LRB

Vol. 34 No. 18 · 27 September 2012

‘You have a nice country, I would like to be your son’

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Bertie: A Life of Edward VII
by Jane Ridley.
Chatto, 608 pp., £30, August 2012, 978 0 7011 7614 3

Asked in an exam at the age of 16 whether kings should be elected, the future Edward VII answered: ‘It is better than hereditary right because you have more chance of having a good sovereign, if it goes by hereditary right if you have a bad or weak sovereign, you cannot prevent him reigning.’ By Bertie’s feeble standards, this was a flash of insight. For the 59 years that he was prince of Wales, his mother despaired of him. In 1863, she wailed in a letter to her daughter Alice that Bertie – now 21 – ‘shows more and more how totally, totally unfit he is for ever becoming King!’ Neither Victoria nor the constitution could prevent him from ascending to the throne on her death. It didn’t matter. Bertie – this generally amiable but foolish and corpulent cigar-smoking, tiger-shooting adulterer – was a perfectly respectable king. All he had to do was be himself and his people adored him. In the end, like his mother, he gave his name to an age.

Jane Ridley’s absorbing new biography shows that Victoria was horrified by her eldest son almost from the moment he was born. As a baby, he looked ‘too frightful’ and was ‘sadly backward’. The queen compared him unfavourably with his older sister Vicky, who was far cleverer, spoke French at the age of three and read Shakespeare and Gibbon for fun. But the unfailing point of comparison was her sainted Albert, against whom Bertie never had any chance of measuring up. She named him Albert Edward, but when he was 18 months wrote: ‘I do not think him worthy of being called Albert yet.’ She was anxious to prevent the boy from taking precedence over her husband and bestowed the title of prince consort on Albert to give him a rank above prince of Wales, while also making sure Bertie’s name came after Albert’s in the nation’s prayers.

The education Bertie received from his parents was monstrously harsh and unsurprisingly it neither reined him in nor sharpened him up. At two and a half, a phrenologist examined the bumps on his head and diagnosed 'defective' brain development. At four, another doctor found the child 'nervous and excitable with little power of sustained action in any direction'. His governess, Lady Lyttelton, lamented his 'passions and stampings' and inclination to hurl his books and sit under the table. Victoria and Albert's solution was a heavily timetabled regime, modelled on Albert's own German education. From the age of six, every half-hour of Bertie's day was accounted for, from eight in the morning to six at night. At seven, he was taken out of the nursery and given a still more brutal routine, seeing no one except his tutors all day, apart from 15 minutes spent with his parents in the morning and evening. If all this was intended to make him more of an Albert and less of a Bertie, it failed. His tutors found him excitable, with dreadfully weak powers of concentration. Once more, Prince Albert consulted a phrenologist. Again, the news was bad. Bertie's anterior lobe, supposedly responsible for intellect, was said to be small. 'I wonder whence that Anglo-Saxon brain of his has come,' Albert said. 'It must have descended from the Stuarts, for the family have been purely German since their day.'

To those outside the family, Bertie seemed all too German. He rolled his rs in the German fashion all his life. Violet Trefusis, the daughter of his last great mistress, Alice Keppel, remembered a kind man with a 'rich German accent' who 'smelled deliciously of cigars and eau de Portugal'. Ridley suggests that 'his fluency in German' may have been one of the factors slowing down his learning since it 'interfered with his speaking of English'. Yet his parents worried that the boy wasn't German enough. His marriage – an arranged union with the waif-like Princess Alexandra of Denmark – caused the queen renewed anguish, even though she had been the one to engineer it. First, there was the question of Alix's tiny skull. 'Are you aware,' Victoria wrote to Vicky, 'that Alix has the smallest head ever seen?' The fear was that with Alix's small head and Bertie's inadequate brain, 'future children' would be brainless. The greater fear was that they would be too Danish. 'A Danish partisan you must never be,' she lectured Bertie, 'or you put yourself against your whole family and against your Mother and Sovereign – who (God knows!) has been as impartial as anyone ever was!' At the height of the Schleswig-Holstein crisis of 1864 – the dispute was between Denmark, Austria and Prussia – Victoria reminded Bertie that 'your whole family are German and you are yourself half German.'

This was something clever Vicky, who had cleverly married Fritz of Prussia, never needed to be reminded of. Bertie, by contrast, seems to have had mixed feelings about being German even before his marriage. As a child, he showed signs of being drawn to the old enemy, France. One of his best childhood experiences was a ten-day state visit to France in August 1855 with his parents and Vicky. They were the guests of Napoleon III, who drove Bertie round Paris in a curricle. Wearing Highland dress, Bertie knelt at Napoleon's tomb as the band played 'God Save the Queen' and the French crowd went wild, just as they would go wild for him in 1903, when he visited Paris as king, the greatest triumph of his monarchy. The 14-year-old Bertie turned to Napoleon III and remarked: 'You have a nice country, I would like to be your son.'

You can see why the boy might have liked this lush French womaniser for a father instead of cold, German Albert. The prince consort 'spied on Bertie', Ridley writes, 'he whipped him, he treated him as a patient. He never tried to engage his sympathy or initiate him into the world of English manhood.' When Florence Nightingale met the boy she found him 'a little cowed, as if he had been overtaught'. Others found him either rude and rebellious or pathetically childish. The only tutor to develop any emotional bond with Bertie, a handsome former Eton master called Henry Birch, was sacked by Albert for not being Presbyterian enough and for himself being found to have an unsatisfactory skull when the phrenologist was called to examine it. Albert kept setting Bertie tasks at which he couldn't fail to disappoint. When he was 15, he was made to attend Faraday's Christmas Lectures on Attraction at the Royal Institution and produce reports on what he had learned. But the neatly written copperplate pages amounted to no more than '*an inaccurate stringing together of the notes!*' Albert lamented. When Bertie spent a year at Trinity College, Cambridge in 1861, Albert upped the ante, forbidding him from taking any notes at lectures, forcing him to reproduce what he had learned from memory when he returned to his large draughty residence at Madingley Hall.

The same year, Albert opened a dossier entitled 'Bertie's Marriage Prospects'. Princess Alexandra was the lead candidate from the start: she was pretty and had been 'very strictly kept' according to Vicky, who noted approvingly that she had not 'read a novel of any kind'. 'From that photograph I would marry her at once,' Albert creepily remarked when shown a picture of Alexandra at 16. But Victoria feared that Bertie's hopeless Bertieness would get in the way. Her son was 'sallow, dull, blasé'; how was he to make himself 'worthy' of this 'jewel'? Victoria, Albert and Vicky had discussed the matter in some detail before they thought to include Bertie, or even to inform him of the existence of this 'Danish pearl'. When Bertie got cold feet, Albert angrily told him he was duty-bound to propose. The hope was that marriage might finally correct the weakness the tutors had failed to deal with.

Given this upbringing, the question was not whether Bertie would rebel, but how. Soon after his exciting trip to Paris, he and his 11-year-old brother Affie were caught smoking in secret. But that outlet for rebellion was taken away on his 19th birthday when Albert officially granted him permission to smoke. The one means of escape that remained – it would always be Bertie's greatest weakness – was sex. Bertie took his first mistress while his parents were negotiating his marriage. Nellie Clifden was a serial army girlfriend, whom his friend Charles Carrington referred to as 'a well known "London Lady" much run after by the Household Brigade'. She seduced Bertie while he was attending a military camp at the Curragh in Ireland. We know exactly when he first made love to her – and the second and third occasions – because he recorded it in an engagement diary:

6 Sept Curragh N.C. 1st time
9 Sept Curragh N.C.– 2nd time
10 Sept Curragh N.C.– 3rd time

Despite the brilliant cunning of what Ridley calls 'these cryptic notes' – who would have guessed that 'N.C.' stood for Nellie Clifden? – Bertie was found out. Rumours started to circulate that he had smuggled Nellie into Windsor Castle for his 20th birthday on 9 November 1861. Three days later, the rumours reached his father's ears. Albert did not react well.

The prince consort was still only 42, but he was old in looks, temperament and health. He was 'paunchy' and bald, Ridley writes, and 'always cold' – 'when he rose early to work on dark winter mornings, he wore a wig to warm his bald pate.' The news that Bertie had 'fallen' provoked a long letter from Albert claiming that it had caused him 'the deepest pain I have yet felt in this life'. Were Bertie to lose the Danish pearl, he wrote, 'the consequences for this country & for the world at large would be too dreadful.' Why, oh why, he asked, 'did you not open yourself to your father' at the point of temptation? If only Bertie had confided in Albert when he was experiencing these 'sexual passions', his father would have reminded him of 'the special mode in which these desires are to be gratified' – 'the holy ties of Matrimony'. Which may explain why Bertie didn't consult his father about his plan to sleep with a well-known army hooker.

Bertie did his best to apologise. He insisted, truthfully, that Nellie wasn't at Windsor on the night of his birthday. He didn't mention that a different prostitute was there. He grovelled. On 25 November, Albert came to visit him in Cambridge, so that they could have it out again. They stayed up talking on a wet and stormy night until one in the morning. According to his wife, Albert forgave Bertie for his 'fall', which is more than she ever did. When Albert died of pneumonia a couple of weeks later, the queen over and over again blamed Bertie for making his father ill with worry. It is now thought that Albert may have suffered from Crohn's disease, a progressive inflammation of the gut. But for Victoria, Albert's lowness of mind and body had clearly been brought on by Bertie's behaviour. 'Oh! That boy … I never can or shall look at him without a shudder.'

The extraordinary thing is that before he could become king Bertie still had another forty years in which to play the errant, dissolute prince of Wales, forty more years in which to carry on disappointing his mother. Albert was wrong about Bertie's fall destroying his chance of marrying Alix of Denmark. Alix told one of his sisters that she would have married him just as happily had he been a 'cowboy' not a prince, which was lucky because in a way he was. The wedding took place in the spring of 1863. The day before it, Victoria took the couple to visit Albert in the mausoleum at Frogmore, so that the corpse could give his blessing – a 'very touching moment', according to Victoria. The tiny-waisted bride wore Honiton lace and orange blossom. For decades, she was the most celebrated fashion plate in the country. Children ensued: Eddy, Georgie, Maud, Victoria and Louise. Their heads were not alarmingly small. There was huge sadness when 'slow and dawdly' Eddy, the heir, died of influenza at the age of 28. His fiancée, May of Teck, married his younger brother Georgie, who would reign as George V after his father's death. And so Albert's line continued.

Bertie didn't mend his ways; but contrary to Albert's fears, the consequences for world politics weren't too dreadful. Walter Bagehot wrote in *The English Constitution* that 'all the world and all the glory of it, whatever is most attractive, whatever is most seductive, has always been offered to the prince of Wales of the day and always will be.' In his appetite for claiming the pleasures of

the world, Bertie was the archetypal prince of Wales. There were many mistresses besides Lillie Langtry and Alice Keppel, the really famous ones. To be Bertie's mistress, it seems you needed a large bosom and a soothing manner, and the patience to endure endless 'boresome' hours on the sofa while he goggled at you, as Daisy Warwick, one of his longest-standing mistresses, put it. He called her his little 'Daisywife' and fed her suppers of lobster and champagne. When they had an assignation, he carefully noted 'D' in his diary, just as he had with Nellie all those years before. Daisy complained that he monopolised her leisure. 'In 1893,' Ridley writes, '"D" is written on an astonishing 69 days, sometimes twice or even three times a day.'

Bertie had time on his hands. Despite being a largely absent monarch after Albert's death, Victoria was adamant that Bertie must not be trusted with too many royal responsibilities. So he filled his weeks and years with women, dancing, horse racing, playing cards, taking rest cures at Marienbad and shooting – he recorded 8463 pheasants over four days at one Leicestershire house party. And guzzling:

> Shooting breakfast typically consisted of poulet sauté aux champignons, rump steaks pommes, saucisson doré and oeufs brouillés aux truffes. Shooting lunch was: Don Pedro sherry, curry of rabbits, ronde de boeuf, partridges, roast beef, galantine foie gras, wild boar, apple pudding and rum baba.

At Sandringham near the Norfolk coast, Bertie would swallow 'several dozen oysters in minutes'. The house parties, as described by Ridley, both those he gave and those to which he was invited, were stupendous. By the end, though, despite the honour of having Bertie cross your threshold, the invitations started to dry up. 'The cost of entertaining him – estimated at anything from £5000 to £10,000 per house party – was becoming prohibitive.' (That's up to half a million in today's money.)

FOR A MAN of his world and upbringing, some of Bertie's views were surprising. Though he drank champagne in great volume, he hated drunkenness. At one shooting party at Sandringham, he admonished Sir Frederick Johnstone: 'Freddy, Freddy, you're very drunk.' Johnstone unwisely replied, imitating Bertie's German rs: 'Tum Tum, you're verrry fat!' Johnstone was forced to leave Sandringham before breakfast the next day. Another of Bertie's bugbears was the racism of the Raj. He thoroughly enjoyed shooting tigers in India, boasting to his nine-year-old son Georgie that he had shot six in one day and 'some were very savage – two were "man eaters".' But he diverged from his imperial hosts on their free use of the word 'nigger', complaining to Lord Glanville that 'because a man has a black face and a different religion from our own, there is no reason why he should be treated as a brute.' This was a rare question on which he and his mother saw eye to eye. She too found it 'dreadful how they treat these poor creatures'.

Bertie was unusual, too, in his denouncing of anti-semitism and fondness for Jewish friends, if they were rich enough. He complained to the journalist W.T. Stead about the persecution of the Jews in Russia. The archdukes of Austria 'gasped' when he accepted the hospitality of Baron Maurice Hirsch, a Jewish-Austrian financier. Daisy Warwick admitted that the rest of the prince's crowd 'resented the introduction of Jews into the social set … not because we disliked them … but because they had brains and understood finance. As a class, we did not like brains.' On this front, Bertie fitted in just fine. He never read a book if he could avoid it. Shortly before his coronation, he needed an operation to lance an abscess, brought on by gorging on hard lobster. While convalescing, Ridley writes, 'he read novels, a sure sign that he was ill. He

thought them all very poor, especially Conan Doyle's *Hound of the Baskervilles*.' After his mother's death, he told the Windsor librarian to pack up Albert's carefully assembled collection of books and 'get rid of those which were not required'.

After forty years of waiting, Bertie finally took the crown in 1901. It is the thesis of Ridley's wonderfully amusing book that he proved himself in the end to be like 'Shakespeare's Prince Hal, the dissolute prince who reformed after his accession to become the modern king'. This is going too far. Prince Hal was 16 when he fought Harry Hotspur at Shrewsbury in 1403 and only 26 when he became king. For Bertie, by contrast, the womanising and games were not youthful indiscretions but an entrenched way of life. He was nearly fifty when he was implicated in the Tranby Croft scandal, a legal skirmish over a game of baccarat. Nor did kingship curb his appetites. Alice Keppel's daughters Sonia and Violet remembered Mama taking long drives with the man they called 'Kingy' from the Hotel du Palais in Biarritz. Sometimes, he let the children play a game where they put two pieces of buttered bread on his trouser leg to see which fell faster.

The main claim for King Edward VII's reputation rests, as Ridley notes, 'upon his role in foreign policy'. His most notable achievement in that field was his trip to Paris in May 1903: it helped lay the ground for the Anglo-French Entente of 1904, which defused the danger of war with France (though it did nothing to stop the eventual war with Germany). He gave charming speeches in fluent French; the English press hailed his triumph. Ridley complains that the politicians subsequently wrote him out of history, saying of Balfour's insistence that the king had 'nothing to do' with the entente: 'What Balfour failed to acknowledge was that the king's visit to Paris was policy in itself.'

This is to set the bar pretty low for what was required of a British monarch by 1903. If being a smiling, waving celebrity was enough, Bertie was brilliant at being king; but it was not exactly the role Henry V assumed on the death of his father. 'There is something comic in the great British nation with its infinite variety of talents, having this undistinguished and limited-minded German bourgeois to be its social sovereign,' Beatrice Webb noted as she watched him dole out prizes to London schoolchildren four years before he became king. Henry James was equally unimpressed by the accession of this 'arch-vulgarian'. But Bertie turned out to be very good at the rigmarole and regalia of monarchy. Despite his louche private life, he was a stickler for protocol and correct dress when it came to public appearances. Even his grandchildren had to remember to kiss him on the hand before kissing him on the cheek. Though generally indolent and greedy, he could be hard-working when the work was ceremonial. On one day alone, he bestowed three thousand Boer War medals. He showered decorations 'like confetti', Ridley writes. 'He subscribes to his cripples, rewards his sailors, reviews his soldiers and opens bridges, bazaars, hospitals and railway tunnels with enviable sweetness,' Asquith's wife observed. Victoria and Albert despaired for their poor strange boy with his poor strange brain because they believed that the character and talents of the monarch were of critical importance for the nation.

Is it better for a king to be elected or hereditary? What Bertie could have said is that the answer depends on the weight kingship holds. If being king was a job Bertie was good at, it can't have been much of a job. Ridley argues that Edward VII was the first British monarch to come to terms with what it meant to be a constitutional monarch:

> He did not debate policy with his ministers; he showed no party preferences, nor did he veto ministerial appointments. But this did not mean that he was a weak king. He relinquished the powers of the Crown, but he greatly expanded its influence.

Bertie's influence, however, was not the influence of politics but of celebrity. He 'adored being king' and adored thinking of himself as having a people. He was enraged when taken to task for inquiring after the health of the republican Keir Hardie: 'I am King of ALL the People!' he bellowed. They, in turn, doted on him. It is estimated that 400,000 people came to pay their respects at Westminster Abbey after he died – far bigger crowds than turned out for Victoria.