



***The First Royal Media War: Edward
VIII, The Abdication, and The Press.***

By Adrian Phillips

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The First Royal Media War: Edward VIII, The Abdication, and The Press. By Adrian Phillips.

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In *The First Royal Media War: Edward VIII, The Abdication, and The Press*, Adrian Phillips argues that the Abdication Crisis represented a unique moment in the history of the relationship between the monarchy and the media. King Edward VIII was not only the sovereign for much of 1936 but a global celebrity in a changing media culture where cinema and radio disseminated the royal image along with mass circulation newspapers and magazines. Major figures in the Abdication Crisis including Edward VIII, the twice divorced American Wallis Simpson whom he planned to marry, and British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin were all concerned with public opinion and saw opportunities to shape how they were perceived through the press, and by cultivating sympathetic authors to write authorized histories, biographies, and memoirs. These efforts to shape public opinion through engagement with sympathetic journalists and writers were not always particularly sophisticated or successful, especially in the long term, but they represented an important shift in the relationship between the monarchy and the media that continues to the present day. As Prince of Wales, the current King Charles III spoke to journalists and biographers, most notably Jonathan Dimbleby, making efforts to shape his own public image through the media.

The first chapter of *The First Royal Media War* provides a brief overview of the history of the relationship between the monarchy and the media as well as the future King Edward VIII's activities as Prince of Wales. In covering such a wide range of themes concerning the life and reign of Edward VIII, the events preceding the Abdication Crisis, and the historical relationship between the monarchy and the media in the United Kingdom and the wider world in a single chapter, Phillips sometimes makes curious omissions and sweeping generalisations. The trial of Queen Caroline in 1820 is not mentioned in the summary of press attacks on the Hanoverian monarchy prior to the accession of Queen Victoria in 1837, even though it might also be described as the first royal media war. Phillips also states that for the future King Edward VIII, "Most of the 1920s were occupied by a succession of gruelling tours of the Empire...The formal constitutional ties that bound the newly autonomous dominions to the mother country had weakened to vanishing point so personal loyalty to the monarchy took over as the essential glue of the British Empire"(6). The Statute of Westminster that gave the

Dominions formal legislative equality with the United Kingdom, however, would not be passed until 1931.

Phillips's analysis becomes more nuanced when he considers the role of the media in shaping public opinion during the Abdication Crisis itself. He observes that "the lesson that Edward had taken from the adoring crowds on his tours and the unremittingly flattering press coverage was that he enjoyed a unique popularity which gave him the power and right to decide how the country should be run" (12), an attitude that would extend to his determination to marry Wallis Simpson. Edward VIII's perception of himself as a celebrity with broad popular appeal that transcended his role as constitutional monarch informed his relationship with his ministers and the media in the months leading up to the Abdication Crisis. The King assumed that he would continue to receive positive coverage during the Abdication Crisis and was outraged at how he was portrayed in the press after his abdication.

The strongest section of the book is the analysis of the different perspectives of the journalists and authors who wrote about the Abdication Crisis and its aftermath, and how they attempted to mould public opinion in the United Kingdom and the wider world. Biographers often describe Canadian-born press magnate Lord Beaverbrook as one of Edward VIII's key friends and supporters during the Abdication Crisis with little elaboration, but Phillips analyses the full complexity of their relationship. As Prince of Wales, Edward was wary of Beaverbrook but saw the advantage to working with him to influence the press as King. Beaverbrook, however, was motivated by animosity toward Prime Minister Baldwin rather than friendship with the King. In the United States, newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst was in favour of the King's marriage to Wallis Simpson, a fellow American, and worked to increase her public profile both during the reign of Edward VIII and his subsequent term as Governor of the Bahamas during the Second World War.

Phillips also excels at analysing the differences between how the Abdication Crisis is remembered today and how it was experienced by the public in 1936. Modern documentaries concerning the Abdication Crisis almost always include excerpts from the famous 11 December 1936 radio broadcast where the former King Edward VIII stated, "I have found it impossible to carry the heavy burden of responsibility and to discharge my duties as king as I would wish to do without the help and support of the woman I love." The BBC, however, did not intend to preserve this broadcast in a recording but "some of its engineers had disobeyed orders and made one," (88) allowing the former King's words

to become very familiar to modern audiences. Although this circumstance is part of the public history of the BBC and is even mentioned on broadcaster's website, it is rarely mentioned in histories of the Abdication Crisis.

Furthermore, the visual medium of modern royal history documentaries does not reflect the imagery that was easily accessible to a wide public audience in the late 1930s. Filmed newsreels that were shown in 1930s cinemas favoured visual spectacles and King George VI's coronation therefore dominated the newsreel footage of royal events in 1937. The 1936 Abdication Crisis did not provide a clear visual narrative for newsreel footage and there was little newsreel coverage of the 1937 wedding of the Duke of Windsor and Wallis Simpson and their controversial visit to Nazi Germany that same year. Phillips notes that when the Duke of Windsor recorded a 1939 broadcast from the First World War battlefield of Verdun calling for peace in Europe for the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) in the United States, "it was not relayed either by the BBC or its Canadian counterpart" (104). The former King Edward VIII's modern reputation reflects the widespread availability of imagery that was not as easy to access in the late 1930s; an important consideration for placing the king within the context of his own time. Conversely, Phillips discusses how books with insider access published in the decade following the abdication have now fallen into obscurity.

The *First Royal Media War* complements other studies of the relationship between the monarchy and the media between the First and Second World Wars including *The Family Firm: Monarchy, Mass Media and the British Public, 1932-1953* (University of London Press: 2019) by Ed Owens and recent biographies that consider how Edward VIII fashioned his public image including *King Edward VIII: An American Life* (Oxford University Press: 2018) by Ted Powell and *Edward VIII: The Uncrowned King* (Penguin: 2018) by Piers Brendon. The Abdication Crisis of 1936 may not have been the first royal media war in the history of the British monarchy, but Phillips provides a compelling case for this event creating lasting change in the relationship between the royal family and the press as royal private lives became the focus of intense media coverage.

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