

A story still being written

by BROCK WEIR

I don't know what it says about me that one of the most exciting days of my life took place when I was just 11 years old, but it's a fact I can't deny.

As a youngster with a budding interest in the monarchy, Queen Elizabeth II and the Duke of Edinburgh's 1997 trip to Toronto, was a chance not to be missed.

After my mom agreed to take me into Toronto to see them at St. James' Cathedral as they attended Sunday services, I devised a game plan. Wanting to stand out from the crowd, I donned a near-neon tie-dyed Tasmanian Devil t-shirt and picked out flowers of a relatively unusual colour ? a pinky peach somewhat incongruously labelled as ?Oceana? ? in the hopes of leaving an impression. Okay, that sartorial choice, which I still have nearly 30 years later, is one I might regret just a little bit, but you can't argue with results!

The excitement in the air was palpable when the couple arrived at the church around 11 a.m. The Queen was the first to emerge from the car, with Prince Philip following just a few steps behind. After greeting members of the clergy, they made their way towards the entrance of the cathedral, smiling at the hundreds who were waiting to catch a glimpse.

Unaware of the proper protocols, I reached out as far as I could over the crowd barrier to give the bouquet to our Head of State. She glanced over in my direction and made what I felt was eye contact before turning back to the path and entering the church.

My chance had passed. It was the first time I felt truly deflated.

But the feeling was only temporary.

Moments later, a member of Her Majesty's entourage came back out of the church, made a bee-line for me and said in hushed tones that the Queen had asked him to come out to assure me she had seen me and promised she would come my way after the service after meeting members of the choir.

I guess the deflation showed on my face, but any such feelings evaporated instantly and was replaced with a nearly unbearable excitement.

The Queen emerged once again about an hour later to the toll of bells. The entourage-member was standing beside the monarch as he gestured with his arm for she and Prince Philip to walk through the line of choristers and then conduct a walkabout.

Without saying a word, I could see The Queen frown ever so slightly and firmly shake her head. The walkabout was to begin immediately and she walked directly over to my side of the barricades.

The excitement was too much by the time she got to me and I have no recollection of any exchange we might have had ? but the feeling was unforgettable, and I think it's a testament to her character that she made the time to make one little kid in the crowd feel just a little bit special that day.

Over the subsequent years, I was fortunate enough to meet The Queen on three more occasions, each time unique and special, but that very first time stands above the others. And, as they did in September 2022 when the second so-called Elizabethan Age came to an end with her death at the age of 96, they did so again at the start of this week when her memory was celebrated across the Commonwealth in a variety of ways to mark the 100th anniversary of her birth.

Much was said about Queen Elizabeth II during her lifetime, and much more has been said in the years immediately following her passing and the seamless succession of King Charles III.

As I wrote in this space the week of the succession, Elizabeth II never struck me as a public servant who was in it for herself or her own personal glory.

Many of her closest friends and acquaintances underscored the point that she much rather would have spent her life quietly on a farm with her beloved horses and dogs, far away from the pomp and circumstance that defined her life. But fate had other plans.

She had a destiny to fulfil and that destiny was a role she felt duty bound to take anything but lightly. She was conscious of her role as monarch, yes, and took the role extremely seriously, but there was also the fact that she was, above and beyond being Queen, a custodian of the Crown and a representation of something much larger than herself: a public servant like no other.

The subsequent three-and-a-half years since her death have left plenty of time for reflection and, in that time, a fuller picture of the woman continues to emerge as more people within her circle feel more respectfully sharing their perspective.

Historian Anna Key has been tasked by the King in penning his mother's official biography, it was announced last week. As is the case with official biographies of any public leader, the author will have access to a trove of private papers, diaries, and more to get further beneath the surface than any writer has before. Especially interesting to me is the chosen author is a person who can view one of the most remarkable female leaders of our time through anything but a male lens. A generation or two removed from the monarch's more prominent female biographers, she will undoubtedly have very different questions than her predecessors had in searching for answers and a different view on which key moments of her life are in need of greater evaluation.

'I said to a Private Secretary, 'I've spent some time with the Queen. She seems not quite the conservative do-as-you've-done-it-before restrained person she always appears to be in public. She seems quite radical at times,' said another biographer, Gyles Brandreth, a personal friend of the Queen and Duke, who also served as a Conservative MP in the 1990s. 'He said, 'That's deliberate.' I said, 'What do you mean that's deliberate?' 'She feels she ought to be conservative with a small C because her philosophy is that she should only go at the pace of the slowest person in the kingdom so that nobody in the kingdom should ever feel left behind.'

Evidently it was a winning formula, but what other factors were part of that equation?

Perhaps it's a question on the mind of another woman wearing a crown.

'It must have been so difficult being surrounded by much older men,' said Queen Camilla in a BBC documentary that aired Sunday night, watching newsreel footage of her young mother-in-law returning from Kenya as monarch aged just 25. 'There weren't women prime ministers or women presidents. She was the only one, so I think she carved her own role.'

Queen Elizabeth II's role as a female trailblazer is not one often explored, perhaps because the trail she blazed was the only one that was laid out before her, and perhaps because she did not view herself in those terms, but what an exciting facet to explore and help add to a remarkable chapter in a remarkable woman's story.