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The Biographical Consequences of Edward VII: Lord Esher's Bonfire

In this paper Professor Ridley gave us a preview of part of her much-anticipated biography of Edward VII. She suggested that Queen Victoria and her eldest son had very different attitudes towards the historical record. Although the widowed Victoria deliberately withdrew from the public gaze, she took it for granted that her life would be recorded for posterity. She eagerly commissioned an official biography of Albert and published her own *Leaves from the Journal of Our Life in the Highlands*. Bertie, in contrast, lived his life as publicly as possible, while, at the same time, viewing any written record of his life with the deepest suspicion. That suspicion would come to shape the archival record of his own reign and that of several other monarchs as well. His youngest sister, Princess Beatrice, famously abridged their mother's diaries and then destroyed the originals. Ridley suggested that the universal criticism of her from historians is rather misplaced – her brother would have preferred to have the originals destroyed untranscribed. Edward was equally unsympathetic to proposals for an official biography of his mother. The most that was allowed was a selection of official papers edited by the new Keeper of the Royal Archives, Lord Esher. Esher's main task however was to oversee the burning of most of Victoria's papers. Moreover, Edward made sure that the same policy was applied to his own papers when he died. In accordance with instructions left by the king in his will, his Private Secretary, Lord Knollys, set about destroying all the private letters. But a complication soon arose. Palace officials, headed by Arthur Davidson, took offence when Sidney Lee used his entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography* to criticise the character of the late king. Plans for a counter-attack were foiled when Davidson discovered that most of the well-placed courtiers whom he approached to pen that response, such as Esher and Balfour, had been Lee's main sources. An alternative plan was therefore devised. Lee was now given the chance to recant his heresy by being offered the commission to write the official biography of the late king. Once Lee accepted, Esher embarked on a prolonged cat-and-mouse game to ensure that all papers had been carefully weeded before Lee saw them. Further embarrassment had to be headed off when Bertie's former mistress, 'Daisy', Countess of Warwick, tried to blackmail George V by threatening to publish the love letters to her from the late king. Embarrassed by the whole subject, Lee in any case carefully played down the details of Edward's sex life and willingly caved in to the pressure from the Palace to emphasise Edward's supposed interest in politics. Published in the wake of Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* and *Queen Victoria*, Lee's official biography of Edward VII already seemed old-fashioned when it finally appeared in the mid-1920's. Another generation would pass before the British monarchy dared to revive the idea of commissioning official biographies of deceased monarchs and their consorts. **AB**