Introduction

The monarchy has remained important in British political life long after monarchs ceased – in the early nineteenth century – to govern as well as to reign, and after popular legitimacy came to be founded on representation. Autobiographies, opinion polls and academic studies (as well as newspaper coverage) attest to its importance in the private, imaginative lives of many men, women and children. Yet the monarchy's political and cultural significance received little systematic historical analysis before the 1980s. The disciplines of sociology, social psychology, and cultural and media studies developed theoretical perspectives on the modern monarchy, though many of these pay too little regard to specific historical contexts to satisfy historians.

This collection of studies by intellectual, political, social and cultural historians combines original research, new approaches, and reassessments of the recent historiography in order to shed light on two fundamental and related questions. First, what has been the monarchy's role in the political and public life of the nation? Second, why for most of the last two centuries has the monarchy been popular with its subjects? These suggest further questions. What power or authority has the monarchy possessed? Has the gender of the monarch affected the institution's constitutional character and role? If the monarchy has a symbolic or representative function, what does it symbolize or represent? If it embodies national identity, how has it resolved the tension between 'Britishness' and ethnic identities? If the monarchy embodies certain moral values, has it failed to appeal to those who do not share them? Has its representative character been compromised by an upper- or middle-class lifestyle? Why has it not faced a greater challenge from republicanism? Has the monarchy survived because of its capacity to adapt and re-invent itself? Can its popularity be explained in rational terms or does it appeal only to atavistic human emotions? Finally, can the monarchy remain popular (and dignified) in the face of intrusive and sensationalist tabloid interest?

While there is, in fact, a very considerable measure of agreement among the contributors, it was not their object to seek this. Their purpose is

rather to stimulate debate and suggest new avenues for future research at a time when Buckingham and St James's Palaces are uncertain about the future direction of the monarchy and when the European Union, devolution, House of Lords reform and perhaps the possibility of Disestablishment present it with potentially difficult challenges.

The opening chapter accounts for the emergence of interest in the monarchy among historians in the 1980s, and surveys the existing historiography relating to the role of the monarchy, its popularity and the nature of republicanism. It emphasizes that a top-down approach has usually been adopted and that future research must endeavour to uncover ordinary people's perspectives in order to understand the appeal of monarchism. Thereafter the book is divided into three parts, each of three chapters.

The first part consists of three broad overviews. Jonathan Parry argues that the tendency of admirers and critics of the monarchy to focus on the irrational attraction of ceremonial and of mystique has obscured a more straightforward, rational and 'Whig' reason for its popularity: its ability to appear more or less representative of the nation, in terms of both its constitutional symbolism and its liberalism. In particular, it has played a crucial role in defining national identity against less liberal foreign regimes. Moreover, the monarchy has exemplified values which very many people have admired or shared – especially conventional bourgeois values. Yet Parry recognises that this achievement was sometimes in doubt, and that it was effected primarily by political events outside the monarchy's control. A key theme for the Victorian Liberal Party was the defence of the power of party and Parliament, and the assertion of civic republican ideas of political participation and public virtue in the face of monarchical influence. However, by the second quarter of the nineteenth century, monarchical influence was less threatening than several other vested interests that excited criticism, and by the fourth quarter, the traditional radical critique of the vested interest state had lost most of its power, thus safeguarding the position of the monarchy along with other 'Establishment' institutions.

Campbell Orr's chapter considers the significance of gender for the development of the monarchy. She argues that the monarchy was 'feminized' both in the sense of female rule and of feminine values; that constitutional rule is more easily accomplished by women than by men; and that the monarchy consists of several royal households at any one time, and therefore exemplifies different types of both femininity and masculinity as well as a different mix of upper-class and middle-class behaviours. The decline of the warrior-king ostensibly went hand-in-hand with the

emergence of the constitutional monarch. Yet although Albert's respectability and domesticity assisted this, there were other types of masculinity, associated with the dandyism and celebrity culture of the Regency, which persisted throughout Victoria's reign; while Victoria herself adapted the warrior role to her own feminine version. The association of the monarchy with philanthropy was one aspect of its feminization, helped empower a certain kind of female activism, and involved a different style of royal masculinity. Nonetheless, feminization entailed only limited support for women's rights, and the double sexual standard persisted in royal life until the 1990s.

James Loughlin explores the relationship between monarchy and national identity in the case of Ireland under the Union. George III's refusal to endorse the promised Catholic emancipation that was supposed to accompany the Act of Union, was regarded in Ireland as a betrayal. Unlike other regions of the United Kingdom, Ireland combined constitutional integration with semi-colonial status, reflected in a centralized administrative system based on Dublin Castle, at the apex of which stood the monarchical 'substitute', the Viceroy. Conceived in Britain as the embodiment of an accepted constitutional order, in Ireland it meant that the monarchy was often identified with an administrative system alienated from the mass of the people. While opposition to the Union among Irish nationalists was enduring, it coexisted with a more complex attitude to the monarchy explicable in terms neither of simplistic acceptance nor of rejection, with O'Connell and Butt encouraging royal allegiance, Parnell often discouraging it, and Griffith looking to independence under a dual monarchy. However, by the time southern Ireland left the Union in 1922, a bloody civil war was fought over the issue of an oath of allegiance to the King.

The second part considers the extent of royal authority and the nature of republicanism, principally in the Victorian and Edwardian periods. David Craig argues that the widely held assumption that Bagehot simply gave the monarchy a ceremonial role, reads *The English Constitution* out of context. Rather, one of Bagehot's aims was to show that cabinet government was the best form of government, and that unroyal cabinet government was possible, a point which many contemporaries doubted. Nevertheless, Bagehot thought monarchy was important because while Britain already possessed a free polity – a republic – most of the population were not ready for it. It was only because the 'masses' deferred to what they thought a divine-right monarchy and to the aristocracy that this republic was possible. Prematurely shattering this illusion would end obedience to the law; but as education spread, monarchy would become

redundant. Craig concludes that those commentators who invoke *The English Constitution* to bolster their support for the monarchy have unwittingly chosen an inappropriate prop.

Michael Bentley challenges the 'Whig' story of royal enfeeblement in the period 1830–1910. It is only by defining royal power as the ability to override politicians and officials and to make happen what its wielders want to happen, that the way is cleared to write off the British monarchy by 1850. Bentley argues instead for a persistent royal 'authority' well into the twentieth century. Those entrusted by the constitution with making policy could not do so without reference to what Queen Victoria wanted. A political career could depend on not making an enemy of the court. Making sure that the Queen did not get her way cost time, effort and temper which Prime Ministers tended not to have. For most, it was easier by far to let the Queen have her way when no critical aspect of policy came under threat.

Antony Taylor's chapter shows that for republicans, the boundaries between monarchy and the aristocracy were porous. They saw the key to power residing in formal structures of land-ownership and portrayed regal power as a usurpation of the throne by a roguish dynasty, supported by a corrupt Church, and an aristocratic mafia. Republicans projected debt and debauchery, frequently associated with the younger sons of aristocratic families, as the overriding characteristic of the heir to the throne, Albert Edward, and paid minute attention to the origins of aristocratic connection and position. To republican eyes, the people were deprived of their true rights and reduced to the position of internal exiles in their own land. However, republicans misunderstood the nature of the monarchical system they were opposing. Their insistence that aristocracy and monarchy were the same unmodified feudal force not only overlooked the tensions between them but also underestimated the new public ceremonial of the monarchy from the 1880s.

The third part explores the popularity of the monarchy, principally in the twentieth century. Philip Williamson argues that in response to a succession of severe challenges the monarchy was 're-invented' in the early twentieth century to become more secure and more popular. He considers that as for the first time monarchs began to make frequent public statements, the public language of the monarchy best reveals the meaning of the institution, and the nature of the support it cultivated; and that the abdication crisis should be understood as the test of what the monarchy had come to represent. This was to commend and uphold social solidarity, imperial unity, constitutionalism, Christian witness, and – the keystone of them all, over which Edward VIII stumbled – public duty. If this was an 'establishment' ideology, it commanded remarkable support

among all classes and across a great range of opinion. The monarchy's place in public life turned on it being the only agency able to express and symbolize these public values convincingly, because it was now perceived to be above and outside sectional political, social and denominational divisions.

Jeffrey Richards argues that contrary to Bagehot's dictum that the monarchy's 'mystery is its life. We must not let daylight in upon the magic', the cinema and television have played a significant role in the creation of a popular monarchy. Different aspects of the visual media have played to different sides of the institution of monarchy but they have complemented each other. Newsreels and documentaries with their reverent and respectful coverage of great public events have created an enduring image of the monarchy as the epitome of a life of duty and service. Feature films, both British and American, have helped to humanize and mythologize the monarchy by turning past royal figures into stars and inviting the public to sympathize with their private tragedies and tribulations. For Richards, they have replaced the magic of distance with the magic of familiarity.

The final chapter charts the course of royal popularity over the last 130 years, noting that the monarchy has usually been very popular except possibly during the two world wars and in the 1990s. It turns to psychological models to understand why, in a highly inegalitarian society, those with least resources have so enthusiastically supported a Royal Family with among the most. It argues that two key processes are at work. First, the prominence of the monarchy in everyday life as well as its ubiquitous presence during national ceremonies makes conforming far less mentally wearing than resisting. Second, great sympathy is normally generated for 'ordinary' royals who have no choice but to live with the burdens, constraints and miseries of royal life and work, despite their immense wealth. It offers the immense compensation for all those forced to do what they would not choose to do by their lack of money, that even if they had great wealth, it would not bring them happiness or the freedom to do whatever they wanted. What royals have done and said has normally had the effect of reinforcing this wishful thinking, though the unpopularity of the 1990s demonstrates the dangers of any royals appearing to ignore their 'duty' and balk at 'sacrifice'.

1 Historians and the modern British monarchy

Andrzej Olechnowicz

Until the 1980s, academic historians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries largely ignored the British monarchy as an object of research; David Cannadine's celebrated 1983 essay on the monarchy's 'invention of tradition' can reasonably be taken as starting the current round of scholarly interest.[1] There was no one decisive reason for this change. In part the timing reflected a run of royal events which demonstrated the immense popularity of the Royal Family: the Queen's Silver Jubilee in 1977, which saw street parties throughout the kingdom (6,000 in London alone, in rich and poor areas alike);[2] the Prince of Wales's wedding to Lady Diana Spencer in 1981, watched by an estimated world-wide television audience of 1,000 million; and comparable national and international excitement over the wedding of Prince Andrew in 1986. The monarchy manifestly commanded a range and depth of support which no political party, religion or national football team has perhaps ever matched. Such contemporary perceptions began to affect historical perspectives. As Walter Arnstein wrote, there now seemed something odd in most social historians being 'more fascinated with a small band of Lancashire woolcombers who sought to found a trade union than with the 30,000 school children who serenaded Queen Victoria at her Golden Jubilee pageant in London's Hyde Park'.[3]

It was no accident, however, that much of the early scholarly running was made by historians on the left. From the late 1970s onwards, national and international political events – notably the election of Mrs Thatcher's Conservative government in 1979 with a third of workers'

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[1] D. Cannadine, 'The context, performance and meaning of ritual: the British monarchy and the "invention of tradition", c.1820–1977', in E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 101–64.

[2] P. Ziegler, *Crown and People* (Newton Abbot, 1979), pp. 172–93. Cannadine had published a first version of his 1983 essay in Jubilee year: 'The not so ancient traditions of monarchy', *New Society*, 2 June 1977.

[3] W. L. Arnstein, 'Queen Victoria's speeches from the throne: a new look', in A. O'Day (ed.), *Government and Institutions in the Post-1832 United Kingdom* (Lampeter, 1995), p. 131.

votes, and popular support for the 1982 Falklands War – coincided with scholarly reappraisals of British economic and social history to force a redirection in their thinking. Scepticism about the idea of the 'Industrial Revolution' and a new emphasis upon the long dominance of a southern 'gentlemanly capitalism' based around commerce, finance and services, cast doubt both on a Marxist-indebted history of the nineteenth century preoccupied with the socio-economic power of northern, industrial, bourgeois capitalism and with the activities of a labour movement, and on an orthodox Marxist view of aristocratic influence as surviving only because this was in the interests of the bourgeoisie. From the resulting reassessments, the monarchy emerged as a prime candidate in upholding anti-industrial and aristocratic values, containing class consciousness and socialism, and frustrating what these historians considered to be economic modernization (i.e. a more socialist economy), because of its role in shaping a particular kind of national identity. For example, in the 1978 Marx memorial lecture, Eric Hobsbawm explained the halt in the labour movement's advance exclusively in socio-economic terms; but shortly afterwards he shifted to placing greater emphasis on the influence of national culture, through the processes of the 'invention of tradition'.[4]

The most influential contribution came from the heterodox Marxist and Scottish nationalist Tom Nairn, whose *The Enchanted Glass: Britain and its Monarchy* (1988) developed his analysis in *The Break-up of Britain* (1977) of British 'over-traditionalism leading to incurable backwardness'.[5] With greater empirical depth, Linda Colley's *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (1992) presented Protestant Britons defining themselves as a single people in reaction to the Catholic, 'superstitious, militarist, decadent and unfree' French, and identified the monarchy as central to this process: under the Hanoverians it assumed 'many of the characteristics and much of the patriotic importance that it retains today'.[6] Nairn and Colley have influenced each other's work, and both were indebted to another heterodox Marxist, Arno Mayer, who in *The Persistence of the Old Regime: Europe to the Great War* (1981) argued that 'the rising business and professional classes' had failed to replace 'the landed and public service elites' as Europe's ruling classes, in large part because the European monarchies 'remained the focus of dazzling and minutely choreographed public rituals that rekindled deep-seated royalist sentiments while simultaneously exalting and relegitimating the old order

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[4] E. Hobsbawm *et al.*, *The Forward March of Labour Halted?* (London, 1981), pp. 1–19; E. Hobsbawm, 'Introduction', in Hobsbawm and Ranger, *Invention of Tradition*, pp. 1–14.

[5] T. Nairn, *The Break-up of Britain* (London, 1977), pp. 40–2.

[6] L. Colley, *Britons* (New Haven, 1992), pp. 6–7, 193.

as a whole'. Britain, it was argued, had been no exception, remaining a traditional society into the reign of George V.[7]

Non-Marxist historians too came to explore the same terrain, as they 'dispersed the collectivity of class into various other alliances, mainly of a cross-class nature', producing analyses centred around discourses of 'community' and the 'populism' of popular constitutionalism.[8] Increasingly, the political realm was regarded as conditioning social identity, and inequality and exploitation largely disappeared from the academic agenda as British 'class' interests came to be seen as compatible, and 'class' relations as harmonious. A privileging of mainly political discourses also produced a new – albeit contested – periodization which ascribed a fundamental economic, political and social unity from the early seventeenth to the late nineteenth century. This emphasis on continuity saw early Victorian political history 'inverted from the familiar steady march toward representative democracy to a world where theatre and spectacle remained the prime source of political legitimation'.[9]

These two revisionist trends encouraged historians to expect a ceremonial monarchy which faced few ideological obstacles to loyalty among its subjects. Furthermore, inspired by John Pocock's notion of the United Kingdom as an 'Atlantic archipelago' and the work of early modern historians of the Scottish and Irish impact upon English politics – as well as revived political debates about devolution – historians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries also began to examine the interaction of the four nations of the kingdom.[10] Here too the cultural role of the monarchy seemed important in fashioning a British identity, which satisfied a majority of subjects that it respected national differences and was more than English identity writ large.

One fundamental objection to the historical study of the monarchy is that British academic historians cannot write good royal history because they tend to treat the institution with 'a certain obsequiousness'.[11] The real issue is actually not obsequiousness but something altogether different. Many historians have been 'conformists': in the last analysis they

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[7] A. J. Mayer, *The Persistence of the Old Regime* (New York, 1981), pp. 79, 81, 88–95, 135–9.

[8] For a summary of this shift, see R. Price, 'Historiography, narrative, and the nineteenth century', *Journal of British Studies* 35 (1996), 221, 229–31; and for criticism, 'Roundtable. Richard Price's *British Society, 1680–1880*', *Journal of Victorian Culture* 11 (2006), 146–79.

[9] Ibid., 221–2.

[10] E.g. K. Robbins, *Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford, 1988); H. Kearney, *The British Isles* (Cambridge, 1989).

[11] This was the judgement of Robert Baldcock, a history editor at Yale University Press, in 1998.

see little wrong with the monarchy or the structures of the nation. More recent work, focusing on the examination of discourses, runs the risk of a naïve reading of the materials producing a similarly congratulatory history; it has always to be remembered that discourses were not innocent descriptions of reality, but weapons in contests for some form of power.

This essay considers three broad historiographical themes. First, it discusses studies of the monarchy's constitutional role, political power and social character by reviewing the genre of royal biography, the contribution of constitutional and political historians, and changing assessments of Bagehot's classic statement of the British monarchy's role in *The English Constitution* (1867). The second section examines how historians have sought to explain the monarchy's popularity, by assessing studies of philanthropy, ceremony, gender, religion, national identity, empire, media and 'soap opera'. The third section will outline historical understandings of the character of British republicanism. The conclusion will suggest that monarchism should be considered both as a pervasive cultural fact, which often goes unremarked, and as a distinctive ideology articulated in print and other media, which needs close historical investigation.

I

The official royal biography still carries authority in defining the character of individual monarchs and their public role. Nor is the genre extinct: in 2003 the Palace chose William Shawcross to write the Queen Mother's official biography. The biographies of George V by Harold Nicolson in 1952, George VI by John Wheeler-Bennett in 1958 and Queen Mary by James Pope-Hennessy in 1959 all sought to establish that the monarchs had been exemplary individuals, who had behaved in a constitutional manner and had not been hostile to the working class and the Labour movement. In these senses, they were patrician responses to a fear not of republicanism, but of confiscatory socialism. Nicolson, the most scrupulous of the three, quoted the advice of the King's private secretary in 1917 that the monarchy should induce the thinking working classes to regard it 'as a living power for good', and emphasised that the King took special trouble in 1924 to get to know his new Labour ministers personally.[12] Wheeler-Bennett praised George VI for developing 'a new concept of Royalty . . . closely identified with the people, genuinely interested in their affairs'.[13] Pope-Hennessy was less plausible: royal tours of mining

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[12] H. Nicolson, *King George the Fifth* (London, 1952), pp. 301, 389.
[13] J. Wheeler-Bennett, *King George VI* (London, 1958), p. 172.

and industrial areas in 1912–13 were a success because 'the new King and Queen felt more at their ease with British working people than they ever did with members of London Society or with foreign royalties'.[14]

Such statements are hardly surprising given the purpose of the official royal biography, which is illuminated by Nicolson's diaries and letters. Concerned that he might be unable to tell the whole truth, George VI's private secretary, Sir Alan Lascelles, assured him that he would be shown 'every scrap of paper', but added that the book was 'not meant to be an ordinary biography. It is something quite different. You will be writing a book on the subject of a myth and will have to be mythological.' Nicolson would not be expected to say anything untrue, nor to praise or exaggerate, but would be expected 'to omit things and incidents which were discreditable'. When he asked what would happen if he did find something damaging, Lascelles replied that his 'first duty will always be to the Monarchy'. Nicolson did his duty, changing the wording of a 1914 memorandum in which George V threatened to refuse Royal Assent to the government's Irish Home Rule Bill.[15]

In the 1950s these three official royal biographies were 'almost impossible to contest' because government and royal records remained closed to other historians. Moreover, royal insiders abided by a code of silence with anyone other than entirely friendly outsiders. The breaking of this code has been the most dramatic development of the last thirty years of commentary on the Royal Family, making possible muck-raking biographies based on unsubstantiated and unattributable gossip. The genre of popular royal biography is hardly new, but such books used to be deferential and celebratory – 'mythological' in exactly the same way as official royal biographies. Some were written with assistance from the royal persons concerned, for example Kathleen Woodward's *Queen Mary: A Life and Intimate Study* and Lady Cynthia Asquith's *The Married Life of The Duchess of York*. The unauthorized (though still reverential) book by a royal governess, Marion Crawford's *The Little Princesses* (1950), conventionally marks the shift towards a more revelatory style. So far Kitty Kelley's *The Royals* (1997) represents the acme of this genre, using interviews with many 'current or former members of the royal household' to claim exposures of the Windsors' 'secrets of alcoholism, drug addiction, epilepsy, insanity, homosexuality, bisexuality, adultery, infidelity, and illegitimacy', and 'their relationship with the Third Reich'.[16]

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[14] J. Pope-Hennessy, *Queen Mary 1867–1953* (London, 1959), p. 473.

[15] H. Nicolson, *Diaries and Letters, 1930–64*, ed. S. Olson (Harmondsworth, 1984), pp. 334, 343; P. Hall, *Royal Fortune* (London, 1992), p. 175, and see p. 173 for Nicolson's son avoiding the sensitive word 'mythological' in his own earlier edition of the diary.

[16] K. Kelley, *The Royals* (New York, 1997), pp. xii, 2–3; also 23–4 which broke one of the last taboos, criticism of the Queen Mother.