Diplomatic Ladies: New Zealand's Unsung Envoys. By Joanna Woods. Otago University Press, Dunedin, 2012. 292 pp. NZ price: $49.99. ISBN 9781877578304.

Diplomatic Ladies unveils an extraordinary social history of the first hundred years of New Zealand's diplomatic affairs. The diplomatic wife is centre stage. Topics in the book are domestic in nature and cover family matters such as educating children, shopping for food, hiring home help, setting up house in a foreign land and learning to fit in. Woods tells a story of citizenship and 'doing your duty' for the nation. She writes with a women-centred lens and each of the 21 chapters is alive with colour, drama and humanness.

Drawing on Ministry of Foreign Affairs & Trade (MFAT) archives, interviews, and primary and secondary source material, the chapters are sharpened by the author's own observations. Woods draws from her experience as an insider to the diplomatic world – this is her ethnographic moment. An able researcher, Woods obtained her doctorate from Moscow State University published as Katerina: the Russian world of Katherine Mansfield (2001) and has an established publishing history in New Zealand and Russia.

Woods looks towards Joanna Trollope's *Britannia's Daughters* (1983) as a template for exploring the services of imperial women. Trollope recounts the lives of Britain's aristocratic and humble pioneering women adapting to life in India, South Africa, New Zealand, Australia and Canada during the nineteenth century. *Diplomatic Ladies* is primarily an exposé into women who work for the New Zealand nation, often on a volunteer basis, in the twentieth century. The kitchen and garden become the backdrop for diplomacy, the second theme of the book. *Diplomatic Ladies* also traces the evolution of New Zealand's external relations and trade relationships via diplomatic postings. In essence the book is a re-telling of the nation's weaning from Mother England. Until the 1940s, New Zealand had only one diplomatic posting and that was in London and opened in 1896.

The first chapter of the book features 'the pluckiest little woman in New Zealand', Maude Pember Reeves, who in 1895 intervened in the relationship breakdown between the then Prime Minister Richard Seddon and her husband, William, to ensure his appointment as Agent General in London. It was not until 1905 that the Agent General title was changed to that of High Commissioner. In some ways the Pember Reeveses set the precedent for future ministerial appointments to diplomatic positions. Australian-born Maude Pember Reeves, an active suffragist, viewed her husband's posting as 'an extended visit home during which she might pursue her political interests as she pleased' (p14). The Pember Reeves were intellectuals deeply connected to Fabian socialist ideals. The chapter is coloured by their daughter Amber's romantic involvement with author H.G. Wells, who was also active in Fabian circles (p.18). The story reminds the reader of the impact diplomatic life has on families. Other chapters feature daughters growing up in the surreal diplomatic world, including an unmarried Veronica Scott, who in 1974 greeted her parents returning from New York clad in 'a long, blue muslin dress with a big bump in the front and went "Guess what, I'm pregnant" …' (p.115). Another daughter story involves Jane Eyre's midnight sauna adventure with Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, in which she narrowly escaped freezing to death.

Continuing with the chronological theme, the next round of embassies or legations to be opened occurred during the Second World War, and included Washington, Canberra, Ottawa and Moscow, the setting of the second chapter. It opens with a description of a three-month journey to Moscow by Jean Boswell, another Fabian diplomatic wife from Northland, and Archivist Ruth Macky. They travelled on blacked-out ships through the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf and then flew over the Russian landscape, 'pock-marked with bomb-craters; whole villages lay in ruins …' (p.26). Life under the Communist regime is described with anecdotes of fear and violence, food shortages and living in cramped conditions. Any trappings of diplomatic privilege are absent. Jean Boswell's early days are spent living in a small hotel room, subsisting on a diet of eggs and cabbage soup, with a walk with her husband at the end of the day as her only reprieve from the closed expatriate circle (p.30). The narrative resembles that of a movie plot as the reader learns that the New Zealand diplomatic team, with the exception of the Boswells from Northland, were eventually all suspected of being communists. The New Zealand Moscow Legation was shut down as part of a Cold War review and the embassy remained closed for 25 years.

With the chronological approach we see the natural evolution of the diplomatic partner's role. The first chapter featuring a diplomatic lady who singly contributes towards building better relations between New Zealand and Samoa focuses on Eileen Powles, wife of Richard (p.41). Aspects of Kiwi culture are evident as the Powles home and garden, 'Vailima', built by author Robert Louis Stevenson, becomes a sanctuary for relaxation as well as a place for trade and political negotiations. The house was in urgent need of repair and prisoners tended to the 60 acres of gardens. Eileen quickly set to work to renovate 'Vailima' and ousted the prisoner labour, stating it was not good for the community (p.46). Eileen employed her own gardeners and cooks. One of Woods's surprises was finding Eileen's recipes amidst the MFAT archives. Over time Eileen worked out the complexities of Samoan culture and befriended many locals. This may have been aided by the fact that both Richard and Eileen learnt how to speak Samoan. Her main achievement was helping transform the Women's Committees into a national body – giving half the population a voice (p.52).

The next time shift traces what historians describe as New Zealand's postcolonial moment: as Britain moved closer to Europe under the European Union, New Zealand sought new trade partners. The 1970s was a volatile, counter-cultural period: attitudes to married women in the workforce and women's labour in the home were re-addressed. The chatter amongst the diplomatic ladies was noisy and varied. Piera McArthur noted that 'entertaining was all part of your job: It had to be done, so I did it gladly' (p.123). Others lobbied for better conditions, which included the right for diplomatic ladies to engage in paid work, and when under threat, ensuring that family allowances were maintained. There is a pecking order closely associated with the diplomatic title of the husband; women are accordingly ranked as first, second or third wife and 'charity work of some kind is just part of the wife's duties'. Rich with opportunities, diplomatic ladies engaged in essential caring work: HIV/AIDS in the Cook Islands; caring for Amerasian orphans in Vietnam; and nursing the war wounded in Thailand.

Guidelines introduced in the 1970s provided advice on etiquette and survival in the diplomatic world. The unruly wife or modern-day equivalent, partner, could be disciplined. Later MFAT allowed alternative diplomatic wife models, including house husbands and same-sex partners; the stories of both mirror the rise of career women. 'Official Companion' is the title used for June Mulgrew's role as caretaker for Sir Edmund Hillary, who took on the position of New Zealand High Commissioner in New Delhi in 1984. Touchingly, Lady Hillary was awarded a QSM, for which 'the real reason … had very little to do with choosing curtains or re-covering the chairs. It was to thank her for looking after Ed' (p.204).

The final chapter features a working diplomatic lady. Maria MacKay had just started teaching at the United Nations International School (UNIS) in Manhattan when the World Trade Centre was hit on September 11, 2001. MacKay's is an inspirational story, about her educational recovery work with children traumatized by the event; her teaching practice was featured on CNN and attracted international recognition (p.269). The implication is that being a 'diplomatic lady' is both a privilege and a duty. Woods covers widely contrasting positions, from a plush post in Paris to the outposts in India. The letters of 'M' to 'Mama' describe the challenges faced with placements in third world countries. The narrative shifts from first impressions – 'Dear Mama, India is an impossible place. Nothing gets done. Our flat is quite hideous – no water for most of the day, no electricity for days on end' (p.82) – to adapting to the local environment: 'Dear Mama, Well we have a fairly long tale of woe. I have had bacillary dysentery … It is quite hideous & quite unlike anything you can quite imagine' (p.82). The chapter ends with their emergency withdrawal from India in 1971. Another example of a diplomatic lady forced to leave post due to war is seen in Alison Howle's 'Freedom Bird' flight home from Vietnam in 1969. In the 1980s other political unrest forced diplomatic ladies into hiding, such as the author's own time in Iran and Barbara Hill's Fiji coup experience. Resilience is a constant theme.

Overall, Woods provides an insider's view of New Zealand's international relations through a subversive lens that incorporates family history, women's stories, personal photographs, letters and diaries. This is a bold book and it contributes to New Zealand's social history, particularly regarding women's work. The captivating vignettes, combined with the easy writing style, ensure that the book is an easy read. Anyone who has experienced life as an expatriate would relate to these stories. This book is recommended for those who enjoy women's history, social history, women and work stories, and travel writing.

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