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This revised and updated edition published in 2021 by September Publishing

First published in 2002 by Hutchinson with the title *The Monarchy*

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Typeset by Ed Pickford

Printed in Poland on paper from responsibly managed,  
sustainable sources by Hussar Books

ISBN 9781912836932  
Epub ISBN 9781912836956

September Publishing  
[www.septemberpublishing.org](http://www.septemberpublishing.org)

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# Foreword

**W**E WERE YOUNG children living in the United States at the outbreak of World War Two. Our memories of that era are replete with images of the British Royal Family, as well as the British nation, enduring the dangers and hardships of war, and of King George VI, Queen Elizabeth, later the Queen Mother, and the Princesses, Elizabeth and Margaret Rose, inspecting damage and comforting the injured in bombed-out London.

As young adults, prior to meeting and marrying, each of us had lived in Britain for short periods of time, in the 1960s and 1970s respectively, and so we became increasingly aware of the Queen's substance beyond the pomp and ceremony of her constitutional role.

In 1998, after having written oral histories of the administrations of three of the major American presidents of the latter part of the twentieth century—John F. Kennedy, Richard M. Nixon, and Ronald W. Reagan—we sought as our next subject a personality of like stature. Queen Elizabeth II, with the historical sweep of her reign, coupled with the fascination of many Americans with the institution of the British monarchy, provided us with a most worthy subject.

Embarking on this project, we spent a considerable amount of time in the United Kingdom from 1998 to 2000, as well as traveling to the Commonwealth, and elsewhere, to gather information and perspective about the institution of the British monarchy.

When we returned to this book in 2020 for this revised edition, we realized just what a fascinating collection of insights about the first fifty years of the Queen's reign we had. Many of the contributors have now sadly died, and we feel extremely grateful to have been able to interview them and hear their experiences.

We had intended to travel again to the U.K. to interview more people on the last twenty years of Queen Elizabeth II's reign, but the global COVID-19 pandemic of course made that difficult. We have been fortunate to

be able to connect with a number of new interviewees as well as to have renewed contact with some of our original ones. We have made clear in the interviewees' biographies if they were interviewed for this second edition.

Any edits made to the original material are indicated with square brackets.

As we have closely followed the Queen's activities over the past two decades, it has been our pleasure to revisit her extraordinary reign.

Deborah Hart Strober and Gerald S. Strober  
New York, September 2021

PART ONE



# The House of Windsor

## CHAPTER 1

# The Accession of Queen Elizabeth II



**I**N THE EARLY morning hours of February 6, 1952, the Princess Elizabeth Alexandra Mary of Windsor, twenty-five, heiress presumptive<sup>1</sup> to the British Throne, became Queen Elizabeth II, by the Grace of God, Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and of her other Realms and Territories, Head of the Commonwealth, Defender of the Faith.

King George VI had died in his sleep of a heart attack during the night. The King's body was discovered at 7:30 that morning by his valet.

Only a day earlier, the King had been out in an unusually brilliant winter sunshine, enjoying his favorite sport, shooting. He had bagged nine hares and one pigeon. His last words to his companions were: "Well, it's been a very good day's sport, gentlemen!"

At 11:45 A.M., London time, on the day of the King's death, the heiress presumptive was at Sagana Lodge, a farm she and her husband, Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh, had been given as a wedding gift by the colonial government of Kenya. It was the first leg of a Commonwealth tour she had begun only days earlier, standing in for her ailing father.

Confusion reigned in the immediate hours after the King's death. Purportedly, a telegram was sent from Buckingham Palace to Kenya, informing the royal party of the King's death.

The heiress to the Throne actually learned that she had become Queen, however, after Martin Charteris, then attached to her Household and traveling with the royal couple in Kenya, heard a report on the radio and relayed the news to Michael Parker, a close friend of Prince Philip's who was in the royal entourage. Parker informed Prince Philip of the King's death, and he in turn broke the news to his wife.



\* \* \*

Lieutenant Commander John Michael Avison Parker (1920–2001), CVO, AM, equerry-in-waiting to Princess Elizabeth and the Duke of Edinburgh, 1947–52; private secretary to the Duke of Edinburgh, 1947–57 We'd been up the tree, and we'd seen a great herd of elephants and a lot of animals. At the dawn, I discovered a ladder going up to the top of the tree, where you could look over the jungle at Mount Kenya.

Prince Philip was asleep and she was looking out there, and I said: "Ma'am, would you like to come and look at the view?" So up she came with me and we had a look at the dawn of that terrible day, out there in Africa. But what a beautiful dawn it was; it was a fantastic sight!

We went down, and we all went on to Sagana Lodge, which was where we were staying. We had a day or so to adjust, and rest, and do things, before we went on to Mombasa, where we were going aboard a ship and on to Australia.

Well, Prince Philip went to sleep in his little room that was off to one side. The Princess was at her desk, writing thank-you letters, and some family letters—and to the King, I suppose—because we were going to be out of reach for a while and this was the last mail to go.

Then the phone rang. And Martin Charteris, the Princess's private secretary, said: "Mike, there's a ghastly rumor going round that the King has died." He was at a hotel in Nyeri, amongst all the press people there, and they were saying that they had heard.

So I said: "Well, Martin, that's frightening, but I cannot do a thing on a rumor like that. I just won't do anything." And he said: "That's just as well, but stand by."

Down went the phone. I saw a radio on the shelf above me. There was a door open to where the Princess was sitting, so I shut the door and switched on the radio and hunted about for the BBC, and then I could hear the bells of Big Ben ringing, very slowly.

I thought: Ye gods. And my hair stood up a little bit more. Then I heard the announcement. And that was that. I whizzed round the outside of the house, to the veranda, and in to where Prince Philip was sleeping, and told him.

He had just woken up from a heavy sleep and an Australian bloke comes in and tells him that his wife's father, the King, has just died, and she's become Queen. Can you imagine the impact?

First of all, there was his complete concern, his consideration for *her* as a human being, and secondly, the implications of the fact that she

was becoming the Queen and he is her husband. So a whole myriad of thoughts must have gone roaring through his brain.

His first reaction was almost as though a huge wave had hit him. And he just stood there, silently, and thought. It wasn't a moment when I should talk, so I just stood there too. Both of us were thinking the same thoughts, separately.

And then he straightened himself up and went in to tell the Queen. She was sitting at her desk, and he told her there. And then she got up and he put his arm around her and took her out onto the lawn. And they walked up and down the lawn together, very close, and she was weeping desperately for the loss of her father.

She did a bit of grieving like that, which was a good thing too. And then she straightened up and she went in, to the desk she had been working at, and started to send all these telegrams off, round the Commonwealth and to other countries, like the United States.

And Philip was right behind her, sitting there. His presence was a huge, huge piece of confidence for her. And he never left her; while she was working with Charteris and everybody else, he was there. One of the remarkable things was that he didn't interfere with me making all the arrangements. Some people would like to get their hands on. But he knew we would do the job of getting them home, so he didn't bother.

**Lady Pamela Hicks, daughter to Edwina, Countess Mountbatten of Burma and Lord Louis Mountbatten, 1st Earl of Burma, cousin to the Duke of Edinburgh** It was the most appalling shock to them. She was only twenty-five and he was only barely thirty. This really devastated their lives, actually, for a married couple at that moment.

When you think that she went up that ladder onto that platform as a Princess, and she came down as the Queen. They had had a marvelous night, she with her camera, filming all the animals, and looking—just the kind of thing they loved doing—and then to come down again into the little fishing lodge, to be told the news. It was the most appalling shock.

When Mike Parker received the telephone call from Martin Charteris and told Prince Philip, he just covered his face with his newspaper and remained in shock for about five minutes or so, taking in the full extent of what it meant—that his whole career in the Navy would go.

It was very much a conventional British household to the extent that he was very much the man of the family: he took the decisions; she looked after him in their private life. Obviously, as Princess, she had a lot of

official things to do. But they were still able, with those two small children, to have a family group where he could be the *pater familias* and have authority. He was very, very accepting. But she was very careful to let him take part in things and relied on him enormously.

But think of this extremely active and enthusiastic young man who suddenly finds his whole life is going to be taken away from him—he'll be walking two steps behind his wife—and probably thinking he will have to become a yes man for the rest of his life.

She came back into this tiny little house and—it was a very typical reaction actually—she said: “Oh, I'm so sorry, it means we've all got to go home, I'm afraid.”

And one was so overcome with sorrow for her that the only thing one could think of was giving her a kiss and a hug. And then I remember thinking: My God! Of course it means she's the *Queen!*

There was no time then, actually, for her, if she had wanted to, to grieve, which, perhaps, was a good thing. She was so busy because Martin Charteris arrived and they had to let all the prime ministers, and governors general of Australia, New Zealand, and all the rest of the Commonwealth know that the tour was canceled because, of course, we'd been right at the beginning of it. So all these telegrams had to go off. Martin Charteris didn't even know what name she was going to call herself as Queen—things like that. There was so much that she had to do.

\* \* \*

To this day, there is confusion about whether the telegram breaking the news was ever sent from England.

\* \* \*

**Sir Edward Ford, GCVO, KCB, ERD, DL (1910–2006), assistant private secretary to King George VI, 1946–52; assistant private secretary to Queen Elizabeth II, 1952–67** It's a mystery. I can only tell you my side of it because I was in London and the King died at Sandringham. The private secretary there was the principal private secretary, Sir Alan Lascelles.

We had a code for various contingencies, and one was the death of the King. And at a quarter to nine one morning, I got a telephone call from Lascelles at Sandringham, saying “Hyde Park Corner,” because that was the code. He simply said: “Hyde Park Corner. Go and tell Mr. Churchill, and the Queen Mary,” and he rang off.

I had no further instructions. All I knew was that the King had died and that I had to go and tell his mother and the prime minister before the news could get out in any other way.

At the same time, I assumed—if I didn't know—that he'd sent that coded message to Sir Michael Adeane,<sup>2</sup> who was in Kenya with the Princess. But, in fact, the news of the King's death got there by other means.

And when I asked whether this telegram from Lascelles had ever been received nobody had any knowledge of it.

Was it sent? I can't tell you. I think it must have been. It was perfectly clear that the important thing was to tell them before anybody else, obviously, although that was not the way that the message was received in Kenya.

My theory is that the code was a very bad code. Actually, we had about four different codes for these various events and they all had London geographical names—Trafalgar Square, and Knightsbridge, or something like that.

To be quite honest, I had forgotten about them and only that night, seeing that my wallet was rather thick, I thought I'd just see if I couldn't off-load things, and I came across these codes, tucked away in my wallet. I was very lucky. I had forgotten almost that I had them. So I knew immediately what it meant. It might have taken me a little bit of time, otherwise, to find out.

So what is one to conclude? A possible explanation is that the Post Office getting a telegram saying: "Hyde Park Corner" thought this is just an address, and that was that. They didn't send it.

But it's interesting that it didn't affect the issue in any way. In fact, they got it on a local radio message; it wasn't through a telegram from Sandringham.

## BREAKING THE NEWS AT HOME

In London, meanwhile, plans were being made to inform the British public, the Commonwealth, and the world of the King's death. First, however, members of the Royal Family and the government had to be notified.

Queen Elizabeth, née Lady Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon, the King's devoted wife of nearly twenty-nine years, and now by virtue of his death a widow at the age of fifty-one, was the first to be informed. Then Sir Alan Lascelles instructed Edward Ford to break the news to the prime minister, Winston Churchill.

\* \* \*

**Sir Edward Ford** I wasn't worried about how to because I had no details. Therefore, I couldn't enlarge on the fact. And the point was really to be a sort of human telegram to him.

It's a commentary on the changes in affairs, but I drove my little car straight up to the door of Number 10 Downing Street; I wasn't stopped by anybody. I got out and rang the bell, and said: "I want to speak to the prime minister. I have a message to deliver to him."

The private secretary came down and took me up. And there he was, lying in the bed, a little sputtery green candle at the side of the bed. He always kept a light there because he was a bad cigar smoker: he chewed them up and they used to go out, and then he had to relight them. And he had lots of papers in front of him, all over the place—he was composing a speech for a foreign affairs debate on the next day.

I said to him: "Prime Minister, I've got bad news for you. The King has died in the night." He was absolutely stunned by this news, and he said: "Bad news? The *worst!*" Then he threw these papers aside and said: "How unimportant these various matters seem now."

Then he thought what to do. And I sat there in silence. And then he got onto his telephone and asked to speak to Anthony Eden, who was his deputy prime minister. And, curiously, they went on as they had in the war, thinking that you had to disguise what you said for security reasons. Instead of just saying: "The King is dead," he said to Anthony Eden: "Scramble. Ah, ah, we must have a cabinet." They couldn't scramble. I can't remember the exact paraphrase he used, but he didn't say: "The King is dead," which struck me as curious.

Then I said: "Well, I must go and tell the Queen Mary." So I left and went off to her. That was more difficult. I found her staff at breakfast at Marlborough House where she lived, and I said: "The King has died, and I've been asked to inform Queen Mary."

Their faces fell and Lady Cynthia Colville, who was her main lady-in-waiting, said: "I don't think you can do that. I think you'll have to tell her that he's very ill."

And I said: "I couldn't possibly do that! In half an hour the world will know this!" And she said: "Well, she's never forgiven me for the way in which I told her that the Duke of Kent<sup>3</sup> had been killed in the war."

However, she said: "I think I'll just go up and see her and tell her you're here." And she did. Then she came down and said: "Well, I have actually told her, and she'd like to see you."

So I went up. And there she was, sitting very upright in a chair, and she was in shock. Unfortunately, I had no information about the details, so I could only say: “He was found dead early this morning.”

And so I went off, back to Buckingham Palace to arrange the public announcement, which was made very soon afterward.

The people who were utterly unprepared for it were the BBC, oddly enough. You would have thought that they would have been. But not a bit. They took nearly half an hour after the deadline.

It was supposed to be arranged when I got back to the Palace that the news should be promulgated at a quarter to eleven. And we had means of getting through to the Press Association and Reuters, and so on. So they were all told to release at a quarter to eleven, and they were given a few minutes or so.

And the BBC were still putting it out at a quarter to eleven. They went into conference as to how they should deal with it. One of the things they decided was that this news was of such importance that it had to be given to the world by someone called John Snagge,<sup>4</sup> who was the man who had established a considerable reputation in broadcasting the university boat races. And everybody was running round the BBC trying to find John Snagge because nobody else could make the announcement. And it wasn't till about ten past eleven that the BBC announced it.

Meantime, the Duke of Norfolk, the Earl Marshal, under whom all the business of a new reign comes—he is the one responsible for the royal funeral and the Coronation later—was traveling up from Arundel,<sup>5</sup> in Sussex, to London, and arrived at Victoria, to see a poster: “King Dead.” He drove straight to Buckingham Palace and was there within twenty minutes, by about half past eleven. It was an astonishing coincidence.

## HIS SUBJECTS' RESPONSE TO THE KING'S DEATH

**Lady Angela Oswald, CVO, woman of the bedchamber to Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother** The King's death was one of my earliest memories. Everybody was shocked and horrified. The whole nation was really plunged into grief when the King died. Everybody was terribly, terribly shocked.

**Robert Lacey, historian and royal biographer** My first recollection—I was eight years old at the time—is of the death of King George VI and the sense of national gloom and mourning all over the country. And I can remember, in particular, the famous newspaper photograph of the three

Queens—Queen Mary, Queen Elizabeth, and the new Queen—all in black and in veils.

That was also the first time that the tabloid newspapers hit my consciousness because I remember seeing the tabloid front page—entirely a photograph—and I had been brought up in a respectable lower-middle-class home with the *Daily Telegraph*, which didn't do that sort of thing.

**Baroness Young, Janet Mary, PC, DL (1926–2002), life peer, cr. 1971; Chancellor of Duchy of Lancaster, 1981–82; leader, Conservative Party in the House of Lords, 1981–83; Lord Privy Seal, 1982–83; minister of state, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 1983–87** All of us in those days took the death of King George VI very seriously. I recall we were going out, my husband and I, to a party, and it was canceled because of the death of the King, as a mark of respect.

**Sir Shridath “Sonny” Surendranath Ramphal, GCMG, AC, ONZ, OE, OCC, QC, born in British Guiana, now Guyana, Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, 1975–90; co-chair Commission on Global Governance, 1992** My own feeling was that another element of the old order was passing and the newness of the succession was welcomed.

**Rev. Canon Paul Oestreicher, canon residentiary and director of the International Centre for Reconciliation at Coventry Cathedral, 1985–97** I wasn't a typical New Zealander. Frankly, I don't remember my immediate thoughts. It didn't impact on me—okay, we've got a young Queen now—because I didn't have that background. I had a German-Jewish background.<sup>6</sup> I wouldn't have dreamed of calling England home; it would be absurd.

To me, it was a constitutional event. I happen to be extremely interested in politics, and I went on to study politics—it became my obsession, if you like—so to me it was a political event of no great significance because nothing was going to change as a result: it was a tradition that was going to live on. And she [the new Queen] was a nice person.

**Countess of Longford, Elizabeth, CBE (1906–2002), royal biographer** I'm afraid I have to admit I was rather absorbed with my own family affairs. We knew he'd had an operation, and all the rest of it. You couldn't fail to know, because there were bulletins. But I don't think anybody expected him to die.

**Neville Kenneth Wran, AC, CNZM, QC (1926–2014), premier New South Wales, 1976–86; a founder, Australian Republican Movement** It's fair to say that we took it very seriously. And because the King had during the Second World War been the very visible figure in Great Britain, that translated itself into our imagery of what was going on. And the King was the *King*.

My only recollection of it, because I was only a teenager then, is that the shops in the whole city were draped in black and purple, and there was a genuine period of mourning. We regarded it as a very important occasion.

England had absolutely no effect or impact materially upon us at all. But when England went to war with Germany, we automatically regarded ourselves at war. We didn't have to make a separate declaration, such as the homogeneity of our relationship: when England went to war, the Empire were there. So it was a period of genuine mourning when George VI died.

**Sir Michael Oswald, GCVO (1934–2021), manager of the Royal Studs, 1969–99** The first big military parade I took part in was the King's funeral at Windsor when I was seventeen. That I remember vividly because I was in the school Officers' Training Corps, and we marched up over Windsor Bridge and up past the Castle.

There were huge crowds and there was a deathly silence, which is quite unusual when you see large crowds of people—my impression was that there was a total hush. And then we were marched into the Castle and lined part of the route. It made a great impression on me really.

**Dr. Vivien Noakes (1937–2011), biographer, co-author *The Daily Life of the Queen: An Artist's Diary* (2000)** As a teenager, I went with my family [to watch the funeral procession pass]. My father was a member of something called the Royal Aero Club. Some of the members were given seats in windows.

I remember the music, particularly, the solemnity of it; I remember the whole thing was profoundly moving. I remember wearing a black armband, which we did in those days.

I wrote to the Palace and I said: "My Girl Guide patrol and I want to say how sorry they are." And a letter came back. I've got the letter still from them.

**Ian Adams, former Foreign Office official** We all sensed that we had lost a King who had done a really splendid job which he never wanted to do.



He was a very reluctant King, after all, and the Queen at the time was very reluctant that he should have to become King. If she could have put a stop to it, certainly she would have done.

We all sensed we'd lost somebody who had really shown the greatest possible sense of duty, and somebody for whom there was tremendous sympathy over his speech defect,<sup>7</sup> realizing what agony that was for him, to have to speak as he did, reasonably awkwardly, in public. There was a real affection there.

**Philip Ziegler, CVO, FRS, former diplomat, historian and royal biographer** I queued when he was lying in state in Westminster Hall.<sup>8</sup> It was immensely impressive, and very moving. But I couldn't at all honestly say that I felt any *personal* grief.

My first thoughts about his death were absolutely pitiful: should I, or should I not, put on a black tie? It was a kind of social status symbol: if you are of a certain level in society, or of a certain degree of conservatism, you put on a black tie.

I say this with shame *now*, but I remember myself putting on a black tie and then going to one kind of party, and then taking it off again and going to another kind of party. And I suspect there were quite a lot of people like that.

**Baron Wright of Richmond, Patrick Richard Henry, GCMG (1931–2020), life peer, cr. 1994; private secretary (overseas affairs) to the prime minister, 1974–77; permanent under secretary of state and head of the Diplomatic Service, 1986–91** I was shocked by the news of the King's death because George VI was actually a rather popular figure, much more so than George V. But then those were more formal days.

**Baron Healey, Denis Winston, CH, MBE, PC, life peer, cr. 1992; secretary of state for defense, 1964–70; Chancellor of the Exchequer, 1974–79; deputy leader, Labour Party, 1980–83** I remember very well, because I was a student when he took over from George V. I wouldn't say I had very *strong* emotions about it. He'd been ill for some time; his death wasn't unexpected.

**Tim Heald, FRSL (1944–2016), author of, among other books, *The Duke: A Portrait of Prince Philip* (1991)** My father was in the Army, stationed in Vienna, but when the King died we were all on a family holiday down on a lake in Austria. And I can see my father, wearing his

British Army overcoat—I was very small—taking me out onto the frozen lake, and saying, basically: “The King has died.”

I didn’t know much of what was going on, but for him it was very, very important—in an almost tribal way. I don’t think it would be true of many people today, but I think that was a fairly normal reaction that you would have got from a serving British Army officer in those days. That was the first moment that I really was aware that the Royal Family meant something.

**Sir Kenneth Percy Bloomfield, KCB, head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service and second permanent under secretary of state, Northern Ireland Office, 1984–91** I was at Oxford University, actually, when the King died, and I remember going to a terrific memorial service for him in St. Mary’s, the university church, and the vice-chancellor parading in with the university mace, and all that stuff. It was very touching.

The King, I suspect, had become a more familiar figure to the people than would have normally been the case because of the war, in that he fairly regularly broadcast at a time when radio was the only thing—the television service had been suspended during the war, so radio was terribly important—and we all remembered this very conscientious kind of voice, trying to master an awful speech impediment. He really did have quite some difficulty in uttering speeches, and it was a marvelous thing to have overcome it as well as he did.

**Venerable George Bernard Austin (1931–2019), archdeacon of York, 1988–99** I was at university in Wales when he died—I was in the second year of my degree—and I can remember going to Evensong that night in the chapel and hearing us pray for, instead of “George, our King,” “Elizabeth, our Queen.” And we had to change all the he’s and his’s into hers’s.

We were all very sad. The monarchy then meant more to the nation, not least because we were conscious that George VI had stayed in London during the bombing. We never really believed that they suffered the same rationing we did. But they suffered the bombing—Buckingham Palace was bombed—whereas they could have fled to Canada, or Australia, and they didn’t. They stayed in London with their people and they were very much loved.

I believe it’s hard for people today to understand the affection in which they were held: they were completely separated; it’s another role. I wouldn’t say it was almost like the Japanese Emperor, but it wasn’t far from it.

**Sir Gordon Wesley Jewkes, KCMG, commercial consul to the Midwestern region of the United States (Chicago), 1969–72; deputy high commissioner, Trinidad and Tobago, 1972–75; head of the finance department, Foreign Office; governor, the Falkland Islands, 1985–88** There was genuine grief in the country—there’s no question of it. And court mourning was ordained, which lasted for, I believe, six months: we wore black armbands; we did not go out; we had no parties.

I have to say that the end of court mourning did coincide with the week of my discharge from the military. I shall draw a veil over those celebrations, but that was a big relief.

But, of course, in between times, we became conscious of the very young Queen and her court—her mother, obviously, and Prince Philip at her side.

**Michael Parker** My first reaction was purely for *her*, then him: what in the name of heaven could I do now to help them? Obviously, the first thing I must do is get them back to London.

### WAS THE KING’S DEATH UNEXPECTED?

While the King had been suffering from a variety of ailments and had been operated on the previous September for lung cancer, his death came as a surprise to his subjects, as well as to some members of the Royal Family.

\* \* \*

**Baron Armstrong of Ilminster, Robert Temple, GCB, CVO (1927–2020), life peer, cr. 1988; personal private secretary to Prime Ministers Edward Heath and Harold Wilson, 1970–75; secretary of the cabinet, 1979–87; head of the Civil Service, 1983–87** We had all seen pictures of him—when the Princess Elizabeth went off to Kenya, there were photographs taken of the King waving goodbye to her—and he looked a very ill man.

I believe that people were ready to acknowledge that he was an ill man—they must have known that he was an ill man—but his death, when it came, was not directly due to the illness; it was a heart attack, and so it was, in that sense, unexpected.

We all woke up in the morning on February 6, 1952, to learn that he had died in the night. It was a very great, sudden shock, compounded, of course, by the fact that we now had a young and attractive Queen.