Queen Victoria - Context

Queen Victoria's reign spanned nearly sixty-four years of British history, 1837 to 1901. Those years are remembered as the Victorian Age, which encompassed tremendous changes for Great Britain. Change occurred in nearly every aspect of British life—political institutions and structures, economic and social conditions, trade, science, and technology.

The international position of Great Britain was strong upon Victoria's succession, as the defeat of Napoleon in 1815 had guaranteed Britain a prominent role in the shaping of European politics. The British Empire, while it had suffered a setback half a century earlier with the loss of the American colonies, was expanding throughout the world with great success. By the end of Victoria's reign, Great Britain was in possession of the Indian sub-continent, Australia, Canada, substantial portions of Africa, parts of the Middle East, lands in South America, and numerous islands all over the world. It was a fact that, as late nineteenth century phrase expresses, "The sun never set on the British Empire." No nation in the history of the world had ever achieved such global domination.

At home in Britain the proper position of all the parts of government—the monarchy, Parliament, and especially the common people—was being debated hotly. After living through the mental illness of King George III, who died in 1820, and the generally disliked reigns of his sons King George IV and King William IV, many British subjects had grown dissatisfied with the monarchy as an institution. Some even pushed for stripping it of all official power in favor of making Britain a republic. This feeling was exacerbated by republican revolutions throughout Europe. As Queen, Victoria had to contend early on with anti-monarchist public opinion, but by the end of her reign she had endeared herself to her people and secured the future of the Crown. She achieved this control by lessening the direct power of the Crown. Victoria was aware that new democratic nature of the government required that her position be more symbolic than directly powerful.

The major democratic movement in Britain during Victoria's reign was directed toward expanding the voting population for parliamentary elections. Victoria succeeded to the throne five years after the passage of the 1832 Reform Bill, which was the first major step in reducing property requirements for voting and holding office in Britain. The 1876 and 1884 Reform Bills achieved further democratization of British politics, and by the end of the nineteenth century universal male suffrage was nearly, though not fully, a reality. Women were not granted the vote until well into the twentieth century.

Achieving a greater role in the government of Britain became a realistic desire for many people after the onset of the industrial and economic revolutions. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the middle classes in Britain were gradually expanding to prominence, primarily as a result of increased activity in manufacturing and business enterprises. Urbanization was another important aspect of industrialization, and made the old property requirements for voting seem archaic and unreasonable. The expansion of the middle classes held great cultural implications: social position began to rest less on family and inheritance and more on financial and business success. The virtues of thrift and professional diligence were elevated to a central place in the Victorian mind.

The Victorian age is famous for its circumspect conception of virtue. Honesty, hard work, extreme modesty in dress, and decent public and private behavior are a few of the virtues that gained cultural currency in the nineteenth century. The Queen herself believed strongly in the importance of these virtues, and promoted them by her public example.

While Queen Victoria's reign was a time of great material prosperity and economic growth, industrialization and urbanization brought new social difficulties. Urban poverty and the poor treatment of many in the working classes were major results of the newly capitalized and industrialized economy, and political pressures mounted throughout the nineteenth century to address such problems before they amounted to a great crisis. The threat of socialist revolution, while not as imminent in Britain as elsewhere in Europe, was a source of concern and consternation for the ruling classes. Also, the ever-miserable condition of poor Roman Catholics in British-ruled Ireland was a major cause of unrest. One of the worst stories of the Victorian age was the willful neglect by the British government of millions of starving Irish during the potato
famine of 1845–1846. Violent revolutionary movements sprouted in Ireland throughout Victoria's reign, and were the single greatest source of domestic strife in the Britain at the time.

Steam power, trains, telegraphs, indoor plumbing, electricity, and countless other advancements changed British life dramatically while Victoria was Queen. She and her husband, Prince Albert, promoted such advancements as much as they could. The Great Exhibition of 1851 was a watershed event for the development of technology.

**Plot Overview**

Queen Victoria was born on May 24, 1819. She was the daughter of Prince Edward, Duke of Kent, minor son of the reigning King George III, and Victoire of Saxe-Coburg, a German princess. Both her father and grandfather died in 1820, the year her uncle succeeded as King George IV. When George died without issue in 1830, Victoria stood to inherit the throne after the daughter of her second royal uncle, King William IV, died in infancy. William himself died in 1837, and the eighteen-year-old princess became Queen Victoria of Great Britain and Ireland on June twenty that year.

Victoria was a virgin queen until February 10, 1840, when day she married her cousin, Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg Gotha. Victoria bore nine children within the next seventeen years, among them the future King Edward VII. Albert was an avid patron of the arts, sciences, and burgeoning industries, and he helped organize the famous Great Exhibition of 1851 at the "Crystal Palace." Victoria doted on her husband, who influenced her greatly and became her most trusted adviser in matters of state. The other major influence early in her reign was her first Prime Minister William Lamb, second Viscount Melbourne, of the liberal Whig party. These early years of Victorian rule saw major reforms in British education, with the Grammar Schools Act of 1840 and the founding of Queen's College for women in London in 1848.

When Prince Albert died in 1861, the queen was devastated and went into deep mourning. She rarely appeared in public until the end of the 1860s, and during this time Great Britain saw a major movement in favor of republican government and for the abolition of monarchic powers. However, with the help of the Conservative party's Benjamin Disraeli, prime minister in 1868 and again from 1874 to 1880, the queen eventually reassumed a more public and influential role in the government.

Throughout the middle years of her reign, Victoria presided over Britain's involvement in the Crimean War (1854–56), non-intervention in the Prussia-Austria-Denmark war of 1864–1866, and the aversion of a Franco-German war in 1875. She also presided over major domestic reforms in the British government, including the Second Reform Act of 1867 and the Representation of Peoples Act of 1884, both of which greatly expanded the population of her subjects permitted to vote in parliamentary elections. Victorian England also saw great advances in commerce and industry, aided by the spread of railroad lines throughout Great Britain and the laying of the first trans-Atlantic telegraph cable in 1866.

During Victoria's reign, the British overseas Empire achieved its greatest size and power. The queen added the title Empress of India to her crown in 1876. She was a strong supporter of empire, which often pitted her against the Liberal party's William Gladstone, prime minister from 1869–1874, 1880–1885, and again from 1886–1894. She had better relations with her last prime minister, the Marquess of Salisbury, also a strong supporter of empire and opponent of Irish Home Rule, which was one of the most contentious issues of the day.

Victoria lived to celebrate both her Golden Jubilee in 1887 and her Diamond Jubilee in 1897. These events were celebrated as great public affairs, and by this time the queen had achieved great popularity in Britain and she had come to be seen as the great symbol of the British Empire. The last years of her reign were preoccupied with the Boer War in southern Africa (1899–1902).

After sixty-three years as queen—the longest reign of any English monarch—Victoria died on January 22, 1901. She was eighty-one years old.
Important Terms, People, and Events

Terms

**Conservative** - The political party which succeeded the Tory party in the mid-nineteenth century. The Conservatives were pro-Empire in their policies and favored slow democratic reforms, if any, in the ruling structure of Britain. They were more pro-business than their Tory predecessors.

**High Church** - A form of liturgy in the Church of England characterized by its many rituals, traditional sacramental practices, and close similarities to the rites of the Roman Catholic Church. Raised as a Lutheran, Victoria was not fond of High Church Anglicanism, and preferred the simple worship services of the Scottish Church and other more formally Protestant denominations.

**Home Rule** - Controversial policy idea pushed by some British Liberals and desired by many of the Irish people to grant Ireland its own parliament, rather than have Irish representatives sit in the British Parliament in London. It was rejected consistently by parliaments throughout Victoria's reign.

**Liberal** - The political party which succeeded the Whigs in the mid-nineteenth century. The Liberals continued to champion democratic reform efforts, were less imperialist in their politics than the Conservatives, and tended to be more open to the establishment of labor unions and other organizations that empowered traditionally unrepresented groups in politics.

**Prince Consort** - Title granted to Prince Albert, Victoria's husband, in 1857. It reflected his official position in the Crown government, which was wholly subordinate to the rule of his wife and Queen. Parliament had originally been reluctant to grant him any official title, fearing it would encourage him to behave as a king—a reasonable fear considering Victoria's great personal dependence on her strong-minded husband.

**Republican movements** - Sporadic, non-violent revolutionary efforts in Britain to change the principle of the nation's government from the constitutional "Crown, King (or Queen), and Commons" to that of total popular sovereignty. The republican effort was very strong at the beginning of Victoria's reign as well as in the 1860s, when the Queen hid herself from the public eye in mourning for her late husband, Prince Albert.

**Tory** - Name of the conservative, monarchist political party in Britain in the first part of the nineteenth century. Tories were often opposed to democratic reform efforts in the Parliament, favored protectionist trade policies, and often represented the interests of the traditionalist elements in the Anglican Church and the agricultural aristocracy.

**Whig** - Name of the liberal political party in Britain in the first part of the nineteenth century. Whigs usually favored free trade and were often enthusiastic about democratic reform efforts in the Parliament. They usually represented the merchant and middle-class interests, along with those of a substantial portion of the moneyed aristocracy.

People

**Balmoral** - Victoria's home in the Scottish Highlands where her family often went for extended stays. The Queen adored Scottish ways and the romantic beauty of the Highlands, and Balmoral reflected her penchant for a more rustic way of living than most previous British monarchs had ever shown.

**Benjamin Disraeli, Earl of Beaconsfield** - Conservative Prime Minister of Britain in 1868 and again from 1874 to 1900. A staunch imperialist and also notably open to democratic reforms in the government, Disraeli was Victoria's favorite prime minister. He pushed through the bill that made her Empress of India in 1876.

**Edward, or Albert Edward, Prince of Wales** - Born in late 1841, the eldest son of Victoria, and heir to the throne. He was crowned King of Great Britain and Ireland in 1901 upon his mother's death. As a young man he continually disappointed his mother's hopes, dropping out of college and showing little talent or judgment. He lived a fast, cosmopolitan life with gamblers, actresses, and similar people who Victoria disdained greatly.

**John Brown** - Scottish servant of Victoria's who, in the mid-1860s, also became the Queen's closest friend and confidante. Their relationship sparked many rumors and scandalized many in Britain, though it is unknown whether the relationship was sexual in nature. Brown's death in 1883 affected the Queen deeply, and she mourned him in a manner similar to the way she mourned her late husband, Prince Albert.
Leopold, King of the Belgians - Uncle and father figure of Queen Victoria, brother of Victoire of Saxe-Coburg. Leopold corresponded regularly with his royal niece, who depended upon his wise counsel in matters of state for many years.

Melbourne, William Lamb, Second Viscount - Victoria's first Prime Minister, member of the Whig party. Lord Melbourne was the Queen's most important adviser during her first several years on the throne. He was also her political mentor, teaching her many of the ins and outs of royal government while she was young and inexperienced as a ruler.

Osborne House - Built on the Isle of Wight in 1845, the Queen's favorite retreat home which she called "a place of our own" when writing to Prince Albert. It was modest for a royal residence, reflecting Victoria's taste for simplicity rather than grandeur.

Otto Von Bismarck - Prussian Chancellor and chief architect of the new, united German Empire constituted in 1870. Bismarck was one of the chief figures in European politics in the nineteenth century. Victoria's relations on the whole with Germany, the land of her mother's and husband's birth, were very friendly.

Palmerston, Henry John Temple, Third Viscount - Foreign Secretary of Britain early in Victoria's reign and Whig Prime Minister in the mid-1850s and early 1860s. He was the chief architect of Victorian foreign policy, as well as a firm moderating influence on the liberal politics of his fellow Whigs in Parliament, before his death in 1865.

Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg Gotha - Husband and Prince Consort of Queen Victoria, and father of her nine children. He was German by birth, a cousin of the Queen's, and married her in 1840. Victoria and Albert were devoted to each other, and Albert was her most important adviser on all matters until his untimely death at the age of forty-two in 1861. He was remembered especially for organizing the Great Exhibition of 1850.

Prince Edward, Duke of Kent - Fourth son of King George III of Great Britain and Ireland, father of Queen Victoria. He led a disreputable life before marrying Victoire of Saxe-Coburg in 1818, and died only seven months after the birth of his only daughter, who was destined to be Queen.

Princess Royal Victoria - Born in late 1840, the firstborn of Victoria's nine children, and future bride of the German Emperor Friedrich III. Pretty, intelligent, and talented, she was very close to her mother and she may have been the Queen's favorite child, often outshining her younger brother Edward.

Sir John Conroy - Comptroller of Victoire of Saxe-Coburg's household at the palace of Kensington while the future Queen Victoria was growing up. He was alleged to be a lover of Victoire's, though the rumors were never substantiated. He is most known for attempting to make himself young Victoria's regent, or power behind the scenes, during her teen years, involving the household at Kensington in several feuds with that of King William IV's court. Victoria stood fast against his attempts to influence her, and shook off his power quickly upon succession to the throne.

Victoire of Saxe-Coburg - German princess, widow of Prince Charles Emich of Leiningen, later Duchess of Kent, and mother of Queen Victoria. She married Prince Edward, Duke of Kent in 1818, giving birth to Victoria, her third and last child in May 1819. Her relationship with her royal daughter was rocky; after Victoria's accession to the throne, Victoire exercised little if any influence over the young queen.

Victoria - Born April 29, 1819, Queen of Great Britain and Ireland from 1837 to her death in 1901. Named Empress of India in 1876, she came to transform the institution of the British monarchy into its modern form, came to be beloved by her people in the later decades of her reign, and was nicknamed the "Grandmother of Europe," in part because her nine children had married into many European royal families.

William Gladstone - Great Liberal Prime Minister from 1868 to 1874 and again from 1880 to 1885. Very democratic in his politics, he was responsible for the Third Reform Bill and also made many political enemies for supporting Home Rule for Ireland. Victoria disliked him with a passion.

Events

Boer War - 1899–1902 conflict between British forces and descendents of Dutch settlers in the country later known as South Africa. The war was brutal, drawn-out, and opposed by many quarters in Britain and abroad, casting the one great, dark shadow over the otherwise happy end of Victoria's long reign as the British Queen and Empress.

Crimean War - 1853–1856, a war fought by Great Britain and Turkey against Russia, which had aggressively moved in on Turkish lands in the Balkans in 1853. The war was strongly supported and
encouraged by the British people, but was noted for its many blunders, including the famous Charge of the
Light Brigade, when 600 soldiers charged into sure death after misinterpreting their orders.

**Diamond Jubilee** - 1897 celebration marking the sixtieth anniversary of Victoria's succession as Queen.

**Golden Jubilee** - 1887 celebration marking the fiftieth anniversary of Victoria's succession as Queen.

**Great Exhibition** - Organized by Prince Albert in 1851, a gathering of thousands of scientists, inventors,
and artists from around the globe showcasing the cutting-edge technological advancements of the mid-
nineteenth century.

**Mutiny** - 1857–1858 rebellion by the people of India against the rule of British east India Company. The
rebellion was crushed by British troops and marked the transition to direct rule over India by the British
government.

**Second Reform Bill** - 1867 bill introduced by Benjamin Disraeli that expanded the electorate by reducing
property requirements for voting. Better-to-do artisans and middle-class people were primarily affected,
though the bill was originally intended to affect the greater population of working class people.

**Third Reform Bill** - 1884 bill passed by Gladstone's parliament which expanded the voting franchise to
poorer agricultural workers and laborers in British towns and cities.

**Treaty of Berlin** - 1878 treaty that avoided another British war with Russia, whose troops had moved in on
the Balkan territories of Turkey. The treaty restored Turkish power to the Balkans and also handed Bosnia
and Herzegovina to the Austro-Hungarians. Benjamin Disraeli was one of the treaty's main architects.