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## **King Edward VIII Transcript**

Date: Tuesday, 14 March 2017 - 6:00PM

Location: Museum of London

14 March 2017

## King Edward VIII

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This is the fourth in a series of six lectures on British monarchs from Queen Victoria to the present day. This lecture is on Edward VIII, the only king to have voluntarily abdicated from the throne, and this abdication was the most serious crisis faced by the monarchy in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and because of it, 1936, the year when Edward came to the throne and the year when he abdicated, was the “year of the three kings”. I think not since 1066 have we seen three kings in one year. But in a sense, the abdication was not a crisis but a resolution of a crisis because the crisis was caused by the desire of Edward VIII to marry Mrs Simpson, who had been twice divorced, and at the time, it was thought that the abdication might damage the monarchy, but in fact, it left it virtually unscathed, though I suspect it is seen by the Royal Family as a traumatic event never to be repeated.

I think it is fair to say that the abdication continues to fascinate people, and I wonder why that is so. A man called Tom Jones, who was Deputy Cabinet Secretary in the 1920s and then, in the 1930s, very close to Stanley Baldwin, who was Prime Minister at the time of the abdication, Tom Jones wrote this in his diary at the time. He said: “We invest our rulers with qualities which they do not possess, and we connive at the illusion, those of who know better, because monarchy is an illusion that works.” But I think there is also a rather more prosaic reason, a constitutional reason, that we are interested in it, because the essence of monarchy is that succession to the throne is automatic and not a matter of choice, and as soon as the sovereign treats the office as one that can be voluntarily renounced, automatic rule of succession comes under threat. Under a monarchy, the great advantage of it, for those who support it is that succession is not a matter of choice but of duty, and so it removes the question from any politics. In a play written in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Edward Bulwer-Lytton said: “What suicide is to a man, abdication is to a king.”

1936 is the only voluntary abdication in our history. It was said in 1689 that James II had abdicated, but in fact he was forcibly deposed by Parliament and fled to the Continent. It is sometimes suggested today that the Queen should abdicate to relieve herself of her heavy workload, as sovereigns in the Netherlands and Luxemburg do, but the Queen said, in a speech on her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, that she would devote her whole life, whether it be long or short, to the service of the Commonwealth, and during her Silver Jubilee in 1977, she reiterated the pledge, saying that although it had been made “...in my salad days when I was green in judgement, I do not regret or retract one word of it”. So, I think it is very unlikely that the Queen will abdicate.

Another figure involved in the abdication in the 1930s was Lord Beaverbrook, who was a newspaper proprietor. He owned the Daily Express and had a lot of influence in politics. He was, as it were, the Rupert Murdoch of his age, though, unlike Murdoch, he was a friend of the monarchy, or at least a friend of Edward VIII, and he said abdication was a very grave course: “While it may close one set of problems, it opens another. For instance, it is an object lesson in the quick disposal of a monarch who gets at cross purposes with the executive.”

The reign of Edward VIII lasted just 325 days, just over 10 months, and of course is dominated by the abdication, but he was already 41 when he came to the throne, and indeed, we know a lot more about him than we do about other monarchs because he is the only monarch to have written an autobiography, called “A King’s Story”, published in 1951, by which time he had become Duke of Windsor. The book is mainly devoted to the abdication, but there is also a great deal of material on the role of the king and of the Prince of Wales.

Edward was born in 1894. He was educated at home and then at the Royal Naval College in Osborne, and then in Dartmouth, and he then spent eight terms at Magdalen College, Oxford, but he left without taking a degree, and the Head of the College, in his report on him, said: “Bookish, he will never be”, not I think an unfair comment.

In World War I, he joined the Grenadier Guards, but was restricted, much to his dismay, to staff appointments, unlike his brother, Albert, later George VI, who saw active service in the Navy at Jutland. He was not allowed to go to the Front for fear that he might be kidnapped and held to ransom by the Germans. He said: “I feel such a swine having such a comfortable time out here, while the Guards’ Division is up at Ypres.”

He was invested as Prince of Wales in 1911, and as Prince of Wales, Edward, or David, as he was called by his friends, proved an extraordinarily glamorous heir to the throne, with his blond hair, blue eyes, and winning smile, and seeming eagerness to please. Indeed, his favourite phrase was “Anything to please”, and he became really a figure at the centre of society, and I think he was the first heir to the throne on whom a song was written in 1927, and the song was “I’ve danced with a man who’s danced with a girl who’s danced with the Prince of Wales”.

[Music plays]

The song was written in 1927, “I’ve danced with a man who’s danced with a girl who’s danced with the Prince of Wales”, I think the only song ever written for an heir to the throne, and certainly the only song that will be mentioned in these lectures.

But one must not dismiss the Prince of Wales as being purely glamour. He was really the first heir to the throne to find a role for himself, and he particularly felt that he was a spokesman for ex-servicemen. At the Mansion House in 1919, he said he wanted all ex-servicemen, in every part of the Empire, to "...remember me as an old comrade in arms", who wants them always to look to look on him as a comrade.

He was the first to promote British goods in overseas markets. Lloyd George called him "our greatest ambassador". In that connection, he helped to found the British Council in 1934, and he made a tour of the Commonwealth which was a great success. Even George V, his father, who was not overgenerous with praise, wrote to him: "I offer you my warmest congratulations on the splendid success of your tour, which is due in a great measure to your own personality and the wonderful way in which you have [played up]. It makes me very proud of you."

At home, he seemed to show a concern for the underprivileged, and was idolised by many of the general public. The wife of a Government Minister said, visiting the slums, he was really at his best: he knocked at the door, and when the woman opened it, he said, "I'm the King, may I come in?" He said that he and his brothers had picked up vermin when visiting slums in Durham.

When he became King, his Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, said of him: "He has the secret of youth in the prime of age. He has a wider and more intimate knowledge of all classes of his subjects than any of his predecessors."

He hoped to modernise the monarchy. George V was a very traditional figure, and one of Edward's biographers said, perhaps not unfairly, that "George V had all the character for royalty, but Edward VIII had all the talents." In 1970, in an interview with the BBC, long after he had abdicated, an interview with Kenneth Harris from the BBC, he explained his views of how he would like to modernise the monarchy.

[Clip plays]

*"...back to the days of my Great-Grandmother, Queen Victoria, who changed the image of the monarchy, from the rather frivolous and dissolute times of what she described as her "wicked uncles". Widowhood struck her when she was comparatively young, at the age of 40, and the life at court and the atmosphere became one of mourning and austerity, which she maintained until her death. As you will recall, there were even great criticisms that she didn't show herself more. She wouldn't show herself because she said "People only want to see me in my great grief."*

*My Grandfather changed it all during the nine years that he was King. He'd been the leader of the Society of Britain and all the gay life, which is now called the Edwardian era. There was the horse-racing. He was fortunate enough to win the Derby horse-race three times, and the Grand National once, in the same year as the Derby, and he was seen a great deal around the country and was very popular.*

*My Father was always a quieter man, a great King, and a great reign, but life at court, again, shall we say, became more subdued.*

*When it came to my turn, it only lasted 10 months, a matter of days, I wasn't going to change a great deal, but I could see, although a great believer in tradition, a great believer in the ceremonial which is part of the monarchy, that there were some outmoded ceremonials which could be dispensed with. In other words, all I wanted to do, and all I meant to do, was to open the windows a little and let in some fresh air.*

*After I left, my brother had also a great reign, was a very popular monarch. I think he tended more to follow in the footsteps of our father.*

*After his untimely death, early death, tragic death, my niece became the Queen, and bear in mind all the great changes that have taken place in these last two decades, since the last War. I think that the monarchy could not possibly be in better hands than it is today."*

Edward says, in his memoirs: "I had no desire to go down in history as Edward, the Reformer. Edward, the Innovator, that might have been more to the point. Yet, I had no notion of tinkering with the fundamental rules of the monarchy, nor of upsetting the proud traditions of the court. In truth, all I ever had in mind was to throw

open the windows a little and to let into the venerable institutions some of the fresh air that I had been accustomed to breathe as Prince of Wales. My modest ambition was to broaden the base of monarchy a little more, to make it a little more responsive to the changed circumstances of my times."

There were some minor reforms. He banished frockcoats at court. He opened the Royal Victorian Order and other honours granted by the King to women. He tried, unsuccessfully, to get rid of the so-called Loyal Declaration read by the sovereign at the opening of his Parliament to uphold Protestantism, which he thought was offensive to Roman Catholics. There would, no doubt, have been other reforms had his reign lasted longer.

He seemed a rather modern figure, in contrast to the somewhat stuffy court of George V, and rather disturbing to traditionalists. For the Accession Council after the death of George V, he travelled to London by air - he was the first monarch to use a plane - and he emerged from the plane without a hat, very daring in those days, and instead of travelling the short distance from St James Palace to Buckingham Palace in a chauffeur-driven car, he walked, carrying an umbrella. This disturbance to traditionalists is beautifully captured in a poem written by John Betjeman, later to be Poet Laureate. It is a poem he wrote on the death of George V. Those who attended my lecture on George V will remember that his main hobbies were shooting birds and stamp-collecting, and he was very concerned, many would say excessively concerned, with correct standards of dress.

*"Spirit of well-shot woodcock, partridge, snipe*

*Flutter and bear him up the Norfolk sky.*

*In that red house, in a red mahogany bookcase,*

*The stamp collection waits, with mounts long-dry.*

*The big blue eyes are shut which saw wrong clothing*

*And favourite fields and coverts from a horse.*

*Old men in country houses hear clocks ticking*

*Over thick carpets with a deadened force.*

*Old men who never cheated, never doubted, communicated monthly,*

*Sit and stare at the new suburb stretched beyond the runway*

*Where a young man lands hatless from the air."*

The Establishment felt the new King did not know the rules. Edward VII, no doubt, had been dissolute, but he knew the rules. Edward VIII seemed to think he could divide his public from his private life, and he said to one of his advisors they must take him as he was, a man different from his father and determined to be himself. He would be available for public business and private occasions when he was wanted, but his private life was to be his own. So, as long as he performed his public duties, his private life, he said, was his own business, but of course, for a member of the Royal Family, the two overlap, and it meant the King had to subordinate some aspects of his private life to his public duties. Now, many were worried by this attitude, and in particular, his mother, Queen Mary, the wife of George V, was deeply concerned, and shortly before the accession, she told an advisor that she was concerned as to whether the Prince had fully realised his responsibilities and how far he would have to alter his manner of living. But perhaps all would have worked out smoothly had he not met Mrs Wallis Simpson, an American divorcee, and he talks about Wallis Simpson now...

*"[Wallis] Simpson and I first met over a weekend at the house of friends near Melton Mowbray in Leicestershire. She had a terrible cold and was not feeling or looking her best. Our first conversation was surprisingly stilted and banal, and it ranged from the lack of central heating in British country homes and the ruggedness of the British climate."*

*"Mrs Simpson had heard a song about the Prince some time before."*

*"I remember coming back from China. It was after the Prince's trip to America, and the song then saying "I knew a girl who knew a girl who had danced with the Prince of Wales".*

*"Wallis Warfield Simpson had now been married to Ernest Simpson, her second husband, for three years. They lived in London, and that year, Mrs Simpson was presented at court."*

*"I was struck by the grace of her carriage and the dignity of her movements."*

*"After our first meeting, I didn't see him again until the following spring. Then, we met occasionally in the houses of friends."*

*"From the first, I looked upon her as the most independent woman I had ever met, and presently the hope formed that one day I might be able to share my life with her. Just how, I did not know."*

The King always insisted, for reasons that will become clear I hope later on, that she had never been his mistress before they were married and he would sue anyone who suggested the opposite, but at some time, perhaps in 1934 or 1935, he formed the definite intention of marrying her. He later said he had hoped to discuss the matter with his father, George V, but the occasion never arose, and it is sometimes said that, had the King lived longer, there would have been a discussion between them, but I think that unlikely because the truth is that George V was so distant and authoritarian a father, and there was such a gap between these two men of different generations, with very different views of the world, that a genuine discussion between the two would have been quite impossible. But George V was aware of the attachment and deeply distressed by it. Shortly before he died, he told a courtier, very presciently: "My eldest son will never succeed me. He will abdicate." He also said: "After I am dead, the boy will ruin himself within 12 months."

To understand the abdication, we have to understand the atmosphere of the time, which was very different from today, even if we do not sympathise with that atmosphere, and we also have to understand the law of divorce, which was very different from what it is today.

The monarchy in the 1930s was seen as even more important and central to the emotional lives of the British than it is today, and that was partly because of the rise of dictatorships on the Continent – Stalin, Hitler, Mussolini. The British public became even more attached to the stability and moderation of the system of government which made Britain appear a paradise compared to most of the Continent, where democracy was a threatened species, and that was true on the left as much as on the right. On the death of George V, Attlee, the Opposition Leader, said in the House of Commons that the late King had been "not only a democrat but also a real social reformer who had recognised the claims of social justice", which was perhaps a bit of an exaggeration.

Secondly, it was an age of much greater deference than today. Little was known about the private lives of members of the Royal Family. The press thought it wrong to expose such details, and, remarkably, the British papers said nothing about Mrs Simpson until 10 days before the abdication, and American newspapers which reported the friendship were censored. One censored headline read: "Cutie Simpson cuts out bloodless British women in Royal choice". The British press operated a voluntary censorship which is inconceivable today.

Consequently, the public were completely unaware of the friendship between the King and Mrs Simpson until shortly before the abdication, when all the key decisions had been made. Lloyd George's Secretary wrote to him five days after the abdication: "We Londoners, with our insatiable thirst for scandalous gossip, tend to assume that everybody knew all about Mrs Simpson, and I was rather staggered, on visiting Birmingham and Manchester a week prior to the crisis, to find that not a single soul I talked to had ever heard of her." But there was gossip in London and a contemporary joke: Mrs Simpson is supposed to have got into a taxi and said "King's Cross", and the taxi-driver said, "Sorry, lady." But even if the public had known, it is doubtful if public influence could or would have been exerted. In the days before opinion polls, politicians were eager to say that public opinion favoured one view or another, but in general, people were happy to let the politicians make the key decisions.

Now, because of this deference, people felt they had to see the King as a model human being, and that was strengthened by the fact that Britain was a much more religious society than it is today, a greater belief in the truths of Christianity, and a stronger support for the Church of England, which was the established church. Perhaps there was an element of hypocrisy in it, which was well picked up by Stanley Baldwin. He said: "The average working man likes to spend Sunday in bed reading the newspaper, if possible to the accompaniment of a pint of beer, but he says to himself all the time, "Well, anyhow, I am glad the King and Queen are going to church, even if I am not doing it myself this morning." The Royal Family were expected to observe the rules, and the new King was to arouse criticism by not attending church every Sunday. The monarch was expected to be a role model, and the monarchy was particularly associated with concepts of duty and sacrifice.

On the death of George V, Baldwin said, on the radio, "The doing of his duty was the guiding principle of his life". This notion of sacrifice was particularly powerful since the end of World War I, which had seen so many lives sacrificed. One of the sermons for the Coronation of Edward VIII, which never in fact occurred, was to say that: "True royalty reveals itself in self-denying sacrifice". Queen Mary wrote to her son after the abdication: "It

seemed inconceivable to those who had made such sacrifices during the War that you, as their King, refused a lesser sacrifice." She said: "My feelings for you, as your mother, remain the same, and our being parted and the cause of it grieve me beyond words. After all, all my life, I have put my country before anything else, and I simply cannot change now." So, whereas the romantic view, which perhaps many hold today, and certainly people held abroad, was that the King had given up the throne for love, in Britain, the feeling was he was neglecting his duty.

When he came to the throne, there could be no question of marrying Mrs Simpson because she was already married to Ernest Simpson, her second cousin, and to marry the King, she would have to divorce Ernest Simpson. Divorce, in those days, was not easy. It was granted only in cases of adultery. Interestingly, Mrs Simpson's first divorce, granted in America on grounds of cruelty - her first husband had been a brutal alcoholic - this was not recognised by the Church of England. This system where you could only get a divorce for adultery was defended by the Mothers' Union, which was 500,000-strong at this time, and the reason they gave was it should not be made easy for men to ditch their wives for, as it were, a younger model, but it did lead to a great deal of hypocrisy because the better-off could always secure a divorce by paying. There were agencies which arranged it. The husband would do the gentlemanly thing: he would approach the agency, and he would pay a sum of money plus a deposit for the agency to procure a young woman to spend the night in a hotel with him, quite innocently. If the man sought further services, he forfeited his deposit. Now, the maid would bring breakfast and see the two together and the hotel register would be used as evidence of adultery. So, although the law was intended to prevent divorce by consent, which was seen as a threat to public morals, the well-off could get round it. The less well-off had no such advantage and often had to stay in quite dreadful marriages, even violent ones, because desertion or violent abuse was no grounds for divorce.

There was also some stigma for divorce at that time. There were only around 5,000 a year. Divorcees could not be remarried in church, and so-called "guilty parties" were excluded from royal functions. Innocent parties were admitted from the late-1920s, though before they were admitted, their case was inspected by the Lord Chamberlain's Office, and Queen Mary never came to terms with that. She was once asked to invite a divorcee to a royal function and told the person concerned was the innocent party. "There is no innocent party in a divorce", she replied. Before Mrs Simpson was first presented at court in 1931, she had to submit the records of her first divorce.

A Scottish nobleman sought admission to a royal function and told George V that his divorce had been purged by subsequent remarriage in church because the rules of the Scottish Church were more liberal than the Church of England. He was told, "That may well get you into the Kingdom of Heaven, but it will not admit you to the Palace of Holyrood House."

Now, very oddly, at that time, amongst the upper classes, adultery between married people, as long as discretion occurred and did not become public, was more tolerated than divorce. Indeed, Baldwin explicitly told the King there would be no objection to Edward VIII making Mrs Simpson his mistress. He said to the King was it absolutely necessary he should marry her - in their peculiar circumstances, certain things are sometimes permitted to royalty which are not allowed to ordinary man. To this he replied, immediately: "There's no question of that - I am going to marry her." All this is of course quite different to modern mores, where there is much less stigma, if any, towards divorce, but adultery is viewed I think more critically. I will leave you to judge whether or morals are better or worse than those of our grandparents, but of course Edward VIII had to deal with the law and mores of the age in which he lived.

The legal position was as follows, that until Edward came to the throne, his marriage, like marriages of other members of the Royal Family, was regulated by the Royal Marriages Act of 1772, which meant the marriage had to be approved by the King, who would do it on advice, and, almost certainly, the Government would have advised against the marriage. But once Edward came to the throne, that was no longer the case. The King, legally, could marry anyone he liked, except that he could not, through the Act of Settlement, marry a Catholic.

When Edward came to the throne, some Ministers pressed the Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, to intervene and ask the King to end the friendship, perhaps even to offer official advice to end it, but Baldwin declined to do that, and that was partly out of a natural inertia - he tended to assume that crises, if left alone, would blow over - but partly out of a sure instinct that if the Government were to appear to dictate to the King, this would arouse a wave of sympathy for him and so divide the country. But the position altered when, in 1936, Mrs Simpson decided to initiate divorce proceedings against her husband because this opened the possibility that she might marry the King, and it was at this point that Stanley Baldwin intervened, less than seven weeks before the abdication, on 20<sup>th</sup> October 1936. He was persuaded to do so by the King's Private Secretary, who said the King must be warned so that he could not say afterwards that he had not been told of the significance of the divorce. Only the Prime Minister could convince the King that the association with Mrs Simpson would raise a constitutional issue and not merely a private one. On the 20<sup>th</sup> of October 1936, Baldwin held the first of eight meetings with the King, and we have got extremely detailed accounts of this meeting from Baldwin's speech in the Commons after the abdication and from the King's own autobiography. The conversation, I think, is very revealing, not only on the specific issue but about the conventions which govern the monarchy and the relationships between the monarch and the Prime Minister.

Baldwin went to the King's private home, Fort Belvedere at Virginia Water, and the King said they met in the garden and they began by talking about gardening, and he said: "Baldwin's attitude was friendly, friendly casual

discourse. He might have been a neighbour who had called to discuss a dispute over a boundary fence." But when they went inside, Baldwin became rather nervous, as well he might be, and he asked if he could have a whiskey and soda – this was about 10 in the morning. When he was going to pour a drink for the King, the King really gave him an implicit rebuke and said, "Oh no, Mr Baldwin, I never drink before 7pm!"

Baldwin began rather gingerly. He said: "You have all the advantages that a man can have – you are young, you have before you the example of your father, and you are fond of your home. You are fond of your house and you like children. You have only one disadvantage: you are not married and you should be." The King did not rise to the debate – he said nothing. So, Baldwin continued. He said: "You may think me Victorian, Sir, and you may think my views are out of date, but I believe I know how to interpret the mind of my own people, and I say, although it is true standards are lower since the War, it only leads the people to expect a higher standard from their King. People expect more from their King than they did a hundred years ago." The King said nothing. There was a pause. Baldwin then said: "People are talking about you and this American woman, Mrs Simpson." Again, the King said nothing. So, Baldwin used a phrase the King was fond of: "I don't believe you can go on like this and get away with it." He said: "I think you know our people. They will tolerate a lot in private life but they will not stand for this kind of thing in the life of a public personage, and when they read in the Court Circular of Mrs Simpson's visit to Balmoral, they resented it." It may be asked how many people actually read the Court Circular.

The King, rather sadly, then said: "I hope you will agree that I have carried out my duties as King with dignity." Baldwin said: "I do agree, and all the more as I know the duties of royalty are not much to your liking." The King said, really rather plaintively now: "I know there is nothing kingly about me, but I have tried to mix with the people and make them think I was one of them." Then, Baldwin, at last, came to the point: "Cannot you have this coming divorce put off?" The King replied: "Mr Baldwin, that is the lady's private business. I have no right to interfere with the affairs of an individual. It would be wrong were I to attempt to influence Mrs Simpson just because she happened to be a friend of the King's." Baldwin said later that was the only occasion on which the King was not straight with him because of course it was he who had pressed Mrs Simpson to initiate divorce proceedings so he could marry her.

Baldwin then said: "There might be sides taken and factions grow up in a matter where no faction ought ever to exist." He then referred to the value of the monarchy in holding the Empire together and in maintaining the moderation of the political system. He said the Crown was: "...not only the last link of Empire that is left, but the guarantee in this country, as long as it exists in that integrity, against many evils that have affected and afflicted other countries."

The conversation then ended. They went out into the garden. Baldwin again commented on what a pleasant garden it was. The question of marriage was not mentioned.

Baldwin later told the Governor General of Canada that at least the ice had been broken, but the King later ruefully commented that the only ice that had been broken was the ice that had melted in the Prime Minister's whiskey and soda.

A week after this interview, on 27<sup>th</sup> October, Mrs Simpson was granted a decree nisi at Ipswich, Cardinal Wolsey's home town. Baldwin said he could quite understand why people were put in the Tower in the old days and he would gladly put Mrs Simpson there if he could.

The decree absolute, granting the divorce, would come in six months' time, in April 1937, with the Coronation due in May, and it was the granting of the decree nisi which precipitated the abdication crisis.

Under the law at that time, there were two obstacles to making the decree absolute. The first was it would not be granted if it could be shown the petitioner had herself committed adultery. So, you had the odd situation, if both the partners in a marriage had committed adultery, no divorce could be granted, which was very peculiar. This of course was why the King insisted that Mrs Simpson was not his mistress – you may say a further element of hypocrisy.

Second, the decree would not be granted if it could be shown the divorce was collusive or based on faked evidence. Now, the Simpson divorce clearly was collusive and based on faked evidence, as nearly all divorces in those days were. Ernest Simpson, having been informed by his wife that she wanted a divorce, agreed to spend the night quite innocently with a lady procured for the purpose at a hotel called, perhaps appropriately, the Hotel de Paris at Bray in Berkshire, which was frequently used for this purpose. There was a joke between the Wars: "Are you married or do you live in Bray?" Mr Simpson left the hotel bill for the night in the flat which he shared with Mrs Simpson, so providing the basis for the divorce, and Mrs Simpson generously repaid her ex-husband's costs. But under the law as it then was, any private citizen could intervene to show cause why the decree nisi should not be made absolute, and an official called the King's Proctor was then under a legal duty to investigate, and when the archives were opened a few years ago, it became apparent that the King's Proctor had received a number of complaints from scandalised members of the public. For example, a solicitor's clerk wrote to say that the divorce was collusive and the petitioner had committed adultery with the King. Fortunately, the Proctor chose to ignore his legal duty to investigate.

Baldwin, meanwhile, received a visit from the Leader of the Opposition, Attlee, who told him the Labour Party's

attitude. Attlee says: "I said that while Labour people had no objection at all to an American becoming Queen, I was certain they would not approve of Mrs Simpson for that position. I found I had correctly gauged the Party's attitude, despite the sympathy for the King and the affection which his visits to the depressed areas had created. The Party..." - and then there was a typical Attlee waspish comment - "The Party, with the exception of a few of the intelligentsia who can be trusted to take the wrong view on any subject, the Party were in agreement with the views I had expressed." That was important because it meant there was no alternative Government should Baldwin threaten to resign.

The Civil Service was now preparing a draft submission to the King giving formal advice he should end the association with Mrs Simpson. Baldwin did not want to do that. He did not want to put pressure on the King, and he decided instead to call on senior Ministers to consider the next step. At this point, the King's Private Secretary, Sir Alexander Harding, intervened. He was worried about this meeting of senior Ministers and worried by what he was told by the Editor of the Times, that the self-denial of the press could not be maintained for much longer. He wrote a letter to the King telling him about this meeting, which could result in the resignation of the Government, he said, and the only solution was for Mrs Simpson to go abroad immediately. The King did not reply to this letter, which he thought of as impertinent, but in response, asked Baldwin to meet him, this time at Buckingham Palace, and this precipitated the abdication.

The second meeting was held on 16<sup>th</sup> November, and Baldwin made it clear the King could not marry Mrs Simpson and remain on the throne. The conversation began by the King saying: "I understand that you and several members of the Cabinet have some fear of a constitutional crisis developing over my friendship with Mrs Simpson." Baldwin said: "Yes, Sir, that is correct." Baldwin said such a marriage would not be approved by the country. Now, I said earlier the King could, in statutory terms, marry whom he liked, and was not bound by the Royal Marriages Act. The King said, in wishing to marry Mrs Simpson, he was only claiming the same freedom as his subjects enjoyed. Baldwin said the King was not in the same position since his wife becomes Queen, so the choice must be suitable, and the Government, as representatives of the people, decides who is suitable. Furthermore, the King, by his coronation oath, is defender of the faith and supreme governor of the Church of England, and at that time, the Church would not marry a divorcee in a religious ceremony. In theory, no doubt, the King could contract a civil marriage, but under these circumstances, the Archbishop of Canterbury might refuse to crown him because the coronation was and is a religious ceremony, an Anglican ceremony. So, the King was limited in his choice not by statute but by convention, because the Queen, like the King, represents the people, and unlike the King, Baldwin, as Prime Minister, had been elected by the people to interpret their wishes, so Parliament decides who can and cannot be Queen and, as shown in 1689 when James II had abdicated, Parliament decides who should be King. Parliament can, at any time, alter the line of succession. Our monarchy is not only a hereditary monarchy but also a parliamentary monarchy.

In the debate on the abdication, Baldwin quoted Polonius' speech from 'Hamlet': "His will is not his own, for he himself is subject to his birth. He may not, as unvalued people do, carve for himself, for on his choice depends the safety and the health of his whole state."

The King said this: "I want you to be the first to know that I have made up my mind and nothing will alter it. I have looked into it from all sides. I mean to abdicate and marry Mrs Simpson." He said if he could marry and remain King, he would do so and was sure he would be a better King as a result.

It is important to note, the King, and not the Prime Minister, was the first to mention abdication. Baldwin was shocked by the news. He said: "Sir, this is a very grave decision and I am deeply grieved." Now, the King had made his decision and never came near to altering his mind, and in a sense, the whole of the abdication is encapsulated in that conversation.

The day after he saw Baldwin, the King saw his older brother, the Duke of York, later to become George VI, who broke down on hearing the news. But, a few days later, Prince Albert, later George VI, wrote to the King and said the news had come as a great surprise but he wanted his brother to find happiness "...with the one person you adore". The day after, they met again, and the Duke of York said, after the abdication, he would be prepared to undertake the succession.

One Cabinet Minister, Duff Cooper, who was a friend of the King's, said: "Why don't you delay till after the coronation and then you can try again to get married once you've been crowned? Your hand would be much strengthened." Rather cynical, and meant the King would be ignoring his coronation oath, and in fact, what Duff Cooper and the King's friends hoped was that this was just an infatuation which would end, and that was a misjudgement, I think.

The King said: "For me to have gone through the coronation ceremony while harbouring in my heart a secret intention to marry contrary to the Church's tenets would have meant being crowned with a lie on my lips." He also insisted his relationship with Mrs Simpson was not an infatuation but something permanent. So, the issue seemed straightforward: either the King was going to abdicate or he would have to give up Mrs Simpson.

But at that point, there seemed to be a way out, the idea of a Morganatic marriage, and under a Morganatic marriage, the wife of the King is not the Queen and the children do not succeed to the throne. It's a foreign conception because monarchs are required to marry from a specific range of aristocratic families. There is no such restriction in Britain. Oddly enough, Queen Mary's grandfather, from a German principality, had made a



Morganatic marriage. But to have a Morganatic marriage in Britain would involve a change in the law – there was no provision for it – and it would be not only Westminster that would have to change the law, but the other self-governing dominions, of which there were, at that time, five – Canada, New Zealand, Australia, South Africa and the Irish Free State.

This was proposed to Mrs Simpson, the idea of a Morganatic marriage, by Esmond Harmsworth, who was the son of Lord Rothermere, the proprietor of the Daily Mail, another Rupert Murdoch sort of figure. When they met again, on 25<sup>th</sup> November, the third meeting, the King suggested it to Baldwin. Baldwin knew it had come from the Daily Mail, a paper he did not like. He said the Daily Mail was the worst judge in England of what the people were thinking, and he later told the King that the King was supported by only three newspapers: the News Chronicle, which was a liberal paper, no longer exists; the Daily Mail; and the Daily Express, and the King said they were perhaps the worst papers in London. But he said he would put this issue to the Cabinet and the dominions. Now, the Cabinet rejected it, as did the dominions, and so that just left the two stark alternatives.

The silence of the press then ended through a chance event. On 1<sup>st</sup> December, the Bishop of Bradford gave a sermon in which he regretted the fact the King had only attended church twice in his reign and said that he was neglecting his duties. I think that was probably the first time in modern history the sovereign has been publicly and openly rebuked by a Bishop, and the Bishop of Bradford's name was Dr Blunt, and it was said the King had been "wounded by a Blunt instrument". So, there was an immediate discussion in the press, and the press silence broke.

On 4<sup>th</sup> December, the King asked whether he could make a broadcast putting his case to the country, and again, the Government said no because that would put the King in opposition to his Ministers. Now, these were the only two issues on which the King sought advice: the Morganatic marriage, and the radio broadcast. He did not seek advice on abdication and was not advised to abdicate; it was he who proposed it of his own free will.

At this point, near the very end of the crisis, supporters of the King urged him to fight. Lord Beaverbrook, whom I mentioned already, and Winston Churchill, who told the King to barricade himself in Fort Belvedere in Virginia Water to buy time for what Churchill characteristically called "time for the big battalions to mass".

The position of Churchill, then, was quite different from the way he's seen now. He is seen now as a national saviour. In the 1930s, he was widely seen as a political adventurer. He had switched from the Conservatives to the Liberals, and then back to the Conservatives, and Churchill said, ruefully, "Anyone can rat but it takes some political skill to re-rat." Then he had broken with the Conservative leadership in the early-1930s because he was opposed to proposals for self-government in India, an issue on which most people thought he was wrong. He was seen as a man who would do anything to get back to power. The wife of one of Baldwin's Ministers, referring to Churchill, in some anger, she mixed her metaphors, and she said that he was "...the possible snake in the grass, Winston Churchill, whose very freedom from loyalties makes him a dark horse in a loose box," so he was both a horse and a snake.

Churchill seemed to see no objection. He said to Noel Coward the King, quote, should be "allowed to marry his cutie". Noel Coward replied: "England does not wish for a Queen Cutie." But, actually, Churchill did not believe the marriage would go ahead. He thought, with time, the attachment would end. He said: "The King falls constantly in and out of love. His present attachment will follow the course of all the others." It is fair to say, not even the King's closest supporters really believed the marriage would take place. They hoped, with time, the relationship would end, which, as I say, was a profound misjudgement.

Churchill's second misjudgement was that the Cabinet was advising the King to abdicate and hustling him off the throne. In a statement on 4<sup>th</sup> December, he said: "The question is whether the King is to abdicate upon the advice of his Ministers of the day." That was the opposite of the truth.

Churchill suggested to the King he play for time, and the Cabinet got rather worried that Churchill was telling the King his Ministers did not represent the view of the country but that he, Churchill, did and would be willing to form an alternative Government if Baldwin resigned. In Neville Chamberlain's diary, he said that "Churchill was moving mysteriously in the background and, it is suggested, expressing willingness to form a Government if there should be any refusal on our part to agree." But since Churchill had no majority in Parliament, he would have had to dissolve Parliament, and there would be a General Election on the question of the King, which would be deeply divisive.

The King, however, in the end, decided, with a Morganatic proposal blocked and having been refused permission to broadcast, that he would abdicate, and on 5<sup>th</sup> December, he told the Prime Minister he would definitely abdicate. On the 10<sup>th</sup>, a Bill was introduced into the Commons, passed through all its stages quickly, and then the Lords' stages, without amendment, and the Declaration of Abdication Act took effect on 12<sup>th</sup> December, and similar legislation was passed in the dominions.

Baldwin made one of his great speeches on the abdication in Parliament, and one MP said that it was "the best speech we shall ever hear in our lives". Churchill accepted in the debate the decision. He said it was "...essential there should be no room for assertions that the King had been hurried in his decision. I accept wholeheartedly what the Prime Minister has proved: namely, the decision taken this week has been taken by His Majesty freely,

voluntarily, spontaneously, at his own time and in his own way.”

Was Baldwin right, in the age before opinion polls? Susan Williams has written a book called “The People’s King”, showing, on the basis of a great deal of research, from letters the King received, there was great popular support for him. But Baldwin and other Ministers and MPs received letters from people opposing the King, and the monarchy loses its value once it becomes a source of division. It must unify the country. My own judgement, for what it is worth, is the majority disapproved of the King, so I think that Baldwin was right in his judgement, and he was in a good position to weigh up public opinion. One of Baldwin’s Ministers said: “If compared to a wireless, Baldwin has his earth in the British soil, and his aerial listening in to the British public.”

The abdication is sometimes called a constitutional crisis, but in fact it avoided what would have been a constitutional crisis had the King sought to defy his Ministers. The abdication was the resolution of a crisis, and because the King acted in accordance with the constitution, it did not give rise to a constitutional crisis. Baldwin said: “Whoever writes about the abdication must give the King his due. He could not have behaved better than he did.” Most of the discussions between Baldwin and the King were concerned not with principles but with ways and means, and from that point of view, it is really quite a simple story.

The King said, in his radio speech after the abdication: “There has never been any constitutional difference between me and them” – between me and his Ministers – “and between me and Parliament. Bred in the constitutional tradition of my father, I should never have allowed any such issue to arise.”

He says, in his memoirs: “I put out of my mind all thought of challenging the Prime Minister. I would no longer be King by the free and common consent of all. The cherished conception of a monarchy above politics would have been shattered.”

Shortly after the abdication, a friend wrote to him: “When the history of this episode comes to be written, it will be realised that your nobility in refusing even to test your popularity was a sign of true greatness and probably saved the very existence of the Empire. I must humbly express my intense admiration for your obvious and inflexible determination not to encourage a King’s party. It was within your power to create civil war and chaos. You had only to lift a finger or even come to London and show yourself to arouse millions in your support.”

Churchill, at his final meeting with the King, on the eve of abdication, with tears in his eyes, quoted as he left Marvell’s poem on the execution of Charles I: “He nothing common did or mean upon that memorable scene”.

The danger came not from the King but from political extremists seeking to use the crisis for their own advantage - the Communist Party and Oswald Mosley’s British Union of Fascists both supported him - and also from political adventurers seeking to use the crisis to their own advantage - Lord Beaverbrook and Winston Churchill. They wanted to form a King’s party, but as Lord Beaverbrook later admitted: “We were indeed the King’s party, but unfortunately the King was not a member of it.”

Perhaps the main political significance was the damage it did to Churchill’s reputation, harming his campaign for resistance against dictators. He was shouted down in the Commons and says, in his war memoirs: “All the forces I had gathered together were estranged and dissolved, and I was myself so smitten in public opinion that it was the almost universal view that my political life was at last ended.”

Baldwin’s reputation, by contrast, was greatly enhanced, and he retired in 1937 to nearly universal acclaim, and in my opinion, he handled the abdication with great skill. He hoped that the King would remain on the throne, but acted so that if he did not the damage to the monarchy would be minimal. He was, at all times, convinced that the decision as to whether the marriage took place or whether there was to be an abdication must be the King’s and not the Government’s, and it must be a spontaneous decision by the King. At no time did the Government advise this or abdication, and Baldwin thought, rightly, in my view, that this would divide the country and obscure the constitutional issue.

The King later came to believe, in his embittered exile, that Baldwin had hurried him off the throne, that there had been a conspiracy, but the King did not believe it at the time and thanked Baldwin for giving him every consideration.

Baldwin told the Cabinet, I think quite rightly, that the issue had not been a constitutional struggle between the King and his Ministers but rather a struggle in the human heart, a struggle in which he himself was trying to find a solution. Baldwin, I think, was right to say that, and so perhaps it’s best to end on a human note. At their final meeting, on the eve of the abdication, as he was about to say goodbye, the King said to Baldwin: “I quite understand the reason you and Mrs Baldwin do not approve of my action. It is the view of another generation. My generation don’t feel like that about it.” Baldwin replied: “Sir, it is quite true that there are no two people among your subjects who are more grieved at what has happened than we are, but I beg you will always remember that there are no two people who hoped more truly and sincerely that you may find happiness where you believe it is to be found.” And, at this, the King’s eyes filled with tears and he said: “Of all the people I have had around me during these last months, you are the only one that has said anything that showed you cared about my happiness.”

