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Book Review: The Honourable Consul: A Story of Diplomacy

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Antony McCammon. *The Honourable Consul: A Story of Diplomacy*. New York: The Radcliffe Press, 2013.

Antony McCammon's book offers an entertaining look at the challenges and peculiarities of a British national traveling and working abroad nearly all of his life. McCammon's adventures begin at a very young age and extend into his retirement years. As his story unfolds, the reader is treated to a series of short vignettes describing a wide variety of experiences from hastily planned youthful exploits to a mature British consul serving in Switzerland.

McCammon's autobiographical sketch begins with a brief look back at his immediate family. His father and mother married in India during his father's enlistment with the military. After returning to Jersey in Great Britain, McCammon's father continued his military career until he received a medical discharge. Gwynneth, McCammon's mother, decided to move to Australia after her husband's death but returned to the British Isles a few months later. Nonetheless, this brief sojourn resulted in sparking the wanderlust in McCammon's soul.

Other than the initial chapter explaining the minor role his parents played in instilling a love of travel, McCammon's tales mostly flow in chronological order. The storyteller strategy of an occasional flashback interrupts the smooth current of his accounts but only helps provide appropriate historical context for the story. McCammon's writing gives insight into a different time when young men traveled widely to expand their horizons. McCammon managed to complete his college education while enjoying various adventures journeying around the globe. In one story, McCammon reveals his willingness to attempt any line of work in order to earn tuition money. He accepted a chance offer on an unknown job while attending McGill University in Canada. He quickly discovered his task was digging holes for telegraph poles near the icy waters of the St. Lawrence River. On one occasion during this particular time, McCammon found himself in the company of a tanker truck driver who slid off a flooded roadway but successfully regained traction by rocking the truck until the momentum of the tanker contents helped force the vehicle back onto the road. This experience taught McCammon the value of making the most of an opportunity and introduced him to some creative problem-solving techniques.

Additional tales of high adventure and the interesting challenges posed by foreign language dialects make up the bulk of McCammon's work. Writing with characteristically dry British wit, the text often pokes fun at the author's expense when travel plans go amiss. These spots in the book offer insight into McCammon's strength of character as well as his quick thinking and adaptability to unusual situations. At one point, McCammon posits that perhaps missed opportunities might actually be lucky breaks and begins a series of "what if?" questions. This particular passage in the book gives the reader pause to indulge in some philosophical pondering of their own chance encounters.

After pursuing a long career in international banking that took McCammon from Brazil to Portugal to Canada and many points in between, he accepted an offer to become an honorary consul in Switzerland. Much like his employment in Canada as a linesman, the job appeared unexpectedly. McCammon details a letter sent to him as a sample of the position description which was quickly followed by a second missive asking for his formal acceptance. McCammon notes that he speedily replied to the request and provides a list his expected employment requirements. However, as his stories reveal, those duties took an amazing turn away from the commonplace when dealing with the public. Additionally, at this point in the book, a small segment describing the history of the diplomatic corps occurs and includes such points as the original purpose of the *attaches*. These gentlemen generally took the Continental tour to acquire polish in social situations. Most, according to McCammon, did not intend to establish a formal consular career and thus, had few duties. Anyone considering a career in the diplomatic corps is well advised to read McCammon's memoir for a taste of the many different personalities and problems that come from residing abroad and serving in an official capacity.

In the midst of McCammon's reminiscences, he frequently demonstrates his fondness for Japanese haiku poetry especially those pieces composed by the famous poet, Basho. He uses these words to illustrate a particularly poignant or meaningful period in his travels. Evidence of McCammon's proclivity as a diarist abounds throughout the work as he often perfunctorily quotes journal entries made during his travels. McCammon also relies heavily on correspondence carefully

preserved by his mother for information about his parents' lives in early chapters of the book. Rather than providing a scholarly work, McCammon's personal papers allow for a general contextualization of his life and times. Nonetheless, the work is enjoyable and offers an entertaining glimpse into another time and place.

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