



---

## Introduction

On 4 August 2014, the United Kingdom marked the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War with three major ceremonies – a service at Glasgow Cathedral to commemorate the Commonwealth contribution to the war effort, a vigil at Westminster Abbey and a moving twilight ceremony at St Symphorien Military Cemetery near Mons in Belgium. At each of these solemn events, the British monarchy was prominently represented: Prince Charles attended in Glasgow; the Duchess of Cornwall was at Westminster Abbey; and the younger generation of royals, Prince William, his wife Catherine, the Duchess of Cambridge, and Prince Harry, took part in the St Symphorien commemoration. The three younger royals, together with Prince Charles and his wife, performed a similar role at the centenary ceremony at Thiepval, marking the start of the Battle of the Somme, on 1 July 2016. One hundred years on from the start of the war, the British monarchy took the central part in representing the nations of the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth in honouring the war dead.

Yet, while the monarchy remains visibly at the heart of British First World War commemoration, it is largely absent from the historiography of the conflict. This study is the first academic monograph on the British monarchy's role during the First World War and the first to explore the social and cultural functions of monarchism in the British war effort.<sup>1</sup> Historians of monarchy have largely focused upon either the 'long' nineteenth century, ending with the outbreak of the war in 1914, or upon individual reigns in which the war receives cursory treatment as only a background context for royal biography.<sup>2</sup> Notably David Cannadine's seminal essay on the British monarchy and the 'invention of tradition' skips the war in its focus upon four phases: 1820–70; 1877–1914; 1918–53; and the period between Queen Elizabeth II's coronation and her jubilee.<sup>3</sup> Historians studying popular opposition to the British monarchy and its response, such as Antony Taylor, do discuss the conflict, but almost entirely focus on 1917 and the impact of the Russian Revolution upon the monarchy, especially the question of asylum for the Russian Tsar and his family, and the name change to Windsor.<sup>4</sup> Frank Prochaska's key article on 'republicanism' in Britain likewise focuses on 1917.<sup>5</sup>

These works generally ask the same question – why did the British monarchy survive the First World War? – and concur in their answer: that the British monarchy was already in a process of long-term modernisation and democratisation from the nineteenth century into which the war fitted. Frank Prochaska, for example, argues that Britain was already effectively a ‘crowned republic’ by 1914 due to the stripping away of royal power that had previously taken place and that, from the late Victorian period, the monarchy turned to philanthropy to sustain its popularity, becoming a ‘welfare’ monarchy.<sup>6</sup> He argues the war further catalysed modernisation processes and emphasises the successful strategies of royal political impartiality that George V and his advisors chose and the monarchy’s increasing visibility and democratisation during the conflict.<sup>7</sup> Frank Mort suggests that George V profoundly modernised the monarchy before the First World War by investing in ‘new styles of royal accessibility’ to combat the challenge of labour militancy and the rise of mass politics to project, through successful media management, ‘a different relationship between sovereign and people’.<sup>8</sup> He also highlights how George V pioneered royal political impartiality and his 1912 and 1913 tours, with Queen Mary, of Welsh and northern English industrial areas. Edward Owens looks at how the monarchy modernised its relationship with modern media, while Vernon Bogdanor focuses on a modernising narrative in which the Crown ceded ‘power and partisanship’ for more neutral, detached influence.<sup>9</sup> All of this important work on the monarchy’s modernisation has profoundly inspired this book. Yet, it also triggered questions: how did the clearly delineated, long-term modernisation of the monarchy that these studies show interact with older ideas about royalty? And what was the impact of cataclysmic ‘total war’ in 1914–18 upon this process?<sup>10</sup>

The emphasis on the long-term history of modernisation of the monarchy means that the First World War generally only appears – if at all – as another historical accelerator among many factors or subsumed into a broader biographical narrative about George V’s reign.<sup>11</sup> Even in those few cases where historians of monarchy have examined the war more closely, they have continued to focus on modernisation. The recent volume *Monarchies and the Great War*, edited by Matthew Glencross and Judith Rowbotham, has two chapters dedicated to the British monarchy: one a diplomatic history of King George V’s visits to the Western Front, the other a social history of Queen Mary’s charitable war work; both put forward the modernisation of monarchy paradigm outlined above.<sup>12</sup> In 2018, Alexandra Churchill published a popular history of King George V at war which emphasises his importance in modernising the monarchy. While it is not an academic work, it contains many useful and important revelations of new primary source material on aspects of the king’s role that have not been documented in the existing historiography, thanks to the access she was granted by the Royal Archives.<sup>13</sup>

However, it is a fair assertion that the British monarchy and British monarchism during the First World War is still a largely unresearched academic subject, and its cultural history virtually non-existent.<sup>14</sup> As Frank Mort has argued, ‘the issue of cultural expression has been a significant focus for recent historians of the Great War, but until recently it has been largely absent from studies of popular responses to the modern British monarchy’.<sup>15</sup> Mort’s 2020 article on public responses to the wartime monarchy is a rare attempt to redress this. It looks at monarchy ‘as part of the routines and emotional fabric of ordinary lives’, and argues that ‘the outpouring of opinions about George V and his family during the Great War’ allow us to map responses to the monarchy and achieve a ‘clearer assessment of the effectiveness of royal experiments in accessibility and democratization’.<sup>16</sup> Mort finds that the war promoted a more modern royal ‘accessibility’.<sup>17</sup> Yet as Andrzej Olechnowicz has argued, historians have focused more readily on how the British monarchy modernised rather than on popular perceptions of it: “the assimilation of the monarchy into individual subjectivities” is still unexplored’.<sup>18</sup> If, as Benedict Anderson has convincingly argued, the rise of modern nationalism saw nations function as ‘imagined communities’, it seems pertinent to consider the role that the British monarchy and monarchism played in the collective wartime imagination of British identity.<sup>19</sup>

Overall, the war itself has never been studied in detail in its own terms as an exceptional, specific, four-and-a-half-year-long episode of national and imperial crisis and totalising warfare which set up particular dynamics with regard to the British monarchy and saw it operate in very different ways to peacetime. This book argues that the war not only accelerated powerful, nascent modernising languages about the British monarchy – as democratic and accessible – but also reconfigured traditional representations of the king and queen, and led to the reconstruction of the popular image of the monarchy in freshly mythologised, sacralised ways that contributed to its meaning and purpose, and its survival, which were embedded with older concepts of honour, duty, religion and service. Moreover, in wartime in 1914–18, the king had greater powers than in peacetime – cultural, but also military and political – as this study shows. It argues that in wartime, modernisation processes *coexisted*, often symbiotically, with much more archaic cultures of honour codes, dynastic leadership, royal myth and romanticisation which the war rejuvenated; the conflict does not fit seamlessly into a modernisation narrative. This reflects the findings of studies on other aspects of the conflict, such as war mourning.<sup>20</sup> Generation was a factor here: by 1914 George V and his Queen were middle-aged. They had been socialised in nineteenth-century values regarding monarchy and were steeped in older belief systems concerning tradition, the religious role of the king and class cultures, as well as duty, honour and other leadership virtues.

This is a book about the sacralisation discourses built around the British monarchy in the Great War, how they operated and were perceived and to what extent they were challenged. Its primary purpose is to explore what the role of the British monarchy during the war tells us about the *cultural meanings* of the monarchy at the time and how the war affected them. It asks if the monarchy and monarchism did indeed matter in wartime, then in what ways – cultural, social, political, military – did this significance manifest itself? And what does this tell us about the nature of the First World War United Kingdom and British identity? These are largely new questions. As Frank Mort has argued, ‘research on British patriotism has tended to infer, rather than demonstrate, the effectiveness of monarchy’s appeal as a symbol of national unity’.<sup>21</sup>

This study thus differs to the existing historiography in a number of regards. Not only does it adopt a cultural history methodology, but it also gives full weight to all the war years, as without covering the conflict in full, the 1917 moment lacks context.<sup>22</sup> It also analyses the war’s aftermath and its legacy for the monarchy into the interwar period, as well as integrating the transnational historiography: it is difficult to assert why the British monarchy survived without incorporating the broader European wartime context. Victory mattered – defeated monarchies were much more likely to collapse – but so too did royal behaviour: perceptions of personal conduct played key roles in popular hostility to the ill-fated Tsarina Alexandra of Russia, Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany and his son Crown Prince Wilhelm and King Constantine of Greece. Individual royal personal sensitivity to wartime public expectations was an important factor in a monarchy’s outcome. Unusually for studies of the British monarchy, this book also reintegrates the history of Ireland, which is often treated separately.<sup>23</sup>

Interwar British attitudes of reverence to the monarchy which lasted until the 1936 abdication crisis are inexplicable without understanding its First World War role. This book suggests that the modernisation narrative in historiography on the British monarchy, while very important, has its limits: it sets out to explore the relationship between older sacralising languages and cultures of monarchy and the ways in which these survived into, or were even revived by the First World War, in tandem with modernisation. It also considers how new challenges due to the war led to the creation of innovative sacralising royal rituals. Moreover, it suggests that many of the changes historians have pointed to as signs of the monarchy’s increasing ‘modernity’ – its greater visibility, through visits to war factories and shipyards, hospitals and troop inspections and through photography and film – were intended to promote archaic ideas about the direct, personal subject–sovereign relationship of loyalty and duty as drivers of war service, belief systems which were also widespread among those populations the royals visited. The means adopted for publicising royal visits may have been more modern, but their purpose was

frequently about sustaining much older monarchist value systems and ensuring they were at the heart of the war effort and society. This also accounts for their success: the wartime monarchy presented itself as a monarchy built on a specific kind of royal leadership – with strong Protestant overtones – that promoted the values of honour, duty, humility, religion, dynastic loyalty and service. These were recognisably familiar, older norms, and this proved very popular with a wartime public, disorientated and often frightened by the scale and rapidity of the social changes the conflict was bringing.

In many respects, the monarchy projected itself as representing reassuring continuity during the war. Even the royal wartime acceptance of the need for greater democracy, and promotion of the narrative of a ‘democratic’ British monarchy, was based upon an ideal of the king treating all his loyal subjects equally and a concomitant promotion of the monarchy as the core foundation of empire. None of this was particularly ‘modern’. The monarchy’s most important role by the end of the conflict was honouring the war dead who had died in its name; the scale of this role was new and the means used often innovative, such as the burial of the Unknown Soldier, but the concept behind it, the royal recognition of war service by loyal subjects, was not. It was the processes of royal ‘sacralisation’ that the war unleashed that ultimately explain why, as Edward Owens has shown, by the mid-1930s, ‘the crown occupied a near-sacred place in national life’.<sup>24</sup> David Starkey has argued its supporters rendered it virtually a secular religion, while Philip Murphy refers to the cult of the interwar monarchy as ‘British Shintoism’.<sup>25</sup> Jay Winter has argued that the conflict led to a resurgence in traditional cultural motifs for understanding conflict and loss; in Britain, the royal role in mourning the war dead was a central part of this process.<sup>26</sup>

If historians of monarchy have only very partially addressed the war, academic historians of the conflict have generally ignored the British monarchy completely.<sup>27</sup> This is partly because the focus since the social and cultural turns of the 1960s and 1980s respectively has been away from political history – the subfield of history which, until the 1960s, had been considered most relevant to the wartime monarchy – and partly because the history of elites has declined in prominence as a focus for war historians more generally during the past forty years.<sup>28</sup> These factors help to explain why the British monarchy has been largely ignored in the new wave of cultural historiography of the First World War.<sup>29</sup> This gap also applies to the history of the British monarchy and twentieth-century conflict as a whole, which, as historian David Cannadine has highlighted, has so far ‘gone largely unexplored’.<sup>30</sup>

However, changes in historiographical trends alone do not entirely explain the gap: after all, the historiography of British wartime generals, another elite, has not suffered from similar academic neglect by First World War historians, nor has the German monarchy.<sup>31</sup> In fact, Kaiser Wilhelm II, the Prussian court and wartime German royal dynasties in general have been subjected to detailed

academic scrutiny.<sup>32</sup> Other factors have clearly contributed, such as the ongoing association of royal biography in Britain with non-academic, popular history, the inaccurate image of George V as a staid, stamp-collecting figure less interesting than his predecessors, Queen Victoria and King Edward VII, or successor Edward VIII, and problems of access to sources.<sup>33</sup> The history of the Royal Archives at Windsor Castle and the Great War merits its own study.<sup>34</sup> Royal papers have an obvious sensitivity: one of the roles of King George V's Private Secretary Lord Stamfordham was to ensure that when one of the royal family's close correspondents died, the fate of the royal letters they had received was carefully managed, because, as he wrote in 1919 to the family of the late Bishop of Ripon, 'unfortunately from time to time Their Majesties have painful experiences of family letters being exposed for sale'.<sup>35</sup> Such letters were to be destroyed or returned to the Royal Archives; in cases where they were retained by descendants, the Royal Archives were often consulted regarding who had access to them, even after they were donated to other archive repositories. This was the case for some of Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin's correspondence held at Cambridge University Library relating to the 1936 abdication, and remains so for certain of Alan 'Tommy' Lascelles's papers at the Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge.<sup>36</sup> As with any letters, legally copyright rests with the author. In other words, the Royal Archives at Windsor are a private archive and follow the norms governing granting access to private family papers, not official state archival material; several other European monarchies follow similar practices, while others are now part of state archives.<sup>37</sup> Until very recently the Royal Archives' policy was to grant access on a case-by-case basis and only archivists – not researchers – have access to the inventories. The Royal Archives is now reviewing its access policy, the principles of which can be viewed at [www.royal.uk/archives](http://www.royal.uk/archives).<sup>38</sup> In previous generations, figures such as Lascelles, a former Keeper of the Royal Archives, also destroyed 'documents that reflected badly' on royal figures or the monarchy.<sup>39</sup> This particular archival history may also be a factor in the major historiographical gaps in the academic study of the twentieth-century British monarchy which are only now beginning to be addressed by historians.<sup>40</sup>

Another important factor was the monarchy's own desire to play up certain aspects of its war role and marginalise others as public opinion towards the conflict changed. By 1919, it was much more prudent to emphasise the monarchy's wartime charitable aid than how monarchism had been utilised to promote voluntary recruitment in 1914–16, for example. After the war George V was not keen for his political and military influence during the conflict to be known, according to historian Ian Beckett: 'Understandably, it was also certainly the King's wish that much of his own role in events should remain concealed. Thus, George V appears, if at all, in the major postwar memoirs very much on the periphery, visiting munitions factories, making an

occasional national appeal, or setting an example by his pledge of wartime abstinence.<sup>41</sup>

There has also been a lack of engagement with innovations in the historiography of Continental European monarchies, where a cultural, and indeed a transnational approach has emerged, rejuvenating monarchy history, which has not yet fed into new work on twentieth-century British monarchy.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, while Wilhelm II has received enormous attention from academic historians, his cousin, George V, and the role of the British monarchy, has remained remarkably overlooked.<sup>43</sup> This greater historiographical profile has ensured cultural history approaches have been applied to studying the German 'court' and royal social and gender roles, issues that this book is the first to explore for the British 1914–18 case.<sup>44</sup> In the European context, this greater academic attention is also due to the fact that monarchism was a very live, legitimised and visible *political* creed in the years leading up to 1914, which existed alongside the other 'isms' of the period, such as socialism and liberalism, as the question of to how to organise a modern state became increasingly debated. Britain at the time was aware of these questions in other countries, and figures such as Reginald Brett, Lord Esher, Deputy Constable and Lieutenant Governor of Windsor Castle, a long-term key court advisor, were influenced by them.<sup>45</sup> There was also discussion in the public sphere as to whether Prussian-German 'direct' monarchical government was more modern than Britain's more constitutionally limited version.<sup>46</sup> At a European level, monarchical rule was seen as a valid state organisational system – dynastic government was common to many states prior to the outbreak of war, but did not often survive the challenges that the conflict raised; the new ideologies of democracy and socialism had largely triumphed over such political monarchism by 1918, although it lingered on in some right-wing schools of thought which advocated varieties of authoritarianism, some of which made space for direct monarchical government. For example, the right-wing, radical conservative Carl Schmitt, in his 1922 work *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* and his 1928 book *Constitutional Theory*, considered the meaning and purpose of authoritarian monarchical models.<sup>47</sup> However, the few European monarchies in belligerent states that survived the war did so largely as symbolic constitutionally limited entities, stripped of direct political interference with or control over government, with a few arguable exceptions such as the Yugoslav case. In contrast, the end of the war saw the British orchestrate the foundation of a string of politically interventionist monarchies across the Middle East, for example, in Iraq, suggesting that post-war, for key British bureaucrats, the idea of a politically powerful monarchism still had a hold on their thinking, even as in Europe it was disappearing. There has also been a wave of cultural histories of how national leadership mythologies were configured around key European historical figures.<sup>48</sup> The methodology of



these studies serves as a useful model, as kingship in First World War Britain lends itself to similar kinds of analysis.

Yet, perhaps the most significant factor has been social change: the decline by the 1990s in those very cultures of class deference, which had so marked the First World War era, meant that historians often simply did not consider the British monarchy – or monarchism – a significant wartime cultural factor worth exploring. It is all too easy to miss the cultural trappings that held greater weight in past societies or operated in different ways. The monarchy was one of these. In the First World War, an age of deference, class culture and religious practice – even if all of these were increasingly contested by the start of the twentieth century – the meaning of monarchy was obviously constructed and perceived differently to today.<sup>49</sup> As William Kuhn has argued, monarchy, and royal ceremonial in particular, represent what cultural anthropologists describe as communities of people speaking ‘about themselves to themselves’ through central rituals that are ‘unusually communicative about the implicit beliefs that underlie their common social life. On these ritual occasions some members of society symbolize what they believe to be essential ideas in their cultural life both for their own benefit and the benefit of others.’<sup>50</sup> The British monarchy in the Great War exemplifies this. Moreover, borrowing from the historian Robert Darnton, the most ‘strange’ historic occurrences can help us ‘to unravel an alien system of meaning’.<sup>51</sup> In other words, where monarchist rituals or beliefs become visible during the Great War in ways that appear odd, inexplicable or jarring with the purported modernity of the conflict, they can be especially revealing. As Roger Chartier writes, one can gain entry into cultures of the past through ‘a seemingly incomprehensible, “opaque” rite, text, or act’.<sup>52</sup> David Blackbourn’s work on the nineteenth-century Marpingen apparitions offers an exemplary lesson: we should never assume that people in the past did not believe what they claimed to believe so as to dismiss those of their beliefs that perhaps do not match modern sensibilities.<sup>53</sup>

This study draws upon the *Annales* School’s ‘history of mentalities’ approach, as well as on the new cultural historiography of the First World War.<sup>54</sup> Peter Burke has pointed out how diverse the practice of ‘cultural history’ now is and how difficult it is to define it: ‘one solution to the problem of defining cultural history might be to switch attention from the objects to the methods of study. [...] The common ground of cultural historians might be described as a concern with the symbolic and its interpretation.’<sup>55</sup> The *Annales* history of mentalities has been described by Lynn Hunt as the study of ideological systems or collective cultural representations in societies which act themselves as constituents – and even determinants – of social reality.<sup>56</sup> In this approach, ‘economic and social relations are not prior to or determining of cultural ones; they are themselves fields of cultural practice and cultural production’.<sup>57</sup> In other words, the representations of the British monarchy in wartime reflected not only the



actions of the royal family and the court but also a collective belief system of meanings that were commonly held about monarchy, including by royals themselves. Behaviour was a product of cultural beliefs and also constituent of them. The study of monarchism here is further inspired by Reinhart Koselleck's pioneering idea of *Begriffsgeschichte*, which encourages historians to explore the history of concepts and their past understanding.<sup>58</sup> It also draws upon the history of emotions – how emotional attachments to the monarchy contributed to individual behaviours: as Daniela Saxer puts it: 'History contributes studies about emotional regimes and ideals that trace long-term historical changes in emotions as well as historically distinct configurations of emotional expression and emotional agency in specific social contexts.'<sup>59</sup> The monarchy is a good example of a form of social 'emotional expression' during the Great War.

Obviously, in an era before public opinion surveys, investigating the cultural meanings of the monarchy raises methodological problems. The source base for this period is skewed towards elites, who were more literate and more powerful in the public sphere; it is difficult to assess how representative they were of broader public attitudes. Moreover, as Andrzej Olechnowicz has pointed out, the existing historiography on the British monarchy overwhelmingly adopts a 'top-down' approach; 'ordinary people's perspectives' have been overlooked.<sup>60</sup> Press reports in the Great War also largely followed a deferential code: their value lies principally in analysing them to see what discourses they were presenting to the public about the monarchy and monarchism. They often operated out of the very cultural constraints of those monarchist beliefs that they also present. Some pro-monarchy stories were also 'planted' by elite figures: for example, Walter Lawrence, the commissioner for wounded and sick Indian soldiers in France and England, 1914–18, wrote an anonymous article praising the queen in *The Indiaman* in July 1915 and was thanked by the king's Private Secretary.<sup>61</sup>

Yet newspapers should not be dismissed as simply official mouthpieces either. Lothar Reinermann in his study found that 'interventions by British government or court officials into newspaper politics were very rare indeed. [...] Freedom of the press was regarded as too fundamental a part of the British way of life.'<sup>62</sup> For the new tabloid press, which 'revolutionized the British journalistic scene in the late nineteenth century', notably the right-wing *Daily Mail*, founded in 1896, the purpose was 'emotionalizing its readership', and presenting particular emotional languages around monarchy was pivotal to this.<sup>63</sup> The press was thus a key force in determining understandings of monarchy. Human interest, sentimental tales of the royals in the Great War sold, something that provides us with insights into what the public liked to read, as much as about how the monarchy wanted to be portrayed. As Catriona Pennell points out, newspapers not only sought to influence public opinion, but also to record and mirror it in order to increase their readership and

financially survive.<sup>64</sup> Press sources often reveal popular hegemonic discourses: what was considered acceptable and normative in wartime culture.

Yet the monarchy was also one of what James Joll termed the ‘unspoken assumptions’ of the 1914–18 British world, which, like most of Europe, was influenced by older honour cultures, not always overtly clarified or explained in written sources.<sup>65</sup> As historian Maarten Van Genderachter explains: ‘when searching for sources that go “beyond” the official rhetoric’, historians are ‘likely to be confronted with heuristic problems. Documents in which ordinary citizens themselves talk directly to or about “their” royal family are not that widespread.’<sup>66</sup> Even when written sources by ordinary people refer to monarchy, there is ‘always an influence of the hegemonic public transcript’, what James C. Scott describes as ‘the way in which the subordinate publicly address the dominant’.<sup>67</sup> This is particularly the case in any letters from ordinary people which have survived in the Royal Archives, which often make appeals ‘that remain within the official discourse of deference’.<sup>68</sup> To what extent such sources reflect the authors’ actual individual attitudes beyond standard dominant cultural norms is thus difficult to assess. And as Andrzej Olechnowicz points out, there are questions about how representative such letters are of broader society.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, are they merely ‘public transcripts’, what Scott terms open interactions ‘between subordinates and those who dominate’ that reflect back the ‘self-portrait of dominant elites as they would have themselves seen’?<sup>70</sup> Can such letters contain ‘hidden transcripts’ – ‘low-profile forms of resistance’ couched in deferential cultural norms?<sup>71</sup> Any reading of such sources requires being alert to these issues. Nevertheless, this study considers that written sources on the monarchy by ordinary people, when analysed carefully, can help us understand personal attitudes and beliefs as well as collective norms.

Moreover, the fact that ordinary people wrote to the monarch is, in itself, revealing. As George V’s official biographer Harold Nicolson states, the king received large numbers of letters from ordinary people during the war, which he usually instructed his secretaries to pass on to the government department concerned:

the King was deluged by a flood of private correspondence. His loyal subjects appear to have regarded him both as the arbiter of justice and the vehicle of bright ideas. He would receive letters, from responsible as well as irresponsible quarters, discoursing upon such varied themes as the administration of the National Relief Fund, the bad relations existing between the Red Cross and the Royal Army Medical Corps, the alleged pro-German utterances of the Head Master of Eton, [. . .] the visits of society ladies and other tourists to Head Quarters in France [. . .].<sup>72</sup>

Queen Mary also received letters from the public.<sup>73</sup> It remains unclear how much of this material has survived. Where it has been possible to consult, it provides real insight into the monarchist values of the period.