



An Anchor For Our Age

This year Queen Elizabeth II is celebrating her Platinum Jubilee. That means she has been on the British throne since I was seven, virtually all my life. As often happens with celebrities, she has become so familiar that I think I know her. I wish I did, so that I could ask her what she has seen in the last seventy years.

Elizabeth Alexandra Mary Windsor was born in Mayfair, London on April 21, 1926. She was the first child of the Duke and Duchess of York (later King George VI and Queen Elizabeth). Her father ascended the throne in 1936 when his father died and his older brother, King Edward VIII, abdicated just months after he was crowned, making Elizabeth, at ten years old, the heir presumptive. She was close to her uncle and dismayed when he chose “the woman he loved” over his duty as king. Her own sense of duty was abundantly clear at an early age. Winston Churchill, who had known her since she was born, said she had “an air of authority and reflectiveness astonishing in an infant.” On her 21st birthday, she publicly announced: “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.”

Her family called her Lilibet. She was educated at home with an emphasis on language, literature, and music. She was tutored in constitutional history and learned French from her governesses. The 1st Buckingham Palace Company of Girl Guides was formed so that she could socialize with girls her own age. During the second world war she trained as a driver and mechanic and was given the rank of honorary junior commander, the female equivalent of captain at the time.

Her husband also called her Lilibet. He was Philip Mountbatten, a distant cousin and prince of Greece and Denmark, who served with distinction in the Royal Navy. After their first meeting they exchanged letters for years

until their engagement was officially announced in 1947 and they were married later that year. Philip was foreign and had no money, but Lilibet loved him, and love prevailed. They shared a long life together and had four children. He was very direct, and his off-the-cuff remarks made his entourage nervous. He came to Montevideo in 1962 and, among other activities at the British Schools and the Polo Club, he was feted at a British Embassy garden party. I was one of many locals standing in a line that snaked around the garden as HRH strolled past, shaking a hand here and there, smiling and nodding. He stopped in front of the man beside me, shook hands and said: “And what do *you* do here?” The man replied: “I work for Pepsi Cola, sir.” Philip chuckled and said: “Good lord, you don’t have to *drink* the stuff, do you?” Certain character traits notwithstanding, Lilibet praised him for his role as consort, calling him “my strength and stay.”

When her father, King George VI, died in 1952 Elizabeth became queen of the United Kingdom and its empire, a daunting task for a twenty-five-year-old woman. Over the years, she has remained unflinching in her selfless devotion to duty and is widely respected for her handling of the affairs of the crown. As constitutional monarch, she has no direct control over Parliament but has influence to use as she sees fit. The same can be said of her involvement in world affairs. Pierre Trudeau, the Canadian prime minister, admitted that he was impressed by “the grace she displayed in public” and “the wisdom she showed in private.” Another Canadian prime minister, Brian Mulroney, said Elizabeth was a “behind the scenes force” in ending apartheid. The UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon, once introduced her as “an anchor for our age.” Prime ministers have come and gone, Britain has been at peace and at war, technology has changed the world, and Elizabeth is still queen.