

Mary Bodfish - 'You Can't Abdicate and Eat It'.



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In a fascinating and lively talk that evoked humour and nostalgia, Mary Bodfish gave an attentive audience the facts behind the abdication of King Edward VIII. During the talk she exploded the myths which surround this royal love-story, a love-story that brought about a constitutional crisis and rocked the monarchy. King Edward VIII is the only British Sovereign to have voluntarily abdicated/resigned the Crown in British history.

The title of the talk was actually a quote from Wallis Simpson, who was known for her very sharp, and often cruel, wit.

Mary began by giving the Group a biography of Edward VIII, known to the Royal Family as 'David'. She mentioned the excellent 1978 television series, 'Edward and Mrs Simpson', which many in the Group could remember. She explained the family background, and his difficult relationships with his emotionally cold parents. This affected and influenced his character and choices in later life. Mary then outlined his military career, both during and after The Great War, and emphasised that he was 'a man of the people' who cared for his people.

However, in his private life there were inner tensions – he was immature, shy, stubborn and opinionated and hated the palaver of royal duties and public events. He was emotionally needy and had no self-discipline. However, conversely, he enjoyed popularity and the trappings of public life (what we might now term a 'celebrity lifestyle').

Before his marriage Edward VIII had many mistresses, the first being Freda Dudley-Ward who was his close companion for 15 years.

Mary continued by providing a biography of Wallis Simpson. Her father having died when she was just five months old, she lived in genteel poverty in America and this affected her life. Wallis acquired an attitude of entitlement. With no intellectual leanings and not well-educated, Wallis compensated by having a lively personality. She manipulated men and was self-centred. Because of her genteel class upbringing in Baltimore there were social restrictions and she was not allowed to work. At 19 she married an older man and although it was not a good marriage it enabled her to start climbing the social ladder.



The Duke and Duchess of Windsor on their wedding day.

After her divorce, Wallis moved to New York and met Ernest Simpson, husband No 2. He was respectable but very dull. Wallis and Ernest married in the United Kingdom. The Simpsons were introduced to the Prince of Wales through Lady Thelma Furness, an American living in England and another of his mistresses. Fatefully, while Thelma was abroad in 1934, she asked Wallis to 'look after the little man for me'.

As a result, Wallis became the Prince of Wales' hostess. She called herself 'Wallis in Wonderland' and called David 'Peter Pan'. Although she was not pretty, she was very stylish and enjoyed wearing the latest fashions. Wallis was a tough realist and a perfectionist. She was cruel to David, but he thrived on it. She also had cruel comments to make about the then Duchess of York (later Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother) and Princess Elizabeth (Queen Elizabeth II). Her cruel tongue was her preferred form of humour. Soon, Wallis became David's mistress.

On January 20th 1936 King George V died and David became King Edward VIII.

In October 1936 Wallis and Ernest divorced – generously, he gave her grounds to divorce him for adultery. The Press, although aware of the situation, were ordered not to print anything about it. The UK public, meanwhile, were totally unaware of the situation. Stanley Baldwin, the Prime Minister, said about the King that he was 'obsessed, mad' about her. King Edward VIII desperately wanted to marry Wallis and preferred to give up his throne rather than lose her.

Thus, with a constitutional crisis looming the King abdicated on 10th December 1936 and 'Bertie', the Duke of York, his younger brother became King George VI.

On 3rd June 1937 Edward and Wallis Simpson married in France. They thought the whole situation would blow over and die down and they would be able to return to the UK few years later. But relationships with the Royal family were strained and the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, as they were now known, were forbidden to return to England. The Windsors travelled to Germany in late 1937 and met Adolph Hitler, Edward having fascist leanings. This strengthened their unpopularity in England.

After the Second World War the Windsors led an aimless life as rootless socialites, finally settling in France. Mary gave the Group some information about the Windsors later and last years of their lives and of the consequences of this royal affair. When the Duke of Windsor died in 1972 he was buried at Frogmore, in the Royal Mausoleum. Wallis died in 1986 and was buried beside her husband.

Mary's superb talk was given under extremely difficult conditions, as she was unable to use her PowerPoint presentation – a technical glitch on our part. But with her lively, well researched presentation, lots of humour, anecdotes and quotes, she had the rapt attention of the Group throughout. She was, deservedly, very warmly applauded.

Heidy Hague