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Keepers of the European Flame? Narratives and self-representation of British diplomats in historical perspective.

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Abstract

This paper deals with the importance and the specific role of British diplomats in the historical narratives that have developed in the past decades on the relationship between Britain and the EEC/EU.

Diplomatic actors have contributed, quite early on, to the first narratives that were produced on “Britain and Europe”, as anonymous providers of information or direct witnesses. This paper will venture the idea that, within the small group of British top diplomats in charge of European affairs from the 1960s to the late 1990s, some individuals have progressively acquired – or been attributed - a peculiar status in historical studies and narratives: their personal contribution and commitment to the European policy of the UK when they were on active service, and their participation to the political and/or academic debate on Britain and Europe, when retired, may qualify them to the title of “keepers of the European flame”, in the absence of political figures available to assume that role in the UK.

The paper will seek to understand and assess the validity of such a title in the light of the increasingly diversified corpus of sources that has emerged in the past thirty years: programmes of oral diplomatic history, published diplomatic memoirs and published official sources.

Keywords

United-Kingdom, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), diplomats, historiography, hagiography, sources.

Thomas Raineau
Max Weber Fellow, 2014-2015

Introduction – Vacancy for a European heritage

In December 2013, the House of Lords, the upper chamber of the Parliament of the United Kingdom, started its first reading of the EU Referendum Bill, proposed by the Liberal-Conservative coalition government led by Prime Minister David Cameron. The purpose of this bill was, among other things, to introduce a “referendum lock” that would oblige a future British government to hold a referendum in case of any further transfer of competence from London to the institutions of the European Union. In late January 2014, the bill was killed off in the Lords, thanks to various parliamentary tactics and to the work of a coalition of peers from all sides of the political spectrum¹. Among those who actively participated to defeat the bill – adopted later by the Commons after a second reading - the press soon underlined the role of a handful of cross-bench peers such as Lord Hannay, Lord Kerr and Lord Armstrong, whose actions were a mix of opposition in the House, and whistleblowing in the press about the negative consequence of such a bill for the already deteriorating relations between the UK and the European Union².

Six months earlier, the then conservative MP Douglas Carswell³, via a blog post on the *Daily Telegraph*'s website, had denounced the fact that “for the past quarter century, “Britain ha[d] been represented round the table in Brussels by people personally determined that [it] should be part of the Eurosystem”, and then delivered a black list of allegedly Europhile British diplomats comprising some of the January 2014 Parliamentary filibusters: “Lord Hannay of Chiswick, Baron Kerr of Kinlochard, Sir Stephen Wall and Sir Nigel Sheinwald⁴”, all ex-Permanent Representatives and ambassadors of the UK (UKREP) to the EU.

This public recognition of the role and influence of ex-Foreign Office diplomats, on the current and past European policy of the UK, is somehow natural, as some of them have joined the British Parliament and been active members in the House of Lords; still, the fierce and personal attack from the soon-to-be single UKIP MP at Westminster, suggests that the perception of some ex-Foreign Office grand figures has gone beyond the simple recognition of their past role in Britain's diplomacy in the EU. The violence of the blame appears not only disproportionate, but also misplaced, considering that they were, by function, the honest executants of the orders given by their then political masters, including Mrs Thatcher, nowadays the only reference of a sound EU policy for many British Eurosceptics.

Addressing this episode as a symptom, far from being unique, the purpose of this paper is to examine how this criticism initiated, in the 1980s, against British diplomats for their actions in Britain's EU policy, has produced a counter-narrative constructed by the actors themselves. With their professional achievements put into question publicly, in a context of rising Euroscepticism in Britain, I will show that a handful of prominent figures from the Foreign service came to embody and to defend, for a limited period, the strength of Britain's pledge to participate positively in the European Union.

The paper will then address the various sources that have been made available to document how the collective and individual actions of those diplomats have been *perceived* and *expressed*. I will examine how the recollections of the actors, in a context of increasing Euroscepticism, generated a series of self-narratives presenting common characters from one individual to the other. In many recollections of their own past, and of the European policy they contributed to design and implement, we notice a tendency to underline certain personal qualities and to select particular episodes. This

¹ Hansard HL Deb (2013-2014), 31 Jan 2014: Column 1469

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201314/ldhansrd/text/140131-0001.htm#14013131001297>. Consulted 11th March 2015.

² See for example Nicholas Watt, « Cameron's EU referendum 'timebomb' could undermine UK position, say lords », *The Guardian*, 10/01/2014. Accessible online.

³ Douglas Carswell resigned as Tory MP in August 2014 and changed his political allegiance to UKIP. He was re-elected as the first UKIP MP in October 2014.

⁴ Douglas Carswell, « Will our next ambassador to Brussels be another fanatical Europhile? The mandarins of SW1 don't think it's any of our business », *The Daily Telegraph*, 06/08/2013. Accessible online.

process of selection in self-narration, can be related to the notion of a “strategy of remembrance” (Bruner, 2002: 8). Its result, whether conscious or not, did forge a consistent story of both their individual and collective achievements (Confino, 2011: 41).

I also argue that this narrative of the practices and achievements of Britain’s diplomacy in Europe was made possible by the absence of an historical figure on which a consensus could have been built in the UK, and on the role of the country in Europe. In the absence of a British “founding father” of Europe and of a clear pro-European leader, the strategies of remembrance deployed by these diplomats, and seconded by historical accounts, tended to fill, but only partially and temporarily that historical role.

No Founding Fathers, few European builders

British politics has witnessed, in the past twenty years, the increasing scarcity, and/or marginalization, of top politicians standing firmly and continually in the defence of a proactive role for the UK in the European Union, as a pro-EU stance has, for some time, been considered as a likely vote-loser. That long-lasting situation in politics proceeds from the absence of a collective consensus on the situation of the UK within an increasingly integrated Europe (Bevir, Daddow & Schnapper, 2015). The absence of a strong pro-European political leadership – at least since Tony Blair retreated from his public claim to be a “man of Europe⁵” – is a long term tendency in contemporary British history that can be explained by the late entry of the UK into the European Community in 1973. Since then, if the British people have generated a collective narrative that makes sense of their membership of the EEC/EU, this narrative has portrayed public opinion being, at best ambivalent on the virtues of being a member or, more probably deeply divided between pro and anti-membership (Geddes, 2013: 241-48).

A striking feature of the press or academic narratives of the Britain and Europe story is the notorious absence of an historical figure whose legacy would comprise the European anchoring of Britain in Europe once and for all, hence legitimizing a heritage upon which a collective consensus could have been built in the country. Winston Churchill is the figure that is often referred to, among the “eminent Europeans⁶”; still, European mythology has struggled to reconcile Churchill’s European prophecies of the late 1940s⁷ with his equally clear conviction that Britain was “with Europe, but not of it⁸”, then leading the Great Man to the policy of non-commitment during his last spell in power (Critchley, 1996). After Churchill, the figure most untitled for having provided a European heritage is obviously Edward Heath, but he has been, for a long time now, one of the most disliked Prime Ministers in popular memory (Seldon & Ball, 1996: 1-21).

If there’s no undisputable British *père fondateur* of Europe, historical narratives have barely allowed British top politicians, and firstly Prime Ministers, to be awarded the title of “builders of Europe”, a lower title which hagiographic literature would award to national leaders of later generations, who still brought an eminent contribution to the process of European integration (Cohen, 2007; Milward, 2001: 281-303; Frank, 2001: 20)⁹. On the contrary, mainstream narratives of Britain’s

⁵ « Je suis un homme d’Europe », Assemblée Nationale, Paris, mars 1998. See Daddow (2007: 592)

⁶ He is the only British name currently listed as « founding father » on the historical section of the European Union’s official website, for being « one of the first to call for the creation of a 'United States of Europe' ». http://europa.eu/about-eu/eu-history/founding-fathers/index_en.htm#box_4.

⁷ Following Robert Frank Churchill would be more accurately described as the “god-father” of a united Europe (Frank, 2001: 18).

⁸ [...]We are linked but not compromised. We are interested and associated but not absorbed”. *The Saturday Evening Post*, 15/02/1930

⁹ In that sense, the club of the “builders of Europe” remains opened to all national leaders, including politicians of Central and Eastern European countries, such as the Czech Vaclav Havel, the Pole Bronislaw Geremek who should have been given a seat in the European mythology. Mrs Thatcher may qualify for the title of “builder” for the support she gave to Single European Act in the mid 1980s, but that credential is somehow tarnished by the acrimony she showed towards the EEC before and after the SEA, from the budget dispute to the Bruges speech. It is quite telling that no mainstream expression has been forged in English to translate literally the idea of “building Europe” (*construction européenne*)

European policy insisted on her reputation of “awkward” and “semi-detached” partner, or even its status of “stranger” in Europe (George, 1992 & 1998; Wall, 2008).

The United Kingdom having joined the EEC at a later date, the quest for the consensual figure of a founding father automatically transfers the attention to British statesmen who then contributed to achieve British entry into the EEC, granting them an hybrid status as half-founders (from the internal point of view of the British people) and half-builders (for the people of Europe). Two historical figures qualify for the title, and there is no wonder that their action was endorsed in the institutional memory of Europe by the award of the Charlemagne Prize, created in 1950 to honour “exceptional work performed in the service of European unity¹⁰”: Edward Heath in 1963¹¹ and Roy Jenkins in 1972¹².

If Heath or Jenkins have undoubtedly contributed to bringing the UK into Europe, they share somehow the common fate of not enjoying an excellent reputation in the British collective memory; on the contrary, posterity has attached to them the image of “losers” or, less bluntly, of promising national figures who, despite their eminent career and responsibilities, did not prove able to meet the aspirations of the majority of the British people. Both underachievers in the subsequently created collective memory of Britons¹³, Heath and Jenkins also share a common feature that has been frequently stated by their biographers and commentators. Both of them are remembered as top politicians who operated very similarly to civil servants, sometimes dubbed as civil servants *manqués*, for the way in which they used to understand and handle Whitehall bureaucracy, and also for their tendency to conceive and conduct their policies in an over-rational and intellectual fashion (Hennessy, 2000: 331-56; 2001: 450-55). This aspect of their personal style of government might explain why, as politicians, Heath and Jenkins were even more easily associated with the allegedly theoretical and over bureaucratic aspects of the European Community, and why they would easily embrace the general narrative of the process of integration as the rational development of European politics in a post-WW2 bipolar world (Cohen, 27-28).

In that context of an historical vacuum of European leadership in Britain, this paper will examine to what extent a handful of top diplomats from the Foreign Office, seconded by the works of historians and journalists, contributed to forge and publicize an historical account of their careers in which they appear neither as founding fathers, nor as European builders, but more modestly as “keepers of the flame”.

I. Ingredients for an ego-history of Britain and Europe, in the age of rising Euroscepticism

It seems that, from the late 1980s onwards, the landscape of sources available to write the history of Britain and/in Europe has known significant inflections, changing some important element of the narratives that had prevailed so far. I argue that, from this period onwards, a group of British diplomats has acquired a growing importance in that narrative, for they have contributed both to the knowledge of past events by sharing their memories, and also because some of them have participated in the shaping of a new narrative trend which has emphasized both their personal and professional contribution to the major steps of Britain’s policy in Europe.

¹⁰ <http://www.karlspreis.de/en/the-charlemagne-prize/who-is-awarded-the-prize>

¹¹ For having conducted at ministerial level the first and aborted accession negotiation (1961-1963). Heath would of course achieve the actual entry of the UK into the EEC as Prime Minister ten years later.

¹² On 28 October 1971, Jenkins, then Deputy Leader, had led 69 Labour MPs to defy Party discipline by voting in favour of the Tory government’s motion to take Britain into the EEC. Jenkins would then be the first and – so far – only British President of the European Commission from 1977 to 1981.

¹³ Recent works in British historiography have started to re-evaluate the Heath years, within a general tendency to re-assess British history in the 1970s, following the work of historians who, over a considerable period, depicted this period as the most disastrous decade in Britain’s post-war history, being then consistent with the narrative that Mrs Thatcher and her heirs contributed to developing in the 1980s.

The first element is the advent of historical works that started to take a more detailed focus on the decision-making process in Britain's European policy, hence shedding a brighter light on civil servants and diplomats, as actors in the historical process, than they had enjoyed before. This is first explained by the development and maturity, since the early 1980s, of a revisionist school of historians who worked to invalidate the theory of "missed opportunities" that had for long dominated academic and popular narratives of the relationship of Britain with Europe (Daddow, 2004: 114-156). Researching the papers of the 1940s and 1950s, historians were able to explain how the decisions that had been taken were perfectly consistent with both an assessment of the hard facts, and with the dominating representations which political and diplomatic actors were embracing in the post-war years. While the official papers were made more widely available, allowing a direct approach to diplomatic decisions, the 1980s and 1990s also witnessed a surge in the interest and use of oral sources about the past, which started to be collected for ambitious programmes of oral history¹⁴, but also for a larger TV and radio audience¹⁵.

In the case of the British diplomats in charge of European affairs, the period of the early 1990s coincided with the final retirement of important figures of the 1960s and 70s who then felt they were allowed to testify about the past, while most of their eminent predecessors had largely remained silent¹⁶. Access to this significant volume of new sources coincided first with a change of generation, with retired diplomats who were then more prone to talk to the media. It also took place in a context of rising Euroscepticism in the British media and the Conservative Party which, I argue, induced diplomats who had contributed to Britain's European policy in previous decades, to take a stronger line in the defence of Britain's role in Europe. In that environment, where an important part of public opinion was questioning and even threatening what some diplomats considered to be their lifework, it cannot be excluded that the form of personal memories and testimonies was affected by a veteran syndrome, with personal contributions and achievements being embellished or magnified. Public attacks on Britain's membership of the EU may have turned the witnesses into defenders, and memories of "honest brokers" into that of "visionary dissenters".

In 1998 the direct product of this new documentary context, Hugo Young's book *This Blessed Plot: Britain and Europe from Churchill to Blair* (Young, 1998), was published. In that highly celebrated summing-up the respected and pro-European political editor of the *Guardian* was somehow clearing the scene for what seemed then to be a more pro-European policy initiated by the New Labour government of Tony Blair. More importantly, Young himself conducted many interviews with Whitehall and FCO grand figures, and dedicated significant developments of his book to the actions of civil servants and diplomats, usually depicting them as the – so far – anonymous heroes of past epic periods when politicians were struggling to make their minds up about Europe¹⁷. In doing so, Hugo Young's book had a double-edged consequence on how the diplomats' role and responsibilities was to be subsequently perceived and expressed by later witnesses. On the one hand, the book paid a public tribute to some of the FCO figures who had worked hard for their country, and would have remained unknown beyond diplomatic circles. But by personalizing and romanticizing the narrative of their achievements, and by opposing talented diplomats/civil servants with undecided politicians, the former were then put under public scrutiny. They were becoming more suspect of the double sin of pursuing political preferences in their jobs, and/or defending vested interests, as "mandarins" advocating that Britain should remain, at all cost, within the allegedly "bureaucratic" European Union. Young's journalistic style undoubtedly helped to maintain this ambivalence, from the title of Chapter

¹⁴ Witness Seminar by the Institute of Contemporary British History (ICBH), Diplomatic Oral History Programme (DOAP) by the Archives Centre of Churchill College Cambridge, various programmes of European oral history by the Historical Archives of the European Union (HAEU).

¹⁵ *The Price of Victory* by Michael Charlton (BBC 2, 1981); *The Last Europeans* (Channel 4, 1995) and *The Poisoned Chalice* (BBC2, 1996) by Hugo Young.

¹⁶ For instance, Con O'Neill, the negotiator of the accession treaty and a highly respected figure died in 1988 without having given any interview.

¹⁷ In the central section displaying pictures of major politicians and civil servants: all of the latter are diplomats from the FCO (Young, 1998: 286-87).

5 (“John Robinson: a *conspiracy* of like-minded men”) to the title of the book itself¹⁸: commentators immediately emphasized the new publicity granted to the normally discreet mandarins of the FCO, with Boris Johnson, then journalist for the *Daily Telegraph* and already a Eurosceptic, congratulating his colleague “for going into the closet and rooting out the federasts at the heart of the British establishment” and for having “had the guts to blow the whistle on the lot of them¹⁹”.

Around the same time two important publications on Britain and Europe were finally issued, forming the last piece of this documentary panorama. As the actions of diplomats and civil servants were being more exposed to public judgement, it was decided to disclose what had thus far been the secret history of the accession deal: the 464 page *Report by Sir Con O'Neill on the Negotiations of 1970-1972*, published in 2000, with a foreword by the recently retired top diplomat David Hannay (Hannay, 2000). This gives the courageous reader, willing to embark on such dense and dry prose, the opportunity to decide whether the negotiators obtained a good or bad deal in the accession negotiation. However limited the audience of the book was likely to be, it turned the spotlight on the diplomats, past and present, at the forefront of Britain’s relations with Europe. And so did the first volume of the official history of *The United Kingdom and the European Community* – commissioned by the Cabinet Office from the renowned economic historian Alan Milward – was published in 2002. A powerful demonstration defending the thesis of a “national Strategy” attempted by the UK between 1945 and 1963, Milward’s book also insisted, in many sections, on the role of key civil servants and diplomats in shifting the minds of the establishment in favour of Britain joining the EEC (Milward, 2002: 214, 322-332).

In the early years of the 21st century, the British public had then access to a wide spectrum of sources and literature in which the faces of some diplomats recurred and now appeared alongside the familiar ones of Wilson, Heath and Thatcher. What were the main and common features that self-narratives tended to underline? To what extent did they converge in the shared self-representation of European diplomats as “keepers of the flame”?

II. Converging narratives: diplomats and Europeans

Exploring the corpus of sources aforementioned and examining how they have been used in historical/para-historical narratives, it is quite striking how some diplomatic actors, in the depiction of their professional roles, tended to borrow elements of the archetypal-hagiographic descriptions and biographies of the founders/builders of Europe that prevailed for a long time in European historiography (Cohen, 2007, Frank, 2001). The habit of romanticizing and rationalizing ex-post biographical elements in memoirs, autobiographies or interviews is nevertheless quite common in diplomatic narratives. It is usually helped by the mix of exotic dust and lustre attached to a diplomatic career.

In the case of the European jobs though, some diplomats were inclined, consciously or not, to single out and, sometimes, hammer home, episodes or personal attitudes that would sometimes blur the frontier between the neutral role of civil servants obeying orders and that of autonomous individuals pursuing a “European” agenda. The fact that most of those episodes were repeated, though rarely verifiable, turned them into the new orthodoxy, or even into a legend. It undoubtedly helped to build a coherent perception of a group whose members usually succeeded one another on the same top jobs in Brussels and London. Borrowing from Robert Frank’s attempt of a typology of the founding fathers (Frank, 2001: 15-20), I shall select four features tending to signal a symbolic parenthood with the European family.

¹⁸ *This Blessed Plot* is a quotation from Shakespeare’s *Richard II* (Act 2, sc.1); the title plays on the meaning of “Plot”, land in Old English, and conspiracy in modern English.

¹⁹ *The Daily Telegraph*, quoted in Young, 1999. Here, the homophobic pun already encapsulated in the Eurosceptic insult “federast” (for federalist) is redoubled by the classic cliché which sees the corp of diplomats as overpopulated and even controlled by homosexuals.

Visionaries

Among the first qualities usually attributed to the fathers of Europe was their ability to grasp the opportunities offered to advance the cause of a United Europe. They would combine their sense of opportunity within a broad vision of the European future based on the new equilibrium between national sovereignties and new supranational powers that the terrible mistakes of the past then commanded. This ability to anticipate and this sense of momentum is frequently underlined in our diplomats' self-narratives. Michael Butler²⁰ has underlined that, having just joined the Western Department of the FO in Spring 1950, as a 23-year old 3rd Secretary, he was immediately made aware of the importance of the Schuman proposal by his colleague Barley Alison who had served in Paris, while hardly anyone senior in the office had grasped this (Butler, 1986:2; 1997:2; 1998:3). Also a junior diplomat in the German Finance Department in 1951, Michael Palliser²¹ recalls being infuriated by minutes coming across his desk written by senior diplomats who dismissed interest in the plan (Palliser, 2011: 7-8)²².

These memories of the impotent but allegedly clairvoyant juniors are complemented by those of the seniors who did not foresee immediately the importance of the early proposals for European unity, but then dedicated the rest of their lives to making amends for their early lack of discernment. Gladwyn Jebb²³ is one of those figures whose strong commitment to the cause of Britain in Europe can be partly traced back to his grief at failing to get Britain to catch the Messina bus in 1955. Although he had perceived, as early as mid 1956, the danger for Britain in rejecting the Common market²⁴, Jebb had nevertheless written a year before that "Nothing spectacular [would] come out of the Messina Conference²⁵". In his memoirs, Jebb subsequently branded himself as a "European convert" (Jebb, 1972: 288-309) and his conversion would clearly turn into a public apostolate in the House of Lords, and even to an editorial crusade against the dangers of a Gaullist "Little Europe" in the 1960s (Jebb, 1965, 1966, 1969^{ab}). Jebb is surely the first FCO diplomat who, when retired, became publicly identified with the cause of Europe (Greenwood, 2008: 409-431).

The diplomats of those two first generations used to claim that their ability to catch the importance of European unity, and their subsequent dedication to encouraging Britain to participate to the movement, was rooted in their experience of the Second World War, as was usually the case for the totemic builders of Europe (Frank, 2001: 16). For men like Gladwyn Jebb, the war had contributed more to taking some distance from the Europeans and to forging the strong bond of the Anglo-American alliance that only Suez would later demystify. But for Butler and Palliser, their experience as soldiers in the war and, for the latter, of the occupation army in a ruined Germany after the war, had given birth to a strong imprint of European consciousness in their mind (Palliser, 1998: 6; 2011, 5). Similarly, Christopher Audland²⁶ identified his life in occupied Germany, and his professional involvement in German-Allies talks in the post-war years, as the decisive period when his European consciousness was forged (Audland, 2004: 74-91).

²⁰ (1927-2013), served in Paris in the 1960s, and presided over EEC affairs at the FCO in London from 1972 to 1979. UKREP in Brussels, 1979-1985.

²¹ (1922-2012), served in Paris in the late 1950s and in 10 Downing Street, 1964-1969, UKDEL-REP, 1971-1975. Head of the Diplomatic Service, 1975-1982.

²² Palliser recalls a note, written by the Deputy Secretary Roger Makins, as being a stringent rebuff to the (poorly thought of) Foreign Secretary Herbert Morrison who had expressed some beginnings of interest in the plan. The note is absent from the volume dedicated to the Schuman Plan in the *Documents on British Policy Overseas* and could not be retrieved in the British archives.

²³ (1900-1996). Permanent Representative to the UN, 1950-54, Ambassador to France, 1955-60. Subsequently Deputy Leader of Liberal Party in the House of Lords, 1965-88, Member of the European Parliament (1973-76) and President of the European Movement.

²⁴ United Kingdom National Archives, PREM 11/1844, G. Jebb to S. Lloyd, 27 April 1956

²⁵ FO 371/116040, Jebb to Eden, 15 June 1955.

²⁶ (1926-). Entered Foreign Service in 1948, served in Bonn and on the Council of Europe, member of the 61-63 negotiating team, seconded to the European Commission in 1973 as Deputy Secretary-General, then joining the EU civil service as Director General for Energy.

Persevering

Perceiving the broader picture of European unity led the fathers of Europe to be pragmatic, and to persevere in the project (Frank, 2001: 17), despite the multiple crises and pitfalls, from the EDC to Euratom, or the first European monetary system. On the diplomatic side, that perseverance appears to be in the career choices that our British diplomats claimed to have made, expressing their determination to remain in charge of European affairs.

Any aspiration to specialize in European affairs should have been discouraged by the Foreign Office which, like any Foreign Ministry, tries to avoid its agents “going native” by moving them from job to job on a regular basis. But EEC/EU affairs offer the peculiar case of a sub-section of British Foreign Policy which remained in the hands of the same group of people for decades, partly with the explicit consent, or upon the explicit request, of the agents concerned, and with an informal system of co-optation among the incumbents. Doing so, some diplomats were indeed able to combine their professional duty with personal convictions.

Still, as the Foreign Service tradition, by definition, prohibits those convictions from being disclosed and invested in career patterns, it is also clear that specializing in EEC affairs appeared as an opportunity for British diplomats to maximize professional resources which, until the mid-1980s, remained in scarce quantity at the FCO. Technical expertise on Community affairs, networks of contacts on the continent, and experience of the specific European multilateral negotiations, progressively became great assets for the diplomat who mastered them, especially at a time when a significant part of Britain’s foreign policy in Europe was focused on the Community, first trying to join it for ten years, and then struggling to make a success of Britain’s membership in the following decade. The way that Michael Palliser or John Robinson²⁷ used to describe their careers, illustrates that kind of perseverance in embracing European affairs. Having served in Paris in the second part of the 1950s, Palliser was promoted in 1964 to become Private Secretary to Prime Minister Harold Wilson and to advise him on Foreign Policy. Palliser was convinced that the key to Britain’s entry into the EEC was in Paris and, in 1969, he declined Wilson’s offer to receive a full embassy as a reward for his service in N°10, and asked instead to be under-promoted and posted as the number two in the Paris embassy, where he would serve as a key operator during the last accession negotiation. His unique position in the system, and the considerable amount of his both social and professional capital²⁸, offered him two prestigious postings to finish his career as the first ambassador to the European Communities (1971-1975) and Head of the Diplomatic Service at the FCO (1975-1982).

John Robinson’s career offers the rather different path of a diplomat dubbed a “Euro-fanatic²⁹”: from the moment he embraced his first European job as a member of the first negotiating team in 1961, he pursued with a fierce and ceaseless determination the objective of bringing the UK into the European Community – referred to by himself as “my shop” – up to the point of obsession. His skills as a drafter (Sanderson, 2012: 56-57), a negotiator and a man with networks assured him the unparalleled longevity of 17 years in charge of European affairs, especially the whole of the 1960s. His subsequent career revealed that so long a fiefdom had rendered John Robinson less answerable to the needs of flexibility required by a diplomatic career, and all his various ambassadorial jobs out of Europe in the 1970s proved to be calamitous³⁰.

²⁷ (1925-1998). Served in Paris in the late 1950s, negotiator in the accession rounds (61-63; 70-72), in charge of EEC affairs in Brussels (UKDEL) and FCO continuously from 1963 to 1972; ambassador to Algeria and Israel.

²⁸ In 1948, Michael Palliser had married Madeline Spaak, daughter of Paul-Henri Spaak, the Belgian statesman who ranks among the « founding fathers » of Europe. Thanks to his education and marriage, Palliser was almost bilingual in French.

²⁹ *The Guardian*. Archives Department, HJSY (Papers of Hugo Young) 6/2/1, notes from witness interview with John Robinson, 20/08/1993.

³⁰ A central-figure of the “Britain and Europe” story, J. Robinson was interviewed only once by Hugo Young for the preparation of his book. Admitting he had persevered in the task of bringing the UK into the EEC, he also abstained from any self-staging of his personal actions, pretending he was just “doing his job”. It is Young who undoubtedly romanticized Robinson’s character, giving his name to a full chapter of his book (Young, 2000).

Non-conformists?

In presenting their professional trajectories, autobiographical narratives of the “Europeans” in the Foreign Office usually present a mix of determination and calculated risk, balancing the strength of their professional assets with the sometimes daring choices or actions they made³¹. Thanks to that blend of personal conviction and awareness of their undeniable experience, some of them acquired, still on active service, a legendary aura within the Service, and subsequently in the general FCO history of Britain and Europe.

If our British diplomats are tempted to depict themselves as non-conformists, many balanced their tendency to heterodoxy with powerful resources of legitimization, allowing them to pursue, sometimes in a non-linear fashion, very bright careers.

As stated before, the publication in 2000 of the secret *Report* of 1972, while establishing the link of continuity and filiation between Sir Con O’Neill and Sir David (future Lord) Hannay, also contributed to spreading the reputation of O’Neill beyond FCO circles. In the Foreign Office, the Irish diplomat had already gained his reputation as a man of iron principles and a committed European, as well as a tremendous diplomatic operator in Europe: his fame was already founded on the fact that he had, twice in his life, resigned from the Foreign Office and been re-established in service³². His second resignation actually allowed O’Neill to resume his old job as editor for *The Times*, enjoying there a public tribune where, for a few months in 1967, he was able to display publicly his competence in European affairs³³, before being recalled to lead the negotiating team at official level.

While embodying the ultimate FCO *ethos* as a young diplomat (*see infra*), Michael Palliser also built himself the reputation of a man who had no fear of letting his views be clearly known when it came to his European convictions, even at the risk of compromising promotion in his career. Of his interview with Harold Wilson when he was about to become the Prime Minister’s advisor on Foreign Affairs after the 1964 General election, Palliser explained:

“I just thought I could not go and work for this man if we were to disagree over Europe, because it [was] going to be a crucial part of my work and of our relationship. So I felt I had to say to him “Look, the only thing about this I feel I should be clear on is that I am a very keen European and I don’t want this to be an obstacle to working for you” (Palliser, 2011: 12)³⁴.

Michael Butler was also keen on portraying himself as a somehow subversive diplomatic operator whose European zeal and skilful schemes in European affairs would occasionally raise the qualms of foreign actors and of his own political masters. He then stated that French President de Gaulle had tried to have him sent back to London in 1964 while Butler was serving in the Paris embassy and, allegedly, that he was was collecting a lot of confidential information on de Gaulle’s meetings with foreign visitors via his network of contacts³⁵. The French president supposedly alerted the French Foreign Minister saying “*Ce jeune Butler s’agite trop* (“That young Butler is growing too restless”). Ten years later, as the newly elected Labour government embarked on a policy of renegotiation of the terms of Britain’s membership of the EEC, the new Foreign Secretary Jim Callaghan reportedly summoned Butler, then Assistant Secretary in charge in EEC affairs, after reading overnight his briefing on Europe. He then let Butler know that, as it was well-known he “really care[d] about Europe”, he should remember that, as a minister, Callaghan “really care[d] about the Labour Party”

³¹ We find here another common features with hagiographic accounts of the founding fathers of Europe: depicted as both visionaries and pragmatists, most of them enjoyed strong institutional positions, allowing them to embark on a course of foreign policy whose form was new and whose developments were unforeseeable (Frank, 2001: 15, 18).

³² The first time in 1938 to protest against the Munich agreements, and the second time in 1968 after he had been denied the British ambassadorship to West Germany by the Foreign Secretary George Brown.

³³ Bodleian Library, Oxford, The Papers of Sir Con O’Neill, MSS. Eng. c. 6061, f. 1, 13, 14, 70, 86, 87, 94 96

³⁴ Palliser repeated *passim* the version of the interview, which was never confirmed – or denied – by other sources.

³⁵ In a context when, humiliated by De Gaulle’s veto in 1963, the Foreign Office was hesitating between different strategies to deal with France.

(Butler, 1997: 16). Whether true or not, these anecdotes have found their way into the official narrative about Britain and Europe (Wall, 2013: 512).

Europeans at the FCO, according to their testimony, did not hesitate to clash with their political masters, or even to distort their instructions when they judged that the interest of the country, which was linked to a successful membership of the EEC, was at stake. In the 1970s and 1980s, the occasions of direct or indirect confrontations multiplied.

After a long spell in Brussels, David Hannay³⁶ returned to London in 1977 with the reputation of a committed European; the advice he received was to “keep quiet for a while” (Hannay, 2013: 236). As head of the Energy and Science department at the FCO, he was to work closely with the minister of Energy, the ferocious anti-marketier Anthony Wedgwood Benn with whom he disagreed openly (Hannay, 2010: 17) and against whom he used to secretly brief the Foreign Secretary David Owen (Owen, 2011: 15). Ten years on, John Kerr³⁷, then Under Secretary presiding over EEC affairs at the FCO would fight “a lengthy war of attrition” with his colleague Charles Powell, advising Mrs Thatcher in Downing Street, over the content of the Bruges speech whose “explosive shockwaves resonated around the EC (Wall, 2008: 78-79; Hannay, 2013: 144).

Britain first, but in Europe

The attacks of the Eurosceptics, past and present, blaming British diplomats for having “gone native” or “sold their country to Brussels” have been commonplace since the 1980s. Mrs Thatcher, as Prime Minister, sometimes publicly scorned the Foreign Office as a bastion of “compromisers” (Hennessy, 2000: 413-14), not willing to stand up for Britain in Brussels. An examination of the reputation that the diplomats considered in this paper have enjoyed, within and beyond diplomatic circles, contradicts bluntly these criticisms that were anyway very rarely formulated by British politicians³⁸.

Reading the testimonies of the “Europeans” in the FCO, they were able to perform efficiently and conduct brilliant careers because they were able to blend, in their personal behaviour as in their policy advice, the right balance between domestic patriotism and European considerations. Their efficiency as operators in the domestic and the European scene was permitted by their capacity to defend British national interests within the more general picture of European unity. And that conviction was ingrained in the Service from the time it had been decided – more than demonstrated with hard facts – that belonging to the European Community was in the utmost national interest. Making a success of EEC membership was then a precondition. Michael Butler summed this up in his valedictory dispatch when he left UKREP in late 1985:

“It is in our interests to convince the other member governments that the British government and people are with them on the voyage. We shall get our way more often if we are prepared to be more in favour of the aim of European Union.” (quoted in Wall, 2008: 67)

No wonder, then, that Mrs Thatcher enjoyed a very satisfactory working relationship with diplomats with whom she had quite diverging views on both how the style and the substance of Britain’s European policy should be (Wall, 2008: 59). Michael Butler pretends that during the bitter budget dispute (1982-1984), she kept feigning surprised publicly at his “loyalty”, since he was duly implementing the course of action she had decided upon, even though he did not approve it entirely (Butler, 1997: 33).

³⁶ (born 1935). Served in Brussels in UKDEL (1965-70), in the negotiating team (70-72) and in the European Commission (1973-1977). Served in the FCO and Washington, and in Brussels as UKREP (1985-90) and ambassador in the UN (1995).

³⁷ (born 1942). Served as Private Secretary to Michael Palliser at the FCO in the 1970s, seconded to the Treasury in the 1980s, in charge of EC affairs (1987-90) and UKREP in Brussels (1990-95). Served in Washington and ended his career as head the Diplomatic Service. He then served as Secretary General to the European Convention (2002-2005).

³⁸ Mrs Thatcher’s criticism of the Foreign Office started with the Falklands’ War in 1982 and continued as her grasp on Britain’s foreign policy increased in the mid-1980s, to the detriment of the Foreign Secretary Geoffrey Howe (1983 to 1989), with whom her relationship dramatically deteriorated.

Mrs Thatcher also found in the Europhile Michael Palliser, when he was Head of the Diplomatic Service, an advisor she trusted, up to the point of retaining him as a special advisor during the Falklands War when he had just retired (Campbell, 2003: 136). As a diplomat and a person, Palliser embodied, for the entire British establishment, the quintessence of a *grand serviteur de l'Etat*. While Palliser was known to be strongly in favour of Europe, his military style and his personal and social credentials – he had been mentioned in dispatches as a young officer in WW2, he had married the daughter of a Belgian Prime Minister and was admitted to the finest British and European circles – would certainly serve as an antidote to any criticisms, not to mention the fact that his professional abilities were recognized and needed by the successive politicians he served, from Wilson to Thatcher.

Towards the end of Mrs Thatcher's premiership though, as she turned more and more hostile to the EEC, she seemed to have lost the benevolence and measure she had kept towards the "Europeans" in the early years. David Hannay pretends indeed that she deliberately vetoed his foreseen appointment as Head of the Diplomatic Service in 1990 (Hannay, 2013: 243). With the Conservative party starting to break up on the European question, a "European" could no longer be given supervision and power over the whole diplomatic apparatus and appointments.

Conclusion – Keepers of the flame?

New types of personal sources, whether written or oral, have made possible a specific narrative of Britain's history with the European Community, in which a group of diplomats from the FCO had a decisive role. In the fashion they have been portrayed, or have depicted themselves, in fulfilling their diplomatic duties in the EEC/EU, many figures have borrowed characteristic items of the hagiographic archetype of the "*pères de l'Europe*": anticipation, perseverance, anti-conformism, personal courage and political skills and, *in fine*, patriotism.

Despite the journalistic temptation to describe those diplomats as a "conspiracy of like-minded men" (Young, 1999: 172), it would be misleading to describe them as an organized group pursuing an agenda within the FCO. Collectively, they contributed to forging and maintaining a European orthodoxy within the FCO whose strong foundations were laid during the 1960s; individually, they passed on this tradition from seniors to juniors, succeeding one another in the same top jobs along a central axis uniting the EC/EU department at the FCO to the office of the Permanent Representative in Brussels³⁹, via the British Embassy in Paris. There is no doubt that the dynamics of co-optation, and the transfer of European experience was eased by the fact that many "Europeans", from Michael Palliser to John Kerr, held the office of Permanent Under Secretary (PUS)/Head of the Diplomatic Service at the FCO, supervising all the internal transfers and promotions.

As top civil servants in Whitehall are the wardens of the British constitutional order, British diplomats in the European section of the FCO have tended to present themselves, at least until the past few years, as the guarantors of that cardinal paradigm of FCO orthodoxy, relatively recent in time, but hard fought, and of tidal magnitude: Britain's membership of the EU. This principle has meant consistent action and clearly identified red lines (Wall, 2008: 41-62). Just as maintaining the British state in order is the utmost and permanent mission of the Home Civil Service, maintaining their country in Europe was considered an imperious duty to fulfil for at least two generations of diplomats, the second having by now almost completely retired. In that sense, I would label them as "keepers of the flame".

I should then conclude that the apparent failure of a consensual historical narrative on a positive relationship between Britain and Europe, with few active politicians to endorse it, has left the European diplomats of the FCO with the role of keepers of Britain's European commitment.

Finally, two simultaneous recent events tend to indicate that this particular type of self-narrative produced by the FCO "Europeans", and nurtured by the rise of British Euroscepticism twenty years ago, is now ending, having lost its *raison d'être*. First, the post of Permanent Representative to the EU has been staffed since 2012 by mandarins seconded from the British Treasury: with financiers replacing diplomats in Brussels, the FCO has simply lost its top

³⁹ Six out of the eight diplomats studied in this paper have been UKREP.

ambassadorial job⁴⁰, and a powerful levy for Britain's EU policy. Second, after the death of Alan Milward, the task of writing the official history of Britain and the European Community has not been given to another historian but to the retired diplomat and former Permanent Representative to the EU, Sir Stephen Wall⁴¹. In his introduction to the second volume published in 2013, and covering the years 1963-1975, the author recalls being asked "by a leading historian" what "the basic thesis of [his] book was going to be". And Sir Stephen's answer was that "there [was] none", adding then that he hoped he had done justice "above all to the memory of Macmillan, Wilson and Heath, the three principal architects of Britain's membership of the European Community" (Wall, 2013: 2, 6). While diplomats were being marginalized in Brussels, the historian of Britain and Europe was being turned into a historiographer with no thesis, and then no distinct voice on the story of Britain and Europe.

⁴⁰ In the posting system for policy grades at the FCO (called JESP, Jobs Evaluation Senior Posts), the highest two scoring posts were the jobs of PUS (grade 28) and of Permanent Representative to the EEC/EU (grade 25). The first ambassadorial job for British diplomats for the past 30 years was then not Washington, but Brussels (Dickie, 2004: 64).

⁴¹ Stephen Wall had published a book on *Britain and Europe from Thatcher to Blair* in 2004, largely based on his personal experience as a diplomat dealing with the EU.

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⁴² HAEU: Historical Archives of the European Union; DOHP-CCAC: Diplomatic Oral History Programme, Churchill College Archives Centre; all the interviews listed are accessible online.

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