

## Comment

In the past few months considerable attention has been given to the nature and role of the monarchy in British society. Much of this discussion has been prompted by revelations about the personal lives of certain members of the Royal Family. The protective veil of impersonality, often thought necessary if monarchy is to retain authority and credibility within the nation, has been lifted. The Habsburgs were well aware of the iconic power of royalty. Those who married into the family were clearly shown what dynastic loyalty involved: duty, discretion, self-sacrifice and self-assurance. At a Christmas ball in 1913, given solely for the members of the reigning family, the guests waltzed to the strains of an invisible orchestra concealed behind a screen; the leisure activities of the dynasty were not to be observed by lesser mortals lest the spell be broken.

In early November 1918, Kaiser Wilhelm II and the twenty-odd reigning kings and grand-dukes of Germany abdicated. The young Emperor Karl of Austria-Hungary struggled to hang on to at least a fraction of his fragmenting dominions before realising the hopelessness of the enterprise. This 'fall of eagles' prompted many people to ask not why it had happened, but why had it endured so long? The Vienna of Franz Joseph had also been the city of Freud, Adler, Schnitzler, Schönberg, Loos, Klimt, Hindemith and Wittgenstein. In the birthplace of much of the modern, the ruling elite was dominated by a court cocooned in the suffocating hieratic formality of sixteenth-century Spanish royal protocol. The mystique of monarchy was sustained by the meticulous preservation of tradition and the identification of the dynasty with the empire itself. As a result, the court became increasingly rarefied, it had less and less contact with the realities of Central European society and was undermined not by outright hostility but by indifference.

The last years of the Habsburgs provide a worrying example of the unravelling of the monarchical fabric. The tapestry of Austro-Hungarian society was held together in its last decades by the sixty-eight year reign of the Emperor Franz Joseph, who had acceded to the throne in the reaction to the liberal revolutions of 1848, and who was to see the tide turn against the dual monarchy before his death in 1916. His devotion to duty, dogged perseverance, old-fashioned courtesy, stoic endurance of personal tragedy and unflinching loyalty to the business of the administration of the empire, disguised the ill-health of the institution of the monarchy. Things were done as they had always been done, but

people were ceasing to believe in their efficacy. The image of security, which Franz Joseph's longevity and commitment provided, actually gave the monarchy an illusory stability. Even the apparently reforming, and indeed revolutionary, measures he sanctioned were to be devoted towards reactionary ends. In 1918 it became obvious that the business of monarchy had assumed a facade of formalism which concealed a vacuousness verging on the chaotic. Hereditary monarchy does not always guarantee wise and prudent government, it often relies on pageant, ceremonial and a kind of caesaro-liturgical theatre to insulate it from responsibility for personal failings and the constitutional problems of government.

Experience shows that questions as to the function of monarchy in any society may often distract attention from a necessary interrogation of the functioning of the constitution. Most of the criticisms of the present British monarchy focus on the issue of the monarchy's loss of touch with people. The example of public service provided by some members of the royal family, and the number of public engagements undertaken by almost all of them, suggest this might be a difficult charge to sustain; the present members of the royal family must meet more of their subjects than any of their predecessors. Through the media they are probably more aware of the circumstances of their contemporaries than their ancestors. In a recent Gallup poll 65 percent of the respondents wished to see the monarchy reformed along 'more democratic' lines. However, no suggestion as to what this reform might involve was made. Presumably, as some commentators have suggested, this democratisation of the monarchy would mean a reduction of ceremonial, a modernisation of the royal household and a less formal and more accessible style of life. This might reflect the present nature of British society in a more accurate and satisfactory way, or so it is claimed. However, it remains to be asked, of what kind of British society is the monarchy an icon?

In January 1937, a Dominican contributor to *Blackfriars* wrote of the Abdication Crisis:

What the 'crisis' has made abundantly clear is that the real power which governs us is neither royal nor democratic; let alone, as many of us would wish it, both. The whole business was staged and arranged without any reference to the people, or even to their alleged representatives in the English and Dominion parliaments. The ex-King was not permitted, on 'constitutional' grounds, to present his case to the people so long as he was King. Catholics had in common with their late Sovereign an instinctive repugnance to sham.

The modernisation of the monarchy will not be achieved by the recent relaxation of royal protocol to allow 'companions', of either sex, of 'people of single status', official entry to Buckingham Palace garden parties. The sovereign's agreement to pay income tax may win some temporary respite from the rigours of public opinion but will not reduce the impact of larger questions. These questions are to do with matters of parliamentary representation and the integrity and accountability of government. The willingness of ministers to hide behind the exercise of the royal prerogative are as scandalous as are their frequent self-protective resort to the interests of national security. Criticism of the monarchy is essentially a distraction from the main constitutional issues facing Britain today. Can a declining power, desperately keen to disguise that decline by an appeal to heritage, tradition and custom, hope to preserve its influence in a world which has expressed its own view of Britain today by destroying its currency? The multi-cultural, multi-ethnic society which Britain has become needs to evolve a system of representation and government which accurately reflects it. Attempts to evade these problems by cutting the role of an Imperial monarchy to a narrowly national stage are doomed to failure. The crisis facing the monarchy is simply a reflection of the political crisis of a declining and directionless nation.

AJW

## The Earth as a Gift

### Petroc and Eldred Willey

It is often said that the earth and its creatures are God's gifts to humankind. Animals and plants are understood to have been 'sent' for us, so that we may, by and large, do with them as we will. What we must do in return is express our thanks to the Creator for His generosity. We must say Grace over our meals. So John Locke wrote:

The earth and all that is therein is given to men for the support and comfort of their being. . . all the fruits it produces, the beasts it feeds, belong to mankind in common, as they are produced by the spontaneous hand of nature.<sup>1</sup>