

The problems of the British royal house.

Bagehot and the Monarchy

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I

TODAY THE MONARCHY in Britain is under fire. Yet never since Victoria's years has it been so 'popular.' If this seems a paradox, it is one which explanation readily makes plain. Those who criticize the Queen in the performance of her office are a literate fraction, a noisy few — opinionated people with minority opinions. Those, on the other hand, who look towards her warmly are the largely silent many, whose instinctive loyalty finds little expression beyond a burst of cheers on state occasions. Of the first, we can say that they have a wrong notion of what monarchy is and entails; of the second, that they have no idea of it at all, or — at best — a vague unformulated one.

Nothing is so little understood to-day as the idea of the individual as a symbol; and since it is upon some such apprehension that the working nature of monarchy depends, misunderstanding inevitably results. What, then, is meant by the symbolical individual?

Anthropologists are agreed that the primitive psyche was powerfully collective; that it was, in fact, pre-individual. Primitive man had a limited and painful sense of self-identity. He found it difficult, and rather fearful, to conceive of himself in spatial isolation, as a separate being distinct from the environing communal body. When once an awareness of the self had become, for man, a psychological reality, primitive thinking was at an end: a new phase of history had begun. But this new way of thinking and feeling, which commenced to weaken at the Renaissance, was still far from individualistic in the segregated manner of to-day. Medieval society, with its feudal pyramid, produced an organic mode of thinking, of conceiving oneself in relation to the State. When the medieval man recognized the King as head of the commonweal, his thought enriched the metaphor with physiological implications. He envisaged himself as part of the body which the King's own person crowned. And as the head is part of the body, so the King and he were united, were of one social and spiritual flesh. The theory of loyalty stemming from this, and the horror of internecine conflict, are socially organic notions. 'Whatever happens to the King,' argued medieval man, 'happens to me.' His own health rested therefore on harmony between the monarch and his people.

Today, the tail-end of this mode of thought is retained in the image of the King as figure-head. The second word in this epithet preserves the organic medieval notion; but the first, with its reference to the carved bust on a ship's prow, suggests the more abstract function now accorded to this office. A ship's figure-head is inanimate. In Britain, at the present, we may imagine the Ship of State in the following fashion: at the helm of the vessel stands the Prime Minister, while over the cut-water leans the Queen. According to this metaphor, one office is real while one is nominal; one calls for personal activity, the other, for largely individual inaction. But, apparently, so misunderstood, these days, is the role of the symbolical individual that even this simple ceremonial image — a figure of speech acknowledged by millions — gives no indication of what we should expect from the Queen with reference to our way of living.

The two commonest misconceptions of her office may be styled 'the abstract' and 'the popular.' The first, which is almost exclusively evinced by Rationalists and Left-Wing Progressives, regards the monarchy as an empty pretension, an out-dated office without purpose or meaning. The fallacies of this attitude are many, but perhaps the chief of them is the belief that government is solely an administrative matter — a productive, work-performing affair. The 'teaching' aspect of government — its business of creating public ideals, public standards of conduct and behavior, especially in domestic and neighborly living — is something this attitude over-looks. By focussing upon the 'real work' of government — its legislation and policy-making — the 'abstract' critics of monarchy discover in the Throne a vain and idle status. But any government worth its salt must provide for the people some food of the ideal, some point of rest outside of laws and action, some source or spring of the national 'good life.' Different governments with different constitutions will attack this problem in differing ways. Some will

choose a President, some will resort to an Emperor by election, and some (like Britain) will seek to adapt hereditary kingship to this end. Certainly, the influence of the monarch as a model for private imitation, in the field of manners and morality, is an incalculable one. Even today, little girls in Britain are sometimes reclaimed from their tantrums by their mothers asking them if they thought their Queen would behave like that. In failing to see the function of the monarch as a reflecting reservoir of ideal behavior, the 'abstract' critics reveal their limitations. Their attitude reveals their 'impersonalist' conception of man as a social being. They imagine him as malleable to the word and working of law and logic, but do not view him as equally open to the plastic power of personal persuasion. To the quiet but telling rhetoric of good will and decorum, of modesty and simple moderation — which the monarch is expected to manifest in Britain — they turn a deaf utilitarian ear. Man, they would say, is better addressed by a Blue Book than a Blue Ribbon.

The 'abstract' party conceives of man as an adaptive animal even while it ignores his profoundly imitative powers. They conceive of the 'good society' as a structure rather like a mold, designed by *avant-garde* technocrats, sociologists, and statisticians. Into this legalistic construction of up-to-the-minute social engineers, they believe that man can be poured like a jelly, like a liquid substance which then proceeds to 'set.' Their error, here, consists in emphasizing the passive aspect of man's civic growth. They assume an absence of the will to resist, an absence of the will to develop, in terms of national personality, along an indigenously given line. This process of entelechy (which the 'abstract' critics neglect) is powerfully assisted by the existence of a social 'end-figure' — a symbolical individual, such as the monarch — upon whom the people may fix their eyes. Just as in the production of art, the creative process in the citizen is a largely

imitative matter. We grow by becoming what we approve, by approximating to our source of admiration. Few are stirred in such a fashion by the blue-prints of the social draftsman. And unless we are moved, we do not grow — which is what the ‘abstract’ planners fail to understand. Writing in 1867, Bagehot described the British Government as a “disguised republic.” “Tell a cabman,” he remarked, “to drive to Downing Street, [and] he most likely will never have heard of it, and will not in the least know where to take you.” Yet every cabby knew Buckingham Palace. Men, we have said, demand to see the mover behind things, not the apparatus. In Britain, of course, the political movers are those who comprise the Cabinet. But these are changing impersonal figures. Their period of office, their life as statesmen (save in exceptional circumstances — Gladstone, Disraeli, Churchill, etc.) is too short for the popular imagination to crystallize richly about them. Longevity of status or function, as incarnate in the figure of the monarch, gives to the ordinary man a sense of contact with tradition. And without this sense of linkage with tradition, there is no sure growth — no extension to the future — only a marginal up-rooted aberration. Because of this, the social imagination in Britain fixes, then, on the figure of the Queen rather than on Mr. Macmillan. He, and his colleagues and opponents, come and go. The monarch alone has mortal permanence, a symbol of Aristotle’s “Unmoved Mover.”

Poets of an earlier day understood the essence of this with a conjunction of all their faculties: their will, their intelligence, and their imagination. The Court (or, rather more exactly, the Throne) was the natural center of thought when politics or social affairs were in question. But who ever heard of a school of poets growing up around the Cabinet? To-day, in Britain, this instinctive urge finds itself stultified by current culture. On the one hand, we have in Robert Graves, with his mytho-

poeic study of *The White Goddess*, a champion of the feminine-psyche image as the natural hub of poetic creation. On the other, in the fashionable exponents of Logical and Critical Positivism, a force making for disintegration in the symbolic workings of the mind. Without a certain assent to instinct, symbols cannot root or flower in the brain. When instincts are questioned and doubted and divided by a recurrent analytic process, the mind ceases to live by symbols, and attempts to direct itself by reason and ‘hard facts.’

A paradox of this position is that we possess, in Robert Graves and his *White Goddess* myth, a theory of the mind’s imaginative process with no public application of it. The rhetoric of civic occasion, in which this theory might find expression, is a lost art for most of our poets. With their minds pared and impoverished by the anti-synthetic currents of the day, the younger poets can crystallize their thoughts about no substantial loyalty or image which the whole nation shares with them. They are driven back to the smaller certainties (or hesitations), the verified hates or loves of private lives. Courtliness and compliment in address cannot reach out to seek the sovereign figure which should, at times, be their proper end or home. If, then, we still look to discover a traditional form of apostrophe, we must turn, not to the younger poets, but to an older practitioner of the craft. Thus, seventy-eight-year-old Herbert Palmer writes “At the Time of the Coronation of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II” the following eloquent and liegeman-like lines:

You shoulder half the darkness of the
world
Though with a smile, and springtime
in your face;
So we have hope, for have you not unfurled
Our banner of Hope by your bestowing
grace?

But what is the ‘reality’ behind this graceful encomium? Certainly not one

which the Critical Positivist mind could admit as anything save a 'pseudo-statement.' In terms of the literal elaboration of policy, we know there is little the Queen can do, save through her Ministers. The answer is, that the monarch, and the "Hope" with which he or she inspires the people, is largely a mythopoeic reality — an impression produced in the imagination and not a managerial or administrative fact. This does not mean that it is not subject to verifiable proof in exceptional cases. The lack of "Hope" which certain bad monarchs, such as George IV, created in their people could have been a matter for public census if polls of opinion had then been established. The error, in short, of the 'abstract school' who criticize the monarchy in Britain to-day, is that it thinks in too crude and literal terms. Its notion of public function and office is dominated by Carlyle's doctrine of the supreme 'reality' of work. It does not recognize that public duty extends beyond the range of figures of production, that those who follow a path of public 'leisure' (or rather dedicate their leisure to the State), that those whose 'leisure' is mainly made up of humane, benevolent interest and inspection, are serving society every whit as much as the miner with his pick or the clerk with his pen. The 'truth' of the 'abstract critics' is partial. Like the "hard-fact fellows," whom Dickens exposed so brilliantly in his novel *Hard Times*, they divorce the facts of labor and production from their meaningful source — the full humane mind. They look to program-planning as a good in itself, without reference to the final satisfaction, the final human harmony which planning may effect. Their emblem is the ant (insect of labor) and not the butterfly (Greek symbol of the soul). It is not to be wondered at that, with these preconceptions, the subtle work of monarchy should be misconstrued by them.

But in Britain to-day the monarchy is as much embarrassed by its 'popular' adherents as by the censorious 'abstract'

school. As has been said, those who look to the Queen with warm, loyal, and simple feelings are largely of the unexpressive mass. The persons constituting this majority have seldom any individual view of her office. They cheer her, listen to her Christmas broadcast, and take a feeling interest in her family life. But, there, their understanding of her position ends. The Queen for them is a personality, but hardly a symbol of continuity. At first, this may seem a harmless attitude. The nineteenth-century critic Walter Bagehot has showed how 'stupidity' (more kindly described as the unanalytic mind) is a powerful national adhesive, a force binding society together by means of its broad, unprobing assent. But when this 'stupidity' finds itself provided with organs of expression, in the daily popular press, the nation becomes in danger of saturation and subjugation by it. One of the things we have to contend with in Britain, at the present moment, is an apotheosis of this 'stupidity,' a canonization of near-illiterate culture. This 'typist's' democracy is adept at presenting the Queen in terms of T.V. — or film-star-glamor; or, again, in exhibiting her as an almost suburban house-wife figure. In Britain, the Royalist generally has a streak of the egalitarian in him. He does not wish to see his sovereign presented as a Ruritanian *Roi-soleil*. He expects that the office of the Queen will be played down, but resents it being obscured or forgotten. In the 'printed democracy' of the popular daily press (and most Sunday newspapers heighten this impression) the personality-cult of the Queen detracts from true appreciation of the Throne. The Queen is loved and mobbed in print, but it is a love which depreciates her status in the imagination. The way in which news of the sovereign is presented puts her on a level with a famous tennis-player, a new pop-singer, or the latest radio-celebrity. But the Queen's status is mistakenly reckoned either in terms of a 'personality' or a glorified private individual. She represents the nation in terms of living as a Prime Minis-

ter only partly (because of his Party's affiliation) represents the country's political opinion. And this function of the monarchy the popular newspapers do not reflect.

Both the 'abstract' and the 'popular' schools ignore the Queen's role as a symbolical individual. The first, with its impersonal notion of the function of government, looks upon the Throne's symbolical role as an archaic figment devoid of content. The second, with its levelling theatrical bias, ignores it as an idea too hard to expound to the low-brow mind of newspaper readership. So it comes about that intelligent discussion of the monarchy in Britain is seldom to be heard.

II

The two chapters on "The Monarchy" in Walter Bagehot's classic *The English Constitution* offer a minimal defense of kingship. Because of this, their relevance to the present position is remarkably apt. The time for more assertive proclamations of faith in the sovereign power of the monarchy (such as Bolingbroke's *Patriot King*) is over and done with these two hundred years. Nor is an abstract historical work such as J. N. Figgis' *The Divine Right of Kings* likely to assist the confused public mind concerning itself with the question of the Crown. In order to preserve that show of compromise (a stabilizing factor in British history) the English mind has conditioned itself to a subtle avoidance of first principles in most great political and public issues. This has been called dishonesty, hypocrisy, and other bad names (according to the critic's standpoint). A kinder term for it, though, is pragmatism. This was a quality powerfully developed and deliberately cherished in Bagehot himself. His book on *The English Constitution* (first published in 1867) was no abstract treatise on the subject, no historical manual for the student. Instead, he wrote it for the intelligent man of business and affairs, suiting it, in brief, "to such

tury as the nineteenth." Such a being does not quite exist to-day, but because of the author's shrewd knowledge of human reaction, experience, and nature, there is much that we continue to find valid, as there is in the writings of his master Burke.

Bagehot saw the monarchy as possessing two capacities: "the dignified," and "the efficient." The first of these he reckoned the more important; its hold and influence on the minds of people being, as he said, "incalculable." Bagehot's defense of this "dignified" role is the more impressive because it springs, not from intellectual assent to kingship (as that exists in its pure idea), but from an approval of its actual working nature. "Most people," he writes — and he means the educated — "when they read that the Queen walked on the slopes at Windsor — that the Prince of Wales went to the Derby — have imagined that too much thought and prominence were given to little things. But they have been in error; and it is nice to trace how the actions of a retired widow and an unemployed youth become of such importance." "Retired widow" and "unemployed youth" — there is no Royalist unction about these terms; but we should be wrong if we took them to imply a dismissal of royalty's magnetic power. "The best reason why Monarchy is a strong Government," continues Bagehot, on the heels of these remarks, "is that it is an intelligible government. The mass of mankind understand it, and they hardly anywhere in the world understand any other." This natural national focus which monarchy provides was something which Bagehot himself scorned the majority of people for requiring: "When you put before the mass of mankind the question, 'Will you be governed by a king, or will you be governed by a constitution?' the inquiry comes out thus — 'Will you be governed in a way you understand, or will you be governed in a way you do not understand?'" The implication here is that ignorance makes monarchy, for most men, the best kind of

government — the 'best' since the better cannot be apprehended.

Bagehot's importance as political theorist comes from his never minimizing the part which inertia, sluggishness of mind, and uninformed conservatism play in human nature. He knows (though he may regret the fact) that societies are not held together by abstract passion for logical perfection. He knows that political communities are not Utopias or Realms of Pure Idea; that the State is not like a syllogism. He is brusquely, healthily, non-Platonic. The majority of us, Bagehot points out, understand persons more readily than ideas. Government by kingship is more easily grasped than government by a Cabinet. "The acts of a single will, the fiat of a single mind" (which the mass of Bagehot's countrymen then read into kingship) can better be seized by the simple mind than "the nature of a constitution, the action of an assembly, the play of parties." Government by this nexus of factors is beyond the comprehension of the uninstructed. One of the values of the monarchy, as Bagehot saw it, was that it presented a focal-point for simple loyal attention, while the complex business of government took place beyond it as behind a screen. To pretend that the workings of the Cabinet are crystal-clear to every member of the British electorate would, of course, be erroneous; but, clearly, on this point, Bagehot's opinion stands in need of revision to-day. All now know that the Cabinet, and not the Queen, is the ruling body, though many still feel a firmer loyalty to the monarch than to the Party.

But, in one very real sense, Bagehot is right when he locates the power of the monarchy in its being individual. A person excites interest and attention, a person can be responded to with love. A Cabinet can hardly elicit such feelings; its collective nature de-personalizes it.

The personal aspect of monarchy is strengthened by its dynastic connections, for here the collective characteristic does

not produce an impersonal effect. As Bagehot remarks, "A *family* on the throne is an interesting idea Women — one half of the human race — care fifty times more for a marriage than a ministry . . . [and] a princely marriage is the brilliant edition of a universal fact, and as such, it rivets mankind. . . . To state the matter shortly, Royalty is a Government in which the attention of the nation is concentrated on one person doing interesting actions."

Under the role of the monarch in her "dignified" capacity, Bagehot next considers other offices of the Queen — "historical, august, theatrical" — which are formal rather than personal in their nature. The Queen is the head of English society, and as such she is the apex of all Court functions and all national-level ceremonial occasions. Between good society as organized for the purpose of intercourse and conversation, and the staid hieratic society of the Court, Bagehot makes a careful distinction. The Court does not express an ideal of the best society, qualitatively considered. Instead, it represents top-society in terms of etiquette and precedence.

Bagehot compares the heavy vapid Court of Victoria's day with the glittering world of the Court of St. James under Charles II. In a very true social and cultural sense, this quizzical third Stuart was really the head of society: "Whitehall, in his time, was the center of the best talk, the best fashion, and the most curious love affairs of the age. [The King] did not contribute good morality to society, but he set an example of infinite agreeableness. He concentrated around him all the light parts of the high world of London, and London concentrated around it all the light part of the high world of England . . . Whitehall was an unequalled club, with female society of a very clever and sharp sort superadded." Bagehot's panegyric of this Congreve-like nucleus of brilliant individuals is of a purely aesthetic order. On the moral and the political side, he knew the dangers of a lively Court as affecting the monarch and the monarch's decisions. And

because of this, he exonerates the fusty and pompous Court of Victoria. A high-toned insipidness is the price the later nineteenth century paid in coming to regard "the Crown as head of our *morality*." When the ethical comes in, as Kierkegaard knew, the aesthetic and "interesting" may often go out.

Most of this still holds to-day; but the great decay of aristocracy—in power, social resources, and estates—has advanced the Queen to a fuller position in the public eye than Bagehot was able to envisage. Not only does the Queen take precedence, officially and formally, in setting the social tone, she also represents the aristocratic spirit and way of life before an audience of the whole nation. In this sense, she has to express the feudal and chivalric element in a peculiarly modern manner. As the Lords diminish, her own influence increases, making her, as it does so, a unique democratic paladin.

Concerning the other great office of the monarchy—its "efficient capacity," as he calls it—Bagehot is far more critical and cautious. He believes that "the post of sovereign over an intelligent and political people under a constitutional monarchy is the post which a wise man would choose above all others—where he would find the intellectual impulses best stimulated and the worst intellectual impulses best controlled." At the same time, he thinks that the likelihood of a "wise man" (in the sense of a sage) being born to the throne is somewhat remote. The education of a prince certainly makes more for honor, or courage, or social style than for wisdom or originality of mind. We should not expect Plato's philosopher-king.

Even so, the monarch can yet claim, in the light of his "efficient capacity," the three rights which Bagehot sets forth: "the right to be consulted, the right to encourage, the right to warn." Naturally, these may be more successfully supplied by an older rather than a younger sovereign. The monarch's office being permanent, while that of the Prime Minister is temporary,

the sovereign may call on a fund of experience not available to his Minister. A King who has sat some score years on the Throne will have seen Cabinets come and go, observing their respective successes and mistakes. The sum of this knowledge he can make over to his Prime Minister if he thinks fit to do so. But, again, this will depend on the kingly individual, his discernment and discretion, or lack of them.

The function, rights, and duties of the monarch are nowhere defined in tabular fashion. The office of the monarchy follows no written constitution in Britain. All goes by a subtle balance of precedence and initiative—a theme, so to speak, with individual variations. "There is," writes Bagehot, "no authentic explicit information as to what the Queen can do, any more than of what she does. . . . That secrecy is, however, essential to the utility of English royalty as it now is . . . royalty is to be revered, and if you begin to poke about you cannot reverence it. When there is a select committee on the Queen, the charm of royalty will be gone. Its mystery is its life. We must not let in daylight upon magic." Bagehot's words are still cogent to-day; and one wishes that this particular passage was framed on the walls of every British newspaper-office. Journalists rightly ask for color, but their brash and over-familiar touch rubs off the powder from many filmy wings. Must a popular press continually imply an offence to privacy?

Yet Bagehot, after his own lucid fashion, does explore this mystery for us. In the two brilliant chapters of *The English Constitution*, he penetrates the regal labyrinth, neither as worshipper nor iconoclast, but rather as a critical assessor. He balances the books of monarchy; and finds, at the end, a sum in credit. More might be said for the Crown at present than Bagehot said in Victoria's time. But what he wrote is a minimal defense—a statement of the case on its lowest assessment. Those who have not entertained his arguments, and countered them successfully, should be ruled out of court as critics of the Throne.