

Pomp, Pageantry and Privilege

The coronation on June 2nd of a young woman by the name of Elizabeth Alexandra Mary of Windsor, as Queen of Great Britain and the British Commonwealth of Nations, is an event which, it is safe to say, has received more publicity and been the subject of more propaganda than any other peace-time occurrence of the last fifty years. Since the death of her father, the Queen has been publicised to such an extent that there can hardly be a literate person in the whole world who is not aware of the forthcoming event.

For the first time millions of people will, as it were, be inside the Abbey witnessing the ceremonial, the religious service, and the rest of the mumbo jumbo with which a Monarch is crowned. They will be there by virtue of Television, and wireless which will relate every detail of the ritual. Every organ of propaganda has been geared to the event; schools, Churches, newspapers have given it every attention all with the design to make us feel that we are part of the coronation and that we shall all be the better for it.

There can be no doubt that the organisation will prove itself efficient. The collection of notabilities from every corner of the world; the display of heraldic symbols; the presence of dignitaries with such titles as Gold Stick, Bluemantle, and Rouge Dragon will provide a magnificent spectacle beside which the productions of Hollywood will pale into insignificance. We may be sure that the belted Earls, the Dukes and Marquesses, the Society ladies, the Dowagers, the Duchesses and so forth will appear dressed in their full regalia, their diamonds sparkling, and their coronets adding lustre to the occasion.

But when the cheering has died away; when the inevitable dustcarts which follow coronations as well as Lord Mayor's Shows appear to clear the debris; when the "captains and the kings" have departed, what will remain? When the sightseers stands have been demolished; when the red carpets have been taken up; when the diadems and the crowns and the rest of the regalia have been returned for safe keeping to the Tower of London, what then?

If the historians and the publicists, the journalists and broadcasters are to be believed, Coronation day is to usher in a new period of glory and prosperity for this country. They assure us that whenever a Queen had ruled this land it has flowed with milk and honey, and its influence spread all over the earth. They cite the days of Queen Elizabeth and Queen Victoria as evidence for their claims, yet even the most superficial examination of those two periods will show that they are either ignorant fools or deliberate liars who by promising us the fictional glories of the past, hope to blind us to the grim, sordid realities of the present.

The Elizabethan Era

What are these glories of the first Elizabethan age? It is true that then was laid the foundations of the British Empire and British mastery of the seas. It is true that British merchantmen sailed all over the world trading goods and bringing back to these shores unimaginable wealth. Colonies were established in America; pirates, cut-throats and swashbucklers flourished, prospered and were honoured by the Virgin Queen. Those

not brave enough to fight the Spaniards indulged in trading in the human flesh of the African coast. Many fortunes were made in those days and it is interesting to note that some of the congregation at Westminster Abbey are there because their ancestors in the days of Queen Elizabeth were successful freebooters. But while all these things are true and while the rich and ruthless became ever more wealthy, the majority of the people of England had no share in that prosperity. For them there was work and poverty and starvation. For them the privilege of fighting to preserve the wealth of their Feudal Lords. (Strange how history repeats itself!) All the viciousness of the Elizabethan era is now glossed over with a tawdry coating of journalistic paint. But a writer of the period shows in a few words the hollowness of the claim that England as a whole was prosperous in the days of Queen Elizabeth:-

"The poor lie in the street upon pallets of straw, and well if they have that too, or else in the mire and dirt as commonly it is seen, having neither house to put in their heads, covering to keep them from cold, nor yet to hide their shame withal, penny to buy them sustenance, nor anything else, but are suffered to die in the streets like dogs or beasts, without mercy or shame showed to them at all.

"Truly, brother, if I had not seen it, I would scarcely credit that like the Turkish cruelty had been used in all the world." (Philip Stubbs; The Anatomie of Abuses).

The truth is that in all ages and at all times in written history, prosperity has always been for the rich, never for the labourers, the "hewers of wood and drawers of water".

The Victorian Era

If we have demolished, as is the case, the claims made about the days of Good Queen Bess, what of the age of Victoria? The Industrial Revolution had already taken place. Railways had been introduced and England had become the workshop of the world. No other country could compete in the manufacture of goods, and the world's markets were the preserve of British industrialists. Huge fortunes were built up and their possessors bought themselves titles forming a new aristocracy to replace the fast-dying old. At such a time then, surely the poor and oppressed were better off? Work there was in plenty for they were forced to toil sixteen to eighteen hours a day. Surely, therefore, the workers were amply rewarded for their toil? Nothing could be further from the truth.

Men, women and children slaved in the factories, their pay a miserable pittance, their homes hovels, their food cheap and adulterated. Epidemics, when they came, killed them off like flies. The child labourers became stunted and old before their time. There was no lack of priest or Bishop to condone this cruelty in the name of God. They praised the manufacturers for keeping children at work so that evil thoughts would not invade their otherwise idle hours.

During the reign of Queen Victoria, India became the "most precious jewel in the Imperial crown"; the Suez Canal came under British control, and yet a poet of that time could still write of Child Labour:-

"How long', they say, 'how long, O cruel nation
Will you stand to move the world on a child's heart--

Stifle down with a mailed heel its palpitation,
And tread onward to your throne amid the mart?"
("The Cry of the Children", E. B. Browning)

And if a poet's word is not considered evidence we can refer to many factual reports given by Government Inspectors, reformers and others. In a book published just before Queen Victoria came to the throne, and dealing with conditions which prevailed well into the Victorian era, the author, J. Fielden ("The Curse of the Factory System") wrote:--

"Cruelties of the most heart rending were practised upon the unoffending and friendless creatures who were thus consigned to the charge of master manufacturers; they . . . were harassed to the brink of death by excess labour . . . they were in many cases starved to the bone while flogged to their work . . . "The beautiful and romantic valleys of Derbyshire . . . secluded from the public eye, became the dismal solitudes of torture and of many a murder. The profits of manufacturers were enormous; but this only whetted the appetite it should have satisfied." (Fielden did not know his capitalists!)

So much for the "prosperity" of the Victorian era, that age of ruthless exploitation when the wealth and power of the ruling class was literally built on the blood and life of the workers.

The Coronation and its Meaning

Not content with telling us that the Coronation will usher in this new period of glory and prosperity, we are told that it will be a dedication and a consecration. Bishops have prated on the holiness of the occasion, politicians, with their ability to seize every opportunity, have tried to fill us with patriotism, and the whole collection of lick-spittles, ink-slingers and columnists of Fleet Street have combined to convince us of the promising life which lies ahead.

What is this dedication and to whom in this day consecrated? Prayers for the safe keeping of her Majesty will be offered up to God; and all over the country, if the Archbishop's suggestion is followed, people will join the choir at Westminster in singing "All people that on earth do dwell". And in that sense perhaps it will be a day of dedication. But behind the facade of prayer and patriotism there are other interests involved which makes the Coronation a day of dedication to Mammon.

The late King's body was scarcely cold in its grave, when every junk manufacturer in the Kingdom rushed to produce enormous quantities of shoddy souvenirs. Not one avenue for making money has been neglected. Even the "Gentry" tumbled over themselves to cash in on this "day of consecration". They have advertised their homes to let at fabulous rentals, from which even American millionaires have recoiled. Hotels and boarding houses, restaurants and nightclubs have put up their charges, and anybody with window-space to let on the route of the procession has been courted, bribed and enriched.

Nothing has been overlooked in this money-making jamboree called the coronation. *The Star* fashion expert tells us:--

"If you're fired with a desire to be patriotic through and through, so you can be . . . right down to your corsets. Berlei are showing—as the star item of their new summer collection—a strapless one-piece controtlette in elastic net and nylon voile in a choice of red, white or royal blue".

This then is the "holy" character of Coronation day, a day on which the money-makers will give their workers a day off on full pay. While they count their money they will join in the singing of the incantations at Westminster Abbey. And indeed they will have something to sing about for it is estimated that over twenty million pounds will accrue as a result of this "day of consecration". Is it not strange how holiness is so often linked with the "things of this world"?

A People's Coronation

Efforts have been made by means of propaganda to imbue this Coronation with a democratic flavour. For the first time, at least that is what we have been told, the people are to take part in this event. But again this claim is hollow. The only part that the "people" will have is to stand in the streets and at their windows, or crouch before their TV sets cheering the procession of as great a collection of parasites as have ever been seen together before.

Not a dignitary involved but is a wealthy banker, landowner, Field Marshal or Major-General. There will be Black rods, and Gold sticks, and Knights Pursuivants in profusion. Most of them directors of large Banking or Insurance Companies. Many of them huge land-owners who are no more representative of the people than is the Queen herself, a by no means poverty-stricken personage. Surrounded as she is by these wealthy courtiers and nurtured in Palaces with a background of wealth and splendour she is cushioned off from the ordinary cares that beset the people who will stand and cheer her as she passes through the streets.

We have no personal quarrel with the Queen. As occupant of the Throne of Great Britain she has no power. The monarchy has become a mere facade of authority, a rubber stamp signature at the bottom of State documents. The Queen's whole life is regulated by strictly-defined rules and a standard of behaviour is expected which would make even the humblest of us protest.

Surrounded at the Abbey by Bankers, landowners, Labour leaders and a "few representatives" of the Trade Unions her Majesty will perform her part, we have no doubt, with grace, charm and dexterity, and the Archbishop will intone at the right time and in the right places. The choirboys will contribute their "Vivats", and the people whose coronation we are told this is, will stand outside and cheer. Thus it has always been; the people on the outside looking in, wearing clothes which cost less than one button of the gorgeous raiment that they have made and which they are allowed to see only at a distance. This is all the people will receive or can expect from this "People's" coronation.

The ceremony to be performed on June 2nd has no meaning for us. It is of no consequence who sits on the throne, which flag or Royal Standard flies over Buckingham Palace; or whether her titles are Elizabeth II or I. We are not concerned with all the flummery and mediaeval mumbo-jumbo with which the event is to be celebrated. Nothing will have changed. The private ownership of the means of life will

continue with all its consequences. The threat of war, the general insecurity will not be abated one jot or tittle by this glorified circus. Not one of the claims made for this event will be fulfilled as far as the workers are concerned. The promises and allurements of a brilliant future will be forgotten almost as soon as the procession has disappeared from sight.

In the Psalms, some of which will be read during the service there is a phrase which we commend:--

"Oh, put not your trust in Princes, nor in any child of man . . ."

adding only the counsel to trust to yourselves, to your experience, to your knowledge to build a better Society in which all mankind will live in freedom, peace and security.

"Who would be free themselves must strike the blow."

(June 1953)