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On the Fringe of Diplomacy

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Book Reviews

ON THE FRINGE OF DIPLOMACY. By Alfred Stirling. Melbourne: The Hawthorn Press, 1973. 213 pages. A \$9.95.

Alfred Stirling was Australian ambassador in the Philippines for a very short time — 1959 to 1962 — yet in that brief period he managed to learn a good deal about Philippine life and society. He saw more of the Philippines than most ambassadors ever see — or for that matter, most Filipinos. He has also been “Her Majesty’s Australian Ambassador” to Holland (1950–55); to France (1955–59); to Italy (1962–67). Also to Canada and to South Africa — but in these cases the title was “High Commissioner”, the term that the nations of the British Commonwealth employ to designate each other’s ambassadors. He also rendered service in various capacities in England and the United States.

From this varied experience, Ambassador Stirling could have written a huge book of reminiscences or a pedantic treatise on diplomacy. He has chosen instead to give us a slender volume containing a few selected pieces. Some were addresses delivered before civic societies — but Stirling’s speeches were never the ordinary variety. They were (and are, in this book) alive with anecdote and wit, and full of erudition — doubtless garnered by painstaking research, yet worn ever so lightly.

There are no sensational revelations in this book, no headline-hunting disclosures of secret diplomatic deals, no scandal-mongering. Stirling’s interest wherever he went was the land, the people, their culture and their history. And on this subject he writes with tact and insight. Hence the title of this book: “On the Fringe of Diplomacy.”

Yet in one sense, that title is misleading. Stirling’s type of diplomacy — which he modestly calls “on the fringe” — was really the genuine, centric, human attempt to bring persons of different nationalities and backgrounds together, and make them feel that they had common objectives and common interests. The classic cynical definition of a diplomat as “a person paid to lie for his country” has been in effect revised by Stirling into: a person whose duty it is to make friends for his country. Stirling has probably made many more friends for Australia than the Australians will ever realize.

How did he do it? It is evident in this book. In dealing with Italy, he does not say much about Rome. He speaks about Genoa and Milan in the

north, and about Catania and Palermo in Sicily. In each case he makes the reader feel what great cities these are, and what a wealth of history and of art and of humanity their people have. In dealing with South Africa he does not speak about diamonds or *apartheid*; instead he gives us his own English translation (side by side with the Afrikaans text) of "one of the best known poems by Uys Krige, the South African writer of poems, plays and films, short stories and essays." There are here addresses delivered in Italian. There are poems translated from the French into English verse. Indeed, this is a book written in many languages, a sample of that astonishing linguistic competence so common among European (and Australian) diplomats, which our own Philippine foreign service might well emulate.

A good deal of Ambassador Stirling's efforts in Italy and in Holland were expended in trying to promote Italian and Dutch migration into Australia. Australia is a continent inhabited by only fourteen million people — less than the population of Taiwan and one-third of the population of the Philippines. There is therefore a determined effort to bring in immigrants. But because Asians are excluded, the newcomers must come from Europe. Diplomatically, Mr. Stirling is silent on his country's anti-Asian policies, or indeed on any other policies. What he does give us are anecdotes and thumb-nail sketches (snapshots he calls them) of interesting personalities. And here he is a master. Visit of (192-2891) general of (2891-2891) There is, for instance, Queen Wilhelmina of Holland, of whom Churchill had said that of all the wartime heads of state, she was "the strongest man" of all. Stirling describes her arriving in a simple limousine and going up the steps of a London building. She is dressed simply in black. Yet had she arrived in a royal coach drawn by six horses and escorted by cavalry, she could not have been more regal. Later she stands erect in a small office with only the fireplace behind her, but one gets the impression that she is in a royal hall with a throne somewhere in the background.

Members of the Rotary will like this book, for it gives several interesting glimpses of the Dutch Rotarians.

Most interesting of all are Stirling's "snapshots" of De Gaulle. He first met him in London in June 1940, three days after the fall of Paris. De Gaulle had just arrived by air from Bordeaux. He looked as if he had not slept for days. His uniform was crushed and dust-stained. But, worn and exhausted, he somehow personified young France. If I had not known his rank I should have thought him not a day over thirty. Actually he was fifty.

Several years later, when Stirling was Australian ambassador in Paris and De Gaulle was in retirement in his native village, they arranged to meet in a modest hotel in Paris.

I went to his hotel in a quiet street near the Arc de Triomphe, the Hotel Laperouse. I have since heard it described as "De Gaulle's headquarters in Paris, a luxury hotel." On the contrary, it was a very small and modest hotel and the apartment in which he was staying was also very small and modest. There was no sign of any office staff or activity around him. The general had of course aged in the ten years since I had last seen him. His hair was greying, his eyes I thought looked chronically

he fired and strained; and he had put on weight, but he was clearly still remarkably fit at sixty-six. I found in him the formal courtesy I had remembered, relieved with sudden human and homely touches. He sat well back in his armchair, slowly smoking a cigar, but his head and shoulders were as alert as ever. I reported to Canberra by telegram on the visit and my impressions, and made an attempt at a political forecast. The forecast was verified; for as one French government succeeded another in a period of increasing chaos, all eyes were once more turned towards the old general, now 66, and the nation recalled him back from his village. His reentry to Parliament was memorable. There were many who thought he would arrive with great pomp, in uniform and with a military escort even hands. He walked in from the lobby quite unattended, wearing a dark lounge suit. He sat down alone on the front bench, then, when called on by the Speaker, making a very short speech as Prime Minister. He stood there straight, alert and fit.

De Gaulle was not immune to unintended *faux pas*. During a visit to Scotland, he delivered a speech in Edinburgh. Speaking in French (which his learned audience understood) he was applauded heartily when he announced that his grandmother had been from Scotland. "I have Scottish blood flowing in my veins!" Deafening cheers. Then he added, "My grandmother came from Glasgow." Glacial silence. Edinburgh and Glasgow were feuding.

One anecdote takes us back to the early years of the war when Churchill had just assumed power. He summoned the representatives of the allies to their first meeting at St. James Palace. De Gaulle, representing the Free French, attended, and since he could not understand Churchill's speech, delivered in unforgettable English, an interpreter had to translate for him sentence by sentence while Churchill spoke. But it was not easy to translate Churchill. At one point, speaking with contempt and rolling his r's, Churchill spoke of Mussolini as "a tattered lackey frisking at the heels of Hitler." The interpreter was completely stumped. What bothered him was the word "frisking". But the Australian representative, Bruce (whom Stirling accompanied as counsellor), had been following the French translation. He wrote swiftly on his pad and pushed it across the table. "Ah, merci, M. le Haute Commissioner!" cried the interpreter gratefully, and proceeded to translate Churchill's phrase: "*Mussolini sautillant aux talons d'Hitler!*"

Another snapshot takes us twice to the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris where De Gaulle attended a Te Deum. The first was in 1945, soon after the liberation, when snipers fired down from the clerestories and everyone ducked, except De Gaulle who remained standing. The second was several years later, as Prime Minister, the first time in history that a Prime Minister and the President of France (Coty) attended Notre Dame together.

The cathedral was packed, the bells were pealing. Pierre Gocheseau (I was thundering at the organ). I remember how the excited congregation sang to its feet as a small procession came up the aisle, thinking it was De Gaulle. But in fact it was the Comte de Paris, slight, modest, knees

eyed, and with him his beautiful wife, treading the footsteps of their ancestors, the Kings of France, in unbroken male descent for a thousand years. And they were taken to special seats near the High Altar. Then the great west doors, always closed, were flung open and in came the Archbishop of Paris, Cardinal Feltrin, and with him the President of France and the Prime Minister. It was a moment of concentration — of the great past, the present, and, one hoped, the future of France, all together.

Stirling saw De Gaulle for the last time in altered circumstances in 1967, during a summit meeting of six countries in Rome. "This was just a meeting for a few moments, a very short exchange, but I felt just as I had done that midnight of 18 June 1940, that he was essentially a great leader, a great part of the history of France — and not only of France. As Béranger sang of Napoleon: *On parlera de sa gloire / Sous le chaume bien longtemps.*"

Stirling does not mention (he was not there at the time) what to this reviewer was the one big blot in De Gaulle's splendid record: his treatment of Marshall Petain. Surely the hero of Verdun, and the one man who had the courage to give his conquered people leadership during their darkest hour, deserved better at the hands of De Gaulle, and of the Allies, than that perpetual imprisonment and the lonely death.

To the Philippines, Ambassador Stirling devotes 12 pages, three of them to President Carlos P. Garcia. Garcia was in Canberra as a guest of Prime Minister Menzies when Magsaysay's plane crashed against a mountain in Cebu. Everyone's concern at the time was how to get the Vice-President as quickly as possible back to Manila to assume office as President. Something was wrong with the official car, and so Dame "Pattie" Menzies herself drove Garcia to Sydney. ("She was a very brave lady," said Garcia later; "she drove me through the bush, along a country road without any hesitation.") At Sydney, he went to the Philippine Embassy, took his oath of office, and then was driven to the airport where the Menzies Government had put at his disposal the no. 1 airplane of QANTAS, named the "Southern Cross". Garcia never forgot that trip. Some years later, when Stirling was ambassador in Manila, Garcia "opened a drawer in his desk and showed me a notebook saying, 'I have recorded in that book the names of the captain of the Southern Cross and all his crew'."

Stirling was aware of the criticisms made of Garcia and his administration. But the Australian ambassador had the highest respect for the dark Filipino President from Bohol: "Whatever the critics may say, he was, from the angle of relations with Australia, a good President."

Perhaps the reason for this high esteem was the fact that Stirling saw in Garcia (what this reviewer was also privileged to see) the essential gentleman that was underneath the politician. Stirling quotes a Spanish proverb in this connection: "*Es la persona que cuenta.*" And he mentions one of Garcia's qualities: "a gift which it seems was not possessed by all his predecessors — he gave you his full and undivided attention."

Stirling mentions many Filipinos of whom he has high regard: Dr. Paulino Garcia and his NSDB; Dr. Romeo Gustilo and his Southeast Asian association of neuro-surgeons; Emmanuel Pelaez, Raul Manglapus, the two

writer-brothers, Alejandro and Alfredo Roces, among others. Stirling mentions a lecture that he attended at the Ateneo on Chinese painting and ceramics by Fernando Zobel — but not just about porcelains “but also covering a deep knowledge of Chinese history and Chinese thought”. Of Zobel’s lecture and of another series of lectures on fine arts given at the Ateneo, Stirling says: “I have never heard better lectures than these, at the Universities of Melbourne, Oxford and Paris.”

Ambassador Stirling pays a generous tribute to the Ateneo de Manila, to its alumni, and to the Jesuits. He also devotes several pages of over-generous (and entirely undeserved) praise to this reviewer and the book for which he wrote the Foreword, *Bamboo and the Greenwood Tree*. Perhaps I can show my appreciation by supplying the details of a trifling incident which he has been kind enough to allude to. He says of this reviewer: “While in the Australian delegation to the United Nations in 1961, I was indebted to him for a very thorough introduction to Yale, where he had returned for a year before revisiting England, Spain and other European countries.” The incident was as follows:

One day at New Haven I received a note from Ambassador Stirling informing me that he was in New York. Since he had shown me many kindnesses in Manila, and had held a formal dinner in my honor on the eve of my departure, I felt that I should reciprocate even in a small way. So I invited him to come to New Haven and see what an American university looked like. He came on a Saturday and I took him to several of the Yale buildings, including that unbelievable library, shaped like a Gothic cathedral, which houses one million books under one roof; and the equally incredible Yale gymnasium, also shaped like a Gothic tower, which among its eleven floors, houses an artificial river (for boat-practice), two swimming pools, squash courts, and a fencing floor. Afterwards I brought him to the Faculty Club for a small luncheon to which I had also invited some of the professors. The club manager (an Irishman born in England) was so impressed by the presence of an Australian ambassador that he brought out some of his best wine — on the house. After lunch (if my memory does not play me false) I brought Mr. Stirling to witness (perhaps for the first time in his misspent life) that wonderful spectacle, a game of American football in the Yale Bowl. He then returned to New York.

That was not the end of the matter, for a few days afterwards, there came a counter invitation to lunch with him and his sister Dorothy at the United Nations headquarters in Manhattan. It was Miss Dorothy Stirling who wrote to me, so I wrote back to her, accepting the invitation but requesting directions. (I had never been inside the UN buildings and I suspected that there would be several dining rooms in the place.) But back came a note from Miss Stirling with a message from the ambassador: “Tell Father Bernad that if he can find his way to the top of Mount Apo, he can certainly find his way through the UN buildings.”

That was that. And it was an excellent lunch.

Miguel A. Bernad