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**A. N. Wilson**

**VICTORIA**

**A Life**

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text

The notion of a sovereign’s peculiar capacity to occupy two bodies – one earthly and mortal, the other mystical and quasi-divine – has long since faded into history. Yet the suggestion of such duality lingers around royal personages, and it explains much of our curiosity about their lives. Victoria represents a particularly telling example of this doubleness. She was a small, unprepossessing woman, who became dumpy and belligerent in middle age. She was never much inclined to exert herself in any kind of purposeful activity, and was not endowed with an exceptional intellect. This did not prevent her from becoming the charismatic emblem of a nation that expanded in power and prosperity throughout her long reign. She was revered around the globe, though her iconic grandeur often sits awkwardly alongside a quirky personality.

These contradictions represent a challenge for Victoria’s biographers. Readers are eager to learn about the oddities that make her human, but the larger cultural and political context is what gives her life its substance. A. N. Wilson balances the competing demands of his task with buoyant assurance. His narrative is bolstered by a stream of solidly researched information about the public world that Victoria inhabited, the formidable politicians she dealt with on a daily basis (Melbourne, Peel, Palmerston, Disraeli, Gladstone), and the great national and international events that transformed her world (the expansion of British democracy and colonial power, the Crimean War, the Boer War). Victoria’s education was patchy at best, and she sometimes failed to appreciate the complexity of the issues that confronted her. But she had a sure sense of popular mood, and of the international repercussions of national policies. Her judgement was shrewd, and she insisted on the right to exercise it independently. Any attempt to patronize her was dismissed with furious contempt. No friend to feminism, she nevertheless demonstrated how domestic authority could be translated into a magisterial public presence.

Wilson is not oblivious to Victoria’s shortcomings, but she emerges from his sympathetic account as a spirited and likeable figure. His advocacy is sometimes engagingly partial. Commenting on a late photograph of Victoria where she looks more than usually bored and discontented (she disliked having her photograph taken), he remarks that the image reflects “the passion, caprice, vulnerability and humour that Queen Victoria retained from early childhood”. Only the most besotted observer could discern those qualities in the dour portrait that Wilson is describing. Victoria was far from morose, but the dignity of her position, and the limitations of contemporary photography, mean that she is rarely shown with a smile on her face. Unfortunately, she had a small, down-turned mouth, which gave an impression of perpetual disapproval. Her apparent sourness has largely inspired our willingness to believe that that she was not amused (Wilson notes that there is no evidence that she ever uttered this over-familiar phrase). In fact she found much that was highly amusing in her solemn public role, partly because she maintained a degree of sceptical distance from the elaborate paraphernalia of court life. She received the deferential service that she inherited with the throne as an unquestionable entitlement, but she was not entirely willing to be constrained by the demands of a Queen’s majesty.

The circumstances of her childhood defined Victoria’s nature. Her father, the Duke of Kent, died when she was nine months old, leaving her German mother, Victoire, isolated and short of money. In later life, Victoria was apt to exaggerate the privations of her “rather melancholy childhood”. In fact, as Wilson shows, her mother was dedicated to the happiness of her “dear little Girl”. She was much indulged, and she had the constant companionship of Prince Charles and Princess Teodore, the children of Victoire’s first marriage. Victoria was remembering an emotional truth, not a practical reality. The family was not popular with the court, and as Victoria grew she resented attempts to control her life. John Conroy, an officious and self-interested presence in her early years, became a focus of her frustration, and when she inherited the throne as an inexperienced eighteen-year-old she promptly exiled him from her life. He fulminated about the ingratitude of the “ignorant little child” who had ascended to greatness, but his indignation made no difference. Victoria’s decisive action was characteristic. Conroy was not wrong in calling her “ignorant”, a condition to which his neglect of her schooling had contributed a good deal, but Victoria knew that becoming a Queen meant that no one was in a position to push her around. From the first, she meant to rule.

Her autocratic behaviour co-existed with much uncertainty, and in the early years of her reign she was evidently out of her depth. She needed, and wanted, support. Melbourne was an early mentor, and in his company Victoria began to find her way. But it was marriage to her high-minded cousin, Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, that transformed her life. Her letters and journals leave no doubt that she was deeply in love with him, and the union was never simply a matter of political expediency. One reason for her passionate attachment was her sense of kinship with Albert as a German. Victoria’s mother was German, with imperfect English. Her father was half-German. Albert was a handsome prince from another land, but he made her feel at home. In 1874, long after Albert’s death, a visitor to Osborne House noted with surprise that the royal family spoke German to each other in the privacy of their home. Victoria, who has come to seem the quintessence of Englishness, was in many ways scarcely English at all.

The complex connections of Victoria’s court were centred in Germany, but they extended across the Continent, particularly as her nine children and forty-two grandchildren married into a network of affiliated royal houses. Inherited privilege seemed to suggest that royalty could float above the seismic changes convulsing Europe. In practice, regal status was no guarantee of security. The Empress Eugénie of France fled as a mob threatened her palace during the Franco-Prussian war in 1870, escaping only with the gallant assistance of her American dentist. She spent the rest of her life in an ignominious English exile. Years after Victoria’s death, two of her granddaughters died in the Russian revolution. Victoria knew that prosperity and safety could never be depended on. She survived several serious attempts on her life, terrifying episodes that can hardly have encouraged her to mingle freely with her people. The sense of vulnerability that haunted her girlhood never quite disappeared.

Victoria’s web of European associations was a matter of births, marriages and deaths rather than political alliances, but it meant that she was often more alert to what was changing on the other side of the Channel than her English ministers. Her eldest child, Vicky, was married to Friedrich III, the German Emperor. Informed by regular correspondence with her exceptionally intelligent daughter, Victoria understood the ominous implications of the rise of Prussian militarism, and the growing dominance of Otto von Bismarck, better than most of her compatriots. She had a clear grasp of the tangled roots of the hostilities between Russia, Denmark, France and the increasingly confident and aggressive Prussia. To her, these were matters of family rivalries. Albert represented a Protestant and liberal German identity, committed to the development of science, technology and commerce. Vicky was his most determined emissary. Though Albert’s idealistic vision of human progress was to be defeated in Germany, it made an enduring impact in Britain.

Though the mutual commitment of Victoria and Albert never wavered, they were both obstinately strong-willed, and from time to time they lost patience with each other. Albert, feeling (often with reason) that his views were more enlightened than those of Victoria, wanted to claim the authority that he thought a husband was entitled to impose on his wife. Victoria, on the other hand, never forgot that she was the one who wore the crown. Despite his loyalty to Victoria, in describing these quarrels Wilson usually finds that his sympathies are with Albert – “the only member of the Royal Family in recent history, or perhaps ever, who deserves the name of genius”. Albert promoted new scholarship and technological advances; he brought about the triumph of the Great Exhibition of 1851; he supported, scolded and loved his wayward Queen. He was fanatically hard-working, and perhaps he tried too hard to control everything that came within his reach. His attempts to manage Bertie, the self-indulgent heir to the throne, were spectacularly unsuccessful. Nevertheless, Albert’s achievements remain hugely impressive, and his death in 1861 left Victoria desolate.

Wilson is careful not to allow the legend of the mourning widow of Windsor to dominate his treatment of her later years. Victoria’s grief was almost pathological in its intensity, but she continued to engage with political life, though she shrank from public appearances. She had depended on Albert’s competent support, and struggled for years to find ways of coping without him. Finally, she emerged from the shadows – “victory against painful odds”, as Wilson puts it. As her self-imposed isolation receded, her confidence, and in some respects her capacity for political influence, expanded. It is here that Wilson’s thoughtful interpretation is at its most revisionary. Victoria was traumatized, but not diminished, by Albert’s death, and it was as an older woman that she came into her own.

It was inevitable that she would, over the many decades of her reign, develop close associations with her government’s ministers, and with the leading members of her court. Most of these figures were men. None were able to intimidate Victoria, who reached firm conclusions as to their capacity to live up to her own principles. Her popular Toryism meant that she had no time for “that madman” Gladstone’s disturbingly radical values, and her frosty working relations with him never thawed. Disraeli’s sense of political theatre, brilliantly expressed in making Victoria “Empress of India”, was more to her taste. She tended to consider everyone that she came into contact with as her servant, of a higher or lower order, and got on best with those who were uncompromisingly faithful, without being obsequious. Her long-serving private secretary, General Sir Henry Ponsonby, fitted the bill perfectly, and his skilful handling of her public role as she made her slow recovery from the loss of Albert’s support made a major contribution to the repair of her standing.

Servants also supplied her emotional needs. Wilson handles the delicate question of her relations with the Scottish ghillie John Brown with careful tact. Victoria’s family, and those who tried to manage her image (never a straightforward task), were appalled by the unseemly closeness that developed between the lonely Queen and her forthright servant. Brown was a threat to the respectability of the Crown. But he was what the Queen needed. His affection was utterly dependable and authentic, and he was not afraid of her. Dismissing the warnings of her advisers, Victoria reciprocated with her own devotion. His death did not hit her as hard as that of Albert, but it renewed her sense of loss and solitude. Her final favourite, an Indian servant she knew as the Munshi, went some way to filling Brown’s place. An outsider in the court, as Brown had been, the Munshi owed his position to Victoria’s partiality. He responded with fidelity of the kind that his Queen could lean on, and she rewarded him with a gratitude that some found yet more alarming than her earlier reliance on Brown.

These eccentric relationships reveal Victoria’s susceptibilities, and also her strengths. She was self-willed to an extent that would sometimes put her own public position at risk, but she was not a cold or calculating woman, and finally she valued personal warmth more than political advantage. She was never snobbish, nor racist. She was not in the least troubled by the facts, scandalizing to many in her circle, that Brown was not a gentleman, and the Munshi was an Indian. She was the Queen, and she made her own decisions. Her power arose from an arbitrary accident of birth, rather than any special accomplishments. But for Britain, the chance turned out to be a lucky one. With all her faults and follies, she was a magnificent monarch.

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