



*George VI's 1939 Royal Tour of
Canada: Context and the
Constitution*

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Abstract: Canada has had a long tradition of tours by members of the royal family, beginning with the 1860 visit of the Prince of Wales. But George VI's 1939 royal tour of Canada was the first by a reigning British monarch, and its real significance can only be fully understood in context. World events, most notably the looming threat from Hitler's Germany, made Canada's attachment to the Commonwealth vitally important. Canada's Prime Minister Mackenzie King revered the Crown but was a prickly Canadian nationalist who was loath to make any defence commitments to the mother country. The institution of the Crown had weathered a series of crises in the period preceding the visit: the 1931 Statute of Westminster marked a fundamental change in the Crown's relationship to the dominion governments, and the 1936 abdication sullied the sovereign's image. The 1939 visit also raised the practical issue of how the duties of the Crown ought to be fulfilled when both the king and his dominion representative were present in the dominion. The 1939 visit represented a vital test of the institution of the Crown, and the true import of the five-week tour must be assessed in light of its political, foreign policy, and constitutional significance.

Keywords: Canada, Royal tour, George VI, William Lyon Mackenzie King

eorge VI's 1939 royal tour of Canada—the first by a reigning British monarch—has been thoroughly commemorated. It was captured on film, complete with breathless narration of each event and the rapturous crowds that turned out to cheer the king and queen.¹ It has also been the subject of scrutiny in popular and scholarly works.² By every measure, the five-week tour was a resounding success. The tour offers considerable fodder for cultural historians and other observers who might wish to analyse representations of royalty and loyalty in the Dominion. For example, it has been claimed that the now popular tradition of the “walkabout” originated in Ottawa in May 1939, when Queen Elizabeth impulsively told the governor general, Lord Tweedsmuir, that “she must go down among the

¹ *The Royal Visit*, National Film Board of Canada, 1939.

² The official history is Gustave Lanctot, *The Royal Tour of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth in Canada and the United States of America, 1939* (Toronto: E. P. Taylor Foundation, 1964); other works include Arthur Bousfield, *Royal Spring: The Royal Tour of 1939 and the Queen Mother in Canada* (Toronto: Dundurn, 1989); Tom MacDonnell, *Daylight Upon Magic: The Royal Tour of Canada, 1939* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1989); J. William Galbraith, “Fiftieth Anniversary of the 1939 Royal Visit,” *Canadian Parliamentary Review* 12, no. 3 (Autumn 1989): 7-11; Charles V. Reed, *Royal Tourists, Colonial Subjects, and the Making of the British World, 1860-1911* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016); Simon Potter, “The BBC, the CBC, and the 1939 Royal Tour of Canada,” *Social and Cultural History* 3, no. 4 (2006): 424-444; and Mary Vipond, “The Royal Tour of 1939 as a Media Event,” *Canadian Journal of Communication* 35, no. 1 (2010): 149-172. My thanks are due to the librarians of University of the Fraser Valley, especially Paula Brennan of interlibrary loans.

troops, meaning the six or seven thousand veterans.” The royal party was “simply swallowed up,” Tweedsmuir enthused in a letter to his sister: “The police could not get near us.”³

But the tour had special importance that went beyond the iconic cultural moments, and its full import can only be understood in light of its political, foreign policy, and constitutional significance. As is so often the case when we seek historical understanding, context is everything. David Cannadine notes that public displays involving the monarchy cannot be fully analysed by means of theoretical sociological frameworks, or by comparing formulaic ritual elements: “[I]n order to rediscover the ‘meaning’ of royal ritual during the modern period, it is necessary to relate it to the specific social, political, economic and cultural milieu within which it was actually performed.”⁴ The tour carried enormous freight. Myriad circumstances combined to make it important; the timing for the tour was especially propitious, and the stakes for its success were very high. World events made Canada’s continued allegiance to the Commonwealth a matter of genuine urgency. In addition, more attention than usual had been focused on the Crown in the years immediately preceding; the 1936 abdication in particular carried the risk of real damage to the institution. The royal visitors faced a daunting prospect in encouraging the maintenance of a strong sovereign tie in the empire’s oldest dominion. George VI and Queen Elizabeth were as yet unproven, the 1937 coronation still a fresh memory. But “Canada made us,” the Queen later observed.⁵ The tour helped to cement Canadian loyalties to the Commonwealth immediately before the outbreak of the Second World War, built bridges with Canada’s mercurial prime minister, and, perhaps most enduringly, set out a formula to make manifest the ambiguous constitutional position of the Crown in Canada.

Royal Tour Traditions

While no reigning monarch had yet visited Canada, there was a long tradition of royal tours to draw upon. Queen Victoria’s only imperial travels had been to Ireland, but Prince Albert, Charles V. Reed argues, “willingly and enthusiastically” endorsed the idea of imperial tours by his sons.⁶ The Prince Consort marvelled in 1860 that the Prince of Wales (later Edward VII) was inaugurating Montreal’s Victoria Bridge just as his younger brother, sixteen-year-old Prince Alfred, was laying the foundation stone of the breakwater at Cape Town’s harbour. “What future hopes!” Prince Albert enthused, looking to the “distant and rising countries who recognise in the British Crown, and their allegiance to it, their supreme bond of union with the mother country and each other.”⁷ The Prince of Wales’s visit at the age of twenty-three was only the first among numerous visits to Canada made by members of the royal family, and these were almost uniformly regarded as successful, although, perhaps predictably, there was a dreary sameness to the ritualistic entertainments organized by various towns. A Fredericton, New Brunswick, newspaper suspected that a serious conspiracy was

³ Lord Tweedsmuir, as quoted in William Buchan, *John Buchan: A Memoir* (Toronto: Griffin House, 1982), 236.

⁴ David Cannadine, “The Context, Performance and Meaning of Ritual: The British Monarchy and the ‘Invention of Tradition’, c. 1820-1977,” in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 105.

⁵ As quoted in Carolyn Harris, “1939 Royal Tour,” *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, accessed 26 March 2017, <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/1939-royal-tour/>.

⁶ Reed, *Royal Tourists*, 6-9.

⁷ Prince Albert, toast at Trinity House, June 1860, as quoted in Reed, *Royal Tourists*, 9.

afoot to bore the Prince to death.⁸

The Prince also spent a busy month in the United States, travelling some 2,600 miles under the unconvincing alias of “Lord Renfrew,” one of his lesser titles. Journalists remarked upon the enthusiasm with which the Prince was greeted, the inevitable interest his visit provoked among young ladies, and the democratic character of his interactions with American well-wishers whose “wonderfully free and easy” manners the Prince tactfully praised.⁹ At a White House levee, men chewed tobacco and “sauntered into the room with their hands in their pockets,” one reporter observed.¹⁰ Others were attuned to the diplomatic dividends the tour might generate. The American Civil War, which broke out six months after the prince’s tour, ushered in a new era of dangerous strain in Anglo-American relations, but in the period preceding, the trend had been one of growing amity, including an 1854 reciprocity deal between the British North American colonies and the United States. The New York *Herald* observed that the “graver import of the visit” was to secure “more firmly ... the general interest of the two great sections of the Anglo-Saxon race.”¹¹

On the British North American leg of the tour, the only significant contretemps occurred over displays of “loyalty” organized by the controversial Orange Order;¹² the royal party altered plans to avoid becoming embroiled in sectarian tensions and the spurned organization vented its disappointment with a petition to Queen Victoria, an awkward episode historian Ian Radforth characterizes as “public ceremony gone completely awry.”¹³ This embarrassment pales in comparison to the humiliation of Australia’s first attempt at a royal visit. In 1868, the then twenty-three-year old Prince Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh, visiting New South Wales, was shot and wounded by a would-be assassin who claimed Fenian affiliations.

Canada enjoyed regular visits by other members of the royal family, and some even filled the vice regal role on occasion. Between 1878 and 1883, the Marquess of Lorne, Queen Victoria’s son-in-law, served as governor general, although Canadians who had looked forward to a royal court at government house found the frequent long absences of Princess Louise disappointing.¹⁴ Other members of the royal family visited Canada during Lorne’s vice regal term. Prince Arthur, Duke of Connaught, who had earlier travelled to Canada during his military service, followed in his brother-in-law’s footsteps and served as governor general between 1911 and 1916. This episodic royal presence undoubtedly helped to keep the imperial connection in good repair, and to kindle the flame of monarchy in Canada.

George V was the first reigning British monarch to visit the overseas empire. Charles

⁸ As Carolyn Harris’s article in this special issue points out, the very first British royal to visit Canada was probably the future William IV, who visited on naval service in the late eighteenth century. Ian Radforth, *Royal Spectacle: the 1860 Visit of the Prince of Wales to Canada and the United States* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 130. See also Bonnie Huskins, “‘A tale of two cities’: Boosterism and the imagination of community during the visit of the Prince of Wales to Saint John and Halifax in 1860,” *Urban History Review* 28 (October 1999): 31-46.

⁹ As quoted in Radforth, *Royal Spectacle*, 320.

¹⁰ Radforth, *Royal Spectacle*, 321.

¹¹ As quoted in Radforth, *Royal Spectacle*, 330.

¹² Founded in Ulster in the 1790s, the Orange Order was transplanted to British North America with Protestant immigrants from Ireland. Ontario and New Brunswick contained especially active Orange lodges from the early nineteenth century, and members exercised considerable political and economic clout. The order emphasised loyalty to the Crown and the Protestant faith, but were a perennial source of sectarian conflict.

¹³ Radforth, *Royal Spectacle*, 165, 202.

¹⁴ Robert M. Stamp, *Royal Rebels: Princess Louise and the Marquis of Lorne* (Toronto: Dundurn, 1988).

V. Reed remarks upon the very changed circumstances and understanding of empire that surrounded George V's 1911 accession to the throne. The June 1911 coronation was, he observes, "celebrated as a Festival of Empire" and was followed by a durbar in Delhi that same year.¹⁵ George V was already a seasoned imperial traveller before his reign; in 1901, the then Duke and Duchess of Cornwall and York made what Phillip Buckner describes as "the longest and perhaps the most expensive official tour ever taken by members of the British royal family," travelling to Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and South Africa, with brief stops at Gibraltar, Malta, Aden, Ceylon, Singapore, and Mauritius, a tour that lasted almost eight months.¹⁶ Reed underlines the British policy objectives the tour was meant to serve; Secretary of State for the Colonies Joseph Chamberlain "conceived of the tour as an opportunity to thank the colonies for their service in the South African War and to forward his own ideas about imperial unity."¹⁷ At a time when the rising power of the United States, and especially a unified and worrisomely bellicose Germany, upset the traditional balance of power, Britain sought to revitalize ties with members of the empire who had long been viewed with indifference. The colonies in this era, Donald Creighton wryly observed, were "haled forth, blinking, into the sunshine of Britannic favour."¹⁸ The Queen eventually agreed to the tour a few months before her death, although her successor, Edward VII, had to be convinced of the merits of the plan in turn. When George V acceded to the throne in 1911, he, more than either his grandmother or father, had "a clear sense of his role as an imperial monarch," and did much to advocate imperial unity and defence.¹⁹

Constitutional context

By the time of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth's 1939 tour of Canada, very significant changes had occurred within the empire, and the visit would be a demonstrable sign of the monarch's commitment to his now explicitly autonomous dominions. Canada's governor general, Lord Tweedsmuir, would have to "translate the Statute of Westminster into the actualities of a tour."²⁰ This state of autonomy had come about incrementally, as was most often the case in Britain's constitutional development, and how it would manifest itself in the monarch's role was yet to be fully worked out.

Peter Marshall notes that while the Great War strengthened common bonds, it also "deepened the Dominions' sense of national separateness" and distinctiveness, both in the Commonwealth and the international sphere. He notes the significance of Britain's 1925 creation of a separate Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, a clear symbol that "dealing with the Dominions was essentially a diplomatic task ... regarded as ... wholly different in

¹⁵ Reed, *Royal Tourists*, 24. See also: Cannadine, "The Context, Performance and Meaning of Ritual," 125.

¹⁶ Phillip Buckner, "The Royal Tour of 1901 and the Construction of an Imperial Identity in South Africa," *South African Historical Journal* 41 (November 1999): 324-348. See also: Joseph Pope, *The Tour of Their Royal Highnesses the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall and York Through the Dominion of Canada in the Year 1901* (Ottawa: S. E. Dawson, King's Printer, 1903).

¹⁷ Reed, *Royal Tourists*, 25.

¹⁸ Donald Creighton, "The Victorians and the Empire," *Canadian Historical Review* 19 (June 1938): 151.

¹⁹ Reed, *Royal Tourists*, 28-27.

²⁰ J. A. Smith as quoted in Galbraith, "Fiftieth Anniversary of the 1939 Royal Visit," 8.

character from the administration of the Dependent Empire.”²¹

There was not precisely an inexorable move toward clearer definition of the changed relationship between Britain and the dominions, but the topic was taken up by a succession of Imperial conferences. “[A]s so often in British history, theory proved less appealing than an ad hoc muddle,” Margaret MacMillan notes. Canada’s Prime Minister Robert Borden, at the 1917 Imperial War Conference, advocated a readjustment of the constitutional relations of the Empire, “based upon a full recognition of the dominions as autonomous nations of an Imperial Commonwealth.”²² The 1917 conference passed a resolution declaring that the readjustment of the component parts of the Empire was too important to be dealt with during the Great War, but that there should be a special conference to undertake such a readjustment after the peace. It “should be based upon a full recognition of the Dominions as autonomous nations of an Imperial Commonwealth ... [and] should recognise [their] right to an adequate voice in foreign policy and in foreign relations.” As well, it should provide a mechanism for consultation on common concerns. Some were hesitant to carry this out. David Lloyd George, in a 1921 House of Commons speech, feared it was “difficult and dangerous to give a definition” of Dominion status, and said that the delegates to that year’s Imperial Conference had indeed been anxious to avoid a rigid definition; it was “not the way of the British constitution.”²³

Ultimately, the 1926 Imperial Conference did yield a definition. The formula arrived at by Arthur Balfour, British cabinet minister and former prime minister, characterized the Dominions as “autonomous Communities within the British Empire,” and won praise for its encapsulation of this ambiguous relationship. Canada’s Prime Minister Mackenzie King recognized that the report, in common with other great charters of freedom in British history, did not “introduce anything new or revolutionary.”²⁴ Instead, it was a statement of the agreed upon state to which the constitution had evolved.

The 1931 Statute of Westminster brought the Balfour Report into the realm of statute law. This was, in itself, controversial; K.C. Wheare noted that some British parliamentarians objected, not to the provisions of the Statute, but to the fact that it was written. Lord Buckmaster, during the House of Lords debate, feared a “grave mistake” was being made. “[T]he thing which has made this country grow is that it never has had a written Constitution of any sort or kind,” he insisted. This made it possible to adapt “without any serious mistake or disaster.”²⁵ The Statute described the Crown as “the symbol of the free association of the members of the British Commonwealth of Nations.”²⁶ Simon Potter explains that “many of

²¹ Peter Marshall, “The Balfour Formula and the Evolution of the Commonwealth,” *The Round Table* 90, no. 361 (September 2001): 542.

²² Margaret MacMillan, “Canada and the Origins of the Imperial War Cabinet,” in *Imperial Canada, 1867-1917*, ed. Colin Coates (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Centre of Canadian Studies, 1997), 64, 73.

²³ K. C. Wheare, *The Statute of Westminster and Dominion Status* (London: Oxford University Press, 1947), 21-22.

²⁴ Mackenzie King, as quoted in Marshall, “The Balfour Formula,” 546.

²⁵ Wheare, *The Statute of Westminster*, 5-6.

²⁶ *Statute of Westminster 1931*, 22 George V c.4 (UK),

<http://www.solon.org/Constitutions/Canada/English/StatuteofWestminster.html>. After the independence of India and Pakistan in 1947, the term “British” was dropped from the title of the Commonwealth. The 1949 London Declaration referred simply to “the Commonwealth.”

<https://web.archive.org/web/20120927031216/http://www.thecommonwealth.org/files/214257/FileName/TheLondonDeclaration1949.pdf> See also: BBC Profile, “The Commonwealth,” accessed 26 March 2017,

the underlying social, cultural, and economic links between Britain and the dominions seemed to be growing stronger in the wake of the First World War. A loosening of the constitutional bond was thus unobjectionable, because so many other connections seemed to be tying Britain and the dominions more closely together.”²⁷ The nations were “united by a common allegiance to the Crown,” a phrase that attributed a “symbolic quality to the Crown,” Peter Marshall observes.²⁸

The recognition of the changed status of the self-governing colonies contained in the Statute of Westminster brought a very fundamental shift in understandings about the nature of what was once considered an “indivisible” Crown.²⁹ In an earlier era, constitutional scholar Anne Twomey explains, “both the common law and statutory rules concerning the Crown became part of the law of the British colonies, including Australia, New Zealand and Canada.... [Britain’s] [c]onstitutional statutes ... applied to the colonies by paramount force” and could not be amended by laws enacted within the colony. Any such colonial legislation that “was repugnant to an Imperial law of paramount force was void.” The 1865 *Colonial Laws Validity Act* confirmed this common law doctrine in statute form.³⁰ It has been remarked that it might more accurately have been called the Colonial Laws *Invalidity Act*, insofar as the intended effect was to limit the legislative freedom of the colonies. The era 1926 to 1931 marked a watershed, a profound change to this idea of an indivisible Crown. The sovereign, when exercising powers with respect to a self-governing Dominion, acted on the advice of ministers responsible to the legislature of that Dominion. “This meant,” Twomey explains, “that there was a separate Crown of Australia, a Crown of New Zealand and a Crown of Canada.” The Crown “became divisible.” With the 1936 abdication of Edward VIII, for example, it was necessary for each Dominion to expressly declare their consent. Because of the different forms and timing of these enactments, Twomey notes, “there were different Kings in different parts of the Empire from 10-12 December 1936.”³¹

The Monarchy under scrutiny

The 1931 Statute of Westminster was only one in a steady series of developments in the 1930s that would heighten public attention to the Crown and increase the stakes attached to a successful tour in 1939. In August, 1931, George V proved to be the instrument through

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/country_profiles/1554175.stm.

²⁷ Potter, “The BBC, the CBC, and the 1939 Royal Tour of Canada,” 425.

²⁸ Marshall, “The Balfour Formula,” 547.

²⁹ An excellent explanation of the concept may be found in David E. Smith, *The Invisible Crown: The First Principle of Canadian Government* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 28-30.

³⁰ Anne Twomey, “Royal Succession, Abdication and Regency in the Realms,” paper presented at “The Crown in the 21st Century: Deference or Drift,” held at Government House, Victoria, British Columbia on 14 January 2016. My thanks are due to Professor Twomey who kindly provided a draft copy of the paper presented.

Twomey’s paper argues that Canada’s 2013 *Succession to the Throne Act*, which asserted that Canada did not have a law of succession and that whomever was the Sovereign of the United Kingdom was by definition also Sovereign of Canada, is at odds with Canada’s historical position, a “stark case of short-term political pragmatism taking priority over fundamental constitutional principle.” This paper has since been published as “Royal Succession, Abdication, and Regency in the Realms,” *The Crown in the 21st Century, Review of Constitutional Studies* 22, no. 1 (2017): 33-53.

³¹ Twomey, “Royal Succession,” 33-53.

whom a coalition “National government” was organized in Britain when the minority Labour government of Ramsay MacDonald was faced with a fiscal crisis and caught between the demands of Britain’s creditors and party colleagues, and trade unionists unwilling to accept harsh austerity measures.³² The King’s role in bringing together political antagonists demonstrated the discreet, behind-the-scenes constitutional role a sovereign might occasionally fulfil to ensure the continuity of stable government.

King George V began the tradition of radio broadcast Christmas messages in 1932. Mary Vipond notes that the king perfected a “friendly, intimate, personal” voice: “He came across not as an aloof superior speaking of abstractions like imperial unity but as a family man, sharing his Christmas joy with other families throughout the empire.” The Christmas speech was also broadcast in Canada.³³ George V’s 1935 silver jubilee, celebrating the twenty-fifth year of his reign, garnered further attention for the institution of the monarchy. Among other commemorations—concerts, banquets, thanksgiving services, and sporting events—a Jubilee medal was struck and awarded to 85,235 recipients, 7,500 of whom were Canadians.³⁴

The king’s death in January 1936 and the succession of Edward VIII brought a new level of media scrutiny, especially given the Prince of Wales’ celebrity image. In 1919, at age twenty-five, the Prince of Wales, the future Edward VIII, had toured Canada, capturing widespread acclaim. David Lloyd George mused that a visit by the popular prince to the countries of the Commonwealth “might do more to calm discord than half a dozen solemn Imperial Conferences.”³⁵ The press, Gordon Beadle explained, made him “a paragon of all manly virtues and held him up as a model for youth long after he ceased to be young.”³⁶ But this media attention carried considerable risks, and when reports of the new king’s attachment to the manifestly unsuitable twice-married Wallis Simpson grew increasingly hard to ignore, events began to spiral into a full-blown crisis for the monarchy. Beadle notes that Canada’s press coverage of Edward VIII’s romance and ultimate abdication was deeply unsympathetic to the king. Although Edward had offered to abdicate early in the crisis, Canadians, “were left with the impression that Edward’s proposed marriage had resulted in a dispute between the King and his Ministers in which the principle of Parliamentary supremacy was being challenged by a reckless and irresponsible Sovereign.” Beadle points to a “curious phenomenon” whereby Canada’s greater-than-ever autonomy made the nation “increasingly dependent upon the British Monarchy as a unifying force within the Commonwealth.”³⁷ Lady Tweedsmuir, the wife of Canada’s governor general, was in London as the Wallis Simpson crisis gained momentum. She wrote to her husband in Ottawa that she was “dreadfully sorry for you.... [I]n some ways Canada minds more than anyone, though Australia appears to be absolutely up on end. I feel a desperate sense of discomfort, misery and unhappiness.” Five days before the abdication was announced, she reported that “There is a feeling of things

³² Harold Nicolson, *King George the Fifth: His Life and Reign* (London: Constable, 1952), Chapter XXVII, “National Government, 1931.”

³³ Vipond, “The Royal Tour of 1939 as a Media Event,” 157.

³⁴ “King George V Silver Jubilee Medal (1935),” *Veterans’ Affairs Canada*, accessed 28 March 2017, <http://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/medals-decorations/details/73>.

³⁵ David Lloyd George, as quoted in Gordon Beadle, “Canada and the Abdication of Edward VIII,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 4, no. 3 (August 1969): 34.

³⁶ Beadle, “Canada and the Abdication of Edward VIII,” 35.

³⁷ Beadle, “Canada and the Abdication of Edward VIII,” 37, 44.

slipping and crumbling everywhere, and that the King has given a blow to monarchy from which it won't easily recover.... It is an awful mess.”³⁸ Press coverage became increasingly lurid, and vicious rumours circulated about Wallis Simpson's past sexual history. A letter to the editor of the Vancouver *Daily Province* labelled her a “harlot” and the “cast off of two men.”³⁹ Once the more pedestrian and less flashy George VI assumed the throne, Canada's press emphasized his moral virtues and family-centeredness. But the episode dealt a damaging blow to the image of the Crown, one that Edward's successor would have to work to overcome.

Prime Minister Mackenzie King and the Commonwealth Tie

Canada's Liberal prime minister during much of the period from the 1920s to the 1940s, William Lyon Mackenzie King, forms an important element in the 1939 royal tour story. King's ideas about the Commonwealth tie and the monarchy cannot be easily encapsulated, and the evidence suggests that British statesmen frequently felt uneasy about Canada's reliability as an ally while King led the government. The tour would offer the opportunity to both confirm the loyalties of the Canadian people and to win favour with Canada's prickly prime minister. King was “not a difficult man to flatter,” Canadian philosopher George Grant recalled.⁴⁰ The tour clearly played to King's vanity.

King had habitually sought intimacy with the prominent and the powerful, cultivating friendships with British aristocrats and world leaders. He formed a special bond with American President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, despite Eleanor Roosevelt's intense dislike of him. He told Roosevelt that he had dreamt Jesus wanted them to set an example of spiritual brotherhood for the world.⁴¹ King confided in another friend that the two statesmen discussed North American defence strategies while floating in the pool at Roosevelt's Warm Springs country home, “both stark naked except for little belly bands.”⁴²

Some of King's prominent friends shared his devotion to spiritualism. During an autumn 1934 visit to Europe, King spent time with Lady Aberdeen, whose recently deceased husband had once been Canada's governor general, and they compared notes about posthumous communications from Lord Aberdeen via automatic writing and séances. He found a less eager audience for such revelations among the Gladstone family. “I told them ... about having talked with Mr. Gladstone,” he recorded in his diary. “‘It is all very strange’ was Lord Gladstone's remark, it seemed to nonplus each of them a little & I wondered afterwards if I should have told them what I did, but something seemed to prompt me.”⁴³ In the autumn of 1936, King again went to Europe and met King Edward VIII and British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin. This 1936 trip was the real genesis of the 1939 tour: Edward VIII delighted

³⁸ Lady Tweedsmuir to “JB” (Lord Tweedsmuir), 4 and 6 December 1936, as quoted in William Buchan, *John Buchan: A Memoir* (Toronto: Griffin House, 1982), 222-223.

³⁹ Beadle, “Canada and the Abdication of Edward VIII,” 39.

⁴⁰ “In Bed with an Elephant,” National Film Board, 1986, directed by Kent Martin, https://www.nfb.ca/film/in_bed_with_elephant/.

⁴¹ “In Bed with an Elephant.”

⁴² Malcolm J. MacDonald, “King: the View from London,” in *Mackenzie King: Widening the Debate*, ed. John English and J. O. Stubbs (Toronto: Macmillan, 1977), 49.

⁴³ 29 Oct 1934, Mackenzie King Diary, as quoted in C. P. Stacey, *A Very Double Life: The Private World of Mackenzie King* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1976), 180.

King by proposing to come to Canada. King had floated the idea with Edward VIII's private secretary, implying that the event might divert attention from the sovereign's increasingly scrutinized relationship with Wallis Simpson. If the King made a tour of Canada and the rest of the empire, "people would completely forget the other," King speculated in his diary.⁴⁴ Shortly afterward, he recorded in his diary a spiritual communication with the dead King George V.⁴⁵ King, in fact, even hoped that a shared sense of being guided by fate might enable him to exert a positive influence on Adolf Hitler, and he visited Hitler while overseas for the 1937 Imperial Conference. King marvelled that "[Hitler's] speech three months ago that he was following his star of destiny just as a somnambulist walks in his sleep, showed how completely mystical he was." King felt a deep connection. Hitler's eyes, King later recorded, had "a liquid quality... which indicates keen perception and profound sympathy."⁴⁶

King revered the monarchy yet feared imperial encroachments upon Canadian autonomy. He was, Norman Hillmer observed, a "thoroughgoing monarchist." The 1937 Imperial Conference and coronation of George VI offered the opportunity for King "to drink in the pageantry and emotionalism of the coronation, ... to bask in the company of the great and the deference of his peers." The year was an especially auspicious one, King believed, as it was exactly one hundred years since his grandfather's unsuccessful rebellion in Upper Canada.⁴⁷ He had romanticized William Lyon Mackenzie's failed 1837 rebellion as a noble blow for the principle of responsible government, ignoring the inconvenient fact that Mackenzie had sought Upper Canada's annexation to the United States. "As I thought of the changes in 100 years ... there seemed to me to be poetic justice in the way all is working out at the completion of the perfect circle" King reflected.⁴⁸ Malcolm J. MacDonald, Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, was close to King, as was his father, British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald. King had a "pleasing although overdeveloped" sentimentality, MacDonald remembered, and the two had many conversations about Canada's relationship with Britain, an "abiding close partnership" for which King had genuine "zeal." At the same time, King was proud of Canada's status as a "recently graduated sovereign state." MacDonald observed that "Fond as he was of the old 'Mother Country,' ... there was in [King's] make-up a strong streak of suspicion of the intentions of the rulers of that pristine Imperial power." King could be "over-sensitive, over-cautious, [and] over-suspicious sometimes in his relations with others."⁴⁹ The diplomat Charles Ritchie also remarked on this apparent paradox—King's intense devotion to the royal family" coupled with a deep suspicion "that the British Government and Whitehall were going to try to draw us back to some kind of semi-colonial status. This was a real obsession with him."⁵⁰

⁴⁴ 26 October 1936, Mackenzie King Diary, as quoted in J. William Galbraith, *John Buchan: Model Governor General*. (Toronto: Dundurn, 2013), 146.

⁴⁵ 29 November 1936, Mackenzie King Diary, as quoted in Stacey, *A Very Double Life*, 186.

⁴⁶ Mackenzie King, as quoted in C. P. Stacey, "The Divine Mission: Mackenzie King and Hitler," *Canadian Historical Review* 61, no. 4 (December 1980), 504, 505.

⁴⁷ Norman Hillmer, "The Pursuit of Peace: Mackenzie King and the 1937 Imperial Conference," in *Mackenzie King: Widening the Debate*, ed. John English and J. O. Stubbs (Toronto: Macmillan, 1977), 150.

⁴⁸ 1 January 1937, King Diary, as quoted in Hillmer, "The Pursuit of Peace: Mackenzie King and the 1937 Imperial Conference," 149.

⁴⁹ MacDonald, "King: the View from London," 41, 44, 45.

⁵⁰ Charles Ritchie, "Reminiscences," *Canadian Issues* 1, no. 2 (Spring 1977): 34.

The most conspicuous example of King's ambivalence toward the imperial tie was his famous 1926 clash with the British-appointed governor general, Lord Byng, over Byng's refusal to grant him a dissolution of parliament to enable him to avoid a non-confidence vote. King saw the episode as a manifestation of British interference with Canadian self-government. When a customs department scandal had broken in June 1926, King's minority administration held a precarious grip on parliament. Byng's refusal of a dissolution—after repeated discussions with King reached an impasse—was motivated by the fact that elections had been held only eight months before and the opposition held more seats. King reluctantly resigned office, making his displeasure with the governor general public. The opposition failed to sustain office after Byng's controversial decision, making an election necessary after all, and King fought the election campaign around what he presented as heavy-handed imperial interference with Dominion politics, skilfully diverting attention from the customs department scandal. He refused to recognize that Byng was not acting as an imperial functionary in his insistence that his Canadian ministry be able to sustain the confidence of Canada's parliament. Lady Byng, in a letter to her friend the prominent novelist John Buchan, fumed: "What a scurvy cad Mr. K. is and always has been ... He has come out in his true colours as totally regardless of Empire, Crown and everything but his own 'place in the sun.'" His treatment of the governor general had been "disgusting beyond words."⁵¹

In the event, John Buchan, later Lord Tweedsmuir, proved to be one of Byng's later successors as governor general. Conservative R.B. Bennett had been prime minister at the time of the appointment, and when he courteously consulted King about selecting a new governor general in 1935, King insisted that he would oppose *any* appointment made before the next election, placing Bennett in an embarrassing predicament. With George V's private secretary pressing for urgent action, Bennett offered King complete freedom to name his choice. King had been acquainted with the accomplished Buchan through a mutual friend and greatly admired him. King was again prime minister by the time the newly ennobled Tweedsmuir arrived in Canada, and enthused that nothing would afford him more "comfort and satisfaction as that I shall have you at my side as a counsellor and friend [and that] our paths have been brought together through the guidance of Providence."⁵² Tweedsmuir was "patience itself" with Mackenzie King, the governor general's son recalled. King "was an odd mixture of hard, political shrewdness and an unappealing kind of sentimentality, and was given to fits of high enthusiasm punctuated by sulks. He was extremely touchy and inclined to imagine slights where none were intended."⁵³ Tweedsmuir's tactful handling of his difficult prime minister was undoubtedly a factor in the success of the royal tour.

For King, the 1939 tour afforded ample photo opportunities and the chance to share in the reflected glory of the popular young royals. At a November 1938 séance conducted by King's friend and medium Joan Patteson, George V appeared in order to tell King that "the visit is due to their affection for you." King assured his dead sovereign: "Your Majesty knows how much I think of each of them."⁵⁴ Canada would go the polls ten months after the royal

⁵¹ Lady Byng, as quoted in Allan Levine, *William Lyon Mackenzie King: a Life Guided by the Hand of Destiny* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 2011), 159.

⁵² Galbraith, *John Buchan*, 75.

⁵³ Buchan, *John Buchan: A Memoir*, 217-218.

⁵⁴ As quoted in Bousfield, *Royal Spring*, 23.

visit, but King was apparently considering calling an earlier election, for the autumn of 1939, and the visibility and popularity of the tour might pay electoral dividends.⁵⁵ He and his minister of justice, the French Canadian Ernest Lapointe, met the king and queen dressed in identical gold braid uniforms and cocked hats, after fighting with palace officials who believed the governor general ought to have been the one to welcome them to Canada.⁵⁶ Lapointe would invoke his personal loyalty to the King a few months later in a House of Commons speech as Canada considered a declaration of war: "Our King, Mr. Speaker, is at war, and this parliament is sitting to decide whether we shall make his cause our own."⁵⁷ It is noteworthy that tour organizers took pains to include prominent French Canadians in the events; Senator Raoul Dandurand gave an address in which he drew attention to the Norman origins of the monarchy. The King responded in English and in French. In his official account of the tour, Gustave Lanctot notes that the events included an assembly of 40,000 French Canadian children in Montreal stadium dressed in red, white, and blue capes to form a giant Union Jack.⁵⁸

During the weeks of the tour, the journalist Bruce Hutchinson wrote, "Every drop of King's royalist blood tingled, ... and he basked in a warm, sweet nostalgia." King was seemingly always in the orbit of the royal couple, and the cheering crowds "gave King a month of rapture." The prime minister changed from his gold braid uniform "to evening dress, to morning coat, to country tweeds, in exhausting sartorial sequence," Hutchinson recorded. "Eager to be seen and photographed in the royal presence, he leaped from the moving train at a western station and would have fallen on the platform, perhaps injured himself, if a Mounted Policeman had not caught him in his arms."⁵⁹ It is tempting to speculate that King's constant presence, even during the two days' "rest" accorded to their majesties at Jasper, Alberta,⁶⁰ must have been fatiguing. But winning over the prime minister was important. No one who witnessed the enraptured crowds "could doubt the nation's course should war come to England," Hutchinson observed. "If the tour was designed to test that sentiment and to strengthen it, the results were conclusive. Canada's long isolationism, and King's, melted by the hour."⁶¹ The historian James A. Gibson, who was a youthful staffer attached to the prime minister's office, had no trouble recalling after an interval of sixty years that King's pleasure in the tour prompted him to offer "the only kind words" he had ever heard from his demanding boss: "I think that went pretty well."⁶²

⁵⁵ Robert Bothwell, Ian Drummond, John English, *Canada, 1900-1945* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 315.

⁵⁶ Tony McCulloch, "Roosevelt, Mackenzie King and the British Royal Visit to the USA in 1939," *London Journal of Canadian Studies* 23 (2007-2008): 86.

⁵⁷ Ernest Lapointe, quoted in Bousfield, *Royal Spring*, 78.

⁵⁸ Lanctot, *The Royal Tour*, 4-5, 11, 12.

⁵⁹ Bruce Hutchinson, *The Incredible Canadian: a Candid Portrait of Mackenzie King* (Don Mills, ON: Longmans Canada, 1952), 247-248.

⁶⁰ *The Royal Visit*, National Film Board of Canada, 1939.

⁶¹ Hutchinson, *The Incredible Canadian*, 247-248.

⁶² Professor James A. Gibson, personal conversation, November 2001.



Figure 1: King George VI, Queen Elizabeth, and Mackenzie King, Banff Springs Hotel, Alberta, Canada. 27 May 1939. Library and Archives Canada, PA-802278

Commonwealth and World Context

The vital importance of the 1939 tour can only be properly appreciated by a full consideration of the world context in which it occurred. The abdication crisis seemed safely over by 1937, and the dutiful George VI on the throne. But winds of change continued to shake the monarchy, with implications for the Commonwealth tie. On the day of George VI's accession, the Irish Free State removed any mention of the monarch from the country's constitution, a preliminary step to the establishment of a presidency the next year. Amid the rising tide of Indian nationalism, it was thought inadvisable to attempt to hold a Durbar to mark the coronation, as had been done for George V in 1911. In 1934, Sir Maurice Hankey, secretary to the UK cabinet, had travelled the Commonwealth in an attempt to gauge the level of support Britain might reasonably expect should war break out. He was gratified by a spirit of "fervid Imperialism" in Australia and New Zealand, but disconcerted by "the chill he found at Ottawa." Then Prime Minister R.B. Bennett was a reliable ally, but Hankey sensed a general zeitgeist of pacifism and isolationism. Mackenzie King's return to power in 1935 made Canadian support even less assured, and it was evident during the election campaign that King was attentive to strong French Canadian anti-war convictions and disinclination to oppose

Roman Catholic Italy.⁶³ King had a vivid memory of the bitterly divisive conscription issue in 1917, of the riots in Quebec, the antipathy spurred by lower French Canadian enlistments, and the damage done to the political career of his mentor, Sir Wilfrid Laurier.

For Britain in the mid-1930s, rapidly changing world events made Commonwealth support acutely important. Adolf Hitler, who had become German Chancellor in 1933, sought popular approval in a referendum the following year to assume the title of Führer, creating a dictatorship by merging the roles of head of government and head of state. Hitler's flouting of the terms of the Treaty of Versailles won popular acclaim in Germany, and Britain thought it unwise to resist Germany's policy of rearmament. An Anglo-German Naval Agreement in June 1935 allowed Germany to begin a campaign of naval building. Hitler's remilitarization of the Rhineland followed in 1936.

The May 1937 coronation of George VI seemed a logical occasion for an imperial conference, providing British statesmen the opportunity to assess and influence Commonwealth sentiment. Such conferences had been held at irregular intervals since the first one in 1887. Photographs of the 1937 conference reveal how much had changed since the 1897 conference marking Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, how the relationship had changed from one of colonial subordinate status to a meeting of equals. F.H. Soward noted that, in 1897, Joseph Chamberlain was seated with the other fifteen delegates standing around him. In 1937, King George VI stood on the steps of Buckingham Palace "surrounded by his Prime Ministers carefully arranged so that Mr. Baldwin supports him on one side and Mr. Mackenzie King on the other."⁶⁴

Defence considerations loomed large in the conference agenda. Canada's Department of Defence had just laid estimates before Parliament that called for a significant spending increase—\$36 million in the fiscal year 1937-8—but military spending had long been a low priority. Robert Bothwell, Ian Drummond, and John English ruefully remarked that field artillery "could bang away at an enemy for precisely ninety minutes, after which, ammunition exhausted, its members would have to creep away as best they could."⁶⁵ And Mackenzie King was deeply conscious of a rising opposition force on Canada's political landscape: the socialist Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), formed in 1932, had drawn close to ten percent of the popular vote in the election that followed, and CCF leader James Shaver Woodsworth was an influential pacifist. French Canadian parliamentarians in King's caucus openly insisted that defence spending was meant to secure Canada alone. In a House of Commons debate, King obligingly offered the reassurance that "There will be no participation by Canada in a war overseas...except by the consent of our own parliament" and that "what we are doing we are doing for Canada alone." The CCF openly opposed any military spending, while the Conservatives, led by R.B. Bennett, maintained silence.⁶⁶ A Canadian contemporary observer noted that, as King met with other Commonwealth heads of government at the 1937 conference, "isolationists, socialists and imperialists are all watching every move that Mr. King

⁶³ Bothwell, Drummond, and English, *Canada, 1900-1945*, 306-307.

⁶⁴ F. H. Soward, "The Imperial Conference of 1937," *Pacific Affairs* 10, no. 4 (December 1937): 441-449.

⁶⁵ Bothwell, Drummond, and English, *Canada, 1900-1945*, 311-12.

⁶⁶ As quoted in H. Blair Neatby, *William Lyon Mackenzie King, Volume III, 1932-1939: The Prism of Unity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), 193-194.

makes.”⁶⁷

Moreover, Mackenzie King came to the 1937 imperial conference fresh from discussions with Roosevelt in which the two contemplated calling a conference in the Canary Islands aimed at addressing economic grievances as a means to secure international peace. A British Foreign Office observer lamented this “dangerous drivell.”⁶⁸ King remained adamant that he would avoid any obligations that would bind Canada to act. When Australian and New Zealand delegates proposed a common imperial foreign policy, King “gave them no quarter,” as he proudly recorded in his diary. He marvelled that “at the end of 100 years, I was contending in No. 10 Downing Street, for a policy that would preserve the Empire while preserving national freedom to its parts, the very thing my grandfather was fighting for.”⁶⁹ Perhaps ironically, the only sense in which King endorsed a unified Commonwealth position was with respect to a general policy of appeasement.⁷⁰ Hankey was forced to conclude that all Britain’s efforts at the Conference “failed to obtain from Canada any really satisfactory assurance that we should be able to count with certainty on obtaining supplies from her in time of war. ... It would clearly be disastrous if we laid our plans on the assumption that we could count upon Canada, and then when the day came we found that we had been building on false premises.”⁷¹

This uncertainty about Canada made American friendship even more important to Britain. If the 1939 tour was meant to enhance the Commonwealth tie, the few days the King and Queen spent in the United States were also critically important. The British recognized the pervasiveness of American isolationism; Congress had passed a series of neutrality laws between 1935 and 1937, and British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain confided in his diary early in 1938 that isolationist conviction was “so strong and so vocal that she [the USA] cannot be depended on for help if we get into trouble.”⁷² The British ambassador to Washington, Sir Ronald Lindsay, was deeply mindful that any British activity was at risk of being regarded as propaganda aimed at undermining American neutrality. “If the sovereigns’ visit were thus perceived,” Peter Bell explains, “far from improving relations, it would prove counter-productive. But if handled skilfully, it could perhaps, as Lindsay hoped, pay hidden dividends.”⁷³ Mackenzie King served as a go-between to promote the American leg of the royal tour, although he was dismayed to see that palace officials did not believe he should accompany the party. He had been invited by Roosevelt, and took the audacious step of phoning the President directly to sound him out on the question. Unsurprisingly, Roosevelt insisted he should come, and so King’s wish prevailed.⁷⁴ The first ever visit by a British reigning monarch to the United States was an important milestone in Anglo-American

⁶⁷ Soward, “The Imperial Conference of 1937,” 445.

⁶⁸ Bothwell, Drummond, and English, *Canada, 1900-1945*, 311.

⁶⁹ As quoted in Hillmer, “The Pursuit of Peace,” 157.

⁷⁰ James Eayrs, “‘A Low Dishonest Decade’: Aspects of Canadian External Policy, 1931-1939,” in *Readings in Canadian History: Post Confederation*, ed. R. Douglas Francis and Donald B. Smith (Toronto: Thomson Nelson, 2006), 429.

⁷¹ As quoted in Hillmer, “The Pursuit of Peace,” 158.

⁷² As quoted in Peter Bell, “The Foreign Office and the 1939 Royal Visit to America: Courting the USA in an Era of Isolationism,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 37, no. 4 (October 2002): 601.

⁷³ Bell, “The Foreign Office and the 1939 Royal Visit to America,” 603.

⁷⁴ McCulloch, “Roosevelt, Mackenzie King and the British Royal Visit,” 88-89.

relations. After all, a Gaumont newsreel narrator remarked, the last time the British came, it had been “to burn the White House.”⁷⁵ Sharing a hotdog picnic lunch with the Roosevelts was not merely a novel dining experience. Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother, later recalled that the visit “was very valuable because the King was able to talk to Roosevelt. Endless night talks they had, because Hitler was looming then.”⁷⁶

In the aftermath of the imperial conference, having received no reassurance of Canadian support, Britain witnessed a steady deterioration in prospects for peace. The League of Nations had already shown itself to be impotent, unwilling to effectively oppose Japan's 1932 seizure of Manchuria or Italy's 1935 invasion of Abyssinia. In March 1938, Germany's annexation of Austria, the Anschluss, extended the Nazi reach. Incursions into Czechoslovakia followed in short order. As the crisis deepened by September, Britain and other European powers were unwilling to risk war; they opted for appeasement in the face of Germany's demand for control of the Sudetenland and Hitler's cultivation of civil unrest in Czechoslovakia. By mid-September, war seemed inevitable, and Britain began to mobilize.⁷⁷ With the carnage of the Great War still searingly fresh after a lapse of twenty years, it seemed impossible to contemplate the return to global warfare. The Munich Conference late that September made it clear that Britain was willing to take any step that might avert another war or at least buy time. Neville Chamberlain famously exchanged Hitler's empty promise that his ambitions had been satisfied for a false assurance of “peace for our time.”⁷⁸ Mackenzie King's press statements praised “this far-seeing and truly noble action on the part of Mr. Chamberlain.” It was “emphatically the right step.”⁷⁹

In the event, of course, appeasement solved nothing, and the prospect of war loomed as the royal couple prepared to depart for Canada. “We were going ... in a battleship,” the Queen remembered, “and had to change to a liner in case [the warship] was wanted. It was as close as that.” In a letter to Lady Tweedsmuir afterwards, she expressed her deep thankfulness for the success of the tour, recognizing that “a united Empire is the only hope for this troubled world of today.”⁸⁰ The Queen's memories of the event in later years suggest that the prospect of war was foremost in their minds. Lord Tweedsmuir, too, was mindful of the significance of the tour in this respect. One old man, witnessing the adulation that greeted the royal couple while they unveiled a monument to the Great War dead, remarked to the governor general: “‘Aye man if Hitler could just see this.’ It was a wonderful proof of what a people's King means.”⁸¹

While the well-documented events of the tour itself are not the focus of this article, some mention must be made of the sheer scope of the journey the King and Queen undertook during the five weeks they spent in North America. The tour began at Wolfe's Cove, Quebec, when the *Empress of Australia* finished its voyage up the Saint Lawrence on 17 May 1939,

⁷⁵ Bell, “The Foreign Office and the 1939 Royal Visit to America,” 599.

⁷⁶ Quoted in Carolyn Harris, “The 1939 Royal Tour,” *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, accessed 26 March 2017, <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/1939-royal-tour/>.

⁷⁷ Bothwell, Drummond, and English, *Canada, 1900-1945*, 314.

⁷⁸ “BBC On This Day: 30 September 1938: ‘Peace for Our Time’ – Chamberlain,” accessed 28 March 2017, http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/september/30/newsid_3115000/3115476.stm.

⁷⁹ As quoted in Eayrs, “A Low Dishonest Decade,” 429.

⁸⁰ As quoted in Harris, “The 1939 Royal Tour.”

⁸¹ Bousfield, *Royal Spring*, 25.

escorted by two cruisers and two destroyers of the Royal Canadian Navy. The royal visitors travelled west by specially built trains supplied by the Canadian Pacific Railway and Canadian National Railway companies. The twelve-car, royal blue train had a silver-tinted roof, gold-coloured accents, a full-colour royal coat of arms, and aluminium panels with diamond designs between the windows that “flashed brilliantly when caught by the sun.” It was accompanied by a separate pilot train of a further twelve cars, which travelled a half-hour ahead and carried officials along with fifty-five journalists. The royal train, featured in popular commemorative photos, became “legendary,” Arthur Bousfield explained. Souvenir seekers put coins on the track to be flattened by the royal train.⁸² From Quebec, it travelled west on the CPR route to Trois-Rivières, Montreal, Ottawa, Kingston, Toronto, Winnipeg, Regina, Calgary, Banff, Vancouver, and Victoria, with additional stops at other smaller towns along the way. The return journey, via the CNR track, was just as arduous, with stops at Jasper, Edmonton, Saskatoon, Sudbury, Guelph, Kitchener, Windsor, Hamilton, St. Catharines, Niagara Falls, Rivière-du-Loup, Fredericton, Saint John, Moncton, Charlottetown, and Halifax. The last stop was for a single day in the then-separate Dominion of Newfoundland.⁸³ The few days the tour spent in the United States—between June 7 and June 11—were of course deeply important. But even the mode of travel was significant. In the planning stages of the tour, an idea was mooted to have them depart the USA for Canada by means of an American warship. British Foreign Office officials speculated that this would “constitute a gesture of friendship and association which would at once strike the imagination of the peoples of the United States and the Empire; and its effect upon the rest of the world, including the Dictator Countries, would not be lost.”⁸⁴ In the event, the King and Queen travelled back across the border in their own royal train. CBC radio broadcasts—some ninety-one of them between May 17 and June 15—reported on the events, with some transmitted to Britain and the United States. A summary of the day’s activities was broadcast each evening.⁸⁵

The Tour’s Constitutional Implications

Beyond the whistle stops and speeches, the acceptance of nervously bestowed floral tributes, and inspection of troops, one of the most revealing aspects of the tour lies in its implications for the constitutional role of the Crown in Canada. The monarchy in Canada, as in other Commonwealth countries, occupied, and still occupies, an important, but peculiar, place in the nation’s constitution and culture. The monarch, as Queen or King of Canada, is technically the constitutional head of state, but all functions in practice are carried out by the resident head of state, the governor general, or, in the provincial realms, the lieutenant governors. Such an arrangement is admittedly baffling to outsiders and indeed even to many Canadians. While there are inherent ambiguities and tensions in this idiosyncratic constitutional arrangement, we are seldom confronted with them. The monarch’s geographical distance provides a ready explanation for why virtually all duties are carried out by a local designate. When a reigning monarch visits, it becomes necessary to penetrate some of the mysteries of

⁸² Bousfield, *Royal Spring*, 18.

⁸³ Harris, “The 1939 Royal Tour”; Bousfield, *Royal Spring*; Lanctot, *The Royal Tour*.

⁸⁴ As quoted in Bell, “The Foreign Office and the 1939 Royal Visit,” 610.

⁸⁵ Potter, “The BBC, the CBC, and the 1939 Royal Tour of Canada,” 438.

the often-opaque constitutional functions of the sovereign and governor general.

Canadians may imagine that some sort of chain of command exists whereby vice regal appointees confer occasionally with the monarch whose role they carry out in Canada. In fact, there is no regular channel of communication. Adrienne Clarkson, who served as governor general between 1999 and 2005, told me that the only direct personal correspondence she had with the Queen was a private note of condolence sent on the occasion of the death of her father. Even much earlier, any communication between the sovereign and the governor general was likely to be a product of previous personal acquaintance, not any sort of obligatory briefing on Canadian affairs or policy. The sovereign did not attempt to dictate how the representative of the Crown in the Dominion should fulfil his duties. There were rare instances in which communications did take place, but these tended to be cases in which the governor general provided insight gleaned in Canada on matters that affected Britain. For example, Edward VIII's private secretary sought information from Tweedsmuir on Canadian public opinion when the Wallis Simpson episode became tabloid fodder in the United States. Tweedsmuir expressed his willingness to pass along information but demurred that it would be "improper for me to have any view."⁸⁶

In 2009, then governor general Michaëlle Jean faced a monarchist backlash when, in speeches and on the vice regal website, she described her role as that of the head of state. Even the qualifier "de facto" failed to satisfy those who insisted that the phrase only applied to the sovereign.⁸⁷ The historian Phillip Buckner calls it a "constitutional fiction" that the Queen is the Queen of Canada.⁸⁸ This characterization of the arrangement would certainly raise the hackles of devoted monarchists, but is in some respects a valid assessment, insofar as the Queen does not herself normally carry out the role of the sovereign in any of the dominions.

Sir Arthur Shuldham Redfern, secretary to Lord Tweedsmuir and his successor as governor general, the Earl of Athlone, summed up the situation accurately. He rejected the oft-repeated description of the governor general as the king's official representative: "It would be more correct to say that he is the official representative of the Crown, for there is a difference between representing a person and representing an Office held by a person."⁸⁹ George VI's 1937 coronation oath had contained the king's specific pledge to govern the people of Canada, as well as those of Great Britain and the other realms, "according to their respective laws and customs."⁹⁰ But with virtually all the sovereign's duties normally carried out by the governor general, the 1939 tour offered an important test case of how the Crown's functions would be carried out while both the king and his viceroy were present in Canada.

⁸⁶ Galbraith, *John Buchan*, 108.

⁸⁷ Campbell Clark, "A Hot Debate about Head of State," *Globe and Mail*, 10 October 2009, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/a-hot-debate-about-head-of-state/article4290596/>.

⁸⁸ Phillip Buckner, "The Last Great Royal Tour: Queen Elizabeth's 1959 Tour to Canada," in *Canada and the End of Empire*, ed. Phillip Buckner (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2005), 89-90. The title "Queen of Canada" was adopted with Elizabeth's II succession. See Phillippe Lagassé, "The Queen of Canada is Dead: Long Live the British Queen: Why the Conservatives must rethink their approach to succession," *Macleans*, 3 February 2013, <http://www.macleans.ca/politics/the-queen-of-canada-is-dead-long-live-the-british-queen/>.

⁸⁹ Memorandum by A. Shuldham Redfern, 1945, quoted in David E. Smith, *The Invisible Crown: The First Principle of Canadian Government* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 123.

⁹⁰ "Coronation of George VI and Queen Elizabeth," *British Pathé*, accessed 28 March 2017, <http://www.britishpathe.com/video/coronation-of-george-vi-and-queen-elizabeth-reel-1>.

Lord Tweedsmuir had been eager to see the tour take place, seeing in it a way to give Canadians the message that George VI “was as much their own King as he was King of England.” He was determined to remain in the background during most of the tour, and went fishing once the royal party left Ottawa. “I cease to exist as Viceroy, and retain only a shadowy legal existence as Governor-General in council,” he explained.⁹¹ Sir Robert Falconer put it in poetic terms: When the king arrives, “the Governor General withdraws...[H]e is functionless; even the brilliant star of the morning fades as the sun rises.”⁹² Mackenzie King was evidently unwilling to trust that Tweedsmuir was fully appreciative of Canadian autonomy, Tom MacDonnell observes. When the prime minister learned that Tweedsmuir had cabled Buckingham Palace to confirm his understanding about the minimal role he should play during the visit, King’s “over-heated imagination” inflated the question to the realm of a looming “constitutional crisis” fed by King’s “galloping paranoia.”⁹³ King confided in his diary that “I have felt all along that [Tweedsmuir] was itching to be in the foreground on the arrival of the King. I have had no such desire....” During subsequent meetings, King harped on the question to his governor general, even reading aloud his own speeches on the King-Byng affair. Tweedsmuir “had long since learned that the way to get along with the Prime Minister was never to disagree with him.”⁹⁴

The tour was planned so that the king might be seen performing the constitutional duties of the Crown with respect to Canada, and not in any way that involved Great Britain. In light of this plan, Canada in 1939 created a Great Seal of its own, and the king would use this while in Canada.⁹⁵ Before this, any document that had to be authenticated under the Great Seal of the Realm had to be sealed in London. The creation of a Great Seal of Canada meant that most documents would no longer have to be sent to London for sealing. Constitutional scholar Peter W. Hogg notes, however, that until 1947, when new Letters Patent were prepared constituting the office of Governor General, it remained necessary to send treaties in head of state form to London to be sealed; once the governor general was granted this authority in 1947, that practice was no longer necessary.⁹⁶ The 1947 Letters Patent Constituting the Office of Governor General authorized the governor general to “keep and use Our Great Seal of Canada for sealing all things whatsoever that may be passed under Our Great Seal of Canada.”⁹⁷ Since 1947, Hogg explains, “it has become possible to conclude all formalities in Canada.” That said, “the treaty in head of state form has become so unusual in international practice that Canada has never since 1947 had occasion to use its new formal powers.”⁹⁸

⁹¹ Buchan, *John Buchan*, 235.

⁹² Sir Robert Falconer, quoted in MacDonnell, *Daylight upon Magic*, 21.

⁹³ MacDonnell, *Daylight upon Magic*, 22.

⁹⁴ MacDonnell, *Daylight upon Magic*, 22-23.

⁹⁵ *The Seals Act, 1939*. 3 George VI, c.22. My thanks are due to Lyndsay Forsythe of University of British Columbia Law Library.

⁹⁶ Peter W. Hogg, *Constitutional Law of Canada*. 5th ed. Supplemented Vol. 1 (Toronto: Thomson Canada, 2007), chapter 11.3n6. A treaty in “head of state form,” now rare in the Commonwealth, is one concluded in the name of the sovereign, under the Great Seal, as opposed to simply between governments. For further discussion of the decline in use of “head of state form” treaties in the Commonwealth, see Günther Doeker, *The Treaty Making Power in the Commonwealth of Australia* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966), 22-23.

⁹⁷ Letters Patent Constituting the Office of Governor General of Canada, 1947, accessed 30 March 2017, <http://www.solon.org/Constitutions/Canada/English/LettersPatent.html>⁷.

⁹⁸ Hogg, *Constitutional Law of Canada*, chapter 11.3, chapter 11.2.

In Ottawa on 19 May 1939, within two days of his arrival in Canada, the king conspicuously carried out some of the most important functions of the sovereign. He accepted the credentials of a foreign diplomatic representative, Daniel C. Roper, the new United States Minister to Canada. The heads of diplomatic missions were also presented to the king. Later, George VI attended the Senate Chamber to perform what Gustave Lanctot characterized as “the greatest royal function of all”—the act of giving royal assent to legislation, an act normally performed by the governor general. The governor general was not present.⁹⁹ Kenneth Munro observes that Mackenzie King was aware that having George VI take part in the ceremony to grant royal assent to legislation “would demonstrate in one dramatic royal gesture that Canada was an independent constitutional monarchy,” especially since the traditions for conferring royal assent were different in Canada than they were in Britain. Britain no longer has the sovereign carry out this duty personally; the practice lapsed in 1854.¹⁰⁰ The Lords commissioner performs the duty in the UK Parliament.¹⁰¹ The same afternoon, Prime Minister Mackenzie King presented the king with diplomatic agreements to be ratified: a trade agreement between Canada and the United States concluded on 17 November 1938, and a convention regarding the boundary waters of the Rainy Lake district concluded on 15 September 1938. The King ratified both under the Great Seal of Canada for the first time, rather than the Great Seal of Great Britain.¹⁰²

Future royal tours would similarly provide opportunities to self-consciously demonstrate the sovereign’s constitutional position regarding Canada, even as the day-to-day functions of the Crown had been delegated to a resident Canadian. Phillip Buckner notes that during Queen Elizabeth II’s 1957 visit to Canada—one of twenty-two she has made—she met with cabinet, ratified a convention with Belgium, and read the speech from the throne. The Queen’s much more extensive 1959 trip was very consciously styled a “royal tour,” rather than a “visit,” to make it clear that the Queen was “equally at home in all her realms,” Buckner points out. John Diefenbaker, Canada’s prime minister, was also insistent that the Queen’s 1959 visit to the United States, part of the tour’s itinerary, was to be managed by the Canadian, and not British, embassy; her speeches in Chicago were written by her Canadian ministers and “stressed steadily the fact that she had come to call as Queen of Canada.”¹⁰³ For all that, Buckner believes that these symbolic gestures were unconvincing: “the contradiction inherent in welcoming the Queen as Queen of Canada and yet having to display royal symbols that were clearly British in origin was not lost on many Canadians.” A subsequent 1964 visit, made to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of the Charlottetown Confederation conference, was “a disaster,” Buckner concludes: Quebec nationalists protested the visit, and then Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson “for all his monarchical sympathies, had to admit that it might be better to abandon the constitutional fiction that the Queen was Queen of Canada, and to consider her as the sovereign of Britain and Head of the Commonwealth rather than “an absentee monarch endeavouring... to live up to a designation which is theoretical rather than

⁹⁹ Lanctot, *The Royal Tour*, 15.

¹⁰⁰ Kenneth Munro, “Can the Queen Give Royal Assent in a Provincial Legislature? A Debate Between Monarchists. Yes.” *Canadian Monarchist News* 24 (Fall-Winter 2005): 17-18.

¹⁰¹ “Royal Assent,” *UK Parliament*, accessed 30 March 2107, <http://www.parliament.uk/about/how/laws/passage-bill/lords/lrds-royal-assent/>.

¹⁰² Lanctot, *The Royal Tour*, 19.

¹⁰³ Buckner, “The Last Great Royal Tour,” 66, 69.

exact.” The Queen herself was anxious to ensure that the monarchy not become a source of division in Canada.¹⁰⁴



Figure 2: King George VI and Queen Elizabeth leaving Canada's Parliament buildings after giving royal assent to bills. Prime Minister Mackenzie King in background. 19 May 1939. Library and Archives Canada. C-017440.

The best known example of the sovereign carrying out her constitutional role in Canada is Elizabeth II's signing of the Constitution Act—the statute by which the 1867 British North America Act was “patriated” or brought home to Canada as a piece of Canadian legislation. In a rain-drizzled ceremony in Ottawa on 17 April 1982, the Queen signed the proclamation of the act; smudges caused by the drops of rainwater can still be seen on the document. Of all the periodic manifestations of the Queen's reign in Canada, the important constitutional milestone of patriation was an occasion that most warranted such a display.

¹⁰⁴ Buckner, “The Last Great Royal Tour,” 86, 89-90.

Canada's relationship with her sovereign remains fraught with ambiguity and even inconsistency. For example, experts have disagreed about whether the sovereign may fulfil the duties normally carried out by her provincial counterparts while in Canada. During the Queen's 2005 visit to Edmonton, Alberta's provincial government sought to have the Queen give royal assent to bills in the province's legislature, but were disappointed when the governor general's office vetoed the plan.¹⁰⁵ Consistency would have suggested that the Queen might just have readily carried out the role of the Crown in the provincial sphere as the federal sphere. But no such tradition had been established. By contrast, in 1939, the royal tour was used to directly demonstrate the sovereign's ongoing reign over the Dominion of Canada. The Commonwealth had recently undergone statutory redefinition, the institution of the monarchy had been rocked by crisis, and Canada's willingness to lend military help to Britain in the coming war was in question. In such a context, the royal tour of Canada, the first ever by a reigning monarch, was steeped in a significance that was much more than merely symbolic.

¹⁰⁵ Munro, "Can the Queen Give Royal Assent in a Provincial Legislature?," 17.