

Queen Victoria's German Prince Charming

The Uncrowned King: The Life of Prince Albert

Stanley Weintraub
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REVIEWED BY
Florence King

"The stud farm of Europe" was Bismarck's name for the Duchy of Saxe-Coburg. One of many independent states in the patchwork quilt of the German Confederation, it was *the* place for royalty with marriageable daughters to shop for willing and able princelings to carry on the line.

The greatest coup in the history of this one-export Ruritania was the marriage in 1840 of Prince Albert, younger son of the reigning duke, and England's Queen Victoria. They were first cousins; his father and her mother were brother and sister. DNA aside, they had little in common; at their first meeting in 1836 the only discernible chemistry between them was metabolic. Victoria, who loved to dance the night away and sleep until noon, "never saw the dawn but through a ballroom window," but Albert the early bird could not stay awake after ten and frequently nodded off at late suppers.

She had a hearty appetite; he picked at his food and had a weak stomach. She liked brisk English room temperatures and thought it a sign of weakness to light a fire; Albert was always cold. He was also a bookworm. Despite his good looks he displayed a "marked indifference to women" and abstained from the time-honored Teutonic tradition of student prancing while at the University of Bonn. To the amazement of classmates and professors alike, Albert preferred studying to wenching.

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The marriage of these two chaste 20-year-olds (both were born in 1819 but Victoria was three months older) inspired many a ribald joke, mostly at Albert's expense. "His virtue," said one wag, "was indeed appalling; not a single vice redeemed it." But virtue had the last laugh. That the young couple's lack of sexual experience did them no harm is evident from the Blue Lagoon sweetness of Victoria's diary entry for their wedding night: "When day dawned (for we did not sleep much) and I beheld that beautiful angelic face by my side, it was more than I can express! He does look so beautiful in his shirt only, with his beautiful throat seen.... Never did I think I could be so loved."

During their honeymoon at Windsor Castle, the couple were seen taking an early-morning walk, prompting Lord Greville to tell Lady Palmerston, "This is not the way to provide us with a Prince of Wales." He didn't reckon with the Saxe-Coburg sperm count. Nine months later Victoria gave birth to the first of nine children (four boys and five girls), but the real augury of the marital dominance Albert would achieve is that walk: He got her up.

Stanley Weintraub's earlier biography, *Victoria*, follows the queen to the end of her long life when she had become a grand old lady who "wrapped the nation in her warm Scotch shawl," so beloved that even London's prostitutes wore black when she died. In his new biography of her husband, he is limited to the younger Victoria, who was often less than lovable and occasionally a hysterical shrew. To keep her from dominating the book, Weintraub had to do what Albert himself had to do and put her firmly in her place. Both of them succeeded. *The Uncrowned King* is a concentrated look at a man of astonishing intellect and ability that gives Albert his long-overdue place on center stage and offers proof on every page that England, at least, got two for the price of one.

Albert got off to a bad start. The English people were sick of foreigners, having endured German sovereigns since 1714 when Queen Anne, the last of the Stuarts, died childless and the Crown went to her distant cousin, the Elector of Hanover who became George I. The first George never learned English; Albert did, but he never lost his heavy German accent, and the news that he and Victoria always spoke German together did not please.

Nor was he popular with the powerful, except for the wrong reasons. Victoria's ministers, jealous of their influence over her, welcomed the unthreatening youth but refused to do anything to enhance his status, including giving him a title. As for useful work, his job was to sire the Succession, nothing more.

They did not bargain on Albert's extraordinary conscientiousness. Like all members of the royal family, he was given honorary chairmanships and invited to lend his name to committees, but unlike them, he actually went to the meetings. The Association for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, the Association for Relief of the Poor, the Committee to Redecorate the Houses of Parliament, Sponsors of the Boys' Mechanical Institute, every Royal Society for this or that—wherever improvers gathered, Albert was there; taking notes, asking questions, listening and learning.

It was while he was at one of these meetings that he received a message saying, "The Queen desires HRH to return to Buckingham Palace." Albert ignored it. A little while later came another that said, "The Queen awaits HRH..." Still he ignored it. Finally, there came a third message: "The Queen commands HRH..." Knowing that Victoria simply wanted him home, Albert ignored this one as well and spent the night—alone—at another royal residence. His refusal to be "managed" won the respect of male members of Victoria's court, who knew her imperious ways.

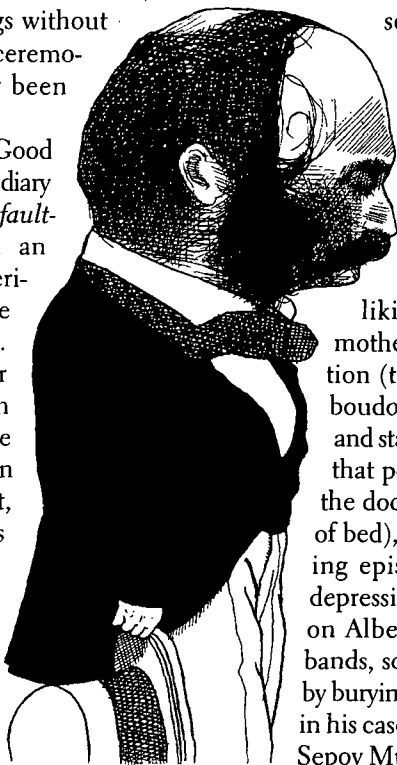
Albert followed up on what he learned, researching topics with a Germanic thoroughness that flattered and impressed his audiences, leading an awed glass manufacturer to exclaim, "Why, he knows more about glass than I do." The aristocracy, less impressed, saw in Albert what a later age would call a geek. "Almost the only

time the Prince came alive at dinner," writes Weintraub, "was when he could discuss problems of drainage and heating."

Albert's consuming interest in science and industry dragged England into the nineteenth century. Made an honorary chancellor of Cambridge, where Latin and Greek were sacrosanct and a professor of Oriental languages lectured in Sanskrit, he moved higher education into the "ungentlemanly" areas of applied science and engineering. Whenever he encountered an antiquated practice that offended his methodical mind—a frequent occurrence—he urged change. Learning that all of Britain's screws were made by hand in a quaint Yorkshire workshop, he imported an American screw-making machine. This and many other mechanical innovations were displayed in 1851 at the Great Exhibition, a living museum of modern industry conceived and designed by Albert, which became the inspiration for the World's Fair.

Having by now earned the trust of Victoria's ministers, he read state papers, drafted her replies, and sat in on audiences, taking notes which he labeled and filed in his meticulous fashion. He even read and clipped the newspapers for her. All this on top of his continuing round of committees, societies, and associations, and cornerstone layings without end (his collection of ceremonial trowels has never been equaled).

This was Albert the Good of Victoria's italic-strewn diary ("Dear, dear Albert, so faultless, so perfect, such an angel!"), but though serious and responsible, he was never a bluenose. The prudishness for which he has been blamed was actually the work of the Wesleyan Methodist movement, which, Weintraub points out, saw his "foreign" influence in every pleasure. When he approved free Sunday concerts by military bands, "Leaders of the movement for strict



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Sabbath observance were outraged that the working classes might be drawn away from prayer, and promoters of penitential Sundays also objected to the bands as a German sacrilege introduced by Prince Albert."

Albert himself was an organist whose playing, said Felix Mendelssohn, "would have done credit to any professional." (During this private recital some sheets of music fell to the floor and were picked up by Victoria.)

He could be quite witty, especially at the expense of the English who criticized him. In a letter to his brother he wrote: "Sentimentality is a plant which cannot grow in England, and an Englishman, when he finds he is being sentimental, becomes frightened at the idea, as of having a dangerous illness, and he shoots himself."

His married life was subject to the extremes of Victoria's nervous system. Disliking everything about

motherhood except conception (the couple filled their boudoir with nude paintings and statuary and had a device that permitted them to lock the doors without getting out of bed), she suffered frightening episodes of post-partum depression which she took out on Albert, who, like all husbands, sought peace and quiet by burying himself in his work—in his case, the settlement of the Sepoy Mutiny.

By 1860, when he addressed the fourth International Statistical Congress, his life resembled an eternal C-Span gig. Though only 41, he looked like an old man, and his stomach trouble worsened. Nonetheless, he found time to tutor his oldest and favorite child, the Princess Royal Victoria ("Vicky"), who alone of all his progeny had inherited his brilliant mind and answered his deep need for intellectual companionship at a time when Victoria, worn out from childbearing, expected him to read *Jane Eyre* to her. On top of this, it also fell to Albert to explain the facts of life to another daughter before her betrothal when Victoria sidestepped the duty herself ("Papa told her all," she noted in a letter).

The following year he collapsed as England faced a *casus belli*: the seizure of HMS *Trent* by the USS *San Jacinto* and the forcible removal of two Confederate envoys from the British vessel. Dragging himself literally from his deathbed, Albert defied the jingoistic politicians and found the perfect diplomatic loophole to prevent England from entering the American Civil War on the side of the Confederacy.

The American captain had taken the Confederate envoys back to blockaded Norfolk and jailed them. Although this was technically impressive, enemy communications were proper contraband of war, and since the envoys were traveling with oral instructions only, they could be considered "the embodiment of dispatches." Moreover, the Americans did not take HMS *Trent* into port but allowed her to sail on, making the offense against the British flag illegal in form but not in substance.

Albert latched onto these mitigating circumstances and combined them with common sense: Surely, he pointed out, no country that had just split in half would deliberately add to its troubles by provoking a war with England. In his letter to Secretary of State Seward he said that HM's Government was unwilling to believe that this could be the case, and felt that the American naval commander had acted on his own rather than on official orders, in which case HM's Government would accept "the restoration of the unfortunate passengers and a suitable apology."

The letter, dated December 1, 1861, was a masterpiece of diplomacy that let the

Lincoln government off the hook and saved face all around. "This draft was the last the beloved Prince ever wrote," Victoria noted in the margin. On December 14 he died.

Weintraub argues convincingly that Albert died of the kind of stomach cancer that starts with ulcers—he was a classic ulcer type—not from the long-assumed typhoid, and certainly not from a chill caught while lecturing the erring Prince of Wales on prostitutes (Victoria's theory).

Victoria survived him by thirty-nine years. At first she slept clutching his night-shirt; later she mourned him by insisting that all future male successors to the Throne bear "Albert" as one of their

names. All did, but none, Weintraub reminds us, dared rule under it. "They recognized the risks. The Prince's vision for the modern monarchy died with him. It could not have been sustained without his intellectual qualities and his intensity of purpose, and he left no such potential in his spouse or progeny."

The Uncrowned King is one of those rare books that thoroughly justifies its title. As Disraeli said in his eulogy: "With Prince Albert we have buried our Sovereign. This German Prince has governed England for twenty-one years with a wisdom and energy such as none of our Kings have ever shown." ❀

the Articles, it was obviously in for some rough sledding. Just how rough became apparent in Massachusetts, whose ratifying convention was deadlocked between Federalists and Anti-Federalists. The Anti-Federalists, fearful that the new, more powerful government created in Philadelphia posed a threat to liberty, demanded a "bill of rights" (the term was already widespread at the time), protecting states' powers and limiting congressional powers, as a condition for ratification; the Federalists called for unconditional ratification.

According to Goldwin, what motivated most of the Massachusetts Anti-Federalists "was not an objection to this or that part of the text of the Constitution, but rather suspicion on the part of the poor, the debtors, the less well-educated that the campaign to impose this new plan of government was part of a plot against them.... They did not trust a system produced by the educated, the rich, the successful, the powerful."

They did, however, trust their governor, John Hancock. Elected to the convention as a "neutral" on the question of ratification, Hancock devised the breakthrough that broke the stalemate. He agreed to the Federalist demand for unconditional ratification of the Constitution, but he simultaneously demanded that the first Congress to be elected under the newly ratified Constitution enact a series of radical amendments that would return power to the states, as demanded by the Anti-Federalists. The Massachusetts formula—ratify now, amend later—was adopted by other state conventions as well and saved the Constitution from almost certain defeat.

As the new Constitution was making its tortuous way through the state ratifying conventions, James Madison, one of the leading Federalists, was busily corresponding with his dear friend, Thomas Jefferson, then serving as America's minister to France. Jefferson had horrified Madison by declaring that the Constitution still needed amending—precisely what the Anti-Federalists were claiming! "A bill of rights is what people are entitled to against every government on earth," Jefferson insisted, and while Jefferson's proposed amendments did not stress states' rights as strongly as Anti-Federalist proposals did, both

Why Madison Flip-Flopped

From Parchment to Power: How James Madison Used the Bill of Rights to Save the Constitution

Robert A. Goldwin

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REVIEWED BY
Joseph Shattan

According to the eminent constitutional scholar, Robert A. Goldwin, James Madison is to the Bill of Rights what St. Paul is to Christianity: an early opponent who underwent a massive change of heart and became an impassioned supporter. Why Madison initially opposed amending the Constitution, and why he subsequently changed his mind and became known to posterity as the Father of the Bill of Rights, is the subject of Goldwin's elegant and enlightening study—the first, amazingly, to provide a narrative history of how and why the Bill of Rights was added to the Constitution.

Goldwin's story begins in Philadelphia in the summer of 1787. The delegates to the Constitutional Convention, after four months of intense deliberation, had just completed one of the most glorious achievements in the history of statecraft—

the American Constitution. But they faced an awkward problem. The Continental Congress, which had established the Constitutional Convention, merely authorized the delegates to amend the Articles of Confederation under which the United States had been ineffectively governed since 1781. It certainly gave them no warrant to scrap the Articles altogether and devise a new structure of government. Yet having done just that, the Convention now had to report back to the Congress, and win its members' support for a new constitution that would abolish their positions.

But the framers of the Constitution were up to the challenge. They simply ignored their mandate and steamrolled the Constitution through the Continental Congress. They were able to do so because, while the delegates to the Convention included some of the most illustrious names in America, members of Congress were for the most part time-serving non-entities. The "chief factor" in the compliance of Congress, writes Goldwin, "was its profound weakness relative to the vigor of the Constitutional Convention... Congress [collapsed] under pressure from a superior force."

Winning Congress's assent was only half the battle. The Constitution also had to be ratified by at least nine out of thirteen states, and since it deprived the states of many of the powers they enjoyed under

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