



The Queen Mother: The Official Biography

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The official and definitive biography of Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother: consort of King George VI, mother of Queen Elizabeth II, grandmother of Prince Charles—and the most beloved British monarch of the twentieth century.

Elizabeth Angela Marguerite Bowes-Lyon—the ninth of the Earl of Strathmore’s ten children—was born on August 4, 1900, and, certainly, no one could have imagined that her long life (she died in 2002) would come to reflect a changing nation over the course of an entire century. Now, William Shawcross—given unrestricted access to the Queen Mother’s personal papers, letters, and diaries—gives us a portrait of unprecedented vividness and detail. Here is the girl who helped convalescing soldiers during the First World War . . . the young Duchess of York helping her reluctant husband assume the throne when his brother abdicated . . . the Queen refusing to take refuge from the bombing of London, risking her own life to instill courage and hope in others who were living through the Blitz . . . the dowager Queen—the last Edwardian, the charming survivor of a long-lost era—representing her nation at home and abroad . . . the matriarch of the Royal Family and “the nation’s best-loved grandmother.”

A revelatory royal biography that is, as well, a singular history of Britain in the twentieth century.

The Queen Mother: The Official Biography Details

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Ekaterina says

The Queen Mother was an amazing person! Wow! She was incredible.

When I picked up this book, I was hoping to also learn a little bit about British history in the 20th century. I was not disappointed. The book was primarily about the Queen Mother, obviously, but I also learned a lot about the changes in England, the monarchy, and about the economy (generally speaking.)

I really loved the part in the book about England during World War II. I knew that England was important in the war, suffered from the bombings, and how Winston Churchill was important, but I had no idea how large those three things were. At one point in the book, Eleanor Roosevelt visits England before America enters the war. She describes how you can see Nazi occupied France over the channel, you really get the feeling like the enemies are in your backyard. In America, they didn't know what that felt. That made an impact on me, especially thinking about America's part during World War II. I also really liked the quotes in the book from Winston Churchill. I didn't realize how eloquent he was. I now want to learn more about his life.

The writing was slightly dry. I was expecting this because it's an in-depth biography, but I don't think everyone would enjoy the book based on the writing. I would recommend this book to anyone who is extremely interested in royalty in general, history, and the British royal family.

Caidyn (SEMI-HIATUS; BW Reviews; he/him/his) says

This review can also be found [here](#)!

The thing that stands out most to me is the small print about this being the official biography of Queen Elizabeth, The Queen Mother. Shawcross states as much in the introduction that Queen Elizabeth II asked him to write this biography. Which means that this is pretty biased towards her.

It glosses over the nasty things. Such as Diana, the Queen Mother's reported alcohol abuse (although reading up on it a bit, I don't see it as abuse), and her intimate thoughts on things.

It's pretty clean. It keeps calm and cool and diplomatic, just as she was in her public life. So, that's important to remember. This is a biography that her daughter asked the author to write.

But, honestly, I really liked this book.

I found her life interesting beforehand because of the circumstances of it. She was never going to be a queen. Never. She married Albert and then, because of his brother, Albert became George VI and history changed. And then her husband died so young, leaving her widowed and she lived half of her life without him. That's crazy and fascinating to me.

The Queen Mother was a fascinating woman. She had such life, such vivacity. She lived through two huge wars, members of her family dying in each. She became something that she never expected in her life. And

she handled it all with such grace and was a role model for so many people because of how she was.

Sure, I don't agree with her conservative views, but I still think that she was a fantastic woman someone can look up to. I hope that I can hold my head up, find humor in all things, and enjoy life fully like she did.

I'm very glad I read this book, even if I wish it had gone more into how she felt about huge points in the history of her daughter's reign. Would I reread this? Maybe. Maybe one day when I want to delve back into her life because she had a great one that she lived to the fullest.

Angie says

Being an "official" biography it's a little squeaky clean, but still plenty interesting, well-written and well-narrated.

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Sheena says

This was unbelievably difficult to get through. I have not ever read anything as detailed, meticulously researched and with as many footnotes. I have to say that I am very glad that I stayed the course and finished it. I thoroughly enjoyed the history of both World Wars and it brought to life all the stories I had been told during childhood. My impetus for reading this book was really seeing the current film "The King's Speech". The subject of George VI's stuttering problem is given very little attention. Since this book is actually an "official biography", I feel this is probably a very sanitized version of most events. Great care seems to have been taken to cast the royal family in a favorable light at all times and very little is mentioned in regard to Edward VIII and Wallis Simpson's roles as Nazi sympathizers. I really was not interested in so much staggering detail. I feel as though I was present for every meal and conversation that the woman had in her entire life.

Nancy Loe says

I didn't expect a seminal work from this official biography - I should probably give Hugo Vickers' 2002 work a whirl for that. But I did appreciate the liberal use of correspondence and other personal papers Shawcross was given access to.

The bio is riveting up through George VI's death and then went off a cliff into some rather numbing recitations, including her "welfare and warfare" patronages. I can't decide if her life did turn boring after her husband died or if Shawcross is just being enormously discreet about still living people in the second half of her life. Probably the latter.

Judy says

At 943 pages, this may be more than anyone who isn't a "royalty buff" may ever want to know about Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother. I'm fairly exhausted after reading the book--primarily because the sucker is really, really heavy. I've been reading this book for what seems like weeks, 50 and 100 pages at a time, and still I'm left feeling unsatisfied. It's an official biography, which apparently means that the author is a total admirer of the Queen Mother and the current Queen so that scandals are swept under the rug along with any information that casts the main character in an unflattering light. I was interested in the information about Prince Albert wooing Lady Elizabeth Bowes Lyon and in the fact that she repeatedly turned down his marriage proposals. Why she then changed her mind and accepted is really not made clear. Also I was longing to get to the parts of the book featuring the Queen Mother's relationships with and feelings about Wallis Warfield Simpson and Princess Diana. Sadly, that was glossed over for the most part. In the end, this is a fluff piece--a really, really long fluff piece. Yet I came away admiring the woman that Elizabeth was, missing warts and all.

Jessica says

This book started out as a bang for me. The Queen Mum was way more fascinating then I anticipated or remembered about her. Towards the end the book starts to lose itself. Entire chapters (which are not short) were devoted to her charity work and travels. Although, on the surface this seems like a good thing to write about it, it knocks the entire book out of chronological order for a very dull side road---especially as they had been peppered through out the previous 600 pages. Interesting enough she had political views, forgiving and never let first impressions scare her...otherwise she would have always feared Churchill. Speaking of Churchill he SHINES in the book. I found myself highlighting whole pages of gems and even learned something new.

Natalie Tyler says

What ho! as the Queen Mother was wont to begin her letters when she was a young woman. This biography sheds fascinating light on the Queen Mother as a child and as a young woman. Especially amusing were the quotations from the letters she wrote at the time---a bit racy and saucy and full of puns, double entendres, and other lively palaver. After she married "Bertie" (the Duke of York and then King George VI) the book becomes much more decorous and starts to bog down.

I doubt that she lost her vivacity but I suspect that she had to train and restrain it to fulfill her public role. Intelligent without being learned, witty without being callow, energetic without being manic, this great Queen seems to have been the perfect ingredient to add to the royal family. She provided a little touch of humanity to off-set the stifling propriety of King George V and Queen Mary.

Because it's an official biography--or maybe because she was very well-disciplined, the Queen Mother's letters become more stilted and less natural as time passes. She was an endearing character who managed to win love and respect both from Buckingham House and from the public.

This book is huge and it's not totally satisfactory as history or as biography. And what ho! That saucy Princess Margaret burned so many of her mother's letters that we have lost some potentially great

commentary and a possible dish of dishiness. Alas!

Katherine says

Absolutely fascinating and surprisingly topical look into not only the Queen Mother's personal and private family life, but a simultaneous look into the history and politics of Great Britain during the Queen Mother's 100+ year life.

William Shawcross the biographer and historian, explains how the Queen Mother and members of her immediate family made important decisions and how they then lived with the outcomes of these decisions. Topical book because what went on with Great Britain in the 1930's through the 1970's is going on right now in America.

For example, the breakdown of traditional marriage, the emergence of a secular society, the growth of a casual society with a growing lack of civility and respect for others, government pouring money into poor schools to no avail because the underlying problem was the breakdown of the family, the growth and intrusion of government in general, inflation, an agricultural drought and how a single "Death Duty" tax bankrupted the "Landed Gentry" class, their way of life and the massive loss of jobs of the traditional servant class they employed, the loss of industry due to corrupt unions and unskilled workers, the loss of the power of Great Britain on a grand, worldwide scale, class warfare, unending government spending again and again, even after the infusion of 25 Billion US dollars the American Heiresses infused into Britain's economy from the 1880's up until

before WWI, and the effect two world wars had on their federal budget, the Royals in general, the Queen Mother, her immediate family, and their way of life.

Shannon Vincent Nelson says

One of the best biographies I've read of an incredibly interesting life and an even more fascinating woman.

While not for the faint of heart at almost 1,000 pages, The Queen Mother portrays the interesting life and experiences of a common woman who ascends to the throne of England. The Queen Mother proves a fascinating character shaped by her childhood experiences, sense of duty, joy for life, and love of family. Her experiences alone make this book worthwhile, but by reading her correspondences with family and friends, one gets to really understand the reason for her appeal during her 101 years of life.

In addition to learning about the Queen Mother, you also get a glimpse of the 20th century in England from World War II, the abdication crisis, World War II, and the emergence of the modern UK. And as they say, sometimes truth is much better than fiction.

Tracy says

This amazing woman, who became queen only because she was married to the brother of Edward VII who abdicated the throne, was gracious and as well-loved as Princess Diana two generations later. Born in 1900 and buried in 2002 she experienced the entire 20th century including two world wars, drastic changes in the views of the people toward the monarchy, and personal pain as she outlived siblings and her husband. This is a wonderful story of what she and her world were like.

Baxter says

None of my friends or relatives would likely read this biography. One review I read of it had the reader 'tired' from covering almost 1,000 pages of 101+ years of history, holding a 5 pound book along the way. I feel somewhat the same way having just finished it. Well written, though does get bogged down w/ reviews of QEOM's regiments, patronages, trips to Canada. During her widowhood, the 22 'private' trips to France w/ her entourage over 30 years were interesting in that her private secretary had to find just the right French region, the best chateau, the wealthiest host and busy itineraries to keep her interested. What determination this lady possessed. QEOM was the last of a breed of aristocrats who had the pampered life and loved it without guilt. But she also could mix with all types, thereby endearing herself to the masses. She and Churchill likely held Britain together after the abdication and WWII. She kept going almost to the end. A wonderful life!

Mark Hollingsworth says

The author was given exclusive access to the archives of the Royal family to write this biography. As a result it is a warm and generous, yet balanced, perspective on the life of the Queen Mother. More importantly it is a unique perspective on the history of the 20th century, with the Queen Mother being born in 1900 and living for over 100 years.

You cannot but help feel a great deal of sympathy for her as you read this book. Growing up in the period of the First World War, when her house became a military hospital, and so many of her friends were killed in that most tragic conflict. Then a reluctance to marry into the Royal family, eventually gave way to love for the future King George. The author captures wonderfully the relationship between the Queen Mother and the Royal family, and handles with care and considerable skill that most difficult period of the abdication in 1936 of King Edward brought about by his relationship with Mrs Simpson. You feel the immense burden that fell upon the Queen Mother, the new king George, and her 2 daughters, one of whom of course goes on to be Queen herself.

The rest as they say is history, and through skilled narrative, diary and letter extracts, we see the Queen Mother emerge from the tragedy of the early death of her husband, whilst still a relatively young woman and then how she handles the next 50 years of her life as a widow.

What emerges is a very human account of a remarkable woman, who was still enjoying tea from her 1940s brown china teapot, and strong dry martinis, well into her 90s! This book is an inspiration in how to enjoy life to the full.

Phillis says

What an amazing book. I felt as if I lived her whole life as a friend and from day one, August 1900 until her death in March 2002. The author has written about the life of a very well loved woman without sugar coating or over dramatizing the Queen Mother's life. The author's insight and research was complete and

non-biased and made for a very entertaining history of this most loved person. For questions on why she did or didn't do certain things was explained by way of learning the how and why of Elizabeth, the person. I am looking forward to reading William Shawcross' book of Queen Elizabeth II.

Angie Rhodes says

This has taken me months to finish, over a 1000 pages, but a great read, some reviews have said that she was a little full of herself as a child etc, personally I just think, she was comfortable in her own skin., liked to help people when and where she could. I enjoyed reading about her life, her family,,and what made her tick. Some people will hate it. others will love it. You don't have to be a Royalist to enjoy it.

Amy says

A phenomenal book!

Author, William Shawcross states in the Epilogue that fate dealt the Queen Mother an extraordinary hand and that this book attempted to show what she made of it.

She had an incredible life! I learned so much about the Queen Mother and her family from this book; I also gained a wealth of information about Great Britain and its history. For example, in 1772 the Royal Marriages Act was put into place after two of King George III's brothers secretly married commoners of whom the King did not approve. The Royal Marriages Act requires the sovereign's approval before members of the royal family can marry a commoner -- this "law" is still in effect today!

Queen Elizabeth and King George VI married for love and theirs was a cherished period in the history of England. However, her relationship with the Duke of Windsor after he abdicated the throne and Wallis Simpson could be described as chilly at best. I believe she long thought that by abdicating the throne, the Duke, was responsible for the death of King George VI at such a young age.

People are always debating the merits when the United States steps into various conflicts around the world. Both Churchill and King George VI wanted to draw the US into the war as an ally of Britain. While Roosevelt was willing to provide supplies to Britain, he was not yet willing to "go to war".

Early in 1941, a new basis for the purchase of American material was introduced. It was intended to make arms and supplies available to governments whose defense was considered vital to the defense of the United States. The Lend-Lease Act, passed by Congress on March 11th, gave Britain extended credit, allowing the country to buy equipment, oil and other supplies, and would not have to be paid for until the end of the war ... However, this war debt was not actually paid off until 2007!!

Many people on Goodreads have stated that this book is not very good after King George VI dies. I disagree. The reader is introduced to a slightly different side of Queen Elizabeth in the 50 years after the King's passing.

And yes, she is known as Queen Elizabeth after the King dies. Her daughter, Queen Elizabeth II (the reigning monarch) is known as THE QUEEN.

Queen Elizabeth developed a keen interest in horses and horse racing beginning in the early 50's. One of her jockeys was none other than famed author, Dick Francis, who recently passed away at the age of 89.

I mentioned the Royal Marriages Act of 1772 above. That Act came into play again when Princess Margaret was contemplating marriage to Peter Townsend, a commoner in the mid-50's.

Queen Elizabeth believed that people should marry for love, but she also believed that duty to the crown should always come first. If Princess Margaret wished to marry Townsend, she would have to renounce her royal status. After a matter of some arduous years, they mutually decided that marriage would not work.

Throughout this book, I thought about this relationship and that of Prince Charles and Princess Diana vs. Camilla Parker Bowles. How would history have changed if these people had been allowed to marry for love instead of for duty?

Queen Elizabeth had many patronages that she supported through the years. For the reader, there is a 15-page alphabetical list at the end of this book of all the patronages Queen Elizabeth sponsored along with the years and offices served. As you read this book, it will come as no surprise to learn that she had a special affection for groups relating to WWII. She also had some other interesting passions including the Aberdeen Angus Cattle Society (p. 742).

Queen Elizabeth had a passion for her patronages, but she was also impassioned for her family. She spoke to The Queen at least once a day and had great relationships with her grandchildren -- King Charles was a favorite!

She also had a fantastic relationship with Antony, Earl of Snowdon before and after his divorce from Princess Margaret.

It was [naturally:] very upsetting whenever Queen Elizabeth lost a family member or friend or employee -- at 101, she outlived so many including all of her siblings. I do not mean to be disrespectful, but it could almost be considered a fluke that she lived as long as she did.

Probably the saddest event (besides the death of the King) was the passing of her younger daughter, Princess Margaret on February 9, 2002. Princess Margaret had been ill for awhile and while her death came as no surprise ... the death of a child ...

Queen Elizabeth passed away at 3:15 on March 30, 2002.

There is so much more that I could have added to this review, but did not. The information discerned in this book is fascinating! I am not a student of the royals meaning I have not read everything out there, but I do like history and I sincerely believe that anybody who has a taste for learning about the past, will love the book!

Maureen says

The first half was really enjoyable, but after King George VI dies, the book becomes more a compilation of her patronage organizations and house party guests. The earlier part of the book gives insight into family

relationships by quoting letters from various royals, especially Queen Mary, but as the book goes on the material is thinner. There is no discussion of her relationship with Queen Elizabeth, Princess Margaret, Princess Diana, or her grandchildren.

Leigh says

Oh, Lord...what can I say? The book is a total whitewash of Queen Elizabeth (the one that was married to George VI) and her life. Granted, she was a hard working Royal who was devoted to the British public. But she also drank hard, held grudges like a bulldog and ran up a multimillion debt at Coutt's, Britain's richest bank. She was one of the most interesting women of the 20th century and this book could have been a really interesting look at her. But instead it glosses over her weaknesses, justifies her faults and trumpets her strengths to no end. It's a shame.

Barbara says

This book was fantastic! I usually reread a couple of books a day, but this one lasted almost three weeks. The author used hundreds of sources to flesh out, not only the person of the Queen Mother, but her husband, King George VI, his parents, their kids, his brother King Edward and the woman he abdicated his throne for, and many, many others, including Winston Churchill. The historical perspective it gave was priceless, stretching from the beginning of the twentieth century for a hundred years. I also learned so much about the rules and customs governing the royals and how they came about. I was impressed to learn that at the beginning, even the most humble peasant felt it an honor to support the royalty, while at the end, the populace had come to feel as if the royals were living off the back breaking work of the common man. The hundreds of small changes over those hundred years added up to cause one of the most far-reaching transformations in the history of the British Empire. This book is a must read.

Isa Lavinia says

The Queen Mother On being pregnant with the future Queen Elizabeth II:

"The sight of wine simply turns me up! Isn't it extraordinary?" she wrote to her husband in September. 'It will be a tragedy if I never recover my drinking powers.' She need not have worried."

LOL

Very tame, but then again it's an official biography. Still, The Queen Mother did write very entertaining letters.
