

# Covert world behind crown

## THE SECRET ROYALS

By Richard Aldrich  
& Rory Cormac  
Allen & Unwin, Nonfiction  
725pp, \$45

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QUEEN Elizabeth may well be the best-informed person alive. For more than 70 years, she has taken part in weekly briefings with a succession of British prime ministers, some of whom were not even born when she came to the throne. Her international contacts are also without peer: when she greeted Joe Biden at the G7 summit in June, he was the 14th US President she had been required to meet. Naturally, she also meets with Australian leaders.

Yet transparency cannot be assumed, even between allies. This new book, *The Secret Royals*, makes plain that monarchs have protected their own interests, and often managed their own espionage operations outside the normal channels of government, helped by the extensive family connections of royal families. Queen Victoria, for example, was kept informed by a network of relations in most of the major courts of Europe.

The book is very long, and it veers between diplomatic history and the sort of innuendo that one usually finds in popular magazines. Some of the anecdotes, for example the information held by spy agencies about the marriage of Charles and Diana, are well known; others will be new to anyone but the most dedicated of royal watchers. Even your reviewer found his attention wavering as he read the detailed accounts of every attempt – unsuccessful – to kill or assassinate the current royal family, culminating in 24 pages needed to establish that Diana was not the victim of a political hit job.

While the book straddles four centuries it concentrates heavily on monarchs since Victoria, and the constant interplay between the sovereign and her government. This relationship was most strained, it seems, by the short reign of Edward VIII, who after his abdication was suspected of Nazi sympathies and who was, therefore, a key target for British and German security agencies.

That said, one suspects that the current British secret service has been as concerned at monitoring Prince Andrew as

they have at protecting him, and the book suggests MI6 was aware of Russian interest in the less savoury aspects of Prince Andrew's life.

Running through the book is the gradual development of British intelligence as it slowly developed from the preserve of gentlemen to the highly professional agencies of today. Writers were particularly prominent in the mid-20th century services, with John

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Buchan, Somerset Maugham, Noel Coward, Compton Mackenzie all involved in secret missions. It seems appropriate that the first female head of MI5, Stella Rimington, has become a successful thriller writer.

The authors suggest Queen Victoria was well ahead of her ministers in advocating for strong anti-terrorism meas-

ures, motivated by anarchist attacks on royalty in the late 19th century.

Given the authors' interest in any involvement of the monarchy in political intrigue, the role of the Palace in Sir John Kerr's dismissal of Gough Whitlam is discussed. There are several other references to Australia, but most intriguing is the suggestion that after World War II, Edward, the Duke of Windsor,



thrive precisely on not being secret, while maintaining the veneer of avoiding anything political. The clear lesson of *The Secret Royals* is that the monarchy remains politically relevant; the Queen has taken her constitutional duty to be consulted, to encourage and to warn seriously.

She has been a considerable asset to British foreign policy, with many countries vying for the honour of a royal visit. The book contains fascinating detail about the diplomatic energies employed in visits to countries such as Iran and the Soviet Union, and the problems of both diplomacy and security these involve.

Had I read this book before I finished my own discussion of contemporary monarchies, I would have found further arguments for taking the institution seriously. As Aldrich and Cormac write, it perpetuates “an illusion of power, popularity and divine protection.” Anyone interested in how this illusion is fostered should read *The Secret Royals*.

Dennis Altman's most recent book is *God Save the Queen: The strange persistence of monarchies*.

may have been offered the position of Governor-General. One wonders whether they are confused by the fact that his younger – and duller – brother, the Duke of Gloucester, was appointed to the position by the Curtin government before the end of the war.

The title of this book is somewhat ironic, as the royals