

## Victoria's Early Reign: 1837–1861

**Scope:** Victoria came to the throne in 1837 at the age of eighteen. Her predecessors, George III, George IV, and William IV, had been unimpressive and had impaired the reputation of the monarchy. By her authority and example, she restored its reputation and dignity, embodying the era's mood of moral improvement. Along with her husband, Albert of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, whom she married in 1840, Victoria made the most of what limited political power and influence the monarchy still retained, communicating regularly with her prime ministers. She bore nine children and enjoyed many of the material advantages of the industrial age. Her husband's death in 1861 was, to her, a shattering catastrophe.

### Outline

- I. Victoria became queen at the age of eighteen, succeeding her uncle, William IV.
  - A. Born in 1819, Victoria did not seem likely, at first, to be heir to the throne. She was the daughter of George IV's younger brother, the Duke of Kent.
    1. Her father died when she was less than a year old.
    2. Her mother, a minor German princess, was left with only a tiny allowance.
    3. When William IV's legitimate children all died in infancy, the government realized that Victoria was the probable heir and gave her and her mother a much larger income.
    4. Victoria was fluent in German and French, written and spoken; understood Italian; was a regular diarist; and was familiar with many of England's stately and aristocratic houses.
    5. Most of her childhood was lonely. She was close to her governess, Louise Lehzen, but had no friends of her own age.
    6. She resented her mother's scheming with Sir John Conroy to make him regent in the event of her becoming queen when too young to rule.
  - B. Victoria was notified of her accession early in the morning of June 20, 1837, in her dressing gown, by the Archbishop of Canterbury and Lord Coyningham, the Lord Chancellor.
  - C. She relied on the advice of Whig Prime Minister Lord Melbourne in her first years as queen.
    1. He was a fifty-eight-year-old widower whose wife had been mentally unstable—she had been one of Lord Byron's lovers.
- II. Victoria married Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, her cousin, in 1840, but showed her determination to be monarch as well as housewife.
  - A. Albert was earnest and well educated, at the University of Bonn.
  - B. Victoria's uncle, King Leopold of the Belgians, had trained Albert for the role of Victoria's husband.
  - C. Victoria disliked the idea of marrying Albert but thawed when he came to visit in 1839, because he was handsome, serious, and charming.
  - D. British dislike of foreigners meant that he was given no official title until 1857 (when he was named Prince-Consort) and was not allowed to have German friends and advisors in his household.
    1. At first, Victoria froze Albert out of her political affairs altogether.
    2. Albert showed his abilities, however, by rationalizing the chaotic conduct of the royal household.
    3. When Victoria was about to give birth for the first time, Albert was admitted to the Privy Council and named regent in the event of her death.
  - E. British politicians of both parties came to respect Albert, his hard work, active conscience, and high moral tone.
- III. Victoria regarded him as a father figure (she had never known her own father) and they got on extremely well. He trained her to run affairs, and they met or wrote letters to each other every day.
  3. Her superiority over her three predecessors, whom Sir Sidney Lee described as "an imbecile, a profligate, and a buffoon," soon made her popular among politicians and populace.
- D. Victoria was upset when Melbourne resigned in 1839 and furious when Sir Robert Peel, the Tory leader, asked to change her Ladies of the Bedchamber, removing Whigs and adding Tories.
  1. Throughout her reign, Victoria resented prime ministers at first but later came to value them—by 1846 she was a great admirer of Peel.
  2. The exception was the great Liberal leader Gladstone, whom she always disliked.
- E. Victoria found it difficult to accept that she was now only a constitutional monarch.
  1. In the late 1840s, she bitterly disliked Foreign Secretary Lord Palmerston because of his opposition to some European monarchs, her relatives.
  2. In 1850, she tried to demand that the prime minister, Lord John Russell, dismiss Palmerston or subordinate him to her will, but was unable to prevail.
- F. She followed the progress of the Crimean War in 1854–1855 and created the Victoria Cross for gallantry, personally awarding it to common soldiers, as well as officers.

**III.** Victoria and Albert enjoyed many of the new amenities of industrial society.

- A.** They bought and rebuilt two houses, Osborne House, on the Isle of Wight, and Balmoral, in the Scottish highlands, filling both with the most modern heating devices and using modern iron-frame technology.
- 1.** At Balmoral, Victoria sketched, painted, rode, and learned Scottish dances, while Albert tried to learn Gaelic and stalked deer.
- 2.** Victoria later published a book about Balmoral, *Leaves from a Journal of Our Life in the Highlands*.
- B.** Victoria traveled by train in 1842 from London to Windsor—on Brunel's Great Western Railway.
- 1.** Later, she had a luxurious train built for her frequent travels to southern England and Scotland
- 2.** Her royal yacht, *Victoria and Albert* (1842), used brand-new propeller technology instead of paddles.
- C.** Victoria accepted chloroform to help her in childbirth of Prince Leopold in 1853, the eighth of her nine children.
- D.** She suffered acute postpartum depression and often flew into rages against Albert, feeling penitent later.
- E.** She and Prince Albert opened the Great Exhibition, the first world's fair, in 1851.
- IV.** Prince Albert's death in 1861 sent Victoria into a profound depression and withdrawal from society.
- A.** She continued to have his shaving gear brought to their rooms every morning and his side of their work desk prepared each day.
- B.** She refused to attend public functions throughout the 1860s and made her prime minister, Lord Palmerston, fear that republicanism would gain ground.
- C.** She wore mourning for the rest of her life.
- D.** The Albert Hall, the Albert Memorial, and many other structures still visible today, were built and named in his memory in the 1860s and 1870s.

**Essential Reading:**

Christopher Hibbert, *Queen Victoria: A Personal History*.

Stanley Weintraub, *Albert, Uncrowned King*.

**Supplementary Reading:**

Lytton Strachey, *Queen Victoria*.

Juliet Gardiner, *Queen Victoria*.

**Questions to Consider:**

- 1.** What qualities enabled Victoria to revive the popularity of the monarchy?
- 2.** What were the benefits and drawbacks to Britain of maintaining a queen?

## Quotations from Queen Victoria

### From Lecture Two

Journal comments after being notified of her accession:

“Since it has pleased providence to place me in this station, I shall do my utmost to fulfill my duty towards my country; I am very young and perhaps in many, though not in all things, inexperienced, but I am sure that very few have more real good will and more real desire to do what is right than I have.”

Journal, 20 June 1837, cited in *Queen Victoria in Her Letters and Journals*, Christopher Hibbert, ed., (New York: Viking, 1985), p. 23.

Letter to her uncle, King Leopold of Belgium, regarding Lord Melbourne:

“Let me pause to tell you how fortunate I am to have at the head of the Government a man like Lord Melbourne. I have seen him now every day, with the exception of Friday, and the more I see him, the more confidence I have in him; he is not only a clever statesman and an honest man, but a good and kind hearted man, whose aim is to do his duty for his country and not for a party. He is of the greatest use to me both politically and privately ... It is to me the greatest pleasure to do my duty for my country and my people, and no fatigue, however great, will be burdensome to me if it is for the welfare of the nation.”  
25 June 1837, *ibid.*, p. 24.

Journal comments regarding her proposal of marriage to Prince Albert:

“I said to him ... that it would make me too happy if he would consent to what I wished ... we embraced each other over and over again, and he was so kind, so affectionate. Oh! To feel I was, and am, loved by such an Angel as Albert was too great delight to describe. He is perfection; perfection in every way, in beauty, in everything. ... I felt it was the happiest moment in my life.”

15 October 1839, *ibid.*, p. 57.

Journal comments, a few days later:

“I signed some papers and warrants, etc. and he was so kind as to dry them with blotting paper for me. We talked a good deal together and he clasped me so tenderly in his arms and kissed me again and again.”

27 October 1839, *ibid.*, p. 58.

Comment on babies:

“An ugly baby is a very nasty object, and the prettiest is frightful when undressed, till about four months; in short, as long as they have their big body and little limbs and that terrible frog-like action.”

From a letter to her daughter, Princess Frederick William of Prussia (i.e., Princess Victoria who had married the German Prince), 2 May 1859, *ibid.*, p. 112.

Letter to her uncle King Leopold regarding the Great Exhibition of 1851:

“I wish you could have witnessed the 1st May 1851, the greatest day in our history, the most beautiful and imposing and touching spectacle ever seen, and the triumph of my beloved Albert. Truly it was astonishing, a fair scene. Many cried, and all felt touched and impressed with devotional feelings. It was the happiest, proudest day of my life and I can think of nothing else. Albert's dear name is immortalized with the great conception, his own, and my own dear country showed she was worthy of it.”

c. May 1851, From J. B. Priestley, *Victoria's Heyday* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p. 78.

Journal comments on Albert's death:

“I took his dear left hand which was already cold ... and knelt down by him ... All, all was over ... I stood up and kissed his dear heavenly forehead and called out in a bitter and agonizing cry ‘Oh my dear darling’ and then dropped on my knees in mute distracted despair, unable to utter a word or shed a tear ... Then I laid down on the sofa in the red room and all the gentlemen came in and knelt down and kissed my hand, and I said a word to each.”

Journal, 14 December 1861, *Letters and Journals*, p. 156.