



## Dear Mother Victoria

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Motherhood is by many, especially women, one of the greatest experiences in life. The ultimate goal that women, if not all than many, should achieve. Nowadays, we are flooded with help books, websites, guides that lead us through pregnancy and then assist us during the first months of our new born baby. This blessed state seems to be cherished now above all, however, this view was not always the same. Throughout history we can see many women for whom maternity was not meant to be and still they were able to fulfil their life-time goals devoting themselves to other areas of life. For some, maternity was rather a political aspect that would secure the future of the nation. In my article I will focus on the aspect of motherhood through the eyes of Queen Victoria for whom, indeed, maternity was rather an unwelcomed addition to her royal life. I will discuss her own rigid upbringing which can help to understand her later attitude towards her own children. The trend, where there were no proper roles ascribed to parents in terms of their influence on their children, was predominant in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and based on this we can see how important it was for character creation.

**KEY WORDS:** Queen Victoria, upbringing, royal children, Prince Albert, Kensington System

Motherhood is considered by many to be one of the greatest and most amazing experiences in life. This is an ultimate goal that women, if not all then many, should achieve. For this reason, nowadays women are flooded with maternity help books, websites providing

a step-by-step guide through pregnancy, blogs, vlogs and many more; all to aid the healthy, modern, undisturbed upbringing of future generations.

However, this godly attitude towards the blessed state was not always cherished as such. History reveals many women aiding in the idea that children are not always what everyone should yearn for – Queen Elizabeth I, Jane Austen, Florence Nightingale, Beatrix Potter and many more, famous in many areas, give solid proof that having offspring might not always be a life-time goal. Nevertheless, bearing children, especially boys, was believed to be the utmost luck and ensured the families of different social statuses that there will be continuity of the blood line. Of course, for those for whom the fortune foresaw a broom and the bad end of the street, children often meant expenses and worry. However, for those who had a crown or riches in their cards, it was often a race to be the first with the child brought into this world.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century is when the world went through many turbulent events. England is considered to be a country that has undergone many of those. The very beginning of it brought an unsteady situation on the court and it only ended with a succession race that began in 1817 with the death of Princess Charlotte, the granddaughter of George III. King George III's surviving daughters were either childless or past their bearing age. The unmarried sons began the charades of marriage in order to produce legitimate heirs. In the end, after many tumultuous events, the crown of the Albion was passed on to a young girl of only 18 years – Alexandrina Victoria – or as more commonly known – Queen Victoria.

Queen Victoria was and is and perhaps will be the most cherished and beloved queen. Her monuments adorn the squares of many cities in the world. Nicknamed the Grandmother of Europe, she assured that her lineage was linked to the most influential royal households of Europe. A doting mother to her people across the globe, on the homefront she was far from the ideal picture of warmth and love. However, to understand the implications influencing her character and attitude towards motherhood, it is vital to understand

the importance of her own upbringing. What one is subjected to as a child indefinitely shapes the future character and frames the approach one has towards having their own children and the style of raising offspring. In the case of Queen Victoria, undoubtedly, her own experience played a vital role in her future position as a mother. One would say, quite a distant mother whose approach stood greatly in opposition to the parenting style presented by her husband, Prince Albert, who, just like Victoria, did not have an easy childhood himself. Thus, the question remains: was the cold, structural, rule-regulated upbringing the cause of Victoria's mothering style?

Victoria was the child of Prince Edward, Duke of Kent and Strathearn, who was the fourth son of King George III and Princess Victoria of Saxe-Coburg-Saalfeld. She was born on May, 24, 1819 as the only child of the couple. At that time, Victoria was fifth in line to the throne. Her father, before marrying Princess Victoria, had been involved in some liaisons of which the most known is the one with Madame de Saint-Laurent. She was the wife of a French colonel whom she left for Prince Edward in order to spend almost 28 years with. They went together to Canada where the Prince was commander-in-chief of British forces in the Maritime Provinces of North America.<sup>1</sup> Victoria's mother, Princess Victoria of Saxe-Coburg-Saalfeld, when marrying Prince Edward, had already been married once to Charles, Prince of Leiningen, with whom she had two children. However, she was widowed in 1814. After her first husband died, she became a regent of the Principality during the time his son, Carl, was a minor. Following Princess Charlotte's death, her widowed husband Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg, who was Victoria's brother, foresaw the succession crisis and thus suggested Princess Victoria as the wife of Prince Edward. They got married in 1818. A year after and heavily pregnant, Princess Victoria and Prince Edward travelled across Europe to reach England in order to have their child born on English land. The marriage was considered a happy

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<sup>1</sup> Worsley, L., *Queen Victoria: daughter, wife, mother, widow*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 2018, p. 17.

one. Prince Edward was fully devoted to his wife and put aside his long-time mistress. However, their happiness did not last long as the Prince, while staying in Sidmouth, contracted pneumonia and died on January 23, 1820.<sup>2</sup> Even though Victoria was deprived of the loving father figure, throughout her life she was quite fond of him – especially the fact that he was a military man. For her, being the daughter of a soldier was something she often mentioned.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, she felt a void that throughout the years she did try to fill with different male paragons – Lord Melbourn, King Leopold, Prince Albert, or even John Brown.

The missing father figure left an imprint on her upbringing that was lacking proper fatherly love. Instead, Victoria was left in the hands of her mother, Duchess Victoire and Sir John Conroy, who was an executor of Prince Edward's will. By many, he was a vile and cruel person "whose name is absent from the *Dictionary of National Biographies*".<sup>4</sup> His sole purpose was to shape Victoria to his liking and only for the purpose of gaining control and influence over the future queen. In order to achieve this somewhat gruesome aim, Conroy, with the silent consent of Duchess Victoire designed a system that would allow him to be fully in charge of little Victoria's life. It was known as 'the Kensington System' or simply 'the System'.<sup>5</sup> This hostile, demanding, and oppressive set of rules subjecting the princess to isolation, was targeted at creating a proper, devoted, most respectable and etiquette-versed princess. In this vile environment there was no place for regular, warm emotions that would be given to a child by a loving mother. Of course, she did love her mother as it was her duty, however, it was her governess, Lehzen, her dear half-sister Feodora, and Uncle Leopold

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<sup>2</sup> Ashdown, D., *Queen Victoria's Family*, Robert Hale & Company, London, 1975, p. 20.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Queen Victoria's early letters*, edited by Raymond, J., Batsford Ltd, London, 1963, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Vallone, L. *Becoming Victoria*, Yale University Press, NY, 2001, p. 8.

who created or at least had given Victoria something resembling family love.<sup>6</sup>

Studying the relationship Victoria had with her own mother one can realise that this was a rather toxic relation that cast a shadow on Victoria's own relations with her nine children. The scrutiny she was subjected to till the moment she became Queen was unbearable. "Morning and evening, day and night, there was no relaxation of the maternal vigilance. The child grew into the girl, the girl into the young woman; but still she slept in her mother's bedroom; still she had no place allowed her where she could sit or work by herself."<sup>7</sup> It needs to be noted that the control Victoria was subjected to, in present times is perceived to be completely irrational, even pathological. She was not allowed to walk down the stairs without someone holding her hand, play time was regulated, education was to be executed with the highest standards. She was supposed to have her education moderated at the early age of five in a way that would make her fit to be the sovereign, or if not, that hold a position within the Royal Family.<sup>8</sup> This ill-conceived protection of Victoria lasted till the moment of the King's death and her abrupt succession to the throne. She had managed to overcome the tyranny she was subjected to by the hands of her own kin, and from that moment onwards she cut off all virtual strings that were attached to her body, mind, and soul. She removed herself from her mother's bedroom, disposed of Conroy, and denied her mother any insight into the ministerial meetings. This was the end of Victoria's childhood – a childhood that was deprived of parental love, stability and devotion.<sup>9</sup>

This emotional structure that shaped the Queen influenced her future relationship with her children, as well as the overall and general perception of motherhood which was not positive in any

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<sup>6</sup> Strachey, L., *Queen Victoria*, First Harvest/HBJ Edition, 1978, p. 36.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p. 43.

<sup>8</sup> Benson and Esher, *Letters of Queen Victoria 1837-1861*, ed.1908, vol. I as found on <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/20023/20023-h/20023-h.htm#pagei.8> access on 17/02/2021.

<sup>9</sup> Ashdown, D., *op. cit.*, p. 39.

manner. It is widely acknowledged and agreed upon by many historians that the Queen, even though she gave birth to nine children, was not a fond and doting mother. Victoria considered pregnancy as an unwanted, sad result of an intimate relationship with Prince Albert. She absolutely enjoyed this relationship as she often proved herself to be passionate and ultimately devoted to her Angel. And for this passionate reason she detested having children. She conceived distressingly soon after the wedding, "I was in for it at once & furious I was"; "the greatest horror of having children and would rather have none".<sup>10</sup> She described herself when pregnant as "ugly & enormously fat, more like a barrel than anything else".<sup>11</sup>

Within seventeen years, Victoria gave birth to nine children – five girls: Victoria (1840), Alice (1843), Helena (1846), Louise (1848) and Beatrice (1857); and four boys: Albert (1841), Alfred (1844), Arthur (1850) and Leopold (1853). When Vicky was born, Victoria was greatly disappointed for the child to be a girl as she knew that now she would have to get pregnant again in order to produce a male heir to the throne. She remarked "It would have been better politics to have produced a male heir straight away, as she and Albert had so hoped and wished for. We were, I am afraid, sadly disappointed."<sup>12</sup> Victoria did attend to some extent to her first born, Victoria or Vicky as she was referred to by all. However, she did not see very much of her daughter. The care and upbringing of the royal babies was so well professionalised and outsourced that the Queen only saw Vicky naked in the bath only twice in the first five weeks of the child's life.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, with time, when more children came, she felt as if all were the same, she could not tell them apart. Besides, as Victoria

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<sup>10</sup> As quoted in Pakula, H., *An uncommon woman*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, NY, 1997, p.104.

<sup>11</sup> RA VIC/MAIN/QVLB/ 10 November 1840 as found in Worsley, L., op. cit., p. 151.

<sup>12</sup> As quoted in Woodham-Smith, C., *Queen Victoria*, Black Five Books, 1972, p. 216-217.

<sup>13</sup> Worsley, L., op. cit., p. 159.

thought, “children were not terribly interesting, mere little plants for the first six months.”<sup>14</sup>

For Victoria, her children were those who kept her dear Albert away from her. At one point she stated, “all the numerous children are as nothing to me when he is away; it seems as if the whole life of the house and home were gone.”<sup>15</sup> “I find no especial pleasure or compensation in the company of children, I only feel properly a mon aise & quite happy when Albert is with me.”<sup>16</sup>

Victoria’s children were able to tell that their mother shared quite mixed feelings towards them and as a result, they grew up to be rebellious and dysfunctional. They did undergo a rigorous educational regime designed by their father as he had high expectations and standards of intellectual achievements and self-control.<sup>17</sup> If the children turned to be unruly their behaviour would be corrected by force. Albert did not shy away from beating the children even for the smallest error, “they had almost more than their share of corporal punishment from the hands of their father.”<sup>18</sup>

After each pregnancy, Victoria retreated from politics more and more, becoming more dependent on her husband. When she gave birth to Vicky, she did return to her state quite swiftly. However, after giving birth to Bertie, she suffered rather severe postnatal depression, “my poor nerves were so battered... I suffered a whole year from it.”<sup>19</sup> The Queen experienced vision impairment “spots on peo-

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<sup>14</sup> As quoted in Pakula, H., *An uncommon woman*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, NY, 1997, p.105.

<sup>15</sup> Benson and Esher, *Letters of Queen Victoria 1837-1861*, ed.1908, vol. 3, as found on <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/20023/20023-h/20023-h.htm#pagei.240> access on 17/02/2021.

<sup>16</sup> As quoted in Ponsonby, F., *Recollections of Three Reigns: Prepared for the Press with Notes and an Introduction by Colin Welch*, London, ed. 1951, p. 85.

<sup>17</sup> Worsley, L., *op. cit.*, p. 169.

<sup>18</sup> Anon., *The Private Life of Queen Victoria*, ed. 1901, p. 42 as found on <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=loc.ark:/13960/t9n30j31n&view=1up&seq=64>.

<sup>19</sup> Weintraub, S., *Uncrowned King: The Life of Prince Albert*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1997, p. 137.

ple, which turned into worms”, “coffins floated before her eyes”.<sup>20</sup> Victoria understood that her mental state was an illness that came and went but was distinctly connected with pregnancies. She clearly addressed the discomfort of being pregnant so quickly. However, Albert persisted on having more children. He also hoped that they would occupy the Queen to such an extent that would allow him to assume more power and responsibility.<sup>21</sup> As much as the fact of being pregnant and having children was not too much of a pleasing state for Victoria, she did, however, enjoy the intimate relations she had with Albert that led to having children in the end. And it is truly fortunate that in the midst of the XIX century the Queen and Prince Consort never lost a child, and in the end, they welcomed nine little princesses and princes between the years 1840 and 1857.

Victoria was quite ashamed of her fertility and thought very low of women who were frequently pregnant. She often compared them to rabbits or guinea pigs.<sup>22</sup> She strongly opposed breastfeeding and always had a wet nurse employed. Many years later, her own two daughters, Vicky and Alice breast fed their own babies and at one time even Vicky breast fed one of Alice’s children when the latter was ill. It is perhaps with some spitefulness on Victoria’s side that soon after she had found out how maternal her daughters were one of her cows was named ‘Princess Alice’.

The Queen never enjoyed being around small babies as she detested them and for her, they were ugly and unruly. She preferred to see them dressed nicely, quiet and docile.<sup>23</sup> Her own offspring was seen by her only for a limited time as they tended to annoy her. There were perhaps just a few occasions when the Queen actually had to take care of her own children. However, she was completely perplexed and did not know much of what had to be done. Such a stance happened once on their way from London to Windsor when on a train, together with her ladies-in-waiting, she was left with her

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<sup>20</sup> Worsley, L., *op. cit.*, p. 172.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Ashdown, D., *op. cit.*, p. 63.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*



own children as the nannies were parted from them and were placed elsewhere. From the very beginning it was made clear that Victoria would not be the one overlooking and raising the children. This duty fell upon Prince Albert who made it his priority to make the children suitable for the top places in government and European society. Their education not only had to be perfect, but their characters had to be moulded and shaped in order to express the best possible features of character and high moral standards. Thus, he was the one that would spend countless hours playing with them, dragging them along the Buckingham corridors,<sup>24</sup> simply spending time with them. His never-ending worry and planning for their future was manifested by the tedious educational regime introduced by Prince Albert. Vicky, the Princess Royal, the first child, was the most promising in terms of the intellect, wit and learning abilities. By the age of four, the little princess managed to master French to such an extent that she was able to perform some lines of poetry. At the same time, the same features were not bestowed upon the Prince of Wales, future king, Bertie. He seemed to be reluctant to learn, even resistant to the knowledge he was being taught. Where Vicky was quick and bright, Bertie was slow and somewhat dim. This situation was the reason for Vicky constantly teasing her younger brother. She had a real conviction of her importance and superiority and even teased her brother on his intellectual inferiority. She believed for years that it was her who would sit on the throne at some point, and she made it extremely difficult to be convinced otherwise.<sup>25</sup> This belief led to her feeling superior to others and treating people with little respect. It was an arduous task to teach her appreciation and reverence.

With the family becoming bigger and bigger the system of upbringing the children improved. However, both Victoria and Albert strongly believed that the children under no conditions should be spoiled. For this reason, their nursery was small, food was plain, and their clothes expressed economy. However, education was not to be

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, p. 69.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, p. 63.

treated cheaply. The whole process was divided into three stages: first was the elementary stage under the supervision of Lady Lyttelton, called Laddle by the children. She was the one who took over after the dismissal of Lehzen. Laddle was responsible for the children even after entering the next stage of their education where they were to focus on different subjects under the lead of English, French and German governesses. The final phase was devoted to having their knowledge polished and perfected by individual tutors. Apart from a well-structured curriculum, Albert believed that the children should express other vital skills. And that is why at Osborne, their summer retreat house at the Isle of Wight, they had a Swiss cottage installed where they could learn such skills as cooking, hosting, gardening or even carpentry.<sup>26</sup>

Even though Victoria did not express many maternal feelings, she did participate to some extent in the upbringing of her children. She taught the Princess Royal religion and attempted the same with the Prince of Wales, but it was too strenuous and often ended with the Queen scolding the young prince. In fact, it was only when her daughters and sons were adults when she finally came to understand them and share a closer relationship, especially with Vicky and Alice. She did resent them as they took her Albert away from her.<sup>27</sup> The four eldest children were quite a self-contained group with Vicky and Bertie being noisy enemies. Bertie found his younger sister, Alice, to be much more devoted as a sibling than the older Vicky. The four younger ones would spend time together and only the baby, Beatrice, would be on her own. Both Helena and Arthur were the least troublesome of the lot, turning to be placid and quite obedient. Louise, perhaps the most artistically talented one, would often act out as a grande-dame, supercilious and superior. She was quite independent and even studied at the National Art Training School. After Albert's death, Louise proved herself to be of secretarial use to the Queen. However, she was quite bored with the mundane and

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 75.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p. 73.

repetitive schedule full of replying to letters, dealing with political correspondence and being Victoria's companion. And for this reason, the Queen was reluctant to allow Louise to marry. Nevertheless, Louise being a desirable match, Victoria did not want her to be part of Prussian or Dutch marriage biddings. What is more, Louise did not want to marry any prince as for her it was not what she had desired. She set herself upon marrying John Campbell, Marquess of Lorne. This match was not favoured by the Queen as Louise would not be marrying into royalty. Victoria found it hard to let go of her daughter citing she "felt painfully the thought of losing her".<sup>28</sup> Louise, unlike her siblings, was an unconventional royal. When travelling, she preferred to be addressed simply as Ms Campbell. She was well-known for her charity work, sculptures and various rumours surrounding her private life.

Perhaps the most particular problem was presented by Prince Leopold as he was the only male who manifested the royal illness that was spread throughout Europe - haemophilia. Leopold was a sickly child, even though Victoria claimed his birth to be the easiest one of all due to the usage of chloroform.<sup>29</sup> The obvious danger was that any severe wound would not heal as the blood would not clot as it should causing the sufferer to die. However, even though Leopold was aware of his condition, his behaviour was far from being preventive of injuries and he despised being supervised expressing his strong spirit.<sup>30</sup> However, with time, when he entered an adult age, he came to terms with his condition and, to his mother's pleasure, he confided himself to more academic pursuits resembling his father in doing so.

The youngest of the royal lot was Princess Beatrice. She was only three years old when her Papa passed away, however, she managed to spend more time with her parents than any of her brothers and sisters. She was able to get away with some mischief which would never be the case with the other children. She was destined by the

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<sup>28</sup> RA/QV, 1884 as found in Worsley, L., *op. cit.*, p. 296.

<sup>29</sup> Ashdown, D., *op. cit.*, p. 72.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

Queen to remain by her side at all times and eventually she did resign herself to her fate. Even though there were many suitors, Victoria strongly opposed any idea of her 'Baby' leaving her. Since the age gap between her and her other siblings was quite vast and the closest in age to her, Prince Leopold who was forbidden from any child-like activities due to his haemophilia, Beatrice grew up in solitude. With time, Beatrice took over the role of Victoria's secretary and eventually even being admitted to the Queen's private journals. No matter how hard Queen Victoria tried to keep Beatrice at her side, she could not have foreseen that when Beatrice attended Louise's wedding at Darmstadt she would fall in love with Prince Henry of Battenberg. Victoria gave her consent to this union, however, under the condition that the couple would remain by her side. And thus, Beatrice spent the following 16 years assisting Victoria with all. After the Queen's death, she undertook the strenuous task of rewriting and censoring Victoria's journals. It needs noting that the Queen was more than just a prolific writer. Her journals spanning from as early as 1831, consisted of day-to-day records. Numerous letters, private correspondence, notes were either destroyed or edited in order to keep Victoria's memory untarnished.

With time, and with all her children somehow settled in more or less convenient marriages, Victoria regained her balance and optimism. The great loss of her husband dwindled down to a permanent ache. She was now ready to enter, what would later be known as the 'golden age', a new stage in her life. This stage was accompanied by new companions and new emotions.

All of the above paints Victoria in a completely different light to what the readers of common works or commercial film viewers are accustomed to. She emerges as a woman driven by physical passion towards her husband, willing to become submissive and agreeing to ascend to an inferior to her husband's role. Still a Queen in name, but more often a Hausfrau to her Albert. Throughout the years of their marriage, she showed herself to be extremely emotional and vivacious which had to be trimmed down by her husband. She enjoyed his company, however, did not so much enjoy the company

of their children. She resented her own offspring, preferring them to be rather out of sight. After Albert's death, the resentment she had towards her children turned into an obsessive control that lasted till Victoria's death in 1901. She made sure that her children always remembered she was not only their mother but also their Sovereign. So when one could rebel against their mother one could not do so against their Queen. It might even be dared to state that the later relationship Victoria had with her children was rather pathological. Victoria's person is a perfect example showing that improper child development in early years, as well as later, as was the case with the Queen and her upbringing, deeply influences future relations with their children. Victoria, being stripped from role models of her father and mother, was unable to emulate or learn correct and appropriate maternal actions and reactions towards her own children. Her example pictures quite a common trace in 19<sup>th</sup> century England, where in certain social circles the role of a mother was not as we understand it today. This also allows us to see the importance of proper roles ascribed to the parents or caretakers and how they can affect the character creation.

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