

What Might Have Been...



PICTURES: PRIVATE COLLECTION

Although in no way as profound as the campaign in the United States of the now President-Elect Barack Obama, there is a corollary a century earlier which nevertheless is decidedly interesting. Had it proved successful, says MARIO VALDES, the victor would undoubtedly have been hailed as the first black sovereign of a European monarchy in modern history

LE CHEVALIER NOIR in the royal lottery for a small but wealthy grand duchy was none other than George, Count of Merenberg, from the House of Nassau. The uncle of Countess Nadeja (or Nada) de Torby – who later married Prince George of Battenberg and became an aunt to the Duke of Edinburgh – in 1907 he entered the lists to win for himself and his heirs the hereditary rights to the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg.

When the Count's father, Prince Nikolaus of Nassau-Weilburg, died a couple of years earlier, his cousin William, the then reigning Grand Duke of Luxembourg, decided to revoke the Salic law that excluded females from the line of succession. The ailing father of six daughters but no sons, his position as Grand Duke and head of the House of Nassau should otherwise have devolved to George, but William's argument with Parliament was that although George's mother was the daughter of a Russian noble she was not royal, and as the child of a morganatic marriage he was therefore ineligible to succeed him. The national legislature agreed with William despite strenuous objections from the Count of Merenberg and declared the Grand Duke's eldest child, Marie-Adélaïde, to be next in line.

George then took his case to Germany, where two years earlier the decision of the supreme court in a similar case

regarding the marriages of Count William Ernst of Lippe and his son Ernst had demonstrated that such matrimonial alliances could no longer be considered a bar to succession.

Mary of Teck, for example, who was then the wife of the Prince of Wales and would become Queen Empress on the accession of George V in 1910, was herself the granddaughter of such a union, that of Duke Alexander of Wurttemberg and Claudine, Countess of Kis-Rhedey. But in this trial in which both the state of Luxembourg and his Nassau relatives were the defendants, the Count of Merenberg was not as formidable a match and on William IV's death in 1912 Marie-Adélaïde did indeed become Grand Duchess.

However, since George's mother was Natalia, daughter of the great Russian poet Alexander Pushkin, the question arises as to how important the issue of race might have been in the decision. News reports of the proceedings never failed to mention that the Count of Merenberg's grandfather was, in turn, the grandson of Peter the Great's 'coal-black negro' favourite, Gannibal. And these were far from the only racial references to be bandied about at that time.

The Count of Merenberg's sister, Sophie, wife of the Russian Grand Duke Mikhail Mikhailovich, made the news frequently – and a lot earlier – because of insatiable press curiosity about her lavish lifestyle. ➤



**Natalia Pushkina,
Countess of Merenberg**

**OPPOSITE PAGE: George
Nikolaus, Count of
Merenberg (1871-1948)
had two sons, and
also a daughter from
his first marriage**



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Sophie's marriage to Mikhail had been forbidden by Tsar Alexander II, his cousin, because of the morganatic status of her own parents' union. What added so irresistibly to the romantic drama was the fact that as a result of his defiance of the Tsar, the Grand Duke had not only been stripped of his military rank and his position as adjutant at the imperial court but had also been banished from Russia forever. For newspaper editors, the *pièce de résistance* of this great love story of the *Belle Époque* was the fact that Sophie was descended from a 'coal-black negro'.

It was widely reported that on hearing of her son's *mésalliance*, Grand Duchess Olga Feodorovna collapsed in a state of shock and died a few days later.

Sophie and Mikhail spent the rest of their years in exile between Britain and the south of France. Their villa in Cannes, where they employed six chefs, became the hub of social life for much of the Russian imperial family as well as other European royals, aristocrats and American magnates such as the Astors and the Vanderbilts.

In England, the Grand Duke leased palatial Kenwood House from the Earl of Mansfield so that his wife could more easily extend her reign over London society. His choice was significant for another reason: the first Earl, Britain's Chief Justice, had handed down the famous 1772 decision that ended slavery in Britain; it was at Kenwood that he raised Dido, the illegitimate daughter of a slave and his wife's nephew.

It would seem that as the Countess was then the only recognised person 'of colour' on the international social scene Mikhail felt that the house offered her and their three children some kind of acceptance against racist sentiments directed towards them. ➤



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PA PHOTOS

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:
Nada, Marchioness of
Milford Haven on one of
her last visits to England
in 1951

**The 3rd Marquess of
Milford Haven shortly
before the wedding of
Princess Elizabeth and
his cousin Lieutenant
Philip Mountbatten in
November 1947**

**Grand Duke Mikhail
Mikhailovich of Russia
and his wife Sophie,
Countess de Torby**



ABOVE: A group taken at Claridge's after the wedding of David, Marquess of Milford Haven and Miss Janet Bryce in 1960. Standing, left to right: Earl Mountbatten of Burma, Colonel Harold Phillips, the bridegroom and bride, Mr Patrick Broome, Sir Harold Wernher and Mr John Bryce. Seated: Lady Zia Wernher, Queen Louise of Sweden, Mrs Francis Bryce, Lady Tatiana Mountbatten, Mrs John Bryce and Mrs Harold Phillips

RIGHT: William IV, Grand Duke of Luxembourg and his eldest daughter, Marie-Adélaïde



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In 1916 Kenwood was the setting for Sophie's supreme triumph as the venue for the wedding reception of Nada, her younger daughter, and Queen Victoria's great-grandson Prince George of Battenberg, later 2nd Marquess of Milford Haven. Although the London *Times* treated the ceremony at the Chapel Royal on 15 November with the respect required of the occasion, tabloid journalists had a field day.

The *Star* in the UK and the Hearst papers in the United States gleefully speculated on the possibility of a 'coal-black' child with 'kinky hair' and 'thick lips' being born into the English royal family.

Besides its similarity with the Obama situation, what the Merenbergs' story reveals, surprisingly, is how the royal family has been forced to deal with the issue of race at a very personal level. From the choice of Nada's son David, Prince Philip's 'black' cousin, as best man at his wedding to the future Queen Elizabeth II in 1947, there are any number of examples that could be referenced. Perhaps the most telling is the book that Her Majesty's Heralds, Sir Iain Moncreiffe and Don Pottinger, published in 1956, three years after her Coronation.

Blood Royal was a delightful and charmingly illustrated explanation of the monarch's multi-ethnic background, including genealogical charts of both her Asian and African descent, the latter from Zaida, the formerly Islamic wife of the 11th-century Spanish king, Alfonso VI of Castile.

As Head of the Commonwealth and 'symbolic Mother of a quarter of the population of the world', the authors pointed out, the Queen's ancestry expresses 'the original relationship of all mankind, regardless of colour, caste or creed.'

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