

TV: Wedding Coverage Done in a Regal Manner

By JOHN J. O'CONNOR

AFTER all was said and done — and a whale of a lot was said and done by American television — it was lovely. The royal wedding of Prince Charles to Lady Diana Spencer was one of those thoroughly efficient spectacles for which the British are justifiably noted. Just about everything went off on cue, and everybody, including the massive street crowds, played their parts to perfection. One correspondent, ABC's Peter Jennings, aptly recalled Winston Churchill's description of a similarly grand occasion involving Queen Elizabeth II: "A flash of color on the hard road we have to travel."

American television, of course, was thoroughly prepared for the occasion, sometimes to the point of absurdity. The correspondents were almost choking on trivial facts. Jane Pauley of NBC's "Today" show was so overflowing with information that a British guest on the program said, not in total admiration, that "you know more about this than we do."

CBS's Dan Rather managed to mangle some of the facts being funneled to his desk. He observed, for instance, that Lady Diana would become the first Princess of Wales in 300 years. Lady Antonia Fraser, the historian, quickly noted that the last Princess of Wales was created in 1910, diplomatically adding with a smile that "that's almost 300 years." Mr. Rather had been attempting to make the point that Lady Diana would be the first native-born Englishwoman to hold that title in 300 years.

Given the extent of the television hoopla, some confusion among the correspondents was perhaps inevitable. "Today" and ABC's "Good Morning America" were broadcasting from Britain for the entire week. This extraordinary effort inevitably led to a certain amount of strain in devising special material to fill the time. On NBC, Willard Scott, the irrepressibly friendly weatherman, was sent to a pub for, among other things, some dart-throwing. And ABC's Joan Lunden took a bus tour of London with an excessively chatty magician.

On Tuesday, the night before the wedding, ABC went on the air with an hourlong special at 8 o'clock, thereby beating similar specials scheduled later on CBS and NBC. Evidently, this allowed Barbara Walters and Peter Jennings to proclaim that their coverage of the fireworks was "exclusive" — at least for an hour or so. Also included was a British television interview in which Prince Charles agreed with his fiancée that drawing up the guest list for the wedding had been "a nightmare." Life, it seems, can be difficult, even for a prince.

Yesterday's coverage of the wedding itself began at 4:30 A.M., Eastern time. The British Broadcasting Corporation's "feed," with Tom Fleming as announcer, was carried in the metropolitan area on WPIX-TV, Channel 11,

and on the Cable News Network. The BBC pictures, which were frequently picked up on a pooled-coverage basis by the American networks, were excellent, especially when the wedding ceremony offered an opportunity for closeups on the interior detail of St. Paul's Cathedral. And, as usual, the BBC reporting was exemplary, avoiding unnecessary small talk and generally restricting commentary to whatever happened to be on the screen.

American television, needless to say, abhors a silence. For this event, chattering correspondents were supplemented with assorted guest "experts." ABC had Robert Morley, the actor, done up in a top-hat costume. NBC had Robert Lacey, the author of "Majesty," who was described as a "royalty watcher" and introduced by Tom Brokaw as "an extremely well-known journalist." CBS came off best with Lady Antonia Fraser and David Frost, who was clever enough to offer "a special salute to the people in America who switched on early." Lady Antonia offered several nifty historical tidbits, including the terribly British comment that Queen Victoria made in a note to Prince Albert on their wedding day: "I do believe the rain will stop soon."

As usual, ABC provided the liveliest visual content, heavy with informational graphics. Like the other two networks, it had access to the BBC feed, but ABC also arranged to use coverage being provided by ITC, Britain's independent television system. The switching back and forth produced a bit more visual variety but, at the same time, often disrupted the carefully calculated "inner logic" of the BBC coverage. But the most jarring moments of the coverage were doubtlessly suffered by CBS's Mr. Rather who, sitting outside St. Paul's, suddenly found himself being drowned out by the church's bells as he was trying to say something about the wedding cake.

Inevitably, television becomes part of the story. During the wedding ceremony, cheers could be heard outside the church from people who were watching the event on portable sets. Later, a woman spectator, while insisting she enjoyed the day out, admitted that about all she saw of the wedding was the tops of helmets as the various guards rode by. Meanwhile, the television cameras seemed to be almost sitting in the carriages with the royal participants. Television, however, will never entirely replace the real thing. As the newlyweds were leaving St. Paul's, even Mr. Rather momentarily left the television arena, explaining: "We want to turn around and see this. I don't want to see this simply on television."

As the fairy-tale event rambled cheerfully to a conclusion, coverage began returning slowly, almost reluctantly, to harsh realities, including the news that a young man had been killed in Liverpool rioting the night before. But the royal wedding had served the purposes of pageantry splendidly. As the BBC's Mr. Fleming observed: "It's a remarkable sight."