

Happy and Glorious: *The Crown*

When I was a student in England, in the late 60s, *God Save the Queen* still came through the loudspeakers after every film, every concert, every theater performance, and the whole audience rose to its feet, remaining motionless until the last note. Except my English not-quite-boyfriend.

A self-proclaimed anarchist, he'd march out ostentatiously, to glares from all sides, while I stood frozen -- not because I believed in either God or the Queen, but for the same reason I'd never have jumped a queue, the reason I tried so hard to modify my vowels: my dread of being seen as a boorish American.

Once we went to a jumble sale in a church hall, a freezing cold, damp place, as were also English houses back then (I regarded the frigid temperatures of English rooms and the awfulness of English food as signs of moral superiority, a noble unconcern with creature comfort). We were there to buy him a jumper, since the only one he owned was full of holes; like all my friends at university, he was living on a tiny government grant that barely covered his rent and bus fares and purchases of food and books and mind-altering substances.

Two white-haired ladies with bony ankles presided over the sale, in tweed skirts and pearls. As we browsed through the piles on the trestle tables, they engaged us in polite chit-chat, first about the weather, then about our literature "studies", seeming unfazed by my friend's appearance: his hair fell down past his shoulders, and there was a gray flannel heart stitched onto the rear of his purple velvet bell-bottoms, to cover a tear.

But after he'd mentioned his essay on de Quincy and his love for William Burroughs one of them asked, in an interested voice, "So do you take lots of drugs?" Most definitely, he said, and assured them that hallucinogens would very soon bring about the sort of revolution that Blake and Shelley had espoused (in those days, Church of England ladies could be counted on to have read the Romantics).

The other one asked mildly, "But do you want to blow up the Queen, dear?" Suddenly he turned bashful; he didn't know about that, he mumbled, ducking his head, maybe he'd settle for a castle or two. At the time, I assumed he was hedging so as not to offend them -- or not to get arrested. In retrospect, I think he probably *didn't* want to blow up the Queen; anarchist or no, he would have seen that as really a step too far.

Now the Queen is ninety, and nobody, socialists included, seems eager to blow her up. According to the latest polls, 79% of the British public want her, in the words of her song, "long to reign over us." (Is there any other national anthem that doesn't even mention the country in question, let alone its special greatness or a willingness to die for it, but merely asks the Lord to preserve its monarch?) Perhaps more surprising, 62% expect the monarchy to be around in a hundred years, though the aging heir to the throne is widely mocked for enjoining his future subjects to talk to their plants and telling his beloved he wanted to be her tampon.

Even my friends among what could loosely be called the intelligentsia have no wish for a republic. It doesn't matter, they tell me, if many of the royals are a bit dim, and some are downright degenerate; it's the institution that counts: the way it binds the nation together, the continuity it provides, the stability, the living embodiment of the country's history. The one aristocrat I know refers to the Windsors jokingly as "the Krauts," his own ancestors having been part of the ruling class for centuries before the Queen's arrived from Hanover. But he,

too, is firmly in favor. Much safer to have the Queen as head of state, he says, than -- sniff -- some politician.

Secretly, I always felt a sort of pitying amazement when they talked like that. How could people with such a well-developed sense of irony maintain allegiance to something so irrelevant...so frankly absurd? Even at the height of my teenaged Anglophilia, it was never the monarchy I was in love with -- all those plumes and pageants -- but *Brideshead Revisited* and Ernest Dowson, and later Keats, Wordsworth, Matthew Arnold, George Eliot. Then I came here to study, and the first time I turned on a television, the Labour MP Michael Foot was sitting on a bare stage, extolling the brilliance of Hazlitt; when I was subletting my dingy £3-a-week bedsit, several of the bank tellers and secretaries who came to view it, noticing the postcard I'd tacked on the wall, exclaimed, "Oh, Coleridge." To me, that was as thrilling as the beauties of the English countryside, or the way genteel old ladies took a kindly interest in one's drug consumption.

In my all-American high school, in a decaying factory town, someone who read Matthew Arnold and Ernest Dowson and Coleridge was just plain weird, doomed to the outcast state; in England I was a recognizable type, an approved one even: "literary". ("I should have thought they'd be blue," the anarchist said, when, late for my *Beowulf* seminar one morning, I was hunting frantically for my black tights.) So though I was very noticeably a foreigner -- the world was much less of a global village back then -- in a way I felt less foreign than I had at home.

But when it came to the monarchy I really was an outsider. And though I married an Englishman, settled here permanently some years back, and even took out British citizenship (which of course involved swearing allegiance to the Queen), such I remained. When someone in the village shop said how marvelous the Queen was for her age -- she still maintains a killing schedule of royal duties -- I always politely agreed, but it was the same automatic assent I give to other staples of English conversation: "Hasn't the weather been shocking this week"..."Doesn't the garden look lovely"..."I see the French have been pandering to the Germans again."

Then Netflix launched *The Crown*, its hundred-million-pound extravaganza about the early days of Princess Elizabeth's marriage and -- after the premature death of her father -- her first years as Queen.

I had just finished a novel and was waiting to hear from my publisher. Thanks to a bum knee and the shocking weather we'd been having that week, bracing walks weren't an option. I felt too agitated to dive into Gibbon or study Greek verbs or write letters to the *Spectator* about questions of grammar, especially when the news came that Donald Trump had been elected the 45th president. Thus did I wind up watching the entire first season of *The Crown*, over my husband's grumbling objections. (Roughly speaking, he's all for the royals preserving the stability of the nation, if only they'd do it quietly, without his having to hear about them all the goddamn time. When he opens the paper to find photos of the Royal Baby on the front page, when TV coverage of a service for Battle of Britain pilots opens with a shot of the Duchess of Cambridge arriving at the church and continues with a discussion of her hat, his monarchical sentiments give way to snorting about wankers.)

I would argue that those, like my husband, who dismiss *The Crown* as merely a soap opera on a grand scale are being unfair. It actually provides a fairly good primer on the history of the period. But it would be silly to pretend that it isn't *also* a soap opera on a grand scale.

There is much stormy domestic drama, of a specifically royal kind: Prince Philip, taking the sexy bad-boy rebel part, is seen chafing at the restrictions on his freedom and the various humiliations of his new role as consort. Before his wife's ascension to the throne, he was the man in charge, the serving naval officer whose family went with him from posting to posting. Now he has nothing to do while his wife is "out queening," as he puts it. He must walk three steps behind her in public, he has no say over where they'll live, he can't even give their children his name. When he's not sniping and snapping at Her Majesty, he's hiving off for dare-devil flying lessons and boozy lunches with raffish ex-servicemen, leaving Elizabeth to struggle with the demands of queenship alone.

There is also thwarted romance, royal style: Princess Margaret, the Queen's spoilt younger sister, just as willful as Philip, more self-indulgent, falls in love with the war hero Peter Townsend, a trusted royal equerry who unfortunately is also a divorcé (the Church of England may have been founded to free Henry VIII from an inconvenient wife, but it still insists that marriage is a binding sacrament, period). After two years of enforced separation, much kerfuffle, and a misguided attempt by Elizabeth to smoothe the lovers' path, Margaret gives Townsend up when it turns out marrying him will mean forfeiting her royal title and allowance and all her royal privileges. But she holds a grudge against her sister from then on.

Such are the emotional tempests of the first season, which takes us from Elizabeth's and Philip's wedding in 1947 through Margaret's "renunciation" of Townsend in 1956. We also get a moving portrait of Winston Churchill's pitiful decline over his final term as Prime Minister. John Lithgow, though he is a) American and b) about a foot taller than Churchill ever was, does a magnificent job of portraying the weary old bulldog.

But personalities aside, *The Crown* delves into some lofty questions about the purpose and meaning of monarchy, most explicitly in the episode covering the Queen's coronation in 1953. In a flashback to a day sixteen years before, George VI, whose brother's abdication in favor of marrying Wallis Simpson has forced him to take on a role he never wanted or prepared for, looks intently into his eleven-year-old daughter's face as he explains to her that once anointed with the holy oil at his coronation he will be "transformed...brought into direct contact with the divine...forever changed...bound to God." It's plain that he means her to realize what she will be undertaking in her turn, though neither of them could have suspected how soon that turn would come. But when, at the end of the episode, we see the Archbishop of Canterbury anointing the 25-year-old Elizabeth, as "kings, priests, and prophets" have been anointed, as "King Solomon was anointed by Zadok the Priest", we know that she is thinking of her beloved father. And however we feel about the ceremony's religious significance ourselves, we believe in Elizabeth's belief in it. No less than a priest or nun, she is making a sacred promise to both God and her subjects.

Meanwhile, the waspish Duke of Windsor, who abdicated before he could be officially crowned, is shown watching the ceremony on a television screen at his chateau near Paris, pronouncing on its meaning to his jet-set guests in a voice that veers from mockery to anguished yearning. Though the Duke's spite and self-absorption have been on display throughout *The Crown*, it's one of the series' most poignant moments. It also provides a counterpoint to the mixed emotions much of the audience may feel. We've just seen a quasi-medieval spectacle of great pomp and glitter, completely preposterous in this day and age, and even more so in 1953: the country was nearly bankrupt, London was full of bombed-out buildings, meat and candy were still rationed. Yet despite everything there is something solemn and magnificent about it, not just the velvet and ermine and gold but the consecration of this ordinary young woman to something that might, after all, be greater than her individual self. Or so, for those few minutes, we can all believe.

The royal family has made it known that none of them will watch *The Crown*, probably a wise decision, especially since another five seasons are planned. As the story moves closer to the present, there are many worse scandals to come -- accusations about Prince Andrew and under-aged girls, photos of Prince Andrew's wife having her toes sucked by her "financial adviser," Princess Margaret's drunken cavortings with a toyboy twenty-eight years her junior, the vitriolic meltdown of Charles's and Diana's marriage. If Elizabeth did tune in, though, I think she'd see that the portrait of her is at least 79% sympathetic. Even more than in *The Queen*, the film by the same writer, she comes across as unfailingly decent, loyal, conscientious, forbearing, even humble: ashamed of her lack of education, she hires a tutor to fill some of the yawning gaps in her knowledge. When she must sacrifice her family feelings for what she's been told is the good of her country, i.e., insist that Prince Philip move from Clarence House to Buckingham Palace or nix Princess Margaret's marriage, she does not ask for sympathy, but we see in her face -- and Claire Foy, who plays her, is wonderful at conveying pain through a stiff upper lip -- the misery it causes her. Her love for her husband remains steadfast despite his angry outbursts and unruly behavior, even in spite of those infidelities that up to now have merely been hinted at.

For many years, the received wisdom had it that the monarchy's survival depended on retaining its mystery and dignity. In the 19th century, Walter Bagehot famously warned, "We must not let in daylight upon magic," while as late as 1969 the film-maker David Attenborough had a similar concern about a ground-breaking BBC documentary that showed the royals at home (at several of their homes, actually), feeding carrots to their horses from silver salvers, barbecuing sausages on a riverbank. "You're killing the monarchy, you know, with this film you're making," Attenborough told the program's producer. "The whole institution depends on mystique." Yet on me, at least, the demystifications of *The Crown* have had the opposite effect. As I watched the Queen's anodyne Christmas speech on television this year, I felt as though I finally understood the point of her -- her real necessity to the nation. Maybe it was because of the American election, or the horrors in Syria, or just the manifold hatreds tearing the world apart. But *The Crown* had something to do with it too. What I realized was this: *the Queen is the one person in public life whom everyone can trust always to mean well*. Think about it: that might be worth something. No doubt Charles, too, will genuinely mean well, if he ever gets a turn on the throne, and his son William, who's almost certain to wind up there, will also. Amidst all the dissension and upheavals and bitter recriminations within the country, and the chaos and cruelty and looming disasters outside it, with politicians everywhere hurling insults at each other and bickering over their turf, these avatars of slightly dippy good will, figureheads with no direct political power, not only help steady the ship of state: they soothe the spirit, they serve as an antidote to despair.

Another friend, when pressed for her views on the monarchy, said briskly, "Well, she's the mother of the nation, isn't she." Is it possible that the Brits, who have never embraced Freudianism the way Americans have, who are leery of psychobiography and psychohistory and psycho everything, are collectively engaged in a Freudian relationship with their sovereign? Certainly the most unlikely people were swept up in the celebratory mood that marked Elizabeth's diamond jubilee and her 90th birthday. At times, their atavistic attachment to Her Majesty seems to be all that connects the squabbling factions in an otherwise *dis* United Kingdom, the one benevolent form of solidarity that endures. Again, that can't be such a bad thing. And so, dear reader...God save the Queen.