

The Meghan Paradox

When I was researching *Wallis in Love*, my biography of the Duchess of Windsor, I came across a photograph that seemed to encapsulate her relationship with her royal husband and his world.

It was taken in a ploughed field or some bleak, flat ground. While the Duke of Windsor, dressed in loud check trousers, merrily blasted away at pheasants and other flying creatures, Wallis Simpson, seated uncomfortably on a wooden shooting stick, looked a picture of abject misery, wincing at the noise of the guns. Dressed in an off-white fur coat, a stylish hat and fashionable ankle boots, the duchess seemed attired for shopping on a winter's day in Knightsbridge or some other ritzy neighbourhood. Boredom seeped out of every pore. Wallis, a city girl down to her elegantly manicured fingertips, clearly wished she was somewhere, anywhere else rather than watching her husband kill things.

I was reminded of that photograph and what it represented when it became clear that another American had won the heart of a dashing prince, himself acknowledged as one of the finest shots in England. Not for nothing did his mother, the late Diana, Princess of Wales call her sons 'the killer Wales', as Harry and William were exceptionally accomplished and enthusiastic when it came to hunting.

How would Rachel Meghan Markle – whose favourite word was 'classy', who supported animal rights and whose politics tended to the left – fit in with a family to whom hunting, shooting and fishing was a way of life. Diana passed the so-called Balmoral test, the unspoken assessment of royal girlfriends – and boyfriends – by the family, when she fell in a bog and came up laughing. The royals and their party thought her misfortune hilarious. As her grandmother Lady Ruth Fermoy later cautioned her, the Royal Family has a very different sense of humour to the rest of us. Diana didn't listen and went ahead with her ill-fated royal match.

Would Meghan, a girl raised on the West Coast of America, catch the arcane family codes and obscure references that had them chortling and chuckling? At least her love of dogs was a conversational starting point with the Queen.

As Kate Middleton discovered, Meghan was poised to join a family in which who enters a room first, who sits where, who bows or curtsies to whom, forms part of a labyrinthine pecking order. Meghan was on the cusp of swapping her world of tastemakers, influencers and brand ambassadors for a confusing flurry of equerries, valets, beaters and ghillies.

I wasn't the only one pondering these issues when news broke of Prince Harry's romance with the star of *Suits*, a legal drama on cable TV. As Diana's biographer, I was frequently asked by journalists: 'Would it last?' This question about the dating couple was clearly predicated on the unhappy marriage and eventual divorce of the Prince and Princess of Wales.

At the time I felt it was the wrong question, as anyone with even a passing knowledge of Prince Harry would have realized that he was the eager supplicant in this romantic drama – not the other way round.

The single unifying observation made by one and all concerned what she was about to give up – a successful TV career, a thriving social media presence, and charitable positions as global ambassador for World Vision Canada and a UN advocate role – in order to marry into the Royal Family.

It was also clear that she was not some shy girl from the shires fresh out of finishing school, but rather a divorced woman of the world who was an active promoter of gender equality, women's rights and, to use a Markle phrase, 'being the change'. It is a slogan that does not spring readily to mind when considering the monarchy, an institution defined by the past and precedent. As Diana joked, the only thing they change is their clothes.

The Meghan Paradox cuts two ways. Feminists saw her as being swallowed whole by the royal system, seriously compromising her agenda as an equal rights activist. She was about to swap her values and principles for the appellation 'Her Royal Highness' – and the chance to curtsy to the Duchess of Cambridge for the rest of her life.

On the other hand, traditionalists feared that she was a well-groomed stalking horse, her values and lifestyle inimical to a thousand-year-old institution that is studiously hierarchical, and which encourages deference and acceptance of the existing order. This was no European-style designer cycling monarchy. How then would this progressive in 4-inch heels cope in a world where a misplaced decoration can earn a royal rebuke?

Of course the ultimate irony was that, even though Meghan was successful in her own right, we only began to take collective notice of her because she was marrying a man whose place in society was secured by virtue of his birth rather than his abilities.

Perhaps the reason why the Meghan Paradox holds good is that she was marrying into a family – and an institution – defined as much by its contradictions and incongruities as its position at the apex of society. It shouldn't make sense, but it does. As Thomas Paine, author of the eighteenth-century tome *Rights of Man*, observed: 'A hereditary monarchy is as absurd a proposition as a hereditary doctor or mathematician.'

The real issue was who would accommodate whom: Meghan or the monarchy? Or to put it another way, who would blink first?

Meghan was very different from other royal brides – at least in the House of Windsor. She came from a country, culture and profession where the self and the service of self comes first, second and third. The institution she hoped to join was about self-effacement, about being, to quote one pundit, 'brilliantly bland'. The causes she espoused – gender equality and female empowerment – sat ill inside an institution that was about rank, place and hierarchy.

She may have been something of a unicorn but she was not the only one. Americans have married foreign princes, forged successful careers and lived to tell the tale. Think of the actor Grace Kelly, who went on to marry Prince Rainier of Monaco, and Princeton-educated Lisa Najeeb Halaby, an airline executive who became Queen Noor of Jordan following her marriage to King Hussein of Jordan. Both women are renowned for their philanthropic work, as is Texan Sarah Butler, who earned a degree in international relations and has an impressive résumé that includes stints working at the United Nations, Human Rights Watch and charities dealing with women's issues. She found her happily ever after in Prince Zeid bin Ra'ad Zeid al-Hussein of Jordan, the couple marrying in 2000 after which Ms Butler became Her Royal Highness Princess Sarah Zeid.

They were living proof that different cultures and nationalities were not barriers to individual happiness and wider public respect. The difference was that, unlike the other American royals, Meghan was a mixed-heritage woman who could trace her lineage back to the cotton fields of Georgia and the world of slavery and suppression. Her racial background, indeed her very existence, provoked a debate in Britain about ethnic tolerance.

The new dual-heritage kid on the block arrived at a time of genuine and profound change in both the nation and the monarchy itself. Harry and Meghan started dating just as the UK began licking its wounds after the rancorous departure from the European Union following a referendum in 2016. Rightly or wrongly, Britain was seen as a more insular and nationalist country just as the Royal Family was viewed as more relevant and inclusive thanks to the girl from California. First signs looked promising, with anecdotal evidence suggesting that predominantly ethnic minority communities were more interested in the work of the monarchy thanks to the presence of Meghan.

Inside the institution itself, the retirement of Prince Philip and the Queen's reduced workload, particularly her decision not to undertake long-distance travel, placed a heavier burden on the younger generation. There was an expectation that Meghan would help to share the load.

While Meghan was beginning her royal adventure at a critical moment in regal and British history, she was following in Diana's footsteps by giving the House of Windsor an international, glamorous gloss. Unlike Diana, she was camera-ready, not camera-shy. It is doubtful that the global media would have been so excited had Harry chosen a nice upper-class girl from the county set.

Long before Prince Harry was mentioned in conjunction with Meghan, her high school, Immaculate Heart in Los Angeles, regularly screened the speech that she made at the UN Women 2015 conference on gender equality as inspiration for the current generation of female students.

She arrived at the gates of Buckingham Palace fully formed: a successful actor, a popular blogger and an acknowledged humanitarian. The puzzle remained as to whether this ambitious, intelligent, modern and successful woman would stay the course.

She boasted a bloodline of slaves and kings, servants and swordsmen. Hers has been a remarkable journey, and one that began where else but in the city of dreams: Los Angeles.