The fact that the TV special marking the 40th anniversary of the accession of Elizabeth II set a new record for the highest rating show in British history, with an estimated 27 million viewers, demonstrates why only brief thoughts on the British monarchy are necessary. Notwithstanding the peccadilloes of the royal progeny and public gripes about the Queen herself, the vast majority of the British people are either benignly indifferent to or firmly supportive of both the present incumbent and the institution itself.

Hence, for a historian, the main interest lies in viewing the monarchy in a long-term perspective and deducing from that some hints as to the origins of its present position.

For a start, it is self-evident that the British are very conscious of their own history. The monarchy goes back a very long way in that history, and played a large part in much of it. Hence, the present-day monarchy reeks of British history, personifies it and constantly evokes it. Continuity fosters stability, and adaptability fosters change without coercion. As Walter Bagehot commented of the aristocracy in the 1860s, so with the monarchy: its continued strength is not a bulwark against revolution, but a sign that it is highly unlikely. Moreover, there is something about both femininity and longevity in monarchs that engenders special loyalty, if not genuine popularity. Two out of the three previous monarchs who ruled for more than 40 years were women—Elizabeth I, who ruled for about 45 years, and Victoria, who holds the record at 64 years. George III managed 60 years, but has a mixed report card.

Given the erosion of its real political power, the strength of the monarchy clearly arises partly from its overtly non-partisan role, as an institution above sectional interests but nonetheless an integral part of the system. The Queen is the apex of the tripartite political machine of Crown, Lords and Commons, and has important constitutional functions within the parliamentary process. Although allowed only to consult or advise, encourage or praise, and warn, her continuous presence gives her influence. The Queen has so far had dealings with nine British prime ministers, not one of whom has taken her lightly. She also personifies the state, and ceremonially links the established Church, the armed forces, and various other organisations to the state, while the judiciary theoretically dispenses justice in her name. Honours such as knighthoods and peerages are awarded in her name. She, or members of her family, represent the state on a wide variety of occasions, both at home and overseas. Yet in all these things she projects an image of propriety, dignity, dedication and impartiality. It might be doubted whether an elected political figurehead could ever attain such a degree of acceptance and universality. Certainly most British observers feel that the way the monarchy has evolved historically and now works in theory and practice has contributed to, rather than detracted from, the quality of British liberal democracy.

Another major source of the strength of the British monarchy is the role as the pre-eminent symbol of national unity, the epitome of pomp and circumstance, and the centrepiece of spectacle and pageantry—a particular strength in this age of the global media circus. Its value as a lubricant of the machinery of domestic inter-relationships and a focus for national identification is enormous. It also assists overseas relationships, as well as contributing significantly to the tourist industry. Moreover, it contributes to continuity during times of change. During Elizabeth's reign, the nature of the British Commonwealth, the ethnic composition of the British people, and Britain's economic and political place in Europe and the world, have all changed considerably. The Queen has both played a part in this and remained a constant. She has travelled widely and met political and religious leaders of all sorts. Governments and their leaders have come and gone, while the Queen has kept on keeping on.

The third major source of the strength of the monarchy is undoubtedly the personality and performance of Elizabeth herself. Having become heir to the throne at the age of ten, when her father became King in 1936, she was trained for the position from childhood. She quickly developed the most important qualification for a successful monarch in the modern era, the willingness and ability to communicate with people and project a public image. She made her first radio
broadcast at 14 years of age. In her broadcast to the Commonwealth on reaching her majority she enunciated her frequently reiterated pledge, that the purpose of her life would be “service of our people”. She is unlikely to abdicate in favour of Charles, since she says of her position, “It’s a job for life.” As television replaced radio as the major means of communication, she has become a household icon. Her serenity and sincerity are patent, and her former severity has been cleverly moderated. She is a consummate performer, at both the individual level and as the centrepiece of pageantry. The phrase “My husband and I” must be one of the best-known identifiers in Modern history. Royal ‘occasions’ are seen by hundreds of millions of people—about 750 million in the case of the wedding of Prince Charles. Her fortieth anniversary as Queen has been celebrated modestly, by Royal standards, but her Golden Jubilee in 2002 is likely to announce the survival of the British monarchy into the 21st century in the grand manner.

Finally, however, the strength of the monarchy is also an indicator of just how all-pervasive and self-perpetuating is Britain’s class structure. The Royal Family, after all, is just the most eminent of the aristocratic families whose lineage is recorded in the stud books of thepeerage. It is worth remembering that of all the aristocracies in the world in the late 18th century, the British aristocracy has done far and away the best job of surviving and retaining influence. They are the only aristocracy to have their own house of parliament, and the fact that life peers constitute about half their number these days only makes the hereditary ones more exclusive. Their wealth and social, economic and political power is considerable. Their position is strengthened by the success of their chief. But that chief, by her lifestyle and ideas, also appeals greatly to the middle class, and even to most of the working class. The simultaneous transmission and manifestation of class consciousness in education, culture, the media, work and leisure, emphasises the virtues of the existing system and its acceptance by all classes. The ‘value’ of the monarch permeates everything.

KEN MACNAB teaches in history at the University of Sydney.