

Netflix series on Elizabeth II

The Crown: Sentenced to be queen

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“Despotism is unjust to everybody, including the despot, who was probably made for better things . . . [A]ll authority is quite degrading. It degrades those who exercise it, and degrades those over whom it is exercised. ” Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*

The Crown is a biographical drama series, created and written by Peter Morgan (*The Queen, The Damned United*), about the life and reign of Britain’s Queen Elizabeth II.

The first, 10-episode season on Netflix treats the period from 1947, when the future Queen marries Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, to 1955. Her coronation in June 1953 (her father, King George VI, dies in February 1952) obviously occupies a central place in the initial season. The Queen’s relationship with aging Conservative Prime Minister Winston Churchill and his, in turn, with political heir apparent, Anthony Eden, are also prominently featured.

“The British monarchy,” commented Leon Trotsky in 1924, and “hypocritical British conservatism” in general, “religiosity, servility, sanctimoniousness—all this is old rags, rubbish, the refuse of centuries which we have no need for whatsoever.”

Every genuine socialist will agree with this essential truth. But does that mean that a drama about the Queen of England and her various relations, associates and employees, which almost inevitably results in “humanizing” them to some extent, can have no possible value? Those who feel that way should probably read no further.

Unquestionably, there is always the genuine danger in such a project of condoning or justifying the behavior and even the institutions represented, along the lines of the French saying, “To understand all is to forgive all.”

As well, before any reader gets the wrong impression, *The Crown* is not in any profound fashion a historical or political critique of the monarchy. Rather, it is an imagining of the relationships among the members of the British royal family as though they were, so to speak, “real people.”

As such, it is intelligently constructed and well performed. The Netflix series is quite sharp and even profound on certain matters—and dangerously wrongheaded, as we will discuss below, on others.

The sharpness and best elements in *The Crown* generally come from the fact that British writers and directors, far more than their counterparts in America, for example, continue to view class as a determining factor of social life. In the US, a comparable drama—about the Roosevelts or the Kennedys, perhaps, or even, God forbid, the Clintons—would contain moments of acting bravura and remarkable recreations of certain settings and occasions, but it would almost inevitably tie itself up in knots attempting to show how individual determination or will overcomes social constraints. Personal freedom through personal struggle, even if the struggle is ultimately unsuccessful, is the common American theme, and it’s a very threadbare one.

In *The Crown*, Peter Morgan, along with directors Stephen Daldry, Philip Martin, Julian Jarrold and Benjamin Caron in the first season, emphasizes the monstrousness of the monarchy as an entity and

demonstrates dramatically that its demands are implacable and inescapable. “Duty” for everyone involved (and this is *not* sacrifice for some higher cause either, but simply that of preserving the British ruling setup) requires the suppression of whatever elementary or vestigial human feeling they possess.

In a revealing letter (in the second episode, “Hyde Park Corner”), Elizabeth’s grandmother, Queen Mary, the widow of King George V, appeals to her granddaughter—following the death of the latter’s father—to put sentiments such as grief “to one side now, for duty calls. . . . I have seen three great monarchies brought down through their failure to separate personal indulgences from duty. You must not allow yourself to make similar mistakes. And while you mourn your father, you must also mourn someone else. Elizabeth Mountbatten. For she has now been replaced by another person, Elizabeth Regina [i.e., Queen Elizabeth]. The two Elizabeths will frequently be in conflict with one another. The fact is, the Crown must win. Must always win.”

The series is essentially a fictional working through of numerous episodes and conflicts in which “the Crown” and the social forces that stand behind it triumph every time.

The viewer is not obliged to feel the slightest sympathy for individuals who lead lives of immense wealth and privilege at the direct expense of the British people, but it is clearly the creators’ notion that the Queen and her relations have been sentenced to an existence that dehumanizes and makes them miserable. In an interview with *Radio Times*, Morgan referred to “the imprisonment of the institution. And the suffering of the family ripples out from the crown, inflicting profound abuse on people upon whom it’s assumed it only projects luxury. It’s a hideous thing for them.”

There is also the matter that while politicians choose, within definite limits, to be what they become, members of the royal family are born into their situation and have for all intents and purposes no choice. There is something touching about the 13-year-old Elizabeth taking lessons on the British constitution from the vice-provost of Eton College. Probably no one deserves to be despised as the future head of state of a great power at age 13.

Trotsky once noted that “the great, moving forces of history,” including monarchy, “operate through people,” and this in itself justified an interest in the personality of a historically significant monarch. But he added that it was necessary to show “just where in a personality the strictly personal ends—often much sooner than we think—and how frequently the ‘distinguishing traits’ of a person are merely individual scratches made by a higher law of development.”

In its most compelling portions, *The Crown* demonstrates this predominance of the objective, of class forces, of historical law. It is a corrective to various forms of “left” subjectivism, which simplify life by reducing events and processes to the personal wickedness of those in power. The wretched people in this series are *entirely* the playthings of forces beyond their control.

In the earliest episodes, Elizabeth’s father, George VI (Jared Harris), is

portrayed—in a flashback—as a man who only very reluctantly became king in 1936 when his brother, Edward VIII (Alex Jennings), now the Duke of Windsor during the series' time-frame, abdicated. George VI dies of lung cancer and accompanying ailments at 56 in 1952. His widow (Victoria Hamilton) blames Edward (“the man is a monster”) for the early death: “The responsibility of becoming king killed your father and I will never forgive his [the Duke of Windsor’s] selfishness and weakness in passing on the burden.”

Following their wedding in 1947, Elizabeth and Philip (Matt Smith) have no success in determining for themselves elementary things such as where they will live and what their last name will be. Those decisions are made for them. Later, the Queen vainly attempts to select her own private secretary. She comes up against “Tommy” Lascelles (Pip Torrens), the previous holder of the position and the nightmarish personification of royal tradition and rectitude. Torrens’s performance, one of the most convincing and chilling in *The Crown*, has to be seen to be fully appreciated.

Expressionless and, as always, utterly leaden-toned, Lascelles lectures the Queen (in “Scientia Potentia Est”) on why her choice for private secretary, Martin Charteris (Harry Hadden-Paton), is the wrong one:

“There’s a way of doing things here. An order developed over time, generations. And individuality in the House of Windsor, any departure from that way of doing things, is not to be encouraged. It results in catastrophes like the abdication. ... [I]t’s in the small things that the rot starts. Do the wrong thing once, it’s easier to do it again. Do the individualistic thing once, it is easy to do it again. ... The next in line and the senior of my two deputies and the natural heir is Michael [Adeane].”

“Your man.”

“The right man. But as always, the final say is with you, Ma’am.”

But, of course, it never is. And Lascelles, from his point of view, is quite right. Any reform of the archaic, irrational institution, any weakening of its “order developed over time,” might open the door to its being called into question as a whole.

In regard to this issue, existential threats to the monarchy, *The Crown* reveals a schizophrenic attitude, or perhaps reflects the royal family’s own one. On the one hand, the series tediously shows us scene after scene, in various parts of the globe, of crowds cheering the Queen and her consort-husband. (Was there no one in Britain or Kenya or Northern Ireland or Jamaica who did not offer rousing support?) On the other, every member of the monarchic inner circle, plus each top government official, is terrified lest popular sentiment should suddenly and radically alter. The suppression of every hint of royal scandal or even eccentricity is justified on the grounds that it might jeopardize public support.

The series spends a good deal of time, too much time, in fact, on the relationship between Princess Margaret (Vanessa Kirby), the Queen’s younger sister, and Group Captain Peter Townsend (Ben Miles), an older man in the process of getting a divorce. The ins and outs of the affair are fairly complicated, but the gist of it is this: as a member of the immediate royal family, Margaret needs her sister’s moral support, in opposition to the government and the Church of England, to wed a divorced man. In the end, despite earlier pledges of that support, Elizabeth accedes to pressure and facilitates the break-up of the relationship. The implication is that her sister’s life will go downhill from here.

The Queen’s mother, inevitably accompanied by the relentless Lascelles, first warns Elizabeth (in “Gelignite”) that “If Margaret were to marry Peter, it would be a scandal. Don’t mistake your current popularity for long-term security. Your uncle’s affair and abdication almost destroyed the monarchy. This could too.”

When the royal family, in alliance with the government, succeeds in crushing the Margaret-Townsend romance, the newspapers denounce the former for their brutality. One editorial (read out loud by Prince Philip)

comments: “The near-holy reverence shown for the Crown by the people of Britain is a fact of life, as the recent coronation has shown. ... Can that veneration be sustained in the light of the Royal family’s cruelty to its very own members? The Royal family in Britain has survived a thousand proofs that it is artificial and superfluous and seems to have as deep a hold as ever on the loyalties of the people. It is not likely, however, to survive the clear proof that it is insensate and cruel. The treatment of her sister has now jeopardized the future of the monarchy in Britain.”

Philip, painted as a generally unsavory, selfish womanizer, with quite reactionary political connections, seems especially sensitive to the question of popular mood. In “Smoke and Mirrors,” which treats preparations for the coronation and the event itself in June 1953, he argues in blunt terms for televising and generally “modernizing” (paring down) the ceremony. When Elizabeth expresses incredulity at his plan to invite “trade unionists and businessmen” to Westminster Abbey, Philip replies: “If you want to stay on the throne, yes. ... If you want to avoid a revolution, yes. You forget. I have seen first-hand what it is like for a royal family to be overthrown because they were out of step with the people. I left Greece in an orange crate. My father would have been killed. My grandfather was. I’m just trying to protect you.”

(Philip’s grandfather, King George I of Greece, was assassinated in 1913. His father, Prince Andrew of Greece and Denmark, was arrested in an uprising in Greece in 1922 and banished from the country for life. Philip was transported in a cot made from a fruit box.)

Whatever else they don’t understand (“I know almost nothing,” Elizabeth complains to her mother, who, while sloshed, is watching, wonderfully, a trashy variety show on television), the leading members of the royal family do sense intuitively how central the Queen is to the British bourgeois order—that, in fact, she somehow holds it all together.

Walter Bagehot, journalist (founder and owner of the *Economist*, in fact) and essayist, in his famous work, *The English Constitution* (1867), the very book Elizabeth is studying with the vice-provost in *The Crown*, observed, “The use of the Queen [Victoria], in a dignified capacity, is incalculable. Without her in England, the present English Government would fail and pass away.”

Bagehot further noted that British royalty “seems to order, but it never seems to struggle. It is commonly hidden like a mystery, and sometimes paraded like a pageant, but in neither case is it contentious. The nation is divided into parties, but the crown is of no party. Its apparent separation from business is that which removes it both from enmities and from desecration, which preserves its mystery, which enables it to combine the affection of conflicting parties—to be a visible symbol of unity to those still so imperfectly educated as to need a symbol.”

This is an *approving* manner of dealing with a social phenomenon Trotsky treats *critically* —i.e., that “the office of kingship is an interrelation between people...the king is king only because the interests and prejudices of millions of people are refracted through his person” and that what the British bourgeoisie specifically “has been able to achieve is a sort of hypnotic fascination for its culture, its world-historical importance.”

John Lithgow is very fine as Churchill, the cunning, coldblooded imperialist politician, whose career already dates back more than half a century when *The Crown* opens. The series offers what it surely considers to be a balanced picture of the geriatric prime minister, but since it accepts the British establishment on the whole, or at least considers its foundations to be immovable, *The Crown*, in its passive conservatism, paints a generally sympathetic portrait.

However, it is not overly flattering and, indeed, Churchill’s dark and ruthless side emerges at certain important junctures. “Act of God” takes place in part during the Great Smog of London in December 1952, when a cold front, combined with windless conditions, resulted in airborne pollutants (mainly coal-produced) forming an almost impenetrable smog

over the city for several days. “At Richmond Bridge this morning, visibility was officially measured at one yard,” we hear.

As conditions for masses of people worsen and hospitals fill up, Churchill expresses his indifference at a cabinet meeting: “Fog is fog. It comes and it goes away. ... It’s an act of God, Bobbety. It’s weather.” The prime minister takes action only after one of his secretaries is killed in a smog-related accident. A title at the end of the episode notes that government medical reports at the time estimated that 4,000 people died as a direct result of the smog, while more recent research suggests that it caused some 12,000 fatalities.

At this point in history, despite age and illness (at one point he is near death for a week, as the result of a stroke, a fact that is hidden from Elizabeth), Churchill is desperately clinging to power.

One of the more telling sequences is a confrontation with Anthony Eden, impatiently next in line for the premiership, at Churchill’s country home, which explodes into verbal and near-physical violence. Churchill taunts Eden, who himself is in very poor health. “Be careful, Anthony, too much excitement is not good for one so soon after an operation,” he says. Eden replies, “Spoken by a man who only two months ago was effectively dead.” Churchill: “Which makes two of us.” Eden: “I have recovered.” Churchill, shaking with fury: “That’s not what I hear. I hear you are a shadow of your former self. That when you walk, the pills rattle around inside of you!”

A word should also be put in for Stephen Dillane for his intense, restrained performance as artist Graham Sutherland, whose warts-and-all portrait of Churchill deeply offends the vain politician.

Where *The Crown* goes most seriously and recklessly off-course is in its depiction of the Duke of Windsor, the abdicated Edward VIII. It seems to need the character as a dramatic foil to the constricted, protocol-governed royal family. The Duke is the “liberated” soul, the “one who got away.” And, as such, he is able to make all sorts of spiteful and sometimes truthful comments about the rest of the family. In “Windsor,” for example, while attending his brother’s funeral, the former king writes to his wife, the former Wallis Simpson (Lia Williams), in Paris, “They say hell is an inferno. What a sunless, frozen hell we both escaped in England. And what a bunch of ice-veined monsters my family are. How cold and thin-lipped, how dumpy and plain. How joyless and loveless.”

However, whatever their motives, the series creators have done a public disservice in rehabilitating one of the nastiest swine that walked the earth in the twentieth century. Edward VIII/the Duke of Windsor was a notorious anti-Semite and racist, pro-Nazi and ferociously anti-communist. In 1937, following his abdication, he and the Duchess of Windsor visited Adolf Hitler at his Bavarian mountain retreat. In the course of the visit, the Duke offered a full Nazi salute. The couple were known for their fascist sympathies before and during World War II, a conflict the former monarch blamed on “Roosevelt and the Jews.” For her part, Wallis Simpson reportedly conducted an affair with Joachim von Ribbentrop when the Nazi foreign secretary was in London. All in all, a loathsome pair!

Even in regard to the less personally reprehensible figures and assuming the best of intentions, it is difficult for film producers and directors to match actors closely and strictly with historical figures. Only at the highest level of dramatic art is such an identity truly possible, in cases where actors, strongly sustained by directors and their colleagues, disdain being “liked” by audiences and strive only for historical truth.

Even if the actual words spoken by Elizabeth II during the years in question were known to us, their very reading or performance by an appealing contemporary actress such as Claire Foy would give them a different, more amiable coloring. Foy does her best to portray someone of mediocre intellect and skills, a retiring young woman who would have preferred to spend her life in the countryside with dogs and horses, but she inevitably creates a human being, as do nearly all the performers, more

attractive than the original.

And, of course, these are *not* the actual words spoken by the Queen and family, they are lines of dialogue put down on paper by a “nonpartisan” and “objective” writer-creator, one who feels that the Queen “does the job well. If you got a team of scientists together you couldn’t create a better queen.”

This is not an argument for simply making the characters hateful—who would want to watch a 10-part series under those conditions?

In any event, taken with the necessary large grains of socio-historical salt, the results here are intriguing and even at times illuminating.



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