

# The King's Speech: the real story



*A staged photograph of George VI, whose real name was Albert, announcing the declaration of war to the nation in September 1939 Photo: Hulton-Deutsch Collection/CORBIS*

*By Nigel Farnsdale*

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There are many forms of irony – verbal, dramatic, situational and so on – but the one that surely applied to King George VI was the irony of fate. It was as if the gods, or Fates, were amusing themselves by toying with his mind, mocking his failings, reminding him that he was very much a mortal. It was, after all, almost impossible for him to pronounce the letter 'k', thanks to his debilitating nervous stammer. A cruel fate for a king.

Even crueller, his reign coincided with a revolution in mass communication. For the first time in British history, subjects could listen to their monarch addressing them through their wireless sets, as if he were with them in their living rooms.

But the technology didn't allow George VI to pre-record his broadcasts, as would be the case for the generations that followed. When he addressed the nation, it had to be done through a live microphone, without editing, an agony for a stammerer.

The layers of irony did not end there. Because he had been told that cigarettes might help with his stammer, George VI chain-smoked – and he consequently died of lung cancer at the age of 56

in 1952. And the greatest irony of all? This vulnerable and stammering king proved to be exactly the right man at the right time.

The stammering that defined him, and the courage with which he tried to beat it, came to symbolise the vulnerability of the British people as they stood alone against the Nazi tyranny that had the rest of Europe in its grip. A certain solidarity between monarch and subject emerged, especially when George VI overruled requests from the government that he and his family relocate to the safety of Canada.

This became a mutual love the day after a Luftwaffe bomb landed on Buckingham Palace. 'I'm glad we've been bombed,' Queen Elizabeth said memorably. 'Now we can look the East End in the face.'

John Boorman's autobiographical film *Hope and Glory*, about growing up in London during the Blitz, captures this relationship well. In one scene the family sits tensely by the wireless set on Christmas Day listening to the King's speech. When it is over they sigh with relief and comment cheerfully upon how his stammer seems to be improving. If he can get through his affliction, they think, perhaps the British people can get through theirs.

For their part, the Nazis seemed to regard King George VI as a joke. In his *Germany Calling* broadcasts, Lord Haw-Haw would sneeringly refer to 'Your stammering King and your bandy-legged Queen'. And as part of the preparations he made for the invasion of Britain in 1940, Hitler planned to return the Duke of Windsor – whom he regarded as a Nazi sympathiser – to the throne.

On the surface, Edward VIII seemed to be much better equipped to be king than the brother who succeeded him. He was more charismatic, more handsome, more fluent. But he was also more feckless, self-indulgent and politically naive. He also seems to have been mean spirited, taunting his younger brother about his stammer.

George VI, in contrast, had fortitude and dignity. Had Edward not abdicated in 1936 in order to marry Mrs Wallis Simpson, the consequences for Britain could have been disastrous. And this was another of the great ironies.

The story of George VI, the reluctant, stammering king, has been made into a film, one tipped to take all before it at this year's Oscars. The King's Speech is mesmerising, moving and beautifully judged, and cinematically it is right up there with Dame Judi Dench's Mrs Brown and Dame Helen Mirren's Oscar-winning The Queen.

It stars Colin Firth as the King, Helena Bonham Carter as his wife Queen Elizabeth – the future Queen Mother – and Geoffrey Rush as Lionel Logue, the maverick Australian speech therapist who forged an unlikely friendship with the King after almost curing him of his disability.

The two met on October 19 1926 at Logue's consulting room in Harley Street. Prince Albert – Bertie, as he was known – was still the Duke of York at the time. Elizabeth had tracked Logue down after an attempt at a live broadcast had ended in humiliation and silence – the Duke had been asked to give the closing address at the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley in 1925.

The couple had tried all the traditional court doctors with their antiquated methods, such as filling the sufferer's mouth with marbles, but to no avail. The received wisdom at the time was that stammering was a form of 'mental weakness'.

After the war, Logue's pioneering work with the King was recognised with the award of a CVO. He was also acknowledged as a leading figure in the speech therapy world. Yet Logue was not only medically unqualified as a therapist, he was actually an actor by training.

He did, however, know a great deal about anatomy and muscle therapy. His unorthodox methods had been honed while treating 'verbally locked' and shell-shocked soldiers returning home to Australia from the First World War. The approach he pioneered was psychotherapeutic –

he suspected the problem for stammerers was not simply physical, that there was something, usually a trauma, around the age of four or five, that created the condition.

Logue suspected that the Duke's speech impediment might be connected to his domineering father, George V, who had, among other things, forced the left-handed Bertie to write with his right hand, something that is associated with stammering.

But part of his technique was to make the Duke believe the opposite: that his condition was physical rather than psychological and could be cured by breathing exercises and saying tongue twisters. This gave the Duke confidence that he had been lacking hitherto.

Another part of Logue's unconventional approach was to insist on addressing the Duke as Bertie, much to the Duke's initial discomfort. He also insisted that their consultations should take place at his Harley Street office rather than at the palace, in order to make the atmosphere less formal. The Duke reluctantly agreed and, over the course of the next 10 months, the two men were to see each other on 82 occasions, for sessions lasting an hour.

Rosemarie Hayhow, a leading speech therapist who is also a spokesperson for The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists, says some of the methods used by Logue are still relevant today. One of the treatments used on the King was getting him to sing the words he was having trouble speaking.

'Singing is a very different process to speaking because the timing is dictated by the music,' Hayhow says. Another method Logue used was to play music to the King through headphones while he was reading, so that he couldn't hear himself and become self-conscious, something known today as 'masking'.

Another scene shows the King becoming fluent when he swears and it is generally accepted today that when stammerers are angry they lose their inhibitions.

'Anxiety can tighten the voice box,' Hayhow says. 'And we do become less inhibited when we swear because the words don't hold meaning in the same way. But it is not a standard technique.'

How would she have treated the King? 'Well, I would use breath techniques, as Logue did, and I would also stand face to face with the King when he was doing his broadcasts because many stammerers find it easier with someone supporting them. But the smoking I wouldn't advocate, as it irritates the vocal chords.'

'Nowadays, we let the patient talk through their problems more. We are more client-led. In some ways Logue was treating the King as a child. But his methods were certainly an improvement on what came before.'

On September 3 1939, the day war was declared, the King had to deliver the most important speech of his life. A photograph of George VI on this occasion shows him in front of a microphone in his naval uniform sitting at his desk at Buckingham Palace.

This was staged. He actually delivered the speech standing at a lectern in an anteroom, with the window open and his jacket off. Only Logue was allowed in the room with him and he advised the King to forget everyone else and just say the speech to him, as a friend. His delivery was calm, dignified and measured. At the end of the broadcast Logue finally called him 'Your Majesty'.

As a child, David Seidler, screenwriter for *The King's Speech*, suffered from a profound stammer. Listening to George VI's speeches on the radio during and after the war inspired him to think that if the King could cope with a stammer, so could he.

He tracked down one of Logue's sons, Valentine, who told him that he had some of his father's papers, but that Seidler should check with the Queen Mother before proceeding. She wrote back and asked Seidler not to write the film in her lifetime, as 'the memories of these events are still too painful'.

So he waited. The papers include a diary detailing Logue's working relationship with the King, as well as the King's medical report card.

The novelist Nicholas Mosley is another sufferer, one who has written movingly about his condition. There are some intriguing parallels between his experiences and those of King George VI. Like the King, Mosley had 'a good war' in so far as he won an MC, but also, like the King, he had a domineering father, the leader of the Blackshirts, Sir Oswald Mosley.

In his memoir *Time at War*, Mosley recalls his life in the Army with a mix of affection and ennui – the latter to do with his stammer. Mosley has vivid memories of his platoon trying not to laugh while he gagged and contorted his way through a lecture. His sergeant eventually banged on a table with his stick and shouted: 'Don't laugh at the officer!'

By 1944, King George VI felt confident enough about his stammer to turn it into a verbal signature. He made a speech disbanding the Home Guard and it was deemed a great success. And he did it without the help of Logue, although the speech therapist was on hand if needed.

The King only stumbled over the 'w' in weapons. Afterwards, Logue asked him why this letter had proved a problem. 'I did it on purpose,' the King replied with a wink. 'If I don't make a mistake, people might not know it was me.'

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/8223897/The-Kings-Speech-the-real-story.html>