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Opening Extract from...

Victoria: A Life

Written by A. N. Wilson

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AUTHORS

One gusty April day in 1838, Thomas Carlyle was walking in Green Park, near Buckingham Palace in London, when he saw the young Queen ride past in her carriage. Forty-two years old, the Scotsman had been living in the English capital for a little over three years, and he had lately soared to literary fame. His study of *The French Revolution* had been published in the previous year – the year in which Victoria was crowned the Queen of England – and the popularity of the two events was not disconnected. Carlyle had made what his first biographer, J. A. Froude, called a 'vast phantasmagoria'[1] culminating in the French people getting rid of their monarchy.

The English were not minded, in any very organized sense, to do the same, but Victoria became queen in hungry times. The monarchy had not been popular in the first decades of the nineteenth century. Froude noted that 'the hungry and injured millions will rise up and bring to justice their guilty rulers, themselves little better than those whom they throw down'.[2]

Britain in those days was very far from being a democracy. It was governed by an oligarchy of aristocratic, landowning families. Its stability as a state depended upon the functioning of the law, the workings of two Houses of Parliament, the efficiency of the army and navy, and the balance of trade. Parliament was representative, not democratic. That is, the members of the Commons were not elected by the people, but by a small number of men of property. In the reign

previous to Victoria's, that of her uncle William IV, the Reform Bill of 1832 had done a little to extend the franchise and to abolish the more grotesque of the electoral anomalies – the so-called Rotten Boroughs, in which there were only a handful of electors. But the members of the Commons were not elected by more than a tiny handful of those whom they represented. Checking and approving the deliberations of the Commons was the function of the Upper House, the Lords, some hundred or so rich men who owned most of the land, and exercised most of the power, in Britain.

There had, as yet, been no French-style revolution to overthrow these arrangements. And it was to be the care and concern of the British governing classes to make sure that no such revolution occurred. The previous old King, William IV, having had a dissolute life and fathered ten children out of wedlock, died legitimately married and reconciled to God, murmuring the words, 'The Church, the Church.'

The twin institutions of the Church of England and the monarchy clearly played a vital role in the delicate balance of the British Constitution. The Victorians liked to tell one another that the monarch was simply a figurehead, kept in place by the Whig landowners, a figure who signed state papers and gave the nod to the deliberations of the House of Lords. This was not really the case. The monarch still occupied a position of real power in Britain, and if that power were to be exercised recklessly, or if the monarchy were hated by a hungry populace, there was no knowing what anarchy would ensue. The monarch depended upon the peerage; the peerage depended upon economic prosperity, and upon the rising commercial classes who could provide it; the shared powers of Trade, Land, the Law and the Church were all delicately, and not always obviously, interwoven in the destinies of that young woman glimpsed in the park by the historian. It was essential for her future that the other institutions should continue to support her; it was essential for all of them that she should maintain the status quo, that she should not fail.

Victoria's grandfather, King George III, a monarch who was politically active and who had played a pivotal role in the shaping of British political history, was blind for the last ten years of his life, and at sporadic intervals in the last twenty years of his long reign (1760–1820) he had been raving mad. The fear that the royal madness was hereditary was ever-present in the British governing class, and the young Queen's ministers watched every one of her tantrums, each emotional display, every instance of irrational behaviour, with anxiety.

George III's son, who ruled as Regent during the times of blindness and madness, had been extremely unpopular, not least because of the sordid and cruel way in which he had divorced his queen, Caroline of Brunswick. By the time he was succeeded by his brother the Duke of Clarence (William IV) in 1830, it had looked very much as if the supply of possible heirs to the throne had all but dwindled. It was mere luck that William had not, in turn, been succeeded by his extremely unpopular brother Ernest, Duke of Cumberland, a scar-faced brute who was widely believed to have murdered his valet and married a woman who had killed her previous two husbands, and whose extreme Toryism made him hated by the masses.[3] Had the young Victoria not existed, Ernest would have been the King of England, and Britain might well have made a second decision to become a republic.

Carlyle himself was by way of being a republican, certainly one deeply read in the era of the first Republic in the seventeenth century, and a hero-worshipping biographer of Oliver Cromwell. Carlyle was a sardonic and amusing man, whose stock in trade was a refusal to be impressed – by the English, who to his Scottish soul were ever alien; by the Establishment, which he found laughable; by the class hierarchy, very near the bottom of which he had been born. His hero was the German poet Goethe, and Carlyle sought, in the confused state of modern England, with its great social injustices, its teeming poor, its disease-ridden industrial cities, its Philistinism, some means of returning, with that poet, a positive attitude to life, an Everlasting Yea. Carlyle, on that breezy April day, was passed by a carriage: the

Queen taking, as he said in his Scottish way, 'her bit departure for Windsor. I had seen her another day at Hyde Park Corner, coming in from the daily ride. She is decidedly a pretty-looking little creature: health, clearness, graceful timidity, looking out from her young face… One could not help some interest in her, situated as mortal seldom was.'[4]

Carlyle, who went on to write one of the most magisterial royal biographies in the literature of the world – *The Life of Frederick the Great* – was peculiarly well placed to see the strangeness of Victoria's position as she swept past him in the carriage. (They would not meet until years later, when, both widowed and old, they exchanged small talk at the Deanery of Westminster Abbey.)

She was indeed situated as mortal seldom was. This makes her story of abiding fascination. Her father and mother might so easily not have had a child at all. Once born, Victoria's often solitary childhood was the oddest of preparations for what she was to become: not merely the mother of nine and the grandmother of forty-two children, but the matriarch of Royal Europe. She was either the actual ancestor of or was connected by marriage to nearly all the great dynasties of Europe, and in almost each of those crowned or coroneted figure-heads, there was bound up a political story. Her destiny was thus interwoven with that of millions of people – not just in Europe, but in the ever-expanding Empire which Britain was becoming throughout the nineteenth century. One day to be named the Empress of India, the 'pretty-looking little creature' had a face which would adorn postage stamps, banners, statues and busts all over the known world. And this came about, as the Germanophile Thomas Carlyle would have been the first to recognize, because of the combination of two peculiar factors: firstly, that Victoria was born at the very moment of the expansion of British political and commercial power throughout the world; and secondly that she was born from that stock of (nearly all German) families who tended to supply the crowned heads for the monarchies of the post-Napoleonic world.



The moment in the park, when two stars in the Victorian galaxy passed one another, is one of those little conjunctions which happen in capital cities. This was the era when Britain rose, for a few decades, to be supremely the most powerful nation on earth: richer and more influential than any of its European rivals, even than Russia. Thereafter, another power would emerge, formed from the coalescence of the German states, the development of German heavy industry, the building up of German military and naval might. Carlyle and Queen Victoria, like so many figures who shape a new and vibrant civilization, were outsiders, who had seemingly come from nowhere. One of the things which marked them out was an acute consciousness of Germany and its importance in the scheme of things. Mr Casaubon, the inadequate scholar married to the heroine of George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, wrote worthlessly because he had not absorbed developments in German scholarship, and this was a period when it was said that only three of the dons at Oxford could so much as speak German. (It was said that the whole story of religion in the nineteenth century would have been different if the future Cardinal Newman had known German.) Yet the story of Germany, and the story of Britain, and their tragic failure to understand one another, lay at the heart of nineteenth-century history, being destined to explode on the battlefields of the First World War.

There was something else about the young Queen which, had he known it, would have made Carlyle – historian, journalist, biographer – all the more interested in her. Whether or not Benjamin Disraeli, novelist and Prime Minister, really buttered up his Queen by using the phrase 'We authors, Ma'am',[5] it would not have been flattery alone. Disraeli's words are always quoted as a joke, but she really was an author. Disraeli's alleged flannel referred to her published work, *Leaves from the Journal of Our Life in the Highlands*, published in 1868. But this publication and its sequel were but a tiny fragment of her pen's outpouring. Her often solitary childhood made it natural for her to express her feelings in writing. There was often no one but

herself to talk to. She kept journals from infancy to old age. She was one of the most prolific letter writers of the nineteenth century, that letter-writing age, and, whether she was conducting state business, or emoting about family crises, or worrying about her health, or noting the passing season, it was her custom to put her feelings and thoughts into writing. In a recent study, Yvonne M. Ward calculated that Victoria wrote as many as 60 million words.[6] Giles St Aubyn, in his biography of the Queen, said that had she been a novelist, her outpouring of written words would have equalled 700 volumes.[7] Her diaries were those of a compulsive recorder, and she sometimes would write as many as 2,500 words of her journal in one day.

When she died she left many volumes of journals, an historical record of political events, conversations, impressions, of the entire cast-list of nineteenth-century public life. There was scarcely a Head of State, or a bishop, or an aristocrat, or a famous writer or composer or painter whom she had not either met (reclusive as she was for much of the time) or of whom she had not formed some impression. She asked her youngest daughter, Princess Beatrice, to transcribe these, and to omit any details which might be upsetting to the family. The princess followed these instructions, and all the evidence suggests that she censored quite a lot, destroying her mother's manuscript journals as she did so. Very few of the original journals in the Queen's own hand survive.

Princess Beatrice was not alone in wishing to obliterate her mother's writings. King Edward VII likewise left instructions to his secretary, Lord Knollys, to go through his papers upon his death. Knollys destroyed freely, especially anxious to cover up the unhappy relations between Edward and his wife, Queen Alexandra. Historians will be even sadder to realize how much of Queen Victoria's correspondence with her wittiest Prime Minister, Disraeli, has also been destroyed. Though nearly twenty morocco-bound volumes of the correspondence survive at Windsor, the hopeful researcher discovers that nearly all of the Queen's letters have been excised from this collection; and of Disraeli's letters, the great majority are anodyne

discussions about minor honours being awarded to now-forgotten mayors or Members of Parliament.

The compulsion felt by Victoria's children to expunge her writings from our view leads immediately to the thought that she must have had something to hide. The reader of any modern biography of Queen Victoria is naturally hopeful that some of the indiscretions, so diligently veiled by Princess Beatrice, can be finally unmasked. Here a word of caution must be sounded. Queen Victoria was an instinctively indiscreet person. Much as she would have hated our contemporary habits of prurience, and dismissive as she would have been of a modern writer picking over the details of her private life, she was nevertheless almost compulsive in her need to share that private life with a wider public. To this extent, though she was not an 'author' in the sense that Disraeli might have half-mockingly implied, she was much more like Dickens and Ruskin and Proust than she was like the majority of royal personages who have a quite simple desire for privacy. Victoria was much more complex. On the one hand, she considered any intrusion into the Royal Family by the press to be an abominable impertinence. On the other hand, she was only prevented with the greatest difficulty by courtiers and by her children from publishing her version of her relationship with her Highland servant John Brown.

In our lifetime, the whole convention of discretion about the lives of royal personages has been blown apart by a succession of factors – including the willingness of some members of the Royal Family to tell all, or nearly all, to newspaper and television journalists. Clearly such behaviour would have been unimaginable, indeed horrifying, to Queen Victoria.

In December 1890, for example, she erupted with anger at *The Times* printing a mild story (as it happened, it turned out to be untrue) about a proposed visit to England by the Duke and Duchess of Sparta (the Crown Prince of the Hellenes, Constantine, and his wife, Princess Sophie of Prussia).[8] All the newspaper had said was that the Duke and Duchess of Connaught, rather than accompanying the Queen

and the Court to Osborne the previous day, would wait behind in London for the Duke and Duchess of Sparta. An indignant Victoria instructed her Prime Minister to remonstrate with that newspaper's editor for 'the exuberant fancy of his fashionable correspondent, who makes announcements about the Queen and Royal Family at variance with the plain unvarnished Court Circular'. Her private secretary, General Ponsonby, 'told the Queen the newspapers put in the Royal news because they thought it pleased the Royal Family and they knew it pleased the public. Her Majesty replied with some asperity that these notes were most interfering and annoying to the Royal Personages who wish to be left in peace and do not desire their movements to be announced, and that the public were informed of all particulars in the Court Circular & could not be pleased at being misled by erroneous notices'.[9]

So, there could be no doubt that the queen would have deplored anything in the nature of an intrusive journalism, or history, which pried into her private life. And yet – for with interesting personalities there is always an 'and yet', and Queen Victoria was among the most fascinating and self-contradictory of all British monarchs – she also had a desire to write about her life for publication. Her children might cringe, but she was unselfconscious about describing the pleasures of her Highland picnics, her watercolouring expeditions, and her love of the Highlanders themselves. Of course, her published books were not confessional or revelatory in the manner of modern journalism, but her own freedom of expression and lack of caution were closer to the 'modern' approach than were the instincts of her children. When, in the 1920s, the ex-Prime Minister's wife Margot Asquith began to publish indiscreet volumes of autobiography, a step had been taken in the direction of modern 'kiss and tell' conventions. Queen Victoria's daughter Princess Louise (Duchess of Argyll) expressed amazement that her friend Lady Battersea was also going to publish some completely anodyne reminiscences. 'I have been rather taken aback, for your letter says, what you assured me would not be the case, that you would publish your reminiscences. I confess I thought

them charming and entertaining, for just your personal belongings and friends, but not the public. This Margo [sic] fever to me is such a pitty [sic]!'[10] In another letter to the same friend, Louise wrote, 'This letter need [sic] the flames after you have read it as I do so dislike any letters being kept these days, you will not wonder?'[11]

It is easy to understand the reluctance of King Edward VII to have all the details of his private life recorded. He had only narrowly avoided being cited in divorce courts as a correspondent on more than one occasion, and the King, who was nicknamed Edward the Caresser, was a by-word for raffish behaviour. Princess Louise, herself trapped in an unhappy marriage to a homosexual, her name 'linked', as journalists say, to several men not her husband, and desperately lonely in her widowhood, was understandably touchy about vulgar publicity.[12] But it would be a mistake to attribute her views to a fear of scandal. There was a sense, in the pre-1914 world, which extended in most English circles until the Second World War, of two sets of information: things which everyone 'knew' but which were not written down; and matters which were printable. It was not so much that the laws of libel prevented newspapers from printing stories. It was more a matter of what was and was not 'done'. Strong conventions prevented the British public from being told, until a few days before it happened, that their King was on the verge of abdication in 1936. Yvonne M. Ward also makes the powerful point, in her *Censoring Queen Victoria*, that the public image of the Queen, for a good half century and more after her death, was determined by the letters which her editors chose to put into print. Arthur C. Benson and the 1st Viscount Esher, both homosexual men of a certain limited outlook determined by their class and disposition, were the pair entrusted with the task of editing the earliest published letters. It is a magnificent achievement, but they chose to concentrate on Victoria's public life, omitting the thousands of letters she wrote relating to health, to children, to sex and marriage, to feelings and the 'inner woman'. It perhaps comforted them, and others who revered the memory of the Victorian era, to place a posthumous gag on Victoria's emotions. The

extreme paradox arose that one of the most passionate, expressive, humorous and unconventional women who ever lived was paraded before the public as a stiff, pompous little person, the 'figurehead' to an all-male imperial enterprise.

This atmosphere of discretion which surrounds the Royal Family has done Queen Victoria a disservice. By destroying so many of her mother's journals, Princess Beatrice makes us suspicious that she was covering up details which would satisfy the eyes of the salacious. Certainly, it is hard to see why Edward VII would have been so anxious to buy letters from a blackmailer, 'some of them most compromising' about his mother's relationship with John Brown, had he not himself believed that they would be scandalous. These matters will be discussed in their due chronological place. They are mentioned here at the outset, however, to alert the reader to the fact that there is a certain amount of the story which has been systematically censored by the Queen's children. At the same time, it is necessary at the outset to realize that just because a letter or a diary has been burned does not mean it was either sinister or even especially interesting. On the contrary, as Princess Louise's reaction to her old friend's memoirs showed, the habits of discretion, the desire to burn perfectly harmless letters in order to cover their traces, might not conceal the garish secrets which the imaginations of a later generation wish to supply. The modern biographer, or the reader of modern biographies, might be so anxious to find the few hidden, or irrecoverably lost, 'secrets' of Queen Victoria's life that they miss the one very obvious reason why her children would have wanted to destroy as much of her archive as possible.

To judge from the surviving letters, one feature of Queen Victoria's written life which must have been especially painful to her family is the free and ungoverned manner in which she criticized her children – both to them directly and behind their backs. Their physical appearance, their dress sense, their capacity to procreate, the frequency with which they did so, the names they gave their children, the manner in which they brought them up were all subjected to a

ceaseless and frequently far from complimentary commentary. For her son the Prince of Wales she reserved especially uncompromising vilifications, and it was hardly surprising, when he had the power to do so, that Bertie, having become Edward VII, took matters into his own destructive hands.

The fact that Princess Beatrice destroyed so large a proportion of her mother's journals is not, therefore, a fact which demands only one interpretation: namely, a cover-up of scandals. The Queen expressed herself so forcefully, so freely, so often, that it could be this fact alone, and not any particular 'secret', which Princess Beatrice wished to obliterate from the history books. Luckily for us, an abundance of the Queen's letters still survive, as do the reminiscences, diaries and correspondence of those who knew her. And it is from this primary material in general that the following pages will, wherever possible, derive, as we revisit the story of that 'pretty-looking little creature' glimpsed by Carlyle in Green Park; for we would echo his instinctual judgement, 'one could not help some interest in her'.