

Despite poor health and the fear of recurring polio, Lord Snowdon still works at a prodigious rate — and finds time to campaign on behalf of disabled people. He talks to Lynn Barber

LORD SNOWDON is of an age, 65, when most photographers would be hanging up their Hasselblads or pensioning off their Pentaxes. Instead, he has just produced an enormous body of work — a 56-page celebration of British theatre — for the November issue of *Vanity Fair* magazine.

It entailed 85 sittings and included almost all the big names of British theatre, from grand old knights such as Sir Alec Guinness and Sir John Gielgud to hot new talents like Julia Ormond and Ralph Fiennes. Many of these portraits are elaborately staged, with props and costumes and fancy locations, and most photographers would count it good going to shoot three such sessions a week. Snowdon, over the summer, was often shooting three a day — or even a night, when he had to catch his stars after the theatre.

Snowdon is by no means fit, and worried about a possible recurrence of what he calls "boring polio". He contracted it at 16, when he was at Eton, and spent six months in the Liverpool Royal Infirmary. It left him with a withered left leg, one inch shorter than the other, which always meant that he walked with a slight limp. Now he limps more markedly, and uses a walking stick. "I've never been very good at any sort of acrobatics or walking, but I don't have to be. I'm not very good at carrying things — well I can't. Boring polio. I don't carry anything really. For one reason, if I fall down I break the camera, so it's very expensive!" He has to sit if he is doing a long photo session, although inevitably it slows him down.

Has his polio come back? "Mmm. I read about the MP [Julian Critchley] and it does come back when you're about 60 or something."

In Critchley's case, it has confined him to a wheelchair. But Lord Snowdon prefers not to dwell on it — "It's such boring subject". Anyway it



Business as usual: Lord Snowdon's recent work has seen him clambering on to Westminster

The fortitude

studio cloakroom — photographic awards and citations for this and that, honorary degrees, his GCVO, two Emmys for television documentaries which he sprayed matt black because "they looked so vulgar".

I remember thinking in 1961, when he was created Earl of Snowdon, "how dis-

pulling strings. (This is a cause of grief to editors, who imagine that he can just ring a chum to fix something.) He has never said a word about his marriage to Princess Margaret; or divulged any royal tittle-tattle whatsoever. The only faintly royal revelation I got from him was that he hates corgis.

any questions. So after we have admired the haunted house peepshow, and the chairs he designed for the Investiture ("I saw one in a catalogue the other day going for £500!") and the model of the folly he is building in the country, and the Snowdon crystal ball watch, and the fountain and the summer-

because budget. What should his la graphy ion, £ much his w "The incret that I

confined him to a wheelchair. But Lord Snowdon prefers not to dwell on it — "It's such a boring subject". Anyway it didn't stop him clambering on to the Palace of Westminster roof to photograph Glenda Jackson or up London Zoo's Mappin Terraces — fortunately devoid of polar bears — to photograph Brian Blessed.

He could have refused the *Vanity Fair* assignment of course but he wouldn't dream of it — "Oh golly, no! I work as much as I can. Otherwise I wouldn't get out of bed. I have to have a project. I mean I might sometimes stop taking photographs and design things but I wouldn't — I can't — do nothing. And the other thing is that one is terrified of not being wanted. It's lovely at my age, as an OAP, to be asked to do that number of pages for *Vanity Fair*. It is a tremendous honour."

He says this without irony — a man whose life is already loaded with honours. Most of them are arrayed in his

looked so vulgar. I remember thinking in 1961, when he was created Earl of Snowdon, "how disgraceful that he should get a peerage just for marrying Princess Margaret!" but he has certainly earned it since, notably through his work for disabled people.

He remains very much *persona grata* with the Royal Family and still takes photographs for them. Even his divorce from Princess Margaret in 1978 and his remarriage to Lucy Lindsay-Hogg did not rock his royal approval-rating. Last year he returned to Caernarfon Castle to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Prince of Wales's Investiture and there is a charming photograph on his studio wall of him and Prince Charles roaring with laughter at something Sir Harry Secombe said. He has never exploited his title or royal connections professionally and he makes a rule that all his sittings should be arranged by editors so that no one can accuse him of

royal little-tattle whatsoever. The only faintly royal revelation I got from him was that he hates corgis.

Nowadays, in his tweed jacket and cavalry twill trousers, he looks more the earl than the photographer. It is a very long time since, as Constable of Caernarfon Castle, he twinkled in his elfin green jumpsuit at the Investiture of the Prince of Wales. He is obviously frail, leaning on a walking stick and his

hands shake so badly you wonder how he can handle a camera, but he still insists on giving me a guided tour of his domain — the office and tiny studio beside his house in Kensington — pointing out all his treasures.

This is a well-known displacement activity which other journalists have warned me about — he will show you things till the cows come home and never answer

country, and the Snowdon crystal ball watch, and the fountain and the summerhouse he has already built in the back garden, I plonk myself firmly in an Investiture chair and refuse to budge.

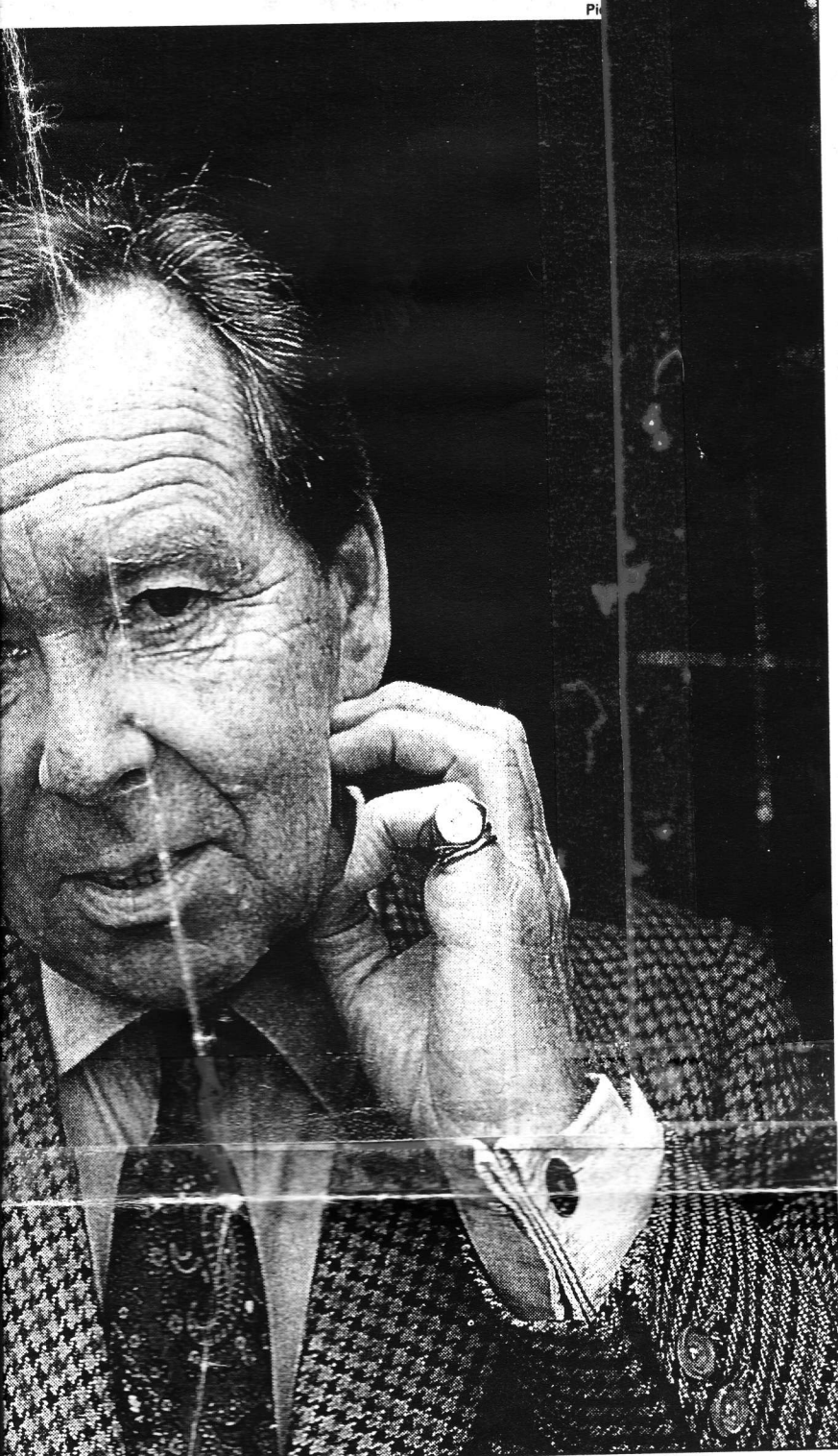
He still prefers telling stories to answering questions — I particularly liked one about his neighbour, Dustin Hoffman, who sent round a "frightfully grand" architect to ask his permission to raise the garden wall. Snowdon thought it was a bit odd of Hoffman — "since he and I are about the smallest people in London, and he's not exactly going to see me hanging out the washing" — but, anyway, he agreed and suggested he raise it to the height of the other wall. But the architect said, "Oh no we can't do that. We can only take it up two courses [two rows of bricks]

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Picture: CHARLES HOPKINSON



palace roof to photograph Glenda Jackson. 'I have to have a project,' he says

of Snowdon

we're on a very tight

Lord Snowdon is doing is plugging his latest book of photographs, *Wild Flowers* (Pavilion, £9.99), but he seems keen to talk about his work for *Vanity Fair*. "We are quite a few of us who do a lot of really private jokes and respect people to

tion. For instance, he carted a sunbed down to Shepperton to photograph Kenneth Branagh supposedly tanning for *Othello* — the only trouble is that Branagh is playing Iago.

Then there is a very strange picture of Michael Gambon, dressed as a cleaner with a mop and bucket, standing next to the bust of Samuel Johnson in

shirt printed for Sir Ian McKellen saying "Wherefore art thou Romeo?" and hiring a bunch of corgis for Alan Bennett. "They cost a fortune — £500 for the morning — and I'm terrified of corgis!" Meanwhile, Graydon Carter, the editor, kept issuing orders like "I want an elephant (seriously)". Ideally, Carter should have

good Estuary accent] 'Have you got a camera you can put around your neck?' And I said, 'But I don't actually use a camera round my neck, I use a tripod.' He hadn't done any research at all. I don't mean that conceitedly but it is rude."

There is steel beneath his apparent lightness. It comes out every year when he presents the Snowdon Awards (about £60,000 worth of bursaries for disabled students) and invariably makes a fighting speech — attacking hearing aid manufacturers for their enormous mark-ups, or British Rail for making disabled people travel in the luggage van, or the Chelsea Flower Show for not allowing guide dogs.

I wondered if he worried beforehand about attracting flak, but he said: "I don't care about that at all. Because I'm not politically involved with any party, I'm

I don't think people discriminate on purpose; they do it through ignorance'

totally unambitious, I've got nothing to gain, you see, and nothing to lose."

He says people always assume he got interested in disability because of his childhood polio but, "I'm not sure that's really true. In the Sixties I was doing quite a lot of photographs about the problems of disabilities in the *Sunday Times*, and then I designed a wheelchair for a friend, Quentin Crewe, and that went into production and they made 5,000, and then I got more involved."

He gets irritated when the BBC talks about "the disabled" — it should always be "disabled people" — and when the managers of public buildings don't think about wheelchair access. "I don't think people discriminate on purpose, they just do it through ignorance and lack of experience. Luckily my children, all three of them, are always seeing people whizzing in and out of the house in wheelchairs, so it seems perfectly natural."

He said a few years ago that he was worried about his eyesight. He has solved that problem by having special lenses built into his camera, but now he says, rather bleakly: "I'm not worried about that so much as other things..." He obviously fears more after-effects of his polio and he has kept a *Times* article entitled "Return of a crippling disease" which starts off: "Poliomyelitis is a disease which sometimes has the unpleasant habit of returning to haunt its victims decades after they were first

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Wild Flowers (Pavil-
99), but he seems
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don't expect people to
e says happily, flicking
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an orchard in 19th-cen-
ostume. Er... "Well,
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ment in *The Cherry*
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Chekhov, that's right
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bag here with Shake-
e's head on it and then
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which we scattered on
grass as though they've
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me of his jokes are ren-
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Othello —
that Branagh is playing Iago.
Then there is a very
strange picture of Michael
Gambon, dressed as a
cleaner with a mop and
bucket standing next to the
bust of Samuel Johnson in
Poets' Corner, Westminster
Abbey. Why? "I was told to
go and do Gambon with Ben
Jonson in Poets' Corner
[because Gambon was play-
ing in Jonson's *Volpone*], but
his tombstone is on the floor
and I just saw the name
Johnson and thought that
was the one."
"They wanted me to photo-
graph Gambon in a 16th-cen-
tury hassock — or do I mean
cassock? I always get mud-
dled — and I had to do it at
seven o'clock in the morning
because that was the only
time they would let me in and
I just happened to see that
mop and a bucket and I
asked: 'What do people wear
when they clean this abbey?'
and they showed me this
wonderful blue top with
Westminster Abbey written
on it so I used that. But it was
a mistake."
He went to great lengths to
set up his jokes, getting a T-

ing — and I'm terrified of cor-
gis!" Meanwhile, Graydon
Carter, the editor, kept issu-
ing orders like "I want an
elephant (seriously)". Ide-
phant with Richard Harris
and Peter O'Toole sitting on
top of it but Snowdon
demurred — "Elephants are
extremely difficult to get and
very expensive." So he put
Richard Harris and Peter
O'Toole at a tea table in the
Dorchester, and made do
with Alan Rickman standing
on a stone elephant instead.
He said all his sitters were
very co-operative. Surely not
Jeremy Irons? I exclaimed,
but even Irons was fine. Per-
haps Snowdon's own cour-
tesy rubs off on his subjects.
He does a lot of research
beforehand, reading up press
cuttings and discussing how
they would like to be shot.
He believes that "you're
more likely to be lucky if
you've done your research.
Someone came to photo-
graph me the other day,
didn't know anything about
me at all. He said [here Lord
Snowdon puts on a rather

article entitled "The
crippling disease" which
starts off: "Poliomyelitis is a
disease which sometimes has
the unpleasant habit of
decades after its victims
struck down." It cannot
make cheerful reading.
I asked if he had ever had
to worry about money, and he
said, vehemently: "Yes I do
— permanently, all the time.
The upkeep of things, the
cost of things. And I don't do
any advertising much, you
see, and that's where the big
money comes from. At Cam-
bridge my father gave me — I
think quite rightly — £300 a
year, which was very little
actually. But it taught one a
lot. I don't spend very
much."
But he can't really believe
that he'll be penniless tomor-
row? "I think everyone does.
Don't you?" No. "Oh! Now
you're going to make me
think about it all the time!"
And so he waits eagerly for
the phone to ring and bring
him another enormous pho-
tographic assignment "It is
so lovely to be wanted." 18