

Churchman

EDITORIAL

Long to reign over us

On 6 February 2012 Queen Elizabeth II completed sixty years on the throne. Only once before has this happened in British history, when Queen Victoria celebrated her Diamond Jubilee in 1897. Other countries have known longer reigns, but their after-effects have been less inspiring. Francis Joseph I ruled as emperor of Austria-Hungary for sixty-eight years (1848-1916) but his empire disappeared less than twenty-four months after his death. Louis XIV of France reigned even longer, from 1643 to 1715, and his throne survived him by more than seventy years, but his extravagance sowed the seeds of its destruction and the only monument to his memory now standing is in the city of Quebec, which his successor lost to the British before the French Revolution could destroy it.

Our own monarchy has been more fortunate. Dozens of places round the world recall the name of Victoria, who had the good fortune to be on the throne when the British Empire was at its height. Her great-great grand-daughter has reigned in reduced circumstances, but the Commonwealth is the only example known to history of an imperial power that has successfully transformed itself into a family of independent (and mostly democratic) states, and it does not deserve the bemused contempt that it sometimes receives from the British press. Of course, as the Queen knows only too well, being attacked by the press in Britain is nothing to be ashamed of, especially now that the recent phone-hacking scandals have revealed the seamy underside of what passes for journalism in this country. The monarchy has been put through the wringer of unwelcome publicity but it has survived, and in some ways it is stronger and more genuinely popular now than it was in the days of its imperial splendour.

For this, much of the credit must go to the Queen herself. She has had to endure the breakup of four marriages in her immediate family, but she and the Duke of Edinburgh are still together after nearly sixty-five years and no scandal has touched them. They are both hard-working in a way that people half their age can barely imagine and they have mastered their often thankless tasks to perfection. Wherever Her Majesty goes she takes decorum and good taste with

her and never disappoints. Critics of the royal household's expenditure have largely been silenced, partly by discreet economies at the palace but also by the realisation that many in Parliament have been on the take (in the form of 'expenses') for years. The Queen may travel first class on the train, but her subjects know that she will not be building duck houses with taxpayers' money.

Of course we live in a fallen world, and there is a peculiar fashion for republicanism among British intellectuals and Australian politicians that people who actually live in republics tend to regard as an inexplicable form of madness. But even the most conceited republicans have to admit that theirs is a lost cause as long as the Queen is alive and they can do no more than place their hopes on the perceived unpopularity of her successor. It is certainly true that the Prince of Wales lacks the common touch and will be forever haunted by the tragedy of Princess Diana, but he stands head and shoulders above almost all his predecessors as heir-in-waiting. It is perhaps worth remembering that Edward VII also had a poor reputation before he became king but made a successful, if short-lived, monarch when he finally succeeded. Prince Charles is much more accomplished than his great-great-grandfather was, so the fear that he will dissipate the goodwill towards the crown that the Queen has done so much to build up may turn out to be misplaced.

At the heart of Her Majesty's success is her deep Christian faith, instilled in her by her parents, and especially by her mother, who brought the great traditions of Scottish piety into the royal family when she married the future King George VI in 1923. It is characteristic of the Queen that, on the eve of her jubilee year, she should address the Commonwealth not by drawing attention to herself, but by preaching the Gospel in her annual Christmas broadcast. She has done this before, most notably at the turn of the millennium, but never as clearly as last year, when she spoke quite directly about human sin, the forgiving power of Christ and the need for each of us to be born again. In ten minutes she said more about the power of God in our lives than the Archbishop of Canterbury has said in ten years. Apologists for Lambeth Palace will doubtless remind us that a man in the Archbishop's position cannot talk too much about religion and has to stick to politics instead, but the Queen shows no such inhibitions. She knows that politicians and their fantasies come and go, but that the Word of our God stands forever, and in her golden years the call of the realms above sounds ever louder in her messages.

Where does she go from here? We have no idea how many more years the Lord will give her, nor can anyone say what opportunities and potential dangers will arise in the final stage of her earthly pilgrimage. Queen Victoria went home happy after her jubilee celebrations, but two years later the Boer War broke out and it was still being waged when she died. Today economic storm clouds are gathering and the potential for conflict is an ever-present reality. Mercifully, the future is hidden from our eyes and we can only pray that the God who has saved the Queen thus far will continue to do so until the day when he comes to claim her to reign with him in his eternal kingdom.

Her Majesty is a woman of faith, but she is also a woman of hope. For years she has longed to see a genuine improvement in relations with Ireland, and in May 2011 her visit to that country helped to make her dream come true. Everyone who heard it agrees that her speech in Dublin Castle was a masterpiece of reconciliation and encouragement to build a better future that resonated across that often troubled island. She knows that she will not live to see the fruits of her labours, but some words in her speech give us a hint of what may be going through her mind. She exhorted her audience to work towards creating in these islands a society of peace and prosperity that our grandchildren may enjoy and of which our grandparents could only dream. Now it so happens that Britain and Ireland fell apart in the reign of her grandfather, much to his anguish. Can she be hoping that they may come back together again in the lifetime of her grandson? Perhaps her voice may yet prove to be prophetic, to the great benefit of us all.

Finally, the Queen is a woman of deep and abiding love. That may seem a strange thing to say about someone who never shows emotion in public, but Elizabeth II is made of sterner stuff than the average pop star and she knows that true love is not the gushing sentimentality that stage and screen have taught us to expect. Her first and greatest love is for God, whom she vowed to serve as a young woman and to whom she answers still. From there it overflows to her family, her subjects and the world at large. It is manifested above all in the way she performs the duties of the position she has been called to occupy for the greater part of her life. Year in and year out, she visits the far-flung corners of her distant realms, speaks to untold thousands of individuals small and great, and waves unflaggingly at those who turn out in their thousands to greet her. If she wanted to please herself, she would have put her feet up years ago and

gone to live in retirement in a Tuscan villa as so many well-off people do. But no – for her, every day is a new challenge, a new responsibility. She knows, as we all do, that she will die in the trenches with her boots on. Greater love hath no woman than this...

The year 2012 will be one of celebration and thanksgiving for a gift to Britain and the Commonwealth that we shall not see again in our lifetimes. In an age of moral and spiritual decline we have been blessed with an example of how to live that is truly counter-cultural and that touches people across the globe. In a dark and stormy world, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II shines out as a beacon of light, pointing her subjects towards a better way, one that only the God by whose grace she reigns can provide. As we rejoice with her in passing her latest milestone, may the words of the national anthem truly be our prayer: ‘Long to reign over us, God save the Queen!’

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