Perceptions of the Monarchy

King George VI and the Abdication Crisis

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By the early twentieth century the British Monarchy was little more than a politically impotent figurehead. Any vestiges of direct political influence disappeared during the reign of King George V, marking the separation of the royal family from party politics. It is difficult to date the exact end of the monarchy's direct political power, given its gradual decline throughout the Victorian era. However, the 1911 Parliament Act offers one potential time and place. In response to the House of Lords rejecting a proposed budget for the first time in two centuries, the Parliament Act stripped the House of Lords' absolute veto power over legislation from the elected House of Commons. The ability of the reigning monarch to appoint peers to the House of Lords correspondingly lost much of its significance, ostensibly marking the end of royal political power and reducing ensuing monarchs to purely ceremonial status.

However, despite the House of Windsor's muted political role, the Crown still served as an important societal institution after 1911, symbolizing British culture and empire. Beginning in the late 1870s, even as direct political influence slipped from royal hands, the grandeur of the royal family was inversely and carefully enhanced via a series of pageants and ceremonies. Far from being merely aesthetically pleasing pomp, these pageants were specifically designed to elevate the status of the monarchy and the reigning monarch. The efforts to position the royal family as a relevant public institution have been most notably documented by historian David Cannadine who suggests that, by the mid 1930s, the monarchy had indeed become "splendid, public, and popular." In turn, as the prominent head of the nation, the monarchy – in unison with the British media and political and social elites – was used as a tool to symbolize and correspondingly disseminate certain social values amongst the populace. While the Crown had lost its immediate and obvious political power, it exerted a new form of persuasive soft power: grand royal ceremonies were viewed as opportunities to enhance both the royal image and the social ideals imbued within the contemporary royal family, which purportedly correspondingly shaped national values and embodied what Britishness truly meant.

According to various historical accounts, by the 1930s, the British monarchy was thus exceedingly popular and quite effective at disseminating certain aristocratic ideals. David Cannadine, a prominent historian of modern Britain, has offered the most thorough accounting of this history in works such as *History In Our Time* (1998) and a chapter in *The Invention of Tradition* (1983). Other scholars, both before and after Cannadine, have also addressed these themes, such as Edward Owens, whose work focuses specifically on the British monarchy, the British public, and mass media around World War II, to be encapsulated in an upcoming monograph. The royal ideals these accounts describe were intended to enhance conservative stability by promoting concepts such as domestic cohesion, family life, and respect for the upper classes.[1]

However, in 1936 and 1937, a rupture occurred within the British monarchy, disturbing its public image and creating a documented public reaction that enables popular perceptions of the interwar British monarchy to be studied in greater detail. In 1936, King Edward VIII, a complicated figure who personally contradicted the image many British elites thought the monarchy should represent, abdicated the throne to his brother, King George VI. This prominent and publicized event—the abdication crisis—and the ensuing aftermath sparked lively reactions. Usefully, and not accidentally, the Mass Observation project was launched in 1936—an endeavour recording everyday social life in Britain via voluntary "Observers"—leaving behind extensive, deliberate, and frequently referenced records of public and private views toward the monarchy. Mass Observation's founders, Tom Harrisson, Charles Madge, and Humphrey Jennings, three young Cambridge graduates, hoped to document and categorize the public mood and how everyday Britons operated in their sur-

1 Domestic cohesion referred to both the physical home and the nuclear family, as well as the larger British nation as a grand, national family.

roundings. They collected diaries, interviews, reports, anecdotes, and other daily observances from the hundreds of Observers who eventually joined their project, intending to create a scientific study of British social behavior: the self-declared "Anthropology of ourselves." The coronation of King George VI following Edward's abdication, an event that earned the focus of Mass Observation's first major publication, duly allows a unique exploration of how people actually perceived the British monarchy, the grand ceremonies intended to enhance the monarchy's reputation, and thus the effectiveness of the ceremonial monarchy at both directing Britain's national spirit and propagating values favorable to the ruling classes.

Privileging a ground-level perspective of British society, this essay illustrates that public perceptions of the monarchy in the 1930s have not been adequately represented. The work of David Cannadine and others who have explored perceptions of the ceremonial monarchy undeniably reflect and illustrate the numerous contented and adoring contemporary views toward the British royal family. However, additional and often contradictory perceptions existed as well. As some authors, such as Philip Ziegler in *Crown and People* (1978), have briefly noted, there was a portion of the British population who, for various reasons, did not admire or 'buy in' to the image of the apparently popular monarchy and what it embodied. Notably, few people critiqued the institution of the monarchy and the inequality it represented, indicating a general acceptance of the royal institution in the national consciousness. However, as this essay argues and highlights, on May 12, 1937, various segments of the population expressed distaste for George VI compared to his brother, voiced widespread and marked disinterest in everything related to the monarchy, and offered careful criticisms of the royal ceremony. These accounts not only highlight immediate perceptions of the monarchy in 1937, but illustrate that the decades-long project to popularize the monarchy had, perhaps from its inception in the 1870s and culminating in this moment in time in 1937, been less successful than some scholarship has portrayed. The dislike and general antipathy prevalent in many of these accounts contradict the image of a wholly popular, seductive monarchy and crucially demonstrate that the conception of the monarchy as Britain's national head, to be followed and emulated, was not without its dissenters. This paper complicates the reactions of British society toward the monarchy, questions the monarchy's success at disseminating cultural and societal messages, highlights those Britons who expressed distinct agency in rebuffing their leaders' desired norms, and illustrates the plurality of perspectives that simultaneously existed during the interwar era.

Approach and Relevance

This paper's primary evidence is founded on the individual voices recorded in the Mass Observation archive. While such an approach might raise concerns about mistaking the voices of just a (relative) handful of people as indicative of broader societal mindsets, this view enables a micro-history, privileging a detailed analysis. Moreover, the Mass Observation project is uniquely special for the breadth of its scope and the numerous individual reactions it recorded, and the accounts highlighted in this paper are a notable portion of all voices in the Mass Observation *May the Twelfth* publication.[2] Additionally, this paper does not suppose that the dissenting voices utilized were those of the majority: as will be further explored, the monarchy was undeniably quite popular in the eyes of many, and a plurality of Mass Observation accounts illustrate a genuine adoration for both the monarchy and royal events. Rather, this paper simply highlights those who lacked a voice in the public sphere. Instead of a top-down analysis tracking and numbering those who stood for or against the monarchy, the focus moves to the micro-level to examine why people were uninterested in the monarchy, how they felt (or did not feel) about royal events and their intertwined values, and where popular imaginations were actually focused. This personalized history—even if it lacks the names of the many people whose accounts will be used—focuses on how individuals felt, lived, and acted at the ground level (pertaining to perceptions of the monarchy) as part of larger and seemingly significant dissenting groups that cannot be specifically quantified in size.[3]

2 For a good discussion and summary of both the value and drawbacks of Mass Observation as a historical source, and its frequent use and unique value for historians, see Annebella Pollen, "Research Methodology in Mass Observation Past and Present: 'Scientifically, about as valuable as a chimpanzee's tea party at a zoo'?", *Historical Workshop Journal* 75 (April 2013): 213–235. Given the mass of early materials Mass Observation produced, this paper generally limits itself to analyzing voices from the *May the Twelfth* publication. Other authors, such as Helen Busby and James Hinton, have used similar approaches, limiting the scope of Mass Observation materials they covered by using methods such as severely limiting the date-range on the publications they examined, choosing starkly contrasting accounts only, etc., as highlighted by Pollen.

3 The names of the individuals in Mass Observation are not available due to the recording method used by Mass Observation at this time. In

The perspectives highlighted in this paper suggest several things. They highlight the complicated relationship between crown and people, and the continued, conscious presence of the royal family in the public sphere well after its political decline. However, despite the efforts of various British elites to mold national consciousness via a royal presence, individuals nonetheless maintained their own vision of what the monarchy should be and what sort of Britain they wanted the monarchy to represent. Newspapers and various official accounts, inherently linked to the project of propagating the monarchy and its apparently popular image, correspondingly silenced dissenting voices, highlighting the crucial value of ground-level perspectives. Finally, as historian Laura Beers discusses, it is often assumed that in the interwar period the British people were uninterested in "cults of personality" and figures perceived as embodying change.[4] However, Beers contends that changes in interwar Britain's political culture have been understudied or overlooked, and, as this first section of this paper implicitly demonstrates, a man (Edward VIII) perceived to embody change could clearly capture the imaginations of some Britons, especially when serving as a foil to Britain's aristocracy and the values it stood for and propagated. In defiance of what many British leaders wanted, independent visions and ideas of what was considered socially valuable, and what actually defined Britishness, were performed and lived out at the street level and via daily actions and words, in community celebrations, parlor rooms, and cinemas, in distinct expressions of individual autonomy.

Organization

This paper is divided into four parts, beginning with a review of the manner in which the interwar monarchy was popularized, the purposes British elites hoped the monarchy would serve, and the historiographical work surrounding the perceptions and popularity of the monarchy. Following this contextualization are three sections built primarily off of the Mass Observation archive, highlighting the various ways people expressed their disapproval or ambivalence toward the monarchy, what it stood for, and the ceremonies intended to popularize it.

The first of these sections focuses on perceptions of Edward VIII on the day of King George VI's coronation, and Edward's continued popularity. Due to the polarizing effect of Edward's personality and abdication, his continued popularity on May 12 both demonstrated and fostered resentment toward other members of the royal family and their elitist tone and values. Many people specifically preferred Edward because he stood against the values the monarchy, politicians, and media were attempting to disseminate. In turn, some openly disliked and rejected George VI and the aristocracy behind him precisely because of what they embodied. The monarchy and aristocracy not only failed to capture the imaginations of Edward's many supporters, but the aristocratic values the monarchy represented and was supposed to popularize were actually an active source of disinterest and hostility toward the royal institution.

The second section explores how, despite the collaborative efforts of the monarchy, politicians, and media to enhance the grandeur of the monarchy, many people were simply apathetic toward the publicized coronation, regardless of the fantastic rituals surrounding it. Though a superficial examination would suggest that the British public had great royal enthusiasm, ground-level explorations show that many listening to the radio or celebrating out on the streets on coronation day were seemingly far removed from the monarchy and the values it was supposed to disseminate. Despite an unstated acceptance of the existence of the monarchy and its ceremonies, marked disinterest prevailed in the minds of many.

Finally, this paper concludes by briefly examining the small portion of the population who were actively turned off by the pageantry and ceremony surrounding the monarchy on coronation day. Intended to enhance the monarchy's image, influence, and message, the pomp of coronation actually eroded the values and image of the monarchy in the eyes of some individuals, who perceived the ceremonies supposed to popularize the monarchy as undercutting and demeaning the traditional, stable message the monarchy was supposed to embody.

Together, these sections illustrate a significant group of people united by their dislike or ambivalence to-

rare cases the *May the Twelfth* publication offers some insight into the specific Observer's identity, such as "English girl."

4 For Beers' discussion of cults of personality in interwar Britain see Laura Beers, "A Model MP?," *Cultural and Social History* 10 (June 2013), 231–250. For an example of the existing scholarship surrounding Britain's interwar political culture and the supposed lack of interest in cults of personality, Beers points us toward the work of Jon Lawrence, "Forging a Peaceable Kingdom: War, Violence and the Fear of Brutalisation in Post-First World War Britain," *Journal of Modern History* 75 (2003), 557–589.

ward the monarchy's image. These individuals complicate conceptions of the institution's widespread popularity, illustrate that not all "bought in" to what the monarchy represented, and highlight those people who, not aligned with the media or aristocracy yet given voice by Mass Observation, have been somewhat overlooked in the historical record.

Historiography — The "Traditional" Ceremonial Monarchy

As David Cannadine expertly catalogues, by the interwar period, the British monarchy had become synonymous with triumphal processions, pompous celebrations, and "traditional" ceremonies. In the 1870s, royal heads of state across Europe began engaging in "ceremonial competitions," which expressed "national rivalry" and held prestige because of their supposed long-standing traditional nature.[5] For example, in Britain, King Edward VII embraced "full-dress ceremonial occasions," the grandeur of which was affirmed by the musical works of Viscount Esher.[6] In reality, such gaudy ceremonies and their specific rituals and publicized nature were a relatively modern invention and had little historical backing. They were merely framed and presented as traditional to grant both the ceremonies and their participants ancillary legitimacy, appealing to the authority of the past.[7] Between 1914 and 1953, royal occasions continued to evolve, and pageants expressed "continuity in a period of unprecedented change".[8] These supposedly traditional events were successfully implemented and accepted as genuine, and by the 1930s, Edward Owens suggests, the monarchy had indeed become fully domesticated and a "truly national symbol."[9] Sarah Gristwood, an author and commentator on royal affairs, similarly suggests that the monarchy and royal events had become "valuable crowd pleasers" and a corresponding "focus for national unity."[10] Even as early as 1955, at an academic debate, Professor Shils, Professor Birnabaum and Dr. Michael Young concluded that royal coronations, such as the one just two years prior, created a "readier acceptance by the Briton of the society in which he lives".[11]

The popularization of the monarchy was a conscious effort to serve political goals. Amidst continental upheaval, the advent of full adult suffrage in Britain, a hungry working class, and the Great Depression, the grand, ceremonial monarchy comfortingly embodied and promoted stability, family values, and national consensus, crucially linking the national family together as its ceremonial head.[12] In this important role the monarchy was socially and politically relevant: via its "restrained, anachronistic ceremonial grandeur" it became a "rallying point of stability" and a bulwark against (perceived) dangerous change.[13] In turn, the monarchy served the purposes of Britain's aristocracy, who "orchestrated royal family events as nation-building exercises designed to create loyal subjects."[14] A popular monarchy was supposed to both encourage a durable, unchanging society, since the monarchy itself was supposedly steeped in tradition, and foster a reverent respect of the well-off upper classes in Britain. Such principles appealed strongly to Britain's leaders, to whom rapid and unpredictable change was dangerous. George VI, for instance, was symbolically presented as the national father—contrasting nicely with his childless

5 David Cannadine, "The Context, Performance, and Meaning of Ritual," in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 133.

6 Cannadine, 136.

7 Cannadine, 133.

8 Cannadine, 139.

9 Edward Owens, "All the World Loves a Lover: Monarchy, Mass Media and the 1934 Royal Wedding of Prince George and Princess Marina," *English Historical Review* (2018): 3–4. Tom Nairn also reviews and discusses such perceptions in *The Enchanted Glass: Britain and Its Monarchy,* 2nd ed. (New York: Verso, 2011), 20–22, as does Michael Billig in *Talking of the Royal Family,* (London: Routledge, 1992).

10 Sarah Gristwood, "Retaining the royals: why has the British monarchy survived – and thrived?," HistoryExtra, *BBC History Magazine*, August 7, 2018, https://www.historyextra.com/period/20th-century/retaining-the-royals-why-has-the-british-monarchy-survived-and-thrived/.

11 Philip Ziegler, *Crown and People* (New York: Knopf, 1978), 45. Michael Billig states that Shils' and Young's work essentially portrays the 1953 coronation as a "a nation enthralled by the antiquity of the proceedings and collectively reaffirming its sacred values," much like the 1937 coronation has been framed. Found in Billig, *Talking of the Royal Family,* 4. For a further discussion of the opinions of Shils and Young, and how coronations became a "ceremonial occasion for the affirmation of the moral values by which the society lives," and an "act of national communion," see J. G. Blumer et. al., "Attitudes to the Monarchy: Their Structure and Development during a Ceremonial Occasion," *Political Studies* 19 (June 1971): 151.

12 Cannadine, "The Context, Performance, and Meaning of Ritual," 140.

13 Cannadine, 141; Owens, "All the World Loves a Lover," 3–4.

14 Owens, 3–4.

brother—and his coronation purportedly projected and imbued the aforementioned values into the hearts and minds of accepting onlookers, in a united effort to shape the soul of British society.[15]

The British media were active participants in this endeavour. They covered royal ceremonies in a reverent, awed manner, displayed remarkable reserve in covering royal affairs, and hailed the royal family as an institution of integrity and respect.[16] The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) even permitted the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Earl Marshall, a royal official, to edit any and all materials produced after the coronation of King George VI to ensure photographs and films met royal standards.[17] Political and social elites, the media, and the royal family were inherently intertwined and collaborative in their efforts to disseminate a specific message of what the monarchy stood for, and what should thus be emulated. In 1937, a media commentator wrote of the royal coronation that there is "no other spectacle of any kind so impressive, so awe-inspiring, to be witnessed anywhere else in the world."[18] This spectacle, and the corresponding importance and role of the monarchy as a propagating tool, was summed up by Prime Minister Baldwin, who, in a speech to Parliament, declared, "The Crown in this country through the centuries has been deprived of many of its prerogatives, but today, while that is true, it stands for far more than it ever has done in its history."[19]

Efforts to popularize the monarchy and influence the British populace were not futile, and the monarchy undeniably held great esteem to many. Vast crowds lined the streets of London for George VI's coronation ceremony, and it is believed some 60,000 people watched it on the television. The radio was particularly significant in bringing people close to the monarchy: it created a "democratic space" in which listeners "affirmed their loyalty to the Crown through joint participation in nationally shared experiences."[20] Edward Owens emphasizes that, by this era, the monarchy had become a focal point of emotional attachment, brought fully into "national public life."[21] At the wedding for Prince George and Princess Marina in 1934, which was broadcasted via the radio, some listeners even expressed a sense of social unification through shared identification with the lovers.[22] Certain values were indeed successfully disseminated amongst the general populace via royal events, and the works of Cannadine, Owens, and others highlighted above aptly and informatively demonstrate how the popularized monarchy could be wielded as a successful social-modeling tool.

IMAGES OF THE MONARCHY

In contrast to the popular image of the monarchy are the significant voices of those who dissented against the monarchy and the values it was supposed to embody. While much of the existing scholarship on the subject focuses on the intended purposes of the monarchy and the successes it did achieve, this essay turns to accounts from the days on and surrounding the 1937 coronation to illustrate the many alternative visions, meanings, and interpretations of the monarchy that also existed at the ground-level of British society. In three sections—organized broadly around the themes of Edward vs. George, perceptions toward royal ceremonies on coronation day, and views toward the monarchy as a traditional institution—this part of the paper illustrates the distinct ground level agency and autonomy Britons expressed via their everyday lives, often in defiance of their social superiors.

1. Edward VIII, George VI, and the (Un)Popular Monarchy

The Duke of Windsor, referred to as Edward VIII throughout this paper, was an undeniably captivating figure. Few embodied the image of a contemporary celebrity so well, and his penchant for ignoring royal norms (such as religious observances) and the polarization he fostered demonstrated an implicit rejection of the stable family image that the monarchy was supposed to represent.[23] As

15 Ziegler, *Crown and People,* 46.

16 For example, the British press did not report on Edward VIII's love interest in Ms. Simpson for an extended period of time to protect the monarchy; the news was in the American press well before. The British media also refused to publish certain comics making fun of the monarchy.

17 Cannadine, "The Context, Performance, and Meaning of Ritual," 141–142.

18 Quoted in Cannadine, 145.

19 Quoted in Patrick Howarth, *George VI: A New Biography* (London: Hutchinson, 1987), 64.

20 Owens, "All the World Loves a Lover," 5.

21 Owens, 5.

22 Owens, 33.

23 David Cannadine, *History In Our Time* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998), 62.

a result, those who supported Edward—and he was undeniably popular amongst many Britons—implicitly or explicitly supported or at least accepted his rejection of tradition. Edward quite prominently turned his back on the "very institution of monarchy," tossing away customs, tradition, and stability.[24] Edward was correspondingly unpopular amongst many of Britain's elites, and King George VI himself regarded Edward as the "negation" of everything the monarchy and the old British social order stood for.[25] Edward was determined to "rebel against a system which he only dimly understood."[26] However, as Susan Williams states, in contrast to and perhaps because of Edward's unpopularity amongst the elites, many people viewed Edward as their "democratic king."[27] There was an undeniable "star quality" to Edward, and the personality that turned off many aristocrats also encouraged affection.[28] Many of those announcing their preference for Edward were thus entering into and declaring their side, even if unconsciously, in a politicized debate between Edward and George, and illuminating more generally where they stood in regards to the aristocrats' monarchy of choice.

These preferences and divisions were predictably present on King George VI's coronation day, and many continued to openly prefer Edward to George even after the coronation. As one Mass Observer astutely noted on May 12, there were two camps in contemporary Britain: "die-hard pro-Baldwinites," who were pleased that the morally unfit Edward would not sit the throne, and "staunch pro-Edwardians."[29] As this section now highlights, Edward's popularity, the messy circumstances under which he was encouraged to abdicate, and the opposing personality of his successor, George VI, meant that Edward's popularity transformed into a rejection of Britain's elites, the monarchy, and the values it was supposed to represent on coronation day.

Perhaps most subtly, if not unconsciously, the rejection of the monarchy on May 12 evinced itself in the imaginaries and actions of select individuals who simply ignored the coronation ceremony entirely. They turned their attentions instead toward Edward, their desired King, who did anything but embrace the values imbued within the royal pageant taking place that day. In a form of quiet protest, the extensive coverage of the coronation ceremony—more thoroughly brought to the public's doorstep than any prior royal event—was imaginatively, internally marginalized. Indeed, even amongst those who did listen to or watch the ceremony, Edward's shadow was present: during the broadcasted coronation ceremony one woman listened silently to the BBC with tears streaming down her cheeks. "Oh, it ought to be Edward— it— it ought to be Edward," she moaned.[30] Another woman, who declared she had consciously ignored the entire coronation in a silent protest, informed an Observer that she would have "went up and cheered" had Edward simply been physically present.[31] Meanwhile, friends of an Observer, all "great fans" of Edward, whiled away the coronation by posing questions such as "How is Edward feeling?" or "What is Edward thinking now?"[32] Some, as Susan Williams noted, even wrote letters to Edward personally to express their adoration, and their sentiments spilled over into the Mass Observation archives as well.[33] One London resident, apparently too tired to bother with King George VI's coronation, announced that, for Edward, she would "have gone [to the coronation] and not thought about being tired."[34]

The desire to ignore the coronation unless Edward was present was shared by others as well, ranging from a man who intended to name his vehicle Edward to honor him, to an upset individual who thought the whole coronation business was "beastly," to numerous accounts of tear-shedding.[35] These expressions of upset illustrate that Edward's shadow remained in the minds of many on King George VI's coronation day, and recollections and fond-

24 Cannadine, 51.
25 Cannadine, 62.
26 Cannadine, 58.
27 Susan Williams, *The People's King: The True Story of the Abdication* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 251.
28 Edward also engaged in a host of actions that enhanced this perception, such as visiting workers' factories and decrying, or displaying real sympathy for, their conditions; Williams, 51.
29 DS266, Day Survey for March–October 1937.
30 Humphrey Jennings and Charles Madge, *May the Twelfth: Mass-Observation Day Surveys* (London: Faber, 1937), 280.
31 Jennings and Madge, 281.
32 DS194, Day Survey for May 1937.
33 Williams, *The People's King,* 242–246.
34 DS164, Day Survey for May 1937.
35 DS090, Day Survey for April 1937; Day Survey Respondent 090, April–July 1937.

ness for Edward actively stole attention away from the ongoing royal pageant. An apparently eager rumor even spread throughout London that Edward was set to return and reclaim his place as King.[36] The personal celebrity of Edward meant the hearts and minds of many were focused on anything but the publicized royal coronation and the affirmation of stable aristocratic values that it was supposed to symbolize.

Despite the monarchy holding little real political power, many Mass Observation accounts highlighted that some people felt the monarchy could indeed represent and lead social change. The abdication of Edward—a man who seemed to embody change—thus provoked a sense that the people had been undercut, fostering a more explicit, conscious, and bitter rejection of the values the apparently popularized King George VI and monarchy were supposed to represent and disseminate. One indignant individual, for example, claimed that Edward had been "forced" off the throne due to a "triviality," and "if Edward VII had been crowned I would have gone."[37] Another individual even outright denounced George VI as a stooge of the church and the clerical order, and, to another outraged gentleman, Edward VIII would have been a different King, since he would have made an "announcement" to the people and "blow[n] the gaff."[38] What hidden truths such individuals suspected were being kept from the public were left unstated, but many nonetheless believed that Edward would have stood against the established order in the interests of the populace.

A sense of betrayal—that the people had lost their King to Britain's elites—thus emerged. A theatre operator expressed that the whole coronation and publicized ceremony was actually just for "the archbishop of Canterbury and not the King." He not only felt the whole monarchical pageantry was about the religious order, but believed that Edward contrastingly "wouldn't [have stood] for this."[39] Another Observer wistfully explained that Edward was "more independent in his outlook" than George, and took interest in the social problems of the people.[40] An additional account concluded, "Some people expressed the view that it would have been different if it had been Edward to be crowned, as people really liked him."[41] To many, Edward was imagined as the people's King and perceived as capable of altering the balance of social power and knowledge in the people's favor. The change that the British elites feared Edward represented endeared him to others, and Edward's popularity meant that many expressed outright upset or distrust toward Britain's established order, even as its elites gathered in Westminster Abbey to crown a man who they hoped would enforce stability.

Given the juxtaposing images of Edward and George, and the aforementioned divided camps in Britain favouring Edward versus George (and vice versa), it is no surprise that those in Edward's camp also outright denounced George VI on his own coronation date. In turn, they further demonstrated how George's coronation and what it embodied was soundly rejected as a gaudy, publicized day intended to popularize the monarchy's image. This rejection was founded around George VI's own promise, publicly affirmed on May 12, that under his watch there would "be a return to the traditional standards of his father's day."[42] As Cannadine writes, the Queen was even "successfully packaged and presented as a crinolined, romantic figure straight out of a winterhalter painting."[43] This image fulfilled the hopes and expectations many British aristocrats had for the monarchy, but for those who desired a new royal demeanor representing their common interests, George VI and the surrounding ceremonial pageantry carefully and intentionally contradicted that ambition.

Thus, as the aforementioned gentleman put it, George was perceived as a man who would never "blow the gaff" to and for the people, and the monarchy's popularity correspondingly suffered. One Observer disparagingly questioned if George was capable of any independence whatsoever, and instead concluded that George would simply do "just as he was told."[44] To some, George VI had committed a double sin: not only did he sit down in "King Edward's chair" and supersede the man who would have invoked change, but George VI was both personally

36 Jennings and Madge, *May the Twelfth,* 281.
37 Day Survey Respondent 135, May 1937.
38 Jennings and Madge, *May the Twelfth,* 287.
39 DS266, Day Survey for March–October 1937.
40 Jennings and Madge, *May the Twelfth,* 292.
41 Day Survey Respondent 163, March–May 1937.
42 Cannadine, *History In Our Time,* 63.
43 Cannadine, 63.
44 Jennings and Madge, *May the Twelfth,* 292.

unexciting and would fail to represent the people's interests.[45] One Geoffrey Wells, for instance, wrote that he felt the need to leave a cinema on coronation when the "New King" and his "blasted wife" appeared on screen. Wells expressed not only a disgust for the "sheer hypocrisy of the British press & public" for accepting George, but felt that Edward was forced off the throne since he, compared to George, was determined "to be, as King, an individual."[46]

The happy, stable family image that George VI embodied, which so pleased many British elites, thus fostered bitterness in the minds of others. Many were notably either disinterested or upset with the monarchy on May 12, 1937, explicitly because of the values the day represented. The event affirmed and reminded them of what they had lost in Edward and the triumph of Britain's leaders over the people, and demonstrated the close ties of the monarchy to religious and political interests. These reminders served to create a polarization in attitudes toward the monarchy and what it stood for, distracting from and undermining the values the aristocracy had hoped such royal events would foster.

2. The Forgotten Monarchy?

While all in Britain may have held an opinion on George and Edward, their individual attributes were still not necessarily enough to capture the attentions of some Britons, even on May 12, a national holiday intended to celebrate the monarchy and royal coronation. The Mass Observation records illustrate a host of people whose imaginations were not entranced by the monarchy and its apparent popularity, even if, in some fashion, they seemingly participated in the day's events. This section explores the individuals who, within both private and public spaces, ignored or never bought in to the gaudy royal ceremony the British media, elites, event organizers, and monarchy attempted to popularize. Within the domesticated space of the home, tens of thousands of Britons listened in to the coronation on the radio. Yet, Mass Observation records indicate that the attentions of even these listeners were often elsewhere. Moreover, celebrations in the public spaces of the street often had very little to do with the monarchy whatsoever, and were far removed from celebrating or practicing what the monarchy exemplified.

The advent of radio transformed how people participated in public events, supposedly bringing Britons closer to the monarchy than ever before. King George V's speech at the Empire Exhibition in 1924 was heard by millions, convening people over the radio in the sort of national communion that monarchy was supposed to foster.[47] In 1937, John Reith, Director General of the BBC, wrote, "Poor Edward. But thank god he and his ways have passed and there is a new King and Queen [...] It seemed as if old England was back."[48] In turn, it is no surprise that on May 12, the BBC was an active and loyal participant in the endeavor to propagate the popularity of the monarchy, the importance of the occasion, and the messages people were supposed to draw from the event. The BBC was no stranger to endeavours to influence how common citizenry thought: when the radio had first launched, the BBC had even considered creating guilds to teach listeners how to listen appropriately—an operation in "cultivating good taste to mirror that of the cultural elites."[49] Leading up to May 12, 1937, the BBC held "coronation week," an array of special broadcasts to celebrate the monarchy. *The Empire's Homage* broadcast, which preceded the coronation broadcast, "emphasized the Britishness of both the monarchy and the empire."[50] Britain's most prominent broadcaster (the BBC), and one that dominated media accounts of King George VI's coronation, was mindful of aristocratic desires, and did its best to popularize the monarchy in a manner that would favorably influence the general population.

However, listening to the carefully planned radio broadcast did not necessarily mean that people bought into and supported the ongoing royal events. As John Reith himself was acutely aware, the radio also included the "unwilling audience as well as the willing," and how people listened to public addresses via the radio and interpreted the words of the commentators was "indiscriminate."[51] Many listened to the coronation, yet the day's message did not reach or significantly influence the consciousness of some listeners.

45 DS057, Day Survey for February–May 1937.

46 Williams, *The People's King*, 248.

47 Thomas Hajkowski, *The BBC and national identity in Britain, 1922–53* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2010,) 87.

48 Hajkowski, 89.

49 Kate Lacey, *Listening Publics: The Politics and Experience of Listening in the Media Age* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013), 37.

50 Hajkowski, *The BBC and national identity*, 89; 91.

51 Lacey, *Listening Publics*, 36.

Various events recorded in Mass Observation on May 12 demonstrate the multiple ways people heard the coronation. Some individuals even became involuntary listeners, as recorded in several accounts, ranging from the radio broadcasting to disinterested audiences in restaurants or pubs, to employers turning on the radio throughout the house for detached servants. On the Isle of Man, a cinema event was interrupted in the middle of a show to broadcast the coronation, creating a roomful of involuntary listeners. Though all dutifully rose for "God Save the King," a watching Observer noted the pervading sense of obligation in the room.[52] A sense of duty also encouraged a man listening privately within his own home to tune in to the event, warding off feelings of guilt, yet his thoughts became critical: the whole broadcast sounded far too patronizing and childish.[53] Another Observer, gathered with her family members to listen to the broadcast by their eager and "royal" mother, privately felt the whole thing was "bunkum."[54] Numerous others in the archives also recorded that they carried out various tasks during the coronation, and the radio was simply a distracting background noise. At one pub a group of soldiers even had to coax and shame disinterested patrons to stand during the King's speech.[55] A notable number of Mass Observation accounts, although their exact proportion is difficult to quantify, illustrate unenthusiastic listeners who often had little choice but to listen. Their disinterest, and the few cases in which the listeners' thoughts are recorded, highlight that several radio audience members were figuratively tuned out of the royal event.

Moreover, the auditory spectacle of the event itself distracted the attentions of a handful of individuals away from the royal family supposedly centered by the event. As some socially conservative Britons feared, the visual, theatrical, and auditory appeal of the celebrations that had come to surround the monarchy was overwhelming: spectacle, in and of itself, became the attraction.[56] One Observer even explicitly noted that, during the radio event, they became "interested in the *spectacle* of the procession" and the commentator's descriptions, rather than the royal family themselves.[57] The monarchy's apparent popularity and what it embodied was eclipsed. A young woman, who recorded that she did not particularly care about the whole event, described that the only emotion she felt during the coronation was amusement at the highly poetic commentator enthusiastically describing the visual proceedings.[58] While many did enjoy the broadcasted ceremony, or were at least neutral on the subject, others did not buy in to the public event and the triumphal, heady occasion. Merely listening to the coronation ceremony did not inherently suggest support for or interest in the event, demonstrating that the monarchy's apparent popularity not only failed to draw listeners' attentions toward a monumental royal affair, but also that the expressions of national communion and national values imbued within the ceremony were perhaps lost on these distracted individuals.

Similarly, in the public spaces—the alleys and streets of cities and villages around the country—the psyches and imaginations of many people involved in events supposedly celebrating the monarchy did not necessarily involve the royal family whatsoever. Ground-level observations from Observers indicate that many celebrations, particularly those outside of London, were, as Ziegler writes, "little more than […] an excuse for a party or an extra drink."[59] Many simply enjoyed a holiday and the opportunity to let loose in communal events. These celebrations, supposedly part of fostering a "popular image" of the monarchy, often lacked any focus on the monarchy at all.

The coronation and the celebrations that occurred throughout Britain were undeniably grand. However, it was the grandiose displays of wealth and power that oc-

52 Jennings and Madge, *May the Twelfth,* 257.

53 Jennings and Madge, 275.

54 Jennings and Madge, 283.

55 Several accounts from Observers in London on the day of the coronation described pubs, restaurants, and other venues playing the broadcast over the radio with limited patron interest. See Jennings and Madge, Chapter 2, particularly pages 145–165.

56 As aforementioned, the BBC and other media discussed the problem of people listening incorrectly or focusing on the wrong part of the message via the radio. According to Kate Lacey in *Listening Publics*, 36–37, broadcasters were often concerned that their listeners did not know *how* to listen. The *Daily Mirror* described listening as an art and skill which had to be learned, since everyone was so focused on talking and being heard that they missed the key points communicated over the radio. Broadcasters slowly trained themselves to speak in a "familiar tone of voice suitable to the domestic conditions of reception."

57 Jennings and Madge, *May the Twelfth,* 273. Italics original.

58 Jennings and Madge, 273.

59 Ziegler, *Crown and People,* 46.

cupied the attentions of many Britons, both the aforementioned radio listeners and those on the streets.[60] Summarizing such views, the postmaster of one English town informed an Observer that nobody really cared about the coronation but were merely waiting for a "gluttonous feast."[61] As one window cleaner put it, the widespread attitude among many people was that paying attention to the coronation was "not worth the effort," but that they—the people—would instead "party on Coronation day" and see the "decorations" afterwards.[62] In towns around the country it was "tea and sports"—the tea being "meat and beer"—and events such as races, sports, and tug of wars that brought people together.[63]

Observer accounts described how there was little royal enthusiasm at some of these spirited coronation events. One Observer even picked up on visible "irritation" when "The King" began playing over the radio, and the dutifully listening crowd quickly dispersed when it ceased.[64] At a parade—specifically intended to honor the monarchy, the coronation, and Britishness—the observing crowd took widespread pleasure in taunting the uniformed soldiers passing by. Calls of "oh, the little mites!" and cries of "Ooo Bert," intended to confuse those passing by, were shouted out to general delight.[65] Not only did a portion of the population care little about the monarchy, but they consciously mocked the very pomp, glamour, and formality intended to celebrate and popularize what it stood for. Undeniably, many did reverently pay respects to the monarchy on coronation day. However, for others, the monarchy earned neither their respect nor interest on May 12.

There were some more chaotic celebrations that took place on coronation day as well. The unruly moments that occasionally erupted were perhaps unconscious protests against the celebratory yet serious and controlled coronation event. Aristocrats embraced grand ceremonies to enhance the grandeur of the monarchy and hoped to position the solemn new King George VI as a nationwide role model, but their sanction of celebrations likely did not extend to the uncontrolled drinking and wild festivities that had little thought of God or King in mind. One girl, for instance, enthusiastically predicted the great bonfire, torchlight processions, and games that would take place in the evening of May 12, and "every town, every borough, nearly every village and hamlet" had a similar ceremony of some kind.[66] These festivals often took a wild tone since, as one Observer explained, "people seem to feel that tonight the police are powerless. They can do what they like."[67] Scuffles developed, loud and raucous public drinking was recorded in a multitude of Observer accounts, fires were lit in side streets, and one group of factory workers even ordered sixteen barrels of beer for their group so they could celebrate in a gluttonous fashion.[68] The atmosphere on the night of May 12 was described as a cacophony: there was a "pandemonium of noise, shouts, laughs and songs," torches were "thrown on bonfire[s]", and "embankments [caught] fire."[69] In these communal festivities national spirit and union was abandoned since, as Ziegler documents, communities competed with one another to put on a better show, and outsiders were viewed suspiciously if not expelled.[70] The existence of such celebrations, even in London—where groups went on pub crawls, drunken singing hung in the air, and massive and unruly crowds gathered to the annoyance of policemen—opposed the solemn values the coronation day was supposed to popularize and instill. While something of a nationwide celebration did take place on May 12, many such celebrations displayed little connection to or affinity for the monarchy.

Indeed, several individuals expressed explicit disinterest and boredom with the royal events taking place on May 12. As one Observer recorded, nobody he interviewed was particularly interested in the actual event. "My husband is thoroughly bored with the whole business," declared one woman, and another lady announced that

60 King George VI's "coronation business" cost four times more than King George V's coronation in 1911. Jennings and Madge, *May the Twelfth,* 22.

61 Jennings and Madge, 51.

62 Jennings and Madge, 53.

63 Jennings and Madge, 51; 184.

64 Jennings and Madge, 197.

65 Jennings and Madge, 203.

66 Jennings and Madge, 169.

67 Jennings and Madge, 235.

68 Jennings and Madge, 285.

69 Jennings and Madge, 327.

70 Ziegler, *Crown and People,* 76.

"EVERYONE is having a holiday," but that she would not attend the coronation.[71] Accounts such as these were incredibly common since, as another Observer wrote, "they [people] have no interest in it [the coronation] except that it is to be a holiday."[72] For many individuals, the coronation—even if they did celebrate on the streets—was not only an afterthought, but something they consciously and openly stated was simply not important to them. The polish and glamour surrounding the monarchy thus did not evince itself in popularity amongst all member of the populace. One female typist said, "I became very bored with the very word *coronation*," as it was constantly invoked throughout the city.[73] Moreover, the most disinterested voices may not even be in the archives: As Philip Ziegler writes, those most apathetic and disinterested in the entire day might be invisible to us in the present, since the large, bored minority group that Ziegler thinks could feasibly have existed would have not recorded their emotions whatsoever.[74]

Although much of the populace appeared to exhibit attentiveness on coronation day, when these accounts are examined in detail it is clear that many people had little thought of the monarchy in mind. Some individuals and communities simply enjoyed the coronation as a national holiday, a day of freedom and frolicking. Others, both in and outside of the home, simply turned their attentions elsewhere, or even became critical. Despite the best efforts of British leaders and the British media to enthrall all potential watchers and listeners, the day's revelry did not universally capture the national imagination. People instead expressed their own autonomy and ability for independent thought, and Mass Observers recorded various views, ideas, and reactions at the ground level, revealing a plurality of perspectives that complicate the notion that the monarchy—and what it stood for—had become splendid, public, and popular in the public eye.

3. The Traditional Monarchy

Some individuals openly embraced and liked the monarchy—particularly what they felt it stood for and represented—but also openly denounced the glamour and pageantry intended to popularize the monarchy and promote it as the head of Britain. They instead preferred a return to a less splendid monarchy, disliking grand ceremonies or even believing that they were counterproductive to the role the monarchy should hold.

As Ziegler notes, the frivolity of the royal ceremonies became a source of criticism. Can we really "expect the disabled and unemployed and ex-service men to gather around with their wives and children and throw up their caps in jubilation?" questioned one individual, unsure that glamorous festivities truly embodied and honoured traditional Britain.[75] In many royal courts, doing *away* with royal ceremonies had once been seen as a sign of both disrespect toward the monarch and symbolic of the fading power of the monarchy.[76] Yet the critiques some now levied in Britain toward royal occasions indicated that the existence of gaudy royal ceremonies was seen as detracting from and disrespecting the monarchy. The contradiction at the heart of the British aristocracy's attempts to instill certain values via a popularized monarchy was thus revealed: the monarchy was supposed to symbolize concepts of tradition, harmony, and longstanding stoic upper-class values, yet these values were supposed to be communicated to the populace via distinctly modern ideas of celebrity and gaudy public events.

As such, to one Observer, who also made sure to inform readers that he was highly patriotic and could even be moved to tears at the solemnity of royal occasions, the coronation of King George VI had gone too far: the whole "jingo of flag waving" was simply too childish and nonsensical.[77] Another man affirmed that the whole ceremony was "overdone and artificially pumped up."[78] The idea that a supposedly stable, family-oriented monarchy

71 Jennings and Madge, *May the Twelfth*, 51; 53. Capitalization original.

72 Jennings and Madge, 53.

73 Jennings and Madge, 303.

74 Ziegler, *Crown and People,* 54.

75 Ziegler*,* 47.

76 In a striking example, French republicans had imagined tempering the King's royal rituals and ceremonies, or refusing to participate in them, as a means of protest. At the opening of the Estates General in 1789 the assembly greeted the king with "grave respect," rather than loud applause and celebrations, indicating both their disapproval of the monarchy and the stripping of the King's dignity, as discussed by Antoine de Baecque, "From Royal Dignity to Republican Austerity: The Ritual for the Reception of Louis XVI in the French National Assembly (1789-1792)," *Journal of Modern History* 66 (December 1994): 671–696.

77 Jennings and Madge, *May the Twelfth*, 275.

78 Jennings and Madge, 303.

should be celebrated via wild street parties and colorful ornaments was perceived by at least one small group of individuals as demeaning. Some imagined that the monarchy still had a significant and serious role to play in British society, ranging from showing up "socialist nonsense" to helping breaking down class barriers to giving the ruling class prestige.[79] These were the very values the British aristocracy hoped everyone would believe the monarchy stood for. However, one Observer argued that the gaudy coronation ceremony inhibited the monarchy from seriously performing such duties: "The British monarchy still has a highly important task to perform and the tempo of the publicity which the coronation has received will certainly not help it to overcome its greatest difficulties."[80] Harkening to the cult of modern celebrity that surrounded the monarchy, one man critically observed, "it seems to me like [the coronation is] dragging the Queen down to the level of a film star."[81]

Such perceptions indicate that, even amongst those who did agree with the messages the monarchy intended to embody and disseminate, there were objections to the mode of delivery. The contradiction of a supposedly traditional monarchy being treated as modern celebrities was perhaps too much for some people to reconcile, and indicated that the monarchy's popularity and ability to influence the populace was criticized from all sides.

Conclusion

The national consciousness of Britain on May 12 was clearly scattered, diluted, and contradictory, with the nation turning its attentions in many different directions. Undoubtedly many genuinely loved the monarchy and the ceremonies that popularized it, and embraced what the royal family symbolized. The works of David Cannadine, Edward Owens, and others who have discussed how the popularized British monarchy served to successfully influence the populace are not contradicted: they do illustrate a highly credible and realistic vision of the monarchy's role in the early to mid-twentieth century. However, the reactions of society are always complicated and never monolithic, and other contemporary perspectives toward the monarchy and what it stood for existed as well. Britain's elites may have wanted the monarchy to be splendidly popular and involved in nation-shaping projects, but their efforts did not inherently mean all people shared their vision.

While alternative views usefully highlight the voices and agency of common individuals, the personal adoration of Edward VIII, and the corresponding repudiation of Britain's elites, some of the perspectives illustrated in this paper may not have held sway for long. World War II affirmed the importance of the British monarchy as an institution, and King George VI became a national icon in the eyes of the majority. Additionally, the 1937 coronation and the circumstances surrounding it could be considered somewhat exceptional: the abdication crisis sparked excellent conversations that make for ideal study, but the controversial event may have also encouraged societal partitions that were somewhat more drastic than they normally would have been.

Moreover, the reasons people disliked the monarchy and what it stood for in this era are fascinating and deserving of a more detailed study: people critiqued the monarchy and did not buy in to its popularity because they disliked the individual monarch, imagined the monarchy was the puppet of the aristocracy, or were simply disinterested in the monarchy. However, very few voices in the Mass Observation archives critiqued the monarchy because of what the institution stood for. The inequalities the monarchy represented, its unearned wealth, and its undemocratic nature were ignored. The institution seemed entrenched in the national consciousness. Most of the voices highlighted in this essay were apathetic to the monarchy—and thus antithetical to the popular image of the monarchy and its ability to 'sell' values via its popularity—but their dislike or indifference was limited to this moment in time, and few, if any, called for the royal family to be dissolved, indicating a broad social acceptance of its existence.

Despite these caveats, in pre–World War II Britain, ideas of monarchy, tradition, celebrity, and ceremonies clearly had important and varying meanings and influences. While Britain's political and social elites and media may have seemed domineering, people objected to, ignored, and even quietly protested against the aristocratic vision of what Britain should be, and how the monarchy should be approached. While the many reactions highlighted in this paper may seem uncoordinated, the announced preferences for Edward, criticisms of the monarchy, and general indifference jointly emphasize a portion of the populace that

79 Jennings and Madge, 283.

80 DS277, Day Survey for April–November 1937.

81 DS277, Day Survey for April–November 1937.

contradicted what the monarchy was supposed to achieve and symbolize. Despite the prominent auditory and visual reminders of the monarchy’s popularity—broadcasted over the radio and acted out in the crowds following the royal procession to the coronation—the voices of upset dissenters are brought forward by the Mass Observation archives, illustrating a plurality of distinct and unique accounts and ground-level agencies.