



*Victoria, A Life,*

A.N. Wilson.

(London: Hutchinson, 2014).

Review by: Eoin Martin

*Victoria, A Life*. By A.N. Wilson. London: Hutchinson. 2014. ISBN 978 1 84887 956 0. 642 pp. £25.

In January 1899 a journalist called William Sutherland, writing in the *New Century Review*, asked: “Will Queen Victoria be a Historical Personage?” Few could remember a time before Victoria ascended the throne in 1837 yet Sutherland considered it unlikely she would be remembered. There was nothing personal in this, the ingredients were simply missing: while Victoria’s reign had been a great pageant of progress, it lacked the earth-shattering events that had marked the reigns of some of her predecessors and, while her large family and domestic virtues endeared her to her subjects, it did not make for a salacious story. Unlike Boadicea, Elizabeth I, or Mary Queen of Scots, Victoria’s fame seemed destined to wane.

Sutherland was soon proved wrong. Within a year of Victoria’s death in 1901, the first full biography of her was written by Sidney Lee, editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*. Since then, dozens of authors have written the life of one of Britain’s longest reigning monarchs – from Lytton Strachey’s iconoclastic *Queen Victoria* in 1921 to Elizabeth Longford’s encyclopaedic *Victoria R.I.* in 1964. A.N. Wilson’s *Victoria, A Life* suggests that, even at the moment when Queen Elizabeth II assumes the title of Britain’s longest reigning monarch, interest in the previous title holder, Queen Victoria, shows no sign of diminishing. Wilson is a prolific writer who has written biographies of numerous historical figures, from C.S. Lewis to Hitler. As a historian he is most well-known for his portrait of *The Victorians*. He has since written *After the Victorians* and *The Age of Elizabeth II*. Clearly though, he could not resist a return to Victoriana to write the life of the monarch who defined the age.

Like countless biographers before him, Wilson recounts Victoria’s remarkable unwavering belief in her own destiny. When she ascended the throne, she wrote in her journal: “I am very young and perhaps in many, though not in all things, inexperienced, but I am sure, that very few have more real good will and more desire to do what is fit and right than I have” (75). When she was born in 1819 Victoria was fifth in line to the throne. Yet, she clearly believed that she was born to rule and, as sovereign, she was never afraid to speak her mind. She actively involved herself in domestic and foreign politics, and the affairs of the Church and the armed forces. Similarly, as a mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother she never hesitated to choreograph the lives of relatives who, by the time she died, occupied thrones across Europe. Wilson evidently relished getting to know this larger-than-life character, particularly in her last decades. Echoing Sutherland, Wilson argues that Victoria did very little with her life apart from the business of monarchy and yet she captivated those around her. He writes:

“Those who visited her in the latter decades of her life might have made pleasantries about her, smiled at the vehemence of her opinions, observed her vacillations between well-grounded common sense and sheer caprice. In her presence, however, they felt something like awe. Anyone who has tried to write about her develops this sense too.” (575). It is not clear, however, why Wilson felt it necessary to write another biography of the monarch whose life has been written countless times.

Wilson meticulously details Victoria’s life: a troubled childhood; a happy marriage to Albert; the long years of grief that followed his death and the public hostility this provoked; a renewed zest for life in the later years that brought with it unprecedented levels of popularity; a death that came soon after the dawn of the century and appeared to mark the end of an age. This standard narrative has been written by many biographers. Wilson adds nothing new to it. His lengthy and often cumbersome retelling of Victoria’s life belies the work of numerous academics in the past twenty years whose work has allowed for a more nuanced and meaningful interpretation of Victoria’s monarchy.

This is exemplified by Margaret Homans’s *Royal Representations: Queen Victoria and British Culture, 1837-1876* (1998) and Adrienne Munich’s *Queen Victoria’s Secrets* (1996), both of which investigate the ways in which Victoria negotiated the seemingly conflicting roles of monarch, wife, and mother. This scholarly trend is further represented by Frank Prochaska *Royal Bounty: The Making of a Welfare Monarchy* (1995), which analyses the way in which Victoria broadened the role and remit of the monarchy through her charitable work; Walter Arnstein’s *Queen Victoria* (2003), which includes an in-depth investigation of Victoria’s political position; James Murphy’s *Abject Loyalty: Nationalism and Monarchy in Ireland During the Reign of Queen Victoria* (2001), which uncovers Victoria’s complex relationship with Ireland and the part she played in its estrangement from the United Kingdom; and Jonathan Marsden’s *Victoria and Albert, Art & Love* (2009), which offers an unprecedented examination of the breadth and sophistication of her and Albert’s patronage of the visual arts.

Wilson’s earlier history of *The Victorians* is peppered with quotes from Queen Victoria, who is often a useful and, at times, amusing chronicler of the age. Unsurprisingly, in his biography of the Queen she is promoted from a minor character to the central protagonist. Yet, the biography often reads like little more than an expanded edition of *The Victorians*, with more space devoted to Victoria’s role in the major events of the age and her relationship with its most significant figures. As a result, Wilson’s biography of Victoria is longer than his history of the age she gave her name to. The Queen’s star may not have waned as Sutherland predicted just before she died, but biographies like this suggest that it is perhaps time it did.

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