



## Victoria: The Queen: An Intimate Biography of the Woman Who Ruled an Empire

*Julia Baird*

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## **Victoria: The Queen: An Intimate Biography of the Woman Who Ruled an Empire** Julia Baird

The extraordinary story of the world's most influential, intriguing and surprising ruler, Queen Victoria.

When Alexandrina Victoria was crowned Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland on 20 June 1837, she was 18 years old and barely five feet tall. Her subjects were fascinated and intrigued; some felt sorry for her. Writer Thomas Carlyle, watching her gilded coach draw away from the coronation, said: 'Poor little Queen, she is at an age at which a girl can hardly be trusted to choose a bonnet for herself; yet a task is laid upon her from which an archangel might shrink.'

Queen Victoria is long dead, but in truth she has shaped us from the grave. She was a tiny, powerful woman who reigned for an astonishing 64 years. By the time of her Diamond Jubilee Procession in 1897, she reigned over a fourth of the inhabitable part of the world, had 400 million subjects, and had given birth to nine children. Suffrage, anti-poverty and anti-slavery movements can all be traced to her monumental reign, along with a profound rethinking of family life and the rise of religious doubt. When she died, in 1901, she was the longest reigning monarch in English history. Victoria is truly the woman who made the modern world.

A fascinating, provocative and authoritative new biography of Queen Victoria which will make us see her in a new light, from one of Australia's most admired and respected journalists and commentators, Julia Baird.

## **Victoria: The Queen: An Intimate Biography of the Woman Who Ruled an Empire** **Details**

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## From Reader Review *Victoria: The Queen: An Intimate Biography of the Woman Who Ruled an Empire* for online ebook

### Rhi says

A big thank you to Random House & NetGalley for providing me with an ARC of this book in return for an honest review!

The publication of a new biography of Queen Victoria is very timely, considering that her record as the longest-reigning British sovereign was broken only last year by her great-great-granddaughter, Elizabeth II. It reflects on Victoria's entire life, highlighting the tumultuous events and debates that preceded her ascension to the throne, her disastrous first year as monarch, the famous marriage to Prince Albert, and the long period of widowhood during which she had to redefine herself in the wake of immeasurable loss. Julia Baird states in her introduction that "We forget, now, how long Victoria ruled alone ... the great volume of Victoria's grief meant that a myth sprang up almost immediately, which many still believe today: that she stopped ruling when Albert died, and that she had abdicated almost all her authority and power to her clever husband when he was alive." She sets out in this biography to debunk that myth, bringing new emphasis to the years Victoria ruled without a husband at her side.

Baird's mission in re-framing preconceptions about Queen Victoria is ambitious and has worth both as an historical and feminist project. However, her thesis is hardly original. Victoria's reign has been considered and reconsidered by many historians since her death. The argument that she was inhibited by Albert while they were married and that his early death set her free to reclaim the power he'd confiscated during her many pregnancies has been tossed around frequently. For a recent example, we can look to Gillian Gill's 2009 publication, *We Two: Victoria & Albert: Rulers, Partners, Rivals*. She, too, poses a challenge to the "Widow of Windsor" mythology. Baird brings very little new material to the table in *Victoria, The Queen*.

Something that continuously bothered me while reading Baird's work was the chaotic organization within each chapter. There were many "Squirrel!!!" moments peppered throughout that distracted from the points the chapters were meant to make. She got bogged down in peripheral detail, losing her train of thought regularly. The sub-sections of each chapter were only loosely connected rhetorically, and she crammed anecdotal asides in the midst of sentences. She also makes a habit of including "cinematic"-like scenes in which she presents Victoria as a character in a novel, describing thoughts, emotions, and judgments that are completely unexplained. If these details came from journals, letters, or some other documentation, Baird should have shared the information. Without it, these little vignettes are just a cute little distraction that make it seem like Baird really wanted to write a novel rather than a biography. All in all, I found Baird to be a very frustrating author, though her voice is very clear and even occasionally elegant.

Frustrations aside, Baird's biography of Victoria is informative of a life that was long, saw much, and influenced the course of British, European, and world history. It would be a good read for anyone who is casually curious about Victoria's life.

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### Matt says

As Canada prepares to celebrate its 150th birthday, I felt it high time to look back and explore the life and times of our first monarch, Queen Victoria. Much of the country was either shaped or influenced by this British monarch, whose reign was only recently surpassed by Queen Elizabeth II. Julia Baird offers a thorough and thought-provoking biography of Victoria, exploring and dispelling many of the key events and

stories that history have attributed to this 19th century wonder. Baird's presentation sheds Victoria in three distinct lights that the reader will notice throughout the narrative: Victoria the woman, the politician, and the monarch. Striving to provide a clear understanding of Victoria and the influence she had over much of the world, Baird provides the reader with a stellar piece that opens the door to further exploration.

While her enduring reign over Britain and the British Empire may have made Victoria seem super-human, she proved to have common concerns, like many of her subjects. Born in 1819, Victoria arrived amidst an ascendancy crisis in Britain. Fifth in the line of succession after the recent death of her grandfather, George III, Victoria was vilified by some of her uncles, all aged and without legitimate heirs to the Throne. Baird attributes this to George III's Royal Marriages Act, which required the monarch to approve of all unions before they could be officially accepted by Parliament. A few deaths and no heirs to take their place left Victoria in a position to rule at a young age. Victoria ascended to the Throne at nineteen, without a husband or significant love interest. Enter Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, who boldly presented himself to his cousin and determined to convince her that they should wed. Hesitant at first, Victoria soon acquiesced and they married, beginning what some have called the strongest romantic relationship of any English monarch. Victoria soon began a period of almost constant pregnancy, giving birth to nine children in total while still running the country (and Empire). Interestingly enough, while she held much power Victoria willingly handed the reins of power to Albert, as women of the time might have done, without a second thought. Baird amply illustrates the long and devoted marriage that Victoria and Albert shared, growing stronger with each passing year, during which time Albert was able to make many of the household (and monarchical) decisions without Victoria's protest. Equally shocking, as Baird presents it, Victoria remained a devoted mother as well, tending to the nine children and her subjects as effectively as possible. To bestow so much onto the shoulders of one woman is, in my opinion, more than can be expected, but Victoria did it all masterfully. When Albert fell ill and eventually died in 1861, Victoria was beside herself with grief. Baird supports what many have said that Victoria continued to reign, but never passed out of her period of mourning. Much speculation arose as John Brown soon appeared on the scene, Victoria's manservant, which Baird addresses as being rumoured to be her lover for the years before his death. (The reader can make their own decision after reading Baird's curious discovery surrounding Victoria's requirements during her preparation for burial.) Surely the friend and support that Victoria needed in her time of despair, Brown, too, succumbed earlier than one might have expected, dealing Victoria another blow. As a mother with grown children, Victoria sought to ensure her daughters married well and history proves that this was surely the case. With her son 'Bertie' (the future Edward VII) in the wings, Victoria offered as much affection to her family as possible, while remaining in a state of grief for the loss of Albert all those years before. Even when the Crown bore heavily upon her, Victoria emerged as a woman of power and significance throughout her life. At her death in 1901, Victoria had lived a life full of remarkable joy and dreadful sorrows, the weight of the latter at times self-imposed. Interestingly enough, while Victoria did little at the time to bolster the role of female emancipation or women in a position of authority, the world looked to her after her death and lauded much praise and ceremonial titles that had otherworldly connotations. While a remarkable queen, Victoria's qualities as a woman cannot be forgotten.

While surely not a member of either of Britain's Houses of Parliament, Queen Victoria played a significant role in the political machinations throughout her reign. Soon after she ascended to the Throne, Victoria forged a strong friendship with her first prime minister, Lord Melbourne. Baird presents him as a father figure that Victoria lacked in her formative years, though some may also speculate a strong affinity or 'crush' on Victoria's part. Needless to say, Victoria did not hide her sentiments and tried all she could to keep him and the Whigs in power. From this point forward, Baird presents Victoria as having a strong and lasting influence over her prime ministers and their cabinet choices, as well as messages she presented in the numerous Openings of Parliament. Victoria's strong-headedness becomes apparent as she clashed greatly with William Gladstone, Prime Minister on four occasions. Baird illustrates the dynamic between these two and how they could not find common ground on much. These were formative years for England and the British Empire, a time in which Victoria sought to have her voice heard. Issues of Irish famine, steep grain tariffs, Irish Home Rule, and imperial expansions into Africa fill the narrative, areas in which Victoria

offered her own opinions, though she was happy to help shape solutions through her actions as a part of the political machine throughout the time all ten of her British prime ministers led governments. In exploring Victoria's hands-on approach, Baird discusses something that is taken for granted in Canada, the role of a constitutional monarch in the larger process. Baird refers to writings by Walter Bagehot, who sought to explain the loose English Constitution and the place in which the monarch rests. Advice differs from influence and acceptance from determination, though much of the process was steeped in precedent and not firm law. Victoria played a much more active and quasi-partisan role than might have been expected (or allowed?) today, on either side of the Atlantic, though it was surely interesting to see her interpret and play such a transparent role in her choice of engagement at the top of the parliamentary process. Victoria may never have faced the ever-growing electorate at the ballot box, but her political influence could surely be felt throughout her time on the Throne.

Until recently, Victoria held the record for the longest-serving monarch in English history, surpassed by the current Elizabeth II. During that long period on the Throne, Victoria saw not only the Empire transform, but also her own family, as well as herself. From the early years as a young queen, Victoria was more apt to get in the middle of things, playing the role of innocent monarch, ignorant of her larger ceremonial role. However, as mentioned above, Victoria soon became a monarch that sought to steer England in a specific direction, at least to the best of her ability without facing a parliamentary election. The Empire grew significantly during her time, turning her from English monarch to that of numerous countries all over the world. For as regal as she was, Baird presents Victoria as a monarch who took her own family life to heart and did not espouse the stoic nature to which many are accustomed with today's queen. Victoria's decades-long mourning for Albert and reclusiveness for a significant period may, for some, lessen the impact of her reign. However, using her Jubilee celebrations as any measurement for her support, Victoria was loved by many and adored by her subjects. Longevity cannot be the sole factor in the praise she received for her Golden Jubilee, nor the deference paid to her around the world and especially throughout Europe. Truth be told, she had her bloodline running through many of the significant monarchies of Europe, but even still, she was not one to hold back her opinions when it suited her. The British Empire expanded and many could feel the Victorian impact, a legacy that has long outlived her reign. Victoria kept the Empire together, which was surely no small feat, and left England ready to face the 20th century by the time she died. Influential without being dictatorial, Victoria's influence as a monarch lasted throughout her long life.

Baird has taught us much in this biography, though many questions remain. Through her powerful narrative abilities, Baird takes the reader on a winding journey through the life of Victoria and the creation of a firm Empire, which continues in the form of the British Commonwealth. Born at a time when the English Throne was still seen as a despotic seat, Victoria sought to soften the blow in her own way. Baird effectively argues numerous points of contention in the book, which may leave some readers somewhat distraught, though the supporting arguments are strong and prove convincing. While I might show some bias, I would have liked to have seen a little more on some of the monumental aspects of the Empire's growth, particularly the formal addition of Canada as a country in 1867 or Australia's lobby and eventual inclusion in 1901. True, Victoria remained in mourning during the Canadian build-up, which might limit Baird's ability to track down sentiments and strengthen the narrative, but as the largest Dominion in the Empire, one might have expected it receive some place in this biography. On the flip side, Victoria's waning years occurred as Australia set to formally distinguish itself as an independent country, leaving little Victorian influence. Tackling such a large project may have been daunting, though Baird synthesises Victoria powerfully, getting detailed when needed but not drowning in the minutiae that was surely tempting over such a long reign. The reader can sail through the biography with ease, seeing Victoria as an influential (and influenced) woman whose love for family trumped all else. Any who are curious about this wonderful woman ought to give Baird a chance to offer formal introductions in this stellar piece of writing.

Kudos, Madam Baird for such a powerful biography. I did learn a great deal about Canada's first queen. I can only hope to find more of your work and marvel at the detail you add to the narrative.

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<http://pecheyponderings.wordpress.com/>

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## **Pamela says**

*"Victoria's story is one of unmatched prestige and immense privilege, of defiance and crumbling, of meddling and mettle, of devotion and overwhelming grief and then, finally, a powerful resilience that defined the tiny woman at the heart of an empire. It is a surprising story of strength. What we have truly forgotten today is that Victoria is the woman under whose auspices the modern world was made."*

There are not enough stars . . . FIVE is simply not enough. This is a biographical/history tome of **EXCELLENCE**, in a class all its own! Such attention to detail - but without ever bogging down in the unnecessary or inane. Richly told, in a voice that beckons and enthralls. Conversational, in a way, but yet authoritative. It's also culturally and atmospherically transporting. Baird made Victoria and the crown come alive. Researched in great swathing breadth. I can only imagine the vast amount of time that entailed.

*"They wished to treat me like a girl, but I will show them that I am Queen of England."*

The pages are exceptional numerous and the scope is broad, but don't let that dissuade you from reading this if you have any interest whatsoever in England and/or its rich history, the Regents, Women of Notoriety, or Leaders who influenced the course of history and the times.

## **Julia Baird - standing ovation, round of applause!!!!**

FIVE \*\*\*\*\* Readably Engaging and Excitedly Enlightening - Biographical-History Brought Alive Through a Mastery Wordsmith Pen \*\*\*\*\* STARS

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## **DeB MaRtEnS says**

Queen Victoria's story has been well defined in this fascinating, well-rounded and researched biography by Julia Baird. Victoria Regina Imperatrix was the petite queen whose feet did not reach the bottom of the throne on the day of her coronation. Her daughters saw her beautiful smile, her husband enjoyed her strong libido and to her dismay she found herself in a cumbersome pregnant body for eight out of nine years running. Prince Albert was the man of the relationship and Victoria deferred in the marriage, but she was always the Queen. In a time when revolution threatened monarchies in Europe, to her country she was both the symbol of the British aristocracy and an English mother, entrusted with her nation's safety and wellbeing.

Victoria's history is fairly well-known, especially that of her courtship and marriage to Albert. Julia Baird had access to previously inaccessible documents which further enriched the biography, adding insight and balance to former accounts. Their youngest daughter Beatrice between 1933-1943 had taken upon herself to whitewash her mother Queen Victoria's diaries, rewriting them, and burning the originals "in one of the greatest acts of historical censorship of the century". As a result, we know about "The Queen" but her interior self has been poorly represented. Baird has filled in that picture, giving context and softening the more familiar grim biographical portrait which has represented Victoria. I appreciated her life, it's hardships, her joys and felt great compassion for the working mother, wife and widow that the author has brought to life.

The global style of this biography is very satisfying. Baird's writing brings us closest to Victoria and then as her timeline is followed, so too is that of Britain, the Commonwealth and the fully expanded Empire. She was actively knowledgeable about Parliament, hard-working and opinionated and at times meddlesome when politicians would have preferred to ignore her mature good advice. Though she insisted that everyone who met with her must always walk away backwards and never show their backside to her, she was surprisingly free of racial prejudice. Interestingly, the prim attitudes toward sex which characterized the Victorian Age were Prince Albert's, not Victoria's!

There is such a broad range of information in this biography: history, anecdotes, interesting trivia, fashion, a theory of the psychology about extended bereavement and killer diseases prevalent in the previous century, now almost unheard of today. Family grudges had a part in starting World War I; British empire building can be linked to the beginning of crises in the Middle East. Considering the years and years of intermarriage between royalty from different countries, Julia Baird's retelling of the facts sometimes seemed like the zany family history of misbehaving European monarchs, with actions that resonated eerily today. Prince Albert's mother met a fate so much like Princess Diana's, it gave me shivers.

\*\*\*I admit that I skimmed through the most detailed passages set in government; the political infighting between Gladstone and Victoria became tiresome. I felt that the nitty gritty of his life and other politicians, in finite detail, bogged the book down in the middle. A large general audience might enjoy this biography if this section was pared down to a more basic focus, keeping its good anecdotes (eg., the ones about Disraeli). I could then confidently recommend *Victoria: The Queen* to fans of *Downton Abbey* because the majority of the biography otherwise is as fluid as good historical fiction.

*Victoria: The Queen* is a bibliophile's pleasure. Part history, part personal story, the book transports the reader into Victoria's life to imagine the scenes, the trials and tribulations and splendour of her great life.

NetGalley and RandomHouse Publishing provided the ARC for my unbiased review.

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### **Ashley Brooks says**

For me it's usually a gamble with long, historical biographies on whether or not they'll be dense and dull. *Victoria: The Queen* was definitely the opposite. Baird wrote an engaging, well researched and well rounded account of the woman who shaped an era. It's a shame that Victoria's journals and letters were censored so heavily, but I think Baird did an excellent job of uncovering the truth where she could, and making (clearly noted) educated speculation based on the information she had.

I highly recommend this and will be keeping an eye out for Baird's writing in the future!

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### **Chrissie says**

This book covers Victoria's entire life from childhood to death, revealing both personal details about her personality, her life and her family as well as her influence on British and international politics and history. There is a large amount of British history detailed. One might not guess this from the book's title.

I particularly appreciate the simplicity and clarity by which, with just a minimum of detail, international and national controversies are summarized. Then, knowing the background situation, interesting details relate Victoria's, her husband's or perhaps a dignitary's response to the situation. Secondly, the book brings to

vivid life the deep bond that grew between Victoria and Albert.

Together, historical events as well as personal family events unfold chronologically. The book concludes with a sweeping summary of the changes which took place during the Victorian era – industrialization, unionization, new technologies, rapid increase in the size of the British Empire, feminism and better social rights.

After the death of her father, when Victoria was less than a year old, Victoria's mother, the Duchess of Kent, aligned herself with Sir John Conroy, an ambitious comptroller and most probably her lover. Their domineering control led to Victoria's isolation and a desire to be master of her own fate. This early conflict with her mother clearly shaped Victoria into a strong-willed queen, determined to hold on to the power that was rightly hers. It also left her a person in search of love and companionship. Even when surrounded by many, she felt alone. She became close to her trusted governess, and later advisor, Louise Lehzen. At eighteen years of age Victoria became queen. Her dependence and close friendship with Prime Minister Melbourne is discussed. In 1840, she married Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, this having long been planned by her close friend, father-figure and maternal uncle, Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg-Saalfeld. It was he who later became in 1830 the first Belgian king.

Victoria and Albert had nine children. Childbirth was of course physically and psychologically wearing and immensely time-consuming in the life of an active queen. But, she had a strong libido and did love her children too. Despite her strong bond with Albert, disagreements naturally arose and Victoria bluntly voiced what she thought. Their relationship is a marvel to observe. The love between Victoria and Albert was deep, but not friction free. Victoria became pregnant after only three months of marriage. During her childbearing years, Albert, the Prince Consort, stood in for many of her duties, but this was exactly what he desired. This was his life goal and what he had envisioned. He loved his role as "king". Victoria and Albert pushed their desks together and worked side by side together as a team with both Prime Ministers Peel and Palmerston. After Albert's untimely death in 1861, Victoria became **immensely** depressed. Slowly, after intense bereavement, she regained her sense of self.

In the 1870s and 1880s she worked alongside Prime Ministers Disraeli, Gladstone and Salisbury. Both Victoria and Albert were born the same year, in 1819. Victoria lived forty years after his death! At Victoria's death, her children and grandchildren were established in the courts of Germany, Russia, Spain, Norway, Greece, Romania and Portugal. Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany was her grandson. It is known today that she and her daughters carried the hemophilia gene into the royalty of many a European nation. Reigning for sixty-three years, seven months and two days she was the longest reigning British Monarch, only later surpassed by her great-great-granddaughter Elizabeth II.

In 1901, the year of Victoria's death, the British empire encompassed a quarter of the entire world and 400 million people. The industrial age was well established, women's rights were being recognized, child labor restricted, the work day had fallen from twelve to eight hours and unionization was in progress.

Victoria's relationships with both John Brown and Hafiz Mohammed Abdul Karim are discussed and more importantly what these relationships reveal about Victoria herself. Was Victoria a prude? No, absolutely not. She was the opposite of ever being a racist and even if she did not support the suffragette movement, her actions showed what a woman could in fact do in the man dominated world of the 19th century.

The book is also praiseworthy in that it draws a clear picture of where Europe stood before the First World War. The Crimean War, the coalition of German states, Germany's occupation of Alsace and Lorraine, distrust of Russian expansionism, the Berlin Congress of 1878 regulating among other things Bulgaria's independence and borders and Turkey's position as the "sick man of Europe" are all detailed.

Nightingale and how she fought against cruelty to animals are but three examples.

That the book at the end shifts away from Victoria, the person, to the societal changes transforming her era is on one hand an appropriate conclusion, but it also makes the focus of the book unwieldy.

The audiobook is narrated by Clare Frankel. It is very well done. Pauses and an altered intonation make it easy to identify quotes, of which there are many. Most of the book is read clearly and at a speed that allows one time to absorb the dense information packed into the lines. However, near the end, the tempo becomes much faster than it had been before. This portion is almost impossible to follow. I chose to decrease the speed to 75%. At the lower speed, the lines are lethargically slow, which is in turn also annoying but better than listening to a jumble of words! Since the normal tempo does return after about a quarter of an hour, I did not lower my four star rating.

This book is equal parts history and biography. It is clear, engaging and well researched, revealing facts which previously had been removed by Victoria's daughter Beatrice. In this volume, both Victoria's attributes and weaknesses are presented. I really enjoyed the reading experience, and so therefore I must give it four stars.

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If this book interests you, I believe these will too:

We Two: Victoria and Albert: Rulers, Partners, Rivals 4\*  
(Unfortunately, this book concludes with the death of Albert!)

George, Nicholas and Wilhelm: Three Royal Cousins and the Road to World War I 4\*

Charlotte And Leopold: The True Story Of The Original People's Princess 3\*

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## **Steven Z. says**

The current airing of PBS' Masterpiece Theater of VICTORIA and its popularity has created great interest in the British monarch who ruled her kingdom and the world's largest empire between her accession to the throne in 1837 and her death in 1901. The program is written by Daisy Goodwin who has recently published her novel VICTORIA a fictional account of the early years of Victoria's reign. For a full and intimate biography Julia Baird has filled that void with VICTORIA: THE QUEEN which is an in depth study of the queen focusing on what it was like to be a female monarch in a world dominated by men. Baird takes a somewhat feminist approach to her subject and based on years of research and mastery of primary and secondary material, the reader will learn what it was like for the teenage girl to suddenly assume the throne in 1837, her views on Parliament, Prime Ministers, attitudes toward the poor, foreign policy ranging from the Crimean War to the Boer War, but also the effect of her reign on society and women in particular. The approach Baird takes is informative, well thought out, provides impeccable analysis, but at times she takes her intimate approach a bit too far. I understand the importance of Victoria's multiple pregnancies that produced nine children, but I do not need to know the details of her menstrual cycle and her reproductive anatomy. Details about her life with Prince Alfred are fascinating, but at times, here too, she goes overboard. However, despite some flaws the book is beautifully written and an important contribution to the historiography of the Queen.

During her reign Victoria steered her people through the social and economic changes wrought by the

Industrial Revolution, and oversaw her kingdom as the European balance of power was radically altered through nationalism and imperialism. The Queen's reign was the longest in British history until it was recently surpassed in 2015 by Queen Elizabeth II. Baird points to the many myths associated with Victoria relating to her marriage to Prince Albert, her use of power as queen, her treatment of her subjects, and her personality traits. Baird accurately concludes that "Victoria is the woman under whose auspices the modern world was made." Further, Baird does an exceptional job analyzing her subject in the context of mid to late 19th century socio-economic change and her impact on European society and the larger world especially for the role of women. In a sense Baird has created an ode to the development of the women's movement with Victoria's situation seen as a primary motivator behind it. Baird correctly argues that Victoria fought for her independence, prestige, and respect for her reign from the time she was a teenager, and did so mostly on her own. For the author, she "worked until her eyes wore out, that she advised, and argued with, ten prime ministers, populated the royal courts of Europe, and kept the British monarchy stable during the political upheavals that shook Europe in the nineteenth century."

Baird gives Victoria a great deal of credit but then she backtracks as she discusses the queen's relationship with Lord Melbourne, who she leaned on for support in dealing with her mother, John Conroy, certain members of her family, Parliament, and policy decisions. Baird describes a young woman infatuated with an older man, who thankfully does not seem to take advantage of his position. According to Baird, Victoria will eventually concede powers to Prince Albert in most major social, political, and foreign policy areas. Granted, Victoria was pregnant a great deal of the time during her marriage to Albert, and suffered from postpartum depression and other ills that made her involvement in decision making less of an issue, but Baird herself points out the differences in approach between Victoria and Albert. The Prince was more of an intellectual than his spouse and was greatly interested in the problems of the poor and working classes. Albert was a cultured and well educated person who did not want to crush public dissent like Victoria and it appeared he wanted to bring about reform in order to lessen that dissent. According to Baird, "the role of the monarchy under Albert's leadership, then, was a forceful influence, which urged the government to exercise restraint in foreign policy and democratization, to erode the authority of the aristocracy and exert influence through a web of royal connections that spanned Europe in a network of carefully planned and delicate backdoor diplomacy." Victoria on the other hand was not as empathetic toward her subjects. A case in point is her approach to the Irish famine where she started out criticizing tyrannical landlords, but once a few landlords that she knew were murdered, her sympathy for Irish tenant farmers waned. Baird argues that it was a stretch to blame Victoria for the famine, but there was a great deal she could have done to mitigate their effects. It is clear that from the time of her marriage to Prince Albert in 1839 until his death in 1861 England may have gone through an Albertine Age as Baird suggests, and it took until the Prince died for Victoria to seize the reigns and create the Victorian Age.

For Victoria until Albert's passing life was a balancing act; how to be a good mother, wife, and reign over her kingdom. Baird does her best to show the Queen as a loving and doting mother, but then in the next sentence she will point out that she was rarely involved in certain aspects of her children's care. Victoria possessed a quiet stubbornness that forced many who opposed her wishes to underestimate her, particularly when she ruled by herself. Lord Melbourne did school her well on how to be an effective Queen, and she learned from Albert certain sensibilities that a monarch needed to possess.

Baird does an effective job dealing with Victoria's views and impact on events. Her role in the Crimean War debate is discussed in full, her fears of revolution in 1848 and why the social upheaval throughout Europe did not cross the English Channel, her distaste for the Russians in the Eastern crisis that led to war and the Treaty of Berlin in 1878, and her opposition to Home Rule for the Irish. Further, Baird's discussion and analysis of Victoria's relationship with her Prime Ministers is top drawer particularly her negative relationship with Lord Palmerston when he was Foreign and Prime Minister, and her up and down relationships with certain Prime Ministers, particularly William Gladstone, Lord Derby and Lord Russell. Her relationship with Lord Salisbury was excellent but nothing compared to her relationship with Benjamin Disraeli as he was the only Prime Minister to realize that the lonely queen wanted to be "fettered, flattered, and adored." As \_\_\_\_\_

Victoria aged she moved on from her Whiggish liberalism under the influence of Melbourne to outright conservatism due to her close relationship with the Tory, Disraeli. The last twenty years of her reign Victoria, who never acted as an impartial monarch, became greatly involved in politics, especially when the man she loathed, William Gladstone had defeated Disraeli in parliamentary elections in 1881.

It can be argued that 1861 was a watershed year for Europe and the world because of its impact on the United States and across Europe. It witnessed the outbreak of the Civil War in the United States, the supposed emancipation of serfs in Russia, and the death of Prince Albert. Her husband's death became the greatest test for Victoria's reign. She seemed to succumb to an extreme depression and many wondered if mental illness would overtake her as it did George III. Her depression would last for a number of years where she had doubts about how to proceed with policies and felt extremely alone. During that time a number of major events in Europe would draw the attention of the British Foreign Office. The Polish Revolt against Russia and the controversy over Schleswig-Holstein would lead to the Danish War between Denmark and Prussia. English influence in this 1863 crisis was marked and if Albert had been alive he might have influenced events more than his mourning widow. By the late 1860s it appeared that Victoria was emerging from her depressive state, and as she overcame her loss she would go on to be a strong monarch in her own right making a deep impact on her kingdom as well as Europe.

The key individual in Victoria's emergence from her widowed state was John Brown, a Scottish Highlander who had been Albert's outdoor attendant at Balmoral who became her most intimate friend. Her children despised him and nicknamed him the "Queen's Stallion." There are many rumors and myths about their relationship that Baird addresses, whether they were lovers and what impact he may have had on policies, as one writer referred to him as "Rasputin with a kilt." No matter what the truth may be, one thing is certain is that the Queen came to rely on him and he helped fill the void created by Albert's death. In fact, Victoria would spend eighteen years in his company, almost as long as she spent with her beloved Albert.

Baird spends a great deal of time discussing royal genealogy and its impact on Victoria's life and policy decisions. Using the marriage of her children for diplomatic need had been a tradition of European and English monarchies for centuries, but in her case the result can be considered quite disastrous as her lineage connects her to Wilhelm II of Germany, and Nicholas II of Russia who both bear a great deal of the blame for the outbreak of World War I and the carnage that followed. Her children were placed throughout Europe as a means of extending English influence, but in reality that goal was rarely met.

There is no doubt that no one person dominated her kingdom the way Victoria had, particularly from the 1870s onward as she applied the political lessons learned over the decades, especially working in the shadows to achieve her goals while her subjects thought she was romping in Scotland as any monarch would do. Baird creates an absorbing picture of a fascinating life. Despite a few flaws Baird should be commended for producing the most comprehensive analysis of Victoria and her importance in history, and it should remain the most important secondary source on Victoria's life for years to come.

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## Sean Gibson says

Queen Victoria was a zombie warlord who ruled Great Britain for more than 1,000 years and whose favorite beverage was Coke Slurpees.

There are those who will suggest, perhaps even insist, that the foregoing is not a factual statement. In fact, they may even label it impossible, or at least absurd. To those smug individuals, however, I would pose this unanswerable question: do YOU know what was in the countless letters Victoria received and sent that her

family and biographers destroyed in an attempt to keep certain potentially embarrassing or compromising details out of the hands of the general public?

No—you most certainly do not. It's entirely within the realm of plausibility that she was a Slurpee-guzzling undead general.

And that is, undoubtedly, one of the most fascinating aspects of Victoria and the body of literature that has grown around her and the era in which she ruled (which, I'm given to understand, people briefly thought about calling "The Ham Sandwich Era" before settling on "The Victorian Era" as a more sensible alternative). Baird's masterful biography explores this and other equally interesting aspects of Britain's now-second-longest-serving monarch, who oversaw an era of change unlike any king or queen before her (though one could quite convincingly argue that her great-great-granddaughter Elizabeth II has seen even more radical change in her lifetime).

As you'll note from my status updates while reading the book, there are any number of fun facts we might conjecture about in the absence of that destroyed correspondence. Putting those aside for the moment, however, there is still ample material of interest for Baird to cover, from the challenges Victoria conquered in ascending to the throne and her controversial relationships with her prime ministers (too close in some instances; disrespectfully not close in at least the case of William Gladstone) to her relationship with her husband and later reliance on male servants (strapping Scot John Brown being the most prominent) for companionship (platonic, certainly, but also perhaps of the giggleberries-go-spelunking kind) and simple friendship.

The duality of the Victorian age has been covered exhaustively by historians and literary critics alike, but it really is a fascinating study in contrast, and Victoria herself is a prime example. She was, by turns, a long-suffering but devoted daughter, a mercurial but doting mother, an assertive but conservative ruler, an adoring and dutiful wife who insisted on maintaining her independent power, a champion of the people and bastion of racial tolerance who thought little of women's right to vote, and a conservatively clad lady of decorum who most likely enjoyed more than an occasional ride on John Brown's mighty caber.

If you're interested in Victoria—either as a ruler or as a person, or both—or simply want a better understanding of the interplay between government and the monarchy in Victorian Britain, this is essential reading. If you like small old ladies in drab mourning garb guzzling sugary beverages through spoon straws while slaying ghouls and ghosts with a glowing laser sword, well, it may or may not be for you—it all depends on what you read between the lines.

(Need more Victorian goodness? I highly recommend *Conan Doyle for the Defense: The True Story of a Sensational British Murder, a Quest for Justice, and the World's Most Famous Detective Writer.*)

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## **Book Riot Community says**

It's not often I'm able to read a nonfiction book in one sitting, much less a historical biography, but that's just what happened with Julia Baird's new biography of Queen Victoria. Baird writes beautifully, crafting a careful narrative around Britain's second-longest reigning monarch. Her research is thorough, and she really provides the reader with a sense of what Victoria the woman and Victoria the queen were like. But most of all, this book is compulsively readable. Don't let the 500+ pages of this biography intimidate you: you'll breeze through this enjoyable biography as easily as the first season of Netflix's *The Crown*.

-Swapna Krishna

from The Best Books We Read In November 2016: <http://bookriot.com/2016/12/01/the-be...>

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## Michael Livingston says

Maybe 3.5

To be honest, I'd never have picked up a ~800 page bio of Queen Victoria if it hadn't made the Stella Prize longlist. Am I glad that I did? I'm not sure. It's eminently readable and meticulously researched, but I think my enthusiasm for the royals is so lacking that even the perfect bio was going to leave me a bit cold.

I learned a lot that I didn't know - especially what an awful person Albert was - but I still felt like I came away a bit lacking in a real understanding of the person Victoria. How did she go from fierce and self-sufficient 18 year old to someone completely manipulated by her husband into feelings of helplessness and incompetence? What did she really believe in, beyond supporting Prime Ministers who she got along well with? What power did she actually have over this period? I felt a few things could have been better fleshed out, although the royal family's gutting of her diaries and letters no doubt make a lot of this hard for even the most thorough researcher.

It's a long commitment and, while I found it a lot more entertaining than I expected to, I'd really only recommend it to someone with an existing interest in the British royal family.

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## K. says

4.5 stars.

Things I learnt from this book:

- Queen Victoria was THIRSTY. Like...T.H.I.R.S.T.Y. Homegirl reeeeeeeally wanted the D. Her main concern when told that she should stop having children was basically "But I can still get laid, right??"
- When Albert died, Queen Victoria had marble replicas of his hands made and kept them by her bed. Read into that what you will.
- Queen Victoria was totally in favour of progression in society, unless it involved women. And yet she was the most powerful woman in the world.
- Some academics think that Prince Albert was gay because he was nervous around women and had lots of close male friends. Excuse me, y'all? HE HAD NINE CHILDREN WITH HIS SUPER THIRSTY WIFE. THE WORD "BISEXUAL" EXISTS, PLEASE AND THANK YOU.
- Queen Victoria's kids went through her diaries and photos after she died and got rid of all the good stuff (including photos of her smiling????) because they thought it wasn't sufficiently regal. Rude.
- Albert was...kind of a power-hungry asshat at times.
- You will probably learn far more than you wanted to about the impact that having nine children had on Queen Victoria in later life. Although to be honest, learning ANYTHING about Queen Victoria's lady parts probably would have been more than I want to know...

So yeah. On the whole, this was FASCINATING and incredibly readable. Just don't try and read it in bed because it's heavy and you'll probably drop it on your face like I did and it hurts.

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## Carolyn Harris says

An engaging biography of Queen Victoria, which captures her personality and wide range of interests. Baird places Victoria in the context of her times, highlighting the social issues and changing attitudes toward women over the course of the 19th century. As a female Head of State, Victoria inspired other women interested in achieving a greater role in public life, even though she was personally opposed to women's suffrage and women joining a number of the professions. This focus on Victoria's influence as a woman in power makes this biography stand out from many others about the Queen. The contradictions within Victoria's character and relationships are also well illustrated here.

There are a few points where I disagree with Baird's analysis. Like A.N. Wilson, she argues that Victoria had romantic feelings toward Lord Melbourne while I agree with Kate Williams that she viewed him more as a father figure and "favorite tutor." It's also disappointing to see some of the speculation about Princess Louise from Lucinda Hawksley's recent bio of the Princess repeated as though they are facts.

Overall, I enjoyed Baird's biography of Queen Victoria, which demonstrates that more than a century after the Queen's death, there are still fresh perspectives and interpretations of her long life.

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## Jamie Collins says

Another biography of Queen Victoria. It's very good, but can there be anything new to say?

This book has the agenda of dispelling the "myth" that Victoria "stopped ruling when Albert died, and that she had abdicated almost all of her authority and power to her clever husband when he was alive." The author asserts that "Queen Victoria was a decisive ruler who complained of the weight of her work while simultaneously bossing prime ministers about daily, if not hourly."

Most biographies focus on her life with Albert, and while this certainly covers that period, it gives full weight to the 40 years Victoria lived and ruled after his death. During this time she was a "robust and interventionist ruler", often crossing constitutional lines. She "carefully cultivated the image of a compliant, reclusive, and domesticated queen... Her subjects pictured her ambling around Scotland, not shoving a popularly elected minister from his perch."

The book also emphasizes Victoria's relationship with John Brown, showing evidence that she was in deeply in love with him. There's no proof of sexual intimacy, but a few tantalizing hints survived the family's attempt to purge all evidence of his influence.

Overall this is a highly readable, well-organized, fascinating view of Victoria.

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## Sam says

Overall, *Victoria: The Queen* is very well researched and has a flowing narrative style that makes it easy to engage with. We are treated to Victoria's own life chronologically, from an infant fifth in line to the throne to a passionate teenager thrust into rule, from the swooning love and contentment of her marriage to Albert, to her consuming grief and seclusion after his death, from the Widow of Windsor to her reemergence in politics and foreign policy. Above all, Julia Baird is able to refute the popular notion (one that Victoria herself

propagated) that Albert was the true power behind the throne, as even when pregnant and caring for young children, Victoria's strength and fiery personality are ever present and assertive in terms of dealing with foreign policy and thinking of how best to care for her subjects. She also is able to draw a strong hypothesis as to the nature of the relationship between John Brown and the Queen, one that has always elicited interest and controversy even from contemporary Victorian sources. And she does what she can to set the record straight so to speak from the heavily censored version of Victoria's diaries that her daughter Beatrice edited after her mother's death, to present a true, well-rounded portrait of a powerful, feisty woman and ruler, showcasing her strengths and flaws of character to equal effect.

Besides being an exhaustive portrait of Victoria herself, Julia Baird also does a wonderful job giving very strong portraits of major figures in British and European history as well, notably Prince Albert, Gladstone and Disraeli and their political battles, and Kaiser Wilhelm II, Victoria's grandson (who comes off distinctly poorly). Baird is also very well able to situate some of the European political crises of the Victorian era, and show the connecting threads from Victoria's family and personal and political decision making to various critical events in the 20th century like World War I, and even some that still reverberate today, like conflicts in Afghanistan and elsewhere in the Middle East. I do wish there was a bit more discussion about the Empire that greatly expanded under her reign, and given a bit more insight into the positive and even more so negative impacts of the British colonial policy and how they did or did not affect Victoria: those parts are definitely minimized, which perhaps speaks to the ministers leaving the Queen in a bit of ignorance about atrocities and famine and hunger in the name of the Empire.

The Victorian era of England and Britain is very well captured, and we absorb the fast changing social, industrial, and economic conditions as Victoria, Albert, and the government's reforms and laws are implemented. One really got a well rounded sense of what it meant to be living in the transforming Victorian Britain, from the early days of Victoria's reign to the end at the dawn of the 20th century, and how progress and change in fashion, medicine, and cultural mores occurred. I particularly liked the connective tissue between Victoria- who perpetuated the idea that women should be subservient to their husbands and even she was lesser than Albert though her rule, importance, and assertiveness were undiminished and unchallenged in his lifetime - and the women's suffrage movement, something that she herself was ambivalent about and yet her longevity and dominance and strength came to be embraced and the symbol of Victoria adopted in some ways by early suffragettes.

I highly recommend this read for people interested in Queen Victoria and the Victorian era in British politics and British life, and also for most readers of biographies who'd like to see the long life of a dynamic and powerful, emotional and courageous Queen.

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### **Barbara (The Bibliophage) says**

Julia Baird undertook an enormous task in researching and writing this extensive and highly detailed biography of England's second-longest ruling monarch. Queen Victoria's long reign was just eclipsed last year by her great-great-granddaughter Queen Elizabeth II.

Baird masterfully mixes stories of Queen Victoria's family life, relationships, political ambitions, failures, and triumphs. We learn the details of how Britain's system of government works, as the author explains how the Queen negotiated with and bullied 19 Prime Ministers during her reign.

But Victoria wasn't just a ruler, she was a woman, a wife, and mother of nine. This aspect of her life is covered in detail as well. Imagine having to get comfortable with a new husband who had his own desire for power while also learning to rule a country. The 19th century was ripe with prejudice against women, and

Victoria barreled through most of it with strength, diplomatic negotiation, and humor.

Victoria and Albert's relationship, including their power struggles, was interesting within the context of the times. I found it both depressing and captivating to see how they balanced their public and private lives, with Victoria taking the back seat to Albert in so many things.

In terms of writing style, isn't at all dry. Parts of it are even fascinating, although my personal lack of interest made descriptions of military campaigns seem interminable. This is the first biography of Queen Victoria I've read, and I'm quite sure I've received a comprehensive perspective.

Thanks to the author, publisher Random House, and NetGalley for a digital advance copy in exchange for an honest review.

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