

The Royal Wedding & Its Impact On The British Public

An Analysis of the Responses to the Mass Observation Directive Special of 1981

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Observing the 80s is a digital project that collects the thoughts and emotions of British men and women, from a variety of social and regional backgrounds, regarding a number of significant events that took place in Britain. The project offers key insights into life in Britain throughout the 1980s, thus providing a greater understanding of a crucial period in British history.

The responses to the Royal Wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Diana, on the 29th of July 1981, highlight some of the main factors that had an impact on the everyday lives of British people during the 1980s. The responses include references to attitudes towards the Royal Family, general confusion regarding British identity, changing family values, rising levels of unemployment and economic hardship, all of which paint a vivid picture of Thatcherite Britain.

Given that respondents opt into the project, it is interesting to note that the majority of the responses about the Royal Wedding came from women, whose ages ranged from 39 to 54 at the time. This self-selection process creates bias, which must be taken into consideration in analyzing their responses. There is, however, one response to the wedding that is written by a 47-year-old man, which offers a male perspective of the event.

Each respondent was asked to keep a detailed account of what they did on the day of the Royal Wedding, in order to determine whether the event had an impact on their daily routine or altered it in any way. For example, in a few of the diary entries, the first

thing the respondent in question did after waking up in the morning was to prepare and drink a hot caffeinated beverage before starting their day – “Made a pot of tea for husband, mother and self.”¹ “Went down and made coffee for the two of us.”² In both these cases, the respondent is a woman in her 40s, tending to the needs of herself and her family. Respondent C108 appears to be a more traditional housewife; she does the housework and the cooking, takes care of the family pets, and makes sure to telephone her elderly aunt and youngest stepson to check up on them. There is a clear contrast between Respondent C108 and Respondent G226, who embodies the qualities of a more modern woman. Respondent G226 emphasizes that she usually does not prepare her husband’s breakfast and only did so on the day of the wedding as it happened to coincide with his birthday. In fact, it appears that her husband makes the breakfast on a normal day, as she describes taking up the breakfast tray as a “switch of roles.” This highlights an important facet of life in 1980s Britain: the departure from conventional gender roles.

The 1980s also saw changes in the fabric of family life and family structure. Some people, such as Respondent S496, used the wedding as an opportunity to spend the day surrounded by family and friends – “Sat down to enjoy the wedding with two of my daughters who live with me, a married daughter and my husband.”³ Respondent H260 marked the occasion by spending it at a holiday camp with her family, in hopes of enjoying the activities offered – “Fun for the kiddies, celebrations during the evening etc.”⁴ While these respondents made the day of a wedding into a family affair, others

1 *Observing the 80s*. (Date Accessed: 22 March 2014). Respondent C108.

2 *Observing the 80s*. (Date Accessed: 22 March 2014). Respondent G226.

3 *Observing the 80s*. (Date Accessed: 22 March 2014). Respondent S496.

4 *Observing the 80s*. (Date Accessed: 22 March 2014). Respondent H260.

chose not to participate in the festivities. For example, Respondent W632 did not spend the day with her husband and teenage sons; her husband was working and her sons were with their friends. The respondent herself chose to go a pub alone, and that too only because “there would be no bunting.”⁵ Despite the fact that this family seems to fit the mold of a typical family, its members appear somewhat detached from one another, which signals to the change in family values in 1980s Britain. This is underlined further through Respondent C108 remarking on how nobody felt the need to visit her elderly, and recently widowed, aunt on the day of the wedding to keep her company. This neglect of the elderly shows how highly independence was valued at the time, to the point where it was almost cruel. Changes in family structure are also alluded to in the diary entries, especially through Respondent G226’s mention of her divorcee neighbour and Respondent C108’s mention of her stepchildren. An incident in which these changes are particularly accentuated is when Respondent G226 overhears a small boy asking his mother about Charles’ and Diana’s wedding – “But Mum, what happens if they call it off?” The respondent very aptly labels this moment as a “sign of the times,” which is relatively accurate given the decline in marriage in the 1980s, coupled with increasing divorce rates and fewer children being born into traditional families.

1980s Britain was also a period of economic hardship and this is reflected in the respondents’ diary entries. Respondent C108 alludes to the mounting unemployment at the beginning of the decade when she talks about the “redundancies at ICL” with her stepson. The feeling of uncertainty associated with working in an environment as volatile as Britain during this time made people hungry for information at all times. Respondents’

⁵ *Observing the 80s*. (Date Accessed: 22 March 2014). Respondent W632.

accounts of the day of the wedding support this, as a number of respondents make references to radio stations or newspapers – “I switched on the Today programme on Radio 4” (Respondent W633); “The Guardian – thank goodness there are newspapers as normal!” (Respondent G226); “Listened to LBC” (Respondent C108).

Britain’s economic environment made it difficult for ordinary people to afford everyday items. Respondent S496 mentions walking to see the HM Band of the Royal Marines march, rather than taking the bus – “buses are too pricey.” – and also talks about purchasing newspapers for the sole purpose of cutting out the coloured photographs to use to decorate her home – “much cheaper than buying photos.” Respondent N403 chooses to knit jumpers for her children rather than buying them from a shop – “better than shop bought woolens.”⁶ While the slang she uses in her diary entry indicates that she is middle class, her aforementioned statement shows that the quality of mass-produced clothing at the time did not justify the money spent on purchasing it. The cost of the Royal Wedding was also a topic of concern for some respondents. For example, Respondent S496 mentioned an encounter with a trade union leader, who informed her that “one of Diana’s presents cost as much as the house” a friend of hers was buying on a mortgage. Despite the questionable validity of this statement, such a rumour is likely to have inspired negative emotions amongst members of the public, especially those who were financially insecure. The fact that the respondent’s friend was purchasing a house on mortgage refers to Britain’s emerging middle class lifestyle, as well as the Housing Act of 1980 that made owning houses substantially easier for the public.

⁶ *Observing the 80s*. (Date Accessed: 22 March 2014). Respondent N403.

The Housing Act, amongst other things, emphasized the sharp contrast between the economic hardship of the 1980s and the enterprise culture promoted by Thatcherism during the same period. A variety of businesses used the Royal Wedding as a means of promotion to encourage sales. Florists, hair salons and wedding shops put out advertisements in attempts of capitalizing on Royal Wedding fever, while seemingly unrelated businesses such as car garages and chemists marketed in similar media as well.⁷ The presence of prosperity at a time of economic downturn created a confused middle class, which was not completely sure of its own identity. The slang used by some respondents in their diary entries imply that they are middle class – Respondent C108 uses “settee” instead of ‘sofa’ and Respondent N403 uses “sweet” instead of ‘pudding.’ Respondent S496’s 8-year-old daughter says that she plans on marrying a prince in the future, so that she can be “posh,” which reflects a middle class mentality, despite her young age. While some members of the middle class thrived during the 1980s, class politics made society a breeding ground for resentment. This is evident when Respondent C108 talks about her decorations for the Royal Wedding – “Mind you I think we are the only two in the road to bother. Or perhaps the others think it is rather non-U.”

These factors all contributed to the conflict and turmoil that gripped Thatcherite Britain. With the rise of multiracialism, race riots were an unavoidable reality, and caused a great deal of chaos. As a result, people saw the Royal Wedding as a means of escape from “the gloom of redundancy, youth unemployment and riots” (Respondent C108). Love and admiration of the Royal Family made the summer of 1981 very enjoyable for some people. The general sense of optimism that surrounded the Royal Wedding inspired

⁷ *Observing the 80s*. (Date Accessed: 22 March 2014). Misc.

good behaviour in people. For example, Respondent G226 mentions an unexpected act of generosity: a TV rental firm lent her neighbour a new model of a colour TV for her to watch the broadcast of the wedding.

People also felt personally linked to the Royal Family; almost like an extended family of sorts. This sentiment is particularly prominent in Respondent S496's diary entry – "We girls are all very fond of Charles." "Nearly everyone I know think the Royals are great and often talk about them like they talk about their own families." Respondent W663 too makes note of people's emotional connection to the Royals; a friend of hers remarked that Charles and Diana took "exactly the same vows"⁸ as he and his wife did, which heightens the strength of their connection to the new couple. Respondent S496 also comments on the Royal Family being "an example of old fashioned family life." Through emphasizing this, the Royal Family was seen as an idealized embodiment of traditional British values.

This commodification of the past was unquestionably apparent in the Royal Wedding itself. The horse-drawn carriages, the soldiers and the veil of perfection draped over Charles and Diana made the wedding a spectacle of the past in a modern setting. Charles and Diana stood out as an overwhelmingly aristocratic and heterosexual white couple against the background of Thatcherite Britain, which was defined by its multiracialism, its breadth of social classes and its fluid nature of sexuality. However, as the entire event was aired in colour on live television, it can be argued that the Royal Family was attempting to embrace the modern world, albeit at a slower pace than the rest of Britain.

⁸ *Observing the 80s*. (Date Accessed: 22 March 2014). Respondent W633.

The fact that one could experience the festivities of the Royal Wedding through their television made the concept of a viewing party popular amongst the public. Respondents chose to visit family members or friends who owned colour TVs in order to enhance their viewing experience – “I went to my father’s, a hundred yards away, at about 9:30 to watch the Wedding on his colour television” (Respondent W633). To further commemorate the day of the wedding, some respondents felt obliged to dress themselves, and even their children, in Union Jack colours of red, white and blue out of fierce patriotism – “Wearing red, white and blue jumper. Blue slacks. Red, white and blue beads, bangles and rings.” (Respondent C108) “I washed and dressed my four-year-old daughter who chose a navy, red and white cotton pinafore dress with a white blouse as the nearest she could get to a patriotic colour-scheme” (Respondent W633). Respondent H260, on the other hand, was displeased with the lack of enthusiasm and patriotic pride shown by other guests at the holiday camp she was visiting with her family – “In fact, I felt a little let down, as my daughter and I had dressed in our red, white and blue tee shirts but others had not bothered.”

While the Royal Wedding did provide people with the opportunity to display their patriotic side, a number of respondents mentioned that fewer people were involved in celebrations for the wedding than they were at the time of the Queen’s Silver Jubilee in 1977. Participation in the festivities seemed to vary from place to place. Respondent G226 made note of a small clothing factory that had “unashamedly dug out all the flags and decorations it could find” and Respondent S496 bought a “25ft strip of Union Jacks” to decorate her home with, but Respondent W633 found that “it was so quiet that we even heard the church clock chime in the quarters.”

It seemed that people favoured private parties, as opposed to public ones. A number of respondents spoke about elaborate meals they had prepared in honour of the day of the wedding – “special three-course menu: hors d’oeuvres, pan fried trout in mushroom cream sauce with sauté potatoes and courgettes, and a bought cream gateau. Washed down with a better-than-usually-afforded bottle of white wine” (Respondent G226). Street parties did take place, but there were noticeably fewer than those organized at the time of the Jubilee – “There was street parties in our town, but not as much as there was when it was the Jubilee” (Respondent N403).

The lack of enthusiasm for the Royal Wedding upset some respondents – “Perhaps we had hoped for too much patriotism!” (Respondent H260) – but other respondents were generally uninterested in the entire event. Respondent W632 was clearly annoyed by the “wedding service blaring from someone’s TV,” and emphasized that she did nothing special on the day – “dressed in old clothes.” While it is apparent that Respondent W632 was thoroughly unimpressed by the excitement surrounding the Royal Wedding, Respondent R470’s response is harder to analyze. Respondent R470 was the single man to offer his insights regarding the Royal Wedding, and had a particularly unique viewpoint. He identifies himself as a leftist, but believes that “it is cheaper to breed heads of state than elect them, they cost no more to keep, and you don’t get lumbered with geriatric actors. Most important, they don’t actually meddle in the running of the country. They know they can’t go too far, because every time they open Parliament, they pass the famous execution site in Whitehall.”⁹ Respondent R470’s answer is decidedly more political than most respondents’. Not only does this highlight

⁹ *Observing the 80s*. (Date Accessed: 22 March 2014). Respondent R470.

the differences between a male and female perspective, but it also shows a deep level of mistrust for figures of authority. An important thing to note is that he feels it would be appropriate to execute a member of the Royal Family if they “go too far.” Violence was rampant in Thatcherite Britain, and this comment shows how severely violence can impact one’s rational mind.

Britain has always been synonymous with the concept of monarchy, and this is distinctly clear in the respondents’ accounts. The Royal Family is a globally recognized symbol of Britain, and therefore contributes to the British identity. Respondent S496’s daughter declared that the spectacle surrounding the Royal Wedding would make Americans jealous – “The Americans must be green with envy.” – because of the lack of a monarchy in American history. Respondent W633 mentions how a particularly tough Canadian man “was almost overcome as the Princess appeared” while watching the broadcast of the wedding, which shows that patriotic pride has the potential to extend to Commonwealth states. Respondent W633 also discusses how her husband visiting their allotment on the day of the wedding was “not out of disloyalty,” but only in order to take advantage of the good weather. Her use of “disloyalty” shows that support of the Royal Family from the British is almost expected for one to be part of society. In a way, this separates the less patriotic respondents from the rest of British society and subtracts from their identity as British citizens.

It is difficult to arrive at an all-inclusive conclusion about how British people felt about the Royal Wedding as a whole due to the contrasting views conveyed through the respondents’ diary entries. However, the respondents’ accounts highlighted some of the key conflicts that defined Thatcherite Britain, most of which contributed to the confusion

surrounding British identity at the time. None of the respondents ignored the wedding; they all acknowledged the occasion, whether their reactions to it were negative or positive. Each of the respondents' diary entries showed how important they felt patriotic sentiments were towards being part of British society. Some thought it was a vital component of being British and expressed this by decorating their homes in memorabilia and dressing up in Union Jack colours on the day of the wedding. Others took a more casual approach in terms of celebrating the wedding, by simply choosing to watch the live broadcast or eat a special meal. The remaining respondents appeared to be averse to the festivities and chose to spend the day of the wedding like they would any other day.

The Royal Wedding clearly inspired a range of emotions in British citizens. The respondents provided a perspective on the wedding from a strongly female standpoint, particularly from married women, who sometimes had children and even grandchildren. What is lacking in the responses is a more comprehensive male perspective, as well as an illustration of how the youth reacted to the wedding when it took place. For a more informed conclusion to be made about the impact of the wedding on British society, these outlooks must also be considered.

Nevertheless, given that the Royal Wedding took place at a time when Britain was facing a great deal of critical social and economic issues, the responses provided by the participants of the project succeed in identifying areas of concern for the general public. Unemployment and economic hardship had an obvious impact on the respondents, influencing everything from the food they ate to their ability to take a day off from work. The discord and chaos caused by riots made them worry about security on the day of the wedding, and may have even limited the number of street parties thrown to celebrate the

royal couple. The manner in which respondents interacted with their families on the wedding day provided insight into the changes in family life and family structure that were taking place at the time. Lastly, the varying levels of patriotism displayed by the respondents during the event conveyed their attitudes towards the Royal Family, and ultimately brought light to the struggle people faced during the 1980s in maintaining their identity as British citizens as part of a sovereign state submerged in the waters of Thatcherism.