

*Coronation: A History of Kingship and the British Monarchy* by Sir Roy Strong  
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Sir Roy, one time director of the Victoria and Albert Museum, and of the National Portrait Gallery in London, is one of the foremost British arts critics, writers and broadcasters. He has now brought us what can, with some justification, be called the definitive history of the coronation.

There have been many works on coronations – usually written in time for one – varying from the comprehensive 1937 history by the German scholar Percy Schramm, and the early twentieth century researches of father and son John and Leopold Wickham Legg, to more popular works. These latter have included books by Randolph Churchill (son of Sir Winston), Brian Barker and others who were personally involved (though in a relatively minor role) in a coronation. But although there has been a considerable amount of writing on some aspects of the coronation (usually highly technical) there has not, until now, been a major book which brings up to date the scholarship of the past century or so.

Strong takes us through the history of the coronation (the subject is the coronation in Westminster Abbey, so Scottish coronations receive slight and only peripheral attention). This coverage is always with an eye to the contemporary context, but at the same time emphasising continuity. Indeed the coronation service shows remarkable resilience, with the form of the coronation of King Edgar in 973 (one of the earliest for which comprehensive details are available, and also one of the most important) being clearly recognisable as the forerunner of The Queen's coronation in 1953.

That is not to say, however, that the symbolism, and the purpose (let alone its content), of the coronation have not changed substantially over time. In the early mediæval period the coronation owed much to the blending of pagan tribal kingship – with its acclamation, and formal bestowal of a helmet and other regalia – into a Christian tradition. The coronation of the early middle ages was primarily a religious ceremony, with the heir becoming king through their anointing. By 1200 coronations were essentially a rite of passage, from *Dominus Anglorum* to *Rex Anglorum* (mere de facto ruler, to de jure King). The Archbishop of Canterbury bestowed unction – using holy oil or chrism – transforming a candidate from merely *Dominus* (ruler) to being *Rex Dei Gratias* (King by the grace of God). Just as the early used oil in baptism and confirmation, so the Church used oil for anointing Christian kings.

The secular aspects of the coronation at the middle ages were relatively less significant (though important nonetheless), and since only a relatively few people could actually be present at a coronation only the political and religious elite could witness it. But there were a number of essential elements in a mediæval coronation, as there are still. These are the recognition or acclamation, the oath, anointing, the investiture with regalia, the crowning, and the homage. There were also elements which occurred outside the Abbey, such as the procession into London, and the coronation banquet. Over time the importance of each of these changed, to reflect differing expectations and requirements. The main role of the coronation became

secular rather than sacred, but both elements were always present. As the Crown lost much of its spiritual power in the eighteenth century so it increasingly gained psychological authority – which also required the occasional “manifestation of magnificence”.

For the coronation service itself the liturgies for each was recorded in a series of manuals, the best known of which is the *Liber Regalis*, used in 1308 (and probably earlier). This shows a considerable degree of commonality with the coronation of Edgar, and that of Elizabeth II.

The Fourth Recension of the coronation order (the *Liber Regalis*) was the basis of all modern coronations. In its essence the message the service conveyed was that only when he was enthroned aloft on a raised stage, kissed by the officiating clergy, and had received fealty by the supporting magnates could a would-be king be seen as having sovereignty over both Church and people.

The acclamation – when the congregation expressed their acceptance of the king-elect – grew in importance when the title of the king was slightly suspect (as for example King William III and Queen Mary II). In the case of William the Conqueror the acclamation almost caused a disaster, as the enthusiasm in the Abbey was misunderstood by the Norman soldiers on guard duty outside. A king who wished to emphasise his divine right to the Crown would subtly downplay the importance of this part of the ceremony. This could be done without deleting it.

In a similar way sixth century Byzantine theorists focused not on the coronation but on the “election” and the consent as crucial elements in the imperial inauguration. This was the divine choice through officials, senators and people.

One element which has long remained particularly important, and uniquely British, is the coronation oath. The coronation incorporated and perpetuated features which put limits and conditions on the king’s reign. The coronation oath stressed the idea that the king was a servant of God and the Church, and had assumed important Christian duties, and it also called loyalty to the king’s person and to the office. The claimant had been put in possession of the Crown, throne, and kingdom as securely and as publicly as the wit of man could devise. His power had been legitimised. *Potestas* was converted into *auctoritas*. He had also been given a new character, and was now different from other men. He was required to swear that he would ensure that the Church of God and the whole Christian people within his dominions would keep true peace.

Further, he swore that he would forbid impure and wrongful acts to men of every degree, and that he would order that justice and mercy should be observed in all legal judgements. The exact wording of the earlier oaths is generally lost, but there is no doubt of the contemporary importance with which they were treated. To this day the coronation oath is a formal legal requirement under the Act of Settlement 1700 and the Coronation Oath Act 1688.

King James I and St Charles the Martyr both regarded the oath as not strictly binding upon them, since their title to the Crown was by divine right. But kings were always expected to honour their coronation oath, and not a few reissued their oaths later in

their reigns. Oaths in a feudal society were inviolable, or even if there was no direct sanction – except divine – on a royal oath-breaker, still they were in some manner bound. Equally, the magnates and prelates bound themselves to the new king in the homage service. With the accession of William and Mary the Crown was in a quite different situation.

By 1603, under the influence of Calvinism, the coronation as a whole was seen as a royal ornament, a solemnization of the royal title. Symbolism remained important, but it was the symbolism of the court, not of the Church or the people. Elizabeth I took care to meet the people's expectations with her pre-coronation procession. Just as the acclamation within the Abbey was part of the king-making process, so too was the procession. James I and St Charles the Martyr both neglected the procession into London – the latter to the extent of cancelling it. He thereby incurred the resentment of City burghers, who lost the traditional opportunity to express their loyalty to him, and remembered this to his disadvantage fifteen years later.

The investiture with items of regalia, and the crowning, underwent detailed changes over time, but its function remained largely unchanged. Even the destruction of almost all the regalia by the Parliamentary forces in 1649 – only the anointing spoon, and the three swords of spiritual justice, temporal justice, and mercy survived – did not cause undue changes to be instigated. Indeed in 1662 a new spirit of antiquarian inquiry ensured that the best efforts were made to recreate the regalia in as authentic a manner as possible.

The coronation of 1689 did much to legitimise the new order, with King William and Queen Mary crowned in the traditional manner, but jointly (rather than as King and Queen Consort). The oath enjoyed particular importance, due to the so-called “Glorious Revolution” and the new parliamentary supremacy. We start to see the coronation serving a different function to the king-making of past centuries.

After 1685 the constitutional and social significance of the coronation went into decline. The hallowing by the Church remained important constitutionally and religiously, but there were increasingly large numbers of spectators in Westminster Abbey, whose interest perhaps lay more in the show of the investiture with the regalia and the later coronation banquet in Westminster Hall than in anointing and oath-taking.

The coronation ceremonial was treated in cavalier fashion in the 1700s and 1800s. King George I succeeded not by divine right or even popular choice but by the will of Parliament. Hanoverian coronations lacked the attention to detail that characterized many of those of earlier periods, though they did bring us Handel's incomparable music. The coronation of William IV was a mean affair; even that of Victoria was only marginally better. By the time of Victoria's coronation, however, there were signs of a desire for the revival of a ceremony of some splendour, to emphasise the setting aside by anointing with holy oil of the Sovereign as popular embodiment of both Crown and nation.

The pre-coronation procession into London was discarded after 1661, but was replaced in effect by the parade to the Abbey. The coronation parades of the twentieth century (even that of 1953) far exceeded the earlier efforts for sheer size. For

splendour the twentieth century parades may have been at a disadvantage compared with their mediæval and later counterparts, but now they were aimed at showing the nature of a popular monarchy, dependent not on the choice of God hallowed by Holy Church, or the choice of Parliament, but on the approbation of the people. In the course of the twentieth century the form of service was improved to recover from the slash and burn treatment under James II and William and Mary.

For coronations continuity has always been important. These were never occasions of mere spectacle – though George IV’s tended towards that (though the cost was very largely met by the French war indemnity) – nor merely an antiquarian extravaganza. They were not even primarily exercises in propaganda – though that was an element, especially in the parades (as in the twentieth century the parades’ emphasis was already on expressing imperial power – national not personal to the King). They remain primarily religious occasions at which the Sovereign is anointed and hallowed for their role – though now a rather different role to that in the middle ages.

It had become a national and international act of commitment. Although he goes into this briefly, it is beyond the scope of Strong’s plan for his book. Nor did he explore the justification for the retention in the face of twenty-first century iconoclasm. While it can be said – with some justification – that it goes without saying that Charles III will have a coronation, in this age of advancing destruction of our ancient heritage in the name of modernisation – or simply for the sake of destruction for its own sake – it is important to show why coronations are not merely indispensable, but that changes are made to them only with due caution.

Even in the latter days of Queen Elizabeth I’s reign Sir Peter Wentworth maintained that a coronation was a declaration rather than a creation of right. In *Calvin’s Case* (1608) the Court of King’s Bench decided that a coronation, as a consequence of hereditary succession, was not a legal necessity. But no king – or queen – would have felt secure without one.

There are several principal reasons for this. Firstly all kings since time immemorial had been crowned, and since Saxon times had been anointed with holy oil – a privilege not accorded by the Church to every ruler. Secondly the coronation served to publicly declare the king to have come into his own, and allowed the people to welcome him. In this regard the parades were important elements. The swearing of the coronation oath was important from Anglo-Saxon times, and never lost its constitutional and political importance. Indeed, since 1689 they have been enjoyed increased importance, with the coronation an indispensable rite of passage for a kingship recast since the late eighteenth century as a bulwark of the democratic system which it fostered. Since the claim to the Crown by divine right was weaker, popular support, based on adherence to the ancient constitution, grew in importance, as did the need to affirm the accession symbolically.

The idea that the Sovereign is above politics – which can be traced to *The Patriot King*, a 1714 essay by the statesman and philosopher Henry St John Viscount Bolingbroke – does not render the oath any less important. It becomes, like the anointing, part of the hallowing and dedication of the Sovereign as a national figure.

But the oath-taking was not all one way. For a king or queen to have any chance of keeping their oath they had to have the support of their people, hence the homage. Not only was the king expected to take the oath, but the king expected the magnates and prelates to reciprocate.

The coronation was also expected of a new king – and even as recently as William IV, the economy measures which were followed led to him being lampooned in the less sympathetic press as having had a “half-crownation” or “penny coronation”. Although in strict legal terms the Sovereign accedes the throne immediately on the death of their predecessor, the popular idea that the king hasn’t really become king until they are crowned remains fairly common – and who is to say that the title is not only made secure by a coronation, *Calvin’s Case* notwithstanding (after all, what would a common lawyer know of sociological, political or theological questions?). Lastly, it is rarely a wise move to make radical changes at the beginning of a reign.

Where does this leave the coronation in the early years of the twenty-first century? The Queen’s coronation in 1953 was in the latter days of empire. It was marked by a significant coronation parade in which figures such as Queen Salote of Tonga stood out. It was also in the early days of the development of the realms as clearly distinct. Theoretically future coronations could follow the 1953 model exactly – so far as the service itself is concerned at least – and in principle there is no reason why they should not do so. But care would have to be taken to ensure clarity of understanding of its exact role. In 1953 elements were further changed to incorporate Scotland – where the last coronation was in 1633 (Scottish peers and officers of state had been involved in the London ceremony from 1714) – and the realms.

In an ideal world it might be thought that the realms could have their own coronations (or at least inaugurations), but really this isn’t necessary. The Queen is crowned for the whole Commonwealth. At the coronation of King Edgar there were five sub-kings present. It was truly an imperial occasion, just as in 1953 The Queen wore, figuratively speaking, many crowns.

Some changes may doubtless be required – and some are desirable for liturgical or historical reasons (such as the restoration of the sermon, abandoned in 1902) – and others to reflect the diminished role of the House of Lords (this could be achieved by including the Speaker of the House of Lords). But no Sovereign can risk their title being questioned – least not one succeeding to the Crown in an age of media hostility and vindictive and evilly-disposed opportunists – not to mention jaundiced and sceptical academics.

The greatest challenge today is apathy and ignorance. By 1838 the coronation had become a popular spectacle – rather than a state religious rite, or a mere court entertainment – but so-called educated classes were suspecting it as a gigantic extravagance, without any more purpose than to amuse the masses (though that role was important enough – probably far more than contemporary commentators realised).

Sir Roy himself remarks on the ignorance shown by many people. Even in 1953 there was widespread ignorance of the nature and elements of a coronation, only partly helped by the avalanche of books at the time. Apathy or downright hostility, fuelled

by a desire to save money, could result in the idea that a coronation is an optional extra. Nothing could be further from the truth, though both William IV and Edward VIII would have dispensed with the coronation altogether, given the choice. While the ceremony in Westminster Abbey is the last true coronation in western Christendom – there are equivalents in other civilisations – this is because the United Kingdom is the last of the ancient major Kingdoms of the west.

The inauguration of minor European royalty in no way compares with the historic importance of a British coronation. The major cost of a coronation would be the procession, which would doubtless include far fewer military personnel than before – simply because the armed forces of the Crown are everywhere smaller than in 1953. But to abolish the parades would be as wrong in the twentieth century as it was in the seventeenth. It would be even more unwise, for the parades are the primary public aspect of the coronation – while it is true that we can all watch a coronation at home on television, taking part in an event of this nature far exceeds merely viewing it from afar. The trend from the seventeenth century has been towards perceiving the coronation as a public spectacle, an occasion for national and later international rejoicing. From 1838 – when Buckingham Palace was the first used as the point of departure for the coronation – the parade has been far longer than in ancient times, reflecting the increased emphasis upon public participation.

Rather than scaling back the parade it would be desirable to return to the ancient practice of allowing City livery companies, foreign merchants guilds, and their modern equivalents to contribute in their own way. Such pageants as the Queen Mother's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday parade, in which Her Majesty's charities paraded floats, would be an admirable modern interpretation of the ancient coronation procession.

With respect to the service itself the overall structure can scarcely be touched, such is its antiquity and importance. Careful liturgical revisions have corrected the errors which had crept in, and the only acceptable changes would be to make small changes to further improve it – not wholesale vandalism aimed at “modernising” it. For instance, the innovation in 1953 of a hymn to be sung by the congregation can be expanded. But although music has been increasingly important in the last one hundred years adding bongo drums would be going too far, and make a mockery of the service.

On the delicate question of whether to involve representatives of other religions, all that need be said is that they can be included in the parade, or a separate service, perhaps drawing inspiration from the now-defunct coronation banquet, and held in Westminster Hall. The coronation service itself is a Church service, of great antiquity, and on that score alone unsuited to the admixture of non-Christian elements.

Equally importantly, it remains an important religious service, the hallowing of the Sovereign. Doubtless twenty-first century atheists, separation of Church and State enthusiasts, and so-called “politically correct” people might baulk at that. But it is true nonetheless. The monarchy, like the legal system and the principal institutions of government, is underpinned by Christian concepts; but it has rarely been exclusive. The Queen is Sovereign alike of Christian and non-Christian, but the mantle of kingship has been hallowed by the Church since the Christianisation of Britain.

Strong has done a great service in bringing us this book. It is lavishly illustrated, and nicely produced, and will be a major addition to many bookshelves. It also will prove a valuable source for all those wishing to understand the context of the next coronation, which is doubtless to occur within the next couple of decades.

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