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The Visits of Empress Elisabeth of Austria in Britain and its Impact on the English and Irish People

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the impact the visits of Empress Elisabeth of Austria (1854-1898) and Queen consort of Hungary (1867-1898) had on the British and Irish people. Elisabeth is mostly remembered as being one of the most beautiful women of her time. However, she was also one of the best women riders of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. It might not be an exaggeration to say that her name can be mentioned among the best who have ever ridden in the British Isles. In Britain, between 1874 and 1882 the Empress stayed seven times: five times in England and twice in Ireland. The English said that “there was nothing but praise for a woman [Empress Elisabeth] who ‘looked like an angel and rode like the devil’” (Haslip 1987: 325).

Keywords: Empress Elisabeth of Austria, Empress Elisabeth, Franz Joseph, Bay Middleton, Queen Victoria, horse riding, Lord Spencer, Marie Festetics

When Elisabeth Wittelsbach, the Bavarian Duchess was born on 24 December 1837, no one expected that less than 16 years later she would be proposed to by the Emperor of Austria. However, to the greatest astonishment of everyone, Franz Joseph fell deeply in love with the girl and chose her instead of her elder sister, Helene (Corti 1935: 21-23). On 24 April 1854, Elisabeth and Franz Joseph were married. Elisabeth was a very accomplished horsewoman and this passion became an escape from both the atmosphere of the rigid Viennese court ruled by her authoritative mother-in-law and the obligations that her position as an Empress demanded (Corti 1935: 15, 71-73). She encountered the Renz Circus right after her wedding, however, she had to wait to invite them until the Hungarian coronation in 1867, when she established her “own” court in the Royal Palace of Gödöllő, Hungary (Corti 1935: 41, 233-234). She asked Franz Joseph to finance her a trainer from the Renz Circus and two of its famous equestriennes, Emilie Loiset and Elise Petzold taught her Circus stunts (Hamann 1988: 320). Four circus horses were bought for the Empress (Corti 1935: 233). Horse runs and steeplechases were often organized in the Gödöllő hunting area, where Elisabeth gathered the best horsemen of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy (Hamann 1988: 317-319). Not rank but riding skills were important when she chose the ones whom she invited. There were years when Elisabeth was not satisfied with the hunting fields of the monarchy and wanted to try herself out in a more difficult area (Hamann 1988: 321).

It was one of her sisters, Maria Sophia, the ex-Queen of Naples who persuaded the Empress to go to England, where she was living after the fall of the Kingdom of Naples (Hamann 1988:

321-322). She said to Elisabeth that England was the “country where one was allowed to live in peace and where privacy was respected” (Haslip 1987: 267). Not only her sister, but also Edward, the Prince of Wales (the future Edward VII) told the Empress about the exciting English style hunts. He also persuaded her to visit England during the hunting season, when he was at the Great Exhibition organized in Vienna in 1873 (Grössing 2000: 150).

Elisabeth had to have an excuse to have a holiday in England. In the summer of 1874, “invigorating sea-baths” (Haslip 1987: 267) were prescribed for her youngest daughter, Marie Valerie. The excuse was made, and Elisabeth chose the Isle of Wight, where Queen Victoria had a holiday residence, the Osborne House. This fact had an inevitable consequence: The Empress had to visit the Queen. However, Elisabeth was travelling incognito to avoid having to fulfil her royal duties. Nevertheless, the daily papers wrote about the Empress’ visit, and the secret was not a secret anymore. The “incognito” was used only for avoiding representation. Ventnor, Steephill Castle was hired for two months, in which – as in other places where the Empress stayed – some alterations were made, such as bathrooms and a gym were installed. Elisabeth, Marie Valerie, her large number of entourage with horses, and her favourite dog arrived on 1 August 1874 (*Fővárosi Lapok* 1874; *Budapesti Közlöny* 1874; Corti 1935: 225-226; Walterskirchen-Meyer 2021: 178).

The Queen of England announced her visit soon after Elisabeth arrived. Countess Marie Festetics, a Hungarian lady-in-waiting, who escorted the Empress to Britain, wrote in her diary on 16 August 1874, “I was not surprised. [The sight of the Queen] standing next to the Empress was startling, though. Archduchess Valerie was rather scared from the sight. She has never seen anybody with such a strong body. She [Queen Victoria] was quite warm-hearted, though” (Walterskirchen-Meyer 2021: 253).

During her stay in Ventnor, Queen Victoria invited Elisabeth to lunch twice, however, both invitations were refused by the Empress referring to “her delicate health.” The Queen, who was hurt, wrote to her relatives that “the Empress was wonderfully beautiful but totally lacking in any sense of duty as to the obligations due to her position.” Elisabeth confessed in a letter to her mother, Ludovika that she “refused [the invitations] because quite frankly, that kind of thing bores” her (Haslip 1987: 269).

Finally, two years later in March 1876, the Empress paid a visit to Queen Victoria at Windsor Castle, however, this meeting did not go very well, either, and Elisabeth spent her time rather at the estate of Baron Ferdinand Rothschild in Mentmore, where she enjoyed herself talking about the horses. It was an honorary visit since the Rothschilds supported her sister, Maria Sophia after the fall of the Kingdom of Naples (*Magyar Polgár* Kolozsvár 1876; Corti 1935: 244). There is no need to explain that Elisabeth did not help Franz Joseph improve the sensitive relationship between Austria and Great Britain.

Several reports suggest that Elisabeth enjoyed her time in England: “We had a trip to Melton and the Belvoir Castle. ... Her Majesty visited all the hunting stables and horses, she had fun. I am afraid that it will be continued” – wrote Marie Festetics in her diary on 26 September 1874 (Walterskirchen-Meyer 2021: 181).

Countess Festetics was right. Elisabeth had six more visits to Britain between 1876 and 1882, and she spent about six weeks there each year, except in 1878. She arrived for the late winter-early spring hunting season. She often invited her new British friends to Austria and Hungary

to the autumn hunting season. In this paper, only two of the Empress' hunting friends will be mentioned, Lord Spencer, the former Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, and Captain William George (Bay) Middleton. Lord Spencer made a lot of successful efforts to organize hunts and smaller informal dinner parties to entertain the Empress, who gave a portrait of herself in return. This painting, which depicts Elisabeth on her horse called 'Merry Andrew' during the hunt, has been on the wall of Althorp House, the Spencers' estate since (Image 1) (Corti 1935: 256; Grössing 2000: 143-177; Althorp House website).

Bay Middleton, a noted British horseman and equerry to Lord Spencer, was appointed to pilot the Empress during the hunts. Although he initially disliked this "mandate", on the very first ride together he became amazed by her appearance, kindness, and riding skills. Middleton was the pilot of Elisabeth afterwards during each hunting season in England and Ireland between 1876-1881 (Corti 1935: 245; Haslip 1987: 286-288; Grössing 2000: 144, 148-149, 158).

According to Marie Festetics, Middleton spent some days in the Royal Palace of Gödöllő in the autumn of 1876, 1877, 1878, and 1879. She wrote how everyone, including Franz Joseph, grew to like him although the Scottish rider only spoke English (Corti 1935: 249; Tolnayné 2009: 101, 103, 118, 123, 127, 141). Even when Elisabeth gave up horse riding, they could keep contact in letters, and met more times, for instance, Marie Valerie revealed in her diary that Middleton visited her mother in London in March 1888 (Schad 2001: 150). After the Empress learnt that Middleton had a fatal riding accident on 9 April 1892, Marie Festetics wrote the following to Ida Ferenczy, the Empress' confidante: "That poor, dear Middleton. How much it hurt me – I cannot even say! This poor, good, trustworthy man. How sorrowful her Majesty was, I can only imagine!" (Tolnayné 1998: 74)

In light of all the reports that were made, it can be stated that Middleton might have fallen in love with the Empress, however, Elisabeth felt only friendship towards the man. She admired his riding skills, his harsh, often rude manner, and might have enjoyed that Bay sometimes scolded her when she was too irresponsible on horseback endangering her own life (Grössing 2000: 143-177; Tolnayné 2009: 101-102).

About how dangerous the hunting was, it is worth reading an extract from a letter written by Elisabeth to the Emperor: "Lord Langford fell on his face and has not been able to swallow very well since One day we came to a boggy ditch, quite green, over which both Middleton and I fell, but ... we did not get wet, and the ground was quite soft... of course, I rode on at once. I saw Lord Langford standing by another ditch, fishing for his horse" (Haslip 1987: 313).

There was always huge interest in the Empress wherever she appeared. In the *Northampton Herald* on 6 March 1876 the following was written: "there was no small amount of anxiety manifested to accord the Royal visitors a hearty and becoming reception" (Webb). Elisabeth's beauty and kindness had a major impact on both the English and the Irish. People were eager to see one of the most beautiful women in the world. Consequently, it is no wonder that the Empress' appearance was a common social topic. After giving birth to four children, Elisabeth managed to preserve her slender figure during her whole life: her waist was between 47 and 55 centimetres, and her weight was between 45 and 50 kilogrammes, which is considerably low considering her height of 172 centimetres. Obviously, there was a great contrast in appearance between the overweight and short Queen Victoria and the tall and slim Empress Elisabeth.

Ellen Harriet Tollet, the daughter of a noted foxhunter and breeder of hounds wrote to her friend on 25 February 1881, when Elisabeth was at the age of forty-four:

We had a great meet at Woore to see the Empress jump. ... her manner Mrs C says was 'most queenly.' She is still a pretty looking woman with a fine figure and an awfully tight habit, so tight, she descended the stairs at Woore Hall sideways, she could not walk straight in her habit. She was ... talking English perfectly. The funniest thing was her enormous orange fan which she used out hunting, when at a check. Where she kept it, I don't know. She gave £200 to the United Hunt races near Whitchurch yesterday and was present galloping about with her fan up. (*Shropshire Archives*, quoted by Webb)

As mentioned in the letter, Elisabeth spoke English very well. She learnt the language in her childhood, and it is not widely known that she spoke to her sister, Helene, in English instead of their mother tongue, German "nearly all the time", as Marie Valerie revealed in her diary (Schad 2001: 223). At this point, it is interesting to call the attention to the Empress' poem in which she humorously wrote about the notorious womanizer Edward, Prince of Wales, who took part in hunting with her. The title of the poem written in English is "There is somebody coming upstairs" (Hamann 1988: 388).

The most compelling details in the letter above are about the Empress' "awfully tight habit" and "enormous orange fan." There are legends in the British Isles that Elisabeth had herself sewed in her gowns, especially in her riding habits (Haslip 1987: 325). The following quote supports the fact that her clothes were under discussion: "So closely did her well-cut skirt cling to her form that it was a common saying among ladies that she must be 'sewn into it,' and that they did not believe she could dismount" (Burgh 1899: 198). Whether she was sewed into her gowns or not, they fitted perfectly her tall, slender figure. She usually "wore a dark blue riding habit with gold buttons" (Burgh 1899: 191), which attracted the eyes. Elisabeth often hid her face behind a veil, usually a blue one, which was also often noted. For instance, when arriving in Ventnor, 1874, a Hungarian paper wrote that she was wearing a simple black travel suit and a black hat with blue veil (*Magyarország és a Nagyvilág* 1874). Both the veils and the fans were very important accessories to her. She did not let any photos be taken of her after she became thirty years old, which she revealed to her lady-in-waiting, Irma Sztáray on 9 September 1898, the day before her death (Sztáray 1998: 136). Every single photo afterwards is a montage based on previous photographs or taken by paparazzi (Image 2).

There are many stories about the kindness of the Empress, who gave a lot of presents to everybody including the servants at the end of each stay (Haslip 1987: 307, 315). She was given a horse called Domino by the Ward Union Hunt (Ireland). She commissioned a well-known Austrian painter, Wilhelm Richter to make a painting of her, in which she is sitting on Domino while hunting in Meath. She intended to give it to the Ward Union Hunt as a thank you gift for the horse. The frame of the oil painting was decorated with scrolling shamrock (Parsons 2012).

Shamrock is one of the symbols of Ireland. Elisabeth wrote in Hungarian to Ida Ferenczy (officially appointed as Her Majesty's Reader) from Combermere Abbey, 1881 with reference to the painting: "The painting still has not arrived. Though, this week the Master whom I want to give it will come. Two of my friends from Ireland are already here." Then she wrote in the very same letter, which was continued a week later: "The painting has arrived. Everybody is staring at it so maybe Richter would stare the most! I think it is because of the fan and the

shamrock. We had a very good hunt yesterday, although I had a fall, I was with the dogs in a minute” (Tolnayné 1992: 106). Elisabeth has a leather fan in this painting, too.

The painting had an interesting afterlife: It had been missing for decades when it was accidentally “found behind a wardrobe in kennels in Co Meath”. The famous portrait, titled Domino “had apparently been stashed away for safe-keeping and then forgotten” (Parsons 2012).

As mentioned, Elisabeth’s stays did not help the Emperor to improve the relationship with Queen Victoria. The Empress made the biggest mistake when not caring about the effects of her Irish stays. Marie Festetics wrote that even in the poorest village everybody wore their Sunday best and made triumphal arch from leafy branches for the Empress and kissing the ground on her footsteps. She also added that even the lords expressed their deep respect towards Her Majesty: The “lord is a Catholic, and she was greeted not as an empress but as a Catholic priestly dignity!” Both the Empress and her entourage were aware of the fact that it annoyed the Queen of England, a Protestant ruler. The Irish hated the English, who treated them badly (Walterskirchen-Meyer 2020: 197-198).

Empress Elisabeth was celebrated in Ireland also for her riding skills. At a dinner party, at Summerhill House, which was hired for her, a member of the Meath hunt improvised a poem, which was sung when the Empress entered: “To the Queen of the Chase / The Queen, yes, the Empress / Look, look how she flies / With a hand that never fails [...] / The best man in England can’t lead her – he’s down / Bay Middleton’s back is done beautifully brown [...]” (Haslip 1987: 313). Elisabeth, who did not like to be celebrated as an empress, must have enjoyed being celebrated because of her riding skills.

Elisabeth obviously enjoyed herself in Ireland: “Summerhill is the only place on earth where I have been allowed to live my life in my own way” (Haslip 1987: 314). She stayed at Summerhill House, Meath in 1879 and 1880. However, she could never return since another visit would have caused serious political conflicts between Austria and England. (Haslip 1987: 306-314, 322).

It was entirely unexpected that Elisabeth would give up horse riding from one day to the next around 1883. In 1882, Elisabeth had her last hunting season in Cheshire, North England, where she hired Combermere Abbey as in the previous year. She looked forward to this hunting season. However, after Bay Middleton had told her that he could no longer be her pilot, and in the autumn, he would get married, Elisabeth started to lose her interest in hunting. It might be important to note that she had been suffering from sciatica more and more, which made riding painful (Haslip 1987: 328-329).

When Elisabeth was asked by Irma Sztáray why she had stopped riding, she said: “Suddenly and without all true reason I lost my heart, and I, who did not consider any danger the previous day, then found it in every bush and I could not get rid of its image” (Sztáray 1998: 118).

Elisabeth would never take part in any hunt in Britain, where she would have four more very short visits afterwards in 1885, 1887, 1888, and 1890 (Corti 1935; Hamann 1988; Tolnayné 1998; Webb; Schad 2001). However, the memory of her visits has not entirely faded. Even nearly two decades later, the Irish remembered that the Empress’ “hands were perfect, and when the hounds began to run in earnest that there was no fence big enough to stop her” (Burgh 1899: 190). Two of her presents to the Catholic priests at Maynooth College, where she had an

incident when accidentally jumping into the garden while chasing a fox on horseback, have been exhibited at the College since then. The first one is a silver statue of St George given by Elisabeth who had not known that St George is the patron saint of England and not that of Ireland, whose patron is St Patrick. The second one is a “peace-offering” after the hurt she accidentally caused by not having given the proper present is a magnificent set of green and gold vestments. Both were preserved by the monks. At Maynooth College after Elisabeth’s death in 1898, a Requiem Mass was held (Haslip 1987: 308; *Maynooth College* website; Denis 2010).

All things considered it seems reasonable to assume that Empress Elisabeth of Austria left her footprint in Britain. If one is not convinced, let us mention one more fact which supports the argument of this paper: “In 2005 a new grandstand was built at Towcester racecourse and aptly named ‘The Empress Stand’” (Webb). On the racecourse, today the largest room, which can accommodate no less than 450 people, located on the first floor of the stand is named the “Empress Suit” (“Free Racing Tips”) in memoriam to the visit of the Empress.

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Annexes

Image 1: Empress Elisabeth of Austria on her horse, Merry Andrew. The steel engraving was made by Thomas Lewis Atkinson after the picture of John Charlton. A similar painting was made and given to Lord Spencer.



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Image 2:

In the photo, Empress Elisabeth is on horseback, hiding her face behind her leather fan. The photo was taken by a paparazzi. On the left, Captain Bay Middleton, her pilot can be seen.



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