

UNH British Historian Available to Discuss Royal Birth, Succession Tradition, and Why Americans Love the Royals

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DURHAM, N.H. – Nicoletta Gullace, associate professor of history at the University of New Hampshire who studies 20th century and modern British history, is available to discuss the birth of Prince William and Kate Middleton's first child, the tradition of British succession, and why Americans love the British royals.

Gullace, who can be reached at nicoletta.gullace@unh.edu, offers the following insights:

Significance to Legal Change Regarding Royal Succession

"I'm not sure how fully Americans grasp the tremendous significance of the law that allows the eldest female child of the reigning monarch to inherit the throne over a younger brother or uncle. For Kate and Will, it means that their child will be the heir to the throne, regardless of the sex of the child. The age-old pressure on the king's consort to produce a male heir is gone. Had this law been in place 500 years ago, Henry the VIII might never have divorced Catherine of Aragon or beheaded Anne Boleyn. In fact, Henry only embraced the Protestant Reformation because he saw it as a way to secure a divorce from one of the most powerfully connected Catholic queens in Europe.

As we all know, the irony of Henry's obsession with having a boy was that his daughters Mary and Elizabeth both eventually became queens of England and Elizabeth I, was, perhaps, the most powerful and best-beloved English monarch of all times. Yet, Mary and Elizabeth could never have inherited the throne had their sickly younger brother, Edward, lived. While England did not bar women from sitting on the throne, they could only do so in the absence of a direct male heir."

The Royal Family and Modern Influences

"The British Crown is not as traditional and hidebound of an institution as Americans tend to think. We've already seen that Henry VIII threw tradition out the window – along with the Catholic faith – in order to secure a divorce from a queen who couldn't produce a male heir. For the next two centuries the British bucked tradition with a series of skirmishes for the crown that centered not around producing male heirs but on securing Protestant ones. For hundreds of years, the central obsession of the British Parliament was to keep Catholics off the throne – even if they were the legitimate heirs to the monarchy. Protestants believed that Catholic loyalty was suspect because they owed allegiance to the Pope rather than the King and they tried to move heaven and earth to keep Catholics off the throne. When Elizabeth I, 'the virgin queen' died without heirs, the crown fell to the Stuarts who had strong Catholic sympathies.

In the mid-1600s, England found itself in a bloody Civil War, waged over these religious issues, and Charles I was eventually beheaded by radical Protestants of the same ilk as our forefathers on the Mayflower. Despite the Stuart Restoration afterwards, the horror of the thought of having another Catholic monarch caused Parliament to summon William of Orange and his Protestant wife Mary to take the throne away from the legitimate king in 1688. After that, Parliament passed a law saying that the British succession could only go to a Protestant. From then on, religion trumped gender in determining the heir to the throne.

Even today, the legislation that allowed female heirs to inherit the throne did not amend the prohibition against Catholics. So, although recent legislation allows a reigning monarch to marry a Catholic, he or she cannot actually be a Catholic. Thus, if William and Kate have a daughter, she will inherit the throne from her father – unless she chooses to become a Catholic."

Broader Implication of Allowing Female Heir in the Royal Succession

"The implications are vast because they raise questions about the inheritance of aristocratic property. Not only were British thrones the entitlement of first born sons, but all aristocratic titles, and the lands that went with them were – and ARE – in British law the property of the first born male heir. Vast amounts of property, stately homes, and wealth are still in the hands of the British aristocracy, and the new law regarding the royal succession has gotten a lot of elder sisters wondering why they too shouldn't be the beneficiaries of their families' wealth.

It was historically assumed that sons would carry on the family name and that the eldest boy would get the title, land, and property, so as to preserve both blood lines and fortune, by preventing the division of the lands owned by noble families. This son would

traditionally sit in the House of Lords, control the family fortune, and reside in the family 'seat,' often a great palace-like house of the sort we've become familiar with from watching Downton Abbey. British literature is full of commentary on the injustice of such laws.

Jane Austen's novels often center on families of girls who will lose their property to an uncaring brother or distant male relative, leaving high-born girls in a state of penury. But imagine if the law of male primogeniture was changed today. Would vastly wealthy dukes and earls be expected to turn their great palaces over to their older sisters? And what if primogeniture itself were called into question? Why should birth order be all determining of a family members' access to wealth? Parliament is hesitant to deal with laws that could involve vast and acrimonious transfers of wealth among Britain's most powerful subjects. Already, the law that allows Kate and Will's baby to inherit the throne, even if it is a girl, will bump Prince Harry to fourth place in the line and put Princesses Beatrice and Eugenie – of crazy hat fame – in the line of succession."

Why Americans Are Interested in the British Royals

"As people who live in a fairly new country, we are fascinated by an institution that goes back thousands of years and seems to us to be timeless. While this isn't quite true, the fact that the British have chosen to hang onto the institution of the monarchy, even in modern times, is a testament to their deep connection to the past and their sense of tradition as a stabilizing force in modern society. In order for the monarchy to remain compelling, however, it has had to modernize too, and the health of the British monarchy depends, to some extent, on the star power of the monarchs and their ability to garner media attention and public affection.

While the queen professes to hate publicity and desire privacy, she was the first British monarch to bring television crews into the palace. She did so to enhance the prestige of the monarchy after the Second World War, by allowing Britons to see her young family and to relate to them on a more personal level. Still, what attracts us to the British monarchy is probably not the ways they are like us, but their larger than life quality. They are richer, more beautiful, and lead exciting jet-set lives, surrounded by vast wealth.

Our obsession with movies like 'The Princess Diaries' or our desire to devour any People magazine with Kate Middleton on the cover, show that we are still attracted to the Cinderella stories that pervade the British monarchy and aristocracy. Their celebrity status and their ability to put on a good show, whether it is a wedding at Westminster Abbey or the christening of a baby draw us to the spectacle of the monarchy.

Our interest has not waned since the death of Princess Diana, who did more than anyone else to make the British monarchy glamorous, relatable, and a source of endless fascination both in the United States and in Britain. Her death came as a shock to pundits who did not realize the depth of feeling for the People's Princess worldwide. Kate and Will have become the heirs to that glamour and affection, and we are all watching and wishing for them to live happier lives than our beloved Diana did."

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