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Buckingham Palace and the (re)invention of tradition(s): the flag, the gate, and the balcony

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ABSTRACT: At a time when Britain/the United Kingdom is mentally heading towards yet another royal succession, I will be looking briefly at three examples provided in recent decades by Buckingham Palace as the official seat of the British Head of State and thus a space deeply invested with historical, institutional, and symbolic meaning(s); a space where, at different times, and in changing contexts and circumstances, arcane traditions and all their attending rituals and conventions keep on being invented, enacted, and performed.

KEYWORDS: Buckingham Palace, British monarchy, Royal Family, the monarchy and the media, Royal symbols and traditions.

RESUMO: Num momento em que a Grã-Bretanha/o Reino Unido se prepara mentalmente para uma nova sucessão régia, comentarei rapidamente três exemplos facultados, em décadas recentes, pelo Palácio de Buckingham enquanto residência oficial do Chefe de Estado britânico e, por conseguinte, um espaço profundamente investido de sentido(s) histórico(s), institucional(is) e simbólico(s); um espaço onde, em épocas diversas e em contextos e circunstâncias variáveis, tradições vetustas e todos os rituais e convenções a elas adjacentes continuam a ser inventados, encenados e representados.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Palácio de Buckingham, Monarquia britânica, Família Real, a monarquia e os media, símbolos e tradições reais.

The existence or subsistence of monarchies in the 21st century remains, as we know, a debated issue and, unsurprisingly, one sometimes heavily tinged with ideology, notwithstanding the scientific rigour and objectivity required and expected of anyone academically involved in studies of royalty. Often criticized as outdated, anachronic, almost “feudal”, and certainly elitist,² monarchies, even constitutional ones, can be derided as to some extent “undemocratic”, if only in the sense that monarchs are not elected and voted for (or against, for that matter!). In the words of a socialist historian,

It is the inevitable function of a constitutional monarchy to act as a brake and therefore to slow down the process of political and economic reform. This is held to be a desirable result. Is it?

(...)

There is something to be said for conservatism (...); there is much to be said for radical change; the defects of gradual reform are greater than is commonly supposed — and it is gradual reform which the British constitution and monarchy inevitably promote. (Taylor 1984, 207-208)

In *Down with the Crown* (1999), another A. Taylor has studied the origins and development of British anti-monarchism from the 1790s to Princess Diana’s death (1997), an event to which I shall return at the end. For the time being, however, I would simply note that the hostility against the regime is all too obvious in Graham Smith’s title, *Abolish the Monarchy: Why we should and how we will* (2023).

Conversely, monarchies can be praised and defended for embodying a hazy, timeless sense of historical identity and continuity, to say nothing of their mediatic, touristic, and commercial iconicity and hence their “value” — in every sense of the word (material, cultural, moral, ethical...) — as a merchandising asset and an “invaluable” source of revenue.³ As Krishan Kumar points out: “The monarchy (...) goes up and down in popularity, depending (...) on the day-to-day behaviour of this or that member of the royal family. But most commentators stress the overall commitment, even affection, for the

monarchy as an institution” (2017, 16).⁴ In the Preface to *Royal Fever: The British Monarchy in Consumer Culture*, Cele C. Otnes and Pauline Maclaran wonder:

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What would British consumer culture (...) be like if its Royal Family had never existed? (...) as researchers of consumer behaviour, we focus on how people engage in and with contemporary consumption practices and the goods, services, and experiences associated with this particular monarchy. (2015, xi)

The issue of whether or not the Royal Family is a worthwhile burden on the national budget and public expenditure (due to royal prerogative and privileges, taxation, the Civil List pensions, etc.), as well as the abolition of monarchy itself, lie beyond the scope of this paper, not disregarding the Crown’s laudable efforts to “modernize”, in the “Cool Britannia” of the 1990s.⁵ I will simply quote Laura Clancy, to whom:

(...) media representations of the royal *family* are staged as affective and ideological projects to distance the monarchy from issues of capital and inequalities and ‘produce consent’ (...) in the public imagination, (...) the reproduction of power and privilege happens in tangent with, and through, affective notions of family and other forms of benevolence, belonging and identity in media culture. In sum, the corporate power of monarchy (the Firm) is disguised through media representations of the royal *family* (the Family Firm). (2021, 4-5; see the whole chapter 2, 63-92)

Irrespective of pros and cons, evaluated by social and political journalists, commentators, and academics,⁶ monarchies are obviously anchored on tradition, but, as Eric J. Hobsbawm has shown in his “Introduction” to the volume co-edited with Terence Ranger (1987), traditions can be (re)invented, not merely passed on and immutably perpetuated.⁷ This process ensures that, rather than being “stuck in time”, monarchies, as the living organisms they truly are, can develop and evolve,⁸ adapting and adopting, consciously or unconsciously, their own survival strategies,⁹ and always striving to (seem to) keep in touch with their subjects and their needs, hopes, moods, cares, causes, and concerns. In Hobsbawm’s words, “[i]t is the contrast between the constant change and innovation of the modern world and the attempt to structure at least some parts of social life within it as unchanging and invariant, that makes the ‘invention of tradition’ so

interesting for historians of the past two centuries” (1987, 2); whereas John McCormick argues: “One of the great strengths of the British monarchy (...) is that it has been more adaptable than many of its now-extinct continental European counterparts (...) The adjustments being made (...) are just the latest in a long series (...) it has had to make to meet new styles, expectations, and political realities” (2003, 95).¹⁰ And, as Kate Nicholl recalls, no small part was played by Queen Elizabeth herself (1926-2022),¹¹ whose life Robert Lacey once described as “(...) an obstacle course beset with booby traps” (1977, viii) and whose birth centenary (April 2026) this article seeks to commemorate. Indeed, the sheer length of Elizabeth’s reign (70 years), as well as the multiple and wide-ranging political, social, and cultural transformations that Britain experienced since her accession to the throne (1952), could hardly fail to accommodate change and renewal, a trend which will certainly continue under King William V.

At a time when the United Kingdom is mentally heading towards yet another royal succession, due to Charles III’s failing health, I will be looking briefly at three examples provided in recent decades by Buckingham Palace, considered not in the cold austerity of its architecture,¹² nor in its materiality as a monumental house, but rather in its capacity as the official seat of the British Head of State and thus a space deeply invested with historical, institutional, and symbolic meaning(s); a space where, at different times, and in changing contexts and circumstances, arcane traditions and all their attending rituals and conventions keep on being invented, enacted, and performed; a space now made public, shared, and watched at world level, thanks to the media, social networks, and communicational platforms.

Curiously enough, the same Walter Bagehot (1826-1877) who noted, long ago, that “[w]hen there is a select committee on the Queen [Victoria], the charm of royalty will be gone. Its mystery is its life. We must not let in daylight upon magic” (2001, 54), also wrote: “To be invisible (...) is to be forgotten... To be a symbol, and an effective symbol, you must be vividly and often seen” (qtd in Cannadine 1987, 119).¹³ And *heard*, I would add, considering the now “traditional” royal address at Christmas, broadcast for the first time — and thus “invented” — by George V (1910-1936) in 1932, ten years after the foundation of the BBC (1922).

In Cannadine’s view, “[t]he combination of the novelty of the media and the anachronism of the ceremonial rendered royal ritual both comforting and popular in an age

of change” (1987, 142) and the emerging importance, in the 1930s, of the media and of public image (including *sound*) was famously highlighted and explored in the film *The King’s Speech* (2010), directed by Tom Hooper, featuring Colin Firth, Geoffrey Rush and Helen Bonham-Carter. It would therefore seem sensible to ponder how the (in)visibility of the Crown, with all the complex dialectics it entails, should be managed in(to) a global and hypermediatized 21st century.

Dealing with all these issues would inevitably require a research project much larger than the one suggested in the present article. I will simply focus on the three items contemplated in my “Lewisian” title, but before I do so, I would like to quote a passage of a little book I bought in 1973, when, aged just 14, and fascinated by the historical information provided in the coursebook of the 8th grade, I was starting to ponder doing English Studies at university level: “As the sovereign’s power diminished and the spotlight of communications probed deeply into the everyday life of the Royal Family, so has the job of being sovereign, king or queen, or a member of the family, become more arduous to perform” (Taylor 1971, 1).

THE FLAG

In the gloomy and dramatic days following Princess Diana’s tragic death in Paris (August 1997), while the Royal Family remained in Balmoral, and Kensington Palace was being flooded by a sea of flowers in loving memory of “The People’s Princess”, as Tony Blair, the then recently elected Prime Minister, dubbed her, there was no flag flying at half-mast in Buckingham Palace, a fact largely perceived by the British people as showing lack of feeling, sensitivity, or empathy (if not, as many argued at the time, some semiconscious, unspoken sense of remorse, and moral guilt).¹⁴ Although Diana was no longer part of the Royal Family, having obtained the divorce from Prince Charles (1992), her popularity had risen after Martin Bashir’s interview for *Panorama*, the revelation of Charles’s ongoing affair with the now Queen Camilla Parker-Bowles, and Diana’s own involvement in humanitarian campaigns at world level, including such causes as AIDS/HIV and the landmines left in Angola; furthermore, she had retained the title of Princess of Wales and William, her eldest son, was (and is) in the front line of succession. After a few days of

152 intense public pressure, political advice, and media coverage, the Union Jack finally flew at half-mast.

As Cele C. Otnes and Pauline Maclaran recall, “[t]he Queen was genuinely surprised at the public outcry over her decision not to fly the Royal Standard at half-mast and to treat the death as a *family* tragedy rather than as a *national* matter” (2015, 54; my emphasis). This point is taken up and expanded in a footnote: “The Royal Standard is only flown when the monarch is in residence, and the Queen was at Balmoral (...). It is never flown at half-mast, even when the sovereign dies. In a *compromise move* (my emphasis), the Queen agreed to allow the (...) Union Jack (...) to fly at half-mast (...) on the day of Diana’s funeral” (*idem*).¹⁵ However tactical or tactful this decision may have been, it helped to appease the British public opinion, and to abate the anger targeted at the Windsors.

THE GATE

The comments made might also apply to the planning and management of the Princess’s funeral, from Paris to Westminster Abbey (and finally Allthorp), but this would take us far and away from Buckingham Palace. Suffice it to mention that when Diana’s coffin went past the Palace, it was greeted *outside*, **not** *inside*, the gates by Queen Elizabeth herself, who respectfully lowered her head, thus paying both a personal and an institutional homage to her former daughter-in-law (please see the video below). A decision to stay *inside* the Palace grounds and *behind* its barbed ironwork would have increased, physically as well as symbolically, the distance between the Queen and her subjects; moreover, it might convey an image of Elizabeth as somehow bound by, tied down to, or “caged” within the cold formality of State protocol. From the point of view of political marketing and communication — let alone intuition —, the skilful management of private/royal vs. public/common(er) space helped to draw together crown and country, a bond that had been severely strained in the preceding week.



[YouTube Video Link](#) (4:25)

THE BALCONY

“Yet such is life ...” in sorrow and in joy, in sickness and in health, for better and for worse. Although the tradition of royal appearances on the balcony of Buckingham Palace dates, in fact, from the long Victorian period, its mediatic symbolism was greatly increased after the coronation of George VI (1936) and the famous V-Day celebration (1945), especially on festive occasions (Coronations, Royal engagements, weddings, birthdays, and anniversaries, Trooping the Colour, etc.). The following video recalls some of the most important and significant moments along the way:



[YouTube Video Link](#) (2:28)

As we have just heard, the Queen's decision to ban Harry and Meghan, the Dukes of Sussex, from the balcony in the 2022 Jubilee, rather than a personal punishment inflicted by a grieving grandmother, was a direct outcome of their decision to leave the Royal Family (2020), thus assuming institutional proportions. Once again, as in the examples provided above, in all the speculation about the relationship between the royal brothers, and, finally, in the radical and unprecedented banishment of the former HRH Prince Andrew, Duke of York (now simply Andrew Mountbatten Windsor) from both the Royal Family and the Royal Lodge (2025), state and family affairs strike us as intertwined in (and for) the public eye through mass media communication, broadcast, and protocol. Actually, any soapbox-like incident or scandal involving members of the Royal Family, greedily explored and amplified by the tabloid press, may also play a part in narrowing down popular perceptions of social distance between "them" and "us".¹⁶

Like Edmund Burke (1729-1797) once wrote, "(...) by preserving the method of nature in the conduct of state, in what we improve, we are never wholly new; in what we retain we are never wholly obsolete" (1986, 120). Bearing in mind A. J. P. Taylor's observations, quoted at the beginning, I believe patterns of "gradual reform" to be indeed paramount in English culture and civilization; however, neither *intrinsically negative* nor *necessarily incompatible* — and why should they have to be? — with those of progress and evolution, held dear by the "Whig interpretation of history", famously examined by

Herbert Butterfield (1900-1979) in 1931. To prove the point, two institutional examples from Church and State could be adduced here: firstly, Betty Boothroyd's election as Mrs. Speaker (1992-2000), making her the first Chairwoman of a male-dominated House of Commons; secondly, Bishop Sarah Mullally's nomination, in October 2025, as the new (and first female) Archbishop of Canterbury. To say nothing of King Charles III's and Pope Leo XIV's historical meeting and joint prayer in the Vatican (2025), an event which might be symbolically interpreted as "reforming" the spirit of the Henrician/Anglican Reformation (16th century).

To claim that the three examples discussed above, topical as they admittedly are, have given (or will give) birth to new traditions would perhaps be going too far. Only time will tell, but, as we know, precedents, once invented, can originate and become traditions. The brief comments made on the flag, the gate, and the balcony illustrate not just the British love of pageantry and their celebrated sense of compromise, but also their ability to review, reform, renew, and reshape practices, rites, and conventions, thus helping preserve a "United Queendom".

Queen appears on Buckingham Palace balcony at end of platinum jubilee celebrations – video



[Guardian Piece and Video Link \(1:39\)](#)



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END NOTES

¹ A shorter version of this paper was presented at the International Conference "Queen Elizabeth II: Life, Times, Legacies", held at NOVA FCSH (17th-19th April 2024).

² As Edward Shils points out, "Hereditary monarchies deal with the determination of succession in a simple way; lineage and order of birth prescribe the heir to the throne. Hereditary monarchy is legitimized by the belief that sovereignty resides in a lineage" (1981, 187-188).

³ See Rosen 2003, 39-46 and McCormick 2003, 91-95. A critical view of the topic is put forward in Laura Clancy's introduction and chapter 1 (2021, 1-62); in a lighter but very informative vein, see also Baker, 2020, especially the chapter "On your bike" (pp. 391-404).

⁴ “(...) twenty years after many political and media pundits (...) sounded the death knell for the British monarchy, the institution is alive, well, and demonstrating more momentum than ever before in popular and consumer culture” (Otnes and Maclaran 2015, 283).

⁵ “The Queen (...) made matters worse by opening Buckingham Palace to the public and charging them for entry. She ‘meant well’, of course — as with the previous decision that the Royal Family should start paying income tax. Both moves were thought of as modernisation, or ‘opening up’. But in fact they could only be opening down, levelling things monarchical into a society (...) where greed had eclipsed class. All that was sacred could but be profaned (...) when the idols asked meekly to be costed and tried to put their own price on the mysteries. What they were encountering was former subjects who had (...) half-mutated into citizens (...) in a society still unprogrammed for citizenship” (Nairn 2011, xxi). Despite the time gap, Nairn’s words could be compared with Walter Bagehot’s, quoted in the main text.

⁶ See, for instance, Storry and Childs, eds., 2017, pp. 23-24 and 281-283, namely the views that “[p]erhaps the most enduring stereotypical version of Britain is that which revolves around the idea of monarchy” (23), and “[m]onarchy in Britain is a fact of life. It forms part of Britons’ psychological (...) make-up, if only through the knowledge that people are subjects rather than citizens” (281).

⁷ “Nothing appears more ancient, and linked to an immemorial past, than the pageantry which surrounds British monarchy in its public ceremonial manifestations. Yet, (...) in its modern form it is the product of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. ‘Traditions’ which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented. (...)”

‘Invented tradition’ is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules (...) of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past.” (1987, 1) In order not to stud my text with quotations from Hobsbawm, I suggest the reading of the whole introductory piece” (1-14).

⁸ “To understand how and why monarchy has mattered here, one needs to look not just at tradition and custom, but also at disjunctions and at change over time. (...) The apparent antiquity of monarchy (...) masks considerable discontinuities in terms of evolution and the dynasties involved” (Colley 2014, 44-45). Likewise, in his assessment of Edmund Burke’s political ideas, C. W. Parkin presents society as “(...) an organism whose parts are deeply formed by their common life, with a tempo of change and a cumulative growth of its own. It is a living thing which reaches out into past and future” (1969, 123).

⁹ As Paul Connerton argues, “whenever the social institutions for which ‘old’ traditions were designed begin to crumble under the impact of rapid social change, a widespread and

instant invention of new rituals occurs. The invention of ritual turns out to be both a general problem and a phenomenon of particular interest in post-traditional societies.” (2009, 51)

¹⁰ Andrew Rosen recalls that “[i]n August 1996 it was reported that the most senior members of the royal family had begun to hold regular meetings of what they called The Way Forward Group, at which proposals for the future of the monarchy were discussed. Among the possibilities considered were ending the monarch’s role as head of the Church of England, allowing kings and queens to marry Catholics, allowing female members of the royal family equal rights to the throne, and restricting membership of the royal family to the monarch, the consort, and children and grandchildren who are direct heirs” (2003, 45).

¹¹ “Queen Elizabeth II’s success and popularity is rooted in her ability to adapt and evolve in the modern world. This has not always been straightforward or easy. Circumstances, family tragedies, and scandals (...) have forced her to reinvent the institution of monarchy in order to secure its future” (2022, x) and “[t]here may never be another Platinum Queen, but the modern monarchy she has fashioned over seventy (...) years will live on” (2022, 256).

¹² The former Buckingham House was rebuilt for George IV (1820-1830) from 1825 onwards by John Nash (1752-1835) and later by Edward Blore (1787-1879); the first British monarch to live in the palace was Queen Victoria (1837-1901), whose Memorial stands right opposite (Bahamón 2007, 97).

¹³ “(...) all royal representations are stage-managed and precisely manufactured, and indeed royal visibility is balanced with a paradoxical but co-dependent *in*visibility, to ensure monarchy retains its mystique” (Clancy 2021, 20; this point is taken up on p. 65).

¹⁴ For the suggestion of a possible analogy between the two “hunts” (the stag’s and Diana’s) in the film *The Queen* (2006), see Alarcão, 2011.

¹⁵ See also Jonathan Mayo’s article, recollecting, twenty years on, the week after Diana’s death ([Why didn't Buckingham Palace fly flag half mast for Diana? | Daily Mail Online](#)).

¹⁶ As Antony Taylor puts it, “[b]y demonstrating the fallibility of our ‘betters’ and directing attention towards their failings, they have an implicitly levelling effect that erodes the mystique of monarchy and makes us feel better about ourselves” (1999, 240).

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