

Our Queen by Robert Hardman,
Hutchinson, 2011.
The Diamond Queen: Elizabeth II and Her People
by Andrew Marr,
Macmillan 2011.

The Diamond Jubilee of HM the Queen was always going to be an opportunity for sustained reflection on every aspect of the Queen's reign and the Queen herself. The two books under review here are probably the most high profile of such reflections and therefore merit, in my view, being considered together. In the spirit of the times I should declare an interest as my wife, the Queen's former Chief Clerk, supported Andrew Marr in the initial stages of his work on Diamond Queen.

Robert Hardman has been an observer of, and writer about, the royal family for many years and had a reputation, as I recall during the more frenzied days of royal reporting in the 80s and 90s, of being both more measured and more respectable than other more feral beasts.

Our Queen is a gentle, anecdote-rich journey through the Queen's life and personality based on extensive interviews with the great and the good, both royals and commoners, and sumptuously illustrated. It is also extremely well and pacily written as might be expected from a journalist who has been at the top of his game at the Daily Telegraph and then the Daily Mail for many years. It will be a delight to all who read his articles regularly and for whom facts, figures and stories about the royal family are grist to their mill. I do not imagine that the Queen could possibly object to anything in its pages.

The Diamond Queen is, however, of a different class entirely. As the subtitle makes clear this is not just a book about the Queen, or about the royal family, but about them and us, and the ways in which over the six decades of the Queen's reign popular attitudes to the monarchy have changed, and partly in response, the monarchy and to her great credit – the Queen herself have changed.

Andrew Marr has, over the course of his career as a journalist and writer, acquired a justified reputation as a critical observer of great merit as well as possessing that most special of gifts, the ability to distil complicated matters into language and form that can be understood and appreciated by everybody. The perfect example of this is his excursus towards the end of the book about the Queen's finances, which I have never seen bettered.

The Diamond Queen is informative, interesting, amusing and similarly to Hardman, based on extensive interviews, in Marr's case with all but one of the Queen's children and all her grandchildren. Marr does much to correct some of the more hysterical assessments and ill-judged critiques of aspects of the Queen's reign, and though his assessment is similarly unlikely to ruffle royal feathers (except perhaps in Clarence House) it is not lacking in healthy criticism where needed.

One is left at the end of Diamond Queen with the impression that, much to his surprise perhaps, Andrew Marr finds himself to be a profound admirer of the Queen herself and the part she has played in all our lives over sixty years of near flawless service to crown and country.

Readers of Our Queen and The Diamond Queen will find ample reasons to praise both, but I suspect that the latter will long stand as one of the best books of its kind written about Queen Elizabeth II at any time in her long reign.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh