



COURTIERS

INTRIGUE, AMBITION, AND THE POWER PLAYERS
BEHIND THE HOUSE OF WINDSOR

VALENTINE LOW





COURTIERS



THE HIDDEN POWER
BEHIND THE CROWN

VALENTINE LOW



HEADLINE

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About the Author



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Valentine Low has been reporting on the royal family for over a quarter of a century, and his exclusives for *The Times* have made front page news and headlines around the world. After graduating from Oxford University, Valentine worked at the *Evening Standard* for over twenty years, reporting from all around the world. He lives in West London.

[About the Book](#)

The gripping account of how the Royal family *really* operates from the man who has spent years studying them in his role as Royal correspondent for *The Times*. Valentine Low asks the important questions: who really runs the show and, as Charles III begins his reign, what will happen next?

Throughout history, the British monarchy has relied on its courtiers – the trusted advisers in the King or Queen’s inner circle – to ensure its survival as a family, an ancient institution, and a pillar of the constitution. Today, as ever, a vast team of people hidden from view steers the royal family’s path between public duty and private life. Queen Elizabeth II, after a remarkable 70 years of service, saw the final seasons of her reign without her husband Philip to guide her. Meanwhile, newly ascended Charles seeks to define what his future as King, and that of his court, will be.

The question of who is entrusted to guide the royals has never been more vital, and yet the task those courtiers face has never been more challenging. With a cloud hanging over Prince Andrew as well as Harry and Meghan’s departure from royal life, the complex relationship between modern courtiers and royal principals has been exposed to global scrutiny. As the new Prince and Princess of Wales, William and Kate – equipped with a very 21st century approach to press and public relations – now hold the responsibility of making an ancient institution relevant for the decades to come.

Courtiers reveals an ever-changing system of complex characters, shifting values and ideas over what the future of the institution should be. This is the story of how the monarchy really works, at a pivotal moment in its history.

To JT, at last

PROLOGUE

Sydney, Australia, 26 October 2018

It used to be a standard part of a royal tour, the moment when the royals would venture to the back of the plane, where the media were sitting, to say hello and share a few thoughts about how the trip was going. But this tour by the Duke and Duchess of Sussex was different. It had started off with a bang, with the announcement that Meghan was pregnant, and in many ways had been a success. Harry and Meghan had proved extremely popular in Australia, and their engagements in Fiji and Tonga had also gone well.

Harry had come a long way from the days when he was better known for his laddish exploits than his service to Queen and country. Strip billiards in Las Vegas may not have been forgotten, but it was certainly forgiven. His creation of the Invictus Games for injured servicemen and women was an extraordinary and much-valued achievement. And, now that he had found happiness with the woman he loved, the prince seemed to be in a better place than he had been for years.

But on their tour of the South Pacific, Harry had looked out of sorts. His relations with the media pack had been prickly and strained. Where Meghan smiled, always putting on her best face whenever she was on show, Harry glowered. On the five-hour flight back from Tonga to Sydney, his press handlers promised that he would come to the back of the plane and thank the media for coming. The hours passed with no sign of Harry and Meghan. Then, after the plane had landed and it seemed as if it was not going to happen, the couple appeared.

As the *Times* correspondent on that tour, I remember

the scene well. Harry looked like a sulky teenager, forced against his will to talk to some unwelcome visitors. Meghan stood a couple of feet behind him, smiling benignly but not saying much. Her only contribution was a comment about how much everyone must be looking forward to Sunday lunch at home. Harry did all the talking. He sounded rushed, as if he couldn't wait to get back into the first-class cabin, away from the media.

'Thanks for coming,' he told the assembled press pack, 'even though you weren't invited.'

Even for a man who has a deep mistrust of the press, this was spectacularly rude – and incorrect. The media very much had been invited to cover the tour. If the couple's casual meet-and-greet moment with the royal correspondents had been meant to repair relations with the media, it had the opposite effect. Later, Harry's staff, who had spent much of the flight trying to persuade the duke to speak to us, told him how badly his remarks had gone down. He replied: 'Well, you shouldn't have made me do it.'

Megxit was more than a year away, but Harry's petulant behaviour was a taste of the dramas that were to come. It revealed much, not just about the Sussexes' hatred of the press but also of the couple's deteriorating relationship with their own staff. Although everyone was aware of the tension in the air, none of the media on the plane realised quite what was going on behind the scenes. Some of the secrets of that tour – the reasons behind Meghan's meltdown at a market in Fiji, the hidden story of her diamond earrings – would not emerge for more than two years. Two of the couple's advisers would soon be gone. When Meghan's assistant private secretary Amy Pickerill handed in her notice a few months later, it would prompt an angry outburst from the duchess. Samantha Cohen, the couple's private secretary, would hang on for another year. By the time she left, her relief at being able to escape at last was palpable. Back home, Harry and Meghan's communications secretary Jason Knauf, who was not on

the tour because he had broken his collarbone, was about to compose an email containing explosive allegations of bullying that would destroy what remained of his faltering relationship with the Sussexes, and would later create headlines around the world.

Harry's behaviour also raised fundamental questions about the relationship between royal and courtier: who wields the power? To what extent do royal servants play the master? And who – or what – do they really serve?

CHAPTER ONE

STARCHED SHIRTS



A SENIOR MEMBER of the Queen's household, who had originally come to Buckingham Palace on secondment from his job working for the Australian government, was on his way back home when he stopped at immigration control at Sydney Airport. The man at the desk leafed through his passport until he came to the page where the adviser had entered his profession. He gave it a quizzical look, then snapped the passport shut and handed it back.

'Mate,' he said, 'there's no T in courier.'

This story may have an apocryphal edge to it, but it was good enough to be told at the party marking the departure of one of the Queen's private secretaries, Lord Janvrin, about one of his predecessors, the Australian Sir William Heseltine. Regardless of whether it is true, however, it raises two related points. One is that to contemporary ears there is something inescapably ridiculous about the word courtier. Who are these absurd characters, with their knee breeches and fawning ways, their courtly intrigues and scheming ambition? Which leads us to the second point: the very name suggests someone who is not to be trusted. When the Duchess of Sussex spoke in her interview with Oprah Winfrey of the difference between the royal family and the people running the institution, she knew it was a distinction that would resonate with people around the world. Ah yes, audiences said to themselves, we know what's going on here. There's the royal family, who are

blamelessly just trying to do their best. And then there are the courtiers, who are up to no good.

These are the men in grey suits (a catchphrase much loved by the late Diana, Princess of Wales). Or the men with moustaches (Princess Margaret's epithet of choice, from an era when the wearing of a grey suit did not really single anyone out). They are the enemies of youth, progress and true love, who can be relied upon only to pursue power at all costs and to betray anyone who crosses their path.

It is small wonder, then, that during the research for this book I encountered only a tiny handful of people who would admit to being courtiers. No, no, they would protest, I'm not a courtier. Can't stand the word. I'm a modern professional, a seasoned purveyor of impartial advice who would be equally at home acting as a consultant to the CEO of a FTSE-100 company. You wouldn't catch me in knee breeches.

COURTIERS HAVE been around for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. Whenever there is a monarch, there is a court; and whenever there is a court, there are courtiers. They look after the money, they provide advice, and they organise all those entertainments that are the essence of palace life. And, of course, they plot and scheme and attempt to curry favour with their principal.

This book is not a lengthy history of courtiers: there are simply too many of them for that. One could write a book just on the Cecil family, who have been wielding power and influence in England ever since Lord Burghley was treasurer to Queen Elizabeth I. Modern-day courtiers have had their own dynasties. Lord Stamfordham, who served Queen Victoria and George V, had a grandson, Michael Adeane, who was private secretary to Queen Elizabeth II for nineteen years. Michael's son, Edward, was private secretary to the Prince of Wales.

Our fascination with courtiers is not hard to understand. They exert power, but do not rule. Instead, they live in the

shadows, using their influence behind the scenes, not on the public stage. It is a world closed to the rest of us, with strange rules and peculiar dress codes, where survival is all and fortune's favours are easily lost. Sir Walter Raleigh was not the only courtier who made the journey from court favourite to the executioner's block. Fortunately, these days the worst an errant courtier can expect is to be escorted to the door with a pay-off and a gong.

One of the literary sensations of the sixteenth century was Baldassare Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier*, a lengthy philosophical dialogue on the ideal courtier. It covers everything from the importance of noble birth to the nature of good advice, as well as tips on dancing (not advisable for elderly courtiers), conversation, games and practical jokes. It also contains a discussion on the appropriate dress for a courtier. Sobriety, according to one of the characters, is all important, 'for things external often bear witness to the things within'.

When in doubt, apparently, wear black.

ALAN LASCELLES, who was always known as Tommy, would no doubt have approved of such solemn advice. One of the modern monarchy's most famous courtiers, he began his royal service under Edward VIII when he was still Prince of Wales, and went on to become the epitome of the old-school palace insider. However, he was not born into royal service, unlike so many of his predecessors; nor did he initially have any particular wish to serve the royal family. His early years were not especially distinguished. Educated at Marlborough and Oxford, where he achieved a disappointing second, he twice failed the exam to get into the Foreign Office, and then tried unsuccessfully to get a job in journalism. During the First World War he was wounded and won the Military Cross, after which his family connections helped him get a job in India as aide-de-camp to the Governor of Bombay. He returned to England in 1920, with a wife – Joan, the daughter of the viceroy – but without any clear idea of what he should do with his life.

He was, however, well connected. Tommy's first cousin, the 6th Earl of Harewood, was married to Princess Mary, who was sister to two monarchs, Edward VIII and George VI, and aunt to a third, Queen Elizabeth II. And he had a large circle of friends. Duff Hart-Davis, who edited Lascelles's celebrated diaries, says: 'He had a tremendous social life – he knew everybody.'¹ In 1920, one of those friends passed Lascelles an unofficial offer from the Prince of Wales – David, the eldest son of George V, although he would later reign as Edward VIII – asking if he would like to join his office as an assistant private secretary, on a salary of £600 a year.

Lascelles was thrilled. 'I have got a very deep admiration for the Prince,' he wrote, 'and I am convinced that the future of England is as much in his hands as in those of any individual.'² His views were soon to change. The Prince of Wales was, at the time, the country's most eligible bachelor, a status that he exploited with enthusiasm by embarking on a series of affairs, more often than not with married women. For the moment, however, his reputation remained unsullied, and his star in the ascendant.

Lascelles found his first real test during a transatlantic tour in 1924, when the American press developed an appetite for the salacious gossip that always followed in Edward's wake. Judging by the 'idiotic' press coverage of the tour, said Lascelles, 'you might think that he had done nothing but jazz and ride and flirt'. One particularly challenging occasion was when Edward's travelling companion, the charming but reckless Edward 'Fruity' Metcalfe, managed to leave his wallet, containing several letters from the prince, in the flat of a New York prostitute. 'Damned old fool,' wrote Lascelles, 'but it is impossible to be really angry with him, and tho the incident might do the Prince very serious harm, we have all rocked with laughter over it.'

Lascelles was doing his best to keep Edward on the straight and narrow. It was not easy. Esmé Howard, Britain's ambassador in Washington, thought Lascelles

'excellent in every way' but 'too young to have any great authority'.³ He was thirty-seven at the time, seven years older than the prince. Howard's patronising remark is hard to square with the image we have of the older Lascelles, memorably portrayed in the Netflix series *The Crown* as a stern, unbending pillar of palace rectitude. Lascelles was tall, slim and elegant, with a neatly trimmed moustache and immaculately parted hair. His friends appreciated his shrewd judgement and dry wit, but to most people he was the 'aloof, austere, jealous guardian of the royal prerogative; a man who had the reputation not only of not suffering fools gladly, but of rarely enduring their presence in the same room'.⁴

Although Lascelles had his concerns on that American trip about the prince's romantic liaisons, he managed to take Edward's behaviour in his stride. But as time passed, the scales began to fall from Lascelles's eyes. In 1927, Lascelles wrote a letter to Godfrey Thomas, the prince's private secretary (one rung up from Lascelles in the prince's household), saying: 'The cold fact remains that, as Joey [Legh, Edward's equerry] and I both agree, it would be a real disaster if, by any ill chance, he was called on to accede to the throne now and that neither of us see any prospect of his fitting himself any better, as time goes on.'⁵

His concern was so great that, when they were in Ottawa that year, Lascelles had a 'secret colloquy' with the prime minister, Stanley Baldwin, who was with them on the Canadian tour. He recalled in his diaries: 'I told him directly that, in my considered opinion, the Heir Apparent, in his unbridled pursuit of Wine and Women, and of whatever selfish whim occupied him at the moment, was rapidly going to the devil, and unless he mended his ways, would soon become no fit wearer of the British Crown.' Lascelles had expected to get his 'head bitten off', but to his surprise, Baldwin said he agreed with every word. Lascelles told the prime minister: 'You know, sometimes when I sit in York House waiting to get the result of some point-to-point in which he is riding, I can't help thinking

that the best thing that could happen to him, and to the country, would be for him to break his neck.'

'God forgive me,' said Baldwin. 'I have often thought the same.'⁶

If Lascelles nurtured any hopes that the prince would see the error of his ways, they were soon dispelled. The following year, likening himself to an 'inverted Falstaff', he retired in despair at the age of forty-two, and 'left Prince Hal to work out his damnation'.⁷

And that should have been that. The prince did not mend his ways but instead embarked on the affair with the American divorcee Wallis Simpson that would later lead to him dramatically renouncing the throne. Meanwhile, Lascelles got on with his life, taking up a position as private secretary to the Governor-General of Canada. On his return from Ottawa in 1935, he was invited to return to royal service as assistant private secretary to King George V; but in January 1936, less than two months after Lascelles had accepted the job, the King died at Sandringham. Much to Lascelles's surprise, the new King, who respected his abilities, took him on as assistant private secretary: Prince Hal and his inverted Falstaff had been thrown back together again. However, any rapprochement, such as it was, did not last long. In later years, Edward referred to his former adviser and confidant as 'that evil snake Lascelles'.⁸ (He was not the only person to see a devious side to Lascelles: Chips Channon described him as *sournois*, the French for sly and deceitful.⁹) However, Lascelles survived to see out Edward's abdication in December 1936, before becoming assistant private secretary to George VI under Alec Hardinge. When Hardinge resigned in 1943, Lascelles took over, and remained in the role until the King's death.

SO IT WAS THAT by the time Elizabeth II ascended to the throne in 1952 Alan Lascelles had already served three Kings. He was a tough, experienced courtier, and just the man to break in the new Queen. After returning to the

palace in 1936, he had watched Princess Elizabeth grow up: in South Africa, he had watched her come of age. The 1947 tour with the King and Queen was the first time that Elizabeth and Margaret had been abroad in their lives, and the trip marked the young heir to the throne's debut on the world stage. Politically, it was also a highly sensitive trip, coming as it did at a time when South Africa was bitterly divided between the English and the Afrikaans-speaking populations. The latter were bent on breaking South Africa's bonds with the Empire, and in the words of one historian, the visit was 'essentially a mission to save [Prime Minister Jan] Smuts and the Crown of South Africa'.¹⁰

The curmudgeonly Lascelles was clearly entranced by Princess Elizabeth. After a particularly tedious state banquet in Cape Town ('in thirty years of public dinners, I can't recall one that caused me greater misery') he wrote: 'Princess Elizabeth is delightfully enthusiastic and interested; she has her grandmother's passion for punctuality, and, to my delight, goes bounding furiously up the stairs to bolt her parents when they are more than usually late.'¹¹

The tour is mostly remembered nowadays for the radio broadcast that Elizabeth made from Cape Town on her twenty-first birthday, in which, in those ringing, cut-glass tones, she declared 'before you all 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'. That speech, which has become famous for expressing the sense of duty and service that would be the Queen's watchwords throughout her reign, was written by Dermot Morrah, the writer and *Times* journalist, who had written a number of speeches for the King during the war. As soon as Lascelles received the first draft, he knew it was something special. 'I have been reading drafts for many years now,' he wrote to Morrah, 'but I cannot recall one that has so completely satisfied me and left me feeling that no single word should be altered. Moreover, dusty cynic though I am, it moved me greatly. It

has the trumpet-ring of the other Elizabeth's Tilbury speech, combined with the immortal simplicity of Victoria's "I will be good".'

When Elizabeth read it, she told Lascelles it made her cry. 'Good,' he said, 'for if it makes you cry now, it will make 200 million other people cry when they hear you deliver it, and that is what we want.'

It seemed to achieve its purpose. Summing up the success of the tour, Lascelles wrote in his diary: 'The most satisfactory feature of the whole visit is the remarkable development of Princess Elizabeth. She has come on in the most surprising way, and in all the right direction.' She had a 'good, healthy sense of fun', but could also 'take on the old bores with much of her mother's skill'.

That diary entry included one more prediction: 'My impression, by the way, is that we shall all be subscribing to a wedding present before the year is out.' Lascelles had insider knowledge here. Prince Philip of Greece had, in fact, already asked Elizabeth to marry him late the previous summer, and had been accepted. The King and Queen were of the attitude that Elizabeth should not hurry into a decision; as one former courtier told the historian Ben Pimlott, 'The King and Queen basically said: "Come with us to South Africa and then decide."' ¹²

Lascelles was already deeply involved with the negotiations behind the scenes to smooth the path of Prince Philip joining the royal family. In one sense Philip was an excellent match for Elizabeth – he was royal on both his mother's and his father's sides of the family (his mother, a great-granddaughter of Queen Victoria, was born at Windsor Castle), and he'd had what they used to call a 'good war', having served in the Royal Navy and been mentioned in dispatches. But he was rootless, impecunious and a foreigner: worse yet, he had undeniably German ancestry.

There was, then, plenty of opposition to the idea of Elizabeth marrying Philip. Tommy Lascelles told the diarist Harold Nicolson that the King and Queen were initially

unimpressed: 'The family were at first horrified when they saw that Prince Philip was making up to Princess Elizabeth. They felt he was rough, ill-mannered, uneducated and would probably prove unfaithful.'¹³ Lascelles may well have privately agreed with this verdict, although he later came round to Philip.

Whatever the stuffed shirts at the palace thought of Philip, he thought equally little of them. Edward Ford, the assistant private secretary, said that Philip refused to be deferential or ingratiating. 'He behaved with all the self-confidence of a naval officer who'd had a good war. He didn't show the respect which an English boy of his age would have had for the older people around him. He wasn't in the least afraid to tell Lord Salisbury [the eminent Tory and wartime cabinet minister] what his own opinions were.'¹⁴

Philip's friend Mike Parker told the writer Robert Lacey: 'The Salisburys and the hunting and shooting aristocrats around the King and Queen did not like him at all. And the same went for Lascelles and the old-time courtiers. They were absolutely bloody to him – and it didn't help that all his sisters were married to Germans.'¹⁵ John Brabourne, who was married to Lord Mountbatten's daughter Patricia, used the same language to testify how the royal establishment did its best to make Philip feel unwelcome. 'We were at Balmoral that summer, and they were absolutely bloody to him. They didn't like him, they didn't trust him, and it showed. Not at all nice.'¹⁶

Nevertheless, on 18 March 1947, Lieutenant Philip Mountbatten of Chester Street became a British citizen, and his engagement to Princess Elizabeth was announced less than four months later. They married on 20 November that year, with the bride wearing a dress designed by Norman Hartnell, made of ivory silk and decorated with pearls. Winston Churchill thought the wedding provided the touch of romance that the country needed in those bleak post-war years, describing it as 'a flash of colour on the hard road we have to travel'.¹⁷