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Queen Victoria's Constitutional Monarchy

Her Majesty Queen Victoria was born in 1819 and was barely 18 years old when she succeeded her uncle, King William IV, to the British Throne. The Victorian era was the name given to her nearly 64 year reign, which lasted from 1837 until 1901. It was the longest reign of any English or British Monarch in history, and it was possibly the greatest period of stability and progress that Britain* had ever known until the 20th century. During this era, the British Monarchy remained relatively secure in its foundations. This, however, was not the case for much of the rest of the world; republican sentiment was growing and many foreign monarchies were falling. Royalty from 14 different monarchies visited London for Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee in 1887, only four of which have survived to the modern day.¹ Britain largely remained a bastion of pro-monarchical sentiment in a world where the republican debate was becoming more and more prominent. Queen Victoria herself, along with the social, political and economic progress that was allowed to flourish under her Constitutional Monarchy, was an important factor contributing to this phenomenon. If not for her long reign, monarchism in Britain may not have been nearly as strong as it was at her death in

* When using the term 'Britain' I am not referring to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland; I am merely referring to the Island of Great Britain, which includes England, Scotland and Wales. In contrast with Britain, Ireland had a growing Republican movement during the reign of Her Majesty Queen Victoria. This was mainly due to Nationalistic sentiments which were the result of years of mistreatment to Ireland's Catholic population by the pro-English Protestant minority.

¹ "The Queen's Jubilee." *The Times* 20 Jun. 1887. *Debrett's Queen Victoria's Jubilees 1887 & 1897*. Ed. Caroline Chapman, Paul Raben. London: Debrett's Peerage Ltd., 1977.

1901, and the 16 Commonwealth Realms in existence today might have had a completely different history.

The British Monarchy, however, had not always enjoyed such widespread support among its people. It was widely acknowledged among British subjects that, with few exceptions, Queen Victoria's predecessors since the reign of Queen Elizabeth had been bad rulers who lacked moral character. The official biographer of Queen Victoria and King Edward VII, Sir Sidney Lee, even called her three most recent predecessors "an imbecile, a profligate and a buffoon."² In previous reigns, the House of Hanover had been ripe with sexual, financial and personal scandals, and at Queen Victoria's accession the popularity of the Monarchy was low and republican sentiment was increasing. As the popular Victorian writer, Charlotte M. Yonge, said of her accession:

Afterwards she went to St. James's Palace to show herself at the window while proclamation of her accession was made by the heralds, but there were no great acclamations, and she was observed to look pale. Loyalty had been a good deal trifled away by the two latter kings, and she had to win it back again.³

And win it back again she did. By the end of her reign Queen Victoria had become the most popular Monarch since Queen Elizabeth I, as well as one of the best known people in the world. Frank Hardie writes that "in 1901 it [republicanism] not only ceased to be a faith, but had once again become a heresy."⁴ The following journal entry by Queen

² Tingsten, Herbert. Victoria and the Victorians. Trans. and Ed. David Grey, Eva Leckström Grey. England: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1972, p. 73

³ Yonge, Charlotte M. The Victorian Half Century: A Jubilee Book. London: MacMillan and co., 1887, p. 5

⁴ Hardie, Frank. The Political Influence of Queen Victoria. London: Oxford University Press, 1935, p. 219

Victoria during the Golden Jubilee illustrates the incredible difference 50 years had made in the popular support for the Monarchy:

No one ever, I believe, has met with such an ovation as was given to me, passing through those six miles of streets... the crowds were quite indescribable, and their enthusiasm truly marvellous and deeply touching. The cheering was quite deafening and every face seemed to be filled with real joy... [22 June 1987]⁵

Queen Victoria's accession marked the turning point in the perception of the Monarchy among British subjects. Up until that time, the popular assessment of the Royal Family had been one of "general moral squalor,"⁶ but from the moment of her accession onwards, a change began to take place in the manner in which royalty was spoken of in Britain. It was Queen Victoria's conduct, in public and in private life, which was the main cause of this change.⁷ There was, however, an exception to this trend which must be mentioned. In 1861, Queen Victoria's husband, Prince Albert, died of typhoid fever, and his devastated wife entered a state of mourning in which she wore black for the rest of her life. She also began a long period of self-imposed seclusion in which she continued her official duties, but stayed away from most public appearances. After the Prince Consort's death, Queen Victoria expressed her strong sense of duty "in an aloof and private performance with no audience to encourage and appreciate,"⁸ and this long withdrawal from public life fostered criticism and encouraged the growth of

⁵ Tingsten. Victoria and the Victorians, p. 71

⁶ Ibid., 73

⁷ "The Queen's Jubilee." Debrett's Queen Victoria's Jubilees 1887 & 1897.

⁸ Caroline Chapman, Paul Raben, ed. Debrett's Queen Victoria's Jubilees 1887 & 1897. London: Debrett's Peerage Ltd., 1977.

republicanism in Britain.⁹ Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee, however, almost single-handedly wiped out the republican sentiment which had been allowed to cultivate during her seclusion. Forced to face the world once more, her subjects confirmed their love for their Queen through immense demonstrations of loyalty, and when the Jubilee was over, she never again reverted to her former isolation.¹⁰ As H. B. Brooks-Baker writes:

Queen Victoria's subjects were also immensely loyal to her, not only because of their love and admiration for the monarch, but because the mystique of the crown had mesmerised them. When she returned to the Palace after her last Jubilee, she was choked with emotion by the demonstrations of loyalty manifested by her loving subjects. The success of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee would be remembered for ever. The Queen recognised that the republicanism which was rampant before 1887 had vanished for ever.¹¹

In 1897, one of Queen Victoria's subjects, Charles Bullock, B.D., writes that "Queen Victoria has remained the central, the most prominent, and permanent figure gathering to her, as the years passed, more and more of the loyalty and affection of the people over whom she rules."¹² This increasing trend of pro-monarchical sentiments from the beginning to the end of Queen Victoria's reign can largely be attributed to the Queen's personal character. As was stated above, Queen Victoria was deemed by her subjects to be of a more scrupulous moral fibre than that of her predecessors. While the

⁹ Tingsten. Victoria and the Victorians, p. 71-72

¹⁰ Chapman, Raben. Debrett's Queen Victoria's Jubilees 1887 & 1897.

¹¹ Brooks-Baker, H. B. "Forword." Debrett's Queen Victoria's Jubilees 1887 & 1897. Ed. Caroline Chapman, Paul Raben. London: Debrett's Peerage Ltd., 1977.

¹² Bullock, Charles, B.D. The Queen's Resolve: "I will be Good" and her "Doubly Royal" Reign: A Gift for "the Queen's Year". London: "Home Words" Publishing Office, 1897, p. 16

previous Kings had been considered licentious, deceitful or shift¹³ Queen Victoria was viewed as their polar opposite. Charlotte M. Yonge praises the Queen in her book, “The Victorian Half Century,” writing:

May we be thankful that through this critical period, when every throne around us has been shaken, and many overthrown, that we should have been blessed with a Sovereign whose personal character commands not only loyalty, but love and reverence, whose heart beats for all that is high and noble, who sympathises with all suffering, guides all wholesome effort, and discourages all that is foul or cruel.¹⁴

But it was not only her perceived superior moral fibre that produced the admiration in her subjects; it was also the Queen’s extreme sense of duty. An article, written in 1900, and featuring in *The Cosmopolitan*, expresses this sense of duty nicely, stating that “Her Majesty... has taken a far closer, keener, more continuous interest in the government of her empire than any of her Ministers.”¹⁵ And the *Times* writes, in 1887, that from the moment of her accession onwards “the Queen has been deeply impressed with the responsibilities of power, and has held her sovereignty to be a sacred trust for the benefit of the peoples under her rule.”¹⁶

Queen Victoria’s sense of morals and duty were important in the resurgence of the pro-monarchical sentiment that had dissipated under the rule of her predecessors. This personal character, when combined with the incredible length of her reign, helped her to

¹³ Tingsten. *Victoria and the Victorians*, p. 73

¹⁴ Yonge. *The Victorian Half Century: A Jubilee Book*, p. 114

¹⁵ Stead, William T. “What Kind of Sovereign is Queen Victoria?” *The Cosmopolitan* (1900): 207-216. *Empire Online*. 18 Nov. 2007 <<http://www.empire.amdigital.co.uk.ezproxy.lib.ucalgary.ca/contents/document-detail.aspx?sectionid=367>>, p. 2

¹⁶ “The Queen’s Jubilee.” *Debrett’s Queen Victoria’s Jubilees 1887 & 1897*.

become a living institution representing the glory and superiority of the British Empire. At the time of her accession, public support for the Monarchy was dwindling, but 60 years on, during her Diamond Jubilee, Queen Victoria had become the most significant symbol of Imperial unity in the British Empire.¹⁷ As Herbert Tingsten puts it in his book, “Victoria and the Victorians”:

There were few among the thousands sharing in the rejoicing of 1897 who had not beheld the Queen for the better part of their lives as an enduring symbol of Empire, indeed, most of them had been born during her reign. Other public figures had shone for a while and then vanished, but the Queen lived on, the object from year to year of constant publicity, with the Court Circular and the newspapers announcing daily what she did and whom she received.¹⁸

It was only natural for Queen Victoria to be associated with her Empire in this way. By the time of her second Jubilee, few people in Britain, or indeed the world, could remember a time in which Queen Victoria had not reigned as Queen, and much of the Empire itself had been acquired after she ascended the throne. Eighteen territories in all, a quarter of the people in the world, and nearly a quarter of the land mass were under her rule. The Jubilee celebrations of 1897 were not merely celebrating the 60th year of Queen Victoria’s reign; they were, in reality, a demonstration of the might and importance of the British Empire.¹⁹ The Queen’s constant reign had transformed the Monarchy into the living embodiment of the British Empire; it was impossible for the people to take pride in one without the other. As the Times put it, “everybody feels that the Queen is something

¹⁷ Brooks-Baker. “Forword.” Debrett’s Queen Victoria’s Jubilees 1887 & 1897.

¹⁸ Tingsten. Victoria and the Victorians, p. 72

¹⁹ Brooks-Baker. “Forword.” Debrett’s Queen Victoria’s Jubilees 1887 & 1897.

unique, something extraordinary, something of which all the world envies us the possession; and the multitude exults in possessing it.”²⁰

Under Queen Victoria the Monarchy had become a National and Imperial symbol, but the symbolic nature of her reign was not the only reason for the popularity of the Monarchy in Britain. Absolute monarchy had been absent in Britain for many years, but at the time of Queen Victoria’s accession, constitutional monarchy was still in the process of evolving into what it has become today. By the end of her reign, however, it was widely believed by her common subjects, as well as by many politicians, that until Queen Victoria, “no constitutional Monarch [had] shown a more consistent respect for popular liberties or a clearer conception of royal duties.”²¹ The Times writes that:

At the very outset, Her Majesty grasped the true idea of her constitutional position, and from that position she has never swerved. Her work has been neither to initiate movements nor to resist them, but to moderate them. In her relations with her Ministers she has always maintained, and never overstepped, her constitutional rights; and her extraordinary knowledge of precedents—for her memory is as remarkable as her experience is long—has always given her a great advantage in any discussion.²²

Many of her subjects viewed her like a mother to the people, “ready to do her people’s will when that will has been good,” but restraining them “from committing great follies and mistakes.”²³ Politicians might come and go, but it was the Monarch who remained

²⁰ “The Diamond Jubilee.” *The Times* 22 Jun. 1897. *Debrett’s Queen Victoria’s Jubilees 1887 & 1897*. Ed. Caroline Chapman, Paul Raben. London: Debrett’s Peerage Ltd., 1977.

²¹ “The Queen’s Jubilee.” *Debrett’s Queen Victoria’s Jubilees 1887 & 1897*.

²² “The Diamond Jubilee.” *Debrett’s Queen Victoria’s Jubilees 1887 & 1897*.

²³ “The Triumph of Monarchy.” *Vanity Fair*. 24 Jun. 1897. *Debrett’s Queen Victoria’s Jubilees 1887 & 1897*. Ed. Caroline Chapman, Paul Raben. London: Debrett’s Peerage Ltd., 1977.

the permanent guardian of Britain's constitution.²⁴ One contemporary writer at the time compared Queen Victoria's role as Monarch to the role of the editor-in-chief of a newspaper, writing that:

When the staff (as sometimes happens) differ among themselves, she can, and usually does, exercise the casting vote. In the times of political interregnum, while the nation is engaged in changing the temporary staff, she takes the whole control of the paper, and carries it on till her new assistant is appointed. Such an analogy at least enables us to form some idea of the immensely important part which the Queen had played in the government and development of the British Empire since she came to the throne.²⁵

In other words, Queen Victoria's role was believed to be of crucial constitutional importance. If a Prime Minister died or retired, or if no political party possessed an overall majority in the House of Commons, most politicians believed that an individual who was above party politics was required to arrange the consultations that might lead to a workable ministry.²⁶ Her life-long position as Monarch also gave Queen Victoria incredible insight and experience, giving her the ability to counsel and persuade her Ministers in affairs of state.²⁷ A letter written to the Queen in 1874 by her Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli, exemplifies the important role that she was believed to play in the government:

Your Majesty has, sometimes, deigned to assist Mr Disraeli with your counsel, and he believes he may presume to say, with respectful candour, that your Majesty cannot but be

²⁴ Arnstein, Walter L. Queen Victoria. New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003, p. 135

²⁵ Stead. "What Kind of Sovereign is Queen Victoria?" The Cosmopolitan, p. 3

²⁶ Arnstein. Queen Victoria, p. 204

²⁷ Stead. "What Kind of Sovereign is Queen Victoria?" The Cosmopolitan, p. 1

aware of how highly Mr Disraeli appreciates your Majesty's judgment and almost unrivalled experience of public life.²⁸

It is undoubtedly true that Queen Victoria played a significant role in many of the political decisions of her day. Even if some of her subjects were not entirely happy with her interventions, most of them were willing to maintain the status quo, as no alternative form of government seemed appealing. Obviously there was no going back to the absolute monarchy of the past, and the other alternative, the Republican Movement, was becoming less attractive every day. A stable constitutional monarchy—and Britain's government was stable; there had been no constitutional crisis worth mentioning during the whole of Queen Victoria's 63 year reign²⁹—was considered by many to be superior to a republic. Ever since the establishment of the French First Republic in 1792, France had become the epitome of governmental instability, systematically alternating between republic, empire and monarchy for most of the 19th century. The other large republic of the times was the United States of America, which was engaged in a bloody Civil War between 1861 and 1865. The republics of South America were shown to be even less stable. Queen Victoria and the Monarchy, on the other hand, lived on as a symbol of Britain's permanent institutions. Politicians might come and go, but the Queen was the symbol of the state and its long and glorious history.³⁰ As Frank Hardie said, "it is now fairly easy to see why this Republican movement came to nothing. At that time the first

²⁸ Arnstein. Queen Victoria, p. 139

²⁹ Tingsten. Victoria and the Victorians, p. 124

³⁰ Arnstein. Queen Victoria, p. 205

French Revolution still spread alarm among conservatively minded people in the same way as the Russian Revolution to-day.”³¹

Under Queen Victoria’s rule, Britain’s Constitutional Monarchy was allowed to evolve and flourish into the political system shared by the Commonwealth Realms today. This stable government helped foster political, economic and social gains that were unrivalled anywhere else in Europe, if not the world. During her long reign there had been progress in almost every field; democratic government had increased, and the standard of living among Queen Victoria’s subjects had risen. Charles Bullock, B.D. mentions some of these reforms in “The Queen’s Resolve”:

Political changes are almost impossible to chronicle. When the Queen came to the throne the first Reform Bill was only five years old. It was thirty years before the borough householder was enfranchised, and the complete enfranchisement of the county householder is now an accomplished fact. The Corn Laws have been abolished, Free Trade has been established, our financial system reorganised, and, greatest and most beneficial change of all, education has been made universal.³²

Queen Victoria’s reign had been one of unequalled achievements, and her subjects had little reason to be discontent. As Charlotte M. Yonge says, “the Victorian era will be remembered as a period of great progress in all respects. Perhaps no fifty years in the whole history of the world has produced such changes, affecting all classes in their domestic life and prosperity.”³³

³¹ Hardie. The Political Influence of Queen Victoria, p. 219-220

³² Bullock. The Queen’s Resolve: “I will be Good” and her “Doubly Royal” Reign: A Gift for “the Queen’s Year”, p. 175

³³ Yonge. The Victorian Half Century: A Jubilee Book, p. 113

The long reign of Queen Victoria had not only played an integral role in fostering the pro-monarchical attitude of her subjects, but it has helped to preserve the popularity of the future British Monarchy in the 20th century. The Queen's exceptional character had helped to redeem the reputation of the Royal Family after it had been trifled away by her predecessors, and her long reign had transformed her into the living embodiment of the British Empire. Under Queen Victoria's rule constitutional monarchy had evolved into what it has become today, allowing democracy and a higher standard of living to flourish. The Victorian era had been one of tremendous progress, and by the time of Queen Victoria's death in 1901, there was no republican movement of any significance anywhere in Britain. Queen Victoria's subjects had learned to love the Monarchy while she reigned, and this did not stop upon her death. Tingsten writes that:

The personal devotion inspired by Queen Victoria in her subjects can be more fully understood by comparing it with the similar, though less fervently expressed popularity of her successors to the throne. As if some of the Queen's own popularity had rubbed off on her descendants, those of them who have reigned in the twentieth century have been accorded their own share of loyal admiration and homage at their accessions, coronations and jubilees.³⁴

Queen Victoria's influence has continued to live on long after her death, with all of her successors[†] enjoying widespread support in Britain, not to mention in many of the Dominions. Even today, the sense of duty and moral character which marked her reign is

³⁴ Tingsten. Victoria and the Victorians, p. 72

[†] This includes His Majesty King Edward VIII. He enjoyed widespread popularity upon his accession to the Throne, but was forced to abdicate less than a year into his reign due to opposition to his proposed marriage to the American divorcee, Wallis Simpson. He abdicated in favour of his brother, His Majesty King George VI, who remained popular throughout his reign.

appreciated, with Tingsten saying that the current Monarch, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, “seemed a sort of reincarnation of her great-grandmother as a young woman and a reminder that the figure of Queen Victoria is still at the heart of the persisting English liking for royalty.”³⁵ If not for the incredible reign of Queen Victoria, the monarchist cause would not have been in nearly as good a standing as it was at the beginning of the 20th century, nor as it currently is, at the beginning of the 21st century.

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³⁵ Tingsten. Victoria and the Victorians, p. 73