

Queen Victoria

And the Men who Loved Her

'Tis better to have loved and lost
Than never to have loved at all.

Tennyson

Queen Victoria
and the Men who Loved Her



Recollections of a Journey

ROBERT STEPHEN PARRY

To Ruby

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ISBN: 9781797616667

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Introduction

It really was a long time ago, far longer than I usually care to recall, and the mystery surrounding the incident is something I still find a little disturbing and difficult to explain. I was journeying by rail to Scotland on a day that must have been sometime shortly before Christmas because there was an air of excitement and anticipation among those travelling, and beyond the misted windows of my carriage a little snow could be detected upon the fields and rooftops of the towns and villages. Even the first-class spaces on board were crowded, and every chair in the sleeper lounge occupied. At the first available halt, therefore, I took the opportunity to venture farther along the train, and found myself in a compartment with an altogether very jolly and talkative group of distinguished ladies and gentlemen who were, I soon gathered, on their way to a celebration or conference of some kind in the city of Edinburgh. Drinks were flowing freely, with various flasks of strong liquor in circulation. Eventually, their hospitality extended to me, and we introduced ourselves.

Upon learning of their intention to journey all the way to Edinburgh, I asked them if they, like me, had beds reserved. But apparently they did not. ‘We have no need of sleep,’ one of them declared with laughter, and after a short while in their company I could understand why. The conversation was most stimulating. They were all historians, specialising in the era of 19th-century England, and were likewise all devoted to the remarkable woman whose name became synonymous with the period: Queen Victoria.

Surprised and delighted, I confessed a certain personal fascination with those times myself. Though by no means an expert, I had long been an admirer of Gothic art, of the Pre-

Raphaelite painters and poets of those times and, naturally, also of the woman who once sat at the very heart of the British Empire, Victoria herself.

As the train continued its long and relentless journey northwards (this was still in the era of steam, by the way) my travelling companions decided to pass the time by staging a little contest. Who could come up with the best and most original anecdote concerning the great lady herself, Queen Victoria and - most importantly - the men in her life?

I was surprised and not a little disconcerted that they should choose such a potentially risqué topic by which to amuse themselves. The Queen had, after all, passed away only a few decades previously. But they insisted on it. We must each choose a real person, an individual from a shortlist of names - men who had been associated with Her Majesty in one way or another and who had also loved and admired her. The names were agreed upon by popular vote, written down on pieces of paper and drawn from a hat.

After a few minutes of good-natured argument and the occasional swap as to who precisely would have whom, the cast of players was established in what would become a series of improvised monologues. As there were nine names in all, and as there were only six of us present in the carriage, including myself, it was obvious that someone would have to take on more than their fair share. I hasten to add that I did not volunteer for this honour. One was quite enough to manage. Meanwhile, the only rule we were obliged to adhere to was that each of our offerings should be speculative as well as educational - that it should include a brief made-up story alongside the facts as they were known. A little piece of fiction each time.

The result, I must say, was most enlightening. It really was one of those brief episodes in time that leaves a little magic behind in its wake. In the following pages, therefore, I shall endeavour to relate each presentation and to describe the subsequent hours that passed that evening as accurately

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as I can - interspersed with one or two observations of my own concerning the illustrious lady herself, Victoria as princess and queen. I hope you will find it as entertaining and intriguing as I certainly did at the time.

1 ~ Victoria - a Brief History

Before I go on to tell you all about the stories that evening on the railway journey to Scotland, here is a brief summary of the life of Queen Victoria herself and the people she knew. You can refer to this if you ever get stumped by an unfamiliar name or event. This is followed by a timeline showing the various relationships in graphic form, and which demonstrates how and when the lives of the men overlapped with hers.

During her lifetime, Victoria enjoyed numerous titles, both regal and domestic - titles that ranged from Princess to Queen; from Wife, Mother and Grandmother, to Empress of India. When she came into the world as a baby, however, on 24th May 1819 there was little to suggest such a glorious destiny. At the time, she was just fifth in line to the throne, and with so many of her uncles busy endeavouring to secure an heir for themselves, any possibility that she might one day become queen was expected to recede as time went by.

In fact, just the opposite occurred. Victoria's father died, and the elderly uncles, failing to produce legitimate heirs, gradually fell by the wayside - until, through no effort or fault of her own, it became more and more likely, and ultimately obvious, that Victoria would succeed. She was crowned at Westminster Abbey in June 1838.

A most singular destiny, to be sure. And for a woman who lived to the age of 81 and reigned as queen for almost 64 of those years while maintaining authority in a largely male-dominated society, her life was an extraordinary achievement by anybody's standards. Here, then, is a swift chronology of what took place during those remarkable 81 years.

A Brief History

1819 Victoria is born at Kensington Palace. Her mother is German, the Princess Victoria of Saxe-Coburg-Saalfeld. Her father is Edward, Duke of Kent - the fourth son of King George III. He describes his new daughter as 'a pretty little Princess, as plump as a partridge'. The christening is presided over by the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the child is baptised as Alexandrina Victoria.

1820 Victoria, not yet one year old, loses her father, who dies unexpectedly, leaving her 4th in line to the throne. When her grandfather King George III dies just six days later, Victoria becomes 3rd in line.

1830 King George IV dies and is succeeded by another of Victoria's elderly uncles, the 64-year-old Duke of Clarence - now William IV. Because William has no legitimate children, the eleven-year-old Victoria becomes heir presumptive. Later, the ailing William, suspicious of the motives of Victoria's mother and her ambitious companion, John Conroy proclaims his wish to live to see Victoria succeed at the age of 18 without any need for a Regency. With dogged determination, this is achieved, and he passes away shortly after Victoria comes of age.

1837 Upon the death of William IV Victoria succeeds to the throne, becoming Queen of Great Britain and Ireland. She is aided during these first few days and weeks by Baron von Stockmar, a physician from her mother's home of Coburg sent over by her maternal-uncle, Prince Leopold, a man who has always taken a lively interest in her affairs.

1838 More than 400,000 people line the streets of London to celebrate the young queen's coronation at Westminster Abbey. The 60-year-old Lord Melbourne is Prime Minister in Her Majesty's government, and the couple spend considerable time together, in business and recreation.

1839 The young queen loses the immediate support of Prime Minister Melbourne when he is forced to resign. What comes to be known as 'the bedchamber crises' ensues, in which Victoria refuses to accept the next prime minister, Robert Peel's meddling in her affairs - namely the replacement of her ladies in waiting with those - more suitable to his own political agenda. Peel refuses to become Prime Minister as a consequence, and Melbourne returns to office.

A triumph for Victoria, but her popularity diminishes somewhat with speculation that she and Melbourne might have become a little too close.

Also during this year, Victoria renews her acquaintance with a handsome young German prince - Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha. The two fall in love, and Victoria proposes marriage.

1840 The marriage between Victoria and Albert takes place in February at St James' Palace, London. Later, in November, Victoria gives birth at Buckingham Palace to her first child, a girl - named Victoria after her mother. The Regency Act is passed through Parliament, allowing the child's father to serve as Regent in the event of the Queen's premature demise (there had already been an assassination attempt earlier in June of this year).

1841 The birth of Victoria and Albert's second child, and first son, the future Prince of Wales, Albert Edward, at Buckingham Palace. Great Joy. Victoria is disappointed, however, at the defeat in the general election of her friend and erstwhile mentor Lord Melbourne. Robert Peel finally becomes Prime Minister.

1842 Victoria and her family undertake a tour of Scotland - part of the United Kingdom that will prove a magnet to them in future years, and where they will eventually create a summer retreat at Balmoral. On a darker note, this year also