



were in the eyes of critics an outdated form of transport, the car and the coach were the future and maybe the best plan for the rail network was tarmac and conversion to roads.

*Disconnected* includes chapters on the way in which huge swathes of our rail network were lost. Major mainlines like the Great Central, freight lines across the Pennines, commuter lines into Edinburgh, Bristol and Leeds, all gone and all vividly described. The whole rail system seemed to be in inexorable decline.

But how times have changed! *Disconnected* tells the tale of how some of the worst proposed closures were averted, often through the determination of individuals, including whistleblowers at a national level, and also through the determination of communities at local level.

The environmental and safety advantages of rail transport became more and more apparent. At the same time, the jams, the fumes and the accidents, not to mention the land take of motorways in comparison with new railway lines, made politicians and the public reflect more carefully on the merits of different forms of transport.

And so, as the book describes so well, the sense that the railways were past their sell by date has been transformed quite remarkably. The railways today are a rapidly growing part of the transport system for the future. Closed lines are being re-opened, closed stations brought back into use, and even brand new railways are being built. At

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last we are recognising that we can no longer rely entirely on a West Coast mainline built by picks and shovels in the 1830s (in the face of massive opposition) to meet the needs of the 21st century, and a brand new railway is to be built.

The book ends appropriately and optimistically with a look at lines long closed which would be valuable if reinstated today as well as a list of branch lines capable of restoration. We could all add to the list or modify it, but the pleasure is knowing that we are at last in an age when we are talking about opening railways, not closing them.

*Disconnected* is a fine book with a clear thesis, well researched and illustrated, both a good read as well as being useful for reference and research. Perhaps we can look forward to another volume from Austin and Faulkner telling the tale of how the lines they identified were re-opened and began serving their communities once again. 🇬🇧

Lord Grocott is a Labour peer

Andrew Gimson has produced a stylish, sharply etched collection of pen portraits of our forty sovereigns from William the Conqueror to the present day, writes **Lord Lexden**



**Gimson's Kings & Queens: Brief Lives of the Monarchs since 1066**  
Andrew Gimson  
Square Peg

It is easy enough to write a very rude book about our monarchs. Even the mightiest of them had their little weaknesses.

Incessant publicity blackens every blot. Rupert Murdoch continues what unkindly medieval monks and chroniclers began. It is equally easy to write a sycophantic book about them, the kind that American visitors to the royal palaces will unhesitatingly rush to buy. In such publications every trite detail of birth, upbringing and marriage fortifies the mystique and glamour of the monarchy. It has been the curious misfortune of our kings and queens to inspire two diametrically opposed traditions of writing.

Andrew Gimson, the acclaimed biographer of Boris Johnson, relishes the human frailties with which our monarchs have been so plenteously imbued without ever censuring them on those grounds (he has no hesitation in including in full a particularly obscene poem about Charles II). He records royal successes and triumphs in amiable but astringent terms. In this way he finds a middle path between the two conflicting schools of royal historiography. The result is a stylish, thoroughly good-humoured, sharply etched collection of pen portraits of our forty sovereigns from William the Conqueror to the present day. Huge enjoyment is assured.

The collection is offered to help those not as well versed as they should be in royal history, a subject once considered essential but now sadly neglected in the ➤



Queen Elizabeth at Tweedbank Station, on the day she becomes Britain's longest reigning monarch

**“ It is to the interplay between monarch and Parliament that we owe our tradition of ordered liberty ”**

nation's schools and widely misrepresented on television. This is just the moment for a book of informed but entertaining guidance. On September 9 last year the Queen's reign became the longest in British history, surpassing that of her great-great-grandmother, Queen Victoria, who was on the throne for 63 years and 216 days.

Now the Queen's 90th birthday approaches. These events strengthen still further the affection and admiration in which she is held. But they also invite curiosity about the longevity of our monarchy as an institution and how it has been accomplished. Gimson senses the existence of misunderstanding. "Because

the monarchy is seen as a source of stability", he writes, "it is easy to fall into the error of imagining that its history must be stable". In under 250 beautifully written pages he counters that error by exhibiting the wide range of upheavals caused by the unsettling vices and sometimes fleeting virtues that his subjects have displayed over the centuries.

Among those who earn high marks under Gimson's courteous but unsparing examination, Elizabeth I and the grossly underestimated warrior-statesman William III are especially prominent. The power of Parliament advanced significantly during the latter's reign. When as a result of his

superb generalship Louis XIV surrendered all his recent territorial gains in 1697 " Parliament promptly cut the size of the army to a mere 7,000 men leading William to remark: ' Parliament did in a day what Louis XIV had been unable to do in eight years'". It is to the interplay between monarch and Parliament that we owe our tradition of ordered liberty.

Without the monarchy, there would have been no Tory Party. It came into existence in 1678-9 to put a stop to a dastardly plot designed to remove the right of succession from the heir to the throne because he was a Catholic. Tory success in its first political venture gave us James II who embarked on " a course of such conscientious foolhardiness that he united the English nation against himself" though his church nearly canonised him.

Unabashed, the Tories fought all their elections until the 1832 Reform Act with the simple slogan " King and Constitution". In Queen Victoria they finally found a monarch who repaid their devotion by giving ardent support in return. Sir Robert Peel won her respect; Disraeli won her love. Victoria was the only monarch to become an unofficial member of the Conservative Party, persecuting its opponents. Gladstone declared: "The queen alone is enough to kill any man".

Victoria's successors have held firmly to the wise practice of regarding politicians in both the main parties with equal wariness, leaving them to face triumph and disaster as best they can. It is infinitely safer to be above politics than part of it. In an immensely shrewd afterword, Andrew Gimson concludes: "Politics is a constant repetition, in cycles of varying length, of making kings, and then killing them in order to achieve a kind of rebirth. The survival of the House of Windsor depends on its continuing willingness to surrender this sacrificial role to the politicians". 🇬🇧

**Alistair Lexden** is a Conservative peer and historian