



WHOSE MAN IN HAVANA? ADVENTURES FROM THE FAR SIDE OF DIPLOMACY by John W. Graham

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WHOSE MAN IN HAVANA?

*Adventures
from the
Far Side of
Diplomacy*



JOHN W. GRAHAM

WHOSE MAN



IN HAVANA?

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WHOSE MAN IN HAVANA?

*Adventures from the
Far Side of Diplomacy*

JOHN W. GRAHAM



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For Judy

*“[The Colossus] saw the humorous aspect of everything,
which is the real test of the tragic sense.”*

Henry Miller, *The Colossus of Maroussi*

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FOREWORD

John Graham's memoir is a joyous guide to a life in the Canadian foreign service, and reassuringly he also shows that there is a life after bureaucracy. Graham joined the foreign service when becoming a Canadian diplomat was thought to be a Good Thing. Canada's Department of External Affairs managed to look glamorous from the outside, and proved to be interesting and often strenuous from the inside. Though the foreign service had its share of clunks and incompetents, and ran a few posts that competed with Devil's Island for isolation and discomfort, it was usually much better than that, and there were real rewards – not the least of which was to join an international profession that required its members always to understand the other point of view and not simply to parrot instructions from head office in Ottawa.

Diplomatic life could be pleasant. There were indeed parties and receptions and dinners. Other diplomats from other countries could be, and often were intelligent, good company, and sometimes lifelong friends. It could also be stressful, as Graham shows, hair-raising, and occasionally tragic – as he also shows. Life abroad with allowances was mitigated by home duty: ice and snow in Ottawa, and quite often a modest lifestyle. It was (and is) the equivalent of the slave riding in a chariot with a Roman conqueror, whispering in his ear, "Remember, you are but mortal."

Canadian foreign policy when Graham was a diplomat was run from a smallish ministry that had been originally attached to the prime minister's office (with a lower case "o" at a time when it had not achieved the grandeur and size it has today). That meant it was located in a neo-Gothic pile, the East Block of Canada's Parliament buildings, where prime ministers

could keep an eye on it. Indeed for almost forty years the prime minister was also styled “Secretary of State for External Affairs” to distinguish him from the “Secretary of State,” who handled patents and other forms.

In the 1940s, “the Department” (all such entities were called departments before ascending in nomenclature to be “ministries”) acquired its own minister, and two of them, Louis St. Laurent and Lester B. Pearson, went on to be prime minister: it seemed a natural step. Pearson even collected a Nobel Peace Prize as he passed Go.

Under the minister came the under-secretary, the deputy minister. The under-secretary was a homebody, minding the store, running errands (“interfacing” today) between the political and the bureaucratic, rewarding, punishing, stretching budgets and generally keeping his fractious brood in line. He (for they were all male in Graham’s period) occasionally had to suppress bad ideas from ambitious ambassadors. “For the son-of-a-bitch,” one under-secretary growled when an ambassador in Cuba produced a plan for harmony between the United States and communist Cuba. In that case his staff calmed the enraged deputy minister, but sometimes diplomats found themselves abruptly yanked and returned to Ottawa to contemplate life from within the department’s Historical Division.

It was understood that ministers, and more broadly the cabinet, made policy, and the diplomats executed it. It was also their function to give advice, as practically as possible, for ministers to adopt or disregard. As a general rule, however, the advice bore some resemblance to the policy adopted, and the policy, in turn, helped shape the advice. For that to be so, there had to be some common ground or at least mutual confidence.

Most day-to-day work sailed comfortably under the ministerial radar. Readers will find very few ministerial irruptions in Graham’s volume, and rightly so. Diplomats on post had considerable freedom to conduct their work as they saw best, disturbed only by very infrequent visits from superiors from headquarters or sorties by ministers in search of trade and publicity. An ambassador or high commissioner could address the local Drones Club or Meathead Society and nobody in Ottawa would be any the worse – in fact, better for not following up on such mundane details.

Common ground and mutual confidence also applied to relations among foreign missions in a given capital. Sometimes this was necessary for survival or more usually comfort, pooling supplies, or shopping at the same commissary. This shared cordiality even applied to contacts

with officials from one or another of Canada's official enemies, such as the Soviet Union. But even Soviet ambassadors might have opinions, and sometimes social charms, which were worth harvesting.

Graham represented "Canada" – the combination of geography and demographics and economy and strategy that made up the country. "Canada" was not just a projection of domestic politics, though ambassadors were assumed not to contradict the explicit policy of the government of the day. Diplomats from other countries often admired the ability of their Canadian counterparts to sail past political tests and witch-hunts. One very senior American diplomat wished he could have moved: "I would have felt comfortable serving in the Canadian Foreign Service, and I felt I knew enough people that it was a conceivable thing."

Canadians in the eyes of other diplomats had a characteristic negotiating style. According to the same witness, "There is something special about the Canadians which you cannot transpose to many other situations, and that is at a point where we would appear to face irreconcilable difference over something, the Canadians were people you could sit down with over a cup of coffee or a beer and talk and say, 'Now come on. We've got to find our way through all this.' They have a nice genius for knowing when to move on from total hard-line position to search for a compromise that's palatable to both sides, and they showed it many times."

Reading Graham is to contemplate many good beers – fine ales, to be sure. It is reminiscence not only of a career well spent, but of a foreign service and a Canada that deserve commemoration and if possible replication.

Robert Bothwell
September 2015

*George Vest, stationed in the US embassy in Ottawa, 1951–54, desk officer for Canada in the State Department, 1954–57. Vest later became Inspector-General of the Foreign Service.

PREFACE

Every morning when I am at home I greet Cuthbert in twelve languages. Cuthbert is our thirty-five-year-old Amazon parrot, and the languages are Arabic, Arawak (from his home in Guyana), Aymara, Bosnian, Cantonese, Czech, Greek, Guarani, Japanese, Kyrgyz, Mam, and Quechua. As I am not a gifted linguist, the greeting in these languages is only “Good morning,” but Cuthbert, a unilingual anglophone who is known as Maggie to the rest of the family, seems to enjoy the performance. He spreads his spectacular tail feathers, dilates both irises, and waves a claw to acknowledge the greeting. It is a curious routine, and I suppose that I do it not just out of habit but in remembrance of fascinating times in fascinating places. I think the family would be relieved if I were to stop, but I like to believe that Cuthbert would be disappointed.

This book is about unusual and often extraordinary experiences in many of the places these languages are spoken – half of them as a Canadian diplomat, the other half as a member of international and non-governmental organizations, with one as a private traveller. Because it was originally conceived as an ‘entertainment’ and not a treatise on diplomacy, I have focused mostly on the lighter side of people and places. But almost everywhere the dark side intrudes, especially the man-made dark side. The intersection of both sides is black comedy, and there is a great deal of that. Substance slips in from time to time.

In the fifties and sixties, young officers in the Department of External Affairs were invited to tell the Personnel Division where they would like to be posted. Like many of my colleagues, I wrote London, Paris, and Washington on the form, naively thinking that the mark I could make

in those places would be visible to my superiors in Ottawa. Of course the Department never read these requests, and eventually I learned not to be disappointed by assignments to non-A-list countries. Off the beaten track is often more fun, as I hope these pages will reveal, and I quickly developed a taste for exotic cultures. I was lucky to take my apprenticeship in the Dominican Republic and Cuba, and professionally fortunate also in my timing. These were two very different dictatorships: the one on the right ended in assassination, and the other, on the left, almost ignited an East–West holocaust. Even in fantasy I could not have imagined that I would be sent to Cuba after the missile crisis to spy on Soviet military operations, and that the mission (not me) would have the blessing of the president of the United States and the prime minister of Canada.

It was only after I gave up completing these forms that we were sent to London and, much later, Washington. Over two postings we had seven golden years in London full of cherished memories, including the birth of two of our children, and, much later, three years in Washington. But only one of the London and none of the Washington stories make the cut for this book.

Readers may be surprised that the volume contains almost as many stories from my post-diplomatic career as from the years when I was in government harness. After my departure from the foreign service I sometimes pushed for particular assignments, but on the whole the appointments and their destinations were serendipitous – more good luck than good management. For this project it has also proved invaluable that about twenty years ago I acquired the habit of buying a fresh notebook in advance of each expedition. Some stories are from memory, but they are supported by fact-checking with Library and Archives Canada, Google, and friends. Several have been previously published. Most are mined from my stack of notebooks – saved and boxed by my wife, Judy, and from scrapbooks assembled by her. The dialogue resembles the original conversations, but it is not an accurate reproduction of them. Some names are changed or not given, for reasons that will be obvious, but most names are real. The incidents speak for themselves. There has been no invention, and if there has been embroidery it is a flaw of memory, not of intent.

The list of people to whom I am indebted for their support of this enterprise is long and deep. For at least twenty years, friends and mentors have said – some, probably, because they had heard the same story

too many times – “For God’s sake, write it down.” These include Simon Wade, Sharon Edwards, Louise Muise, and Reed Whittemore, a former US poet laureate, who provided critical guidance and encouragement at the Writer’s Center in Bethesda, Maryland; Paul Mackan, who performed a similar role in classes offered by the Ottawa Board of Education; John Meisel, Denis Smith, and George Post, who went through every page and produced a wealth of invaluable criticism; Don Munton, who found several of my Havana telegrams in the Kennedy Library in Boston; the Rt. Hon. Joe Clark, who authorized the use of his responses in an exchange of correspondence and provided counsel, Greg Donaghy, Julie Fournier from Foreign Affairs, Patrick Belanger from the Foreign Affairs library and Lana Merifield from the Library and Archives Canada, whose toil on my behalf bore fruit with declassified material; Sharleen Tattersfield, who helped make up for my technological failings by scanning and transmitting many illustrations; Paul Durand, James Bartleman, John Kneale, and Jean-Paul Hubert, who encouraged, helped with revision and spotted errors; Stephen Randall, who made the key introduction to the University of Calgary Press, Hendrik Kraay of that university, who had confidence in the project, Peter Enman, editor at the university’s press, Melina Cusano, who provided design and the frame for the cover page illustration, Paul Dole, who instigated advance publicity, Douglas Campbell who sanded rough surfaces, and Joe Choi for timely tech support. The chapter on mediation in the Dominican Republic would not have emerged without generous help from Monsignor Agripino Nunez Collado, Juan Bolivar Diaz, and Michael Skol. Other support was provided by Lisa Chartrand, who insisted that I include maps, and Eric Bergbusch, who provided ideas and suggested that I remove some cluttered thinking. My greatest debt is to Judy, to whom this book is dedicated, and without whose wisdom, skill, and sorely tested forbearance it would never have happened.

Literary debts invariably run in other directions. Over many years I have been drawn to the enchantment of first-class travel writers. I have in mind such people as Isabella Bird, William Dalrymple, Edith Durham, Rebecca West, and particularly those such as Lawrence Durrell, his brother Gerald, and Patrick Leigh Fermor, who manage their stories with self-deprecating humour. Spike Milligan is on this list, but in a separate category: the gloriously inane. Four of these writers (Lawrence Durrell, Durham, Leigh Fermor, and West) devoted space to the Balkans, the focus of five of

my chapters. This is rich memoir ground, vividly cross-hatched with light and dark. To these authors my debt is a sort of unrequited admiration.

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