

Not As Good As She Thinks She Is

by John McLeod

Queen Victoria's Descendants
Marlene A. Eilers
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I don't know whether to forgive really is divine, but to err is certainly human. Genealogists are especially prone to error, dealing as they do with long lists of names and dates that can easily get mixed up. As a result they are usually pretty tolerant of each other's mistakes.

But Marlene A. Eilers is an exception. In the preface to her new book *Queen Victoria's Descendants*, she tells us that she has decided "to provide a totally accurate record" because other works on royal genealogy are so full of mistakes. One may well wonder if such arrogance is justified: has Miss Eilers reached her goal? Unfortunately, the answer is no, and the tone of her preface encourages me to point out a few of the many errors she has made.

I need not dwell on her grammatical slips. Nor will I say much about the opinions that she sometimes presents as facts, although I don't see what role these play in what is supposed to be an objective historical record. Many people might disagree with the typically American statement (p. 63) that "common sense... proclaims the whole concept [of Monarchy] a sham". (Rational people would rather be ruled by a crook, a peanut farmer or an ageing film star than a king or queen, right?)

Again, Miss Eilers vehemently denies (pp. 103-104) Grand Duke Vladimir's claims to be head of the House of Romanov, but they are accepted by most Russian monarchists and the points against them are not as conclusive as Miss Eilers makes them sound. Then there are the many typographical slips which (whatever Miss Eilers may think when she sees them in the work of others) are generally recognised as inevitable.

Seeing (p. 213) that Danish sovereigns were formerly styled "King of the Gothas" made me think that Miss Eilers is more familiar with the titles of genealogical books than with European history; and I hope that the confusion (p. 203) between Russia and Prussia is due to careless proof-reading rather than ignorance. German words and names give surprising trouble to the Teutonic Miss Eilers: hausgesetzmaessig becomes hausgesetzmaessing (p. iv), and Hitler's retreat at Berchtesgaden is transformed into "Berchtesgarten" (p. 45).

What about the real mistakes, though? These may be divided into several categories. There are errors in terminology. For example, from 1884 to 1913 the head of the House of Brunswick was prevented from assuming his ducal throne; Miss Eilers (p. Monarchy Canada - Spring 1988



Queen Victoria and her family depicted in 1897, the year of the Diamond Jubilee. An illustration from *Queen's Diamond Jubilee / Jubil e de la Reine*, a bilingual souvenir magazine published in Montreal for the occasion.

169) calls this the "impeachment" of the House — like most Americans, she seems to think that "impeach" means "remove from office". Another point about the same family sounds trivial but from the historian's point of view is important. Members of the House of Hanover bear the title of Duke of Brunswick and Lueneburg. Now, in 1913 it was a member of this House who became Duke of Brunswick. Just plain Brunswick, but this has (p. 27) been corrected to Brunswick-Lueneburg.

Our author has invented her own titles for Queen Victoria ("Queen-Empress of the British Isles and Empire", p. 3), but not once does she mention our present Queen's sovereignty over Canada and her Other Realms and Territories (surely worth noting in a "totally accurate" book). The Leiningen family, technically a "Mediatized Princely House", is raised (p. 108) to the rank of royal by Miss Eilers. And Canadians may be interested to learn that she has decided that our Governors-General, like her Presidents, serve a fixed term of office (pp. 121-122).

Then there are errors of fact. Many of these would be small enough to overlook were it not for Miss Eilers's claims to perfection. On p. 171 we read that King George V became Duke of Cornwall on 6 May 1910, which was actually the date on which that honour passed to his son the future Edward VIII. On pp. 51 and 172 we learn that our Monarchs were Emperors (or Empresses) of India from 1876 to 1947; in fact it was from 1877 to 1948. On p. 99 Miss Eilers writes that King Peter II of Yugoslavia is "the only King to be buried in the United States of America", which is simply wrong. Her weakness in arithmetic is revealed when she says that Edward VII was Prince of Wales for fifty years (p. 51).

Then there are what seem to be puzzles in chronology, although most of them are probably really misprints. Princess Victoria

Melita of Edinburgh married a man who had died seven years earlier (p. 194); the Tenth Duke of Arenberg died at the age of ten days, but not before he had time to get married (p. 205). In a slightly different vein, we are told (p. 123) that the future King of Sweden became engaged to the daughter of the Duke of Connaught while her father was serving as High Commissioner at Cairo. Actually he was High Commissioner in the Mediterranean, but we'll let that pass: the real mystery is how this could have happened given that his daughter's marriage took place two years before he assumed the High Commissionership.

Probably the most serious error occurs when some of the endnotes which expand on the genealogies get misnumbered (pp. 166-167 and 170), so that we learn (among other things) that Princess Marie Alexandra of Hesse was the last Chancellor of the German Empire.

I hope that the reader will forgive this rather lengthy (but by no means complete) catalogue of the errors in *Queen Victoria's Descendants*. It seems appropriate to demonstrate, however, that, like the predecessors she has so vehemently criticised, Miss Eilers has been unable "to provide a totally accurate record". The point is that there is a real danger that readers will take Miss Eilers at her word and decide that, if she says it, it must be true.

Can I make any comments that would be more helpful to someone thinking of buying the book? Well, it consists of two parts. First is a set of essays, telling something about the descendants of each of Queen Victoria's children. There are photographs of many of them. Some of the stories are familiar, others are not. Some may be doubted. I was particularly puzzled by a longish section devoted to an American reporter's claims that King Peter of Yugoslavia died as a result of a liver transplant. One reporter's say-so does not make a story