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**About the author:**

Inger Merete Hobbelstad is a journalist. She works as a commentator and critic in Dagbladet. In 2016 she wrote *Living with Shakespeare* (Tiden Forlag)

**About the book:**

She has so far outlasted 14 prime ministers – from Winston Churchill to Boris Johnson. She is the world’s longest-reigning monarch. She is so famous that you would probably recognize her face faster than that of a close friend. She fascinates us and yet she remains a mystery.

*The Years with Elizabeth* takes you deep into the royal chambers. It shares tales from the Queen’s life and the many dramas of the royal family – the loves, the feuds and the divorces – and casts an enquiring gaze over what is really going on when millions of people weep over a dead princess or rejoice at a royal wedding.
Deftly, with a feel for both intriguing details and the longer, historical perspective, Inger Merete Hobbelstad writes with charm and sensitivity about the British royal family, about each of its key members and about British history. The story of the House of Windsor is also the story of the United Kingdom’s road from the Empire to Brexit. The book abounds in funny, tragic, unheard and unforgettable tales, displaying a wealth of knowledge and interpretations. At the very centre of the story stands Elizabeth: daughter, sister, mother, wife – and Queen.

**Contents**

Foreword

THE WORLD’S FAVOURITE

A sheltered childhood and a tremendous history

THE MOST DANGEROUS WOMAN

A king abdicates and a war breaks out

MEETING PHILIP

A ring on her finger and a crown on her head

TOO ROYAL AND NOT ROYAL ENOUGH

Philip fights for his name and Margaret fights for Peter Townsend

CRACKS IN THE DEFERENCE

Boys shooting in Suez and girls curtseying in London

SCENES FROM A MARRIAGE

The Profumo affair, Philip’s trip and the demand to be allowed behind closed doors

VISITS FROM DOWNING STREET

Fourteen prime ministers and one Queen

WIDOW FOR FIFTY YEARS

The Queen Mother at Clarence House and Wallis in exile

LOVE AND WAR

Princess Margaret and Antony Armstrong-Jones

TROUBLED PRINCE

Prince Charles and the difficult paths

PRINCESSES ON TRIAL

An ancient title in a time of change

TEAR THEM DOWN

Rebellion against the crown, from the Middle Ages to the Sex Pistols, and the rebellion against the rebellion

SENSE AND SENSIBILITY

A reserved woman in a time of openness

THE QUEEN ACROSS THE WORLD

Elizabeth intervenes in history and Dickie Mountbatten departs from it

THE DYNASTY SEEKS DIANA

An ominous engagement and a lavish wedding

BLANK CARTRIDGES, FENCING MATCHES AND INSULTS

Conflicts and love stories in the eighties

THE FAIRYTALE FALLS APART

Behind closed doors with Charles and Diana

ANNUS HORRIBILIS

1992

WHEN DRESSES TALK

Four generations of royal fashion

THE DIVORCE OF THE CENTURY

Charles goes to Camilla and Diana is cast out in the storm

DEATH IN THE TUNNEL

A sobbing populace and a silent royal family

MAJESTY IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

Farewell to the past and negotiations with the future

“I SHALL BE KING ONE DAY”

William battles for independence and Kate battles for William

FROM HELMAND TO HOLLYWOOD AND HOME

Prince Harry in the wilderness

UNCHARTED WATERS

The royal family in a smaller country facing an uncertain future

NOTES

LITERATURE

**MAJESTY IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM**

**Farewell to the past and negotiations with the future**

On New Year’s Eve 1999, Prime Minister Tony Blair, Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip were all gathered at London’s new Millennium Dome along with Princess Anne, Tim Laurence and several thousand other Britons to see in the new millennium with a spectacular show. The entire event was like a thick cosmetic layer of rejoicing plastered over a much more complicated reality. The Dome itself was an expensive and controversial construction that had ended up becoming a regular source of ridicule: a concert hall and exhibition space designed to be an arena for some sort of futuristic festivities that nobody had ever quite managed to define. The Dome would later become known as the O2 Arena.

On the night itself, attendance at the enormous building was notably sparse, in part because one of the Tube lines intended to transport several thousand revellers into the city centre had broken down. The interior of the dome was chilly. Alastair Campbell recalls that Princess Anne looked “like granite”. Tony Blair realised too late that the trapeze artists, who performed without safety nets, were displaying their artistry directly above the head of the Queen; with rising panic, he pictured one of them falling on her and flattening her. Just before midnight, those present were supposed to link hands and sing “Auld Lang Syne”, which would unavoidably lead to a breach of the convention that nobody must ever touch the Queen. Blair and his wife Cherie sang their hearts out with an apparent air of desperation while the Queen stood motionless for quite some time. When Blair reached out to take her hand, she barely touched his, and did so with what appeared to be not inconsiderable reluctance, permitting him wave it up and down in time to the music for a while. Towards the end of the evening, Prince Philip kissed her on the cheek, perhaps to console her for not being able to spend the evening where she would most have liked to be: in the bosom of her family at Sandringham, far from the big city and all its soulless modern contrivances. Blair would remember it as a dreadful event. “There is only one thing I am going to thank God for tonight,” he told his wife Cherie afterwards. “And that is they [millennia] only come round every thousand years.”

The celebration may not have been as brilliant as the optimists had envisaged, but nor was the turn of the millennium as catastrophic as the pessimists had forecast. The fear that the world’s computers would be unable to cope with the transition from 1999 to 2000, causing banking, government and military systems to collapse, proved to be unfounded. On 1st January 2000, Britons woke up and brewed their morning tea as usual in a world that did not look so drastically different. The royal family did the same. Nonetheless, the years around the turn of the millennium ushered in considerable change in the family’s life, marking, in a way, the end of one era and the beginning of another.

A new sense of calm appeared to have settled around the more fraught international issues in which the crown had been embroiled. The debate about how the UK should relate to the racially discriminatory regime of South Africa was largely history. Shortly after Nelson Mandela became the president of South Africa and returned the country to the Commonwealth, he invited the Queen on a state visit. There was still a great deal of unrest in South Africa but, as in previous situations, the Queen brushed aside the concerns of her politicians – in this case the Foreign Secretary, Douglas Hurd, who was uncertain that it was a good idea to travel there. “Mr Mandela is getting advice from lots of people but no one’s actually giving him any help,” she said, according to the former captain of the Britannia, Robert Woodard. “He needs physical assistance and he needs a show.”

The Queen sailed into Cape Town in March 1995 and disembarked to massive press coverage. It was the first time she had visited South Africa since travelling there on her very first foreign tour in 1947 and falling in love with the country. When Mandela paid a return visit to London the year afterwards, he and the Queen attended a concert of African music at the Royal Albert Hall. Mandela soon got up to dance and the audience’s jaws dropped when they saw the Queen get up beside him and sway to the music. It was a valuable alliance: Mandela was, perhaps, the world’s most respected head of state and even as a rebellious law student he had grasped the value of linking the struggle for black rights in South Africa to the British royal family. Even so, the two of them astonished those around them with their closeness. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that both were royals – Mandela came from a royal line – and both were used to meeting enthusiastic admirers; consequently the relationship between them wasn’t as imbalanced or unequal as most of the other relationships in their lives. They corresponded on a regular basis; she called him “Nelson” and he was the only head of state other than Zambia’s Kenneth Kaunda who called her “Elizabeth”. “Elizabeth,” Mandela would say, beaming with joy, when they had not seen each other for a while. “You have lost weight!” During a lunch for Mandela, she gave one of her extremely rare spontaneous and unscripted speeches, in which she referred to him as “this wonderful man.”

In 1998, the long and painful peace process in Northern Ireland had resulted in the Good Friday Agreement, which led to the creation of the Northern Ireland Assembly and government, as well as a fragile peace treaty between the conflicting parties. This agreement was what made it possible for Queen Elizabeth to visit Northern Ireland during 2002, the year when she had been on the throne for 50 years and was celebrating her Golden Jubilee. As with South Africa, she had been obliged to stay away from Northern Ireland for many years on political grounds and had not been there since her Silver Jubilee in 1977. Ten years later, in 2012, a new and more challenging visit took place, when the Queen met Martin McGuinness, the Deputy First Minister of the Northern Ireland Assembly, who had been a leading figure in the IRA when one of its terror attacks claimed the life of Dickie Mountbatten and several of those on board his boat. The year before, the Queen had been in Dublin, where she was praised for addressing the people of Ireland in Gaelic and referred in her speech to the violent events that “have affected us all, many of us personally” – the only occasion on which she referred publicly to the murder of Uncle Dickie.

All in all, it was easy to sense an air of modernisation, reconciliation and openness – the cautious construction of a greater “we.” In the early 2000s, the Queen started to speak about the value of the United Kingdom being a country of many cultures and religions. During a speech in Parliament to mark her Golden Jubilee, she said Britons could take pride in “our tradition of fairness and tolerance – the consolidation of our richly multicultural and multi-faith society, a major development since 1952, is being achieved remarkably peacefully and with much goodwill.” For the first time she visited a British mosque, a Jewish museum, a Sikh temple and a Hindu temple, also sending family members on visits to Jains and Buddhists.

Generally speaking, it was a period in which it appeared that regional and cultural diversity could provide the foundation for a new, attractive Britishness. *Trainspotting* (1996), set in the mean streets of Edinburgh, was an international film sensation; Zadie Smith, daughter of a Jamaican mother and an English father, conquered the literary world with *White Teeth* in 2000. Everywhere, notable Brits sprung up: bands like Blur, Pulp and Oasis – the latter two originating from the industrial cities of Sheffield and Manchester, respectively – created the era-defining sound of Britpop; Damien Hirst sawed cows in half and became a star of the art world; fashion designers like John Galliano, Alexander McQueen and Stella McCartney became head designers for venerable French fashion houses, while the sullen pixy Kate Moss modelled their clothes on the world’s top catwalks.

It was post-Cold War and pre-War on Terror, and London was a playground. One thing many of the most notable artists had in common was a certain political distance; it was as if cultural Britain was worn out after 18 years of a harsh Conservative party and a fossilised Labour party, and preferred to cultivate its own creative universe. Jarvis Cocker, vocalist of perhaps the most socially conscious of the major pop groups, Pulp, offered acerbic depictions of the frictions in a United Kingdom still divided by class. In the song “Cocaine Socialism”, he mocks Tony Blair – without naming him – for trying to ingratiate himself with musicians and cultural figures, and attempting to turn their success and attitudes to the advantage of New Labour: “Do you want a line of this? Are you a socialist?” Blair had worked diligently to become associated with Cocker and people like Oasis frontman Noel Gallagher, who suddenly found himself at Number 10 Downing Street, champagne glass in hand. But one facet of the situation was also that many of the big new British names were just as focused on marketing as Blair himself; many, moreover, were from the cultural periphery and had deliberately penetrated the mainstream in order to conquer the world.

Boundaries were shifted and now, more than ever before, Britons insisted on helping themselves liberally to the cultural smorgasbord. The middle classes engaged with football, previously the preserve of the working classes; Jamie Oliver taught lads to cook; adult readers devoured the Harry Potter books and a flourishing ecosystem of men’s magazines offered men fashion and lifestyle tips. The ever-anxious English court was afraid that the younger generation would see the monarchy as irrelevant and made conscious efforts to demonstrate that it saw and included all groups in the modern United Kingdom. The royal family itself also became more diverse, at least on its outer margins, when Lady Davina Windsor – daughter of the Duke of Gloucester and great niece of George VI – married a builder from New Zealand, Gary Lewis, who was Maori.

The Queen also became more culturally daring. In 2001, she sat for a portrait by Lucian Freud, the uncompromising realist who was the grandson of Sigmund Freud and famed for his gritty portraits. Freud wanted to paint the Queen in front of a plain, beige studio wall, dressed in a blue suit, but is said to have suddenly become concerned that his famous model would not be recognisable enough in his painting; he therefore asked her to wear the “state diadem” – the famous crown she is wearing in her portrait on the stamps. Freud turned out to be a horse lover and the two of them spoke so much and so intently about horses, jockeys and trainers that it hindered the progress of the portrait. But when the tiny painting – smaller than an A4 sheet of paper – was revealed to the world, it immediately provoked strong reactions. In Freud’s painting, undoubtedly the most controversial portrait of the Queen, she is fierce, gnarled, almost mannish, with tightly compressed lips, and regards the observer with a gaze that is dark and hard. Large swaths of the British press were angered on her behalf. Arthur Edwards, the Sun photographer who took pictures of the Royals for several decades thought Freud deserved to be sent to the Tower. Others looked at the portrait and saw a portrayal of a woman that, above all, radiated ruggedness, toughness and reflected the difficulties suffered by the aging queen. In old portraits of her, like the one painted by Pietro Annigoni in the 1950s, the young Elizabeth is beautiful, slender and veiled in feminine mystique, dressed in clothes from a vanished era, her dreamy gaze directed into eternity. Freud’s Elizabeth is like a soldier home from the wars. The Queen herself has not expressed any opinion about this or any other portraits, but Sir Hugh Roberts, director of the royal art collection, immediately went on record, describing Freud’s portrait as a “remarkable work” and “a wonderful addition to the series of royal portraits.”

The state diadem that Freud had asked the Queen to wear is an unusually large diadem for a woman – and that is because it was originally made for a man, the dissolute King George IV. By the time Freud painted it, it had made regular appearances in paintings with royal motifs for almost two hundred years; it had appeared in romantic portraits of Queen Victoria, stately portraits of Queen Mary and iconic portraits of Queen Elizabeth. The dresses in the pictures had become outmoded, the faces beneath the characteristic, diamond-studded cross had gone from young to old and most of the models were now dead, but the diadem was still in use, still the same – and the role and function of the woman who had the right to bear it had endured. By the time he received the commission to paint the Queen, Freud had been one of UK’s most renowned painters for several decades; he was no longer controversial per se, but his painting appeared all the more radical because an element of the motif was so familiar, so established, and had been visible for almost two hundred years, and because the portrait – new and irreverent yet serious and profound in its scrutiny – demonstrated in an instant precisely how much had changed.

When, some years later, the Queen attended an exhibition of Freud’s work that included the painter’s explicit and grotesque nudes, Elizabeth commented to a listener that she had to navigate the exhibition with care to ensure that she was not photographed “between a pair of those great thighs”. When the curator asked if she herself had been painted by Freud, she said “Yes, but not like that.”

Diana’s death had given Buckingham Palace more compelling arguments in support of their efforts to ward off an over-invasive press. In 1999 they negotiated an agreement with the editors of the major newspapers: If the press left Prince William and Prince Harry in peace as long as they were at school and in education and agreed not to photograph their everyday life, the court would regularly give accredited photographers and journalists permission to photograph them. Strictly speaking, the media had no choice – they were afraid of losing “William points” if they failed to cooperate, because William was the one all of them wanted on their front pages. Following his mother’s death, the teenage William was the most popular member of the royal family. He resembled her in both appearance and behaviour, as well as his in habit of peering out from under his fringe; soon, he was met with crowds of cheering, screaming girls whenever he appeared in public. His photo was a fixture in young girls’ bedrooms worldwide, alongside film stars and boy bands, and in an era of sensitive, longhaired teen idols like Kurt Cobain, Leonardo DiCaprio and Jared Leto, Prince William – with his doe eyes and tragic early history – was a natural addition to the gallery. In Vancouver in 1998, just over six months after Diana’s death, he was met by hordes of young girls, who hurled themselves howling and weeping at the police barricades when he disembarked from his plane. William smiled and waved, but the reporters accompanying the royal party noticed that there were tears in his eyes; and when the family escaped the crowds, he gave free rein to his feelings, saying that he’d had enough of the whole thing – until his father gently persuaded him to continue with his official programme.

But William soon learned to perform the role of a calm and worthy prince as needed. When Prince Charles and his sons were photographed at Klosters in 2005 and a microphone picked up Charles complaining about the press and saying how much he hated having to make himself available to them, it was his eldest son’s turn to pacify his father and say they just had to grin and bear it and get it over and done with. Those around them found it remarkable to see Diana’s eldest son apparently making such a quick recovery from her death and functioning so well. But when, in an interview many years later, Alastair Campbell asked William if he had grieved, he replied:

“Probably not properly. I was in a state of shock for many years. People might find that weird, they might think of shock as something that is there, it hits you, and then in an hour or two, maybe a day or two, you are over it. Not when it is this big a deal, when you lose something so significant in your life, so central, I think the shock lasts for many years.”

As William grew older, he became distrustful, guarded and strong-willed; a person who knew how he wanted things to be around him and was careful about who he allowed to get close to him. His younger brother reacted differently, tending to act out more. Just after their mother’s death, Harry turned 13 and was visited at school by Diana’s sister, Sarah, who brought him a Playstation Diana had bought in Paris and had planned to give him as a birthday present. During the next school holiday, which he had been going to spend with his mother, Prince Charles took him on an official tour of South Africa, where he met both Nelson Mandela and the Spice Girls. In the pictures of Harry alongside what were, at the time, the UK’s biggest pop stars, he grins in a mixture of delight and embarrassment – and Charles earned plenty of dad points in the media. But it was clear to those close to him that Harry was struggling. In the years that followed, the young teenager drank more and more; on a holiday with his father in 1999 he drank himself to oblivion and ended up sobbing in the arms of his faithful nanny, Tiggy Legge-Bourke. But he rarely spoke about Diana.

“My way of dealing with it was sticking my head in the sand, refusing to ever think about my mum, because why would that help?” he said many years later. “I said to myself: ‘It’s only going to make you sad, it’s not going to bring her back.’”

Harry had never done well at school. Now he dropped out completely and had to retake a year before he could follow his brother to Eton. Once there, he was a troublemaker, ill-at-ease in the stiff school uniform of jacket, waistcoat and striped trousers, and uninterested in schoolwork. Since the lists of every pupil’s marks were posted at the end of every academic year, everybody could see that he was close to the bottom of the list in his class. He was so hot-tempered that other pupils were warned not to provoke him and he often ended up in fistfights. Anybody who walked past his door quickly became accustomed to the sweetish smell of hash. Because his father was always away on royal duties, he often spent holidays alone at Highgrove, where he and friends who were similarly keen on pushing the boundaries would party, drink and smoke in a cellar suited to their purpose with black-painted walls.

Ever since Diana’s affair with James Hewitt had come to light, there had been speculation about the possibility that Hewitt could be Harry’s father, since they shared the same red hair. The rumours have persisted even though it has become increasingly obvious as Harry has got older that he resembles his father’s side of the family – in particular his grandfather, Prince Philip. The red hair is probably inherited from the Spencers: both Ruth Fermoy and two of Diana’s siblings are redheads. But the rumours were troublesome enough to prompt Prince Charles to have a man-to-man conversation with his youngest son about the matter just before the start of term in 1998. Charles told him there was no doubt that he, not Hewitt, was Harry’s father. Harry didn’t say anything, but listened attentively.

The years that were so painful for the boys were good years for their father from a PR perspective. These days, when he appeared with his sons, to whom he had become closer after their mothers’ death, questions were no longer raised about whether he was a good father. When he was on duty, there was no longer an ex-wife attracting all the attention. Although Charles was often absent, he was also a loving parent and as soon as the boys were old enough to give interviews, they expressed a protective attitude to their father. In the very first interview William gave as a 21-year-old, he said that Charles was a role model, a person who had a great influence on him, especially on questions of conservation and sustainability.

“He does so many amazing things, I only wish people would see that more because he's had a very hard time and yet he's stuck it out and he's still very positive,” said William. “I just wish that people would give him a break.”

As early as the year after their mother’s death, William and Harry were introduced to Camilla. The reason the meeting happened so soon was because they were due to meet her anyway on the occasion of Charles’ imminent fiftieth birthday celebrations. William and Camilla met and had a calm chat, although Camilla apparently said afterwards “Now I really need a gin and tonic.” Harry met her for the first time a few weeks later.

Two years would pass before Camilla met the Queen for the first time since the early 1980s: a cautious approach in which Charles’ mother and his controversial lover were invited to the same party at Highgrove. The Queen smiled, Camilla curtsied, and that was that. The aim was “acknowledging but not accepting”, as one courtier put it. The Queen had not approved of her son’s double life and had frowned on the drama that ensued. At one point she apparently said of Camilla: “I wish she would go away and leave Charles alone.” But there was, in any case, one area in which the Queen could see that Camilla and she had something in common, beyond being able to sit well on a horse. In all the years during which the love triangle between Charles, Diana and Camilla had played itself out, Camilla – unlike the other two – had never felt any pressing need to explain herself, defend herself or tell her side of the story.

The pressure had been significant. After *Diana: Her True Story* came out, Camilla’s home was besieged by journalists and she had to go into hiding at the house of friends. She would go to buy groceries and a stranger at the till might comment: “Who’s paying for that then – the taxpayer?” Maybe Camilla, who had warm close relationships with both friends and family members, was better equipped than Charles and Diana to deal with the anxiety about what people might think. “Camilla never whines,” said a friend. She tried to treat the whole business with humour. During one period, after hearing that Diana called her “the Rottweiler”, she took to answering the phone, “Hello, Rottweiler speaking”. What’s more, Camilla secretly developed her own deliberate relationship with the media, which always printed unflattering pictures of her. Stuart Higgins, one-time Editor-in-Chief of *The Sun*, used Camilla as one of his anonymous sources for a decade while he himself was a regular reporter. He would ring her to have rumours about royal circles confirmed or denied without realising what a key role she herself was playing in the family drama. Higgins would later think that his relationship to this particular source had been driven more by mutual usefulness than he had realised – in a sense it had been a way for Camilla to get the lay of the land and gain an impression of what the press really knew or suspected about her and the Prince of Wales.

Diana’s death complicated the question of whether the couple would ever be able to marry. This was not something Camilla would initially have had any reason to expect. Nor is it certain that it was what she would initially have wished for.

The passion of a pair of lovers is what draws them together and external forces influence them from the outside; the most significant reasons why things turn out the way they do are not always obvious. Charles and Camilla found their way back to each other on their own, but in a way it was Diana, with her spectacular revelation of their relationship, who bound them together in a shared destiny. If Charles and Camilla’s feelings for each other had ultimately floundered in secret, they could have drifted apart without any fuss. But the fact that the relationship was revealed turned them into a couple in the eyes of the world; and after the story ended the way it did, with tears and accusations and huge headlines in the media – and then the sound of the Mercedes crashing into a concrete pillar in a tunnel in Paris – it would have been almost impossible for them to separate, since these tremendous forces appeared to have been unleashed by the passion between them.

Camilla’s divorce also introduced another, more prosaic factor into their relationship. Suddenly, she no longer had very much money. The divorce settlement provided her with enough to buy a house but not to enjoy a day-to-day life in the style to which she had become accustomed, and she had not been brought up or educated for work. As a result, she lived off Charles, almost like a “kept woman” from days gone by. He paid for her small household staff, allowed her to charge her groceries to his credit account and transferred sums to her that eventually became significant – at most as much as 180,000 pounds in a year. It slowly became clear to all that the most dignified solution would be for them to get married.

The person charged with laying the groundwork for their marriage was Mark Bolland, the PR advisor who was friends with both Camilla and Rebekah Wade, editor of the *News of the World* tabloid and one of Rupert Murdoch’s most trusted employees. Bolland had been recruited by Prince Charles as early as 1996.

Bolland was a talented spin-doctor at a time when spin-doctors were in high demand. During an era in which Tony Blair was creating a government where ministers were almost subordinate to their communications advisors and where the narrative about events was more important than what had actually happened, Bolland set to work polishing Prince Charles’s public image. It proved to be a far from thankless task. The tale of Charles and Camilla could be recast as a Romeo and Juliet story – a middle-aged version: the story of a couple who truly belonged together but had been unable to have each other – and had never managed to forget one another despite having married other people. That was the line Bolland took.

He went a long way. As the person who controlled journalists’ access to Prince William he was sitting on one of the hottest media properties in the world, and he could barter headlines about the prince for positive headlines about Camilla. At the same time, he also engaged in extensive horse-trading, giving access to exclusive articles in order to keep the young princes and their partying out of the press. The reason why the timing of Camilla’s first meeting with William is common knowledge is that it was leaked to the press afterwards – and Bolland was more than happy to confirm the details. A relationship that was still far from rosy took on a rosy glow. The news item that followed upset Prince William. He felt he had been used in a game to satisfy the same media that he still held responsible for his mother’s death. He and Prince Harry took to calling Bolland “Lord Blackadder”.

The rest of Charles’s family would probably have been happiest for him not to have stuck by Camilla. The couple themselves didn’t know whether they would ever be able to marry. On one occasion, when Bolland asked Camilla how she saw her prospects, she responded with a story about her friends – some of whom were unhappily single, others unhappily married, while others again had married beneath their station and no longer felt welcome in their original milieu. “Then there’s me,” Camilla apparently said. “I can’t really complain and I don’t. I’m probably happier than all of them, however complicated it may be.” Bolland added. “At one time the extent of their ambition was to be able to go to the theatre together.”

But Bolland’s plan succeeded: Prince Charles’s popularity rose and in January 1999, he and Camilla attended the 50th birthday party of Camilla’s sister Annabel together at The Ritz in London – making their way through an almost epilepsy-inducing storm of flashes from press photographers, who had been duly tipped off in advance. It was their first public appearance as a couple.

But despite the spin, despite the pragmatic and practical reasons for them to stay together, despite the money problems and the undoubtedly humiliating negotiations over who should pay for what, Charles and Camilla still gave the impression of being a far better match than Charles and Diana had been. He disliked her smoking, she rolled her eyes at the prospect of yet another evening of classical music. But they still laughed at the same things. A friend of Camilla’s, with whom she stayed for a while, was surprised by the frequency of Charles’s phone calls. “It would have driven me mad, if anyone rang me up like that. You are either driven mad or you love it and she obviously loved that sort of dependence on her.” The Queen’s former private secretary Martin Charteris was in no doubt. “Of course she is the love of his life,” he said in an interview.

Bolland used every chance he got to rebuild Charles in the eyes of Britons. The prince’s office had long been concerned that Prince Harry’s considerable alcohol and cannabis consumption would end up in the media. In 2001 and 2002, *News of the World* had gathered proof of Harry’s habits and was planning to splash an exposé across many pages. In a later interview, Bolland spoke of how he opted for collaboration, telling the paper a moving tale of the long, concerned conversations Charles had had with Harry about his unhealthy lifestyle, and of how he had personally taken Harry to the Featherstone Lodge rehab centre, to show him how things could turn out for people who abused drugs. In this way, Bolland was largely able to transform the tabloid story into a heart-warming story about a father taking responsibility for his son rather than a gritty exposé. It hardly mattered that Harry had been accompanied on his visit to Featherstone by an adviser and not Prince Charles, or that the visit had taken place before the episodes involving drugs documented by *News of the World* – and before Harry’s father knew about his drug problem. Bolland himself admitted that the chronology of the published story had been misleading. The behaviour of Prince Charles’s office at the time prompted the royal biographer Robert Lacey to write: “The greater irony is that Prince Charles has now become as image-manipulative as Diana was, stepping into his ex-wife’s shoes as the royal leaker and press manipulator par excellence.”

The Queen herself had reason to dislike the media strategy deployed by Charles’s office. In 1998, it was leaked that Charles would be privately delighted if his mother decided to abdicate. The Prince of Wales, then on a trip in Bulgaria, received a furious phone call from his mother and zealously denied that he had said anything of the sort or allowed it to come out. The basis for the story appeared to be Charles’s occasionally expressed frustration that the whole of his adult life was turning into one long wait, in which he had to find something to fill the time while he waited to take on the job he was born for – a feeling that most adult heirs to the throne express sooner or later, and which has historically made the relationship between a royal parent and their heir somewhat tense. In private conversations Charles is said to have commented that he would rather become king sooner than later – and even to have said out loud: “Why can’t she just abdicate?”

Bolland decided to test the waters without telling the prince, so that he could deny the whole business without telling a lie. The prince apparently wanted to know what the answer would be himself. According to his cousin, Margaret Rhodes, the Queen would only consider stepping aside if she suffered from dementia or a stroke. Even then, there would be no need for her to abdicate; according to the Regency Act of 1937, Charles would, in such a case, be regent until her death. In 2003, she spoke to Archbishop George Carey about the matter and assured him that “I am going to carry on to the end.”

On the whole, Charles and Bolland’s new media strategy appeared to be based on a kind of zero-sum game that involved, among others, presenting Charles as more worthy and dependable than any of the other members of the royal family. This led to a souring in the relationship between the Prince of Wales and his brothers, who felt that an increasing number of stories in the press showed them in a poor light, pitting them against their responsible older brother.

Prince Edward still had ambitions of pursuing work outside the royal family and had, in 1993, set up his own TV production company, Ardent. When a striking number of Ardent productions turned out to be about the royal family and royal history, Edward was accused of exploiting his blue blood. It didn’t help when, in 2001, an Ardent crew filmed Prince Williams at St Andrews University in Scotland where he had started to study that autumn. In so doing, the media company that belonged the prince’s own uncle breached the ban on photos observed by the other media organisations. The response was immediate: at once news items appeared in which the Prince of Wales made no bones about how furious he was on William’s behalf. Although the transgression was the sole responsibility of Ardent, many noted that Prince Charles’s anger found its outlet in the media rather than a closed family forum – and that this was undoubtedly a conscious choice, because it provided yet another opportunity to tell a story about a committed and protective single parent.

But Prince Edward attracted drama even without the involvement of his older brother. In 1999, the then 35-year-old Edward married 34-year-old Sophie Rhys-Jones. On their wedding day, he was named the Earl of Wessex. He did not become a duke because it had been decided that Edward would inherit his father’s title, becoming the Duke of Edinburgh, after his parents’ death. This is a title that would ordinarily go to the eldest son but since King Charles III cannot also have an aristocratic title, it may be passed on to Prince Edward.

The relationship between Edward and his father is warm, although Edward appears less like Philip than Charles. Charles is a pilot and naval officer, whereas Edward dropped out of the Marines to work in theatre. Even so, Charles’s lack of toughness, in his father’s eyes, has strained the relationship between the two of them. Biographer Gyles Brandreth thinks that an almost perverse desire to be contrary on the part of the Duke makes him protect the youngest son who has rarely succeeded in or followed through on anything that he has started. It may also be to do with the fact that Philip was well advanced in years and already had three children by the time Edward was born, so it no longer seemed so crucial to form the youngest in his own image.

In the heated atmosphere that built up around the wedding, Sophie was described as a middle-class version of Diana. Sophie was the daughter of a tyre salesman and a secretary, and worked for the PR firm RJH, of which she was a co-founder. She presented a down-to-earth contrast to the overwrought upper-class girls who were always surrounded by so much drama, and when she announced that she wished to continue working after getting married, people generally nodded approvingly. The bride also had the most important traits needed to ensure a good relationship with her mother-in-law: she was well-versed in horses and country life, had great respect for the monarchy as an institution and had a jolly personality. But just two years after the wedding, Sophie also got into hot water for saying too much, too loudly and too publicly – not so much from a confessional urge as from a sales instinct.

Mazher Mahmood, a *News of the World* journalist, manoeuvred a meeting with Sophie in which he turned up with a concealed microphone, disguised as an Arab businessman. The result was a scandalous exposé that was based, among others, on disparaging quotes from Sophie about the Queen, the Queen Mother, Charles and Camilla. When, after a furious battle in the newspaper columns, *News of the World* was pressured into publishing the entire tape, many of the published quotes proved to be untrue: Sophie had spoken warmly of Prince Charles, saying that he and Camilla could and should get married, even though it would be difficult while the Queen Mother was alive. Nonetheless, she was extremely indiscreet. She spoke patronisingly of several politicians, including Tony and Cherie Blair, declaring that the Blairs had no understanding of country life and telling Mahmood that the royal family referred to the prime minister as “the president” (“because that’s what he believes he is”). She was perfectly open about the fact that it could be highly beneficial for a company to hire a PR firm with royal connections.

When Sophie subsequently gave a major interview to *News of the World* in an attempt to limit the damage to her reputation, she also said a great deal more than Buckingham Palace had bargained for. Among other matters, she spoke freely of the rumours about Edward’s sexuality, prompting the headline “My Edward isn’t gay”. In March 2002, it became known that the Wessexes were giving up their jobs to become full-time royals and support the aging Queen.

Sophie won back much of the sympathy she had lost when she went through difficult and sometimes dangerous pregnancies: In December 2001, she had to undergo surgery for an ectopic pregnancy and when she became pregnant again and was due to give birth two years later, she ended up having an emergency caesarean four weeks before her due date because of placental abruption – a problem that endangered the lives of both mother and child. Edward and Sophie’s daughter, Lady Louise Windsor, was also born cross-eyed, a condition that was surgically corrected when she was ten. In 2007, the couple had their second child, James, Viscount Severn.

Edward and Sophie did not wish their children to be royal highnesses, and thought they would be able to make their way more easily in the world if they were not burdened by an HRH. Louise and James were the first of the Queen’s grandchildren to be given the designated surname, Mountbatten-Windsor, although “Windsor” is mostly used on its own for Lady Louise.

As the ranks of the Queen’s grandchildren steadily swelled, she remained responsible for the descendants of her father’s siblings. She had five surviving cousins on her father’s side, three of whom – Prince Richard, Duke of Gloucester; Prince Edward, Duke of Kent; and his younger brother, Prince Michael of Kent – lived in grace-and-favour apartments at Kensington Palace. They appeared appropriately attired at family gatherings, carried out royal duties and otherwise kept a very low profile whenever debate arose about the number of royal family members who were living off the Queen and the public purse. Before the Christmas celebrations one year, the Queen had found out that 36 royal family members were expected. After a Trooping of the Colour ceremony some time in the nineties, she looked across at the palace balcony, filled to bursting with her relatives, and commented: “There are just too many of us”.

The question of who should be deemed core royal family, who should be called “royal highness” – thereby earning the right to expensive 24-hour police protection – had become more pressing. The most radical reformers at court thought the title should be reserved for the monarch’s children as well as the direct heirs of the heir to the throne. This made Prince Andrew nervous: he not only saw himself as an indisputable royal highness but was also father to two princesses who held that title too, and were accustomed to the advantages and security measures that came with it. He was also well aware that the person who was probably keenest of all on a drastic downsizing in royal highnesses was his big brother, Prince Charles, who would come to have more and more influence in the years ahead, until he ultimately became the decision-maker. And Charles was far from convinced that Beatrice and Eugenie should be paid royals with police protection.

Prince Andrew’s life as a divorcé had already had its challenges. In 1997, the Queen called a secret crisis meeting about Fergie. Fergie’s debt had grown to more than five million pounds and she was writing what was supposed to be an extremely candid life story in order to make money. The book could not be stopped and in 1997 *My Story* appeared, in which Fergie – self-loathing and defensive by turn – talked about both her own complexes and breakdowns, and the greying courtiers whom she believed to have undermined her because they thought her unworthy to be a royal duchess. But it became increasingly clear that Andrew would be obliged to help his ex-wife with her debt burden.

In 2001 he was appointed British trade envoy and set to work helping British businesses win the battle for major contracts. The businesses he worked with were satisfied and were firmly convinced that this little sprinkle of royal fairy dust was extremely helpful when meeting international businesspeople who saw the British monarchy as a wondrous, fairytale institution. As for Andrew, he enjoyed the job very much. But the prince who happily allowed himself to be transported here and there by jet and helicopter at the state’s expense soon attracted attention in the media, who nicknamed him “Air Miles Andy”. Eventually, Andrew also faced accusations of fraternising with the kind of people whose bank balances were not exactly matched by their reputations – like the filthy rich son of the Tunisian dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, the similarly filthy rich son of the Libyan dictator Muammar al-Gaddafi, along with North African arms dealers and Khazakstani oligarchs – and, in general, of accepting commissions and entering into contracts with men who had amassed enormous fortunes through corruption and other nefarious means. “Prince Andrew dazzles easily when confronted with immense wealth and apparent power,” Libby Purves wrote in *The Times*. Nor was he especially receptive to correction.

“Andrew has a stubborn streak,” a critical friend of the prince told *Vanity Fair*. “He does stupid things out of hubris, to show that he can do them ... He thinks that he can power his way through everything. He’s an adored second son. His mother, the Queen, dotes on him, favours him above all her other children, and excuses his every foible.”

A royal aide reported to the *Daily Mail*, “And he always greets ‘Mummy’ in the same way—bowing from the neck, kissing her hand, and then kissing her on both cheeks. It’s a little ritual that she adores. Believe me, he can do no wrong.”

Since the nineties, Andrew had been a close friend of the American financier and billionaire, Jeffrey Epstein. It was a friendship he stuck by firmly even after Epstein was charged with sex-trafficking and paedophile abuse in 2018. Epstein was found guilty of procuring the prostitution of a girl younger than eighteen. A person who knew both the prince and the financier thought Epstein was the person who had persuaded Andrew to wear jeans for the first time in his life and had taught him to relax. But Andrew must also have been thinking about the responsibility he felt he had, or felt he had been assigned, for Fergie’s debt – which Epstein helped him to reduce and restructure. The acquaintance added, “But the major reason Andrew hung out with Jeffrey was to get money for Sarah Ferguson.”

Because Sarah had never really gone away. Although she had become a *persona non grata* in the royal family, and an object of Prince Philip’s enduring wrath, she continued to live at Sunninghill with Andrew until 2004. At that point Andrew moved to another royal property, Royal Lodge in Windsor Park, but four years on, Sarah was living there too. In the years after the divorce, Andrew was constantly seen in the company of other women – generally models by profession and younger than his ex-wife – but none of them seemed to quite stick. In court circles, some wondered whether Fergie might have sabotaged Andrew’s relationships before they had a chance to develop. Perhaps Andrew wasn’t so averse to having them sabotaged either. That is how the situation was interpreted by Major Colin Burgess, one of the Queen Mother’s aides, who believed friendly Fergie offered something that the rigid Andrew missed when he was on his own. “I don’t think Andrew, to this day, has ever got over their split. He still loves her very deeply. She is the fun that’s missing in his life”. Burgess would also recall that the Queen Mother would sigh and say, “You know Andrew does love her so.”

The Queen Mother herself continued to live a life full of official duties and much socialising. But after turning ninety, she had become physically depleted. Both hips had been replaced and she was having difficulties with her eyesight. Elizabeth tried to persuade her to take things easy. But according to her biographer Hugo Vickers, the Queen Mother was no great fan of retirement on the whole: she thought that “you were either alive or dead, and if you were alive you were working.” This attitude applied both to herself and to those waiting on her; all around her, grey-haired courtiers fell at their posts. Ruth Fermoy was long gone, having died of cancer in 1993. She seems to have been troubled to the last about having eagerly supported the marriage of Charles and Diana, perhaps feeling that the person responsible for the marriage also bore some of the responsibility for the funeral. Shortly before she died, she virtually confessed to Jonathan Dimbleby, the prince’s biographer, telling him she was actually opposed to the marriage but had not believed she could do anything about the approaching wedding. “If I’d said to him ‘You’re making a very great mistake,’ he probably wouldn’t have paid the slightest attention,” she said, “because he was being driven.”

One by one, the people the Queen Mother was accustomed to having around her died. On the day of the Queen Mother’s hundredth birthday, 4th August 2000, she was served her breakfast tea and given her present from the staff by Reg Wilcox – her long-time servant and William Tallon’s long-term lover – who had advanced leukaemia. Immediately afterwards he collapsed outside her door, and died just days later.

She had been nervous about the imminent festivities. When she was to be driven down The Mall to Buckingham Palace, she was uncharacteristically afraid right up until the moment she was due to walk out of the door, imagining that attendance would be poor. But then Prince Charles offered her his arm and said, “Come on, Granny – remember Hitler said you were the most dangerous woman in Europe!” Outside, she was met by impressive crowds: Forty thousand people had turned out to celebrate the woman who had lived longer than any of them and had been a public figure for as long as they could remember. Her hundredth birthday was also marked by a parade full of symbols and images from the entire century in which she had been alive: Women in Edwardian dresses with trains, punk rockers and jitterbugging couples.

The parade and the crowds were not only a celebration of a very old woman but also a very old institution, which – precisely by virtue of its own deep historical roots – encouraged Britons to see themselves from a longer perspective than they normally would. The distant past was brought closer through the person being feted. The one-time Empress of India reminded the people of a time when they had been a global power; the woman Hitler had feared made them think of the heroic years when they were Europe’s last bastion against the Third Reich. Generally speaking, the monarchy will gather people in a moment that raises them above the drone of the everyday, striking a slower rhythm: they no longer think about the “eighties” or the “nineties” or the brief period between two or three elections when a person was a prime minister, but about longer stretches of time in which they have related to a royal figure. Before the habit of thinking in decades took over as the usual way to organise history, eras were named after their monarchs; people spoke of Georgian furniture, Edwardian houses and the Victorian age. Seen from this perspective, the hundredth birthday had a similar effect to the State Diadem in Lucian Freud’s portrait: it prompted onlookers think in terms of centuries rather than decades.

The birthday girl herself wished to present herself in public as strong, and tended to wave William Tallon away on the occasions when he offered her an arm to lean on. But she was, in reality, greatly diminished and had been for many years. Later, William Tallon would speak of a day when he had been in the Queen Mother’s car as they drove down The Mall. The Queen Mother’s head was tilted and she smiled and waved at the crowds that stood looking at her car, just as she usually did. Suddenly, Tallon saw that she was sliding off the leather seat and onto the floor, still smiling and waving and apparently unaware of what was happening. He managed to pull her up again. Other times, he saw her wandering around the rooms of Clarence House, smiling and waving – aimless and absolutely alone.

Yet her appetite for life was undiminished. When Prince William was about to move north to Scotland to study at St Andrew’s University, she asked him to invite her if he got asked to any good parties. And during the last Garter Ceremony in which she participated, at St George’s Chapel, Windsor Castle, she was walking along beside Prince Charles when she suddenly looked towards the King George VI memorial chapel and asked, “Am I to be buried here?” “Yes,” her grandson replied nervously. She looked up at him as if to say, “Well not for a while yet.”

Princess Margaret’s health was also going downhill. Margaret had had part of a lung removed as early as the eighties, was struggling with migraines and depression, and was becoming increasingly dependent on the Queen. If she went on a trip, the first thing she did on reaching her destination was call her sister.

In 1999 she was, as so often, holidaying in Mustique and decided to take a shower in her own bathroom. By accident, she apparently turned on the lower rather than the upper tap. The house’s ancient plumbing system made the temperature of the water that came out unpredictable – and in this case, boiling water streamed over the feet of the princess, who was too shocked to move. Only when her staff saw the steam pouring out from underneath the door did they force their way into the room and get Margaret out. But her scalded foot transformed her into a permanent invalid and was she never able to walk properly again.

At the time of the accident, the princess had already suffered the first of what would prove to be a series of strokes, which robbed her of movement on her left side, as well as the sight in one eye. She was unable to read and write, and spent her time sitting alone and unhappy in her room, sometimes accompanied by a friend who read aloud to her. She had become dependent on a wheelchair and often seemed distant and exhausted. The various medicines she was taking had made her face swollen and puffy. She did not want to be seen by men.

On 9th February 2002, she suffered yet another stroke and died at 71 years of age, with her two children sitting by her sickbed. It was a heavy blow for the Queen. For her part, the Queen Mother took the news of Margaret’s death with apparent equanimity, commenting that this death must have come as a release.

Lord Snowdon and Roddy Llewellyn both attended the funeral. Llewellyn tried to strike up conversation with his one-time rival but Tony, not a man to forget past offences easily, brushed him off. At the time of Margaret’s death, his life was falling apart, he had a dramatic divorce behind him and he was drinking too much. He increasingly viewed his stormy life with Margaret in an idyllic light and spoke effusively of the woman with whom he had once had screaming matches. A portrait of her was always on his writing desk right up until the day he died himself, fifteen years later.

Margaret would not be buried alongside any of the men she had been in love with. In the period before her death, she had spoken of longing to “to join Papa”. She had asked to be cremated and for the urn containing her ashes to be placed in the crypt of her father, King George VI, who had been so admiring of his lively youngest daughter and whom she had loved so dearly. When Margaret’s coffin was carried away, the Queen bowed her head and wept openly. The Queen Mother, for her part, was composed. She had arrived at the chapel in a wheelchair but struggled to her feet when the coffin was borne past her. “There was something strong, almost demonic in determination,” wrote Hugo Vickers, who felt above all that what she expressed was a kind of triumph. “Her energy was devoted more to the physical effort of being there than to the expression of emotions concerned with her dead daughter.”

Just six weeks later, the Queen was out riding in Windsor Park when she received a message telling her to return and go to her mother’s. The Queen Mother, who lived at the Royal Lodge near Windsor, was sitting by the fire wrapped in a dressing gown when her daughter arrived in full riding gear. They had a short, quiet conversation before her mother lost consciousness. She died that same afternoon, at 101 years of age.

The Queen Mother’s coffin was placed on a catafalque in Westminster Hall and over the days that followed, more than 170,000 people filed past it. Both the Queen and Prince Charles recorded speeches after the death of the Queen Mother. Charles spoke openly about how he had long been dreading his grandmother’s passing. “To me, she meant everything,” he said. “She seemed gloriously unstoppable, and ever since I was a child, I adored her… She was, quite simply, the most magical grandmother you could possibly have.” The Queen was briefer, expressing her gratitude for all the letters of condolence and for her mother’s long life. On 9th April, the funeral cortege of the woman who had once been Lady Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon left Westminster Abbey. Around a million people lined the route of the funeral procession. On top of the coffin, which was draped in her personal standard, was the crown she was crowned with in 1937, along with a simple card inscribed “In loving memory, Lilibet.”

In November, the Queen took part in a ceremony at the memorial garden in Westminster Abbey that commemorates all those who have died in battle. The ceremony ended with a minute’s silence and those present suddenly noticed that the Queen was standing there with tears running down her cheeks.

Elizabeth had been closer to her mother and her sister than to her children. During the long phone conversations, decade after decade, they had listened to and commented on everything that was going on in her life. Now she had lost them both in a short time. Also gone was “Porchie”, the Earl of Carnarvon, the confidant with whom she had shared a passion for racehorses; he had collapsed and died of a heart attack on 11th September 2001, just hours after Al Qaeda’s planes struck the World Trade Centre in New York. In a short time, her burden of grief had become heavy.

Since 1992, the *annus horribilis* when Elizabeth and her husband had faced a popular fury that neither of them could comprehend, those around them noticed that they had grown closer. It was as if the experience had created a mutual protective instinct, or a stronger sense of standing shoulder to shoulder in a world that did not understand them.

But Elizabeth had always been hedged about by a thicket of strong-minded women – her sister, her mother and “Bobo” Macdonald (the Queen’s nanny and later confidante) – all of whom Philip had to force his way through. Now to a greater extent man and wife became the fulcrum of one another’s lives. If they were apart, they rang one another each day. Philip became more tender, more considerate. If the Queen was out late on royal business, he always sat up until she returned home. “She still lights up when he comes into the room,” a courtier said. “She becomes softer, lighter and happier.” Now and then, it was almost as if Elizabeth were daydreaming about living a different life, with just her husband. She could speak longingly of a valley near the Forest of Bowland in Lancashire in north west England, a rolling area of natural beauty with only sparse habitation, old castles and stone churches. It was a place, she told a friend, where “Philip and I would like to retire”.

But a while after the Queen Mother’s funeral, those close to the Queen observed a fresh energy in her. Robert Salisbury, former leader of the House of Lords, remarked: “I would guess the Queen has rather blossomed since her mother died.” She was warmer, more cheerful, seemingly had more of a spring in her step. Her mother’s death was a loss but also a liberation.

The American professor of linguistics, Deborah Tannen, has studied the communication between mothers and daughters. She notes how intensely most daughters desire recognition from their mothers, even after they have reached adulthood; sometimes, they become ashamed of their own longing and can react harshly if they feel that their mother expresses overly strong opinions about how they are leading their lives. At the same time, mothers may be particularly forthright in their conversations with their daughters – saying they should lose weight or dress differently, which generally stems from a protective instinct and an instinctive conviction that they must speak out when their daughters do something unwise or ill-considered because nobody else will do so. When a mother dies, a daughter may react with both panic and relief – a feeling of having new room for manoeuvre and, at the same time, enormous trepidation because one of the most important voices in her life is no longer there.

In many of the dilemmas the Queen had faced, her mother’s opinions had counted for a great deal; not least, this led to the Duke and Duchess of Windsor always being kept at a distance, even though the Queen herself might not have been averse to a reconciliation. “It’s Mummy that matters,” a courtier remembered her saying. “We mustn’t do anything that hurts Mummy’s feelings”.

Like the steadfast Queen during the war, the older Queen Elizabeth was, moreover, a figure many treated with reverence. The more literary guests at court, who considered the Queen to be a limited and rather boring conversationalist, could be enchanted by her charming, well-read mother. Her adored father, George VI, whose legacy and posthumous reputation his daughter had worked so hard to preserve, viewed his wife as the most wonderful woman in the world. James Pope-Hennessy, who met both when he was working on the biography of Queen Mary in the early years of Elizabeth’s reign, experienced the Queen as strained, restless and nervously chatty – and compared her with a tightly wound steel spring. The Queen Mother, for her part, was more feminine, a good listener and good at appearing interested in everything and everybody, according to Pope-Hennessy. Her daughter had to strive to achieve what her mother did as a matter of course.

The young Queen will probably have noticed guests responding differently to her mother than to herself. In the Queen Mother, she had lost a beloved parent, a confidante, an advisor, but also an assessor, a person she compared herself with and, to a certain extent, a competitor. Now she had been promoted. At the age of 76, 49 years after he coronation, she was at last *the* Queen.