

Like making barrels or thatching roofs, writing about the royal family is one of the traditional craft skills of this country. He compares the experience to "wading through candyfloss: you emerge pink and queasy, but also undernourished". It's a tough job, but somebody's got to do it – and I mean that sincerely, because Brown has done us all a favour with his flamingo-coloured odyssey. The memoirs of courtiers, flunkies and hangers-on are among his primary sources, but his research extends to royal encounters recalled by politicians and celebrities. It's biography by crowdsourcing, you might say. It follows Brown's similar books about Princess Margaret and the Beatles, completing a triptych of 20th-century British portraits. The author is a snapper-up of unconsidered trifles and these end up furnishing a vivid and remarkably telling study of our late head of state, and even more so of the people she reigned over for 70 years. Was she a master of psychological jujitsu, turning the gaze of the outside world back upon itself? In 112 often short chapters, the many enjoyable vignettes include the efforts of the go-getting Labour minister Tony Benn to strike a blow for modern Britain by removing the queen's head from postage stamps. These don't quite climax with Benn's own head on a pikestaff, but the queen and her advisers silkily outmanoeuvre him. When Benn is promoted from postmaster general to minister of technology, he goes to be sworn in and she tells him: "I'm sure you'll miss your stamps." It involves raking over yellowing newspaper cuttings and polishing old chestnuts about "majesty" and "radiance".