

Surprising and Strange Encounters



King Æthelstan presenting a book to St Cuthbert

There'll be a change in the weather and a change in the scene. I'm going to change my way of living, my walk will be different, my talk, and my name. Nothing about me going's to be the same.

Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the greatest British monarch of them all? Could it be good Queen Bess, Elizabeth I, or Henry VIII, or Queen Victoria, or Elizabeth II? In a podcast poll in November 2021 conducted on Twitter, 84,000 history buffs voted for Athelstan to be given the title as the greatest. Few non-specialists have heard of Athelstan, whose name might be mistaken for the name of a former republic of the Soviet Union, but he ruled 925-939, first as king of Saxons and then king of the English, driving the Vikings out of Northumbria and uniting the country by merging the kingdoms of Mercia and Wessex. Thus, he was one of the founders of "England." In 937 he defeated the invasion forces of the two kings of Scotland and Dublin, at the significant

Battle of Brunanburh, often cited as the starting point of English nationalism. Athelstan, a grandson of Alfred the Great best remembered for burning the cakes he was supposed to guard, had a narrow victory in the poll by defeating Elizabeth I by 50.5% to 49.5%. He was crowned in Kingston on Thames by the Archbishop of Canterbury, and among his other qualities he was a successful matchmaker in marrying off his four half-sisters to powerful European rulers.

There was nothing unusual about this accomplished warrior, but there was something surprising about a more recent British military leader. A quandary arises as the result of a recently published remarkable letter by Sir Hugh Dowding, British Air Chief Marshal, to Lord Beaverbrook, owner of the Daily Express and minister in the war cabinet, on April 25, 1943 saying that he believed he could communicate with the ghosts of dead pilots. He also wrote to an MP claiming he had a number of conversations with dead airmen, and in his correspondence confessed to his belief in fairies and gnomes and nature spirit, which he accepted "holus bolus," and that he believed in reincarnation. Dowding was interested in spiritualism, writing of encounters with dead boys who b visiting him in his sleep, as spirits who flew fighters from mountain top runways.

Air Chief Marshal Dowding, a Scot born in Moffat in 1882, oversaw the successful defense of Britain in summer and autumn 1940. He favored "big wing tactic," using a wing shaped formation of 3-5 squadrons of RAF fighter command. He oversaw the change from biplanes to advanced monoplane fighters, Hawker Hurricanes and Supermarine Spitfires, and urged the development of radar, good observation posts, and telecommunications for detecting hostile aircraft. His strategy was to use relatively small formations of squadron strength, wearing down the enemy, while conserving his own limited reserves of fighters. The Battle of Britain was won on September 15, 1940, when the Luftwaffe lost 56 planes to the

RAF's 28, and Adolf Hitler cancelled Operation Sealion, the planned invasion of Britain, supposed to take place in September 1940.

After this success, Dowding was, as the result of internal military differences, dismissed from his post and denied promotion. In the 1969 film *Battle of Britain*, the role of Dowding was played by Laurence Olivier, himself a pilot during World War II. Dowding is buried in Westminster Abbey, with a plaque. "He led the few in the Battle of Britain." It was surprising and unusual that an accomplished person of such high rank should have expressed the sort of beliefs in the afterlife that he did.

In contrast, the end of an era of 400 years came with minimal surprise at the ceremony on November 30, 2021 transforming, without a referendum Barbados from a realm in which Queen Elizabeth II was head of state to whom there was a pledge of allegiance, to the world's newest republic, a land whose official head as President is Dame Sandra Mason, 72 year old attorney and judge, without a nationwide election or referendum. Changes have been taking place. In November 2020, the statue, which had been unveiled in 1813, of Lord Nelson was removed from the main square in the center of Bridgetown. The admiral in a letter of May 1805 to his friend in Jamaica had written, "I have ever been, and shall be, a firm friend of our present Colonial system." In 2005., Barbados substituted the local based Caribbean court of justice instead of the London based Privy Council as its final court of appeal.

Barbados became a British colony, the second after Virginia, in 1627 when an English ship entered it and founded Jamestown, in the name of James I. Between 1627 and 1807, the abolition of slavery, some 387,000 Africans were sent to Barbados giving it a majority black population. Slavery was the basis of the successful sugar plantations.

At the ceremony on November 30 inaugurating the constitutional change, Prince Charles acknowledged "the dark and tragic past from which the nation of Barbados was born. But this marks the rebirth of a new nation." The change was made without a nationwide election of referendum. The date was deliberately chosen because it marked the 55th anniversary of Barbados independence from Britain in November 1966. There is to be no change in name of the country, and the nation will remain part of the Commonwealth of Nations, which evolved in 1949, after independence of India, as a voluntary free association of nations. The states have no legal obligations to one another but are connected using English and by historical ties, and without compulsion.

The British Empire is no longer the empire on which the sun never sets. There remain 54 Commonwealth states, most former colonies, or dependencies. from Australia and Canada to tiny Tuvalu. The basic problem was that for many the crown is associated with colonialism. Barbados is the most recent nation to give up the Queen as head of state, following Malta in 1974, Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, Dominica, and Mauritius which abolished the monarch in 1992. Others have decided to maintain the link with the Crown; Australia. Tuvalu, St. Vincent, and the Grenadines.

Barbados remains as a Commonwealth country, and no referendum was held on the issue of change or whether it should become a republic. The vestiges of the colonial past are being replaced. Don't give me a fish, tell me how to fish. The great all round cricket player Garfield Sobers who was made a British knight in 1975, became a "national hero" of Barbados in 1998. Rihanna, top singer and actress who was raised in the capital Bridgetown was made was made a national hero by the new authority on November 30.

So far, Barbados has retained the flag, coat of arms, and national anthem, though the terms royal and crown will not be

used.

Barbados may be free of the British Crown but it may be becoming the subject of a new Emperor Xi. The problem is that the country is has been influenced by Chinese pressure in economic, educational, and cultural affairs. China has invested at least \$ 7 billion, and probably more, in the Caribbean, including a cricket stadium in Grenada, a casino in Bahamas, and the port in Kingston, Jamaica.

Barbados has lost a monarch and become a republic, but China is the new colonial power. Br Barbados has joined the Belt and Road initiative of China and was the first Caribbean county to sign the treaty of extraction and mutual legal assistance with China which has funded projects and provided loans in Africa, Asia and central Europe. Barbados is the latest example of China's expanding imperialism, and its influence in obtaining information on citizens, and helping build a much-needed infrastructure.

Ironically, the Caribbean was the playground for James Bond and his pal Felix Leiter .Now it is becoming Chinese home turf.