

OLLI LECTURE 3

“The Age of Victoria”

October 4, 2011

You will recall that we ended last time with the stunning Victorian triumph of the Great Exhibition of 1851 and then the sad demise of the Queen’s consort, Albert, on December 14, 1861. For her, Albert’s death (probably from congenital heart failure) was traumatic and for years she retreated from public view, causing even *The Times* of London to comment that “mourning had become a sort of religion” for her.

She wrote in her diary: *Oh! Weary, weary is the poor head which no longer [has] the blessed shoulder to rest on in this wretched life! My misery—my despair increase daily, hourly. I have no rest, no real rest or peace by day or by night...And a sickness and an icy coldness bordering on the wildest despair comes over me—which is more than a human being can bear.* Someone even went so far as to post a sign on Buckingham Palace, “*These extensive premises to be let or sold, the late occupant having retired from business.*”

But that recluse is not the real Victoria. Even on her honeymoon with Albert at Windsor she insisted after three days alone with him that they return to London so that she could resume her duties as Queen. She took that obligation seriously and when Lord Palmerston issued a statement from the Foreign Office without her permission she remonstrated and insisted, even in her mourning, that he submit his pronouncements only after her approval.

We have reviewed the rising tide of liberal reform that was taking place in the early years of her reign. Great Britain was not alone in these developments.

- The Spanish empire was breaking up early in the nineteenth century and Britain played a major role in the creation of such newly-independent states as Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia, and Argentina.

- The ancient Ottoman Empire was disintegrating as the Western idea of “nation” spread through the Turkish provinces of the Balkan Peninsula. The Russian Empire, under Czar Nicolas I (1825-1855) increased its claims as protector of its Orthodox brothers there, who were ruled by a Muslim state. With Russian help, Greece won its independence from the Ottomans in 1829; also with significant backing from British volunteers (like Lord Byron [1788-1824] who gave his life in the struggle).
- The United States, Britain’s leading trading partner, was caught up in the nationalist movement as the southern portions of the vast, English-speaking empire eagerly sought to establish their own nation-state, concluding in 1861 with the formal creation of the Confederate States of America.
- And far away in Asia, the British East India Company was expanding its powers on the Indian subcontinent as it added its influence there by playing off what remained of the Muslim Mogul Empire against the Hindu states of the south.
- Relations with the great Chinese Empire continued to deteriorate and in 1841 became outright war.

These were not questions that the new widow in Windsor Castle or Balmoral might have handled easily. But she did with the help of such figures as:

- Lord John Russell (1792-1878), a Whig stalwart who served as her prime minister twice from 1846-1852 and again from 1865-1866.
- Henry Temple, Lord Palmerston, who entered parliament as a Tory and ended up a Whig. “Pam” as he was popularly known served as Foreign Secretary (1846-1851), Home Secretary (1852-1855), and Prime Minister (1855-1858, 1859-1865).
- Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881) served twice as Victoria’s prime minister (1868, 1874-1880). She adored him and he made her “Empress of India.”

And then there was John Brown (1796-1883), a Scotsman who was hired in 1864 to accompany the grieving queen on her morning rides at Balmoral and in time came to occupy the unofficial post of “personal assistant.” The evolving personal relationship became the subject of court gossip and more recently the subject of the award-winning film, “Mrs. Brown.”

It was Albert, however, who had been on hand to help her through the major domestic crises of her early reign: the Chartist movement, the demonstrations of the Anti-Corn Law League, and the horrors of the Irish potato famine.

He was there, too, when word reached London that British forces had engaged imperial Chinese forces over trade rights in Canton. This first Anglo-Chinese War (1839-1842) gained British control over Hong Kong and Singapore.

Albert was there, too, when the Second Anglo-Chinese War (1856-1860) broke out. This time the issue was the same as the first one: Did the British have the right to import opium into the Chinese empire? Under the doctrine of “free trade”, the British insisted that they did. Here’s what happened:

The East India Company, which was supplying China’s opium market from its sources in India, anticipated that its sales would be disastrously cut when the government of the “Celestial Empire” closed down its drug-dealing operations (mostly out of Canton on the Pearl River). In that expectation, the East India Company commissioned the construction of six, iron-clad steamboats; the first of which was “the *Nemesis*,” that arrived at Macao in November, 1840. She was a 660 ton vessel, the largest iron steamboat yet built. It was 183 feet long with a draft of only six feet, meaning that she could penetrate many of China’s rivers. The *Nemesis* carried two, pivoted mounted 32 pounders, 5 six-pounders, and 10 smaller cannon, and a rocket tube. When she went into battle against the Chinese defenses around Canton, the result was historic.

The Chinese knew about the vessels which they called “ships with wind mills.” They had their own side-wheeled ships, but they were powered by sailors operating water wheels manually. The result of the confrontation between the two technologies (steam v. human power) was inevitable. The East India

Company won not only the right to import opium into the Celestial Empire but the privilege of occupying the nearly uninhabited Chinese island called Hong Kong. I can think of no better example of a western power, armed with a superior technology, than its defeat in 1841 of the world's oldest and proudest empire. After all, the "Celestial Kingdom" was seen by its subjects as an intermediate world between heaven and earth. All else was barbarism. Now, the barbarians won and heaven came crashing down with impacts we're still feeling. You can see the beautiful brass canons that tried to defend Canton during this battle (with their handsome dragon-like adornments) outside of the Tower of London.

In addition to Hong Kong and Singapore, the British also gained a toe-hold in Indonesia in 1843 with the capture of Labuan (now East Malaysia); expanded their southern African holdings into Natal that same year; and captured Gambia on the West Coast of Africa at the same time. It was not all an imperial parade. In 1842, the British sent forces into Afghanistan to check Russian advances there. The result was a catastrophe for British arms. A. N. Wilson describes it:

There followed a period in which the British (just like the Russians and Americans in a later age) backed first one and then another bunch of cut-throats who supposedly shared the interests of the foreign occupiers. In November, 1841, when [Sir William] Macnaghten was on the point of leaving Kabul to take up the governorship of Bombay, his successor, Sir Alexander Burnes, was murdered by a mob. Macnaghten himself was then assassinated by the leader of a rival Afghan faction to the one he had been supporting. The winter had begun. There was no chance of the British troops stationed at Kandahar going through the snowy mountains to Kabul. After a series of negotiations with Afghan leaders, the British agreed to withdraw from Afghanistan. On 6 January, the entire garrison began the retreat to Jallalabad, with a large number of Afghan camp followers...and a great number of British women and children. ..Sixteen thousand British troops made their last stand against the Afghans in the pass at Jagdallak. Of this number, only one, Dr. William Brydon (1811-1873), was allowed to limp his way to Jallalabad to tell his tale.

Albert was there, too, when revolutions broke out in Europe that brought thrones toppling in 1848 in France and Italy. In France, the 1848 revolution overthrew the throne of Louis Philippe [Bourbon] and replaced him with a republic, the second time in French history that that had happened. In Italy, the Austrians were temporarily driven out of the northern part of that country. Italy was, from the Austrian perspective, “merely a geographical concept.” The author of those words, Clemens von Metternich (1773-1859), the Hapsburg Foreign Minister, was ousted by revolution in Vienna in 1848 and forced into exile in Great Britain (where he was joined among many others including the former French king, Louis Philippe, and also Karl Marx (1818-1883) who had fled for his life from his native Germany).

Albert was also there also when Britain became involved in the Russian conflict with the Ottoman Empire over the Czar’s claim to be the protector of all Orthodox Christians within the boundaries of the Sultan’s empire. There is a long and interesting history here, which we should know if we are to understand contemporary Middle Eastern politics, but that’s another course. For the moment let’s say that the Ottoman Turks were once so powerful that they extended their rule in the 17th century right up to the gates of Vienna. By Victoria’s time, however, the Turks were barely clinging onto their empire and in 1829 had been obliged to grant independence to the Greeks and in 1840 had actually granted autonomy in Egypt and the Sudan to a rebel general, Mohammed Ali Pasha (1769-1849).

As the Turkish hand in the Middle Eastern affairs diminished, European influence there increased. There was, of course, the disastrous French invasion of Egypt under Napoleon in 1798-99. Ali Pasha, an Albanian, had been sent by the Caliph in Constantinople to replace that foreign intervention. But he and the Greeks had won independence from the Turkish Empire. Then there occurred Christian rebellions from the Danube provinces (now Romania) and subsequent Turkish repression there. Czar Nicholas I of Russia (1825-1855) claimed the right to be the protector of the Orthodox Christian community in the Ottoman Empire and moved Russian troops into Romania (July 2, 1853). The Turks responded in October of that year by declaring war on Russia and then suffering a humiliating

military defeat in the Battle of Sinope (November 30, 1853), the last great sail battle, in which 3,000 Turkish sailors perished. Critical to the Russian victory was its navy's use of the Paixhan gun, which simply obliterated the Turks wooden ships.

The Russians then stood on the gates of Constantinople and the British and French governments could not abide the idea of the Russians gaining access to the warm waters of the Mediterranean and beyond. They both sided with the Turks and beginning in 1854 a very popular and foolish war with Russia was on. This "Crimean War" (1854-56) is known for strategic focus on the Crimean Peninsula, now a Ukrainian peninsula that juts out into the Black Sea. There Russia had (and still has) a great naval base at Sevastopol and it was there that the British and French attacked the Russian Empire in 1854. They were joined in that assault, of course, by the Turks and troops from Piedmont in what would later become Italy. Why Italians would want to die on the shores of the Russian Empire would only become clear later. 'Meanwhile, Russians and British soldiers perished by the thousands.

For the Russians, the problem was transportation. How could one get battalions from Moscow to the Crimea when there were no railroads between those locations? The British and French had the same problem since their battalions could only be supplied by sea and once, during the height of their campaign, a huge storm came up in the Black Sea that wiped out the food, tents, and even water supplies that both armies depended upon. Only the heroism of volunteers such as Florence Nightingale (1820-1910) saved the expedition from disaster. She would go on to be instrumental in the founding of the International Red Cross.

The Allies finally stormed Sevastopol in 1856 and the Russians sued for peace. Actually, the old Czar Nicolas I had died and his son, Alexander II (1855-1881) was the one who sought an end to the war. Alexander understood that his country, even though it had been invaded by incompetents, simply could not survive competition with the Western nations, with their steam power, telegraphs, and disciplined armies. Soon after his coronation as Czar, he:

- Abolished serfdom (1861)

- Created in its place the *mir*, collectively owned property village property.
- Created local self-government with the *zemstvos*
- Abolished the aristocratic courts which had for centuries ruled rural life.

These were huge changes in the Russian Empire and even earlier were events to overwhelm the ancient kingdom of Japan. In 1853, the commander of an American naval expedition, Commodore Matthew Perry (1794-1858) steamed his way into Tokyo harbor on July 8, 1853. His steam-powered “black ships” astonished the Japanese military, especially when they learned that they were equipped with the new Paixhan guns which could obliterate any wooden vessel and could sail against the wind. Perry demonstrated this prowess with his flagship, “the Mississippi,” promised to return the next year with an even larger fleet. When he did in 1854, the Japanese government signed the Treaty of Kanagawa, opening its ports to foreign vessels for the first time since the seventeenth century. What most amazed Perry, however, was that the gift he made to the Japanese government in 1853, a small railroad locomotive, had been mastered by the local rulers and was running on steam with samurai at the throttle.

What ensued was really amazing. Japan not only opened its ports; it opened its culture. In 1867 the ancient Tokugawa dynasty was overthrown, and the former prime ministers, the Meiji family, assumed power and began the “modernization” or the “westernization” of the country. By 1869 a telegraph connected Tokyo to Yokohama and soon these cities were connected by railroad in 1872. As Robert Palmer stated in his History of the Modern World:

The Westernization of Japan still stands as the most remarkable transformation ever undergone by any people in so short a time. It recalls the Westernizing of Russia under Peter [the Great] over a century before, though conducted less brutally, more rapidly, and a wider greater consent among the population. For Japan, as formerly for Russia, the motive was in large measure defense against Western penetration...What the Japanese wanted from the West was primarily science, technology, and organization. ..[This] became the common ground for the

interdependent world-wide civilization that emerged at the close of the nineteenth century.

Albert was alive to witness this Anglo-French victory over the Russians. He even survived the abortive rebellion of the Sepoys in India in 1857-58. That was truly a shocking development. "Sepoys" were the Indian troops that had been hired and trained by the British army to maintain the East India Company's control of the subcontinent. In 1857 there were more than 50,000 of them and they were very good fighters. Britain had already used them in Burma and Afghanistan and would in time employ them later in imperial exploits in Iraq and Palestine.

What in the world were the British doing in India anyway? You'll recall that Columbus himself was eager to reach the Indies with its fabled spices and textiles when he set sail from Spain in August 1492. The Portuguese, however, had beaten him there. Then came the Dutch and finally the English and French. I've written about the French and Indian War in America, but hardly anyone knows about the huge battles the French and British waged against each other at the same time on the Indian subcontinent. Hundreds of thousands of Indians were involved in that conflict which the British finally won, thanks to the skill of their Sepoys. After the defeat of the French in 1756, the English set up an odd arrangement that had the East India Company, a commercial company, dominating affairs on the subcontinent. It was high-priced imports from that firm that touched off the "Boston Tea Party" in 1773.

The "Sepoys," however, were Indians and thus were both Hindu and Muslim in their religious beliefs. In the spring of 1857, these troops were issued the new Enfield rifle, a splendid weapon used by both sides in the American Civil War. It required, nevertheless, that its user spit off the Enfield cartridge which was rumored to be ensconced with animal fat—from pigs and cows. Both substances were abhorrent to both religions and on May 10, 1857 when the Sepoy company of Meerut was ordered to present those weapons, a rebellion broke out. The Unit's British officers were killed and this "Sepoy Mutiny" rapidly spread across northern India.

Here's a description of how it started:

On 9 May 1857, in the parade ground at Meerut...a melancholy scene was enacted beneath of rolling storm clouds and the sunless sky. Eighty-five sepoy troops were being stripped of their uniforms—for which they themselves had paid—and handed over to blacksmiths who riveted fetors on their arms and legs. These were no common criminals. Lieutenant (later General) Sir Hugh Gough...believed that they "were more or less picked men, and quite the elite of the corps."

This event triggered a nationalist uprising against the British and their repression of it was brutal. Thousands of British occupiers were killed, some in horrible circumstances reported back home in the press, and eventually the rebellion was crushed with perhaps as many as a million in Indian casualties. There were atrocities on both sides. In Cownpore (modern Kanpur) the bodies of British families were dumped into a community well. In Delhi, captured rebels were lashed to cannon and shot through with explosive shells. Shortly thereafter, the East India Company's control of the subcontinent was abolished and India (both Hindu and Muslim) was directly ruled by the British "raj."