Bulky, expensive, and gossipy books on the British monarchy continue to pour from the presses in an unending stream. Eric R. Delderfield's summary is none of the above, but it is surely one of the best brief accounts of a monarchy that has numbered some 66 rulers and 10 dynasties, and is now almost 1200 years old. Until the days of Richard II we have little idea of what the monarchs looked like, aside, that is, from some stilted tomb effigies or rather crude coin images. But starting at the end of the fourteenth century we begin to see the royalty as flesh and blood as vividly coloured portraits from the National Gallery gaze out at us in various moods and poses.

Naturally the earlier kings -- Saxons, Normans and Plantagenets--are passed over rather quickly in Delderfield's first 40 pages. Yet even so, medieval anecdotes often save these biographies from being sparse political narratives. From Alfred's cakes to Harold's death by an arrow in the eye to the "nineteen long winters" of King Stephen's reign, we arrive at the wild-tempered Plantagenets with their governmental efficiency and heavy taxes.

Richard the Lionheart's squandering of a fortune on the Crusades ("I would have sold London itself if I could have found a rich enough buyer") gives way to the economic troubles of his younger brother John, the John "Lackland" of Magna Carta fame. It was John's sudden death "after eating peaches and beer" that quite possibly saved England from an autocratic monarchy after the French model, and led to his grandson Edward I's remarkable (if undeserved) reputation as "the father to the 'Mother of all Parliaments'". The great father was followed by a "feeble and perverted" son, Edward II. And then the noble genes showed up once again in Edward III, the great medieval knight who wore out himself, his son (the brutal Black Prince), and his country in the useless Hundred Years' War in France.

One of the strengths of Delderfield's book is that the accounts of the monarchs do not bog down endlessly in the events of their various wars. The progress of Scottish independence, for example, provides a bright strand which will be cheered by many of the readers of this journal. Such themes, along with clear genealogical tables for each succeeding dynasty, provide the political framework without being
intrusive, and the solid accomplishments of monarchs are well delineated.

Having sketched the first eight centuries of Britain's story, Delderfield can afford to slacken the pace with the onset of the Tudors in 1485, and with the more familiar territory of the Stuarts and Hanoverians. In Victoria's reign, however, a new element is introduced to historical biography. That is the advent of photography. From the quaint picture of the dumpy little queen on horseback attended by her faithful John Brown to the one of Prince Charles and Diana exchanging the famous balcony kiss, photography has changed the face of royalty. Today, we are on more intimate terms with our monarchs, and therein lies a dilemma: popularity strengthens the monarchy; yet it has a darker side. It ruthlessly destroys the privacy of those it adulates, and in the end it may (as with the marital misadventures of some of the younger "royals") breed contempt.

Yet taken in a historical context, individual kings and queens have, for all their weaknesses, presided over a system that brought remarkable stability to the British Isles as well as to those parts of the world which derived both their governmental institutions and their law from Great Britain. It is a compelling argument for the strength of the institution of the monarchy that it could survive the weak, the lazy, the immoral, and the slack rulers of the past 1200 years. Today the prestige of the monarchy is--despite the fallout from the tabloids--at the highest level in history. Much of its durability dates back to Elizabeth II's great-great-grandmother, Victoria, who rescued the monarchy from the Hanoverian Georges, and to Elizabeth II's grandfather, George V, who reasserted its respectability. Of the ten monarchies remaining in Europe today (there were twenty at Victoria's death in 1901), the British has managed to adapt best to "the strain of being forever in the public eye."

Certainly in evaluating the monarchy we need, above all, historical perspective. What a pity, therefore, that Canadian educationists for a generation now have banished British history from the classroom, so that not even at the secondary school level is there any time allotted to a study of the British monarchy. Eric Delderfield's compact, clearly written, and sympathetic book should be required reading for all Canadians who, through no fault of their own, have been deprived of their British heritage.

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