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THE SYDNEY MORNING HERALD

BOOK REVIEW

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This is a very funny book. It was written by the author of *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole*. It contains a number of drawings by Martin Honeysett which are classics in their own right showing the Queen's Corgis in various states of extreme ill-temper.

The book is the story of a Royal nightmare. The Queen falls asleep watching the election results in April 1992. The book recounts the imagined fate of the Royal Family when the English electorate vote into office the People's Republican Party. At its head is the unattractive Jack Barker, whose fate was sealed in his youth when he was appointed a school monitor in charge of milk distribution to his fellow pupils. If a child inadvertently squashed its straw, Jack sternly refused to hand out another. He turned the same treatment upon the Royal Family once he got the chance.

They were banished to adjoining tenements in Hellebore Close. The Queen (so referred to throughout) is called by Mr Barker and his supporters "Mrs Windsor". Prince Charles, for reasons of eccentricity, adopts Queen Mary's maiden name and becomes known as "Charlie Teck". Princess Margaret is extremely irritable at her fate and constantly looking for cigarettes. The Duke of Edinburgh takes to his bed in an almighty rage which lasts virtually the whole of the book. Only Charlie Teck seems to find some compensations in the simple life. That is, until he is arrested and charged with affray and "verballed" by police. Princess Anne runs off with a carpet

layer who is kept very busy trying to fit the huge Palace carpets into the modest houses provided to the Royals. The Queen Mother is sure that a digit has been left out in the size of her premises, being convinced that nobody could require her to live in a place so small ("It's a perfectly adorable bungalow, she laughed. It's a darling. It could be a kennel for a large dog"). No indignity is too great for Mr Barker to inflict upon the Queen and her family. They are impoverished. The Queen is made to take the bus to claim a special benefit on social services.

Happily, Prince Andrew was away for the election in a polar submarine and misses the indignities. Prince Edward was in New Zealand in some unidentified artistic enterprise. He turns up in the last scene when the unlovely Barker finally reveals his true colours. Poor Edward is married off to the daughter of the Emperor of Japan. England returns to monarchy - but as a province of Japan's Empire. Barker assumes the mantle of Governor-General. He is seen borne in a royal coach to Buckingham Palace wearing a tricorne hat with white plumes, a scarlet jacket and decorations which the Queen could not identify. They were doubtless conferred on him either by himself or by his new friends. At that awful moment, Her Majesty wakes up, cursing one of the Corgis jumping on her bed. It is only the nice Mr Major who has won the election. The whole story has been a terrible nightmare. The nightmare which 1992 has actually become for our dutiful monarch was at least not as bad as Barker and his cronies would inflict.

It is because we grow up with our Royal Family and perceive from afar their individual strengths and weaknesses that we find such a book amusing. The very notion of the Queen queuing up at a pension office to beg for a few coins is such a juxtaposition of a lifetime's reality that we laugh. And yet the point is made that this is the

life that many of the Queen's subjects lead, as much in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and elsewhere as in the fictitious tenements as Hellebore Close. The portraits of the Royal Family in adversity pander to the stereotypes about individual members of the Family, so far as they are known by us through the media which beat them up for decades and now seems hell-bent on dragging them down.

The book has little relevance to the current controversy in Australia about a republic. Under our constitution, it is only the Queen who has any constitutional function. The rest of the Family, good and bad, are interesting but not highly relevant here as they may be in Britain.

And yet Townsend's book makes two points which we can reflect upon. Perhaps they are made unintentionally or even reluctantly. The first is how horrible and unlovely Mr Barker and his crew are. They may be ideologically sound but they can command no admiration for their small-mindedness and lack of a sense of history, dignity or style. These are the qualities which the Queen shows throughout the ordeal as recounted by Townsend. She is unfailingly polite. She accepts these latest slings and arrows as yet further burdens in a life which has called for many sacrifices. She is charitable to Mr Barker. She even blesses him, on the way from the pension office, when she finds that she is the beneficiary of a newly granted fare reduction ("Good for Mr Barker").

She always looks for good motives. She ascribes the cold food served to Charlie Teck in prison to the Prison Governor's concern that the prisoners should not burn their mouths. She rejects humbug and condescension. When the social worker calls, she ties her scarf around her head (as we have often seen) and goes out of the house, thereby attracting institutional wrath. She is attentive to her family. She even forgives the one Corgi she was allowed to retain

when it brings a rat home. It reminds her of a State dinner in Belize where she was obliged to eat rat lest the RAF lose an important re-fuelling base. Constantly, her mind goes back to the instruction of Crawfie, her well known governess, telling her to put her hat, coat and gloves on and get out and do things. It is a pity Crawfie was not around a little longer.

Even when the Palace carpets are cut up, the Queen carefully puts the remnants aside against the possibility that the nation may one day require their reconstruction to their original magnificence. Her unfailing kindness to, and interest in, other people shines out from the book. It attracts the appreciation of ordinary people, such as the neighbour whom she pluckily helps in childbirth. She is even patient with the horrible Corgi, Harris, whose social life has been improved by his new environment but who regards his new food as a joke and looks on the Queen with a malevolence she has never seen in his eyes before. In the end, when the dream is descending into High Camp, Corgi Harris joins the luckless Edward and his shimmering bride in the company of the new Japanese rulers of Britain. It is the desertion by Harris that finally wakes the Queen from her nightmare: alas, into the real awfulness that 1992 has been.

With a monarch as thoroughly admirable as Elizabeth II, it is difficult to terminate the bond of affection and respect. Over more than forty years Australians have had plenty of opportunities to see the fine personal qualities which Townsend recounts. If or when a referendum comes, the people of Australia will take their recollections of these qualities, aptly collected in this book, into the voting booth. The prospect of their rejecting this admirable woman and risking a local Jack Barker in her place as our Head of State, seems remote.

MICHAEL KIRBY