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Ambassador's Activities

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Speech by HE Bernard Emié,
French Ambassador to the United Kingdom

at the award ceremony for the Pol Roger Duff Cooper Prize
at the French Residence

11 February 2014

Chère Artemis Cooper,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I'm very happy once again to be hosting the award ceremony for the Pol Roger Duff Cooper Prize, which, every year since 1956, has rewarded the best work of biography, history or political science published in the United Kingdom. It's a tradition, in a way, because this ceremony has been taking place here since 2006. I want to highlight the generosity of the Pol Roger champagne house, represented this evening by the Chairman of its board and whose excellence has been long recognized on both sides of the Channel; its prestige *cuvée* bears the name of Winston Churchill, one of whose grandchildren is present here. So this evening we remain *en famille*! It was, by the way, over a bottle of Pol Roger champagne that Duff Cooper introduced Odette Pol-Roger to Winston Churchill, and they became close friends.

I'd like to give a warm welcome to Artemis Cooper and the other members of the eminent Pol Roger Duff Cooper Prize jury, which she chairs. And I want to congratulate all the people nominated this evening, whose works have all been hailed by that jury. Each of you deserves our greatest admiration for giving us such stimulating, high-quality works. However, I'm sure you won't begrudge me focusing on our winner, Lucy Hughes-Hallett, author of *The Pike: Gabriele d'Annunzio, Poet, Seducer and Preacher of War*.

But first, I want to recall the close nature of the ties linking Duff Cooper to my country. Indeed, he began his career as a writer in 1932 by publishing a noted biography of the French statesman and diplomat Talleyrand, who, among other things, was Ambassador in London from 1830 to 1834. You can see a fine full-length portrait of him in the entrance hall of this residence, above the staircase. The decision to devote a work – indeed, the first of its kind –

to this great diplomat prince leaves no French person indifferent. For all that, France's reciprocal interest in Duff Cooper is clearly not just literary.

Duff Cooper also played a key role in Franco-British relations during the Second World War and the post-war period. A friend of Winston Churchill since the 1920s, he was very critical of the policy of appeasement conducted by Neville Chamberlain at a time of increasing danger. He bravely resigned after the Munich Agreement of 1938 and served as a liaison officer between the British government and the Free French Forces during the war. He was the UK's Ambassador to France from 1944 to 1947.

I would even say that Duff Cooper, who was certainly an outstanding embodiment of the style and gallantry of the British spirit, also marvellously epitomizes a certain French tradition of the writer-diplomat. I'm referring to those figures whose talents have straddled literature and letters of credence. I'm thinking, among others, of Chateaubriand (dispatched to Rome by Bonaparte in 1803), Stendhal (promoted to Consul in Trieste in 1830, the year when *Le Rouge et le Noir* was published), Saint-John Perse, Paul Claudel (posted to all five continents and to Tokyo in particular, where he completed *Le Soulier de Satin*) and Romain Gary.

This tradition is currently being supplanted by the nascent and, in my view, less brilliant one of "Twitter diplomats"!

Chère Lucy Hughes-Hallett, after the chorus of praise following the publication of *The Pike* (which won the 2013 Samuel Johnson Prize), it's difficult to find a word which hasn't already been widely used by the critics. I'll simply say that you have produced an outstandingly painstaking piece of work, which still manages to be easy and enjoyable to read. This for me

is what makes your biography of Gabriele d'Annunzio – a figure of rare complexity who is as enthralling as he is disconcerting – so original and where it deserves full credit.

Gabriele d'Annunzio is obviously a first-rate subject for a biography – rarely is a life so densely packed on the cultural, political and human levels. From the child prodigy of Italy's *fin de siècle* literature and the experienced aviator, to the lover of the most desirable women during the *Belle Époque* and the Roaring Twenties and the founder of the Free State of Fiume in 1921, his life reads more like something out of a novel than a biography. Such an abundance of events and meetings – I won't dwell on the shadowy areas of the fascist period – is a treasure trove for any biographer, but it also presents a challenge. How does one bring together such disparate elements to make as flamboyant and complex a life as this intelligible to the early 21st-century reader? Lucy Hughes-Hallett, you successfully took up the challenge by ditching a strictly chronological study in favour of themed chapters and cross-sections. This decision allows the reader to distinguish the man from the myth and comprehend all the facets of a figure whose escapades – including romantic ones – today arouse disapproval rather than admiration. Leaving readers the right – or the responsibility – to make up their own minds is a remarkably skilful and honest approach on your part, *chère* Lucy Hughes-Hallett, and I congratulate you on this.

For all these reasons, *chère* Lucy Hughes-Hallett, I have the pleasure today of awarding you the 57th Duff Cooper Prize./.