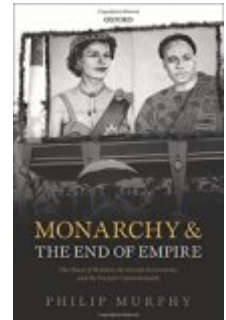


Philip Murphy. *Monarchy and the End of Empire: The House of Windsor, the British Government, and the Postwar Commonwealth.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Maps, illustrations. 256 pp. \$74.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-921423-5.



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The recent royal tours by the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge to Canada (2012) and the Antipodes (2014) were received with acclaim by media across the Anglophone world. Thousands of the queen's Canadian and Australian subjects came out to witness the presence of the royal couple. Yet, since the 1980s, Canada and Australia have embraced, as Brian Galligan has put it, “essentially republican constitution[s] disguised by monarchical forms” (p. 175). Around the same time as the Canadian tour, and on the eve of Prince Harry's tour of the Caribbean, Jamaica's prime minister Portia Simpson Miller expressed her intention to introduce a republican constitution. Simpson's announcement was hardly a seismic shift in the history of the Commonwealth (Elizabeth is queen of only sixteen of the fifty-three Commonwealth nations). Instead, the ambiguity represented by this seeming enthusiasm for the monarchy coexisting side by side with a rejection of it reflects the complex relationship between the monarchy and Britain's former empire,

the topic of Phillip Murphy's excellent *Monarchy and the End of Empire*.

Murphy's book is a rich overview of the monarchy's relationship with and role in the Commonwealth since the 1931 Statute of Westminster. While scholars have lavished ample attention on the relationship between Britain's monarchy and the empire, fairly limited attention has been paid to the monarchy's relationship with the Commonwealth.[1] Although the purpose of the Commonwealth has pivoted over the past half century, from a focus on maintaining the bonds of culture, history, and trade among the white dominions to a far more diverse organization dedicated to democracy and human rights, Murphy argues that the Commonwealth has been characterized by an important constant in providing the British monarchy with a renewed purpose in a postcolonial world. As Prince Charles quipped in 1977, “the Commonwealth exists because, quite simply, it is ‘there.’ Perhaps no-one quite knows why it is there, but since it is and because it has survived so many trials and tribulations ... a considerable

number of influential people must feel it has some relevance in the contemporary world” (p. 136). Murphy’s book, then, is a skilled examination of how the monarchy, Britain, and its former empire came to terms with and made sense of their places in the world after empire.

The first half of the book focuses on the processes by which an imperial monarchy became the head of an international association of nations, most of which became constitutional republics at or near independence. Murphy focuses on the political and constitutional maneuvering required for Britain to maintain the relationship with and between its former empire and the personal role of Queen Elizabeth II in those processes. Murphy argues that the Commonwealth has been defined, above all, by its constitutional ambiguities and a frequent reluctance on the part of the palace, Whitehall, and later the secretary-general of the Commonwealth to define the role of the monarchy in Commonwealth nations, its divisibility, and the right (or not) of British or Commonwealth prime ministers to provide ministerial advice to the queen. Decolonization also witnessed the transformation of a Commonwealth of the “old” Dominions to a “New Commonwealth” populated by Britain’s former colonial empire in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean and the complex negotiations required to maintain the British monarch as the “head of the Commonwealth” but not queen of most of its member nations.

As Murphy explains, a certain degree of bipolarity and ambiguity has always been an inherent feature of the Commonwealth. Irish nationalist leader Eamon de Valera’s acceptance of George V “as a symbol and accepted head of the Association” established the precedent recognized in the London Declaration of 1949 that republics, as India, Pakistan, and many other members of the New Commonwealth became, could maintain their membership without owing direct allegiance to the Crown (p. 40). In fact, the Colonial and the Commonwealth Relations Offices, worried that

the monarchy “might be tarnished by association with African politics,” advised newly minted African nations to embrace republican constitutions (p. 89). They also expressed fears that the monarchy’s reputation would suffer if former colonies embraced the monarchy at independence only to cast it aside in the aftermath of decolonization. While Kwame Nkrumah demonstrated “deep personal affection for the Queen,” for instance, the 1959 royal visit to Ghana was cancelled because of fears that Ghana would become a republic—Nkrumah was invited to Balmoral as a consolation prize (p. 71). Conversely, the Caribbean colonies were understood by Whitehall to be more firmly entrenched in British traditions and more attached to the monarchy, and were therefore encouraged to continue those bonds.

The monarchy’s title and status in relation to the Commonwealth is a running theme through the book. Efforts to keep India in the Commonwealth, in the context of growing Cold War tensions, explain the constitutionally ambiguous title, “Head of the Commonwealth.” Even George VI’s Latin title as head of the Commonwealth required a process of negotiation, with *Consortionis Populorum Princeps* being agreed upon after consultation among the Commonwealth prime ministers and with the Oxford Don Colin Hardie. When Elizabeth came to the throne in 1952, there were significant differences among the Commonwealth members in adopting a royal title, reflecting both the participation of India and other republics as well as the perceived divisibility of the monarchy. Other questions arose. Was the head of the Commonwealth a hereditary position that would be inherited by Prince Charles, or would it be passed onto another member state after her demise? From whom should the queen receive ministerial advice?

On the latter question, the queen’s dedication to the idea of the Commonwealth and her ability to effect changes in policy are perhaps best

demonstrated in her determination to attend the biannual Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings (CHOGM) and her passion for the Commonwealth's causes. As Murphy reveals, Whitehall advised the queen to skip the 1971 meeting in Singapore because of fears of a walkout over South Africa. Though the queen did not attend, she believed that her presence might inspire more conciliatory stances on the part of the meeting's participants. When Edward Heath, the Conservative prime minister, proposed to give the CHOGM a break after Singapore, the palace conspired with the Commonwealth secretariat for an Ottawa meeting that Heath could not refuse with an offer from Canada to host in hand. After Heath discouraged the queen from attending because of the attendance of Idi Amin, a determined Elizabeth accepted the invitation as the queen of Canada and at the advice of the Canadian government. Murphy also points to evidence that the queen experienced similar rows with the government over the Suez Crisis (1956) and Margaret Thatcher's policies toward South Africa. Moreover, Murphy contends that Queen Elizabeth accepted decolonization to a much greater degree than her father and speculates that, had the 1959 royal tour of Ghana gone forward, it might have been the queen rather than Harold Macmillan who had been "the harbinger of the 'Wind of Change'" (p. 79).

Murphy's book is a meticulously researched, comprehensive, and much-needed study of the monarchy's relationship with the Commonwealth during the reign of Elizabeth II. It identifies the ambiguities of this relationship, seen as anachronistic by so many onlookers, and contributes importantly to the literature on royalty and empire. The Commonwealth is "there," as Murphy demonstrates, in part because of the queen's investment in it. With this in mind, Murphy speculates about the future of the association once the queen who personifies its purpose is gone. According to a 2009 YouGov poll conducted in seven Commonwealth states, only 15 percent of Indian respondents supported Charles's candidacy for head of

the Commonwealth while 27 percent of Australians (his greatest supporters in the poll) favored him (p. 193). One option, according to Murphy, is a rotating head of state. If the Commonwealth does outlive the current monarch, it will presumably have to take on a new purpose and identity that extends beyond the legacies of the British Empire and a relationship with the British monarchy.

Monarchy and the End of Empire is a traditional political study that examines in detail the dynamic relationships between and among the palace, Whitehall, and Commonwealth governments. This political focus is its greatest strength, as Murphy researches and writes this kind of history exceedingly well. Yet while Queen Elizabeth II has demonstrated a firm dedication to the Commonwealth, the commitment from the rest of the political order of Britain has been uneven at best, and Murphy could have given more attention to the larger geopolitical context of Commonwealth politics—the Cold War, for instance—and the other influences toward which Britain gravitated during this period, including the United States and Europe. Murphy's work also points toward the need for a companion volume that explores the popular history of the Commonwealth monarchy through an examination of how citizen-subjects of former colonial states understood these relationships. Murphy has thus provided not only a monograph that enriches and gives texture to our understanding of monarchy and Commonwealth but also one that demonstrates a need for more work on these topics, if we are to ever fully understand the process and results of decolonization.

Note

[1]. See, for instance, Anne Rush, *Bonds of Empire: West Indians and Britishness from Victoria to Decolonization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), Hilary Sapiro, "African Loyalism and Its Discontents: The Royal Tour of South Africa, 1947," *Historical Journal* 54 (2011): 215-240, and

my own *Royal Tourists, Colonial Subjects, and the Making of a British World* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, forthcoming).

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