



A Magnificent Obsession: Victoria, Albert, and the Death That Changed the British Monarchy

Helen Rappaport

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As she did in her critically acclaimed *The Last Days of the Romanovs*, Helen Rappaport brings a compelling documentary feel to the story of this royal marriage and of the queen's obsessive love for her husband – a story that began as fairy tale and ended in tragedy.

After the untimely death of Prince Albert, the queen and her nation were plunged into a state of grief so profound that this one event would dramatically alter the shape of the British monarchy. For Britain had not just lost a prince: during his twenty year marriage to Queen Victoria, Prince Albert had increasingly performed the function of King in all but name. The outpouring of grief after Albert's death was so extreme, that its like would not be seen again until the death of Princess Diana 136 years later.

Drawing on many letters, diaries and memoirs from the Royal Archives and other neglected sources, as well as the newspapers of the day, Rappaport offers a new perspective on this compelling historical psychodrama – the crucial final months of the prince's life and the first long, dark ten years of the Queen's retreat from public view. She draws a portrait of a queen obsessed with her living husband and – after his death – with his enduring place in history. *Magnificent Obsession* will also throw new light on the true nature of the prince's chronic physical condition, overturning for good the 150-year old myth that he died of typhoid fever.

A Magnificent Obsession: Victoria, Albert, and the Death That Changed the British Monarchy Details

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From Reader Review A Magnificent Obsession: Victoria, Albert, and the Death That Changed the British Monarchy for online ebook

Leslie says

What I Learned:

1. Queen Victoria was quite the selfish old bird.
2. Prince Albert would not have approved of her endless memorializing of him (and really, how many statues do you need?).
3. Doctors in the late 19th century were little more than total quacks.
4. Albert and I apparently have tummy troubles in common, as the author proposes that complications due in part to Crohn's disease is what really killed him. Am now even more thankful to live in 2012 and not 1861.

This book is amazingly researched and about as lively as the subject matter could ever hope to be. Victorians be crazy, yo.

Nancy says

In life Victoria had a cloying love of Prince Albert. In death this turned into an overbearing and overriding obsession that dominated her monarchy and nearly ruined it.

Queen Victoria's world came to an end on Dec. 14, 1861, when her husband, Albert, died supposedly of Typhoid fever. The book describes in detail all of the intimated details of Albert's untimely death. Victoria continued to mourn her husband's death in a consuming way until her death in 1901.

Like many Victorians, Victoria had always been mesmerized by death. With her husband's death she now reveled in all of its rituals and forced her family and society to do likewise. For 10 years Victoria almost totally avoided the public eye. The public began to have a revulsion to a mourning that would never end. Victoria overbearing overriding obsession almost pulled her reign down. Ten years later in 1871, it was the near death of her son Edward (Bertie) which changed the the tide and got Victoria engaged with the public again and saved the crown.

This is a very good book. However I think it relies heavily on Queen Victoria by by Lytton Strachey for its psychological portrait of Queen Victoria and her Prince Albert. This is not acknowledged. Where the book covers new ground is in it's research on and assertion that Prince Albert died of Crohn's disease.

Allison Mc says

While the subject matter was intriguing, the writing made it very difficult to stay interested. I tried really hard to stick with it because of the subject matter. The dry, repetitive, and robotic writing style quickly made reading it a chore. Will look for another book on the topic.

Shawn Thrasher says

The meat of this book is in the title: Queen Victoria was obsessed with her husband Prince Albert when he was alive, and then became obsessed by and with his death. The subtitle though - "the death that changed the British monarchy" - that's where this book gets tricky (or I suppose if I'm following idiom here, vegetarian). I have no doubt that the queen's longest of mournings changed the British monarchy, but I'm not sure Rappaport proved that anywhere in her book. I do think the prince consort's death and Victoria's shutting herself away for so long had an affect on the monarchy; it probably weakened the power of the monarch considerably. Rappaport, though, doesn't really go there in any great detail. There is lots of hemming and hawing and grasping of hands and exasperation by Gladstone and ministers about the Queen spending so much time in Balmoral and Osborne and not enough time in London; there were calls for her abdication and the doing away with of the monarchy itself. I've read elsewhere that her behavior constitutionally eroded the power of the monarchy; and I think that's the path Rappaport could have explored. She did elude to the current monarch's sense of duty bearing the hallmarks of "a tradition set by Prince Albert" and also a snide aside about whether this tradition would survive beyond her reign (wait and see). Rappaport did a tremendous job on showing how the death changed a monarch without delving too deeply in how the monarchy was changed for the better or for the worse. I don't think this is a mere quibble, but I also don't think this should stop you from reading what is still a very good, well written book.

Jane says

Where I got the book: purchased on Amazon.

I guess I haven't read an in-depth biography of Queen Victoria before, just scads and scads of books about the era, and my view of the Queen was the standard one: a great monarch but also a passionately engaged family woman, who was distraught about her husband's death and remained in mourning for him for the rest of her life but otherwise got on with queening.

This thoroughly entertaining history has revised my view. QUITE a bit. I heard Helen Rappaport talk about the book on BBC radio and knew I had to read it, and I'm so glad I did. Let's use headings to sort out my thoughts about what I learned.

Albert the King: I always thought of Albert as a bit of a second fiddle, but NO. Late in the book Rappaport makes the point that Albert's death probably saved Victoria as queen, because (since she was pregnant for much of their lives together) he basically took over all of the important work and let her sink into the role of *gutes Weibchen* (good little wifey) that she obviously relished. I'm guessing that Victoria LOVED being dominated by Albert with his strict principles and relentless pursuit of excellence (between them they made their eldest son and heir's childhood a living hell) and her attitude toward him seems to have been remarkably fawning for a woman who was quite the domineering Queenie when she was single. It's telling that her faithful servant of the post-Albert period, John Brown, was a similarly domineering figure (he called her 'wumman'. AHAHAHAHAHAHA)

Passive-aggressive much? But on the other hand, Queen Vic appears to have taken her revenge against Albert being the boss of her by insisting that all the rooms be kept very cold with the windows open even though her poor dear husband was ever a-shiver and wore a wig at breakfast to keep his pate warm. And she treated all of his health problems as little sniffos until it was TOO LATE. Did she have a...

Death wish? Victoria was given to excessive mourning and a lugubrious interest in death. When her mother

died she went completely off the deep end, to the point where Albert got on her case about self-indulgence etc. etc. Putting that side by side with the above point, I wonder: Did Queen Vic secretly WISH her husband dead so she could revel in widow's weeds forever without the inconvenience of the Man of the Palace putting his foot down against it?

Malingering, tipling and spending money on statues; wouldn't YOU fire this woman? Mourning provided a perfect excuse for Queen Vic to do pretty much what she liked, which was essentially to stay on vacation forever. This caused some constitutional crises in a system where the monarch theoretically had her hand on the tiller of the realm; her ministers were supposed to consult her about all sorts of things but she was usually miles away in both physical and emotional terms. And she spent what today would probably be millions of public money putting up statues and other memorials to Albert against his express wishes (although this did give us the Albert Hall, where my first degree ceremony was held, the Natural History and Victoria & Albert museums where I spent many a happy hour as a student, and Imperial College where I was, for a brief but glorious moment, a TV presenter. So I pretty much owe the early 80s to Queen Vic's obsessions).

A redemptive note: And somehow she got away with it all, eventually growing up a bit and emerging as everyone's favorite Queen Grandma. Except if you were one of her long-suffering children. If Rappaport shows redemption, it's in extremely summary form and I'm glad of it. Hooray for the one-sided argument!

This is such a great story of nuttiness on the throne that I'd heartily recommend it to all Victoria fans, whether you agree with Rappaport's interpretation or not. At the least it'll give you something to rail against. Very nicely written, really quite short (248 pages of text plus a short discussion of Albert's symptoms) and, if these things matter to you, the US hardback edition is beeeeyooootifully bound and presented. I do love a hardback book that lays open obediently at your page wherever you are in the book, so my thanks go out to St. Martin's Press.

Conclusion: what are you waiting for? Go read it and tell me what YOU think.

Update: oooo forgot to mention that there's tons of interesting stuff about Victorian mourning customs in there for the history buffs and morbid people.

6/11/16: reread after a Facebook conversation started by Helen Rappaport (who is one of those very approachable writers on social media) reminded me that there's a TV series knocking around somewhere, must check it out. I enjoyed the book just as much the second time around, and found myself focusing a bit more on the hapless Bertie and Alix, as well as Queen Vic's daughter Alice, all victims of Victoria's moods and self-centeredness.

The Lit Bitch says

The book was good, well researched, informative, and presented an interesting topic. But at times I felt like I was reading a long history paper.

I think the average reader might struggle with this book a bit. As an academic whose focus is in that time period, I could draw on my knowledge of the time period and related the info I was reading in this book to other historic events of the time. This is a must read for historians and Victorian scholars, but that average reader....??? it's hard to say which was why I didn't rate it as high.

I think my academic background helped me appreciate this book more than if I were reading it as a casual

reader. I think if this book was a little less academic it would have broad appeal, I did however enjoyed this book but not as much as I think I would have if it was written as more of a story though. See my full review [here](#)

Louise says

The book lives up to its title, by showing the grand scale of Victoria's obsession with Albert in life and in death. It does not live up to its subtitle. It tells how the monarchy was managed during and after Albert's life with Victoria, but does not discuss whether the monarchy, itself, was changed.

Despite some kind words by the author, Victoria is shown to be stubborn and self-centered throughout. She seemed to need the status of her role but did not want its responsibility. Albert helped her to avoid this responsibility; She later used her mourning for Albert as an excuse to avoid it.

Author, Helen Rappaport gives a good portrait of Albert. While Victoria smothered him with her needy affection, he may have seen his marriage as a career move. He does not seem to return her affection, in fact, he feels that one of his princely duties is improving his wife. Despite the image of a large, happy and wholesome family projected at the time, and through history, there is a fundamental dysfunction, and the eldest son bears the worst burden.

Regarding the subtitle I was hoping this book would shed more light on the evolution of the constitutional monarchy. It would seem Victoria's seclusion created a vacuum which further strengthened parliament. I was hoping this book would have some discussion on this.

There was a lot of text devoted to Albert's death and Bertie's illness. The state of the queen's seclusion, the reaction of her family, the public, the government, and her stubborn insistence on memorializing her deceased husband are given good coverage. John Brown and his influence on Victoria are discussed. The book ends abruptly with a discussion on the diagnosis and treatment of Albert, the state of medicine at the time, and today's opinions.

Therese says

\$12.99

I have always been a fan of Victoria and have read a biography about her several years ago, but this book takes on a different angle -- the death of Albert and how it changed the British monarchy. At first I didn't understand the title, but as the book ended, I completely got it. For a good part of the book it seems like the author was very pro-Albert and very anti-Victoria who really changed a great deal after she married Albert. At first she didn't want to get married right away because she enjoyed having the freedom and the power to herself. Still marriage to Albert was good for her and as most people know, it was a real love affair, at least from her point of view!

Needless to say when people died in those days, folks took mourning to a whole new level, and Victoria seemed quite obsessed with it even before Alberta passed away. During her childhood she had not been close to her mother said she restricted herself much (it was a real fight for the throne after Princess Charlotte and her baby died -- the daughter-in-law of George III and heir), but in latter years they had become close. After marrying Albert, she very willingly let him take over much of the running of the country. Besides she was

busy having babies and suffering from postpartum depression, not to mention having a female monarch was not the most popular thing during this time. She bought in to the sexual inferiority until after losing Albert. She went into SERIOUS mourning for him after he passed away in 1861 and this continued for nearly 10 years. The English people did not like this at all and thought she should abdicate (which she would never do for her son, Bertie soon to be Edward VII), but she did not want to rule either complaining that it was so much work and she was completely overwhelmed. Her children were intimidated by her and she would not listen to her ministers although some of them learned the kowtow to her quite effectively. After he passed away, Victoria spent the following decade having monuments and memorials erected for him that I believe many are still present to this day. After some time, John Brown became a very close friend and confident much to the dismay of her family and the English people. Still during this time she published her journals and had someone else write a book about Albert. These are available on Amazon although not in Kindle form and quite expensive. So after she finally got around the business of getting out among her people call she finally came into her own. The ironic thing is that if Albert had not passed away, it would have been an entirely different country although he was firmly dedicated to duty and country. At least the people came to appreciate what he did for them although it took them a long time to come around from their anti-German sentiments. The author has done unimaginable research, and I have learned a great deal from reading this book. I'm looking forward for my book club discussions next week and next month.

Mary Rose says

Why read 50 Shades of Grey when you can read this unfortunate account of how creepy and awful Victoria's marriage to Albert was? Seriously, ick. If you had any inclination that Victoria was a good monarch, read this book. The whole marriage comes across as weirdly abusive and controlling, but there's probably a generational divide that I'm missing here. I hope I never love someone that much.

Subject matter aside, it's a pretty good book, but it drags on forever. Albert dying alone takes up pages upon pages upon pages, and if it were half as long I don't think we would have lost much. Oh, and there was a whole chapter at the end about what actually killed Albert which I never finished.

By the way, it's not actually 336 pages long, it's 260 with 76 pages of source information for the 100's of primary sources Rappaport references. It's well researched, that's for sure.

Ryan Santle says

This book is for those people who hunger for more information as to what really happened during the final days of Prince Albert, and the effects it had to Queen Victoria. This is intended as a "companion book" to existing biographies of this mythical royal couple.

As a fan of biographies, I am deeply much in love with books that explores the human side of its subject rather than just narrating the events that I could just simply read in free articles such as Wikipedia. This book offers way more than that. Its meticulous narration to detail about the progress of Prince Albert's illness (as if hour by hour, day by day, the author witnessed the events herself) until his death satisfied my hunger for "extreme details"

For those of you who have read a biography of Queen Victoria, I am pretty sure that most of you have sparked an interest to what kind of person Prince Albert was so that a British queen would become so smitten

by him in the most bizarre manner. Is he really that mythical, legendary Prince of every woman's dream?

This book is divided into two parts. The first one is dedicated to Prince Albert, a brief look into his life and his eventual betrothal to Queen Victoria, his aspirations, sense of duty and his loyalty to his adopted country despite his unpopularity as a foreigner. The Second one is dedicated to Victoria, and the obsessive after-effects of the death of her husband caused to her.

I love this book because it taps to sources that are usually overlooked, prompting you to deduce that the author really did her research and offered a very good attention to detail about the personal side of the queen and her sense of loss. This book shows how one should write an account: Full of humanity, passion, attention to detail, and presenting facts to questions that are sometimes been neglected by previous Biographers.

Kate Lynn says

This is actually the first non-fiction book I've read over Queen Victoria. It challenged my knowledge and perceptions of the queen and her reign.

Amy Bunn says

I've done a lot of reading on the Tudors, but I'm less familiar with the later monarchs. Victoria's great love for her consort, Prince Albert, has always been a source of fascination, and this book fleshes out their story.

In a traditional Victorian era household, the man was in charge, but Victoria and Albert's relationship was made unique by her status as Queen. Denied a kingly title by convention, Albert was actually a quite active participant in Great Britain's government, and his ideas had a profound influence on his smitten wife. When Albert died unexpectedly at the age of 42, the Queen was left adrift. As expected of a woman during the time, she responded to her loss with frailty and confusion, but she was less able to fulfill her people's expectations of their monarch. She retreated into her grief and sorrow, and much of the work that Albert had done to bolster the couple's public image fell into disrepair. While some grief was understandable, even admirable, her failure to meet her public obligations was met with frustration and discontent.

On the one side, I read this book with some anger towards Victoria. She was often stubborn and self deluding. She had lost a husband, but she still had much to live for, including several children and a country that needed her. Yet even as my anger built, I would sometimes stop and think how alone she must have felt. Because of her unique position in British society, there was *no one* who could speak to her as Albert had, and there was *no one* who could fully understand that predicament. It was obvious that Victoria faced some very real and debilitating depression, and reading her story made me exceedingly glad that I am not a member of any royal family.

This was an interesting depiction of Victoria's life with, and later without, Albert, but I still found myself wanting just a little bit more. Although decades passed before Victoria joined Albert in the afterlife, the latter half of the book skips from decade to decade with some rapidity, and it never really touches on the final years of her reign. In fact, chronologically speaking, the last events described happen in 1878, over twenty years before Victoria's death. Although I realize this is the story of Victoria *and* Albert, not just the story of Victoria, I doubt she stopped thinking of her beloved husband near the end of her life, and I suspect that her own impending death must have brought him to mind. I wish I'd known more about how she spent her last years. I was also curious about the legacy that this relationship had on Great Britain and the monarchy, and I

don't feel the author really spent enough time exploring that aspect of the events. I guess I'll just have to find another biography to fill in the gaps...

Carol Dixon-Smith says

Magnificent Obsession is a very readable and insightful account of the effects of Albert's death politically, socially, and culturally in the years that followed. Helen Rappaport has that rare skill; she can make a scholarly historical work come alive. Superb.

Mary Ronan Drew says

The brilliant Helen Rappaport has done it again, written a book about a subject we thought we knew all about and made it fresh and new and in this case mesmerizing. I knew Victoria wore black for the rest of her long life after Albert died, but I had no idea of her obsession with death and mourning etiquette. Nor was I aware that she was such a typical 19th century hysterical female. Nor did I realize the extent of her "royal malingering," as one of her courtiers called her reluctance - her refusal - to perform most of her duties. She would regularly retreat to Balmoral, 600 miles from London, forcing her ministers to take a 24-hour train trip to get to her.

It was also surprising to discover how fragile Albert's health was for most of his life and how he declined into his last illness for fully two years before his death in December of 1861. During this time Victoria, while focused on him to an unhealthy extent, dismissed his illness as hypochondria. Having hardly been ill more than once or twice in her life she nonetheless reclined into hypochondria herself after his death to avoid appearing in public.

The overworked Albert was a remarkable figure and during his 20 years as Victoria's consort made an important contribution to English government and foreign affairs. He was a skilled musician and interested in the sciences. He was extremely well read and of course knew everyone who was anyone in Europe. (In fact, he and Victoria were related to most of them.)

For a fine blog review by Elaine of Random Book and Opera Lover go here:
<http://randomjottings.typepad.com/ran...>

and for another, by dovegreyreader, go here: <http://dovegreyreader.typepad.com/dov...>

This is a book for which I wish I had a sixth star; it's that good.

2012 No 46

Jessica (booneybear) says

Queen Victoria certainly was a woman obsessed. In the beginning I was questioning the title of this book. I

couldn't imagine why a book about British Royalty would be entitled A Magnificent Obsession (for some reason I had visions of Fatal Attraction in my head). But as I was reading it became very obvious that Queen Victoria was obsessed with her husband Albert and also obsessed with mourning him after his death.

I thought Helen Rappaport did a fabulous job keeping the reader involved and informed. She didn't turn the book into a history lesson. I remained a story about a very conflicted woman, who was very weak yet incredibly strong all at the same time.
