BEN PIMLOTT

In this extract from one of the 16 obituaries in the latest Biographical Memoirs volume, **Professor Peter Hennessy FBA** *discusses historian Ben Pimlott's roles as biographer of the Queen and adviser to government.*

By the end of the 1992 book-reviewing season, the name Pimlott was firmly associated in the reading public's mind with top-flight political biography of the Left. It was a shock to many, therefore, when the news broke that Ben's next subject was the Queen. Indeed, it caused a touch of incomprehension verging on outrage in those circles of the Pimlott friendship penumbra where republicanism lurked. Though some, like Raphael Samuel, saw the point instantly, telling Ben, when told of his plan, 'What a marvellous way of looking at the history of Britain.' Others, as Ben recalled tactfully in his Preface to the first edition,

> expressed surprise, wondering whether a study of the Head of State and Head of the Commonwealth could be a serious or worthwhile enterprise. Whether or not they are right, it certainly has been an extraordinary and fascinating adventure; partly because of the fresh perspective on familiar events it has given me, after years of writing about Labour politicians; partly because of the human drama of a life so exceptionally privileged, and so exceptionally constrained; and partly because of the obsession with royalty of the British public, of which I am a member.

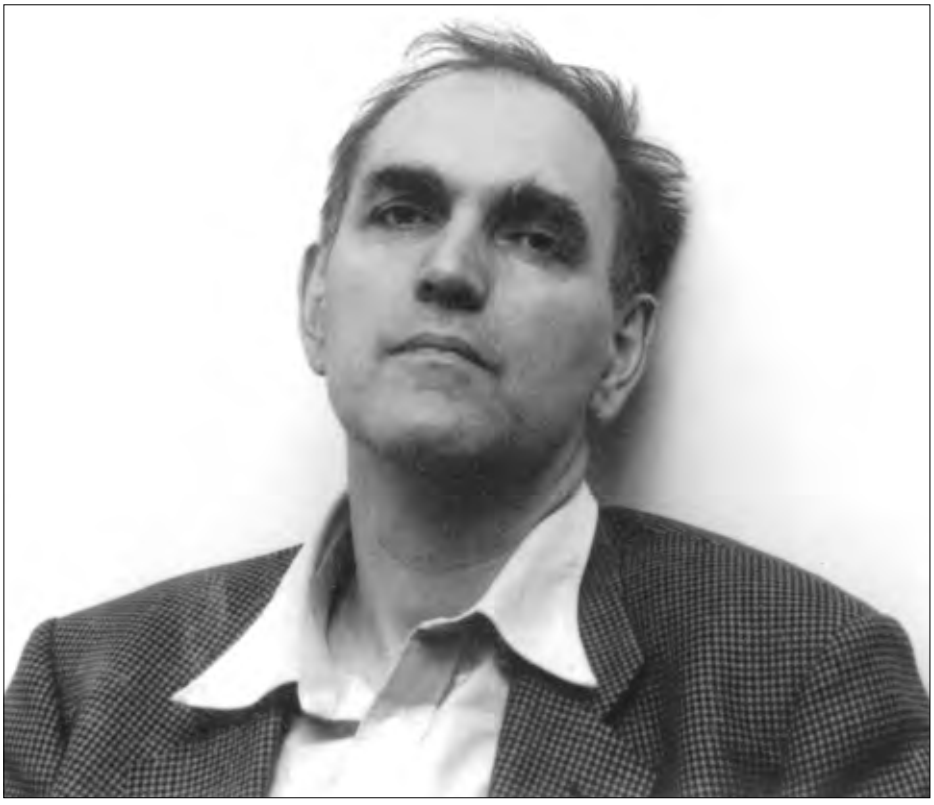
There were those who were certain it would be another triumph, intellectually and commercially. And so it proved.

The point about Pimlott on the Queen is that it *was* another *political* biography and it was about a woman (which interested Ben). It was fascinating on personality and circumstance, but the special value it added was the Queen as Head of Government, the conductor of constitutional functions of which few among the absorbed consumers of royal literature knew very much at all. Ben, however, did not shrink from criticism where he thought it merited. He thought she had mishandled the succession to Macmillan in October 1963 when the Earl of Home took the prize and not the Deputy Prime Minister, R. A. Butler. 'Her decision', Ben wrote, 'to opt for passivity and in effect to collude with Macmillan's scheme for blocking the deputy premier, must be counted the biggest political misjudgement of her reign.'

In reaching this judgement, Ben stood apart from most other constitutional historians who have, before or since, sought to reconstruct the events of October 1963. His friend Professor Vernon Bogdanor, for example, in his *The Monarchy and the Constitution* (1995), had written that

> the criticisms made of the queen with regard to the 1963 succession crisis lack substance. It is implausible to believe that Macmillan was able to misrepresent the opinion of the Conservative Party in the memorandum which he handed to the queen. Faced with the preponderant judgement in favour of Home, based, the memorandum apparently declared, on a canvass of the Cabinet, the Conservative Party in both Houses of Parliament, and in the country, it was not for the queen to conduct her own separate canvass and involve herself in the internal politics of the Conservative Party . . . The queen took the straightforward course, and it was for the Conservative Party, if it so wished, to make it clear it would not accept Home as prime minister.

(The Queen acting on a mid-nineteenth-century precedent, had given him time to see if he could form an administration.)



Ben Pimlott (1945–2004)

Nevertheless, the experience of the Macmillan–Home succession quickly led to the Conservatives abandoning the consultative 'customary processes' for leadership selections in favour of votes by the Conservative Parliamentary Party, the first of which, in 1965, saw Sir Alec Douglas-Home (as he had become on renouncing his peerage in 1963) replaced by Ted Heath.

Ben dined with the Queen at Windsor after the biography appeared but he did not discover what she had thought of it. Protocol prevented him from asking and her from saying. Writing about the Queen affected Ben profoundly. Those who heard him speak about her at Whitsuntide 2002 in Christ Church Cathedral in Oxford, to mark her jubilee, will never forget it. Ben captured how dreadful it must be to be *born* into a function that you have not sought or worked for—and what a remarkable character this had made her. The stolid if highly distinguished audience succumbed to genuine emotion when Ben ended with 'God Bless the Queen!' 'God Bless the Queen!' they cried in return. The Chancellor of Oxford University, Roy Jenkins, was seen to dab his eyes. (Five years earlier, on the day after Princess Diana died, No. 10 rang up Ben for advice. It was the biographer of the 'people's Queen' who gave Downing Street the phrase the 'people's Princess'.)

His first edition of *The Queen: Elizabeth II and the Monarchy* was published in 1996 (he published an updated edition in 2001—it now weighed in at 780 pages—to mark her golden jubilee). In the same year Ben was elected Fellow of the British Academy and joined S5, the Academy's section embracing political studies, political theory, government and international relations. Senior figures in Whitehall came to associate Ben with the Academy because 10 Carlton House Terrace became the venue for a remarkable Friday afternoon seminar he would alternatively chair with the Cabinet Secretary of the day. This was a legacy of the Economic and Social Research Council's Whitehall Programme Commissioning Panel which Ben had chaired in 1993–94 and whose steering committee he led for a further five years. The subjects ranged widely from devolution and immigration through the role of the Treasury to civil contingency planning for emergencies and terrorist attack and public service reform. These occasions were relished by the group of scholars invited and especially by Sir Robin Butler and Sir Richard Wilson during their time as Secretary of the Cabinet. Wilson's successor, Sir Andrew Turnbull, to Ben's great regret, brought them to an end, thus breaking probably the most fruitful link between the scholarly and the Whitehall communities of recent times, though Ben, in his last months, was on the point of agreeing a new format with Turnbull.

Baffling as that rupture was, it was as nothing compared to New Labour's failure to make use of Ben after the Blair election victory in 1997. No one in the university world had done more to help Labour reacquire electability. Ben's M.Sc. in Public Policy at Birkbeck had groomed numerous special advisers in the Labour government to come (and they, rightly, swore by their mentor). Maybe Ken Morgan, himself a Labour peer, had it right when he declared his astonishment 'that the Blair government saw no need to call on Ben, or some of his Fabian friends, for assistance or advice after the 1997 election. Perhaps this reflected the instinctive apprehension of New Labour towards academics, however distinguished, who were felt all too liable to stray unpredictably "off message" into the dangerous pastures of independent thought.' Certainly had Ben gone to the House of Lords and been appointed a minister, there would (to his credit) have been uncomfortable times ahead even before the Iraq War of 2003 to which he was strongly opposed. With a few exceptions, a knowledge of history (including that of the Labour Party itself) has not been among the strongest suits of those upon whom the Blair patronage has fallen and Ben would never have succumbed to what one of his Cabinet ministers called the 'Tony wants' syndrome.

The full text of this Biographical Memoir is published in *Proceedings of the British Academy*, volume 150 – available via www.proc.britac.ac.uk/
