

The Man behind the Queen: Male Consorts in History

Review Number: 1824

Publish date: Thursday, 10 September, 2015

Editor: Miles Taylor

Charles Beem

ISBN: 9781137448354

Date of Publication: 2014

Price: £57.00

Pages: 284pp.

Publisher: Palgrave Macmillan

Publisher url: <http://www.palgrave.com/page/detail/the-man-behind-the-queen-charles-beem/?isb=9781137448347>

Place of Publication: Basingstoke

Reviewer: Estelle Paranque

This edited collection fills some important gaps in the historiography of rulership and the interactions between royal couples, particularly in cases when the man is not the legitimate heir. Extending from the medieval period to the modern day, its 15 chapters reveal the complexities that encompass a royal alliance between a regnant queen and her male consort, focussing on different geographical locations to offer a very thorough analysis of the position of male consort. Through varied primary sources, such as letters, chronicles, and diplomatic reports, the authors highlight the stakes of being a male consort, demonstrating how 'the job of consort was always a much better fit for a woman' (p. 3). In their introduction, Charles Beem and Miles Taylor rightly explain how significant their collection is to the understanding not only of royal couples, but also royal power.

The first chapter of the collection focuses on the consecutive king consorts of Navarre between 1274 and 1512. This study is very well researched, relying greatly on varied primary sources, such as marriage contracts and state papers from Navarre, Spain, and France. Elena Woodacre assesses the successes and ambitions of the Navarrese consorts and evaluates royal partnerships. The strength of this chapter lies in its comparative approach, offering a survey of the different royal couples and evaluating the effectiveness and popularity of the successive king consorts of Navarre. It also explores the complexities of choosing a successful king consort who would care for the country as much as his own native realm.

The next chapter examines the fascinating case of the King Ferdinand of Aragon. While the Catholic king's rule has always been studied in conjunction with that of his wife, Isabella of Castile, David Abulafia aims at defining the political role of Ferdinand, offering a new perspective of his reign and his political decisions. Though Abulafia's study does not rely on primary source materials, the author's knowledge of the topic, along with his engaging writing style, allow the reader to grasp the complexities of differentiating Ferdinand's power from that of Isabella. Furthermore, Abulafia reviews the Aragonese king's involvement in the Muslim issue, showing how he sometimes defended their interests: 'Ferdinand could quite honestly inform a worried Egyptian sultan that he guaranteed the right of his Muslim subjects' (p. 43). The author also insists on Ferdinand's 'very active role in planning New World exploration' (p. 51). In this chapter, a more nuanced portrait of Ferdinand is depicted as his actual political role as a king consort is explored.

In chapter three, Sarah Duncan examines the role of Philip II of Spain as king consort of England during the brief reign of his second wife, Queen Mary I (1553–8). As Duncan explains, Mary's reign has been re-evaluated in recent years; however, more research and analysis is needed to clarify Philip's role as an English king consort (p. 55). In this chapter, largely based on chronicles and state papers, Duncan explores Philip's involvement in English affairs and court entertainments (pp. 64–70). For Duncan, 'the tournaments allowed Philip to take center stage in entertainments that showcased his abilities and celebrated his success' (p. 69).

The subsequent chapter sheds light on the surprising case of George of Denmark, the husband of the last Stuart queen, who never became king of England. With an engaging writing style, Charles Beem shrewdly elucidates the difficulties that Prince George of Denmark faced as Anne Stuart's husband, examining the reasons for his discretion on the political scene. According to Beem, George of Denmark simply played the generic role of consort, seemingly content to be 'by the side of his sovereign wife' (p. 88). This unusual dynamic for a royal couple offers a very interesting manner of analysing royal power, particularly when a woman is in the role of ruler.

Chapter five explores the complex relationship between Queen Ulrika Eleonora, who was forced to abdicate the throne, and her husband Frederick who was crowned king of Sweden (p. 98). Fabian Persson reassesses the reputation of Frederik I of Sweden (p. 94), examining the difficulties he encountered in asserting his responsibilities as king consort. Though this essay can at first be overly descriptive, it offers a fascinating analysis of royal power at a time when the concept of absolutism dominated the political sphere. Through key events and sources, a well depicted and complex portrait of the Swedish king is revealed to the reader.

Through archival research, Michael Bitter examines the role of Tsaritsa and the case of Empress Anna Ioannovna's favourite, Count Ernst Johann Bühren. Covering a very difficult period in Russian history, the author manages to highlight Count Biron's (Bühren) reputation and influence in Russian affairs by focussing on British sources, such as the accounts of George Lord Forbes, a British resident at St. Petersburg. Bitter assesses that his contact with Count Biron gave him 'a rare opportunity to observe and document his statements and activities' (p. 103). Throughout the chapter, a re-evaluation of Count Biron's role and influence on the Russian Empress is offered. The seventh chapter proposes an overview of the varied roles and responsibilities held by Francis Stephen of Lorraine, consort of Maria Theresa, Ruler of the Austrian Monarchy, who became Emperor Francis I in 1745. Derek Beales reviews the qualities of Francis, describing how he and his wife secured the Empire. Beales notes of Francis I that 'he left all of his four sovereignties, Lorraine, Tuscany, the Austrian Monarchy, and the Holy Roman Empire, in better shape than he found them' (p. 139), thus demonstrating the qualities of a good statesman.

The subsequent essay focuses on a famous consort, Queen Victoria's husband Prince Albert. Karina Urbach sheds light on Albert's influence and ability to play roles at court though he 'officially had no power' (p. 154). The author argues that Prince Albert was more involved in court operations than one might believe, portraying a man who was highly conscious of the social and economic challenges that his period provided (p. 147). Urbach reveals Albert's shrewd awareness of 'the power of the press', and how it could help him

secure his royal family (pp. 149–50). The strength of this essay is in its close examination of Prince Albert's role during his wife's reign, which demonstrates his own subtle influence. Chapter nine explores the same topic from an Indian perspective, revealing the impact of members of the British royal family on the nation's colonies. In this very brief but enriching chapter, Simin Patel casts light on the culture of commemoration in Bombay and how Prince Albert's death affected a population located at such a great geographical distance from the Mother country (pp. 157–60).

The last five chapters focus on modern king consorts, considering the different social, political and economic challenges they faced after the industrial revolution. The tenth chapter analyses the regality of Ferdinand II of Portugal, arguing that despite some difficulties linked to Portugal's military situation in the 19th century, the king consort played 'a significant role in Portugal's destiny' (p. 171). Author Daniel Alves explores the royal couple's dynamic and their profound affection for one another (p. 118). Ferdinand was an active king consort, expressing a keen interest in state affairs, which differentiates him from other king consorts, notably Prince Albert of England. This chapter is followed by a review of the case of the French prince consort, Gaston d'Orléans Comte d'Eu, who was married to Princess Isabel of Brazil and often asked to play an important role in the state affairs during the absence of Isabel's father, Emperor Pedro II. Author Roderick Barman examines the role of Gaston d'Orléans in the 1889 overthrow of the Brazilian 'empire' (p. 178). Through crucial letters, Barman reveals the challenges that Gaston d'Orléans faced as a foreigner, but also suggests that his lack of diplomatic and political skills led the country into a darker period fraught with conflict and turmoil. (p. 182).

Caroline Keen's chapter focussing on the rule of the Bhopal region of India is particularly original. Through extensive research, Keen re-evaluates the reputation of Siddiq Hasan, the male consort of Shah Jahan, who was well educated despite not hailing from an aristocratic background. This essay analyses the political context, as well as the consort's intellectual abilities, to explain Siddiq Hasan's impact on the Bhopal monarchy. With an engaging writing style, the reader uncovers a multi-faceted man who 'used the pen rather than the use of violence in his support of its early stages of Islamic nationalism', but who also 'tarnished the Bhopal monarchy for a generation' because of his ego and personal ambitions (p. 201). The next chapter compares three royal couples, drawing parallels and analysing the respective consorts. Though this essay is primarily based on secondary sources, it is well-researched and well written. Maria Grever and Jeroen van Zanten explore the Dutch consorts' backgrounds, status, education and relations to understand how these factors influenced their respective rules.

Chapter 14 examines the case of Prince Philip, consort to Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom. This essay offers an interesting analysis of the prince as a sportsman and youth leader. While many readers may think of Prince Philip as a discreet consort, who does not play an important role in the royal family, this essay reveals how he used athletics to become a youth leader and reinvent the role of a modern consort. The last chapter of this collection reviews the case of the first Danish consort, who was French and found it difficult to assimilate into Denmark's culture (pp. 244–5). Strikingly, Trond Norén Isaksen explains the Danish Prince consort's view of his status as 'an abnormality', and describes how he endeavoured to make 'his own situation an issue of gender equality' (p. 253). Through detailed examples and sources, the author reveals the frustration and challenges of a 20th-century prince consort.

In its focus on male consorts, the authors of this collection reveal new facets of monarchical authority, which is often linked to monarchical representations. Though this volume could have been organised thematically (e.g. comparisons of several consorts, prince consorts, king consorts with power) or geographically, the choice to do so chronologically also makes sense, as it allows the reader to see the evolution of this status, and how it arguably affected male consorts during different time periods. The primary limitation of this collection is that some essays are too short – making the reader want to learn more about some of the historical figures featured. This collection could have been divided into two volumes, but the choice to publish only one indicates the editors' desire to be coherent while nonetheless offering a collection representing a large time spectrum. This being said, *The Man behind the Queen: Male Consorts in History* is without any doubt a valuable contribution to the field and should be read by both scholars and students who are interested in royal studies. The essays are well organised and engaging, and they offer a real grasp of the

challenges associated with the consort role.

Source URL: <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/1824>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/136988>