



## Book & Theatre Reviews



### The Diamond Queen: Elizabeth II and Her People

Andrew Marr

Publisher: Macmillan. £25 (hardback)

Walter Bagehot famously declared that a British constitutional monarch possesses three rights: 'the right to be consulted, the right to encourage, the right to warn'. They are probably the best-known words ever written about the sovereign's political role. Andrew Marr misquotes them, inadvertently turning the modest power to encourage into a much stronger right to advise which no modern monarch has ever claimed. The Queen has always adhered firmly to Bagehot's exact formulation. She was instructed to do so in her youth by a constitutional historian, Henry Marten, who taught at Eton. Marr asserts that she 'was sent to Eton' as if she were an early pioneer of co-education. The tuition actually took place at Windsor Castle where Marten visited her.

Errors, large and small, abound throughout this book by the BBC's famous interviewer and favourite presenter of historical programmes. Inland Dartford (where Margaret Thatcher fought her first election campaign) is mistaken for the naval base at Dartmouth as the place where sailors in the Royal Family were trained. At one point Marr turns the Queen's father, the stammering Duke of York before his accession, into the Prince of Wales, the title held by his elder brother, Edward, the scapegrace of the family. Their mother, Queen Mary, is said to have lived long enough 'to see her granddaughter Elizabeth be crowned queen in 1953'. The coronation took place in June 1953; Queen Mary died over two months earlier, as Marr notes correctly later in the book without any recognition of self-contradiction while adding a fresh error by getting her age wrong.

Some of the most serious errors and misconceptions occur in the sections devoted to the Queen's relations with two of her Conservative Prime Ministers, Anthony Eden and Harold Macmillan, at the time of their resignations in 1957 and 1963 respectively. Marr maintains that Eden was largely excluded from the process by which his successor was chosen because, he claims, the Queen 'did not formally ask' him for his advice as constitutional convention required. Eden was in fact closely involved in the consultations along with other senior Conservatives to ensure that the Queen sent for the person who commanded the widest support. Eden himself recorded that 'Her Majesty followed the constitutional convention'.

No one is criticised more vehemently in this book than Harold Macmillan. Marr insists that 'he used [the Queen] ruthlessly as cover to achieve his ends' in October 1963 which were to block Rab Butler and secure the premiership for Douglas-Home. It is a well-known accusation, repeated here in particularly crude form, flagrantly disregarding recent detailed researches by Professor Vernon Bogdanor and Macmillan's brilliant biographer, D.R. Thorpe. They have shown conclusively that Macmillan went to immense lengths to comply with the Palace's request for the recommendation of just one name, acceptable to the Party as a whole, that could be put before the Queen to keep her out of the inevitable political machinations arising from the existence of up to eight serious candidates for the succession, of whom Butler was one of the weakest, as he himself acknowledged cutting a pitiable figure throughout 1963. Bogdanor has summed up the matter in authoritative terms: 'the selection



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of Lord Home cannot be said to have seriously misrepresented Conservative opinion at the time’.

This, then, is not a book for the credulous or the unwary. Its chief merit is its detailed and reasonably accurate documentation of the Queen’s remarkable devotion to duty which extends to inspecting the flowers in the bedrooms prepared for her guests. Marr, a reformed republican, writes with the fervour of the convert, if not with the elegance of the best chroniclers of monarchy. There are some quite good stories, not all of them familiar. On a Caribbean tour the Duke of Edinburgh asked a local dignitary what he did. The man eyed him coldly: ‘Cocaine’. Prince Philip demanded to know how a drug dealer had got aboard Britannia. The man’s wife piped up: ‘No, No, Dook. Not cocaine. Cookin’. We got a restaurant’.

Lord Lexden is a Conservative peer and historian

## A Walk on Part: The Fall of New Labour

From the diaries of Chris Mullin.  
Adapted for the stage by Michael Chaplin  
Soho Theatre

Chris Mullin’s diaries return time and again to the former Sunderland South’s MPs primary concern with his calling: what difference was he actually making, and what, in the end, would be his legacy to politics? The answer, it transpired, would be the diaries themselves, three volumes of addictive, insightful and at times jaw-droppingly absurd accounts of the life of a backbench MP turned occasional low-ranking minister. Expertly compressed by Michael Chaplin into two hours of theatre, Mullin’s Parliamentary musings have since been brought to life by a cast of five.

John Hodgkinson portrays Mullin with rather more nervy angst than the former

Labour MP might like, but his relentlessly energetic performance is impressive for its stamina alone. On stage without a break for nearly two hours, and switching from monologue to dialogue without drawing a breath, Hodgkinson makes for compelling if exhausting viewing.

The supporting cast of four back him up well, with the quartet of Hywel Morgan, Noma Dumezweni, Tracy Gillian and Howard Ward playing over 60 of the walk-on-parts in Mullin’s diaries. Not surprisingly, given the vast number of roles required, the impressions are a mixed in quality, though the Labour quartet of Tony Blair (Morgan’s tour-de-force), John Prescott, Gordon Brown and Jack Straw are all brought to life with superb takes on their range of tics, mannerisms and accents.

The rise and fall of New Labour is played out at speed, the highs of the early years passing quickly on to the lows of the Iraq War – at one point President Bush waves in Mullin’s direction after Blair mischievously tells the President that Mullin is his biggest fan – and Blair’s eventual departure. “The Man”, as Mullin refers to the former Prime Minister, clearly fascinates our leading man, with his personal charm drawing Mullin close when the old lefty feels he should be keeping a safe distance. Prescott he is less sure about, with the former deputy prime minister portrayed as a shirt-bursting bully whose bad jokes mask an underestimated political brain. The villain of the piece, however, is Hilary Armstrong, with Labour’s one-time chief whip appearing to deliberately ensure that Mullin’s hopes for a further promotion up the ministerial ladder ends with a demotion to the backbenches – punishment, perhaps, for Mullin’s decision to vote against the Iraq War.

Mullin himself comes across as an attractive blend of decency and idealism,



John Hodgkinson as Chris Mullin

a career motivated by an urge to do what is right rather than a quick clamber up the greasy pole of political promotion and “meeting people that don’t need to be met, visiting places that don’t need to be visited”.

But whatever the frustrations he felt, in the end he departs Parliament close to tears and wondering what his “footprint” would be. His dispute-settling advice on an Ethiopia-Eritrea border row, imposing a speed limit on a lake, and a committed attack on Leylandii plants make up a trio of achievements for his ministerial CV. For anyone else, even those with just a passing knowledge of the New Labour years, his fantastic diaries, and this terrific adaptation, make for a special fourth.

Sam Macrory is political editor of *The House Magazine*

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