

The Queen Mother? That spiteful old soak dedicated herself to making our lives hell.

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The setting was palatial, even if it wasn't a palace.

The blue and gold Parisian drawing room in the Bois de Boulogne, with its ornate 18th-century furniture, its royal portraits and Aubusson carpet, was the final stage-set created for the exile of the uncrowned King and his consort, who had been denied the title Her Royal Highness.

Opposite me, on a spring afternoon in 1971, with their pug dogs snuffling and scampering at their feet, sat the 20th century's most legendary lovers: the Duke of Windsor, formerly King Edward VIII, and the twice-divorced American socialite for whom he had renounced both throne and empire, Wallis Simpson, the Duchess of Windsor.

Frozen out: Cecil Beaton's portrait of the Duke and Duchess of Windsor

'So you're planning to write a book about the Queen Mother,' said the Duke, exchanging a conspiratorial smile with his wife.

'Well, we shall have to be extremely careful what we say on that subject, won't we darling?'

'Why is that, Sir?' I inquired innocently, although I was well aware of the reason.

The Duke, only months away from being diagnosed with inoperable throat cancer, was interrupted by a convulsive spasm of coughing.

He cleared his throat and added: 'I hope your book will tell the truth, instead of all that gush they dish out about her.'

'Behind that great abundance of charm is a shrewd, scheming and extremely ruthless woman.'

He must have noticed my surprised reaction, for he quickly added, with his most charming smile: 'But, of course, you cannot quote that.'

The Duchess was less inhibited. 'The Duke would have loved to return to live in the land of his birth,' she said. 'But our way was blocked at every turn. We were never allowed to go back, and we never will be allowed. Not until the day we die. She will never permit it. When we are dead, perhaps she may at last forgive us'.

When I asked her the reason, the Duchess's right arm shot out as if she was taking aim with a gun and she said: 'Jealousy.'

'Jealousy of the Duke?' I wondered. 'No!' cried the Duchess, and for the first time her southern American origins were audible. 'Jealousy of me for having married him.'

The Duke, who appeared vaguely uncomfortable with this topic, murmured: 'Well, it's hard to explain. But, yes, Elizabeth (the Queen Mother) was rather fonder of me than she ought to have been. And after I married Wallis, her attitude towards me changed.'

'My sister-in-law is an arch-intriguer, and she has dedicated herself to making life hell for both of us.'

The Duchess interjected: 'Somebody once told me that even Hitler was afraid of her.'

The exiled Duke and Duchess then proceeded to make a series of astonishing allegations against the Queen Mother. All of them were dramatically at odds with her image as the nation's favourite grandmother.

They were equally at odds with the effulgently glowing, reverent, completely sanitised and at times absurdly hagiographic contents of William Shawcross's official biography launched this week.

The Duke of Windsor insisted he possessed 'proof positive' that the Queen Mother had personally engineered the Duchess's exclusion from royal rank – an action now judged

constitutionally illegal and known to historians as 'the Depriving Act'.

'It was her doing entirely,' said the Duke. 'It was not something my brother, the King, would ever have done, left to himself. But he deferred to her influence, just as her daughter does now.'

On the outbreak of war in 1939, the Windsors' enforced return to Britain was met with complete ostracism by the Royal Family, led by the Queen Mother's announcement that she would not meet the Duchess.

'What are we going to do about Mrs S?' she wrote to her mother-in-law, Queen Mary, in a less than kind reference to the woman who had been her sister-in-law for more than two years.

'I personally do not wish to receive her,' she added implacably – making it clear the initiative was hers, and hers alone.

After the fall of France in 1940, when the Windsors fled Paris, they were briefly marooned in Lisbon, where it was reported to the Germans that 'the Duke and Duchess have less fear of the King, who was a complete nincompoop, than of the shrewd Queen, who was intriguing skilfully against the Duke and particularly against the Duchess'.

Referring to her husband's appointment as Governor of the Bahamas, the Duchess told me at our 1971 meeting: 'We were then offered this pathetic little job in a ghastly backwater. It was designed to get us out of the way, but she even tried to stop that.'

Indeed, the Queen wrote to the Colonial Secretary, Lord Lloyd, predicting that if the Duke became Governor, 'a very difficult situation will arise over his wife'.

The fact that the Duchess 'has three husbands alive (including

her two exes – a U.S. navy pilot and a shipping executive), will not be pleasing to the good people of the Islands'. Britons were used to 'looking up to the King's representatives'.

Then she added a sentence that puts her utter loathing of Wallis Simpson beyond doubt: 'The Duchess of Windsor is looked upon as the lowest of the low.'

When the Windsors, despite the Queen's objections, arrived in Nassau, they were confronted by Foreign Office memos instructing the local ladies not to curtsy to the Duchess.

'That was her doing, of course,' said the Duke in 1971. 'Wherever we looked, we could see her hand against us.'

The Windsors' most astonishing claim concerned their visit to the United States in 1941.

The Queen Mother, they alleged, enlisted the help of Special Branch in London; of her brother, David (later Sir David) Bowes Lyon, who was posted to the British Embassy in Washington; of the British Ambassador, Lord Halifax; and of her friends, President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his wife Eleanor, to have them followed and spied on 24 hours a day by FBI agents.

Yet Shawcross, in his determination to present the Queen Mother in a posthumous golden glow, makes claims which verge on the ludicrous.

He quotes Robert Fellowes, later the present Queen's private secretary, as saying the Queen Mother 'would not have minded the Prince of Wales being kind to the Duke of Windsor'.

Really? This contradicts statements by Prince Charles himself. In 1970, he wrote: 'I, personally, feel it would be wonderful if Uncle David and his wife could come over and spend a weekend.'

'Now that he is getting old he must long to come back and it would seem pointless to continue the feud... apart from anything else it would be fun to see what she was like... it is worthwhile getting to know the better side of her.'

Charles raised this possibility with his grandmother 'but it was immediately apparent to him how difficult she would find it to be reconciled with the man whom she held responsible for consigning her husband to an early grave'. (The Abdication changed her life for ever by putting her temperamentally ill-prepared husband on the throne and driving him to a premature death).

Shawcross goes on to quote Fellowes as making the even more extraordinary claim that the Queen Mother 'was herself very kind to the Duchess.

On the rare occasions when I talked to her about the Duchess, she showed no animosity at all'.

If refusing to meet your sister-in-law for 35 years, even when the country was at war, calling her 'the lowest of the low', and freezing her out of the family and British society, can be described as 'very kind', I would hate to think what Lord Fellowes and Shawcross might consider unkind. This is cosmetic history at its worst.

Then there is the tragic saga of the Queen Mother's nieces, Nerissa and Katherine Bowes Lyon, both born mentally deficient and unable to speak.

They were confined in the Royal Earlswood Mental Hospital at Redhill, Surrey, in 1941, where they remained for the rest of their lives.

Although the Queen Mother knew the statement in Burke's Peerage that both women were dead (published after false information had been supplied by their mother) was untrue, she never visited either of them, and apparently saw no

contradiction in her patronage of Mencap, which campaigns against families placing their mentally challenged relations in state care.

The Queen Mother was always renowned for her alleged tolerance of homosexuals – perhaps not surprising considering the notorious and flagrantly homosexual adventures of her own brother, Sir David Bowes Lyon, who, though married with children, was addicted to all-male orgies at which young men were bidden to wear football shorts.

Meanwhile, the Queen Mother's marriage to 'Bertie', into which she entered with extreme reluctance while in love with his handsome equerry James Stuart, was not always the blissfully happy union of legend.

Their marital rows were frequent and sometimes conducted in public. Her unpunctuality maddened him.

He was a jealous man, and her tendency towards flirtatious conduct provoked violent outbursts of temper.

Kenneth Clark, the Surveyor of the King's Pictures, 'might have been a little in love with her', and according to him, 'the King became unreasonably jealous and twice made scenes, once at Windsor Castle and again at Buckingham Palace'.

Typically, Shawcross fails to include this.

To what extent the Queen Mother may have been attracted to her brother-in-law, the Duke of Windsor, is hard to determine. She certainly wrote to him in terms of unusual affection, describing him as 'very, very naughty, but delicious'.

The Duchess of Windsor was not the only victim of the Queen Mother's capacity for ruthless ostracism.

There is also no mention in Shawcross's book of her alcoholic and epileptic nephew, Timothy, the 16th Earl of Strathmore – a source of embarrassment and anxiety to the Bowes Lyon family

over many years.

In 1958, he married an Irish Catholic nursing sister from a working-class background, whom he met in one of the clinics where he went periodically to 'dry out'.

The Queen Mother ignored the wedding and the new Countess of Strathmore, plainly regarding her as an inappropriate chatelaine for Glamis (the family home), and an unsuitable wife for the Queen's first cousin.

For the next nine years, the Queen Mother only visited Glamis while Lady Strathmore was absent.

In 1967, the Countess committed suicide with a massive overdose of the barbiturate Seconal.

The Queen Mother was at Birkhall, on the Balmoral estate, less than 50 miles away, yet made no attempt to attend the funeral, but sent a wreath for the niece-in-law she had neither known nor accepted.

Shawcross records the Queen Mother and her husband, in the early years of their marriage, 'liked cocktails before lunch and dinner and often drank champagne throughout the meal'.

Of her drinking in later years, which became a matter of some concern, he makes no mention.

But the Duke of Windsor told me: 'Between these four walls, you do realise, don't you, that she is an alcoholic? She begins drinking at ten o'clock in the morning, which doesn't make her any easier to deal with.'

If Wallis Simpson was the first great nemesis of her life, Diana Spencer was to become the second. Of her betrothal to Charles, Shawcross alleges that the Queen Mother 'seems to have been pleased with the Prince's choice'.

But according to Ruth, Lady Fermoy, Diana's grandmother and

the Queen Mother's lady-in-waiting, the Queen Mother had 'serious misgivings' about his chosen bride.

'HM thinks Diana is not intellectually equipped for queenship,' confided Lady Fermoy.

'She also fears they have little in common and that the age gap – 13 years – is too great.'

As Diana became transformed into a worldwide media celebrity, entirely eclipsing her husband, the Queen Mother watched with increasing concern and distrust.

'She thinks that courting the press in the way that Diana does, is vulgar and ill-advised,' said Lady Fermoy.

'She believes a wife should support her husband, not overshadow him.'

When the breakdown of the Wales marriage became public, the Queen Mother was angry and devastated. Lady Fermoy revealed sadly: 'I fear my granddaughter's name is no longer to be mentioned at Clarence House.'

Of the Queen Mother's reaction to Diana's death, Shawcross tells us nothing. And though the Queen Mother was fond of Andrew Parker Bowles, we do not learn her opinion of Camilla.

At my final meeting with Ruth Fermoy, shortly after the Wales separation was announced, I asked her about the Queen Mother's attitude towards Camilla.

Her reply was brusque.

'Tolerated, I think, because she keeps a certain person happy, but of course there can be no question of marriage, not as long as HM lives.'

The eternally benevolent figure that emerges from Shawcross's bland pages is not the feisty, steely, stubborn Scot whose

seemingly imperturbable outward calm rallied the nation during the darkest days of the Blitz.

The Duchess of Windsor dismissed her sister-in-law as 'a supreme actress', while the Duke observed bitterly: 'She isn't just two-faced. She is 40-faced.'

The Queen Mother was once described as having 'a touch of arsenic in the marshmallow'. Shawcross's portrait, alas, is almost entirely marshmallow and no arsenic.

In his efforts to do justice to her legend, he has converted a vivid, enigmatic and fascinating woman into a plaster-cast effigy.

- MICHAEL THORNTON is the author of Royal Feud: The Queen Mother And The Duchess Of Windsor.

Read

more: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1214573/The-Queen-Mother-That-spiteful-old-soak-dedicated-making-lives-hell.html#ixzz1zFbP99L4>