

Investiture at Buckingham Palace. March 4th 2014

A crowd gazes in at the Palace through the long line of high railings.

Entering the forecourt means, for us, showing to remarkably pleasant policemen not only our invitations but our passports.

Inside, in the long and lofty entrance hall, discreet pink sofas line the walls, eight of them, each about ten feet wide. But in every alcove and doorway stand – no, not statues, live guards in medieval military garb, absolutely motionless.

"Which of you is the recipient?" My daughter Sonia is wafted away by a quiet and courteous person.

Peter, Ben and I are led by another wonderfully courteous personage (one of the 'Gentleman Ushers to the Queen') up wide stairs past very large paintings (one of which – probably famous? – depicts the coronation of eighteen-year-old Queen Victoria). We then sit among a solemn crowd, some of it wearing big colourful hats, in the vast ballroom. Facing us in front is a dais. On it stand five 'Yeomen of the Guard', also a man who is probably the Lord Chamberlain and who reads out to us a forecast of the event. Behind us on a balcony is an orchestra, in bright red uniforms, which plays, without stopping, for the hour and a half that we are there.

The Lord Chamberlain explains that when the Duke of Cambridge enters "from the door on my left side" the National Anthem will be played and we should stand up; that during the ceremony, which will last for an hour and a quarter, those who are being 'decorated' will enter, one by one, "from the door on my right side", walk up to the Duke (Prince William), make a slight bow or curtsy, and receive from him their decoration; with another bow or curtsy they will then go out "by the door on my left side", walk through an unseen room and re-enter the ballroom at the back to join us. There is to be no applause. We should not speak to each other above a whisper. At the end of the ceremony the National Anthem will be played again while the Duke of C. walks down the ballroom past us to the door at the other end. Only when he has left the room should we get up and leave.

All this happens exactly as forecast. Everything is done smoothly, mildly and perfectly. As each 'recipient' comes in, the Lord Chamberlain or Lord Steward reads out that person's name and a description of the achievement for which he or she is being 'decorated'. The Duke then takes the appropriate medal from a velvet cushion held at his side by the Master of the Household (or his deputy), bends slightly toward the person being honoured, makes –with a smile – a minute of conversation and gives the decoration. While the named person is with the Duke, the next in the alphabetical list comes in halfway and waits between two guards (who seem – we are some way off – to be smiling faintly).

When Sonia rejoins us we ask why she seemed to say more to the Duke than the others did – well, she tells us, he asked her whether the internet ought to be regulated, and she needed to explain to him what a complicated question that was.

My impression throughout was of a quiet, unhurried, mild and utterly tactful, almost graceful, performance: no pomp or hyperbole, no self-consciousness, no irony or doubt. There was a calm certainty that noble deeds had been done and deserved recognition, and that nothing more was needed beyond a few princely words and the presenting of a shaped piece of gold. The word 'muted' kept coming to mind. Something which might have been loudly shouted was being done without shouts, as if the world of shouting and loud-praising was now far away. So unlike academic life; and even less like the political life familiar to us from 'media' presentation; yet not at all like a fairy-tale, but unquestionably real.

'Muted' could be said of the orchestra, too, which played in an extraordinarily gentle manner a series of pieces including Vivaldi's 'Spring', a Slavonic Dance, a Beatles song, 'Funiculi Funicula', 'If I were a Rich Man', Ravel's 'Bolero', a Boccherini Minuet, and many more – each piece being pruned of any strong emphasis or excitement and made to flow smoothly, as if comfortingly (royal 'background music'), into the next.

When we went out afterwards into the rather cold forecourt to be photographed by official photographers, the crowd – doubtless containing other people now – was still pressed against the royal railings, gazing in.

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Twenty-five Investitures are held each year (with up to 120 recipients at each), one at the Palace of Holyroodhouse in Edinburgh, the others at Buckingham Palace or Windsor Castle. If the Queen is unable to conduct an Investiture she will be represented by the Prince of Wales or other member of the Royal Family (*this is, shortened, from the leaflet given to us*).

This time there were seventy recipients.

First of all, someone was made a 'Dame Commander', and someone a 'Knight Bachelor'. Then twenty-six became 'Officers of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire', two being military, the rest civil (of these Sonia was the fifth to come in). More than half of these were being honoured for services to education, families, the disabled, or the disadvantaged. Next, thirty-six became 'Members' of that same Order, four of them military. Two persons then received the Royal Victorian Medal (Silver), and one the Polar Medal 'for services in the Arctic and Antarctic'; one received the 'Air Force Cross' 'for great courage in the air' (rescuing a seriously injured man from a French vessel in the Irish Sea); and, finally, one – a woman – received the 'Queen's Gallantry Medal' 'for great courage in saving life at sea,' and one man an O.B.E. 'for services in Afghanistan'. (*Summary of lists in the programme-leaflet.*)

In each category in the list we were given, the women were listed before the men; married and unmarried status was indicated as follows: 'Miss Cornelia Cooling'; but: 'Sarah, Mrs Court'; someone with a title was simply given her title, thus: 'Professor Sonia Livingstone'. After Sonia's title & name came the words 'for services to children and child internet safety'.