

OLLI LECTURE #8**November 8, 2011****“A Tale of Two Empresses”****November 14 @ 1 p.m. – Franceline Davies presents our tour of “Victoria’s Britain.”**

We ended last time with the 50th anniversary celebrations in 1887 of Victoria’s reign. It was a great occasion with 50 European royals on hand and even Mark Twain, who commented that the ceremony “stretched to the limit of sight in both directions.” Still, some Irish republicans planned to blow up Westminster Abby, the focus of the celebrations, in the notorious “Jubilee Plot.” It failed and the plotters were apprehended, although the whole business may have been a Salisbury government scheme to discredit Ireland’s home rule movement.

Victoria survived the 50th anniversary to live on another 14 years, thus obliging the British government to plan a 60th anniversary occasion. This they called the “Diamond Jubilee” and scheduled it to be conducted on a grand scale in 1897. By then Victoria was 92-years-old and she let her Prime Minister know that, unlike the 1887 festivities, she didn’t want a bunch of foreign royals present, especially her troublesome grandson, Kaizer Wilhelm of German. Robert Cecil [*aka* Lord Salisbury (1830-1903)], was at the time serving his third term as head of the government and complied. However, Joseph Chamberlain (1836-1914), a cabinet member and rising star in Tory circles, had the dandy idea of turning the event into a great celebration of the British Empire. Thus came trooping to the ceremonies all the heads of government from Victoria’s globe-encompassing imperium and the troops escorting them. As one source described the parade [Hall, p. 540] it contained “Dyak police from North Borneo, Maoris from New Zealand, Hausas from West Africa, mounted riflemen from the Cape Colony, armed men from Hong Kong (some of them European, some Sikh, some Chinese), black fighters in the employ of the Royal Niger Company, mounted Zaptieths from Cyprus, a contingent of Rhodesian horsemen, men of Australia clad in brown, and Canadians in the varied uniforms of 30 military organizations.” He failed to

mention the spectacular Bengal Lancers. It was during this gathering that Chamberlain first proposed the creation of an imperial federation that long afterward would become the British Commonwealth.

In his new biography of the Queen (published in 2003), historian Walter Arnstein describes the ceremonies as follows:

The procession of June 22, 1897, which took place in brilliant sunshine, was climaxed by a religious service outside of St. Paul's Cathedral where a grandstand had been set up for thousands of dignitaries and where Victoria remained in her carriage...The Archbishop of Canterbury intervened with a spontaneous cry, 'Three cheers for the Queen.' The spectators responded with delight, and the band and the chorus burst into 'God save the Queen.' The return journey to Buckingham Palace [was] routed through the poorer sections of the metropolis south of the Thames. It turned out to be the greatest ceremonial occasion in the history of London and in the life of the Queen. [Afterward, she wrote in her journal]:

"No one ever, I believe, has met with such an ovation as was given to me, passing through those six miles of streets...The crowds were quite indescribable, and their enthusiasm truly marvelous and deeply touching. The cheering was quite deafening, and every face seemed to be filled with real joy."

So, it now seems, it should have been. There was so much to celebrate.

- London, in particular, was the financial center of the world.
- English-speaking people thrived on virtually every corner of the planet. England's population alone had risen to 32 million while at the beginning of Victoria's reign it had been about 17 million; these numbers don't include the 18 million Britons and Irish who would leave their homeland from 1846-1932.
- The Royal Navy still ruled the seas, although there were increasingly disturbing challenges from the Germans.

In 1866, the English economist Stanley Jevons (as quoted by R. R. Palmer) summed up the situation well:

“The seven quarters of the globe are our willing tributaries. The plains of North America and Russia are our cornfields; Chicago and Odessa, our granaries. Canada and the Baltic are our forests; Australia contains our sheep farms, and in South America are our herds of oxen. Peru sends her silver, and the gold of California and Australia flows into London. The Chinese grow tea for us; and coffee and spice arrive from the East Indian plantations. Spain and France are our vineyards, and the Mediterranean our fruit garden. Our cotton grounds, which formerly occupied the southern United States, are now everywhere in the regions of the world.” (Palmer, 574-75).

In view of this near global hegemony perhaps it was not an exaggeration when Lord Palmerston proclaimed in the House of Commons, *Civis Romanus sum*, thus comparing the British Empire to that of Rome.

But even the powerful Rome had not at its height been the only great empire on the planet. It shared the Eurasian land mass with the Chinese Empire, which (though ancient) was still in existence at the time of Victoria’s “Diamond Jubilee.” It happened that both empires at the moment were ruled by women (at least on paper). Victoria had her male dominant prime ministers. The Chinese Empress, Cixi [1835-1908] (pronounced “pin yin”- only if you were very close to her) was surrounded by eunuchs who ran the imperial administration. Like Victoria, she was an extraordinary person. Born into the family of a minor bureaucrat, she basically had won a beauty contest and became the official concubine of the Emperor Xian Feng (1831-1861). She gave him his only son in 1861 and when both of these males died she became “Empress Dowager” at the age of 25. It was, therefore, she who spoke for China when the Empire was defeated in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894; and, when after the Boxer Rebellion, the victorious foreigners imposed the Treaty of Peking on China in 1901-- opening up its ports to untaxed foreign trade; granting extraterritoriality to its citizens; protecting Christian missionaries; and imposing onerous indemnities on the Empire’s revenues.

What a curiosity that these two imposing women happened to run the world's greatest empires at the same time: Victoria, the pampered and repressed daughter of the Protestant German family which had captured the English throne; and "pin yin," the common-born dancer who ran the world's oldest empire from "the Forbidden City" where representatives of foreign "barbarians" were expected to bow their heads on the ground before her. On paper, the real ruler of China from was her nephew Guangxu (1861-1908). Historian Jonathan Spence [The Search for Modern China, 1990] describes the situation this way:

She [Cixi] was the ultimate political authority while Guangxu languished in palace seclusion—on her orders---from 1898 to 1908. Highly literate and a competent painter, Cixi kept herself well informed on all affairs of state as she sat behind a screen (for propriety's sake) and listened to her male listener's reports. Politically conservative and financially extravagant, she approved of many of the self-strengthening restoration ventures of the time...

Victoria died at her beloved Osborne House on the Isle of Wight not long after her "Diamond Jubilee"; to be precise at 6:30 a.m. on Tuesday, January 2, 1901. Ironically, the two persons on hand at her pillow were her physician and her grandson, Kaizer Wilhelm II of Germany. Her last word was "Bertie," referring to her eldest (and occasionally scandalous) son, who would henceforth become King Edward VII (1901-1910). Arnstein describes Victoria's funeral in part as follows:

Tens of thousands of sailors and soldiers were...recruited to help convey the Queen's coffin all the way from Osborne House to Windsor on February 1, the day of the funeral. Across the Solent from the Isle of Wight to Portsmouth, 18 battleships and 12 cruisers lined the naval route. From Portsmouth the coffin went by train to London's Victoria Station while tens of thousands of spectators packed the platform of every station through which the funeral train passed. The burnished 2 and a half ton gun carriage that bore the coffin was accompanied on its two-hour journey through London from Victoria to Paddington Station by carriages filled with members of the royal family. They were followed by 32,000 slow-marching infantrymen. The entire route was

jammed with well-behaved and eerily quiet spectators. Another train brought the coffin to Windsor station. When the horses rebelled that had waited in the bitter cold to move the caisson up the hill to the castle, Prince Louis of Battenberg recommended that the sailors of the naval guard take over the task. The bluejackets therefore cut away the horses and grasped the reins themselves. They pulled the caisson with dignity and precision through the crowded streets all the way to the Windsor Castle grounds...The queen had come home.

I could find no such descriptions of the funeral ceremonies that accompanied the death of Cixi that occurred in Beijing in November 14, 1908. But they must have been impressive. She was buried in a huge complex covered with gold leaf and bronze. However, in 1928, a warlord who commanded the site west of Beijing allowed his troops to enter the complex and strip it of its wealth. He then dynamited the entrance to prevent further plundering. It was opened again in 1949 by the Chinese Communists and is at present one of the most popular stops on tours of the region.

Within three years of Cixi's death, the Chinese Empire was overthrown by revolutionaries and a republic established in its place. The legitimate heir to the imperial throne, Puyi (1906-1967), died in the humble circumstances depicted in the academy award-winning film, "The Last Emperor" (1987). He had been designated heir to the imperial throne by Cixi when on her deathbed she learned that her nephew, the Emperor Guangxi, had died of arsenic poisoning. She may have been involved. The child Puyi was less than three years old.

So what do we make of these two remarkable women, who are probably among the most important rulers in the history of civilization? Both faced in their reigns a transformation of human society that was just as fundamental as the agricultural revolution, probably 10,000 years earlier. Both tried to cope with it; both, in their own ways. The two survived to be buried in dignity and grace. Yet no one has ever vandalized Victoria's gravesite at Windsor and only now are the Chinese recognizing the importance of their remarkable Dowager.

How do we explain this example of historical interpretation? How do we understand that our conception of the past can come and go by the impact on our minds of the everyday events?

Given our 20/20 hindsight that:

Empress Victoria (1819-1901) :

- Didn't understand the vast revolution her ministers were imposing upon the globe as her forces imposed Western technology upon it.
- Didn't understand the social forces that were unleashed by the Industrial Revolution that was occurring right under her eyes.
- Didn't understand the revolutionary force of the idea of nationalism that her ministers were spreading and confronting throughout her global empire.

Dowager Empress Cxix (1835-1908)

- Attempted to uphold the prerogatives won by the Manchus in their conquest of China (1644).
- Tried to defeat the attempts of the "barbarians" to destroy the "Middle Kingdom."

[show here Cxix receiving western diplomats' wives]

Dowager Cxix ended her reign with China on the brink of revolution. In spite of what we have seen about Victoria's last days, I would not like to have you think that she ended her days untroubled. In fact, five days before she died, Victoria received Field Marshall Frederick Roberts at Osborne House and whispered to him that "there is better news from South Africa today."

- She was wrong. While South Africa was becoming pacified, other corners of the empire, especially India, were growing resentful of British domination. For example, the Congress Party of India had already been

organized in 1885 and soon becoming a growing force for Indian independence.

- The Irish were increasingly unhappy with British rule and the ranks of the Republicans there were growing. When in 1914 the ruling Liberal Party insisted on adopting “home rule” for Ireland the British officer corps there refused to carry out its orders. World War I brought the stalemate to an end until Ireland went up in open revolt in 1916.
- Industrial workers in Britain had grown disenchanted with the “laissez-faire” policies of Gladstone’s Liberal Party. In 1892 they elected the Scottish miner Kier Hardie (1858-1928) to parliament. In 1901, a British court handed down a decision in the Taff Vale case which held that labor unions should be responsible for economic losses caused by their strikes. The decision was overturned by parliament shortly thereafter when the Labour Party elected 29 members in the 1906 elections.
- And then there were the women, led initially by Emmeline Pankhurst (1858-1928). A clergyman’s widow, Ms. Pankhurst founded the “Women’s Social and Political Union” in 1898 and she and her daughters were soon thereafter disrupting sessions of parliament in demonstrations of civil disobedience, demanding the right to vote.

So the Victorian Era did not end on the tranquil note that has so often been romanticized in popular literature. I think it best to end our reflections on the period with the words of the Victorian era writer Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) in his poem, “Dover Beach.”