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Royalty Inc.

Written by Stephen Bates

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Royalty Inc.

Britain's Best-Known Brand

By Stephen Bates

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Chapter 1

I have to be seen to be believed'

(Said to be the Queen's private motto)

Whoever wrote the original words to the National Anthem, the signature tune of Britain, probably at some time in the first half of the eighteenth century, could not have known how apposite they would still be two and a half centuries later. Our noble Queen has certainly lived long – longer than any previous monarch in the nation's history – and she has long reigned over us too, generally happily and graciously, though gloriously may be more a matter for debate. You have to be in your seventies now to remember a time when she was not the monarch. Indeed, if you were born on the day she became Queen you can't be far off reaching retirement and collecting your state pension.

The Queen's longevity is a tribute to her robust health, but how is it that the institution she represents, based on some very quaint traditions and dated assumptions, tracing its origins back more than a thousand years, has not only managed to survive but to flourish well into the twenty-first century? There are very few enduring monarchies in the world in democratic countries: they are basically restricted to a fringe of western Europe, and the British monarchy is by far the best

known of them. More than a governmental system, an ancient flummery or a tourist trap, it is, arguably, the most famous non-commercial brand in the world. Our small, sprightly, octogenarian Queen, after more than sixty-three years on the throne, is one of the most famous women anywhere on earth, as recognisable to someone in Tokyo or Tulsa, or even Timbuktu and Tuvalu, as in Tooting or Truro. Everything about her on the surface is familiar, from her dress sense – pastel colours, off-the-face hats – to her voice, reminiscent of a different era and class. We know she likes dogs and horses and Scotland, that in private she is a good mimic and sometimes sardonic, that she hates being late, that she is strongly religious and is very conscientious and stoic. What we don't know is what she thinks about almost anything: her opinions are unknown and unknowable, a blank. Her inscrutability is the secret of her success. If we really knew anything about her thoughts, the monarchy would rock: its apparent impartiality is its greatest strength, for almost any opinion held by the sovereign would divide the country, whereas having none publicly goes a long way towards uniting it.

For a journalist it is the greatest frustration: how do you report on someone you cannot talk to? With the possible exception of Kim Jong-un, the Supreme Leader of North Korea, the Queen is the only person on the planet who cannot be interviewed – even Pope Francis regularly chats to the media these days. We can guess what she is like and speculate for all we are worth, the Queen even occasionally shows passive emotion, but ultimately the mask never slips. We may think we know what she is really like, but do we? As Lord Fellowes, her former private secretary, told a new member of staff: 'Just because she is friendly, it does not mean she is friends with you.'

Everyone knows (or thinks they know) her family, too. The royal soap opera trundles on, less thrilling perhaps than twenty years ago,

but still fulfilling all the requirements of an ongoing weekly saga: the matriarch with an ageing husband apt to speak his mind too freely and put his foot in it; the frustrated eldest son with the turbulent lovelorn backstory; the young married couple with babies; the dull and grasping younger children. Characters come and go, some die off, others arrive and plots emerge, then peter out, but the story continues. It is a seeming anachronism which remains incredibly popular – much more so than most other institutions in Britain or abroad, shining bright in public affection, untarnished like politicians, or the church, the media, the bankers or big business. This is one company that has somehow pulled off the trick of seeming never to change, but yet it always manages to evolve, quietly, inconspicuously but firmly: as familiar in its way as a Coca-Cola bottle or a Marmite jar. A new label here, a new ingredient there, a plastic bottle instead of a glass one, a new taste sensation. We think iconic brands do not change, but they do and if they do it too drastically or obviously, they suffer. Equally, if they do not change, they decline and die. Royalty is a bit like that. It has been changing successfully for years, centuries even, without most people really noticing. It is not the same institution it was when the Queen came to the throne in 1952; in many ways it has changed out of all recognition and so it sails on. This book seeks to track the changes and explain how the monarchy has achieved its transformation. How has it pulled it off? And will it continue to do so?

The parameters are easy to discern, as are the changes to the lives of those she governs. Queen Elizabeth II is not the longest-reigning sovereign in history. She'll have to last nearly another twenty years to beat King Sobhuza of Swaziland's eighty-two years and 254 days between 1899 and 1982, until 2024 to whizz past Louis XIV of France and 2019 to beat the Emperor Franz Josef of Austria and who knows when the reign of the King of Thailand, Bhumibol Adulyadej, who has

been on the throne there since June 1946, will end? Unlike the Queen, he is perhaps not a world-renowned figure, possibly not even in Bangkok¹. But in Britain the sixty-three years and 216 days that Queen Victoria was on the throne will be eclipsed on 9 September 2015. Remarkably, at the time of writing, Britain has had a female head of state for 127 of the past 180 years. The British Empire has long gone – partly assembled in the reign of Queen Victoria, it has been completely dismantled in the time of her great-great-granddaughter – but she still remains sovereign of sixteen realms, from the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Jamaica, Barbados, the Bahamas, Grenada, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Tuvalu, St Lucia, St Vincent and the Grenadines, Belize, Antigua and Barbuda to St Christopher and Nevis, and about 130 million people are her subjects. Any proposed change in the monarch's constitutional position in the UK requires their agreement as independent states too. The Commonwealth has replaced the empire: fifty-three independent nations, encompassing a third of the world's population, and the Queen is at its head. Even countries that were never ruled by the British, such as Mozambique, have joined and those thirty-one member states that are now republics still acknowledge her: they recognise the organisation as a useful and beneficial international association, bound together by a colonial history, mainly a common language and shared traditions. In the words of the then Australian prime minister Julia Gillard in 2011, in a country that has strong republican traditions, not least in Gillard's party: the Queen remains 'a vital, constitutional part of Australian democracy'. If the Queen sometimes seems the most enthusiastic member of the Commonwealth, she also gives it something that other

1 He may not be as well known as the Queen, but he is considerably richer, with a fortune of £35 billion.

transnational bodies lack. 'She distinguishes us from the United States,' as one Canadian commentator said to me during a royal trip. 'She's something they don't have.'

Not only a constitutional monarch, Elizabeth II is also the Supreme Governor of the Church of England, the mother church of the world's fourth-largest Christian denomination, the worldwide Anglican communion and, following a quirk of sixteenth-century diplomatic intrigue just before the Reformation, has inherited Henry VIII's title, bestowed on him by a then grateful pope, of being Defender of the Faith. Anglicanism's reach, too, extends to the farthest, smallest Pacific islands.

During her reign, Elizabeth II has met a very roughly-estimated one million people, including many of the most significant figures on the planet: not least, a quarter of all the American presidents who have ever lived, five popes and just about every famous starlet from Marilyn Monroe (who was born six weeks after the Queen) to Dame Angelina Jolie and Daniel Craig, and from Frank Sinatra to Kylie Minogue. 'Met' of course is a comparative term: very many of those presented to her have been tongue-tied, or effusive, or have just babbled foolishly in the presence of someone so famous and important; and their conversations will have been fleeting and superficial: a gentle, anodyne question awaited from the Queen, a gasped reply from the subject.

What did she say, for instance, to Pope Benedict XVI in September 2010 when she met him on his arrival at Holyroodhouse in Edinburgh at the start of his official visit? As one who was in the room at the time, I can report there was an exchange of gifts: a reproduction set of Hans Holbein prints of Tudor worthies from her to him and a replica eighteenth-century German Bible from him to her. 'Oh lovely,' said the Queen as if she was accepting a pair of socks at Christmas, 'thank you very much indeed. Lovely.' Then, 'Where would you like to sit?' pointing to one

of three chairs in the room. And: 'It was a very small car you arrived in, wasn't it? Very tight squeeze? But you have got your own car here, haven't you, the Popemobile?' The Pope, a trifle deaf and perhaps not one of the world's great conversationalists, indeed looking a little like the Addams family's Uncle Fester, dressed in white, shifted uneasily and silently in his seat. Thus, one great Christian leader to another. Sadly, we were ushered out before the discussion grew theological.

But it is not just a shy German pope. Even a hardened television interrogator like Jeremy Paxman admits to having shied away from speaking to her when he had the chance at a palace reception: 'The truth was that I had been overcome by nerves . . . "a certain tension which is akin to awe" fitted the mood well enough . . . What was it about this diminutive grandmother that induced paralysing tension?' Even those who work for her experience something similar. One former senior official who found himself being interviewed for his job by the Queen, who he had not met, seen before or ever considered working for, said: 'It is surreal. You are sitting there thinking: "This is the woman whose head is on the ten pound note." Then you start looking harder and thinking, hmmm, curls are tighter. The surprising thing was she was actually quite teasing: it was just a chat, more than an interview. She asked me where I came from and it turned out she'd just been there and knew it better than I did. In meetings with her after I joined the palace you would sit around a table, with tea and sandwiches. I realised that my interview had been about whether I would fit in. The Queen herself was always quite detached: it was as if she was in another world.'

Some would say the nerves come from the sense of being in the presence of majesty – the divinity that doth hedge a king, as Shakespeare said – or of magic; a sense of nerves at standing next to one of the most famous people on earth. It is not power – the Queen cannot order you

to the Tower, or to execution, change a government or decide what constitutes the law in her own courts like some of her predecessors tried to do. It is not, particularly, charisma; perhaps not even a sense of history. But there is definitely an aura. People dream about the Queen, they imagine what they might say to her and what she might say to them (allegedly, it is often something about a cup of tea. And she's usually wearing a crown). Possibly it is an awareness of just who else she has met and shaken hands with and a consciousness of making a fool of oneself by saying something utterly banal or foolish when what one wants to say ought to be memorable, original and witty. She will have heard it all before. She can't answer any really interesting questions. There won't be a *real* conversation (not that you would have that perhaps with any other famous person you met briefly). Best not to say anything. Maybe turning your back and taking a selfie would be safer. As the Queen herself said to someone whose mobile phone went off just as he shook her hand: 'Better answer that. It might be someone important.' So she does have a sense of humour.

And, more importantly, she has been around for a very long time. She has seen more confidential government documents, intelligence reports, foreign and diplomatic assessments, and heard more crucial gossip than anyone else alive. Twelve prime ministers have come and gone – a fifth of all the prime ministers of the past three hundred years – starting with Sir Winston Churchill, born in 1874, to David Cameron, born ninety-two years later, who is younger than all her children. Prime Minister Cameron did not see the light of day until she had already been on the throne for fourteen years. Her governments have required her to meet tyrants such as Nicolae Ceauşescu and Robert Mugabe; heroes like Nelson Mandela and Václav Havel; former terrorists including Martin McGuinness who might once have tried to kill her and now says he likes and admires her; to heads of state of every stamp

and status. There are very few countries she has not visited: North Korea, Cuba, the Congo – turbulent states or ones where they do not appreciate a monarch, even if they are ruled by a dynasty themselves; a dynasty much more controlling, autocratic and tyrannical than Britain has ever had.

It is an extraordinary feat in the twenty-first-century world of instant fame – fame for fame’s sake – and sliding celebrity that the Queen should still be one of the most recognisable and photographed people on the planet. Her voice has modified its timbre over the years but is still redolent of another era, her sensible dress sense has remained much the same for decades and her interests – dogs, especially corgis, horses, racing and church – are mundane or esoteric to many of her subjects. We understand that she does not like opera much, or the ballet; she has given up attending film premieres and Royal Variety Performances with relief – those endless pleasures have devolved on Prince Charles; and she does not often read books. Her reading is the paperwork from the daily red boxes, and the *Racing Post* and *Sunday Telegraph*, whose crossword she enjoys. She has admirably succeeded in passing through the world, meeting its most interesting and important people while scarcely saying a memorable or opinionated word to any of them in reply. Her self-restraint and discipline have been heroic. The nearest she comes to criticism is the blank stare when told something disagreeable or wrong: impassive and inscrutable, but devastating. When it comes to annoyance, if circumstances have made her late for an engagement: ‘She does get stropky then,’ says a former aide. ‘She doesn’t like keeping people waiting.’

Almost her whole life has been lived without ever mingling on equal terms with anybody: an ultimately lonely and exposed state. She did not go to school, but was privately tutored and the only other children she met were the Girl Guides recruited to join the specially

set up Buckingham Palace group who were all drawn from aristocratic backgrounds – her father feared that otherwise she might meet ‘the wrong types’. She has never lived in a house without servants; her first appearance on the cover of *Time* magazine was at the age of three and the first biography about her was published when she was four. No wonder that as she was posing for Pietro Annigoni’s famous portrait of her in Garter robes in 1954, she recalled gazing out of the palace window as a child and wondering what the people outside in the Mall were really like and what they thought of her. Only on one heady evening, VE night in May 1945, is she known to have slipped out of Buckingham Palace incognito to join the crowds celebrating in the Mall; and she has very occasionally popped into shops, or driven a car – though at Balmoral and Sandringham, not in the middle of London.

You will not see her getting out of a taxi in front of the palace, carrying her shopping, as Denmark’s Queen Margrethe, cigarette usually in hand, does from time to time. Queen Elizabeth has occasionally taken scheduled train services in recent years. There are also sometimes scheduled airline flights. She has had tea with pensioners in their council flats and mingled with winning sportsmen and women at receptions. Even journalists have sometimes been invited en masse to the palace, but never for a press conference by the Queen. She meets all sorts of people, but from the outside looking in, as it were, and she rarely hears someone disagreeing with her to her face.

Even now she ploughs on, making royal visits, holding investitures, attending and giving dinners, seeing her prime minister every week, dutifully working on endless boxes of documents for several hours a day, just as she has done since 1952, keeping herself informed, hearing, but not repeating, the gossip and the assessments of her private secretary and other staff, her ministers, the government’s mandarins

and diplomats. She knows no other way and could not imagine stopping: it has been what her whole life has been dedicated to doing. There is still a relentless annual round: regular excursions through the year, the Maundy service at Easter, trooping the colour and Buckingham Palace garden parties in the summer, the Order of the Garter gathering at Windsor in June in the week of Royal Ascot (when the Queen fails to attend the latter we will know something is really wrong), a week at Holyroodhouse in Edinburgh before the annual summer holiday at Balmoral, the State Opening of Parliament, November's Remembrance Sunday ceremony at the Cenotaph, then the Christmas broadcast. There are religious services and commemorations, meetings with ambassadors, both British and foreign, heads of states to meet and entertain on their official visits to Britain. Then there are also state visits abroad – the most recent to Germany in June 2015 – though they are fewer than previously, and also Commonwealth heads of government gatherings every second year. These are increasingly brief affairs, a few days at a time, compared with the 1950s when the Queen embarked on a leisurely but gruelling tour of the Commonwealth lasting six months. Having gone all that way – the first reigning monarch to visit the Antipodes – she spent two months in Australia and New Zealand during the trip in 1953–54. Her sixteenth visit to Australia in 2011 lasted just over a week, including flights from Britain and then back again. If it all sounds like fun, into a seventh decade the routine must have grown wearing at an age when many are putting their feet up – not that there are many outward signs of this happening with the Queen. There are fewer engagements and they are spaced out more to give her and her nonagenarian husband, who often accompanies her, time to recover. There tends to be one engagement a day these days, or one in the morning and another in the afternoon, with a break to catch breath in between – but to all appearances the Queen still seems

to enjoy herself and, as many have commented, certainly smiles more genially and frequently in public than formerly.

Everywhere she goes the Queen – and other members of the royal family – are given presents: a deluge of gifts for the family that already has everything, a sort of permanent Christmas without the possibility of saying: ‘Oh, you shouldn’t have’ and meaning it. Recently the royals have started filing a public annual account of what they have received. In January 2015, the list for the Queen included several bronze equine statuettes, from the president of Ireland, the president of France and two from the Emir of Qatar to take account of her interest in horses and racing – you can see how their minds worked – together with a dressage crop from the governor-general of Canada and a bristled boot-scraper from Felsted public school in Essex. For her bedside table at the same time came *Who’s Who in Australia*, the story of Eurotunnel and a history of accountancy in Ireland, which sounds like a good cure for insomnia. This was just a selection of the odder items: the published list goes on for nine pages. However, even the Queen’s list was outdone by that of her great-grandson, the baby Prince George, whose gifts from Australia and New Zealand included soft toys, a polo mallet, a surfboard, a skateboard, a cricket bat, a rocking horse, a miniature amphibious boat and a possum-skin cloak. Meanwhile, his grandfather Prince Charles returned from a tour to North America with a Stetson, a Metis fur hat from Canada, and a Panama hat and sombrero from Mexico, not to overlook a woollen poncho, a boxed football shirt, a pair of maracas and two slingshots. The twelve jars of honey from Saudi Arabia following a visit there may have come in useful, however, and the twelve boxes of mangoes received by Prince Andrew from the president and prime minister of Pakistan would not have been unwelcome, providing they could be consumed before going bad. The more evanescent presents such as bouquets and posies are discreetly

distributed to local old people's homes, and the more substantial are catalogued and stored: the royals do not sit submerged by presents like the winners of a game show. Some, as became clear during a court case in 2002, find their way quietly to salerooms, but most have served their purpose merely by being given as public tokens of esteem and regard. Maybe some do indeed become useful around the palace. It may be wondered, however, whether the Irish accountancy book or the maracas will ever be seen in public again.

The Queen's reign is a triumph of endurance and not just of longevity. In all those years, she has never acted impetuously nor capriciously, never lost her temper – it seems – nor retreated for years from her public duties as Victoria did. The age will not be named after her, as Victoria's was. Her reign has not defined the country Britain has become. Attempts at the start in the early 1950s to speak of a new Elizabethan era and a young Gloriana were quickly abandoned: it has not been a time for heroics or conquering the world. And yet despite, and perhaps because of, her apparent benign passivity, this woman, whose interests and life experiences are so different from the vast majority of the inhabitants of her realms, remains hugely popular. It is an irony, as well as an achievement, that while most other institutions of the state have declined in popularity, prestige and influence: the landed aristocracy, politics and politicians, government and the church, trade unions and police, banks and lawyers, even the National Health Service and the armed forces, the monarchy not only endures but flourishes: the one unimpeachable, uncompromised and untarnished institution in the land, generally held in as high regard now as in 1952.

In opinion polls, a constant two-thirds to three-quarters of those questioned admire the Queen, with the number rising at times of royal events and celebrations. The figure drops when they are asked about the institution as opposed to the person, but there are still solid majorities

for the monarchy and indifference rather than hostility to it among most of the rest². Impressionistically, the monarch seems to offer a sense of tradition and spiritual continuity between the past and the present. In a largely religiously unobservant, often ignorant country there is a sort of sentimentality about the institution as well as the person.

Maybe the history feeds into a sort of colourful national mythic past. Despite the best efforts of historians to focus on a range of historic narratives and themes: economic history, social history and ethnic minority history, the story of our past is still largely narrated through our kings and queens. They form a sort of backbone on which the rest of our history is hung. It is a vibrant story, replete with incidents real, imagined and exaggerated: good kings, bad kings, wise kings, foolish kings, deposed kings, an executed king, a mad king, a profligate king and even a queen or two, who have done rather better than any of their male counterparts. The character of the monarchs and the office they held informs and shapes our knowledge of our past. They personify the nation's history and are some of its most distinctive characters. Why else would 35,000 people crowd the streets of a Midlands provincial town on a spring Sunday to hurl white roses on the cortege carrying the twisted bones of Richard III to a revered resting place in the local cathedral? Admittedly, the story of the unearthing of the fifteenth-century king's corpse from under a council car park and the forensic work to identify him was extraordinary and fascinating, and the story of his brief, contested reign and ghastly death is compelling. It made for

2 A ComRes online poll of 2,000 Britons in April 2015, carried out for the *Daily Mail*, showed 77 per cent 'liked' the Queen, while 79 per cent 'liked' Princes William and Harry. Asked whether Britain should remain a monarchy, 70 per cent thought so, the figure rising to 84 per cent for older respondents. Those questioned were much more ambivalent about whether Prince Charles should succeed to the throne: 40 per cent were in favour of him giving up the succession, 43 per cent were against; and 55 per cent were opposed to his wife Camilla becoming Queen.

a sort of true-life *Game of Thrones*, a television series whose popularity coincided with the discovery of the body; but the last Plantagenet, the last English king to die in battle, still has a decidedly chequered reputation even by the standards of Medieval royalty. The fascination may be obvious and even worthy if it stimulates interest in a remote and complicated period of English history, but why throw flowers? Whoever he was, Princess Diana he wasn't. Despite the best efforts of the obsessives of the Richard III Society, he was never the People's Prince.

Nowadays, lacking a solid and agreed alternative, let alone a rival, or much pressure for change from its subjects, the institution sails serenely onwards, largely because of what it represents rather than who the monarch is. As her subjects hardly know her, she incurs respect for her dutifulness rather than love for her person. Even republicans, in Australia and New Zealand as well as Britain, do not demand that she should stand down. They recognise her popularity and the hopelessness of either expecting her to abdicate – that's not in her DNA after what happened to her uncle Edward VIII – or the hopelessness of drumming up a popular majority against her. Even in the United States, President Obama appeared to recognise the monarchy's popularity among his fellow citizens, if his mumbled words to Prince Charles during the latter's visit to the White House in March 2015 were anything to go by. The muttered aside – not heard by the assembled media in the Oval Office but picked up on a boom microphone – had the president saying: 'I think it's fair to say that the American people are quite fond of the royal family. They like them much better than they like their own politicians.' The words may have been avuncular and there is no sign of America petitioning to have the Windsors back as heads of state, but there is a small sliver of truth in there. Americans remain proud of having divested themselves of King George in the War of Independence – their great founding narrative – but, as anyone knows who has ever

met an American, they remain fascinated by the royal family their country escaped and many seem more interested in the minutiae of their lives than most Britons are. The US networks send aircraft-loads of camera crews and television anchors to cover royal weddings and funerals, the US London correspondents write up their activities, celebrity authors tap away at biographies, supermarket magazines lap up the latest gossip, film-makers churn out royal fairy tales and American tourists peer through the railings of Buckingham Palace every day of the week. Popular, yes – in a sort of appalled, obsessive, baffled, prurient way.

The first duty of a monarch is to preserve the family line and inheritance, so the Queen may well have done that for a century to come, perhaps even longer than the United Kingdom itself, as things stand. If her great-grandson Prince George, born in 2013, lives as long and as robustly as she has, he will see in the next century as King George VII – and, barring accidents of fate and unforeseen upheavals, who would bet against that happening? The future succession seems all mapped out: after the Queen's death, an inevitably short reign by an elderly King Charles III, followed by a longer one by a middle-aged William V and then, hopefully many decades hence, the seventh George. Recent changes in the law of succession – the Succession to the Crown Act 2013 – to remove gender inequality have been symbolic, but possibly a century premature: the Windsor male line now stretches for decades ahead. Vicissitudes, political, popular and constitutional, may conceivably change things, but the current family firm has at least done its best to preserve its dynastic longevity into the distant, unforeseeable future for decades to come. It will be a middle-aged to elderly monarchy, perhaps lacking the Camelot sparkle, but the family firm has grown wary of that sort of thing. The royal soap opera is here to stay: daylight has truly been let in on the magic and interest across

the world will remain intense, but the next two monarchs at least look set to be boringly and resolutely unglamorous. And that, maybe, is how it should be too. Raciness is not a recipe for longevity.

The Windsor royal family has not survived this far by accident. In the twentieth century, through two world wars, social change, revolutions and economic upheavals when other European monarchies were toppling, they and their advisers devised and developed strategies for endurance and continuing popularity. The Bourbons learnt nothing and forgot nothing, and the Kaiser lost his place in the sun, the Hapsburgs faded away and the Romanovs were shot, but those have not been mistakes made by the Windsors. It has not happened just by osmosis, but by a mixture of guile, pragmatism, common sense and public relations. It has been planned and worked upon, as this book aims to show: the result of subtle and continuous rebranding of a sort that should be the envy of many more supposedly savvy and up-to-date organisations.