

Royal book news

by Marlene Eilers

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Royal Book News is a bi-monthly newsletter that I have published for more than fifteen years now. It is a one-woman organization: I write the copy, edit the text, print it out, and handle the photocopying.

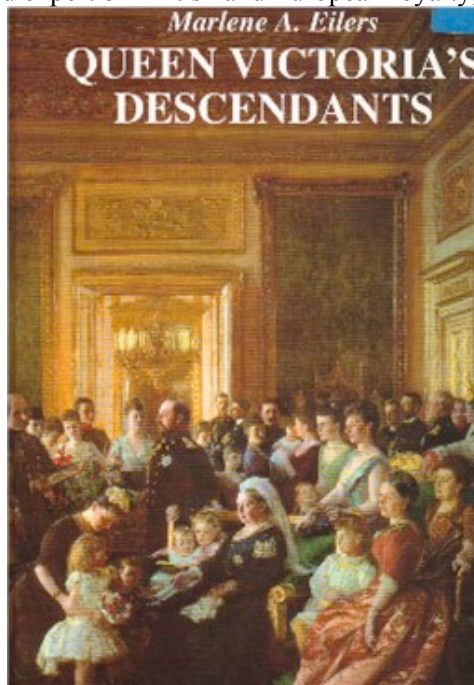
Royal Book News is not a glossy, photo-filled publication. I do it on my computer using Word Perfect for DOS. No real graphics at this time. Just news and reviews about royal books. It was my interest in royalty that got me started down the long road that eventually led to **Royal Book News**, which is affectionately known as **RBN**. In 1982 an acquaintance of mine, Dr Wayne Swift, a psychologist in New York City, got together with several fellow royalty commemorative collectors, and staged the Royalty Collectors' Association of North America. Members of RCANA would be able to exchange information and learn about new royal commemorations. Membership was largely limited to Americans and Canadians. The organization and its journal, **Sceptre**, which was published three times a year, was a good way for collectors and dealers to keep in touch. Dr Swift asked me if I wanted to write for **Sceptre**. Sure, I said. Why not? I am not exactly sure how I came up with the idea of reviewing books, but I did, and that's how I got started.

You might think that this is a great way to get freebies. You're right. Most of the books that I review do come gratis. But I don't have to like everything that I read. I read a lot. I read nearly everywhere: from the subway to work or in the car en route to a baseball game, to the breakfast table or while I am watching TV (Yes I can do both). And, I do read everything that I review in **RBN**.

RCANA lasted three years. In 1985 the association and **Sceptre** crumbled. I liked reviewing books and I didn't want to lose this niche, so I placed an advert in the final issue of **Sceptre**, saying that I was starting a newsletter where I could continue to review and discuss royal titles. Much to my surprise the advert was a success. Subscriptions rolled in (**RBN** has never been a money-spinner, as subscriptions largely cover paper, xeroxing, postage, envelopes, and books or magazines that I have not been able to obtain from the publishers.) I was surprised by the immediate success of **RBN**—which has since been reviewed favorably by **Library Journal** and **Publisher's Weekly**--but I later learned that my reviews were the most popular feature in **Sceptre**.

What do I read most? Biographies, memoirs, histories--nearly everything about royalty.

I am a published author and a noted expert on British and European royalty, but I usually learn something

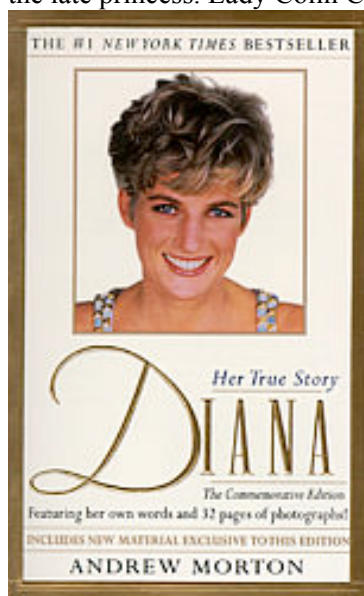


new from many of the books that I have reviewed.

I don't pull any punches. If I love a book or feel that the book has merit I will tell you why. But I do not want to expect that others will see my reviews as the final word on certain titles. I encourage my readers to decide on their own and many times I will hear from subscribers who have disagreed with one of my reviews. I don't mind at all.

On the average, I read two to three books a week. Most of these books are about royalty. I don't like or enjoy every book that I read. In fact, many of the books published today have little or no merit at all. Witness the explosion of books about the late Diana, Princess of Wales since 1981. If I had to make a list of books that should be used by future biographers I would include approximately twenty titles that pertained to the late princess. Lady Colin Campbell, the author of two books about Diana, would not

be on the list. Andrew Morton's **Diana: Her True Story** would be in the top five.



The credibility of a book is often enhanced by the author's expertise. Having access to private papers and archives also helps, especially if the biographer is writing an authorized or authoritative biography. Philip Magnus, Giles St Aubyn, Harold Nicolson, Philip Ziegler, Kenneth Rose, John W. Wheeler-Bennett, Sarah Bradford and Elizabeth Longford are among the best royal biographers in this century. They have produced, perhaps, the essential and definitive examinations of the lives of Victoria., Edward VII, George V, Edward VIII, George VI, and Elizabeth II. Ziegler is also the author of Lord Mountbatten's authorized biography.

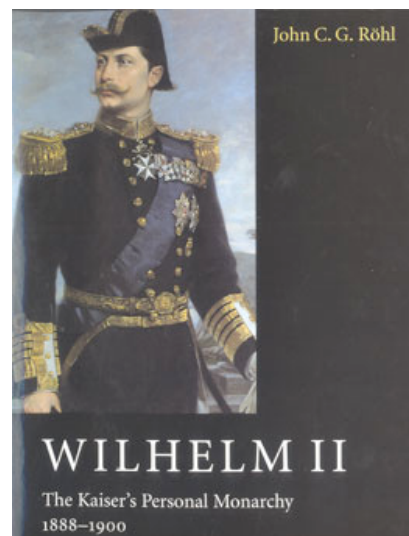
Perhaps the best royal biography ever written, at least in my view, is James Pope-Hennessy's **Queen Mary** which was published in 1959.

This is a beautifully written book. Pope-Hennessy gave us a biographical masterpiece that sets the standard for royal biographies. He was given nearly complete access to an impressive array of private papers: not just Mary's diaries and letters, but also the correspondence and other material belonging to her parents and siblings, which only enhanced the biography. In contrast, Georgina Battiscombe's biography, **Queen Alexandra**, one of few biographies available on Edward VII's queen, cannot match the breadth or scope that Pope-Hennessy offered readers.

A good biography should also have an extensive bibliography of primary and secondary sources. A primary source could be private papers or diaries. Secondary sources might be previously published works about the subject or newspaper and magazine articles, such as profiles or interviews. There also should be an index. A book without an index is not worth my time. Professional indexers are available to assist the biographers and publishers.

Access to original sources is especially important when writing definitive or scholarly books. Kaiser Wilhelm II has been the subject of numerous biographies since his death in 1941. Many of the authors of the English-language books used only English-language sources. Such efforts dim the book's worth because most of the important sources are in German. In the past decade, two major biographies of Wilhelm II have been published by Lamar Cecil and John C. G. Röhl. Both biographies were critically praised. Both authors made extensive use of original materials in German archives, which can inevitably strengthen the subject's biographical portrait. Röhl's biography was first published in German.

Most royal books, namely biographies and histories, that are written in languages other than English are never translated into English. This is, I feel, a disservice to Anglo-American historians who might not have a grasp of a second language. (But Lamar Cecil, one of the most recent biographers of Kaiser Wilhelm II, is fluent in German.) Translating books into English is expensive, and not every publisher can budget for it, especially when the books will not be best sellers. But the Anglo-American market is eager for foreign language books to be translated into English. Historians and biographers are not the only ones who suffer. There are so many books published in Europe—in Danish or German or Spanish—on royalty and monarchy that will never be translated into English. The market, albeit a small one, is open to the best of the foreign language tomes. Birgitte Hamann has written a dozen or so books on the Habsburgs; however, only one, a biography of Empress Elisabeth, has been translated into English. German historian Martha Schad, who has written about the Bavarians and the Churn und Taxis princely family, is one author who should be translated into English.



I abhor reading books that are solely published for jumping-on-the-bandwagon.

A good selection of books about the late Diana, Princess of Wales, fits into this category. No expertise on the subject required. The authors read through a few books, interview several friends of friends and then write a book. Sadly for the rest of us, the books are then published without the editor and publisher sending the books to fact checkers. The publishers are not interested in facts. They want to make money. Kitty Kelley's **The Royals** was published several years ago. (My name appears in Kelley's list of acknowledgments but I provided no assistance to her. She attended my lectures on monarchy at the Smithsonian but she didn't learn a thing.) **The Royals** is the perfect example of a book that needed a fact checker. I went through the book, and filled four notebook pages both sides, with a list of mistakes and inconsistencies. This book--like so many others--ended up on the remainder tables, having not made money for its publishing house.

But poor research and writing is not confined to Kitty Kelley and her ilk. I recently finished a biography of the late Queen Elisabeth of the Belgians. I was severely disappointed by the poor writing and the number of mistakes. It took me several months to locate a copy of this book, which was published by a small house in Maryland. An unfavorable review of **Elisabeth : A Biography** by Wanda Z. Larson will appear in the next issue of **Royal Book News**. I don't get any pleasure in writing bad reviews.

While the majority of books and other publications that I review or discuss are English language titles I make a concerted effort to also include foreign language titles. RBN has included news and information about books published in France, Germany, Austria, Italy, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Belgium, Sweden, Denmark and Norway. I've also reviewed new titles available from Canadian, Australian and New Zealand publishers, but the bulk of the new books are American or British.

I hear about new titles in a variety of ways. Visiting bookstores at least twice a week. Subscribers send me news on new titles they've read about (this is especially helpful for overseas titles). Reading **Publisher's Weekly**, along with the book reviews in **The New York Times**, **Washington Post**, **The Times** and **The Daily Telegraph**. I scan the catalogs, and I am truly appreciative of my subscribers who tell me about new titles.

From time to time, I have also interviewed royal authors, including David Duff, Philip Ziegler, Stanley Weintraub, Giles St. Aubyn, Hannah Pakula, Theo Aronson, and most recently Gabriele Praschl-Bichler, an Austrian writer who specializes in the Habsburgs.

If **RBN** had a Mission Statement, it would read as follows: **RBN** is a newsletter that endeavors to provide subscribers with news and reviews of the latest books on royalty published in North America and abroad; to provide fair and reasonable reviews of books and special publications; to try and offer subscribers a varied selection of new titles in each issue; to let readers know how they can obtain these books; and to always be on the lookout for new books and other publications.

Although there have been a few bumps along the way, I have tried to maintain a bi-monthly publishing schedule. If a newsletter is late, I explain why, and apologize. This is important to me because I do not take my readers for granted. And you will get six Issues for your annual subscription. Currently the subscription for

six issues is \$20 (U.S. and Canada), higher for overseas. If you are interested in subscribing or would like to see a sample issue, please contact me: Marlene Koenig, 6943 Mary Caroline Circle, Unit I, Alexandria, VA 22310. [editors note: this subscription information has been updated for 2007]

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[Any comments or questions?](#)