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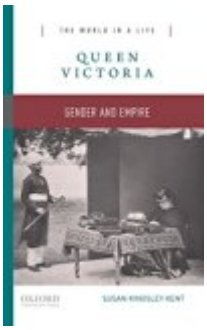
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Susan Kingsley Kent. *Queen Victoria: Gender and Empire.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. 216 pp. $16.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-19-025000-3.



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Commissioned by Stephen Jackson (University of Sioux Falls)

The intent of the Oxford University Press series The World in a Life is to use biographies of globally significant historical figures as "windows onto the complicated trends, events, crises of their time, providing an entry point for a deeper understanding of a particular historical era." [1] The contribution of Susan Kingsley Kent to the series, *Queen Victoria*, deftly meets these aims. In just over 180 pages the author provides students with a rich and complicated narrative that places the nineteenth-century British monarch at the center of a complex web of debates about gender expectations and empire.

The overriding concern of *Queen Victoria* is the disconnection that lay at the heart of nineteenth-century British public life: the place of a woman who, denied the rights of citizenship, was nevertheless the head of a state and an empire. One of the most appealing aspects of the book is the way in which Kent organizes her narrative around the needs of students. While instructors may find the focus on distinct private/public spheres for men and women familiar terrain, the author uses an idea that should be familiar to introduce students to debates germane to nineteenth-century Britain.

One successful example of Kent's use of public/private distinctions emerges in the way the queen navigated assumptions about political and social order. Despite believing that women "are not fitted to reign" (p. 63), Victoria nonetheless justified her frequent political interventions in constitutional terms. One important example occurred when Victoria wrested back monarchical oversight of parliamentary affairs from her husband, Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg Gotha. Albert had used Victoria's interminable pregnancies as an opportunity to govern as a co-ruler, but had grown unpopular during the 1840s. Disquiet erupted in 1851, when an infuriated citizenry blamed the prince for the sacking of the popular Lord Palmerston as prime minster. By drawing on the long-standing private relationships she had developed with government ministers and officials, Victoria publicly forced Parliament to attest to Albert's loyalty, and relegated Albert to a mere-

ly ceremonial political role. Kent shows how by acting to restore order, Victoria connected her constitutional role as monarch to nineteenth-century assumptions of motherhood and domestic stability.

Queen Victoria uses the Palmerston affair to show how the queen translated her familial role to the public stage for her own advantage. Kent locates Victoria's ability to do this in her awareness of the power of rhetorical appeal. To her subjects the queen seemed a compelling figure because of the way her family reflected the typical mid-nineteenth-century middle-class values of propriety, family, duty, and domestic respectability. But as the author explains, emphasizing the respectability of the royal family made good institutional sense. This was Victoria's greatest political victory. Revolutions in Europe, and Victoria's dissolute and unpopular Georgian forebears, had led many newly assertive middle-class liberals to question the need for a monarchy. The suggestion that Victoria secured the longevity of the monarchy by showing how the royal family reflected bourgeois values, is analytically rich and offers great promise for classroom discussion.

Queen Victoria carefully studies the gender prejudices of the period. Kent argues that while Victoria disrupted some gender norms of the period, she carefully did so behind the palace doors. Victoria's enjoyment of sex challenged popular beliefs that women were passionless and sexually unfeeling, but these feelings remained private. Although Victoria publicly identified with her role as royal mother, at home she was a distant and reluctant mother who, lacking knowledge about contraception or nonpenetrative sex, fell pregnant nine times. In reality, Albert was the more loving parent. Similarly, Albert, not Victoria, imposed the tone of morality and prudery that we today associate with mid-nineteenth-century Britain.

Publicly, Victoria had an awkward relationship to women's rights. The queen condemned the emerging feminism of the mid- and late nineteenth century, but also took on a public political role that defied expectations of women. Kent argues that Victoria justified such acts by considering them the fulfillment of her constitutional role as monarch. But surely seeing a woman operate as a political actor inspired Victorian-era feminists as well? At the same time, Victoria set examples in her private life that clearly advocated for women. By demanding chloroform as a pain reliever for her last labor, Victoria broke down both popular suspicion that use of the liquid led to moral degeneracy and clerical belief that the pain of childbirth was punishment for Eve's transgressions. Her acts transformed for the better natal care. Similarly, the queen's relationship with the Scottish gamekeeper John Brown following the death of Albert could be read as an assertion of the right of women to an independent emotional life.

Kent illustrates the care with which Victoria balanced her public role as monarch with the societal expectations impressed upon her as a woman. Although Victoria was no feminist innovator, the author shows how the British monarch reflected the slow passage of change. The biography introduces students to complex arguments about feminism and gender, and to some of the important ideas Kent has outlined in her previous writings.

Victoria also served to unify the empire. Kent depicts Victoria's public image as the mother whose moral authority lay at the heart of the empire as a successful piece of rhetorical theater that drew together colony and metropole. In making this argument, the author shows how the British monarch reflected a series of contradictions that lay at the heart of nineteenth-century liberal Britain. Queen Victoria expressed abhorrence of racial hatred and concern about the lives of her overseas subjects. But at the same time, she was an ardent imperialist who delighted in her title Empress of India, celebrated British control over

the Suez Canal, gloried in the spectacular expansion of the empire after 1880, and, in the months before her death, offered advice to ministers and officials over tactics in the South African War (1899-1902). Nor did Victoria intervene as her governments presided over atrocities in Ireland, India, and South Africa and allowed racial prejudice to flourish throughout the empire.

The organization of the argument leaves Queen Victoria rather divorced from the political machinations driving empire. Kent focuses more on the actions of politicians than those of the queen. But perhaps there is a more important lesson here. The reader is left with the feeling that if Victoria was a stand-in for the British middle classes, she was also reflective of not just increasing bourgeois imperial fervor as the nineteenth-century progressed, but popular indifference to the consequences of empire as well. These points may require classroom clarification.

Susan Kingsley Kent has written a short, comprehensive, and engaging biography. She neatly situates her subject at the intersection of multiple debates about the British past. The prose is focused, crisp, and easy to read. The book is organized around a linear structure that strikes a nice balance between the passage of time and the study of different historical continuities and changes. The analysis is deft and helps explain a series of clearly signposted arguments.

Queen Victoria has a place in any undergraduate class studying British, European, or imperial history. It opens up several important historical debates that, while familiar to historians, are new to the intended audience--students. If assigned along with texts focusing on industrialization and empire, *Queen Victoria* could form the cornerstone of a syllabus on nineteenth-century Britain. Instructors teaching history-writing classes may also want to consider assigning this book. Tracing the sources the author studies, and the steps and connections she makes as she builds her argument, would provide a valuable lesson in history writing and argument.

Note

[1]. Bonnie G. Smith, introduction to Susan Kingsley Kent, *Queen Victoria: Gender and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), iii.

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