

C L O S E U P O N Sarah Ferguson

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BORN: London

AGE: 26

FAMILY: Father Ron Ferguson is a wealthy Hampshire landowner and first cousin to Princess Alice, the Duchess of Gloucester. Mother Susan Barrantes is the wife of a polo-playing Argentinian. With a good deal of industry, Fleet Street has traced Fergie's roots back to Charles II.

EDUCATION: Danes Lodge School, Basingstoke and then Hurst Lodge, Sunningdale, where she was head girl.

PROGRESS: Usually described as 'undistinguished'.

OCCUPATION: Directrice 'of a West End graphic design company.

INTERESTS: The outdoor life (in good Sloane Ranger fashion).

A lot of trees have been cut down for Sarah Ferguson. I now know, because hundreds of 'exclusives' and even 'revelations' have told me, that she has a Sloane Ranger background, is a good friend of Princess Diana's, that she drinks her coffee black without sugar, drives a blue BMW, giggled in her secretarial classes and is (probably) a size 14.

I know that she is a woman of 'lively charm and maturity', has 'good sense and industry' and has a 'natural beauty' although the American fashion experts call her 'frumpy'. I also know that she has an Argentinian step-father (albeit a polo-playing one), a 'past' and a responsible job which she intends to keep.

This makes her a good deal more interesting than Diana Spencer was on her engagement to Prince Charles. Then 19, chubbily and ordinarily attractive, mutely and clumsily innocent, she captivated the country precisely because she was a blank page.

Princess Di became a fairy tale princess in the way that Sarah

Ferguson will never be because she could be transformed from 'nothing' (virgin, unblemished, untried, without a style or even a voice of her own) into 'everything' (glamorous woman, size eight figurehead of British fashion, devoted wife, loving mother, future queen...). Thousand of women see in her the possibility of miraculous metamorphosis.

Sarah Ferguson has altogether more possession of herself. She will not so easily become the object of fantasy. At the age of 26 she has been earning her own living for nearly 10 years.

The press aren't quite sure what being a 'directrice' means or who she actually works for. Some call it a graphic design firm, others a publisher, and the *Daily Express* ('the only news paper to cut through the rumours and come up with the facts') manages to call it both in the same column. But the one interesting 'fact' is that she plans to carry on working.

It is not a resounding breakthrough, but the fact that the prospective Princess Andrew has torn the cocoon of royal procedure and refused to be typecast in the sumptuous House of Windsor soap opera could be important. The royal institution has come to depend more on the extraordinary than the ordinary - probably destructive for the individuals concerned, and harmful for a public glutted on soap opera glamour and drama.

Sarah Ferguson is also a woman with a 'past'. But what is this past but a little (not much) experience? At 26 she has had two serious boyfriends, Kim Bingham-Smith, an old Etonian ski-clothes businessman, and Paddy McNally, 22 years older than her and with two teenage sons. If she had had none she probably would have



considered herself a failure.

While the Palace remains terrified of scandalous revelations (and was certainly embarrassed by Andrew's indiscreet adventures, conducted in a blaze of publicity), we should rightly fear Inexperience. Fergie's past is simply a sign of normality and seems to have given her a handsome and good-natured resilience. The public expects their princesses to be ordinary and extraordinary; she seems to enjoy being simply ordinary - as far, that is, as the Sloane Ranger daughter of a rich landowner who had a nanny and who played with royalty as a child can be.

The pressures to change are on: surrounded by an often sycophantic press, scrutinised and criticised by the fashion world, told that she needs to lose weight, the butt of cruel jokes ('the ground shakes when she walks' etc.) or flattery, it will be harder

for her than for most of us to retain control over her own life.

The reason why feminists find Princess Diana's career, her shifting image, her clothes and her possible anorexia fascinating is that she has become a mirror for the deforming ideals of perfect femininity. She is an unreal figure from which individual life has leaked, enabling her to become the beautiful empty receptacle of cultural pressures on women.

And the reason that feminists will find Sarah Ferguson's progress as Princess Andrew significant is that at present she seems to be resisting such loss of selfhood. She doesn't (yet) belong to the fairy tale, and she is not for public consumption. Nevertheless, I intend to be out of the country on July 23 and when I return the World Cup, Wimbledon and the Royal Wedding will all be over. But I suppose there is still Prince Edward...