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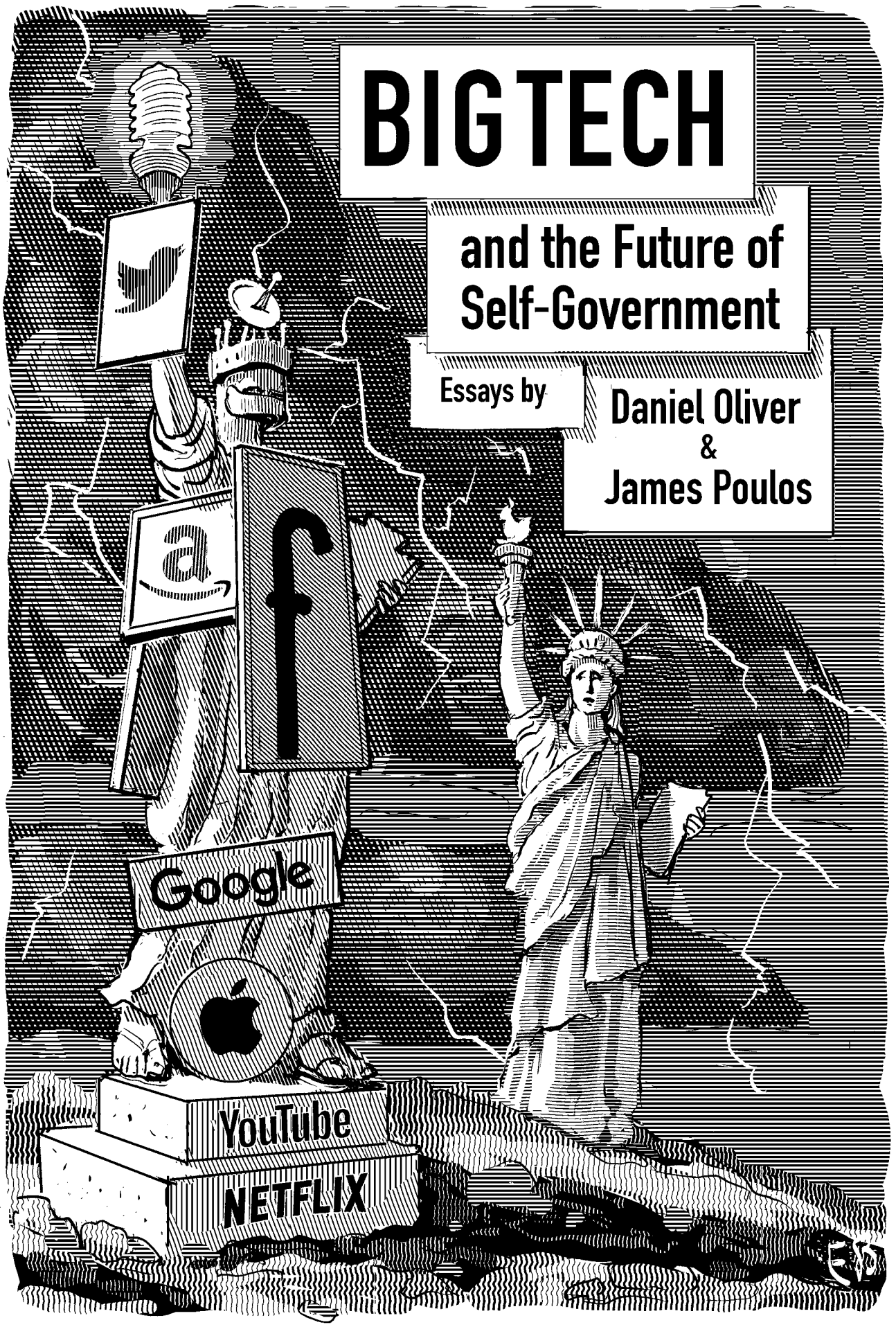

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Book Review by Charlotte Allen

Queen and Country

The Last Queen: Elizabeth II's Seventy Year Battle to Save the House of Windsor, by Clive Irving.
Pegasus Books, 352 pages, $27.95

Clive irving has been covering Britain's longest-reigning queen and her eyebrow-raising family for over 60 years. Although his new book, *The Last Queen*, would seem timed to feed the appetite of the enormous fan base for Netflix's *The Crown*, despite his title Irving is not especially interested in Elizabeth II, whom he regards as something of a stick: dowdy of dress, fusty of manners, scripted of speech, ignorant of arts and letters. His actual theme is the fate of the British monarchy, protected for generations from public scrutiny by a press committed to a genteel *omertà*, in an age which regards royals as no more than high-grade celebrities. "During that time, fawning and obsequious coverage and automatic public deference gave way to aggressive and intrusive world-wide scrutiny. Royal journalism became the most profitable stream of celebrity journalism, and the royal family assumed the role of a compulsively viewable soap opera," he writes. His subject matter is as much the changing media coverage of the royal family as the royal family itself.

A former managing editor of the *Sunday Times* (London) and former consulting editor for *Newsday*, Irving is an experienced journalist with an engaging, gossipy style and a flair for delivering delectable name-dropping tidbits. Many are of a distinctly salacious nature, such as his revelation that the Marquess George of Milford Haven—father of the late Prince Consort Philip's childhood best friend David Milford Haven—secretly compiled a vast, lovingly indexed pornography collection, supplied by knowing bookdealers who catered to the upper-crust in those otherwise prim pre-'60s days. It was all part of the "social compact enjoyed by the eminent and privileged" that kept a press lid on the royal family's bedroom doings.

Of particular interest to irving is Louis "Dickie" Mountbatten, Philip's larger-than-life naval-commander uncle and mentor, who was a tireless intervenor in the family affairs of his nephew and his wife—including a behind-the-scenes effort to change the royal family's legal surname to Mountbatten. (It had already been changed from the German Battenberg to Windsor by George V during World War I). Mountbatten, along with his heiress wife, Edwina Ashley, enjoyed extensive private pleasures—"hopping in and out of other people's beds," as Irving puts it. In Mountbatten's case the beds were shared by members of both sexes, especially after Edwina died in 1960, and Irving points to "credible and squalid" allegations that Mountbatten trafficked in young boys.

The wheels started coming off the press-protected royal coach in 1936 when the *Daily Mirror* broke the news that King Edward VIII was living in a faux-Gothic love nest with a very newly divorced American, Wallis Simpson. She was hardly his first love-nest co-occupant, and the affair had begun long before Wallis's divorce. Before then, hardly anyone outside a discreet band of reporters even suspected the two were an item. The rest is history: Edward's proposal to Wallis, his abdication because of the Church of England's opposition to its titular head's marrying a divorcée, and the pair's subsequent lives as peripatetic socialites and suspected Hitler simpaticos. Irving adds that Edward, as Prince of Wales, had devoted part of his swinging bachelorhood to making sure the public never heard about the adventures of his even more promiscuous bisexual younger brother George, Duke of Kent (not to be confused with King George VI, the brother who succeeded Edward to the throne and fathered

Elizabeth—*his* baptismal name was Albert). George of Kent was a morphine and cocaine addict, who, even after Edward got him married off to a Greek princess in 1934, continued his dissolute adventures. The press kept them all duly under wraps.

The next big royal scandal involved Elizabeth's beautiful, musically talented, and adventurous younger sister, Princess Margaret, and her rocky 18-year marriage to society photographer Antony Armstrong-Jones. Armstrong-Jones and his princess were the original Cool Britannia. They tooled around London on Tony's motorcycle and socialized at their enormous apartment in Kensington Palace, lavishly redecorated at taxpayer expense, with Noël Coward, Harold Pinter, Peter Sellers, the Beatles, and theater critic/playwright Kenneth Tynan. But Tony was also a "libertine" whose studio models often doubled as his mistresses posing for pornographic shots. And he was yet another royal-family bisexual. Soon enough, both Tony and Margaret were unfaithful via numerous dubious partners. They divorced in 1978. He promptly remarried; she drank, lost her looks, and finally succumbed to the last of a series of debilitating strokes in 2002.

By the time we get to 32-year-old Prince Charles's disastrous 1981 marriage to 19-year-old Lady Diana Spencer—and the similar marital catastrophes befalling his sister, Princess Anne, and brother, Prince Andrew—I found myself yearning for the return of some other British royalty besides the suffocating inbred Germans of the Battenberg-Mountbatten-Windsor clan. The Stuarts, Tudors, Plantagenets, Harold Godwinson—*anyone*. Charles, whose tastes ran to the arts, was raised by his father in the same militaristic, "penitentiary-like regime" (Irving's words) that Dickie Mountbatten had imposed on a young Philip. The result was endemic discontent and dilletantish dabbling in architecture and philanthropy. Worse for his marriage, Charles pined for his early love and sometime adulterous companion, Camilla Parker Bowles, whom he married after Diana's death in 1997.

As for Diana, Irving succeeds, perhaps inadvertently, in making her singularly unattractive, despite her beauty. After things soured with Charles, Diana used the media to work out her spite against her in-laws (she wasn't horsey like the rest of them, so she never fit in). She gave off-the-record interviews—duly denied when Elizabeth questioned her—that enabled journalists to paint her as the victim of a loveless marriage and a family of tormentors. A series of affairs began as early as 1985, starting with palace bodyguards married and unmarried and moving on to others married and unmarried, especially after her divorce from Charles in 1996. It mattered little to the public. The photogenic Diana held the hands of AIDS victims and walked across an Angolan minefield in an afterglow of media adoration. With Tony Blair's ascension as prime minister a few months before her death, she became the darling of New Labour. The royals, especially Charles, were hated. When Diana died in the car crash that also took her latest fling, 42-year-old playboy Dodi Al Fayed, Elizabeth failed to fly the Union Jack at half-staff over Buckingham Palace. In fact it was not protocol for the royal family *ever* to fly the Union Jack, but the tabloids still screamed, "where is our queen?"

Irving wastes little sympathy on either Elizabeth or the monarchy itself in all of this. Favorite words of his are "ossified" and "archaic"—references to the institution, its "rigid" (another pet word) mores, its arcane rules of nomenclature, its public suppression of private emotions. He faults Elizabeth for "indifference" in her handling of revelations of Prince Andrew's priapic frolics on Jeffrey Epstein's island getaway—although in fact the queen all but drummed Andrew out of the family. She also read the riot act to her 36-year-old grandson Prince Harry and his American actress-wife, Meghan Markle, who had wanted to continue calling themselves "royal" as a branding strategy, without performing any royal duties. Irving believes the British monarchy cannot survive because it can neither bring itself up to date nor withstand the scrutiny that the modern press inflicts upon those around the throne. There is an inherent contradiction here. Irving clearly resonates to the stylish, ultra-modern royal rebels—Margaret, Diana, Harry and Meghan—while tut-tutting over some of the same rebels' sexual and emotional extravagances that the monarchy could neither hide nor quash. He may believe—and want to preach to his readers—that the royals are doomed as an institution, but he is as fascinated by them as any devourer of photos in the *Daily Mail*.

The real reason for the dim future Irving predicts for Elizabeth's offspring is something he doesn't see. Monarchies depend upon a moral consensus as to their legitimacy. In *The King's Two Bodies* (1957), historian Ernst Kantorowicz postulated that a medieval monarch wasn't just a man sitting on a throne but the body politic itself—a living representation of the society he governed. The king's corporeal body might age and die, but his body politic lives forever in his successors. A monarchy thus has a sacral function, and the British monarchy has since the 7th century been a specifically Christian institution. (Irving, pointedly uninterested in religious matters, never discusses Elizabeth's own faith, or the fact that she may be the last actual Christian believer in the entire royal family.) It is not surprising that one of the features of every British coronation for the past 300 years has been the singing of Handel's "Zadok the Priest," an English translation of the medieval Latin liturgical antiphon for a king's anointing. This belief in the monarchy's sacral nature survived even the monarchy's transition from the assertion of the divine and absolute right of kings under the Tudors and Stuarts to Britain's current "constitutional" arrangement, in which Parliament, not the king, is the effective sovereign, and royal assent to Parliament's acts a mere formality. The last British monarch to withhold royal assent was Queen Anne in 1708. Once belief that the monarchy is above any other human office is lost—as is likely in Britain's current thoroughly secularized and morally polarized society—kings, queens, princes, and princesses are indeed no more than top-level celebrities indulging in pretty pageants, expensive clothes, exotic travel, and occasional erotic foibles.

A revealing joint interview Harry and Meghan gave to Oprah Winfrey that aired to millions in March didn't generate the sympathy (*à la* Diana) the couple was expecting, but instead fueled a resurgence of anti-monarchial sentiment in Britain, where about 25% of the population would already like to see royalty abolished and a "republic" of Great Britain as its replacement. The royal family as an institution is markedly less popular among younger Britons, and 72-year-old Charles, heir-apparent to the 94-year-old Elizabeth, seems to be everyone's least favorite royal (next to Prince Andrew). Although Elizabeth's net worth is about $480 million, British taxpayers cover the ever-escalating costs ($96 million in 2020) of official staff, travel, and ceremonials as well as a massive ongoing renovation of Buckingham Palace—while the Crown itself is tax-exempt. It is fair to speculate how long Britons will want to keep underwriting the entertainment provided by the ongoing Windsor soap opera.

Still, Irving could be premature in writing off Elizabeth as the "last queen" just yet. For one thing, Irving scarcely mentions Harry's older brother, the immensely popular William, and his wife, Kate Middleton, who seem to be models of royal propriety in taste, seriousness of purpose, devotion to their children, and, perhaps most important, absence of Windsor histrionics and sexual antics. Perhaps the populace will rally behind the age-old institution. Turning again to Ernst Kantorowicz's theories of the king's two bodies, it could be that even in a largely desacralized Britain, people yearn to hold at least one thing sacred.

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