

SARAH BRADFORD

Kings of Spin

♦ Royalty Inc: Britain's Best-Known Brand

By Stephen Bates

(Aurum Press 358pp £20)

Clever book, clever title. The image of Britain for most people is not one of a shiny-faced David Cameron in a Savile Row suit or a pixie-faced Jeremy Corbyn in his Lenin cap. Instead, we see the Queen, impeccably turned out in a pastel day dress, handbag to the fore, or in a shimmering gown, her curled silver hair crowned by a stunning jewelled tiara, her gloved hand outstretched greeting people. As Stephen Bates puts it, 'our small, sprightly, octogenarian Queen, after more than sixty-three years on the throne, is one of the most famous women anywhere on earth, as recognisable to someone in Tokyo or Tulsa, or even Timbuktu and Tuvalu, as in Tooting or Truro.' The Queen and her family are, as Bates argues in this knowledgeable, well-researched book, Britain's most recognisable and best-loved brand.

How did they do it? How did the royal family move from Commander Colville, the reporter-hating press officer of the 1950s ('I am not what you North Americans would call a public relations man,' he told one Canadian journalist) to the slick, image-conscious operation of today? The British Empire has long gone, transformed into the Commonwealth – encompassing fifty-three independent nations and a third of the world's population – with the Queen at its head. As Bates says, she is definitely surrounded by an aura: people dream about her and imagine what they might say to her. She is the sovereign of sixteen realms and supreme governor of the Church of England, the world's fourth-largest Christian denomination. She has been around a very long time, meeting many of the most significant figures in the world – American presidents, heads of state, five popes, and celebrities from Marilyn Monroe and Frank Sinatra on. She has seen more confidential government documents, intelligence reports and foreign and diplomatic assessments, and heard more high-level gossip, than anyone else alive. She has always been a star, first making the cover

of *Time* magazine at the age of three.

Victoria and Albert were probably the first royals to realise the importance of presenting themselves as the ideal *family*, in contrast to the quarrelsome, licentious images left imprinted on the public mind by the sons of George III. Increasingly the royal household and government had come to appreciate that visibility and pageantry were the keys to success. Even George IV, portly and unappealing as he later became, drew in the crowds when presented to the people of Edinburgh decked out by Sir Walter Scott in kilt and sporran as the epitome of Scottishness, in what Bates dubs a 'plaid panorama'. With the coming of the railways, the development of the popular

press and, above all, photography, then film and television, the public image of the royal family grew more and more important. In the early 1870s, when republican feeling in Britain reached a peak in the wake of Victoria's selfish withdrawal after Albert's death, Lord Salisbury, who later served as the queen's prime minister, wrote in the *Saturday Review*, 'Seclusion is one of the few luxuries in which Royal Personages may not indulge ... loyalty needs a life of almost unintermitted publicity to sustain it.' Lord Halifax wrote to Henry Ponsonby, the queen's private secretary, in 1871: 'The mass of the people expect a king or queen to look and play the part. They want to see a crown and sceptre and all that sort of thing. They want the gilding for their money.'

The constitutional historian Walter Bagehot discovered that as the monarchy's real power declined, its popularity increased. Its strength lay in being seen as a symbol of national unity. The monarchy promulgated this image through carefully



Crowns, Buckingham Palace, 1958

From Jane Bown: *A Lifetime of Looking*, edited by Luke Dodd and published recently by Guardian Faber (£30). Bown, a photographer for *The Observer* from 1949 to 2009, worked almost exclusively in black and white, using natural light. She died in 2014.

UNEASY LIES THE HEAD

orchestrated events. 'Invented tradition', Bates calls it. The State Opening of Parliament, with its medieval trappings, actually took its present form under Edward VII; the annual Garter procession at Windsor Castle began in 1948, while the 'tradition' of the monarch lying in state in Westminster Hall was introduced after the death of Edward VII in 1910. Public ceremonial was given a stage in a reconstructed Mall in front of a refaced Buckingham Palace; construction of Admiralty Arch and the Victoria Memorial began in the period immediately before the First World War.

Film and television have vastly increased the scope for publicising the royal family: the 1969 film *Royal Family*, showing the Windsors at home and at play, attracted around 40 million viewers in the United Kingdom alone. Stage-managed by modern-minded private secretaries and press secretaries, royal contact with the public developed through walkabouts on public visits at home and abroad. In the jubilee year of 2012, the Queen and Prince Philip paid visits to every part of the British Isles,

while younger members of the family were sent abroad, William and Kate as far as the Pacific, Harry to Jamaica. When William and Kate visited the United States and Canada in July 2011, on their first overseas tour after their marriage, it was estimated that as many as 1.5 million people turned out to see them. Although the Queen and Prince Philip still top the bill, William and Kate are the new stars in the eternal quest for popularity in a celebrity-obsessed modern world.

It is ironic that the secret of royal power is the lack of it. The royal family's private secretaries liaise constantly with their counterparts in the prime minister's office. This synergy reached its acme in the dangerous days following Princess Diana's death in 1997, when Tony Blair and Alastair Campbell orchestrated the reaction of the stunned royal family in the face of unprecedented public hostility. Later, the Prince of Wales's public relations adviser Mark Bolland launched an undercover 'Operation Mrs PB' with the aim of winning public acceptance for Camilla and her eventual marriage

to Charles. Prince Charles's undoubted commitment to good causes, such as the Prince's Trust, was promoted to counteract his reputation for slightly batty initiatives, presented to government ministers in his 'black spider' letters. Royal influence is extended via philanthropy and worthy organisations, including the Prince's Trust, its scope widening with the expansion of the media world. 'I don't believe there is any such thing as a private life any more,' an exhausted Prince Harry told television viewers during a break in Afghanistan. 'Everyone knows about Twitter and the Internet and stuff like that. Every single mobile phone has got a camera on it now. You can't move an inch without someone judging you. It's an unstoppable force.'

There have been scores of books about the monarchy and members of the royal family, but few, if any, as fearless and perceptive as this is. Stephen Bates tells it like it is, covering every aspect with rare humour and intelligence. I couldn't recommend it more highly.

To buy this book, see page 22. All titles arrive gift-wrapped by our partner bookshop, Heywood Hill.