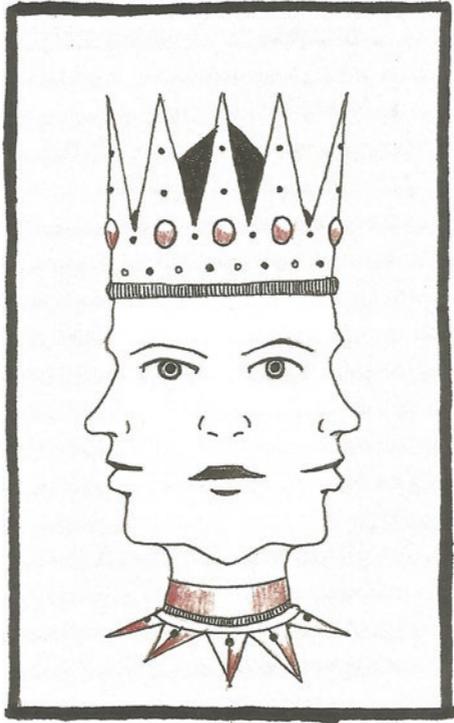


# Royal Wills in Britain from 1509 to 2008



PMSN

Michael L. Nash

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*To my wife Ann  
And to our children James, Joseph, Patrick, Oliver and Sophia*

## FOREWORD

In the contemporary media, the British Royal Family is a reliable stand-by for a good story, and books on ‘the Royals’ serve a similar purpose for the publishing industry. Very often, indeed one might say usually, the material in these stories is thin and recycled, often based on gossip, speculation, rumour; whether or not history repeats itself, Royal historians certainly do repeat themselves. This is emphatically not the case with Michael L. Nash, who has found that most unlikely of things, a new approach to the history of the Royal Family. The wills of members of the Royal Family have not been studied before, and no one has undertaken a detailed examination of them across the long range of British history. There has been a tendency to assume that all that matters is primogeniture and the transmission of the Crown itself but, by examining the detail of Royal wills, Michael L. Nash has been able to put some flesh on the bones of Walter Bagehot’s insight that one of the reasons for the success of the British Monarchy is that it was not simply an Institution, it is a family. By studying successive wills in their historical context, we can see something of that: family heirlooms and property willed according to the wishes of the donor can tell us much about the personal dynamics of the Royal family. These wills offer us insights into the lives of some of the lesser Royals too, men and women who, in terms of their position in society, occupied a grand position, but who were, under that glitter, living in a sort of gilded, genteel poverty, dependent on the charity of those more fortunate in their place in the pecking order. To have a family at the head of your State is to offer several sorts of hostages to fortune. Will the heir be a man (or occasionally in these pages) woman of capacity? After a long reign, how easy it is to distinguish between what

belongs to the State and what belongs to the family? The monarch is, after all, also a private person of some considerable wealth, and their heir, with the Duchy of Lancaster to draw on, is also in that position. There is the natural urge of any testator to leave keepsakes to their children, but how easy is it to draw a distinction between the personal and the public for the monarch who embodies both these things? What can we tell about the relationships within the family by the distribution of personal (and sometimes, perhaps, national) property? Fortunately, we have in Michael L. Nash, an excellent guide through these intricacies. Looked at on paper, even royal wills can seem rather dry, but it is not the least of the triumphs of the author that here he makes these dry bones live. If you thought you knew all there was to know about the Royal Family, you will find here that you did not. Here we get a glimpse behind the scenes and fresh insights into the Family dynamics that lie behind the bland label of the ‘royal family’.

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John Charmley

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