

Review in the Literary Review – September 2007 by Hugh Massingberd of *Right Royal Bastards – The Fruits of Passion* by Peter Beauclerk-Dewar and Roger Powell (Burke's Peerage Gentry 206pp £19.99)

O Father,  
Where Art Thou?

In these mealy-mouthed, politically correct days, the word 'bastard' packs a more powerful punch than one might suppose – as I discovered not so long ago during a kiddie's chat show on regional television presided over by a green animatronic Martian (don't ask). Invited to explain the euphemisms employed in obituaries, I said that 'he did not suffer fools gladly' translated as 'he was a complete bastard'. Shock, horror. The recording was stopped, and high-level conferences held as to whether such an 'emotive' word could be transmitted.

Similarly, as Peter Beauclerk-Dewar says in his introduction to this entertaining and instructive round-up of 'right royal bastards', the title of the book caused shock waves at the Royal Archives' machinery. The security scanning system at Windsor rejected the authors' e-mail attachment of the text 'because it violates our acceptable-use policy on profanity'.

Anyway, it is a splendid title for an absorbing story and I congratulate Beauclerk-Dewar and his co-author Roger S. Powell, for having the courage to chose it and the perseverance to see the project through. I confess that in an earlier incarnation, when I was editing *Burke's* publications back in the early 1970s I conceived the same sort of scheme (and even, as I recall, portentously announced a prospective volume to be entitled *Burke's Bastards*), but failed to get it off the drawing board.

Today, when half the children in the country are born out of wedlock and genealogical reference books include 'natural children' as well as legitimate 'issue'. As a matter of course, it seems eminently sensible to examine the subject of royal bastards in such dispassionate, though sympathetic terms.

The most prolific monarch in siring bastards was King Henry I who, as Beauclerk-Dewar remarks, resorted to 'outsourcing' so that he could marry off his numerous offspring into the leading European dynasties. Henry had twenty or more royal bastards, but as Chris Given-Wilson and Alice Curteis covered the early bastards in *The Royal Bastards of Medieval England 1066-1486* (published in 1984), this book begins with Viscount Lisle, an illegitimate son of Edward IV, of whom a chronicler assured us 'all other members down to his feet kept just proportion with the bulk of his body'.

Altogether some forty-four 'official' Royal Bastards over five centuries are detailed here. Of this total, fifteen were sired by Charles II, the 'Merry Monarch' (by seven mothers); six by his not-so-merry brother, James II; and eleven by the 'Sailor King', William IV (as Duke of Clarence), ten of them with the actress Mrs. Jordan - a liaison popularly described as 'bathing in the River Jordan'.

The authors are particularly strong on the Stuart bastards. Beauclerk-Dewar himself is a descendant (along with Mrs. David Cameron) of the union between Charles II and the nation's favourite royal mistress, Nell Gwyn. ('Come hither you little bastard', she addressed her elder son in his father's presence to remind the King that a title was required); and Powell has made a special study of the period. The authors have been able to identify the genetic Y-chromosome of the Stuart kings which is unique to the male line. This certainly scotches the claim that Colonel Robert Sidney was the father of the Duke of Monmouth rather than Charles II.

The scholarly facts of this reference book are enlivened by well-sourced fruity anecdotes (such as that of Nell Gwyn lacing her rival Moll Davies' sweetmeats with a purgative before she entered the royal bed), though these are not rendered any funnier by the lavish use of exclamation marks. In most cases the authors succeed in putting some flesh and blood on the characters delineated (the men tend to have gone into the Army or the Royal Navy, the women into nunneries) but sometimes one longs to know more. Of Lady Augusta FitzClarence, fourth daughter of Mrs. Jordan by the Duke of Clarence, it is said that 'very little seems to be known', but I managed to throw some light on this passionate and needlewoman who was chatelaine of the House of Dun, Angus, in my book *Great Houses of Scotland* (1997).

In addition to the forty-four 'definite' Royal bastards, another twenty-two allegations, fables and 'might-have-beens' are scrutinised in the final section entitled 'Royal Loose Ends'. This, of course, is the most spicy and enjoyable bit of the book. Although the authors take pains to avoid vulgar sensationalism, I relished the story of one of Edward VII's many mistresses, Cora Pearl, who liked to be dished up on a silver platter '*a la nue*'. Among the intriguing questions posed are the possible cousinships of Douglas Erskine Crum, racecourse director at Ascot, to his boss the Queen, and the Duchess of Cornwall to her the Prince of Wales (could he really be her/her half third cousin once removed' through 'Tum Tum's' affair with Mrs Keppel?). Then there is the pathetic story of Clarence Haddon who claimed to be the son of Prince Eddy, Duke of Clarence (George V's elder brother), and was sent to prison for his pains.

Could the exalted position of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Viscount Furness (memorably sketched 'on his stately progresses from Boodle's to Overtons in a black suit and a black hat carrying a black walking stick and wearing the blackest of dark glasses') within the Sovereign Military Order of Malta possibly have been due to his being a son of Edward VIII?

And could the actor Tim Seely (who played a monarch in the film *King Ralph* and undoubtedly bears a remarkable resemblance to the Duke of Windsor) be another one? They are fascinating mysteries.

The wilder shores of speculation prompted by Captain James Hewitt's 'hypnotic ramblings' are relegated to a mercifully brief epilogue.