

Low-Down on Britain's Higher-Ups

KING, From B1

that he was the nephew of Lord Northcliffe."

Crossman ticks off King as "a disloyal insider" on at least two counts disclosed by the diary. Wilson confided the secret date of his planned 1966 election to a King subordinate and King promptly gave it away to Edward Heath, leader of the Conservative opposition. As a director of the Bank of England, King was privvy to that institution's very private estimates of the plight of the pound, and King also passed on these tidbits to the Tories.

Crossman concludes that King was finally ousted from the Mirror empire because "their chairman was suffering from hereditary megalomania."

Richard March, still another ex-minister and now head of the nationalized rail industry, got his back in a traditional fashion, a letter to The Times. It says:

"Sir: I am reported as saying according to Cecil King that top politicians were a 'grubby lot.' Whether I ever made this rather sweeping statement and, if so, in what context is impossible to say three years later. If the description applies to anyone, it must surely apply to that small group who secretly record the private conversation of their guests and then sell the transcripts for publication. One can only say — UGH!"

As for the 71-year-old King, he is obviously enjoying the fuss, particularly, he says, since it "ensures that the book becomes a best-seller."

King did come into the Mirror through family ties—his uncles were Lord Northcliffe and Lord Rothermere, the powerful press barons who owned The Times, Daily Mail, Daily Mirror and more in their day—but he is generally acknowledged to have been a first rate publisher.

King's troubles began when he used the Mirror's lush profits for reckless experiments and dubious expansion. A King editorial in 1968 aimed at bringing Wilson down tipped the balance. King was ousted instead, and by officers of what had been a subsidiary of the newspaper.

In defense of his diary, King insists that public figures are fair game and have no right to complain if their words come back to haunt them, especially several years after the event. He vigorously denies the charge of some of his Labor critics that he was disappointed because Wilson would neither give him an earldom nor put him in the cabinet.

He somehow forgot his diary entry for Sept. 18, 1967, a conversation with Callaghan in which King records: "I said if they offered me a place in the government, I would consider

it. . . . I recalled that I had been offered the job of understrapper to Douglas Jay (board of trade president) which I should have regarded as a bitter insult if I had been of a vindictive nature.

King's most vocal defender is Bernard Levin, a Times columnist. Levin hailed the diary as "The most revealing and valuable political record yet published in postwar Britain . . . monstrous, overwhelming and unmitigated candour . . . merciless depiction of chicanery . . . incompetence and sheer political squalor . . ."

Levin's thesis is that keeping Harold Wilson from returning to office is "a worthy cause, a necessary cause" and if "King's book helps . . . to avert that catastrophe, he will have deserved the thanks of us all."

For an American bystander, the diary is striking for other reasons. For one, it shows how King and other big businessmen flirted with the idea of replacing the Labor government with a bi-party coalition including themselves and even toyed with the notion of removing elected leaders through some sort of coup.

For another, it displays the remarkable economic naivete of even a sometime successful publisher. King frets continually over the payments imbalance, encouraged by his cousin Lord

Cromer, then governor of the Bank of England and now ambassador to Washington, but King fails to grasp how devaluation would right it. The point he finds most bizarre in Enoch Powell's philosophy is Powell's advocacy of a floating pound, the very prescription that has freed the Heath regime to expand the economy here.

Finally, his judgments on the American scene, where King also enjoyed an extraordinary entree, are remarkable. On Nixon, "It is appalling that this third-rate man should be disinterred." Again, an unnamed Dutch editor is cited as the source for retailing a story that has Henry Kissinger saying in an indirect quote that "It would be such a disaster if Nixon became president." Anthony Solomon, the former Assistant Secretary of State for economic affairs, is twice cited as "Nathan Solomons." The Washington Star-News columnist is "Mary McRory."

Perhaps the last word was had by the anonymous reviewer in The Economist who wrote:

"Mr. King has well and truly carted practically everyone of any note who was, in retrospect, so ill-advised as to give him, or accept from him, hospitality over those years. His book is a nauseating end to many a meal . . . for what is clear from his diary is that Mr. King was not only a vain and arrogant man but he was also a rather silly one."