

The Queen and Marilyn



by Michael Curtis

Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them.

Throughout history a striking, sometimes amusing and not always understandable, characteristic in society has been the element of celebrity, the fame and public recognition of an individual or group by the general public and mass media. Usually conveying a favorable image, celebrity in the contemporary world is mostly associated with individuals in sports, entertainment, politics, and occasionally in other fields, even gangsters. Celebrities are highly visible persons whose attributes and activities are familiar, and who sometimes are publicized as experts in areas in which they possess little or no competence. Celebrity, sometimes, is not linked to any genuine achievement, but to the desire for fame, which is the spur. In absurd fashion, individuals, Paris Hilton, Kim Kardashian, are famous for being famous, persons with no particular objective talent. Equally, some persons,

Stalin, Mao, are prominent celebrities without being glamorous or universally admired.

Comparisons may be odious, but analysis of the similarities and differences of individuals are useful to illustrate the human comedy. By coincidence, events have given us the opportunity to compare two women, extraordinary examples of celebrity, two icons who were and are the object of global fascination, British Queen Elizabeth II, Britain's longest serving monarch, and American Marilyn Monroe, the film actress admired in pop culture.

The two women are on display at the current moment. Queen Elizabeth II, Britain's longest serving monarch, who died at Balmoral Castle, Scotland, on September 8, 2022 aged 96, surrounded by her family, is on view at her coffin in Westminster Hall which will lie in state for several days, before burial in Windsor Castle, and Monroe is visible as the subject of a film at the Venice Film Festival in a three hour biopic *Blonde*, depicting her life over 16 years, the script adapted from a novel by Joyce Carol Oates. Their lives, births and their end illustrate the difference between celebrity and substantial achievement.

Curiously, the two emerged, a few months apart, in the same year. Monroe, was born, Norma Jeanne Mortenson, on June 1, 1926, in Los Angeles, with an unstable mother of working-class roots, who suffered a mental breakdown, and paranoid schizophrenia, and was placed in a state hospital. An unwanted child, Norma spent her childhood in foster homes and in an orphanage. Queen Elizabeth was born on April 21, 1926, in London, the first child of the Duke and Duchess of York, later King George V and Queen Elizabeth, educated privately at home, and undertook public duties at an early age.

Monroe died on August 4, 1962, aged 36, in the bed of her home in Los Angeles, with an unhooked phone in her hand and bottle of sleeping pills by her bed. Though the official conclusion

was that she died from an overdose of pills, acute barbiturate poisoning, conspiracy theories persist about her death, whether it was accidental, suicide or murder. The Queen died peacefully, aged 96, at Balmoral Castle, Scotland, after a reign of 70 years. She will lie in state in Westminster Hall, a 240-foot-long venue built in 1097, which has hosted the trials of Charles I, Guy Fawkes, and Thomas More. She will be visited by world leaders figures in public life and long queues of citizens.

What extraordinary different lives the two women lived! Monroe at 16, married a 21-year-old factory worker from whom she was soon divorced. Shy and insecure, she began modeling for ads and men's magazines, made photos for *Playboy*, got small film parts, and died her hair first blonde, then platinum blonde.

A sex symbol from early years, she wore revealing dresses with no underwear, the epitome of a modern, liberated woman and classless glamor.

Monroe had small parts in some significant films, *All About Eve*, and the film noir, *The Asphalt Jungle*, before becoming a star in two films; *Niagara* in which she played a femme fatale, planning to murder her husband, and *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, in which she wore a startling décolleté gold lame dress. She befriended gossip columnists, and was constantly involved in liaisons with film executives, actors, and PR men.

She was an artifice, creating herself, using a breathy, sometimes childish, voice, distinctive hip-swinging walk, figure hugging outfits, made up with arched brows, red lips, and a beauty mark. She was a flamboyant sex symbol, but one with a complex, troubled private life.

Marilyn was involved in many romances and relationships, virtually non-stop, the most notorious and controversial one being with the Kennedy brothers, President Jack and Bobby, then attorney general. She was scandalous in her appearance at the Democratic party at Madison Square Gardens on May 19,

1962, when wearing a beige, skin-tight dress covered in rhinestones, making her look naked, she sang "Happy Birthday" to the 45-year-old President.

But though Marilyn took acting classes, including at Actors Studio, run by Lee and Paula Strasberg she had professional as well as personal problems. She began to use barbiturates, amphetamines, alcohol. She became erratic, was late for her filming, sometimes not showing up, demanding retakes in filming, not remembering her lines. In a cutting remark, Tony Curtis, her co-star in the film, *Some Like it Hot*, in which she played a dumb blonde, said that kissing her was like kissing Hitler. Her most notorious scene was in the film *The Seven Year Itch*, 1955, when she is shown with air blowing up the skirt of her white dress from a subway grate on Lexington Avenue, NYC.

Monroe was always a puzzle, seemingly dimwitted and dumb, but sometimes parodying herself, and always sexually attractive and available. She was the symbol of a modern, liberated woman, involved in sex without demand, classless glamor. Yet, was she a competent actress? Pauline Kael, somewhat unkindly, wrote Monroe turned "cheesecake into acting, and vice versa."

The contrast between the Monroe kind of celebrity and the admiration of the British monarchy, which represents the whole nation is illuminating. Elizabeth who had been married on November 20, 1947, became Queen of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, on February 6, 1952, aged 25, a symbol of somewhat mystical continuity stretching back in time. Elizabeth was not only a survivor, she was the rock of the British monarchy, if not a rock star, the most famous woman in the world, the longest reigning monarch. She fulfilled what she stated to the British population, when aged 21, that "my whole life, whether it be long or short, shall be devoted to your service and the service of our great imperial family to which we all belong." At 16, she was made an honorary colonel in the Grenadier Guards.

Elizabeth was a model of duty, grace, restraint during a life of dignity and service. Her role as monarch was essentially ceremonial, with no real political power in the British system of constitutional monarchy, but she was the symbol of national unity and of duties. She rose above partisan differences to represent the nation as the British Empire was disintegrating. Elizabeth signed documents addressed to the nation as "Your Servant."

Her personal political, social or economic views, even on Brexit, were unknown to the public. Yet she was well informed, and fulfilled her role and duties, including overseas tours and official visits. A calm public presence, she represented Britain, diplomatically, as when receiving President Theodor Heuss of Germany in 1958, and on a three week visit to West Germany in 1965, meeting Nelson Mandela in 1995, and state visits to Japan, China, Russia, and Ireland in 2011.

In the private code names of the Royal Family, the Firm, she was "London Bridge." The Bridge has now fallen but the memory remains vivid. She played her role, a ceremonial one of formality and pageantry and politeness, adapting the monarchy to the modern world. During her reign she appointed 15 prime ministers of different parties, and met 14 U.S. presidents, starting with Harry Truman. She was head of the Commonwealth of 56 independent nations, in Africa, Asia, Americas, Europe, Pacific. 14 of those countries have the Queen, the monarch, as head of state.

Elizabeth was almost universally internationally admired, respected, and praised. The players of the New York Yankees stood for a moment of silence in her honor at Yankee Stadium. President Emmanuel Macron spoke of her wisdom and empathy, and that "she loved French culture and touched our hearts."

Elizabeth was married on November 20, 1947, and balanced the duties of the monarchy and motherhood from age 22. She was mother, grandmother, and great grandmother of 12.

The Royal Family in recent years has not been the model of domestic virtue or private happiness, but Elizabeth was the center of calm in the 1992 turmoil of members of the Family, a year of *annus horribilis*.

The memory of Elizabeth will linger for a while. Her portrait is present on letters, coins, cereal boxes, all Bank of England notes since 1960, stamps, and 100,000 post boxes.

She was active to the end. Two days before her death she bade farewell to outgoing PM Boris Johnson, and appointed Liz Truss as PM. Elizabeth loved horses and on the same day discussed racing issues with her racehorse-trainer.

Elizabeth was a survivor. Her seven-decade reign, the rock on which modern Britain rested, was the symbol of continuity between a glorious if complex past and a post-colonial era in which Britain was transformed into a modern multilateral state.