The Marriage That Could Have Ruined a Monarchy

Samantha Greulach

It had been approximately 125 years since George III gave up his power in 1810, due to a mental illness, in favor of his son being Regent over the United Kingdom.[1] This was the last time a British monarch willfully gave up power before Edward VIII abdicated his throne on December 10, 1936 for the woman that he loved.[2] At the time of the abdication this very much shook the British people's confidence in the monarchy. Especially, since people were starting to look at monarchies as outdated and it is something that Edward VIII's successor, his brother George VI, had to work his whole life to restore that trust. The abdication of Edward VIII affected the whole British Empire and changed history. It also affected how the people felt about the monarchy at a fragile time for monarchies in Europe.

Before Edward VIII was born, his father, George V, faced difficulties in his reign - as he was faced with not only the problem of home rule in Ireland, but then was almost blindsided by World War I. The end of World War I saw several countries, such as Russia, Germany,

---

[1] Nigel Cawthorne, *Kings & Queens of England From the Saxon Kings to the House of Windsor,* (New York, NY: Metro Books, 2009), 156. Ed. Note: A regent is a temporary, acting head of state in a monarchy.

[2] Robert Ergang, *Europe in Our Time 1914 to the Present*, 3rd ed. (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1958), 217.

Austria – Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire, having rulers who either were assassinated or abdicated their throne. England kept their monarchy because people respected George V, which increased after seeing how he led the country through four years of war. Although the English people had confidence in George V, by the time Edward VIII came to abdicate the throne the British people were starting to question if the monarchy was still needed. These are all important factors of British history that need to be understood when looking at Edward VIII's reign and the terms of his abdication.

On June 23, 1894 at White Lodge the Duke of York, later known as George V, along with his wife Mary of Teck, welcomed a healthy baby boy into the world. This baby boy was later christened Edward Albert Christian George Andrew Patrick David.[3] He was known to his family as David and later, in 1911, he became known as the Prince of Wales. When he ascended to the throne in 1936 after his father's death he took the name Edward VIII. Edward VIII was named after his Uncle Eddy, George the V's older brother, who passed away two years before Edward VIII was born. This means that when Edward VIII was born, he was second in line to the British throne. His father George V became king in 1910, which gave Edward VIII the title of Prince of Wales in

[3] Cawthorne, *Kings & Queens of England,* 185.

1911. From Edward VIII's birth he was taught that he would become the King of England and all of its Commonwealth countries, but his did not stop Edward VIII from doing as he pleased. While his father was morally strict, as was expected of the monarch that was also the head of the Church of England, it would not stop Edward VIII from having affairs with married women during the 1920s.[4] In 1931 Edward VIII met the American divorcee Wallis Simpson and her second husband Ernst Simpson at the country house of a mutual friend, and they started an affair in 1934.[5] When his father George V learned how serious Edward VIII and Wallis Simpson's affair, he reportedly told the then-Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin, "After I am dead that boy will ruin himself in 12 months."[6]

Although many people thought this affair with Wallis Simpson would pass as did Edward VIII's other affairs with married women, it did not. It continued until King George V's death on January 20, 1936.[7] Shortly after King George V's death, Wallis Simpson filed for divorce from her second husband, Ernst Simpson. This is when the problems of abdication started to become serious as Edward VIII's attachment with Wallis Simpson proved problematic now that Edward VIII was king. His

[4] Ibid, 186.
[5] Ibid, 186.
[6] Ibid, 186.
[7] Ibid, 184.

cousin Louis Mountbatten observed "that once their friendship had reached the point where they went to bed together, Edward lost all sense of reason."[8] It is important for a ruler to have people who are close to them for support, but when a ruler becomes too close to someone and loses reason this becomes a problem. Edward VIII was doing everything in his power to keep Wallis Simpson by his side, which ended up costing him the throne.

On December 4, 1936 several articles ran in *The New York Times* under the title "Edward VIII Shows No Sign of Yielding in Crisis; Sees Baldwin, Consults His Mother and York; Abdication Still Considered Likely Outcome."[9] This title encompasses six different articles that are about what the British cabinet is doing to avoid the abdication of Edward VIII. The six articles came to *The New York Times* by special cable from London, England, and they show how British press felt about the possibility of the abdication of their monarch. The title also shows that although this is a state issue, it was also a family issue as the titles highlight the meetings between the Duke of York, the Queen Mother and Edward VIII. These articles were published seven days before the

[8] Susan Williams, *The People's King The True Story of the Abdication,* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 22.
[9] "Edward VIII Shows No Sign Of Yielding In Crisis; Sees Baldwin, Consults His Mother And York; Abdication Still Considered Likely Outcome," *New York Times,* December 4, 1936.

official abdication was announced and confirms that not only people in Britain and its commonwealth states were concerned, but also British allies since these articles were also in American newspapers. Clearly Edward VIII's controversy peaked interest throughout the world, and it may have been one of the first cases of the modern press hounding the British royal family.

Although to some it may seem that Edward VIII gave up the country in order to marry Wallis Simpson, he tried to find ways around abdication. As Charles Selden stated in a *New York Times* article on December 4, 1936:

> Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin to put through Parliament a morganatic marriage act, which would enable him to marry the divorced American woman without raising her to the rank of Queen and would specifically excluded children she might have (by Edward VIII from succession to the throne.

Edward VIII and Wallis Simpson never had children. It has been speculated that she was born with Disorder of Sexual Development, and possibly Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome, which means that she was genetically a male while outwardly she was a female.[10] If Parliament would have allowed Edward VIII to marry Wallis Simpson on the terms of the Morganatic Marriage Act, then his niece Princess Elizabeth

[10] Anne Sebba, *That Women The Life of Wallis Simpson Duchess of Windsor* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2011) 27-28.

(currently Queen Elizabeth II) would still become the monarch. The difference is that she would have had more time to prepare for her role as future Queen if Edward VIII would have kept his crown until his death in May of 1972.[11] Although her father, George VI had grown up as the second son, he was not given the responsibility that Edward VIII was while he was Prince of Wales. This could have hindered George VI's reign because growing up he knew that he was not the heir but just the spare. Instead when Edward VIII gave up his throne in 1936 his brother, who became King George VI, was never prepared for his time as King. Even close advisors and family member did not know what was going to happen with abdication, even though they should have had some insider information.

Charles Seldan related how fragile the situation was in his *New York Times* article: "Mr. Baldwin had made the king understand that the government would resign if he persisted in the marriage regardless of the advice of his Ministers."[12] This shows just how problematic the situation could be because if Edward VIII would have married Wallis Simpson without abdicating. This would have forced the English government to resign, and he would have had a country without a government, creating

[11] Cawthorne, *Kings & Queens of England,* 190.
[12] Charles A. Selden, "Cabinet Bars New Law," *New York Times,* December 4, 1936.

more problems than if he abdicated. This would cause problems because instead of a constitutional monarchy, Britain would have to return to an absolute monarchy, something the British people would not have allowed. If Edward VIII would have forced the United Kingdom into an absolute monarchy, this could have caused a revolution, especially since during World War I many countries were shedding monarchies all together. Even though the abdication crisis was very dire, the London newspapers were sending articles via special cables to the *New York Times*. The articles sent to the *New York Times* saw Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin trying to keep people calm by assuring "that no constitutional difficulty at present exists in regard to King Edward's marriage plans."[13]

Although the British government was trying to convince its citizens that Edward VIII was not going to abdicate, numerous articles were published saying that Edward VIII could not marry Wallis Simpson and be King. It still seemed as if the British officials were at the same time saying that Edward VIII was going to stay on the throne, even though his infatuation with Wallis Simpson was still very strong. It was even said in a biography about Simpson that "the pressure from so insistent a lover was, already, almost more than Wallis could cope with.

[13] "Press of Britain Divided on Ruler," *New York Times,* December 4, 1936.

When the Prince went to Sandringham Estate for Christmas with his family she viewed it as 'a lovely rest for us and especially me.'"[14] Another solution could have been that Edward VIII could have married a European noble woman and produce children with her and keep Wallis Simpson as a mistress. Although not ideal, this was not uncommon for monarchs at the time, as Edward VIII's great Grandmother Queen Victoria ascended to the throne when her uncles were unable to produce a living legitimate heir.

A few days before the official abdication announcement, some of the Commonwealth countries were issuing articles of prayer and concern for Edward VIII. An article from an Australian newspaper published in *The London Times* expressed that "the King may be led to make a choice enabling the Empire to retain its beloved sovereign. In spite of the gloomiest omens, this is still the prayer of every loyal Australian."[15] Even the Commonwealth countries wanted everything to work out and hoped that their King would stay on the throne. It seemed that no matter what happened the Commonwealth countries would still support Edward VIII and be understanding of his decision. In the same article, it seemed as though the Australian people were starting a counter-attack on the

[14] Sebba, *Wallis Simpson Duchess of Windsor,* 102.
[15] "Australian Prayers," *London Times,* December 7, 1936.

British government: "The worst mistake might be that the British cabinet should allow the King insufficient time for a clear decision."[16] The Australian people wanted to make sure that this is what Edward VIII wanted before he abdicated and that no other agreement or arrangement could be made. At the same time, even though it sounded like they were starting to blame the British government, the article also stated, "We endorse the plea by Mr. W.M. Hughes that the King is entitled to a due period of quiet reflection before he makes this decision."[17] This shows that even the people in the British Empire wanted the British government and Edward VIII to slow down and think about whether or not this was the only solution. The Australian newspapers attempts for reasoned discourse regarding abdication, it seemed like the people may have been hoping that given time Edward VIII's affair with Wallis Simpson would have dissolved like the many pervious affairs that he had in the 1920s.

Other nations in the Commonwealth also carefully watched the situation. India, like Britain, was trying to show restraint by not publishing too many articles about Edward VIII's private affairs; as the abdication problem grew into a crisis however, "some Indian press are turning to American sources."[18] It seemed like at this time British

[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.
[18] "Anxious Concern In India," *London Times*, December 7, 1936.

Commonwealth countries would try to refrain from publishing articles about Edward VIII, unless it had to do directly with the possibility of abdication or his public image while leaving out his private life. As it became more and more possible that abdication was going to happen, more articles would become published about anything involving Edward VIII's abdication, including his private life.

Edward VIII told Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin on December 5, 1936 of his decision to abdicate, and on December 10, 1936 Edward VIII signed the Abdication Act, which was witnessed by his three brothers. On the following evening, the now Prince Edward made an official broadcast about his abdication.[19] In the broadcast on the evening of December 11, 1936 he made the famous statement, "You must believe me when I tell you that I have found it impossible to carry the heavy burden of responsibility and to discharge my duties as King as I wish to do, without the help and support of the woman I love."[20] This affected millions of people throughout the British Empire, and even though not everyone liked Edward VIII or the reason why he was abdicating, it was still a hard time for the British Empire. Although he explained in his broadcast to the people of the British Empire his reasons for abdicating,

[19] Cawthorne, *Kings &Queens of England,* 190.
[20] Ibid, 189.

he also tried to comfort them by saying: "This decision has been made less difficult to me by the sure knowledge that my brother, with his long training in the public affairs of this country and with his fine qualities, will be able to take place forthwith without interrupt or injury to the life and progress of the empire."[21] This was to reassure the people, because Edward VIII's brother, now George VI, had a terrible stutter. It also helped to stabilize the Crown because the faith and popularity of the royal family decreased rapidly since Edward VIII ascended the throne earlier that year. On December 12, 1936, one day after Edward VIII's broadcast announcing his abdication, the House of Lords took the Oath to swear their allegiance to King George VI.[22]

After the abdication of Edward VIII, who would from then on be referred to as the Duke of Windsor, the Commonwealth countries such as Australia and Canada seemed disappointed in the situation. In an Australian newspaper, John Curtain the leader of the Labor Party in Australia said, "King Edward had made himself probably the most prominent and conspicuous symbol of the unity of the British peoples, and knew the peoples of the Dominions probably better than any of his predecessors."[23] This shows that the Australian people thought that

[21] Sebba, *Wallis Simpson Duchess of Windsor,* 178.
[22] "The Swearing – In," *London Times,* December 14, 1936.
[23]"Australians And The New King,*" London Times,* December 12, 1936.

though Edward was a good King during his reign, they were disappointed that he had abdicated the throne and the Australian Opposition party leader, John Curtin was not pleased with the new King: "the Opposition would not be behindhand in asserting their loyalty to the new King."[24] When Edward VIII abdicated, the British Empire lost their confidence in their monarchy, which required the new monarch to regain the people's confidence. It could also be said that the Australian people liked Edward so much that they did not want to see anyone but Edward on the throne. In Canada people also did not necessarily welcome the new King George VI with open arms. The Secretary of State in Canada, Fernand Rinfret said that "as there could be but one King for the British Empire George VI automatically became King of Canada and nothing more was necessary."[25] From newspaper accounts it appears that the Canadians and Australians wanted the British Empire to be split, with Edward VIII reigning over Canada and Australia, and George VI reigning over the rest of the Empire.

The abdication of Edward VIII happened 327 days after his succession and was the shortest reign since the reign of Edward V, who was deposed by his uncle King Richard III in 1483.[26] In less than a year

[24] Ibid.
[25] "Canadian Abdication Bill," *London Times*, January 21, 1937.
[26] Cawthorne, *Kings & Queens of England,* 190.

Edward VIII went from being a very popular King of the British Empire to the Duke of Windsor, all in order to marry Wallis Simpson, a twice - divorced American. This was a very tense time for not only Great Britain, but also the whole British Realm, as it would be for any Empire with the loss of its leader. Although many solutions were given to remedy what is now known as the Abdication Crisis, none were able to keep Edward VIII on the throne and still be able to marry Simpson.[27] In a ten month time period, the British Empire had had three different Kings, which hit the monarchy hard and could have split the Empire.[28] Even though the abdication did hit the monarchy hard, the next two monarchs were able to rebuild and keep the monarchy and British Empire intact. If it had not been for Edward VIII's infatuation with Wallis Simpson the British monarchy that we know today could be very different.

[27] Ibid, 188.
[28] "Three Kings," *London Times*, January 1, 1397.

Bibliography

"Anxious Concern in India." *London Times*. December 7, 1936.

"Australians And The New King." *London Times*. December 12, 1936.

"Australian Prayers." *London Times*. December 7, 1936.

"Canadian Abdication Bill." *London Times*, January 21, 1937.

Cawthorne, Nigel. *Kings & Queens of England From the Saxon Kings to the House of Windsor*. New York: Metro Books, 2009.

"Edward VIII Shows No Sign of Yielding in Crisis; Sees Baldwin, Consults His Mother and York; Abdication Still Considered likely Outcome." *New York Times*, December 4, 1936.

Ergang, Robert *Europe in Our Time 1914 to the Present*, 3rd ed. Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1958.

"Press of Britain Divided on Ruler." *New York Times*, December 4, 1936.

Sebba, Anne. *That Women The Life of Wallis Simpson Duchess of Windsor.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 2011.

Selden, Charles A. "Cabinet Bars New Law." *New York Times*, December 4, 1936.

"The Swearing – In." *London Times*, December 14, 1936.

"Three Kings." *London Times*, January 1, 1397.

Williams, Susan. *The People's King The True Story of the Abdication*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.