



***British Royal Weddings: From the
Stuarts to the Early Twentieth
Century***

By Matthias Range

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British Royal Weddings: From the Stuarts to the Early Twentieth Century. By Matthias Range.

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In *The English Constitution* (1867), Walter Bagehot observed that “a princely marriage is a brilliant edition of a universal fact, and, as such, it rivets mankind.” Over the centuries, royal weddings have been an opportunity for a wide cross-section of the public to relate to the life cycle of the royal family as the experience of attending a wedding transcends gender and social background. In *British Royal Weddings: From the Stuarts to the Early Twentieth Century*, the first book in a planned two-volume study of royal weddings from the reign of King James VI/I to the present day, Matthias Range, author of *British Royal and State Funerals: Music and Ceremonial since Elizabeth I*, examines royal weddings chronologically, observing how they became comparatively private occasions during the late Stuart and Hanoverian periods then attracted widespread press coverage during the reign of Queen Victoria, creating the conditions for royal weddings becoming lavish public occasions after the First World War.

British Royal Weddings is a valuable addition to the literature concerning the history of court ceremonial and public perceptions of the monarchy. Royal weddings continue to attract widespread public interest in the twenty-first century but there is little scholarly study of change and continuity in British royal wedding ceremonies over centuries. Individual royal weddings have been the focus of monographs and edited collections including *Scotland's Last Royal Wedding: The Marriage of James VI and Anne of Denmark* by David Stevenson (1997) and *The Wedding of Charles I and Henrietta Maria, 1625: Celebrations and Controversy*, edited by Marie-Claude Canova-Green and Sara Wolfson (2021). Popular histories of royal weddings cover a wider range of marriage ceremonies over time but do not analyze all aspects of these occasions or devote equal attention to each successive century. The wedding of Prince William and Catherine Middleton (now the Prince and Princess of Wales) in 2011 prompted the publication that year of numerous popular histories of royal weddings, including *Royal Weddings* by Emily Brand and *The Ring and The Crown: A History of Royal Weddings, 1066-2011* by Alison Weir, Kate Williams, Sarah Gristwood, and Tracy Borman. While both these books include examples of royal weddings from the Norman Conquest to the twenty-first century, they focus more attention on recent royal weddings, discussing various examples of press coverage and visual display, such as fashion, jewellery, wedding breakfasts, and public appearances by the newly-wed royal couple. Range adopts an innovative approach to the history of royal weddings by analyzing

late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century ceremonies in depth, even though those occasions were largely court events rather than public ones, and by focusing on the auditory aspects of each ceremony, such as music and order of service in addition to the procession and choice of venue.

The spectacular illustrations in the volume, including the very first photograph of a royal wedding ceremony, show how successive royal weddings were shaped by their venues, especially the emergence of St George's Chapel, Windsor as a popular setting for royal weddings during the reign of Queen Victoria. Range engages critically with the images in the volume, observing how artists often chose angles that made intimate venues like the Chapel Royal at St James's Palace seem larger and more imposing than their actual proportions, in keeping with popular ideas of royal splendour. This approach to painting scenes from royal wedding ceremonies explains the discrepancy between the stately imagery of Queen Victoria, Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, their children, and grandchildren on their wedding days and the complaints by political figures and the press that the venues were too small to allow for an extensive guest list or substantial public viewing of the royal personages in attendance.

While *British Royal Weddings* is exhaustively researched and well written, there are a few typographical errors and inconsistencies in the text. For example, Prince Carl of Denmark, who later became King Haakon VII of Norway, is referred to by his brother's name "Prince Christian of Denmark" (9). These inconsistencies do not detract from the overall narrative but seem incongruous in such a lavishly produced volume and should be corrected in future editions.

British Royal Weddings will not only be of interest to scholars of the monarchy and general readers interested in learning more about the history of royal weddings. The strong focus on royal wedding music in the volume will interest readers interested in the history of musical performance and composition. While the impact of royal wedding dresses on the history of bridal fashion is well known, especially Queen Victoria's decision to wear a comparatively simple white wedding dress, the role of royal weddings in creating an accepted canon of wedding music is comparatively underexplored. Range discusses the prominence of George Frederic Handel's compositions in the "concert weddings" of the early Hanoverian period then later explores how the weddings of Queen Victoria's daughters popularized compositions that are still frequently performed at weddings today, including Felix Mendelssohn's *Wedding March* and Richard Wagner's *Bridal Chorus*. Social historians and readers interested in the broader history of wedding culture will also enjoy

British Royal Weddings as press coverage of royal weddings often placed them in the context of wedding traditions of the time. For example, Queen Victoria's cousin Princess Mary Adelaide of Cambridge was praised for walking to church on her wedding day like other English brides.

British Royal Weddings: From the Stuarts to the Early Twentieth Century is an essential addition to any royal history library. The forthcoming second volume about royal weddings in the House of Windsor will likely attract an even larger readership, as scholars and general readers alike will have the opportunity to revisit iconic royal weddings that remain within living memory.

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