
Opening Extract from...

The Diamond Queen

Elizabeth II and Her People

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What the Queen Does

She is a small woman with a globally familiar face, a hundred-carat smile – when she chooses to turn it on – and a thousand years of history at her back. She reigns in a world which has mostly left monarchy behind, yet the result of her reign is that two-thirds of British people assume their monarchy will still be here in a century's time. She is wry and knowing, but she feels a calling. All this is serious. She can brim with dry observations but she seems empty of cynicism. She is not a natural public speaker.

But there she is, in May 2011 and dressed in emerald green, arriving for her first visit to the Republic of Ireland. Aged eighty-five, she makes one of the most politically significant speeches of her life. 'It is a sad and regrettable reality that through our history our islands have experienced more than their fair share of heartache, turbulence and loss. These events have touched many of us personally . . . To all those who have suffered as a consequence of a troubled past I extend my sincere thoughts and deep sympathy.' This is a highly emotional trip, recalling the murder of her relative Lord Mountbatten by the IRA in 1979, and centred on a visit to Croke Park, the stadium and headquarters of the Gaelic Athletic Association where, in 1920, fourteen innocent people were shot by police and auxiliaries loyal to the Crown – to her grandfather – at the beginning of the bloody struggle for Irish independence.

It had been a long time coming and security bosses on both sides of the Irish Sea had been pale-faced with worry. The visit had been announced well in advance, and the Queen does not cancel. As it happened, the vast majority of Irish people welcomed the visit; the Queen even shook hands with a representative of the diehard republican Sinn Fein. So this was a small but significant page-turn in history, recognizing that by 2011 what mattered to Irish and British were their family, business, emotional and sporting links, not the bloodied past. The Queen impresses on the Irish prime minister, the Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, that this is a visit she has waited much of her life to make; what he calls 'a closing of the circle'. In private she sits under the portrait of the Irish military leader Michael Collins. In public she bows her head in memory of the Irish rebels who died fighting the Crown.

Nobody else from Britain could have made such a visit of high-profile reconciliation, covered by more than a thousand journalists and reported all round the world. No British politician has been around for long enough, or been personally touched so closely, or could claim to speak for Britain itself. Ireland's President Mary McAleese speaks for her people warmly and well, the first Northerner and the second woman to serve in the job. But no Briton other than the Queen could speak in that way for the British.

There she is again, just a few days later, welcoming President Barack Obama to stay at Buckingham Palace. In the gusty sunshine overlooking the lawn there is picture-postcard pomp – a guard of Household Cavalry, marching soldiers, bagpipes, national anthems, the reverberations of artillery salutes. On the eve of his visit, speaking in Washington, Obama had gone out of his way to praise the Queen in lavish if not entirely politically accurate terms as 'the best of England'. His

earlier visit had gone spectacularly well. Even so, this is a relationship which is also, in a gentler and more personal way, about friendship and reconciliation.

For when Obama first became US president there had been unease in London. Here was a man who seemed cool about the (exaggerated) 'special relationship' with Britain. He had no personal ties – or rather, just one, which was unhappy and about which he had written himself. His grandfather had been arrested, imprisoned and tortured in Kenya. The early years of the Queen's reign had been marked by a brutal war against the nationalist Mau Mau there. Obama is a supremely professional politician, very unlikely to allow personal history to influence his decision-making, but the unease was there. Once the pomp was over the Queen did her level best to make him and his wife Michelle feel especially welcome, showing the couple to their bedroom.

There was on show a very shrewdly chosen selection of memorabilia from the Royal Archive – as there always is for a state visit. These are worth dwelling on. There was a note in George III's handwriting, from around 1780, lamenting 'America is lost! Must we fall beneath the blow?' but going on to speculate about a future of trade and friendship. There were letters from Lincoln, Obama's hero, and from Queen Victoria to his widow; and diary entries by Victoria showing her sympathy for black slaves, recording her excitement in meeting one, Josiah Henson, who she said had 'endured great suffering and cruelty' before escaping to British Canada. There were records of a visit by the then Prince of Wales to Obama's home city of Chicago in 1860, and a handwritten note by the Queen Mother to the then Princess Elizabeth recording their visit to President Roosevelt in 1939 when they ate under the trees 'and all our food on one plate . . . some ham, lettuce,

beans and HOT DOGS too!' Homely – but a reminder of the vital wartime alliance which followed King George VI's most important overseas visit. There were details and a flag from Hawaii, Obama's birthplace.

This is worth mentioning at the start of a biography of the Queen because in a small way it contains the essence of the case for monarchy. First, this is a constitutional job but it is also a personal one. From American independence, through the story of slavery and places of particular interest to Obama, the job was to make an emotional connection – to find points of contact. In return, Obama gave the Queen a book of photographs of her parents' 1939 visit, on the eve of war. He would set off for important and potentially tricky talks with Prime Minister David Cameron about Libya, Afghanistan and their different approaches to economics in the warmest possible mood. This is what the Queen is for. As with the Irish visit, nobody else could do it. Second, though, she can only work effectively because plenty of other people (such as the Royal Librarian Lady Roberts) work very hard behind the scenes, unknown to the public. This is their story too.

But it is hers first. The best antidote to weariness or hostility about the Queen is to try to follow her about for a few months. From trade-based missions overseas to visits to small towns and hospitals, it is a surprisingly gruelling routine. It includes grand ceremonial occasions and light-footed, fast-moving trips to meet soldiers, business people, volunteers and almost every other category one can imagine. It eats up evenings, where at one palace or another thousands of people have been invited to be 'honoured' for their work or generosity. It involves the patient reading of fat boxes of heavily serious paperwork, oozing from the government departments who work in her name. In Whitehall, where they assess the

most secret intelligence as it arrives, the Queen is simply 'Reader No. 1.'

It has been a life of turning up. But turning up is not to be underestimated. The Queen has a force-field aura that very few politicians manage to project. There is an atmospheric wobble of expectation, a slight but helpless jitter. When she turns up, people find their heart-rate rising, however much they try to treat her as just another woman. Somehow, despite being everywhere – in news bulletins, on postage stamps, cards and front pages – she has managed to remain mysterious. Her face moves from apparently grumpy to beaming, and back. Her eyes flicker carefully around. She gives little away.

After the rapids of family crisis and public controversy, she is in calmer waters. British royalty has become surprisingly popular around the world. She watched with great interest and some pleasure a recent film about her father's struggle against his stutter and the man who helped him, the Australian Lionel Logue. She remembers Logue very vividly. Her father was played by the actor Colin Firth. She herself was the subject of a blockbuster film, starring Helen Mirren. Her illustrious ancestress Elizabeth I was potrayed by Judi Dench in a film about Shakespeare. Firth, Mirren and Dench all won Oscars, as one of the Queen's children wryly notes.

She is not an actor. But the popularity of the monarchy owes a lot to the way she performs. Life has taken her around the world many times and introduced her to leaders of all kinds, from the heroic to the monstrous; and to seas of soapy faces; and to forests of wiggling hands. Since she was a small girl, she has known her Destiny. All the accounts of her childhood agree that she was a calm, thoughtful child, with a passion for animals. Though shy, she regards being Queen as a vocation, a calling which cannot be evaded. She has borne four

children, seen three of them divorced, has eight grandchildren and – take a bow, Savannah Phillips – one great-granddaughter.

Like any eighty-five-year-old she has been bereaved and suffered disappointment as well as enjoying success. She has lost a King, a Queen and Princesses – her father, mother, sister and the remarkable Diana – as well as friends. Yet she can be satisfied. She knows that her dynasty, unlike so many others, is almost certain to survive. Her heir and her heir's heir are waiting. With her, and her kind of monarchy, most of her people are content.

Those who can remember her as a curly-headed little girl are now a small platoon. On 12 May 2011 she became the second-longest-serving monarch in British history, having reigned for 21,645 days, beating George III's record. In September 2015, if she is still alive, she will outlast even Queen Victoria's record too. Her husband, now ninety, still has the gimlet stare and suspicious bearing of a man's man cast adrift in a world of progressives and wets. He could have scaled most ladders. He chose to spend his life as 'Consort, liege and follower'.

The Duke's life and the Queen's life have been lived in lock-step, through an annual circle of ritual and tradition, swivelling from palace to palace as the seasons change; dressing up, often several times a day, for lunches, openings, speeches, military parades, investitures and dinners. The Queen's mornings begin as they have for most of her life, with BBC radio news, Earl Grey tea, the *Racing Post* and the *Daily Telegraph* and, while having breakfast toast with her husband, enjoying the music (ignorant people would call it noise) of her personal bagpiper in the garden. Near her are the last truly dangerous members of the British monarchical system, the Queen's dogs – four corgis and three dorgis (a dachshund–corgi cross).

A discreet, protective staff she calls by their first names come and go; a typed diary sheet of engagements is waiting; soon the first of the boxes of official papers, containing everything from minor appointments to alarming secret service reports, will arrive. There may be a visit upstairs to the domain of Angela Kelly, her personal assistant and senior dresser, who has rooms off a narrow corridor just below the Buckingham Palace roof. A genial and down-to-earth Liverpudlian, she is one of the people closest to the Queen, family apart. She works with huge bolts of cloth, dummies and scissors to create many of the Queen's outfits. Before overseas or long domestic visits, she has planned in detail the dresses, hats, bags and shoes with the Queen. Outside designers are brought in from time to time. One Scottish designer insisted on a full personal fitting. As she crouched down nervously with a tape-measure, the Queen exclaimed: 'leg out! Arm out! Leg out!'and giggled as the measurements were taken. A floor below Angela Kelly, the old-fashioned leather suitcases and trunks for a Royal progress, each stamped simply with 'The Queen', are waiting. They have had a lot of use; the monarch is not a fan of the throwaway society.

Down in her office, the contents of the various official boxes have been sorted out by her private secretary and carried upstairs to be scrutinized. She alone reads these; the Duke maintains a careful constitutional distance from some parts of her life, though he runs the estates and remains a very active nonagenarian, still often weaving through the London traffic at the wheel of his own, usefully anonymous taxi. She is the longest-lived monarch in her country's history. Like anyone who has followed routines for so long, she hopes there will be a surprise today; just a small one. Now what? What will happen today?

The Job

Today, the Queen will dress, and go out and do her job. Angela Kelly will have laid out clothes which will, they both hope, make the Queen stand out in a crowd and will be appropriate to whatever jobs lie ahead that day. At certain times of the year, of course, she will not be working. There are quiet family weekends and a long summer break, mostly at Balmoral in Scotland. But if you totted up the hours she puts in, the European health and safety people would itch to prosecute – well, who? There is the problem. There is no trade union or employment contract for a Queen. The expectations of civil servants and politicians, tourists, presidents and the passing crowd are so great that her duties never end.

Take a breath. As head of state, Queen Elizabeth is the living symbol of nations, above all that of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland – though another fifteen besides, including Australia, Canada, New Zealand and smaller countries, down to Tuvalu. She is not like most other constitutional monarchs. The British state has no single written constitution nor any founding document. About a third of the Dutch constitution, by contrast, explains what the Dutch monarch's duties are. Spain's king is part of one of Europe's oldest and grandest royal houses, the Bourbons; but his job is strictly limited in the careful prose of the Spanish constitution.

The British Queen's authority is more like a quiet growl from ancient days, still quietly thrumming and mysterious. She stands *for* the state – indeed, in some ways, at least in theory, she *is* the state. She is the living representative of the power-structure that struggles to protect and sustain some 62 million people, and another 72 million in her other 'realms'.

She is not the symbol of the people. How could she or anyone represent the teeming millions of different ethnic groups and religions, of every political view, shape, bias and age? Her enthusiasm for the Commonwealth of nations, which is not the private passion of many British politicians, has made her more interested in the lives of the new black and Asian Britons than one might expect. Receptions at Buckingham Palace are generally more socially and ethnically mixed than they are at Downing Street, or in the City. She is at her most relaxed and smiling with young people, nervous people and unflashy people. Watching her at official occasions, it is clear that the chores are the grand dinners and speeches.

Yet, like it or not, she is the symbol of the authority which drives the state servants and laws – the elections, armies, judges and treaties which together make modern life possible. For sixty years she has appeared to open *her* Parliament, to remember *her* nation's war dead, to review *her* troops or to attend services of *her* Church. 'Britain' cannot go to the Republic of Ireland to finally heal a political breach that goes back to the Irish struggle for independence in the 1920s – but the Queen can. 'Britain' cannot welcome a pope or a president. She can.

She has great authority and no power. She is a brightly dressed and punctual paradox. She is the ruler who does not rule her subjects but who serves them. The ancient meaning of kingship has been flipped; part of the purpose of this book is to explain how, and why, that has been done. Modern constitutional monarchy does not mean subjection, the hand pressed down on an unruly nation. Instead it offers a version of freedom. For the Crown is not the government. There is a small, essential space between them. It would be rude to say that ministers are squatters in the state – for governments

come from parliaments which are elected, the ultimate bastions of our liberty. Nevertheless, ministers are lodgers in the state. They are welcome for a while, but have no freehold rights.

The Queen stands for continuity. This is a dull word, but when asked what the Queen is really about, 'continuity' is the word used most often by other members of the royal family, by prime ministers, archbishops and senior civil servants. What do they mean? Not simply the continued existence of the country or the state. It is true that the state is a living and valuable presence before and after any one government. People look back to the past and imagine a future that outlives them: monarchy takes a real family and makes it the rather blatant symbol of that existential fact. So a constitutional monarchy claims to represent the interests of the people before they elected this government, and after it has gone. It remembers. It looks ahead, far beyond the next election.

The distinction between state and government is an essential foundation of liberty. In Britain a pantomime of ritual has grown up to express it. At the annual State Opening of Parliament, once in a year, the Queen reads out her prime minister's words, ventriloquizing for her government. She speaks with deliberate lack of emphasis or emotion: nobody must be able to hear her own feelings break through. A junior minister is taken hostage at Buckingham Palace to guarantee her safety and underline the separation of politics and state. When she leaves Westminster, he is released (after a decent drink) and normal politics resumes. The state and the government have come together, touched hands, and gone their separate ways. Other countries have a similar distinction, expressing it through written documents or powerless elected presidents; the British have long preferred a person.

This is the job. In practice it is a little harder than it looks.

When the most important foreign leaders arrive for a state visit, the Queen greets them in the country's name with a smile and a gloved handshake and small-talk, again deliberately designed never to offend. She offers house-room and pays kind attention to people she may privately regard as abominable or merely hideous bores. Guests at Buckingham Palace or at Windsor will be guided around by the Queen in person. She will have checked the rooms first herself, trying to make sure suitable books are left by the bed, that the flowers look good, and that everything is welcoming. At the grand dinners she will have overseen the food, flowers and place-settings: will everybody be satisfied with where they are seated, and get on with the people put beside them?

When the guests arrive and the conversation starts she has to remember to dodge anything that might cause her ministers a headache. One former foreign secretary, Douglas Hurd, has watched her do it: 'She's got quite an elaborate technique. When a visiting head of state, or whatever it is, begins to talk politics, begins to explain what's happening in his country, she says, "That's very interesting Mr President . . . and I'm sure the foreign secretary would very much like to discuss that with you." And so you're shunted. The points change, and you're shunted onto a different line.' Others talk about how she uses polite silence to deflect trouble; and it is very noticeable that when you ask people about their conversations with the Queen, they bubble about her wit and insight – and then tell you exactly (and only) what *they* said to *her*. Clever.

Much the same seems to happen in her weekly audiences with her prime ministers, of whom there have been a dozen to date. Though these meetings are completely private (no note-takers, no secretaries, no microphones), former premiers and civil servants talk about them as a kind of higher therapy,

rather than a vivid exchange of views. For sixty years she has listened to whatever they have said – self-justifying explanations, private whinges, a little malice about their rivals – without letting any of them know whose side she is on except, in the broadest sense, the side of the continuing government of the country. Sir Gus O'Donnell, a cabinet secretary who has worked with four prime ministers – Sir John Major, Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and now David Cameron – says: 'They go out of their way not to miss it. It's a safe space where prime ministers and sovereigns can get together, they can have those sorts of conversations, which I don't think they can have with anybody else in the country . . . they come out of them better than they went in, let's put it that way.'

She knows almost every state secret of the past sixty years. Every day she works her way through state papers, sent in red boxes to her desk. Gus O'Donnell again: 'We give the Queen the minutes of cabinet, for instance, so she's up to date on the discussions, the decisions that have been made. She gets a lot of material about what the government's actually doing, in her red boxes.' The Queen is very interested in issues involving the constitution – Sir Gus singles out current controversies about Britain's switch to fixed-term parliaments and the future of the House of Lords – and anything to do with Britain's military. She works hard too, to support the civil service, who, like her, have to be neutral but get very little applause from the public or press. In public, in her Christmas broadcasts and many speeches, she generally takes great care to stay on the safe ground of general expressions of goodwill, although at Christmas she often touches on issues of the day. For decade after decade she has dodged traps that could have led the monarchy into serious danger. She has made mistakes, of course. She is only human. But she has managed this dance

of discretion so adroitly that many people have concluded that she is herself almost without character – neutral, passive, even bland.

She is not. She is capable of sharp asides, has a long memory, shrewd judgement and is a wicked mimic. She has been very frank about her children's scrapes. She has closely observed and dryly described the oddities of foreign leaders and famous politicians. She has done it sitting playing patience during the evening at Balmoral, or with her legs tucked up under her on a sofa on the Royal Yacht, a glass of something cheerful in hand, or walking on beaches and hillsides. In private she has hugged and laughed; and been sharp with bores, dawdlers and slow eaters. Though she does not like confrontation, and has often sub-contracted that out to her husband, she has strong views about people. It is just that her job means she has to hide all this. Other people, celebrities and actors, are paid to have a 'personality'. She is required to downplay hers.

This does not mean her life is dull. 'We're in the happiness business,' whispers one of her ladies-in-waiting as the Queen heads for yet another line of shouting, waving children. It must be wonderful to cheer people up without cracking jokes, or telling odd stories. She can do it simply by arriving, smiling, nodding and taking a posy or two. No one who has followed this now slightly stooping lady in her mid-eighties as she walks through small towns, foreign hotels, cathedrals and military barracks, casting sharp glances all around, and observed the grinning, pressing lines of people waiting for her, can doubt it. But there is 'the tough stuff' too – a huge amount of ceremonial, religious and social business to be dealt with, week in, week out. (Some say, too much, particularly for a woman of her age.)

She is a woman of faith. She stands atop the Anglican

Church, that national breakaway from Rome hurriedly set up by her Tudor ancestor, the beef-faced and priapic Henry VIII. So she is called Defender of the Faith and Supreme Governor of the Church of England. The former title is technically absurd since it was given to Henry by Pope Leo X before he rebelled. But the latter one certainly counts: the Queen appoints bishops and archbishops and takes her role as the fount of Anglican respectability very seriously, addressing the General Synod and talking regularly to its leading figures.

The current Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, says she is formally the final court of appeal, the place where arguments stop. In practice, of course, she does not intervene in rows about the ordination of women priests or gay marriage, any more than she does in parliamentary arguments. But, says the Archbishop, 'She believes that she has some responsibility for keeping an eye on the business of the church, some responsibility to support it, to get on the side of those who are administering the church and she is herself very committed as a Christian.' Williams says she was profoundly affected by being given a book of private prayers by a predecessor shortly before her Coronation, which she still uses. For her the Coronation was a vocation, 'a calling, not a privilege but a calling. If it's costly, it's costly.' As we shall see, at times it certainly has been.

The Queen is also 'the fount of honours'. She bestows medals, crosses, knighthoods and ribbons, mostly (but not always) on the advice of politicians, to those who are worthy (and sometimes not so worthy). Each one requires conversation, eye-contact, briefing and time. She has so far bestowed 404,500 honours and awards, and personally held more than 610 Investitures (the grand honour-giving ceremonies) since becoming Queen in 1952.

Then there are the services: the Queen is Head of the Armed Forces. It is to the Queen that new soldiers, airmen and sailors pledge allegiance, and in whose name they fight and die. She has a special relationship with some regiments – her first official job was as a colonel-in-chief – and a general one with all. This means many more visits and ceremonies. She is also a patron of huge numbers of charities. They too lobby and plead for her time, often to encourage fundraising. From time to time the royal family settles down together to try to organize their charitable work. After the death of her mother and sister, the family sat down at Sandringham around a card-table and shared out the work they would have to take on. They discovered some charities had rather too many Royals associated with them, and others none at all; so some switching-around was agreed.

Beginning to feel tired? What about Abroad? The Queen never forgets that she is Head of the Commonwealth, a title invented in 1949 to allow the newly independent republican India to keep its association with Britain. This involves her in a huge amount of travel, in addition to visiting her other realms and the diplomatic and trade-boosting visits her government tells her each year she must make. In the Foreign Office they draw up their wish list for state visits and other visits, arguing about which trading partner has priority over which, and which leader would be particularly gratified if the Queen arrived. And then another negotiation about her diary begins.

These visits are not jaunts. They involve a lot of planning and travel, endless changes of dresses and hats and, above all, a huge amount of listening, nodding and smiling. Most trying of all, there are the speeches. The Queen is a naturally shy and quiet person who even now, after all these years, gets no pleasure from public speaking whether the event is grand or

modest. One journalist who has followed her for decades says, 'Whether it is the Great Hall of the People, or the Girl Guides' Association, she gets nervous before the speech. And yet afterwards, once she's completed that speech and she's got marvellous congratulation and applause, then she's . . . really buzzing because it's out of the way. I've never seen her change once.' As the Queen and Duke get older, they find these visits more tiring and trying. So far, they keep agreeing to go, in general twice a year.

Beyond all this, the Queen has run the monarchy as a national adhesive, making constant visits around the country to be seen, to greet and to thank people who are mostly ignored by the London power-brokers and commercial grandees. She holds parties, lunches and charity gatherings at Buckingham Palace and Edinburgh's Palace of Holyroodhouse to thank or bring together other lists of good-doers, civic worthies and business strivers. At special themed receptions she honours all sorts of disparate groups – they might be Australians in Britain, or young people in the performing arts, or campaigners for the handicapped, or the emergency services. These events are meticulously planned. The Queen hangs over the lists of who may be invited, and why. She plans the evenings and the choreography, and manages to remember at least many of the names. Only by watching the delight of elderly volunteers whom nobody else had thought to make much of or struggling young musicians, can one understand the quiet power of this mostly unreported monarchical campaign.

Finally, there are the mass celebrations, the royal jubilees and marriages, which get most of the attention. The jubilees are an invented tradition, which allow the monarchy to dominate the crowded news agenda of a busy country and enable

people to look back at the last twenty-five, fifty or sixty years, and to look forward too: a kind of national pause-for-thought. The marriages may turn out well or not, but allow the most fanatically royalist, and many others, to go briefly mad. Anyone who has paid any attention to public life in Britain sort of knows all this. Not many of us think about it much. By now, I hope the reader is feeling a little exhausted. We have not yet talked about the extra little jobs of mother, grandmother, wife, aunt, horse-owner, manager of farms and estates, employer and overall accountant-in-chief that fill in the quiet moments.

For most of us the Queen seems always to have been there. She has done her job so well it has come to seem part of the natural order of things, along with the seasons and the weather. One day, of course, she won't be there. Then there will be a gaping, Queen-sized hole in the middle of British life.