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A royal visit revisited: Mackenzie King and the British royal visit to the USA, June 1939

Abstract

In June 1939 King George VI and Queen Elizabeth were on a tour of Canada that included a brief visit to the United States. The timing of this visit proved to be fortuitous from the British point of view as it came soon after the controversial Munich agreement in September 1938, which ceded the Czech Sudetenland to Germany, and the subsequent occupation of the remainder of the Czech state by German troops in March 1939—both of which had damaged Britain's image in America. The royal visit to the USA was a great public-relations success, as was the visit to Canada, and its significance for relations between Britain, Canada and the United States has been discussed by a number of historians from all three countries. However, very little attention has been paid to the key role of the Canadian prime minister, William Lyon Mackenzie King, regarding the American phase of the royal visit. Indeed, a recent Hollywood film about the royal visit and the weekend spent by the king and queen at President Franklin Roosevelt's family home in upstate New York omitted any mention of Mackenzie King, despite the fact that he was their official escort. This essay seeks to fill this gap by assessing Mackenzie King's involvement in the origins and conduct of the royal visit to the United States. It also reflects upon what the royal visit reveals about Canada's relations with Britain and the United States on the eve of the war and, in particular, Mackenzie King's relationship with President Franklin Roosevelt and his contribution to the Anglo-American 'special relationship'.

Keywords: Mackenzie King, Franklin Roosevelt, King George VI, Queen Elizabeth, royal visit, Second World War

Introduction

On Thursday 9 March 1939 William Lyon Mackenzie King, Prime Minister of Canada, began his diary by recounting a dream he had just had in which he was in Washington DC with President Franklin Roosevelt. They were out in the open and when it was night time he thought he would be sharing the same bed as Roosevelt but he ended up sleeping in a blanket on the snow. 'I felt a little restless', he wrote, 'and moved about a bit seeming to think that I was being, as it were, exploited and was resenting this'. When he woke up from the dream, he was cold which he felt explained that part of the dream. 'The part that seemed quite erroneous was that the President himself seemed to have pushed me over to the kind of border that I was lying on, though as I looked back to seeing him, I saw with his infirmity he required the space he was lying in for himself'.¹

This entry in Mackenzie King's diary was unusual even by his standards. Of course, as readers of his diary will know, the Canadian Prime Minister often made reference to his dreams, or 'visions' as he sometimes called them, and he had recently mentioned dreams about King George VI and Queen Elizabeth, as well as Neville Chamberlain and Mrs Chamberlain, all of whom he had met during his visit to Britain for the Coronation and

Imperial Conference in May 1937. The psychological aspects of the Canadian Prime Minister's dream could no doubt form the basis of an interesting essay in their own right. However, one does not need to be a psychologist to realise that the impending royal visit to Canada, and especially the planned diversion to New York and Washington during the visit—the brainchild of President Franklin Roosevelt—was weighing heavily upon his mind. In fact, ever since it had been officially announced in October 1938 that the royal visit would take place in the summer of 1939 Mackenzie King could think of little else and his diary entries very much reflect this anxiety.²

It is not surprising that Mackenzie King was concerned about the royal visit. Its announcement, soon after the controversial Munich agreement, meant that it was bound to be viewed in terms of the worsening international situation in Europe. In particular, Britain's relations with the Dominions—especially Canada—and the United States would be major factors in international diplomacy as the consequences of the Munich settlement unfolded. However, despite his central role in arranging the royal visit to the USA, and the fact that he accompanied George VI and Queen Elizabeth throughout their tour of North America, including their brief side trip to New York and Washington DC, his contribution to the success of the American section of the royal visit has been largely ignored. Indeed, a popular film based on the royal couple's weekend visit to President Franklin Roosevelt's family home in upstate New York, *Hyde Park on Hudson*, released in 2013, made no mention of the Canadian Prime Minister.³

Historians have given very little credit to Mackenzie King for what proved to be a highly significant and successful event. Amongst Canadian historians' attention has naturally been focused upon the royal visit to Canada rather than to the USA. The main book on the Canadian dimension of the royal tour—as it was also known—is largely concerned with the domestic aspects of the visit rather than its international significance (MacDonnell 1989). The same is true of two contemporary accounts by British journalists who covered the royal visit to both Canada and the United States (Gordon 1939; Young 1939). More recently, another British author and journalist, Peter Conradi, has written a book on the visit which mentions Mackenzie King but does not examine his role in it to any extent, focusing instead on the relationship between FDR and George VI (Conradi 2013). There has been some analysis of the diplomatic impact of the royal visit to Canada and the Canadian decision for war in September 1939 (e.g. Stacey 1981). British and American historians have tended to concentrate on the American part of the royal visit which has been mentioned in a number of the main works examining Anglo-American relations in the 1930s but not primarily from a Canadian perspective (e.g. McCulloch 2021: 211-228; McKercher 1999: 268-269; Rock 1988: 189-192; Reynolds 1981: 43).

The royal visit to the USA has also been the subject of several articles. Philip Cantelon has given a detailed account of the visit while Benjamin Rhodes has looked at the significance of the visit from the British perspective and David Reynolds from the American point of view (Cantelon 1967; Rhodes 1978; Reynolds 1981). More recently, Gaynor Johnson has examined British preparations for the royal visit and discussed the perspective of the British Foreign Office as to whether Mackenzie King should be designated as the King and Queen's

Minister in Attendance, but an evaluation of his contribution to the success of the visit does not fall within the scope of her article (Johnson 2021). Peter Bell has examined the fears of the British Foreign Office in the lead up to the visit, given the sensitivity of Anglo-American relations at the time (Bell 2002). But none of these works has paid much attention to the role of Mackenzie King before and during the royal visit to America and his contribution to its success.

The main aim of the current essay, therefore, is to show how Canada, largely in the person of Mackenzie King, played a significant part in the success of the royal visit to the USA. Another aim is to show how this brief visit to the USA—no less than the main royal visit to Canada—reveals a great deal about relations between Britain and Canada at this time. Third, the article will reflect on the relationship between Mackenzie King and Franklin Roosevelt, as portrayed during the royal visit, and the significance of this relationship for US-Canadian relations once war broke out in Europe and for the Anglo-American ‘special relationship’. A key source for Mackenzie King’s role before and during the royal visit is his own diary which, as scholars familiar with this period of Canadian history will know, provides an unparalleled insight into Canadian politics from before the First World War until after the Second. Obviously the diary represents Mackenzie King’s perspective but to the critical reader it certainly conveys his faults as well as his virtues. More broadly, the main arguments in favour of his having played a significant role during the visit and in Anglo-American relations in the late 1930s are supported by evidence from both British and US sources, including the views of both Franklin Roosevelt and George VI (McCulloch 2021).

International background to the royal visit

The election of Franklin Roosevelt in November 1932 had been greeted in London as a welcome change from the Hoover Administration and its economic nationalism, especially its policy on war debts and the high tariffs associated with the Smoot-Hawley Act of 1931. However, after a brief honeymoon period, American policy during the London Economic Conference and, above all, Roosevelt’s bombshell message to the conference rejecting currency stabilisation, soured relations once more. There then followed a period of recriminations that included the Johnson War Debt Act of April 1934 that forbade American loans to countries such as Britain that were in default on their war debts. The prevailing view in London was that Roosevelt, like previous US presidents – notably Woodrow Wilson – could not be relied upon to convert fine words into concrete actions. This was clearly a serious obstacle to Anglo-American cooperation at a time when Hitler’s Germany, having announced its withdrawal from the League of Nations and the Geneva Disarmament Conference in October 1933, was embarking upon a policy of rapid rearmament and military conscription (McCulloch 2021: 22-27; Self 2006: 161–195; Clavin 1996: 117–181).

Anglo-American relations only began to improve in June 1935 with the advent of a new British Government. Stanley Baldwin replaced Ramsay MacDonald as Prime Minister and Sir Samuel Hoare became Foreign Secretary in place of Sir John Simon, who was widely distrusted in Washington. Anthony Eden also became Minister for the League of Nations. The Italian invasion of Abyssinia (Ethiopia) in October 1935 also had the effect of causing a reappraisal of policy in both London and Washington as the threat of war in Europe

increased and the significance of the USA as a potential ally was underlined. Relations continued to improve, especially after the conclusion of the Tripartite Currency Agreement between Britain, France and the USA in September 1936 and the decline of war debts as an immediate issue (McCulloch 2021: 27-37). The visit of Walter Runciman, the President of the Board of Trade, to Washington in January 1937 also aided relations and Runciman was able to report to his Cabinet colleagues on Roosevelt's evident goodwill towards the British Government and his desire to support Britain and France in order to deter Germany, Italy and Japan from risking another world war (McCulloch 2021: 40-59).

However, Roosevelt's hands were largely tied by the Neutrality laws that were favoured by Congress and that included an 'arms embargo' that forbade the export of 'arms, ammunitions and the implements of war' to countries involved in conflict. The American President wanted Congress to give him discretion over the implementation of the arms embargo so that he could exert some influence upon events abroad. Roosevelt's growing frustration over his inability to deter the 'aggressor nations' of Germany, Italy and Japan led him to make the highly controversial 'Quarantine speech' in October 1937 in which he said that lawless nations should be isolated by the international community until they had mended their ways (Dallek 1979: 148-151). Neville Chamberlain, British Prime Minister from May 1937, was happy to accept American support provided it did not cut across his policy of appeasement. The Anschluss between Germany and Austria in March 1938 made an understanding with Germany about Eastern Europe all the more necessary in his view, as Czechoslovakia—which had alliances with France and Russia—was now directly threatened and the prospect of war in Europe had become even greater (McCulloch 2021: 129-147).

In July Walter Runciman (now Lord Runciman) was sent to Prague to try to mediate between Germany and the Czechs over the future of the German-speaking Sudetenland. Mackenzie King gave the Runciman Mission his enthusiastic support and Roosevelt also alluded to the Czech situation during his speech at Queen's University, Kingston, in August 1938 although he refused to endorse the Mission (McCulloch 2006; Vysny 2003). Runciman's 'mission impossible' failed to secure a settlement but it paved the way for the Munich agreement of September 1938, as a result of which the Sudetenland was ceded by Czechoslovakia to Hitler's Third Reich. The Munich settlement was unpopular in the USA, although Roosevelt himself had reluctantly accepted it. But it proved to be only a temporary setback in Anglo-American relations as it was followed by the long-awaited conclusion of a trade agreement between Britain and the USA in November 1938 that the Canadian Government, and especially Mackenzie King, had done much to facilitate (McCulloch 2021: 1-23).

In January 1939 Roosevelt's seventh annual address to Congress was more concerned about the international situation than any of the previous six. He warned his fellow countrymen about what he called 'the illusion of neutrality' and argued that American resources must be employed for self-defence. He then made the much-quoted statement: 'There are many methods short of war, but stronger and more effective than mere words, of bringing home to aggressor governments the aggregate sentiments of our own people'. The *New York Times* said that Roosevelt's address marked a turning point in the administration's foreign

policy. A week later Roosevelt followed up his thinly-veiled threat to Germany, Italy and Japan with a far-reaching statement on defence requirements in which he said that the USA must avoid being unprepared for war, as had been the case in 1914. Needless to say, these sentiments were welcomed by the British Embassy in Washington and the Foreign Office but they attracted the opposition of isolationists inside and outside of Congress. (McCulloch 2021: 191-200).

Roosevelt's invitation to George VI

Such was the situation at the beginning of 1939 and the immediate background to the royal visit and to Mackenzie King's dream in March 1939. There was some suspicion at the time that the visit had been arranged as a result of the Munich agreement and the need to improve Britain's image in North America. However, royal visits take much longer than this to organise and its origins actually go back to the Coronation of George VI in May 1937 which was attended by Mackenzie King. The Canadian Prime Minister got on well with the new King and Queen and it was agreed in principle that the new monarch would visit Canada at an early date. When progress proved to be slow Mackenzie King asked the Governor General, Lord Tweedsmuir, to raise the issue when he was in London during the summer of 1938 and it was subsequently agreed that the royal visit would take place in the early summer of 1939. ⁴

Originally the royal visit was intended to include just Canada but in August 1938 Mackenzie King mentioned the visit to Franklin Roosevelt on the occasion of the President's trip to Kingston, Ontario, to accept an honorary degree from Queen's University. Roosevelt and Mackenzie King had formed a very good relationship since the latter's return as Prime Minister in November 1935 and had played an important part in the eventual conclusion of the Anglo-American trade agreement. When Roosevelt heard about the royal visit he decided to write to George VI inviting him to spend a few days in the USA during the course of the trip to Canada. ⁵ This American detour was eventually agreed and four days were given over to the USA. The royal visit was to begin on 17 May and finish on 15 June and the side trip to the USA was to include time in Washington, a trip to the World Fair in New York City and some time at Roosevelt's family home at Hyde Park, New York State (McCulloch 2021: 215-217).

No sooner had the royal visit to both Canada and the USA been announced than various issues were raised about the arrangements for the tour that involved matters of principle that were of great importance to Mackenzie King. These were chiefly issues of protocol but they became something of an obsession with the Canadian Prime Minister at the beginning of 1939. Indeed, they caused him to complain about the attitude of Palace officials and of the British Embassy in Washington in several long harangues at Lord Tweedsmuir. He became deeply upset by what he regarded as the lack of gratitude of the British Government in contrast to the cooperative spirit of Roosevelt and his Administration. This mirrored his belief that the British had been much less cooperative than the Americans during the negotiations for the Anglo-American and Canadian-American Trade Agreements.

An early issue that arose was whether the American part of the visit should take place at the beginning or end of the tour of Canada. This topic was discussed by Roosevelt, Mackenzie King and Sir Ronald Lindsay in the White House on 17 November 1938 after the ceremony for the signing of the trade agreements. Lindsay, whose term of office was extended so that he could host the Royal Tour, preferred an early visit on the grounds that Washington would be uncomfortably hot for the royal couple in the summer and Roosevelt took a similar view. However, Mackenzie King made it quite clear that, as the royal visit had been primarily arranged so that the King and Queen could see Canada, the oldest Dominion, the Canadian part of their visit must come first. It was therefore agreed that the American phase of the visit should take place towards the end of the visit to Canada—8–11 June—and that Their Majesties would then return to Canada for a few days before sailing for home.⁷

Most of the other issues concerned arrangements for the Canadian part of the royal visit, rather than the American. Of these, the most contentious was who would welcome the King and Queen to Canada when they arrived—the Canadian Prime Minister or the Governor-General. Palace officials—Hardinge, the King's Secretary and Alan Lascelles, his assistant—thought that this duty should be performed by Lord Tweedsmuir, as Governor-General. But Mackenzie King was outraged by this proposal which he believed betrayed a 'colonial' attitude on the part of the Court that took no account of the Statute of Westminster of 1931 giving the Dominions equal status with Britain within the Commonwealth. The Canadian Prime Minister eventually got his way, with the support of Tweedsmuir, but not before he had accused Hardinge of behaving as if he was living 'in the reign of the Stuarts'.⁸

Minister in Attendance?

As far as the American part of the visit was concerned, the issue that aroused most controversy concerned who should act as 'Minister in Attendance' to the King and Queen during the four days that they would be in the USA. At first it was assumed in London that Lord Halifax, the Foreign Secretary, would take on this role and Mackenzie King was quite happy with this idea as he felt it would relieve him of some of the burden of responsibility for the royal visit. But at a meeting of his Cabinet in January 1939 concerns were expressed that if Halifax accompanied the King and Queen it would make the royal visit appear very political and would arouse the suspicions of the isolationists in Congress and of the Hearst press. Mackenzie King himself was also worried that if Halifax came it might make Canada appear to be a subordinate rather than an equal member of the Commonwealth, whose Prime Minister was perfectly capable of escorting Their Majesties through a neighbouring and friendly country.⁹

Mackenzie King discussed the issue with the Governor General who agreed with his reservations and said he would pass this view on to London. At another meeting, a week later, Tweedsmuir told Mackenzie King that he had written a strong letter of support for his position to London pointing out that isolationist senators had taken exception to a visit by Anthony Eden to the US in December 1938, and that he had been referred to as a 'missionary' on behalf of the British Government, even though he was no longer in office. Such criticisms were even more likely to be made if Halifax went to the USA, reasoned Tweedsmuir, and there was a real danger that the whole purpose of the royal visit might be

misinterpreted. Mackenzie King agreed but doubted whether they would see this point in the 'Old Country'. In fact, a similar view had prevailed in London and Tweedsmuir was soon able to inform the Canadian Prime Minister that Halifax would not be joining the Royal Tour. He also said that London was in communication with Roosevelt as to whom he would like to come. Mackenzie King was confident Roosevelt would say that it should be him as he had already received a letter from the President requesting him to come to the USA for the royal visit.¹⁰

Shortly afterwards Mackenzie King had a meeting with Sir Alan Lascelles, the King's assistant secretary, who was in Ottawa to discuss the royal visit. Lascelles said that the Palace view was that if Halifax were to go to the USA with the King and Queen then Mackenzie King should also go. But as it had now been decided that Halifax should not go the situation had changed. They had looked up the precedents of previous royal visits, such as a recent one to Italy, and found that quite often the King had gone without any Minister in Attendance. So he proposed that there should be no Minister during the royal visit to the USA. He also suggested that the State Department would prefer this but said that it would be left to Roosevelt to decide. Mackenzie King pointed out that Roosevelt had already invited him to Washington during the royal visit but he did not press his case although he was privately furious with Lascelles and 'the Tory Court'. 'I can see the whole thing', he wrote in his diary, 'which is that England does not wish to have Canada appear to be on a level with herself in relation to the King. It is asserting too much of an equality of function as well as of status'.¹¹

Mackenzie King made his views known to Tweedsmuir two days later, on 2 March, and the ensuing conversation—or rather monologue—was recorded in great detail in his diary. He made it clear that he was incensed at the attempt to block him from accompanying the King and Queen to Washington which he saw as very ungrateful in view of his role in finalising the Anglo-American trade agreement. He also regarded the suggestion that the State Department did not want him to go as 'a deliberate untruth'. He continued, according to his diary, that 'England might want the services of the Prime Minister of Canada vis a vis the U.S. and desire him to visit the President should she find herself engaged in war in Europe. She had better consider just what her present action meant—what any action, which would prevent me accompanying the King at this time, was likely to mean in that contingency. That she had better be told at once that, as far as helping out in these matters, there would have to be pretty careful consideration of what one's real position was'.¹²

Mackenzie King suspected that Sir Ronald Lindsay was responsible for the view that his services were not required on American soil. He did not get on well personally with the British Ambassador and he believed that Lindsay had been too ready to put pressure on Canada and the other Dominions to make concessions on behalf of the Anglo-American trade agreement. In fact, this was rather hard on Lindsay. It was the Foreign Office, including the American Department, that had most reservations about Mackenzie King accompanying the King and Queen to the USA. The common view was that he was chiefly motivated by domestic politics and gaining some advantage for Canada. Sir Alexander Cadogan, the Under Secretary, complained of the Canadian Prime Minister's 'tiresome' attitude. He also noted that, in conversation with Lindsay, Roosevelt had "resolutely

refused” to confirm that he wanted Mackenzie King to accompany the King and Queen, even though he had invited him to the USA at the same time.¹³

In any case, Mackenzie King realised that there was opposition to his acting as Minister of Attendance and was clearly irate at the British attitude. He told Tweedsmuir that he would cable Chamberlain to seek out the position of the British Government but the Governor General managed to persuade him to wait until Roosevelt had given his views. Mackenzie King did not think that the issue should be left to the American President to decide but, in order to leave nothing to chance, he took the unusual step of telephoning Roosevelt to discuss the issue of the Minister in Attendance with him. This took place on 4 March, soon after the President had addressed Congress. Roosevelt told Mackenzie King that as far as he was concerned the matter was settled and that not only should he accompany the King and Queen to the USA but that he also wanted him to stay at Hyde Park with them and his family. This obviously gratified the Canadian Prime Minister and helped to reassure him.¹⁴

It was a few days after his phone call to Roosevelt that Mackenzie King had his dream about being invited to share the President’s bed and then being pushed out. Of course, it may be that he was subconsciously worried about the sleeping arrangements at Hyde Park—Roosevelt himself said it was a small house. He may also have been worried about how he would fit in during the American visit. Furthermore, he was still not entirely convinced that London would agree to him being the Minister in Attendance in the USA and, in fact, he wrote to Neville Chamberlain soon after to follow up his phone conversation with the President. At the end of March 1939 he received Chamberlain's reply which confirmed that he would, indeed, be the Minister in Attendance in the US. However, no sooner had Mackenzie King got his way over the royal visit than it seemed it might have to be cancelled altogether because of the worsening international situation. During the course of March 1939 Hitler virtually annexed what was left of Czechoslovakia after the Munich settlement and soon after the British Government issued guarantees to Poland and other states in Eastern Europe threatened by Germany. This change of policy was regarded as ‘a curious sudden shift’ by Mackenzie King. But it was generally welcomed by American public opinion and by Roosevelt himself, as noted by Sir Arthur Willert, a former correspondent for *The Times* and an old friend of Roosevelt who met him in March 1939.¹⁵

In the end the royal visit continued, although the destroyer ‘Repulse’— which might be needed closer to home—was replaced by the ‘Empress of Australia’ as the ship to take the King and Queen to North America. The Royal Couple left Southampton on 5 May and eventually arrived in Canada on 17 May, two days behind schedule. They began their tour in Quebec, where they were welcomed by Mackenzie King who then accompanied them on a gruelling tour to the West and back by train taking three weeks. The Royal Party were everywhere met by vast and appreciative crowds, including in Quebec, and this part of the visit was universally regarded as an outstanding success – helping to improve the image of the British Empire at a time when its role in India and Palestine, for example, was being widely criticised (McCulloch 2021: 213-215). Eventually, on Wednesday evening 7 June the Royal Train crossed the border at Niagara Falls and the King and Queen, accompanied by

Mackenzie King, met Sir Ronald Lindsay and Cordell Hull, the Secretary of State, who boarded the train for the trip to Washington. ¹⁶

Royal visit to Washington DC

Next day, 8 June, as the train made its way to the American capital, Hull gave Mackenzie King an account of his conversation with the King which, as was to be expected, revolved around his trade agreements programme. When the party arrived at Union Station in Washington the King and Queen were met by the President and Mrs Roosevelt. 'This is the day we have been living for', remarked Mackenzie King. ¹⁷ There followed two hectic days in Washington, including a dinner at the White House and one at the British Embassy, visits to Mount Vernon, Arlington National Cemetery and a trip to the Capitol Building where the King shook hands with every member of Congress present—over 400 in all. On Saturday 10 June the Royal Party spent the day in New York including the Statue of Liberty, Central Park, Columbia University and the World Fair. Then it was on to Hyde Park for dinner with the Roosevelts followed by church on Sunday and a relatively relaxing day before leaving again for Canada and Newfoundland. The King and Queen finally departed from Halifax for Britain on 15 June (MacDonnell 1989: 191–235; Young 1939: 219–259).

Although the trip to the USA was generally quite relaxed various issues of precedence and protocol arose that Mackenzie King felt revealed an underlying British attitude towards Canada. For example, at lunch in the White House on the first day of the visit to America, Mrs Roosevelt spoke to Mackenzie King about the possibility of the Queen broadcasting to the women of America from Hyde Park. She said she had been informed by the British Embassy that the Queen wished to do this and that Lord Halifax had approved it. Mackenzie King was aghast at this suggestion as the Queen had made no such broadcast in Canada. 'I told her I thought there must be some mistake, as I gathered that the Queen was going to say a few words on leaving Canada to the women of both countries, and I understood that Her Majesty did not wish to broadcast until then'. Mrs Roosevelt was certain that the British Embassy had approved of a broadcast but did not press the issue in the face of the Canadian Prime Minister's obvious discomfiture. ¹⁸

This issue, although a small matter in itself, was symptomatic of the barely concealed tension between Mackenzie King and the British Embassy as regards the arrangements for the various events during the royal visit to Washington and New York. Clearly this situation was the result, at least in part, of the strained discussions over Mackenzie King's role as Minister in Attendance that preceded the royal visit and that had caused him some disturbed nights and uncomfortable dreams. Mackenzie King experienced a number of difficult moments with Lindsay and his wife during the royal visit, all of which he assiduously noted in his diary. For example, on 9 June there was a trip to Congress and Mackenzie King recorded that 'Sir Ronald was punctilious about giving me, once we arrived at the Capitol, the position of precedence, as we walked up the steps, though I noticed he managed to keep his wife in front of me and, later, in the different public appearances, to keep a position of precedence himself, where matters were likely to be observed by the representatives'. He also contrasted this state of affairs with the American attitude. 'The

U.S. Government has not failed conspicuously to keep my position in all arrangements immediately after that of the King and Queen. ¹⁹

To make matters worse, after the dinner at the British Embassy for the President and Mrs Roosevelt on the same day, Mackenzie King found himself excluded from the Royal Party and left talking 'with chauffeurs and others', as he put it. He was in no doubt that this was a deliberate act on the part of Lindsay and his officials. 'It was quite clear that they were for keeping me out of the picture with the King and Queen, and having me rather take the role of a member of the Embassy staff than of a Minister in Attendance on the King', he wrote. 'I could not help but think that if Lord Halifax had been Minister in Attendance instead of myself, there would have been quite a different arrangement all around'. ²⁰

Hyde Park weekend

In terms of the details of the American visit, the most significant part of the trip was the time spent at Hyde Park over the weekend of 10 and 11 June. Lindsay and Hull had remained in Washington so Roosevelt, George VI and Mackenzie King were able to talk about the international situation quite freely and this is what they did on Saturday evening, after a hectic tour of New York and a late dinner at Hyde Park with the Queen, Mrs Roosevelt and the Roosevelt family. In fact, the three men talked until 1.30 in the morning, with the President sitting in the middle, George VI to his right and Mackenzie King to his left. During their two-hour conversation they covered a wide range of topics, all of which were recorded in some detail by Mackenzie King. Needless to say, Roosevelt appears to have done most of the talking. He spoke about what he regarded as the German threat in South America and said that he had received a report that the British Government believed that there was a German submarine base off the coast of Brazil. He said that he intended to have a survey made of the area and that, in Mackenzie King's words 'he had a perfect right to keep European countries from sending warships off the coasts of America, whether it was north or south'. He also said that, if war came, he would like US ships to be able to use Halifax for coal and equipment so that they could 'assist in keeping the waters of the Atlantic free of German ships'. ²¹

Roosevelt also talked about the Neutrality laws, which he hoped would be repealed by Congress before the end of the session. In the meantime, pursuing the line he had taken in his annual message to Congress in January that there were 'methods short of war', the President said that he could allow the export of useful materials for aircraft production such as engines and wing parts, despite the embargo on 'arms, ammunition and the implements of war'. If Canada concentrated on developing assembly plants then he would do his best to provide the necessary materials. 'His whole conversation with the King was to the effect that every possible assistance short of actual participation in war could be given', recorded Mackenzie King. The Canadian Prime Minister himself talked about the negotiations that had led to the Anglo-American and Canadian-American trade agreements in November 1938 and how he was anxious that they should be concluded in time for Armistice Day. 'The President emphasised anew the importance he attached to having the agreement settled for that day', noted Mackenzie King. 'I explained to the King how I made the announcement in Ottawa at the same time the President made it in Washington. ²²

The three men then discussed the threat posed by Germany. The Canadian Prime Minister recorded that the King 'gave his own experience and said that his own family relations in Germany had been used to try and spy to get particulars from other members of the family'. The King also said that his father, George V, had refused to shake hands with the German Ambassador. 'I could see that the King felt very strongly about the whole way Germany had acted', wrote Mackenzie King. 'There was a family feeling as well as a national feeling'. George VI also spoke about the First World War and was very critical of Winston Churchill who had 'dismissed Prince Louis of Battenberg from the command of the navy on the score that he was a German but had later admitted he had done it in order to have the control of it himself'. The King also referred to Churchill's role in the ill-fated Dardanelles campaign and how he had ignored advice not to make the attack too soon. 'The King indicated that he would never wish to appoint Churchill to any office unless it was absolutely necessary in time of war', noted Mackenzie King. 'I confess I was glad to hear him say that because I think Churchill is one of the most dangerous men I have ever known'.²³

Mackenzie King was very gratified by Roosevelt's attention towards him during his stay at Hyde Park. 'He told the King repeatedly that he and I understood each other perfectly and worked together on all matters of mutual relationship', he recorded, with evident satisfaction. 'He told the King that we talked together on the 'phone and was very strong about not paying too much attention to the diplomatic services. Said they were always saying things were impossible and making it difficult where a certain course was obvious'. This naturally led on to the issue of the Minister in Attendance which Roosevelt could not resist mentioning. 'He said to the King that he felt it would have been a mistake to have Halifax. The King, in a chivalrous way, said he himself had been the one who, at the outset, had thought of having Halifax come'. The President then said, according to Mackenzie King, that 'Mackenzie and I know each other so well that I was most anxious he should come'. Roosevelt also said, in Mackenzie King's words, that it had been 'difficult to get matters settled at the Embassy'. This was obviously a rather delicate subject because of the implied criticism of the British Ambassador, Sir Ronald Lindsay. 'I naturally said nothing, and some remark was made to the effect that all had worked out quite obviously for the best'.²⁴

The next day, Sunday 11th, Roosevelt drove George VI and Mackenzie King to church. As Mackenzie King got into the car, so he later recalled, Roosevelt turned to the King and said: 'We have a new name for Mackenzie. He is the official interpreter between the President and the King in relation to the affairs of the United States and Great Britain'. According to Mackenzie King this remark meant that Roosevelt 'was making it perfectly clear that he intended not to discuss matters with the embassy but rather in a more immediate and direct way where it served his purpose'. Ironically, in the light of this statement, Sir Ronald Lindsay and Lady Lindsay were amongst the guests for an informal lunch that day—the main feature of which was the hotdogs served up by the hosts—and Mackenzie King found himself at the same table as the British Ambassador. After lunch Roosevelt invited Mackenzie King to go for a swim. Thinking it was a general invitation, and feeling rather tired after his exertions of the previous few days and weeks, Mackenzie King turned it down only to discover later that the President and George VI had gone swimming on their own, followed by a private talk in Roosevelt's library for about an hour. However, the President

later gave him a report of his discussion with the King which was largely an elaboration of what had been said the night before. Roosevelt had shown the King the reports he had received from London regarding Chamberlain's concerns about German policy. He had also shown the King 'messages regarding German submarine bases along the coast of South America near Trinidad' (Wheeler-Bennett 1948).²⁵

Overall, the Canadian Prime Minister was very pleased by the outcome of the American stage of the royal visit and the anxieties revealed in his dream three months earlier were finally laid to rest. He was particularly pleased with the warmth of his personal relationships with Roosevelt and the King while at Hyde Park, no doubt aided by the relaxed atmosphere of the Roosevelt family home. His pleasure may have been all the greater because his own relations with the President and King were evidently much closer than those of the British Ambassador. When Sir Ronald and Lady Lindsay joined the party for dinner on Sunday it was evidently difficult for the rather reserved Lindsay to cope with the antics of Roosevelt's sons. 'I said to Lady Lindsay, as her husband did not know whether he should be shocked or join in the hilarity, did not seem to know what was happening to his sovereign, that the King was enjoying this evening immensely, and the Queen was most animated in her talks with the President'.²⁶

At the end of Sunday evening Roosevelt drove George VI and Mackenzie King back to the station where the Royal Train was waiting. 'There was some conversation about the possibility of the President visiting the King', recorded the Canadian Prime Minister. 'The difficulty, as the President expressed it, was that of it being almost necessary for him to visit the President of the French Republic at the same time and his difficulty in getting about'. He continued: 'It was after eleven when the farewells were said. Everyone, I think, felt that the visit had been the greatest possible success.... When I got to my car I was more than deeply thankful to Providence that all had gone so very well'.²⁷

Next day, when the King and Queen were back in Canada, George VI and Mackenzie King discussed the significance of the trip to the USA. In particular, the King asked Mackenzie King for his thoughts on their conversations with Roosevelt. 'I replied that it was clear to me that the President was anxious to do everything he possibly could to be of help, short of committing his country to war'. The King said, 'What a fine fellow he is!' and 'Obviously, he is the right man to continue on, if he cannot find anyone else with a similar purpose'. He then told Mackenzie King about his discussions with Roosevelt in his library the day before. He said that they had studied some maps of the Caribbean and discussed where 'the Germans were making their submarine base off Trinidad'. They had also discussed the likely military and naval situation in the event of war and the prime importance of air power and Canada's potential role in producing aeroplanes for the defence of Britain, with the help of parts supplied by the United States.²⁸

At this point George VI asked Mackenzie King what exactly was meant by the Monroe Doctrine. 'I explained to him it meant the U.S. held the view that there was no longer any territory available for conquest or occupation on the Continent and that any effort of a Foreign Power to acquire land on this side would meet the opposition of the U.S. in this, whether the effort to acquire possessions related to North or South America'. Mackenzie

King said that some Canadians believed that the Monroe Doctrine was itself a sufficient protection for Canada from foreign invasion but that 'if America had to protect us, she would soon wish to have us a part of herself'. He also felt that Roosevelt would be taking a considerable risk if he tried to get coal from Canada so that the American navy could keep the Atlantic coast clear of enemy ships, to which the King replied, 'I think that is just what he would like, to have the enemy regard such action as an act of war'.²⁹

George VI reminded Mackenzie King about what Roosevelt had said on Saturday evening, when the three men had discussed the international situation after dinner. The President had explained that he 'was trying to educate the American people to appreciate what it would mean to them if Germany were to win in a war, and the French and British forces to be wiped off the seas'. The US would lose its export market and its trade with those countries would be entirely on Hitler's terms. Pursuing this theme on Sunday, the King had asked Roosevelt 'what would move the Americans most' in the event of a war between Britain and Germany. The President had replied that 'if London were bombed, that would certainly stir the American nation'.³⁰

The King also mentioned his reference to Winston Churchill on Saturday evening and said that he had deliberately brought up Churchill's name to see what the President's reaction would be. He said he was anxious to see, as there was now talk of Churchill succeeding Chamberlain, how this might be viewed in America. 'He did not think the President viewed it too favourably', recorded Mackenzie King. 'He told me quite frankly what he would rather do than have him at the head of a Government. I agreed that it would be inviting disaster, simply challenging Germany'. George VI was also far from impressed with Anthony Eden and complained to Mackenzie King that when Eden came to talk with him, 'he would sit at the end of a chair'. Furthermore, when the King asked him a question, 'he would begin to answer from a bit of paper'. He continued: 'I don't like men to talk with me in that way. I like them to talk to me frankly about everything, in a natural way'. Mackenzie King pointed out that, in the presence of their sovereign, people felt that that had to be very careful and therefore hesitated to say much. 'I told him I thought Eden's fault was his Oxford manner; that he was able, etc. but did not have the kind of touch that foreigners understood'; he was 'democratic at heart but sort of superior in manner'.³¹

As regards the American trip as a whole, when George VI asked Mackenzie King for his overall verdict he replied that he thought that 'it had surpassed all expectations' and 'was an unqualified success in every way'. The enthusiastic welcome that the King had received was 'a demonstration from the people themselves; was personal to himself, and the Queen, as well as expressive of sympathy with the British ideals of freedom and peace'. The King replied: 'This trip has meant a great deal to me, and a great deal to the Queen'. He had enjoyed the informal aspects of the trip and breaking away from the protocol that his father, George V, had regarded as essential to the monarchy. He also felt that the visit to America—and Canada—had helped to restore the image of the British monarchy after the recent abdication crisis that had ended the brief but troubled reign of his brother, Edward VIII. Above all, he had managed to overcome his own lack of confidence on public occasions, partly caused by his tendency to stammer during formal speeches, and had found the visit

to be both enjoyable and stimulating. He was already planning his next such trip and had South America in mind. 'It is apparent that the American visit has made a tremendous impression on him', the Canadian Prime Minister concluded.³²

Historians generally agree that the royal visit was a genuine success in terms of the very favourable response received by the King and Queen in both Canada and the USA. It was also clearly a success as regards the personal relationships of the three main participants—Roosevelt, George VI and Mackenzie King. There can be little doubt that when the British monarch confided in Mackenzie King his preference for an informal style of state visit he had in mind his visit to Hyde Park and the relaxed atmosphere of the Roosevelt family home. More generally, the royal visit certainly helped to improve Britain's image in the USA after the Munich settlement and the subsequent German occupation of Prague. But it did not have a dramatic effect on Congress, despite George VI shaking hands with every member of the House and Senate who was present. The American Neutrality laws were not amended in July 1939, despite Roosevelt's best efforts, and the arms embargo was not finally repealed until November 1939, once war had broken out (McCulloch 2021: 229-231; Dallek 1979: 200–205).

Conclusions

Returning now to the first of the three questions posed at the beginning of this article, what was Mackenzie King's contribution to the royal visit to the USA—apart, of course, from the unique first-hand chronicle of the event to be found in his diary? Notwithstanding his preoccupation with matters of protocol, the Canadian Prime Minister's contribution to the royal visit to the USA was clearly very significant. Most obviously, the royal visit was originally suggested by him when he was in London in May 1937 and it was he who mentioned it to Roosevelt in August 1938, thus enabling the President to invite George VI to the USA. Without Mackenzie King's role as a go-between, the royal visit to the USA might not have taken place, at least not before the War. Much of the success of the royal visit to the USA lay in the fact that it was not overtly political. This would have been much more difficult if Lord Halifax, the British Foreign Secretary, had accompanied the King and Queen. So Mackenzie King deserves credit for his part in dissuading London from this course.

The Canadian part of the royal visit in the three weeks before the trip to Washington and New York was a public relations success and was closely followed in the USA. This helped to build up American awareness of the popularity of the King and Queen even before the Royal Couple arrived in the USA. The fact that Canada and the United States were on good terms at this time also contributed to the success of the royal visit as it meant that Mackenzie King was well received in the US as well as the King and Queen. Finally, Mackenzie King performed a very useful function as Minister in Attendance in the USA. He got on well with both George VI and Roosevelt and was able to advise the King on a number of points during the American trip, most notably when he was asked to explain the Monroe Doctrine! Even before the royal visit Mackenzie King had played an important role in representing the British Government's view of the need for its appeasement policy towards Germany and Italy and in facilitating the Anglo-American trade agreement of November 1938 (McCulloch 2021).

Secondly, what does Mackenzie King's role in the royal visit to the USA tell us about relations between Britain and its oldest Dominion at this time? Clearly the main issue was whether Mackenzie King should act as Minister in Attendance once it had been decided that Halifax should not escort the King and Queen. Although this was ostensibly a question of protocol, for Mackenzie King it touched the raw nerve of Canada's status within the British Empire and the sanctity of the Statute of Westminster (1931) that recognised the equality of the Dominions with Britain within the Empire (Stacey 1981:129–135). The Canadian Prime Minister could see no reason why he should not act as Minister of Attendance in the USA apart from the snobbery of the Court of St James and the jealousy of the British Ambassador in Washington, Sir Ronald Lindsay.

The larger issue involved, of course, was Canada's relationship with Britain and the United States within what has often been referred to as the 'North Atlantic Triangle' (McCulloch 2011: 197-207; McKercher and Aronson 1996; Brebner, 1945). During the royal visit Roosevelt remarked to George VI that Mackenzie King was the 'official interpreter' between Britain and the USA and this was certainly the role that the Canadian Prime Minister saw himself as fulfilling, almost as a lifelong mission (McCulloch 2021: 12-13). The royal visit to the USA was perhaps the symbolic apogee of this role so to have his position as Minister in Attendance called into question was more than he could bear and accounts for his emotional outbursts to Tweedsmuir, as Governor General, and his subsequent telephone call to Roosevelt. As far as Mackenzie King was concerned the Americans came out of the whole episode much better than the British—the King and Queen excepted—and his respect and admiration for the American President reached new heights.

However, although Mackenzie King acted as the confidant of both the Roosevelt and George VI during the royal visit to America, the President obviously had no intention of excluding Lindsay from his developing ideas about what the United States might be able to do in order to aid Britain in the event of war with Germany. Thus he met with the Ambassador at the end of June and again in early July in order to bring him up to date with his latest thinking. He also pointed out that American wartime patrols along the Atlantic coast would require the use of foreign bases, including the British colonies of St. Lucia, Trinidad and Bermuda as well as the Canadian port of Halifax.³³ The British Government acceded immediately to Roosevelt's request and formal permission from Canada to use Halifax followed at the end of August. The President also took steps with South American countries, especially Brazil, on behalf of what became known as hemispheric defence, most notably the agreement reached at the Pan American Conference in Panama in September 1939 to establish a 'neutrality zone' along the Atlantic coastline south of the US-Canadian border (McCulloch 2021: 259-260; Perras 1998: 51–55; Dallek 1979: 205–206).

Finally, what does the royal visit to the USA reveal about the relationship between Mackenzie King and Roosevelt—perhaps the central issue raised by Mackenzie King's dream on 9 March 1939? There is no doubt that their personal relations were very warm during the American trip and Roosevelt unashamedly flattered the Canadian Prime Minister, referring to him as 'Mackenzie', which he seems to have thought was his first name. They were, to a large extent, political allies as both were liberals, both interested in social reform—

Mackenzie King was an admirer of the New Deal—and both increasingly preoccupied with the international situation. However, it should be noted that Mackenzie King's views on appeasement were by no means the same as Roosevelt's. The Canadian Prime Minister was a strong supporter of Chamberlain's appeasement policy and was unhappy when this was changed in March 1939 following the annexation of Prague. He referred to the British guarantee to Poland as “a curious sudden shift” whereas Roosevelt and American public opinion were pleased that the British Government seemed to be standing up to Germany at last (McCulloch 2021: 200-203).

In fact, Mackenzie King was wary of getting too close to the USA just as he was determined to underline Canada's status as an independent and equal state within the British Commonwealth. But, especially after war had broken out and the Neutrality laws were amended to allow a ‘cash and carry’ policy for arms and munitions, the logic of Canada's strategic position suggested a closer coordination of defence policy with the United States and this led to the Ogdensburg agreement of August 1940 when Roosevelt and Mackenzie King agreed to the establishment of a Joint Defence Board composed of senior officials from both countries. This in turn was followed by the Hyde Park agreement of April 1941 when the two leaders met once again at Roosevelt's family home and the President agreed that the United States would purchase an unlimited amount of Canadian-produced defence materials for the duration of the War. Perras 2021: 24-56; Perras 1998: 65–114; Granatstein 1992: 213-235; Granatstein and Cuff 1974: 140-159)

By then France had fallen, Chamberlain had resigned and Churchill had been Prime Minister for almost a year. Winston Churchill's name was mentioned more than once at Hyde Park during the royal visit. Both George VI and Mackenzie King had regarded the prospect of his appointment to lead the British Government as a matter of last resort and had believed that Roosevelt held a similar opinion. In fact, when Churchill did join the Cabinet in September 1939, as First Lord of the Admiralty, Roosevelt immediately wrote to him and thus begun their famous wartime correspondence (Lowenheim, Langley and Jones 1975: 89). When he replaced Chamberlain relations between the leaders of Britain and the United States became much closer and more direct so Mackenzie King's role as ‘interpreter’ naturally diminished. For example, he was not invited to the famous meeting between Roosevelt and Churchill in August 1941 that produced what became known as the ‘Atlantic Charter’ even though it took place in Placentia Bay, off the coast of Newfoundland (Wilson 1991). Thus, as the Second World War progressed, the Canadian Prime Minister was—metaphorically speaking—slowly pushed out of bed by Roosevelt to make way for the politician he had long regarded as ‘one of the most dangerous men I have ever known’. But by then he had changed his opinion of Churchill—as had George VI and many others (Thompson 2020; MacLaren 2019; Reardon 2012).

Churchill's wartime leadership – although not without its critics – is generally regarded as having contributed substantially to the eventual defeat of Nazi Germany in 1945. A crucial aspect of Churchill's strategy during the Second World War was the maintenance of a close relationship with President Franklin Roosevelt and the United States and he is often credited with having established what he later termed a ‘special relationship’ between Britain and the United States. However, Churchill viewed this relationship in terms of the British Empire,

rather than just Britain, and he referred especially to Canada as having played a major role in facilitating the close – although by no means trouble-free – relationship with the United States during the war. In fact, the foundations of the ‘special relationship’ were laid during Roosevelt’s presidency before Churchill became Prime Minister and the royal visit to Canada, and especially the United States, in the summer of 1939, was an important part of this process. Mackenzie King’s contribution to the origins and success of the royal visit was therefore of considerable significance in terms of Anglo-American relations and recognition of his role by historians is long overdue.

¹ National Archives of Canada, Ottawa, Diary of William Lyon Mackenzie King, Volume 86, 9 March 1939.

² For other dreams at about the same time see Mackenzie King Diary, Vol. 86, 9 January, 13 January and 14 January 1939; for dreams about the royal visit after its announcement see Mackenzie King Diary, Vol. 86, e.g. 22 November, 6 December 1938, 11 January, 17 January, 18 January, 26 January, 21 February, 24 February, 28 February, 1 March, 2 March, 3 March, 4 March 1939.

³ *Hyde Park on the Hudson*, directed by Roger Michell (2012); Bill Murray as Franklin Roosevelt; Timothy West as King George VI; Olivia Colman as Queen Elizabeth.
https://www.focusfeatures.com/hyde_park_on_hudson

⁴ Mackenzie King Diary, Vol. 86, 7 October 1938.

⁵ Elliott Roosevelt (ed), *The Roosevelt Letters*, Vol. 3, London, 1952. Roosevelt to George VI, 25 August 1939, 239–40. See also letter from George VI to Roosevelt, 8 October 1938. This correspondence is included in FO 371, Vol. 21548, A7769/673/45.

⁶ Mackenzie King Diary, Vol. 86, 19 November 1938.

⁷ Mackenzie King Diary, Vol. 86, 17 November 1938.

⁸ Mackenzie King Diary, Vol. 86, 21 February 1939.

⁹ Mackenzie King Diary, Vol. 86, 6 December 1938; 11 January 1939.

¹⁰ Mackenzie King Diary, Vol. 86, 11 January; 18 January; 24 February 1939.

¹¹ Mackenzie King Diary, Vol. 86, 28 February 1939.

¹² Mackenzie King Diary, Vol. 86, 2 March 1939.

¹³ Mackenzie King Diary, Vol. 86, 17 November 1938; FO 371, 22800, A2138/27/45, minute by Cadogan (24 March 1939).

¹⁴ Mackenzie King Diary, Vol. 86, 4 March 1939.

¹⁵ Mackenzie King Diary, Vol. 86, 30 March 1939; 31 March 1939; FO 371, 22829, A 2907/1292/45, report of conversations between Sir Arthur Willert and President Roosevelt, 25–26 March 1939.

¹⁶ Mackenzie King Diary, Vol. 86, 7 June 1939.

¹⁷ Mackenzie King Diary, Vol. 86, 8 June 1939.

¹⁸ Mackenzie King Diary, Vol. 86, 8 June 1939.

¹⁹ Mackenzie King Diary, Vol. 86, 9 June 1939

²⁰ Mackenzie King Diary, Vol. 86, 9 June 1939.

²¹ Mackenzie King Diary, Vol. 86, 10 June 1939.

²² Mackenzie King Diary, Vol. 86, 10 June 1939.

²³ Mackenzie King Diary, Vol. 86, 10 June 1939.

²⁴ Mackenzie King Diary, Vol. 86, 10 June 1939.

²⁵ Mackenzie King Diary, Vol. 86, 11 June 1939; the transcript of George VI's handwritten notes of his conversation with Roosevelt on 10 and 11 June 1939 can be accessed online via the Franklin Roosevelt Presidential Library, President's Secretary's File, Royal'.

²⁶ Mackenzie King Diary, Vol. 86, 11 June 1939.

²⁷ Mackenzie King Diary, Vol. 86, 11 June 1939.

²⁸ Mackenzie King Diary, Vol. 86, 12 June 1939.

²⁹ Mackenzie King Diary, Vol. 86, 12 June 1939.

³⁰ Mackenzie King Diary, Vol. 86, 12 June 1939.

³¹ Mackenzie King Diary, Vol. 86, 12 June 1939.

³² Mackenzie King Diary, Vol. 86, 12 June 1939.

³³ FO 371, 23901, W10081/9805/49, Lindsay to Foreign Office, 30 June 1939; FO 371, 23902, W10354/9805/49, Lindsay to Foreign Office, 8 July 1939.

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