ROYAL STUDIES JOURNAL

2019 VI

King Edward VIII: An American Life

Ted Powell

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018

Review by: Barbara J. Messamore

WINCHESTER UNIVERSITY PRESS

King Edward VIII: An American Life. By Ted Powell. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. ISBN 978-0-19-879532-2. xii + 302 pp. $34.95.

Ted Powell's *King Edward VIII* is an unalloyed pleasure, a lively and convincing picture of the strong pull of the United States on the Prince of Wales (1894–1972). America offered a vision of a life free from the conventions of British society and the demands of monarchical duty, "a country in which nothing is impossible," as Edward put it in his memoirs (5). Powell maintains that this American draw exerted a stronger influence on the heir to the throne than did Wallis Simpson. "But for America," Powell asserts, "King Edward VIII would never have abdicated" (254).

Real motives for actions are often hidden—even from ourselves—so it is of course impossible to definitively know whether Wallis Simpson was the cause of the abdication or merely the trigger for it. Much of the evidence Powell presents suggests the latter. In popular legend, it was Edward's deep obsessive love for a twice-married American woman who appeared bafflingly ordinary that provides the entire explanation for the 1936 act that shook the very foundations of the British monarchy. Powell shows how the Prince's heavily Americanized intimate social circle brought him into the Simpsons' orbit. But the woman who emerges as dominant in Edward's life is Freda Dudley-Ward, the married woman with whom the Prince had a decades-long affair, and to whom Wallis Simpson bore a striking resemblance. Powell suggests that the Prince's acquisition of a ranch in Alberta during his 1919 tour of Canada represented "a fantasy of escape" with Freda. "If only WE could settle West (British Columbia or Alberta) darling, what heaven and we could be the happiest couple in the whole world," Edward wrote to her (79). His fantasies sometimes took a darker turn. He chose a curiously light turn of phrase to describe his determination not to use his "little 6 shooter" until they could commit suicide together: "I am just dippy to die with YOU" (157). Freda Dudley-Ward's successor as mistress was another look-alike: the twice-divorced American Thelma Morgan Furness.

Powell creates a vivid historical background for Edward's life, weaving in unobtrusive explanations of important events and people. One fascinating figure described is the American performer Will Rogers, who became a good friend to the Prince and even taught him cowboy rope tricks. The aviator Charles Lindbergh was another. The Prince's film-star glamour and international celebrity brought adulation wherever he travelled, although it is hard not to sympathize with a young man driven to exhaustion by an unrelenting schedule. American fascination with the Duke and Duchess of Windsor continued long after the abdication; Powell attributes the couple's

decision not to reside permanently in the US to tax considerations. By contrast, the pair were an embarrassment in Britain, and officials resisted any diplomatic role for the bored Duke. The entourage of young officials who had accompanied Edward on extended tours—facilitating discreet meetings with young women, arranging entertainments, and shielding him from disagreeable tasks—were not personal friends after all, it proved. Their allegiances were firmly with the monarchy, and not the man. Powell provides a brief epilogue, creating a sympathetic portrait of the Windsors in exile practicing what one observer called "the art of doing nothing" (245).

Powell contextualizes Edward VIII's story by noting the rising tide of American influences in late-nineteenth-century Britain, citing the commercial challenge posed by the USA, the influx of American heiresses into financially struggling aristocratic families, and even Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, which was immensely popular with the royal family. The trend continued with the invasion of Hollywood films in the decades to follow. Powell cites the remarkable statistic that "well over half" of adult Britons attended the cinema at least once a week in the 1920s and 1930s (164). The Prince's earliest sustained opportunity to mingle with Americans came during the Great War. The young heir to the throne was compelled to serve well behind the front lines to mitigate the risk, and the Americans' 1917 entry into the war brought him into contact with a "cheery crowd of d----d good fellows" (26). Amid what Powell describes as a "mutual lovefest," the media even began to speculate that Edward ought to take an American bride. The Prince's love of jazz music and dancing, adoption of American fashions and gum chewing habit, custom-made Buick, and vocal admiration for American business models all suggested a shifting world view. The steady spread of American culture meant that even the cafés of Paris offered the opportunity to absorb its influences, and to hear jazz music while mingling with such American expatriates as F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ezra Pound, and Ernest Hemingway. Powell has a keen eye for details that create a lively zeitgeist.

Among the examples Powell cites of Edward's enthusiasm for all things American is his tendency to adopt American idioms and pronunciations. He broadcast speeches over the "radio," rather than the "wireless," and joked about the "swell" weather during an event in the Scottish Highlands (165). But it is tempting to speculate that both the Prince and the author misunderstood a young dance partner who was used as an example of the fast American girls the Prince met at parties. She "offered to sleep with him," Powell claims, quoting the Prince's boast that "She said I could take her home if I wanted, although she was already booked up with a man for that pleasure" (140). I suspect I am not alone among North American readers in inferring

that the young lady was simply asking if the Prince would escort her to her own home after the dance.

Powell provides strong historical evidence of the appeal to the Prince of American freedom from convention. The thesis is indeed convincing. But the conceit of drawing a distinction between the public "Edward" and the private Americanized "David" skirts close to a less sound psycho-historical approach. Such theories, in the end, are not needed to make the persuasive case that the Prince's Americanization was the definitive factor in the abdication. Powell alludes to the notion of "inner emigration," suggesting that, even when Edward was prevented from returning to the US, he adopted the psychological coping mechanism of retreating into his inner Americanized world.

The book offers a compelling and highly readable analysis of Edward's life and fateful decision, one that offers enlightenment and diversion to all audiences. The Wallis Simpson story is thus no longer the linchpin of a monarch's unprecedented abdication; instead, it is but one element in a long process of cultural estrangement.

BARBARA J. MESSAMORE
University of the Fraser Valley