

# Apocryphilia

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## *Our Island Story*

**B**efore the teaching of history to children in this country descended to its current formula of dinosaurs + Romans + Henry VIII + Hitler (with a side helping of slavery) the past was taught in a rather different way. Many who were at primary school pre-1980 will be familiar with it: *Our Island Story*, the carefully nuanced account of how 'the British Isles' produced the greatest and most progressive people in the world. Written in 1905 it was, remarkably (or not?), still a common textbook 70 years later. It's durability, popularity and influence, over a century later, has been recently cited by prime minister David Cameron and the centre-right think tank Civitas as an example of something they would like to see updated and reintroduced. Why is this?

The *Our Island Story* narrative certainly has its attractions. Stressing national unity, in which Englishness is overwhelmingly predominant, it gives key early roles to Alfred the Great and William the Conqueror – the latter not, of course, English – with the repelling of foreign invasions and conquests (nothing since 1066) a critical factor, highlighted by the dispersal of the Spanish Armada in 1588 and, latterly, the defeat of Napoleon (1815) and Hitler (1940).

British/English excursions into Europe are seen as the brilliantly executed ventures of plucky underdogs (Agincourt, Waterloo and Dunkirk are typical here) against overwhelming odds. The literary backdrop, from Shakespeare, Milton, Pepys, Dickens etc., embellishes this. Milton appears more or less in tandem with Cromwell, both as exemplars of grimly moral, upstanding and typically English parliamentarians – refusing to bow down before Rome and ensuring the lasting legitimacy of the House of Commons.....this being portrayed throughout the book as the finest and fairest legislature in the world.

Peel and Gladstone both feature heavily at this respect as the benign account continues via the Industrial Revolution to the emergence of the biggest Empire ever seen with its accompanying and massive merchant fleet (the dominance and importance of trade being much stressed) leading to the reign of Victoria with much material, medical and social progress being ticked off *en route*. *Our Island Story* may have finished in 1905 but there were many other similar picture book accounts of UK history, aimed at 5 to 14 year olds (approximately) that took the story forward. These covered the victory in two world wars; massive improvements in public health and housing, particularly after 1945; talked much about 'the new Elizabethan Age' but played down the Empire and concentrated instead on the (supposed) emergence of a happy, united and content Commonwealth; before finally bowing out with the big technical projects of the '60s (Concorde, the Post Office Tower etc.) – rather like *Tomorrow's World* for kiddies.

Historians refer to this as the Whig version of history: an account in which things get better throughout – though occasional villains are allowed (King John being a favourite; James II too) – and the time scale is neatly divided up by dynasty (Tudors, Stuarts etc.) and within that by monarch. The 'people' generally benefit as reign by reign the United Kingdom/British Isles/England moves steadily to a majestically improved future.

Today much of this appears at best naive, at worst arrogant....but, it would be churlish to deny completely that this approach has its benefits. Irrespective of any suspected Establishment bias, it provides a simple chronological framework, sets out a context and allows for a fuller picture to be built up, should the reader be curious enough to pursue this. But, as Cameron and Civitas have noted with regret, why do we not do this now? Why did this style of narrative fall out of fashion and fade away at some point in the mid '70s? Is it a matter of trends in historiography, or does it point to a deeper sense of national failure, a loss of confidence? One clue may be found by considering what has happened to the UK during

the lengthy and continuing reign of Queen Elizabeth II and, in particular, comparing circumstances when it began with how matters rest today.

### **Then.....**

Though people may have forgotten this, in 1952 Britain was governed by a Conservative-National Liberal coalition with 321 MPs. Of these 35 represented constituencies in Scotland and 69 in the north of England.<sup>1</sup> Reflecting that this was an administration that had supporters in all parts of the UK, the geographical distribution of seats was replicated at local government level with cities like Cardiff, Leeds and Liverpool being run by Conservative councils. The key political figures in this arrangement, and the first group of ministers from whom HRH took advice, were Sir Winston Churchill (Prime Minister, and a former Liberal), Sir Anthony Eden (Foreign Secretary and, by virtue of his being MP for Leamington Spa, the leading member of the Tory West Midlands group of MPs), RA Butler (Chancellor of the Exchequer, a keen supporter of Chamberlain and appeasement in the '30s) and Gwilym Lloyd-George (from 1954 Home Secretary, National Liberal MP for Newcastle-upon-Tyne North, previously Liberal MP for Pembrokeshire and son of David Lloyd-George).<sup>2</sup>

Government policy then was to intervene and regulate wherever needed to ensure the highest standards of living for

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<sup>1</sup> A mass electorate, where one person=one vote, only emerged in the UK in 1918, later than in many other countries. The Liberal Party split of 1931 produced a two party system that lasted until 1970 and a faction (the Liberal National Party) that worked in coalition with the Conservatives until 1966 when its surviving members formally joined the Conservative Party. Michael Heseltine was a late adherent of the Liberal National Party, being selected by them as candidate for Gower in the 1959 general election. Encouraged by Edward Heath to do so, he joined the Conservative Party shortly afterwards.

<sup>2</sup> An irony, apparent now, was that when HRH ascended the throne her first Prime Minister (Winston Churchill) had served as an officer in the Mohmand Campaign of 1897-1898 on the NW Frontier, while the latter part of her reign featured an extensive UK military expedition to Afghanistan (2001-2013), the end result of which was completely inconclusive. Churchill was not a supporter of incursions into Afghanistan and its surrounding area.

the 50 million inhabitants of the UK – and its fiscal policy reflected this: inheriting a standard rate of income tax of 9 shillings in the pound (45%) from Labour in 1951, Butler immediately increased this to its highest ever peace time level of 9 shillings and 6 pence (47.5%) a year later, also allowing at the same time for an increase in the National Debt. With the massive funds thereby available the government was able to spend heavily on a variety of projects.

Housing was one of these. Minister for Housing Harold Macmillan presided over the construction of 262,000 new council houses in both 1953 and 1954. The Churchill government eventually built 1.1 million local authority properties in total, as well as 400,000 private homes. Its policy was to get people out of dreadful insanitary private rented housing and into high quality affordable municipal housing *and* to increase home ownership – which it did by 5% during its period of office. Much of the building work took place in the 14 new towns inherited from the Attlee government with a 15th (Cumbernauld, started 1956) being planned.<sup>3</sup>

In transport the UK had a nationalised and extensive railway network, which, in 1955, became the recipient of the Railway Modernisation Plan, costing then £1.2 billion (about £34 billion in 2015 prices).<sup>4</sup> In an echo of the first edition of *Our Island Story*, when QE2 ascended the throne 20% of the shipping in the world was registered in the UK, giving the

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<sup>3</sup> Macmillan's career follows in many ways that of the UK as a country. Originally a left of centre MP for Stockton-on-Tees 1924-1929 and 1929-1945, he dallied with Oswald Mosley circa 1930. With an American mother, and related by marriage to John F Kennedy, he was the US candidate to replace Eden after Suez. He initiated the first significant UK spending cuts (in defence and transport) and oversaw a very rapid ending of Empire (1958-1963) before calling at the end of his career (in 1976) for a Government of National Unity and later lamenting privatisation as 'the selling of the family silver'.

<sup>4</sup> However: the Railway Modernization Plan was only allowed by the Treasury on the basis that it was investment that would result in the railways 'paying their way'. When this failed to occur (though note: under private ownership the railways had not 'paid their way' since the late '20s) the programme was halted in 1960 and Beeching installed (1961) to cut the network until it 'became profitable'. No other country in the world cut so extensively, not even the US, where proportionally more track was retained for freight purposes.

country easily the largest merchant fleet in the world. Shipbuilding yards had full order books as they completed the many new vessels needed to take British manufacturing exports to their destinations across the globe. Much of this trade occurred within the still extensive domains of the British Empire which was policed by 600,000 UK servicemen and protected by a Royal Navy with no fewer than 18 aircraft carriers. In aviation the huge industrial concerns of Avro, De Havilland, English Electric, Handley Page, Hawker, Hunting, Short Brothers, Supermarine, Vickers and Westland were midway through a massive construction programme that by 1957 would produce 14,000 jet aircraft, among them the De Havilland Comet, the first commercially available airliner in the world.

Of equal importance – though providing neither the number of jobs linked to aviation or shipping nor their associated export opportunities – was the successful implementation in 1952 of the decision taken by the Attlee government in 1947 to create a completely independent nuclear deterrent, thus confirming, to those who monitored such matters, the continuance of the UK as a world power.

With hindsight, the crowning achievements of this early period of robust, confident and socially inclusive nationalism (some might say Gaullism) might be said to rest on two events: (1) Sir Anthony Eden presiding over the 1954 Geneva Conference that brought to an end the war in Vietnam (with a solution that satisfied France, Vietnam, China and the USSR and which was to be policed by India, Canada and Poland),<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The US did not participate in the Geneva Conference, refused to endorse its outcome and promptly backed Ngo Dinh Diem (who had almost no support) against the nationalist Emperor Bao Dai. Diem proclaimed Vietnam a republic after a fraudulent referendum, ousting Bao Dai, and then cancelled the Geneva accords and the 1956 elections which had been arranged to establish a national legislature. Most of what followed in Vietnam flowed from this. When it emerged after 1975 that the Vietnamese were anti-Chinese, pragmatic in economic policy and united by nationalism as much as communism, it appeared that Eden's diplomacy represented a great lost opportunity. The unravelling of the French position in Vietnam and the role of the US (and CIA) in this formed the basis of the Graham Greene novel *The Quiet American* (1955).

and (2) the announcement in July 1955 of the lowest ever unemployment figures (just 185,000) since records began.

### **.....and now**

**T**hat was the UK when the reign of our current monarch started. How does it compare to how we live 63 years later? Have we seen steady progress?

Ironically, in early 2015, we still have a coalition government, between (approximately) the same political partners as in 1952, though it is debatable whether it is more or less formal than the earlier arrangement. But, while it may command a majority in the House of Commons, unlike its earlier predecessor it does not draw its representation evenly from all parts of the UK. Most of its Conservative and Liberal Democrat MPs represent areas in the south or midlands of England, while in local government the presence of the Conservative Party has vanished in large areas across Wales, the north and Scotland. The background of MPs is also markedly different. Buttressed by a huge substructure of lobby groups, policy advisors and think tanks that barely existed in the '50s, it is now common for individuals to have had no career outside politics (witness Clegg and Miliband) before entering the Palace of Westminster.

Economic policy under Churchill and Eden might have been (as it still is across much of the EU) strictly Keynesian, but, 'official' policy in the UK since 1979 has been to set the basic rate of personal income tax at the lowest possible level; it is now 20%, less than half of that levied by Mr Butler.<sup>6</sup> Unlike 1952 the current UK government – although prone to hand-wringing platitudes and solemn 'pledges' – no longer believes in actively providing housing for ordinary people or in ensuring whatever housing is built is genuinely affordable.

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<sup>6</sup> The largest single source of revenue the Treasury has is the standard rate of income tax. The reduction of this by successive governments to US levels is the dog that never barks in UK political debate.....the cause of virtually all the alarm about a 'deficit', spending being 'out of control' etc. Depressingly there seems little attempt to educate the wider public that if you want European level services you have to pay European level taxes.

Shipbuilding and aviation: at best are very marginal in 2015. The armed forces: are curiously enjoying now an almost fetish-like level of sentimental public support, while reduced to 20% of the size at the start of HRH's reign. The independent management of the UK nuclear deterrent was quickly dropped by Macmillan (in 1958) in favour of co-operation with the US and the last solely UK-built and maintained nuclear weapons, free fall bombs, were scrapped by Blair in 1998. Britain now borrows its nuclear deterrent from the US, and would have to consult it prior to its use, this arrangement being cheaper than paying to build, maintain and deploy an exclusively UK owned deterrent (i.e. it is cheaper than following the procedures used by everybody else).<sup>7</sup> Although disputes continue about how they are calculated, official unemployment figures have clearly been in seven figures since 1972. (And how high would they actually be if the workless were counted in the way they were in the '50s?)

Of course, one cannot consider purely economic and political data and immediately conclude that the last six decades have been a period of decline. Social attitudes show much evidence of change for the better. Consider, for instance '50s attitudes to issues such as sex before marriage, single parenthood, gay rights, gender and race, compared to the views held on these subjects by most people today. Some, libertarians and generally those who consider themselves to be 'on the left' might point, negatively, to the growth in Police numbers and the prison population in the last 60 years. But, while it may be true that we have more police per capita than 1952, the UK remains lightly policed compared to many other

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<sup>7</sup> The only explanation that comes to mind for the extraordinary (and unprecedented) arrangements whereby the US and the UK share a nuclear deterrent appears to be that the UK took a view – after Macmillan became PM – that if it couldn't keep up immediately with the US and the USSR and match these countries every time they produced new nuclear technology it wasn't worth trying at all. The idea of slowly developing your own deterrent, as and when funds are available (the approach followed by France, China, India, Israel, Pakistan, North Korea and Iran(?)) doesn't appear to have been entertained, with a radical short-termism preferred instead.

countries, and, the death penalty is no longer in force.<sup>8</sup> However, social attitudes are rarely broached in *Our Island Story*, so why mention them and rely on them as definite evidence of progress now?

Taking everything into consideration the long view might be that social liberalism has followed economic liberalism during the reign of Queen Elizabeth – though it is interesting to consider, equally, how convenient the trade-off in a drop in state engagement has been for those on the political right who enjoy the benefits (to them) of the deregulated economy while simultaneously advocating social liberalism. Were the masses ever offered a choice? Could we not have had greater social liberalism and a continuing significant role for the state?<sup>9</sup> Today, the benefits of social liberalism (gay marriage, multiculturalism and a more permissive role toward sex outside marriage etc.) are not necessarily apparent to those who struggle with economic liberalism, working longer hours on zero hours contracts, with few employment rights and no occupational pensions.

When first published, *Our Island Story* paid careful attention to the characteristics of each monarch playing-up (alleged) traits like brave, wise and just to demonstrate how much empathy each successive dynasty had with their subjects. However, by the very way its narrative was framed it was clear that every dynasty ends, and whatever succeeds it was not necessarily related to it. Neither the Normans (1066) nor the Tudors (1485) had any real genealogical connection with their immediate predecessors, and both the Stuarts (1603) and the Hanoverians (1714) were installed by

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<sup>8</sup> Compared with say, Italy or France, the UK appears to have relatively few police – 154,000 against 220,000 + 98,000 gendarmes in France and 277,000 + 109,000 carabinieri in Italy. The UK figure is lower per capita than Sweden.

<sup>9</sup> The obvious parallel here would be with Norway, Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands, where social liberalism is combined with higher taxes and a bigger role for the state.

Parliament.<sup>10</sup> Assuming a rebooting of *Our Island Story* as wished by Cameron and Civitas, what, retrospectively, would be 'the line' on the Windsor-Mountbattens?<sup>11</sup>

Firstly, given economic circumstances it may turn out that the story of the British people since 1952 proves difficult to package as steady broad-based progress. Assuming *Our Island Story* was rebooted, the notion of a hereditary monarchy, whose the head of state is also head of the official state religion,<sup>12</sup> whose incumbent is unconstrained by any written constitution, under whom there is no proper system of regional government and the upper chamber of the legislature is absurdly unlimited in size with a membership solely in the gift of the Monarch and the Prime Minister, might be considered by some readers to be rather backward by the standards of 2015.

Apparently HRH Queen Elizabeth II is wedded to the current arrangements on the basis that she needs to uphold her (holy) Coronation Oath. Does this explain her two interventions in the latter stages of the September 2014

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10 In both 1689 and 1714 there were better related claimants (the Stuarts – Roman Catholics) had a strictly genealogical view been taken. There also appears to have been a push pre-1837 to exclude Ernst Augustus (the fifth son of George III) from the throne, thus ensuring that the UK separated from Hanover and continental entanglements. The 1936 abdication provides an example of how Parliament can decide the succession of the Crown.

11 The 'official' name of the Royal family. The Saxe-Coburg-Gothas became the Windsors and the von Battenbergs became the Mountbattens in 1916-1917. Between 1948 and 1960 protracted correspondence took place – pursued mainly by Lord Mountbatten – to ensure the survival of the Mountbatten surname, after the marriage of Prince Philip, though it is almost never used. In his *Vanished Kingdoms* (pp. 571-572) Norman Davies reminds us how unconnected the House of Windsor are to the UK, pointing out that, ultimately, the Windsor-Mountbattens should be correctly referred to by their German surname: Schleswig-Holstein-Sonderburg-Glücksburg.

12 By comparison the Pope leads a religion but only a tiny state. In Saudi Arabia the King is not the head of Islam (the agitation for such a role, a Caliph, being behind the current mayhem in Iraq and Syria). Japan and North Korea appear to be quite similar to the UK model – both have heads of state who are (or can be) worshipped as gods. The role of HRH as Supreme Governor of the Anglican Church – and therefore an intermediary between God and the nation – appears to be a relic of the belief in the Divine Right of Kings.

Scottish Independence Referendum in which she urged electors to 'be careful how you vote' and stated that she was 'very worried'. Some might consider that in doing this she crossed the narrow line from a position of impartiality to taking a partisan stance....seeing her duty as upholding the status quo rather than being the servant of democratic choice. Why would she do this? Alex Salmond was, after all, a beacon of moderation, favouring the Queen remaining Head of State in an independent Scotland and Scotland remaining within the EU, NATO and the Commonwealth. Her opposition to any change at all might puzzle some, until the nuances of what was being suggested by Salmond and the SNP are considered. Yes, they would have had a monarchy, but one answerable to a written constitution that would define the job of the monarch with, one suspects, much of the pageantry and paraphernalia dropped. A future King or Queen of Scotland would therefore operate like a Scandinavian or Dutch monarch. One wonders if somewhere lurking at the back of this was a consideration of how the mechanics of this, post-Independence, might have worked in Scotland: (1) agree a written constitution; (2) retain the monarch as Head of State; and (3) offer the Scottish Crown to QE2. As a short term solution this would be sufficient. But, given her age (89) and the misgivings many have about Prince Charles given his inability to restrain his views on everyday matters, what might their decision be when a successor needs to be agreed?

The notion that the House of Windsor was at risk if Scotland voted for Independence surfaced in the latter stages of the Referendum campaign.<sup>13</sup> Suppose, instead, the Scottish

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<sup>13</sup> The cavalry charge against Prince Charles as successor was led by Stephen Haseler during the Scottish Referendum (*The Times* 18 August 2014, 'Independent Scotland could lose Royal Family' and 11 September 2014). An intriguing figure, Haseler was a founder member of the SDP and for many years Chair of the pressure group Republic. A play, *King Charles III* ran in London in 2014-2015 with a plot that concludes with Charles abdicating.

Close observers may also note the appearance of articles referring to the Monarchy being in a 'transitional stage', something casually reported since 2013 – as could only be the case in a country

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Parliament one day looked for a firmly pro-EU candidate with long experience of regional and federal government and a strong understanding of appropriate constitutional behaviour for the throne of Scotland? And ensured that any candidate meeting these requirements was still related, dynastically, to previous Scottish monarchs? Circa 2020, the Duke of Bavaria, as the current head of the Jacobite line of descent from the Stuarts, might be an attractive alternative to Prince Charles if a monarch as head of state were still deemed preferable in Scotland to an elected President, and the Scots opted to repeat what the English Parliament did in 1689, 1714 and 1936: choose their own monarch. Stranger things have happened.<sup>14</sup>

Secondly, and inevitably, given the extent to which the economic optimism of earlier times has evaporated, it may be noted that HRH Queen Elizabeth remains extremely wealthy, being personally worth £330m. As head of the Crown Estate, which controls an estate valued at £6.6bn, she can also claim, on paper, to be the richest person in the UK.<sup>15</sup> It is no exaggeration to conclude that during her reign her personal

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*Note 13 continued*

without a written constitution. See 'The Queen's era is drawing to a close' (*Time*, 7 May 2013) and 'Queen hands over reins to Prince Charles' (*Daily Mirror*, 20 January 2014). Alarm about Charles III, who has stated that he will continue as monarch to lobby in favour of his personal views and comment publicly on matters he deems of interest, has also been voiced in many mainstream quarters. See 'Prince of Wales presents a real danger to the monarchy' (*Daily Telegraph*, 6 June 2012) and 'We'll not stomach a meddling monarch' (*The Guardian* 3 January 2015).

14 Such as the abdication of Leopold Saxe-Coburg-Gotha (King of Belgium) in 1951, the ending of the monarchy in Greece (a branch of the Sonderburg-Glucksburg family, related to Prince Philip) in 1967 and the return of Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha (formerly Tsar) to Bulgaria, as Prime Minister in 2001-2009. Perhaps the recent funeral of Richard III indicates a UK public interest in Monarchy but with no specific attachment to the House of Windsor.

15 A distinction is usually made that the Queen cannot benefit by selling any Crown Estate assets – the money would pass to the state. If so, the Queen may not be a billionaire, but, she remains wealthy and unaffected by the decline in living standards that has been so significant for so many of her subjects (not citizens) in the last 30 years

wealth has been undamaged and has risen continually while the prosperity and well-being of many of her subjects has fallen. Either explaining or ignoring this in a future edition of *Our Island Story* would be tricky and the line might well be that it is better, perhaps, to concentrate on nebulous personal freedoms and relatively minor triumphs instead. So...should the story continue it will no longer be a saga of steady improvement for all, having swerved into a narrow gloomy cul-de-sac since 1979, with a suspicion growing that it may end badly, if not for us, then for the UK as an entity, and certainly for our children.

Perhaps we should all be careful whom we vote for.