



BOOKS

Triple Threat

Peter Strickland: New London Shipmaster, Boston Merchant, First Consul to Senegal

Stephen H. Grant, New Academia Publishing, 2007, \$18, paperback, 231 pages.

REVIEWED BY AARON CHASSY

When done well, social history illuminates how societies organized themselves and how they reacted to, contributed in — and sometimes even helped set off — some of the world's great events. Similarly, well-written biographies invite us, the readers, to share with the subjects the emotional response to their successes and failures in the face of life's challenges. Taken altogether, historical events and individuals' efforts to play out their own part in these events' creation or unfolding are what impart meaning to these brief moments in time for future generations.

Stephen Grant's biography of Peter Strickland, the latest title in the ADST-DACOR Diplomats and Diplomacy Series, does not set out to offer a grand sweep of history. But it provides us with so much more than a simple recounting of one man's life. It opens our eyes to the workings of transatlantic maritime commerce and U.S. diplomacy in West Africa, putting them in the context of some of the 19th and 20th century's major developments.

Drawing on nearly 60 years' worth of personal diary entries and official dispatches, Grant illuminates the life

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of his subject, the seemingly unremarkable product of a middle-class New England family. Yet as the book's title details, Strickland (1837-1922) enjoyed three fairly successful careers: first as a sailor and later as a ship's officer; then a brief stint as the West African representative of U.S.-based commercial firms; and finally, service as one of the first U.S. consuls in the region.

Beyond describing his many career transitions, Grant allows Strickland's voice to illustrate aspects of some of the major social issues facing America during that era: how to reconcile the issue of slavery between the North and the South as an alternative to an all-out war; the exploitation of unskilled labor, seamen in this case, which drove America's industrial revolution; and the brutal colonization of West Africa by Europe.

What emerges is the portrait of a man whose vision and intellect far surpassed the capacity expected from someone with his meager for-

mal training — he had only a high school education. Further, Strickland's views provide some insight into how American society made the collective choices that ultimately shaped its national character and influenced its relations with other nations.

This careful blending of Strickland's personal view with Grant's selective use of historical hindsight brings enormous value to our understanding of U.S. diplomacy and how it responded to world affairs during the early years of the republic. For instead of focusing on diplomacy's "great men," who are often portrayed as having "made" history, this book shows us how U.S. diplomacy in general, and the institution of the consul in particular. They represented U.S. commercial interests, and provided much-needed support and service to Americans who found themselves alone in remote parts of the world.

The book's organization is straightforward and its style is simple enough to make it a quick read while maintaining the reader's interest throughout. It offers a rich, non-judgmental depiction of one man's life, as well as his achievements and contributions to U.S. diplomacy, all within the context of a world undergoing significant social transformation.

Aaron Chassy, a former USAID Foreign Service officer and former Peace Corps Volunteer, lived and worked for five years in West Africa, where much of this book takes place. He currently lives in Virginia, where he manages anticorruption programs for ARD, Inc., a USAID contractor.