Culture&Society

Substance and Vanity at the Palace
Monarchy and Royalty Beyond the Twentieth Century

Neil Blain

Do the British Really Lose Sleep over Camilla?

A true story: a woman has a hair appointment in Glasgow, Scotland on the day of Diana's funeral in 1997. Upon stepping out of the car on an empty street, she finds the salon closed and curtained. There is a six by four feet black and white photo of Diana in the window, flanked by lilies in funeral urns. She tries the door. After a pause, several locks are disengaged from within, the door opens and an elderly lady in black appears and quickly ushers her inside. The door is closed and locked behind her. Customers are having their hair styled or colored. Three televisions, draped in black cloth and surmounted by black candles, are showing the funeral: Elton John is performing in Westminster Abbey. Her stylist appears, dressed in scarlet to signify her disapproval of all this hypocritical kitsch. They both listen silently to Elton.

In the summer of 2007, there was a debate in the United Kingdom about whether it would be appropriate for Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall and the second wife of Prince Charles, to attend a church service marking the tenth anniversary of the death of his first wife, Princess Diana. The "Camilla debate" ultimately prompted a series of other discussions on the role of the monarchy and royalty in the face of a changing British society. A response to these issues is hardly a simple task and requires a thorough analysis of the matter at hand.

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For those who wish to participate in public discourse about Britain's quintessential royal case, it is often easiest to uphold the myth that British subjects, as a social, cultural and psychological collective, are deeply interested in their monarchy, and that they begin the day by exchanging opinions on the domestic activities of the royal family. Moreover, they do this in an equally mythical space dubbed by the BBC as the "the breakfast tables of the nation," despite the fact that much of Britain no longer eats breakfast. Rather, Britain has shown many signs of social and cultural disintegration, and both the breakfast table and the notion of a unified nation have become nostalgic tropes. These facades, then, are buttressed against signs that today Britain indeed consists of a complex, unstable, and increasingly rancorous brew of constituents, only partially comprehensible to one another. Even the idea of a stable past often invoked is illusory; national broadcasters have their own stake in reassuring themselves that there exists still some residuum of a collective which can be addressed.

In a summer when the London press published statistics showing that over half the mothers of babies born in greater London were born outside the UK—over a fifth in England as a whole—news broadcasts broodingly monitored the numbers of east Europeans entering the UK. Along with the issue of British Muslim populations placed at the fore of media coverage and the completion of Scotland's nationalist First Minister's initial one hundred days in power, the United Kingdom, that lies at the heart of royal mythology, appears more than ever to be nothing but a mythic convenience.

In this matter of comprehending the relationship between a nation and its royal family, objectivity constantly seeps away in the struggle to establish simple facts about both parties. Most of what we imagine about the British public opinion on royal matters results from superficial polling, which offers few revelations. Social psychologist Michael Billig gave a significant number of the British population the opportunity to discuss their thoughts and feelings concerning the British royal family at the end of the 1980s.[1] Robert Turnock created a field study of emotional responses to Princess Diana's death in 1997. Billig's findings challenged the conception that Britons are incessantly preoccupied with royal matters. In one exchange, a confirmed royal admirer attempted to get her dissenting son to admit that he has watched royal weddings. He replied, "I can't remember my feelings at the time, but I remember watching it on television." The mother refused to accept that he could not remember how he felt.

During Diana's funeral, the media in Britain seemed to take on a maternal role, cajoling the audience to admit that they truly cared. This sentiment was repeated after the deaths of Princess Margaret and the Queen Mother. When a reporter found himself on the empty streets of Windsor watching the Queen Mother's funeral, he felt compelled to invest his audience with imminent engagement: "At the moment Windsor is quiet, really exceptionally quiet. There's hardly anybody about…I think people are preparing to watch [the funeral] on television rather than come out onto the streets at the moment."[2] In simple terms, the reporter merely speculated that the absence of people at the funeral must not have anything to do with an apathetic population. At many moments such as this one in royal "reporting," fiction

replaces reportage: "But in general you can see if you look around the streets here…[that] they *are* empty."[3]

Many citizens do care about Britain's royal affairs, even if it is the case that public engagement with royalty in the United Kingdom may as likely be a media phenomenon as much as a truly cultural one. Questionnaires distributed in Britain within two and a half days of Diana's funeral in 1997 elicited interesting evidence concerning the specific media attribution of widespread "grief," leading the research—which noted that "previous knowledge and experience of Diana had been "mediated"—to speculate the extent to which "people are perhaps becoming more dependent on media images, characters, and depictions to provide the resources to help establish identities and trust."[4] The study did not find evidence of "an outpouring of grief"—to use the phrase deployed universally by the media after the car crash in Paris.

In this perspective, strong reactions to the death of Princess Diana might be related to the forms of distress evident when familiar television characters are killed, not at all to be confused—except in a very few pathological cases—with the grief that occurs in response to the death of family, or close friends. What passes for engagement with royal events is often no more than a dimension of consumer behavior in which participants are perpetually exploring aesthetic possibilities for entertainment.

Before returning to the relationship between monarchy and media in Britain, it is important to widen the horizon for the forthcoming discussion. First, there is a stark difference between "royal families" and "monarchies." And secondly, it is instructive to place the British case

alongside a number of others.

Monarchy vs. Royalty. Pre-modern, Modern, Postmodern?

Since enhanced consumption has diluted political engagement in certain countries over the last thirty or more years, rarely does one encounter the older argument in the United Kingdom that monarchy can be justified through its guarantee of political stability. This notion that British monarchy guarantees, even in small part, the distribution of power—which in the United States is embedded variously in state and federal institutions and in Europan republics, across ministerial, presidential, and devolved functions—now appears anomalous. In the British constitutional manner, the idea that the monarchy serves as a buttress for political stability was a conventional argument, which has now become almost defunct as a counter-argument in any debate about the antiquated system, despite the fact that the British monarch does actually retain some powers, even if they express themselves only formally. This arrangement is typical of other constitutional monarchies as well, such as those of Sweden and Denmark. The effect of the British monarchy's extreme personalization is to render its constitutional role generally irrelevant to the British, despite the existence of royal prerogative powers which have in certain imaginable circumstances real force, such as, in principle, the right to choose a prime minister after an inconclusive general election outcome.

Since the United Kingdom lacks a written constitution, discussion about constitutional matters is an imprecise exercise, and the constitutional imagination is limited. Though monarchy is both technically a quite different matter from

royalty—imaginable in strictly constitutional terms and in the abstract—in practice there has been significant interplay between the concept of monarchy and royalty. Likewise in Spain, it was the King who allegedly guaranteed the transition to a modern state form after decades of dictatorial rule by Franco and who was also consequently seen as the defender of Spain's fledgling democracy when under attack. Nevertheless, this historical claim remains a myth, not because Juan Carlos failed to appear on television screens to defend Spain's democratic development as a response to the attempted coup of 1981—a feat he certainly accomplished—but because when the Parliament was stormed by Civil Guards, they failed to overthrow the government for a wide variety of other reasons, most of which are now popularly forgotten.[5]

Although the role of Juan Carlos may be less central to the salvation of the newly-won Spanish democracy than is popularly supposed, it is still the case that Spain has thenceforth experienced a renewed political significance for its monarchy, a phenomenon that does not apply uniformly elsewhere. The traditional notion of power—a quality that monarchies have been divested of in the modern era—should not be limited to the possession of legal right or the capacity to enforce them through arms. A new species of power resides, and often, more importantly, it is found in imagination, language, ideology, myth, and symbolic form. Symbolically, the Spanish monarchy is capable of operating in a fashion almost entirely contrary from that of the British monarchy.

Juan Carlos is seen mythically as a guarantor of the transition from the Franquist dictatorship, and thereby becomes an actor in the process of political modernization. The British monarchy, on the other hand, appears to resist modernization, instead representing conservatism, social hierarchy, and tradition. Its heir is a famous defender of traditional forms of culture, which the Queen herself personifies. In Tom Nairn's late 1980s account, British monarchy has become a central symbol around which a pseudo-modern set of identities coalesces in a British state exemplifying at best "early modern" traits in co-existence with feudal remnants.[6]

If one can still usefully deploy the concept of post-modernization—in regards to society, culture, the psyche, and the economic world—it should be done in the recognition that the modern world can only be partly superseded, and unevenly at that.[7] There is a persuasive sense in which enduring questions about Spain's political stability as a democracy invested the Spanish monarchy, during the 1980s and beyond, with a political seriousness that was able to keep Spanish royalty from turning into fodder for the gossip pages, unlike other European royalties that have fallen prey to the postmodern consumer landscape. It is likely that Juan Carlos, and not the Spanish monarchy as a whole, benefits from this political investment. However, just as Monaco's royal house serves as another prime example of premium media commodity—Grace Kelly's assimilation amplified its value, and her myth, similar to Diana's, provides significant texture even today— the Spanish royal family in general also functions, like Britain's, as a highly specialized form of super-celebrity.[8]

The Low Countries and Scandinavia—despite bouts of attention directed upon royal individuals by the media before and during royal weddings and other events—

produce distinct alternative myths of their own royal families, which are distinguished quite clearly from the "intrusive" royals of the United Kingdom. The constitutional position of the Dutch Royal House—the House of Orange—has received some ongoing attention in the Netherlands, where it has been impor-

gian royal family is thought of as open to scrutiny, relatively "ordinary," and close to the Belgian people.

Norway provides the curious case of a monarchy chosen over a republic by referendum in the early twentieth century, following the country's secession from union with Sweden. The country pre-

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tant for the Dutch to be able to perceive their monarchy as consistent with the requirements of political modernity. The Belgians, to the extent that they conceive of a political role for their monarchy and their royal family members, account for them as part of Belgium's modern dispensation. Similar to the Scandinavian monarchies, and notwithstanding moments of enhanced public engagement with individual royals, the monarchies of these smaller European nations have been personalized as "bicycling royalty"—functional, green, not least when compared to Elizabeth II in her Rolls Phantom, and, most importantly, capable of existing with a fraction of the pomp and formality that characterize their Spanish and British counterparts. These royals bear relatively low profiles and low carbon footprints.

Belgium's royal family members are expected to justify their existence—as are many of the "modernized" royal houses—by promoting industry, commerce, and international trade. So, of course, is the British monarchy, and it does so vigorously. But in most other respects, however, this European model is very different from Britain's. For example, the Bel-

sents no unified national response to its royal family or to the monarchy. Views in the country range from loyal monarchism to republicanism—which is in fact the European position generally—with various degrees of preference for the former or the latter extreme. This likewise applies in different measure to republics, where post-royalty, such as Germany's Hohenzollerns, is still very much discernible.

This brief overview of monarchies limits itself to European instances. The tensions between tradition and modernity produced by the Japanese and other non-European monarchies and royal families share characteristics with those that operate in the West, but also require specific attention, functioning in cultural circumstances even less susceptible to generalization.

It is significant, however, that the British monarchy alone does not easily reflect any sort of modernizing development. Within the United Kingdom, public interest in politics has diminished to the point where republicanism is now probably more anachronistic than monarchy itself. In the British form of consumer culture, monarchy and royalty

can be marketed much more persuasively than any alternative. It is fascinating to speculate whether Britain must first discard its monarchy in order to modernize more successfully, or whether modernization will produce enough apathy in regards to royal matters that such efforts will prove unnecessary, perhaps allowing them to naturally evolve into the "bicycle" monarchies from across the North Sea.

Securing Monarchy in the Twenty-First Century. Although the young British princes can readily be filmed engaging in charitable works at the behest of Palace public relations specialists, the infamous shot of Prince Harry sporting a Nazi uniform and the publicizing of intimate phone conversations between Diana and Charles and their lovers have offered increasing glimpses into lives normally filtered through strenuous image management systems.[9] Of course, nearly all the discussion in Spain about Juan Carlos, or in Britain about the Queen, is almost entirely speculative, guided by ideological fashion, and jour-

Royal families are a prime commodity for both mythic invention and substantive entertainment for media income flows. In this sense, royalty can supersede monarchy; the personal and economic importance of royals destroys the significance of any residual constitutional role.

So, have the British been lying awake worrying about Camilla's future role in the Palace? Certainly, they are not nearly as interested in the royal family as one might imagine from the coverage in the media, which seems gripped by almost universal editorial caution against minimizing royalty reporting amidst fear of loud complaints from customers. The truth is that the British media cannot forgive Camilla for not being young and glamorous. Regardless, Prince William, since the end of his student days at St. Andrews, has taken up his mother's role in the public eye, and Harry is his perfect foil. Eventually the Palace and the British media will allow William to marry someone he likes, someone who too is young and glamorous. Assuming Charles reigns until well into this century, William could thereafter be on the throne until at

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nalistic and editorial imagination. The results can be curiously unpredictable: few imagined Harry's wearing of the swastika as a sartorial exception for him and his family, whereas many have seemed willing to toy with the idea that Diana was assassinated, presumptively at the wish of other members of the royal family.

least 2070. This saga has a long way to run, and if the Norwegians, the Belgians, or the Spanish ever develop really serious doubts about monarchy, it will take only a state visit from William and his bride to put their minds at rest. For now, it remains clear that the British know how to put on a royal affair.

NOTES

1 Michael Billig, *Talking of the Royal Family* (London: Routledge, 1998).

2 Neil Blain and Hugh O'Donnell, *Media, Monarchy and Power* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2003), 196.

3 Ibid.

4 Robert Turnock, *Interpreting Diana: Television Audiences and the Death of a Princess* (London: British Film Institute, 2000), 53.

5 Neil Blain and Hugh O'Donnell, *Media, Monarchy and Power* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2003), 93-119

6 Tom Nairn, *The Enchanted Glass* (London: Radius, 1988); Prince Charles is a very prominent defender of tradition in cultural domains from food to architecture. This has its positive dimensions, as evidenced by his personally very expensive intervention in the summer of 2007 to save the invaluable contents of a Scottish stately home from dispersal—praise where it is due.

7 Neil Blain and Hugh O'Donnell, *Media, Monarchy and Power* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2003),11-35.

8 For a variety of reasons, royals are not mere celebrities. Their real or invented justification through bloodlines (and the great particularity of their lives, which however much varies) places them in a category which is *sui generis*. Some, but not all, are invested with what Tom Nairn, in a very specific archaic Scottish sense, calls *glamour*. '"Glamour" is the old Scottish word for magical enchantment, the spell cast upon humans by fairies, or witches' (Nairn 1988: 214). Glamour can come from a variety of sources. Neither Grace Kelly nor Diana possessed glamour in this sense through prior association with royal bloodlines (though there is a pattern of trying to search for royal antecedents in consorts where they lack them); but their acquisition of royal status engendered it.

9 In January 2005, the younger of Prince Charles's sons wore a uniform of Rommel's Afrika Korps, with swastika, to a fancy-dress party in Wiltshire, and inadvertently appeared thus in full colour on the front page of the UK's best-selling tabloid, *The Sun*, under the banner "Harry The Nazi."