

## Brief Lives of the English Monarchs

*From William the Conqueror to Elizabeth II*

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Kings and queens are the stuff of fairy tales (and games). As such they engage the imagination of the public to a degree unequalled by most other subjects. In the modern age they are truly anachronisms, not to say absurdities, yet they seem to refuse to die, buoyed by public acclaim. They seem to speak to something in us.

The story is of the English monarchy partitioned into 39 separate stories making up a transversal quilt spanning almost a thousand years. The author chooses to start with William the Conqueror and the battle of Hastings in 1066, which retrospectively is seen as a pivotal year in English history when the Nation was forged out of Anglo-Saxon and Norman elements in an age when the original nation was on the verge of being swallowed by Viking conquests. The story is of course more complicated and less clear cut. William was not a stranger coming from nowhere, the feudal lords of Europe knew no national boundaries, partly because no nations had yet been formed, let alone well delineated boundaries to define them geographically, but their influences seeped across and diffused indiscriminately. There was Edward the Confessor an English Monarch with relatives on both sides of the channel, and the expedition by William was not an adventurous foray across the sea but a claiming of a rightful deed and title.

Feudal Europe was an anarchy of feuding war-lords, arranged hierarchically bound by oath of loyalty and fealty, but subject to constant rearrangements and shifting alliances. Those who were the most ruthless and charismatic tended to carry the day, although their conquests and accomplishments were never secure beyond their deaths. To become a King was to prove oneself worthy of respect and obedience and to demonstrate the power to protect. The social phenomenon is still observable in the modern age, although usually on a smaller scale. Yet, somebody like Saddam Hussein fits the bill, and had he lived in another age, and would his ruthlessness have prevailed, he would no doubt be looked up upon as a hero long after his death. The succession of rulers hailed as kings makes up a sorry list of viciousness, some of it effective and successful, some of it merely empty and vengeful. Thus it is exceedingly hard to remember the different personages, in spite of colorful adjectives and striking juxtapositions of the same. It is all but a Brownian motion of triumph and defeat one following the other seemingly randomly and haphazardly. One thing is interesting to observe, namely the struggle to conceive of some formal rules of guidance. What makes power legitimate? One, or maybe the one pivotal question of political science throughout the ages. Ultimately power is based on might, but real might usually does not make itself explicitly manifest. There is the legitimacy conferred by consensus, usually expressed through election among a charmed circle. Some nations have chosen this method of succession, others have formed the more formal notion of right by birth to transcend mere human whim. The English nation was founded on the latter,

and a careful study of the interrelations between successive monarchs reveals an almost continuous thread, whose interruptions are in the nature of rewinding the tape a few generations and choosing a parallel branch.

Among the medieval kings, two might stand out in public memory (at least that of the reviewer), namely Richard I of the Lions Heart engaged in far-away Crusades against infidels and his stay-at-home brother and successor King John, humbled by the Magna Charta, the first document set out to limit the power of an abusive monarch. The stories of those kings and others, are by necessity somewhat mythical, the documentary evidence so scarce as to provide less stricture than encouragement to speculation, and may hence indeed be most profitably seen as outright fictional figures their lives and characters embellished by say someone like Shakespeare.

Modern chronology could be said to commence with the advent of Henry VII in 1485, a line of relative usurpation, yet being a direct descendant<sup>1</sup> of Edward III (1313-1377) as was their rival the white rose of the Yorks. Nevertheless such change of power was connected with bloodshed, in this case the blood that was spilled was that of the unpopular Richard III who supposedly had killed his nephews in his unholy quest. Henry VII gave way to Henry VIII, arguably one of the most, if not the most colorful king of the English realm, and whose likeness also graces the cover of the book. The six wives of Henry VIII makes for an arresting story attracting notoriety well beyond the narrow confines of national history. One thing that unites most of the monarchs is sexual license, in addition to their legal wives, of which they sometimes seem to have been quite fond, there is also a bevy of various mistresses and as a result a profusion of bastards for ever barred from succession. In other cultures the natural solution of polygamy was not ruled out, and thus allowing a large breed, often to fight within themselves for eventual ascension. Maybe a more 'democratic' and just system than the rather rigid one imposed by western conventions. Henry VIII was desperate for a male heir, although ironically two of his daughters, Mary and Elizabeth would eventually take turns on the throne, after the sickly male issue had run his course, and the course it took led among other things to the abolishment of papal authority, seemingly based on a sexual whim of the regent. In due time protestantism, be it in the softer version as codified by the Anglican Church, was to prove popular and become a source for future unrest and civil war in the century to follow. Henry VIII might be a good example on which to dwell, once again showing a youthful king starting out with the best of advantages. Of excellent health and athletic prowess, sociable, good-looking, intelligent, well-read, energetic, brave, artistically gifted, only to eventually run to seed, no doubt corrupted by the sweetness of power unrestrained. In fact about half of the kings start out as paragons of virtue and health only to degenerate into vice and obesity, the other half seem to start on as weaklings, going from bad to worse.

The next discontinuity appeared when the childless Elizabeth designated James VI of Scotland as her heir. Once again it is hard to figure out why exactly him given the pedigrees of a number of potential contenders. He turned out to be the son of Mary Queen of Scots, who like her husband, both were grandchildren of a daughter of Henry VII, thus issues of cousins to Elizabeth. With him the crown of Scotland were united with that of England (and Ireland), and as it would turn out later, when a smaller predator swallows

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<sup>1</sup> As far as paternity can be taken for granted.

a bigger prey, the former becomes eventually part of the latter, rather than the other way around.

The notion of a divine right of a King is of course an ancient one. The pharaohs were perceived as divinities and similarly exalted assessments were the due of a whole hoist of ancient rulers. Of course such notions were not unopposed, Ancient Greece experimented with a kind of limited democracy and for all the accustations of fascism, Plato in his Republic comes down unequivocally against tyranny and the power of one. In Medieval Europe the situation was a bit complicated, kings usually being local warlords and their power fought for and conquered rather than being given. Also the political ascendancy of papal power and the predominance of the Catholic Church did at least insert one impenetrable layer between the Monarch and God, yet slowly the ancient idea of the divine rights of Kings were getting a foothold, and one may say that the 17th and 18th centuries made up the culmination of such. This idea came into forceful conflict with other forces in society, and in no European country more so than in England. So here we had Charles I, son of James I, claiming divine rights and thus getting on badly with the Parliament. Charles I is really the first English Monarch we have a real face on<sup>2</sup>, thanks to the striking portraits of him painted by his court painter - the Flemish import van Dyck. Charles I came to grief, a civil war ensued and he was tried and executed in 1649. An event which was perceived as unique and unprecedented not to say sacrilegious, although the killings of kings have a long pedigree. The reason being that with the execution of Charles, the very idea of divine rights was dramatically flouted. The human institution of Parliament positioned itself higher than any divine court. With the death of Charles there was a temporary hiatus in the succession of British Monarchs, and a republican experiment ensued. However, Oliver Cromwell, although refusing to call himself King, acted as one, and a very authoritarian not to say tyrannical to boot. As Edmund Burke would remark over a century later *a propos* the toppling and execution of Louis XVI, disposing of a king only means replacing him with another regardless if the terminology is preserved or not. The republican experiment does not seem to have been a very successful one, the interlude only survived another two years after the death of Cromwell, before the Monarchy was restored, now the elder son of the beheaded Charles I, assuming the throne as Charles II (and having the body of Cromwell exhumed and beheaded as a petty act of retribution). Charles II was followed by his brother James II, whose more and more catholic leanings made him unpalatable to the majority of his subjects. The restitution was obviously not such a success either and in 1688 James II was hounded out of the country and replaced by a dual monarch consisting of his daughter Mary and her husband and cousin William from Holland. In a sense one may claim that the Dutch conquered England, although of course unlike 1066 (and even then it is not quite so clear cut) this invasion was one of the few instances of a truly invited one. Now after 1688 the monarchs of England would only hold ceremonial roles, although of course William III was an able man with ambitions of joining the combined Protestant forces of England and Holland to contain the continental might of the French, but of this the English showed little enthusiasm. In many ways 1688 was a watershed, often referred to retroactively as the Glorious revolution. After that the English monarchs would only have

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<sup>2</sup> Of course the likenesses of Henry VIII and his daughters, especially Queen Elizabeth are legion as well, but somehow not to the same immediate degree.

ceremonial roles, a development which became more or less universal by the 19th century, when the ruling of modern states became a far too complicated business not to be relegated to the professionals, even when the constitutions gave the kings a wide latitude as to their exercise of power. Thus the continued chronicle becomes one of insipidity occasionally dipping into debauchery.

Quenn Mary died a few years afterwards, survived by her father biding his time on the continent, and fifty years later a descendant (Prince Bonnie) would make an ill-advised and failed expedition to Scotland in order to reestablish his inheritance, at least the Scottish one. Her husband reigned a few more years, and then the throne was passed on to her sister Anne as the couple had left no issue. Neither did Anne, and when she died in 1714 by a strange quirk of dynastic logic, the princely state of Hanover and England were joined in a Royal union. George was connected to the British royal family tree as being a great grandchild of James I, and considered the closest Protestant relative of Queen Anne, the Catholic relayives being banned from the throne. He did not speak English, and he spent more time in his principdom in Germany than in England. The entite 18th century and a third of the 19th would be dominated by Georgian kings, the most interesting being the third with his bouts of a very specific mental disturbance<sup>3</sup> At the death of William IV, the Hanoverian reign came to an end, or rather to a split, as Hanover did not recognize female descendants. So in England the 19th century would be dominated by the symbol of Queen Victoria, while the Hanoverian kingdom with a male heir heeded a different fate eventually becoming subsumed in the emerging German Reich. Queen Victoria was an insipid head of state indeed, a grandmotherly presence (and in fact she ended up being grandmother to most of the European kings and emperos of the end of that century) who apparently always spoke English with a slight German accent. With her we come to the modern age, and about her successors, the less said the better in their inexorable march towards new levels of insipidity.

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<sup>3</sup> Not psychological in nature but due to a very specific metabolic disfunction whose less significant, if startling symptom was a strange discolorment of the urine.