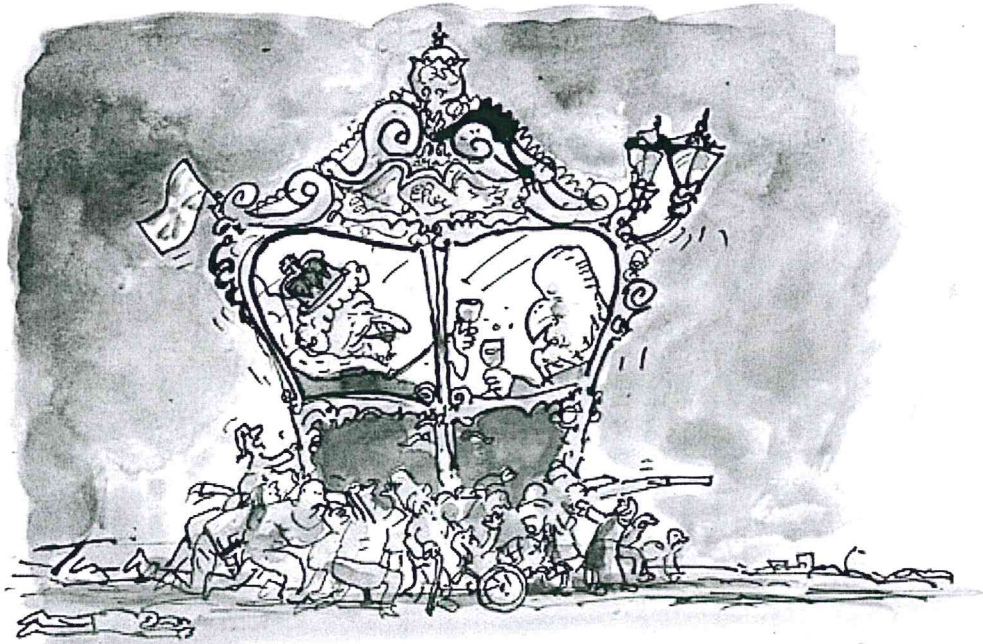


The royal tradition invented

Judith Orr shows how most of the supposedly ancient traditions of the British monarchy were developed in the 19th century to bolster up the capitalist state and empire

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(Pic: Tim Sanders)

Every royal anniversary or wedding is met with an outpouring of drivel about the ancient rituals of the monarchy and its ceremonies.

We are asked to stare in wonder at the horsedrawn carriages, ermine, jewelled crowns and tiaras straight out of children's fairy tales.

But this whole notion of age-old traditions of the royal family is bogus.

Royalty today bears little resemblance to when monarchs actually ruled.

In 1609 King James I told parliament, "Kings are justly called gods, because they exercise a manner of resemblance to divine power on earth... and to make of their subjects like men at chess."

Most people now would consider it is absurd that we should be governed by people whose only qualification is an accident of birth.

But we are encouraged to make an exception for the royal family, which is portrayed as a symbol of continuity in a society unchanged for centuries.

The fact that this continuity was broken by a revolution which saw a king, Charles I, executed in 1649 is conveniently ignored. But it is hard to imagine a sharper break in the historical process than the king's head being cut off by his own subjects.

The monarchy managed to force its way back, but only through a compromise with parliament.

When King James II tried to reintroduce absolute monarchy parliament removed him in the "Glorious Revolution" of 1688. Since then there has been no doubt who is in charge.

At first the new rulers were very pleased with how innovative and revolutionary they were. But they soon changed their attitude.

"The English bourgeoisie has erased even the memory of the revolution of the 17th century, and recast its entire past in the form of 'gradual changes'," as the Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky put it.

Tradition

Creating a new tradition of monarchy went along with this.

The monarchy no longer wields any independent power, but it continues to serve a useful function for the ruling class in perpetuating the idea of unchanging authority.

Much of what we told of ancient rituals are in fact quite modern and rooted in the period of Queen Victoria's reign in the second half of the 19th century.

Capitalism had brought immense changes to Britain, and its ruling class was consolidating its power in an empire that stretched round the globe. But most ordinary people gained no benefits from this and didn't see it as anything to do with them.

Public anger at the ruling class and the monarchy reached a peak during the middle of Queen Victoria's reign.

In March 1864, a protester even stuck a notice on the railings of Buckingham Palace that announced "these commanding premises to be let or sold in consequence of the late occupant's declining business".

The prime minister William Gladstone thought that a popular royal family could help legitimise the class structure of British society.

Royal advisors and politicians threw themselves into the effort to relaunch the monarchy during this period.

The empire became a central feature of royal ceremonies. Queen Victoria was given the title "Empress of India". Representatives from the colonies were shipped in to demonstrate the global power of the British state.

The royal family was portrayed as a symbol of the nation, as being the essence of "Britishness"—although their surname, Hanover Saxe-Coburg Gotha, is a clue to their German roots.

It had to be quickly dropped when the First World War broke out. Scrabbling for an alternative, they plumped for adopting the name of one of their castles—Windsor.

From the end of Victoria's reign every royal event was seized on for its ability to become a popular spectacle.

Royal funerals with the procession and gun carriages, even the continued use of horsedrawn carriages after they had ceased to be the conventional form of travel, was contrived to add to the mystique.

In the 20th century the establishment became adept at using the broadcast media to promote royal mythology. The very first Christmas message was broadcast on the radio in 1932.

The coronation in 1953 showed how television offered new opportunities to popularise the royal family.

The televised investiture of Charles as the Prince of Wales in 1969 was a ridiculous pantomime of fake ceremony and costumes, with coats of arms made of plastic and polystyrene. The whole "traditional" ceremony was designed by Lord Snowdon.

Today the royals try and push the myth that whatever the formal trapping they are really just an ordinary family working hard to represent Britain.

Karl Marx wrote that "All mythology subdues, controls and fashions the forces of nature in the imagination and through imagination; it disappears therefore when real control over these forces is established."

Some of the mythology may remain. But the ruling class cannot be complacent.

They cannot assume that this will distract people from their distrust of the political establishment.

The jubilee will not stop millions questioning the right of a privileged elite to dictate austerity to majority of ordinary people.