean M. Wilkowski. *Abroad For Her Country: Tales of a Pioneer Woman Ambassador in the U.S. Foreign Service*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007. xii + 339 pp. Index. $30.00 (cloth).

In 1922, Lucile Atcherson became the first woman hired as a foreign service officer in the United States. Despite her high exam score, President Warren G. Harding had to intervene to assure her placement in Paris. The opposition of the State Department was evident in the words of Joseph Grew, who noted that Atcherson's appointment was "a very unfortunate precedent."[1] Nevertheless, in 1933, Franklin Roosevelt appointed the first female to lead a foreign delegation, naming Ruth Bryan Owen minister to Denmark. Further progress was slow: by the mid 1970s, just twenty-four more women had succeeded Owen in heading U.S. missions abroad. The picture is much better today; about forty women served as American ambassadors in 2008, and many more were assigned to international organizations or were holding the post of *chargé d'affaires*, a senior position. All the same, until recently the history of women in diplomatic service has been largely one of limited opportunities, in positions that were overlooked, underappreciated, and, in the case of ambassadors' wives, unpaid.

Lydia Chapin Kirk was such a spouse, and like many others in her place, her uncompensated work was vital to her husband's success. Rear Admiral Alan Kirk, the naval commander at the Normandy landings, served as ambassador to Belgium (1947–49), the Soviet Union (1949–51), and Taiwan (1962–63). In

*The author wishes to thank Mark Hove and Kristie Miller for their insights on women in the foreign service.

Both of the discussed books are in the *Diplomats and Diplomacy* series sponsored by the Association for Diplomatic Studies (ADST) and Training and Diplomatic and Consular Officers, Retired (DACOR).

1. Homer L. Calkin, *Women in American Foreign Affairs* (Washington, DC, 1977), 74–77.

Diplomatic History, Vol. 33, No. 3 (June 2009). Published by Wiley Periodicals, Inc., 350 Main Street, Malden, MA, 02148, USA and 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK.

support of his career, Lydia Kirk oversaw meals, parties, and other gatherings, outfitted the embassies in style, and knew well which friendships to cultivate. Her work did not go unnoticed. Lucy Briggs, who served as well as a diplomatic spouse in this era, pointed out: "In those days when a man's efficiency report was written, his wife was also commented on. And if she added to his social position . . . that was always noted." All the same, any corresponding raise in pay for her husband added only incrementally to an "extremely small" diplomatic salary.[2] Ambassadors' families had to subsidize those embassy parties—and a wife of means, like Lydia Kirk, would have been especially important here.

In 1972, diplomatic spouses were at last recognized as individuals with personal and career interests of their own, even as the Foreign Service's own instructions inconsistently stressed the importance of family support to the mission of the embassy. Kristie Miller, then in Caracas with her husband, was one of the first to take advantage of the new regime; she refused to make meatballs for the embassy Christmas party in 1973. But this new policy overlooked the fact that many spouses, like Mrs. Kirk, were continuing to perform vital support duties for free; it was not a satisfactory solution.[3]

The first two parts of Kirk's memoir mostly concern her upbringing in Paris, Washington, and Old Lyme, Connecticut, and will thus be of limited interest to *Diplomatic History* readers. But beginning in 1939, when Alan was named Naval Attaché in London, the family was at the epicenter of action, hobnobbing with kings and Kennedys. Back in Washington during the war, Lydia Kirk recruited a group of women to decode messages, while her husband rapidly climbed the ranks of naval service. Eventually promoted to Rear Admiral, he landed 25,000 men in Sicily and then got the plum, but risky, assignment of command of the Normandy invasion's naval forces.

After the war, the successful veteran of D-Day and his wife were named ambassador and ambassadress (Lydia's term, underlining her importance) to Belgium. Alan's main job was to keep the Belgians Western by cementing promised deliveries of all Congolese rubber to the United States. Lydia, having lived in Europe as a girl, loved the country's royal trappings and French ambiance. She wanted to show the Belgians that American women "could be interesting, interested, and even intelligent" (p. 133). Little disturbed her Belgian idyll. Invited to the Nuremberg trials, she found the sessions worthy of three short paragraphs, one of which concerned a wardrobe malfunction. She was also distressed when Alan, pining for action, was called away to deal with "screaming mustachioed Bulgarian outlaws" during the Greek civil war (p. 158).

But she soon had to brace herself for their next, most challenging assignment: Moscow at the height of the Cold War. Lydia asserted that her husband kept

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2. Jewell Fenzi with Carl L. Nelson, *Married to the Foreign Service: An Oral History of the American Diplomatic Spouse* (New York, 1994), 137–38.

3. Ibid., 274, n. 10, 182.

Washington on the correct path with the Soviets: he would "buck it up when it was wavering and calm it down when it was on the warpath" (p. 185). Such pacifying efforts were particularly important at a time when the Russians had launched their first atomic bomb; Alan well recognized that Stalin was unlikely to start a war, though Washington went ahead with the H-bomb anyway.[4] Spied on whenever she left the building, frustrated in her efforts to reach out to average Soviets, Lydia helped bond a happy embassy "family" against the KGB and the rats downstairs, and managed to speak secret French to "Madame" Vyshinsky.

Their next ten years back in the States were quiet, until one day in 1962, Alan was tapped for ambassador to Taiwan. Lydia balked, but her seventy-four-year-old husband gallantly took on the assignment to rein in Chiang. She accepted her role: "Alan had a job to do, a job that I could share, and that was that" (p. 225). She was fascinated by Soong May-ling, Chiang's wife, who warmed to her in return, but Lydia kept her distance. She worried that this charming woman might overwhelm her and thus hurt Alan's diplomatic efforts. That D-Day director did not support President Chiang's amphibious schemes, which included landing two hunderd men on the mainland to gather intelligence using American planes.[5] It was Alan's last successful endeavor for his country; he died soon thereafter. Although she lived until 1984, Kirk's memoir is silent after Taiwan: she defined her life chiefly in relationship to Alan's career. Lovingly edited by her son, Roger, a diplomat in his own right, this memoir's main flaw is its limited character development. That may reflect Lydia's own reserve, but Alan especially comes off two-dimensionally, like his photograph on page 117, "Freedom Looking at Europe."

By contrast, Jean Wilkowski's personality shines from every page in her memoir. Even the title, *Abroad for Her Country*, may well have been an intentional pun, a subversive poke at the chauvinism she fought throughout her three dozen years in the foreign service. Never mind her claims that she did not believe in "rocking the boat" (p. 202) and her wish that she had "taken a page or two from the manners of Clare Boothe Luce or Pamela Harriman, [who were] dignified, stately, and yet ever-appealing to men" (p. 215). Lacking their social connections, she faced discrimination and harassment with pluck and both covert and overt resistance, the only tools available to one who came of age before the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. This book is not a feminist study, however. It is instead a digest of her diplomatic career, with lively vignettes if sometimes grating generalizations.

Born in Wisconsin in1919, Jean Wilkowski majored in journalism at Saint Mary's College in Indiana and began her career as an overworked English teacher (and swim coach) at Miami's Barry College. She soon took the advice of

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4. David Allan Mayers, *The Ambassadors and America*'s *Soviet Policy* (Oxford, 1995), 170.
5. Timothy J. Naftali, Philip Zelikow, and Ernest R. May, *John F. Kennedy: The Great Crises* (New York, 2001), 273–74.

a priest friend and stopped by the State Department in search of a better life. It being wartime, the department was "literally scraping the bottom of the barrel," she was told (!), taking both 4Fs and women (p. 16). Her first post was as vice consul to Trinidad. It was routine, but the glamour associated with foreign service work never left her. She discovered this glamour only went so far. Women in her position were forbidden to wed—a law that did not apply to male diplomats—and this remained the case until the early 1970s.[6] If she wanted her job, she had to take "the straight and narrow path" (p. 157) Goodbye to her dashing Marine in Trinidad and her oil executive in Bogota, complete with his Studebaker. As a young woman who had been educated by nuns, she had a model of strong single women to follow, if almost none in her own circle to befriend.

Despite her record of unwed commitment, discrimination continued, not helped by the fact, as she reminds us repeatedly, that she stood nearly six feet tall in her nylons. In 1953, Wilkowski was named to the U.S. Mission to the Coordinating Committee for Multilateral Expert Controls (COCOM), the Cold War export controls agency in Paris. But a man took her job, forcing her into a more junior position. When something like this happened to Alison Palmer in the early 1970s, she sued and won, ending decades of accepted sex bias. Wilkowski had no such options, short of leaving her post; she had to be "naturally deferential" (p. 141). Still, she resisted. In the early 1960s, while the men in her training seminar went upstairs to lunch at the Air Force Academy, she protested at being sent to the basement. By the mid 1970s, as chargé d'affaires in Tegucigalpa during the "soccer wars," she did more. When William Bowdler, American ambassador in San Salvador, sent his own man to Tegucigalpa to check up on the disturbances because he did not trust Wilkowski's reports, she bounced Bowdler's emissary right back to his boss.

Wilkowski enjoyed her life abroad as a single woman. She cut up in a shebeen in Zambia with her driver, skiied in the Italian Alps, and always reveled in her cars, reliable or not: "Bella Yella" in Milan, the Hillman Minx in Paris, and her Capri in Rome. She indulged, too, in French cognac, and custom-made Italian shoes—not to mention a money-losing farm in Tuscany, complete with wine-making apparatus. While these tales fill much of the book, her observations on the scene are often enlightening. In Bogota in 1947, she recognized that U.S. bullying in Latin America had yielded bitter fruit, when the embassy came under armed attack during an uprising. As ambassador to Zambia some twenty-five years later, she found herself in the center of another sort of revolutionary storm, with Lusaka the headquarters of the region's liberationist leaders from Namibia to Rhodesia. She claims to have had an influence in changing American policy here, getting a reluctant Henry Kissinger to become more engaged in the opportunities presented by the collapse of the last colonialist strongholds in the

6. Calkin, *Women in American Foreign Affairs*, 263.

region. Indeed, in a speech in Lusaka in April 1976, he condemned racism in South Africa and urged a negotiated settlement for majority rule in Rhodesia. As Donald Rothchild writes, this "signaled an important shift in U.S. foreign policy."[7]

While she may have turned her country's policies in a positive direction in Africa, too often Wilkowski's asides suggest she was a hindrance to her country's diplomacy, resorting regularly to ethnic stereoypes. "Latins are indeed hot-tempered and hot-blooded," she declared from Bogota (p. 63), and "The Italians are great storytellers . . . probably at their most dramatic best when they haven't a clue what they are talking about," she opined in Milan. She even condescended to her own countrymen; while objecting to her objectification by "highly sophisticated, overcultured" Milanese men, she found herself longing for the "simple, redneck male appreciation" of her American brethren (p. 80). A Chinese diplomat in Zambia had a different sort of look for her: an "Oriental stare" (p. 251). To her credit, she sometimes finds her reactions to nonwhites "ridiculous" (p. 36). This book also has typographical errors (e.g., "grizzly" for "grisly" (p. 36)); anachronistic terms (people did not speak of "OD-ing" in the 1940s (p. 40)); and errors of fact. America did not bomb Milan in *August* 1945, and P.L. 480, the food program, was not launched until 1954.

Wilkowski's last assignment was as U.S. Coordinator for the UN's Conference on Science and Technology for Development during the Carter administration. As it concluded in 1979, she had the bad luck of turning sixty, just as Congress decided this would be the new retirement age for Foreign Service officers, instead of sixty-five. A few months later, the law was rescinded, but it was too late. She swallowed her bitterness and turned to volunteer and board work, and now close to ninety, she remains active.

These two memoirs are complementary and well worth reading. If Kirk's suffers from too much reticence and Wilkowski sometimes needs to be reined in, in sum they provide us with an expansive canvas of women's lives in foreign service in the middle years of the twentieth century.

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7. Donald Rothchild, *Managing Ethnic Conflict in Africa: Pressures and Incentives for Cooperation* (Washington, DC, 1997), 158.