



Elizabeth II: The Steadfast, Douglas Hurd (London: Allen Lane, 2015).

Review by:
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Elizabeth II: The Steadfast. By Douglas Hurd. London: Allen Lane, 2015. ISBN 978-0141979410. 102 pp. £12.99.

Among the various books recently published concerning the life of Queen Elizabeth II and her long reign, such as Kate Williams' *Young Elizabeth. The Making of the Queen* (2015), Philip Murphy's *Monarchy and the End of the Empire* (2013), or Ingrid Seward's *The Queen's Speech* (2015), Douglas Hurd's contribution to the field distinguishes itself by its unique liveliness and freshness. Indeed, in under ninety pages the book provides a short yet compelling biography of the current Queen of Great Britain, from her early days as the granddaughter of King George V to her current role as a symbol of unity, tradition and steadfastness, not only for the United Kingdom but also more broadly for the Commonwealth.

Hurd's book is part of a new series published by Penguin and dedicated to all the English and British monarchs (including Cromwell) since the reign of Athelstan. Athelstan, the first "King of the whole of Britain", is also the subject of the book released on 30 June 2016, which is the first of the series from a chronological point of view. Instead, the first sovereigns considered for this new series and published in 2014 were George VI, Henry VIII, Edward VI, George V and Charles I; more titles followed in 2015 (the one on Elizabeth II aside, there have been works on Henry V, William II, Stephen and William IV) and the series should reach completion in 2017. The aim of this ambitious project is to offer historically accurate, enjoyable reading for both history enthusiasts and students, and at the same time inform on both the lives of the rulers and the evolution of the British monarchy as an institution.

Hurd's volume contains a brief preface by HRH Prince William, Duke of Cambridge, in which he praises his grandmother's dedication and sense of duty, and frames the Queen's immediate relations by way of a genealogical table. The book, aided by a beautiful imprint and neat layout, also includes eight pages of carefully selected black-and-white and colour pictures; the images are not completely unfamiliar to the average reader, yet they represent a good selection that sum up the long life of Her Majesty iconographically. Finally, at the end of the text Hurd suggests further readings on the topic; despite the list's brevity, it succeeds in being quite comprehensive as well as a useful starting point for those approaching the subject of the contemporary British monarchy for the first time.

Before considering the value of this publication, it is necessary to make some preliminary remarks to pinpoint the publication's weaknesses.

One major vulnerability of Douglas Hurd's work is its very author. Because of his role as Home Secretary (1985–1989) and, later, as Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1989–1995), Hurd frequently met the Queen and even travelled abroad in her company for political reasons (the first trip is recalled at the beginning of the book), but he does not possess a strong academic background, which should be an important requirement for this series' authors. Hurd himself admits that he does not "claim any privileged access to [the Queen's] thoughts or inner feelings, nor [is he] qualified to produce a definitive account of

the constitutional significance of her reign”(4). Therefore, Penguin’s choice to commission Hurd for a book on the current monarch seems questionable; as previously noted, Hurd is neither a renowned historian such as David Cannadine or Philip Ziegler, the biographers of George V and George VI, nor a close courtier of Her Majesty. Moreover, Hurd’s political association (as an active politician for the Conservatives, 1974–1995, and then as a member of the House of Lords) is a strong one, which somewhat undermines the book’s objectivity and value.

A second major problem is the lack of depth in Hurd’s analysis. While it is quite obvious that no book can be truly comprehensive about the subject, certain events recounted, such as Edward VIII’s abdication crisis, death of Princess Diana, reform of the Civil List and the future of the Commonwealth, could have deserved deeper scrutiny. Instead, the concision required by the series forces Hurd to cut short on a lot of interesting suggestions and prevents the narration from becoming more academic and less gossipy; sometimes it even looks like many interesting cues rest more on hearsay than on solid research. Furthermore, the continuous alternation between a more thematic approach and the actual chronological order of the events makes it more difficult to follow for those less familiar with the United Kingdom’s political evolution, or with the European constitutional changes of the twentieth century.

Finally, the presence of typographical errors (such as in the genealogical tree) contrasts quite significantly with the book’s otherwise professional layout and accuracy that helped to create Penguin’s international reputation.

Regardless of these flaws, the book presents some unquestionable qualities such as its concision and general tone: with Hurd’s combination of personal memories and historical facts, he keeps the reader’s attention alive and his elegant prose makes it a particularly pleasant experience for the reader. Besides, although the actual political significance of the monarchy struggles to surface in his writing, Hurd’s portrait of the Queen is full of grace and empathy, allowing for Her Majesty’s great personal stature to still come out strongly between the lines of his work. Indeed, as the “bright star” sung by John Keats, the Queen at the age of ninety is still as steadfast as on the first day of her reign, over sixty-four years ago, and her example continues to shine even for those critical of the United Kingdom’s form of government.

Ultimately, every book stirring new, genuine interest for the British monarchy should be applauded. *Elizabeth II. The Steadfast*, despite its limitations, is no exception.

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