



***Diplomatic Ladies: New Zealand's Unsung Envoys* by Joanna Woods. Dunedin: OUP (2013). RRP: \$49.99. Pb, 286pp. ISBN: 9781877578304. Reviewed by Olivia Macassey.**

Spanning a period from the 1890s to the 2000s, the subject matter of **Joanna**

**Woods' *Diplomatic Ladies: New Zealand's Unsung Envoys*** is the lives and concerns of the wives of New Zealand diplomats, and occasionally their daughters, during diplomatic postings. One of the later chapters deals with the experiences of a (female) diplomat's husband and another with the experiences of same-sex partners.

Written for a general readership, some chapters sketch short episodes from women's lives, while others span longer time periods. One, 'Supping with the Ayatollah', is autobiographical and describes author Joanna Woods' time in Tehran, accompanying her husband in the 1980s (pp 179-193). The wife of Richard Woods, former ambassador and director of the Security Intelligence Service, Woods is an insider to New Zealand diplomatic circles. Her book draws on interviews, letters, photographs and archival material. Some of Woods' subjects have apparently supplied her with personal photographs and correspondence, and there is a strong sense of both her insider status and her wide knowledge of the social and cultural terrain of the diplomatic world.

Woods' previous works are biographies of individuals, including *Katerina: The Russian World of Katherine Mansfield* (Penguin, 2001). Her use of letters and anecdotes paints the personalities of her subjects vividly, complemented by numerous photographs. *Diplomatic Ladies* is particularly valuable as a record of women's contributions and experiences which have historically been ignored outside of diplomatic circles, and – as Woods argues – taken for granted within them.

Joanna Woods chronicles the trials and tribulations, both physical and mental, of women trying to cope with maintaining a western lifestyle, parenting, and large-scale hostessing in unfamiliar and sometimes conflict-ridden territories. At times, the results are a little disconcerting, as when Woods' account of one of her subject's apparently neutral feelings about Pinochet's

violent coup d'état blithely segues into an account of artistic enjoyment: 'Far removed from the horrors of the stadium, the coffee parties and cultural groups of the diplomatic wives continued, and it was in the unlikely environment of one of these gatherings that Piera discovered her artistic vocation...' (p 126); or when colonial undertones surface: 'Over their three years in Port Moresby, Philip and Penny had become like parents to the whole Kukukuku community' (p 168). Of course, some tension is inevitable when viewing political situations through a social, personal lens.

*Diplomatic Ladies* also reveals the changing expectations placed on spouses in diplomatic circles over time. For much of the twentieth century, wives were unpaid, full-time hostesses and helpmates. In the 1940s, 'For official functions at the Residence, wives were required to arrive at least ten minutes early and to remain until the last guest had departed [...] Late arrivals and early departures had to be for a valid reason, which should be explained to the Ambassador beforehand [...] and for larger parties the guest list was to be studied beforehand' (p 108).

In this century, diplomatic wives are no longer expected to participate and most are working (p 251). Woods gives an account of the changing rules and regulations around work for diplomatic spouses, and women's activism, with spouses themselves at the forefront of agitating for the right to remuneration and to seek their own employment (pp 169-178).

Since host duties and networking were essential for most of its subjects, *Diplomatic Ladies* necessarily gives weight to their social lives. In doing so, the book occasionally strays into prurience about famous men with whom they interacted, which is a pity as it undermines the centrality placed on women's experience elsewhere in the book. This occurs in chapters dealing with relationships between diplomat's daughters and "great men", such as one devoted to a brief flirtation between daughter Jane Eyre and Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau (pp 117-121) which seems a little off-topic. The original edition of this book was recalled by AUP in 2013, after a defamation action by former High Commissioner to London John Collinge resulted in the publisher's removal of a chapter. The excised portion dealt with conflict between Collinge and a former girlfriend, and I suspect that its removal has strengthened the book overall. As a cohesive whole, though, it's largely chronological treatment of material gives a sense of historical context and continuity, and *Diplomatic Ladies* achieves a wide, rich portrayal of its subjects' lives.