War, Culture and the British Royal Visit to Paris, July 1938

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Summary: *Against a background of gathering menace in Europe, an official visit to France was organised on behalf of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth. Its explicit purpose was both to bolster the relationship between France and Britain, and to underline the stark contrast between the "liberal democracies" and the dictatorships. The visit was framed by the memorialisation of the Great War, starting with the unveiling of the Britannia monument on 19 July, and ending with the inauguration of the Australian War memorial at Villers-Bretonneux, in the Somme, on 22 July. In between came a mix of events, including receptions and galas, a garden party, a visit to the Louvre, and, most impressive of all, a gigantic military review at Versailles. The two organising themes of the visit were "War and Culture".*

Keywords: *Franco-British relations, cultural history, politics, ideology, memory, war*

Résumé : *Contre l'arrière-fond de guerre menaçante en Europe, une visite officielle en France fut organisée de la part des souverains britanniques, Georges VI et la reine Elizabeth. Le but explicite en fut de renouveler les rapports entre la France et la Grande-Bretagne et de mettre en relief le contraste entre les « démocraties libérales » et les dictatures. La visite fut encadrée par la mémorialisation de la Grande Guerre, à commencer par l'inauguration le 19 juillet 1938 du monument « Britannia » à Boulogne, jusqu'à la consécration du mémorial aux forces australiennes à Villers-Bretonneux le 22 juillet. Entre ces deux dates, toutes sortes d'événements furent organisés : réceptions, galas, concerts, visite au Louvre, et, le plus impressionnant peut-être, une grande revue militaire à Versailles dont les thèmes furent « Guerre et Culture ».*

Mots-clés : *Rapports franco-britanniques, histoire culturelle, politique, idéologies, mémoire, guerre*

"To speak of France is to speak of everything: for what human achievement is not enclosed in the past and present of that great country?"

(*The Times*, 'The Heritage of France', 19 July 1938)

Against a background of gathering menace in Europe, an official visit to France was organised on behalf of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth. Its explicit purpose was both

to bolster the relationship between France and Britain, and to underline the stark contrast between the liberal democracies and the dictatorships. In particular, Hitler's expansionist designs on Czechoslovakia, which was allied to France by Treaty, were the cause of most concern throughout 1938, leading to the Munich Accords of September that year.

Philip Bell, in his history of "entente and estrangement" in Franco-British relations, rightly affirms that "there is much in the royal visit to France in July 1938 that is worth considering" (Bell, 1996: 219). It was planned in earnest from January 1938. The British embassy in Paris confirmed that the visit would be an "excellent move", and that the buttressing of the Entente would be especially beneficial for the beleaguered French. As British ambassador to Paris, Sir Eric Phipps, put it:

> I think the Paris visit would have an excellent effect internally and all classes would vie with one another in giving Their Majesties an enthusiastic reception. Externally it seems clear that the visit would produce a most healthy effect upon Hitler, Mussolini and Co., who like to think that the streets of Paris are running in blood or at any rate very dangerous to walk about in. The visit would convince the ill-informed Italian and German peoples that the French situation was not as black, or rather red, as their masters try to paint it. (TNA: FO 371/21606)

Thus the British establishment, always preoccupied by the political volatility of the French neighbours across the Channel, believed that a diplomatic display of royal power, in a setting of French flair and civilisation, would help restore a sense of balance to a nation at risk of continuing upheaval. By 18 January 1938, King George VI himself had approved the visit.

At around the same time, the French committee responsible for the construction of a monument to the role played by the British Expeditionary Force in the First World War announced that its giant statue of Britannia would soon be ready for inauguration, it was hoped, by a royal personage. The date proposed by the French was St George's Day, 23 April, but, as the weeks passed, it became clear that the unveiling of the Britannia statue would better be incorporated into the royal visit. However, because protocol dictated that the British sovereign only inaugurated monuments devoted to the dead and missing, a Field Marshal would unveil the statue (TNA: FO371/21606). We shall return to this inauguration shortly.

Another of the dates proposed for the royal visit was 14 July 1938, but British diplomats tactfully suggested that this day would probably not be appropriate, and proposed "to nip it in the bud privately" with the French. On 9 February, an official communiqué announced that the dates had been fixed for 28 June to 1st July 1938. The Paris embassy reported that this had been "welcomed on all sides" and had "given warm and universal satisfaction". Much was made in the Paris press of the fact that this was to be the first foreign trip since the accession of the new King and Queen. Traditionally, the new sovereigns' first destination would have been one of the Dominions. The decision to go to France seemed to underscore the "permanent character of the Entente Cordiale", all the more so because the British monarchy had suffered the relatively recent blow of the abdication. To illustrate how well news of the impending visit had been received in France around 9 and 10 February 1938, the Paris embassy sent a large sample of press cuttings back to the Foreign Office (TNA: FO371/21606). There was remarkable consensus across the political spectrum, which reflected the understanding, forcefully seized upon in France, that the

two countries "would stand by each other" (*Le Temps*). General Gamelin said it was the best news he had heard in a long time, and it was expected that the visit would be "more spectacular" than other royal visits. To remind their readers of the latter, newspapers ran long articles about previous celebrations of the Entente, particularly those organised around Edward VII in 1903 and George V in 1914. Léon Boussard, writing in *L'Intransigeant*, noted an important contrast with Hitler's visit to Rome, which was planned for early May. This contrast reflected a theme which would remain constant until the visit was over: military aims and policies of Germany and Italy were belligerent, whereas British and French rearmament was intended to provide an "instrument de sécurité" for Europe. Even the *Action française*, whose exclusive brand of nationalism had long been defined in terms of opposition to all things British, waxed lyrical, albeit in its own guarded way:

> Français et Anglais, gardons-nous d'imiter les fabricants de pactes « idéologiques ». […] Revenons-en à la vieille et saine conception de l'alliance. Restons ce que nous sommes, avec nos génies propres, deux peuples profondément différents, longtemps ennemis, mais entre lesquels, du fait de leurs luttes mêmes, est née une estime mutuelle raisonnée, qui pourrait utilement développer encore. […] L'Angleterre et la France, aujourd'hui réconciliées et amies, n'ont pas achevé leur mission. Elles ont à conserver en commun et à défendre, si c'est nécessaire, les fruits les plus précieux, si lentement mûris, de la civilisation occidentale. […] Violemment secoués par le vent de folie qui souffle sur le monde, ces fruits-là méritent que les deux plus vieilles nations d'Europe, celles qui ont derrière elles le plus lourd passé de gloire, concertent leur action pour les sauver. (J. Delebecque, *Action française*, 10 Feb. 1938, in TNA: FO371/21606)

As the weeks passed, plans gradually came to fruition. The British embassy noted that, despite the difficult economic situation in France, a Bill had been passed in the National Assembly approving expenditure amounting to 24 million francs, with some 12 million to be spent on turning part of the Quai d'Orsay, by means of a thorough refurbishment, into a palace fit to receive the British royal couple. The decor would, moreover, include priceless historical pieces from the Louvre Museum (TNA: FO371/21606, C5722, 13 June 1938). Among those who were present for the whole visit, Alexander Werth (the long-established Paris correspondent of the *Manchester Guardian*) has left the best published account (Werth, 1939). Our study draws on this, with additional cross-referencing to the Foreign Office archival record, as well as press accounts in both Britain and France.

The visit was postponed until 19 July 1938 because of the death of the Queen's mother, the Countess of Strathmore. At first a disappointment to the French, in the end the three-week delay only added to the sense of feverish anticipation (Werth, 1939: 181). For the French, the visit represented the "symbolic significance of the 'inseparability' of Britain and France in the Europe of today"; their "union" "was the best and only solid hope […] that peace may yet be saved" (Werth, 1939: 183). Denis Saurat, Director of the French Institute and Professor of French at King's College, London, also seized on the political momentousness of the visit: "Nos deux peuples se trouvent à un tournant de l'Histoire où la destinée du monde est entre leurs mains". His was a reasoned call for much closer and deeper mutual understanding (Saurat, 1938).

The visit was framed by the memorialisation of the Great War, starting with the unveiling of the Britannia monument on 19 July, and ending with the inauguration of the Australian War memorial at Villers-Bretonneux, in the Somme, during their majesties' return, on 22 July. In between came a mix of events, including receptions and galas at the Elysée

Palace, the British Embassy, the Quai d'Orsay, the Hôtel de Ville, the Opéra, a garden party at Bagatelle, a visit to the Louvre to see the exhibition of British Art, and, perhaps most impressive of all, a gigantic military review at Versailles. The two organising themes of the visit were, indeed, "War and Culture" (Bradford, 1989: 271).

"War"

In his work *Fallen Soldiers*, George Mosse identifies and describes the "Myth of the War Experience" and its role in conferring meaning on what, in retrospect, could all too easily be seen as the pointless slaughter of the First World War. He shows how memorials and military cemeteries, "reserved for the nation's heroes, came to function as a central symbol in the Myth of the War Experience" (Mosse, 1990: 46). In the late 1930s, memories of the sacrifices made by so many in the Great War continued to remain uppermost in people's minds, memories rendered all the more painful by the increasing realisation that war was again becoming a distinct possibility. Queen Elizabeth herself had known grief through the loss of Fergus, one of her brothers, at the battle of Loos in September 1915. This was the context in which the inauguration of the Britannia monument at Boulogne-sur-Mer should be seen. The ceremony was timed so that, just as the royal yacht *Enchantress*, bearing the royal visitors, passed the statue on entering the harbour, Britannia, covered by a huge Union Jack, would be unveiled. Those writing press accounts of the *Enchantress*'s meticulously choreographed progress across the Channel (with a British naval and air escort for the first half, and French, for the second), and of the yacht's entrance into Boulogne harbour, made much of the morning's dramatic weather effects: "Fog Rolled Back by Sunlight" (*The Times*, 20 July 1938).

Postcard of the Britannia monument

The *Enchantress* passes the Britannia monument
Source : *La visite en France des souverains britanniques 19-22 juillet* (1938)

A special issue of the *Revue de Boulogne* (*RB*), published in August 1938, describes in great detail the story of how the statue was commissioned. Clearly much thought had gone into the conception and installation of the statue, as some of its supporting stones had been hewn and transported from far-flung quarries in different British dominions. The *Revue de Boulogne* also reproduces the speeches preceding the inauguration, orations lasting together for well over an hour. From 10 August 1914 onwards, advance

units of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) had landed at Boulogne with, on August 12, Second Battalion Argyle and Sutherland Highlanders among the first contingents passing through on their way to the front. Veterans from these units were present, alongside survivors of the Old Contemptibles and representatives from a wide range of French veterans' associations. This, affirmed the orators before the unveiling, was proof of the lasting and material reality of the Entente. The blood sacrifice of the British allies on the soil of the Somme had sealed the Entente, and had finally, argued one anglophile French general, put an end to centuries of mutual fear and mistrust that had reached their peak under Napoleon[1].

In an opening speech Senator Roger Farjon, chair of the organising committee responsible for building the statue, provided a lengthy explanation of how, since 1933, innumerable financial and material obstacles had been overcome by the tireless efforts of his team, efforts which included a national veterans' subscription. After further speeches by the deputy mayor and the Marquis de Vogüé (president of the Association France-Grande Bretagne), it was the turn of Marshal Philippe Pétain. The hero of Verdun declaimed:

> C'est à cette situation en face de la côte anglaise que Boulogne dut le grand privilège d'accueillir le premier élément du corps expéditionnaire britannique à son entrée en France. Ce jour-là, l'Entente Cordiale, confirmée par un tel acte, devenait une réalité vivante. La nouvelle de cet événement provoqua dans toute la France un immense enthousiasme. Ce débarquement initial du 12 août fut suivi du transport en France de cinq divisions d'infanterie et d'une division de cavalerie. […] Pendant plus de quatre années, le courant des renforts, des ravitaillements, des évacuations ou des mouvements des permissionnaires, ne fut jamais interrompu. Sans cesse grossi, malgré le péril sous-marin, il mesura la grandeur de votre effort, dont l'intensité se modelait sur les pulsations de la bataille. (Anon., 244)

Moreover Pétain, quoting liaison officer Edward Spears, was at pains to emphasise how the long-term image of Britain as "hereditary enemy" had now changed: "Pour la première fois sur la terre de France, a noté le général Spears, le soldat français pouvait répondre à l'appel d'une sentinelle britannique par ce mot de ralliement: 'Ami!'" (Anon., 244)

All the orators agreed that Félix Desruelles' 35-metre-high statue, in conception and design, would stand the test of time, and would represent a permanent reminder of Boulogne's special relationship with the British in general, and the sacrifices of the BEF in particular: "Lord Cavan paid a tribute to the British soldiers who entered France by this port and never returned. The monument, he said, was one of which every British man or woman might say, 'This is mine.'" (*The Times*, 20 July 1938) Millions of British Empire troops had indeed passed to and fro through the port. It was left to Field Marshal Lord Cavan to unveil the statue, after celebrating how the long enmity between France and Britain had been successfully transformed into permanent friendship. If only the rest of Europe could learn this simple lesson too:

> Un mot encore! Non loin d'ici se dresse un autre monument élevé à l'endroit où le grand Napoléon assembla ses armées pour envahir l'Angleterre. Mais les eaux de la Manche nous sauvegardèrent ! Puisqu'il a été possible, après 140 ans de lutte, pour le vaillants ennemis de se lier par la plus étroite amitié, ne sommes-nous pas en droit d'espérer – tout en priant pour cela – qu'une grande réconciliation pourra se faire partout en Europe et que, suivant ce noble exemple, la Paix se signalera par des victoires non moins éclatantes que celles de la guerre? (Anon., 244)

As we have already suggested, the memory of the First World War pervaded the visit. In the morning of 20 July George VI laid a wreath on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at the Arc de Triomphe, and early that afternoon, in the grounds of the British Embassy, the royal visitors inspected 200 members of the Paris branch of the British Legion. The next day, 21 July, came the extraordinary military review staged at Versailles. A review on such a scale had rarely ever been seen in France. Winston Churchill, a guest of the government and present at the review, had always been impressed by French military might to the point of "obsession". Churchill "continued to believe in the 'unquestionable French military superiority' long after it had ceased to be unquestionable" (Kersaudy, 1990: 32–3). The Foreign Secretary Lord Halifax, who was also present, remembered later: "I can recapture the strength of emotion with which Churchill, who was looking on, spoke of the French army as the bulwark of European freedom" (Halifax quoted in Bradford, 1989: 272). The King took the salute, seated alongside Pétain. Present too were Gamelin, Admiral Darlan and General Vuillemin, all of whom had just been decorated Knights Grand Cross of the Royal Victorian Order (Werth, 1939: 196). The march-past lasted well over an hour, and comprised over 50,000 troops: cavalry, cadets of the Ecole Polytechnique, St Cyriens, Chasseurs Alpins, as well as 25,000 "ordinary" French infantry, with their glistening fixed bayonets. Werth noted that these were "the successors of the *poilus* of Verdun, the flesh and blood of the people of France". Then came into view various contingents of the colonial army: Zouaves, Senegalese warriors, Algerian fusiliers, and several battalions of Spahis. Bringing up the rear was an impressive array of armoured vehicles, excepting the heaviest 80-ton tanks, which "would have damaged the street" (Werth, 1939: 197), and a flypast of 600 military aircraft (but only a few could fly in the morning due to poor visibility). Faced with such a spectacle, who in July 1938 would have dared suspect that such an armed force might rapidly be swept aside?

The final act of memorialisation took place just east of Amiens, at Villers-Bretonneux, during the return journey. As his brother King Edward VIII had done, two years before, at Vimy Ridge, George VI inaugurated another Dominion memorial, this time dedicated to the Australians. *The Times* reminded its readers that Villers-Bretonneux had seen furious fighting in April 1918, with Australian forces sustaining serious losses in their heroic but costly contribution to repulsing German thrusts toward Amiens (*The Times*, 21 July 1938). The monument names their campaigns, and honours almost 11,000 soldiers having no known grave. This represented just over a fifth of all Australian losses (Werth, 1939: 200). The King, in his speech of inauguration, tried to make sense of this bloody sacrifice in terms of the "Myth of the War Experience":

> There is in these stones, as there was in the very sacrifice which they commemorate, a deeper and fuller significance. What we see before us is more than a tribute to the gallant service of a splendid army; it is also a symbol, marking the first entry into History of a young and vigorous nation – the gateway through which Australia passed from youth to manhood. (TNA: FO371/21608, report, 3 Aug. 1938)

President Albert Lebrun, in his reply – which was markedly more emotional in tone than the King's oration – again invoked the War Experience and its contemporary implications for the Entente: "Our nations still stand shoulder to shoulder for the maintenance of the ideals for which so many of our people laid down their lives" (Werth, 1939: 201). There was another much more immediate message, however, on that day in July 1938. Quoting the King, Lebrun continued:

> "L'amitié des deux peuples, disiez-vous naguère, Sire, et la communauté de leur idéal de justice constituent la meilleure garantie de la paix du monde." Cette affirmation, renouvelée hier au cours de ces fêtes dont l'écho n'est pas près de disparaître, garde aux heures troubles du temps présent son actualité et sa force. Puisse-t-elle retentir dans nos deux nations comme un guide dans l'action et un appel à la confiance ! (TNA: FO371/21608, report, 3 Aug. 1938)

Once the formalities at the memorial were finished, the royal train then departed for Calais, where the Admiralty yacht awaited the King and Queen to transport them back to Dover, and then onward to London.


Phot. Associated Press.
Le Maréchal Pétain s'incline devant la Reine.
Marschall Pétain bows before the Queen.

Source: *La visite en France des souverains britanniques 19-22 juillet* (1938)

"Culture"

The revival of the Entente in the mid to late 1930s inspired a growing number of cultural exchanges between the French and the British. For instance, during the two weeks before Easter 1938, following the announcement of the royal visit, the Institut britannique of the Sorbonne welcomed a large party of British secondary school teachers, invited by the University of Paris and the Education Ministry, to listen to a series of lectures illustrating the richness of French cultural life over the previous ten years. The director of the British Institute in Paris, Harley Granville-Barker, laid some stress on the fact that he had only invited "des conférenciers de premier plan", true experts who had first-hand knowledge of the breadth and state of cultural creativity in France. The whole series of lectures was published by Les Éditions Jean-Renard in a volume entitled *Dix Ans de vie française* (1938). Granville-Barker had not made an empty claim: among the lecturers were some of the most eminent writers and intellectuals in France, as they were largely drawn from that unique cultural institution, the *Nouvelle Revue française*. Ramon Fernandez spoke on 'Les Belles-Lettres', Benjamin Crémieux on the novel, and, on 7 April 1938 Jean Paulhan gave a lecture on Poetry, with readings by Jules Supervielle, Georges Pelorson and Jacques Audiberti. Ramon Fernandez's son Dominique draws attention to the high prestige value his father's presence conferred on this event: "Mon père prononce la leçon inaugurale, […] honneur qui prouve qu'on le considère encore comme l'un des arbitres les plus qualifiés de la scène littéraire et intellectuelle française" (Fernandez, 2008: 573).

Alexander Werth witnessed that the visit gave rise to "innumerable activities" apropos of all things British:

> All the French wireless programmes will be crowded with accounts of the royal visit, and talks about English literature and the Entente Cordiale, and British Art, and the cultural relations between France and England throughout the centuries, and broadcasts of Shakespeare; and I have just received the copy of a seven-page *Ode to England*[2] to be broadcast on the first day. A film called *Edward VII* will be shown. (Werth, 1939: entry dated 15 June 1938, 185–6)

There was considerable variety among the cultural manifestations laid on during the visit. Sombre remembrance of war was counterbalanced by joyful concerts, recitals and galas. Even as the royal couple arrived at the Bois de Boulogne station (with the emergence of the sun again on cue), especially renovated for the occasion in order to display Gobelins tapestries, their very first view was that of Bourdelle's new statue to France:

> What an excellent first contact with Paris! French art — old and new. The fine tapestries had by this time been delicately floodlit, and outside, Bourdelle's statue, standing on its high white pedestal and decorated with tricoloured streamers, looked dazzlingly bright when looked at from the dark hall. Moreover, after a dull morning and afternoon the sun had suddenly come out. At the foot of the statue large crowds of school children […] were waving British flags, and as the King and Queen came out into the open from the Gobelins Hall the military band struck up 'God Save the King'. […] And when the band struck up the 'Marseillaise' 10,000 white pigeons concealed behind the statue were suddenly released… (Werth, 1939: 189)

There then followed a "royal cavalcade" along the Avenue Foch, past the Arc de Triomphe, and down the Champs Elysées. "What a reception Paris gave them! The enthusiasm of the several hundred thousand people who must have been there to see the King and Queen drive past was enormous – and spontaneous" (Werth, 1939: 190).

Source: *La visite en France des souverains britanniques 19-22 juillet* (1938)

During the first evening at the Elysée, crowned by a banquet with 270 guests, attention focused on the Queen's wardrobe. Fashion was already an important part of contemporary culture, and couturier Norman Hartnell's team had worked overtime to create a whole new wardrobe for the Queen, in mourning white (the accepted alternative to black). After the Elysée dinner, an artistic *soirée* – which Werth thought too long – consisted of "a sketch by Sacha Guitry, with the famous actor in the part of Louis XIV; five songs sung by Mme Valerin, of the Opéra, with M. [Reynaldo] Hahn, the composer, at the piano; and a one-act play by Musset, played by actors of the Comédie Française" (Werth, 1939: 192). This play, *On ne saurait penser à tout*, noted Geneviève Tabouis, was a "light comedy whose plot turns on the fickleness of the French character"; it might have been a curious choice for this particular occasion, but she added wryly that "our guests gave no sign of having noticed it" (Tabouis, 1938: 308).

Apart from further high-culture events, such as the performance of Ernest Reyer's *Salammbô* at the Opéra, on the evening of the 20th, popular singing stars Maurice Chevalier and Yvonne Printemps performed after the Quai d'Orsay dinner on 21 July. The only noticeable hitch in all this musical performance occurred during the recital after the lunch held in the

Hall of Mirrors at Versailles (a timely reminder of the peace treaty negotiations which had been held there). While the diva Vera Korène was performing, a flypast of French aircraft – those delayed because of morning mist – momentarily drowned out the singer, although sportingly she completed her song (Mistler, 1938: 826). Furthermore, no expense had been spared to decorate the streets and open spaces of central Paris, as noted by the writer and politician Jean Mistler in the *Revue de Paris*. Far from wanting to appear overly critical, he questioned the artistic judgement of some of the street decoration:

> Pour moi, qui juge sans souci d'école artistique ou de clan politique, et qui connais un peu les qualités et les défauts des architectes employés par les Beaux-Arts, je crois que la principale faiblesse de la décoration de Paris a été dans le manque d'une idée générale, d'un style dirigé. […] La décoration du boulevard des Italiens, celle de la place Vendôme, sans apporter rien de nouveau, étaient parfaitement réussies. Par contre, on n'a pas été trop sévère pour les armoiries en lattis de la Concorde […] et surtout pour les monstres aquatiques du pont Neuf, cartonnages forains, bons tout au plus pour Luna Park. (Mistler, 1938: 823–4)

These water-spouting "fairground cut-outs" at the Pont Neuf were intended to represent the Loch Ness Monster and to provide the Queen with an affectionate reminder of home; although Mistler treated these with disdain, they were, reportedly, the cause of much mirth among ordinary sightseers.

Numerous special issues of newspapers were produced to celebrate the visit, including *The Times*, *Le Figaro*, and even *Gringoire*, which three years before had carried Henri Béraud's notorious essay "Faut-il réduire l'Angleterre à l'esclavage?", a diatribe which had sparked a diplomatic incident that the Paris embassy had not forgotten (cf. Cornick, 1993). *The Times* produced a "French number" which remains a model of the genre. None, however, was more impressive than that produced by *Le Figaro*. The paper solicited statements on the Anglo-French relationship from a wide range of contemporary writers and academicians, including Paul Valéry, Paul Morand, Jean Schlumberger, General Weygand, as well as that ubiquitous anglophile, André Maurois. For some, such as Roland Dorgelès, author of the best-selling war novel *Les Croix de bois*, the memory of the Great War remained uppermost:

> Invisibles mais présents, les sept cent mille Anglais qui sont tombés sur notre front vont monter, depuis Boulogne, une garde tragique.
> A nos côtés, ils ont gagné la guerre.
> A leurs fils, maintenant, de nous aider à sauver la Paix. (*Le Figaro*, 19 July 1938)

In the articulation and presentation of such sentiments, war and culture were fused together. Weygand, in his own tribute, invoked again the contemporary urgency of the legacy of the War Experience:

> La visite des Souverains Britanniques émeut les cœurs français parce qu'elle évoque un passé glorieux et symbolise l'espoir en un avenir meilleur. En les accueillant, nous rendrons un pieux hommage à la mémoire des soldats de la vaillante armée britannique tombés à côté des nôtres, et qui représentent l'Angleterre et la France, atteignent un degré de puissance capable de préserver l'Europe de la barbarie d'un nouveau conflit, qui serait la ruine de notre civilisation. (*Le Figaro*, 19 July 1938)

A special bound version of the tributes in the *Figaro* was printed for presentation to the King and Queen.[3]

In the end, during the brief summer respite from the ever-darkening international situation, on both sides of the Channel the visit was deemed to have been a great success. Philippe Barrès, son of the nationalist writer Maurice, opened his assessment of the visit optimistically by stating a "fact": "C'est un fait: depuis la visite des souverains britanniques, il y a quelque chose de changé dans l'air de France; quelque chose d'indéfinissable comme la confiance et de fort comme l'espoir nous soulève. On aimerait comprendre cette inspiration soudaine, cette *aura* bienfaisante, la saisir pour l'entretenir et pour la garder" (Barrès, 1938: 918). However, Barrès noted perceptively that the "instability" of 1938 had derived in part from the failure of the French and the British to continue the spirit of collaboration they had developed during the war into the peacetime period: if they had, Europe would not now be such a dangerous place. The two most powerful democracies in Europe, concluded Barrès, should now come closer together to match the "élan" demonstrated by the "totalitarian regimes". For too long in France, he wrote, French political classes had remained complacent; now things looked different: "cette armée, cette âme françaises d'aujourd'hui, c'est notre réplique militaire et spirituelle. […] Il faut du temps aux nations pour réagir et nous pouvons nous faire confiance à nous-mêmes" (Barrès, 1938: 925). Time, however, had begun to run out.

As for the British, in diplomatic circles the euphoria surrounding the visit also lasted until the end of the holiday month of August. In a long summary dated 1st September 1938 (TNA: FO371/21609, C9481), Ronald Campbell, of the Paris embassy, echoed earlier views that the royal visitors had inspired "remarkable unanimity" in a country "whose inhabitants are notorious for their impatience and […] for their internal dissensions". Once again the civilised elegance of the Paris visit was contrasted with the extravagant and bombastic events laid on by Mussolini to welcome Hitler during the latter's visit to Rome. Campbell drew attention to the speeches made by various political figures after the visit, including that made by French Foreign Minister Georges Bonnet, who declared the Entente had never been "more necessary or complete". Reports from consulates all over the country showed just how far into deepest France the visit had resonated: Lille, Dunkirk, Strasbourg, Marseille, Bordeaux, Bayonne and La Rochelle, Le Havre and Rouen, whose British Consul believed the visit had "dispelled the prevailing cloud of gloom and was greeted as the proof of the solidarity of the friendship between the two countries and the determination of Great Britain to stand by that friendship". All this, concluded Campbell, would help France to play better an "effective role in the international sphere".

In conclusion

The mood changed dramatically in September. Further aggressive intent on Hitler's part and feverish diplomatic activity led quickly to the tragedy of the Munich Accords, on 30 September. The almost unbridled optimism expressed in favour of the Entente – or was it an Alliance? – and faith in the French army which had been stoked up by the royal visit would gradually evaporate.[4] War broke out on 3 September 1939, only to stagnate into the Phony War; but, once the campaign resumed in earnest in May 1940 the Entente and the Allied armies would both be outmanoeuvred and crushed ruthlessly by the German *blitzkrieg*. All those invocations of the Myth of the War Experience, and, one might add, of the Myth of the Entente, were swept aside in the realities of Hitler's war. Marshal Pétain, almost two years exactly after the unveiling of Britannia, would scorn the Entente in July 1940, and Hitler would begin preparing his invasion plans for Britain. The Germans entered Boulogne on 25 May 1940, and, barely six weeks later, the Britannia

statue was unceremoniously dynamited: "Le 1er juillet 1940, à 15 heures, disparaissait le monument 'Britannia', première victime de la Deuxième Guerre mondiale. La machine à détruire les hommes, leur passé comme leur avenir, était en marche" (Debussche, 1995). However, not long after the dust settled from the demolition, an image of the Britannia monument was already being used for more subversive purposes by a Lille journalist, in a very early act of defiance:

> A Lille, le 16 [juillet 1940], le journaliste Lucien Dewerse est condamné à cinq ans de travaux forcés pour avoir produit trois clichés « subversifs » – une photographie de Churchill, le monument des fusiliers marins, et le monument de la *Britannia* (Noguères, 1967: 75).

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Notes

[1] See the conclusion of Général Gouraud's memoirs 'L'Inde avec les Anglais', in *La Revue des deux mondes* for 1 August 1938: "Français et Anglais ne s'aimaient pas dans ce temps-là. Cinquante-deux mois de guerre [1914–18] nous ont révélés les uns aux autres, comme des nations différentes sans doute, mais formées par la même civilisation d'origine chrétienne, ayant le même amour de la liberté, le même respect de la personne humaine, et pour qui un traité n'est pas un chiffon de papier. Rien ne doit faire oublier le sang versé ensemble sur les champs de bataille." How bitter it would have been to read these words two years later.

[2] The *Ode à l'Angleterre*, by François Porché, was printed in the 21 July issue of *Paris-Soir*. See Dubreuil, 1978: 93.

[3] *Salut à l'Angleterre, 19-22 juillet 1938*. ['Quelques traits du génie anglais' par André Chevrillon. 'L'Intelligence anglaise et la science' par le duc de Broglie. 'Le roi George et la reine Elizabeth' par André Maurois. 'Quand la France et l'Angleterre font leurs comptes' par Paul Morand. Suivis de témoignages d'amitié, par 68 personnalités.] Exemplaire unique tiré pour le roi et la reine d'Angleterre à l'occasion de leur voyage en France (BN: RES GN 732).

[4] That optimism was evaporating in France could be perceived in the publication of Louis-Ferdinand Céline's second 'pamphlet', *L'École des cadavres*, at the end of 1938. Céline mocked the royal visit, lumping Britons and Jews together in his anti-Semitic and anglophobic ravings: "Quand vous descendez hurler vos ferveurs sur le passage de Georges VI, demi-juif, de sa reine Bowen-Lyon la juive, mandatés par Chamberlain demi-juif, Eden demi-juif, Hoare Belisha (Horeb Elisha parfaitement juif), enrobés dans la troupaille des plus chevronnés bourricots vendus de la ministrerie française maçonnique, nos caïds de service, vous pouvez sûrement vous vanter d'avoir merveilleusement passé votre après-midi" (Céline, 1938: 160 and following).