Monarchy and the End of Empire: The House of Windsor, the British Government, and the Postwar Commonwealth

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Philip Murphy’s Monarchy and the End of Empire is a carefully researched and beautifully presented book that chronicles the relationship between the monarchy, the UK government, and the decolonisation of the British Empire. In a tightly written 195 pages (plus a further 45 of endnotes and bibliography), the book takes us through, in chronological fashion, the period from 1918 to 2013 (additional material responding to on-going events being carefully sutured into the text until the final moment). The focus falls on the British political classes and the palace, and the ways in which both sought to shape, respond to, and carve out new roles within a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape formed through the tortuous, messy processes of the dissolution of the British Empire.

The interrelated histories of post-war Britain, empire, and decolonisation have recently been the subject of increasing interest. In focusing on two subjects rarely subject to proper academic scrutiny – the Queen and the palace on the one hand, and the post-war Commonwealth on the other – Murphy makes a novel and significant contribution to this burgeoning field, highlighting the contested role that both Crown and Commonwealth were understood to have in the process of Britain’s transition from imperial power.

The book demonstrates that, far from being seen as peripheral by actors in Britain, the post-war Commonwealth was viewed as an important, if not necessarily a positive force. Cast as moral compass, political opportunity, and signifier of multicultural progress, the Commonwealth was also understood as a threat, embarrassment, and as a reflection of the decline of post-imperial Britain.
For the palace, and Elizabeth II in particular (by virtue of her longevity in the role as Head of the Commonwealth) the transformation of the British Empire into a new form of organisation: ‘a voluntary association of independent and equal sovereign states’, provided opportunities. These included the ability to fashion a new international role, separate from that as Queen of the United Kingdom (and the Monarch’s other realms) as ‘Head of the Commonwealth’. At a time when many former colonies and dominions were becoming republics either on or after independence, the Commonwealth provided an on-going official position and profile beyond the UK. Crucially, the Commonwealth Headship also provided the Queen with more freedom to act in her own capacity, rather than solely on the advice of her government(s).

The British government were more uncertain about the value of the post-war Commonwealth, and in particular, of its continued association with the Crown. Various actors in Whitehall realised the value of the Queen and the House of Windsor and were happy to deploy the Royal Family to improve relations with other Commonwealth countries (through tours and the overseeing of independence ceremonies), to add gravitas to Commonwealth meetings, and to intervene in intractable political problems, such as that of Rhodesia. However, the British government was not whole-hearted in supporting this relationship. Murphy notes in the introduction that the book emerged from a question raised by the archival record: why was United Kingdom government encouraging republicanism in countries preparing for independence when this might seem to run counter to a foreign policy aiming to retain links with, and influence over, countries becoming independent from the British Empire? The answer: ‘Officials and ministers feared that in involving the Crown in the politics of post-colonial Africa, they might be exposing the Queen to potential “embarrassment” in a way that would damage national prestige and undermine her capacity to serve as the focus of a specifically British national identity’ (p. 15, italics in original). On some occasions the book shows that the British government had other reasons for concern. For example, over the Queen’s attendance at the controversial Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Lusaka, Zambia in 1979 (chapter eight), and over the issue of apartheid South Africa in the 1980s (chapter ten), it seemed that the palace was diametrically opposed to the British government, with very little that Whitehall could do about this.

Unsurprisingly, given Murphy’s previous publications, the book is particularly strong on Conservative party politics and their relations to Crown and Commonwealth, although the machinations within other political parties, including the Wilson Labour government’s initial embrace of the Commonwealth, and the consequences for the Commonwealth of the reincarnation of the party as ‘New Labour’ in the 1990s are also subject to expert deconstruction.

Although the focus is on the palace and the British government, the book also examines the relationship between Crown and Commonwealth from a non-British perspective. For the Commonwealth Secretary-General and his (it has always been his) Commonwealth Secretariat staff, and politicians in other member countries, Murphy argues that the association with the British Royal Family has also been complex. At some points, for example during the discussions about holding the 1977 Heads of Government Meeting in London to coincide with the Queen’s silver jubilee, concerns were raised by those in the Secretariat that the occasion might give the impression of an imperial durbar, rendering the Commonwealth as merely ‘an adjunct of Britain and its royal family’ (p. 134). Nevertheless, the Commonwealth clearly benefitted materially from its association with the Crown. The Commonwealth Secretariat was housed from its founding in 1965 in Marlborough House, a royal palace, on the Queen’s suggestion, and the Commonwealth’s profile was raised through royal attendance at events and through the annual Christmas Day message. Moreover, Murphy shows that the Queen’s personal support and interventions made the difference at certain key political moments: smoothing atmospheres and urging action, particularly in relation to Rhodesia. In addition, the association with the Queen could be of value to Commonwealth leaders domestically; leaders as diverse as Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Ian Smith of Rhodesia found the association with the Queen useful within their own national spheres.

The book argues convincingly that rather than being an irrelevance, the Crown, and its association with the Commonwealth, was valued by a whole range of actors in Britain and beyond who sought to use this relationship to bolster a wide variety of different agendas. These actors and agendas included those of the
palace, and the Queen herself. The messiness and constitutional uncertainty of Commonwealth protocols and declarations, so clearly illustrated in Monarchy and the End of Empire, provided space for creativity. The surprisingly recent nature of many of the invented traditions that accompany the Commonwealth headship provide one example of the ways that this freedom has been acted upon.

Murphy’s approach is that of (in his words) a ‘conventional political history’, making his book unusual in a growing field largely dominated by a ‘focus on culture and representation’ (p. xiii). Using a kind of ‘documentary archaeology’ (ibid.), the author demonstrates the value and richness of traditional historical sources. As a self-confessed ‘archive rat’, Murphy has rooted out a wealth of fascinating tales from the TNA, the National Archives of Ireland, the Commonwealth Secretariat Archives, as well as other collections, most notably those of Conservative politicians at Churchill College Cambridge, and in the Bodleian Library, Oxford. The book draws extensively on these materials, but does so deftly in the text, maintaining a good balance between evidence, narrative, and analysis.

As the author stresses, much in relation to the views of the Queen has been removed from the archival record as a result of secrecy and paranoia from both the palace and Whitehall, making for significant methodological challenges. One of the book’s key arguments is that the royal family’s association with Commonwealth is as much about the use of this position by other actors (within the British government, within the Secretariat, and by other Commonwealth leaders) as it is about the Queen herself, so this absence can be partially filled by other sources. Nevertheless, some of the most compelling points for me are where – through Murphy’s forensic piecing together of the evidence present in multiple collections, as well as the telling gaps – we seem to be able to tangibly grasp the Queen’s views and agency at important moments. Here, the continuing value of spending significant time amongst the archives is clearly demonstrated.

Despite often being about legal and constitutional debates – a subject that could seem quite dry – Murphy’s text is most certainly not dull. It is punctuated throughout by an incisive commentary which leaves almost no actor without critical scrutiny. As well as subtly highlighting the racist assumptions of many, the book takes a delight in the snarky comments of officials, politicians, advisors of various hues in relation to each other, and particularly their counterparts in other Commonwealth nations. Murphy’s careful archival research gives us a clear idea of the ways in which national stereotypes animated Whitehall discussions over Canada’s strengthening republicanism for example. Seeking to explain this, ‘Canada’s “at times nauseatingly high-minded” attitude to racial questions was cited … [and] “the Candian winter”, it was suggested, made “for isolation, introspection, and inward-lookingness”’ (p. 100). On another occasion, when the suggestion was made that Commonwealth members should contribute to the redevelopment and management of Marlborough House, the Cabinet Secretary noted: ‘We certainly do not want to see the house cluttered up with statuary from India or Ghana, or even modern furniture from Canada or Australia’ (p. 125). This understated humour carries the book along and ensures that, far from a dry constitutional history, this is a colourful account full of people, their propensity to gossip, and their (often unfounded) judgements.

After a first chapter introducing ‘The holy family’ and outlining the methodological and theoretical approach taken, chapter two highlights the relationship between empire and the royal family, exploring attempts to construct an imperial crown between 1918–45, and the substantial challenges (such as the abdication crisis) to this. This sets the context for the chapters which follow, all of which provide a thematic and chronological exploration of the relationships between the British government, the palace, and decolonization. In chapter three we hear about the trials and tribulations of various royal tours, as well as the linguistic fudges by which the title of ‘Head of the Commonwealth’ was produced in reaction to India’s choice to become a republic in 1949. Chapter four focuses on Queen Elizabeth II – a central figure throughout the rest of the book – through an examination of her coronation and Commonwealth tour, 1952–4. The next two chapters explore the fascinating terrain of the relations between the ‘Winds of Change’ and the Royal Family (exploring for example how much the Queen knew of, and agreed with, the Suez invasion), and various reactions to the republicanism (and indeed monarchical loyalty) of the decolonising world. The royalist inclinations of Ian Smith’s Rhodesia after the Unilateral Declaration of Independence provide a particularly intriguing case. Following this, a chapter focuses on the 1960s, when Murphy demonstrates that as a result of the founding
of the Commonwealth’s own Secretariat, and the increasingly diverse membership of the organisation, ‘the Commonwealth was increasingly coming to be regarded as something alien and hostile within British elite circles’ (p. 110). At the same time, this decade saw attempts to flesh out the role of the Head of the Commonwealth on the behalf of the palace, drawing the two British forces into conflict (not for the last time). Chapters eight, nine and ten focus on the Queen’s attendance at Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings in the 1970s, processes of ‘De-dominionisation’ (trends toward republicanism) in Australia and Canada, Malta and Trinidad and Tobago, as well as the competing desire, exhibited by Papua New Guinea, and the Queen’s often antagonistic relationship with the Conservative government’s Commonwealth policies in the 1980s. Chapter 11 takes the story up to date, exploring the Queen and Commonwealth in the 1990s when the royal family was at a low ebb in the UK, and finishing in 2013, when the Queen’s British and Commonwealth role seems more secure than ever, but the Commonwealth’s own future is increasingly being called into question. Murphy finishes by reflecting on this current concern: ‘The monarchy has undoubtedly played an important role in shaping the modern Commonwealth; but so too have the wit, courage and imagination of its leaders. Perhaps it is time for the Commonwealth to rediscover these characteristics’ (p. 195, italics added).

Of course, no book can include everything, and I want to end with a few points for further discussion about roads not taken. The first is to ask what is left out when a book focuses on the history of the British political classes as this account does. Taking such a narrow slice allows for a detailed engagement with this group, but in Murphy’s book we hear very little of popular engagements with the Commonwealth in Britain, and the connections between these popular engagements and the political decisions made by Murphy’s actors. Although there are short sections about the Commonwealth Games, Commonwealth Day, and the Christmas Day message, we hear nothing of other popular Commonwealth endeavours (such as the 1960s and 1970s Comex expeditions, with which Prince Philip was closely engaged). Moreover, there is scant mention of domestic Commonwealth politics in the UK: how were the interrelationships between the Queen and the Commonwealth impacted upon by violent arguments of immigration and race in Britain? If, as Murphy suggests, the Queen was a fairly liberal voice on religious tolerance and an advocate of multiculturalism, how was this taken up or contested by others involved in this debate? As the Christmas Day message was beamed into living rooms across the country, how were the Queen’s messages of Commonwealth value both within and beyond the nation received? How much were external Commonwealth policies mediated through Britain’s domestic concerns?

As Jordanna Bailkin has recently noted, the historiographies of post-war Britain and decolonisation have all too often been treated separately – accounts of post-war Britain touching upon the Commonwealth and decolonisation only with reference to immigration, and those of decolonisation tending to view it as a process taking place in arenas quite separate from domestic concerns. Murphy’s focus on the Queen and the royal family grounds debates about decolonisation squarely within the realm of British culture. But perhaps Murphy could have considered further these domestic politics (beyond Whitehall) in his account – reflecting a growing view in the historiography that decolonization should be seen as something that took place within, and impacted upon, Britain, as well as the countries that were becoming independent.

Second, I wonder how Murphy’s account might have differed if it had drawn upon a wider variety of sources alongside official and personal papers. The book’s front cover image (a photograph of the royal visit to Ghana in 1961, with billboard portraits of the Queen and Kwame Nkrumah in the background), as well as the 20 other images in book point to the richness of the visual evidence available for this period. But the images seem a little disconnected from the account (indeed, Murphy himself freely admits to having come only recently to the value and interest of the visual). I think this shows. There is so much more that could be said and asked about images. One delightful image (figure 2) shows the Queen smiling broadly whilst dancing with Nkrumah in 1961. It would be fascinating to know more about this occasion, and about the ramifications of this image if and when it was published. How was it received by different audiences within Britain and the Commonwealth? Were attempts made to manage these images by the British government and Whitehall? The role of popular culture in representing, supporting, and also challenging elite narratives of empire and the process of decolonisation have been clearly demonstrated in a number of recent
A third question I have is about the focus on Britain. This concentration provides a really detailed exploration of the engagement with the Commonwealth on the part of one country. However, this great strength is of course also its greatest weakness, not least because of sensitivities (neatly expressed in Murphy’s text) about the lingering tendency to see the Commonwealth as a British entity. What would happen, I wonder, if we were to take in the view of Queen and Commonwealth from elsewhere in the Commonwealth? Monarchy and the End of Empire provides glimpses of this, but always from the perspective of its implications for Britain, or for the palace. For example, the decision by Jamaica to push forward a republican agenda is understood through continued possible embarrassment for Britain about colonialism, rather than through a detailed accounting for the ways in which royalty, empire, and Commonwealth could be understood from the perspective of this Caribbean state. Murphy’s account would be usefully placed alongside others (yet to be written) which take in the scene from elsewhere in the Commonwealth.

Perhaps rather than acting as criticisms of Monarchy and the End of Empire – which is undoubtedly a scholarly and important account – these final points highlight the continuing value of studying Commonwealth history, despite the decline of this label in UK universities. Whatever we call it, there is much more to say about decolonisation and the post-colonial Commonwealth, from a broad range of geographical, disciplinary, and methodological perspectives.

Notes


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