

OLLI LECTURE #2

September 27, 2011

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We concluded last time with the accidental incineration of the House of Lords in 1834. At the time, Victoria was still a teenager living at Kensington Palace outside of London under the care and close scrutiny of her mother, the Duchess of Kent. Her father, the Duke, had died of pneumonia in 1820 when Victoria was only eight months old. His widow, the Duchess, was a German import and bore the title "Princess Regent of Leiningen [Saxe-Coburg]" and at the time of Victoria's birth had barely mastered the English language. Aiding her in rearing the young royal was Baroness Louise Lehzen, another German who stayed at Victoria's side until she was 23. Thus, German was the first language that the princess spoke and she slept with her mother until well into her teens. Joining the Duchess in overseeing the royal child was Sir John Conroy, a dashing Irish officer, and a "personal secretary" of the Duchess who with her carefully managed the child's days.

The environment at Kensington was closely regulated and Victoria grew up with few childhood friends. She had a good tutor, however, in the Rev. George Davys who schooled her not only in Latin and mathematics but history, geography, and religion as well. She came to write and speak English fluently and began at the age of 13 to keeping a diary that has been a treasure trove for historians of the period.

At the death of King George IV in 1830, his younger brother (aged 65) was crowned King William IV. He had no children and, thus, Victoria, (the eldest child of the late Duke of Kent) became heir apparent to the British crown. On the morning of June 20, 1837, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Lord

Chamberlain arrived at Kensington Palace and informed Victoria that her uncle the King had died and that she was Great Britain's new sovereign. They fell on their knees and kissed her hand.

Here was an 18-year-old young woman inheriting the crown of a burgeoning empire that now claimed sovereign rights not only over the British Isles but in southern Africa, Asia, Australia, and even Canada. While she reigned that imperium grew until it at its greatest extent encompassed one quarter of the planet's landmass, and one quarter of its peoples, and just about everything that moved on the earth's seas. It was the greatest empire the world had ever seen. Of this responsibility she confided to her diary:

Since it has pleased Providence to place me in this station, I shall do my utmost to fulfill my duty towards my country. I am very young and perhaps in many ways, though not in all things, inexperienced; but I am sure that very few have more real good will and more real desire to do what is fit and right than I have.

I titled my last lecture "Reigning over a Revolution," noting how the Industrial Revolution was transforming Great Britain when Victoria ascended the throne. Some of you noted that that revolution had already begun before the young queen was crowned and that's certainly true. In addition to the technological advances that were occurring with the harnessing of steam power, I would also add two important political achievements which were already in place before Victoria's coronation:

- Because of the untiring efforts of William Willberforce (1759-1833), an evangelical Christian, Britain's role in the African slave trade had been halted in 1807. The United States, a principal importer of slaves, had by its newly-adopted constitution prohibited this commerce in 1808. Willberforce died only a few days before his life-long ambition was adopted by parliament in 1833 when the institution of slavery was abolished throughout the British empire. Unfortunately, the coincidence of Eli Whitney's invention of the cotton gin and the rise of the British textile industry continued to make the now-illegal slave trade lucrative.

- In 1832, parliament passed an historic Reform Bill that abolished noteworthy “rotten boroughs” (such as Old Sarum which had sunk into the North Sea centuries earlier and still sent two representatives to parliament) and opened the way for the Midlands industrial districts to gain a voice in the House of Commons. Called by some “the Victorian Compromise” even though it happened before Victoria’s coronation, the Reform Bill allowed the new industrial wealth a voice in parliament that soon rivaled that of the landowners. For the moment, however, the lower classes (workers and peasants) had few champions in that august body.

The Whig Party, who ruled parliament when Victoria was crowned, had engineered that triumph. Their opposition, the Tories (the aristocracy) resisted to the last minute until the Prime Minister Earl Charles Grey (1764-1845) persuaded King William to stuff the House of Lords with new appointees, thus enabling the legislation to pass both houses. The Tories, under the leadership of the Duke of Wellington, caved in at this threat and thus the Reform Bill was adopted. It would be followed by further and steady expansions of the electorate (1867, 1884, 1918, and 1928) until Britain became a democracy. We know Lord Grey to this day not for his parliamentary victories but for a tea that is marketed in his name.

The actual coronation of the new Queen took place on June 28, 1838. It was choreographed by Britain’s new Prime Minister, Lord Melbourne (1779-1848), and was a much more modest affair than the extravagant coronation of Victoria’s late uncle, George IV. That event was not only costly but the celebrations were confined primarily to Britain’s elite. This time the more modest ceremonies were designed by Melbourne and were far more a public occasion with the new monarch moving ceremoniously through the streets, waving at the crowds, and happily receiving their cheers and good wishes of the 400,000 people assembled there. Melbourne was relatively new to his office and so was the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Howley, who jammed the royal ring on the new Queen’s hand so abruptly that she had to bath it in ice water before it could be removed.

Still, it was a glorious start to the reign, even though an economic depression had begun in 1837. Lord Melbourne served Victoria for the next four years as a grandfatherly tutor (he was almost 40 years her senior) to the intricate subject of British politics. They met almost daily, sometimes for as much as five hours, and she continued to correspond with him long after he stepped down as Prime Minister.

The Whigs had accomplished much more than the Reform Act of 1832. Before they handed over control of the House of Commons to the Tories in 1846 they could claim such major legislative triumphs as:

- The abolition of slavery in the empire in 1833.
- The enactment of the Factory Act of the same year – This prohibited children under nine from working in factories and limited the hours that older children might work in textile mills.
- The Poor Law of 1834 – replaced the welfare legislation of 1601 by adding workhouses for the poor (so aptly described by Dickens in *Oliver Twist*).
- The Municipal Corporations Act of 1835 – unified systems of local government and expanded the qualified electorate.
- The Mines Act of 1842 – prohibited boys under age 10 and all women from working underground.

Actually, the Mines Act was passed under the succeeding government run by the reformist Tory, Sir Robert Peel (1788-1850), the son of a calico manufacturer. We know him for the “Bobbies,” the London police force he established as a model of professional law enforcement in an industrial society. Victoria didn’t care for him at first. He served her as Prime Minister from 1834-35 and again from 1841-1846). Peel was an advocate of “free trade,” a doctrine based upon the writings of Adam Smith (1723-1790) whose Wealth of Nations (1776) attacked the fundamental principles of mercantilism and urged that government stay out of the market price, reduce tariffs, and with regard to the economy pursue a policy

of “laissez faire.” He has many disciples of this small government theory in the United States today.

As you will recall, parliament in 1815 had adopted a series of Corn Laws that erected tariff barriers against imported grains in order to uphold profits for Britain’s landholders. That policy, of course, kept the price of bread and other foodstuffs at artificially high prices, thus impacting especially to well-being of the industrial working class. They responded not only with riots and demonstrations but organizing and launching a broad-based reform movement known as **Chartism**. The idea here was to present a charter (petition) to parliament that would attract millions of signatures and demanding that:

- Future elections be based on universal male suffrage.
- Electoral districts be organized solely on demographic numbers.
- Elections be held annually for representation in the parliament.
- A secret ballot.
- The removal of property qualifications for MPs and government payment for their services.

The first of these petitions (with 1,200,000 names attached) was presented to parliament along with massive but peaceful demonstrations in 1838. It was rejected there by a vote of 235 to 46. The petitioners were warned that in any outbreak of violence the government would be obliged to “maul them with cannon and musketry.” Still the Chartists persisted with their demands for reform and in 1842 submitted a second petition; this time with 3,300,000 signatures affixed. It went down to defeat again by a vote of 287-49. There was a third effort in the revolutionary year 1848, but it fared no better. British workers got the message. They proceeded for the balance of the century to focus their attention on organizing labor unions and eventually forming the Labour Party to speak on their behalf.

It's not that their concerns were ignored altogether. The artificially high price of bread bothered the owners of industry as well, since it meant that they had to pay higher wages to their employees or watch them starve. It was from that quarter of the economy that the Anti-Corn Law League was formed in the 1830's under the leadership of John Bright, a textile manufacturer, and Richard Cobden, an MP from Manchester. Speaking in parliament, Cobden pronounced: *The sooner the power in this country is transferred from the landed oligarchy, which it has so misused, and is placed absolutely—mind I say absolutely—in the hands of the intelligent middle and industrial classes, the better for the condition of and destiny of this country.*

Peel, the Tory Prime Minister who replaced Melbourne, was astute enough to hear these calls from the industrialists and began in the 1840's to dismantle the whole structure of mercantilist laws concluding finally in 1849 with the revocation of the 17th century Navigation Acts that had caused so much trouble with the Americans in the eighteenth century. Britain was now on a course to "free trade" and since it had the world's largest merchant fleet and its most powerful navy it could advocate that policy for the rest of the world.

One major factor in this development was the Irish potato famine that began in 1845 and continued throughout much of the decade. Brought on by an alien fungus, *phytophthora infestans*, in its course from 1845 to 1850 nearly 1.1 million Irish perished of starvation. About the same number fled the island for foreign lands; many finding sanctuary in the United States. Prior to the famine the Emerald Isles had counted a population of 8.3 million. The famine not only decimated that population but revealed the shortcomings of "laissez faire" as a practical policy for governments. It also hurled "the Irish question" into the fulcrum of Victorian politics.

The tiny (5 feet) queen could hardly have been expected to master these complexities of these matters; but she did. She also took charge of the royal house, moved her residence from Kensington to Buckingham Palace, assigned her mother separate apartments there, and found no room for Sir John Conroy, who

was pensioned off and until his death in 1854 was still pleading hopelessly for royal favor.

With Melbourne's help, Victoria plunged into political affairs, receiving daily briefings from him about events in parliament and across the globe. She had at last been relieved of responsibility of governance for the Kingdom Hanover, the German duchy that had come under Britain's domain when in 1714 George I ascending the British throne. Since Hanover operated under Salic Law (which forbade female succession) Victoria's uncle Leopold took that title. Still, there was the question of succession which had so haunted English history. Victoria was of the Hanoverian line and she was still single and had no heirs. She and Lord Melbourne then proceeded to scout for consorts. They had to be protestant by provision of the arrangements of the "Glorious Revolution" of 1688 and they had to meet with her approval. In the course of the first years of her reign the scouting expedition was underway and she met with and danced with many potential suitors. One was her first cousin, Albert, the first son of the Duke of Saxe-Coburg. She had met him first on a state occasion in 1836 and was not particularly impressed. He returned again in 1839 and she found him "beautiful." With Melbourne's encouragement, she proposed marriage to Albert (an unusual practice) and a wedding date was set for February 10, 1840. A. N. Wilson in his The Victorians raises this interesting question about the couple:

The genetic statistics...make it unlikely that Queen Victoria was really the daughter of the Duke of Kent. Likewise, doubt hovered over the paternity of her Coburg cousin, Prince Albert. It was persistently alleged, back home in Germany that he was actually the son of Baron von Mayern, a Jewish chamberlain at the Coburg court. Certainly, unlike his elder brother Ernest, Albert does not seem to have inherited syphilitic symptoms from his supposed father, Duke Ernest I of Saxe-Coburg. Nor did he look anything like his brother. The rumors about Albert parentage were fueled by his mother's disgrace, in his boyhood, when she had a flagrant affair with another courtier. If the suspicions about both Victoria and Albert are well-grounded, this means that many of the crowned heads of Europe are descended jointly from an unscrupulous Irish soldier and a German Jew.

And there were many. Victoria and Albert were married at St. James Palace in London on February 10, 1840. Just the night before Albert had renounced his Belgian titles and formally became a British subject. In their 21 years together the couple produced nine children. One, her eldest daughter, became Queen of Prussia while the others married into practically every royal line in Europe; *e. g.*

- Victoria (1819-1901) married to the future King of Prussia.
- Albert Edward , the future Edward VII of Great Britain.
- Alice (1843-1878) married the Grand Duke of Hesse and was the mother of the future Czarina of all the Russias, Alexandra.
- Alfred (1844-1900) became Duke of Saxe-Coburg.
- Helena (1846-1923) married the Prince of Schleswig-Holstein.
- Louise (1848-1939) married John Campbell, the future royal governor of Canada.
- Arthur (1850-1942) a Field Marshall in the British Army and also royal governor of Canada.
- Leopold (1853-1884), the Duke of Albany.
- Beatrice (1857-1944) married Henry of Battenberg and was the mother of the Queen of Spain, Victoria Eugenia.

Remaining behind at home was “Bertie,” the royal couple’s eldest son, Albert Edward, a troublesome child, who would live to become Victoria’s heir as Edward VII (1901-1910).

In striking contrast to the behavior of her Hanoverian predecessors, Victoria and her consort set a marvelous example of family life with Victoria often pregnant and Albert closely engaged in the rearing of their many children. George III had ambled about the palace in an uncontrollable daze; George IV had actually brought divorce charges against his wife; and William IV, an elderly man, still managed to shock public opinion with his revelries. ‘None of that for Victoria and

Albert. They set the tone of moral and familial probity for the period which we still refer to as “Victorian.”

As the couple grew accustomed to one another Victoria allowed Albert increasingly greater say in affairs of state. In time he came to sit in on her meetings with the prime minister and other leading figures in the government. He drafted long memoranda to her about matters facing the kingdom and in one vital instance (1861) toned down a communication from Lord Palmerston, the Foreign Secretary, that might have led to war between Britain and the Lincoln administration in Washington that was struggling for its life.

Albert also accepted election as Chancellor of Cambridge University and encouraged major curriculum reform, where he saw to it that history, economics, modern languages, and chemistry were added to the curriculum. He agreed to be president of the Fine Arts Commission which sponsored an expansion of the National Gallery which we enjoy to this day. He also added his name and leadership to the projected Exhibition of the Works of All Nations, which opened at Hyde Park in May, 1851. This “Chrystal Palace” exhibition was housed under a iron and glass hall that was for its time “the largest enclosed space on the entire globe.” This was truly the first World’s Fair and it was an enormous success, drawing millions to its global exhibitions. As Victoria wrote to her uncle Leopold of Belgium, this was “the greatest day in our history, the most beautiful and imposing and touching spectacle ever seen, and the triumph of my beloved Albert.” Her beloved husband died in December 1861 and Victoria was traumatized.