

Parallel Earths: Diana 2000

A review essay by Will Brooker

England Her England: The Princess and the Populace, ed. Catherine Hilton (London: Absalom, 2000)

Angel of Mercy: Diana and Cultural Mythology, ed. Dave Killock (London: Terramare, 2000)

Diana at 39: Nation, Culture, Monarchy, ed. Mark Raymond (Cambridge: Peacock, 2000)

As we near the third anniversary of the accident which killed Dodi Al Fayed, Henri Paul and Trevor Rhys Jones - and witness the publication of three substantial new volumes on Diana's life and cultural meaning - it is perhaps time to give voice to the unsayable. What if she had died too? How would the Britain we know now have been altered if the Parisian surgeons had failed to pull off their "miracle", if Diana's sternum rather than spinal column had been crushed by the impact, if the morning of August 31 1997 had seen the country awake to the death of the Princess of Wales?

The narrative of Diana's recovery, and the images through which that story was told, are by now so familiar that it is almost impossible to imagine an alternative history. Whether the events of that morning constitute New Labour's ultimate coup de theatre, stagemanaged from the outset with almost sinister foresight and efficiency, or merely a synchronicity, a coming-together of characters and themes at precisely the right point and place, the date has successfully taken root in popular Blairite mythology - supplanting the evening of the General Election victory - as the symbolic birth of "New Britain". Had it been Diana's body which arrived at Heathrow that day, Blair would no doubt have found something to appropriate from the tragedy - a very modern princess, a woman of the people, a national ambassador - but it is hard to see where even the wildest of spin doctors could have constructed a stunt to rival Blair's first appearance on the steps outside St Luke's, gravely shaking hands with the taxi drivers and office cleaners who made up that earliest and bleariest of crowds before marching up into the hospital, taking the concerns and sympathy of the people along with the modest bunch of white roses, "from Cherie". There would have been a carefully-crafted speech, of course, but surely nothing to match the address at 8am which would be rescreened every half-hour throughout the day and recycled regularly during the next three years, not least as part of the Dome's midnight tribute; no platform would have compared in dramatic terms with those hospital steps, the double-doors sliding open as Blair returned sans flowers but bearing his first report. Nothing, surely, could have consolidated the PM's image as the people's representative quite like that moment when he stepped back out to brief the gathering crowds and the assembled press, his brow furrowed and flushed like a Shakespearian general returning from the field of battle.

Diana was, to many of us ... an angel of mercy and compassion. Now it is our turn to care for her, to attempt to ... pay her back, in some way, for everything she has done in her lifetime. Let us take this ... dreadful accident, this tragedy, as an opportunity for all of us ... to take her lead, and to follow her example. Let her serve as a beacon to us ... let her light show us where we can tend and support each other, as a society. (Blair cited in Hilton, xi)

As Alison McKay demonstrates, this brief address masterfully evoked and condensed contemporary myth - the talkshow homily of Jerry Springer's "final thoughts" and the sentiment of Lloyd-Webber's lyrics for the dying Evita - while defining the terms in which Diana would subsequently be viewed. (McKay in Kollock, 39) Blair successfully constructed a ready-made interpretive framework for the post-accident Diana which drew on existing tropes such as Florence Nightingale and the nurse as "angel" and rearranged them around the Princess in an instantly-accessible, tabloid-friendly format. Blair had effectively taken possession of Diana's new (New) image, swiftly repositioning her as saint and martyr, and was thus able to reinvoké her metaphorically for his own subsequent purposes - the most theatrical being her surprise appearance at his side for the lighting of the Thames Beacon on December 31st 1999.

In a more sober move, Diana's new image - supposedly bridging the gap between private and public healthcare through her two-day sojourn at the Chelsea and Westminster spinal clinic - was brought into service as symbol of New Labour's October drive to improve the NHS. The Angel of Mercy trope was by then well-established in the public consciousness, as evidenced through the children's drawings of a winged and haloed Diana which were being placed outside the hospital gates by the end of the first day, and it was a simple rhetorical strategy to extend the term from the princess herself to "Diana's nurses" and cast the attendant tax rise within the discourse of "paying back". Even Gordon Brown's Commons speech of 19 September 1999 - despite the Chancellor's rumoured opposition to "gimmicky" NHS reforms rushed in without due prudence - echoes Blair's first address in its appeal to "paying our dues" as both a duty and privilege. (Brown cited in Hilton, xii) The concurrent introduction of the "supernurse" bracket, with increased salaries for experienced or "exceptional" nursing staff - the term, typically, was vaguely-defined yet publicly accessible - was in turn an early symptom of the meritocratic discourse which would so heavily inform Blair's vision of Britain at the turn of the millennium.

With hindsight, the seeds of what Paul Kellman calls the Blairite "civil monarchy" (Kellman in Raymond, 12) were also in place during the first days of Diana's convalescence. Snowdon's portraits of the Princess' private suite during early September show Blair and Cherie alongside Hillary Clinton, Elton John and, at one stage, Simon LeBon, who released the first pop tribute to Diana as an album track on 1997's "Medazzaland". Already, the select clique of visitors was drawn from the spheres of entertainment as well as politics, and the boundaries between celebrity politicians and political celebrities were further blurred when John, LeBon and George Michael invited Blair to record the spoken introduction to the charity single "Angels", which remained at Number One from the third week of December 1997 through to February 1998.

Already, too, the traditional monarchy was pushed to the sidelines, uncomfortable and unsure of its role in this drama. The Queen's reputation arguably never recovered from her failure to visit Diana until five days after the accident, and this as a response to widespread public (and tabloid) protest. During the first weeks of the Princess's recovery she and Prince Phillip continued to waver uneasily in the background like old ghosts, expressing their sympathy in stilted, formal terms which only served to underline the traditional monarchy's seeming irrelevance to a newly Dianized Britain which left them baffled, bewildered and increasingly redundant. Charles, of course, fared hardly better. While his reconciliatory visit to Diana's suite won public approval, helped by that half-embrace with Blair at the doorway, his return with Camilla was horrendously ill-judged. Camilla, unfairly, took most of the tabloid's venom, but Charles seemed to retire a beaten man, overshadowed by his ex-wife even as she lay unconscious.

Diana's private suite, then, became the "New Camelot" (Smith, cited in Hilton 151), frequented by selected public figures, while the carefully-posed tableaux of her semi-prone figure, the bed a raft in a sea of flowers, evoked the "classical" tropes of mediaeval statuary and Millais' Ophelia as much as they recalled the deathbed scenes of the Hollywood melodrama from *Little Women* to *Beaches*. The hand-picked well-wishers acquired something of her aura of tragic bravery through their mere attendance, a metaphor linked by Owain Fletcher to far older ways of seeing the monarchy as quasi-divine and possessing the ability to cure plague. While the evocation of such historical myths may seem out of keeping with the new, "civil" monarchy which Diana otherwise espoused, this notion - discussed by Fletcher in terms of discourses of health - worked through its extension of Diana's previous relationship with HIV sufferers (Fletcher in Hilton, 95). She had challenged taboos around figures of "plague"; now she acquired the symbolic power to bless and cleanse.

So while Sophie and Edward might otherwise have been relegated to the ranks of the old guard alongside Charles and the Queen, their audience with Diana marked them as approved. Although Sophie suffered a similar treatment to Camilla in the first week after her engagement was made public, even earning an identical headline as her picture was juxtaposed with Diana's under the strap "THE PRETENDER", she was successfully refigured as Diana's confidante. Her privilege increased as she began to undertake charity "missions" at Diana's request, and she was ultimately cast in the tabloid press as an able-bodied proxy carrying out the Princess of Wales' secret agenda, second only to Prince William in this respect.

Diana's appearance at Sophie and Edward's wedding, as Liam Monk points out in his chapter on queer readings, consolidated her reputation with many gay men. Again, Monk links Diana's new image to cinematic melodrama, this time *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane*, and finds queer potential even in this celebration of heterosexuality.

Diana, we felt, had always known what it was like to be the underdog, and she had struggled through with verve, keeping her smile pasted on and her tiara straight. Now, emerging from the church with a thousand camera-flashes winking off her wheelchair, she was Judy Garland at her most glorious, battling to a bittersweet comeback and easily upstaging the bride even from a sitting position. Diana showed us what we'd suspected and she'd known all along, even at her own wedding almost twenty years ago that this was all just for show, the whole shebang. Just enjoy the drag, her smile said. (Monk in Hilton, 364)

Diana's insistence that a company of NHS nurses and carers from the Terrence Higgins Trust were invited to the reception gave some credence to the Blairite discourse of a Britain which would transcend traditional social boundaries. Certainly, it would be churlish to suggest that Diana's work with charities for spina bifida and muscular dystrophy in particular did not achieve genuine results in raising public awareness as well as research funding, and her pursuit of the anti-landmine campaigns in Angola and Bosnia seemed invested with even greater passion following her accident. More generally, Diana's public appearances in themselves fundamentally shifted the public conception of "disability". As ever, Diana's role in her own mediated image is shot through with contradictions: having requested that her sons be spared tabloid attention in the months following the accident, it was she who apparently leaked the photographs of herself in physiotherapy, although she remained coy about the matter for weeks afterward. Whatever her motives, it has been argued (see Thompson in

Kollock, 41) that those twelve images of the Princess undergoing water therapy in a sleek one-piece, her hair slicked back and face carefully made-up, did more than any publicity campaign to cast disability in a new, positive, even glamorous light. As Adrian Thompson notes, the very fact that terms such as "the disabled" and "wheelchair-bound" now sound painfully outmoded, only three years after the crash, is testament to Diana's achievement. Again, it was often possible to convince oneself that the talk of "opportunity for all" in the new, Dianaized Britain held genuine promise.

Yet even within Camelot there were hierarchies; some were chosen and some excluded from Diana's inner circle, and the penalties were high for those who crossed the Princess. Victoria Adams and Sadie Frost were both rumoured to have angered Diana, the former for wearing a near-identical Gaultier dress and the latter with her comments on Diana's parenting abilities; both were subsequently snubbed at the premiere of *Armageddon*, and Victoria faced added humiliation when her wedding to David Beckham was shunted from the front pages by Diana's much-publicised first meeting with Christopher Reeve. It is interesting to wonder whether, in a world without Diana, Victoria and Beckham might have filled the gap she left in *Hello!* and its sister magazines, as a form of second-rate, make-do royalty. In the event, of course, it was the announcement of Diana's "close friendship" with Paul McCartney in January 2000 which set the seal on the new monarchy; a union so perfectly formed - celebrity, royalty, tragedy and charity in one package - that more than one commentator voiced suspicions that the relationship was a publicity stunt (see Porter in Raymond, Vickery in Hilton).

More seriously, the supposed utopia was by no means all-inclusive. Firstly, for all its "Newness", the architects of Dianaized Britain were both pronounced Catholics, Diana having famously converted after what Blair had called "a series of deep chats". While her newfound faith, compounded with her "miraculous" resurrection, undoubtedly consolidated her image as Santa Diana - Mother Theresa, after all, had passed on mere days after the accident, leaving a convenient vacancy in popular mythology - the quasi-religious icons of the Princess (and sometimes the PM) which first appeared on British high streets during September 1987 proved alienating for many who otherwise supported Blair's policies and Diana's work for charity. The focus on Catholicism during the Dome celebrations was also a source of controversy, and on a perhaps more trivial level, Anthony Walker's audience research indicates that Diana's "Faith Zone" series in the BBC's Sunday evening slot was considered "tedious and preachy" even by Middle England households (see Walker in Raymond, 18).

Reem Dulaimi's discussion of Muslim response to the accident echoes these themes of alienation and exclusion. "Breaking my silence, I discovered that many of my friends and relatives felt the same way," Dulaimi reports. "A man had died, a Muslim, and he had been forgotten while this 'English Rose' was revered. It was hard to shake off the feeling that someone had wanted it this way." (Dulaimi in Raymond, 198). Dulaimi links her account to the internet conspiracy theories which sprung up hours after the crash, accusing anyone from the Queen Mother to the FBI of engineering Dodi Al Fayed's death and the racist sabotage of this intercultural relationship. "Some of us felt we had no other way of expressing our discomfort. I am sure that, though they would not admit it even to me, some of my friends had posted on those sites or were involved in their management."

What these three volumes, Raymond's in particular, make admirably clear is that, even at its most successful, the hegemonic vision of a unified, "Dianaized" Britain was a myth riddled with contradictions - a "new", civil monarchy essentially defined by the mores of the Hollywood star system, a "new" vision of stakeholding democracy profoundly informed by Catholic faith - and troubled by

various resistances. Again, the overriding effect of all three anthologies is to make us wonder what would have happened in some alternate earth where all four passengers had been killed. A week's official mourning, perhaps, some showbiz, gala tributes to a Princess who, in her last weeks, had become little more than a spoiled playgirl; perhaps a rose garden in her name, a newly-minted coin to mark the first anniversary of her death, a footnote in the reviews of the century. Diana might have become, in death, a Princess Grace, fondly remembered by elderly women and some gay men, her story destined for TV movies; by now, surely, she would be regarded at best as a historical icon, frozen in the twentieth century alongside Eva Peron and Marilyn Monroe. It is perhaps her greatest irony that it took physical paralysis to transform Diana into a symbol of, if not a force for, progressive, dynamic social change. The twenty-first century, as these anthologies attest, would be a less fascinating place without her.

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