

# H-Diplo

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### H-Diplo Review of:

**Sir Ivor Roberts, ed. *Satow's Guide to Diplomatic Practice*.** Oxford: Oxford University Press, 6<sup>th</sup> edition, 2009. pp. lvi + 730. ISBN 978-0-19-955927-5; £110.00.

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**N**inety-three years ago, Sir Ernest Satow published *A Guide to Diplomatic Practice*. The appearance of its two stout volumes created something of a sensation; nothing like it had ever appeared in the English language before. A budding diplomatist, one reviewer commented, “will be likely to avoid mistakes if he has at his elbow a guide to diplomacy compiled by one who has practised what he teaches – which accurately describes Sir Ernest Satow’s volumes.”<sup>i</sup> The then Foreign Office Librarian, Edward Charles Blech (later Bleck), predicted “that your book ... will be in constant use for reference and will save us many a weary hunt for the precedents and information of which it is so completely a storehouse.”<sup>ii</sup> His prophecy of the *Guide*’s longevity was remarkably accurate. Since its first appearance it has enjoyed a unique status as one of the classics in the canon of diplomatic literature, so much so that it is now usually referred to simply as *Satow*. It remains the most widely used guide to diplomacy, used in embassies of all nations around the globe.

Sir Ernest Mason Satow (1843-1929) was a scholar-diplomat of the kind that, perhaps, only Victorian Britain could produce. The son of a German merchant resident in London, he joined Britain’s Japan consular service as a student interpreter in 1861, after reading Lancelot Oliphant’s account of the Earl of Elgin’s 1858-9 mission to China and Japan. That early enthusiasm for Japan and the Far East never palled. “His knowledge of Japanese in all ways is wonderful & he has much influence with the leading men [in the Japanese government]”, commented the *chargé d’affaires* at the Tokyo legation in the early 1880s.<sup>iii</sup> His linguistic and diplomatic skills ensured Satow’s rise in his chosen profession. Much of his career was spent in the Far East, apart from the ten years between 1885 and 1895, during which time he headed Britain’s missions at Bangkok, Montevideo and then Tangier. In 1895, he returned to East Asia as minister at Tokyo, from where he was transferred across the China Sea to Peking in 1900 in

the wake of the Boxer Uprising. Following his retirement, in 1906, he was for six years the British member of The Hague court of arbitration. In 1907, he was one of Britain's plenipotentiaries at the second peace conference in the Dutch capital.<sup>iv</sup>

Throughout his career, Satow found time to pursue his scholarly interests. His French colleague at Tokyo in the late 1890s, indeed, described him as “*un peu ‘livresque’*.”<sup>v</sup> Until his retirement he produced a steady stream of learned papers on mostly Oriental philology and early Japanese history. In addition, there was an English-Japanese dictionary and an edition from contemporary sources of John Saris' voyage to Japan in the early seventeenth century. To this day, indeed, Satow is warmly remembered in Japan, a circumstance aided, perhaps, by his clandestine marriage to a Tokyo lady with whom he had three children.<sup>vi</sup> Once retired, Satow laid his Far Eastern interests and experiences aside, and ‘reinvented’ himself as a writer on diplomatic history and international law. He was, in fact, a qualified barrister, and had also attended lectures on Roman law at the University of Marburg in Germany in the late 1880s. In the seclusion of his Devonshire retirement, he distilled his own professional experience and the fruits of his historico-legal studies into a practical guide to diplomacy.

The conceptual unity of history, as the repository of the evolved practice of States in their international dealings, and the law was very much at the core of Satow's original work.<sup>vii</sup> And it continues to be so in this, the sixth edition of the *Guide*. Since 1917, however, the practice of diplomacy has evolved substantially, and it continues to do so at a now accelerated pace. Satow quite understood the transient nature of diplomacy. He had conceived of the idea of the *Guide* well before 1914. But the outbreak of what would become a protracted conflict made it all the more necessary to re-examine diplomacy as the vital lubricant of international relations and a key element of international stability. All wars eventually come to an end, and, in writing his diplomatic manual, Satow was to no small degree motivated by the fact that an eventual peace conference required proper preparation. This also explains the space that is devoted to congresses and conferences in the first two editions of the *Guide*. He also contributed a slim study on such international gatherings to the Foreign Office's series of *Peace Handbooks*.<sup>viii</sup> Satow himself prepared a revised second edition of the *Guide*, which took into account changes to international diplomatic practice following the 1919 Paris peace conference and the formation of the League of Nations, and which was published in 1922. After Satow's death in 1929, four further editions appeared, each revised by a recently retired diplomat. The third edition (1932) was produced by Hugh Ritchie, formerly a technical assistant in the Foreign Office's Treaty Department. As Sir Nevile Bland, former ambassador at The Hague and editor of the fourth edition of the *Guide* (1954), noted in his preface, the Ritchie version was published at “the end of the pre-Hitler era, for with the advent of Hitler the usually accepted ‘practice of diplomacy’ received some rude blows from which ... it has never recovered.”<sup>ix</sup> These rude blows were still in evidence, when, some thirty-five years later, Lord Gore-Booth took charge of the fifth edition of Satow. When preparing it, Gore-Booth, a former Permanent Under-Secretary of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, like Ritchie and Bland before him, encountered the problem of what to retain of Satow's original, what to omit and what to replace altogether: “Satow V must be (1) as near to Satow I and (2) as radically unlike it as feasible.”<sup>x</sup> The resulting

edition, published ten years before the fall of the Berlin Wall, was very much the product of the Cold War era and its preoccupations.

Since then, the end of the Cold War and the revolution in modern communications technology have transformed the international landscape. The simple certainties of the bipolar world order have vanished. The number of international actors, both State and non-governmental, has increased manifold. At the same time, multilateral diplomacy has become more complex and convoluted, the threats to the peaceful conduct of international relations have become more varied, and the demands on diplomats and their political masters have multiplied. Nothing less than radical surgery, then, was required to bring Satow V up to date. The latest revision has been skilfully supervised by Sir Ivor Roberts, a former ambassador to Yugoslavia, Ireland and Italy. Roberts himself wrote a number of the chapters of Satow VI, but was also aided by a team of former and current diplomats and legal advisers to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Satow VI, now transferred from Longmans to Oxford University Press (- ironically, the originally agreed publisher in 1917 -), is very unlike Satow I. In its spirit, however, it is very much the same. Like it, the Roberts edition combines the exposition of historically grown practice with legal analysis. Diplomacy continues to be “the application of intelligence and tact to the conduct of official relations between the governments of independent states, extending sometimes also to their relations with dependent territories, and between governments and international institutions” (§ 1.1). It remains the principal tool of international politics. There is little that can replace it effectively. Diplomacy and war, moreover, remain the two poles around which international relations revolve. Professional failures in one will increase the significance of the other. Practitioners and students of twenty-first century diplomacy, therefore, need to know and understand what constitutes good diplomatic practice.

The reader who has decided to delve into this 700-odd pages thick tome, may well ask himself whether a complete storehouse of precedents and formal information, useful perhaps in 1917, is still required today. After all, international diplomacy today covers such diverse, non-traditional and highly technical topics as nuclear energy, development aid or climate change. E-mail, texting and other electronic platforms provide means of almost instantaneous communication between officials of different governments – frequently experts in their fields – without the need to go through the established channels of diplomatic missions in each other’s capitals, seemingly the preserve of amateurs and generalists. Both the current British Foreign Secretary and his immediate predecessor are card-carrying members of the new class of *twitterati*, and no doubt so are some of their fellow foreign ministers elsewhere. Finally, the opportunities for direct international dealings have multiplied with the growth of international organisations and regional integration, such as the European Union.

What possible role, then, can a traditional ambassador still play? Of course, the diminution of the status and role of embassies is not of recent vintage. International summitry, more presidential styles of direct dealings between international leaders and “back channel” diplomacy have placed the resident ambassador, the principal traditional means of diplomacy,

on the defensive since the 1960s and 1970s. If any visible demonstration of this were needed, the repeated assaults on the diplomatic service budgets in most Western countries supply it. Yet Satow VI is reassuring on these points. For all the changes in international politics over the past thirty years, there is no case for ambassadorial euthanasia. The resident diplomat abroad remains the central feature of international diplomacy, even if he or – fortunately increasingly now – she no longer now has a monopoly position in the diplomatic business. The resident ambassador remains the most efficacious instrument at the disposal of governments for the protection of their interests and those of their citizens. The standardised language of collective notes, *notes verbales* or *bouts de papier* act as a convenient and effective instrument of communication as well as a safety device. Indeed, there is a reassuring quality to them in moments of extreme tension and high political drama – and as such they will remain important instrument in the diplomat’s toolkit.

Modern diplomatic practice is codified to a considerably larger degree than was the case in Satow’s day. Intriguingly, as Satow VI makes clear, the 1899 and 1907 peace conferences at The Hague remain important to international mediation and arbitration (e.g. § 29.16). In so far as diplomatic agents are concerned, the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations of 1961 placed on a firmer basis the customary law on diplomacy, clarified and refined the privileges and immunities of diplomats, and then recast it in the form of a multilateral treaty. The subsequent Vienna Conventions on consular matters (1963) and on treaty law (1969) sought to consolidate the customary practices of States in related aspects of international politics. Yet the precise application of these and similar attempts to codify international diplomacy remains still subject to the discretion of governments. At one level this gives diplomats and the governments they represent a degree of flexibility, itself a precondition of success in international dealings. On the other hand, it can leave diplomatic agents and more especially their local employees vulnerable to political pressure by the host government. The Anglo-Iranian diplomatic spat following the beleaguered Tehran regime’s harassment, intimidation and eventual detention of locally employed embassy staff in the summer of 2009 illustrates some of the problems left by the vagueness of the Vienna Convention. Receiving states have considerable latitude in the immunities they are prepared to grant to their own nationals who work at a foreign diplomatic mission. The Vienna Convention provides a degree of protection for administrative and technical staff employed in this manner. But agreement on the exact treatment to be accorded to such staff has proved elusive, and the formulation under the Convention has never been universally accepted. This enabled the Iranian authorities to arrest Iranian nationals employed in administrative and advisory roles at the British embassy in June 2009, ostensibly on treason charges. British and EU diplomats duly protested vigorously, but could do little more than that. The Vienna Convention limits the immunity and inviolability of nationals of the receiving state to official acts only, and so provided no clear-cut guarantees against a receiving government determined in its claims that local embassy employees had abused their positions to conspire against it.<sup>xi</sup> This case, which occurred after Satow VI went to press, underlines the importance of continued efforts to clarify the position, immunities and privileges of diplomatic personnel.

Similarly, for all the attention that, for instance, the International Criminal Court at The Hague has attracted in recent years, the court has no primacy over national jurisdiction. And

yet, diplomats would be badly advised if they left these new institutions to the lawyers. As Satow VI argues (§ 31.2), conflict resolution in the twenty-first century, let alone post-conflict reconstruction, can no longer afford to ignore questions of responsibility for atrocities committed during that conflict. Indeed, the age-old tension in international politics between stability, order and justice may well have to be re-addressed; the narrow national interest may well have to be married up with a greater global good; and all this requires a reasoned input from professional diplomats.

Diplomatic personnel, however, are also increasingly exposed to threats against which no amount of codification can afford sufficient protection. Satow VI appropriately highlights the impact international terrorism has on the life and work of a diplomat (e.g. §§ 8.15 and 17.24-25). The United Nations might well pass anti-terrorism resolutions, sending and receiving governments may implement various protection measures but, in certain parts of the world, especially Western diplomats still run the risk of injury or worse, as the recent, fortunately failed, suicide attack on the British ambassador to Yemen in the spring of this year illustrated.<sup>xii</sup>

One of the striking external changes in diplomatic practice over the past three decades is the extent to which English has now become indisputably the *lingua franca* of international diplomacy. A comparison of Satow V and VI quickly establishes the fact. It is remarkable how many passages in the Gore-Booth edition of 1979 are still in French. This has been swept away by the tides of recent history, along with Satow's original, more measured writing style – much to this reviewer's regret, though greatly to the benefit of most modern readers.

The linguistic predominance of English in international politics notwithstanding, Satow VI is free from Anglocentric preoccupations. In this it is remarkably like the two original editions of 1917 and 1922, but very unlike Satow III, IV and V. Indeed, in Satow IV, the section on international organizations, gave precedence to the British Commonwealth of Nations over the United Nations. In Satow V, that order was reversed, but the Commonwealth was still listed before any other multilateral, international body. Such oddities of the post-1945 period have sensibly been removed, and the whole thrust of this revised edition is aimed at a wider, global audience.

Indeed, another striking change in current diplomatic practice concerns the increased role of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). In Satow V they were practically non-existent. The current edition, by contrast, affords them and their role proper consideration (§ 32). NGOs come in different guises, though invariably they are single-issue organisations. Equally invariably, therefore, their relations with governments can be one of tension and confrontation. Globalization, the increased speed of global communications and the ease of access to information, now no longer privileged, have weakened the monopoly role of States in diplomacy; and NGOs increasingly fill niches in international politics that have opened up in consequence. This has led to a parallel growth in so-called “track two diplomacy”, which may be pursued on its own or in conjunction with, and often complementing, official diplomatic efforts.<sup>xiii</sup> NGOs and their activities are less well regulated than official diplomacy. Nevertheless, Satow VI urges professional diplomats to accept with good grace the loss of their monopoly as

actors in the field of international relations. Rather than indulging in turf wars, they should cultivate closer ties with NGO representatives, barter information, and exploit the advantages that cooperation with them has to offer.

Modern diplomatic practice has undergone considerable change. Already in 1954, Satow IV noted that a truly modern guide to diplomatic practice “could really only be kept up to date if it were possible to bring out a monthly, if not weekly, supplement.”<sup>xiv</sup> Anyone who has ploughed through Satow VI to the very end may well feel that such a sentiment is applicable ever more today than in the middle of the twentieth century. Indeed, the shifts in the political landscape since the end of the Cold War, the growth in multilateral diplomacy and the technological and cultural impulses towards greater globalization have changed the outward appearance of diplomacy. And the pace of change appears to have quickened as well. In spite of this perhaps gloomy assessment, much remains to which the old rules, expatiated in Satow I and II, still apply. In its essence, diplomacy remains much the same. Tact and intelligence may be fragile instruments, but they are still the most effective ones for containing mankind’s inherent destructive tendencies. Indeed, diplomats, diplomatic historians and historians of diplomacy may well derive some comfort from the fact that the past is a good deal closer to us than some of the critics of diplomacy may realize. The advice on good diplomatic practice proffered by François de Callières or the 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Malmesbury, in the seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries respectively, still holds good today. As Satow VI reminds his readers, most counsels to diplomats, budding or fully fledged, “fall under the heading of ‘organized common sense’” (§40.37). The wisdom of the ancients and a good grasp of diplomacy’s own history, indeed, may be more valuable to any diplomat than any amount of latter-day political science theorising.

Like the earlier editions of the *Guide*, Satow VI offers a *vademecum* for diplomats and students of modern diplomacy alike. It is authoritative in its tone and comprehensive in its coverage. Above all, it is infused with the collective practical wisdom of those who practised what they now teach. Sir Ivor Roberts and his team have very deftly disposed of some of the diplomatic detritus that had come to clutter up the complete storehouse of Satow V. At the same time, they have extended that storehouse in a manner and style in keeping with its original spirit and format.

There is, however, a handful of factual slips, at which Sir Ernest might well have cocked a disapproving eyebrow. Satow was born in Clapton, North East London, not in Essex; and his father was a German, not a Swede, though this is a commonly made mistake (xxxix). Aristide Briand’s and Austen Chamberlain’s German colleague during the Locarno period was Gustav (not Otto) Stresemann (32). The Elector of Brandenburg assumed the somewhat unusual title of King **in** Prussia, rather than of Prussia, in 1712 (37). The official designation of the Belgian monarch is King of the Belgians, not King of Belgium (197). The Russian capital in 1917 was still called Petrograd, but not yet Leningrad (p. 264). And the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary Lord Rosebery spelt his name with only one ‘r’ (420). Finally, for those of an entirely pedantic turn of mind, the footnoting styles are not consistent across the various chapters, and some of the literature cited is not included in the bibliography.

All of these, however, are small matters; matters which could easily be corrected in any reprint of Satow VI. They should not distract from the considerable merits of this erudite and authoritative work. If nothing else, it is a much needed reminder that the diplomat's pen is still the only alternative to the sword – and for that alone it is to be welcomed.

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Notes

<sup>i</sup> Anon., 'The Diplomatist's Handbook', The Times Literary Supplement (3 May 1917), 206.

<sup>ii</sup> Blech to Satow, 3 Apr. 1917, Satow Mss, The National Archive (Public Record Office), Kew, PRO 30/33/13/4.

<sup>iii</sup> Kennedy to Tenterden (private), 3 June 1881, Tenterden Mss, TNA (PRO), FO 363/1/3.

<sup>iv</sup> The only proper biography by B.M. Allen, The Rt. Hon. Sir Ernest Satow: A Memoir (London, 1933) is clearly dated now. However, in 2002, the journal Diplomacy & Statecraft (vol xiii, no. 2) published a series of essays on aspects of Satow's career.

<sup>v</sup> Harmand to Delcassé (no. 119, *très confidentiel*), 18 Nov. 1900, Documents Diplomatiques Français, 1<sup>st</sup> ser. (14 vols., Paris, 1931) xiv, no. 2.

<sup>vi</sup> Yokohama kaiko shiryō-kan [Yokohama Archives of History] (ed.), Zusetsu Aanestu Sato: Bakumatsu-ishin no Igrisu gaiko-kan /The Ernest Satow Album: Portraits of a British Diplomat in Young Japan (Yokohama, 2001), 92-5. A bibliography, albeit incomplete, can be found in Allen, Satow, appendix.



<sup>vii</sup> See my “‘A Manual of Diplomacy’: The Genesis of Satow’s *Guide to Diplomatic Practice*’, Diplomacy & Statecraft xiii, 2 (2002), 229-43.

<sup>viii</sup> This was published two years after the end of the war, Sir E. Satow, International Congresses (London, 1920).

<sup>ix</sup> Sir N. Bland, ‘Preface to Fourth Edition’, *ibid.* (ed.), Satow’s Guide to Diplomatic Practice (London, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., 1954), v.

<sup>x</sup> Lord Gore-Booth, ‘Preface’, *ibid.* (ed.), Satow’s Guide to Diplomatic Practice (London, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. 1979), v.

<sup>xi</sup> The Times (29 June 2009).

<sup>xii</sup> *Ibid.* (27 Apr. 2010).

<sup>xiii</sup> The term was first coined by the then US diplomat Joseph Montville, see G.R. Berridge and A. James, A Dictionary of Diplomacy (Basingstoke and New York, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2003), 260.

<sup>xiv</sup> Bland’ Preface’, Satow’s Guide, vi.