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The Eagle and the Crown: Americans and the British Monarchy

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Author:

Frank Prochaska

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Adam I. P. Smith

In early 1840, the New York lawyer and diarist George Templeton Strong noted that the newspapers were obsessed with commentary and speculation about the upcoming wedding of Queen Victoria. All this was 'doubtless very interesting and important to her Majesty's loyal subjects?', wrote Strong huffily, but 'to us republicans is, or ought to be, rather dull and profitless' (p. 50). As Frank Prochaska emphatically demonstrates in this witty and engaging book, whether or not Americans 'ought' to be fascinated by the royal family, they frequently have been.

If it seems paradoxical that, more than 200 years after their successful rebellion against the Crown, the British royal family retains a hold on the American imagination, Professor Prochaska's book offers some explanations. The book opens by arguing that reverence for the monarchy was so embedded in colonial American culture that, for many, republicanism was embraced only with reluctance. George III had once been revered by his American subjects and, even once the war with Britain was underway and the breach had become irreparable, many still harboured monarchical sentiments. 'Contrary to opinion widespread in America today,' Prochaska writes, 'the Founding Fathers were not averse to kingship, at least of the undespotic, limited variety' (p. 13). Pragmatism rather than principle was the underpinning of the republic, he suggests 'the influence of Paine notwithstanding. More than that, some Americans were unable to conceptualise how the new nation could function without the magic of royalty as a binding agent' and so

Federalists lavished levées and lavish dinners on that most unlikely of surrogate kings, George Washington.

Prochaska is certainly right to recognise that this is an argument which runs contrary to popular historical consciousness in the United States, and even, to some extent, to the prevailing historiography on the Revolution, much of which continues to emphasise its radicalism.⁽¹⁾ He does seem to me, however, to capture an important truth about the enduring conservatism of the new republic, or at least of important sub-cultures within it. In perhaps the most interesting chapters in the book, which cover the 19th century, Prochaska traces the cautious rapprochement between Americans and the monarchy in the decades immediately following the Revolution, the reverence shown by many Americans towards the monarch dubbed by some 'America's Queen,' and the reciprocal fascination between the United States and the future Edward VII. Victoria's Golden and Diamond Jubilees were seemingly celebrated with almost as much enthusiasm in America as in the British Empire, while the Queen's death in 1901 was marked by tolling bells and days of mourning across the United States. The second half of the book covers the 20th century and beyond. It deals with the familiar but enduringly fascinating story of the abdication crisis, the role of the royal family in solidifying the American alliance in the world wars, the warmth shown towards Queen Elizabeth, especially on her 1976 visit to mark the bicentennial of the Declaration of Independence, and, inevitably, the immense impact of Princess Diana, both in life and death.

Perhaps the inevitable risk of making a trenchant argument, as Prochaska does here, is the occasional exaggeration. Certainly, his fondness for generalisations about the 'American people' as a whole will raise the occasional eyebrow. 'Brought up on monarchical idols,' Prochaska writes, 'Americans continued to succumb to their idolatry' (p. 25). Such sweeping statements have the effect of obscuring the very important question of how different groups in American society constructed differing, and, in some cases, rival, images of the monarchy, and more generally of Britain. In fairness, however, this is not a book solely about American images of the monarchy, but about the relationship between the Crown and the United States. Some of the strongest (and, not coincidentally, least speculative) parts of the book concern not the response of Americans to the Crown, but the very self-conscious way in which the Royal family and successive British governments have approached such matters as state visits to the United States. The former recognised very early on that building good relations with the American public was shrewd politics. 'To be known in the United States as a friend of democracy,' writes Prochaska of the court of Edward VII, 'was part of the Crown's strategy to subvert anti-monarchical republicanism at home' (p. 113). Such an approach dovetailed with the diplomatic needs of British governments wanting to generate support or sympathy with Britain.

On one level, this book traces the role of the royal family in the creation and consumption of celebrity culture. Throughout Victoria's reign, American newspapers and periodicals expressed an insatiable appetite for royal tittle-tattle, from discussion of the 'foxy mustachios' sported by the Queen's consort to the utter sensation created by the Prince of Wales' visit to the United States in 1860. The concern with physical appearances and personalities and with the 'soap opera' of births, marriages and deaths, is, as Prochaska shows, not a recent phenomenon but dates back to the very early years of the Republic. Even as Americans embraced democracy, as they boasted to visitors of their egalitarian culture, and as they cheered the heroes of republican revolutions in Europe in 1848, it was still the case, Prochaska argues, that 'royalty dazzled and provided an enthralling, if remote, dimension to life in a country with more space than tradition' (p. 37). The whiff of glamour attached to even the most undashing monarchs such as George VI as well as the utter devotion shown to more obvious candidates like Princess Diana, seems to suggest that there is something inherent in royal titles which has secured successive generations of British monarchs and their families an automatic place in the pantheon of those whose lives have been idolised, dissected and romanticised in the American media.

On another level, this book raises a much larger, and in a way, more surprising and interesting question, about what the apparent American fascination with the royal family tells us about the political culture of the United States. On this subject, Prochaska makes some potentially provocative claims. His core point is that the British monarchy has always 'before, during and since the Revolution' been 'part of America's conversation about itself' (p. xii). Prochaska's pithiest encapsulation of this idea is his claim that 'the Loyalists lost in the Revolution but had their revenge in the republic' (p. 202). While he concedes that 'few,

if any, Americans wanted a hereditary monarchy at home? (p. 107), he also claims that 'echoes of Loyalism' (p. 37) resonated long after the Revolution. There is, perhaps, an uncertain dividing line between celebrating a foreign monarch and a sense that a constitutional, hereditary head of state had some political advantages. It is fairly uncontroversial to point out that the social mobility of 19th-century America brought with it insecurity; Prochaska's contribution is to link this sense of instability to a yearning for the certainties of hierarchy and Americans' own monarchical past. As is well known, there has always been a powerful anti-aristocratic discourse in American politics. Prochaska deals very well with the ironic juxtaposition of this tradition with a yearning for leaders who magically transcend the ordinariness of citizen-politicians. As he shows, the Whitmanesque dream of a pure democracy has curiously co-existed, perhaps in symbiosis, with a tendency to search for kingly qualities in leaders.

The interpretation of 19th-century America presented in this book is one which would have been instantly recognisable to those contemporary British commentators who shared Macaulay's quotable, if misleading, view that the American constitution was 'all sail and no anchor' and who noted the apparent hypocrisy of republican Americans obsessing about status and wealth even while they rejected the outward trappings of a British-style class system. The notion that if Britain was, in a sense, a republic disguised as a monarchy, then America was a monarchy disguised as a republic is not a wholly original one, but Prochaska probably elaborates the American side of that equation better than any previous scholar. At least, he finds quote after quote which re-emphasises not only the fascination with the royal family as celebrities, but a respect for the political function of the monarchy which seemed to reflect an awareness of something lacking in the American republic. 'Had Queen Victoria been on the throne, instead of George III,' wrote William M. Evarts, Secretary of State under President Hayes in what, for Prochaska, is an exemplary expression of the benign view of a Victorian American, 'our rebellion' would not have been necessary, and had there been any rebellion at all, it would have been on the part of England' (p. 82).

Such comments suggest, Prochaska argues, that the break with Britain was 'less absolute than is widely assumed' (p. 200). He captures the almost physical attraction that many Americans from General Grant to Harriet Beecher Stowe felt when they visited the 'Old Country' – the 'thrill and pulsation of kindred' Stowe called it. That sense of racial kinship was often rooted in a religious sensibility – the idea of Britain and the United States as fellow Protestant nations, similarly endowed by God with a transcendent, perhaps redemptive, purpose. This, presumably, is part of what explains the effusiveness of Arthur Cleveland Coxe, the Rector of Grace Church in Baltimore, who apparently wrote after a visit to the House of Lords, of all places, that 'I defy anyone to look at the Throne of England without veneration' (p. 51). While recent scholarship has rediscovered the late Victorian British preoccupation with 'Anglo-Saxon' racial ideology it is still less common to view this question from the American perspective despite the wealth of evidence which suggests that Americans were equally susceptible to such ideas, and, in this regard, Prochaska's book is helpful.⁽²⁾ In 1897, the *New York Tribune* hailed Victoria as 'a Queen of our own race and blood, the head of a sister nation, the titular ruler of the elder half of our own people, who are one with us in spirit, in sympathy, in ambition, and in destiny' (p. 100). A plethora of similar sentiments could be found – and there are many in this book.

Such purple prose raises the question of how far admiration for the British monarchy correlated with a wider cultural or political affinity with England. One might imagine that images of the monarchy reflected this divide fairly straightforwardly, but this does not appear to have been the case. George Templeton Strong, who I quoted at the start of this review, was cited by Prochaska to illustrate a metropolitan scepticism about the relevance of the British royal family to the American republic. Yet, far from being a typical Anglophobe, Strong was a Whiggish Episcopalian banker proud of his English ancestry. He was the kind of person, in other words, who was reliably pro-British in his cultural prejudices and even in his political views. Notwithstanding the lukewarm support for the Union cause by the Palmerston government during the Civil War, it was men like Strong who despaired of what they saw as the baleful consequences of unrestricted suffrage and the cultural debasement of Catholic Irish immigrants – and envied the stability, moderation and liberalism of mid-Victorian Britain.

Overall, it is probably fair to say that Prochaska's approach tends to overstate the extent of American

enthusiasm for the British monarchy in the Victorian era while simultaneously downplaying Anglophobia as a political and cultural force. Blaming England for all America's ills and seeing internal threats to the republic as always emanating from perfidious Albion was not just the default position of Catholic Irish immigrants, it was a reliable electoral tactic throughout the 19th century, indulged in by politicians of all parties. Meanwhile, the hostility often provoked by anyone (British or not) who was perceived to be putting on aristocratic airs is well known – one thinks, for example, of the bloody riot in New York City in 1849 inadvertently provoked by the actor William Charles Macready who (ironically, given his republican sympathies) became the victim of a rowdy working-class political culture which was not only Anglophobic but virulently republican. Strong's case reminds us, however, that an antagonism towards England on the one hand, and an admiration for it on the other, were not, in practice, antithetical. 19th-century American views of England were laced with the ambiguities characteristic of a post-colonial nation. Even as Republican newspapers baited Britain for what they saw as its tacit support for the Confederacy, the preoccupation with British opinion and with British affairs was revealing. In 1863, even in the midst of the Civil War, the *New York Tribune*, edited by the sometimes showily Anglophobic Horace Greeley, found five or six full columns to run a respectful multi-part obituary of the Tory Lord Chancellor, Lord Lyndhurst, who had been born John Singleton Copley, son of the portrait painter, on Beacon Hill in Boston before the Revolution. The whole implication of the coverage was that Lyndhurst's success at the heart of the British establishment somehow reflected glory back onto the country of his birth, a place he had left at the age of one. More generally, one cannot read mid 19th-century American newspapers without being aware of how far Britain served as a historical and contemporary reference point. Lincoln's transgressions of civil liberties were assessed in the light of Cromwell's; emancipation was debated with reference to the experience of the British Empire; American artists and writers were judged by their success on the other side of the Atlantic.

One valuable service of this book, then, is to remind us of the value of examining the United States in the first century or so of its existence through the lens of its rootedness in an imagined England. This transnational perspective allows us to reflect on the differences and the similarities between the bourgeois, Protestant-dominated cultures of the two countries. The 'invisible immigrants' from the Protestant parts of the British Isles clearly had a disproportionate influence on the culture of their new home, but to label the United States 'Victorian' is also to emphasise not only the importance of the Anglo-American connection but also, ultimately, America's provincial status. Although several influential historians of 19th-century America have made similar arguments in the past, it is probably true to say that this is still not a perspective that has had the influence on historical scholarship on the 19th-century United States that it should have done.⁽³⁾

If the Victorian era offers fertile terrain for a transatlantic perspective on American culture, this is progressively less true of the 20th century. Clearly the dynamic in the relationship between the Crown and America altered with the shifting balance of power between the UK and the USA which took place by mid-century and Prochaska is at his most deft when discussing the political strategies pursued by Buckingham Palace in this context. The King and Queen's visit to the United States in 1939, for example, is very effectively tied into the wider story of the anxiety of the British government to secure American support in the coming conflict with Nazi Germany. The material on American responses to the royal family in the 20th century, is, however, slightly less convincing than the earlier parts of the book because the generalisations essential to this kind of argument become harder and harder to sustain, especially in the post-war period. Is there, as he suggests, a common thread, connecting and explaining American reactions to Queen Caroline and Princess Diana, or are they, alternatively, part of different stories? Prochaska is convinced that continuity is more important than discontinuity in this context and, implicitly at least, this leads him to a tacit endorsement of the view of scholars like Samuel P. Huntingdon that, despite multiculturalism, American culture retains a core of 'Anglo-Protestant' values.

Whether or not the British monarchy retains its own special relationship with the American people, this is a book which offers an interesting and in some ways revealing sidelight on American political culture. As Prochaska – rightly, in my view – points out, Americans have dreaded, as well as being drawn to, change; their faith in the future has always been balanced by a 'devotion to precedent, a love of ancient ritual, a

toleration of inherited privilege, a fondness for dynastic families, a regard for titles, and deference to their head of state? (p. 204). It is for this insight, even more than for its delightfully readable quality, that this book should be welcomed.

The author is content with this thoughtful review and does not wish to comment on it.

Notes

1. The paradigmatic book in this context is, Gordon Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York, NY, 1991). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Duncan Bell, *Greater Britain: Empire and the Future of World Order, 1860?1900* (Princeton, NJ, 2007). See [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. *Victorian America*, ed. Daniel Walker Howe (Philadelphia, PA, 1976). [Back to \(3\)](#)

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