

Stabilising a 'Great Historical System'? Researching the Role of Royal Heirs in the Nineteenth Century

Professor Frank Müller (School of History) explains the scope and significance of *Heirs to the Throne in the Constitutional Monarchies of Nineteenth-Century Europe (1815-1914)*, the five-year AHRC-funded project on which he is principal investigator.



Ever since Sherlock Holmes referred to the 'curious incident of the dog in the night-time' we have known that, sometimes, it can be very important to pay attention to what did *not* happen. Perhaps the most important – and generally unnoticed – *non-event* of the long nineteenth century was that there was no mass extinction of the continent's monarchies. The age started with the guillotining of King Louis XVI in 1793 and went on to generate unprecedented change: revolutions, industrialisation, mass literacy, urbanisation, migration, technological and scientific progress and the enfranchisement of tens of millions of (male) voters to name but a few. By the eve of the First World War, Europeans were using wireless telegraphy, aeroplanes and X-ray machines – but they still lived in an almost completely monarchical world. France, Switzerland, Portugal and San Marino were the only republican exceptions that proved an overwhelmingly monarchical rule. The kings and queens, the crowns and courts had survived and looked in remarkably rude health. But monarchy was not just a

surviving relic: all of the newly-formed European states – from Greece and Belgium to Italy, Bulgaria and Norway took the step into their independent future with a monarch at the helm.

Our AHRC-funded research project 'Heirs to the Throne in the Constitutional Monarchies of Nineteenth-Century Europe' digs into this remarkable story of monarchical survival and continuity. It seeks to understand why monarchical systems of rule succeeded in maintaining the support and endorsement (or, at least, the acquiescence) of the populations of a rapidly modernising age. It does so by exploring the roles played and functions fulfilled by royal heirs. The heir to the throne, the next-in-line in a chain connecting the past with the present and the future is a crucial element in any hereditary system. Managing a valid and smooth succession was not just a challenging and potentially crisis-prone necessity for nineteenth-century monarchies, it also offered great opportunities.



Nine European monarchs attending the funeral of Edward VII in 1910

The heir to the throne was a political resource that could be utilised to advertise and popularise the dynasty. The young man, who would – one day – occupy the throne, could attract the people's affection as a young child, impress them as a gallant soldier, resemble them as a husband and father and continuously reflect the attitudes and hopes of the generation that was growing up alongside him. During their decades of waiting for the throne royal heirs were acting as the very embodiments of the continuation of their dynastic-monarchical systems and also functioned as canvases onto which different stakeholders could project their own versions of their monarchies' futures. Some contemporaries were unequivocal about the importance of the heirs' contribution. There never was a time, William Gladstone observed in 1885, 'at which successors to the Monarchy could more efficaciously contribute to the stability of a great historical system, dependent even more upon love than upon strength, by devotion to their duties and by a bright example to the country.' Our investigation of how crown princes and crown princesses fared in this task against the background of the challenges of the late nineteenth century thus offers a new analytical perspective on the political-monarchical culture of Europe between the French Revolution and the First World War.

The St Andrews project began its work in 2012. It is led by Frank Müller, whose awareness of the role of royal heirs was raised when he was working on a life of German Emperor Frederick III (1831-1888): an eternal crown prince who spent 56 years of his life waiting for the throne only to outlive his father by no more than three short, agonising months. Within the project Frank pursues research on princely education and is currently writing a comparative study of the three heirs who would end up as the last kings of Bavaria, Saxony and Württemberg. Heidi Mehrkens, the postdoctoral researcher, is the central hub of the project's activities: in addition to her own research on the various spheres of encounter between royal heirs and the elements of the constitutional state Heidi is in charge of the website (<http://heirstothethrone-project.net/>) and is the main organiser of the project conferences. The first of these took place in St Andrews in August 2013 and investigated the place of monarchical succession in the political culture of nineteenth-century Europe. Our next conference (scheduled for August 2015) will focus on the uses royal heirs made of various forms of 'Soft Power'. The project team is completed by a number of doctoral researchers, some of whom are directly funded through the AHRC grant. Their research topics range from the popularisation of the princes of the Savoy dynasty in nineteenth-century Italy (Maria-Christina Marchi) to the relationship between the military elites and royal heirs in Spain (Richard Meyer Forsting), from the creation of the monarchical brand 'Sailor Princes' (Miriam Schneider) to Prince Albert's foreign policy networks (Charles Jones).

Alongside our individual research and the preparation of our conferences (the first of two edited volumes will be published this year), the project team also maintains a regular essay series 'Heir of the Month.' Published via our website these short pieces are written to highlight individual aspects of our research in a manner that is, we hope, entertaining and accessible to non-specialists. In October 2014 we celebrated



Heirs and graces: four generations of British monarchs (1898)

the completion of our first year by collating our twelve published 'Heirs of the Month' into a free and easily downloadable 'Royal Annual'. Our activities also reach into the more traditional forms of publishing, though. In anticipation of the studies which will be generated by the project, Palgrave/Macmillan have recently launched a new monograph series ('Studies in Modern Monarchy') with both Frank and Heidi serving as series editors.



The cover of the first annual edition of 'Heir of the Month' online essays.

St Andrews seems to be the perfect place for research into what was, in the nineteenth century, the future of monarchical Europe – not least because of the University's own recent role in preparing the House of Windsor for the twenty-first century. The University and the School of History are great hosts for research projects such as ours, and the 'Heirs Team' very much appreciates the support we receive from the institution. We are keen to repay this support by engaging as many people as are interested in our work. So if any of our graduates would like to get involved – contribute an 'Heir of the Month', attend our conferences, or just visit our website every now and then – we would be delighted. After all, monarchy is not the only 'great historical system' that needs a bit of stabilising every now and then. Venerable universities, also 'dependent even more upon love than upon strength', can do with a little help from old and new friends as well.