The Sailor Prince in the Age of Empire: Creating a Monarchical Brand in Nineteenth-Century Europe

Miriam Magdalena Scheneider
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The 'Sailor Prince' in the Age of Empire: Creating a Monarchical Brand in Nineteenth-Century Europe. By Miriam Magdalena Schneider. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. ISBN 978-3-319-63599-6. xii + 309 pp. £79.99.

The last twenty-five years have witnessed a Renaissance in the study of modern monarchy, which has reclaimed the nineteenth century as a monarchical century and the topic from professional condescension. As Frank-Lothar Kroll has written, terms such as "court" and "dynasty" no longer gather dust "at the bottom end of the spectrum of historical interest." Studies at the heart of this trend—by Volker Sellin, Monika Wienfort, Johannes Paulmann, and Dieter Langewiesche, amongst others—are driven predominantly by one deceptively simple question: how did Europe's various monarchies survive the Age of Revolutions and thrive in its aftermath? In response, historians have theorised that these institutions underwent any number of reforms—nationalisation, modernisation, and embourgeoisement being the most prominent—and have debated the degree to which the individual dynasties possessed agency over these changes.

Miriam Schneider's study of sea-faring royals, *The Sailor Prince in the Age of Empire*, not only slots effortlessly into this historiography, but also offers a myriad of new perspectives. Like others, she sees the nineteenth century as a turning point in the self-portrayal and self-awareness of Europe's monarchies. Sailor princes were not an invention of the time—Britain's King William IV had spent eleven years before his accession on active service with the Royal Navy in North America and the West Indies. But, as Schneider cogently and successfully argues, what had once been a temporary, amateurish, and rarely-commented-upon undertaking became a life-long, highly professional, and highly public career. And princes who had once been liabilities—if recognised at all—became central and vital cogs in the royal public relations machine. In short order, the 'sailor prince' became "a powerful monarchical brand" whose ripples are still visible to this day (2).

In this work, Schneider sets out to examine the origins, foundational myths, and rationale of the 'sailor prince' phenomenon and the motivations of those who moulded it. She then evaluates the various ways in which Europe's royal houses adopted, or otherwise benefited, from its success. The investigation is based on a wide selection of British, Greek, German, and Danish archival sources, extensive newspaper collections, and a thorough grounding in the secondary literature. Of particular interest are the many cultural insights provided by Schneider's analysis of popular non-textual sources, such as songs, cartoons, and paintings. The main players are not the customary monarchs—the "principal CEOs" of European Monarchy Inc.—

but members of that oft-maligned royal subset, "the spares." Prince Alfred of Britain, Prince Georgios of Greece, Prince Valdemar of Denmark, and Prince Heinrich of Prussia were only the younger sons or brothers of monarchs, but as Schneider shows, they were just as valuable in the modern world—if not more so—than heirs confined by convention and custom. This innovative approach provides an, as yet unrecognised, perspective on nineteenth-century monarchy and neatly complements recent research by Frank Lorenz Müller and Heidi Mehrkens on the role of heirs and eldest sons.

Schneider's work is divided into six chapters. Following an introduction that presents the study's aims and key players, the second chapter—cleverly entitled "monarchy at sea"—examines how romantic and ancient attachments to the open sea were actively appropriated by royal houses in need of popular support. By tapping into their subjects' deep-rooted self-perceptions as maritime peoples, the ruling houses of Britain (marred by licentiousness and scandal), Prussia (lacking in national appeal in newly unified Germany), and Greece and Denmark (both of foreign origin and facing a precipitous decline in geopolitical significance) nationalised themselves and gained much-needed stability and legitimacy. In the third chapter, the reader embarks on a foghorn-stop journey of the young princes' careers from the lower decks of their training vessels to the upper echelons of the Admiralty. Contemporary accounts frequently applauded the princes for waiving the comforts of their lofty positions and sharing in the privations and hardships endured by all sailors—a powerful display of embourgeoisement. But though dedicated and undoubtedly well-trained, Schneider demonstrates that the princes rarely integrated completely; they enjoyed various unique privileges and were—for the most part—assured of swift promotion to the top of the service. Fourthly, Schneider discusses the princes' roles as roving ambassadors-at-large whose flexibility and mobility—thanks to their peripatetic existence and relatively junior position in the succession—made them indispensable agents in the machinations of empire. The final chapter considers the concept of celebrity, the popularisation and marketability of the 'sailor princes,' and the extent to which they were active agents or passive passengers in their own meteoric rise.

Throughout her work, Schneider demonstrates that the 'sailor prince' brand had many fathers: the princes themselves—who appear universally to have first mooted the idea of a naval career—to their wary or ambitious parents, their tutors and governors, the opportunists who commercialised them, and the receptive public sphere that lapped it all up. The 'sailor prince' was thus anything but a pre-planned, water-tight scheme. Instead, it was an organic and nebulous concept that grew and solidified in response to contemporary phenomena such as "nationalism, imperialism and navalism, the rise of the middle classes, the beginning of mass democracy and the

emergence of the popular mass market" (278). To a greater or lesser extent, these ideas and developments took root across the continent. It is therefore unsurprising that sailor princes could be found in almost every European state (save Spain and the Netherlands, which both lacked male princes) and even as far afield as Japan and Thailand. While naturally adapting to local circumstance, the 'sailor prince' was clearly a pan-European concept.

Criticisms of this work are few. Although *The Sailor Prince* presents a compelling and convincing account of the origins and mechanisms of the 'sailor prince' phenomenon, an evaluation of its overall success is less evident. Schneider concedes the many difficulties in passing such a judgement, and it may be that popular responses to the brand will always be beyond the historian's grasp. Elsewhere, Schneider's analysis could have been complemented by consideration of other forms of royal self-presentation. Her argument about the gap (or chasm, in some cases) between the sailor princes' public façade and professional reality is very interesting; similar disparities, such as that between the fairy-tale love stories and the unhappy marriages they glossed over would have provided fruitful comparisons. For the most part, *The Sailor Prince* is highly readable, though Schneider's style is occasionally indirect and over-reliant on metaphors. In addition, there is intermittent inconsistency in the use of names; that of Germany's final emperor is anglicised as "William," for example, while all other players retain native spellings. Such stylistic quibbles are of little consequence, however, for Schneider has produced a very fine and meticulously researched work that furthers our understanding of modern monarchy, the genealogy of national myths, and European interactions with the wider world in a time of great change. It is to be much welcomed.

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