

Monika Smyth

The Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow

Jane Ridley, *George V. Never a Dull Moment*, London 2021, Chatto&Windus, pp. 560

King George V's reign, from 1910 to 1936, though relatively brief, left a profound impact. It unfolded amidst crucial events, including constitutional crises, global upheavals from war and revolution, and intricate dealings with suffragettes. His decisions, such as refusing asylum to the Russian Royal Family and contributing to the formation of the first Labour government, underscore the complexity of his rule. Despite not being celebrated for intellectual prowess during his time as King of England and Emperor of India, George V's reign stands as a period of significant historical importance. According to Margot Asquith, the wife of his first prime minister, King George V was labeled a "dunderhead." Neither the King nor his consort, Queen Mary, were known for their captivating conversational skills. Sir Max Beerbohm¹, humorously summed up their uninspiring qualities in a cheeky poem: "The King is duller than the Queen [...] the Queen is duller than the King"². This exact quote has

1 Sir Henry Maximilian Beerbohm (24 August 1872—20 May 1956), English essayist, caricaturist and humorist.

2 M. Beerbohm, *Ballade Tragique à Double Refrain*, in: *The Oxford Book of Satirical Verse*, ed. by G. Grigson, Oxford University Press, Oxford—New York—Toronto—Melbourne 1980, pp. 371–372.

just been used by Jane Ridley³, an eminent history professor at Buckingham University and the author of numerous works on the Victorian and Edwardian periods, as the subtitle for her latest biography dedicated to King George V. Jane Ridley's biography of George V is notable for its avoidance of flattery or excessive praise, marking the fourth significant exploration into the king's life. Professor Ridley, renowned for her empathetic approach to the royal family, offers a positive depiction based on meticulous and comprehensive research. Her portrayal reflects authentic respect and, perhaps, a sentiment for the king that may surpass that of her predecessors.

In the initial exploration of George V's life, John Gore, personally acquainted with the monarch and Queen Mary, presented an authorized biography titled *King George V: A Personal Memoir*⁴ Gore's portrayal leaned towards hagiography, framing the monarch in a reverential light. His deliberate choice to focus on royal letters and diaries, rather than formal aspects of the reign, reflects a conscious decision driven by the limited political references found in these documents. George V, apart from sporadic expressions of affection or gratitude, rarely penned down his feelings or thoughts. His diary, primarily a log of engagements, offers a restrained glimpse into disputed incidents associated with him. The biography's appeal lies in its skillful depiction of the king's character, presenting George V with a notable resemblance to a sea captain, a trait likely influenced by his formative years at sea. Despite lacking conventional traits associated with greatness or popularity, he emerged as an exemplary constitutional ruler for twenty-six tumultuous years. His success stemmed from possessing simple virtues—honesty, kindness, sincerity, and an unassuming nature. His profound conscientiousness in fulfilling his duties made him “frank, simple, honest, and good—too good perhaps to be interesting”⁵. This biography brings forth a striking

3 The Honourable Jane Ridley (15 May 1953) is an accomplished English historian, biographer, author and broadcaster, as well as the eldest daughter of the former Conservative Cabinet minister Nicholas Ridley (1929–1993), a granddaughter of Matthew, 3rd Viscount Ridley and Alistair, 4th Baron Stratheden and Campbell. She is also a descendant of Earl of Lytton, Viceroy of India in the 1870^s. Jane Ridley currently serves as a Professor of Modern History at the University of Buckingham.

4 K. Rose, *King George V*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London 1983, pp. 548.

5 “The Journal of Modern History” 14 (1942) No. 2, pp. 244–245; J. Ridley, *George V. Never a Dull Moment*, London 2021, pp. 1–2.

revelation — those amplifying ordinary human qualities to their highest level is ample preparation for the demands of royal duty. Interestingly, despite privately describing the King as a “profoundly ignorant and rather stupid man” Gore’s portrayal in the biography sharply contrasts with this perception⁶.

Another biography of the king was released in 1952. In 1948, at the request of George VI’s private secretary, Alan Lascelles⁷, Harold Nicolson⁸ took on the task. The diplomat and writer had unrestricted access to royal papers with the stipulation that it would be an institutional biography, avoiding “descend into personalities”⁹ and that he should tell the truth but leave inconvenient truths in the shadows. Sir Harold performed the task excellently, officially presenting the monarch as a virtuous father of his people and placing him at the center of the nation’s political life... even though privately, he believed that George V was a dull and uninspiring figure with the “intellectual capacities of a railway porter”. Furthermore, he was painfully aware that he had created “a pure tailor’s dummy and have not tried to make him live at all, since if I did so he would appear as a stupid old bore”¹⁰, whose personal life revolved around his twin obsessions of pheasant shooting and philately as noted in his diary. For years, Nicolson complained, the king “did nothing at all but kill animals and stick in stamps”¹¹. Nicolson began his task by engaging in conversations with former and still-living members of George and Mary’s Royal Household, who openly expressed their opinions—some claiming that the king was stupid, ignorant, horrible, garrulous, simple or unimaginative,

- 6 “The Journal of Modern History” 14 (1942) No. 2, pp. 244–245; J. Ridley, *George V*, p. 2.
- 7 Sir Alan Frederick “Tommy” Lascelles, GCB, GCVO, CMG, MC (11 April 1887 — 10 August 1981), a British courtier and civil servant, Secretary to both George VI and Elizabeth II.
- 8 Sir Harold George Nicolson KCVO CMG (21 November 1886—1 May 1968), a British politician, diplomat, historian, biographer, diarist, novelist, the youngest son of diplomat Arthur Nicolson, 1st Baron Carnock.
- 9 H. Oliver, *The snake who saved the monarchy*, <https://unherd.com/2021/08/the-snake-who-saved-the-monarchy/> (19.11.2023).
- 10 *The Harold Nicolson Diaries: 1907–1964*, 26 July 1951, ed. by N. Nicolson, London 2005; J. Ridley, *George V*, p. 1.
- 11 *The Harold Nicolson Diaries: 1907–1964*, 26 July 1951; Nicolson to Vita Sackville-West, 17 August 1949; J. Ridley, *George V*, p. 2.

others the opposite — that he was loyal, modest, funny and acute¹². None of what Sir Nicolson heard during those conversations made it into the pages of his book, but it left a trace in his extensive correspondence with his wife and, of course, in his diaries.

It took quite a while before another historian decided to take a closer look at the personality of George V. Kenneth Rose¹³ undertook a rather risky attempt to dispel the “painful legend” of George V as f.ex. a cruel father. In his book, published in 1983¹⁴, he managed to breathe life into the king’s character and present him with his virtues and flaws (a gruff, impulsive Tory with a kind heart). Rose, like Nicolson, also began his work by interviewing contemporaries who personally knew the king. Therefore, his book is rich with information supported by references from private sources. It was him, who revealed that the British government had a plan to rescue the deposed Russian royal family, and it was halted by King George V and Queen Mary because they believed that bringing the Tsar and his wife to England would destabilize the British monarchy. Apart from that Rose managed to weave many anecdotes into the text and added vivid details to the narrative. Similarly, he delved into numerous manuscripts, diaries, and memoirs, although he did not go through the famous eighty-nine steps leading to the Royal Archives in the Round Tower at Windsor. Instead, he relied on transcripts from that archive prepared by Nicolson. He also managed to reach out to the Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother and Queen Elizabeth II herself. Perhaps under the influence of the Queen Mother, matters regarding the relationship between George V and his younger son were handled very delicately (not without reason, he was given the nickname *Climbing Rose*).

Jane Ridley’s book is the fourth major biography of George V presenting a narrative that revolves around inherent, quiet decency enduring in an immoral and raucous world. The book is an attempt to explore the spirit of the era and assign the king his rightful place, all conveyed in Ridley’s distinctive style, which is boldly supported by thorough research. The book unfolds in seven chapters, each composed of three to five subchapters arranged chronologically from the day of the king’s birth to his death, concluding with a brief summary of the later life of Queen

12 J. Ridley, *George V*, p. 2.

13 Kenneth Vivian Rose CBE FRSL (15 November 1924 — 28 January 2014), a British journalist and royal biographer.

14 K. Rose, *King George V*, pp. 548.

Mary. In the opening part, *Second Son 1865–1892* especially within the chapter 1. *My Darling Little Georgie 1865–1879*¹⁵ the author unravels the circumstances surrounding the birth of the future king. The narrative delves into the close bond he shared with his mother, Princess Alexandra of Denmark, highlighting the profound influence of two remarkable women in his early life — his strong-willed grandmother, Queen Victoria, and his family-oriented mother, Alexandra. The chapter further explores George’s education, the emotional connection between him and his first teacher, and his service in the Royal Navy, notably on the royal yacht *Britannia*. Additionally, the chapter delves into the potential intellectual disability of George’s older brother, Prince Eddy. In the second chapter, *A Disgraceful Education 1879–1886*¹⁶ Ridley provides insight into the military service of both brothers on HMS *Bacchante*. The narrative delves into examinations for midshipmen and recounts a two-and-a-half-year journey exploring the waters and territories of the empire. The narrative continues with the separation of the brothers, Eddy’s return to England, and George’s voyages aboard HMS *Canada* in the North Atlantic. In the third section, *Naval Lieutenant 1885–1891*¹⁷ author follows George as a naval lieutenant under Captain Harry Staphenson’s command in the Mediterranean Sea. Ridley details George’s extensive correspondence, including letters with his mother, Alexandra, and extended family. This period marks the emergence of George’s lifelong passion for stamp collecting. Ridley also recounts George’s visit to the Danish court, where he formed a personal friendship with his cousin, the future Tsar Nicholas II. Chapter 4 *Eddy 1891–1892*¹⁸ is entirely dedicated to Victor Albert, the elder son of the Prince of Wales and the expected heir to the throne, who in 1891 fell ill with pneumonia, and eventually died. Eddy’s passing resulted in George, his father’s favorite, becoming the heir to the throne. Shortly after the funeral, George proposed to Eddy’s fiancée, Mary of Teck. Professor Ridley then continues the biography, now focusing on the lives of George and Mary, drawing from the work of James Pope-Hennessy *Queen Mary*¹⁹.

15 J. Ridley, *George V*, pp. 9–20.

16 J. Ridley, *George V*, pp. 21–33.

17 J. Ridley, *George V*, pp. 34–42.

18 J. Ridley, *George V*, pp. 43–55.

19 J. Pope-Hennessy, *Queen Mary*, London 1959, George Allen and Unwin Ltd. But also J. Pope-Hennessy, *The Quest for Queen Mary*, ed. by H. Vickers, Hodder & Stoughton General Division, London 2018.

Part II delves into George's life as the Duke of York. In the 5 subsection, *May of Teck*²⁰ Professor Ridley offers a concise biography and genealogical background of the future queen Mary. Rich in quotes from family letters and Mary's diaries, this chapter depicts Mary's renewed engagement but this time with George. Chapter 6 explores the period of "George and May 1893–1894"²¹ confronted with abrupt personal and role-related transformations, George grappled with a profound sense of confinement. Mary, however, harbored ambitions and was not ready to easily relinquish them. Many believed that she prioritized the throne above all else. The initial emotions in their relationship were modest; Mary herself later confessed, "My husband was not in love with me when we married. He fell in love with me later"²². The chapter unfolds with the wedding, honeymoon, the establishment of their first shared home, and birth of their first child, the future Edward VIII, in 1894. In the pivotal years from 1894 to 1897, detailed in chapter 7, *The Wasted Years*²³ George is pictured as a family man at Sandringham. Notable additions to the Royal Household during this time were Albert (b. 1895, future George VI) and Mary (b. 1897, Princess Royal and future Countess of Harewood). Despite Nicolson's portrayal of George's focus solely on hunting and stamp collecting²⁴, it is crucial to acknowledge the future monarch's proactive pursuit of filling his educational gaps, particularly in matters of constitutional intricacies. Chapter 8, titled *I Find Life in General Very Dull 1898–1901*²⁵, delves into the domestic challenges faced by George and Mary. Mary sought respite, embarking on an extended trip to Germany, while George found solace in nature and hunting. Despite their personal struggles, Mary worked diligently to present a flawless image of their relationship to the public, recognizing the importance of perception for her position. Queen Victoria always regarded them as an exemplary couple. News of her illness reached George in Sandringham, prompting a hasty journey through London to Osborne, with Mary in tow. On January 21, 1901 the Queen died and George informally became the Prince of Wales. The lack of an official

20 J. Ridley, *George V*, pp. 59–70.

21 J. Ridley, *George V*, pp. 71–85.

22 J. Ridley, *George V*, p. 76.

23 J. Ridley, *George V*, pp. 86–98.

24 H. Nicolson, *King George V. His Life and Reign*, Constable&Co LTD, London 1952, pp. 570.

25 J. Ridley, *George V*, pp. 99–108.

investiture particularly offended Mary. However, this was not her only concern, as George contracted measles and, consequently, did not attend his grandmother's funeral. Nicolson humorously remarked "George has a habit of being ridiculous"²⁶.

In Part III, *Prince of Wales 1901–1910* George ascended to the second in line to the throne and was officially designated as the Prince of Wales. Chapter 9, *The Heir Apparent 1901–1902*²⁷ chronicles George and Mary's official voyage on the HMS *Ophir* to Australia and New Zealand – despite Queen Victoria's opposition Edward VII emphasized the importance of diplomacy. Following their return, George formally assumed the titles of Prince of Wales and Duke of Cornwall. The *Ophir* journey is credited with transforming George, leading him to a more dedicated approach to his duties. Simultaneously, Mary regained confidence, entered her fifth pregnancy, and became more assertive with her royal mother-in-law²⁸. In chapter 10, *Family Life 1902–1905*²⁹ Professor Ridley keenly observes the emerging contrasts between the opulence of the Edwardian era and the serene family life of the Waleses. Moving into Marlborough House became a pivotal moment, with the Duchess personally redecorating it as the sanctuary for their family life. Ridley extensively explores the upbringing of the royal couple's children, marked by tales of strictness, later recalled bitterly by Duke of Windsor in his memoirs. Additionally, the chapter recounts the royal couple's official journey to the imperial court in Vienna, where Mary, against her usual rules, found the experience captivating, dancing until 4 in the morning while he found the court stiff and living under the dictatorship of the old emperor. Chapter 11, *George's Progress 1905–1910*³⁰ opens with the description of a magnificent official journey to India in 1905, where George saw the confirmation of his belief in "some sort of mystical association between the Sovereign and the common people"³¹. James Dunlop Smith, the private secretary to the Viceroy, astutely observed a dual essence within the prince. On one side,

26 J. Ridley, *George V*, p. 108; *The Harold Nicolson Diaries: 1907–1964*, 24 August 1949.

27 J. Ridley, *George V*, pp. 111–123.

28 Mary looked to Alexandra as an example of the kind of queen she aimed not to become.

29 J. Ridley, *George V*, pp. 124–135.

30 J. Ridley, *George V*, pp. 136–151.

31 J. Ridley, *George V*, p.137; H. Nicolson, *King George the Fifth: His Life and Reign*, p. 86; K. Rose, *King George V*, p. 61.

he embodied the spirit of a jovial and communicative young sailor. Simultaneously, however, he revealed a shrewd demeanor, accompanied by a remarkable memory³²—reminiscent of the traits observed in Edward VII. Mary developed a love for India, finding solace in its unique atmosphere. In contrast to long European ceremonies, she sought to experience the magic of India. Back in England, princely duties, traditional ceremonies, intricate family matters, additional official visits, and domestic political complexities awaited the couple. However, nothing prepared the country or George for the devastating blow on May 6, 1910, when, after a series of heart attacks, King Edward passed away. The new king, bewildered by this awful news, recorded in his journal, “I am quite stunned by this awful blow. Bed at 1.10”³³.

The fourth part of the book, titled *Pre-War 1910–1914*³⁴ portrays the story of King George, commencing with Chapter 12, aptly named “King 1910”. It marks the beginning of a new era for George, with “The Times” reporting that, akin to his father, he would unveil his “unknown talents of a more solid and sterling character”³⁵. The narrative explores George’s perspective on his unexpected ascent, Mary’s viewpoint, its impact on their family, and the unfolding stages of assuming power. Chapter 13, *Constitutional Monarch 1911*³⁶ opens with the description of George’s coronation ceremony. Ridley then delves into the vulnerabilities of the royal couple. George, an avid stamp collector, bemoaned the decline in quality after the Royal Mint took over their production. Conversely, Queen Mary indulged in lavish spending on jewels, particularly favoring diamonds. On the home front, seventeen-year-old David became the new Prince of Wales, while the youngest son, five-year-old John, was identified as an epileptic and, as suggested by the author, likely autistic. In politics, tensions rose with the Parliament Bill and the Moroccan crisis. Despite this, the royal couple chose to travel to India for their Durbar. The visit proved tremendously successful, marking the British Empire at the zenith of its power. Chapter 14, titled *The King is Duller than the Queen 1912–1913* explores

32 J. Ridley, *George V*, p. 137; *Servant of India: A Study of Imperial Rule from 1905 to 1910as told through thr Correspondence and Diaries of Sir James Dunlop Smith*, ed. M. Gilbert, Longmans, London 1966, p. 32.

33 J. Ridley, *George V*, p. 151; RA GV/PRIV/GVD/6 May 1910.

34 J. Ridley, *George V*, p. 137.

35 “The Times”, 9 May 1910.

36 J. Ridley, *George V*, pp. 169–185.

challenges faced by the royal couple after their return from India, including their move to Buckingham Palace, the reorganization of the royal Household, and concerns with their sons—David, the eldest, exhibiting signs of depression, and the youngest experiencing more frequent seizures. The increasingly unsettled situation in Ireland, particularly Irish Home Rule, also occupied the king's mind. His understanding of the situation surpassed that of his government, proving more thorough and practical. In 1914, as described in Chapter 15, *Buckingham Palace 1914*³⁷ by Ridley, George's reign faced one of its most challenging years. Temporarily setting aside weightier issues, the author provides a glimpse into the king's daily life at Buckingham Palace, including the reconstruction of the palace's eastern facade with the addition of the famous balcony. The narrative smoothly transitions to the suffragette movement and the Epsom Derby incident³⁸ and the July crisis in Europe, when George remained passively indifferent. The queen cynically commented on the outbreak of war, expressing doubt about going to war on behalf of "tiresome Servia." Public opinion supported her, although politicians agreed that no German ship could cross the English Channel to attack France.

Part V, titled *War 1914–1918* delves into the Great War era. In Chapter 16 *George at War 1914–1915*, the author quotes the embittered words of the heir to the throne, who, unlike his brother, stayed with King and Queen in London (at least at the beginning of the war): "Here I am in this bloody [gt] palace doing absolutely nothing but attend[ing] meals". The king's diary from that period, filled with details of his activities like hospital visits, troop inspections, and medal ceremonies, is, as noted by Gore, "a curious blending of the trivial and the important"³⁹. In Chapter 17, titled *The King and the Generals 1915–1916*⁴⁰ the author recounts an incident that occurred to the king during his second troop inspection on the front lines⁴¹. At home navigating through yet another constitutional crisis

37 J. Ridley, *George V*, pp. 201–216.

38 Emily Davison, born on October 11, 1872, was a British suffragist who became a martyr for women's suffrage. In 1913, during the Epsom Derby, she entered the racetrack and moved in front of King George V's horse, suffering fatal injuries. Davison never regained consciousness and passed away four days later.

39 K. Gore, *King George V: a personal memoir*, J. Murray, London 1949, p. 299.

40 J. Ridley, *George V*, pp. 235–249.

41 Towards the conclusion of his visit on October 28th, the King conducted an inspection of the 1st Wing of the Royal Flying Corps. A spontaneous burst of cheers

proved challenging for the king, leading him to entrust Lloyd George with the task of forming a government. Lloyd George, the first working-class prime minister in English history, posed a significant challenge for the king, reflecting later, “I must say I did treat [the King] abominably at first”⁴². Chapter 18, *Unrest in the Country and within the House of Windsor*⁴³ explores yet another issue affecting the king’s later reputation—the refusal to grant asylum to the Russian imperial family. While Nicolson alluded to this discreetly, Gore and The Duke of Windsor provided a more detailed account⁴⁴. In 1917 George also recognized the need to abandon the unpopular German name of the dynasty. After careful deliberations, a completely new name was chosen: “I declared that my House should have a name of Windsor & that I relinquished all my German titles for myself and family”⁴⁵. Chapter 19, titled *The Nonentity King 1917–1919*⁴⁶ depicts the final period of the war. Impacted by the war years, the king withdrew into himself, grappling with bouts of depression. Lord Esher noted the monarch’s gradual retreat, reminiscent of his grandmother’s withdrawal after the death of Prince Albert. When tragic news of the execution of the imperial family followed, in his diary, the king expressed, “I was devoted to Nicky, who was the kindest of men”⁴⁷. But amid the general joy of the war’s conclusion, the king and queen suffered a symbolic final loss of Prince John, who passed away on January 18, 1919.

from the men startled the King’s horse, causing it to rear up before slipping on the muddy terrain. The horse fell, inadvertently trapping the King beneath its weight. Following a pelvis fracture in two places, the King experienced intense pain. Uncertain about the severity of the injuries, his doctors hesitated to transport him far. Sir John [French], alarmed by the proximity to the front line and potential German discovery, urged evacuation. When persuasion failed, he relayed a message to the heavily sedated King, who curtly replied, “Tell Sir John to go to hell”.

42 F. Stevenson, *Lloyd George: A Diary*, ed. A. J. P. Taylor, Hutchinson, London 1971, p. 153, 23.

43 J. Ridley, *George V*, pp. 250–264.

44 Edward VIII, *A king’s story: the memoirs of H.R.H. the Duke of Windsor K.G.*, Cassell & Company LTD, London 1951, pp. 129–130.

45 J. Ridley, *George V*, p. 262.

46 J. Ridley, *George V*, pp. 265–277.

47 J. Ridley, *George V*, pp. 269; R. Service, *The Lasts of the Tsars: Nicholas II and the Russian Revolution*, Macmillan, London 2017, pp. 35–53.

The sixth part of the book, titled *Post-War 1919–1927* presents the period between 1919 and 1927. Chapter 20 *The Divine Right of Kings 1919–1921*⁴⁸ analyzes the challenges of the post-war years, like matters related to Irish independence, where the king assumed the role of an arbitrator. Furthermore, she emphasizes the king's adoption of a new pastime during this period that helped him forge a connection with the working class – football. The title of the next Chapter 21, *Grasping the Nasty Nettle 1920–1923*⁴⁹ is a reference to Nicolson's biography of the king, where he used this term to describe George's relationships with his children⁵⁰. Navigating this sensitive subject, Gore and Nicolson offered only fleeting glimpses, yet certain court members acknowledged the king's occasional cruelty towards his sons. One of them said, "It remains a problem... why the King who was one of the most kind-hearted people in the world should have been such a brute to his children." The royal couple's deepest affection was reserved for their daughter Mary, who, in 1922, wed Henry Lascelles. The subsequent year saw Bertie entering matrimony with Lady Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon. However, it was the lavish lifestyle of the heir to the throne that gave the royal couple many restless nights. Between 1922 and 1924, a period of relative tranquility detailed by Professor Ridley in Chapter 22 titled *The Influence of the Crown 1922–1924*⁵¹ the king found solace in his beloved pursuits of bird shooting and tackling constitutional issues. During these years, he navigated the collapse of Lloyd George's government and the establishment of new administrations led by Stanley Baldwin and Ramsay MacDonald. It was during these transitions that the king exercised significant influence in determining the appointments to these governmental roles. Chapter 23, titled *The Dolls House 1923–1925*⁵² is a captivating reference to the 1924 British Empire Exhibition at Wembley. The narrative shifts to the queen's exploration of the world of shopping, where she fervently sought treasures reminiscent of those belonging to the Romanovs. Her penchant for collecting items, often dismissed by many courtiers as having little

48 J. Ridley, *George V*, pp. 281–294.

49 J. Ridley, *George V*, pp. 295–308.

50 J. Ridley, *George V*, p. 295; Beinecke, Harold Nicolson Papers, GEN MSS 614, Box 17, Nicolson to Lascelles, 29 December 1950. See: H. Nicolson, *King George the Fifth: his life and reign*, Constable, London 1952.

51 J. Ridley, *George V*, pp. 309–321.

52 J. Ridley, *George V*, pp. 322–337.

value, along with what some deemed a lack of refined taste, becomes a central theme. In contrast, the ruler, situated in the dynamics of the 20th century, steadfastly adhered to Victorian-era conventions. This created a notable contrast with his eldest offspring, who embraced a cultured taste reminiscent of his grandfather's preferences. The chapter comes to a poignant close, marking the somber moment of Queen Alexandra's departure. Chapter 24, titled *Safe Heaven 1925–1927*⁵³ delves into the transformation of the royal court during this period. It evolved into a more public and ceremonial space, radiating glamour while simultaneously embracing a noticeably domestic atmosphere. The king opted for the comforts of home, reducing his travels, and delegating responsibilities to his two elder sons. On April 21, 1926, the monarch welcomed a new granddaughter, Elizabeth Alexandra Mary, born to Bertie, instantly captivating her royal grandfather.

Part VII, the concluding segment, unfolds across the years 1928–1936. Chapter 25 introduces an ominous title, *Sir, the King of England is Dying 1928–1929*⁵⁴ and it opens with reflections on George and Mary's 35th wedding anniversary. In November 1928, a severe illness struck the king, creating widespread apprehension. A surgical procedure, involving draining fluid from the king's lungs and removing a rib, led to a gradual recovery. Eventually, he was seen once again enjoying his beloved cigar. Chapter 26, *Queen Mary Takes Control 1929–1931*⁵⁵ sheds light on the significant role assumed by the queen in the absence of the ailing king. She not only managed the affairs of the court but also took charge of her sons. Despite her composed exterior, there was a sense that she guarded much within herself, a trait that stirred surprise and concern among family members ("she keeps too much locked up inside herself"⁵⁶). The challenges presented by the sons further complicated the king's recovery journey. David and Henry embraced extravagant lifestyles, while George battled addiction, relying on cocaine and morphine. The turbulence within the family had a detrimental impact on the king's path to recovery. Chapter 27, titled *King George's Last Stand 1931–1932*⁵⁷ delves into the financial challenges faced by both the royal court and the king

53 J. Ridley, *George V*, pp. 338–352.

54 J. Ridley, *George V*, pp. 355–367.

55 J. Ridley, *George V*, pp. 368–379.

56 Edward VIII, *A king's story*, p. 224.

57 J. Ridley, *George V*, pp. 380–393.

during a global economic crisis. Against the backdrop of the empire's core, the author analyzes the Westminster Statute, which granted autonomy to dominions such as Australia, Canada, the Irish Free State, etc., while also establishing the Commonwealth. Amid increasing criticisms that George's monarchy was outdated and out of touch, the king took proactive steps to connect with the public. Launching a series of radio broadcasts, he began with a ceremonial address, stating, "My life's purpose has always been in service. I now speak to you from my residence, reaching out to people scattered by snows, deserts, or seas—so distant that only voices from the air can traverse the expanse to reach them"⁵⁸. The penultimate, 28 chapter in Professor Ridley's book delves into the years 1933–1935, marked by the intriguing title, *That Woman! 1933–1935*⁵⁹. As the king neared the end of his days, a growing fondness for Windsor Castle emerged, infusing the surroundings with symbolic meaning and deepening his ties to ancestral roots. Close to the castle, ensconced within Windsor Park, resided David, whose tumultuous personal life remained a constant worry for his royal parents. The title hints at the woman living alongside David, poised to instigate a profound transformation in the monarchy, ultimately catapulting the second of the royal brothers onto the throne. King George commanded that Wallis Simpson be overlooked, expressly omitting her from his Silver Jubilee, an occasion meticulously documented by the author with exceptional accuracy. The final chapter 29, which serves as the culmination of Professor Ridley's magnificent portrayal in titled *Lord Dawson's Syringe 1935–1936*⁶⁰ paints a vivid picture of the last year in the life of King George as he battled an increasingly incapacitating illness. In line with tradition, the royal family spent the winter at Sandringham. By January, the king's health had deteriorated to a point where little hope remained for his recovery. Indeed, on January 20, 1936, the king passed away. Francis Watson, the biographer of Lord Dawson, king's doctor unveiled the authentic details of the king's final moments in 1986 by obtaining access to the personal journals of the latter. The author unravels the mystery surrounding the king's death and then recounts his final journey to St. George's Chapel

58 King George V, *The King to His People: Being the Speeches and Messages of His Majesty George V as Prince and Sovereign*, Williams&Norgate, London 1935, p. 295.

59 J. Ridley, *George V*, pp. 394–407.

60 J. Ridley, *George V*, pp. 408–418.

in Windsor. She concludes⁶¹ her monumental narrative by delineating the destiny of the second central figure in her biography, Queen Mary.

Jane Ridley crafted this biography independently, free from the constraints of commissioned work, allowing her to escape the looming influence of royalty. The result is an authentic and skillfully written portrayal, rooted in thorough research and enriched with intriguing details, including some previously undiscovered aspects of George V's life. Beyond its merits as a captivating biography, this book offers a compelling argument in defense of a king widely regarded as one of the most uninteresting monarchs, if not the dullest human being, in history. Jane Ridley challenges this perception, asserting that he was not dull but rather an ordinary, upright individual navigating the challenges of an indecent, tumultuous world in an effort to simply survive. George, subjected to infantilization by his mother, haunted by his father's larger than life personality, and receiving minimal education during his naval training, he devoted his early years primarily to stamp collecting and hunting animals. Yet, according to Ridley, he evolved into the stature of a sovereign statesman. He transformed into a shrewd political strategist who steered his nation through a sequence of challenges: House of Lords reform, the Irish Home Rule dispute, the First World War, the emergence of the Labour Party, the General Strike, and the Great Depression. In truth, George functioned more as a symbolic figure with limited sway over state governance. While his position granted him some influence, occasionally put to good use—such as aiding in concluding the war in Ireland in 1921—his prime ministers typically delineated the extent of his authority. Baldwin, in fact, went so far as to caution him, when he tried to meddle in parliamentary affairs, by invoking the fate of Charles I. Ridley suggests that George played a pivotal role in positioning the British monarchy at the pinnacle of the empire by incorporating the lavish ceremonial style of Edward VII into the Delhi Durbar of 1911 in India. Despite the familiarity of such grand displays in India, where Europeans had already integrated British ceremonial practices into local traditions, as seen in Queen Victoria's coronation as Empress, George diverged from strict adherence to these customs. He opted for a modest horseback entry instead of the elaborate elephant ride, making himself almost inconspicuous. Furthermore, his interest in India primarily centered on sports, particularly tiger hunting, rather than diligently fulfilling his official duties. Ridley contends that,

61 J. Ridley, *George V*, pp. 419–427.

despite being a stern father who subjected his children to torment and fear, leading his eldest son, David (Edward VIII), to feel relief rather than sorrow at his father's death, the author also paints their marriage as a partnership founded on mutual respect. Professor Ridley notes the unconventional pairing of Mary and her husband, highlighting her passion for shopping versus his interest in shooting. Despite differences, their strong marriage was pivotal for his success as a King. Their modern approach included open discussions, making Mary well-informed about politics. Ridley underscores that the contemporary Queen's Monarchy echoes George V's model, portraying an ordinary family managing a firm and jointly handling monarchy duties. The Author endeavors to cast the queen in a more sympathetic light by highlighting her virtues while downplaying her shortcomings. This involves depicting her as moderately affectionate toward her children, particularly her daughter Mary, defining her self-worth through diamonds, and adopting an air of majestic frigidity. Nevertheless, Ridley acknowledges that the marriage conforms to a typical dynastic pattern with traditional role divisions. Ridley also notably omits any mention of the king's racial biases, extending beyond anti-Semitism. Yet George V's reign was far from dull, marked by a parliamentary crisis, the brink of two world wars, and a family constitutional dilemma involving his son Edward's controversial marriage to Wallis Simpson. In the tumultuous early 20th century, thrones across Europe fell, including that of George's cousin, Russian Czar Nicholas II, who was not only deposed but brutally murdered with his family. In such circumstances, being a less eventful king might have been a preferable choice. During George V's reign, the threat to his throne was not from overt opposition but rather subtle challenges. Britain, not yet a mass democracy at his coronation, expanded voting rights between 1918 and 1928. In the era of populism, the monarchy had to determine if it could adapt its role to avoid being viewed as an outdated and costly institution in the evolving political climate. Ridley convincingly argues that George V successfully transformed the monarchy into a symbol of respectable domesticity, distancing himself from his dissolute father, Edward VII. Embracing an ordinary persona and traditional values, George prioritized family, rural life, and conservative aesthetics, reflecting his commitment to maintaining a traditional and conservative image for the monarchy. Under George V, the British monarchy shifted from European alliances to embrace English and Scottish connections. Royal weddings became public events, and as political power waned, symbolism and public engagement increased. Amid World War I, George V rebranded the family

as the House of Windsor. The initiation of Christmas broadcasts in 1932 connected the monarchy with every household, enhancing intimacy. By 1935, the monarchy reached unprecedented national prestige. The Archbishop of Canterbury praised George V for elevating the Crown, securing a lasting legacy in British hearts and minds. In his last moments, he accurately predicted King Edward VIII's scandalous abdication within a year. He found solace in the thought that David's brother, "Bertie" the Duke of York, closer in temperament to their father, would take the throne. His hopes extended to his granddaughter, young Princess Elizabeth, as the potential future monarch.

George's consistent predictability played a crucial role in preserving his dynasty during a period when other monarchies faced decline. His steadfast and uneventful persona, which might have seemed dull to Britain, paradoxically garnered affection from his subjects. In the struggle for survival, the Windsors have consistently thrived by subtly wielding the power of their unremarkable and predictable nature.