THE NEWLY REVISED EDITION



Gimson's KINGS & QUEENS

BRIEF LIVES of the MONARCHS since 1066

ANDREW GIMSON

GIMSON'S KINGS & QUEENS

BEING AN ACCOUNT OF EVERY SOVEREIGN FROM WILLIAM I TO CHARLES III, INCLUDING SEVERAL DETAILS ONE WOULD LIKE TO KNOW BUT MAY HAVE FORGOTTEN, SUCH AS WHERE THE BUTT OF MALMSEY COMES IN, FOLLOWED BY A SHORT ACCOUNT OF WHY THE MONARCHY HAS SURVIVED FOR SO LONG.

Copyrighted Material

By the same author

The Desired Effect
Boris: The Making of the Prime Minister
Gimson's Prime Ministers: Brief Lives from Walpole to Johnson
Gimson's Presidents: Brief Lives from Washington to Trump
Boris Johnson: The Rise and Fall of a Troublemaker at Number 10

Copyrighted Material

Gimson's KINGS & QUEENS

BRIEF LIVES of the MONARCHS since 1066



SQUARE PEG
Copyrighted Material

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Square Peg, an imprint of Vintage,
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road,
London SW1V 2SA

Square Peg is part of the Penguin Random House
group of companies whose addresses can be found
at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.



Copyright © Andrew Gimson 2015, 2023
Illustrations copyright by Martin Rowson © Martin Rowson 2015, 2023

Andrew Gimson has asserted his right to be identified
as the author of this Work in accordance with the
Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

First published by Square Peg in 2015

www.vintage-books.co.uk

Quotation on p.243 from 'It was ludicrous but also magnificent'
by Rachel Cooke, published in the *Observer*, 6 May 2023

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 9780224101196

Text designed by Lindsay Nash
Typeset in Quadraat by Palimpsest Book Production Ltd, Falkirk, Stirlingshire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorised representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable
future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book
is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.



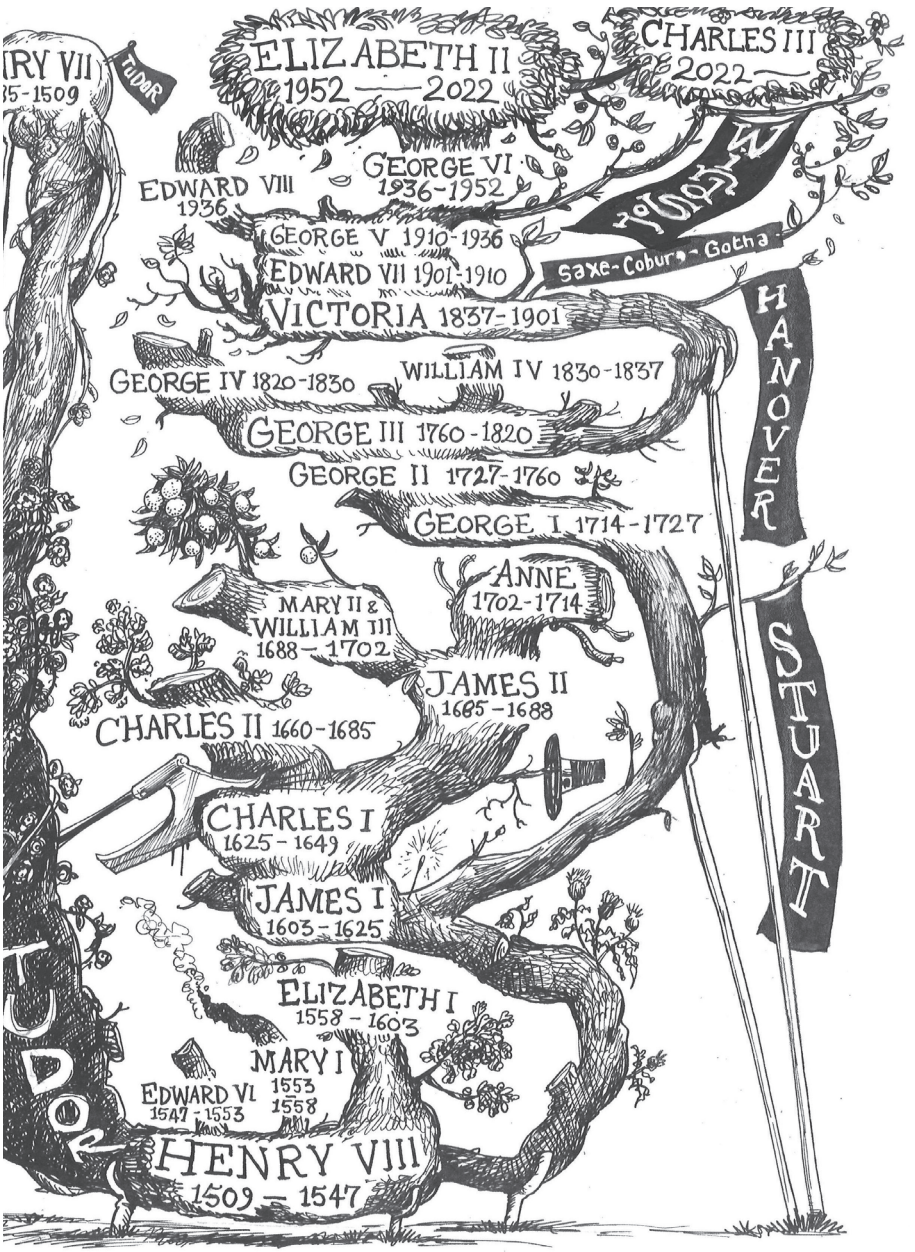
Copyrighted Material

For David Birt

Copyrighted Material



Copyrighted Material



Copyrighted Material

The English will never love or honour their king, unless he be victorious and a lover of arms and war against their neighbours and especially against such as are greater and richer than themselves. Their land is more fulfilled of riches and all manner of goods when they are at war than in times of peace. They take delight and solace in battles and slaughter: covetous and envious are they above measure of other men's wealth.

Jean Froissart, 1400

A Subject and a Sovereign are clean different things.

Charles I, speech before his execution, 1649

Copyrighted Material

The influence of the Crown is not confined merely to political affairs. England is a domestic country. Here the home is revered and the hearth sacred. The nation is represented by a family – the royal family; and if that family is educated with a sense of responsibility and a sentiment of public duty, it is difficult to exaggerate the salutary influence they may exercise over a nation.

Benjamin Disraeli, 1872

A few faults are indispensable to a really popular monarch.

George Bernard Shaw

Our royal family is a rather absurd institution, no doubt. But then, humanity itself is rather absurd.

Max Beerbohm

As far as I can see, some people have to be fed royalty like sea-lions fish.

Lady Strathmore,
maternal grandmother of Elizabeth II

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

CONTENTS

Introduction xiii

1066–1087 William I 1

1087–1100 William II 8

1100–1135 Henry I 11

1135–1154 Stephen 15

1154–1189 Henry II 18

1189–1199 Richard I 23

1199–1216 John 29

1216–1272 Henry III 34

1272–1307 Edward I 40

1307–1327 Edward II 47

1327–1377 Edward III 52

1377–1399 Richard II 57

1399–1413 Henry IV 62

1413–1422 Henry V 66

1422–1461 Henry VI 70

1461–1483 Edward IV 74

1483 Edward V 78

1483–1485 Richard III 82

1485–1509 Henry VII 88

Copyrighted Material

1509–1547 Henry VIII 94
1547–1553 Edward VI 105
1553–1558 Mary I 108
1558–1603 Elizabeth I 114
1603–1625 James I 124
1625–1649 Charles I 130
1649–1660 The Interregnum 138
1660–1685 Charles II 140
1685–1688 James II 147
1689–1702 William III & Mary II 153
1702–1714 Anne 159
1714–1727 George I 163
1727–1760 George II 169
1760–1820 George III 176
1820–1830 George IV 182
1830–1837 William IV 189
1837–1901 Victoria 195
1901–1910 Edward VII 204
1910–1936 George V 209
1936 Edward VIII 216
1936–1952 George VI 221
1952–2022 Elizabeth II 225
2022– Charles III 236

Afterword 245
Acknowledgements 249

Copyrighted Material

INTRODUCTION

This slim volume contains brief lives of our last forty-one kings and queens, from 1066 to the present day. They met with triumph and disaster, but were very seldom boring, for they played a role which exercises an irresistible hold on the imagination. As J. H. Plumb remarks in *The First Four Georges*, 'It is almost impossible for a monarch to be dull, no matter how stupid.'

The book was prompted by the realisation that on 9 September 2015 Elizabeth II would become our longest-serving sovereign, surpassing Queen Victoria's record of sixty-three years and 216 days on the throne. Amid the celebrations of that landmark, many also wondered, without necessarily voicing the thought, how it is that the English and then British monarchy has survived for so long. For Elizabeth, and her heirs Charles, William and George, recall in their very names their forebears.

The story opens with an illegal immigrant, William the Conqueror, who never learned his new subjects' language, though he well understood how to compel their obedience and seize their lands. It continues with such extravagant figures as Richard the Lionheart, the greatest knight in Christendom, and Richard III, regarded by some as the greatest criminal. We see Henry VIII degenerate from a Renaissance prince into a tyrant, casting off wives and servants with merciless finality but making England independent of Rome. His daughter, Elizabeth I, upholds that independence by the heroic expedient of steering a middle course where none seemed to exist.

Copyrighted Material

Charles I would not admit the need to find a middle course, so lost his head. William III, the Dutchman who became our most underestimated monarch, played a vital but forgotten role in the assertion of English liberty. Victoria turned the monarchy into the symbol of a new morality, and a new empire. Her great-great-granddaughter, Elizabeth II, survived the loss of that empire by practising Christian virtues which have become unfashionable.

Because the monarchy is seen as a source of stability, it is easy to fall into the error of imagining that its history must be stable. We glance at its family tree and find ourselves lost in admiration of the millennium of continuity which is there declared.

But look more closely, and one finds the story is marked by savage discontinuities: by family quarrels settled in battle or by murder and usurpation. These pages tell a tale of bastardy, courage, conquest, brutality, vanity, vulgarity, corruption, anarchy, absenteeism, piety, nobility, divorce, expropriation, execution, civil war, madness, magnificence, profligacy, frugality, philately, abdication, dutifulness, family breakdown and family revival.

The first aim of this volume is to entertain, not to instruct. It is not a textbook, and should not be used as an aid to passing exams, for its attitudes might annoy the examiners, and will distress professional historians who attach exaggerated importance to their own discoveries. Brevity has trumped comprehensiveness: the book cannot offer an adequate account of what was happening in Scotland, Wales and Ireland, or in many other fields of English life.

Between the ages of eight and thirteen, I was lucky to have a history master, David Birt, who taught his pupils the things it was a pleasure to know, and not just the things one ought to know. His favourite king was John (1199–1216), conventionally regarded as the worst in English history.

Thanks to his early teaching, I acquired some slight grasp of the whole sweep of English and British history, which I have ever

Copyrighted Material

since felt to be slipping from my not very retentive memory, so that gaps opened up where I had no idea what was going on. Although I read history at university, I found myself responding to any question about the past with the apologetic claim that it was 'not my period'. I no longer knew when the Plantagenets began, or indeed when they ended. The present volume might be described as a refresher course for those who used to know some history, and an introduction for those who never did.

There are many admirable biographies of individual monarchs. But I do not know of a recent, readable volume which covers them all in under 250 pages. The exception to this rule is *1066 and All That*, which by redefining history as 'what you can remember' comes in at a more manageable 116 pages. But the running joke in that classic, namely that everything is misremembered, is not quite so funny now that most of us were never made to learn these things in the first place.

A Shortened History of England, by G. M. Trevelyan, published in 1942, is a masterpiece of Whig eloquence, the best of its kind ever written, but although an abridgement, it still stretches to 560 pages. *The English and Their History*, by Robert Tombs, published in 2014, offers a penetrating narrative informed by wide scholarship, but is 890 pages long. The great difficulty is to know what to leave out. But there is also a kind of liberation in deciding not to try to say everything.

I have called this volume *Gimson's Kings & Queens* – a vainglorious title – in order to emphasise that it offers a personal view. At the end of the book, I offer a few thoughts about why the British monarchy has lasted so long.

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material



WILLIAM I

1066–1087

William I conquered England. This brave, clever, brutal, illiterate Norman warlord attained at the Battle of Hastings the most durable victory of any monarch in English history. At the head of 5,000 knights, he invaded and made himself master of a kingdom with perhaps 1.5 million inhabitants. The English ruling class was wiped out, its lands taken over by the invaders, and French replaced English as the language of government. William the Conqueror, as he became known, was able to pass on his throne to his sons and more remote descendants, who hold it to this day.

Copyrighted Material

During the Hastings campaign, William had several strokes of luck. But for the most part, he made his own luck. To the rapacity of his Viking ancestors, who had seized Normandy from the kings of France, he added remarkable gifts of organisation, including organised brutality. 'This is what will happen to you if you don't back me,' he demonstrated with terrifying clarity to potential rebels as he imposed a mutilation or a famine.

William was born in about 1027, and known at first as William the Bastard, for his origins were not as grand as his later achievements might lead one to suppose. He was the illegitimate son of Duke Robert of Normandy, also called Robert the Devil, and of Arlette, whose father, Fulbert, was a tanner: a disgusting trade carried out by despised people, for it involved kneading the skins of animals for hours in water mixed with the dung of pigeons or of dogs. At Falaise, a town in Normandy about thirty miles from the sea, they will show you the trenches in the castle courtyard which were used to dye those skins, where Duke Robert is supposed to have seen Arlette treading them barefoot and bare-legged.

Duke Robert liked the look of Arlette, and she, one may suppose, liked the look of him. They were both about seventeen years old and soon she bore him a son, William. Robert did not marry Arlette, but a few years later she became the wife of a nobleman with whom she had several more children, including Odo of Bayeux, a pugnacious and avaricious man who would play a large part in the subjugation of England.

Bastardy was normal enough among the Norman upper classes, but the duke wished to ensure that his only son would inherit the duchy. So before setting out on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, he made the counts of Normandy swear that if he died, they would be loyal to William. In the summer of 1035, while on his way home from Jerusalem, he fell ill and died at Nicaea in what is now Turkey.

At the age of eight, William the Bastard became Duke of

Copyrighted Material

Normandy. His inheritance descended into anarchy, and for a dozen years he was in danger of assassination before he could achieve anything. But as a young man he restored the situation by moving against his enemies with speed, boldness and unflinching ferocity. In his early twenties, he besieged the town of Alençon. The holders of an outlying fort mocked him by hanging animal hides from the walls: a reference to his lowly origins as the bastard son of a tanner's daughter. William did not see the joke. He proceeded to capture the fort and thirty-two of its defenders, and, in full view of the townspeople, had their hands and feet cut off. Alençon surrendered.

In 1051, William married Matilda, the daughter of one of his most powerful neighbours, the Count of Flanders. She was tiny, scarcely more than four feet in height, while he was burly, five feet ten inches tall, a dauntless warrior with a harsh voice and reddish hair. Within a few years, he had made Normandy secure.

But his lust for power and possessions was not sated. Early in 1066, on learning that Harold had been chosen as king by the Anglo-Saxon Witan, or council, in succession to Edward the Confessor, he resolved to invade England and overthrow the newly crowned king.

William had a tenuous claim by blood to the English throne: his grandfather was the brother of Edward the Confessor's mother. But the duke set greater store by a promise he had extracted in 1064, when Harold was unlucky enough to be driven on to the shores of Normandy, becoming William's reluctant guest. Harold was only allowed to return home after swearing to help William obtain the throne of England on Edward's death.

Although this oath had been obtained under duress, the duke took Harold's breaking of it as a personal affront. All his nobles except William FitzOsbern nevertheless advised that the invasion of England would be far too risky.

Copyrighted Material

William dismissed their warnings. He recruited a cosmopolitan band of adventurers, drawn from Brittany, Flanders and more distant parts of Europe as well as Normandy, and obtained the Pope's blessing for the gigantic act of plunder on which they were about to embark. The Church was the duke's ally in this venture. His own half-brother, Odo, whom he had made Bishop of Bayeux, led 120 knights in the campaign, and at Hastings swung a mace in order to comply with the Church's teaching that it was wrong for a priest to shed blood with a sword.

By summer the duke had built a fleet, but it was delayed by contrary winds. When it did sail, it was forced back by a storm, with loss of life. William had the corpses buried in secret and persisted. At last, on 27 September, the fleet sailed again.

During the night, William's ship, being the fastest, got separated from the rest of the fleet. There was consternation on board. William calmly ordered a large breakfast, which he ate on deck while the rest of his invasion force caught up.

When the Normans landed unopposed at Pevensey, between the present-day towns of Eastbourne and Hastings, William stumbled and fell flat on the beach. His followers were dismayed by this ill omen. But William rose to his feet, raised a handful of sand in the air and cried out that this was a sign of God's will that the Normans should grasp England.

The Anglo-Saxon *fyrd*, or militia, had been watching the coast for four months in fear of such an attack, but had gone home to get in the harvest. Harold himself had marched north to defend his kingdom against Harald Hardrada, King of Norway, who had invaded with a powerful army.

After winning the Battle of Stamford Bridge near York, Harold hurried south to confront the Normans. They had moved along the coast a few miles east from Pevensey, to Hastings, where William had constructed a castle. He took the precaution of

Copyrighted Material

staying close to his line of communication with Normandy, but ordered his followers to ravage the country inland: a way of provoking the English to do battle with him before his own supplies ran low.

On the morning of 14 October 1066, William sighted the English army, about equal in size to his own. Harold had a reputation for boldness and William was surprised to see that the English had taken up a strong defensive position, on top of a steep hill about seven miles north-west of Hastings, with marshy streams guarding both flanks.

William's counts were appalled. To advance was suicide; to retreat, an ignominious disaster. William immediately ordered an attack.

After several bloody repulses, the Norman army began a panicky retreat, which drew the English from their impregnable position. William pulled off his helmet by the nosepiece, so his men could see he was still alive. By this risky expedient, he rallied his forces and turned the tide of battle. Harold was killed, probably by an arrow through the eye. The Normans were rich in archers and in cavalry, which the English lacked. Harold's men had fought all day with valour, but now they were leaderless and fled into the forest.

William with characteristic boldness followed up this victory by advancing via Wallingford to London, where he received the submission of the principal citizens and had himself crowned on Christmas Day at Westminster Abbey. When the Normans and English inside the church acclaimed the new king, the soldiers who were standing guard outside, and were no doubt feeling jumpy in the presence of large crowds of unknown Londoners, thought the noise meant a revolt had broken out, and set fire to buildings surrounding the abbey. A riot ensued and most of the congregation fled. Even William was seen to tremble, but he

Copyrighted Material

insisted the service be carried through to the end. William the Bastard had become William the Conqueror.

In the twenty-one years that he ruled England, this self-made man showed he knew how to hold what he had seized. The Normans were the greatest military architects of their time. They built castles, many of which survive to this day, at all the most strategic points in England, so a small number of mounted knights could dominate a wide area. They built churches too: William supported the Church on the understanding that it would sanctify his rule. The English clergy were replaced with foreigners. Lanfranc, an Italian Benedictine who had served with distinction as Abbot of Bec in Normandy, became Archbishop of Canterbury.

The Conqueror rewarded the 5,000 knights who had fought for him with English lands, in return for which they had to bring a certain number of men to fight again for him when required. He made these followers pay homage directly to him, rather than via overlords, as happened on the continent. The English ruling class was dispossessed.

In the first years of his reign, William faced frequent uprisings. These he suppressed with his customary savage brutality. In the winter of 1069–70, having crushed a revolt at York he carried out the Harrying of the North: a programme of ferocious terror and devastation which fell equally on everyone, whether they had rebelled or not, and left famine in its wake. The north took a century to recover.

William the Conqueror's marriage was by all accounts harmonious – contemporaries believe he remained faithful to Matilda – and it was undoubtedly fruitful. With Matilda he sired nine children, but he displayed little sense of family, and fought his eldest son, Robert Curthose ('Short-arse'), in single combat, as well as falling out with his half-brother, Odo of Bayeux, imprisoning him for treason.

Copyrighted Material

By 1085, England had largely submitted to its conqueror's rule and was peaceful enough for William to institute his greatest feat of administration: the compilation of the Domesday Book, which recorded landholdings down to the last acre and the last pig. William betrayed no sense of the mystique of kingship. He was determined to have an efficient inventory of his conquests, and used the excellent Anglo-Saxon civil service to provide one. The bandit knew the value of the bureaucrat.

William remained to the end as touchy about insults to his person as he had shown himself at Alençon. With age he became immensely obese, and while recovering from an illness, heard that the King of France had said 'the fat man was long a-lying in': the suggestion being he was pregnant and was about to go into labour. William retorted with grim menace that he would do his 'churching' – the ceremony after giving birth – in Paris.

He accordingly set out on a punitive expedition. At Mantes, west of Paris, his horse stumbled on a hot cinder, and William, his gut spilling over his saddle, was thrown against the pommel. His ribs were smashed and organs ruptured, and in September 1087 he died in agony. The king's servants stripped his body and deserted him. When he was buried at Caen, his corpse burst as it was being forced into too small a stone sarcophagus, and such an unbearable stench filled the church that the service had to be hurried to its close.

Here was a macabre end for a monarch who took himself with unwavering seriousness. One cannot pretend he would have made a great comedian, but he had all the qualities needed to become a severe and celebrated king.

Copyrighted Material



WILLIAM II

1087–1100

William the Conqueror was survived by three sons: Robert Curthose, William Rufus and Henry. On his deathbed, he bequeathed Normandy to Robert, England to William, and £5,000 to Henry, along with the astute observation that the youngest son need only exercise patience to acquire the lands of both his brothers.

Copyrighted Material

William Rufus was about thirty when he became king. According to William of Malmesbury, he had a red face, yellow hair, different-coloured eyes, and a stutter, especially when angry. He never married, fathered no children, and preferred attractive young male courtiers with fashionably pointed shoes who wore their hair long in the English style. About 900 years before gay rights were written into law, chroniclers had no hesitation in condemning him for immorality.

The new king was as brutal and belligerent as his father, but lacked his level-headed strength of purpose, and could never be trusted to keep a treaty. Either by force of arms or the payment of huge sums of money, he wanted to get his hands on his brother's lands in Normandy.

Before long, William Rufus became known as an intolerably greedy king, who milked the English for money, and allowed his followers to do the same. He favoured his uncle, Odo of Bayeux, but was double-crossed by him. After the English had helped William Rufus to take Odo's castle of Rochester, they clamoured for Odo's death: but William had given his knightly word to spare him and the Norman garrison, and did so.

In 1089, Lanfranc, the Archbishop of Canterbury, died, and with him the last restraining influence on William, who proceeded to ravage the possessions of the Church, which he treated as if they were his own. But shortly afterwards, he fell ill, and in the face of death, promised to mend his ways. He accepted the saintly Anselm as Archbishop of Canterbury.

William then recovered, and became as intolerable as ever. A characteristic episode occurred in 1094, when he proposed to invade Normandy. The Normans were by now distrustful of him, and refused to join the expedition, so William instead enlisted the English. Yet when they arrived at Hastings with ten shillings each for provisions, William took their money and sent them home.

Copyrighted Material

In 1097, his older brother, Robert Curthose, joined the First Crusade. To raise money, he leased Normandy to William for 10,000 marks. William found this sum by acts of extortion, carried out against landlords, who in turn robbed their peasants, and against the Church, whose shrines were pillaged.

William Rufus was by now on appallingly bad terms with just about everyone. In 1100 he was murdered (or just possibly killed by accident) while hunting in the New Forest and his body, dripping blood all the way, was carried to Winchester on a cart. There the clergy refused to carry out any services for him: an unprecedentedly severe sanction. It was said of him: 'He was loathsome to almost all his people, and abominable to God.'

Copyrighted Material