



Queen Victoria was the namesake of an age. Her life (1819-1901) essentially spanned a century of transformation (aren't they all?) in which the technology of the times altered the lives of hundreds of millions. She reigned over an empire of breathtaking proportions and affected or was affected by every world leader of any consequence. Yet, her life and personality present an interesting and perhaps even important question. Did Queen Victoria herself even approach in consequence, substance and accomplishment the age over which she presided?

Victoria's life can be roughly divided into four phases. She was the daughter of Edward, and the granddaughter of King George III, who was on the throne when she was born. Her mother was a minor German princess. Victoria's mother raised her in almost complete isolation from other children. She never slept alone or moved about without her mother or her nurse assuring she had no unguarded contact with another human being.

When Victoria was one, King George and Prince Edward both died, and her uncle George IV took the throne, followed in 1830 by her uncle William IV. William died childless in 1837, and Victoria became Queen of England at age 18.

The "teen queen," Victoria was short, rather plain, and not highly educated, in addition to being rigidly sheltered. At the same time she was strong-willed and resented her mother deeply for depriving her of a youth. Despite her limited background she was a talented artist, very musical, and acknowledged to be quite charming, poised and even flirtatious in public given the heavy responsibility forced on her so early in life. Her ministers, her mother, and the entourage of hangers-on who surrounded her all agreed that she needed a strong male hand for support and possibly guidance. Simply put--a good husband.

Victoria was fortunate that there was a candidate, pressed by her German relatives, who was both eligible (royal blood) and for whom she fell head over heels in love: Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg Gotha. Three years into her reign, the second phase of her life began: Queen and wife.

As Queen, Victoria applied herself to “my boxes” and interacted with her ministers: especially Lord Melbourne, on whom she had and maintained even after marriage a girlish crush. She and Albert had nine children within the next seventeen years. They were clearly devoted to each other, but each separately complained that the other was in one way or another moody, depressed, inaccessible and temperamental. Albert described Victoria’s temper tantrums as bordering on mental illness, an assessment shared by many at court. The court itself was a stifling, boring schedule of dinners, card games, and banal small talk, occasionally relieved by lavish balls and entertainments. Victoria’s ladies-in-waiting, Albert’s assistants, and those who helped run the monarchy from day to day wrote letters describing smothering formalities and Victoria’s intolerance of anything she considered “improper” in dress, behavior, language, background or politics. Despite bearing nine children she absolutely banned any sexual references or humor.

Albert was more liberal in his civic perspectives and became a patron of the arts, sciences, and new British industries. He was the force behind the Great Exhibition of 1851 at the “Crystal Palace.” Albert’s flaw, with which he infected Victoria, was his lack of understanding of the role of a constitutional monarch, such that both Victoria and Albert (acting in her name) pestered successive prime ministers with demands for or opposition to government or military action. Each minister in turn developed his own methods for deflecting these attempts without confrontation with the monarch. While Albert expanded Victoria’s horizons he also warped her view of her role as Queen and ultimately her effectiveness in that role. Unlike Queen Elizabeth II, she was not seen by her ministers as a trusted adviser but very often as yet another problem with which they had to deal. Victoria was, however, beloved by her subjects and during her marriage she and

Albert were often “out and about” Britain and Scotland. Some cohort of their sons and daughters princes often joined them but Victoria wrote of her general disinterest in motherhood. She loved her children in principle if not in daily practice and as she entered her fifties she wrote letter after letter nagging and belittling them. The once-youthful Queen was now looking quite old and quite pear-shaped, it being well-known that she ate too much, too quickly, and as a result had grown quite fat.

What she would see as an idyll in her life ended with Albert’s sudden death in 1861. Victoria’s initial widowhood was marked by deep depression and a decade of withdrawal from almost all aspects of public life. Her maudlin grief was beyond extreme--she visited Albert’s tomb at Windsor every day when she was there, and preserved his rooms at all their palaces exactly as they had been on the day he died.

She slept with his bathrobe, and had her son and heir photographed with Albert’s bust as part of his wedding pictures. She wore black for the rest of her life. While she did work diligently through her “boxes” during this period, British politicians actually debated abolishing the monarchy because the monarch was essentially non-existent.

Two men helped Victoria only partially emerge from this isolation and enter the fourth and final phase of her life: Queen and Empress. Benjamin Disraeli, prime minister in 1868 and again from 1874 to 1880, used extreme flattery and the facade of utter devotion (with some element of genuine affection) to charm and reanimate Victoria. In return made it known she supported Britain’s military actions in the Crimea, and opposed the country being drawn into the wars between Prussia and Austria/Denmark, and between France and Germany. She did not resist key political reforms (popular male vote for Parliament), and she backed the emergence of England as the major industrial power of the world. Disraeli gave Victoria her ultimate gift, the “jewel in the crown” that was the title of Empress of India granted to her in 1876. Thereafter she styled herself “Victoria Queen and Empress.”

The other man who helped Victoria emerge from deep widowhood was her servant John Brown, with whom she is acknowledged to have fallen in love, even if there is no evidence that love was ever consummated. The two were inseparable and Brown spoke to her as a rough-edged Scots husband would speak to his wife of many years, even if at the same time he worshipped her as his queen. His death as she entered her old age was a second devastating blow after the loss of Albert.

Victoria lived to celebrate both her Golden Jubilee in 1887 and her Diamond Jubilee in 1897. She also lived to become infatuated one more time with a man: her Indian servant, nicknamed "the Munchi," who became her teacher, confidant, secretary, and purveyor of curries, who like John Brown was hated by her family, ministers, and courtiers. By this time in her life she was loved as the symbol of the glorious British Empire. and her mind remained active though her body gradually failed her. Her ministers were charitable and tolerant at this point if again not beneficiaries of any deep wisdom from their Queen.

She died in 1901 after 63 years on the throne. She was buried next to Albert, wearing John Brown's ring. She had written millions of words in letters to her ministers, most of which were preserved, and to her children, most of which were largely burned. The Munchi was banished, Albert's rooms were cleaned out and redecorated and Britain entered the Edwardian Age.

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