

# Home Away from Home: The Curious Case of Diplomats

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## Introduction

This paper addresses a particular form of life writing by expatriates, the memoirs of diplomats. The diplomatic memoir is an emerging and particular genre of life writing that adds a surprising facet to the rich field of narratives of expatriation. As will be discussed, it is, in some ways, a form of life writing of uncertain promise, hedged about as it is with an array of constrictions that are difficult to escape. In this discussion of Australian diplomatic memoirs I will include some of my own recollections and diary accounts drawn from my experience as a career diplomat.

Expatriates are generally those who have elected to live in a country other than their own. Unlike refugees who may or may not be given sanctuary in a host country, expatriates have the luxury of choices. They have passports, money and futures, and their country of birth remains available for retreat, rest or renewal. And by their absence, often in distant locations, they risk making a foreign country out of their place of birth—which may become a mixed blessing made up of the pleasures and comfort of ‘home’ alongside a sense of dullness.

Diplomats, on the other hand, know that becoming an expatriate is a requirement, rather than a choice, of their working life. As a result they have little choice when it comes to the site of their expatriation, which is determined by government priority and need. As we know from the memoirs of Percy Spender, Peter Henderson, Alan Watt and Walter Crocker, there was a time half a century and more ago when men (and it was only men in those days), could handpick their postings, but those days are long gone.

So, how do Australian diplomats reach the point of an overseas posting? Most graduate trainees, a handpicked bunch of 35 or so every year selected from about 3000 applicants, can expect to be posted at the rank of Third Secretary within four years of commencing their position at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). They are given a minimum of two years of work rotations and training before they are considered ready to apply for an international posting. Postings are generally advertised twice a year, supplemented by the occasional excitement of an *ad-hoc* vacancy.

In recent decades there have usually been over 30 applications for a first world posting, or for the vital ones such as Jakarta or Beijing, and at least six or seven for places like Honiara or Tel Aviv. There were twelve for my first posting in Kuala Lumpur, and seven or eight for my second posting in Abu Dhabi. Successful candidates are phoned at their desks on a Friday afternoon and the workplace soon echoes to their whoops of joy. The unsuccessful learn the outcome by hearing those phone calls and those shouts. Friday afternoon is chosen so the unsuccessful can go home and grieve in private. When I received the news of my posting to Abu Dhabi on a Friday afternoon in late November 2004, a colleague wept at the ‘news’ of her non-posting and departed early.

The processes required in preparation for departure are well-organised, and even mechanical, and require a number of additional steps than the experience of most people preparing to leave the country. In my case, I was aided by a form provided to assist in organising each day leading up to the day of departure, and there was also a handbook listing 40–50 mandatory stages to be completed during pre-posting. These included obtaining a release from my current Branch; mandatory health checks; vaccinations; dental checks; making a will; obtaining a quote for packing and storage (diplomats never take furniture); obtaining a second quote for what I was to take with me; language training where necessary (usually only a month); ongoing liaison over housing; schooling for children, and mandatory pre-departure briefings by other government departments. The dental check required the dentist's signature, and prior to my first posting in 1994 I had neglected to get that signature. So the day before I was to leave I sat looking at my ticket to Kuala Lumpur in the hands of a DFAT officer on the far side of a desk. I had to phone the dentist and ask him to vouch for me, and only then was the ticket handed over.

### **Diplomatic memoirs**

Diplomatic memoirs are an established genre whose antecedents include the long-standing memoirs of British government officials, usually based on their work in the Middle East or the Far East. In Australia diplomatic memoirs were published from the beginning of the twentieth century, and from the outset they carried a colonial note of anxiety about being sufficiently 'proper.' As Kay Schaffer states in her summary of the scope of life writing:

We are using the term 'life narratives' in its broadest sense, as an umbrella term that encompasses the extensive array and diverse modes of personal storytelling that takes experiential history as its starting point. (7)

Diplomats have a very particular form of 'experiential history' to narrate, and one that often brings them (or their text) into conflict with some of the expectations of other forms of life writing. They are, in any case, an inherently complicated form of the already broad and complicated genre of life writing or life narratives. The complications are compounded as the genre of the diplomatic memoir also inevitably intersects with travel writing. The diplomat is effectively a professional traveler, and there are expectations that a diplomatic memoir will engage in description and commentary shaped by the experience of being in a foreign country. Eve-Marie Kröller's argument regarding the 'political memoir' is every bit as true for its near-cousin, the diplomatic memoir:

Like the political memoir, travel writing is a hybrid genre, and with two such mercurial genres coming together, it is impossible to determine a template that applies to all travelogues as they occur in diplomat's life writing. . . . Because they are officials as well as private citizens, their war time travels assume, or are meant to assume an exemplary role. . . . Travel writing in war time is an apt medium through which to study the process of national identity formation because it is predicated on mobility, and even the most ritualized elements of travel, such as the conventions of departure and arrival, are definitively disturbed and made over. (81)

The intersection between the diplomatic memoir and travel writing was particularly the case in the period immediately after the First World War, at a time when travel was still exotic to most Australians, and many diplomatic postings were to cities that were considered 'remote.' With

scarce knowledge about some regions of the world and limited communication, the role of the diplomat was as much about being an intrepid ‘traveler’ as it was about representing the policy and financial interests of a foreign government. As Jessica Stark notes:

The diplomatic memoirs in our corpus all share a similar structure: the narrative follows a chronological order, usually spanning the entire career of the diplomat, including one or two chapters on childhood and education and one on retirement (9). . . . They contain descriptive sequences explaining typical diplomatic practices, the mechanisms of multilateral and bilateral diplomacy, as well as diplomatic conventions and protocol that remain important to the profession. We often find job-profile type descriptions which sum up the main responsibilities and goals of a particular diplomatic posting. ‘Typical-day’ narratives are another strategy used to shed light on a diplomat’s routine . . . (19)

I have read and considered a number of memoirs of diplomatic life written by Australians in the period since the Second World War but chose to ignore memoirs by diplomatic spouses—for example, Jean Spender’s *Ambassador’s Wife* or Susan Ryan’s *Catching the Waves*. That women were left to write the memoirs from the position of the ‘diplomat’s wife,’ points to the elephant in the diplomatic room in that diplomatic memoirs inevitably reflect entrenched discrimination against women. A recent Lowy Institute report concluded:

Australia’s international relations sector—the departments and organisations that are responsible for conducting Australia’s international relations—has a severe gender imbalance in its workforce. While there have been notable trailblazers, the pace of change has been slow and uneven across the sector. Few of the most important diplomatic postings have ever been held by a woman. Women do not appear in the sector’s key policy-shaping activities. Significantly fewer women are rising to senior positions in the sector compared with the Australian public sector as a whole, international peers, and the corporate sector. The gender imbalance in the Australian Intelligence Community is particularly pronounced.

When I joined DFAT in May 1990, as an ASO6 (middle level policy officer) only twenty percent of that junior band were women. The more senior you went, the more pronounced the gender imbalance became. DFAT has been slow to reform—only in July 2016 with Frances Adamson’s appointment as Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade was the first ever female Secretary appointed to the portfolio. Sidonie Smith’s conclusion about life writing certainly applies to diplomatic memoirs:

Having appropriated the idea that personal experience is a credible subject of literary attention, literary forefathers rendered the genre an androcentric contract dependent on the erasure of women’s texts. Male writing about self thereby assumed a privileged place in the canon; female writing about self, a devalued position at the margins of the canon. (*Poetics* 16)

As a result, the female voice is *entirely* lacking in my survey of diplomatic memoirs, and the dominance of male voices arguably produced texts that were overwhelmingly triumphalist and mundane. They were masculinist narratives from an era when notions of masculinity were

constrained by association with traditional values such as strength, bravery, and (in the case of diplomats) national ascendancy. Add to that the necessity for diplomats to be personally discreet, and the result was writing that was devoid of personality and seemingly driven by the need to meet ‘official’ requirements. They are accounts shaped by the responsibilities of public office and therefore written to exclude introspection, doubt and failure. They tell us much of what diplomats do and what they achieve and are notably short on personal reflection.

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson have written of the ‘conditions [which] characterise the imagining of “autobiographical” lives as possessions of “individuals” and of individual lives as “representative” of a community of lives’ (5). Life writing as being ‘representative of a community of lives’ is nowhere more apparent than in the writing of the lives of diplomats, who are constrained and limited, always, by the norms of their professional community. A diplomat’s status as a national representative, both curtails and shapes what they can write. Australian diplomatic memoirs have to be vetted by DFAT before publication to avoid the risk of material that might either contravene secrecy requirements or unnecessarily embarrass a government. In addition to this internal invisible censorship there are further grounds for arguing that diplomatic memoirs are inherently difficult to write, as there is so much else an author remains reluctant to record. As Sir Walter Crocker noted:

Diplomats who take to the pen are greatly handicapped by legislation on Official Secrets though they are the first to understand the reason for such legislation. Diplomacy of itself produces a habit of mind inclined to secrecy or reserve in any case. (vi)

A further inhibiting element is diplomatic rank. Memoirs frequently include stories about senior diplomatic staff and political figures from other countries, but not all diplomats have equal access in this regard. Unlike the military where rank is indicated by stripes and insignia on a uniform, diplomats have no uniform but, nevertheless, rank is just as important as it is in the army. On a diplomatic posting rank usually determines who diplomats talk to—ambassadors to other ambassadors, and a first secretary to other first secretaries. During the frequent periods in Abu Dhabi that I was Chargé—that is, acting as head of mission—I enjoyed better (i.e. higher) access at the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Despite the constraints required of diplomatic memoirs, the texts included in my survey indicated that there is a peculiarly plentiful sub-set—memoirs written to settle scores, a sub-genre made even more interesting when there is a particular axe to grind with Australian politicians. One could cite Henderson, sacked by Bill Hayden; Alan Watt, troubled by where his children would live; and, most famously, Robert Merrilees. All had scores to settle. Among the memoirs there are a number of vicious stories about the late Prime Minister, William McMahon—he was not admired. Perhaps the best story is that told by the reticent Philip Flood, forced by McMahon to lie naked in a gym while Japanese masseuses walked on the backs of himself and his Prime Minister. Alf Parsons, however, had a different score to settle, noting of Governor General Sir John and his wife Lady Kerr:

I cannot recall in all my career ever meeting such a pretentious couple or people so concerned with their status even for a private midnight arrival . . . All in all, it was an undignified, if not distasteful episode. (130)

And then there is Merrilees. As Australia's Ambassador in Athens when Victorian Premier Jeff Kennett visited Greece, Merrilees organised an itinerary with helpful input from Melbourne's Greek community and arranged for Kennett to meet the Greek President and Prime Minister. Shortly afterwards, on an Athens trip the Minister for Foreign Affairs Alexander Downer was not able to meet either—the President was away, and the Prime Minister had other commitments. As a result, Merrilees was 'recalled' and soon after took early retirement. Downer reported to Parliament that, 'Bob fell asleep at the wheel,' giving substance to Richard Woolcott's remark:

The public probably thinks that the problems of diplomacy are only with foreign governments. The reality is that the most difficult governments and ministers, with which a diplomat has to deal, are often their own. (Woolcott, *Hot Seat* 152)

In reviewing Australian diplomatic memoirs it became apparent that Richard Woolcott stood out from his peers for a lively and humorous prose style. Typical of his writing is this extract from the famous dispatch, *All hail, Liberia, hail*, which then DFAT Secretary, Peter Henderson, banned:

The main street boasts a number of lurid signs depicting bleeding rats and large cockroaches which advertise pest destruction. The city is indeed alive with pests of one sort or another. On returning to the hotel in white tie and tails from one of the ceremonies we witnessed a huge rat, which my wife at first took to be a basset hound, being clubbed to death on the doormat by enthusiastic bellboys. (Woolcott, *Undiplomatic Activities* 48)

Almost all diplomats agree that their first posting is the one that leaves the deepest impact. Woolcott says 'a first post is like a first love: it makes a deep impression' (Woolcott, *Undiplomatic Activities* 5), and Merrilees says of Cambodia:

. . . though it would be too much to say that we became intimately involved with Cambodia in the long term, its affairs and the fate of its people had an ongoing impact on my life and career. In the first place it brought me face to face with post-colonial French life *outré-mer*. It was wonderfully exotic, improbable and even decadent. (89)

This seems to be what Francis Stuart is also suggesting, with his conclusion that the work of diplomacy is eventually trumped by the personal experiences acquired in the course of being a diplomatic expatriate.

At the end of a diplomatic posting personal experiences remain more vivid in one's recollections than other things. Professional issues seem less significant than images retained, moods induced. (251)

Many memoirs comment on one of the big personal initial difficulties, such as housing, with Moscow and Jakarta coming in for particular criticism. Peter Henderson went on many PLVs (Post Liaison Visits) and noted of Dar-es-Salaam in 1982:

The accommodation for the more junior staff is quite awful—the worst I have seen for years. At one flat, the septic tank doesn't work properly and an indescribable overflow floats past the kitchen door. The outside surroundings to the three other staff

flats, which can be reached over a rutted dirt track, are unkempt, while the stairwells are filthy. (159)

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the physical landscape of the posting often fills a diplomat with wonder which, years later, matures into nostalgia—diplomats are as susceptible as any traveller to falling under the spell of a special place. Whether it is Phillip Flood mesmerised by a journey down the Buriganga River from Dhaka to Khulna in Bangladesh, Richard Woolcott discovering Timbuktu, or Alex McGoldrick's understatement, 'The desert, as I have said, has many charms' (92), there is plentiful evidence of the types of enchantment that accompany most overseas travel. Here is Bruce Grant breathing the air of India the first night he arrived at the Residence, where the professional excitement of the historic moment is soon rendered secondary to his personal enchantment:

Yet what I now remember especially about that evening is the quality of the air, the most extraordinary air I had ever encountered . . . I had breathed deeply in historic places where I had seen and touched things that millions had seen and touched before, and in empty spaces where those few who had been before had left no mark, and in crowded cities where, like the water and the soil the air is manufactured. But the air in the garden that night was different from these. It was too light for history, and too spacious for urbanity, yet with a body of habitation in it that also made it too civilized for empty spaces. This mysterious air was, of course, simply that warmth of the populous Indian plains overlaid with the perpetual chill of the desolate Himalayan snow . . . (11)

As McGoldrick was quick to observe, however, it was *people* rather than the place that mattered most. Jessica Stark concluded that despite the competitive nature of diplomatic work, in diplomats' memoirs 'references to diplomatic colleagues as well as to countless "friends" encountered in diplomatic postings present a running leitmotif in the corpus' (30). To McGoldrick, the intense working relationships involved in diplomatic postings often added to the friendships that developed, and he noted that 'difficult circumstances make for lasting bonds of friendship and we made many close friends in the Arab and expatriate communities in Riyadh' (90).

On some occasions friendships that were left behind were not generalised, but rather close personal bonds. In his memoir Philip Flood wrote of his friendship with the Bangladeshi poet, Jasim Uddin. When I myself came to the end of my three years in Abu Dhabi I was teased by others who loved the place for now having 'sand in my sandals.' My closest friend, an Emirati, Nariman Al Awadhi, a 51-year-old woman who I had met through our bilateral trade negotiations (she worked at the UAE Central Bank) was one of the reasons for that. Here we are on one memorable evening, in an experience that indicates how important personal relationships can be in allowing diplomats to breach the official channels of communication that dominate their lives and shape their view of a place to which they are posted.

5 January 2007

I picked up Nariman & her Jordanian friend, Nasreen, at 9 pm and we drove to the residence of the Austrian ambassador, a tall woman, like Charlotte Rampling, and her taller daughter. Nariman, in my car, negotiated in Arabic for her nephew to guide us

to the house where the wedding was. 'Yalla.' He lived in Al-Yawsat compound, and we drove out there, and I waited patiently, car in neutral. But the young nephew, allowed for once to drive his parents' new Mercedes, took off into the night and quickly left us behind.

*Who was I following?* I drove out over the bridge and off the island, and Nasreen frantically talked to Nariman who was now in the other car. *Perhaps we'd end up in Dubai.*

A U-turn and a few detours later, the nephew was persuaded to turn on his hazard lights, and we followed him, down streets, round corners, and then to a large villa in a side street out near the East Road where draped white lights all over the 2-storey house, and pounding Arabic music announced a wedding in progress. This was a wealthy house but not a palace. We filed in through a small gate within the large ornate double gates, all screened from passing eyes, and there in the decorated courtyard were about eighty Emirati women, all in bright colours even if the *abaya*, as always, was draped nearby. The bride's mother in a black *abaya*, smiling, wrinkled, and missing a few teeth, welcomed us warmly and led us to a round table. There Nariman seated me next to an older woman in the golden face mask, a Mrs Nasser who had no English at all, but smiled politely, and enthusiastically dabbed my jacket with perfume when the ritual bottles were brought around, real composure, and quite beautiful bones behind the mask.

Up on the small improvised stage small girls with long black hair and a few older women in tight glossy dresses were dancing to the female singer who must have been poured into her blue diamante dress. Heavily made up, she sang in Arabic, accompanied by male musicians hidden inside the house. At the back of the stage was a throne with a white sofa, surrounded by a curtain of hanging glass beads. Over the top was a tented ceiling of blue plastic in case the neighbours peeped. Small boys under five ran about playing. In fact there were children everywhere, watched, or not watched by maids. Only women. Maids swept past with trays of warm fresh Emirati sweets that we ate from toothpicks, a bit like *gulab jamun*.

Other women arrived in groups, mother, daughters, aunts, younger girls without make-up, toddlers, and one little boy about two, dressed as a groom in white trousers. On stage a big cheerful ugly girl about 20 with a huge nose, swathed in yellow brocade was dancing with the bride's very pretty sister who hoisted a magnificent bosom in tight mauve satin, straining sequins, shaking to the drums and the songs. A shayla (headscarf) was deftly tied round someone's hips and the front row clapped wildly as the dancer thrust out her generous bottom and danced backwards (in a way I've only seen in African ethnological films or BBC docos) filmed by a square, scarfed, unsmiling, Lebanese photographer. . . .

We left at a quarter to two, coming out into the night—and the 30 kinsmen standing round their cars smoking. As we drove home along the East Road Nariman talked sadly of how things used to be. In the 1970s she said, at weddings in her family there was lots of dancing. 'Even men and women,' she said. 'If we were all from the same

family then we'd dance. After the bride had left. Some of my cousins even had a band.' We all sighed.

Unsurprisingly, friendships with fellow diplomatic staff were also critical. Alan Watt remembered the kindness of his embassy staff, and noted that on leaving Moscow:

All the Australians accompanied me to the airport, scarcely identifiable in their winter overcoats, caps or hats. Saying goodbye to them I found it difficult to maintain my composure. (159)

Watt was only one to be leaving a posting with regret. A number of diplomatic memoirs record this moment of leaving a posting as similar to farewelling a first love. Richard Woolcott reported, also upon leaving Moscow:

Occasionally I would see a group of Russian women being conveyed to work on the back of a truck. Often they would be singing folk songs in unison, full of longing and sadness and as if the soul and soil of Russia were crying out. Long after I had left Russia and whenever I heard a Russian choir I experienced a nostalgia for the vast, harsh but beautiful countryside. (*Hot Seat* 19)

### **At 'home' with the besieged self**

Diplomats have to follow instructions from Canberra. They can't exceed them. But there is no doubt they find it wearing to embody Australia 24/7 and thus for them, home is especially important. Diplomats live with a 'door' that is like no other. Only at home can they be individuals; only once they shut the door and remove their shoes can they be their particular selves. Once they cross that threshold and walk the air of their host country, Bruce Grant's 'most extraordinary air,' they are representing Australia. Outside it doesn't matter if they are shopping, driving (with the mandatory diplomatic plates), swimming, picnicking, jogging, going to church, or hosting a barbecue, they are still representing their country.

Borders do not always mean a geographical marking, a border crossing with gates and visas, but something more complicated. As journalist and historian Frances Stonor Saunders opened her *London Review of Books* article, 'Where on earth are you?':

The one border we all cross, so often and with such well-rehearsed reflexes that we barely notice it, is the threshold of our own home. We open the front door, we close the front door: it's the most basic geographical habit, and yet one lifetime is not enough to recount all our comings and goings across this boundary. What threshold rites do you perform before you leave home? Do you appease household deities, or leave a lamp burning in your tabernacle? You lock the door. You've crossed the border. (7)

Diplomats are expatriates but they have double borders. The high-viz vest of representing Australia sticks to them and cannot be removed, except behind that important closed door, the second border, the front door of their house.

In Abu Dhabi many of my afternoons on the second day of the weekend were spent sitting alone in a quiet, sunny room—the bay window of my large dining-sitting room—on the fifteenth floor of a modern tower looking down at the eight lanes of traffic along the corniche and wondering if that was Iran on the blue horizon across the Gulf of Hormuz. This was my home inside home, a secure space for a sometimes-besieged self. I wrote on 3 January 2007:

It's strange how accustomed I've become to living here. It feels like my home. I rarely feel out of place, although I sometimes feel a bit bewildered. I cope with the traffic largely unprompted by having to remind myself of its unpredictability. I never start at the call to prayer. Women dressed all in black, faces covered are just that, moving black *abayas*, vertical triangles. Women with the *na'ashat*, the golden leather face masks, are just themselves. I don't expect smiles. I live in a climate of intense stares. Look up, and I am being looked at. It never stops. I expect to walk to the drycleaners and pass twenty men and perhaps one or two women, a maid or two, perhaps a harried Syrian or Jordanian housewife. I hardly hear birds. I never smell pollen in the air, or rain or the wind.

This sense of being 'at home' overseas, as an expatriate in another country, is captured by the recent reflective memoir of Afghanistan by diplomat Fred Smith, *The Dust of Uruzgan* (2016). Smith was the first diplomat in Uruzgan, and a songwriter, or as he puts it 'a scribbler.' His book is very different from any other Australian diplomatic memoirs. The reader may know his song which gives the book its title; or you may know his even more catchy song, 'Live like an Afghan.' Listening again to 'Live like an Afghan' I think it is a profoundly sad song and not only because it works in a minor key. I also link that sadness to the question Smith asks right at the end of the book: *was it worth it?* The song aches with admiration and sadness for the sense of honour and certitude that Smith found in Afghani culture, but as an Australian diplomat there, he asks himself that same question over and over again in his book. It is a question not found in earlier diplomatic memoirs.

Smith starts his book when he first applies to go to Afghanistan as a DFAT adviser by recalling a lack of confidence in the diplomatic project that was foreign to an earlier generation of memoirs:

I had been involved in protests against the invasion of Iraq back in March 2003, but I was in two minds about the Afghanistan intervention. I was in two minds about most things actually. I was born in two minds and had lived that way ever since. (3)

When his posting is confirmed he further highlights his ambivalence and even potential unsuitability for the position:

I spoke to my wife, Maryanne. She wasn't ecstatic about me going to a war zone. But, aside from that, she knew me well, and has my interests at heart. 'Jobs like this have been good for you in the past,' she said. 'They get you out of your shell.' (4-5)

Once he is in Uruzgan, Smith constantly references his family back home in Australia and in doing so charts his susceptibility to the stresses of the diplomatic life. Shortly after he arrives at his posting he phones home and learns that his wife has suffered a miscarriage.

I did what I could to console her before vacating the booth after my allocated fifteen minutes.

I walked out in the warm dusty evening air with a heavy heart and a sense of shame for being on another one of my cowboy missions in her hour of need. Soldiers and civilians deployed to these places get praised for their sacrifices, but there's something selfish about it too. (12–13)

Very early on in his posting Smith is rebuked by his ambassador in Kabul for sending a carefully composed amusing email to a group of colleagues about a Dutch 'cultural practice.' The embassy in Kabul sent him 'a short sharp email: "Save this stuff for the memoirs"' (32). What he also provides in his memoir is something that is quite foreign to the genre, a reflection on the person behind the posting, and a feel for the psychological challenges that diplomacy work brings to the individual diplomat and their loved ones.

Smith also writes a great deal, and wisely, about returning home after an overseas posting, and the impact of his return on himself and those around him. At the end of his book, he describes the birth of his daughter Olympia:

Now in the evenings after work I roll around on the living room floor with a two-year-old Oly and she says, 'I lub you my daddy,' and I feel blessed. I came home from Afghanistan better—freer, clearer, more grateful. The war was good to me, and good for me. But I was one of the lucky ones. (367)

The *Dust of Uruzgan* is an outstanding diplomatic memoir in that its author is always present, and we learn a lot about Smith and his response to the dramatic circumstances and events that unfold around him. It provides hope that there might be better days ahead for the diplomatic memoir.

### **The three essentials of the diplomatic memoir**

My survey of the literature leads me to conclude there are three essential elements that define diplomats' experience and are crucial to the content and tone of their memoirs. The first aspect is working. Working in another country is absolutely different from simply living there. To some extent once you have worked overseas for an extended time—in each of my postings, the anticipated three years—you become part of the place. You drive yourself to work every day (15 minutes in Abu Dhabi); then you drive home or to the shops or a reception. You have a local dry cleaner; a local chemist; a local supermarket. They are all familiar. You have the call to prayer; you have the sunsets. To some extent working overseas is such an intense *embedded* experience that 'holidays,' with all their vulnerability of promised pleasure, are ruined forever. Working is not pleasure, it is work, even when some of it doesn't look like work. As Howard Beale noted:

One hundred ambassadors mean one hundred national day days for which each ambassador usually gave an evening reception, and these other ambassadors or their representatives were expected to put in an appearance . . . At receptions and cocktail parties one became very cunning; the thing was to come in, shake hands with and speak to the host and hostess, take a drink from the waiter, orange or tomato juice if one were wise, look around to see what people were there with whom one wished to

talk, chat with them, maybe exchanging useful bits of diplomatic or political information . . . then slip out by the side-door . . . (121–22)

But it is, nonetheless, work. In Abu Dhabi there were over 140 embassies and so over 140 National Day Receptions that one attended after work and in one's own time. Receptions were often the only chance to maintain contacts, get a quote on an issue for tomorrow's cable, or find out what had actually happened during the visit, say of the late Pakistani Prime Minister, Benazir Bhutto. Most were 'dry' (i.e. without alcohol) and some diplomats and Emiratis would not attend *unless* the function was dry. Beale concluded:

Having regard to all this dressing up, balls, dinners, luncheons, receptions and cocktail parties it is understandable that the public should have the idea that this is really an ambassador's life . . . It is not so. These social activities, so easily observed by the public, have a valuable part to play in helping to establish communication . . . Down below the surface, unpublicized and largely unknown, the real work goes on—in the chancery, among officials of the government . . . the solid practical task of getting information and giving it, of persuading, warning, advising, encouraging and interpreting; and of building up for one's country a reputation [with the host government]. (125–26)

Beale was writing forty years ago, but although a great deal has changed, the essentials remain. There was always work left over from previous days; cables from Canberra instructing one to obtain a host country opinion on a multilateral issue, always with a deadline, often tight; a visit looming up, often two or three, for which a program needed to be prepared. As Chargé, I often managed the embassy in Abu Dhabi for weeks, including the three weeks of the Israel/ Lebanon war in 2006, when thousands of Lebanese-Australians had to be evacuated on specially chartered jets which, at our Defence Attaché's suggestion, we organised to have refuelled at the empty runways in Al Ain, UAE.

The second aspect is learning the language, even if it is merely a few useful phrases and a couple of hundred words. Whereas for other expatriates acquiring the basics of a language might be another of their options, for a diplomat it is an essential requirement of their work and learning. I cannot emphasise enough the sense of *otherness* that comes from rapid immersion in another language. It is an aspect that is under-reported and not widely understood, but as Mary Besemeres has noted:

By definition travel narratives evoke an experience of moving between cultural worlds. Only a fraction of travel books in English, however, emphasise the language borders that are crossed in much international travel, and deal in a sustained way with the question of how language impinges on the self. (245)

The otherness, that duality like light caught in a swinging door, is violently revealed when you begin language training, and the whole world that it encompasses—of being the 'other' in the most fundamental way, by speaking the other's language. Prior to my posting to Malaysia I was lucky enough (at 42) to receive six months full time language training in Malay. By Friday afternoon after fifteen hours of classes speaking only the other language, I would be thinking in Malay. By the end of six months, learning 200 words a week (all tested) I was so immersed in it that I insisted

the biographical note in the reprint of my fiction anthology, *Canberra Tales*, be in Malay as well as English. Speaking Malay had become a central part of my identity and it seemed provincial to be defined in only one language. That was why I insisted. It felt right at the time.

When it came to the harder task of learning Arabic I, along with the majority of the postees, only received a month of training called ‘Survival.’ A month was sufficient to learn to write the alphabet and to acquire at best some 400 words. Long enough for an Emirati to tell me months later in Abu Dhabi that my Arabic teacher must have been from the Maghreb (she was); long enough to help me out at weddings; and to give me an insight into the traps and complications of the Middle East, especially those of politeness and gender. Arabic spoken by a woman has to be used with particular care: a woman can insult a man by speaking to him as she would to another woman; speaking to another woman as if she were a man is just a mistake. Alternatively, a woman on a TV panel may resort to formal Arabic to give herself more authority or to stop male panelists interrupting her. My experience of learning Arabic is summarised in my journal:

6 February 2005 Canberra

Arabic has two words for baby: *reder* for a breastfeeding baby and *tefer* for one that’s weaned and toddling. I am coming up to my third week of it. What a lovely, strange, hard language! In a silly moment I ask Lubna if it is, in fact, a dead language, like Latin, because there’s the colloquial, but never written Fusha and then there’s ammiyat or Modern Standard Arabic which never changes and has to be correct. So 80% of the population speaks a language they can never see written. The other 20% speaks a formal stilted flowery language that carries great authority. I can’t help it: it does sound like early medieval Latin. Worse, how on earth is literature going to grow if people can’t talk in the language of the streets, of now, as they really do? These days, although I love learning Arabic, it’s beginning to build up a picture of a place in my head that’s going to be, has to be, false. It’s leading to a world where I shop, bargain, chat, issue directions etc. Never a world where I sweat over cables, deal with difficult local staff, get rebuked by my boss.

Once on posting you may not use the language as much as you wanted to or planned to when you were in your own country, learning it. But the knowledge that is imbibed with the language cannot be undone and it reinforces your sense of the primary importance of the other place’s ‘wholeness’ and its baffling identity—its equal heft in terms of the quotidian and the mirror.

The third, less important, aspect of being a diplomat is ‘*sleeping with the enemy.*’ A number of young male Third Secretaries come back from their first posting married to a woman from the country of the posting. Some acquire a ‘long-haired dictionary’ while on language training in the country. For women it is less common, but it does happen. There, exposed and painful, is the beating up against ‘otherness.’ For diplomats there is occasionally a private space for a discreet solace.

To be avoided at all costs is the far more common comfort of being ensconced only with friends from the diplomat’s home country. This phenomenon, nicknamed ‘Lifeboat Australia,’ happens when those overseas spend all their own recreational time (as well as their working life) mixing with other Australians and disparaging the country to which they are posted. I was lucky to have

the resilience to build solid friendships in Malaysia, and by the time I left I spent almost every weekend with Malaysian friends.

In Abu Dhabi I achieved this too. This meant I could be driven back from Dubai at night by my friend Narriman, listening all the way to her talking frankly about the new UAE Cabinet. We could try on ball gowns in her apartment for the next wedding we were attending. And I could sit on the floor of the Abu Dhabi apartment of another friend, Mohammed Al Shamsi, eating with my right hand in a circle with others, and observe my host making *shisha* from giant tobacco leaves brought from an Al-Shamsi farm. Far away from bustling Abu Dhabi I could eat a slow lunch in the Al-Shamsi compound in the small state of Ras Al Khaimah, with Saddiqa, mother of six and divorced sister of Mohammed, talking about life, and offspring, and fate.

I have a draft memoir of Abu Dhabi that recorded much about the hothouse atmosphere of working in an embassy—of spending longer with your colleagues every day than with your family, and in this case, spending all those hours in close quarters. And I was lucky: only one bombing happened while I was there early on in 2005, and that was in Qatar. We were accredited to provide diplomatic representation in Qatar and I went there for work about every 6–8 weeks. A suicide bomber drove a jeep packed with explosives into a theatre when an amateur production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was being staged. Several Australians were injured, and I went into the embassy at 1 pm to help our Consul find out their condition. Luckily the play was running ahead of schedule so only one person, the director from the UK, was killed, and not the crowds of theatre goers who had been in the cafe for interval minutes before. I felt a great revulsion that a play at the heart of my culture had been attacked; and somewhat less honourably, an anger that my new posting was being ruined. But, as it turned out, it wasn't.

I have tried to look at memoirs to see how they work when they deal with diplomatic life. But as Sidonie Smith notes:

This genre, apparently so simple, so self-evident, so readily accessible to the reader, is ultimately as complex as the subject it seeks to capture in its representation and as various as the rhetorical expressions through which, with the mediation of language, that subjectivity reads itself into the world. (3)

Perhaps this complexity needs distance to make my memoir work. But there is another reason this memoir doesn't yet work: as I noted earlier, the need for secrecy and reserve that impinge upon the exercise of the obligation to 'truth' upon which life writing usually demands. But also, there are *the lives of others*. As Graham Greene noted, explaining why there was a gap before he wrote the second part of his autobiography: 'I couldn't infringe *their* copyright . . . They had a right to privacy and it was impossible to deal with my private life without involving theirs' (9).

## Conclusion

It is not why you go or even how you go overseas that defines your expatriation. It is what you do there: that you work, that you understand and sometimes speak the language; that you make great friendships there. These are the things that determine your experience as an expatriate.

As a diplomat, when you return to Australia, home is no longer home. In the supermarket back in Canberra you are likely to be hailed by acquaintances who do not know you have been living another life, somewhere else. I wouldn't be the only one to have sometimes flinched from even mentioning a posting for fear of diminishing and diluting the whole space the previous life has been.

When I landed at Sydney airport in the summer after being in Abu Dhabi for two years I was startled by the loincloths and camisoles Australians wore: middle aged men and women in singlets and shorts, seborrhic warts on bulging brown flesh, the Australian natives in rags of cloth. I was used to bodies being covered, women in black, men in white. I drove with constant aggression until gently reminded by a friend that here other drivers *would* signal, would *not* run red lights. I turned my head with joy when I heard Arabic or smelt shisha. I greeted Muslims in the suburbs of Adelaide with *Salam Alaikum* just to see them smile.

Life settles into grey and white. Colour, danger and excitement disappear. This flatness defines the experience. New Zealand writer, Michael D. Jackson captures it:

With every return home, the expatriate is reborn. It is not simply because you are returned to the landscapes of your early life; it is because the quotidian, momentarily bathed in a new light, appears exotic. And so you marvel that this place you could not live in because of its emptiness and insularity still has the power to remind you of who you really are. (235)

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