

THE MONARCHY FETISH

By T. A. JACKSON

ONE result of the abdication of Edward VIII. was that Republican sentiments were avowed and debated in the House of Commons for the first time for a generation, remarks Mr. Kingsley Martin in his little book, *The Magic of Monarchy*.^{*} But this—though regarded “by most English people as a shocking novelty”—was “a revival, not an innovation.” The practice of surrounding the monarch with a halo of systematically manufactured adulation—a practice which culminates in the notion (seriously advanced by an Archbishop) that the Coronation ceremony actually and in fact turns a human being into something super human, “the *incarnation* of his people”—is far from being an old-established English custom. In actual fact it is a cult which dates no further back than to the days of Disraeli, and the cunning which made him see (and seize) the chance to weld into a triple fetish of compelling power, loyalty to the Queen, pride in the Empire, and faith in the sanity and integrity of the Tory Party.

It was an innovation, resented as a piece of “Petticoat Lane vulgarity” when, in 1876, Disraeli persuaded Parliament to agree to confer upon the Queen the title of “Empress of India.” It was an innovation, tolerated by the general public as much out of politeness to an old lady as on any other ground, when the Party he had trained used the 50th anniversary of Queen Victoria’s accession as the occasion for an elaborate military pageant and organised “national rejoicing.” But, ten years later, the second or “Diamond” Jubilee showed the cult established so firmly that only a rump of the Liberal Party was left to protest, stubbornly, against this new-fangled cult of “Imperialism” with a sacrosanct monarchy as its central symbol, and the Tory Party as its hereditary High-Priests and acolytes.

Mr. Kingsley Martin quotes examples of the extent to which the superstition has gone—letters to the *Times* and the *Telegraph* solemnly suggesting that “there must be something more than mere coincidence in the fact that our uncertain weather has been uniformly favourable on State occasions to his late Majesty King George V.,” and that “the stars were unusually brilliant during King George’s Jubilee week,” and so on. He exposes the way in which sychophantic adulation of the Royal Family and everything connected with them, has been as systematically written

^{*} *The Magic of Monarchy*, by Kingsley Martin. Nelson. 2/6 net.

up, boosted, and bally-hooed in the Press, as anything else the advertising specialists have taken in hand to "sell" to the public.

What he does not notice is the fact that a second generation has grown up which has been accustomed from childhood to regard this sort of sap-headed irrationalism as of the essence of "loyalty"; so much so that nearly every master printer in London believes, rightly or wrongly, that penalties heavy enough to ensure bankruptcy will be his reward if he lends his plant and imprint to the production of any sort of openly avowed Republican propaganda. Three separate master printers have at different times assured the present writer that they were afraid of the consequences of printing statements of a Republican tendency which they believed to be true in point of fact, fair comment on matters of public interest, and quite unobjectionable in their wording, but which, because of their Republicanism, were capable of being represented as an "attack upon the King." Block-makers likewise, within my experience, have refused to engrave cartoons for similar reasons.

It is not only that a superstitious, flunkey-minded attitude towards the institution of monarchy, and towards the persons of the Royal Family has spread among the public at large in Britain. What has to be faced is that this attitude has been deliberately created by the Tory Party, by the financial oligarchy behind the Tory Party and the "National" Government. And by that large and powerful section of the Civil Service bureaucracy which is allied to both bodies, through the instrumentality of every agency for influencing public opinion which these forces have at command—the pulpit, the schools, the Press and the cinema—reinforced covertly, by the carefully-spread fear of drastic legal penalties awaiting non-compliance with this cult.

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The extent to which the evil has gone can be estimated from the extent to which the Labour movement has become tainted with it.

When in the early 70's of the last century a definite Republican movement sprang up in Britain—(between the breakdown of the First International, after the Commune, and the revival of a specifically Socialist movement in 1882-3)—the leading trade unionists of Britain, led by George Odger, took their places on its platform side by side with Charles Bradlaugh. When the Democratic Federation (afterwards the Social Democratic Federation) was founded in 1881, it put the abolition of the monarchy at the head of its programme quite as a matter of course. Keir Hardie, equally as a matter of course, opposed grants to Royalty from the floor of the House of Commons in 1893.

By the time the Labour Party first appeared in force in the House of Commons in 1906, a change had come over the leadership. The Fabian Society had become avowedly Imperialist. Philip Snowden and Ramsay MacDonald, long before either of them found his way to the Treasury

Bench, vied with each other in assuring the public that Socialism and Monarchy were quite compatible with each other—that, in fact, a popular and humane-minded monarch might be an invaluable aid in overcoming the prejudices of the reactionary interests. In the '70's, a music-hall comedian could and did include in a list of incredible things that might happen if ever he "ceased to love," the prospect of the Queen having Odger "as a second-floor lodger."

To-day it is a mere commonplace for a trade union leader or a Labour politician to accept from the Crown the knighthood that Odger and Bradlaugh would have spurned, or the peerage that even Gladstone begged, respectfully, to be allowed to decline.

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What is the explanation for this reversion to superstition? How is it that even the Labour movement has become corrupted, and to the extent it has?

A remark of Engels gives us the clue. Writing to Bernstein on March 24, 1884, he says:

The liberal constitutional-monarchy is an adequate form of bourgeois domination: (1) at the beginning when the bourgeoisie have not quite finished with absolute monarchy, and (2) at the end when the proletariat has already made the democratic republic too dangerous. And yet the democratic republic always remains the last form of bourgeois domination, that in which it is broken to pieces.—*Selected Correspondence of Marx and Engels* (Martin Lawrence) p. 435.

Disraeli's manœuvre—his annexation of the Crown as the political property of the Tory Party, his elevation of the Empire to the status of a fetish, and his initiation of an irrational emotional cult around these symbols—came at a critical moment. On the one side economic needs were making absolutely indispensable a monopoly-grip upon sources of supply of raw materials, upon markets for disposal of manufactured products, upon areas for investment and exploitation, and upon the means of communication between them. On the other, the growth of the proletariat, not only in numbers and in organisation, but in understanding and in militancy, was a possibility which threatened the whole process of Empire organisation. And, capable of serving as a decisive ally of the proletariat in its class-struggle, was the whole body of the militant, Radical, Republican petit bourgeoisie.

Increasingly, after 1870, British capitalism, spurred on by the competition of the rival capitalisms of the Continent and the U.S.A., turned its attention to the annexation and development of Africa. Gladstone's Government of 1880-1885, the last stand of old-style, individualist-reformist, anti-Imperialist, Liberalism, came to grief largely because it found itself at every turn entangled in questions of Empire, in the Transvaal and Zululand, in Egypt, in Afghanistan, in the Sudan, and in Ireland. Save for their transient triumph in 1893-5—a hollow victory

which was really a defeat, since only with the votes of the disunited Irish party were the Liberals in a majority—Liberalism went into permanent opposition until the landslide of 1906. And that, in its turn, marked the completeness of the change, since the neo-Liberalism was now avowedly Imperialist.

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One aspect of the organised idolatry which began with the Jubilee of 1887, and bids fair to break all records at the Coronation of 1937, must be stressed. The whole cult has been organised, systematically and deliberately, as a defence of the existing order against a double-danger : (1) A predatory attack upon the British Empire by a rival Empire ; (2) A revolutionary attack—whether by the home proletariat, by the subjected colonial peoples, or by both together—upon the social order which monarchism and imperialism symbolise.

When, at the Coronation, a large part in the procession will be taken by military display in which colonial contingents and contingents from the Dominions are prominent, the purpose goes far beyond providing the public with a display of varigated and novel uniforms. It continues the practice of previous displays—especially of the second Victorian Jubilee, which heralded the Boer War—the practice originated in 1878, where Disraeli strained the law and the constitution on the pretext of a tension in the Eastern Question, to concentrate at Malta 8,000 troops transported from India. It had its effect. Disraeli had not studied the methods of P. J. Barnum for nothing. He literally “advertised” the British Empire as the Greatest Show on Earth. The new imperialism gave a new word to the language. For it was during this “crisis” that the Great MacCormack first sang “we don’t want to fight but by jingo if we do !” from which inspiring ballad “Jingoism” derives its name.

The whole cult of royalism plus the pageantry with which on occasion it is organised, serves the two-edged purpose of war-preparation. First the monarch is advertised in every possible way as the embodiment of every possible bourgeois virtue—one who would be the last person in the world to “want to fight.” Then, on ceremonial occasions, that same monarch is revealed, as it were by accident, as possessed of enormous and incalculable military resources—(by jingo ! *if we do fight !*). So on one side the monarch makes a personal “heart” appeal to every “sucker” within reach of the propaganda, and on the other “his-and-our” Empire is revealed as the Greatest Show on Earth, well worth fighting for, and virtually invincible.

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That the whole cult is a deliberate humbug was revealed in the case of Edward VIII. In one week the people of Britain were taught that Edward was (1) likely to be the greatest and best-balanced monarch the country ever had ; and (2) an undesirable which the country was well

rid of. Nothing could better have revealed the fact that monarchism provides the financial oligarchy who rule the British Empire with just the camouflage they want for concealing the reality of their rule, and just the apparatus they want, on occasion, for over-riding, or side-tracking the "democratic will of the people."

Edward VIII did not fit in to the façade. He was bored by routine and Court retainers, wouldn't go to church and wanted to marry the girl he fancied. No errand boy who didn't suit was ever so easily sacked.

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But if that is the true reading of the case, surely, by now, the working-class movement of the country can take the hint?

In the days when England was the England of traditional glory, such sychophantic imbecility as is now evidenced on every side—when the combination of colours, red-white-and-blue, is popularly supposed to be, by Divine ordinance, specially British, regardless of the fact that it is also "national" to France, Holland, Czecho-Slovakia, Yugo-Slavia, the U.S.A., Guatemala, and a few other South American Republics, to say nothing of Tsarist Russia—would have been laughed to scorn. The Elizabethans tolerated (and flattered) "Good Queen Bess" because the alternative was a bloody scramble between greedy merchants and kulak-aristocrats. The men of the 17th century abandoned a Republic only because an intensifying class-strife made a monarchy the form of government which divided the possessing classes least, and gave them their best common front against the common people. If, contrary to all contemporary expectations, Victoria was not Britain's last monarch, it was from a parallel cause—the fear of the common people, reinforced by the need of maintaining the Empire against its rivals as a means of maintaining capitalism at its heart and centre.

When monarchy ceases to be a camouflage behind which a predatory oligarchy can best organise its defences, external and internal, monarchy itself can be sacked as Edward VIII was sacked, and the attempt made to substitute Fascist leader-worship for monarchy fetish-worship. That is why the struggle for a democratic republic is a part of the struggle for democracy itself.

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