

Picture story

Uncommon touch

The scene was carefully staged to reinforce the image of an accessible, modern queen. Instead the photograph on the front page of almost every British newspaper seemed to capture a declining and disconnected monarchy. Amanda Foreman explains why the picture is 'one of the most important artefacts of the Elizabethan reign'

The picture

guardian.co.uk, Friday 9 July 1999 16.14 BST

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The photograph of the Queen sitting stiffly across the table from Glasgow resident Susan McCarron is so natural and expressive that it looks utterly fake. It looks like an artist's portrait, complete with symbolism, humour and poignancy. No wonder the palace and the press have interpreted it in such different ways.

To the media, the best china, the piles of uneaten biscuits and the sheer space surrounding each of the actors highlights the formal gulf between the Queen and her subjects. To the palace, the photograph represents the new openness and accessibility of the monarchy. The Queen has only one attendant, she is eating and chatting at the same time, one of her loyal subjects appears to be quite insouciantly picking his nose. How different from the endless snaps of the Queen accepting one more bouquet of flowers.

This photograph is probably one of the most important artefacts of the Elizabethan reign. It will reveal more to historians in the next century than any number of articles and newsreels. It is a complex statement about the simultaneous decline of Britain's monarchy and the apotheosis of Elizabeth II. Yet the press has taken a very blinkered approach, concentrating on just one question: 'Does she have the Common Touch?' Meaning, can she compete with Princess Diana in the empathy stakes. The sneering headline in yesterday's Daily Mail says it all: Tea for One.

However, the atomisation of the participants in the scene is but a single theme among several. The real power of the photograph is in its raw honesty.

It depicts the truth of Bagehot's insistence that the monarch must be, and is, different from the ordinary person. In trying to be ordinary, the Queen only manages to be surreal. On the other hand, she has taken a centuries-old tradition public participation in the royal way of life and turned it upside-down to express something extremely modern and much nearer the truth of the matter: royal participation in the public's way of life. This tacit acceptance of her new role is little short of a revolution; it may even, as in the case of George III and his own apotheosis, give back the Queen her dignity.

Touring, glad-handing, sharing royal cups of tea and even slumming it have been a part of the royal repertoire since the Tudors. The ability of the monarch to be among his or

her people, while retaining the proper degree of majesty, lies at the core of the institution. The Tudors achieved it with expensive processions across the country. The grandiose public spectacles may have ruined their hosts, but the sight of the monarch appearing to enjoy himself in a pre-pictographic era was sufficient to forge a connection with the populace. The Tudors allowed themselves to be as much a part of the show as the horses and knights. Conversely, the Stuarts' lack of robustness in this respect may have contributed to their gradual alienation.

They presided over courts that were more like their European counterparts: costly, inward-looking and inaccessible. On the other hand, they also bequeathed to the role a certain inflexible sense of royal self-hood that protected the institution even when the individual suffered. Charles I had at least one opportunity to escape his confinement in Newcastle.

Unfortunately, the scheme required him to dress up as a servant. The king got all the way down the stairs and almost to the door to the courtyard.

Then he froze, struck by the thought that he would be teased by the guards if they caught him in servant's garb. So he turned and went back up the stairs, preferring to preserve his majesty over his head.

The Stuart psychology continued down the line, showing particularly strongly in Queen Anne, who was the last monarch to revive the ancient custom of the King's Evil, healing scrofula sufferers by touch. This was not an expression of unbridled self-importance. Far from it. Queen Anne was simply acting from a deeply ingrained belief of purpose; it was an unfeigned and unfettered expression of monarchy. Three hundred years later, instead of laying on hands, Queen Elizabeth II sips tea in Glasgow. Different acts, similar meaning.

It took the Hanoverians three generations before they realised that the people would not love the monarchy unless the monarchy loved them. The historian Linda Colley has analysed how and why George III transformed himself from being a figure of 'perfect hatred' to the father of the country.

Serendipity played a part, of course, but it was two things in particular: the revival of royal ceremony in conjunction with something entirely new, an image of kingly ordinariness. George III's ability to step in and out of his role fed stories of commoners chancing upon a sturdy gentleman by the wayside who later turned out to be the king.

According to one newspaper, a farmer happened to bump into the king (as one does on a country road) and struck up a conversation. George asked him if he had ever seen the king, to which the farmer replied, 'Our neighbours say he's a good sort of man, but dresses very plain.' 'Aye,' the king is reported to have said, 'as plain as you see me now', and he then rode on.

The story has a familiar ring to it, as anyone familiar with Greek mythology and Zeus's peregrinations incognito will recognise. However, stories like this bridged the gap between a declining monarchy and its increasingly powerful and literate people. The king's lack of pomp now elevated him above the heads of ordinary men.

The ability to seem to walk among the people was something that his heirs only imperfectly inherited. William IV once tried to mix with some sailors and almost started a riot. His granddaughter, Queen Victoria, loved to tour the Highlands incognito, dropping in on unsuspecting innkeepers. However, her attempts to appear 'ordinary' were hardly worthy of the name; it would have been astonishing for the landlord to mistake the royal crest on the carriages waiting outside. Indeed, the locals' reaction was half the point she enjoyed the attention. But on her last expedition, in 1861, the highland residents in one impoverished town were not so accommodating. 'There was hardly anything to eat,' she complained afterwards. 'There was only tea, and two miserable

starved Highland chickens, without any potatoes! No pudding, and no fun.' It took another generation before Edward VII realised that the purpose of bending down to see the people was not to discover how low one can go, or even to impress, but to connect with his subjects. In a break with tradition, the prince actually dressed in workman's clothes so he could see the true state of London housing for himself. What he found naturally shocked him and led to a lifelong interest in the improvement of public housing. An otherwise shallow man was able to connect in ways previously ignored by the monarchy.

And yet, the gulf between Prince Edward and his people was little different from that of George III or even Queen Anne. Until the present Queen, the monarchy has always operated on its own terms, choosing when and how to visit its subjects.

Queen Mary once answered a reporter's question with the words: 'No, we never get bored. And yes, we enjoy opening hospitals.' Even in the drudge of service to one's country she managed to remain aloof.

Although the photograph suggests a different story, Mrs McCarron insists that the Queen was relaxed and friendly yesterday. There was, apparently, no hint of *de haut en bas* as the two women chatted about strokes and interior decorating. A conversation that two perfect strangers would be as likely to have as two elephants sitting on a bus. The press seized on this and laughed, neglecting the extraordinary pageant of neo-majesty which was on display for the first time.

The Queen has finally invented a new form of the King's Evil for the monarchy in the 21st century. It combines Tudor skill for peripatetic spectacles with the divine sense of mission of the Stuarts, the carefully wrought homeliness of the Hanoverians, and the German thoroughness of the Windsors. In personal terms she has given up much more than any of her predecessors. But she has sacrificed the battle to win the war.

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