

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING... GEORGE

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Abstract: *The paper aims to investigate the life and reign of King George VI as a cultural personality. Firstly, I will look at the personal aspect. Destined for life as a Prince, he was marred from early childhood by a terrible stammer, thus being regarded with pity by his subjects. However, soon after the death of his father, Prince Albert was crowned King. Secondly, historically speaking, the prospects of WWII were already looming in the horizon and the British Monarchy needed a trustworthy King. That was when his figure stepped into the light and he became symbol of British resistance.*

Key words: *abdication, monarch, public servant, reign, stammer*

1. Introduction

This paper sets out to highlight the life of a monarch, who showed remarkable behaviour during dire times for Britain. King George VI turned out to be synonymous with British resistance, dedicating his life to the Survival of the monarchy and Britain itself. The subject of many documentaries and movies, George VI has its meritorious place in the gallery of British icons.

In every Royal Family, one must produce two heirs – the heir and the spare – in case something should happen to the first born, in order for the blood line to be preserved. This is the case of Prince Albert, born on the 15th December 1895 as the second son of King George V and his wife, Mary of Teck.

A life marred by his proverbial stammer, a short career in the active service of the British Navy and a life spent in the shadow of his socialite brother, Prince David, ascertained the fact that Albert was closer to his father, supporting him in his duties as King.

Although he did not want the throne, he committed to serving the nation during the dark hours of WWII, where his diplomacy and sensible nature made him a charismatic figure among his subjects and the political class.

On the foreign scene, India gained its independence and the British Empire crumbled, thus resulting the Commonwealth. The toll the stress of the war and the smoking took on the King's health were unforgivable, and he perished very early (1952). However, the sense of public duty and the dedication to the nation that the King showed inevitably left a mark on his successor, Elizabeth II's approach to the monarchy.

2. Personal Life

According to the biography written by Bradford, the family tree in which Bertie was born was dominated by Royal figures. A great-grandson to Queen Victoria, the grandmother of Europe, Prince Albert was related to the German Emperor, the Tsar of Russia and the Kings of Spain, Portugal, Belgium, Bulgaria and Romania, as well as the royal families of Greece and Denmark, through his grandmother, Alexandra. This would later jeopardize the relations between cousins, especially with the outbreak of WWII.

Somehow despite the tradition of the times, the royal couple spent quite a lot of time with their children. However, they were relatively unable to comprehend the ludic behaviour of their early age, expecting them to act like adults in their presence. One thing to be noted is that,

in those times, children were presented to their parents in strictly regulated intervals. Thus, David, Albert and Mary grew up in a room at York Cottage, called the Day Nursery and slept together in the Night one. They were often neglected and ill-treated by cruel nannies, one that fed Prince Albert on a bumpy ride and therefore caused a stomach problem to the future King.

The nature of the commitments the parents had to pursue did not help them in raising their children. As a matter of fact, they did not even understand the way of children and, as a result, were unsuccessful in showing love to them. The children were mostly in the company of their mother and, when their father was away, “she was a different human being” (Bradford 2011: 28), reading stories to them about the history of the royal family, always laughing and joking. This may have stemmed from the family – as George V is quoted “I am damned well going to see to it that my children are frightened of me” (Bradford 2011:30).

The summer of 1902 represented a breakaway from the past, as both David and Bertie were moved to Frogmore, near Windsor Castle and placed under tutelage. This was synonymous with freedom, as the increased space of the house gave way to playful afternoons and a general feeling of joy (Bradford 2011: 36). However, it was not to last, as, at the end of summer, they were sent back to York Cottage. Unnoticed again, as his sister, Mary was his father’s preferred child, and continuously scolded by the stern father, Albert develops the stammer which will haunt him for the rest of his life. On the other hand, as they grew up into teenage years, the conflictual nature of their relationship was more and more difficult to manage, until Prince David was sent to the Royal Naval College in Osborne in 1907 (Bradford 2011:52).

Another issue in their early lives was an epidemic at Dartmouth Naval College in 1911, which Bertie had joined two years earlier himself. The mumps and measles epidemic may have caused procreation problems that is speculated to have affected Edward, as noticed by Bradford (2011: 59). Details of the latter’s active sexual life and public appearances that showed signs of a gland problem may have been relevant for the Prince’s knowledge of his own sterility.

As the differences started to be noticed, it was obvious that the tutors would emphasize the qualities of the heir. This went on to the extent that a contemporary recorded this comparison as “an ugly duckling and a cock pheasant” (Bradford 2011: 63). One area where Albert would outshine his predestined brother would be individual sports and shooting. It was the latter that drew him close to his father.

1912 sees Bertie return to Dartmouth, while David is in Oxford, at the Magdalen College. A troubled time for the monarchies around Europe, with an attempt at the life of the King of Italy and the successful assassination of the King of Greece, in 1913, which made the young Prince aware of the fragile position of the royals at the dawn of WWI. It is an important moment, as, on the occasion of the first dive in the submarine along with his father, King George V, he meets a prominent figure in his later life, the First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, with whom he will develop a close collaboration and friendship during WWII, as mentioned in the biography written by Sarah Bradford (2011:69).

The last part of his naval training was spent on the Cumberland, on which he embarked for a six-month tour of the empire. This coincides with his first public appearance overseas, where he delivers his first speech at the Kingston Yacht Club in Jamaica, though very poorly because of his stutter (Bradford 2011:70). This was also the moment he showed his wonder at the way a public figure is perceived, as he was observed and followed constantly, causing him a discomfort.

Serving in the Navy is where he is found at the outbreak of WWI and yet he immediately suffers from appendicitis and is sent to recover at Sandringham and then back to the War Office at the Admiralty (Bradford 2011: 80) and by 1915 he is declared unfit for a return to the ship due to a stomach ulcer. This, added to a riding accident suffered by the King in France while inspecting the flying troops were enough to make sure that the father-son ties would get even

closer. In a constant spell of in-and-out treatment time, by July 1917, Prince Albert concluded that he was not fit for sea service. A brief spell in the Air Force put an end to his short, 5-year spell in the Service. However, this very experience will serve him well in guiding the nation through WWII.

In the meantime, a historic decision is made – King George V decided to change the name of the royal family to Windsor, because the Saxe-Coburg and Gotha sounded too Germanic. Harold Nicholson, the King's official biographer cited in Bradford (2001: 84) claims that their previous name was uncertain even to the family. It is an important moment in the life of the Royals, as even Prince Louis (known as Uncle Dickie to the family and a mentor to King Charles III and Uncle to Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh) was named Lord Mountbatten in what was an attempt to Anglicize the German heritage of their origins.

The end of WWI gave way to a new reality, as the monarchies in Austria, Germany and Russia had come to an end, this all culminating with the assassination of the Tsar and his family and the triumph of the Bolshevik Revolution. Thus, the perspective of the survival of the British Crown was all to play for. On the internal front, a rebellion in South Africa in 1914, followed by the uprising in Ireland in 1916 and the massacre of Amritsar in India in 1919 were painting up a gloomy perspective for the future (2011:102).

The spectre of Bolshevism rising especially in the Labour Party was a reality and the fears the King had stemmed from a dire reality Europe was facing. It was a good time to sell the image of the monarchy and the princes had a central role – if David was on some tours overseas, Albert would dedicate himself to the industry, becoming the first president of Industrial Welfare Society, and, upon being made Duke of York in 1920, did his best to secure the fundings.

On the front of their own education, Prince Albert and Prince Henry were sent to Cambridge to complete their education. Bertie went to Trinity College. Not living on the camp, they did not have a real opportunity to make acquaintance with the undergraduates and their only friend was Lord Louis Mountbatten, their cousin. (Bradford 2011:112) There, he showed deep interest in the Constitution, good knowledge which will later on be observed by Winston Churchill himself.

As far as his romantic inclinations were concerned, it is important to say that both brothers were deprived of male friends who were close in age to them – as a result, they sought refuge in friendships with females. For Prince Albert, Bradford (2011:128-133) remembers:

- Actress Phyllis Monkman, a star of the 1920s British Theatre, who shared a dinner invitation with the Prince
- Lady Maureen Vane-Tempest-Stewart, daughter of the 7th Marquee of Londonderry, who got married in 1920
- Lady Elizabeth Bowes-Lyons, the youngest daughter of the 14th Earl of Strathmore and owner of the Glamis Castle.

After two rejected marriage proposals, they eventually married at Westminster Abbey, venue that would host the first royal marriage in 500 years, Elizabeth Bowes-Lyons being the first commoner to marry into the Royal Family (2011:141).

3. The King and The War. Relationship with Churchill

The moment the War broke out, the political situation in Britain was complicated – and that was mainly because Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain failed to see the strength and shrewd enemy embodied by Hitler. To the last moment, he thought that he would have the upper hand and manage to convince the Führer to reconsider his position, while the latter was invading France. The King even wanted to send a letter to the Führer and the Emperor of Japan but he was turned down by the Prime Minister (Logue & Conradi 2018:37).

The obvious choice for replacing the outgoing Chamberlain was Lord Halifax, as Weisbrode is sure that the former was to the King's liking – an aristocrat who was a former Viceroy of India and the embodiment of a worthy statesman (2015:2). A foreign secretary, he was already associated in the public's opinion with Chamberlain. Besides, he was reluctant to taking the position and was backing Churchill already.

From the very beginning, Churchill, whose ancestry included the Duke of Marlborough (John Churchill), was regarded, according to Weisbrode, as the "Yankee mongrel", as his mother was American (2015:12). With both receiving a military education, as Churchill was at Sandhurst, it was inevitable that a strong bond would be formed.

The decade to come was marked by two major events – it started with an economic crisis and ended with WWII. The appeasement tried by Prime Minister Chamberlain and the discourse on collective security were in contrast with Churchill's vision of Nazi politics. Harold Nicholson is quoted saying that Churchill could have had a clearer vision on the events to come, regarding the weakness of the British Army and politics in response to Hitler. Although the King and the then-Prime-Minister, Chamberlain hoped until the last minute for peace, on 1st September 1939, Hitler invaded Poland, starting WWII. As Weisbrode puts it, in the end, a 'mediocre' monarch and an 'exceptional' commoner got to lead the nation during its finest hour (2015:60).

Character wise, the two personalities had distinct, if not totally opposing personalities – Churchill was shift, ill-humoured and sometimes hated by his contemporaries for his blunt sincerity. The King, on the other hand, was acquainted, though not directly with Churchill, but was so neutral, that no one could hate him. In his royal position, he could only consult and support, but never directly be involved in the actual matters of state.

The so-called Tuesday picnics between Churchill and the King were often consumed without any servants being present. The matter that was mostly impressive to the Prime Minister was the King's dedication to his duty and his thoroughness in reading the documents presented to him. Overall, the relationship functioned pretty well, as Churchill was as Weisbrode says a selective listener and the King - selective talker (2015:86).

Some similarities between the two statesmen can be noticed, as they both shared an early stammer, an easy-to-see eye-hand coordination, being extremely gifted at sports, even though Churchill was already in his 60s. Furthermore, they also had an extreme care for details, as Churchill is constantly depicted by his contemporaries while dictating letters and telegrams. On the other hand, when found alone, they usually had a tendency to introspection and silence, which could not be bothered and was altered with periods of intense excitability, especially during the war.

The moment that brought them closer together was the evacuation at Dunkirk – it is this precise instance that gave way to their weekly lunches. The King himself, according to Weisbrode confesses in one of the letters to his mother that "we are beginning to understand each other" (2015: 117). Churchill, on his side, praised the Royal couple the same, as he compared them to what would have been under Edward VIII.

As far as the relationship with the U.S.A. is concerned, the Royal couple had an important role to play, as in 1939, they toured around it and Canada, being the first monarchs to do so after the Americans achieved their independence from the Crown. This was just enough to spur the former out of their isolationism.

4. The King and his stammer. Relationship with Logue

Logue was an Australian speech therapist in what may be called the early days of this kind of approach, which meant a combination of oratory and amateur dramatics, according to Logue and Conradi (2018: 10). He did not possess any certificate that could attest to his craft,

but was successful amongst others with a journalist called Keith Murdoch, the father of Rupert, the media tycoon.

The first encounter in Harley Street in 1926 was arranged by Lord Stamfordham, a Royal equerry – the purpose was to help the Duke of York, as he and his wife were to embark on a tour of Australia and New Zealand which would require a lot of public speaking. Although his techniques were not medically acknowledged, they included conscious breathing exercises and a lot of tongue-twisters, that contributed to the monarch's speech flow. Their existence will be closely intertwined with that of the Royal Family.

The most of their relationship is rendered through Myrtle, Logue wife's diary, as she quotes that, at the beginning of the war "life seems suspended" (Logue & Conradi 2018:33). The cultural life is on a lockdown, the petrol is rationed and, for the time being, there seemed to be no air raid, in what was called the Sitzkrieg (the sitting war) or, as Winston Churchill described it – The Twilight War.

On his first Empire Day speech on May 24, the King's hair seemed grayer on the temples, as Logue remembers it. However, they worked together on the speech, which was rendered to have been a success by the British press that hailed "The King has finally cured his speech defect". Although the King thoroughly disliked the broadcasts, "how I hate broadcasting" (Logue & Conradi 2018: 80) and tried not to deliver them regularly, unlike his father, there was a constant need to remind the nation that the King was there and he was commiserating.

Inside information from the diary and historical records by Harold Nicholson also claim that the King himself would have offered his services to the British resistance if the country had been invaded by the Nazis and that the Queen herself had learnt how to fire a revolver, for she "would not go down like the others" (Logue & Conradi 2018:91). At the same time, the castle was refuge to Queen Wilhelmina of Holland and King Haakon of Norway.

After the Blitz started, on September 7, 1940, "the King was in his element when cultivating the public side of the monarchy" (Logue & Conradi 2018:107), as he toured the bombed areas alongside his wife. An important thing to mention, however, is that she avoided being dressed in military clothes in public. Nevertheless, her contribution such public outings was immense. The very attack on Buckingham strengthened the perception of the monarchy in the eyes of the Londoners and across the country.

An important moment happened during the speech the King delivered on 23 September 1940, when, although admitting that "The walls of London may be battered but the spirit of the Londoner stands resolute and undismayed" (Logue & Conradi 2018:118), he announced the creation of a personal distinction, namely the George Cross and Medal, that would be awarded to a wider distribution. It was followed by a radio address from the Princesses on BBC Children's Hour, a 5-minute broadcast that is considered the first to be delivered by the future Queen Elizabeth.

On 25 August 1942, a personal tragedy occurs to the King, as his younger brother, George, the Duke of Kent, is killed in an airplane crash, aged 40, alongside ten other people (Logue & Conradi 2018: 148). When the news broke down, the Royals were expecting to learn about the death of Queen Mary, aged 75 at the time. The news was also devastating for the late Prince's wife, Marina, and their three children. The King was terribly shaken by the funeral. In the meantime, Myrtle Logue was helping with lunches by working for the Australian House, while their three sons were serving in different positions for the British Army.

In 1943, the King, at the request of Churchill, embarked on a tour of North Africa, to visit his troops. Harold MacMillan, the future considered it 'a tremendous success' (Logue & Conradi 2018: 169). The King met the generals, Montgomery being the most noted, as well as De Gaulle and Eisenhower, in Algiers. Upon his return, he promoted Logue to Commander of the Victorian Order, a distinction given for personal services to the monarch.

The Christmas break of 1943 also coincided with the presence of Prince Philip of Greece and Denmark. At the time, he was 18 and, according to George VI's Royal biographer, that was the moment when Elizabeth fell in love with him. An important mention should be given to the fact that they were third cousins through Queen Victoria.

5. Conclusions

All in all, although inheriting the Crown during the most troubled of times, George VI showed composure and determination in order to learn the ropes of such a complex position. Nevertheless, the consuming nature of being a King within the frame of political changes took its toll way too early.

Unconditionally supported by a woman not having Royal blood, but an aristocratic descent, George Windsor also had a model family life, successfully combining his duties as a monarch with those of a husband and father, thing constantly mentioned by his daughter Elizabeth II during her reign.

The purpose of this paper was to cast some light, maybe from a distinct perspective, on a prominent figure of the Royal House and of the world. We look up to him today and rightfully consider him a cultural and political icon of Britishness.

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