Rallying round the flag: The King's Speech

Paul Bond
3 February 2011

Directed by Tom Hooper, written by David Seidler

A filmmaker addressing historical events faces certain tasks. Their work need not be a verbatim or literal retelling of events to be successful, but it must have an underlying historical truth and an element of critical engagement. *The King's Speech*, despite the praise and awards heaped upon it, largely fails in this regard.

The King's Speech displays certain strengths—above all it is well acted. Moreover, it centres relatively sensitively on the portrayal of a man struggling to overcome his stammer through an unexpected and unlikely friendship. What warmth and charm the film has come from this theme. Colin Firth gives an impressive performance as Bertie (short for Albert), Duke of York and later King George VI of England (1895-1952), battling a speech impediment he has had since childhood.

Nevertheless, that story rests on an essentially uncritical, and often reverential view of the British monarchy and its role in the 1930s and more generally. The two themes do not sit comfortably together.

Bertie is the younger son of the stern and bullying George V (Michael Gambon). Because of his stammer he finds public speaking difficult. The film charts his reluctant trips to a failed actor turned speech therapist, Lionel Logue (Geoffrey Rush), who teaches him techniques to try and compensate for his stammer. In an engaging performance, Rush plays Logue as a decent and generous man, trying to do his best to help those afflicted.

The scenes with Logue offer some critical swipes at royal conceit, but disrespect never goes too far. There is only gentle teasing of Bertie and his wife Elizabeth (Helena Bonham Carter). The attraction for actors of a film about qualities of speech is evident. The film has an extremely talented cast and is heavy with impressive voices. Bertie's speech difficulties are emphasised by the surrounding rich voices of Gambon, Derek Jacobi, Claire Bloom, and others. This is not, however, *My Left Foot* with crowns.

Overcoming Bertie's stammer is portrayed as a directed political act, as indeed it was. But this portrayal is where the problems lie. The film's presentation of events is essentially in line with propaganda constructed during the war and faithfully reiterated ever since—as part of the depiction of wartime national unity against the enemy as "Britain's finest hour".

Even with regard to Bertie's stammering, the film presents a second-hand and false account of the results of his speech work. Wartime Prime Minister Winston Churchill in fact issued instructions to the BBC to edit the stammers out of George's speeches.

At the heart of the film's weaknesses is its somewhat shallow and sanitised account of the constitutional crisis that followed the death of George V in January 1936. George's eldest son David (an outstanding performance by Guy Pearce) acceded to the throne as Edward VIII. His relationship with the once-divorced American socialite Wallis Simpson (Eve Best) and declared intention to marry her on taking the throne, while she was still married to her second husband, was considered unacceptable.

With Simpson divorced and the couple's affair made public by the US press (the British press had abided by an official injunction against such reporting), frantic preparations were made to safeguard the reputation of the monarchy from moral censure given the position of the monarch as head of the Church of England. Within a year he abdicated, making way for Bertie to become George VI.

This is how the abdication crisis has generally gone into history. But beneath the surface of events were other, far more politically dangerous concerns over the close relations of Simpson and Edward to Hitler's Nazi party.

Simpson had many close ties with leading Nazis, including Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop, with whom she had had an affair. Shortly after the abdication, the couple stayed as Hitler's guests in Bavaria. Papers have since revealed the couple's willingness to be reinstalled on the throne by an invading Nazi force.

Open royal support for fascism would have been difficult politically. Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin would have resigned. US President Roosevelt, too, was concerned about Edward's fascist sympathies. In the words of Harold Brooks-

© World Socialist Web Site

Baker, publishing director of *Burke's Peerage*, Roosevelt regarded Simpson as "the best thing" that could have happened, as she "stopped him having to deal with a pro-Nazi king."

In 2003, FBI files compiled in the 1940s were released stating that the British government had refused to permit Edward to marry her because of her Nazi sympathies and that the FBI had even sent agents to spy on the Royal couple to see if they were passing official secrets to the Nazis.

The film acknowledges their sympathies, as it must. Warned of a revolutionary movement across Europe, Edward insists, "Herr Hitler will take care of them." This echoes the *New York Daily News* article Edward wrote in 1966, in which he declared that "it was in Britain's interest and in Europe's too, that Germany be encouraged to strike east and smash Communism forever".

In contrast, *The King's Speech* still echoes the sanitised portrayal of the rest of the Royal family, including Bertie and Elizabeth. Overcoming the crisis is portrayed as having enabled the monarchy to stand at the head of popular opposition to the growth of fascism in Germany, under the leadership of a good and personally courageous king.

Churchill (a waste of Timothy Spall here) is seen as George's great supporter because of his concerns about Hitler. Baldwin (Anthony Andrews) offers his resignation in 1937 saying, "Churchill was right all along" about Hitler. The film fuels the wartime propaganda of Churchill as the great farsighted anti-Nazi leader. In reality, Churchill's concerns over the threat to Britain's interests posed by Nazi Germany did not extend to support for Edward's abdication. Rather, he worked so hard to keep him on the throne that there were rumours of his heading a "King's Party".

Following his accession, George and his wife both supported appeasement with a view to protecting the British Empire. In 1939, learning that Jewish refugees were "surreptitiously getting into Palestine," George wrote to the Foreign Secretary Lord Halifax that he was "glad to think that steps are being taken to prevent these people leaving their country of origin."

Halifax telegraphed the British ambassador in Berlin to encourage the Nazis "to check the unauthorised emigration" of Jews. Elizabeth, later the Queen Mother, was close to Halifax, a longstanding advocate of appeasement. Some of her papers, believed to show her close agreement with him, remain embargoed to this day.

There is a fascinating story here. But director Tom Hooper and writer David Seidler repeatedly pull their punches. This is a film largely uncritical towards official myth-making. Hooper dedicates *The King's Speech* to his grandfather, killed in the Royal Air Force during the war. He has described this as "an unnecessary death". His plane was returning from a mission, but was denied permission to land at the nearest airport and crashed.

For him, the film is about George VI emerging as a figurehead who "inspires his people and unites them in battle," to quote the production notes. It culminates in George's first wartime Christmas address of 1939. Backed by swelling music, we repeatedly cut from the radio studio to the rapt faces of listeners in homes and factories across the land. These are almost the only ordinary crowds seen throughout the film. When he finishes, George and Elizabeth go onto the balcony of Buckingham Palace, to be greeted by a crowd won over to him at last.

There are occasional hints at the real concerns involved. Prior to George V's death, Bertie and his father discuss three options. "Who will stand between us, the jackboots, and the proletarian abyss?"

Later, Bertie discusses the unfolding political situation with the newly acceded Edward VIII, warning him of the revolutionary threats that have faced the royal families of Europe. Edward says that he has been busy "Kinging." "Kinging," replies Bertie, "is a precarious business."

Such oblique references to the danger of social revolution are as far as the film goes. This does not compensate for its conformist message. George sums up the film's argument in an extraordinary speech:

"If I am a King, where is my power? Can I declare war? Form a government? Levy a tax? No! And yet I am the seat of all authority because they think that when I speak, I speak for them."

The King's Speech is only the latest of a series of fairly trite and largely sympathetic films about the monarchy, which stands at the apex of the British state and is in turn shaped by its political concerns, portraying them as a family subject to the same emotional traumas as everyone else—only made more difficult by their status as heads of state. Before Logue knows the identity of his guest, he unwittingly compares membership of the royal family with indentured servitude. Elizabeth agrees that it is "Something like that." There is little of value in such an approach.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site