The Succession of King George lll

In the Absence of an Heir

It was 1817. The news of Princess Charlotte of Wales sent the royal family into a frenzy. Charlotte, who was the heir apparent to the British throne as the only daughter of the George lV, Prince of Wales, unexpectedly died in childbirth after giving birth to a stillborn son. Charlotte’s grandfather—the current reigning King of England, King George lll, was left without an heir. It was unthinkable, really, that with 15 children—12 of whom were still alive—there was no legitimate heir to the British throne. The tragedy brought the aging sons of King George lll into a frantic search for young brides, in hopes that they could secure the succession.

The story of King George lll and his family reads like a modern day soap opera, with unbelievable stories of betrayal, secret marriages, illegitimate children and of course the infamous “madness of King George” which left him virtually senseless during his final years.

Birth of a King

George lll was King of Great Britain from 1760 until his death in 1820. His 60-year reign was the longest in British history at the time. His life and reign were marked by many military conflicts involving much of Europe and even as far as Africa, and Americas, and Asia. Later in his life, George lll had a recurrent and finally permanent mental illness. Over the years there have been many theories to explain his reign and life, but many truths are still unknown. “The Madness of King George” has long since been his legacy, but there were many other contributions by this great, if confusing, king.

Early Life

George was born in London in 1738, the eldest son of Frederick, Prince of Wales and Augusta of Saxe-Gotha. Premature by two months, he was not expected to live, but he grew into a healthy but reserved child. By the age of 18 he was offered a grand establishment of his own by the Prince of Wales, but refused it at the urging of his mother, who wished to keep him at home and within strict moral guidelines. His father had passed away when George was only 13, and his mother was carrying her ninth child. Tutored with his brother Edward, George could read and write in both English and German and comment on political events by the age of eight.

Marriage

George, ever an heir apparent, was denied his first love of Lady Sarah Lennox, whom it was deemed to not be a good match for him. He was quoted to have said, “I am born for the happiness or misery of a great nation and consequently must often act contrary to my passions.” As is the story with many monarchs, George’s marriage partner was chosen for him, first by the King, who wished him to marry the Princess Sophie Caroline of Brunswick-Wolfenbuttel, but this was resisted not only by George, but by his mother as well. After George succeeded his grandfather to the throne at the age of 22 after King George ll’s unexpected death, the search for his bridge became all-important. In 1761, George married Charlotte of Mcklenburg-Strelitz, whom he did not meet until his wedding day. All reports show the couple enjoyed a genuinely happy marriage.

Progeny

King George and his wife were blessed with fifteen children—nine sons and six daughters. Caroline’s childbearing years spanned 21 years, during which time she was almost constantly pregnant. She was reported to have said, “I don't think a prisoner could wish more ardently for his liberty than I wish to be rid of my burden and see the end of my campaign. I would be happy if I knew this was the last time.” King George was a fond father, often playing with is small children on the floor. For a queen to bear so many children was uncommon. One of the first duties of any new royalty was to secure the succession as quickly as possible, and with the birth of four sons in a row, King George was no doubt quite comfortable that he had achieved this goal.

Death in Childhood

Of his 15 children, two died in childhood. Prince Alfred, the 14th child, died at the age of two after an inoculation for the small pox virus. His older brother Octavius died of the same thing six months later, which devastated their parents. It is reported that in his later years, King George had hallucinations where he spoke to his two deceased sons. King George’s youngest daughter, Amelia, was always sickly and died young at the age of 21 of tuberculosis and other illnesses. Her death, it is said, finally tumbled King George into insanity.

The Unmarried Daughters

The daughters of a British king and a fertile queen were great prizes, but despite that, three of the King’s six daughters never married. Princess Augusta, Princess Sophia, and Princess Amelia—despite great desires to marry, were never allowed to do so despite several acceptable offers. The daughters of King George were particularly stifled. Princess Elizabeth once wrote, “We go on as we have for the last 20 years of our lives, much as usual, you know, vegetating." Though the king favored his daughters over his sons, the girls lived in terror of their mother, who was strict and confining. The king’s illnesses combined with the queen’s desire to keep her daughters as her companions resulted in all but one of the daughters being cloistered in their mother’s household well past marriageable age.

Childless Daughters

George had six daughters—and none of them had children. Three never married, and one of those died at age 21. The other three remaining princesses, with the promise of a fertile mother, were unable to provide heirs. The eldest princess, Charlotte, married a prince who had children already from his first marriage. She only had one child with him—a stillborn baby girl. It is rumored that Princess Elisabeth had an illegal marriage and a child who was adopted to another family, but she did marry with approval in 1818. She was, however, unable to have children. Princess Mary bears the distinction of being the longest lived of the 15 children, and the only one ever to be photographed. She married in 1816, but also never had children. Many of his other married children, however, did have issue. So why was there no heir to the throne in 1817?

The Royal Marriage Act of 1772

In this act, a law was passed which prescribed under what conditions a member of the British Royal Family could contract a valid marriage. The act stated that no descendant of George ll, male or female, could marry without the consent of the reigning monarch. Any marriage contracted without the consent of the monarch was to be null and void. However, any family member over the age of 25 who had been refused the sovereign’s consent could marry one year after giving notice to the Privy Counsel of their intention to marry, unless both houses of Parliament expressly declared their disapproval. The act further made it a crime to participate in an illegal marriage of any member of the Royal Family.

This act was put forth by King George lll in response to his brother entering into what he deemed as an unsuitable marriage. His other brother did the same shortly afterwards. Despite George’s good intentions, however, the law backfired and was a huge reason why there was no heir later in the succession.

King George had seven living sons—George lV, Frederick, William lV, Edward, Ernest, Augustus, and Adolphus. By 1817, none of these sons—who would all be over the age of 40—had legal heirs to offer. Secret marriages to unsuitable wives had much to do with it.

The Married Sons

George 1V

George secretly married Maria Fitzherbert—six years his elder, a commoner, and twice-widowed, who was undoubtedly not a “proper wife” for a future king. However, the prince thought better of it later, and ditched his bride, to marry instead his cousin Caroline of Brunswick, thus securing his throne and the succession. The marriage was a disaster, however, and only produced one daughter—the ill-fated Princess Charlotte, whose death in childbirth in 1817 set off the panic of finding an heir.

Frederick

Prince Frederick, the second son, married legally but unhappily, and never had children. His life was spent mainly in the army and away from his estranged wife. By 1817, he was rather advanced in years and his wife had no hope of bearing any children.

Ernest

The fifth son, Ernest, served in the army, in in 1799 received a disfiguring facial wound. He married the twice-widowed Fredrica of Mecklenburg-Strelitz—a marriage disapproved of by his mother, but reportedly it was a happy one. Her previous husband conveniently died just in time for her to marry her lover, Ernest—which caused some controversy at the time. As his marriage was not approved, Ernest had little hope of fathering an heir. At the time of Charlotte’s death, he was married but without living children.

Augustus

Son number six married illegally as well. He later confessed to his illegal marriage, and was subsequently shipped to Rome, never to see his wife and child again. His child could never be considered an heir because of this. Prince Augustus married again later in life, and again, this marriage was not legal and his children could not inherit the throne.

The Unmarried Sons

William

Son number 3, William, chose not to marry at all, but cohabitate with a commoner. He was unconcerned about providing an heir, as he was only the third son and was not likely to ever be on the throne. Although this union brought 10 children, none of them could be considered for the throne.

Edward

Prince Edward, the fourth son, was the first to live in North America and is credited with inventing the term “Canadian.” Prince Edward was 50 years old in 1817 and was not yet married. He quickly married Princess Victoria of Saxe-Coburg-Saafeld in 1818 when the need for an heir became apparent.

Adolphus

Adolphus, the seventh and youngest surviving son, was unmarried in 1817, and was thus set about the task of finding a wife when the Princess died. He finally married Princess August of Hesse-Kassel in 1818. He was 43 and she was 20. Although his marriage was legal and he fathered three children—the first of which in 1819--his children came too late to secure the throne. He is, however, the great-grandfather to the current monarch, Elizabeth ll.

The Race is On

Upon Charlotte’s death in 1817, the seven sons of King George found themselves pressured to provide a legitimate heir, despite being in their 40’s, 50’s, and 60’s. All of King George lll’s daughters were past child-bearing age, and so it fell to the sons to secure the succession.

At the time, there were only four sons who were in a position to produce an heir: the third son, William, the fourth son, Edward, the fifth son, Ernest and the seventh son, Adolphus, Within a short time, the four duchesses became pregnant. The first child born was a son, born to Adolphus on March 26, 1819. The following day, William’s daughter was born. Edward’s daughter, Victoria, was born two months later, and finally Ernest’s wife had a baby boy three days after that. Four babies born in a two month span, and the heir would be not who was born first—but who was born the oldest child. This set the daughter of William as the heir, but she died in infancy, as did their next child. Thus Edward—as the fourth son—secured the succession with his daughter who would one day be crowned Queen Victoria.

The Succession

At her birth, baby Victoria was fifth in line for the throne, following her father’s three older brothers and her father. One by one, the heirs died off--Edward died a few months later, when the baby Victoria was only eight months old, followed by King George lll himself. Although there was the possibility that William—whose place in line preceded Edward’s—would produce another child, it was not to be. When William passed away in 1837, he left the throne to his 18-year-old niece, who is known in history as Queen Victoria.

Legacy

King George lll passed away on January 29, 1820. Behind him he left a legacy of 81 years, and a 59-year reign. Under his reign, the British Agricultural Revolution reached its peak and great advances were made in science and industry. As the reigning king during the American Revolution, some have called him a tyrant, others praise his attempt to maintain such a large territory. He was a loving father and attentive husband—unlike many British kings, and though his plan to ensure the moral marriages of his progeny somewhat backfired, his eventual heir of Queen Victoria was a great success. His famous “madness” in his later years, with consisted of dementia, blindness, deafness, and constant crying, left him secluded during his final days in which his “insanity” had become full blown. It is said he babbled nonsense for 58 hours straight, and that he was unable to comprehend his own wife’s death in 1818. His death was only six days following that of his son Edward, the father of Queen Victoria. His legacy is a fascinating and contradictory one, but the story of his succession is truly baffling.