

A LIFE
of
EDWARD VII,
THE PLAYBOY
PRINCE

THE HEIR
APPARENT

— JANE RIDLEY —

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A LIFE OF EDWARD VII,
THE PLAYBOY PRINCE

Jane Ridley



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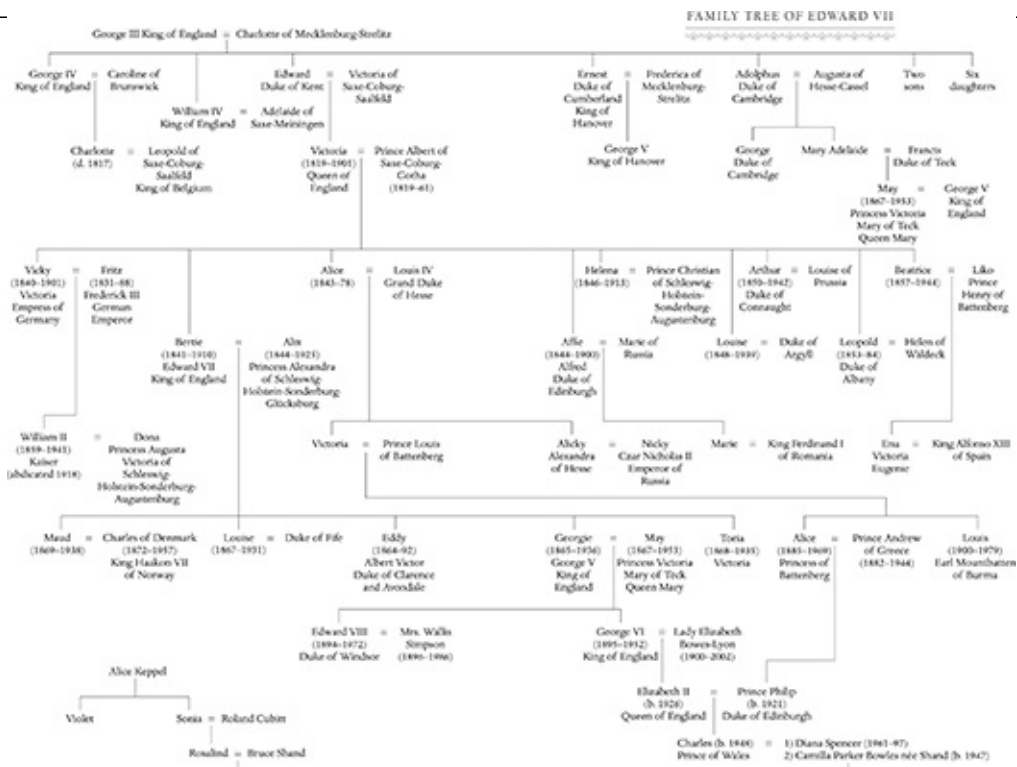
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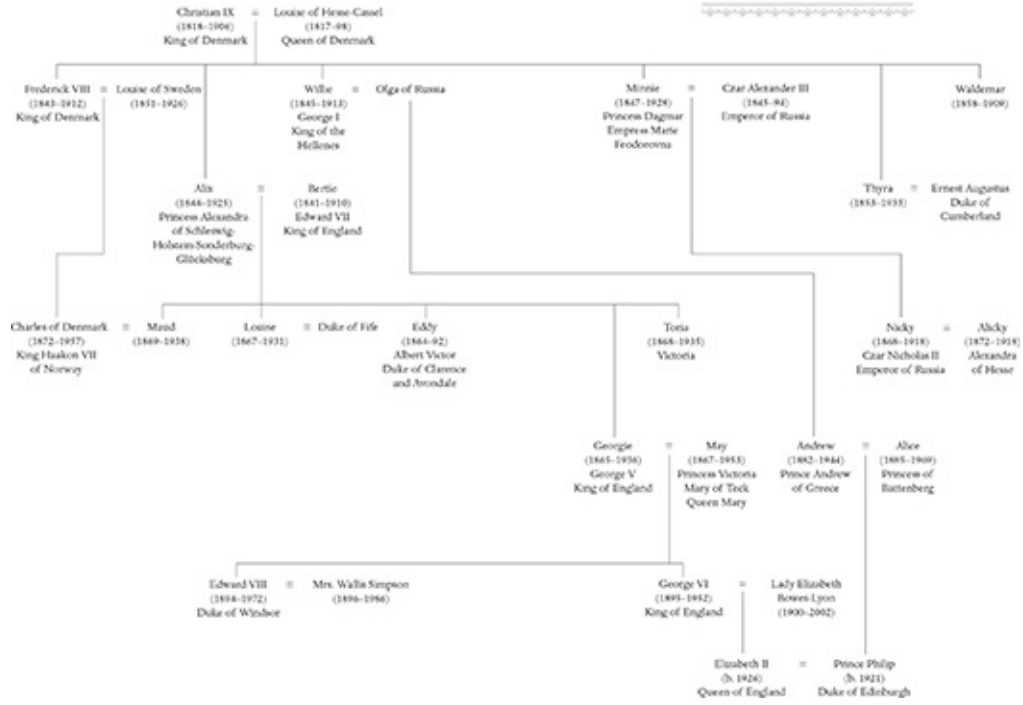
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FAMILY TREE OF ALEXANDRA



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The Eighty-Nine Steps

I began work on this book in 2003. My original idea was to write a short life of King Edward VII, looking at his relations with women: with his mother, Queen Victoria; with his sister with his wife, Queen Alexandra; and, of course, with his mistresses. But then, by gracious permission of Her Majesty the Queen, I was granted unrestricted access to the papers of King Edward VII in the Royal Archives.

This was an extraordinary privilege. I find it hard to convey a sense of the vast riches encountered in the archives at Windsor Castle. The first documents I saw concerned the Prince of Wales's childhood and education. Trolley loads of papers, meticulously catalogued and bound, gave a harrowing insight into an ambitious educational project that ended in a fiasco. Where else was the upbringing of a recalcitrant boy documented as if it were an affair of state? I was the first biographer to see the papers of Edward VII for almost fifty years—since Philip Magnus, who published in 1964. Many more papers have been added since. I realized very soon that I would need to write a full biography.

The research at Windsor took me more than five years. I don't mean that I went there every day—far from it; but whenever I could, I seized a research day. I caught the train from Paddington, changed at Slough, walked from Windsor station up to the castle, passed through security checks at the Henry VIII Gate, and climbed the eighty-nine steps to the top of the Round Tower, where the archives are housed. Windsor is quite unlike any other archive: researchers work in rooms of understated grandeur, the manuscripts are preordered, awaiting your arrival, and when the bell rings for coffee at eleven o'clock the guard changes to the stirring music of a military band in the Lower Ward outside. Arriving pale and haggard (I know this from the police security photographs), I would sink into a chair beside a cart which had been loaded with my ration of papers for the day. Like a caterpillar chewing a giant lettuce leaf, I set to work, reading through the mountain of documents and transcribing them onto my laptop. When I came across gold—as I often did—I would type like a frenzied exam candidate, racing against the time when the bell rang for closing.

I made the decision that I must call my subject Bertie. None of his contemporaries addressed him by the double name of Albert Edward, which he himself disliked. Previous biographers had referred to him respectfully as the Prince of Wales or King Edward, but I wanted to avoid the formality and distancing effect of royal titles. Calling him Bertie—as his family did—brought him closer in some ways, but at the same time gave him reality as a figure from history.

The many thousands of letters that I read from Queen Victoria to Bertie were a revelation. I found it astonishing—admirable, in a way—that Victoria never learned the courtly art of dissembling. Not for her the long pause, the polite request for more information. Whatever was on her mind she poured out in her emphatic, illegible scrawl. Her correspondence with her daughter Vicky reveals her as one of the best letter writers of the nineteenth century.

vivid, candid, and intensely human. Her letters to Bertie, by contrast, were often judgmental and framed in the imperative mood. Her anger leaped from the page, startling in its urgency even today.

Bertie's replies puzzled me. I have read thousands of his letters, and they are—mostly—prime examples of the masculine epistolary style sometimes known as British phlegm. He filled the page with small talk, padded out with comments on the weather or the health of acquaintances, and peppered his sentences with clichés enclosed in quotes. Little wonder that Victoria berated him for failing to enter into a vigorous and heartfelt exchange of opinion with her. There were times when I wondered whether the effort of deciphering the impenetrable loops of his grotesque calligraphy was worth the bathetic result. But then I realized that I was missing the point. For him, letter writing was a duty, not a means of self-expression; the aim was not to reveal, but to conceal, his true feelings.

So closely did Bertie guard his private life that, in his will, he ordered all his letters to be destroyed. No correspondence survives between him and his wife, Alexandra of Denmark. I wanted to place the marriage at the center of my story, but the hole in the archive seemed to make this impossible. My breakthrough came when I discovered that the National Archives of Denmark possessed three boxes of photocopies of letters written in Danish by Alix to her sister Dagmar. I booked a flight to Copenhagen and hired a translator. It was February, and I sat shivering beside my translator in the permafrost of the archive, typing as she read the fading photocopies and translated roughly out loud. Later, she worked systematically through the boxes, translating the letters that at last allowed me to see things from Alexandra's point of view.

The first phase of Bertie's life—up to the age of about thirty—has a strong story line provided by his stormy relationship with Queen Victoria and by his marriage. The second part—the thirty years until his accession aged fifty-nine, which I have called the Expanding Middle—was the hardest bit to write. A great deal is known about what he did—what time he took a train, whom he saw, how many pheasants he shot—but it is hard to find the heart of the genuine man who was Bertie. Then I hit upon the idea of going back to my original plan of trying to work out his inner life by looking at his relationships with women.

No letters from women are preserved among Bertie's papers, but many of his letters to women survive outside the Royal Archives.* These are typically polite and discreet; but their bland contents belie their subversive purposes. Consider the situation. Royal invitations were normally formal and formulaic, issued by equerries or private secretaries and composed in the third person. Here, however, the Prince of Wales wrote to a woman in his own hand, informally and in the first person. His purpose was often to make an appointment to see the woman alone, sometimes for tea—the *cinq à sept*—or for luncheon. Though they give so little away, Bertie's missives can be read as coded messages in a royal dance of courtly love. Some, but not all, of the women became his mistresses. But that did not necessarily mean that he slept with them. The word "mistress" should perhaps be understood in the sense, today archaic, of a woman who is admired, cosseted, and courted by a man, as well as in the modern meaning, which almost invariably implies a sexual relationship.

Queen Victoria deplored Bertie's habit of letter writing, and she had good cause to do so. Time after time it got him into trouble. Writing letters implied a degree of intimacy with a woman—usually a married woman—that most Victorians judged to be improper. Today the

relationships would be censured for a different reason: because they were unequal and often involved what we would see as an abuse of Bertie's power as Prince of Wales. Within Bertie's social set, it was almost impossible for a woman to resist his advances. Some of his early mistresses were destroyed by the experience.

Historians have written of the "feminization" of the monarchy under Queen Victoria, as domestic virtues and philanthropy replaced martial valor, and rulers were no longer expected to lead armies into battle. Bertie's womanizing signaled a vigorous protest against the bourgeois respectability of his parents. It made a statement about a certain type of masculinity that was entirely at odds with the gender politics of the Victorian court.

Bertie's affairs and flirtations depended upon compliant husbands. When the husbands rebelled—as Sir Charles Mordaunt did in 1870, or Lord Randolph Churchill over the Aylesford affair or, later, Lord Charles Beresford—a scandal ensued. It was the men of Bertie's circle—the so-called Marlborough House Set—who caused the crises which punctuated his life as Prince of Wales: the Mordaunt divorce, the Aylesford scandal, the Tranby Croft case, and the Beresford scandal. But what drove these men to come out in opposition to the prince was his predatory behavior toward their wives or mistresses. The functioning of Bertie's court as Prince of Wales can be understood only by exploring his links with women. To a remarkable extent, women—mistresses—are central to the dynamics of Marlborough House.

As a young man, Bertie was not always likable. I found it hard to warm to a prince who blatantly cheated on his wife and ruthlessly discarded his mistresses—even though the explanation for his behavior can be found in the unhappiness and loneliness of his loveless childhood. As Bertie reached middle age, however, he did something that is quite difficult for a royal to do, a thing that Alexandra never fully achieved: He grew up. My affection grew for this man condemned to a lifetime of indulgence and political impotence while he waited for his mother to die.

He continued to be unfaithful, but the pattern of the relationships changed. These late love affairs mattered to him; he cared more. But the evidence is elusive. I knew that Daisy Warwick was central to his life in the 1890s, but all the letters seemed to have been destroyed, leaving a silence that I was unable to penetrate. Fortunately, Daisy possessed a strong sense of her historical importance and—having quarreled with the court—a motive for telling her story. It turned out that she had defied royal commands and kept copies of some of Bertie's letters. My eureka moment came when I discovered in Bertie's diary the code he used to record their frequent assignations, enabling me to reconstruct the intensity of the relationship. Alice Keppel, his last mistress, was both more public and more discreet. She enjoyed a quasi-official status as the King's *favorita*, but the correspondence that passed between them was almost all destroyed. Unlike Daisy the Babbling Brooke, Alice Keppel stayed silent, and to this day the details of her physical relationship with Bertie—if, indeed, it was physical—remain an enigma.

By September 2008, I had almost completed my research on Bertie's years as Prince of Wales and I had written a draft of his life up to 1901. I planned only a brief concluding chapter on his life as king. I was late for my publisher's deadline, which had originally been set as 2009. When I think about the story of this book I am humbled by the patience of my long-suffering

publishers, Chatto, and especially by the support I have received from my editor, Penelope Hoare. The faith of my American publisher, Susannah Porter of Random House, has also amazed me. I was contracted to write seventy thousand words, but by late 2008 the manuscript had already grown to twice that length: Inside the thin book there was a fat book struggling to get out, and my rich grazing at Windsor had piled on the words. But at least the end seemed in sight.

Then I received a telephone call from the Royal Archives. Waiting for me, it seemed, were some papers from the reign that I had not yet seen. I arrived at Windsor to find more than 150 bound volumes of documents, as well as several other important files. Any slight hope I might have entertained of publication in 2009 was dashed. I braced myself to ask for yet another extension and cleared my diary to spend a month at Windsor.

Reading through the bound files of political papers made me realize that I needed to write the history of King Edward's reign as a story. Previous biographers had treated the reign thematically, organizing their books around the filing system of the King's papers. There was always a pressure on royal biographers to write the life and times, but I wanted to convey a sense of the King's preoccupations and achievements, and I reckoned a narrative was the best way to do this. I was struck by the abrupt shift from the party-going Prince of Wales to the conscientious, even workaholic, King. The womanizing comes to a stop—well, almost. The third and final part of Bertie's life—King—was very different from the long years of waiting, yet he seemed instinctively to adapt to the role.

Having written a DPhil thesis on the Edwardian Tory party, I had absorbed the conventional view that Edward VII played a marginal part in the turbulent politics of his reign. These files told a very different story. He was effective and politically astute, he excelled as a diplomat, and (unlike Queen Victoria) he understood and adapted to the changing role of monarchy. Rather to my surprise, I found myself writing a revisionist account of the reign. I came to respect and admire Bertie: The philandering Prince of Wales turned out to be a wise, reforming king, but his intelligence and achievements had been consistently underestimated.

Why historians had got Edward VII so wrong baffled me. But then I came across a collection of nearly 1,200 letters among the papers of George V that documented the writing of the official biography of Edward VII by Sidney Lee. The dossier told a gripping tale of history in the making. These letters revealed the extraordinary efforts made by politicians such as Balfour, Asquith, and Lansdowne to write Edward VII out of history and to suppress his achievements by giving deliberately misleading accounts of his reign.

In this book I have tried to show a Bertie who was both more able and more complex than the figure we know as Edward VII. The real Bertie was obscured by authorized biographers who, in their concern to protect the reputation of the monarchy, concentrated on the political and said little about the scandals. Equally misleading and one-sided was the alternative narrative that flourished of Bertie as prince of pleasure—a frivolous, self-indulgent lothario. His bed-hopping exploits were wildly exaggerated. His name was linked with more than fifty women, and at least ten illegitimate children were chalked up to him. The true figures are, alas, considerably more modest. I have tried to combine both sides of his life, the public and the private. To do this I have had to chip away at the patina of old anecdotes and peel back layers of hearsay that has been repeated so often that it has almost hardened into fact. It has

been a lengthy business. But, like so many women in the past, I have greatly enjoyed the years I have spent in the company of HRH.

* Letters between Bertie and women that have found their way into the Royal Archives are later accessions, and do not form part of Bertie's papers.

PART ONE



Youth



Victoria and Albert

1841

“Not feeling very well again and had rather a restless night,” wrote Queen Victoria in her journal on 17 October 1841.¹ She was heavily pregnant with her second child.

Next day, the royal obstetrician, Dr. Locock, examined the Queen and pronounced the birth to be imminent. Much against her will, she traveled from Windsor, where she was comfortable, to Buckingham Palace, which she disliked. Fat as a barrel and wearing no stay, the twenty-two-year-old Queen expected her confinement daily. She felt “wretched” and too tired to walk.² Prince Albert watched his wife anxiously. He wrote in bold black ink in his large childish hand to the prime minister, warning him to be ready to appear at the palace on the shortest notice, “as we have reason to believe a certain event is approaching.”³ It was a false alarm, the first of many.⁴

Victoria had not wanted this baby, and she was furious to discover herself pregnant again only months after the birth of her first child. She had a “vein of iron,” but though she was Queen of England, she could not rule her own biology.⁵ Feeling nauseous, flushed, and stupid, she was powerless to stop the control of affairs slipping from her fingers. Still more did she resent her enforced abstinence from nights of married bliss with her “Angel,” Albert.

On the morning of 9 November 1841, the Queen’s pains began. Only Albert, four doctors, and a midwife, Mrs. Lilly, attended the labor. At the prince’s request, the prime minister, his colleagues, and the Archbishop of Canterbury did not witness the birth but, contrary to custom, waited in another room. Albert, always conscious of appearances, had insisted that the Queen “was most anxious from a feeling of delicacy that it should appear in the Gazette that at her confinement only the Prince, Dr Locock and the nurse were present in the room. His own attendance at the birth, which was widely reported, gave an example to English manhood of how a modern father should behave.”⁷

Delivering the royal baby was nervous work for Dr. Locock. Although this was the Queen’s second confinement, her first child had been a girl, and the possibility of a male heir to the throne meant that this birth was an important political event. The job of royal obstetrician was so risky that Locock was paid danger money—an exorbitant fee of £1,000.*⁸

At twelve minutes to eleven, a boy was born. The baby was exceptionally large, the mother was only four feet eleven inches tall, and it had been a difficult birth. “My sufferings were really very severe,” wrote Victoria, “and I do not know what I should have done but for the great comfort and support my beloved Albert was to me during the whole time.”⁹ Albert, who (according to his private secretary) was “very happy but too anxious and nervous to bear his happiness with much calmness,” showed the baby to the ministers waiting next door.¹⁰ The healthy boy was the first Prince of Wales to be born since 1762, but for h

mother this was not a cause for rejoicing.

The fate of Princess Charlotte, Victoria's first cousin, could never have been far from the mind of Dr. Locock. Charlotte died in November 1817 after an agonizing fifty-hour labor having given birth to a stillborn son. Her accoucheur—the fancy French title for what was little more than an unqualified male midwife—shot himself three months later.

If Charlotte had not succumbed to postpartum hemorrhage, Queen Victoria would not have been born. Charlotte's death detonated a crisis of succession for the Hanoverian dynasty. Not only was she the sole legitimate child of the Prince Regent, later George IV, but, incredibly, she was the only legitimate grandchild of George III—in spite of the fact that he had fathered a brood of six princesses and seven princes. Not that the Hanoverians were an infertile lot. Three of the daughters of George III remained spinsters and the three princesses who married were childless; but the seven sons managed to sire an estimated twenty children between them.¹¹ All except Charlotte were illegitimate. The sons of George III had failed in the fundamental dynastic purpose: to ensure the succession.

When Charlotte died, Lord Byron threw open the windows of his Venice apartment and emitted a piercing scream over the Grand Canal. She was the only member of the royal family whom the people loved, and with her death the credibility of the monarchy slumped. The Prince Regent, who reigned in place of his old, mad father, George III, was lecherous, gluttonous, and grossly self-indulgent. How he had managed to father Princess Charlotte was a mystery. On his wedding night he was so drunk that he slept in the fireplace. He banished his wife and treated her with ostentatious cruelty, which made him deeply disliked. He and his brothers were the so-called wicked uncles of Queen Victoria, and even by the rakehell standards of the day, they were dissolute.

Charlotte's death forced these middle-aged roués, with their dyed whiskers, their wigs, and their paunches, to enter into an undignified race to beget an heir. One by one they dumped their mistresses and hastened to the altar. Their choice of brides was limited by the Royal Marriages Act, introduced by George III in 1772, which made it illegal for the King's children to marry without his consent. The royal family disapproved of princes marrying into the English aristocracy, as this involved the monarchy in party politics. Under the Act of Settlement of 1701, Roman Catholics were excluded from the succession. So the royal marriage market was effectively confined to the small Protestant German courts, which acted as stud farms for the Hanoverian monarchy.

Prince Edward, Duke of Kent, was the fourth son of George III. Neither dissolute nor vicious, he was large and talkative with a certain sly cunning. He smelled of garlic and tobacco, and he was always in debt. In the army he was a stickler for uniforms and a harsh disciplinarian, heartily disliked by the rank and file. He had lived contentedly for twenty-eight years with his bourgeois French mistress, the childless Julie de St. Laurent. When the death of Princess Charlotte gave him the opportunity to supplicate Parliament to pay off his debts in exchange for trading in his bachelor status, the duke did not hesitate to discard Julie and marry a German princess. His choice was Victoire, the thirty-year-old widow of the minor German prince of Leiningen and the mother of two young children. She was also the sister of Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg-Saalfeld, the widower of Princess Charlotte.

The Kents shared a double marriage ceremony in 1818 with William, Duke of Clarence, the

third son of George III, who married another German princess, Adelaide of Saxe-Meiningen. Two weeks earlier, the seventh brother, Adolphus, the virtuous Duke of Cambridge, his mother's favorite, had married yet another German princess, Augusta of Hesse-Cassel. Ernest, the Duke of Cumberland, who had married a German princess four years before, and had a son, yet produced no children, was now hard at it. The race was on.[†]

Kent won. On 24 May 1819, the duchess gave birth to a daughter, Victoria. This baby was fifth in line to the throne, coming after the Regent and his three younger brothers.[‡]

No one questioned Victoria's legitimacy at the time, but the rogue gene for hemophilia that she carried throws doubt on her paternity. Two of her daughters were carriers of the gene for the condition, which impairs blood clotting, and one of her sons, Leopold, was a bleeder. Victoria's gene was either inherited or the result of a spontaneous mutation. Hemophilia cannot be traced in either the Hanoverian or the Saxe-Coburg family; and as the odds of a spontaneous mutation are 25,000:1, Victoria's gene has prompted speculation that the Duke of Kent was not her biological father. According to one scenario, the Duchess of Kent, despairing of her husband's fertility, and desperate to win the race for the succession, decided to take corrective action and sleep with another man. Unfortunately, this lover happened to be hemophiliac.¹²

This melodramatic hypothesis is entirely speculative, and there is not a scrap of historical evidence to support it. The Duke of Kent was not infertile; on the contrary, he is credited with at least two well-attested illegitimate children.¹³ Victoria, along with her eldest son, inherited unmistakably Hanoverian features, such as a receding chin and protruding nose (her profile in old age is remarkably similar to that of her grandfather, George III), as well as a tendency toward obesity and explosive rages. Courts are hotbeds of gossip, but there was no whisper at the time that Victoria was illegitimate. Scientists believe that the faulty gene was a new mutation. At least one in four incidences of hemophilia are the result of new mutations, and this is especially likely in the case of older fathers; the Duke of Kent was fifty-one when Victoria was conceived. So the odds are that the gene, which was later to wreak havoc with both the Spanish and the Russian royal families via marriages to Victoria's granddaughters, originated in the testicles of the Duke of Kent in 1818. The genetic time bomb of hemophilia was the tragic price paid by his descendants when Kent won the race that the wits dubbed Hymen's War Terrific.¹⁴

Victoria's doctors and family worried not that she was illegitimate, but, on the contrary, that she had inherited the Hanoverian insanity. Mention of the madness of George III was suppressed in the nineteenth century, largely because Victoria herself was sensitive on the subject, but the royal doctors were well aware of it. It blighted the lives of the daughters of George III, who, prevented from marrying, were confined to the so-called nunnery at Windsor. In the 1960s, the mother-and-son medical historians Ida Macalpine and Richard Hunter made the diagnosis of the genetic disease porphyria. Symptoms include severe rheumatic pain, skin rashes, light sensitivity, and attacks of acute illness, but the diagnostic clincher for this rare metabolic disorder is red-stained urine. The disease had apparently bedeviled the royal family since Mary, Queen of Scots, and James I, but only caused madness in extreme cases.¹⁵ A recent analysis of the hair of George III shows abnormal levels of arsenic. This was prescribed by his doctors, but the medication may have been counterproductive and made his illness worse.¹⁶

Building on the work of Macalpine and Hunter, researchers have conjectured that most of the children of George III were afflicted by some of the symptoms of porphyria. The Prince Regent was laid low by bouts of acute illness and episodes of mental confusion, and he complained of a range of porphyria symptoms, which he self-medicated with alarmingly large doses of laudanum. He and his brothers were all convinced that they suffered from a peculiar family disease.¹⁷ The medical history of Victoria's father includes attacks of abdominal pain, "rheumatism," and acute sensitivity to sunlight, all symptoms of porphyria. Earlier biographers insisted that Victoria was completely unaffected, but the picture is not quite so straightforward.¹⁸ One of her granddaughters, Princess Charlotte of Prussia, whose distressing medical history is fully documented, seems to have suffered from the disease. She may have inherited it through Victoria, though Victoria herself was asymptomatic, or at worst a mild sufferer. ||

Much of this is speculative. The porphyria theory is known to be shaky and incapable of real proof, and it has come under attack from other medical historians. No one knows for certain what was wrong with the unfortunate George III. It is conceivable that his contemporaries were right after all, and he really was mad. The latest theory is that he was afflicted by bipolar disorder.¹⁹

Victoria's father, the Duke of Kent, died unexpectedly of pneumonia when she was eight months old. Six days later, her grandfather, George III, also died, and she advanced from fifth to third in the line of succession.

Victoria was brought up in seclusion and (by royal standards) reduced circumstances by her mother, the Duchess of Kent, in an apartment in Kensington Palace. Her mother quarreled with George IV, "whose great wish," as her uncle Leopold told Victoria, "was to get you and your Mama out of the country."²⁰ Had Victoria lived in Germany, as the King desired, she would have been perceived as just another German princess. The duchess, however, was an ambitious woman, and she took great care to ensure that her daughter was brought up as heir to the English throne.

The rift between the Duchess of Kent and George IV meant that her mother kept the young Victoria under constant surveillance. She was never alone without a servant. She was not allowed to walk downstairs without someone holding her hand. At night she slept in a bed in her mother's room. She was allowed no friends. Even her half sister, Feodora, twelve years her senior, was banished, married off to the minor German prince of Hohenlohe-Langenbourg, where she lived in a freezing palace in a dull court. Louise Lehzen, Victoria's governess, was appointed because she was German and knew no one of influence in England. Victoria was effectively a prisoner, with her mother acting as jailer.

In 1830, George IV died and was succeeded by his brother, the Duke of Clarence, now William IV. The Duchess of Kent became paranoid about the new King, whom she suspected of plotting to cut her out and promote Victoria as his heir. Determined to ensure that she should be regent, the duchess kept her daughter away from court. She refused to allow Victoria to attend the Coronation, and she enraged the new King by taking her around the country on quasi-official royal progresses. She was aided and abetted by Sir John Conroy, her comptroller, a scheming Irish officer who was widely believed to be her lover. No Gothic novelist could have invented a villain blacker than Conroy. He terrified Victoria with tales of

plans to poison her and promote the claims to the throne of her younger uncles. When, aged sixteen, she fell seriously ill with typhoid fever, he presented her with a letter appointing him as her private secretary, and stood over her sickbed demanding that she sign it. With precocious strength of will, Victoria refused.

Victoria's isolated upbringing meant that her mother was entirely responsible for her education. Victoria spoke and wrote fluent French and German, and she excelled at arithmetic and drawing. She had lessons in history, geography, religion, music, and Latin (reluctantly). She learned more than most aristocratic girls, but she did not receive the instruction in subjects such as constitutional history considered necessary for princes. As Lord Melbourne remarked: "The rest of her education she owes to her own shrewdness and quickness, and that perhaps has not been the proper education for one who was to wear the Crown of England."²²

Victoria grew up hating and distrusting her mother. She yearned for a father figure to fill the place of the father she had barely known. But she was not lacking in self-worth. On the contrary, knowing that she was so close to the succession gave her a rare sense of entitlement. She never learned to accept authority figures; she *was* authority. Self-reliant with a steely confidence in her own judgment, she was impulsive and volatile. No one taught her to control her temper.

At six a.m. on 20 June 1837, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Lord Chamberlain arrived at Kensington Palace with the news that King William IV had died at midnight. Victoria insisted on seeing them by herself. Later that day, the tiny eighteen-year-old monarch addressed the Privy Council alone.

That night, Victoria moved out of her mother's bedroom.

She had escaped the duchess's plan for a regency, but only by a whisker (her eighteenth birthday had been a few weeks earlier), thanks to her own strength of character and coolness under pressure—qualities that were precisely the opposite of the demure submissiveness expected of women in what was now the Victorian era.

The dramatic events of her accession left the young Queen very isolated. She moved into Buckingham Palace, the still unfinished London residence, reviled for its vulgar raspberry-colored pillars and Queen Adelaide's sickly wallpapers; but her apartments were far apart from those of her mother, with whom she was barely on speaking terms. She found a father figure in the prime minister, Lord Melbourne. His bluff Whig worldliness gave her a much-needed political education, but her court was babyish and philistine.

Into this girlie court of late-night dancing, schoolgirl gossip, and immature politics walked Prince Albert.

Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha was Victoria's first cousin. The two babies had been delivered within months of each other by the same midwife, but the cousins had met only once before. Albert's first visit to the English court had not been a success. He had fallen asleep after dinner and had suffered from bilious attacks.

When a second visit was arranged in 1839, Victoria warned her relations to expect no engagement, "for, independent of my youth, and my great repugnance to change my present

position, there is no anxiety evinced in this country for such an event.”²³ But when Albert arrived at Windsor, late and travel-stained from a bad crossing, and Victoria stood at the head of the staircase to receive him, it was a *coup de foudre*. She wrote in her journal: “It was with some emotion that I beheld Albert—who is beautiful.”²⁴

Throughout her life, Victoria was strongly attracted by male beauty, though she had few claims to beauty herself. She was short and fat, with protruding teeth. But she was the most eligible woman in the world—willful, spoiled, and twenty years old.

Five days later, she summoned Albert and proposed to him on the sofa. “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 in every way—in beauty—in everything!”²⁵

Not everyone agreed. Lytton Strachey wrote of Albert’s distressingly un-English looks: “His features were regular, no doubt, but there was something smooth and smug about them; he was tall but he was clumsily put together, and he walked with a slight slouch.... More like some kind of foreign tenor.”²⁶

Albert was very much a poor relation. He was born in Coburg, the second son of Duke Ernest, the ruler of the two minor German states of Coburg and Gotha, whose combined population totaled no more than 150,000. Duke Ernest ranked only twelfth in the thirty-nine states of the German Confederation. Albert’s mother, Princess Louise of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg, married the womanizing duke at the age of seventeen. Her first child, Ernest, was recognizably his father’s son—dark and swarthy, he grew up a philanderer and syphilitic. But Albert, her favorite, born a year later, was different: gentle, even feminine, and intellectually precocious. He was so unlike his brother that it was rumored that he was, in fact, the son of the court chamberlain, the Jewish Baron Ferdinand von Meyern.

Years later, Albert liked to say that it was, in fact, “a blessing when there was a little imperfection in the pure royal descent and ... some fresh blood was infused.”

“We must have some strong dark blood,” he would say, to correct the constant fair hair, blue eyes, and “lymphatic” blood of the Protestant German royal families who intermarried again and again.²⁷

Whether there was, in fact, a little imperfection in the case of Albert himself is debatable. But his personality was so different from those of his relations—he was an art lover, a scholar, and a workaholic in a family of lusty philistines—that it is tempting to speculate about his Jewish paternity. Supposing Meyern really was Albert’s father and Conroy was Victoria’s, this would mean, as A. N. Wilson has mischievously pointed out, that the royal families of Europe are descended from a German Jew and an Irish soldier. “Given this,” comments Wilson, “it is surprising that these families manifested so few of the talents stereotypically attributed to the Irish and the Jews: such as wit or good looks.”²⁹

Albert’s mother revenged herself on her unfaithful husband by taking lovers. When Albert was five, Duke Ernest banished his wife from court because of her affair with an officer, Alexander von Hanstein. Albert never saw his mother again. She married Hanstein, and died at age thirty, supposedly of cancer of the uterus.

The sudden disappearance of his mother traumatized Albert’s childhood. Physically frail and easily tired, he was often in tears. Duke Ernest was a distant, neglectful father, and Albert’s parent figure was his tutor, Christopher Florschütz, who created a secure schoolroom

world for the two brothers at Rosenau, the Hansel and Gretel castle in the Thuringian Forest where Albert was born.

Albert grew up surrounded by men. Theodore Martin, his official biographer, notes approvingly that he had “even as a child shown a great dislike to be in the charge of women.”³⁰ Uneasy and awkward with girls, he was stiff and overbearing. “Ought to pay more attention to the ladies,” was Melbourne’s gruff comment.³¹ Albert had a horror of the sexual promiscuity that had poisoned his childhood, broken up his family, and contaminated the Coburg court.

The motherless boy learned to forget about his misery by succeeding in his lessons. His hobby was collecting and labeling objects—obsessive behavior that perhaps satisfied a need for control that can still be seen in his wife’s papers, methodically filed, cataloged, and indexed in his own hand in the Royal Archives.³² Order made him feel safe; creating and organizing his own world was perhaps his security against the chaos and loss left by his mother’s disappearance.

Albert’s career was shaped by his uncle Leopold, the widower of Princess Charlotte, whose death in childbirth in 1817 had cheated Leopold of his chance to rule as king or consort of England. Since 1831, Leopold had been King of Belgium, but he still clung to his ambition to control the throne of England. By arranging a marriage between his niece Victoria and his nephew Albert he would guarantee his own influence, as well as bring off a major dynastic coup for the minor house of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha.

When Albert was sixteen, Leopold dispatched his physician Baron Stockmar, who acted as his agent, to report on the boy’s progress. Stockmar’s verdict was mixed. Albert, he reported, was well educated, but knew nothing of European politics and was excessively prudent and unambitious. Stockmar began to groom the shy prince for the English throne. He removed him from Coburg’s provincial, seedy court and sent him to the University of Bonn, where he received the best modern education of the day. Law, finance, public administration, and history—all were eagerly devoured by the studious Albert. Next, he toured Italy with Stockmar; he rose each morning at six to study by the light of his green student’s lamp, shunned social invitations, drank only water, and retired to bed at nine.

When Albert was twenty, Leopold and Stockmar judged him ready for his destiny. He had received an education that trained him supremely well as a public servant, but gave him no experience in dealing with human relationships. He preferred work to social life. He had little emotional intelligence. Of women he had no experience whatsoever.

Victoria and Albert were married on 10 February 1840 in Inigo Jones’s boxlike Chapel Royal in St. James’s Palace. The next day the euphoric bride wrote to her uncle Leopold from Windsor: “Really I do not think it possible for anyone in the world to be happier or AS happy as I am. He is an Angel.”³³

Victoria always slept with a maid on the sofa in the next room, but this never inhibited her enjoyment of sex. Nor did she object to the white cotton long johns that Albert insisted on wearing to warm his perpetually cold feet. She was annoyed to find herself pregnant almost immediately. Later, she complained that the first two years of her married life had been ruined by the aches and sufferings of pregnancy: “Without that—certainly it is unbounded happiness—if one has a husband one worships! It is a foretaste of heaven.”³⁴

Blaming her pregnancies allowed Victoria conveniently to forget the tensions and rows that had scarred the first two years of her marriage. For all their sexual harmony, the two first cousins were locked in a struggle for dominance. Albert had married a wife who was also queen, and Victoria did not let him forget it. When Albert suggested a honeymoon, Victoria put him sharply in his place: “You forget, my dearest Love, that I am the Sovereign, and the business can stop and wait for nothing.”³⁵

Victoria clung to her power as queen, but she was uneasily conscious of her inadequacy for the role. As for Albert, he knew exactly what he wanted: control not only of the royal family but also of the royal household and the monarchy itself. He had no faith in Victoria’s ability to rule. The male-dominated political world of the day legitimized his quest for power. Women had no place in England’s public sphere. A female sovereign was an anachronism, a constitutional oddity. Taking control out of Victoria’s hands was a matter of public interest.

Shortly after the wedding, Albert began to flex his muscles. He complained that the court was dull. Chess after dinner each night bored him; he wanted literary and scientific conversation, but the Queen feared that her education had not equipped her for intellectual topics. He sulked when Victoria refused to discuss business with him.

At first Victoria resisted, but pregnancy soon forced her to share her public duties with her husband. In June 1840, the Regency Bill passed unopposed through Parliament, making the twenty-one-year-old German prince sole regent in the event of Victoria’s death. It was a triumph for Albert, who had been infuriated when Parliament had slashed his allowance a few months before—a snub intended to humiliate him.

When Victoria was seven months pregnant, Albert reported: “I have come to be extremely pleased with Victoria during the past few months. She has only twice had the sulks.... She puts more confidence in me daily.” He noted that he was “constantly provided with interesting papers.”³⁶ Soon twin writing desks were installed for Albert and Victoria, side by side, at both Windsor Castle and Buckingham Palace.

Victoria’s first child, Vicky, the Princess Royal, was born on 22 November 1840. The baptism was held on 10 February, the anniversary of Victoria’s marriage, and her uncle Leopold wrote triumphantly to her: “The act of the christening is, in my eyes, a sort of closing of the first cyclus of your dear life.”³⁷

Only a month after the christening, Victoria was pregnant again. “Victoria is not very happy about it,” Albert told his brother.³⁸ She resented this second pregnancy even more than the first.

Victoria considered that serially pregnant women were “quite disgusting”—“more like a rabbit or a guinea-pig than anything else and ... not very nice.”³⁹ She didn’t admit it, but she disliked motherhood partly because it forced her effectively to abdicate in favor of her power-hungry consort. She made a sort of sense of this by convincing herself that Albert was a higher being to whom she must surrender herself completely. In a letter to her daughter Vicky in 1858, she described her feelings for Albert: “I owe everything to dear Papa. He was my father, my protector, my guide and advisor in all and everything, my mother (I might almost say) as well as my husband. I suppose no one was ever so completely altered and changed in every way as I was by dear Papa’s blessed influence.... When he is away I feel quite paralysed.”⁴⁰

A woman who is trying to find both a mother and a father in her husband is unlikely to be an engaged mother herself. Victoria was so needy for Albert's love and support that she had little affection to spare for her children. Her pregnancies were unwelcome by-products of her infatuation with Albert. She showed no inclination to dote on her new baby son.

* The medical bill for the birth totaled £2,500 and the doctors were solemnly informed that these lavish fees were paid solely "in consideration of HM's having given birth to a Prince and future heir to the Crown of England and that they must not be considered as forming any precedent for future payments." (RA VIC/M11/25, Sir Henry Wheatley to Albert, 11 November 1841.)

† Three other brothers were unable to take part in the race for the succession. The Prince Regent was still legally married to his estranged wife, Caroline of Brunswick, who was too old to have another child. The second brother, Frederick, Duke of York, was married to a Prussian princess, but the marriage was childless. Augustus, Duke of Sussex, brother number six, had ruled himself out by marrying Lady Augusta Murray in defiance of the Royal Marriages Act.

‡ Next in succession after the Regent came the Duke of York (childless), then Clarence (childless), and fourth, Victoria's father, the Duke of Kent.

§ The hemophilia gene is carried on the X chromosome, which means that women can be carriers, though, like Victoria, they show no symptoms.

|| Porphyria is a dominant gene, which means that each child of a carrier has a 50 percent chance of inheriting the disease. However, one of the peculiarities of the illness is that in 90 percent of those with the faulty gene, it remains latent and they show no symptoms of the illness. The gene can thus appear to skip generations and then resurface. Queen Victoria's medical history includes some of the physical symptoms of porphyria, but they are neither specific nor acute enough to make a convincing case for a diagnosis. (Rohl, Warren, and Hunt, *Purple Secret*, pp. 6–7, 117, 222–23.)

“Our Poor Strange Boy”¹

1841–56

The new baby was named Albert Edward: Albert after his father, and Edward in memory of Victoria’s father, the Duke of Kent. The name Albert pleased no one. Lord Melbourne politely harrumphed that although it was an Anglo-Saxon name, it had not been much in use since the Norman Conquest; while Albert’s dreadful father, Ernest of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, objected that the prince was not named after him.² Victoria referred to the child as “the Boy.” When he was eighteen months old she wrote, “I do not think him worthy of being called Albert yet. He never was. Instead, everyone called him Bertie.⁴

When Bertie was four weeks old, he was created Prince of Wales and Earl of Chester. At Albert’s behest, Bertie had been given the title of Duke of Saxony as well, which annoyed Englishmen but gave him the right to inherit German lands.⁵ Victoria worried that, as heir to the throne, the baby would take precedence over his father, and she insisted that his name should come after Albert’s in the nation’s prayers.

She was troubled by depression. Bertie’s birth had been difficult. The doctors told her that “it was a mercy it had not been the first child as it would have been a very serious affair.” She was often tearful, and in letters to her uncle Leopold, she complained that she had been “suffering so much from lowness that it made me quite miserable.”⁷ Six weeks after the birth she was still “much troubled” by lowness.⁸ Her misery dragged on for a whole year.⁹

Postnatal depression made it hard for Victoria to bond with her new son. She claimed to dislike all babies for the first six months; they were “mere little plants,” with that “terrible frog-like action.”¹⁰ She had a horror of breast-feeding, and Bertie was fed by a wet nurse, a woman named Mrs. Brough.¹¹ He was a fat, healthy baby, but Victoria thought him ugly — “too frightful,” she later wrote. He was also “sadly backward.”¹² Never one to conceal her feelings, Victoria made no attempt to hide her boredom with the child.

Victoria blamed her depression on what she called the “shadow side” of marriage — pregnancy and the hormonal chaos that it caused.¹³ But the weeks after Bertie’s birth also saw a crisis in her relations with Albert. He forced a palace revolution, eliminating Victoria’s closest ally: Baroness Lehzen, her devoted governess.

A Lutheran pastor’s daughter with an unappealing habit of chewing caraway seeds (used as a carminative for expelling wind), Lehzen had remained close to Victoria after her marriage. A private passage linked her room to the Queen’s. As well as supervising the court and issuing much-prized invitations, she was in charge of the royal nursery. By the time Bertie was born, Albert had developed an obsessive hatred of her. The “old hag” was, he said, “a crazy, stupid intriguer, obsessed with the thirst of power, who regards herself as a demi-god.”¹⁴

The trouble with Victoria, thought Albert, was that Lehzen had warped her character b

giving her the wrong sort of upbringing.¹⁵ Now, encouraged by his own political adviser, the wizened Baron Stockmar, he sought to promote the development of “proper moral and religious feelings” in his wife.¹⁶ She must be taught that, like the queen bee, her chief purpose in life was reproduction, while Albert did the work of a thousand worker bees. Victoria must be isolated from anyone who might seek to influence her ideas. Stockmar had already tried to put a stop to the correspondence between the Queen and Lord Melbourne, her ex-prime minister and father figure. Now he plotted to remove Lehzen, whom he accused of scheming against Albert.

In January 1842, Victoria and Albert were staying at Claremont, fifteen miles from Windsor, where the Queen had been sent to recover her health after Bertie’s birth. An urgent message arrived: Their daughter Vicky was dangerously ill. They rushed back and raced upstairs to the nursery, where they found the ailing Vicky. Albert flew into a rage, blaming Victoria for allowing Lehzen to neglect the nursery, and refused to speak to his wife for days. Victoria capitulated. She apologized, took the blame, and agreed to Lehzen’s removal. Albert and Stockmar had won.

The angry notes that Victoria and Albert wrote each other during this quarrel give a glimpse of a turbulent marriage. Albert is sometimes seen as a Hamlet figure, always waiting for a better moment, with “a hidden streak of wax,” but this hardly fits with his behavior over Lehzen.¹⁷ Bullying his wife at a time when depression made her vulnerable, and removing her closest friend, reveals a cold ruthlessness that some might say amounts to cruelty.

His motives were partly political. Lehzen was the obstacle blocking his plans to reform the court, which was anachronistic, uncomfortable, and wasteful. The responsibilities of the offices of lord chamberlain and lord steward overlapped, so that, for example, the latter found the wood for a fire, while the former lit it. Albert slashed perks at Windsor such as the “Red Room Wine,” a weekly allowance paid to a butler to buy alcohol, and the daily practice of installing fresh candles, which were sold off by servants if they were not used. Modernizing the court brought it into line with the age of reform; it was, Albert believed, a necessary process that Victoria could never have achieved while Lehzen remained in control.

When Bertie was ten weeks old, he was christened at Windsor. For the baptism, Victoria dressed in her Garter robes adorned with a large diamond diadem. St. George’s Chapel, with its banners and music, filled her with peaceful feelings; she found it “calming” to reflect that so many of her relations, in fact the entire family of George III—including her father, whom she had never known—were buried in the vault beneath the flagstones upon which she stood. “The Child” behaved well, and his mother offered earnest prayers that he might become a true and virtuous Christian and grow up “like his beloved Father!”¹⁹

After Lehzen was sacked, Lady Lyttelton was appointed royal governess. A well-meaning and intelligent woman in her fifties, she was, as Victoria wrote, “a Lady of Rank.” Her role was to supervise the nursery and give occasional lessons.²⁰ Sarah Lyttelton, or “Lally” as the children called her, worshipped Prince Albert, sentimentalized the royal marriage, and wrote syrupy letters about the “babes.”

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