

Absorbing history in real time

by BROCK WEIR

My family kept many mementos over the years.

Family photos were cherished keepsakes. Letters written back home from Europe during the Second World War and in the decade that followed were invaluable insights into what my grandparents and their friends were doing during these tumultuous years. Odds and ends, and gizmos whose practical uses were long lost to the mists of time, were either on display or lovingly packed away as reminders of a particular snapshot in time.

Personal items all, but there were few things kept on momentous world events. One exception to this were various clippings, magazines, and tchotchkes related to the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Another was a sheet of stamps commemorating the marriage of Prince Rainier of Monaco to movie star Grace Kelly. If I wanted to see what people kept of, say, the Moon Landing or the Summit Series I was on my own.

So, whether I was conscious of it or not, I set out to fill in the blanks.

As a kid, I was a frequent flyer at a used bookstore at Yonge and Wellington in Aurora. Filled to the rafters with all manner of paper, each visit was like an archaeological dig; you had no idea what you were going to find, but whatever you found was bound to be worthwhile.

One of the things that instantly caught my eye was a small cache of clippings from The Toronto Star, the Globe and Mail, the Toronto Telegraph and more, commemorating the death of King George VI and the immediate accession of his daughter, Queen Elizabeth II.

The black and white images stuck with me from the outset. Preserved in black and white photography on newspapers that had become yellowed and fragile, it was a moment of history, of time frozen, and, it seemed very much an occasion of its time.

Perhaps it speaks to the longevity and unstinting service provided by Elizabeth II, but as silly as it sounds, I never fully appreciated that at some point or another the scenes would be more or less repeated at the next transition.

Yet, there we were for the last two weeks, watching the same scenes repeated almost identically as they last took place more than 70 years ago, with a few concessions to the more modern world in which we're living.

Watching the events happening in the United Kingdom in real time was not, of course, a luxury afforded to those who were able to see and remember the events of 1952, but so much of our world has changed under the reign of Elizabeth II.

From the time the Palace announced on the morning of September 8 (our time) that the Queen was under medical supervision to the announcement of her death a few hours later, the world was able to tune in to see all the rites and rituals associated with such a historical occasion unfold before our eyes.

We were able to see the flags be lowered in all corners of the Commonwealth as it happened, and to experience the strikingly beautiful Scottish countryside from street level, and with a bird's eye view, as the Queen's coffin, accompanied by Princess Anne, made its long, six-hour trip from Balmoral Castle to the heart of Scottish civic life in Edinburgh.

The procession from Holyrood to St. Giles' Cathedral, although never seen before, had an immediacy to it. As did the first round of vigils at Edinburgh's highest kirk. As did the Queen's final flight to London and simple procession in a hearse through the dark and rainy streets of the capital before the tried and tested ceremonials began the following day.

Out of all the millions of images that came out of the first length of the mourning period, one of the images that struck me the hardest was the raindrop-covered coffin passing through throngs of thousands on the way back to Buckingham Palace.

Make and model of the hearse aside, converted to black and white, it was a tableau that could have been captured in 1952? if not for the equally multiple phone screens in the foreground of the shot trained on the late monarch, each person wanting some personal reminder of the woman who served them quite likely for all of their lives.

It was a potent symbol of just how much the world had changed throughout the reign of Queen Elizabeth II; although she kept pace with the times and tweaked her role and the way she carried out her duties accordingly ? such as embracing the role of ?virtual monarch? through the Global Pandemic, allowing her to engage with the myriad causes she supported in Canada and Australia, for instance, as conveniently and efficiently as she was able to do with those in the United Kingdom ? hers was a steady, reliable presence on the world stage, particularly in these times of uncertainty.

While I am confident that King Charles will embody many of these qualities in what will undoubtedly be a reign much shorter than 70 years, when all was said and done on Monday night and Her Majesty was laid to rest alongside her beloved husband, Prince Philip, her parents, and her sister, I suddenly found myself wondering just what was being mourned.

Were we mourning the Queen herself? An ordinary woman who had an extraordinary role thrust upon her and rose to the challenge in a way greater than she ? and us ? could have foreseen in 1952?

Were we mourning, as well as celebrating, a legacy of unparalleled public service?

Were we mourning the end of a chapter? An era? An idea? An integral piece of our governmental structure?

In the end, I think the answer is yes to all of those things, but I think there's another intangible element: a constant presence in all of our lives, who, as revered as she was, has never been too far away, whether our grandparents had a cup and saucer with her image on it, whether our parents (or we ourselves) made the effort to see her in person, or even in an act as simple as digging into our pockets for change.

?Today, our system might appear anachronistic to some, I understand, but to others who constitute, in my judgement, the overwhelming majority of Canadians, the role of the monarchy, and in particular the irreplicable role played by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II for seventy years was absolutely indispensable in our country's impressive achievements and contributions to peace, prosperity and stability at home and around the world,? said former prime minister Brian Mulroney at a National Service for the Queen following her funeral.

?Her Majesty's brilliant service and contributions over seven decades did so much to sustain and elevate the golden concepts of freedom, liberty and democracy that have brought such honour to Canada and all of our people.?