At the time of writing this review (early April 2020), Harry and Meghan had decamped to Los Angeles, Prince Charles was recovering from the coronavirus, and Queen Elizabeth had just delivered a rare television address to the British people urging resolve in the face of COVID-19. These are not developments that Edward Owens could have possibly anticipated when writing *The Family Firm: Monarchy, Mass Media and the British Public, 1932-1953*. Luckily enough for him, though, each in its own way plays into his narrative.

In ceding their status as senior royals, Harry and Meghan renewed conversations about the burdens associated with the crown—and turned fresh attention on the “dutiful” William and Kate. That Prince Charles has contracted the coronavirus, meanwhile, illustrates a royal family inseparable from the nation that it serves, even as it stands apart. These themes of self-sacrifice, collectivity, and resolve were only reinforced in the Queen’s televised remarks to her subjects, where she reassured audiences that “We should take comfort that while we may have more still to endure, better days will return. We will be with our friends again; we will be with our families again; we will meet again.” To underscore this message, a photo flashed across the screen of the Queen and her sister Margaret delivering their famous radio address to British children in 1940.

Burdens. Responsibilities. Intimacy. Vulnerability. Family. These are words that appear again and again in Owens’s perceptive if sometimes protracted analysis of the way the monarchy harnessed mass media to forge stronger ties with the British public from 1932 (George V’s Christmas radio broadcast) to 1953 (Queen Elizabeth’s televised coronation). In six substantive chapters, framed by an introduction and conclusion, and illustrated with photographs culled from the press, Owens describes how the Windsors—assisted by key courtiers, media partners, and Church officials—used radio, print and television to pitch a new version of themselves to the nation, one intended to right a seemingly outmoded institution. This vision emphasized the emotional connection between sovereign and subject and drew attention to the sacrifices of the royal family. As Owens shows, nothing about this vision was self-evident, especially in the early years. And yet, as recent events attest, it’s a vision that has proven remarkably resilient.

Some aspects of Owens’s narrative likely will be familiar to readers. Much has been written about George
V’s pioneering use of the radio to connect with his subjects during the 1930s, and about his second son’s more troubled relationship with the medium (popularized in the film *The King’s Speech*). The televisation of Queen Elizabeth’s 1953 coronation has also received extensive scholarly treatment. What animates Owens’s book, however, and gives it its analytical purchase, is his decision to pair these better-known moments with less-studied encounters between the royal family and its listening, reading and viewing audiences. For example, he devotes his first chapter to the marriage of Prince George—younger brother of Edward VIII and George VI—to the fashionable Greek Princess Marina in 1934. (The media-savvy couple were the first royals to participate in filmed interviews and to kiss on camera.) Also notable is Owens use of materials culled from film newsreels, assorted newspapers, the BBC Written Archives Centre, Mass Observation Archive, Royal Archives, and Lambeth Palace Library to flesh out his narrative. The royal family, famous for its inscrutability, has more than met its match in this resourceful young historian.

In its most revelatory sections, Owens shows that the standard tropes used to describe the modern monarchy were actually the product of careful and coordinated messaging. One takes away from this interpretation new appreciation not just for the shrewdness of certain royals, but also for the expertise offered by a series of palace press secretaries (the position was first created in 1918), journalists, and archbishops. Working closely with the royal family, men (and they were almost always men) including Archbishop Cosmo Lang, Sir Clive Wigram, Sir Alexander Hardinge, Dermot Morrah, and Sir Alan Lascelles helped the Windsors master the art of “self-exposure.” When George V turned to radio during the 1930s, for example, he leaned heavily on Lang (his archbishop), to ensure that he struck an appropriate tone. It was at Lang’s urging that the King opted for informality and intimacy in his addresses, greeting his audiences as “my dear friends” and casting himself in the role of father to the nation. It was also at Lang’s urging that the King stressed the onus of his position. As Owens explains, “[t]he archbishop created a template for royal public language that…stressed that royalty was forced to forgo the pleasures of ordinary life in executing their public service” (p. 132).

At no time were advisors’ efforts more heroic than following the Abdication Crisis of 1936. As Owens explains in his third chapter—an innovative study of the media campaign around George VI’s coronation—“officials and news editors had to work hard to fill the charisma vacuum created by [Edward VIII’s] abdication with forceful meaning” (p. 41). Edward VIII, after all, had been a media darling, and the public had a hard time giving him up – much harder, indeed, than many of us realize. His younger brother, in contrast, appeared faltering, hesitant, stolid, and unadventurous. Advisors’ solution? They presented the new king as a committed public servant and symbol of democratic politics. In this formulation, it mattered little what George VI himself said or did. It was his willingness to serve that was meaningful, and what the Crown signified on a more abstract level. George VI thus became “the defender of the nation’s and empire’s political freedoms” and his coronation “a symbol of the inexorable progress of constitutional democracy, in direct contrast to continental despotism” (p. 41).

Such “royal public relations repair jobs” seemed to do the trick (p. 136). Drawing on a cache of letters stored in the Royal Archives and assorted materials collected by Mass Observation, Owens shows the efficacy of these strategies in improving public relations. Following the radio broadcast of Prince George and Princess Marina’s wedding in 1934, for instance, listeners wrote letters praising the event for fostering a sense of “national belonging” (p. 48). Similarly, when prompted in 1937 to write essays on “The finest person who ever lived,” 46 schoolboys (out of 512) chose to write on George V, making the king, as Owens notes, the “second most popular choice after Jesus” (p. 125). Mass Observation reports on George VI’s coronation, meanwhile, expressed overwhelming sympathy for the new king and recognized the burdens associated with his position (p. 181). And when Queen Elizabeth (the Queen Mum) decided to deliver a special radio broadcast at the outset of World War II, her words received rapturous reviews from many of her female listeners. One woman upset by “poor health and a young son in the army who seemed to have gone beyond my love and care” wrote to the queen that when her “quiet words echoed in the room you seemed to speak to me, and gradually I saw how much a little home meant, and how important it was to keep on carrying on” (p. 219). Of course, those inclined to engage in correspondence or record their impressions were likely already of a royalist bent. But the enthusiasm is striking nonetheless – and all the more for the fact that the public
reactions so closely mirror strategic intent.

Which is not to suggest that these strategies were always successful. Owens’s book is at its most engaging when illustrating the limits of these public relations schemes. It is in these sections that the British public—often referenced *en bloc*—take on more idiosyncratic qualities. Particularly telling is Owens’s discussion of the royal family during World War II, the subject of his fourth chapter. During the war, the Windsors and their advisors pushed a narrative of “a shared suffering that united the monarchs and their subjects”—one that highlighted the bombing of Buckingham Palace, the separation of the king and queen from their daughters, and the princesses’ own wartime contributions (p. 205). Some Britons, however, recognized the hollowness in the “equality of sacrifice” rhetoric. As Owens notes, “the royal tourists did not always meet with a warm welcome” when they visited “blitzed communities.” He continues, “After the Luftwaffe’s first attacks on London’s East End in September 1940, it was rumoured in elite circles that the king and queen had been booed on visiting local inhabitants who had been bombed out of their homes” (p. 235). Even the wartime death of Prince George, the duke of Kent, did not fully assuage the Windsors’ critics. “While on the one hand,” Owens writes, “respondents described the duke as just another casualty of war (signaling the class-leveling experience of wartime bereavement), they often added that his wife and children would not suffer the same material hardships as other families who had lost loved ones to the fighting” (pp. 250-251). (Similar critiques would surface during Princess Elizabeth and Prince Philip’s courtship in 1947, outlined in Chapter Five, when one Mass Observation respondent complained that the “royal couple will be over-paid and under-worked and live luxuriously; also they will breed child parasites who will be granted huge allowances and be reared expensively” (p. 299).) Part of why royals had to be so assiduous in their messaging, then, stemmed from perpetual fear of antagonizing the public that they courted.

If Owens had pushed his inquiry further still, he might have said more about how the royals and their handlers grappled with gender in their media strategies—and on how their strategies, in turn, affected men and women differently. There are some tantalizing observations on this subject. In his sixth chapter, Owens examines Elizabeth II’s televised coronation coverage as focused on what he describes as “royal maternalism” (p. 43). As Owens explains, “[T]elevision images of the queen separated from and then reunited with her two children—in particular, her son and heir Prince Charles—evoked powerful feelings from viewers who sympathized with the way her public role seemed to prevent her enjoying the freedoms of a normal family life” (p. 43). For Owens, such images of separation and reunion encouraged Britons towards an even greater appreciation of Elizabeth’s sacrifices, that is, of the “unenviable burden” of the crown (which in this case barred the Queen from experiencing a more fulfilling version of motherhood). But might these displays of female independence have also stimulated different lines of thinking? The young Margaret Thatcher, for one, writing as a barrister-in-training, considered Elizabeth II’s accession a moment for British women to “wake up.” As she explained in a piece for *The Sunday Graphic*, a woman “now occupies the highest position in the land.” “If,” she continued, “as many earnestly pray, the accession of Elizabeth II can help to remove the last shreds of prejudice against women aspiring to the highest places, then a new era for women will indeed be at hand” (Margaret Thatcher, “Wake Up, Women,” *Sunday Graphic*, February 17, 1952).

Owens also might have done more with the Empire. He touches on imperial and Commonwealth concerns in his treatment of George V’s Christmas broadcasts, where he notes that the King described the empire as a “family of nations” and helped to advance the idea of the holiday as “a time of imperial reunion” (p. 97). And in his chapter on Elizabeth II’s coronation, Owens acknowledges that the extensive media coverage helped shore up the Commonwealth (both for those at home and abroad), though he goes on to suggest that historians have been misguided in privileging the Empire in their interpretations of the event’s salience (think Jan Morris’s *Coronation Everest* or Wendy Webster’s *Englishness and Empire*). For Owens, “royal maternalism,” not the Empire, proved the dominant lens through which audiences—or, at least, audiences at home—made meaning of the ceremonial. But surely this is a false dichotomy. Both imperial and familial dramas shaped the Coronation narratives. (Instead of adopting an either/or framework here, then, I would have preferred a both/and formulation.) Also strangely absent are references to the works of Anne Spry Rush and Hilary Sapire on empire loyalty. To be fair, though, Owens recognizes the primarily domestic focus of
his study and, in his Conclusion, encourages others to pursue how his themes played out in imperial and international contexts.

Finally, and perhaps I write this because I’m a Victorianist, I would have liked to see Owens give more than a passing glance to the 18th and 19th centuries. He does acknowledge that “[T]he projection of the family life of the monarchy in the years between 1932 and 1953 was not entirely novel” (p. 8). To this point, he notes that George III was an early adopter of the family model of monarchy (p. 118). He also cites Victoria and Albert’s clever use of photographic cartes de visite (8) to establish intimacy with their subjects. There is a rich literature tracing these developments. What then makes the 20th-century Windsors’ strategy distinctive? It may be more an intensification or amplification of preexisting tendencies—encouraged by the newly available media and an increasingly sophisticated public relations machine—than the pivot that Owens often contends it to be. Long before the advent of radio and television, royals relied on tours, portraiture, photography, memoirs, and ceremony to promote a culture of “democratic royalism,” to borrow William Kuhn’s formulation. In this respect, Kate, William, Meghan and Harry’s more recent experiments with YouTube, Instagram, and personal photography – aided by their bevvy of advisors and assistants—only make up the latest chapter in an evolving story of strategic media engagement.

To call out these limitations, however, is not intended to detract from or dismiss this book’s sizeable contributions. At 428 pages, The Family Firm already does much to explain, in forensic detail, how and why the monarchy has survived into the 21st century. As Owens shows, it is by no means obvious that the Crown today should be such a forceful symbol of national unity. That the Windsors are viewed in this way by so many owes much to the generations of royals and their collaborators who have worked to cultivate a particular image. Whether or not heightened understanding of their plotting will sour Britons on the monarchy is for Owens’s readers to decide. Judging by my own emotional reaction to the Queen’s recent televised speech, I suspect that for most it will not.

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