An obscure and fascinating episode in British history is brought to life in this superbly acted drama. BRIAN MCFARLANE reflects on the remarkable relationship that developed between a stammering monarch and his speech therapist, and considers what responsibilities filmmakers have to the reality of their historical subjects.
On the face of it, novelist J.M. Coetzee wouldn't seem to have much common ground with the problems of the British royal family, but I was struck by this sentence from his *Diary of a Bad Year*: "The rule of succession is not a formula for identifying the best ruler, it is a formula for conferring legitimacy on someone or other and thus forestalling civil conflict." In the case of George VI, he never expected the line of succession would push him into top spot and he was ill-equipped for the job, but he worked hard enough and lived long enough to justify this baton-passing process.

His main problem was a very bad stammer that made public occasions especially harrowing for him, exacerbating a natural shyness. In coming to The King's Speech (Tom Hooper, 2010), I had the unusual experience of finishing the book of the same title just one hour before seeing the film. This complicated the experience of the film for me in some interesting ways. The book had only recently become available and had been written in the wake of the film, so it is not an adaptation from page to screen, but rather an elaboration in light of the research surrounding the film's central subject matter. I found it difficult to view the film without thinking of what the book revealed about the king and his speech therapist. Should this have been irrelevant or not?

**A complex intertextuality**

In 2009, BBC Radio 4 aired a play called *A King's Speech*, which dealt with Lionel Logue's work in the matter of the Duke of York's (later King George VI's) speech difficulties. This led his grandson Mark Logue to 'appreciate that his life and work could be of interest to a far wider audience beyond [his] own family'. The following year, this episode in royal history was made the subject of an ambitious Anglo-Australian production now called *The King's Speech*, to be directed by Hooper and with an all-star cast drawing on the acting strength of the two producing countries. In 2009, Iain Canning, the film's producer, approached Mark Logue, and in the spirit of adviser - 'Logue Family Consultant' is his credit - he conducted wide-ranging research into his grandfather's role. Drawing above all on Lionel Logue's 'vividly written diaries' and his correspondence with the Duke/King, Mark came up with the absorbing book that details a remarkable, if little-known, byway of British history. Whether the film influences one's reading of the book, or whether it is the other way round, the two make for some very provocative comparisons. It is an interesting sidenote that David Seidler, the film's screenwriter, is planning a stage version in 2011.

The story's appearance across radio, film and stage is only one of the intertextual influences at play in one's viewing of the new film. The historical events that form the background to the personal story are themselves significant in recent history, and have been the subject of innumerable studies that, to varying degrees, many viewers will have in mind. As well, though, several recent films have drawn their narrative inspiration from true events. The most obvious example in the present context is Stephen Frears' *The Queen* (2006), a shrewd and compassionate study of monarchy under stress. Perhaps some viewers will also recall the popular 1978 television miniseries *Edward & Mrs Simpson*, which dramatised Edward VIII's abdication (with a definitive impersonation from Edward Fox) and the unwilling succession of 'Bertie', who was pushed into assuming the throne as George VI.

A more recent point of reference is director Tom Hooper's previous film, *The Damned United* (2009), based on the 44-day tenure of Brian Clough as manager of top football club Leeds United. Those who have seen this film may have in mind Hooper's way of making absorbing drama from true events. In *The Damned United*, he dramatised Clough's takeover from the club's legendary manager Don Revie: Clough disliked Leeds' dirty style of play and determined to change its image. In other words, there was an interest in
the processes and repercussions of 'the line of succession', a matter near the heart of The King's Speech. More generally, one thinks of how other films have dealt with actual events, including such recent examples as Balibo (Robert Connolly, 2009) and The Special Relationship (Richard Loncraine, 2010), in which the unstructured interplay of everyday life is fashioned into drama.

My point is simply this: we rarely come to a film with no prior knowledge of its matter, and perhaps even more rarely does any film exist in a vacuum, without setting up echoes of other films, other texts, other events. Indeed, The King's Speech may have a richer and more varied intertextuality than most.

History boys

Apart from all the resonances of other film texts that make themselves felt in The King's Speech, behind its character drama there is the palpable sense of a tumultuous historical background. At the personal level, the austere, authoritarian figure of the 'sailor king', George V, was no one's idea of a loving father. While he may have loved his family, he had no skill in making his affection felt, which cannot have given poor stammering Bertie much confidence. At the public level, as England recovered first from World War I and then from the Depression, George V died. Furthermore, the country stumbled into the crisis of the abdication. Edward VIII, very popular with the people (and especially with the ladies, several of whom had been his mistresses), fell for American divorcee Wallis Simpson. In his famous renunciation speech he told the anxious nation that he could no longer continue as king without 'the woman I love by my side', thus catapulting the diffident and unwilling Bertie into the limelight of top job. His unwillingness was partly a matter of congenital shyness, but it was hugely exacerbated by his speech defect. With the woman he loved by his side (by then Queen Elizabeth and later the Queen Mother) and with the help of Logue's therapy, he persisted and became a much respected monarch, giving the nation something like moral leadership through the grim days of World War II.

Bertie and Logue are the key figures in the personal drama of the film, but those other historical personages — George V, Queen Mary, Edward VIII, Mrs Simpson, Queen Elizabeth, the prime ministers Chamberlain and Churchill, and others — all bring memories of their roles in recent history. The filmmakers have necessarily given coherent presences to all of these figures in the film, and chosen carefully what to stress and what to soft-pedal about them. Personal and public histories are what the film goes to work on.

'We've become actors!'

George V hates making the Christmas Day broadcast, complaining in the film that these days of the emerging 'wireless' require kings to be vocal actors. This will of course be one of the film's key motifs in view of Bertie's fear of public utterance. The film's opening image is, appropriately, a close-up shot of an old-fashioned radio microphone. The announcer (a witty cameo from Adrian Scarborough) intones 'the new invention of radio' by way of introducing the Duke of York, Bertie (Colin Firth), who is standing by looking very apprehensive. Despite the comforting presence of his wife Elizabeth (Helena Bonham Carter), the speech is a disaster. After Bertie's physician recommends the relaxing powers of smoking and a mouth full of marbles, Elizabeth seeks out Australian speech therapist Lionel Logue (Geoffrey Rush). And thus the film's central drama is set in motion.

Logue insists that he will 'need trust and
total equality', leading Elizabeth to tell him, 'You're awfully sure of yourself.' This sequence is followed by brief contrasting interludes of domestic intimacy: Bertie with his wife and daughters, and Logue with his wife and sons. These segments seem to be the film's way of announcing the total (dramatic) equality that must exist between its two protagonists, if not quite in the way that Logue imagines.

The real heart of the film is, then, in Logue's dealings with the future monarch. It is Logue's function to help Bertie become the sort of 'actor' his father has in mind, and the film is essentially structured around meetings between the two men, in which Logue helps Bertie to overcome his speech defect, and public occasions, where Bertie's progress as a royal actor can be observed. The dramatic impulse is in Bertie's gradual mastering of the techniques Logue has taught him; perhaps surprisingly, these involve therapeutic bursts of four-letter words that prove cathartic for dealing with Bertie's frustrations. All this is treated without sentimentality as Bertie moves towards greater public confidence, culminating in a wartime Christmas speech. Hooper and Seidler avoid the inviting trap of the feel-good in the film.

The filmmakers have clearly decided that, for the sake of dramatic contrast, they would make Logue a much less respectful character than he seems to have been. As Mark Logue writes in summary, 'Indeed, to a modern reader, the tone Logue adopts when writing of the King can seem fawning.' This raises the question of what responsibilities filmmakers have to the actuality of their historical subjects, as distinct from those that might pertain to a case of adapting a fiction. This will not matter to viewers who don't read the book just before seeing the film, but those who do will bring to the latter a strong sense of a much more deferential Logue — just as determined to do his job to the best of his ability but within the parameters of a historically more probable commoner-royal relationship.

One sees what Hooper and Seidler were up to in this matter. There is actually specific reference to the King's ignorance of how 'the people' live and how little they know of his life. It's as if the film wants to explore this gap of understanding, to suggest a common humanity, a common capacity for friendship. Perhaps, too, the filmmakers want to point to the way the colonies were losing any residual subservience to a distant monarchy. If so, this function is proleptic: many Australians would still refer to England as 'home' for a decade or more after the events of this film. What concerns me here is the degree of licence the 'adapter' of a real-life situation can reasonably take in order to make, say, a political or other cultural point. Such concerns inevitably followed my response to Rush's engaging performance, which seems to have little to do with the actual man's demeanour and attitudes.

The film's two stars are surrounded by a very impressive cast that brings the other historical figures (less problematically) to life. Helena Bonham Carter has done nothing so fine since The Wings of the Dove (Ian Softley, 1997), steely determination and wifely solicitude vying for precedence in the interests of Bertie's growing confidence, with a nicely wapsiah aside about Mrs Simpson's 'certain skills, acquired in an establishment in Shanghai'.

Eve Best is an astonishing look-alike as the basilisk-eyed divorcée whom the Duchess ignores; Guy Pearce is an aptly handsome, teckless Edward; and the parents are magisterially incarnated in short studies by Michael Gambon as George V and Claire Bloom as Queen Mary, who falls to her knees in obeisance before Edward when her husband dies. There is also Derek Jacobi (Archbishop Lang), Jennifer Ehle (Mrs Logue), David Bamber as a theatre director making snide remarks about 'the colonies' when amateur actor Logue auditions for Richard III, and a vocally uncannily Churchill from Timothy Spall. I mention all these people because this is one of the most strongly cast films in years, and because there is complex interest in considering the extent to which the actors' personae are melded to what we know of the public figures they are representing.

The King's Speech might have become a mere Sunday-night TV drama, but it doesn't: it is persistently engrossing as it avoids cosiness and maintains a capacity to disconcert. In addition to the major virtues of acting, the film also has Eve Stewart's production design (a role she also filled on Hooper's The Damned United) and Jenny Beaven's costumes, which together evoke period and class associations with unerring eyes for detail. Just look at the Duchess idly flicking through the pages of The Illustrated London News as she waits for Bertie to finish his session with Logue, or any of her discreet ensembles in their pastel shades. These are creative talents that know what they're about — as does the film at large.

In Colin Firth and Geoffrey Rush the film has two of the world's best actors at this moment, and both are at their best here.

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Endnotes
3 ibid., p.x.
4 ibid., p.x.
5 ibid., p.228.