

HOT DOGS AND COCKTAILS

*When FDR Met King George VI
at Hyde Park on Hudson*

Peter Conradi



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To J.D.

Hot Dogs and Cocktails

Introduction

Winston Churchill's speech in March 1946 in Fulton, Missouri, is largely remembered for his coining of the term "Iron Curtain" to describe the fault line that was beginning to emerge in Europe between the capitalist West and communist East, a divide that was to shape the history of the Continent – and of the world – during the second half of the twentieth century. The speech also contained another phrase that was to have an enduring resonance: Churchill called for a "special relationship between the British Commonwealth and Empire and the United States", which should "work together at the common task as friends and partners".

At the time Churchill spoke, such a relationship already existed. Indeed, it had been displayed to dramatic effect by the US forces that had just stood alongside their British and Commonwealth counterparts on the battlefields of Europe and beyond – as they had done during the First World War. Historians may differ on the moment when the relationship began, but an important stage in its development was undoubtedly represented by a series of meetings between King George VI and Franklin D. Roosevelt at Washington

and at the President's family seat at Hyde Park in New York State in June 1939, which form the subject of this book.

I touched briefly on this visit in a previous work, *The King's Speech: How One Man Saved the British Monarchy* (co-written with Mark Logue), which told the true story of the events depicted in the multi-Oscar winning film of the same name. My inspiration to return to it came from another film, *Hyde Park on Hudson*, which has at its heart a picnic that Roosevelt, accompanied by his long-suffering wife, Eleanor, and his domineering mother, Sara, held for the King and Queen Elizabeth at Hyde Park during the visit.

The events of that summer day are little remembered today, but at the time the picnic – and the bizarre question that loomed over it: would or would not the King eat a hot dog? – made headlines on both sides of the Atlantic. Yet the goings-on at Hyde Park were but a small part of a three-week tour of North America that took the royal couple across Canada and back, as well as to New York and Washington.

This was arguably the most important tour in British royal history. For the people of Canada, it was the first time a reigning monarch – *their* monarch – had visited their country. The visit's importance to Britain's ties with America was even greater. It is difficult now, looking back on the close links that have grown up between London and Washington over the past decades, to remember the degree of mutual distrust that still existed between the

two countries during the 1930s. The personal relationship between King and President that began at Hyde Park played an important role in turning this distrust into enduring friendship.

In this book, I tell the story of the tour, describing the royal couple's progress across North America and the tumultuous and enthusiastic welcome they received at every point, and setting it in the context of Britain's relations with the United States and with Canada. I also describe the main characters: the King and Queen and the Roosevelts, of course, but also the principal women in the President's life: Margaret "Daisy" Suckley, Marguerite "Missy" LeHand and Lucy Mercer.

The bulk of the narrative has come from the many detailed contemporary newspaper reports of the journey. Also invaluable were two "instant" books: *Voyage of State* by G. Gordon Young, a correspondent for the Reuters news agency who covered the tour, and *North America Sees Our King and Queen* by Keith V. Gordon. The diaries of William Lyon Mackenzie King, who accompanied the royal couple, provided an insider's view of the visit, including near verbatim accounts of some of his conversations with the King, while Eleanor Roosevelt's many writings, together with books by her sons, James and Elliott, gave a wonderful insight into goings-on within the White House that would be unimaginable today.

Among more recent works, *Closest Companion*, edited and annotated by Geoffrey C. Ward, is a fascinating collection of the diaries of Suckley and of her letters to and from Roosevelt, *Franklin and Lucy* by Joseph E. Persico is a masterful study of Roosevelt's love life, while *The Roosevelts and the Royals* by Will Swift charts well the relationship between these two "royal" families.

Chapter 1

Hyde Park on Hudson

No one could remember when they had last flown the Union Jack in Hyde Park, Dutchess County, but the chances were it had been back in colonial times. Now, all those years later, the British flag and the Stars and Stripes were strung in alternate rows between the trees along a short stretch of Main Street. There was a large welcome sign on the approach to the village from the town of Poughkeepsie and smaller ones on several other buildings. The post office, immediately opposite the village garage, strewn with bunting, looked especially festive.

Although home to just eight hundred people, Hyde Park had grown accustomed to its unlikely role as summer capital of the United States. Whenever the opportunity arose, the town's most famous son, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, often known simply as FDR, would slip away from the stresses of Washington DC and pitch up at Springwood, the colonial-style clapboard house set in 1,300 acres of woodland with glorious views of the valley leading down to the Hudson River, which had been in the family for more than seventy years.

Since Roosevelt's election as president almost seven years earlier, this was where he had entertained visiting princes, prime ministers and presidents. Like American leaders before and after him, Roosevelt appreciated the usefulness of a place away from the formality of the White House to which he could invite allies or opponents and pursue politics and diplomacy in a beautiful, relaxed setting. He also loved this house and this particular corner of New York State. It was in his blood. "All that is within me cries out to go back to my home on the Hudson River," he once declared.

It was also where he played, enjoying the company of the various women who had assumed a special role in his life since an affair two decades earlier that had taken the passion out of his marriage to Eleanor, turning their relationship into one of friendship and mutual support. And it was into the surrounding countryside that he would go careering off in his open 1936 Ford Phaeton, which was custom-built with special hand controls that allowed him to drive it without using his feet. Usually, one of those women, maybe Marguerite "Missy" LeHand, his long-serving secretary, or Margaret "Daisy" Suckley, a distant cousin, would be by his side.

Yet the visit this weekend was to be something different: on the evening of Saturday 10th June 1939, Springwood would play host to the King and Queen of the United Kingdom. As the *New York Times* put it, Hyde Park was preparing for a "new and unique role in its history – to serve for one

brief weekend as the unofficial capital of the entire English-speaking world”.¹

As citizens of a nation born of a struggle against an earlier British monarch, the people of the United States could have been forgiven a feeling of indifference towards George III’s great-great-great-grandson, a quiet and tongue-tied man of forty-four who owed his place on the throne to the decision of his elder brother, Edward VIII, to give up his crown to marry Wallis Simpson.

Nothing could have been further from the truth. Since King George VI and Queen Elizabeth had arrived in Canada just over three weeks earlier, the US newspapers, radio and newsreels had recorded their progress across North America with a growing sense of frenzy. The Americans had been led to expect an uncomfortable, stuttering monarch obsessed with formality and protocol. Instead they encountered a smiling and relaxed man who seemed in many ways just like them – and beside him a charming young woman who dazzled everywhere she went with her beauty and style.

This frenzy had reached a crescendo three days earlier, when the *Royal Blue* train on which they had been travelling through Canada crossed Niagara Falls and they set foot on American soil – making George VI the first reigning British monarch to do so. Their visits to Washington and New York had drawn crowds of more than a million people, more even than had turned out to see them during their many stops north of the border. Now, after a short drive

through a part of the United States that had seen some of the fiercest fighting during the war waged by the American colonies against the British Crown, they were due to arrive in Hyde Park.

The locals had initially been slow to latch on to the significance of the occasion, not least when it came to decorating their town. The Town Board had no power to appropriate money for official decorations except on Memorial Day, which had already passed. After much thought, the problem was solved by Elmer Van Wagner, the Hyde Park supervisor, who asked the seven members of the board to stump up \$5 each and appealed to village merchants to pay their bit, too. In total, some \$80 had been spent on decorations, Van Wagner told the *New York Times*: most of the flags had been rented and a special welcome sign had been made to order at a cost of \$4; a special large Union Jack for display in the Town Hall had set them back \$4.50.

Asked what he would do with the flag after the visit, Van Wagner paused. "I don't know," he said. "Guess I'll present it to the King." In total, some five to ten thousand people were expected to crowd into the town for the occasion; fields and side streets were to be converted into parking lots to accommodate the influx of cars.

The paper's reporter found the people of Hyde Park taking things in their stride. "While not of the temperament that gives much outward expression to enthusiasm, the inhabitants of this community are giving every indication that they

are aware of the role that history has assigned to them for the weekend,” he wrote.²

So, too, was Roosevelt. Unlikely as it may seem, given the radical nature of his politics, the Democrat President had been brought up with a strong interest in monarchy. As his son, Elliott, wrote later: “He was fascinated by kings and queens, half amused, half impressed by the pomp and pageantry that enveloped royalty.”³ This was due in large part to Roosevelt’s mother, Sara, by then a grand old lady of eighty-four, but no less domineering and imperious than she had always been. Sara’s own obsession with royalty has been traced back to 1866 when, visiting Paris at the age of twelve, she watched as Empress Eugénie drove past her in the royal coach. Many years later, Sara’s husband, James, bought her as a present the red velvet-lined sleigh that Tsar Alexander II had given to Eugénie’s husband, Emperor Napoleon III. Sara used it to ride around Springwood during the winter.⁴

In July 1918, when he was a thirty-six-year-old assistant secretary of the Navy, Roosevelt had fulfilled his mother’s dream and, during a visit to Europe, was invited to Buckingham Palace to meet King George V. Theodore Roosevelt, a distant cousin, had become a friend of the royal family while he was president before the First World War, and what was meant to have been a formal meeting to discuss the war effort assumed a more personal character. Conversation quickly turned to the twin passions shared by the King and Roosevelt: the Navy and collecting stamps.

And so, two decades later, in the run-up to the royal visit, despite the many other pressing political, economic and military problems facing him, Roosevelt had thrown himself into the organization of the trip and, in particular, the twenty-four hours that the King and Queen would spend at Springwood. From seating plans to choice of furniture and gifts, no detail was too small for the President's attention. Eleanor, although no lover of pomp or formality, had no alternative but to get caught up in the preparations too.

For newspapers on both sides of the Atlantic, though, one small detail of the arrangements mattered more than anything else: would the King and Queen be served hot dogs during the picnic that their hosts planned to hold for them? Since Eleanor had dropped a casual mention of the proposed menu into a press conference a few weeks earlier, the question had assumed almost an iconic importance. There was no better culinary symbol of American classlessness than the humble hot dog. The idea of feeding it to royalty amused and appalled in equal measure – especially after Sara, who never shied away from a public spat with her daughter-in-law, made clear her horror at the very idea of such a “vulgar” food being presented to the King and Queen.

Roosevelt's mind was necessarily on weightier matters. The royal visit came at a sensitive time both for America and for Britain: the future of freedom in Europe was in doubt as Hitler's aggression pushed the Continent towards war.

Roosevelt cared deeply about maintaining that freedom, for the sake of both Europe and the United States. Yet he found himself in a difficult position: many Americans remained deeply suspicious of the Europeans and the British in particular, despite a shared language and culture. Deep-rooted animosity dating back to the War of Independence had been fuelled in recent years by anger at Britain's failure to pay back all its debts from the First World War and by the policy of appeasement that Neville Chamberlain, the Prime Minister, pursued towards Hitler. Whatever the rights and wrongs, many ordinary Americans simply wanted to keep out of an impending conflict thousands of miles away from home.

But the President's hands were tied: although he was personally keen that the United States should play a part in the coming struggle – or, at the very least, help Britain and his allies to arm against Hitler and Mussolini – he knew he would have to carry Congress and the American people with him. What better way to enhance the image of the British at such a sensitive time than by hosting a visit by its two most prominent representatives, the King and Queen?

Just after six o'clock that evening, Roosevelt, Eleanor, Sara and their children sat in the library of Springfield waiting for the royal party to arrive. The President had a tray of cocktails ready in front of him. His mother, who was sitting on the other side of the fireplace, looked disapprovingly

across at them. The King would much prefer tea, she said. Roosevelt, who, according to his wife, “could be as obstinate as his mother”, refused to back down and kept his tray ready.

Finally, at just after eight o’clock, the waiting was over. The sounds of motor cars announced the arrival of the royal party. One of the most extraordinary twenty-four-hour periods in the history of Anglo-American relations was about to begin.

Chapter 2

The King

King George VI was not fond of trips, especially those that involved making many speeches. As a young child, he had developed a debilitating stammer that turned even ordinary conversations into an ordeal. This impediment, which began to manifest itself when he was eight, was only one of many problems that turned his life into what often seemed a constant stream of challenges.

Born on 14th December 1895 at York Cottage, on the Sandringham estate in East Anglia, Albert Frederick Arthur George – or Bertie, as he was known to the family – was the second son of the future George V and a great-grandson of Queen Victoria, then into her fifty-eighth year on the throne. His early life was spartan and typical of English country life in that era. The estate, which spanned twenty thousand acres, had been bought by his grandfather, the future Edward VII, in 1866 as a shooting retreat. The cottage, given to his father and mother, Mary, was a modest place, situated a few hundred yards from the main house on a grassy mound, built by Edward as overflow accommodation for shooting parties. “The first thing that strikes a

visitor about the house itself is its smallness and ugliness,” wrote Sarah Bradford, the royal biographer.¹ It was also extremely cramped, becoming home not just to the couple and what were eventually to be their six children, but also to a number of staff.

Like other English upper-class children of the day, Bertie and his siblings had only a distant relationship with their parents. What contact he had with his father was often harsh. An unbending Victorian who had spent his formative years in the Navy, the future George V believed in inculcating a strict sense of discipline from an early age – as was clear from a letter he wrote to his son on his fifth birthday. “Now that you are five years old I hope you will always try & be obedient & do at once what you are told, as you will find it much easier to you the sooner you begin. I always tried to do this when I was your age & found it made me much happier,” he wrote.² Punishment for transgressions was administered in the library – which, despite its name, was largely devoid of books and filled instead with George V’s stamp collection, to which he devoted his leisure time when he was not taken up with his other pursuits of shooting and sailing. The room was remembered by his children as a “place of admonishment and reproof”.³

Bertie was a sickly boy: suffering from an early age from poor digestion, he had to wear splints on his legs for many hours of the day and at night to cure him of the knock knees from which his father suffered. He was also left-handed, but,

according to the practice of the day, obliged to write with his right hand. Furthermore, he was constantly in the shadow of his elder brother, David, the future Edward VIII. Just eighteen months older, David was good-looking, charming and fun – and destined one day to become king. The two were inevitably close, but it was an unequal relationship: “When we were young, I could always manage him,” David wrote years later in his autobiography.⁴

It is difficult to pinpoint the cause of Bertie’s stammer, but it was certainly exacerbated by the attitude of his father, whose response to his son’s struggles could be summed up with a simple phrase: “Just get it out.” The stammer proved to be a problem at the Royal Naval College, based at Queen Victoria’s former residence Osborne House on the Isle of Wight, where he and his elder brother were sent for their education. Although good at practical subjects such as engineering and seamanship, Bertie was poor at mathematics, often coming near the bottom of the class. His problems were compounded by his stammer: on one occasion, he failed to respond when asked what was a half of a half because he was unable to pronounce the initial consonant of “quarter” – which produced an unfortunate reputation for stupidity. In the final examination, held in December 1910, he came sixty-eighth out of sixty-eight.

On 15th September 1913, aged seventeen, he began his naval career, after he was commissioned as a junior midshipman

on the battleship HMS *Collingwood*. Like his father before him, he expected this to be his life for the next few years. Although he worshipped the Navy as an institution, he did not much like the sea itself – and was plagued with seasickness. He was also shy. One fellow officer, Lieutenant F.J. Lambert, described the Prince as a “small, red-faced youth with a stutter”, adding: “When he reported his boat to me he gave a story of stutter and an explosion. I had no idea who he was and very nearly cursed him for spluttering at me.”⁵ Proposing a toast to his father, who had become king in 1910, was a torment because of the initial “k” sound.

Days before Britain declared war on Germany on 3rd August 1914, *Collingwood* was sent to Scapa Flow in the Orkneys, to guard the northern entrance to the North Sea. Bertie’s wartime career was not an especially glorious one, however: after just three weeks he began to experience violent pains in his stomach and suffer difficulty with his breathing; he was diagnosed with appendicitis and sent to Aberdeen for surgery. Although he subsequently returned to his ship and took part in the Battle of Jutland in May 1916, he endured repeated stomach problems that were eventually diagnosed as an ulcer. By July 1917, ill once more and transferred ashore to a hospital near Edinburgh, he reluctantly accepted that, after eight years of either training or serving in the Navy, his career was over. “Personally, I feel that I am not fit for service at sea, even after I recover from this little attack,” he wrote to his father.⁶

Following the end of the war, he returned to civilian life, and after a year at Trinity College, Cambridge, where he studied history, economics and civics, he became drawn into the public side of royal life: he developed a special interest in industrial welfare, visiting coal mines, factories and rail yards; and, in July 1921, instituted a series of annual seaside summer camps designed to bring together boys from different social backgrounds.

Bertie was also beginning to rise in the estimation of his father, who was having misgivings about David and his apparent disregard for duty and tradition and love of the modern – as well as his predilection for married women. On 4th June 1920, aged twenty-four, Bertie became Duke of York, Earl of Inverness and Baron Killarney. “I know that you have behaved very well, in a difficult situation for a young man & that you have done what I asked you to,” his father wrote to him. “I hope you will always look upon me as yr. best friend & always tell me everything & you will always find me ever ready to help you and give you good advice.”⁷

It was a month later that the Duke met Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon, the daughter of the 14th Earl of Strathmore and Kinghorne, a society beauty five years his junior. He spotted her across a crowded room at a ball, asked her to dance and soon decided she was the only woman for him. Two proposals of marriage followed – both of which she rejected. “I honestly can’t explain to you how terribly sorry I am – it worries me so much to think you may be unhappy,”

she wrote to him on 28th February 1921. “Anyway we can be good friends can’t we? I shall never say anything about our talks I promise you – and nobody need ever know.”⁸ The Duke persisted, however, and she accepted on his third attempt. They married on 26th April 1923 in Westminster Abbey, the first time it had been used for a royal wedding.

Marriage proved a turning point; happier and more at ease with himself, the Duke became far more confident. Public speaking nevertheless remained an ordeal, despite the considerable support his wife provided him. A low point was reached in May 1925, when the Duke was due to succeed his elder brother as president of the Empire Exhibition in Wembley. The previous year David had made a speech formally asking his father for permission to open the event, a massive festival that was to draw some twenty million visitors. In a first, the Prince’s words and his father’s response had been broadcast to the world by the British Broadcasting Company (later Corporation). “Everything went off most successfully,” the King noted in his diary.⁹

It was now the Duke’s turn. He had only a few words to say, which he practised intensely, but his dread of public speaking was such that the whole thing turned into a terrifying ordeal – even more so because for the first time he was speaking in front of his father. The speech, broadcast not just in Britain but around the world, ended in humiliation. Although through sheer determination he managed to

reach the end, there were embarrassing moments when his jaw muscle moved frantically and no sound came out. The King tried to put a positive gloss on it. “Bertie got through his speech all right, but there were some long pauses,” he wrote to the Duke’s young brother, Prince George, the following day.¹⁰

It would be difficult to overestimate the psychological effect that the speech had on both the Duke and his family, and the problem that his faltering performance created for the monarchy, for which such performances were a part of daily routine. As one contemporary biographer put it, “it was becoming increasingly manifest that very drastic steps would have to be taken if he were not to develop into the shy retiring nervous individual which is the common fate of all those suffering from speech defects”.¹¹

There was a need to take such steps urgently: the Duke and Duchess were due to embark in January 1927 on a six-month trip to Australia and New Zealand that would be full of speaking engagements – the high point of it on 9th May when he was due to open the new Commonwealth Parliament House in Canberra. The *Daily Telegraph* claimed the speech he would make there would be as historic as the proclamation of Queen Victoria as Empress of India in 1877. With all eyes – and ears – upon him, Bertie could not risk a repetition of the Wembley fiasco.

It was this that led the Duke, with some prompting from his wife, to draw on the services of Lionel Logue, a

charismatic elocution teacher turned speech therapist who opened a practice on Harley Street after arriving from his native Australia in 1924. During their first consultation on 19th October 1926, Logue heard the Duke's problems, in particular with the hard "k" sound – as in "king" – and established he had "an acute nervous tension brought on by the defect". He diagnosed the underlying problem, as with many of his patients, as one of faulty breathing. Logue prescribed an hour of concentrated effort, made up of breathing exercises of his own invention, coupled with gargling with warm water and standing in front of a window, intoning the vowels one by one, each for fifteen seconds. "I can cure you," Logue declared at the end of the session, which lasted for an hour and a half, "but it will need a tremendous effort by you. Without that effort, it can't be done."¹²

The Duke made considerable progress, thanks to intensive consultations – some eighty-two of them during the fourteen months leading up to his departure for Australia. Though lacking the easy fluency of his elder brother, he made a success of his speeches in Australia – even the all-important one in Canberra. "I have so much more confidence in myself now, which I am sure comes from being able to speak properly at last," the Duke wrote in a letter to his father.¹³ He continued to consult Logue after his return, but their meetings became less frequent; after one consultation in March 1932 they did not meet again for almost two years. Although the King's age and deteriorating health