



Windsors in the soup

by James Fox

The King Over The Water: The Windsors in the Bahamas, 1940-45, by Michael Pye (Hutchinson, £7.95).

THE Windsors arrived as unwilling Governors of the Bahamas in 1940, ordered there, more or less, by Churchill. Their continuing contacts with Nazi sympathisers in France and Portugal and the Duke's warmly pro-German views made him an active target for Axis propaganda. In their new role, instead they became the enfants terribles of the diplomatic service, in spite of the comparative unimportance of the task.

The Duke delayed the trip for ten days while Walter Monckton, his adviser during the abdication, was told to check out a strong (Nazi-inspired) tip-off that the British secret service would have him killed when he got there.

Filled with suspicion, they came in the hottest season, hating it from the start: the Duke smarting, as ever, from the "shabby treatment" of royals, government and friends during the abdication crisis and preoccupied with vivid imaginings of being kidnapped from a submarine, the Duchess frightened of the violent thunderstorms and horrified by the sight of land crabs on the pavements. They exploited their privileges mercilessly, leaning on an exasperated American State Department, for example, to get their maid sprung from occupied France or to get free passage for the Duke's laundry and shoes for repair through the Miami Customs.

They made Nassau instantly fashionable and presided over a much-needed tourist boom, but it was a seedy place even in its best days. The creation of ever more exclusive clubs seemed to fill a need to keep ahead of the humid contamination of vulgarity and hot money. The three biggest beasts in the jungle were Harold Christie, who dominated the real estate business in the islands, Sir Harry Oakes, a bluff gold-mining millionaire, who had been knighted in England for relentless acts of charity, and a Swede, Axel Wenner Grenn, oil supplier to the Nazi regime and a friend of Goering, who also made friends with the Windsors early on, with blatantly political motives.

Some diligent archive work, mostly in the State Department (the British evidence is either sealed away or destroyed) has convinced Pye that the Windsors were on the verge of substantial exchange control fraud with all three men — an action that in his view would have amounted almost to treason. The State Department certainly thought of Wenner Grenn, and Windsor too, as politically subversives, but Pye has found it difficult to produce the hard evidence.

The Windsors worried incessantly about money and felt hemmed in by exchange control which they saw as yet another means of restricting their movements. They had placed \$2.5 millions at the disposal of Wenner Grenn in Nassau. Wenner Grenn was setting up a development bank in Mexico where there were good investment prospects under a sympathetic right-wing government. The Mexican contact was Maxi-

minio Comacho, brother of the President, and the front man was Oakes. He and Christie visited Camacho in Mexico in 1940. Pye speculates that Oakes's gold was transferred in the Wenner Grenn yacht, and certainly despite exchange control, Oakes did manage to get money to Mexico.

Next, the Duke and Camacho have a two-hour conversation in Nassau, despite the fact that Britain and Mexico had broken off diplomatic relations. The suggestion — and it's no more than that — is that the Duke was lending respectability to the scheme. Pye writes that "it would be known later" how much Windsor entrusted to Wenner Grenn, but he doesn't provide that piece of information. The theory supposes that the Duke and Duchess would have gone to Mexico in the yacht before their Governorship was over, but Pearl Harbour put an end to the plan.

Meanwhile the Duchess was throwing herself into war work with a commitment that was to go unnoticed and unpraised, and the Duke was governing with spectacularly poor results. In Caribbean terms, as royalty he had come with the qualifications of Old Testament prophet and modern saviour, descended from Queen Wikki herself, the freer of slaves. The Duke was addressed by a street teacher, who expressed the growing disappointment. "In faith, believing," he said, "I ask on behalf of all my brothers and sisters: are thou He that cometh, or must we look for another?"

The gaps between expectations and possibilities was wide. The Bahamas had been badly governed for years and was ruled by the white merchants of Bay Street. The Duke never got the better of them, even though he intended the simplest of constitutional and tax reforms.

But the worst, the fatal blunder was the way Windsor handled the murder of Harry Oakes, killed in his own house with Christie claiming to have been two rooms away. To the surprise and displeasure of the Colonial Office, Windsor invited two hack detectives from the notoriously corrupt Miami police department to deal with it. They tampered with the evidence and trumped up charges against Alfred de Marigny, Oakes's disreputable son-in-law.

After his acquittal, Windsor made scandalous efforts, which were blocked by the War Office, to have de Marigny deported as an undesirable alien. Pye suggests that Windsor protected the real killer — Christie — to conceal Oakes's real intentions in Mexico, but weakens what is again no more than a supposition by saying "they (Windsor and Christie) shared a common bond of Masonic loyalty".

In fact the trap that Pye sets for the Windsors never closed on them, the scandal never broke, although no government was ever tempted again to repeat the experience of giving them an official posting. Christie and Axel Wenner Grenn prospered, however. The former was knighted for his property services to the Bahamas, and the latter became Krupp's right-hand man in the post-war revival.