

St Paul's Cathedral Melbourne

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Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother, 1900 – 2002

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During the course of a lifetime we find ourselves being drawn to those whose special qualities engender our admiration. They touch our lives such that we feel that we have encountered in them a spark of the divine.

Such a person, for me, was the Queen Mother.

I was captivated by that incredibly winning smile, coupled with the obvious joy that she radiated as she moved amongst people. "Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother could charm a bird off a twig", to quote a past member of her household.

It was a special and unexpected friendship, which I have enjoyed for over 20 years; and like countless others, I will hold memories of her for the remainder of my life. So too, indeed will a certain shopkeeper in Prestbury in England, whose shop the Queen Mother would pass on her way to Cheltenham, her favourite racecourse. Each year, as she went by, he would present her with a bunch of flowers and a packet of humbugs.

Then there is also a certain County Councillor, who was so overcome by his being presented to the Queen Mother that instead of bowing, he curtsied - causing some small frisson of amusement. She clearly was conscious of his embarrassment and delayed proceedings for some five minutes while she chatted to the man, putting him at his ease - much to the envy of those others present.

The late Buzz Kennedy was appointed as the Queen Mother's Press Secretary for her 1958 visit to Australia. Buzz Kennedy confessed that he was not too sure of being in the presence of a royal. However, his fears were allayed whilst on a journey with the Queen Mother to one of the many destinations. During the course of the flight, the Queen Mother invited him to join her and the lady-in-waiting for lunch. There was a choice of either chicken maryland or lobster mayonnaise. Buzz chose the latter and on being served with the meal, the plane hit an air pocket, which caused the lobster mayonnaise to rise to the ceiling, and from there it descended on his head and shoulders. At that moment, he explains that he could only feel annoyance at his parents for not having taught him how to deal with being covered in lobster mayonnaise in the presence of a royal. The Queen Mother acted immediately by taking her napkin, dipping it in a glass of water and proceeded to remove the offending mayonnaise from his face and shoulders. From that point onwards, the Queen Mother won him over for ever.

Prince Charles wrote in praise of his grandmother:

“Ever since I can remember, my grandmother has been the most wonderful example of fun, laughter, warmth, infinite security and above all else, exquisite taste in so many things. For all she has always been one of those extraordinary people whose touch can turn everything to gold: whether putting people at their ease; turning something dull into something amusing; bringing happiness and comfort to people by her presence; or making any house she lives in a unique haven of cosiness and character. She belongs to that priceless band of human beings whose greatest gift is to enhance life for others through her own effervescent enthusiasm for life. She has been doing that through war and peace, through change and uncertainty – an inspiration and a figure of love and affection for young and old alike.”

Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon was born on 4 August 1900, the second daughter of the Earl and Countess of Strathmore, one of ten children. Much to her late-Majesty’s amusement, there is no record of where the birth took place. It was suggested that it may have been in a taxi. Her reply to the speculation was supposedly similar to that of Lady Bracknell who, famously, in *The Importance of Being Ernest*, when told that Ernest had been discovered in a handbag, exclaimed: “A Handbag!”

The Lady Elizabeth was born into a life of privilege, her home being the great castle of Glams in Scotland. Nevertheless, although enjoying what her family’s wealth and her station in life could bring, she was to use that privilege throughout the course of her life for the sake of Country and the people whom she believed it was her duty to serve. At an early age she began to manifest her obvious love for people, and the nearby village became accustomed to the warm-hearted young child being completely un-self conscious of being the daughter of an Earl, and obviously at home with people from all stations of life.

There is an amusing story of her greeting a guest to Glams at the age of three. The guest was greeted thus: “How do you do, Mr Ralton, I have not seen you looking so well for years. You will be sorry to know that Lord Strathmore is suffering from toothache.” Elizabeth enjoyed a magical childhood, although somewhat isolated and lonely. She was free from the intrusions of a world which was about to change, an era which was distant and arcadian, a world that now seems inconceivable.

The death of her older brother in 1915 must have been for her the first shock to an established order that had appeared unassailable. Glams Castle was opened to those wounded at the war front, and Elizabeth played a significant role in nursing wounded bodies and minds back to health.

The twenty-three year old Elizabeth's life took a significant turn, which was to make a significant mark on the English Monarchy and indeed make a place for her in the history of England and the Empire. Somewhat reluctantly, after two refusals, Elizabeth said 'yes' to Albert, the second son of George V and on 26 April, 1923, she became the Duchess of York.

Destiny was beginning to loom with a test that neither the Duke nor his Queen had ever thought it would be necessary to consider. With the abdication of Edward VIII, at 11 am on 12 December 1936, the Duke became George VI and his Duchess, Queen. She was to play a vital role in the moulding of a king and restoring faith in the monarchy.

The reign of King George VI experienced a radically-changing world and the diminishing of the British Empire. The Second World War brought the King and Queen to the hearts of their people. Refusing to leave London, they encouraged the spirits of those who lost homes and loved ones – the belief in one's duty to serve was the unbending conviction of King George and his Queen. Hitler considered her the most dangerous woman in Europe. When Buckingham Palace was bombed, Queen Elizabeth is reputed to have said: "Now I can look the East-End in the face."

On 6 February 1952, King George VI died and a new role as that of Queen Mother came to a woman who possessed enormous energy and a zest for life and a willingness to serve. Widowhood did not come easily at first, but gradually that sense of duty, which was always her hallmark, revived and Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother took on a role which has endeared her to millions throughout the western world. Queen Elizabeth, as she has been known to her staff, has been a woman of deep faith in God, and ardent in prayer. She has kept up her reading in various areas of the spiritual life, and she wrote this foreword in one of the books compiled by one of her closest and long-time friends, Lady Elizabeth Bassett – entitled *Love is my meaning*:

"We live in a world of unusually rapid change. It is no wonder therefore thinking and sensitive people want to know what is fundamentally changeless. It is my hope and belief that this book can help to assure us that we can, at one and the same time, be truly contemporary men and women and have our thoughts and lives rooted in truths that do not change.

For many of us, it is difficult to convey at all clearly the faith and hope that is in us. I am sure, therefore that those who read this anthology will find expressed in the pages what in our hearts we believe, but find hard to say."

Queen Elizabeth has been a light in the lives of countless numbers of people and that light will continue to burn brightly. One of Her Majesty's favourite hymns was *Love Divine, all loves excelling*. The last verse reveals something about her attitude to the pilgrim's journey and faith in the hope that God has given us in His Son, our Risen Lord.

Finish then thy new creation:
pure and spotless let us be;
let us see thy great salvation,
perfectly restored in thee;
changed from glory into glory,
til in heaven we take our place,
til we cast our crowns before thee,
lost in wonder, love and praise.
