The British Royals in Australia

Traditions, Icons, and Popular Culture

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Articles

This article examines how and why, from Australia's colonial past to today, the British monarchy have "intruded" into our daily lives (Cannadine *Orientalism* 103). To 'intrude' suggests

consciousness and agency in making sure they are constantly part of our social life. Public events, press releases, Websites, ceremonies, and the like do not occur randomly. Queen Elizabeth II was very aware that she 'needed to be seen to be believed'. Is this enough of a reason for the British royals to appear on our currency or postage stamps, for their images to adorn tea towels and magazine covers, or for them to be subject of films, television shows, and book? Is the need to be seen the reason they visit our shores so frequently?

If the British monarch rules with divine right, why does the royal family need to spend their time intruding into the lives of everyday people? Given Cannadine's arguments that the royal family adopts traditions, symbols, and signifiers to reinforce and legitimate their power, it is possible to come to a view that the word 'intrusion' is not used by Cannadine by accident. The British royals need more than to be seen: they need to be seen in a particular light, with meanings that reinforce their positive role in national life – or at least posit that they do no harm and that they may indeed be good for the economy.

It is not only their apparent public good that endlessly intrudes in our daily lives; so too do their transgressions. Regardless, they remain ever present. While representations of the British royals are not always positive, they are constant. Because they are constant, the public form views about them and their character. In this 'social construction of reality', as sociologists Berger and Luckman would put it, we think we know who and what the royals are, and for the most part we accept them as their preferred representation. If this is the case, the British royal family have successfully engaged in a hegemonic project – which explains why the royal family has survived, when so many other European royal families did not, and it also explains why they need to intrude into our daily lives.

In her 2021 book *Running the Family Firm: How the Monarchy Manages Its Image and Our Money*, Laura Clancy argues that the British royals are very conscious of the need to present and continually represent a very particular, curated, and stage-managed version of themselves as a benign middle-upper class family, committed to public duty and sacrifice, who symbolise the nation and stability. This image, along with the public's emotional investment in their daily lives, particularly when they marry and have children, seeks to render their capital accumulation, immense wealth, corporate and political power, and social and cultural privilege invisible. Clancy argues that this carefully curated public image of family and tradition not only conceals the power and wealth of the royals, but acts to counter criticisms and silence calls for their devolution.

Invented Traditions

What were the early expressions of empire and monarchy? For Australians, early expressions of empire and the British monarchy were evident in annual Empire Day activities and in royal visits. These expressions were accompanied by material expressions, including the British monarchy giving its names to our states, cities, streets, and parks as well as appearing on our postage stamps and currency. Monarchial kitsch including everyday items such as crockery, glassware, and tea towels aimed at family consumption were complemented with items aimed to be consumed by younger Australians, such as schoolbook covers. Overlaying this was the ubiquitous images of the monarch, hung in family homes and government offices, the flying of the Union Jack, and the daily singing of *God Save the Queen* at schools, its regular playing on the ABC, its playing at the start of theatrical productions, and sometimes at national sporting events, and its rendition at official events such as the opening of state and federal parliaments.

The British empire was once vast and powerful, however its size and authority has always required its attention. Empire Day was first envisaged in 1897, when Queen Victoria ruled one quarter of the world. The early aim of Empire Day was to remind children what it "meant to be sons and daughters of such a glorious Empire" (Johnson). It was an invented tradition, largely a product of imperial Irishman Lord Meath (English 258). Meath believed that "from their earliest years the children of the Empire should grow up with the thought of its claim upon their remembrance and their service" (Johnson). Unsettled by British vulnerabilities experienced during the Boer War (1899-1902), Meath wanted to "nurture a sense of collective identity and imperial responsibility among young empire citizens" to ensure the future defence of the empire (English 248). Simultaneously, with the power of America and Germany rising, and with "public enthusiasm" for Britain's "imperial enterprise" waning, efforts were needed to reconsolidate British authority in the realm (Thompson 152).

Empire Day was first celebrated in Australia in 1905. Initially a day aimed at children, it included saluting the British Union Jack and singing *Jerusalem* and *God Save the Queen* (Johnson), but it quickly became a ritual celebration which captured the popular imagination of both children and adults (English). Whole communities participated in Empire Day spectacles including flag waving, fetes, galas, parades, and the like, which rapturously demonstrated "unembarrassed fervor for King and country" (English 253). One 1908 example is indicative of Australian Empire Day celebrations.

> At three o'clock a procession will be formed and the Cadet Corps with the band playing and colours flying will march to the reserve enclosure on the Common. Arriving at the Arena, the Cadet Corps will fall in line with the school children in alphabetical order from the right. At 3.30, the Cadet Corps will troop the colours at the saluting base, the school children and Cadet Corps will march past and give three cheers and sing 'God Save the King'. (Beaven and Griffiths 384)

The initial success of Empire Day was that it "incorporated the cultural elements of imperial nationalism" (English 258), and at least until World War I it provided "social cohesion" that "appeared to transcend class divisions". More likely, the day "reinforced social relations" by performing a "socialising role that upheld a belief in the racial superiority and the righteousness of the British Empire" (English 275). Empire Day provided a potent vehicle to indoctrinate Australians with British virtues (Springhall 97). These virtues were clearly spelt out by the watchwords of the Empire Movement, "Responsibility, Sympathy, Duty, and Self-sacrifice", realising its "hegemonic potential" (English 258). It proved to be a "useful and important index of imperial sentiment" especially during the wars. That said, the "hegemonic imperial ideology" was not "uncontested" (English 258).

But reflecting the decline of the British empire in the post-war period, Empire Day was re-badged as British Commonwealth Day in 1958, and in 1966 it became known as Commonwealth Day. The date of Commonwealth Day was also changed to 10 June, the official birthday of Queen Elizabeth II. The date was again changed in 1977 to the second Monday in March, when each year the Queen sent a special message to the youth of the Commonwealth via a radio broadcast. Empire Day was a celebration of British imperialism situated in, and performed by, citizens of the Commonwealth, to maintain British legitimacy and relevance; however, with the demise of such imperial days, royal tours took on new meanings. This was especially the case with the newly coronated Queen Elizabeth II.

Royal Tours

Though a modern concept, the idea of royal tours has a much longer heritage, dating to the Tudor and Elizabethan eras. By the time of Queen Victoria, royal tours came to be seen as a "more immediate way in which the crown was made truly imperial and the empire authentically royal" (Cannadine *Orientalism* 115), because they were

> majestic journeys to the empire which reciprocated and paralleled the pilgrimages made by the potentates from the periphery to the imperial metropolis … . These grand progresses by land and sea, lasting many months and covering many miles, involving countless receptions, dinners, parades, and speeches, and all carried on before vast, delighted and admiring crowds. (Cannadine *Orientalism* 115)

British imperialism, and its own sense of righteousness and racial superiority, meant that royal tours were appealing (Reed 2). While events such as royal tours may appear on the surface as unproblematic, royal visits are more than benign public relations exercises. Decades of curated royal tours have acted more akin to propaganda, as they arguably ensure ongoing social, cultural, and political support for the British monarchy. In considering the nature of royal tours and other royal-related events and ephemera, it is timely to consider how much of what is presented to us is born out of tradition and how much of it is a construct designed to maintain the royals' relevance. With monarchies in decline, largely seen as a relic of a past now unimaginable to many, it is necessary for them to ensure they are seen as vibrant and relevant. Royal tours provide a controlled opportunity to put themselves before flag-waving crowds and give speeches that speak of their affection for the host country. Royal tours do several things, but largely they seek to reaffirm the current and future monarchy, and they act to resist histories of racism and colonisation.

In grief following the death of her husband in 1861, Queen Victoria herself rarely appeared in public and did not leave the British Isles, but by the last decades of her reign she did re-emerge as a "public icon, a national symbol, and an imperial totem" (Cannadine *History* 43). Reluctant to conduct royal tours herself, Queen Victoria arranged for other royals to represent her overseas, and these tours took on a ceremonial feel which became standardised and considered (Reed 3). Hence, royal tours emblematised a "newfound *raison d'être*" and "ceremonially perform[ed] as a symbol of the British nation-empire" (Reed 4). This was necessary considering that by the start of the twentieth century the British Empire was an "astonishingly diverse dominion, a rag-bag of territorial bits and pieces, created and governed in a correspondingly disorganised and unsystematic way" (Cannadine *History* 145-146).

On becoming Empress of India in 1876, and with Queen Victoria's Golden (1887) and Diamond Jubilees (1897), this saw a "symbolic reinvention, during which the monarchy was celebrated in grand style in Britain and across the empire" (Reed 4). The years also saw the arrival of mass-produced consumer items, meaning the "face of the Queen went around the world on souvenir crockery, handkerchiefs and chocolate wrappers", making her the most famous person on earth at the time of her death (Connors 4). The royal family has "always reproduced itself" in pictures: be it coins, statues, paintings, photographs, and later television, "reiterating its symbolic identification with the nation" (Roberts 38). Event such as royal Jubilees and early royal tours provided crowds in Britain and throughout the empire with "ripe occasions on which to celebrate their white supremacy" (Connors 4). The British monarchy then and now has sought to project itself not only as "ancient and timeless, and therefore indispensable to national identity, but also

as modern and useful" (Reed 5). But it remained a "cornerstone of an Anglo-Saxon race imperialism, the racially based patriotism that cemented the success of empire" (Connors 4). As such,

> royalty has always been produced to reify not just power but an idealized racial image. The pale-skinned, white-haired, pearl-draped Queen Victoria, her image reproduced on stamps, money, biscuit tins, postcards, and her portrait hung in colonial offices all over the British Empire served to make white rule of the non-white seem normative. (Roberts 33)

With colonial policy shifting from military administrations in some parts of the British empire to one which recognised the "distant sympathies" of the empire, the realm was increasingly seen as "a source of incalculable strength and happiness" for Britain (Connors 2). In this context, the "imperial fantasy" was appealing (Reed 2).

Since 1867, there have been over 50 royal tours of Australia, but only six before 1954. Queen Elizabeth's first royal tour as the monarch was a six-month tour of the British Commonwealth beginning in November 1953, including a two month visit to Australia. The tour was planned as an "opportunity to thank the Commonwealth for its support during the Second World War, and to introduce the new Queen to her subjects" (HM Queen Elizabeth II). Queen Elizabeth II is the only reigning monarch to visit Australia, and did so 16 times before her death in 2022. The Australian leg of her royal tour began in Sydney on 3 February 1954. She was 27 and had only been coronated in June of the previous year.

Royal visits consist of official events, such as the opening of parliament or attending Anzac Day services, and they consist of a range of highly curated visits to iconic Australian locations, including Bondi Beach or Uluṟu (Brien). Each event provides carefully managed photo opportunities of the royals. Enveloped in ceremony and pomp, such regular and ongoing events entrench the British royals into the daily lives of Australians. The aim of the visits is to represent the royals in ways which capture Australia's imagination – hence the use of iconic locations.

Modern societies often draw on "myth and ritual", and the British royal family supply this with public ceremonies, including royal tours, that observers may have assumed have always existed and have been passed through the ages largely unchanged (Cannadine *Context* 102). Such ceremonies act to embody, reflect, uphold, and reinforce popular views about the royal family and their ongoing function and value. Ceremonies are therefore one example of how the royal family consolidates "its ideological dominance by exploiting pageantry as propaganda" (Cannadine *Context* 104). The reasons for public engagement with royal tours and to participate in royal tourism are diverse. They often do so to "satisfy their desires for aesthetic pleasure, edification, elitism, and/or entertainment". They may also "make explicit connection to their citizenship, ethnicity, genealogy, or gender" (Otnes and Maclaran 195).

Royal Icons

The British empire successfully imported itself throughout its realm in the building of monuments and statues which glorified British monarchs. Such physical intrusions ensured a "powerful and widespread sense of the royal presence throughout the empire" which was not just "cartographical, sculptural, architectural or cadastral": it was also an intrusion on "individual and collective" lives and imaginations (Cannadine *Orientalism* 103). Queen Victoria especially became a "ubiquitous symbol of Britain and its empire, made real to people across the world through

images, statues, and visits" (Reed 2), and she "covered her colonies with the mantle of her name" (Connors 6).

> There are perhaps more statues of Victoria on earth than of any other non-religious figure in history. She sits or stands among whizzing automobiles in Auckland, in front of neo-Gothic façades in Mumbai, and near the waterfront that bears her name in Cape Town – in bustling metropolises and provincial towns, near churches, mosques, and temples. (Reed 1)

The royal soap opera of weddings, babies, divorces, transgressions, and celebrities provides entertainment, but it also provides insights into the lives of people who are rich, famous, separated from us, but part of our memories and experiences. The impact they have on our lives is not just in royal tours or royal scandals, they provide a barometer of national life and are a reminder of where we were at pivotal moments, like the death of Princess Diana or King Charles III's coronation. Hence the royals have become a part of our national consciousness and continue to be a part of our nation as a constitutional monarchy. The royals also do so much more, most of it grounded in invented traditions and imagined rituals; in fact, "with the possible exception of the papacy, no head of state is surrounded by more popular ritual" than the modern British royal family (Cannadine *Context* 102).

It was via the creation and performance of public ceremonies from Empire Day to royal tours, at which we lined the streets for glimpse of a famous royal, be they happy to be here or not, that the royals became part of our everyday life. When the royals are not here wandering about on our beaches or judging sheep at agricultural shows, we don't forget them. They are constant images on the cover of women's magazines; as we wait in the checkout we are constantly reminded of them. We consume images of them and their children in designer clothes, mixing with the rich and famous, living a life most will never know, and safe from worries about the cost of living or mortgage rates. They holiday in exotic places and are featured in films and television. They give a glimpse of their rarefied world. 'Royalty' has in many ways always been a construction. Royalty is political, gendered, raced, sexualised, and embodied. Royalty is imagined, in that is it something

> sculpted monumentally as if they were giants, to Elizabeth I, whose portraits in dresses heavy with pearls and rubies, both erase her body and celebrate its virginity (always figured as white), depicting her at once as the Fairy Queen (a supernatural being) and a tough, worldly, almost genderless ruler. (Roberts 35)

The iconography, for example, of Princess Diana is

> symptomatic of a deep nostalgia for a white class that had been based on royal birth and marriage … . Diana, Princess of Wales, is emblematic of the good-white female of class and nobility. Though her marriage to Prince Charles was a disaster, the media portrays her as the beneficent, long-suffering good-white mother, who seemingly gave up her party girl ways to make sure that her sons kept their whitened royal stature. (Foster 125)

The royal tour to Australia seems an apt place to exhibit the young female royal bodies of just coronated Queen Elizabeth II, an even younger Princess Diana, and the newly married Princess Catherine. But regardless of the popularity of Meghan in Australia in 2018, her 'princess' status

was slippery; she was a Duchess, she was also divorced, and her age (37 at the time of the 2018 Australian royal tour and older than Prince Harry) may have meant that she did not neatly fit into the category of 'young'. Princess Diana was 22 at the 1983 royal tour, Queen Elizabeth was 27, and Princess Catherine was 32. More so, much like Sarah, Duchess of York, Meghan did not fit the stereotype of the white, English princess because of her non-white, non-blonde appearance, never mind that she is American and divorced.

Popular culture is saturated with idealised images and adoration for the 'princess', whether she is real, constructed, or imagined. The 'princess' is a "commodity, created and sanctioned by those who buy her image, a fiction written to feed those who 'read' her … she is deeply satisfying to us archetypally [and] emotionally" (Roberts 36). She is unattainable, revered, and celebrated. The role and history of British female monarchs – princesses and queens – has been a staple of popular culture representations, and 'she' has been the theatre of how audiences engage with the British monarchy. It is in film, television, theatre, statues, songs, magazine covers, and all manner of imagery from Queen Elizabeth I to Catherine, Princess of Wales, that the public has experienced, and often romanticised princesses.

It is in these everyday iterations of British monarchs that we are reminded of how they have entered our public imaginations. Considering how many everyday and exceptional moments of royal engagement we encounter in our life, when it comes to questions like Australia becoming a republic the hegemonic work of the royals in becoming a part of our everyday lives and memories has been a success. It is in this project, evident most noticeably since the end of World War II when the British monarch was possibly on the slippery slope to obscurity, that a conscious, curated, and mediated project of royal tours, celebrations, births, deaths, marriages, divorces, and even scandals and transgressions, has kept the royals in our everyday lives (Hackett and Coghlan).

Some we love, some we hate; they fight, just as our families do, and they represent and embody things they want us to believe and things we want them to be. As Walter Bagehot argued in the middle of the nineteenth century, and as is often repeated, it is the "symbolic, psychological and theatrical role of the constitutional monarchy" that the British royals provide to Britain and the Commonwealth. It is in the symbolism, theatrics, iconography, and ceremony that they continue to make themselves part of our national consciousness. While they continue to do so, Australia may well remain a constitutional monarchy rather than become a republic.

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Jo Coghlan is an Associate Professor of Sociology and Politics at the University of New England (Australia). Her research interests are in popular culture and material culture with an emphasis on royalty, gender, families, political representations, film and television, fashion studies and death studies. Jo's recent publications have appeared in the *Australasian Journal of Popular Culture*, *Media/Culture*, *the International Journal of James Bond Studies*, *Film, Fashion and Consumption* and has upcoming articles in *Clothing Cultures*. Her next book is the *Royals in Popular Culture* (Routledge) due in 2024 with Dr Lisa Hackett and Huw Nolan. Jo, along with Dr Hackett have completed a monograph on the cultural history of the swimsuit, and Jo is also completing a book on pigs in popular culture. Jo, Lisa and Huw are the founding members and lead researchers at UNE's Popular Culture Research Network, Australia's leading research network in popular culture.

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