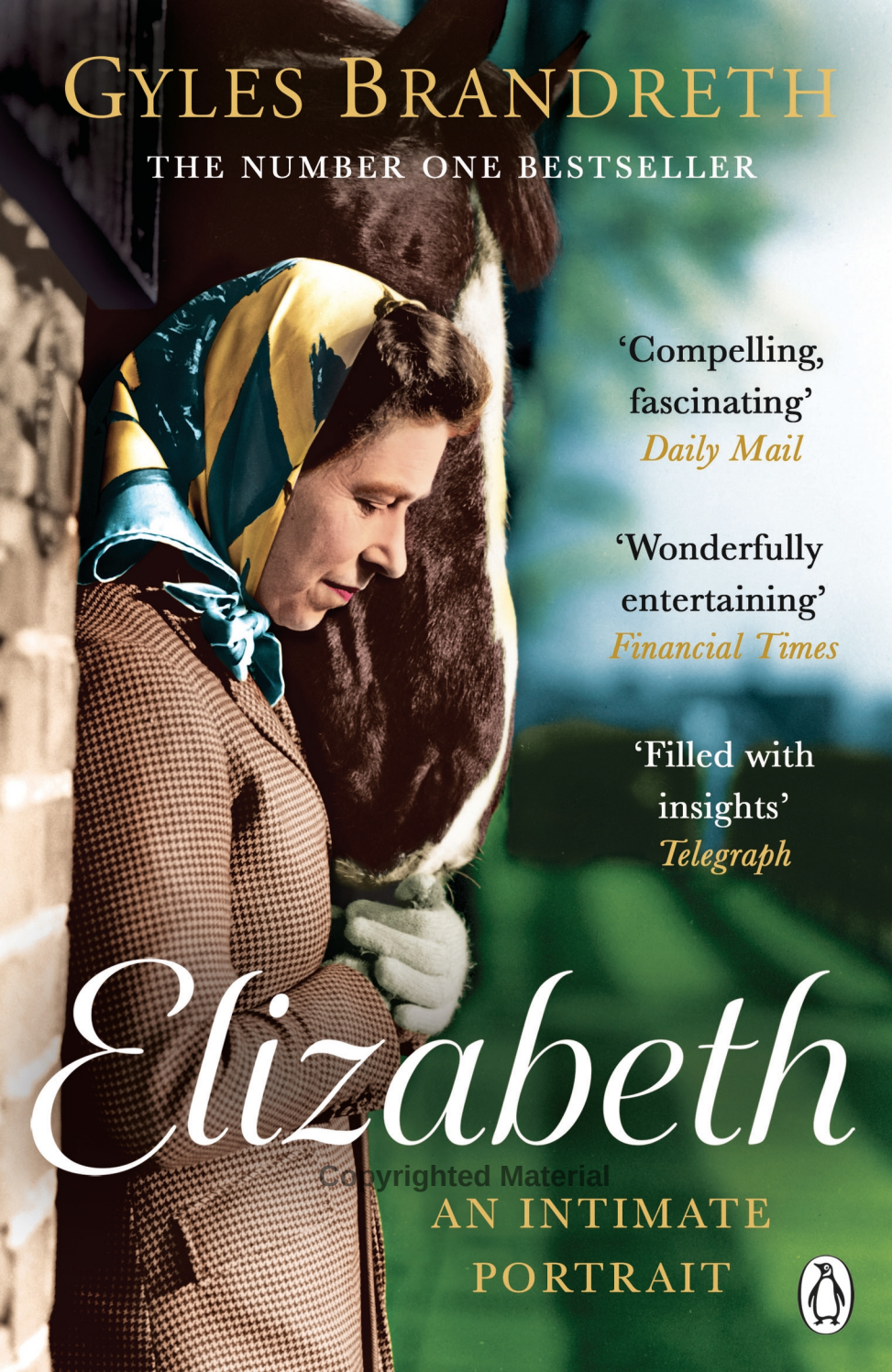




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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gyles Brandreth is an acclaimed biographer and bestselling author, who was once the MP for the City of Chester (and a Lord Commissioner of the Treasury) and is now the Chancellor Emeritus of the University of Chester. He is the founder of the Poetry Together project, bringing schoolchildren and people in care homes together over poetry, tea and cake, and with his daughter, Aphra, hosts the *Commonwealth Poetry Podcast*, a celebration of the Commonwealth through poetry, launched with the Queen Consort in 2022.

Best known for his TV appearances on programmes such as *This Morning*, *QI*, *Celebrity Gogglebox* and *The One Show* – and as a commentator on royal events for the BBC – he has been a regular on Radio 4's *Just a Minute* since the 1980s. He is the host of the multimillion-download podcast *Rosebud*, in which he interviews famous people about their early memories.

As a journalist, he writes for the *Telegraph* and the *Daily Mail* and is a columnist for the *Oldie*. His many books include a series of Victorian murder mysteries, a bestselling autobiography, *Odd Boy Out*, and a life of the Duke of Edinburgh, who he met through the National Playing Fields Association when Prince Philip was President and the Queen was Patron.

Married to writer and publisher Michèle Brown, they have three children and seven grandchildren, and live in Barnes in south-west London with Nala, the neighbour's cat.

Elizabeth

An intimate portrait

GYLES BRANDRETH



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INTRODUCTION

April 2026

This book is a personal portrait of Elizabeth II, the longest-reigning sovereign in British history. It runs from the time of her birth, as Princess Elizabeth of York, in 1926, to the coronation of her son as King Charles III in 2023. As you will discover as you read on, it was written over a number of years in a variety of places. The book begins in the Elizabeth the First gallery in the Royal Library at Windsor Castle where I happened to be two days before Elizabeth II died on 8 September 2022. Today, as I write this introduction to this new edition of the book, I happen to have just had lunch at Lilibet's, a large and rather lovely fish restaurant that opened in 2025 at 17 Bruton Street in London's Mayfair – the address at which Elizabeth II was born on 21 April 1926.

The original large, wide and handsome four-storeyed town house at 17 Bruton Street was built in 1742 and demolished in 1937. It boasted quite a roster of aristocratic tenants over the years, among them, the 3rd Earl of Roseberry in the 1790s and, in the 1860s, Henry Herbert, 4th Earl of Carnarvon, great-grandfather of Henry Herbert, 7th Earl of Carnarvon, Elizabeth II's racing manager and special friend. During the First World War the house was used as the headquarters for an appeal for clothing and donations to support Lord Kitchener's army. In 1920 the house was the headquarters

of the anti-communist Liberty League set up by Rudyard Kipling and Rider Haggard, among others, to fight the threat of Bolshevism. In 1921, Claude Bowes-Lyon, 14th Earl of Strathmore and Kinghorne, Elizabeth's grandfather, took a lease on the property and undertook extensive renovations before it became the Bowes-Lyon London base in 1922.

In 1938 Berkeley Square House (one of London's first substantial reinforced concrete buildings) was constructed as an office block on a parcel of land where 17 Bruton Street had stood. It is on an extensive corner of this building that Australian chef Ross Shonhan has opened his restaurant, Lilibet's. He told me today that it was his wife's idea to name it 'Lilibet's' in honour of the late Queen. And then their branding company came up with the same suggestion. 'We've done it with great respect,' says Ross.

And great taste, too. The decor is stylish, the food delicious and the royal touches – 'Lilibet's crepe £14', 'Princess cake £14' – understandable. The opening page of the menu tells you: 'This historic address now begins a new chapter shaped by heritage re-imagined, home . . . to an unexpected majesty.'

Would Elizabeth II have been amused? Queen Camilla has taken her daughter to lunch at Lilibet's and enjoyed it. Queen Elizabeth II used to dine out in London now and again: in 1956 she went to Quaglino's on Bury Street, making her the first reigning British monarch to eat at a public restaurant; in later years she enjoyed Bellamy's in Bruton Place and The Goring hotel close to Buckingham Palace. I think she would have liked the atmosphere and the more straightforward fish dishes on the menu at Lilibet's, but I am not sure she would have been entirely happy about the restaurant's name.

Elizabeth II was a public figure, but a private person. Lilibet was her pet name from childhood, coined by her grandfather, George V. As I explain in the book, it was used by almost

no one outside her most immediate family. She was disconcerted when her grandson, Harry, told her that he and his wife, Meghan, planned to call their daughter Lilibet. She did not like the idea, but she loved her grandson and went along with it.

‘Acceptance was the hallmark of the Queen,’ Alastair Bruce said to me. ‘She accepted what her life was, she accepted what life put her way. She was rather like a monk in that respect.’ Major-General Alastair Bruce of Crionaich CB, OBE, VR, DL, descendant of Robert the Bruce, television journalist, historical adviser to films such as *The Young Victoria* and *The King’s Speech*, was a senior officer in the British Army Reserves and Governor of Edinburgh Castle. He once went on a retreat to St Michael’s Abbey, a small monastic community on the Hampshire–Surrey border, where the monks (many of them quite young) live a traditional life of prayer, work and study according to the Rule of St Benedict. ‘At the heart of their life,’ Alastair said to me, ‘is a daily round of duties, of Mass and prayer, that brings them peace and closer to God. The Queen accepted the daily round of her life in much the same way.’

General Bruce had a special friendship with the Queen that he rarely talks about. His parents and grandparents came into her orbit in the late 1940s when the then Princess Elizabeth joined her husband, the young Duke of Edinburgh, when he was serving in the Royal Navy in Malta. Alastair was born in 1960, four years before Elizabeth II’s youngest, Prince Edward, was born in 1964. The boys became friends and remained so. (Alastair is godfather to Edward’s son, James, Earl of Wessex.) Over time, Alastair got to know Elizabeth beyond his friendship with Edward. He was easy with her, and amusing (he is both easy and amusing); they shared an interest in military life and in heraldry, orders and honours, and the crown jewels. The Queen gave Alastair her only ever television interview in 2017 when they talked about the Coronation and examined together

the Imperial State Crown. She told him how unwieldly it was to wear, how ‘it weighed a ton’ and how she couldn’t look down to read her speech during the coronation because the heavy crown would cause her neck to break, so the speech was brought up to her instead. And Alastair, in turn, revealed to Her Majesty how, during the Second World War, on her father’s orders, the most precious gems from the crown jewels had been hidden in a biscuit tin and buried underneath a secret passage at Windsor Castle in case of enemy invasion.

Alastair would go to have tea with the Queen on his own. ‘Of course, if you’re the Queen you are never really alone. There’s always someone there, hovering nearby, waiting to put a log on the fire or to remind you of the next appointment.’ I think the Queen valued Alastair because he had nothing to gain from her. (By contrast, when I was with her I always had the possibility of this book in the back of my mind. As you will read, the Duke of Edinburgh once warned her about that.) All General Bruce wanted to offer his Queen was friendship – and a respectful friendship that never overstepped the mark.

Alastair had read this book, so I asked him if I had missed out any aspect of her character that he felt was important. ‘Her shyness,’ he said. ‘She really was very shy – and used talking about her dogs and her horses to deflect from her shyness.’ I told him that I had been struck by her sense of humour and her teasing quality. I asked him if she was ever naughty – if she ever broke the rules. ‘Well,’ he said, ‘when she was ill, on doctors’ orders she was told to cut back on milk, so when tea was served, looking mischievous, she would take her teaspoon and dip it into the milk jug and then use the teaspoon to give her tea a quick swirl.’

Elizabeth II accepted her lot in life. Her calendar varied little from year to year. Every day (except for Christmas and Easter) she opened her red boxes and dealt, meticulously,

with whatever state (and Commonwealth) papers required her attention. The royal round is remarkably repetitious. She did not argue with the system, as her husband would have done or as her son does from time to time. She did not kick against the pricks.¹ She only became Queen when she did because her uncle, Edward VIII, had put private happiness before public duty when he gave up the throne in 1936. Because of Edward's abdication, Elizabeth's father became King George VI – and being king took its toll on him. He was only just fifty-six when he died in 1952. His widow, Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother, blamed his early death on the Abdication. His daughter, Elizabeth II, accepted life's vicissitudes.

That said, while instinctively conservative, when required, when 'push came to shove' (in her phrase), she could be decisive. As we will see, in the matter of the ending of Prince Charles's marriage to Diana, or the issue of forcing her second son, Andrew, to step down from royal duties, or the vexed question of how to handle Prince Harry when he hoped for a half-in/half-out royal role following his marriage to Meghan Markle, she did what she felt needed to be done in the interests, she believed, of both the Royal Family and the country and the Commonwealth. (Prince Andrew, Duke of York, felt to an extent protected while his mother was still alive. I am not so sure. Had she still been alive in 2025, I think she would

1 And she was familiar with the phrase which comes from the King James Version of the Bible and is used by Jesus to counsel against trying to resist God's will. To attempt to do so is painful and futile, like an ox hurting itself by kicking against the pricks (sharp sticks or goads) used to drive it. When an ox kicked out, it only drove the prick further into its own flesh, causing itself more pain. Elizabeth II read her Bible regularly. As she said openly, she tried to live her life according to the teachings of Jesus.

have bowed to the inevitable and done as Charles III did, on 30 October 2025, stripping Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor of his remaining royal titles.)

Elizabeth II did not rush to judgement. With people, as a rule, she was non-judgemental and accepting. Her friend Alastair Bruce is gay. As was Patrick Plunket, 7th Baron Plunket, who features in the pages that follow as a good friend of the Queen's and a key member of her household for more than twenty years. As is Lord Ivar Mountbatten, another near contemporary of Prince Edward (and godfather to Edward's daughter, Louise) and the first member of the wider royal family to be openly in a same-sex relationship and, in 2018, to have a same-sex wedding. When Ivar won the US version of *Celebrity Traitors* I invited him to be a guest on my podcast, *Rosebud*, and he gave a very moving account of how wonderful Elizabeth II had been when members of his family were murdered by the IRA in 1979. He also told a story to show how she could be firm when she wanted to be. Ivar was delayed getting to Balmoral because of problems at Bristol airport. Later in the day, once he had arrived, he told the story to the Queen sitting next to her at tea. She was particularly interested, she told him, because Bristol airport had just invited her to open their new terminal. Ivar was amused to discover later that Princess Anne, the Princess Royal, was despatched to open the terminal in her mother's stead.

Working on this book I have been blessed to meet many people of all walks of life who knew her – and some who knew her well. I was particularly thrilled when those who had known her as a child or in the 1940s and 1950s read the book and told me (as her exact contemporary, Prudence Penn, generously did) that I had 'got her about right'. Elizabeth II was not easy to know well, in part because of her shyness, but also because she did not give a lot away. Unlike her son and successor, Charles III, she did not naturally show her emotions.

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As well as meeting friends and family, courtiers and prime ministers, ladies-in-waiting and people in the racing world, over the years I have known several of her personal pages. The title ‘Page of the Backstairs’ was introduced in the reign of Queen Anne at the start of the 1700s to denote a male servant who was in personal attendance on the sovereign, originally using the backstairs to the royal apartments. The pages serve the drinks and meals, deal with domestic arrangements, deliver the red boxes and, for Elizabeth II, looked after and walked her beloved corgis. Some of them (though not all) were gay. Alastair Bruce pointed out to me: ‘The pages are in attendance day and night, come and go between the sitting room and the bedroom, et cetera, often one-to-one and at all hours, so perhaps it’s more comfortable if they’re gay.’

To the public at large, perhaps the most recognisable of Elizabeth II’s pages is Paul Whybrew, because he is tall and featured famously alongside Daniel Craig in the hugely entertaining James Bond film sequence shown at the opening ceremony of the London Olympics in 2012. I sometimes have tea with Paul, not to gossip about the Queen (he is the personification of discretion), but because he is good company, amusing yet quite soothing. He served the Queen for more than forty years. She appointed him a Sergeant-at-Arms in 2008 and, as such, he took part in the Royal Procession at the coronation of King Charles and Queen Camilla in 2023. Since then, at the King’s behest, he has been tasked with going through the late Queen’s chests of drawers and desks and cupboards, ‘sorting, sorting, sorting’ all her personal papers and accumulated bits and pieces.

Another of Elizabeth’s most devoted members of staff (she never called them servants) is Terry Pendry, her groom at the Royal Mews at Windsor Castle – still there because he promised the Queen he would look after her favourite pony,

Emma, until Emma's dying day. It was Terry who brought home to me Elizabeth's total devotion to her horses. As well as riding them, of course, she bred them. She even watched them being born. 'Even here, when she was at Windsor, Paul Whybrew, the page, or whoever, would wake her up in the middle of the night, and she had a video link to Sandringham where all the racehorses are bred. And if a mare was in foal, when they were about to give birth the phone would ring and she would love to see the foal born.'

The groom rode with the Queen for twenty-eight and a half years, around the year. 'She used to love the seasons,' he told me, 'particularly the autumn. She used to love crunching through leaves, kicking leaves through with the horse's feet. She adored that.'

I asked him about the last ride they took together. It was on 18 July 2022, less than eight weeks before her death. 'She rode that day,' he said, 'I didn't.' She came down to the stables as usual to see Emma, bringing the pony a bag of carrots. 'She was quite frail. Her last four years she was quite poorly and she got smaller and smaller. She used a mounting block to step onto Emma. Every year I had to add another step to it. She could go up and step onto Emma, but I always used to have to lift her off.'

'That last day, I was on my feet walking round with her and she looked down to me and she said, "This hasn't happened to me since I was a princess". I said, "What?" She said, "Someone walking alongside me like this." And I said, "If you want me to step away, I'll step away. I'll go and get another pony and I'll ride with you." She said, "No, no, just walk with me."

'And I said, "Let me take a picture of you," and she said, "What do you want to do that for?" I said, "Well, you'd like one for your scrapbook. Your pony is twenty-six, you're ninety-six, that has to be a record."

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Terry took the photograph up to her in the castle that evening so she could paste it into her little scrapbook and write a sentence underneath. The next day, she came down to the stables again to say goodbye to Emma before leaving for Balmoral. ‘And she told me off,’ Terry Pendry told me. “‘You were very rude to me yesterday,” she said. I said, “Your Majesty, I’m awfully sorry, but what do you mean ‘rude’? If I was, I apologise profusely. It wouldn’t have been intentional. Was it something I said?” “Yes,” she said, “it was.” I said, “Well, what was it?” She said, “You said my age!” And then she burst into fits of laughter. That was just her – the last time I ever saw her.’

The Queen invited him to come to Balmoral, but he told her, ‘There’s no point because you’re not going to ride.’ He told me he was sure she only invited him because his wife would have come, too, and the Queen loved his wife Sue’s homemade raspberry jam. ‘She adored Sue’s jam. She kept it for herself and some of the grandchildren if they behaved themselves. She wouldn’t let the Duke of Edinburgh touch it.’

Terry Pendry promised the Queen that, in the fullness of time, Emma’s ashes would go between those of Burmese, the last horse she rode for Trooping the Colour, and Sanction, the last horse that she ever rode, ‘a dear horse’, a home-bred riding horse that, according to Terry, had ‘an almost telepathic’ bond with his mistress. When Sanction died in 2002, aged twenty-four, the Queen changed to riding native Fell ponies.²

2 To hear his voice and to understand the quality and depth of Terry Pendry’s devotion to Elizabeth II, listen to my extended interview with him on my podcast, *Rosebud*. Other *Rosebud* interviews that touch on aspects of the late Queen’s life and character include those with Alastair Bruce, Merlin Holland, Boris Johnson, Anne, Lady Glenconner, Sir John Major, Ivar Mountbatten, Sir Nicholas Soames and Charles, Earl Spencer. See: www.rosebudpodcast.co.uk.

When plans for the national memorial to Queen Elizabeth II were first announced in 2025, Her Majesty was depicted on horseback. Since then, the plans have ‘evolved’ and the memorial – situated in St James’ Park, close by Buckingham Palace and the Mall – will now have as its centrepiece a statue of Her Majesty ‘standing, wearing formal robes to emphasise her role as head of state.’ The overall design, led by the architect Norman Foster’s practice, will include a second statue of the Queen alongside the Duke of Edinburgh, underlining the importance of their partnership throughout her reign, as well as a ‘Unity Bridge’ (with a cast-glass balustrade inspired by the Queen Mary Fringe Tiara, which Elizabeth wore on her 1947 wedding day), two ‘Commemorative Gardens’ (the Communities of the United Kingdom Garden and the Commonwealth Garden ‘providing spaces for reflection and to celebrate national diversity’), and a golden, large-scale wind sculpture by artist Yinka Shonibare ‘as part of the memorial journey’.

We can guess that Prince Philip might have raised a wry eyebrow at some of the memorial’s features, but what Elizabeth II would have made of it we will never know. We can assume that she would have appeared graciously accepting of it – whatever her private feelings. At lunch today at Lilibet’s on Bruton Street, at the address where the Queen was born, my host (now working for the Royal Household, but too young to have known the Queen personally) made an interesting observation: ‘Because no one knew what she was really like, you could imagine her as anything. Her apparent lack of emotion was helpful because we could put our emotions onto her.’

Never mind Lilibet’s or the statues and gardens in St James’s Park: for me, her life and her values are her memorial. This book, I hope, tells her story.

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Gyles Brandreth

I declare before you all that my whole life whether it
be long or short shall be devoted to your service and the
service of our great imperial family to which we all belong.

Princess Elizabeth, 1947

It has always been easy to hate and destroy.
To build and to cherish is much more difficult.

Elizabeth II, 1957.

There are any number of reasons to find fault with each
other, with our governments and with other countries.
But let us not take ourselves too seriously. None of us
has a monopoly of wisdom and we must always be
ready to listen and respect other points of view.

Elizabeth II, 1991.

Some cultures believe a long life brings wisdom. I'd like to
think so. Perhaps part of that wisdom is to recognise some
of life's baffling paradoxes, such as the way human beings
have a huge propensity for good, and yet a capacity for evil.

Even the power of faith, which frequently inspires great
generosity and self-sacrifice, can fall victim to tribalism. But
through the many changes I've seen over the years, faith,
family and friendship have been not only a constant for
me but a source of personal comfort and reassurance.

Elizabeth II, 2018

Paddington Bear: Happy Jubilee Ma'am.

And thank you for everything.

Elizabeth II: That's very kind.

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PROLOGUE

September 2022

It is Tuesday 6 September 2022, seventy years and seven months – 25,780 days – since Elizabeth II became Queen.

I am sitting in the Royal Library at Windsor Castle – in the Elizabeth I gallery, the third of the three remarkable rooms that make up the library and house its many treasures, from Henry VIII's Bible to the Second Folio of Shakespeare's plays that King Charles I read – and annotated – as he awaited his execution in January 1649.

As I begin this book, my account of Elizabeth II, planned for publication after her death, this beautiful library seems a fitting place to contemplate the mystery of monarchy and its peculiar and undiminished hold on the public imagination. For more than a thousand years, in Britain, our kings and queens have been central to our island story and, curiously, now, in the twenty-first century, when the sovereign is no longer an executive monarch and has no real 'power' to speak of, around the world there continues to be a fascination with the British royal family. Britain was once the centre of a global empire. No longer. Ours is only the twenty-first most populated country in the world with the sixth largest economy, but every survey shows that our monarch remains the most famous head of state on earth. Elizabeth II is a global figure – the longest serving sovereign in our history

and, at home and abroad, arguably the best-loved and most respected.

Windsor Castle is the oldest and largest inhabited castle in the world, originally built by William the Conqueror in the eleventh century, following the Norman invasion of England in 1066. It has been used by kings and queens since the time of Henry I, who reigned from 1100 to 1135. Elizabeth II often claimed it as her ‘favourite’ home.

This morning, to my right, through the window, in the late summer sunshine, beneath the castle ramparts, I can see two guardsmen marching between their sentry boxes in the courtyard below. To my left, on the table immediately in front of me, sits a small French Psalter – a little book of psalms – that belonged to Elizabeth I when she was a teenage girl, in the 1540s, before she became Queen. I have been leafing through it (with permission) and marvelling at the poem the young princess inscribed at the back of the book and signed ‘Elizabeth’ in a clear and elegant hand. With her brother Edward (the future Edward VI), Elizabeth (also a child of Henry VIII) was taught to write in the fine Italic script which had been developed during the early Renaissance period.

In 1547 the young Princess Elizabeth sent a painted portrait of herself to her brother, Edward, accompanied by a letter in which she described the portrait as ‘the outward shadow of the body’ and expressed a wish that her ‘inward mind’ could be more often in her brother’s presence.

As I sit here, I realise that is my challenge with this book: to try to present to you the ‘inward mind’ of Elizabeth I’s successor, Elizabeth II. You know the ‘outward shadow’: you know what our Queen looks like. Living so long, no one in the history of the world has been painted from life more often or been photographed more frequently than Elizabeth II. She has been depicted on stage and screen, in plays, in films, in

television series, as a waxwork, as a puppet, even as an avatar. But what is she really like? Who is Elizabeth II? What is the nature of her ‘inward mind’?

The Queen herself is not here today. She is at Balmoral – on duty, as ever. As I sit here at Windsor (at the invitation of HRH The Duchess of Cornwall, who will be the Queen Consort by the time you read this), Her Majesty is in the Drawing Room at Balmoral Castle in Aberdeenshire – her other ‘favourite’ home, a place with ‘a special atmosphere all its own’ she used to say, a royal residence since 1852 when Prince Albert bought the estate for Queen Victoria as a Scottish royal retreat.

Today, Victoria’s great-great-granddaughter, Elizabeth II, wearing a tartan skirt and a lavender blouse and matching cardigan, carrying a favourite handbag on her left arm, steadying herself on one of her late husband’s walking sticks, is awaiting the arrival of Boris Johnson MP, her fourteenth prime minister. He has come, with his wife Carrie, to tender his resignation to his sovereign. Shortly afterwards, Her Majesty is due to receive Liz Truss MP and her husband, Hugh O’Leary. Ms Truss, the Queen’s fifteenth prime minister, another Elizabeth, was born in 1975. Sir Winston Churchill, her first, was born in 1874. From Churchill to Truss, from Truman to Trump, from Idi Amin to Vladimir Putin, the Queen has met them all. The broadcaster James Naughtie told me that once, when she was asked to name the person she had met in her life who she considered the most remarkable, she named Nelson Mandela, because, she explained, he had emerged from twenty-seven years of imprisonment ‘without rancour’.

The Queen is a committed Christian who told me she repeated the Lord’s Prayer on a daily basis – as my father used to do, saying his prayers on his knees at his bedside every night, as people of that generation did. ‘Sometimes,’ said the Queen, ‘it’s all you need.’

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Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

Elizabeth II believes in the power of prayer and in the importance of forgiveness. She is a woman without rancour. Her husband told me that her greatest quality was ‘tolerance’. ‘She is infinitely tolerant,’ the Duke of Edinburgh said, ‘and forgiving.’ Famously, in 2012, in an historic encounter at Belfast’s Lyric Theatre, the Queen shook hands with Martin McGuinness, then Northern Ireland’s Deputy First Minister, but formerly an Irish Republican Army commander. She lost a close relative, Lord Mountbatten of Burma, her husband’s uncle, to an IRA bomb in 1979.

The Queen believes, too, in the reality of redemption. She looks for the good in people, not the bad. Here in the Royal Library, across from where I am sitting, I can see a display of the ribbons of the Order of the Garter, the order of chivalry founded by Edward III in 1348, the most senior order of knighthood in the British honours system, outranked in precedence only by the Victoria Cross and the George Cross. The Order’s motto is *Honi soit qui mal y pense* – ‘Shame on him who thinks evil of it’.

Elizabeth I’s Psalter was given to the future Elizabeth II as a wedding present in 1947. She cherished it and was, she said, ‘particularly struck’ by the thought expressed in the short verse the young princess inscribed at the back of the little book four hundred years ago:

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No crooked leg, no bleared eye,
No part deformed out of kind,
Nor yet so ugly half can be
As is the inward suspicious mind.

Honi soit qui mal y pense.

*

It is now 7 September – Elizabeth I's birthday, as it happens – and I am back in London thinking about this book: my attempt at a personal portrait of Elizabeth II. Every newspaper is carrying pictures of the Queen at Balmoral yesterday. She appears old, yes, she is ninety-six, and frail – there is a dark bruise mark on the back of her right hand – but she looks alert and very much alive. She is smiling, looking over the tops of her spectacles at the camera. There is a definite, mischievous twinkle in her eye.

That said, suddenly, here in London, rumour is rife. It is late in the afternoon and I have just had a call from my son-in-law (a former Coldstream Guards officer) to say that he is at the Cavalry and Guards Club in Piccadilly where groups are gathering to discuss the detail of Operation London Bridge – the codename for the action-plan that comes into being the moment the sovereign dies. A newspaper editor has just called my agent to ask what we've heard. What is happening? The Queen was in good form twenty-four hours ago – and busy, presenting her outgoing Communications Secretary with an honour as well as spending time with her fourteenth and fifteenth prime ministers and their partners. Boris Johnson reported that she was in fine fettle, full of 'characteristic humour and wisdom'.

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Clive Cox, one of Her Majesty's favourite racehorse trainers, got a call from her at ten o'clock yesterday morning. She wanted to chat to him about the prospects for her two-year-old, Love Affairs, who was running in the two o'clock at Goodwood. 'We talked about the filly,' he said, 'how the race might pan out, how another horse of hers was doing in my stable, and about a couple of other things. She was sharp as a tack.'

Yesterday, clearly, she was very much alive. The royal family was not expecting this. Prince Charles has spent the day doing good works in Lanarkshire. Tonight, he is hosting a dinner at Dumfries House in Ayrshire. Edward and Sophie, the Earl and Countess of Wessex, are at events across Lancashire. Princess Anne, the Princess Royal, is visiting the Isle of Skye and the Isle of Raasay. It's business as usual – except, it seems, it isn't.

*

Thursday 8 September 2022. Elizabeth II is dead. Rumour swirled all morning. At 12:32 p.m. Buckingham Palace issued a statement saying the Queen's doctors were concerned for her health and, though she was 'comfortable', recommended she remain under medical supervision while family members were informed. The Queen's helicopter left Windsor Castle at 6:48 a.m. to collect Prince Charles from Dumfries House where he had spent the night. He reached Balmoral at 10:27 a.m. Camilla had spent the night at Birkhall on the Balmoral Estate and was driven by car to join him. The Princess Royal was already there – at her mother's side to the end. Andrew and Edward, the Queen's younger sons, and Sophie, Edward's wife, and Prince William and Prince Harry were reported to be on their way. There was confusion about whether or not

Harry's wife, Meghan, would go up to Scotland with him. When it became clear that Catherine was not going because she would be collecting her children from school, it emerged that Meghan was not going, either.

Andrew, Edward and Sophie, and Prince William arrived at Aberdeen airport in an RAF executive jet at 3:50 p.m. and William drove the four of them to Balmoral, forty-five miles away. They arrived at 5:06 p.m. The Queen was already dead. The formal announcement of her death came from Buckingham Palace at 6:30 p.m. while Prince Harry was still in the air. His flight from Luton airport to Aberdeen was delayed. He was the last of the family to arrive at Balmoral, and the first to leave.

I have spent the evening in different BBC studios contributing to the coverage of the Queen's death – alongside every royal correspondent, royal biographer, commentator and relevant public figure you can imagine. We all tried to say the right things, many with a catch in our voices and tears in our eyes. I thought Nicholas Soames, grandson of Sir Winston, and Stephen Cottrell, the Archbishop of York, were particularly good – one emphasising the Queen's ability to take the long view, 'having met everybody and seen it all', and the other underlining the centrality of her faith to her life and explaining that her personal modesty and 'lack of self' came from her consciousness that, while she was a queen to whom others bowed and curtsied, she would 'always bend the knee to one greater than any, Almighty God.'

Travelling to the studio in the early evening I saw a double rainbow in the sky above Buckingham Palace. And I found out from a friend in the racing world that the Queen's horse, Love Affairs, comfortably won the two o'clock at Goodwood on Tuesday: 'led field centre, made all, ridden and stayed on gamely final furlong, unchallenged.'

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Friday 9 September 2022. I am writing this in my notebook standing outside the gates of Buckingham Palace. It is early in the morning, cold and damp, but already there are hundreds of people here – soon there will be thousands. They are people of all ages from many countries: some have brought flowers and flags and home-made condolence cards. There are parents who have brought children here and, interestingly, more young people and middle-aged people than, as I had expected, people of my vintage. And though there are so many here, crowding around the gates and beginning to fill the Mall, it is very quiet. Some people are crying. Several have said to me, ‘I can’t believe she’s gone, she’s been part of my life for as long as I can remember.’ Some mention their love and admiration for her: all mention their respect.

Later.

In parliament today, the new prime minister and former prime ministers, and politicians of every stripe, are paying tribute to the Queen – ‘Elizabeth the Great’, as Boris Johnson describes her in probably the most eloquent speech of the day. President Macron of France is eloquent, too – speaking in English of his and his country’s deep admiration and affection for the Queen, who visited France often, who spoke French well and who, when she was young, had got to know the great General de Gaulle, who led the Free French from London during the Second World War. The leaders of the world are united in their praise for Queen Elizabeth II. Even Vladimir Putin has put in a good word for her.

Social media is swamped with pictures and tributes. Alongside my favourite photograph of her, taken by Cecil Beaton when she was a girl in the 1940s, I posted my own:

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Driven by duty, sustained by faith, made happy by her love for her dogs & horses. A remarkable human being, kind, considerate, consistent, instinctively generous & forgiving. She was the best & brought out the best in others. A wonderful example to us all. May she rest in peace.

Later still.

Back in a BBC studio I took part in a programme about the succession, alongside Tony Blair (an admirer of Prince Charles) and the actor David Oyelowo (a grateful beneficiary of the Prince's Trust), whose family came originally from Nigeria, and who Charles saw play the title role in Shakespeare's *Henry VI* – one of the new King's favourite plays. The Prince once asked me, 'How on earth did Shakespeare manage it? I *am* Prince of Wales. Shakespeare wasn't, but he knew exactly what it's like. *Exactly*. How did he do it?'

We all agreed that the new King's speech this evening – his first televised broadcast as sovereign – was pitch-perfect: his praise of his mother and of her example, his renewal of her vow of lifelong service, his commitment to the principles of constitutional monarchy, his announcement that he is today making William Prince of Wales, and his expression of his 'love for Harry and Meghan as they continue to build their lives overseas.'

He spoke from the Blue Drawing Room at Buckingham Palace, a room sometimes used by the Queen for her Christmas messages. To one side of him there was a framed photograph of his mother, to the other, in a small vase, at the base of which were three little corgis, a posy of sweet peas and rosemary – 'There's rosemary, that's for remembrance,' as Ophelia says in *Hamlet*. There was another quotation from *Hamlet* at the end of the King's speech, too. And to my darling

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Mama, as you begin your last great journey to join my dear late Papa, I want simply to say this: thank you. Thank you for your love and devotion to our family and to the family of nations you have served so diligently all these years. May “flights of Angels sing thee to thy rest”.

Watching the King’s speech, I smiled and thought, ‘We’re going to get more Shakespeare and fewer horses during this reign.’ More seriously, I also thought the new King rose to the occasion completely.

*

Saturday 10 September 2022. It’s official. At 10:00 a.m. this morning at St James’s Palace, in a form of ceremony dating back centuries, and to a fanfare of trumpets, Charles III was proclaimed King at a meeting of the Accession Council of privy counsellors. The new King, with Camilla, his Queen Consort, and his heir, William, the new Prince of Wales, at his side, swore, with the help of God, to dedicate ‘what remains to me of my life’ to ‘carrying out the heavy task that has been laid upon me.’

He will do it well. I know him and admire him – and like him. He is a good man with a good heart. Sometimes in the past he seemed to walk about with an invisible rain cloud hovering over his head. Not so now. He is equal to this moment and you can see it straight away – in his bearing, in his tone of voice, in his turn of phrase. He will be a fine king and will fulfil his destiny in his own way – which inevitably, because of her example and the length of her reign, will be largely her way. Elizabeth II casts a long shadow.

That is why I am writing this. I want to understand this remarkable woman; I want to know what made her the extraordinary person she was.

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I was born in 1948 – the same year as Charles III. The Queen has been part of my life for as long as I can remember. I know that I first became aware of the idea of ‘death’ when the Queen’s grandmother, Queen Mary, died in March 1953. I had just turned five and my parents did their best to explain the newspaper headlines to me. I remember the Coronation in June 1953, sitting on my father’s shoulders, somewhere along the Mall, trying to watch the procession through a toy periscope made of cardboard and tin mirrors. Like so many families in Britain, we got our first television set to watch the Coronation. (We didn’t buy the television: we hired it by the month from a company called Radio Rentals.)

I first became aware of the Duke of Edinburgh when I was a small boy in the 1950s because my mother supported the charity the Queen’s father, then the Duke of York, had founded in the 1920s and that the Duke of Edinburgh became President of in 1948: the National Playing Fields Association. Every year my mother bought the NPFA calendar, and it hung on a cupboard door in the kitchen. She used it to record family appointments – swimming lessons, outings, visits to the dentist – so we consulted it every day. Each month the calendar featured a different photograph of the Queen’s handsome young husband – playing cricket or polo, kicking a football around a playground or racing in a yacht off the Isle of Wight.

I remember seeing lots in the newspapers in the 1950s about the Queen’s sister, Princess Margaret, and her ‘friend’, Peter Townsend. I don’t think I understood quite what the fuss was about. I certainly understood later that when the Queen’s sister married the photographer Antony Armstrong-Jones in 1960, it meant we got a day off school. Later still, I got to know Tony Snowdon quite well. He was a brilliant photographer

and a great charmer: I would not have wanted to be married to him, but for several years we were proper friends.

My parents talked a good deal about the royals. Among their best friends were Mary and John Paice (my godfather), and their son, Peter Paice, happened to be ‘Guardian’, or Head Boy, at Gordonstoun when Prince Charles arrived at the school in 1962, so we heard at first-hand about how the young prince was settling in – or, rather, wasn’t. My father was a solicitor, legal adviser to the Automobile Association, of which the Duke of Edinburgh was President. Occasionally, when the Duke was alleged to have driven his car too fast or parked it where he shouldn’t, my father would be summoned to Buckingham Palace to meet with the Duke and his private secretary. Once, my father took me to the Palace with him. I don’t remember much about it, beyond the distinctive scrunching sound our feet made as we walked across the gravel from the right-hand gates of the Palace to what’s known as the Privy Purse door.

I first met the Queen on 2 May 1968, when I was a student at Oxford and she came to visit the university debating society, the Oxford Union. When she’d gone, I reprimanded William Waldegrave (the Union President, now Baron Waldegrave of North Hill and Provost of Eton) for not carrying Her Majesty’s umbrella for her as he escorted her across the courtyard in the rain. He told me, ‘The Queen insists on holding her own umbrella – always. If someone else holds it, the rain trickles down her neck.’

Years later, I asked the Queen if she remembered that Oxford visit. She did, she said, because Harold Macmillan (her third prime minister) was the University Chancellor at the time, and she recalled giving him a lift back to London in the royal train at the end of the day. She remembered the wonderful stories Macmillan told. Recently (on 12 July 2022 – I can be precise about dates because I keep a diary), Susan

Hussey told me she remembered that visit to Oxford, too. She was one of William Waldegrave's older sisters and was 'in waiting' to the Queen that day. Now Baroness Hussey of North Bradley GCVÖ (she married Marmaduke Hussey, later chairman of the Board of Governors of the BBC, when she was nineteen), she served as a Woman of the Bedchamber to Her Majesty over many years. From her 'boss', she received the Royal Household Long and Faithful Service medal (a civil decoration established by Queen Victoria) with 30-, 40-, 50- and 60-year bars. She is a godmother to Prince William and accompanied the Queen to Prince Philip's funeral in 2021. She is also the mother-in-law of Sir Francis Brooke, baronet and racing man and the Queen's representative at Ascot, and grandmother to Olivia Brooke, who happened to be the production assistant looking after me and Dame Sheila Hancock (and treating us like royalty!) when we made two television series together on England's canals in 2020 and 2021.

I have been lucky to know these people – and, over the years, other ladies-in-waiting to the Queen, courtiers and private secretaries, personal friends and members of her staff – but, in my experience, the closer they were to Her Majesty the more discreet they were. Knowing and talking with them will, I hope, have informed this portrait, and made it more intimate, but none of them is guilty of betraying any confidences.

I first met Prince Philip in the 1970s, when he was in his fifties and I was in my twenties, and I became involved in the work of the National Playing Fields Association. It is a good cause (protecting and enhancing recreational space, sports fields and playgrounds), if a touch unglamorous. Prince Philip, as a young Duke of Edinburgh, took on the presidency of NPFA (now known as Fields in Trust) in 1948, soon after he married Princess Elizabeth. It was the first national charity in which

he became involved. He remained its president until the week of his ninety-second birthday in June 2013, when he handed over the reins to his grandson, Prince William. The Duke was unwell on hand-over day (13 June), but the Queen came with Prince William and Catherine. (I was there, too, of course, introducing the proceedings – and making notes. ‘People who write books ought to be shut up,’ said King George V. Perhaps he was right.)

As the President of the NPFA Prince Philip was impressive: informed, committed, personally involved. He took the responsibilities of his office seriously. He was an effective fund-raiser. ‘The fund-raising never stops!’ he used to sigh. He was an intelligent and persuasive leader, with an unnerving eye for detail (and for flannel and flimflam), who was at his best when given a problem to solve, a difficult meeting to chair, an internal row requiring resolution. He liked to be given something specific to do. He welcomed detail. I accompanied him to the opening of a youth centre on Merseyside. His debriefing note to me was devoted to how best to relocate the lavatories and showers so as to maximise the space available for the sports facilities. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I am practical. I like to help make things work.’ He wanted to make a difference where others, often, only make a noise. He wasn’t one for honeyed words and empty gestures. He did not give his wife bunches of flowers or cards inscribed with sentimental messages: he gave her pieces of jewellery he had designed and made himself.

I liked his style. I admired his achievement. Until this week I thought he was irreplaceable. I was wrong. Seeing King Charles III and his Queen Consort travelling to the four corners of the United Kingdom this week, watching them together every step of the way through the difficult, tense and

crowded days since the Queen died, I see my old boss (and hero) reborn – in Camilla.

If we regard the remarkable reign of Elizabeth II as a success (and I imagine you are reading this book because you do), the joint author of that success was Prince Philip. A quarter of a century from now, when people look back on Charles III's reign, if it proves to work out as sure-footedly as it has begun, the co-author of that success will be Camilla – the Prince of Wales's wife of seventeen years, his 'non-negotiable' partner, whose value to him and whose worth as a person were both so clearly recognised by Elizabeth II that in her Platinum Jubilee message the Queen declared her 'sincere wish' that her daughter-in-law become Queen Consort. Elizabeth II was a wise woman. She knew what she was doing and, as ever, she got it right.

Famously, the Queen described Prince Philip as her 'strength and stay'. That's exactly what Camilla is to Charles. She is fundamental to the architecture of his life. She is his good companion and best friend and, now that his children have left home (one has even left the country), she is the only person in the entire world with whom he can be completely free and open. He could confide in his grandmother (and did absolutely) and in his mother (the soul of discretion), but they are both gone now. Camilla is his strength and stay, the ally who knows him better than anyone and, now that he's King, the only person who can still treat him as an equal.

I have watched them at close quarters – at Highgrove (before they were married and since), at Clarence House, at Buckingham Palace. He adores her, clearly. In small-talk, he mentions 'my darling wife' in almost every sentence. She looks at him with a kindly eye, amused and aware of his foibles. When he gets tetchy (because the pen doesn't work, as it didn't when he was signing a document at Hillsborough Castle in County Down this week, or the ink well is in the wrong place,

as it was at the meeting of the Accession Council in St James's Palace on Saturday) she soothes him, putting out a hand and kneading him gently in the small of his back. When he is running late or talking too much, she tugs discreetly at the back of his jacket – sometimes quite vigorously.

Like Prince Philip, Camilla has accepted her destiny. She did not seek it. She has never wanted a place centre stage. Prince Philip always knew he was the support act not the star attraction. In more than seventy years as the Queen's consort, he never over-reached himself. He always made sure he walked one step behind Her Majesty. Watch closely and you will see Camilla does exactly the same.

In July 2022, not two months before the Queen's death, along with the actress Dame Joanna Lumley, I hosted a happy lunch to mark Camilla's 75th birthday. The guests were all friends and admirers, theatrical knights and dames, sports personalities and Chelsea Pensioners, Twiggy, Michael Palin and Andrew Lloyd-Webber – the usual suspects. The Duchess of Cornwall (as she then was) made a speech worthy of the Duke of Edinburgh. She talked about the year she was born, 1947, adding, 'by the way, a vintage year for claret'. It was also, she told us, 'the year when the first of the Ealing Comedies was released, the school leaving age was raised to fifteen, *Gardeners' Question Time* was first broadcast, the University of Cambridge admitted women to full membership and soft loo paper went on sale for the first time, in Harrods – much to the nation's relief.'

We laughed and then a hush fell as, deliberately, she paused before saying, 'It was also in 1947 that the then Princess Elizabeth married Lieutenant Philip Mountbatten – two of the most remarkable people in our country's history.'

Then, looking over the top of her glasses, she nailed her colours to the mast. The Duke of Edinburgh's philosophy

was clear,' she declared, "'Look up and look out, say less, do more – and get on with the job.'" And that is just what I intend to do.' And that is exactly what she has been doing this week and will continue to do in the months and years ahead.

I first met Camilla when we were both teenagers in the 1960s and I was at a boarding school in Hampshire and visited her grandparents at their rather grand manor house, Hall Place, nearby. About ten years ago, on the BBC radio comedy programme *Just a Minute*, out of the blue I was given the subject 'My Secret Crush' to talk about. Suddenly, spontaneously, for sixty seconds, I found myself talking about Camilla and that first teenage encounter in 1964. I conjured up a picture of the future Queen Consort in her riding jodhpurs in her grandparents' garden, hiding in the shrubbery smoking Woodbines.

Of course, it never occurred to me that Her Majesty (as she now is) might be listening. It turns out that *Just a Minute* is one of her favourite programmes and a few days after the broadcast she happened to bump into my wife – at a flower show for the Queen's Diamond Jubilee at our local church – and said to her, 'Tell Gyles I don't deny I was smoking, but it definitely wasn't Woodbines. I deny the Woodbines absolutely!'

She doesn't deny that she was a naughty girl at times. She remembers her (quite strict) grandmother with affection and happy holidays at Hall Place, with her much-loved younger sister, Annabel, rolling down the Hampshire hills, catching butterflies, making mischief. Annabel remembers that her beloved teddy bear was once buried in the garden by Camilla, who only owned up to it decades later. Says Camilla, 'Yes, Tiddy Bar – he had a very happy resting ground.' 'I've not forgiven her,' insists Annabel, 'it still rankles to this day!'

King Charles III listens to *Just a Minute*, too. In fact, he told me he used to leave voicemail messages for William and Harry

in the style of *Just a Minute*, doing his best to say what he had to say in under sixty seconds, without hesitation, deviation or repetition.

Charles and Camilla share a sense of humour and they share a love of poetry, literature and theatre, too. And a love of gardening and the countryside. In some ways, they have more in common than did the Queen and Prince Philip, who had separate hobbies and enthusiasms. Prince Philip found his wife's corgis infuriating and did not share her passion for horse racing. At Royal Ascot he would do his duty, accompanying the Queen along the course in her open carriage, but once they were there, he would either race back to Windsor Castle by car or disappear into a room at the back of the Royal Box to watch the cricket. Camilla endeared herself to the Queen by sharing her love of dogs and racing.

Like Prince Philip, the Queen Consort runs a busy diary with a very lean team. She has a handful of younger women running her office and a small group of girlfriends of her own age who can serve her now as ladies-in-waiting – not, I think, that she will have official 'ladies-in-waiting': that is not her style. She brought three of them to her birthday lunch and they were fun and funny like her. Her son, Tom Parker Bowles, and his daughter, Lola, came to the party, too, as a surprise, bringing in the birthday cake. The Queen Consort is close to Tom and his sister, Laura, and to her five grandchildren, but very much like Prince Philip, knows she has to leave the next generation to do their own thing. As the Duke of Edinburgh said to me of his offspring, 'You've just got to let them get on with it. I try to keep out of these things.' I have seen the Queen Consort's grandchildren with Charles at Clarence House, jumping up and ragging him. He obviously loves them. I have also seen the lovely photograph of Harry

and Meghan that has pride of place in the Clarence House drawing room.

Like Prince Philip, Camilla also has her own bolt-hole. Just as the Duke of Edinburgh would escape on his own to his own ‘cottage’, Wood Farm, an unpretentious farmhouse close by the sea on the Sandringham Estate, two miles from the ‘big house’, Camilla still has her own private home, Ray Mill House in Wiltshire, a fifteen-minute drive away from Highgrove. She can disappear there and simply be herself.

Like Prince Philip, she is very familiar with court life, but far from wedded to it. Philip was an outsider (a prince of Greece) when he married Princess Elizabeth in 1947, but he had royal blood in his veins stretching back generations. Camilla was also an outsider with her own royal connections, descended from, among others, Arnold Joost van Keppel, 1st Earl of Albemarle, a favourite (and possibly a lover) of William III, and Charles Lennox, 1st Duke of Richmond, one of the illegitimate sons of Charles II by his French mistress, Louise, who became the Duchess of Portsmouth.

Famously, of course, Camilla is the great-granddaughter of Alice Keppel, the last love of our new King’s great-great-grandfather, Edward VII. ‘A lively crowd, eh?’ she said to me of her family once, laughing. It was at one of the drinks parties I give to mark the birthday of the Victorian playwright, Oscar Wilde. For a while, Camilla’s great-grandfather, Alec Shand, was engaged to a girl called Constance Lloyd, who went on to marry Oscar Wilde. It was at that party that I introduced the future Queen Consort to Baga Chipz, one of the stars of *Ru Paul’s Drag Race*, and to April Ashley, one of the first British people known to have gender reassignment surgery at the beginning of the 1960s. They got on like a house on fire. Camilla is brilliant with people. It’s always all about them. It’s never about her.

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Another of the new Queen Consort's several times great-grandfathers was Thomas Cubitt, the builder who reconstructed Buckingham Palace. Queen Victoria loved him. When he died, she said, 'A better, kinder-hearted or more simple, unassuming man never breathed.'

Elizabeth II called Camilla 'a very special lady'. I think she is special, as you can tell. She is totally normal and completely unspoilt. She is like Prince Philip in that she is outward-looking, optimistic and not remotely self-centred or self-absorbed. Philip regularly boosted the Queen's morale by telling her how lovely she looked and how well she was doing. He also threw in what he called his occasional 'two penny-worth'. Camilla does the same with Charles, offering praise, encouragement and common sense as required. (According to my wife, men seem to need this a lot more than women do.)

But there are differences between the last royal consort and this new one. Prince Philip loved flying. Camilla hates it, squeezing her husband's hand anxiously on take-off, distracting herself with Travel Scrabble through the turbulence. Camilla is easy company always – which Prince Philip wasn't. He could be cantankerous. He could be quite frightening. While he came to loathe the press, Camilla (who has had a pretty rough ride in the media over the years) does not appear to hold any grudges. The Duke of Edinburgh was impatient with photographers – 'Take the fucking photograph!' he'd bark. Camilla as Duchess of Cornwall was happy to do selfies – to the dismay of her protection officer. As Queen Consort that may change. If it does, it won't be her doing.

She is going to be the least stuffy queen in history – and exactly the consort the new King needs: as charming as the Queen Mother, as committed as Queen Mary, as kind-hearted as Queen Alexandra, and, with her immediate predecessor,

Prince Philip, as her role model: looking up, looking out, doing more, saying less, getting on with the job.

I have been lucky to know these remarkable royal consorts. Though, naturally, I call her ‘Your Majesty’ and ‘Ma’am’, I hope she regards me as a friend. What the Duke of Edinburgh made of me, if anything, I cannot tell you. He called me ‘Gyles’. I called him ‘Sir’. His last letter to me, written from Windsor Castle, was full of characteristic dry humour and his trademark double exclamation marks (!!); it was signed ‘Yours ever’. But I am mindful of the former prime minister James Callaghan’s observation: ‘What senior royalty offer you is friendliness, not friendship. There is a difference.’

There were times when I felt quite close to Prince Philip – like a proper friend, or as much of a friend as you can be with a man who is thirty years your senior and the husband of the head of state. He showed me many acts of kindness. For example, when I told him I hoped to be a member of parliament, after he had spluttered ‘What on earth for?’, he asked ‘Do you know anything about it?’, and when he discovered I didn’t, he sent me and my wife tickets to the State Opening of Parliament where, incredibly, we sat in the gallery of the House of Lords, on little gold chairs, as special guests of Her Majesty The Queen.

And a few days after I was elected as the Conservative MP for the City of Chester, he and the Queen happened to come to my constituency, on 16 April 1992, for the Royal Maundy Service at Chester Cathedral. At the service the sovereign ceremonially distributes small silver coins, known as ‘Maundy money’, as symbolic alms to elderly recipients. The name ‘Maundy’ and the ceremony itself derive from Christ’s instruction, or *mandatum*, at the Last Supper that his followers should love one another. The Queen valued the service highly and only missed it five times during the course of her long reign.

When she and Prince Philip came to Chester in 1992, the Duke of Edinburgh caught sight of me at the back of the crowd of civic dignitaries gathered in the Town Hall and pulled me forward to meet Her Majesty – much to the irritation of the Liberal Democrat Lord Mayor and the Labour Councillors, who were infuriated that, against the odds, I had won the parliamentary seat just a week before.

Five years later, when I lost my seat in the 1997 New Labour landslide, Prince Philip got in touch to commiserate and to ask me about my future plans. I told him I was going back to my old life – broadcasting and writing books. ‘Is there anything I can do to help?’ he asked me. ‘You could give me a newspaper interview,’ I said. He did. It was wide-ranging and personal – and well-received. And it led to him asking me to write a short biography of him that one of his charities (the Outward Bound Trust) wanted to publish to mark his eightieth birthday. Working on that with him (and with his friend and private secretary, Brian McGrath, and his librarian and archivist, Anne Griffiths) led to the book I published about him and the Queen in 2004: *Philip & Elizabeth: Portrait of a Marriage*.

‘This is Gyles Brandreth,’ said the Duke, introducing me to his wife on one occasion. (It was the Royal Variety Performance at London’s Dominion Theatre on Monday 26 November 2001.) Her Majesty proffered me a tightly gloved hand and murmured an almost inaudible, ‘How do you do?’ Her consort continued cheerily, ‘Apparently, he’s writing about you.’ He paused and leant towards his wife’s ear: ‘Be warned. He’s going to cut you into pieces.’

The Queen looked startled. The Duke chuckled. I smiled. I was accustomed to his sense of humour. I liked it. I liked him. I admired him as much as any man I have known. It was knowing him as I did that led me to write that first book about him, and his wife, and their remarkable marriage – the

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longest-lasting marriage of any sovereign and consort in history. In writing this new book, inevitably I am revisiting that first one, but this is different because it is more personal, less circumspect, and it includes my conversations and small-talk with the Queen – all recorded at the time, on the day, in the diary I have been keeping since 1959.

As you will discover if you read on, I enjoy other people's diaries and quote from them quite frequently. Royalty may not remember all the people they meet, but people who meet royalty invariably recollect the moment, usually in some detail, and, if they are diarists, they keep a record of it, too. Here, for example, is an account by the political diarist, Clerk of the Privy Council under three sovereigns and, incidentally, gifted amateur cricketer, Charles Greville (1794–1865), of a conversation he enjoyed with Queen Victoria at Buckingham Palace in March 1840:

Q: 'Have you been riding today, Mr Greville?'

G: 'No Madam, I have not.'

Q: 'It was a fine day.'

G: 'Yes ma'am a very fine day.'

Q: 'It was very cold though.'

G: (like Polonius): 'It *was* rather cold, Madam.'

Q: 'Your sister, Lady Francis Egerton rides I think, does not she?'

G: 'She does ride sometimes, Madam.'

(A pause, when I took the lead though adhering to the same topic.)

G: 'Has your Majesty been riding today?'

Q: (with animation): 'O yes, a very long ride.'

G: 'Has your Majesty a nice horse?'

Q: 'O, a very nice horse.'

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Making small-talk with the monarch is not easy. One hundred and fifty years later, in 1990, at a drinks party hosted by her godson, Geordie Porchester (son of the 7th Earl of Carnarvon, the Queen's racing manager and friend, who died on 11 September 2001), I found myself with Elizabeth II, alone, in a corner of the room. I was an aspiring member of parliament at the time, but had spent the day rehearsing for the Christmas pantomime at the Wimbledon Theatre in south-west London. (I was playing Baron Hardup in *Cinderella*.) The Queen was coming up to her Ruby Jubilee, the fortieth anniversary of her accession. Standing where we were, there was no obvious means of escape for either of us, and, both a little weary (I had had a long day; she had had a long reign), neither of us could think of anything very interesting to say. Later that night, in my diary, I recorded our exchanges. (Believe it or not, this was before I had read Greville's diary.)

GB (getting the ball rolling): 'Had a busy day, Ma'am?'

HM (with a small sigh): 'Yes, very.'

GB: 'At the Palace?'

HM (sucking her lips): 'Yes.'

GB: 'A lot of visitors?'

HM (apparently biting the inside of her lower lip): 'Yes.'

(PAUSE)

GB (brightly): 'The Prime Minister?' [It was John Major.]

HM: 'Yes.'

(PAUSE)

GB: 'He's very nice.'

HM (nodding): 'Yes, very.'

(LONG PAUSE)

GB (struggling): 'The recession's bad.'

HM (looking grave): 'Yes.'

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GB (trying to jolly things along): 'I think this must be my third recession.'

HM (nodding): 'We do seem to get them every few years . . . and none of my governments seems to know what to do about them.'

(A MOMENT OF TINKLY LAUGHTER FROM HM, A HUGE GUFFAW FROM GB, THEN TOTAL SILENCE.)

GB (suddenly frantic): 'I've been to Wimbledon today.'

HM (brightening briefly): 'Oh, yes?'

GB (determined): 'Yes.'

HM: 'I've been to Wimbledon, too.'

GB (now we are getting somewhere): 'Today?'

HM: 'No.'

GB (Oh well we tried): 'No, of course not.' (PAUSE) 'I wasn't at the tennis.'

HM: 'No?'

GB: 'No, I was at the theatre.' (LONG PAUSE) 'Have you been to the theatre in Wimbledon?'

(PAUSE)

HM: 'I imagine so.'

(INTERMINABLE PAUSE)

GB (a last, desperate attempt): 'You know, Ma'am, my wife's a vegetarian.'

HM (what will she say?): 'That must be very dull.'

GB (what next?): 'And one of my daughters is a vegetarian, too.'

HM (oh no!): 'Oh dear.'

The Queen had a wry sense of humour. Her voice in conversation was softer, less artificial, less strangled, than the voice we heard when she was opening Parliament or giving

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her Christmas Day broadcast. Physically, she was small, and became smaller with age, but, until her last years, she was sturdy. Close up, she always appeared younger than she was. Her dress sense and her helmet of permed silver hair may have come from a bygone era (increasingly she looked like her grandmother, Queen Mary), but her skin was good, and her make-up straightforward, simple, and modern.

Happily, most of my conversations with the Queen were less halting than that one – and though royal protocol requires that one should let the royal personage lead any conversation and make the first remark, in my experience Elizabeth II didn't seem to mind at all if you made the opening gambit before she did. In fact, she seemed to welcome it, which was how over time I found myself talking to Her Majesty about pantomimes, and politics, and pizzas, *Countdown* and the Commonwealth, my jumpers and her dogs and horses. Not knowing much about the world of horse racing, when I found a line that seemed to work I ran with it. I told her I had been to Dubai as a guest of the ruler, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, and that he had shown me around his famous Godolphin stables. 'I envy you,' she said. She knew the Sheikh well because of their shared love of racing. 'I went on my birthday,' I said. 'Did he give you a present?' she asked. 'Yes,' I said, 'but it wasn't the white Rolls-Royce he had lent me for the week.' 'What was it?' she asked. 'It was something he said my wife would treasure.' The Queen looked at me wide-eyed: 'Pearls? Diamonds?' 'No,' I said, 'it was a small book of love poetry – poems written by the Sheikh himself and then translated into truly awful English by the retired British brigadier who worked as his ADC.' She laughed at that and told me she had received some 'quite strange' presents in her time, including all sorts of animals, from antelopes to zebra, and what she described as an 'Aladdin's cave' of gems when

she visited the Gulf states in 1979. ‘Millions of pounds’ worth of jewellery and gold and silver,’ she said. ‘I’m not sure what happened to it. It’s probably locked up in a basement at the Foreign Office.’ (What I want to know is what happened to the little statuette of her son, Prince Charles, standing alongside a ceramic figure of Postman Pat, that – almost incredibly – the Kingdom of Jordan presented to Her Majesty on her ninetieth birthday in 2016.)

To make her smile, on another occasion I told the Queen about our family dogs: the sophisticated French poodle we called ‘Phydeaux’ and the ageing mongrel who thought his name was ‘Down Boy’. She did smile (in fact, she laughed) and then told me that Prince Philip had a dog called ‘Sargent’ and asked me to guess what some of his other dogs were called. ‘Major?’ I suggested, ‘Corporal?’ ‘No,’ she explained, ‘Beecham, Boulton. They’re not named after army ranks, they’re named after musical conductors – Sir Malcolm Sargent, Sir Thomas Beecham, Sir Adrian Boulton.’

Thanks to Prince Philip, I was given privileged access to Her Majesty, to walk with her, to talk with her as she went about her official duties, and to chat with her at assorted private events and parties. I also came into contact with her in my own right when I was an MP and in the government whips’ office as a Lord Commissioner of the Treasury. One of the Lord Commissioner’s duties is to sign the government’s cheques – the mandates authorising government expenditure. It was explained to me by Treasury officials that with the larger amounts – the mandates involving billions of pounds of expenditure – I would not be signing the cheques alone. Two signatures were required, a second as well as my own. ‘The Chancellor of the Exchequer’s?’ I asked. ‘Or the Prime Minister’s as First Lord of the Treasury?’ ‘No,’ I was informed, ‘It is HM Treasury. You will be signing the large cheques with

HM – with Her Majesty.’ Later, I said to the Queen, ‘You know, Your Majesty, the way the government insists on the two of us signing these huge cheques . . . I can’t help wondering which of the two of us it is the government doesn’t entirely trust?’

I think she was amused. I know she was amused by the daily handwritten message sent to her from another member of the government whips’ office whenever parliament was sitting. The whip who is Vice-Chamberlain is required to send a report to the sovereign supplementing the official parliamentary record published by Hansard. This ‘message’, as it’s known, was much more informal and was designed to give the Queen a flavour of the mood of the House of Commons, who was doing well, who wasn’t, how the wind was blowing. The Vice-Chamberlain in my day was a lovely man called Sydney Chapman who kindly sent Her Majesty some of my jokes when he thought they would amuse her. She was certainly amused when I told her that political correctness required that Sydney Chapman should properly be known these days as Sydney Personperson.

The fun of spending time with the Queen was both finding out how much fun she was and discovering unexpected things about her. She really did love all the early James Bond films – ‘before they got so loud’. She really could sing ‘When I’m cleaning winders’ and the other songs George Formby sang to his banjolele when she was growing up during the war – and with Formby’s authentic Lancashire accent, too. (She was the Duke of Lancaster, after all.)

This week, early one morning, standing outside Buckingham Palace while the Queen’s body lay in its coffin in the Bow Room before it travelled to Westminster Hall for the lying-in-state, I was asked by a BBC reporter why it was, I thought, that so many people were up so early, coming in their hundreds and thousands to pay their last respects to Her Majesty.

I said I reckoned it was partly because people wanted to share in an historic moment. Republican or monarchist, like it or not, royalty is a thread running through our island story for a thousand years. William the Conqueror, Richard III, Henry VIII, Elizabeth I, ‘Good King Charles’, ‘Mad King George’, Queen Victoria – we have been brought up on the stories of our kings and queens. The death of Elizabeth II is an historic moment. We feel it particularly, too, I think, because her reign has encompassed all our lives: she has been there for as long as almost all of us can remember. But most of all, I said, I think people are coming here because of who she was, ‘Elizabeth the Great’, ‘Elizabeth the Steadfast’, a remarkable human being: a woman of integrity – decent, dutiful, discreet, conscientious, consistent, kind. In a world where there is so much that is bad and dark – I mentioned the war in Ukraine – people are reaching out to the Queen because of her essential goodness. She was an exemplar of goodness.

But how did she come to be this remarkable person? What was it made her who she was? ‘The destination of all journeys is their beginning,’ wrote the novelist, Angela Carter. We will begin at the beginning then, with her family and her forebears. The Queen’s journey reached its final destination on Monday 19 September 2022 when she was laid to rest alongside the Duke of Edinburgh in the memorial chapel commissioned by her in 1962 and named by her in honour of her father, George VI, within St George’s Chapel at Windsor Castle. The marble slab is simply engraved: ‘ELIZABETH II 1926–2022’. Her journey began on Wednesday 21 April 1926 in Mayfair, London, with little or no thought that one day she would be a queen, let alone such a queen.

CHAPTER ONE

Princess Elizabeth Alexandra Mary

The future Queen Elizabeth II was born in a handsome eighteenth-century townhouse in Mayfair in the early hours of Wednesday 21 April 1926. Just off Berkeley Square, 17 Bruton Street was then the London home of the Earl and Countess of Strathmore, and their daughter, their ninth child, Elizabeth Angela Marguerite, was the new baby's mother. Aged twenty-five, she was also the Duchess of York, having married the Duke of York, the second son of King George V, three years earlier, on 26 April 1923.

For the Duke of York, who was now thirty, the baby was a very special anniversary present. 'We always wanted a child to make our happiness complete,' he wrote to his mother, Queen Mary, '& now that it has at last happened, it seems so wonderful & strange.'

For the Duchess of York, it was not an easy birth. It had taken her time to conceive. She had found pregnancy uncomfortable, confining and 'very dull'. She was tiny (not quite 5 foot 2 inches in height) and small-boned. The obstetrician to the royal family, Sir Henry Simson (a Scotsman, born in Bengal, a keen golfer and rugby player, which the King appreciated, but more pertinently, one of the founders of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists), in consultation with Sir George Blackyer (an Irishman, born in Dublin, twice

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mentioned in despatches during the First World War, which the Duke of York appreciated, but, again, more pertinently, a surgeon and editor of the standard work on midwifery), had decided in advance that the Duchess's breech baby should be delivered by caesarean section. The baby was born at 2:40 a.m. The Duke of York and Lady Strathmore were in the room for the birth and 'much relieved' that everything had gone to plan.

Downstairs, in the drawing room, the Home Secretary sat waiting for news of the safe arrival. Sir William Joynson-Hicks, known to all as 'Jix', was a conservative Conservative, best remembered for clamping down on nightclubs he regarded as dissolute and literature he considered obscene – notably the work of D. H. Lawrence and Radclyffe Hall's lesbian novel, *The Well of Loneliness*. The writer H. G. Wells said Jix represented 'absolutely the worst element in British political life ... an entirely undistinguished man ... an obscure and ineffectual nobody'. On the night of 20/21 April 1926, however, he was unquestionably a 'somebody', the member of the government required by custom long established to 'witness' the birth of any baby in direct line of succession to the throne and the last holder of his office to be on hand for the birth of a baby destined to become a sovereign. The custom continued until the birth of Princess Alexandra (the daughter of the King's fourth son, the Duke of Kent) in 1936, but had been abandoned by the time Prince Charles was born in 1948.

Soon after 3:00 a.m., Jix left Bruton Street to report the glad tidings to the prime minister, Stanley Baldwin, while the Duke of York relayed the good news to his parents at Windsor Castle. The new princess was third in line to the throne – after her father and his older brother, the Prince of Wales – but there was no serious expectation that she would eventually become Queen. The Duchess of York was still young and would no doubt go on to have more children, including a boy

who would take precedence. (The rule of royal primogeniture, giving first-born boys precedence over first-born girls in the line of succession, was not changed until 2013.) The Prince of Wales was only thirty-one and still a bachelor. In time, he was expected to marry and have children, too.

George V and Queen Mary were delighted to hear of the safe arrival of their first granddaughter. ‘Such a relief and joy,’ the Queen wrote in her diary. Their Majesties travelled up from Windsor that afternoon to meet the little princess for the first time. She is ‘a little darling,’ reported the Queen, ‘with a lovely complexion and pretty fair hair’.

Through the day, crowds of well-wishers gathered in Bruton Street to catch sight of the royal comings and goings. Messages of congratulation were received from across the Empire, as well as from ten reigning European sovereigns and the Emperor of Japan, among many others. The royal birth was front page news and a happy distraction from the main story of the day: the impending General Strike.

By 1926 the relative prosperity that had followed the First World War and heralded the so-called ‘roaring ’twenties’ was over for most of the general population. Following the minor boom came a major bust. In 1925, the re-introduction of the Gold Standard by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Winston Churchill, kept interest rates high and made British exports expensive. The economy was in decline. By the mid-1920s unemployment had risen to over 2 million. Coal reserves had been depleted during the war and Britain was now importing more coal than it was mining. Britain’s coalmine owners announced their intention to reduce their workers’ wages while increasing their hours. The miners rejected the owners’ terms: ‘Not a penny off the pay, not a minute on the day’ was their battle-cry. In support of the coal miners, the General Council of the Trades Union Congress called a general strike.

It began at midnight on 3 May. Some 1.7 million workers – mostly in heavy industry and transport – took part. Fearing economic paralysis and potential social unrest, Baldwin's government – with Churchill as Chancellor and Jix as Home Secretary in the vanguard of the battle – took on the strikers, mobilised the army and galvanised a legion of middle-class volunteers to maintain essential services.

Privately, the King had some sympathy for the miners' plight – 'Try living on their wages before you judge them,' he said – but he did not go so far as to condone the strike itself. Indeed, with his private blessing, court equerries and lords-in-waiting were excused royal service to volunteer for Jix's brigade of special constables. For a week, the country held its breath and nervous royalists wondered whether the strike presaged the kind of revolution that had led to the overthrow of the Russian Tsar by the Bolsheviks in 1917. They need not have worried. After nine days, the government prevailed and the trades unions gave up in defeat.

The new royal baby was born twelve days before the strike began and christened a fortnight after it ended, on Saturday 29 May, in the private chapel at Buckingham Palace. Using water from the River Jordan in the Holy Land, the christening was performed by Cosmo Lang, the Archbishop of York, a staunch ally of the royal family – so close, said some, he was 'more courtier than cleric'. The new princess, dressed in the satin and lace christening robe that had been made for Queen Victoria's eldest daughter, was named Elizabeth Alexandra Mary, after her mother (there was no thought of Elizabeth I in the choice), her grandmother, Queen Mary, and her great-grandmother, Queen Alexandra, who had died of a heart attack, aged eighty, the previous November.

Her godparents included her royal grandparents, George V and Queen Mary; her paternal grandmother, Lady Strathmore;

her royal aunt, Mary, the Princess Royal, the Duke of York's younger (and only) sister, who had married the Earl of Harewood in 1922; a non-royal aunt, Lady Elphinstone, her mother's older sister; and Arthur, Duke of Connaught (1850–1942), Queen Victoria's last surviving son.

What everyone seems to have remembered most about the christening was how much the baby cried. 'Of course, the baby cried,' said Queen Mary. The Queen's long-serving lady-in-waiting, the Countess of Airlie, reported that (to the amusement of the Prince of Wales who was in a joshing mood that day) the baby's old-school nurse shocked 'the modern mothers present' by trying to calm the squawking child by dosing her with dill water. This was the first and last – and only – occasion on which the future Elizabeth II was seen to cry in public.

'She doesn't cry,' her husband, the Duke of Edinburgh, told me eighty years later. It was in 2006, when the film, *The Queen*, starring Helen Mirren in the title role, had just opened to critical acclaim. There is a moment in the movie where the Queen is seen sitting alone on a hill near Balmoral and a beautiful Highland stag appears nearby. In the picture, this is in the aftermath of Diana's death and, apparently overwhelmed by the pressure of recent events, the Queen bursts into tears.

'They just make it up,' said Prince Philip wearily. He hadn't seen the film, nor had she, but he had read about it. 'The Queen doesn't cry,' he repeated. 'You can have feelings without blubbing,' he added.

I thought of Prince Philip's observation during the Queen's funeral service at Westminster Abbey in September 2022. Grief and sadness were apparent in the faces of all the members of the royal family, but (rightly or wrongly) crying in public is not the Windsor way. The only person seen to conspicuously shed a tear that day was Prince Harry's wife,

Meghan. Back in 2006, referring to Helen Mirren, the Duke of Edinburgh said, ‘An actress might cry and think it rings true. All I’m saying is that it isn’t accurate. The Queen doesn’t cry.’

Warming to his theme, the Duke moved from the makers of *The Queen* to the media in general. ‘They’re obsessed with people showing their emotions in public. They’re determined to get a picture of the Queen with tears in her eyes – and if it’s a cold day they might succeed. They want a photo that suits their story. Do you remember the pictures at the decommissioning of *Britannia*?’ The Royal Yacht, launched by the Queen in 1953, was taken out of service in 1997. The Queen certainly had affection for the vessel: it had taken her and other members of the royal family on some 696 foreign visits and 272 trips around British waters, including many happy holidays. According to *Hello!* magazine and most of the media, the farewell in Portsmouth brought tears to the sovereign’s eyes: ‘Overcome with emotion, she was seen wiping her eyes as her beloved yacht was taken out of service.’

‘It was the middle of December,’ snorted Prince Philip. ‘It was bloody cold. We all had tears in our eyes.’

Prince Philip also told me that on 21 April 1926, the day on which the future Queen Elizabeth II, his future wife, was born, his parents, Prince and Princess Andrew of Greece, happened to have lunch at Windsor Castle with the King and Queen.

‘I didn’t know that,’ I said. ‘That’s a charming coincidence.’

‘Not really,’ he said. ‘They were cousins, after all.’

CHAPTER TWO

Queen Victoria

At the Queen's funeral in September 2022, among the most notable of the royal mourners from other countries was Queen Margrethe II of Denmark, born in 1940, and now Europe's longest-serving head of state and only reigning queen. She is also Colonel-in-Chief of a British regiment and only the seventh Lady of the Order of the Garter since 1901, when Edward VII appointed his wife, Queen Alexandra, to the Order as the first. A few years ago, when I visited Queen Margrethe at her palace in Copenhagen, she told me, unsurprisingly, drawing on yet another cigarette (she is a committed smoker, though only in private nowadays), how much she admired Elizabeth II and the Duke of Edinburgh, and reminded me, incidentally, that she was related to both. She said, 'I love coming to their parties in London, especially when they are just family gatherings, for wedding anniversaries and that sort of thing. If it's just royalty in the room, once the door is closed you know you're all there because you are related, however distantly. You feel safe. You can say what you like, you can be yourself. Royals understand other royals. We all know what it's like. In the old days when royals only married other royals, there were disadvantages, of course, but there were advantages, too. Everyone had been brought up in the same sort of way. It can be difficult if you're

an outsider. My husband has found it difficult, I know.' He was a French career diplomat given the style and title of 'His Royal Highness Prince Henrik of Denmark', but the marriage, which lasted more than fifty years until his death in 2018, had 'many ups and downs,' Margrethe told me. She added, smiling while lighting another cigarette, 'Your Queen and Prince Philip are cousins. I think that helps.'

Both Elizabeth II and her husband, the Duke of Edinburgh, were great-great-grandchildren of Queen Victoria, whose reign, of course, until Elizabeth's, was the longest in our history.

Victoria lived more than eighty-one years, from 24 May 1819 to 22 January 1901. She came to the throne aged eighteen, in 1837, and gave her name to a century, its achievements and constraints, its values and aspirations. Britain's first and only Queen-Empress was small (not five feet tall) and round (at her heaviest topping 200 lbs), but she cast a long shadow. Whenever Queen Elizabeth II appeared on the balcony of Buckingham Palace she looked out over the Victoria Memorial, designed at the time of the old queen's death, but not opened until the reign of George V and only completed in 1922. Whenever Elizabeth II drove in or out of Windsor Castle, she passed the bronze statue of Victoria erected to mark the Queen-Empress's Golden Jubilee in 1887.

Elizabeth II had plenty in common with her great-great-grandmother, not least her longevity, sense of duty, acceptance of destiny, love and admiration for her husband, sometimes complicated relationship with her eldest son, and sustaining faith. 'England has become great and happy by the knowledge of the true God through Jesus Christ,' wrote Victoria. 'For me,' said Elizabeth II, 'the teachings of Christ and my own personal accountability before God provide a framework in which I try to lead my life.'

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Duty drove Elizabeth II, but it was her faith that sustained her. There was not a Christmas broadcast in which she did not speak of it – starting with her first, in 1952, when she was only twenty-six. ‘Pray for me,’ she said, looking ahead to her coronation the following year, ‘that God may give me wisdom and strength to carry out the solemn promises I shall be making, and that I may faithfully serve Him and you, all the days of my life.’

In the mid-1950s, when the American evangelist Billy Graham came to London he met the Queen and told her one of his favourite stories – about her great-great-grandmother. In Billy Graham’s version, ‘Victoria went into the slums of London and visited the home of an elderly lady. When the Queen rose to leave, she asked, “Is there anything I can do for you?” The woman said, “Yes, ma’am, Your Majesty, you can meet me in Heaven.” The Queen turned to her and said softly, “Yes. I’ll be there, but only because of the blood that was shed on the cross for you and for me.” Queen Victoria, in her day the most powerful woman in the world, had to depend on the blood of Christ for her salvation; and so do we.’

To Elizabeth, as to Victoria, her Christian faith was fundamental to her life. Both sovereigns said their prayers on their knees at their bedsides every night, not as a matter of form, but as a matter of belief. And for Elizabeth, as for Victoria, her marriage – sanctified by God – was the most important relationship of her life.

Elizabeth married her cousin, Prince Philip of Greece and Denmark, in November 1947, when she was twenty-one and he was twenty-six. Victoria married her cousin, Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, in February 1840, when they were both twenty. Victoria adored Albert and it is clear from her journal that, at least when she was young, her approach to the physical aspects of love was anything but ‘Victorian’:

I NEVER NEVER spent such an evening!!! My DEAREST DEAREST DEAR Albert sat on a footstool by my side, & his excessive love & affection gave me feelings of heavenly love & happiness, I never could have *hoped* to have felt before! He clasped me in his arms, and we kissed each other again and again! His beauty, his sweetness and gentleness – really how can I ever be thankful enough to have such a *Husband*!

I doubt that Elizabeth II in her journal ever wrote about Prince Philip quite like that. It does not feel like her style, but I do know from friends and family members who knew Elizabeth and Philip when they were young that – in the words of Patricia Mountbatten, Prince Philip’s first cousin on his mother’s side – ‘They absolutely adored one another – you could see it in both their eyes.’ They were never ones for public displays of affection – there are no photographs anywhere of them holding hands or kissing except by way of a greeting on the cheek – but Countess Mountbatten told me that Prince Philip had told her, more than once, how ‘gorgeous’ his young wife was and ‘what fun they had together’.

In 2021, in her Christmas broadcast nine months after her husband’s death, the Queen spoke of ‘my beloved Philip’ in a way she had never done before in public. ‘His sense of service, intellectual curiosity and capacity to squeeze fun out of any situation, were all irrepressible,’ she said. ‘That mischievous, inquiring twinkle was as bright at the end as when I first set eyes on him.’ She loved her man as much as Victoria loved hers.

Elizabeth had four children and, so her childhood friend Sonia Berry told me, one miscarriage. Victoria, despite the discomforts and indignities of childbirth (‘I think . . . of our being like a cow or a dog at such moments,’ she said), had nine children. The first of them was born on 21 November 1840, nine months and eleven days after her wedding night.

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‘Oh, Madam,’ said her physician, Dr Locock, ‘it is a Princess.’ ‘Never mind,’ answered the Queen weakly, ‘the next will be a Prince.’ It was. Eleven and a half months after the birth of Princess Victoria (known first as Pussy, then as Vicky), on 9 November 1841, Bertie, the Prince of Wales, the future King Edward VII, was born.

When Prince Albert died, on 14 December 1861, the Queen was only forty-two. Bereft, she closeted herself at Windsor Castle, and her sustained seclusion – at Windsor, at Balmoral, at Osborne House on the Isle of Wight – did not endear her to the press or public. She became the maudlin ‘widow of Windsor’, accused by some of indulging her grief and becoming neglectful of her duties to her people.

Elizabeth II’s response to widowhood was very different. When Prince Philip died at Windsor Castle on 9 April 2021, just two months short of his one hundredth birthday, he and Elizabeth had been married for more than seventy-three years. The Queen was nearly ninety-five and well accustomed to death. She knew and accepted that life, as she put it, ‘consists of final partings as well as first meetings.’ Many of those closest to her had died over the previous two decades: her sister, her mother, her much-loved racing manager, Lord Carnarvon, among them. In 2021, along with her husband, she lost so many of her nearest and dearest: her first cousin, Mary Colman, aged eighty-eight, and Mary Colman’s husband, Sir Timothy, a Knight of the Garter, aged ninety-one; the manager of the Royal Studs at Sandringham, Sir Michael Oswald, aged eighty-six; Lady Farnham, one of her longest-serving ladies-in-waiting, aged ninety; and the Dowager Duchess of Grafton, aged 101.

In 1946, Fortune Smith married Hugh Fitzroy, Earl of Euston, who became the 11th Duke of Grafton on the death of his father in 1970. As we will discover later in our story,

before Philip proposed, the teenage Elizabeth was quite sweet on Hugh. Her friendship with the Graftons was lifelong, comfortable and profound. Fortune joined what the Queen called ‘my team’ as a Lady of the Bedchamber in Coronation year, 1953, and succeeded the Dowager Duchess of Devonshire as Mistress of the Robes in 1967.

The Mistress of the Robes is the senior lady in the Royal Household. Once upon a time responsible for the queen’s clothes and jewellery, as the title implies, the post now has the responsibility for arranging the rota of attendance of the ladies-in-waiting on the queen, along with various duties at state ceremonies. Over the years, the role has almost invariably been fulfilled by a duchess. In the past, whenever the queen was a queen regnant rather than a queen consort, the Mistress of the Robes was a political appointment, changing with the government. Queen Victoria had to endure twenty changes of Mistress of the Robes. It is different now and Elizabeth II had only two Mistresses of the Robes throughout her reign.

When I was travelling with the Queen’s party on one of her regional tours in 2001, we overheard someone in the crowd asking if the Duchess of Grafton, seated next to the Queen in the royal Bentley, was the Queen’s sister. This really delighted the Duchess. ‘I do feel like her sister,’ she said to me, proudly. They were very close.

When the Duke of Grafton died, the Dowager Duchess moved to Whitelands House, a block of flats in London, on Cheltenham Terrace, just south of Sloane Square. Fellow residents were pleasantly surprised to occasionally see the Queen emerging from the lift after a visit to her old friend. In February 2020, just before the first Covid-19 lockdown, Her Majesty delivered the sovereign’s traditional card to a centenarian in person.

In 2021, when her husband died, Elizabeth II did not give

way to grief. Unlike Victoria, she did not hide away: she got on with the job. Indeed, she told one of her ladies-in-waiting, she was ‘grateful to have a job to get on with’.

At the time of Prince Philip’s death, there were Covid-19 lockdown restrictions in force across the United Kingdom. On the eve of her husband’s funeral, it later transpired, officials in Downing Street were enjoying alcohol-fuelled staff parties late into the night. At Windsor Castle, the Queen, by contrast, was obeying the government’s pandemic rules to the letter, only associating with members of staff within her ‘bubble’ and, at the funeral itself, sitting in her pew in St George’s Chapel on her own, ‘socially distanced’ from the other twenty-nine mourners permitted to be part of the congregation.

Much was made of the stark image of the Queen, masked and dressed in black, sitting all alone at her husband’s funeral, but, in truth, she did not feel ‘isolated’ or ‘alone’ in St George’s Chapel that day as some of the press described her. For the Queen, a church was the one place where she never felt alone. In church, she was with God and at times of travail a church, for her, was the place to be to find comfort and consolation. It did not trouble her to be seated on her own. As Queen, she was accustomed to sitting apart from others.

As Queen, too, she was accustomed to her own company. Even when her husband was alive, she often spent evenings on her own. Immediately after his funeral, she returned to her apartment in Windsor Castle in silence. ‘I helped her off with her coat and hat,’ her dresser, Angela Kelly, remembered, ‘and no words were spoken. The Queen then walked to her sitting room, closed the door behind her, and she was alone with her thoughts.’

When Prince Albert died, Queen Victoria retreated from the world. When Prince Philip died, Queen Elizabeth II went

towards it. She continued with her official duties, working through her paperwork every day, signing letters and state papers, making phone calls, taking Zoom calls, meeting ambassadors on screen when they presented their credentials.

In the immediate aftermath of Prince Philip's death, Vice-Admiral Sir Tony Johnstone-Burt, the cheery Master of the Household and part of the Queen's Windsor 'bubble', told me, 'My principal duty with HM has been to keep her spirits up – so I've been watching *Line of Duty* with her . . . I'm "the Explainer"! It's very funny.'

The ninety-five-year-old widow of Windsor laughed as she struggled to understand the convoluted plotting and sometimes incomprehensible dialogue in the popular 'police procedural' television series. She enjoyed watching television, she told me: 'It keeps me in touch – when I can understand what's being said. There's an awful lot of mumbling on television now. It's not my hearing. They just don't seem to speak as clearly as they used to do.'

'Life goes on,' said the Queen. 'It has to.' 'All that lives must die, passing through nature to eternity,' is how Queen Gertrude put it in *Hamlet*. Though (unlike King Charles III) not particularly keen on Shakespeare, that was Elizabeth II's philosophy, too. 'We are all visitors to this time, this place,' she said in a broadcast in the run-up to her Platinum Jubilee in 2022, when, inevitably, she knew she was not long for this world. 'We are just passing through. Our purpose here is to observe, to learn, to grow, to love, and then we return home.'

Nor was Elizabeth II in favour of excessive or prolonged mourning – what Claudius in *Hamlet* termed 'unmanly grief', saying what Elizabeth believed: 'It shows a will most incorrect to heaven.'

Following the Duke of Edinburgh's death, the Queen thanked God for the blessing of her husband's long life and

got on with the business of living her own as best she could. She knew it was her Christian duty to do so. ‘There is no magic formula that will transform sorrow into happiness,’ she said, ‘but being busy helps.’

Frustratingly for her, because of the Covid-19 restrictions in force in 2021 she felt she should not go to the Epsom Derby at the beginning of June that year, only the fourth time that she had missed the race in seventy-five years. And for the first time in her reign, she missed out on Royal Ascot, too. She went to her first Royal Ascot in 1946 and, with the exception of 2020 when it was held behind closed doors, had not missed a day of the meeting since her coronation. She watched the racing on television, and ‘working from home’, continued with her duties, welcoming, among others, the Australian prime minister, Scott Morrison, to Windsor during Ascot week. I was on parade at Royal Ascot in 2022 when she told Sir Francis Brooke, her official Representative at Royal Ascot, and the sixth to hold the office during her reign, that she ‘hoped, so hoped’ to be there on the final Saturday. It wasn’t to be and her cousin, the Duke of Kent, eighty-six, did the honours instead. ‘We miss her so much,’ said Francis Brooke. ‘We love her. It’s as simple as that.’

From the death of her husband, for the rest of her days, Queen Victoria was dressed in mourning. Her great-great-granddaughter’s approach was very different. Not only did Elizabeth keep herself busy that first summer after Philip’s death, with the help of one of the other key members of her pandemic ‘bubble’, her dresser, Angela Kelly, she also chose to dress, as the Queen herself put it, ‘as cheerfully as possible’ – in yellow and pink and powder blue, in summery dresses with pretty floral designs.

In bright green (appropriately in the run-up to the forthcoming international Climate Change conference in Glasgow),

in October 2021 she opened the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh. A few days later, all in pink this time, she opened the Welsh Senedd in Cardiff. The Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall were also on parade for both visits. ‘We weren’t required,’ the Duchess said to me soon afterwards, laughing. ‘We were there to help out if necessary. It wasn’t necessary. The Queen did it all. She wanted to. She’s unstoppable.’

For six months following Prince Philip’s death, the Queen did so much, so purposefully and with such a determination not to give way to any form of self-pity (which, she said, ‘My husband would certainly not have approved of’), that she probably did too much. In the autumn she had a sudden ‘energy low’. She felt exhausted. Her doctors ordered her to ‘rest a bit, not to push herself so much, to take it easy.’

She had planned to attend ‘COP’ (the ‘Conference of Parties’ who had signed up to the United Nations declaration on climate change) in Glasgow in person, but, in the event, had to record a video message instead. She had hoped to attend the Festival of Remembrance at the Royal Albert Hall and the Remembrance Sunday service at the Cenotaph – fixtures in her calendar – but was persuaded not to. ‘I’ve got to be sensible,’ she said.

CHAPTER THREE

In the blood

‘Sensible’ is what Elizabeth II always was – from childhood to old age. How come? All her life she was a much steadier person than many of her forebears.

Queen Victoria, even before her husband’s untimely death, could be temperamental, emotional, and volatile. There were times when her family, and her ministers, feared for her sanity. There were times when observers suggested that Elizabeth was too controlled and that her reluctance or inability to show emotion created difficulties for some, if not all, of her children. We will explore this later. I will only report now that her daughter, Princess Anne, says simply, ‘That’s complete tosh.’

What is not in dispute is that both Victoria and Elizabeth were able, intelligent and perceptive. Victoria was more susceptible to flattery than Elizabeth. ‘Gladstone treats the Queen like a public department,’ said Benjamin Disraeli, ‘I treat her like a woman.’ Of course, Queen Victoria preferred Disraeli. Through her reign, Elizabeth was more amused than seduced by the flattery on offer from some of her prime ministers, as we will discover in due course. She appreciated the charm of Anthony Eden and Harold Wilson in the 1950s and 1960s, for example, but, as her private secretary for many years, Lord Charteris put it to me: ‘They were wily ones, but they didn’t pull the wool over her eyes.’

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