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## CHAPTER I

*Introduction*

*Margaret Homans and Adrienne Munich*

Queen Victoria has been hidden in plain view for a hundred years. We propose to reveal her where we believe she always was, at the center of Victorian cultures around the globe. She was hardly obscure during her own reign: the author of best-selling books, the beloved “grandmother of Europe,” the subject of a multitude of portraits disseminated in homes rich and poor, she is demonstrably as important to her age as Elizabeth I was to hers. Nonetheless, Victoria is generally viewed as having negligible importance for the political history of Britain because during her reign the last vestiges of monarchic political power were transferred to Parliament. Moreover, the newer social histories of Britain, which have brought to light much that was once considered unhistorical, have concentrated on the middle and working classes. Perhaps it is because Victoria embedded herself so firmly in the history of what she herself called the “people” that she has seemed indistinguishable from them. For multiple reasons, then, the term “Victorian” is not likely to bring the Queen herself to mind; even scholarly studies that use her name have next to nothing to say about her.

Where the Queen receives more than her share of attention has been in the genre of personal history – of biography. Members of her household began to publish illicit memoirs, beginning late in her reign; her two jubilees inspired scores of illustrated retrospectives of her reign and life. In 1921 Lytton Strachey’s *Queen Victoria* permitted a less hagiographic view, and a new life is published every few years. Notable among more recent biographies are Elizabeth Longford’s comprehensive study (1964); Cecil Woodham-Smith’s biography of the years up to the Prince Consort’s death (1972); David Duff’s study of the relationship between Victoria and Albert (1972); Stanley Weintraub’s “intimate” biography (1987); Monica Charlot’s two volume study, only the first volume of which has been translated into English (1991); and Giles St. Aubyn’s full-scale reassessment (1991). Yet this cult of royal personality isolates her

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from the cultural history of her era. Rich and full as these biographies are, as long as they remain the principal source of information and analysis, understanding of Victoria's historical and cultural importance will inevitably remain muted.

This volume makes few claims about Victoria's political power, narrowly construed as the execution of decisions taken about matters of state. It does, however, claim for her an expansive political role because we recognize that power is largely ideological and that social relations are power relations. In our view, and that of the contributors to this volume, Victoria was central to the ideological and cultural signifying systems of her age. She has disappeared from history not because she was unimportant but because her importance – like her monarchy itself – has been difficult to categorize. She was a monarch without precedent: neither consort nor king, she baffled expectations throughout her career. Never had England seen a reigning monarch so matrimonially devoted, so excessively maternal (nine children), and then so emphatically widowed. But these peculiarities nonetheless cast their influence over, and were in turn shaped by, the culture of a rapidly changing Britain and its increasingly colonized domain.

*Remaking Queen Victoria* takes a modern measure of Victoria's reign in terms of its cultural work. Victoria reflected back to her subjects their own values to reassure them about the comprehensibility of their lived reality; they in turn created her in their image to serve their social and economic needs. Queen Victoria, her subjects around the globe, and even those outside the empire collaboratively made her into a myth and an icon. The dynamic of these constructions produced those cultures that are collectively called Victorian. This volume recognizes the existence of many Victorias. It treats the diffusion of her image not as a problem to be solved by the creation of an illusory wholeness, but as a series of entry points into Victorian culture and into the nature of cultural formation. Each chapter shows how different "Victorias" created varieties of Victorian cultures and their disparate legacies. Taken together, the chapters remake Victorian cultural history.

Victoria's absence from histories and cultural studies of Britain is a twentieth-century phenomenon, although she had already begun to disappear and her image to fragment during her reign. She disappeared when she became a widow in 1861, declining for several years to open Parliament, to travel in an open carriage, or to make public appearances of any kind except to dedicate statues of Prince Albert. But she vanished

in a different sense throughout her career into the varieties of representation by which she became known. One image became ubiquitous at the time of her jubilees: the impassive but maternal widow whose profile – as Thomas Richards (1990) demonstrates – became as identifiable as any commercial logo. Victoria, in publishing selections from her journals in 1868 and 1884, contributed to a persona that seems in keeping with this static expressionless image. *Leaves from the Journal of Our Life in the Highlands*, and *More Leaves*, which made her a best-selling author, often read like merely dutiful recordings of pleasant activities, drained of their pleasure. Although she was an accomplished amateur watercolorist, her descriptions of Scotland resemble little more than embellished cartographies: “The scenery in *Loch Linnhe* was magnificent – such beautiful mountains. From *Loch Linnhe* we entered *Loch Eil*, and passed the entrance of *Loch Leven* to the right, at the end of which is *Glencoe*, so famous for its beautiful scenery, and for the horrible massacre of the Macdonalds in William III’s time” (Victoria 1868: 94; 20 August 1847). With this iconic image proliferating in the colonized territories and within the British Isles, Victoria seemed to validate imperialism and render it harmless, even comforting. Not only did official statuary in far reaches of the empire – South Africa, Australia, India – testify to Britain’s power, small Parian ware busts of the Queen graced mantles from Dublin to Durban. Owing in part to the Queen’s longevity, a color lithograph of her at her Golden or Diamond Jubilee was just as likely to be found in an American parlor as an image of any American president.

Despite the prominence of the familiar stolid icon, other muted images worked their way into Victorians’ values. In place of a determinate identity of a singular Queen Victoria, many conflicting ideas of her increasingly came to be used to model or to justify a wide variety of cultural practices and personal self-fashionings. Writers on Victoria like to point to the paradoxes she encompassed. In Giles St. Aubyn’s words, “Nobody can hope to understand the Queen without recognising that her nature abounded in contradictions, and it can only be misleading to seek rational explanations for what was essentially illogical” (St. Aubyn 1991: 58). Intensely private in her domestic relations, the Queen displayed her privacy for public consumption; she was alone and surrounded; autocratic and abject; charitable to the poor, egocentric and abrupt to others; immensely hardworking and immensely self-indulgent. Her writings include both classic statements of docile femininity – “we women are not made for governing” – and the utterances of a person long habituated to getting her own way. In 1892, for instance, a woman

requests permission for her daughter to write an article on the Royal Mews and Kennels. The Queen responds to her secretary, “This is a dreadful & dangerous woman. She better take the facts from the other papers.” The next year a painter asks leave to engrave one of the pictures he painted for the Queen. “Certainly not,” she writes, “They are not good and he is very pushing” (Ponsonby 1942: 48). Adrienne Munich explains some of the difficulties in conceptualizing Victoria’s power by mapping the doctrine of the separate spheres on to the medieval concept of two monarchical bodies: “the Queen’s maternal body belonged to the private sphere while her sovereign body belonged to the public sphere.” These ideologies, she argues, created a “gap in representability” (Munich 1987: 265) that could be usefully filled by a proliferation of different Victorias.

These Victorias often occurred simultaneously, for Victoria was capable of gesturing to both spheres at once. When she was widowed and flamboyantly sequestered, she explained her absence from public view by recourse not to the expected delicacy of a bereft widow, but to her royal duties. It was not “the Queen’s *sorrow* that keeps her secluded,” she explained to Sir Robert Martin, author of the six-volume authorized biography of the Prince Consort.

It is her *overwhelming work* and her health, which is greatly shaken by her sorrow, and the totally overwhelming amount of work and responsibility – work which she feels really wears her out . . . From the hour she gets out of bed till she gets into it again there is work, work, work, – letter boxes, questions, &c., which are dreadfully exhausting – and if she had not comparative rest and quiet in the evening she would most likely not be *alive*. Her brain is constantly overtaxed. (Martin 1908: 28–29, quoted in Strachey 1921: 215)

Victorians understood the ideology of work as well as that of true womanhood. The image of the lonely Queen laboring over the dispatch boxes despite her desolation fitted both plots at once. Victoria’s style conveys her feminine superfluity of emotion while her action conveys the Victorian work ethic.

A handful of recent studies of Victoria have embraced her multiplicity. In *Defining Voices*, volume one of *The Woman Question: Society and Literature in Britain and America, 1837–1883* (1983), Elizabeth K. Helsinger, Robin Lauterbach Sheets, and William Veeder opened a feminist discussion of Victoria by examining how in her writing and her actions she both endorsed and undermined the so-called Victorian ideal of feminine asexual domesticity. Notably, this work succeeds by embracing Victoria’s paradoxicalness: “She represents her era so adequately

because the conflicting elements of her personality characterize the age itself" (Helsingers *et al.* 1983: 64). Cynthia Huff's 1988 essay on the Queen's diaries similarly finds paradoxes in the merging of public and private. Dorothy Thompson's *Queen Victoria: the Woman, the Monarchy, and the People* (1990) is the first extended study to ask feminist questions about Victoria and to explore her cultural significance from a historian's point of view. Thompson explains the almost universal acceptance of "a female in the highest office" in a "century in which male dominion and the separation of spheres . . . became entrenched in the ideology of all classes" by claiming that very separation enhanced her sway. At a time when the future of the monarchy was at risk, "her youth and gender . . . helped to reconcile many to traditional monarchical loyalties which, it should be remembered, included a strong folk memory – perhaps more a mythology – of good times for England under previous women rulers, from Boadicea through Good Queen Bess to Queen Anne" (Thompson 1990: xviii–xix).

Margaret Homans's work on Victoria discusses the paradoxes of her power. Early in her career, at a time of "enormous and sometimes self-contradictory anxieties about female rule," Victoria found in representations of her marriage "an effective strategy both for handling the public relations problem of female rule and, perhaps more important, for completing England's transition to parliamentary democracy and symbolic monarchy" (Homans 1993: 7, 2). Throughout her career, "Queen Victoria gave away her power in order to have it" (Homans 1994: 251); she achieved ascendancy in her subjects' minds by appearing not to rule. As a widow, she maintained her monarchy by making a spectacle of her absence (Homans 1997). Adrienne Munich's *Queen Victoria's Secrets* (1996, incorporating Munich 1984 and 1987) investigates the way Queen Victoria performed the age's significant cultural codes, giving them her own personal signature. She meant different things to different groups, but her inspired performances ultimately made it possible for multitudes to think that they were doing the Queen's work, whatever they did – from explorations to ethnography, to "little" imperial wars, to having portraits made of their pets. Almost everyone attended in their imagination what Kipling called "the widow's parties," his term for the imperial wars but applicable also to the spectacular celebrations of her reign, including the jubilees in 1887 and 1897. Moreover, in the domestic and trivial connotations of "parties," one finds the kind of sexism that has made this extraordinarily complex figure easier to ignore as an active power in history. It is no accident that feminist scholars have been the first to take Victoria

seriously. Her importance emerges with the emergence of feminist studies of culture.

This volume seeks not so much to assemble Victoria's diffused parts into a coherent whole – something that could be done only in an illusory way for any human subject – but to “remake” her diffuseness into a series of apprehensible and legible moments. Victoria is a model for middle-class women, as in Alison Booth's chapter on “role model anthologies” and in Sharon Aronofsky Weltman's chapter on Ruskin's domestic queens. On a larger scale, she serves to reflect ideals of nationhood, as in Elizabeth Langland's chapter on Victoria's role in shaping and promulgating the Victorian myth of ethnic Englishness; in Mary Loeffelholz's account of the “constitution of nineteenth-century American nationalism *vis-à-vis* Great Britain”; and in Robin L. Bott's chapter on how Liliuokalani, the Queen of Hawaii, imitates Victoria's style of rule to solidify her authority in the face of American colonization. Often, Victoria is ostensibly respected while being criticized indirectly, as in Dagni Bredesen's chapter on the insubordinate invocation of the “widdy” by Kipling's imperial soldiers or in Maria Jerinic's chapter on the dangers of female power when rendered exotic by the figure of the Rani of Jhansi. Sometimes her representation is entirely negative, as in Janet Winston's chapter on an Adrienne Kennedy work in which Victoria colonizes the mind of a present-day black woman. Other chapters emphasize the fashioning of her persona in positive or negative relation to cultural ideals of girlhood, womanhood, or queenship: Gail Turley Houston's chapter on the didactic fiction Victoria read as a child, fiction that modeled the law of female subordination that her reign was both to resist and to endorse; Karen Chase and Michael Levenson's chapter on her baffling of her subjects' and her ministers' expectations of her early in her reign; Susan P. Casteras's chapter on early portraits that both defy and conform to standard images of girlhood; or Nicola J. Watson's chapter on representations of Queen Elizabeth that indirectly and inversely create portraits of Victoria. But in all these cases, as in others, Victoria does not have a fixed identity to which others accede or object: instead, her image is created even as it is read, and destabilized even when it is treated as monolithic.

Of course there are common themes. Because Victoria was and is widely understood to be a domestic monarch who modeled ordinary middle-class womanhood even while she presided as empress over one quarter of the planet's territories, nearly all the chapters touch either on her utility for promulgating this ideology or on her failure to support it,

or both at once. As a domestic, maternal, and seemingly middle-class queen she played out many aspects of the era's crucial yet self-contradictory ideology of "separate spheres." "Of all Victorian women," writes Houston, "the Queen had the greatest opportunity to resist but the most to gain by appearing to conform to the dominant Victorian pattern for femininity." For Americans in Loeffelholz's account, her role as peacemaker during the Civil War gradually merged with her tamer profile as ordinary matron, a role into which they saw her disappearing by the end of her reign. Casteras shows how portraits of Victoria represented her as both girlish and regal, and Chase and Levenson explore contradictions between her royal and domestic identities in an early crisis about her official household. Several chapters note the use of Victoria to criticize what some subjects saw as excesses of female power – hers or others': "the Rani's status . . . as primary insurgent," writes Jerinic, "indicates a British discomfort with ruling women and consequently with their own Queen." For the Queen of Hawaii, according to Bott, copying Victoria's glamorous excesses proved a political mistake. Conversely, Booth demonstrates that Victoria became a "role model" for female virtue only when writers downplayed her power and the narrative interest of her life story; for Watson, the Victorian denigration of Elizabeth I's sexual and political aggressiveness provided reassurance about their own queen's unthreatening virtues. For Weltman, by contrast, the power of domestic women is enhanced by their assimilation to a queen regnant. Two chapters – those by Langland and Winston – focus on her exemplary or oppressive whiteness, her imperial imposture as an Anglo-Saxon ethnic model. "As icon of empire," writes Winston, "Victoria comes to represent in twentieth-century literature both colonialism's excesses and the powers and limits of colonial representation."

Perhaps nowhere more vividly does Queen Victoria's influence live on than in the current English monarchy. The Victorian Queen haunts the English royal imagination; she has long shaped the idea of how good queens behave. According to their various dispositions, different members of the House of Windsor follow precedents set by Victoria. Consciously and unconsciously they pay her homage. Elizabeth II, Queen Victoria's great-great-granddaughter, seems at least partly conscious of her identification with her progenitor. The film honoring her fortieth year on the throne features her showing a visitor a page from Queen Victoria's journal. The explicit reference to Victoria brings to the fore what the entire film demonstrates: that Elizabeth's royal persona draws upon Victoria's methods of being a queen, from its carefully

managed public appearances to its insistence upon the monarchy as an articulator of moral values. Elizabeth sets an example to her people by her restrained, moral behavior and her visiting of philanthropic institutions: hospitals, retirement homes, and orphanages. Projecting an image as asexual as Queen Victoria, Elizabeth II seems respectable by virtue of her always sensible shoes, her matronly handbag, and her seeming imperviousness to the winds of fashion.

By the end of her reign, Queen Victoria had become a shorthand for the firm virtues named for her age: family values, integrity of one's word, and earnest disapproval of levity. Considering her son irresponsible, she refused to give up the throne to him. Like Elizabeth II, she experienced trouble with her children's sexual escapades. Of her four sons, two, Edward Albert (Bertie), Prince of Wales, and Alfred (Affie) posed the most flamboyant problems. Bertie's taste for a fast set and for womanizing kept him in the public eye. "Beware of London and Marlborough House," Victoria warned her granddaughter, Princess Victoria of Hesse, about the houses where the Prince of Wales entertained what came to be known notoriously as "the Marlborough House set" (Victoria 1985: 282; 22 August 1883). The lesser-known Prince Alfred, without the charm but with the vices of his older brother, caused Victoria despair. Even the prospect of marriage to a good woman might not rein him in, she thought: "I wrote to him that I hoped and prayed he felt the very solemn and serious step he was going to take, how I prayed he would make the dear, amiable, young girl . . . happy and that she alone must have his heart and love – and all old habits must be given up. But he has said nothing in return! Oh if he only does break with old habits! It would be awful if he did not" (Victoria 1985: 234; November 13, 1873, to the Crown Princess of Prussia). Much like her descendant, Victoria found that her children did not follow in her virtuous footsteps: "You will find as the children grow up that as a rule children are a bitter disappointment – their greatest object being to do precisely what their parents do not wish and have anxiously tried to prevent" (Victoria 1985: 241; December 29, 1875, to the Crown Princess of Prussia). As if the two queens' own sexuality were transferred to their offspring, what seemed repressed in themselves returned in their children. Malcolm Potts and William Potts argue that Victoria was a bastard, fathered with the complicity of the Duke of Kent who knew that he was sterile and wished to produce an heir to the throne by any means. Apart from the story's possible interest to history, its journalistic coverage assimilates earlier royal behavior to tabloid reportage about the House of Windsor.



Despite their spectacular failure to live up to the model of marital felicity provided by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert's marriage, Diana, Princess of Wales, and Sarah, Duchess of York, nonetheless have included ingredients of Victoria's own recipes for royalty into their self-presentations. If Princess Diana cannot follow Victoria in her marital bliss, she can effectively portray herself as one who cares for ordinary people. A 1995 press release reported that the Princess sneaks out of her apartment in Kensington Palace (where Princess Victoria spent her childhood) disguised in jeans and a baseball cap to visit the seriously ill in nearby hospitals. Queen Victoria was often represented visiting wounded soldiers in Netley Hospital and sick cottagers in the Highlands. "I always feel drawn to the sick-bed of anyone, to be of use and comfort," Princess Diana's Victorian model confided to her Uncle Leopold, king of the Belgians, only a few years after the death of her husband (Victoria 1985: 189; 8 June 1865). Allowing for the slippage of time, Princess Diana's changed marital status allows her, also, to claim special connections to the unfortunate as she seems to echo Victoria in her words to a reporter: "There are hundreds of patients who are there without their own loved ones and need a human presence. I really love helping. I seem to draw strength from them" (*Newsday*, December 1995).

More surprisingly because more paradoxical, the Duchess of York claims a "psychic link" to Queen Victoria. Before the scandals that eventually led to her marital separation the Duchess coauthored a book, *Victoria and Albert: a Family Life at Osborne House*, because she was drawn to the Victorian royal family's intimate home life. Victoria represents more to the Duchess of York than simply the matriarch of a happy family. She believes that Victoria guided her while she researched for her book, *Travels with Queen Victoria*. "Several times she stopped to sketch a scene, only to discover the Queen had been there before. Once she impulsively detoured from her route to visit some villages – and found the Queen had done the same." From reading the Queen's diaries after her trip, the Duchess "realised obviously Queen Victoria wanted to show me where they had stopped." Like Princess Diana, the Duchess of York finds her imitation of Victoria therapeutic; and, after reading aloud the Queen's diaries, "in my Queen Victoria voice," she has fallen for her familiar: "I adore her," she confesses. "I think she's got this huge strength, this great will and yet this soft romantic side" (*International Express*, October 6, 1993: 2).

Victoria stood for the uprightness Princess Diana and the Duchess of York adopt, a trait that was, for the Queen, physical as well as moral.

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“Promise me one thing, dear; don’t stoop when you sit and write, it is very bad for you now, and later it will make you remember how straight I always sit, which enables me to write without fatigue at all times” (Victoria 1985: 106; June 29, 1858, to Princess Frederick William). Yet she has also been held responsible for the ills suffered by the inheritors of her reign. In her role as matchmaker of the royalty of Europe, Queen Victoria was seen as spreading contagion: the hemophilia descending through the royal genes was traced to her. Because Victoria’s descendants populated the royal houses of Europe, the physical disease became a metaphor for a political one. Queen Victoria became the imagined cause of European disputes – between her grandson-in-law, Nicholas II, Tsar of Russia, and her grandson, Wilhelm II, Kaiser of Germany, for example. In addition, her imperialist sympathies became identified with the worst of British chauvinism. So powerfully has her image performed in its various theaters that she has been blamed for European – indeed for global – disorders. Queen Victoria’s legacies continue to inspire new contradictory formulations, new paradoxical myths.