

“Watching Charlie’s Coronation”: The Disenchanted Glass

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I gave in, and watched Charlie’s coronation. And I was surprised.

I am republican: I believe that heads of state should be elected, and aristocracy abolished. Being Irish, I particularly despise the British monarchy, for all the centuries of horrors committed in its name. And I loathe Anglicanism’s camp fusion of church and state.

So I was going to ignore it. But rain killed my plans for the day, so I decided to amuse myself with Janey Godley’s voiceover. But this time the wonderful Janey didn’t work for me, so I switched to the BBC. Know your enemy.

I expected high pomp and pageantry, executed with precision by a vast horde of absurdly-dressed flunkies, sonorously narrated by a sombre BBC voice. A vast production to wow the viewers, and to bolster the myth of an eternally strong and magnificent monarchy.

At first, that’s roughly what I saw. An “Enchanted Glass”, as Tom Nairn called it.

Penny’s Sword of Truth

Brit Royalty has been doing grand ceremonies for centuries, so all the men in silly clothes did their silly walks in unison, and the horses were flawlessly synchronised. Inside Westminster Abbey, everything was perfectly choreographed, and the extravagant robes were immaculate. Huw Edwards provided the reverential commentary, following the standard BBC-Royal formula of subdued voice complete with plentiful long pauses, as if he was whispering to a slow learner at a funeral. His co-presenter was a gushing woman whose two tasks seemed to be to waffle about the supposed “excitement” of the crowds and to provide forgettable potted bios of some of the personnel.

All the usual ingredients of royal pageant were there, but the more I watched, the less

believable it became.

The allegedly excited crowds were actually thin and subdued. The lists of Sir This and Lord That and Captain T'Other sounded well beyond their use-by-date.

The Lords and Commons Speakers' processions looked like failed comedy skits, as four people in silly clothes carried a stick through the rain. The queue of former Prime Ministers looked tawdry: grey man, war criminal, brooding bully, toff, robot, liar and halfwit. Minor royals wandered in, recognisable only to readers of Hello magazine. Large chunks of the music were modern compositions, and like most modern choral works they were dire: lots of notes, huge vocal range, but no discernible tune and no emotion. Even the return to stonking tunes like Handel's Zadok couldn't restore the broken spell.

This was a grave error. The Anglican liturgy has a massive back catalogue of greatest hits, works which have stirred emotions for generations. The coronation needed to connect with a young generation who don't go to church and are unfamiliar with its ritual. But instead, royalty's most important gig in seventy years had a soundtrack peppered with obscure experimental dirges which should have remained as MIDI files in university music labs. It's hard to imagine the thought processes behind these choices, but baffling people with passionless obscurity was hubristic.

Such atonal diversions might have been tenable if the core proposition was strong. When Elizabeth II was crowned in 1953, the British Empire had lost India and Ireland, but still ruled swathes of Africa, the Caribbean and Central America. The so-called "Old Commonwealth" — the white settler colonies of Canada, Australia and New Zealand — were solidly loyal to the imperial Crown, as was Britain itself. Elizabeth herself was an elegant young woman, a hugely popular celebrity with a well-managed backstory.

If Elizabeth had been crowned to the tune of Three Blind Mice, the magic would have been undimmed. That radiant young woman would have stolen any show.

But Charlie is not easy on the eye, and his backstory does him no favours. Opinion polls show little love for him, and he isn't even hated. It's worse than that: most Brits are apathetic.

So on his big day, Charlie needed to exceed expectations, to sparkle and exude stardom. But he didn't. Instead, his glum face and flat voice sucked the remaining oxygen out of the proceedings. By the time he was handed the orb and sceptre, he looked miserable, and seemed to be holding back tears.

The cameras should have been showing a man filled with pride and confidence, a leader strengthened by an ancient ritual of anointment, inspiring faith in his followers. Instead they showed a broken old man who seemed to long to be anywhere else, and who was stonily unresponsive even to the ritualised kiss from his older son. I found myself thinking of The Crown's portrayal of young Charles as a sensitive child abandoned by his mother as she toured the Commonwealth, and then consigned to misery in a macho boarding school.

Hardcore monarchists will find their faith undented. But this lavish ceremony needed to reach far beyond the faithful. Its strategic goal was to connect with the apathetic majority, and to wow them with magic. That was always a big ask, and it failed. The cameo roles for non-Anglican faiths has little meaning to Britain's agnostic majority, and the belated

inclusion of Celtic languages won't dent the independence movements. The core production fell flat, and the Palace's hope of ubiquitous coronation parties didn't happen.

The Met and Pre-Crime

The Metropolitan Police's ruthless crackdown on potential protesters went beyond heavy-handedness. Arresting peaceful protesters without giving a lawful reason was chilling, and arresting holders of rape alarms set a terrifying precedent, especially in the context of the Met's appalling history of misogyny. But in the right-wing climate of England, concern is unlikely to extend beyond the marginalised left.

Similarly, the obscenity of the £250 million cost is unlikely to be a major controversy. No significant political or media voice objects, and in England there will be no major outrage at foodbanks losing funding while cash pours into regal ceremonies.

So the Saturday's dramas leave no immediate fallout to trouble the Palace. But if there any wise heads remaining in the English establishment, they will recognise the coronation overreach, and choose their moment to propose scaling back future ceremonies, and the monarchy itself.

That planning should of course have happened decades ago, long before the Elizabeth's reign began to fade. But there seems to be no political space in England to discuss this without being cancelled, so no mainstream politician will dare speak of it. The crown will continue to box beyond its weight, as Scotland and Wales and Northern Ireland turn their backs.

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