Watching Queen Elizabeth place flowers at a makeshift memorial to Diana in 1997, journalist (and renowned Nixon-basher) William Shawcross sympathized with the often misunderstood monarch: I thought how lonely she must feel, and how perplexed she must be by the vast changes through which Britain has passed in the decades since her accession. The U.K. is now not quite so united, not quite so British, not nearly so powerful as it was in the time of her father, George VI. Elizabeth has struck many observers as a lonely, aloof soul, struggling valiantly to hold a difficult family together while assuring her nation that the constitutional monarchy remains relevant in the modern world. Over half a century of rule, Shawcross suggests, the queen has risen to every occasion and capably led both the British Commonwealth and the royal family, even if both have given her plenty of troubles in the bargain. This well-written and nicely illustrated portrait does a fine job of showing the many ways she has earned the affections, respect, and consent of her people. --Gregory McNamee

My Personal Review:
"There was something magical about this Queen's accession to the throne. She is the only woman known to have gone up a tree a Princess and come down a Queen." William Shawcross is referring to the circumstances of Her Majesty's accession which happened automatically once her father, King George VI died. She and her husband were in Kenya at the time with a small company of courtiers and servants on a trip on behalf of her government since her father was stricken with cancer. At a place called Treetops, which was a hut built within an enormous and old fig tree, the small royal entourage watched all sorts of wildlife gather at a salt lick, and it might have been when they were there that her father passed away. I loved this story told by Lieutenant Michael Parker, the Prince's Private Secretary: "Parker remembered ever after that as they sat there a large
Shawcross wrote this book to coincide with Her Majesty's golden jubilee. As a protestant American, I've always scoffed at all of the pageantry which the British subject themselves to. You must understand my religion is a no frills religion, my government, a no frills government. A monarchy of any kind seems outdated. What purpose could it possibly serve? And so too today, there are some in Great Britain who feel the same way. At one of my workplaces, a British couple would talk about such things like the Trooping of the Color as if it were some grand event not to be missed. What is the Trooping of the Color, I thought? Who cares, was another? I'm slowly beginning to understand why.

I wish I had read this book before Ben Pimlott's. It is infinitely easier to read, not as detailed. Shawcross's chapter on "Constitutional Monarch" is infinitely easier to comprehend than others I've tried to read. He has clearly written this book for the lay reader. I'm finally beginning to understand vaguely the workings of the British system of government. And most importantly why people love this particular monarch so much the world over and why the Brits are so fond of the monarchy. It somehow doesn't seem so strange to me anymore. Shawcross succeeds in revealing Queen Elizabeth II's character traits which account for her popularity the world over, even if she has some fierce critics in her own country. In her relationships with the many prime ministers who have come her way, she has never forced her opinions on anyone, always advising, and listening to their concerns about issues and crises. She is somehow above the fray, making it easy to accommodate a new prime minister, whether they be Conservative or Labour leaders. Many prominent statesmen make some of the same comments about her that she has had a stabilizing influence in so many crises around the world. Reading this book you'll understand too how Great Britain has evolved, changed so much since the beginning of her reign. Shawcross states in his closing chapter that "In all the turmoil and change, only the Queen has remained the same—a still small voice of calm at the vortex of the storm."

Her role of peacemaker stems from her character, her religious beliefs, her sense of duty, undoubtably instilled within her from her symbolic anointing with oil during her coronation ceremony in 1953. I loved Pimlott's detailed description of the ceremony. Shawcross also quotes Pimlott quite often. I share with you a quote I loved by Lord Tweedsmuir/John Buchan in his Pilgrim's Way about King George V, Queen Elizabeth II's grandfather: "He had one key of access to all hearts, his sincere love of his fellows....His simplicity, honesty, and warm human sympathy made themselves felt not only in the Empire but throughout the globe, so that millions who owed him no allegiance seemed to know and love him. He was a pillar of all that was stable and honourable and of good report in a distracted world."
There are many photos in this small book, my favorite being the Corgis descending the steps of a Royal airplane. They're so cute!

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