

London Takes Liking To Anne Armstrong

By ROBERT B. SEMPLE Jr.

Special to The New York Times

LONDON, May 28—London, which can be stuffy and hesitant about these things, has taken an instant liking to Anne Armstrong, the new American Ambassador, and not—she would call this the “ultimate put-down”—because she is a woman or a Texas curiosity or someone who survived the worst days of Watergate.

Judging by conversations with officials, as well as her press notices, the British like her because she is visible and direct and informal without turning informality into a cloying down-home soupiness.

Mrs. Armstrong, the first woman to represent the United States at the Court of St. James's, presented her credentials to Queen Elizabeth II on March 17.

She has made no secret of the fact that she enjoys Britain and the people who inhabit it, which flatters her audiences, but she has also made no secret of what she thinks is wrong with the place, where she stands on international issues, and who she prefers in the current American political scramble.

Mrs. Armstrong is also under no illusions that the American Ambassador here makes a heavy contribution to foreign policy-making, a fact that dawned on her restless predecessor, Elliot L. Richardson, not long after he arrived last year. This is partly a function of Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger's highly personalized diplomacy, and partly of the fact that most major foreign policy issues tend to bypass Britain.

All This, For Example

Accordingly, she has been carrying on much as Mr. Richardson did, as a convenor of persons and ideas, meeting and entertaining a broad cross section of people and feeding what she finds useful about British foreign and domestic policy into the State Department's ceaseless traffic.

In a typical two-week period, for example, she entertained Sir Harold Wilson at a small luncheon, gathered a group of scholars for discussion of strategic issues, met with some oil company executives, addressed a group of parliamentary correspondents, held a stag dinner—she was the lone exception—for Mr. Kissinger, talked to trade union leaders, visited Manchester to help a big department store there launch a “buy American goods” campaign—all this in addition to regular staff meetings on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Africa, world trade and other issues on which she freely concedes she is still a novice.

To an extent, any ambassador is first a listening post, second a master of ceremonies and, third a decision-maker. John Kenneth Gal-

braith, once Ambassador to India, compared the job to an airline pilot's “hours of boredom, minutes of panic.” London does not offer even those redeeming moments of panic, but if Mrs. Armstrong is bored by the routine, she does not show it, and this is what has caught the British imagination.

“I have seen her in action three times,” wrote the often acerbic diarist in The Times of London a few weeks ago, “more than I saw her two predecessors put together. Yesterday I saw her open an exhibition of art by invalid children. There was no clear American connection—she did it because she wanted to support the cause. And she did it with great charm and expertise.”

As for Mrs. Armstrong's view of Britain, she is hopeful and polite—up to a point. She told a lunchtime audience of political journalists the other day that she thought the country's business needed a higher level of profitability, less backbiting between management and labor, and a more modest level of public expenditure, at least until inflation was brought down.

Some Things Praised

But she also, in that speech and in an interview yesterday, said she saw many good signs, not least “the spirit of cooperation reflected in the recent agreement between labor and Government to restrain wages, sacrificing short-term selfish interests for the good of the country.”

“Many thoughtful people know that Britain has problems, whether because their industry is inefficient or out-of-date, or for other reasons,” she said. “But I think the long-term prospects are hopeful.”

Some of her optimism is derived from her personal assessment of the men and women she has met, including Chancellor of the Exchequer Denis Healey, Secretary for Prices Shirley Williams, and labor leaders such as Jack Jones, head of the Transport and General Workers Union.

All three call themselves Socialists, which Mrs. Armstrong, a Republican and wife of a wealthy Texas rancher, most assuredly is not. But she told the journalists' luncheon that all three had “plenty of moxie.”

When told later that the word “moxie” had mystified many in her audience, she laughed and said she would use “guts” in the future, even though she had no intention of modifying her natural breeziness in order to give the “utterly false impression that I won a first at Oxford.”

She is clearly feeling her way on foreign-policy issues, and her conversation on these issues is unspecific. Using the generalities with which she is now comforta-



Central Press/Pictorial Parade

Ambassador Anne Armstrong at her office in London

ble, however, she believes that any isolationist urge in America would be “disastrous,” that “there is no way we can or will cut the cord with the rest of the world.”

She conveys this message to any Briton who asks about the American political scene, and, at least in interviews, makes clear that she has confidence that one man will keep the internationalist tradition going.

His name is Gerald R. Ford. Like him, Mrs. Armstrong defended former President Nixon until the truth became clear to her a few weeks before the end. Mrs. Armstrong survived the Ford purge of the White House, stayed on until late 1974, then left to devote herself to her family and directorships of several large corporations before Mr. Ford sent her here.

Her “family”—by which she means her husband, Tobin, who is here with her now—is the one thing, she says, that will keep her cut of elective politics. An interviewer cannot escape the impression that she would like someday to run for office, and she says that if she doesn't run she would eagerly accept a job under a future Republican Administration. She is an overpoweringly friendly person; she is also not unambitious.

She insists, however, that she does not relish the idea of spending the days on the campaign trail required to run and win, and the reason is not so much her grown children—the youngest of the five is now 19—but Mr. Armstrong, the tall personable rancher who, if central casting and a few chauvinists had anything to say about it, would himself fit very well as Ambassador to the Court of St. James's.