
Royal Photographs: Emotions for the People

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The visual representation of twentieth-century European dictators is increasingly attracting the attention of historians. Hitler's face is worth a 'physiognomical biography',¹ and a recent conference on communist leader cults included several papers on the visual representation of Stalin and his east European imitators.² While some studies exist on allegorical representations of republics,³ the visual representations of twentieth-century royal heads of state has so far received very little attention, despite the fact that there are few places on the continent which during this time have not been under royal rule for at least as long as Germany was ruled by Hitler. By analysing a specific set of visual representations of royal heads of state, namely royal photographs, this article thus attempts to fill a historiographical gap.

One of the striking aspects of any monarchy, at least for me as a Swiss citizen, is that royal photographs can be found almost everywhere. Not only are public buildings such as city halls or state archives usually adorned with framed photographs of the reigning monarch, images of Queen Elizabeth, King Albert or King Juan Carlos can also easily be spotted in shops, restaurants or private homes in London, Brussels or Madrid. The aim of this article is to find out more about their history. When and why did people start putting up photographs of their royal heads of state in their homes? Why and how were these images made and how were they distributed to the general public? And, most importantly, what was their meaning? What messages did royal families want to get across to the general public by means of their photographs, and what meanings did these images have in the eyes of those who saw them?

This article will concentrate on official royal photographs made in the first half of the twentieth century, that is, images which were commissioned by royal families themselves. The vast amount of news photographs taken during official royal

¹ Claudia Schmölders, *Hitlers Gesicht. Eine physiognomische Biographie* (Munich: Beck, 2000).

² See papers by Catriona Kelly, Jan Plamper and Alice Mocanescu presented at the conference on Stalin and the Lesser Gods. The Leader Cult in Communist Dictatorships in Comparative Perspective, held at the European University Institute in Florence in May 2003 (Publication forthcoming).

³ See Maurice Agulhon, *Marianne au pouvoir. L'imagerie et la symbolique républicaines de 1880 à 1914* (Paris: Flammarion, 1989), and Georg Kreis, *Helvetia – im Wandel der Zeiten* (Zürich: Verlag Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 1991).

engagements will thus have to be left out. Empirically this article is based on three main case studies, namely Britain, Belgium and Italy. While Belgium undoubtedly is a good example of a west European constitutional monarchy, the advantage of the British case is that the lives and work of two important royal photographers, Dorothy Wilding and Cecil Beaton, are exceptionally well documented.⁴ In Italy, on the other hand, the introduction of the republic by referendum in 1946 led to the abandonment of the royal administration and the eventual transfer of its papers to state archives. In contrast to existing monarchies, such as Belgium or Britain, where older administrative papers of the monarchy are regularly destroyed because they have become irrelevant and use up too much space, the Italian royal archives provide us with a unique set of sources documenting the everyday workings of a monarchy in the first half of the twentieth century.⁵ Although I was unable to study any of the Balkan or Scandinavian monarchies, where royal photographs of course also exist, I believe that a series of interesting comparisons and general conclusions can be drawn from the cases I have analysed.⁶

Communication

Soon after the invention of photography in the late 1830s European royal families realised that photographs were an ideal means of communicating their image to the general public. While in 1842 Prince Albert was the first member of the British royal family to appear on a daguerreotype, in 1859 Emperor Napoleon III of France was the first European monarch to appear on cartes-de-visite. By allowing the Paris

⁴ Wilding's royal photographs are kept in the National Portrait Gallery (NPG), those of Beaton in the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A). Scrapbooks containing newspaper clippings documenting Beaton's published work are contained in the V&A's Blythe House (V&A BH); all three archives are in London. Both photographers published autobiographies: Dorothy Wilding, *In Pursuit of Perfection* (London: Robert Hale, 1958); Cecil Beaton, *Photobiography* (London: Odhams Press, 1951). Beaton also published seven volumes of – heavily edited – diaries with Weidenfeld Nicolson between 1961 and 1978: *The Wandering Years. Diaries 1922–1939*, *The Years Between. Diaries 1939–44*, *The Happy Years. Diaries 1944–48*, *The Strenuous Years. Diaries 1948–55*, *The Restless Years. Diaries 1955–63* and *The Parting Years. Diaries 1963–74*. Interesting transcripts of original diary entries can be found in Hugo Vickers, *Cecil Beaton: The Authorized Biography* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1985), and in Roy Strong, *Cecil Beaton: The Royal Portraits* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1988).

⁵ I have consulted royal archives contained in the Archivio di Stato in Turin (AST) and the Archivio Centrale dello Stato in Rome (ACSR).

⁶ Most of the empirical research for this article was made possible by a Swiss National Science Fund Research Fellowship I held at the Oxford University History Faculty between 2000 and 2002. The Italian case I was able to study when I was a resident research fellow at the Istituto Svizzero, Villa Maraini, Rome, during the academic year 2002–3. In addition to the archives already mentioned for this article I have analysed sources contained in the Royal Archives in Windsor Castle (RA), the Public Record Office, Kew (PRO), the Archives du Palais (AdP) and the Musée de la dynastie (MdD), Brussels, as well as the Schweizerisches Bundesarchiv Bern (BA). I should like to thank the staff of all these archives for their help, in particular Charlotte Cotton and Eva White at the V&A, Frances Dimond at the RA and Gustaaf Janssens at the AdP. Furthermore I should like to thank Mme. R. Marchand and Tom Hustler for generously allowing me to reproduce free of charge photographs for which they hold the copyright, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II for permission to quote from a document held by the RA, Martin Conway and Luisa Passerini for their useful comments on my text, Mary Vincent for encouraging me to write this article in the first place and the two anonymous referees who supported its publication in this journal. All translations are my own.

photographer Adolphe-Eugène Disdéri to sell them to the general public, Napoleon triggered the international craze for cartes-de-visite which, in contrast to earlier forms of photography, were cheap and easily mass-produced.⁷ All over Europe photographs of royal families became best-sellers – in Britain 270,000 copies of the first royal cartes-de-visite were sold in only a few months.⁸ The high propaganda value of royal photographs became apparent after the fall of the French monarchy in 1870. Because photographs of the imperial family were one of the most efficient tools by which Bonapartists gathered support, the young republic had to ban them on several occasions, for the first time in 1872.⁹

The distribution of royal images as such was of course nothing new. Indeed, great amounts of mass-produced royal imagery had already been produced and consumed long before the invention of photography. After the death of Maximilian I in 1519, for example, the demand for Albrecht Dürer's woodcut of the late emperor was so great that countless unauthorised copies of it were made and sold all over Germany.¹⁰ With the advent of the carte-de-visite, however, photography quickly marginalised all older forms of mass-produced royal imagery.¹¹ Marie José, last queen of Italy and the only daughter of King Albert I and Queen Elisabeth of the Belgians, born in 1906, noted towards the end of her life: 'As a child barely able to understand, I remember the suggestions of Brussels photographers about the gracious pose that I had to strike in the never-ending hours of torment which I had to undergo for the photographs that officially documented my growing up to the Belgian citizens.'¹²

Although until the beginning of the twentieth century it remained technically impossible to reproduce photographs directly in the press, illustrations based on them began to appear as early as 1848.¹³ Ever since, royal photographs have been a regular feature of the illustrated sections of any newspaper or magazine. Even though the reproduction quality was not very high – in the case of the dailies it remained rather low well into the twentieth century – many people collected royal photographs published in the press. The Manchester *Daily Sketch* for example, made use of this

⁷ See Helmut Gernsheim, 'Queen Victoria and the New Art of Photography', in Colin Ford and National Portrait Gallery, eds., *Happy and Glorious. Six Reigns of Royal Photography* (London: Angus & Robertson, 1977): 25–43, and Jean Sagne, 'Porträts aller Art. Die Entwicklung des Fotoateliers', in Michel Frizot, ed., *Neue Geschichte der Fotografie* (Cologne: Könemann, 1998), 102–22.

⁸ Wolfgang Baier, *Quellendarstellungen zur Geschichte der Fotografie* (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 1980), 50.

⁹ For details see Donald E. English, *Political Uses of Photography in the Third French Republic, 1871–1914* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1984), 81–110.

¹⁰ Ulrich Grossmann and Germanisches Nationalmuseum Nürnberg, eds., *Albrecht Dürer. 80 Meisterblätter* (Munich: Prestel, 2000), 146.

¹¹ Vicki Goldberg, *The Power of Photography. How Photographs Changed Our Lives* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1991), 13.

¹² 'Bambina in età di capire, ricordo i suggerimenti degli operatori fotografici di Bruxelles sulla posa aggraziata che dovevo tenere nelle interminabili ore di supplizio acui ero sottoposta nelle fotografie che dovevano ufficialmente documentare ai sudditi belgi la mia crescita.' Maria José di Savoia, 'Il potere evocativo della fotografia' in Maria Gabriella di Savoia and Romano Bracalini, eds., *Casa Savoia. Diario di una monarchia* (Milan: Mondadori, 1996), 6.

¹³ See Pierre Albert and Gilles Feyel, 'Fotografie und Medien. Die Veränderungen der illustrierten Presse', in Frizot, *Neue Geschichte der Fotografie*, 360.

practice by making forthcoming publications of royal portraits a sales pitch. A day before the release of new portraits of Queen Elizabeth in 1939 the paper announced: ‘To-morrow the “Daily Sketch” will publish wonderful pictures of the Queen, taken specially by Mr Cecil Beaton at Buckingham Palace. These pictures will be treasured in hundreds of thousands of homes throughout Britain and the Empire. Make sure of them by ordering your “Daily Sketch” from your newsagent to-day.’¹⁴ The following day the newspaper encouraged the preservation of the royal images by printing them surrounded with elaborate frames.¹⁵ Interestingly, this practice of putting up cheap reproductions of royal images also predates the invention of photography. Few of the aforementioned woodcuts of Emperor Maximilian survive because of the sixteenth-century ‘habit of gluing or nailing such commemorative prints on the wall thus leading to their rapid destruction’.¹⁶

Apart from distributing official photographs to the general public by means of the press, royal families also handed out large amounts of photographs directly to individuals. Countless copies of official photographs were used in the course of dealing with the unsolicited correspondence which prominent members of royal families received in great quantities every day. Apart from people wanting royal help, financial or otherwise, many people wrote to royal families because they wanted to express their feelings of loyalty, sympathy or admiration. Such letters were often accompanied by little gifts such as poems, drawings or music especially made for the royal recipient. Their number regularly increased on the occasion of national holidays, religious festivals or royal family events such as birthdays, marriages or deaths.¹⁷ In response to this kind of acclamatory correspondence, royal households usually sent out postcards displaying an official portrait of the royal addressee. In the archive of the household of Italy’s Crown Prince Umberto one such postcard has survived because it could not be delivered to the recipient, a Roman youth called Mario Caldiroli, in June 1918.¹⁸ The postcard shows the thirteen-year-old crown prince wearing a sailor suit. It was signed by the Umberto’s tutor, Lieutenant-Commander Bonaldi, and contained only a very brief message: ‘H.R.H. the Prince of Piedmont thanks you for your kind thought.’¹⁹ Umberto’s household dealt with so many letters in this way that it used a special stamp to mark them, reading: ‘Ringraziato con cartolina’.²⁰ (Figure 1).

¹⁴ *Daily Sketch*, 4 Dec. 1939, V&A BH, Beaton scrapbook 27.

¹⁵ *Daily Sketch*, 5 Dec. 1939, *ibid.*

¹⁶ ‘[der] Brauch, solche Gedenkblätter an Wände zu kleben oder zu nageln und sie dadurch raschem Verschleiss auszusetzen’, Grossmann, *Albrecht Dürer*, 146.

¹⁷ This account is largely based on Italian evidence I have found in a great variety of dossiers contained in the AST. Maarten Van Ginderachter’s paper ‘Dear Majesty’. The Custom of Citizens Writing Letters to their King and Queen (Belgium, 1880–1940)’, presented at the conference on The Monarchy: A Crossroads of Trajectories, University of Ghent, November 2003 (publication forthcoming), makes similar observations.

¹⁸ Commune di Roma to Governatore di SAR, il Principe Ereditario, 17 June 1918, AST, 0379.

¹⁹ ‘SAR il Principe di Piemonte, ringrazia del gentile pensiero’, Bonaldi to Caldiroli, no date [June 1918], AST, 0379.

²⁰ See, for example, Pardi to Umberto, 15 Sept. 1915, AST, 0472/c.



Figure 1. Postcard of Umberto di Savoia, Crown Prince of Italy, 1918. Archivio di Stato, Turin.

Despite the fact that royal postcards were small, mass-produced items with rather impersonal textual messages, they were very useful and effective public-relations tools. This is made abundantly clear by looking at the countless thank-you letters contained in royal archives such as that of Crown Prince Umberto. Giuseppe Pardi, a Livornese who had actively fought under Garibaldi for Italy's unification, wrote a letter to Umberto on the occasion of the prince's tenth birthday in 1914. A year later he told the prince that he had been overjoyed to receive a postcard 'illustrated with your beautiful and charming photograph that for me, dear Signore Principe, has been a precious object. You know where I put it? At the top of my bed. And every evening I give it a kiss. Are you happy that I do this? I would like to think you are.' As further proof of his devotion, Pardi this time sent Umberto his own photograph. It shows a grey-haired man holding the national flag and proudly wearing on his chest the military decorations he had won in the wars of national unification (Figure 2). In return Pardi received another royal postcard.²¹

A further important way in which royal households distributed official portraits directly to individuals was as personal commemorative gifts. Signed by the royal sitters displayed on them these were given to people whom members of royal families had met personally. They were usually vintage prints, that is, high-quality photographs made directly from the original negative. As royal families were regularly involved in provincial tours, receptions for foreign guests, state visits abroad and, almost every day, in official engagements in the cause of charity or public welfare, large numbers of signed vintage prints of official portraits were needed.²² According to the importance royal households attached to the recipients of these royal gifts, their size, framing and additional personal touch varied. The least important recipients received small, at times even unframed, versions of official portraits. More significant personages, on the other hand, received large and expensively framed prints adorned with personal dedications.²³ Of course, there was not necessarily any correlation between the lavishness of the royal gift and the joy it provoked among its recipients. After a visit by Emperor William II to Blenheim Palace in 1899, Consuelo, Duchess of Marlborough, was not at all looking forward to the 'inevitable photograph' her German guest had promised to send her.²⁴ On the other hand, in 1937 a photographer of the trade-union

²¹ Pardi uses hardly any punctuation in his letter. In order to make it more easily intelligible I have added some in my translation. The original text reads: 'illustrata con la sua bella e simpatica fotografia che per me caro Signore Principe e stata una cosa preziosa, lo so in dove lo messa a capo del mio letto e tutte le sere li do un bel bacione, e contento se faccio questo, credero di si', Pardi to Umberto, 15 Sept. 1915, AST, 0472/c.

²² For the paramount importance of charity work for modern monarchies see Frank Prochaska, *Royal Bounty. The Making of a Welfare Monarchy* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995).

²³ This account is largely based on Italian sources. Very similar practices existed in Britain and Germany. For details see, Klaus-Dieter Phol, 'Der Kaiser im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit. Wilhelm II. in Fotografie und Film', in Hans Wilderrotter and Klaus-Dieter Phol, eds., *Der letzte Kaiser. Wilhelm II. im Exil* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann-Lexikon-Verlag, 1991), 9–18

²⁴ Consuelo Vanderbilt Balsan, *The Glitter and the Gold* (London: Heinemann, 1953), 102.



Figure 2. Photograph sent by the ex-Garibaldino Giuseppe Pardi to Umberto di Savoia, 15 September 1915. Archivio di Stato, Turin.

owned *Daily Herald* recorded the great interest and pride which working-class women in the east London district of Poplar took in an unframed photograph they had just received from Marina, Duchess of Kent (Figure 3).



Figure 3. 'A photograph of the Duchess of Kent is presented to the girls of the Centre of Promotion of Occupational Industries, Upper North St, Poplar.' Original caption, Daily Herald, 30 December 1937. NMPFT/Daily Herald/Science & Society Picture Library, London.

Royal photographs and the nation

Ernst Kantorowicz has shown that since the Middle Ages royal bodies had served as symbols of European states.²⁵ After the French Revolution had challenged the union between the monarchy and the state in the name of the nation, in the course of the nineteenth century most European monarchies successfully integrated the potentially dangerous concept of the nation into their self-representation. This nationalisation of European monarchies was the result of a complex process involving not only royal families eager to remain on the throne but also large and diverse sections of society actively constructing monarchical nations.²⁶ One of the main results of this development was that representations of royal families became the most important symbols of monarchical nations, even in Russia, the last of the European monarchies to give itself a national image.²⁷ In the twentieth century representations of royal

²⁵ Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies. A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).

²⁶ For further details see Johannes Paulmann, *Pomp und Politik. Monarchenbegegnungen in Europa zwischen Ancien Régime und Erstem Weltkrieg* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2000).

²⁷ See Richard Wortman, *Scenarios of Power. Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy*, vol. II (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

families remained key symbols of monarchical nations and proved to be even more adaptable to rapidly changing historical circumstances and taste than abstract allegories such as Marianne or Helvetia.²⁸ In the process of turning royal families into symbols of the nation photography played a key role.

Already in 1814 Benjamin Constant, one of the most perceptive writers on modern monarchies, noted that the kings of his age knew that ‘the base of their throne lay in the heart of their subjects’.²⁹ As monarchies continued to lose political power to ever larger groups of their subjects, the importance of emotional bonds constantly increased and in the twentieth century became paramount. One of the most important ways in which emotional links between nations and monarchies, or, more precisely, between individual members of the general public and royal families, were constructed was by means of photographs. As members of royal families were photographed almost from the day they were born, the general public was able to follow their lives closely. Thereby a strong sense of identification could develop, especially if a royal person was more or less in one’s own age group. Countless letters in royal archives refer to the fact that the letter writer was the same age as the royal person he or she was writing to and that photographs had played an important role in establishing the emotional link to the royal addressee. For instance, photographs showing the eight-year-old Italian Princess Maria Pia on the day of her first communion in April 1943 prompted several children who were also about to receive their first communion to write to her.³⁰ As royal photographs were published not only at home but also abroad, identification with a royal age peer could also occur among people living in republics. In December 1936 Mrs McAllister from Spearfish, South Dakota, a widow in her mid-forties, wrote to the British king Edward VIII, who was about to abdicate in order to marry Wallis Simpson: ‘I am enclosing a picture of you I cut out of a magazine when I was about fourteen years, & I think you were the same age. I fell in love with the picture then & have kept it ever since, which is about thirty years. How I used to take out the picture at nite [*sic*] and sleep with it under my pillow. You know & remember perhaps what one goes through at that age. I was always somewhat romantic & so have kept my first love all these yrs. But now that you have chosen someone [Wallis Simpson] I feel I have no right to the picture.’³¹

²⁸ See Alexis Schwarzenbach, *Portraits of the Nation. Stamps, Coins and Banknotes in Belgium and Switzerland, 1880–1945* (Bern: Lang, 1999).

²⁹ ‘[L]a base de leur trône reposoit dans le cœur de leurs sujets’. Benjamin Constant, *De l’esprit de conquête et de l’usurpation dans leurs rapports avec la civilisation européenne* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale Editions, 1992 [1814]), 186.

³⁰ See, e.g., Maddalena Molini to Maria Pia, 11 April 1943, or Maria Angela Doroni to Maria Pia, 11 May 1943, ACSR, Real Casa, Casa di SAR il Principe di Piemonte, B21.

³¹ McAllister to Edward VIII, 1 Dec. 1936, RA, PS/GVI/ABD: Letters before Abdication. Interestingly, the newspaper cutting which Mrs. McAllister sent along with her letter is not a portrait of Edward and it shows no sign of having been treasured for 30 years. This suggests that Mrs. McAllister did not want to part with her picture of Edward after all and that she sent him the photograph of another young prince instead. According to Frances Dimond, curator of the Royal Photograph Collection at Windsor Castle, the newspaper clipping attached to Mrs. McAllister’s letter probably shows Prince Manoel of Portugal.

The signed vintage prints royal families distributed to people whom they had met during official engagements aimed at leaving a permanent trace of these essentially ephemeral encounters. As one of the main attractions of photographic portraits has always been their direct and apparently truthful link to the physical appearance of the person represented on them, providing people with signed vintage prints was an ideal way of creating *lieux de mémoire* of personal encounters with a member of a royal family. Combined with a signature, and at times a personal dedication, these photographs allowed royal families to leave tangible evidence of their physical presence wherever they wanted. Such multiplications of royal bodies had of course existed for centuries. Indeed, there are striking parallels between twentieth-century vintage prints of official royal photographs and Hellenistic royal statues or the effigies of French Renaissance kings – they were all intended to represent royalty when they were physically absent.³²

Finally, the postcards which royal households sent out in response to unsolicited acclamatory correspondence were intended to strengthen and individualise emotional links between the monarchy and the nation that had been developed by other propaganda means, for instance lavish royal pageants.³³ Although these postcards contained neither a royal signature nor a royal greeting, the mere fact that they displayed a photograph of the royal person to whom one had written suggested his or her personal involvement. This led the letter-writers to believe that they were directly communicating with a member of a royal family – to whom letters were almost always directly addressed – rather than with their household staff. Of course the illusion of direct royal communication was especially important in the case of children, whom royal families wanted to grow up to become loyal subjects. That is one example from Italy: Mario Pangrazio, a Roman boy about six years old, could hardly believe his luck when he received a postcard displaying a photograph of the thirteen-year-old Crown Prince Umberto in 1917. Convinced that the prince had read his letter and that it had been Umberto himself who had sent him the postcard, Mario immediately wrote him another letter. This time he sent the prince a photograph of himself and his younger brother, Tullio. Mario begged Umberto to accept their gift, ‘together with the warmest wishes for your wellbeing, that of your parents and that of our fatherland’.³⁴

The inclusion of the sender’s photograph in letters to royal families was quite a frequent phenomenon. Gino Minghini, for instance, a ten-year-old refugee from Austrian Trieste, sent Crown Prince Umberto a postcard of himself on the occasion of the prince’s twelfth birthday in September 1916. The photograph shows Gino playing the violin in a countryside courtyard in San Giorgio di Nogaro, a village

³² See R. R. R. Smith, *Hellenistic Royal Portraits* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), and Ralph E. Giesey, *The Royal Funeral Ceremony in Renaissance France* (Geneva: Droz, 1960).

³³ For the importance of pageants in the case of Britain see David Cannadine, ‘The Context, Performance and Meaning of Ritual: The British Monarchy and the ‘Invention of Tradition’ c. 1820–1977’, in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 101–64.

³⁴ Pangrazio to Umberto, 30 Dec. 1917, AST, 0379.

south of Udine. This suggests that Gino earned a living as a musician. In his written message to the prince Gino referred to the fact that Umberto had recently acquired the title of Prince of Gorizia, the Austrian town gained in August 1916 as a result of Italy's only military success along the Isonzo river during the First World War. Gino wrote: 'New Prince of Gorizia: On this beautiful day of Your birth, Prince, please accept my heartfelt good wishes which I put in front of you in homage. I sincerely hope that next year I will be able to celebrate Trieste becoming Italian by playing the royal march'³⁵ (Figure 4).

The phenomenon of people including their own photograph in their correspondence with royal families shows that visual communication between royal families and their subjects was by no means a unilateral affair. On the contrary, many members of the general public not only wanted to consume royal images, they also wanted to communicate their own image to royal families. In many cases such as the photographs sent by Gino Minghini or the ex-Garibaldino Giuseppe Pardi, it is clear that these people wanted to communicate not only their feelings for a member of a royal family but also their deep emotional interest and involvement in the affairs of the nation which royal families represented. Although their photographs were never seen by the royal addressees, people like Minghini or Pardi were convinced that they had successfully included their image in the representation of the nation, especially after having received a royal postcard in return. Including one's own image in the correspondence with royal families was thus a participatory political statement by which people forcefully tried to put themselves in the national picture, to paraphrase the provocative title of the autobiography of the British artist-photographer Jo Spence (1934–92).³⁶ Better than any other example this mutual exchange of photographs between monarchies and individual members of the general public shows that monarchical nations were constructed from above *and* below.

Be they reproduced in the press, given as commemorative gifts or sent out on simple postcards – official royal photographs were always powerful tools for establishing, strengthening and sustaining the emotional links between the monarchy and the nation, between individual members of the general public and members of royal families. A letter to the editors of the *Daily Sketch* in January 1943 illustrates this point very well. Mabel Tiffany from Manchester reacted to the publication of a new portrait of the two daughters of King George VI, Elizabeth and Margaret: 'Thank you for the picture of our Princesses. It is refreshing in these days of constant war pictures. Nevertheless it is itself a war picture, because it is an inspiration and it will be treasured for its beauty and its message in thousands of British homes.'³⁷ Given the importance of emotional bonds sustained by visual communication, royal families resorted to unconventional means in order to get their images to their subjects when

³⁵ 'Nuovo Principe di Gorizia. Questo bel giorno della Vostra nascita: accogliete Principe i miei sentiti auguri, che, oggi, con omaggio, Vi porgo. Possa col nuovo anno festeggiare Trieste Italiana suonando la marcia Reale che tanto desidero', Minghini to Umberto, 11 Sept. 1916, AST, 0379.

³⁶ In *Putting Myself in the Picture. A Political, Personal, and Photographic Autobiography* (London: Camden Press, 1986), Jo Spence emphasised the political implications of taking and distributing one's own image.

³⁷ *Daily Sketch*, 4 Jan. 1943, V&A BH, Beaton scrapbook 27.



Figure 4. Photograph sent by Gino Minghini to Umberto di Savoia, 11 September 1916. Archivio di Stato, Turin.

normal distribution channels were blocked. During the liberation of a village in West Flanders at the end of the First World War, Queen Elisabeth of the Belgians noticed the display of a photograph of her husband King Albert I and herself in a window of a small house. She took a picture of the scene and in her album wrote under it: 'In a simple house in the rue du moulin shone a photograph of Their Majesties the King and the Queen. These photographs had been thrown from aeroplanes during the occupation.'³⁸

Production and composition

Official royal photographs were the result of a rather complex production process. Usually it was an event such as a birthday, an engagement or a royal tour which led royal families to commission new official photographs. A renowned professional photographer was chosen and a photo session took place, usually in one of the royal residences rather than in the photographer's studio. A great number of photographs, often involving several changes of dress and background, were taken during a single sitting. Thereafter the photographer printed the photographs and submitted them to the royal sitter for selection and approval, without which no royal photograph could be published. Official royal photographs therefore always showed royal families in the way in which they wanted to be seen, and it is thus interesting to examine the production process as well as the composition of royal photographs in more detail.

Taking royal photographs was a very much sought-after job, for it meant not only high print runs of one's work in the press but also an immense boost in terms of prestige. Probably in order to ensure competition and to prevent complaints among rival photographers, royal families usually made sure that no single photographer had a monopoly over this lucrative business. At least in the three cases I have looked at more closely, namely Britain, Belgium and Italy, royal families always collaborated with several photographers at the same time. This did not, of course, prevent photographers from presenting themselves as exclusive royal photographers. In Britain, for instance, both Cecil Beaton and Dorothy Wilding did this in their autobiographical writings, in which they failed to inform their readers that they and other photographers were constantly competing for royal photographic commissions.³⁹

A common feature of the composition of official royal photographs is that in contrast to news photographs they rarely make direct visual reference to the event which led to their creation. While in news photographs members of royal families appear in all sorts of different places doing a great variety of things, on official photographs they are seldom doing anything specific. Usually immobile, either standing or seated, the royal sitters appear in front of artificial backgrounds, usually canvasses, sometimes monochrome, sometimes figuratively decorated, or in one of

³⁸ 'Dans une maison simple, rue du moulin, brillait une photo de L.L.M.M. Le Roi et La Reine. Ces photos furent lancées par avion pendant l'occupation', Image no. 1323, 18 Oct. 1918, AdP, Albums de la reine Elisabeth, vol. III, May 1918–October 1918.

³⁹ Details of the autobiographical writings of these two photographers are contained in note 4 above.

the royal residences. Often these images show little more than the face of the royal sitter. Much less tied to historical contexts than news photographs, official portraits thus had a relatively timeless and unspecific nature. This was of course deliberate. Like other important national symbols, such as flags or allegories, royal photographs had to be both easily recognisable yet at the same time without too precise a meaning. Only thus could they be used for a relatively long period and in as many contexts as possible.

A good example of the adaptability of royal photographs to rapidly changing circumstances is a series of portraits Cecil Beaton took of Queen Elizabeth, the consort of George VI. Possibly intended for the Queen's upcoming fortieth birthday in 1940, these photographs were taken in Buckingham Palace in July 1939. Shortly afterwards the Second World War broke out. Although the portraits had been taken under very different circumstances, many of them turned out to be extremely useful even under war conditions. Released in December 1939 and March 1940 they were greeted with enthusiasm by newspapers all over Britain and its empire and they were very often directly linked to the war. For a full-page reproduction of a portrait of Elizabeth seated in front of a painted architectural background, dressed in a sparkling crinoline dress, wearing a tiara and a priceless diamond necklace and holding a fan in her lap, the *London Illustrated News* used the following caption: 'A royal lady whose example of self-sacrificing public service has been a continuous inspiration to the Empire in the fight against Nazi-ism: A new photograph of H.M. Queen Elizabeth.'⁴⁰ Portraits of this series also adorned the cover of *The Queen's Book of the Red Cross*, which was sold for charity purposes, and a copy of the magazine *War Savings*, as well as the royal Christmas cards sent out to all members of the British army in December 1939. These cards of course also included a portrait of King George VI. It was made by one of Beaton's competitors, E. O. Hoppé.⁴¹ Interestingly, while many papers praised the queen's participation in the war effort, none of them mentioned the fact that ever since the war had broken out Elizabeth had had little occasion to wear evening dress and lavish jewellery as she did in Beaton's photographs. It is perhaps no coincidence that it was a Swedish magazine which pointed out the discrepancy between the carefree images of the queen and the war situation. The *Vecko-Journalen* commented in 1940: 'England's Queen as the people like to see her – otherwise she mostly tends to the home front's everyday duties'.⁴² (Figure 5).

There is no evidence for the claim put forward by Roy Strong that the reason for not publishing some of the photographs of this series was that they 'were felt to be out of keeping with the mood of a country which declared war only two months after they were taken'.⁴³ The images not published until the 1960s show Queen

⁴⁰ *London Illustrated News*, no date [Dec. 1939], V&A BH, Beaton scrapbook 27.

⁴¹ See British Red Cross Society *et al.* eds., *The Queen's Book of the Red Cross* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1939), and *War Savings*, 4, 3 (1940); see also *News Review*, 28 Dec. 1939, V&A BH, Beaton scrapbook 27.

⁴² 'Englands drottning som folket lycker om all se henne – mest sköter hon annars hemmafrontens vardagsplikler', *Vecko-Journalen*, 6 (1940), V&A BH, Beaton scrapbook 27.

⁴³ Strong, *Cecil Beaton: The Royal Portraits*, 68.



Figure 5. 'A royal lady whose example of self-sacrificing public service has been a continuous inspiration to the Empire in the fight against Nazi-ism: A new photograph of H.M. Queen Elizabeth.' Original caption, *London Illustrated News*, December 1939. The photograph was made by Cecil Beaton in July 1939. V&A Picture Library, London.

Elizabeth walking through the garden of Buckingham Palace with a parasol. They were hardly less warlike than the sparkling images of the bejewelled queen inside the palace. Yet in contrast to them they were visually much more contextualized and thus less useful as official royal portraits. The queen is more often seen in motion

than still, the photographs frequently put more emphasis on the landscape than on the royal person, and most importantly they were definitively linked to a particular season, namely a short English summer. This made it difficult to use them at other times, for example at Christmas.

Retouching

A technique used by all professional photographers until at least the 1960s was retouching. The original negatives were reworked manually in order to eliminate anything that was not supposed to appear on the final photograph. In her autobiography the British photographer Dorothy Wilding argued that retouching was a prerequisite for a good portrait. At the same time she vehemently denied 'that the main purpose of re-touching is to make a sitter more beautiful or handsome (according to sex!) than she or he is in real life. It isn't that at all. It's more to make a portrait a fairer representation of a sitter than it would be if a negative were left alone.' Wilding went on to explain that 'the strong artificial studio light exaggerates all the lines and folds and creases in a face. It registers them much more harshly than the naked eye.' In order to eliminate this 'grotesque' effect 'most skilful retouching is necessary. The unfair exaggerations have to be removed without the subtle personality of the face being in any way lost.'⁴⁴

Contrary to Dorothy Wilding's claims, retouching of course went far beyond eliminating the distorting effects of studio lights, the case with royal portraits. A comparison between the contact prints and the finished versions of royal portraits by both Dorothy Wilding and Cecil Beaton shows that not only wrinkles emphasised by artificial light but also any other signs of ageing, such as grey hair or bags under the eyes, were skilfully removed by retouching.⁴⁵ Beaton wrote the following instructions to his retoucher on a contact print of a portrait of the thirty-nine-year-old Duke of Kent taken in 1941: 'Please do an enormous amount of retouching to all of these. H.M. is not accustomed to any but most retouched pure lines.'⁴⁶ As images of this series accompanied many of the obituaries published after the duke's accidental death in 1942, they helped to immortalise an ever youthful and attractive image of this British prince.⁴⁷ Not only faces but bodies could be reshaped by retouching. Dorothy Wilding commented about the routine of the retouching department of her London studio: 'We continually tuck food-loving men's necks back into their collars, coax away overflowing double-chins, reduce waistlines from 36 to 24 etcetera, etcetera, etcetera'.⁴⁸ While the tight uniforms of male royal sitters usually did not require much retouching of their bodies, those of female members of royal families were regularly reshaped. Often this meant taking several inches off royal arms, necks, bosoms, waists or behinds, even when the sitter was anything but old or overweight – the

⁴⁴ Wilding, *In Pursuit of Perfection*, 17–18.

⁴⁵ Wilding's royal photographs are in the NPG, those by Beaton in the V&A.

⁴⁶ Cecil Beaton, contact print, Duke of Kent, no date [Dec. 1941], V&A, PH 8005–1987.

⁴⁷ For examples see V&A BH, Beaton scrapbook 31.

⁴⁸ Wilding, *In Pursuit of Perfection*, 88.



Figure 6. *The making of a fiftieth-birthday photograph in 1950. Left: portrait returned to Cecil Beaton by Queen Elizabeth because of too much retouching. Centre: unretouched photograph. Right: approved version. V&A Picture Library, London.*

teenage body of Princess Elizabeth was as much reshaped as the extremely thin body of her aunt, the Duchess of Windsor.⁴⁹

I have only found one incident in which there was a complaint about excessive retouching and interestingly it came from the royal sitter. In 1950 Cecil Beaton was commissioned to make a new series of portraits of Queen Elizabeth on the occasion of her fiftieth birthday. As usual, he retouched the photographs and sent the finished versions to the queen for approval. At least one image she did not like and returned. Beaton wrote a note to his assistant on the back of the returned photograph: 'HM does not like all this retouching.'⁵⁰ An unretouched print was made on the basis of which Beaton decided how to retouch it in a less dramatic way. Compared with its predecessor the second, finally approved, version showed the queen with much more chin and narrower lips but still much younger than on the unretouched photograph: all wrinkles were eliminated, the eyes and eyebrows enhanced and all traces of grey hair removed. Although on his first version the queen had not looked at all like a fifty-year old, in his autobiography Beaton noted with surprise that this had been 'the first time that any of my sitters has suggested that the pictures were too flattering'.⁵¹ (Figure 6).

The effect of retouching thus clearly was what Dorothy Wilding so vehemently denied it to be, namely to make the royal sitters look more beautiful and handsome than they were in real life. Personal vanity was probably not the only reason, however, for making male and female royal sitters look younger and for slimming the bodies of royal women. Both Wilding and Beaton stated that their childhood interest in photography had been triggered by photographs of actors, and both made their

⁴⁹ For samples see Strong, *Cecil Beaton: The Royal Portraits*, 106, and Terence Pepper, *Dorothy Wilding: The Pursuit of Perfection* (London: National Portrait Gallery Publications, 1991), 88.

⁵⁰ Cecil Beaton, vintage print, Queen Elizabeth, 1950, V&A, PH 1037-1987.

⁵¹ Beaton, *Photobiography*, 155.

professional breakthrough which eventually led to their royal commissions thanks to their exquisite photographs of stage celebrities.⁵² Actors needed photographs for their personal publicity. In order to satisfy their clients Beaton and Wilding made them as attractive as possible by retouching their faces and bodies in the same way in which they later also retouched their royal photographs. Furthermore, both Beaton and Wilding regularly worked as fashion photographers, which enabled them to portray their thespian sitters in line with the latest trends and styles. By commissioning the most fashionable and up-to-date stage photographers the royal family therefore tried to capture the imagination of their subjects in the same way as popular actors did. Thus, while in the nineteenth century companies began using royal portraits to sell a great variety of consumer goods,⁵³ the evidence analysed here shows that in the twentieth century royal families began to employ the professional publicity techniques of consumer society for their own public-relations purposes.

Although it was generally known that retouching was practised by even the most provincial photographers, it is interesting that I have never found any complaint about this practice in the papers which published royal photographs. On the contrary, if anything, the papers led their readers to believe that the way their royal family appeared on their official portraits was the way they really looked. When the aforementioned fiftieth birthday portraits of Queen Elizabeth were published, the *Daily Express* wrote: 'The Queen looks just like a Queen should – supremely splendid and serene. She wears the pomp of her life with perfect ease.'⁵⁴ The *Newcastle Journal* even ran the headline: 'The Queen, At 50, Keeps Girlhood Graces'.⁵⁵ On the occasion of the fiftieth birthday of Marina, Duchess of Kent, in 1956 the *Daily Mail* went one step further. It published not only the new Beaton portrait of the duchess, but also a portrait of the princess at the age of thirty. Under the headline 'Unchanging Beauty' the *Daily Mail* wrote of Marina's fiftieth birthday: 'This is the age . . . when a woman no longer regards a camera as a friend. This is the age that women are not supposed to admit. But Royal Princesses live in an inquisitive searchlight, and here is one for whom the camera is no enemy. The Duchess of Kent, at 50, has an elegant beauty that has changed not even in expression in 20 years. The picture on the left is just 20 years old, and there's the evidence.'⁵⁶

Romance

Most royal photographers shared a painterly approach to photography. Dorothy Wilding's professional label showed an artist with a paintbrush and a palette which illustrated her credo 'to produce a portrait, as the lens of my own eye saw it, and

⁵² For their childhood fascination with actors' photographs see Wilding, *In Pursuit of Perfection*, 15 and Beaton, *Photobiography*, 13.

⁵³ See Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England. Advertising and Spectacle, 1851–1914* (London: Verso, 1991), 73–118.

⁵⁴ *Daily Express*, 4 Aug. 1950, V&A BH, Beaton scrapbook 37.

⁵⁵ *Newcastle Journal*, 4 Aug. 1950, V&A BH, Beaton scrapbook 37.

⁵⁶ *Daily Mail*, 13 Dec. 1956, V&A BH, Beaton scrapbook 42.

not as the lens of the camera'.⁵⁷ The Hungarian-born photographer Ghitta Carell, one of the most important photographers of the Italian royal family, stated: 'I'm not really a photographer, I'm rather a painter of souls'.⁵⁸ Cecil Beaton even published a drawing of Queen Elizabeth before he was ever invited to take a royal photograph.⁵⁹ Later he frequently named the painters in whose tradition he consciously put his royal photographs – they ranged from Holbein and Van Dyck to Gainsborough and Winterhalter.⁶⁰

Although they shared a consciously painterly approach, royal photographers practised a wide range of individual styles. In the case of Britain this led to speculations about the link between styles and messages the royal family wanted to communicate. Following the 1987 exhibition of Cecil Beaton's royal photographs in the Victoria and Albert Museum, its former director Roy Strong argued: 'Beaton played a key role in restoring the image of the monarchy after the Abdication crisis of 1936 [because he] recreated a powerful visual mythology for the Crown after Edward VIII's disastrous dabbling with modernism.'⁶¹ According to Strong, prior to taking photographs of George VI and his family Beaton had practised 'his "Windsor Style" of photography, the antithesis of the romanticism he was to use from 1939 onwards for the Royal Family.'⁶² Strong's argument therefore suggests a conscious decision on the part of George VI and his family to use a specific photographic style in order to distinguish themselves from the preceding reign. Closer analysis shows, however, that the story is a bit more complicated.

Beaton's most important competitor was Dorothy Wilding, whose trademark was monochrome backgrounds and abstract architectural props. According to the feminist photo-critic Val Williams, 'Dorothy Wilding made women look as they had never looked before – beautiful, starkly elegant and uncompromisingly modern.'⁶³ Despite her style, Wilding regularly received royal commissions even after Beaton had begun taking 'romantic' portraits of George VI and his family in 1939. Wilding not only took the first official photographs of the new sovereigns in January 1937 and documented their coronation, her work for Elizabeth II included the first official photographs of the new queen in 1952 and the portraits used for the new reign's stamps and coins.⁶⁴ While compared with the nostalgic work of Beaton involving a lot of flowers and figurative painted backgrounds Wilding's photographs were undoubtedly modern, her style did not rule out the possibility of romantic results. On the contrary, romance was one of the leitmotifs of her work. In her autobiography she described herself as a

⁵⁷ Wilding, *In Pursuit of Perfection*, 17–18.

⁵⁸ 'Non sono tanto fotografa quanto pittrice di anime', Quoted in Giuseppe Turrone, ed., 'Ghitta Carell. Fotografa di un'epoca', *Skema* V, 8/9 (1973), 65.

⁵⁹ The drawing appeared on the day of the coronation of George VI in the British edition of *Vogue* magazine. The queen did not sit for Beaton for this drawing. See *Vogue*, 12 May 1937, 74.

⁶⁰ See, for example, Cecil Beaton, 'The Official Portrait', in Ford, *Happy and Glorious*, 82–97.

⁶¹ Strong, *Cecil Beaton: The Royal Portraits*, 9.

⁶² *ibid.*, 38.

⁶³ Val Williams, *Women Photographers. The Other Observers 1900 to the Present* (London: Virago, 1986), 152.

⁶⁴ Pepper, *Dorothy Wilding*, 22–9.

'romanticist',⁶⁵ and like Beaton she consciously aimed at creating romantic portraits of the British royal family. In 1947 she instructed her assistant about the proper printing of a portrait of Princess Margaret: 'Funnily enough the other pose, looking away – printed browner, is more Romantic [sic] & so keep warmer but not too green.'⁶⁶

By regularly commissioning the ardent romantics Cecil Beaton and Dorothy Wilding, George VI and his family thus did make quite a striking bid for romantic portraits of themselves. Yet if this decision was in any way linked to the reign of Edward VIII, it is more likely to have been an attempt to compete with the former king in the field of romance instead of being an attempt to distinguish themselves from him. Ever since Edward's famous abdication broadcast on 10 December 1936, in which he declared that it would be impossible for him 'to discharge the duties of King as I would wish to do without the help and support of the woman I love',⁶⁷ the Duke of Windsor had claimed the field of romance for his own self-representation. For many of his contemporaries the story of Edward and Wallis Simpson was indeed the 'world's greatest romance',⁶⁸ an impression the ex-king continued to foster all his life, most importantly in his 1951 autobiography, which he called both a 'romance' and a 'fairy-tale'.⁶⁹ Choosing romantic representations of themselves may thus have been an attempt by George VI and his family to prevent the Duke and the Duchess of Windsor from having a monopoly of this very popular theme.

A more likely explanation for this royal bid for romance was, however, a general change in the importance attached to romantic love in royal self-representation after the First World War. One of the most striking differences between pre- and post-war monarchies is the way in which royal marriages took place. In contrast to early modern times, when important monarchs such as Henry VIII or Peter the Great did not hesitate to marry non-royal women, and following the unpleasant experiences with the parvenu Napoleonic monarchies, until 1914 European royal families made sure that none of their members married below their rank, especially not heirs to the throne. If a prince decided otherwise because of love, he was usually forced to contract a morganatic marriage, for example the Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand who married Countess Sophie Coteck in 1900. After the First World War, incidentally triggered by the assassination of Austria's unequal crown-princely pair, the situation changed. In 1923 the Duke of York married Lady Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon, who in 1936 was the first minor aristocrat since the sixteenth century to become queen consort. In 1973 Silvia Sommerlath was the first commoner since Napoleonic times to achieve this rank by marrying King Carl XVI Gustaf of Sweden. Hand in hand with this change went an unprecedented emphasis in royal self-representation on the mutual love between royal spouses, as well as the elaborate mise-en-scène of royal

⁶⁵ Wilding, *In Pursuit of Perfection*, 31.

⁶⁶ Dorothy Wilding, vintage print, Princess Margaret, 1947, NPG, Neg. 014912-K.

⁶⁷ Duke of Windsor, *A King's Story. The Memoirs of the Duke of Windsor* (London: Prion Books, 1998 [1951]), 413.

⁶⁸ *Time Magazine*, 16 Nov. 1936.

⁶⁹ Quoted in Philip Ziegler, 'Introduction', in Windsor, *A King's Story*, viii.



Figure 7. *Romantic queens gazing past the beholder. Left: Queen Astrid of the Belgians by Robert Marchand, ca. 1934. © Mme. R. Marchand, Brussels. Right: Queen Elizabeth II of England by Dorothy Wilding, 1952. By kind permission of Tom Hustler.*

weddings as grand national events.⁷⁰ One of the earliest royal weddings conducted in this new style, which quickly became common practice everywhere, was that of the Belgian Crown Prince Leopold with Princess Astrid of Sweden in 1926. When announcing their engagement, the mother of the groom, Queen Elisabeth of the Belgians, told reporters: ‘Et dites bien que c’est un mariage d’amour!’⁷¹

Twentieth-century European monarchies thus aimed at creating romantic images of themselves, but what did this rather ill-defined term mean when it came to royal photographs? In the descriptions of their encounters with royalty Dorothy Wilding and Cecil Beaton explained what romance meant to them. Both repeatedly made reference to fairy tales and dreams, two of the main themes of early nineteenth-century romantic literature.⁷² That is Cecil Beaton on the effect of the studio lights on Queen Elizabeth during his first photographic session with her in Buckingham Palace in 1939: ‘[The lights] went on in a flash and to my utter amazement and joy the Queen looked a dream – a porcelain doll – with flawless little face like luminous china in front of a fire.’ Later the sun began to shine, which gave Beaton ‘new inspiration

⁷⁰ For the case of Britain see Cannadine, ‘Context, Performance and Meaning of Ritual’, 151.

⁷¹ Quoted in Pascal Dayez-Burgeon, *La Reine Astrid. Histoire d’un mythe* (Paris: Criterion, 1995), 57.

⁷² The most important romantic fairy tales are of course the collection of the Grimm brothers first published in 1812. For the dream theme in romantic literature see Peter-André Alt, *Der Schlaf der Vernunft. Literatur und Traum in der Kulturgeschichte der Neuzeit* (Munich: Beck, 2002), 243–64.

and we took many more lovely pictures that should be very romantic – of the fairy Queen in her ponderous Palace'.⁷³ Similarly, Dorothy Wilding noted that during the coronation of George VI in 1937 the 'women in beautiful gowns and jewels, men in Court costume of knee breeches, white stockings and white slippers' looked 'like figures in a fairy tale'. On the other hand, arranging the major royal participants of the coronation for a group photograph provided Wilding with 'a spectacle such as one imagines only in dreams'.⁷⁴ Furthermore, both Beaton and Wilding were deeply impressed by situations which strongly resembled key scenes of romantic love stories. During his first photo-session with Queen Elizabeth in 1939 Cecil Beaton managed to get hold of a handkerchief which the queen 'had tucked away behind the cushion of the chair away from the onslaught of the camera lenses – A relic of the occasion that will have much more Romance [*sic*] and reality than any of the photographs'.⁷⁵ For Dorothy Wilding, the most romantic scene of the coronation in 1937 was the sight of Prince Charming on horseback. Looking down from a balcony into the inner courtyard of Buckingham Palace, Wilding saw the Duke of Kent mounting his horse: 'He looked so handsome and romantic in the full costume of a naval captain, with a hat like Nelson's and the shoulders loaded with braid.'⁷⁶

As both Beaton and Wilding created photographs according to preconceived artistic ideas, they tried to capture and express their romantic feeling for the royal family in their photographs. The photographers' artistic intention was that by looking at their romantic royal photographs the general public should be able to develop the same positive feelings which they had experienced while encountering royalty. Romantic royal photographs were thus intended to create and foster the all-important emotional links between the nation and the monarchy. They invited people to enter a dreamlike, fairy-tale world, and in some people's imagination members of the royal family even began to fuse with characters of romantic love stories and fairy tales. During the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953, a Mass Observation volunteer noticed a five-year-old girl and her mother waiting for the queen to drive by in Fulham Road. 'Cinderella will be here in a minute, won't she, Mum?' asked the girl. 'She always calls her that,' explained the mother. 'I can't stop it. She likes to think she's a sort of fairy girl, it's the books, what they make her look like in the picture books I suppose.'⁷⁷

Romantic royal portraits were by no means an exclusively British phenomenon. Belgian photographers such as Robert Marchand created similarly romantic – and excellently retouched – images of their royal family, especially of Leopold and Astrid.⁷⁸ Long before their accession to the throne in 1934 they were successfully presented to the general public as a happily married couple very much in love with each other. In 1935 Queen Astrid died in a car accident in Switzerland at the age

⁷³ Beaton diary, July 1939, quoted in Strong, *Cecil Beaton: The Royal Portraits*, 50, 60.

⁷⁴ Wilding, *In Pursuit of Perfection*, 108, 111.

⁷⁵ Beaton diary, July 1939, quoted in Strong, *Cecil Beaton: The Royal Portraits*, 50.

⁷⁶ Wilding, *In Pursuit of Perfection*, 109.

⁷⁷ Quoted in Philip Ziegler, *Crown and People* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), 122.

⁷⁸ The negatives of the royal portraits by Robert Marchand are kept in the Musée de la dynastie, Brussels.

of twenty-nine. Louis Werro, a Swiss railway employee from Fribourg, was one among thousands who were deeply shocked by the tragic death of one of the most romantic queens of her age. In a letter to the Belgian royal family he explained that the key to his long-term fascination with Astrid had been her beauty captured in photographs: 'Brilliant Queen Astrid has not only been the object of admiration for the Belgians. Her sparkling physiognomy was thus that it had to shine beyond. This admiration and this sympathy I have shared ever since the day Queen Astrid was revealed to us through the choice of your august monarch. And ever since I have been following the luminous path of her glorious life through the reports and the illustrations which provided me with her image.'⁷⁹ Romantic royal photographs thus even allowed citizens of Europe's oldest republic to engage in royal dreams⁸⁰ (Figure 7).

Photographs and paintings

Despite its success, photography did not eclipse older forms of royal representation. A British decision in favour of royal portraits in oils illustrates this very well. In February 1937 Buckingham Palace informed the Foreign Office and other overseas departments that formal state portraits of the new king George VI and his wife were to be commissioned. In line with all previous reigns except that of Edward VIII, which had been too short for the creation of a state portrait, oil copies of the paintings were to be produced in British art schools and then distributed to important buildings abroad, including embassies and government houses.⁸¹ In 1938 the portrait painter Gerald Kelly was commissioned with the creation of new state portraits. He wanted them to be 'romantically decorative', which was probably in line with the sitters' expectations.⁸² Unintended was, however, how long it took the artist to produce them. In October 1942 Cecil Beaton came to photograph the royal family in Windsor Castle where he met Kelly, 'who has been in the household painting one bad picture after another for the last four years. Everyone groans at his continual presence but seems incapable of ousting him.'⁸³ Kelly finished the portraits in May 1945, seven years after he had received the commission to paint them.⁸⁴ (Figure 8).

⁷⁹ 'La brillante reine Astrid n'a pas été l'objet d'admiration pour les Belges seulement. Son étincelante physionomie ne pouvait que rayonner au dehors. Cette admiration et cette sympathie, je les ai partagées dès le jour où la reine Astrid nous fut révélée par le choix de votre auguste Monarque. Et depuis lors, au gré des communiqués et des illustrations qui m'en livraient l'image, j'ai suivi la voie lumineuse de sa glorieuse vie.' Werro to Ministre de Suisse, 8 Dec. 1935, BA, 2200 Brüssel, 3/4.

⁸⁰ For further details see Alexis Schwarzenbach, 'Rêves royaux. Réactions à la mort de la reine Astrid, 1905–1935', in *Cahiers d'Histoire du Temps Présent*, 5 (1999), 7–41.

⁸¹ Note, 10 Feb. 1937, PRO, FO 366/987.

⁸² Quoted in Derek Hudson, *For Love of Painting. The Life of Sir Gerald Kelly* (London: P. Davies, 1975), 61.

⁸³ Beaton diary, 23 Oct. 1942, quoted in Vickers, *Cecil Beaton*, 269.

⁸⁴ The portraits are today part of the royal collection in Windsor Castle. For details see Christopher Lloyd, *The Paintings in the Royal Collection. A Thematic Exploration* (London: The Royal Collections, Thames & Hudson, 1999), 273–7.



Figure 8. *Left: first official photograph of King George VI of England taken by Dorothy Wilding in January 1937. By kind permission of Tom Hustler. Right: state portrait of George VI painted by Gerald Kelly between 1938 and 1945. The Royal Collection © 2004, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.*

In 1946 the Foreign Office and other overseas departments interested in obtaining copies of the state portraits found out that they would cost ‘about £300 each’, and that their production would take even longer than that of the originals, ‘perhaps 20 years’.⁸⁵ The Foreign Office therefore had to abandon its aim of obtaining ‘the customary copy in oils of the King and Queen’ for its forty-six most important posts.⁸⁶ Since it nevertheless attached ‘very great importance to having worthy portraits of Their Majesties in our Missions’, it asked the household of George VI about the ‘possibility of Their Majesties agreeing to sign photographs of themselves for our Embassies and Legations’.⁸⁷ The response was negative. The king’s private secretary Alan Lascelles explained that the sovereigns only gave signed photographs to people ‘whom they have known personally’. Instead the palace offered signed photogravures based on official photographs.⁸⁸

In March 1947, engravings based on Kelly’s state portraits became available, and King George VI decided to distribute them instead of the photograph-based

⁸⁵ Report, ‘Royal Portraits for Missions and Consulates’, 19 March 1946, PRO, FO 366/1544.

⁸⁶ Note, 14 March 1946, PRO, FO 366/1544.

⁸⁷ Dixon to Lascelles, 16 April 1946, PRO, FO 366/1544.

⁸⁸ Lascelles to Dixon, 13 June 1946, PRO, FO 366/1544.

photogravures. The Foreign Office was not pleased. One of its London-based diplomats wrote: 'I am horrified to see . . . that engravings of the State Portraits are preferred by the Palace to signed photogravures for Embassies & Legations abroad . . . Signed photographs are in my opinion a thousand times more appropriate than engravings or copies of bad paintings.'⁸⁹ The British consul in New York also firmly believed that signed photographs would 'greatly add to the prestige' of the consulate and added: 'I find that most of my colleagues have either their offices or their homes adorned by pictures, usually signed, by the Heads of their States.'⁹⁰ George VI refused to change his mind, however. A diplomat noted the final discussion on the subject with the king's private secretary: 'Sir A. Lascelles [was] saying that The King regarded the photogravures as inferior works and much preferred the engravings. I explained the reasons why we were in favour of the photogravures but he was not impressed. . . . Sir A. Lascelles appreciated that the ideal would be to have signed photographs but said that these are very sparingly issued and only go to special friends.'⁹¹ Change only occurred in the following reign. Shortly before the coronation of Elizabeth II in 1953, Dorothy Wilding's studio was stacked with 'hundreds and hundreds of great big portraits of the new Queen . . . all waiting for the Queen's signature before being sent to the British Services and Embassies and Consulates all over the world.'⁹²

Royal photographs thus not only played a key role for the construction of emotional bonds between monarchies and nations; in the twentieth century they were also a useful tool in international diplomacy. The importance diplomats attached to these seemingly irrelevant images is best illustrated by a letter sent by the British ambassador in Belgrade to the Foreign Office in November 1946. As the embassy had no images of the present British sovereigns, the ambassador urgently asked for signed royal photographs and explained why.

'It so happens that these pictures are of great importance to me in this particular post, where so many of my visitors are communists. Marshal Tito has already threatened to send me a signed portrait of himself, and you will appreciate how very invidious it would be for me to have such a portrait in my drawing room without also having portraits of the King and the Queen. Indeed it would give quite a wrong idea to my callers'.

Given the importance of portraits in communist leader cults, the British ambassador was convinced that signed royal photographs 'are just as necessary to me here, if I am to do my job, as despatches and telegrams'.⁹³ While highlighting the fact that visual sources should even be taken seriously in diplomatic history, in the larger context of representations of heads of state this letter shows that even photographs of people without real power, such as constitutional, west European monarchs or indeed

⁸⁹ FO Minutes, 25 April 1947, PRO, FO 366/2506.

⁹⁰ Evans to Anstruther, 14 March 1947, PRO, FO 366/250.

⁹¹ FO Minutes, 21 March 1947, PRO, FO 366/2506.

⁹² Wilding, *In Pursuit of Perfection*, 174.

⁹³ British Embassy Belgrade to Foreign Office, 6 Nov. 1946, PRO, FO 366/1544.

republican presidents with purely symbolic roles, were potentially quite powerful and should no longer be ignored.⁹⁴

The most important aspects of this article is, however, the emotional engagement of twentieth-century Europeans with members of royal families. Although critical voices are by definition largely absent from sources such as unsolicited letters to royal families or memoirs of royal photographers, the emotions expressed in them should not be discarded because all they seem to express is naive and simple-minded monarchism. On the contrary, these sources finally give a voice to ordinary members of the general public which in many studies of twentieth-century monarchies is lacking, for instance in David Cannadine's landmark analysis of British royal ritual.⁹⁵ Furthermore, the rich epistolary material provided by royal archives provides historians with one of the rare opportunities to differentiate between representation and perception – the cases analysed here show that emotional engagement with royal families was not simply a translation of royal representation into feelings but rather the result of a complex communicative and imaginative interaction between individual members of the general public and representations of royal families. Finally this article showed that the twentieth-century success of monarchies owed at least as much to monarchies' active bids for modernisation as to their anachronistic survival in a modern world. Indeed, in view of the evidence analysed here, it is clear that the use made by royal families of professional photography-based public relations, along the lines of the ever more powerful entertainment industry, was at least as important for their twentieth-century success as invented traditions such as holding pageants centred on horse-drawn carriages 'endowed with a romantic splendour' in an age when everyone else was driving cars.⁹⁶ Due to their successful modernisation, their role for national identities and, above all, because of their direct link to the still largely unexplored history of European emotions, monarchies should be taken out of the margins to which they have so far been relegated in histories of twentieth-century Europe.

⁹⁴ For an interesting comparison of visual representations of powerful political leaders see Martin Loiperdinger, Rudolf Herz and Ulrich Pohlmann, eds., *Führerbilder. Hitler, Mussolini, Roosevelt, Stalin in Fotografie und Film* (Munich: Piper, 1995).

⁹⁵ Cannadine, 'Context, Performance and Meaning of Ritual'.

⁹⁶ *ibid.*, 124.