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Underwood & Underwood: shaping the public's view of the 1902 Coronation

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Introduction

Around three o'clock on the afternoon of Saturday 9 August 1902, a small group of photographers took up their positions at Buckingham Palace in London to await King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra. Returning from their coronation ceremony at Westminster Abbey, the couple took a few moments to pose in their robes and crowns for the assembled cameras. As well as historic, this ceremonial occasion was seminal for two photographic reasons. Firstly, one of the photographers given access to Buckingham Palace that day produced a three-dimensional stereograph of the moment (figure 1). Secondly, a photograph taken from that stereo negative was circulated to the world's press. However, when it appeared in print, it did not feature the name of an established court photographer or photographic company granted a royal warrant. Instead, it was credited to Underwood & Underwood, an American stereoscopic photography

company. This article uses original research to explore the creation of that exclusive 3D royal portrait and how photographs 'taken from stereographs' shaped the 'look' of the illustrated press.

Company background

Underwood & Underwood (U&U) began life in Ottawa, Kansas in the early 1880s. Founded by the Underwood brothers, Elmer (1859-1947) and Bert (1862-1943), the firm initially distributed 3D stereocards produced by leading American publishers, notably C. Bierstadt of Niagara Falls, the Littleton View Company of Littleton, New Hampshire, and J.F. Jarvis of Washington, DC. During the 1890s, U&U began originating high-quality cards using its own stereoscopic photographs of places and people and created a worldwide distribution network from its head office in New York.¹

In Britain, the company set up an office in Liverpool in 1890. The transatlantic port city offered a prime

Figure 1. 'The Crowned King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra in Coronation Robes ...' Copyright 1902 by Underwood & Underwood. Author's collection.





Figure 2. Bert Underwood (extreme right) with stereoscopic camera. John Lemmon Russell (left) leading Joseph Chamberlain MP. Location unknown, Summer 1902. © U&U Collection, George Eastman Museum. 1988.0202.0007.

location for the import of stereocards and hand-held viewers into continental Europe and beyond. By the middle of the decade, the firm had relocated its UK operation to London. The U&U office at 26 Red Lion Square, close to Fleet Street, was ideally located to service the emerging demand for press photographs made possible by the adoption of half-tone printing. The company's first significant success in servicing the newspaper industry with images occurred in the spring of 1897, supplying prints 'taken from stereographs' of the short-lived Greco-Turkish War.² In Britain, the *Illustrated London News*, *The Graphic* and *Black & White* were among the first illustrated newspapers to use and credit U&U's news photos. In America, *Harper's Weekly*, *Leslie's Weekly* and, later, *Collier's Weekly* followed suit.

'A Stereoscopic Record'

As the 20th century dawned, U&U was one of the most successful stereoscopic photography companies in the world, feeding the public's insatiable appetite for all things 3D. The assassination of US President William McKinley in September 1901 was marked by publication of a 60-stereograph memorial set accompanied by a booklet authored by Bert Underwood.³ Of significance for the history of press photography is that many of these McKinley images had previously appeared in American papers as news photos. These were credited to U&U and captioned 'taken from stereograph/s.'

Following the death of Queen Victoria, her son Bertie's coronation as King Edward VII was scheduled to take place on 26 June 1902. As the first such event in Britain for more than 60 years and the first since the advent of photography, U&U earmarked the occasion as a significant commercial opportunity. That spring, Bert Underwood arrived in London 'to supervise the photographing of a stereoscopic record of the Coronation of King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra.' In surviving pages of an unpublished autobiographical memoir, he described how 'a photograph of Their Majesties in their Coronation robes and crowns' would provide 'a fitting ending' to the set.⁴ Gaining access to the heart of the Establishment in Britain to achieve this ambition proved to be less than straightforward.

Following McKinley's assassination, the special relationship between U&U and the White House continued when his vice-president Theodore Roosevelt entered the Oval Office. In its mission to secure a 'coronation robes and crowns' stereo, the company deployed an 'unusual letter of introduction' obtained from the US State Department. This highlighted U&U's role as 'the special photographers who accompanied President Roosevelt on his trips around the country.'⁵ In addition, US diplomats in London were also approached for help, but U&U were not alone in seeking such photographic access to the new monarch and his consort. More than 100 similar requests from around the world were reportedly received by the royal household. To address this over-



Figure 3. . 'King Edward VII and his gracious Queen passing down Whitehall to Westminster Abbey to be crowned.' Copyright 1902 by U&U. © Author's collection.

demand, access was limited to two photography companies with an established track record of portraying the British royal family. The chosen firms were W. & D. Downey and J. Russell & Sons. Both were based in London, and both had royal warrants recognising 'the ongoing supply of goods or services' to the royal household, in their case photography.⁶

At this point, fate intervened. With the big day approaching, the King was taken ill with perityphilitis, a condition akin to appendicitis.⁷ As a result, the coronation was moved to Saturday 9 August to allow him time to recover from the life-saving surgery. It was during this hiatus that U&U pursued a new strategy to achieve its photographic objective. A cordial working relationship had been established with one of the chosen coronation photographers, J. Russell & Sons. Their rapport is evident in U&U photographs taken that summer. In one, John Lemmon Russell (1846-1915), the firm's head, is pictured leading the British politician Joseph Chamberlain across a courtyard at an official function (figure 2). Looking on, Bert Underwood can be seen with his stereo camera atop an extendable ladder. An unnamed colleague is at his side and a camera equipment bag can be seen at their feet. Bert described Russell as having 'a most pleasing personality.' The nature of this relationship is captured in an anecdote recounted by U&U's co-founder in his memoir:

If I was unable to gain permission, he [Russell] would take me into Buckingham Palace on the day of the Coronation as his assistant and I could use my stereo-camera.

Reluctant to accept this 'generous offer' for fear of upsetting the King, Bert decided to write a 'long letter' to Lord Knollys, Edward VII's private secretary, repeating U&U's original request. It has proved

impossible to trace this correspondence and verify its provenance.⁸ However, the outcome was that when the day of the coronation dawned, U&U's stereoscopic camera was admitted to Buckingham Palace, suggesting that Knollys replied positively.

Saturday 9 August 1902

Like other photography companies covering the coronation procession, both still and moving, U&U employed what Bert called 'my corps of cameramen:'

...arranged in advantageous positions along the route of the parade. Some of the best places were given; others were paid for liberally.

Cloudy and overcast, the weather conditions provided an additional challenge to those capturing the historic events, whatever their choice of camera (figure 3). By the time the royal party returned to Buckingham Palace, it had started to rain. Unafraid of hyperbole, Bert described the unfolding scene.

Mr. Russel [sic] and I were standing within ten feet of where the golden and glass chariot stopped. The King's face was white and worn. Mr. Russel [sic] turned to me and said: 'We have waited all day for nothing.'

Russell's prediction proved to be unduly pessimistic. By this point, the photographers had identified an interior location with sufficient light. After some discussion, the royal couple briefly paused to have their photograph taken in full coronation regalia. Of the three companies present, only U&U were deploying a stereoscopic camera. According to Bert, it obtained 'three under-exposed, but fair, negatives.' The company later published two of these as stereocards. In the first, the royal couple were captured in a shot that revealed palace staff in the background (figure 1).⁹ In the second, the shot has



Figure 4. 'The Crowned King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra in Coronation Robes ...' Copyright 1902 by U&U. © Author's collection.

been widened, the Queen's pages are now visible on the right of frame, and the King is gazing in the general direction of U&U's operator (figure 4).

The company certainly made commercial capital from its 3D 'coronation robes and crowns' scoop. One card verso proclaimed: 'Stereographed by Special Command to Mr. B. Underwood' and went on:

This stereograph was made by special permit from Lord Knollys, His Majesty's Private Secretary, by direction of the King, and is the only stereoscopic portrait, in Coronation robes, of their Majesties, in existence. Therefore, as an accurate historical record it is invaluable.

This assessment of 3D's ability to place the viewer 'at the scene' informed both U&U's stereoscopic travel photography, which enabled customers to tour the world virtually, and its press photo operation. Technically, this perception was achieved by use of moderately high, but not excessive contrast; short focal length creating a foreground that comes out to meet the viewer; and a deep depth of field. Given the 'look' and ubiquity of U&U images 'taken from stereograph/s' that were used in their tens of thousands by newspapers and magazines post-1900, it is perhaps surprising that the impact of 3D on early press photography has previously gone unrecognized. In the case of its 'coronation robes and crowns' stereos, *Collier's Weekly* in New York was among the publications that credited U&U with an image taken 'from copyrighted stereoscopic photograph' (figure 1).¹⁰

Despite their royal warrants, both Downey and Russell were less successful in their photographic endeavours on that afternoon. According to Bert Underwood, this was because their larger plate cameras required longer exposure times. As a result, only single negatives were possible in the limited time available. To make matters worse, Queen Alexandra swayed at crucial moments. This account is corroborated by a surviving photograph in the Royal Collection (figure 5). Attributed to W. & D. Downey, it is captioned 'King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra in

Coronation Robes, 9 August 1902' and is accompanied by a note on the Royal Collection Trust website noting that 'the photograph is slightly out of focus.'¹¹

As for J. Russell & Sons, its head called at U&U's London office on the morning after the coronation 'feeling extremely disconsolate.' As his firm's negative was unusable, Russell was offered the use of one of U&U's three from the Buckingham Palace shoot. As Bert's memoir recalled:

He [Russell] generously admitted that this would save the day for him. He made a fine enlargement and etched in a beautiful background.

Again, this account is corroborated by an image that subsequently appeared in at least two of Britain's illustrated weeklies credited to Russell. In *Black & White*, it was captioned 'A National Portrait: The King and Queen on Coronation Day' whilst *The Sphere* titled it 'Their Majesties Crowned: King Edward and Queen Alexandra in their Coronation Robes.'¹² In the

Figure 5. 'King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra in coronation robes, 9 August 1902' by W. & D. Downey. RCIN 2933174. Royal Collection Trust / © His Majesty King Charles III 2023.





We publish this, we believe the only photograph of their Majesties taken in their coronation robes, as a matter of historic interest, although it but serves to emphasise the fidelity of our artists as displayed in our Coronation Number. The photograph was taken at Buckingham Palace by Mr. J. Russell of Baker Street

Figure 6. 'Their Majesties Crowned: King Edward and Queen Alexandra in Their Coronation Robes' by Mr. J. Russell. *The Sphere*, 20 September 1902. 10703500. © Illustrated London News Ltd/Mary Evans.

image, which shows evidence of an artist's hand, the King and Queen posed in the same positions and at the same angle as in the U&U stereo (figure 6).

U&U's royal stereographer

As to who took U&U's 'coronation robes and crowns' stereos, an answer is informed by examination of the copyright forms lodged by the company with Stationers' Hall in London on 17 October 1902, now held in the National Archives at Kew. The 'Author of Work' is named as 'James Edward Ellam of 3 Heddon Street, Regent Street, London,' U&U's then office address in the capital to which it had recently moved.¹³ Ellam's working relationship with U&U dated back to 1897 when he supplied stereographs taken outside St. Paul's Cathedral during the service held to celebrate Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. One of these, 'Ambassadors and Royalties Witnessing the Thanksgiving Service,' was published by *The Graphic* in its Diamond Jubilee Celebration

Number.¹⁴ This was a significant moment for U&U at the outset of its efforts to establish a reputation for supplying high quality press photographs. It was also important for James Edward Ellam, an amateur stereographer from Yorkshire, who went on to forge a successful professional career in Fleet Street working for a London photo agency.¹⁵

What the 1902 copyright forms also confirm is Ellam's involvement in a series of royal stereos taken in the weeks following the coronation. The project culminated in a photo shoot at Balmoral, the royal family's residence in the Scottish Highlands. U&U's stereo titled 'From the cares of Empire to the joys of Home...' pictured the King surrounded by his grandchildren with the castle walls as a backdrop (figure 7).¹⁶ These included two future monarchs, Edward VIII and his younger brother George VI, the father of Queen Elizabeth II. What is evident from an examination of contemporary newspaper accounts is that J. Russell & Sons were also in attendance.

Russell's version of the same grouping appeared in *The Sketch* on New Year's Eve 1902 captioned 'Grandpapa.'¹⁷ Trying to date when the image was captured reveals that the Highland outfits worn by members of the royal group may not have been solely for the benefit of U&U and Russell. The King and Queen along with their grandchildren attended the annual Braemar Gathering on Thursday 11 September 1902. This was a regular event in the royal calendar, but one that had not been held for two years because of the South African War and then the death of Queen Victoria.¹⁸ Given the nature of Braemar as a particularly Scottish occasion, the 'From the cares of Empire...' stereo and Russell's photograph may have been taken before the suitably attired royal party set out for the day or on their return to Balmoral.

The presence of Russell is further confirmed by coverage of the day's events at Braemar in the society journal *The Tatler*. Its report included a photo credited to Russell featuring the King and his two eldest grandsons in Highland dress as they also appeared in U&U's stereo. In addition, as part of the same report,

Figure 7. 'From the cares of Empire to the joys of Home - Edward VII and his grandchildren, Balmoral Castle, Scotland.' Copyright 1902 by U&U. Author's collection.



From cares of Empire to the joys of Home—Edward VII, and his grandchildren, Balmoral Castle, Scotland. Copyright 1902 by Underwood & Underwood.



Figure 8. 'Balmoral Castle. King Edward's favourite summer palace – and a Scottish piper – Scotland.' Copyright 1903 by U&U. © Author's collection.



the paper used a cropped version of the 'coronation robes and crowns' photo that U&U had supplied to Russell a few weeks earlier. Again, Russell got the credit for a 'snapshot taken ... immediately after the coronation.'¹⁹ However, given the royal access that working alongside Russell helped secure, U&U may have accepted this situation as a price worth paying. Whatever the resulting compromises, the company made the most of its opportunities. Another of its coronation stereo set captured at Balmoral featured James Campbell, the King's piper, with the castle in the background (figure 8).²⁰ Even the King's coffeemaker, Amin Ibrahim, who reportedly joined the royal household from Ritter's Hotel in Homburg, Germany, was stereographed by Ellam for U&U in the grounds at Balmoral.²¹

The successful collaboration between U&U and Russell during that coronation summer

Figure 9. Bert Underwood (left) and John Lemmon Russell, London 1902. © U&U Collection, George Eastman Museum. 1988.0202.0003.

is exemplified by a single portrait photograph dated 'London 1902' that remained a treasured possession of Bert Underwood's family until its donation to the George Eastman Museum in 1988 (figure 9). Framed within a mount bearing the brand 'J. Russell & Sons, Photographers' complete with royal crest, the portrait featured both Bert Underwood and John Lemmon Russell and was signed 'Yours Truly, J. Russell.' Taken at face value, this momento supports what the evidence presented within this article has revealed, that neither company could have achieved what it did without the help of the other. For U&U, its 'coronation robes and crowns' stereo exclusive also provided it with a valuable photographic calling card. It was one that alerted newspaper and magazine editors around the world to view U&U, hitherto a stereoscopic photography specialist, as an emerging player in the fast-evolving world of press photography.

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Notes & References

- ¹ Robert Taft, *Photography and the American Scene: A Social History, 1839-1889* (New York: Dove Publications, 1938), pp. 502-503. Taft précised a U&U company history written by Elmer Underwood in the mid-1920s and updated in 1936.
- ² For example, see *Illustrated London News*, 3 April 1897, pp. 451-453; *Black & White*, 3 April 1897, p. 424; *Harper's Weekly*, 10 April 1897, pp. 370, 372; *Leslie's Weekly*, 15 April 1897, front cover and p. 246.
- ³ Bert Underwood, *A Stereograph Record of William McKinley as President of the United States* (New York: Underwood & Underwood, 1902).
- ⁴ Bert Underwood, *A Photographer's Experience during the Coronation of Edward VII* (expanded version), Underwood & Underwood Collection, Box 1, Folder 1, pp. 1-21, George Eastman Museum, Rochester, New York. All quotations and material credited to Bert Underwood in this article are drawn from this source.
- ⁵ Many of U&U's William McKinley stereos were the work of Henry A. Strohmeyer (1858-1943). From 1887, Strohmeyer and his partner N. Dwight Wyman collaborated with U&U who published their Strohmeyer & Wyman stereocards. In 1901, when U&U became a limited company, Strohmeyer joined the

board as vice-president whilst Wyman became company secretary.

- ⁶ <https://www.royalwarrant.org/#history> (accessed February 2023).
- ⁷ Frances Dimond, *Developing the Picture: Queen Alexandra and the Art of Photography* (London: Royal Collection Publications, 2004), p. 28 citing a report in *The Lancet* (5 July 1902).
- ⁸ Julie Crocker, Senior Archivist (Access), Windsor Castle, email to author, 20 July 2018.
- ⁹ For a digital interpretation of this stereo, see <https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/about/photographs-collection/stereoscopic-photographs-in-the-collection/the-crowned-king-edward-vii-and-queen-alexandra-in-coronation-robes-on-their-return-from-westminster-abbey-buckingham-palace-london> (accessed February 2023).
- ¹⁰ 'Gossip of the Coronation,' *Collier's Weekly*, 30 August 1902, page unknown.
- ¹¹ <https://www.rct.uk/collection/2933174/king-edward-vii-and-queen-alexandra-in-coronation-robes-9-august-1902> (accessed February 2023).
- ¹² *Black & White*, 20 September 1902, p. 397; *The Sphere*, 20 September 1902, p. 305.
- ¹³ COPY 1/457/360. The original copyright form held in the National Archives at Kew, Surrey, England confirms Ellam's authorship. The online catalogue version omits this information and instead lists U&U as the work's author.
- ¹⁴ *The Graphic Diamond Jubilee Celebration Number*, 28 June 1897, p.39.
- ¹⁵ James Edward Ellam (1857-1920) was a member of the United Stereoscopic Society who exhibited at the 45th RPS annual exhibition in 1909. Ellam's 'stereoscopic transparency' (no. 582) was viewable through a 'stereoscope on the balcony.'
- ¹⁶ For a digital interpretation of this stereo, see <https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw249378/From-the-cares-of-Empire-to-the-joys-of-home--Edward-VII-and-his-grandchildren-Balmoral-Castle> (accessed February 2023).
- ¹⁷ *The Sketch*, 31 December 1902, p. 395. Russell's version featured an eye-line to the right of U&U's.
- ¹⁸ *Daily Telegraph*, 12 September 1902, p.7.
- ¹⁹ *The Tatler*, 17 September 1902, p. 461.
- ²⁰ COPY 1/457/365, National Archives, Kew. James Campbell was Piper to the Sovereign from 1891 to 1910, serving both Queen Victoria and King Edward VII.
- ²¹ COPY 1/457/368, National Archives, Kew. See 'Arrival of the King and Queen ...,' *Daily News*, 26 September 1901, p.8.