



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Queen Victoria and India, 1837-61

Taylor, Miles.

Victorian Studies, Volume 46, Number 2, Winter 2004, pp. 264-274 (Article)

Published by Indiana University Press

DOI: [10.1353/vic.2004.0109](https://doi.org/10.1353/vic.2004.0109)



➔ For additional information about this article

[http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/vic/summary/v046/46.2taylor\\_m.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/vic/summary/v046/46.2taylor_m.html)

# Queen Victoria and India, 1837-61

MILES TAYLOR

## I. The Blot on the Queen's Head

With the passage of the Royal Titles Bill in the summer of 1876, Queen Victoria became Empress of India. Contemporaries saw the measure as a theatrical coup engineered by her prime minister, Benjamin Disraeli. Disraeli had neglected to consult properly the opposition before the announcement of the Bill in the Queen's speech and his critics therefore lambasted his imperial pretensions, which were deemed un-English and despotic (Knights; Durrans; Metcalf 60-61). As David Feldman and Anthony Wohl have shown, antisemitic caricature of Disraeli reached a frenzied climax in 1876. The image of Disraeli as an Eastern potentate, corrupting the English monarchy by turning the Queen into an Empress was a popular theme within this stereotype, exemplified in *Punch's* "New Crowns for Old" cartoon of 15 April 1876 (see fig. 1), and also in Edward Jenkins's 1876 pamphlet *The Blot on the Queen's Head*, which sold 90,000 copies within the year (Feldman 94-115; Wohl; Jenkins). By contrast, Disraeli's supporters welcomed the Royal Titles Bill as a brilliant diplomatic move, which underlined Britain's global power in a world increasingly dominated by continental empires such as Russia, bearing down on the northwest frontier of India, and Germany, recently unified under the Prussian imperial throne (Buckle 5: 456-77; Smith 199-200).

But amid all the controversy provoked by the Royal Titles Bill in 1876—concealed by the rush to identify Disraeli as either hero or villain of the piece—lay a rather disturbing truth. Queen Victoria thought she was Empress of India already. Throughout the 1860s and early 1870s she habitually referred to herself as "Empress," and to her Indian dependencies as her "empire." For example, in June 1872, when told that envoys from Burma were refusing to prostrate themselves before her on their being received at court, she declared, "As Empress of India, I must insist on this" (Buckle 2: 218-19). And six months or so later, in 1873, her secretary Frederick Ponsonby enquired on her behalf of the Liberal



Fig. 1. “New Crowns for Old Ones.” *Punch* 15 April 1876: 147.

Secretary of State for the Colonies, Earl Granville, “how it was that the title of Empress of India, which is frequently used in reference to her Majesty, has never been officially adopted” (Buckle 2: 238-39).

The object of the following paper is to attempt to understand the source of Victoria’s belief that she had in fact been Empress of India, at least since the East India Company lost control of India in

1858, and possibly further back than that. The relationship between Victoria and India in the first half of her reign is largely unexplored. We are more familiar with the ways in which India became inscribed at Victoria's court in the latter half of her reign—the Prince of Wales's Indian tours, the creation of a “durbar” room at Osborne House, her summer retreat on the Isle of Wight, the presence of the Munshi in her domestic service, and the prominence given to Sikh regiments at the jubilees of 1887 and 1897. The Raj has come to be seen by scholars as a vital component in the increasingly ornamental and feminized character of Victoria's reign (Cannadine, “Context,” *Ornamentalism*; Cohn; Washbrook; Homans 229–32). This paper looks at two earlier episodes in her reign, and in a highly preliminary manner argues that India played a rather different role in the reconfiguration of the monarchy in the middle decades of the nineteenth century from that emphasized by recent scholars. First, the paper examines the ways in which Victoria upheld the royal prerogative in the military administration of India in the tumultuous 1840s, when the northwest frontier of India became secured from external and internal threat through the annexation of Scinde, the Punjab, and a number of smaller princely states in the interior. Second, the paper describes the significant and largely overlooked role both Victoria and Prince Albert played in the Government of India Act of 1858 and the subsequent transfer of power from the East India Company to the Crown. In both instances, Victoria is revealed to be less a modern icon of Empire and more a European-style monarch, exercising a considerable sway of personal influence.

## II. The Warrior Queen and India in the 1840s

India did not loom very large in Queen Victoria's affairs in the first few years of her reign. On her accession she did become Patron of the Royal Asiatic Society, and quickly became involved in the patronage of the various Indian bishoprics (see Hobhouse 10 July 1837, 3 July 1838). The See of Madras (1835) had recently been added to the existing See of Calcutta (1814), and further new bishoprics were created at Bombay (1837), and Colombo (1845). But with her marriage to Prince Albert in 1840, and the return of the Conservatives to power in 1841 under Robert Peel, India began to assume more importance at the Court.

There were a number of reasons for this. First, just as Prince Albert found at home a role in philanthropy and patronage of the fine

arts, he also discovered an outlet for his aspirations to statesmanship in imperial affairs, especially on the evangelical side. His first public speech was given in 1840 to the Anti-Slavery Society, endorsing that group's role in the ending of slavery in the British Empire and backing its call for other countries such as Brazil to end their participation in the immoral trade. Later he became a vocal supporter of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (Martin 1: 87; *Principal Speeches and Addresses* 131-35; Taylor, "Prince Albert"). Second, the Duke of Wellington became Commander in Chief of the British Army in 1842. The young royal family were very close to the Duke. In the early 1840s they spent much time at Walmer Castle in Kent, the Duke's preferred home outside London. The Duke became godfather to their first son, Prince Edward. And, most significantly of all, Wellington's military thinking influenced Albert, and through him, Victoria. Lastly, Lord Ellenborough—one of the leading ultra-Tory opponents of the Reform Bill in 1832—became President of the Board of Control, and then Governor General of India. In 1832 Ellenborough had opposed the eradication of "nomination" boroughs which he felt weakened the representation of India at Westminster, and also weakened the power of the Crown over the Commons (Taylor, "Empire" 301). Now he had the opportunity to correct the score on both counts.

Albert, Wellington, and Ellenborough disliked the Whigs and their Indian policies of the 1830s. They objected to the cosy relationship the Whigs enjoyed with the bankers and fundholders of the East India Company, and they opposed the Whigs' interventionist stance in Bengal on matters such as the Education Code (the insistence that English become the language of administration), and the attempt to suppress religious "idolatry" and practices such as sati (widow-burning) (Bearce; Stokes). Victoria became a weapon with which Ellenborough in particular (but supported by Albert and Wellington) fought back at the Whigs. This can be seen in a number of different ways in the early 1840s.

As soon as Ellenborough reached India in 1842 he began the unusual procedure of direct communication with the Queen, passing on information and advice that really should have been restricted to confidential correspondence with the Board of Control and the Cabinet.<sup>1</sup> Then there was Ellenborough's controversial decision to award a medal to the victorious Royal (European) troops in the East India Company regiments in the Queen's name. The victors of the Afghan campaign and the successful attack on China were given these

medals, much to the annoyance of the Cabinet back in London, who objected that only the Queen could authorise such awards, and that the medals would create jealousy and tension within the Army, as a certain portion had been singled out for distinguished service, whereas most soldiers were content to fight without such reward. However, the Queen was happy to go along with Ellenborough's unilateral decision, and Wellington smoothed the path with his Cabinet colleagues (Wellington 9 December 1842). It is clear that the Court was particularly preoccupied by events in Afghanistan (about which Albert and Victoria received a running commentary from Ellenborough) and the war with China. In the late autumn of 1842 they stayed up in town and did not return to Windsor as planned so that they could hear firsthand news from the East. And when the British were finally victorious at the siege of Jalalabad, the regiment involved—the 13th Light Infantry—was given a new commander—Prince Albert—and henceforth became known as “Prince Albert's Own” (Martin 1: 135, 148).

The events of 1842 created an important precedent in Queen Victoria's relationship with India, establishing her personal authority independent of the East India Company. At a time when cautious prime ministers such as William Lamb (Viscount Melbourne) and Peel, and her advisors such as Prince Leopold and Baron Stockmar, were reminding her of the limits to her royal prerogative at home, Tories such as Ellenborough and Wellington were extending the remit of her sovereignty in India. In other words, in India in the 1840s Victoria was living up to the reputation of a “warrior queen,” to use Walter Arnstein's useful phrase. The controversy over the Afghan and China medals in 1842 was settled in the Queen's favor, and in 1849 a similar medal was struck and awarded to Crown troops following the successful outcome of the wars against the Sikhs in the Punjab (Benson and Esher 2: 238-39). Indeed, many of the annexations of further Indian territories in the 1840s were marked by a conspicuous display of the personal authority of Queen Victoria. Following the secession of territory to Britain, *darbars* were held at which Indian chiefs and princes swore allegiance to the Crown. And this was not done in a perfunctory manner, but with some pomp. For example, in 1842 Charles Napier, the victorious general in Scinde, organized the *darbar* to coincide with the Queen's birthday. Moreover, the events of the 1840s gave rise to a style of direct diplomacy between Victoria and individual Indian sovereigns, mediated by Ellenborough and later governor-generals such as

Henry Hardinge and James Ramsay, 10th Earl Dalhousie. Armory and portraits were exchanged, and personal friendships struck up with, variously, the Maharajah of Nepal (who visited the British Court in 1849), the Queen of Oudh, and, most famously, Duleep Singh, who in exile in Britain became a habitué of the court, converted to Christianity, and befriended the young Prince Alfred (Alexander and Anand; Gell).

Perhaps the most compelling image of the importance that India had come to play in the monarchical style of Victoria by mid-century was the Indian Court at the 1851 Great Exhibition, in which Albert played a central role of organization. The centerpiece of the display was the Koh-i-noor diamond, taken from the Battle of Lahore in 1842, along with a howdah elephant. So successful was the Indian Court that two years later the East India Company and the Royal Society of Arts joined forces once more to stage an exhibition solely devoted to Indian artefacts and commercial wares (Auerbach 100-04; Davis 138).

### III. Queen of India

The second episode that reveals why Victoria had developed imperial pretensions in India long before 1876 is the Sepoy Rebellion of 1857 and its aftermath. Scholars have begun to address the ways in which Queen Victoria became integral to the gendered reconfiguration of India in the British public imagination. Contemporary British periodicals and newspapers rendered the violence and bloodshed that characterized the mutiny and its suppression as the “rape” of British India and dwelled particularly on the ferocity with which the “mutineers” attacked white women and children (Blunt; Paxton; Palmegiano). Once the rebellion was suppressed Victoria was represented as a feminine pacificator. She led prayers of thanksgiving once victory was confirmed, she was referred to as “Victoria Beatrix,” and on 11 September 1858 *Punch* depicted her as a virtuous and tolerant ruler prepared to forgive her Indian subjects who were represented in the cartoon by a kneeling Indian princess (see fig. 2) (Stanley; Kaye 113).

In fact, Victoria’s reaction to the events of 1857 was at complete odds with this feminized depiction. Instead, her instincts as a “warrior queen” were to the fore. Her diagnosis of the problems that had led to the rebellion in India in 1857 was that Britain had become overreliant on Indian troops and needed a single, integrated army (Martin 4: 78-82). In 1857 she urged Prime Minister Palmerston to bring in extra



Fig. 2. "The Accession of the Queen of India." *Punch* 11 September 1858: 107.

troops from other parts of the Empire, namely from Canada and from the Mediterranean (18 September 1857). She also thought that the Indian princes had been mistreated in the years immediately preceding 1857. Many of her concerns became incorporated into the Government of India Bill that was drafted and redrafted throughout the summer and early autumn of 1858. Victoria and Albert insisted on some of the key provisions of the bill: the creation of a single army with one chain of

command; a specific commitment by Britain to public works schemes of irrigation and railways; a restriction on the powers and composition of the new advisory Council of India—Victoria was particularly insistent that the new secretary of state (her minister) should have the power to override the Council; the requirement that the Crown see all despatches relating to India, as in the existing arrangement with the Foreign Office, and that all government proclamations in India be made in Victoria's name; and, finally, the conciliation of the Indian princes, through respect for their religions, and confirmation of their lineage and legitimacy (Martin 4: 200-03, 310-12, 337).

This last provision—conciliation of the Indian princes—became an abiding concern of Albert and Victoria in 1859 and 1860. They came up with the idea of an Indian order of knighthood as a means of rewarding and strengthening the personal bonds of loyalty between Victoria and the many Indian princes who had not rebelled in 1857. This was the “Star of India” Order, or the “Eastern Star,” to give it the working title bestowed by Albert, who designed its ribands and mottoes in consultation with the new Secretary of State Charles Wood (Prince Albert to Charles Wood 29 May 1860, 22 September 1860). The Order was specifically aimed at non-Christian Indian princes—although Albert included himself in it. Albert probably hoped for India what he had hoped for Germany after the revolutions of 1848—that is a national German diet, at which all the small states of the German Bund might be represented by their ancient ducal, princely, and monarchical houses (Martin 2: 56-57). The first investiture of the new Order took place in 1861, shortly before Albert died, and routine investitures took place in India during the 1860s and early 1870s, several years before the spectacle of the Raj took over. No wonder Victoria declared, after Albert's death, that India was his “sacred legacy” (Benson and Esher 1: 242).

#### IV. Conclusion

There are thus several reasons why, by the 1860s, Victoria thought of herself as Empress of India. Partly it was due to the influence of Albert, anxious to find in an Indian empire something that allowed him a larger role as consort. Partly it was due to the influence of Conservative politicians, determined that Victoria use her royal prerogative to reverse Whig policies in India, especially in military affairs. But, above

all, Victoria's delusion of imperial power—if that is indeed what it was—rested on her prolonged and involved contact with the affairs of the Indian princely states during the 1840s and 1850s. This was both practical—she possessed an intimate knowledge of Indian strategic and military issues—but also personal—in that she exoticized her Indian subjects in the same way that she was to cultivate a Scottish Highland identity in later years. However, in believing herself to be Empress of India, Victoria was not, this paper contends, anticipating or becoming complicit in a Disraelian world of pomp and theater, in which the new artisan voter of the second Reform Act would be given spectacle to divert his mind from social reform. Rather, she was looking back, almost to medieval Europe—certainly to European monarchy before the rise of the absolutism under Louis XIV—where holy emperors ruled, statesmen obeyed, and princely subjects proved loyal.

*University of Southampton*

---

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The sequence of correspondence begins with Ellenborough to Victoria, 15 September 1841, Ellenborough Papers, National Archives, Kew, London (formerly the Public Records Office), PRO 30/12/28/11.

## WORKS CITED

- Albert, Prince. *The Principal Speeches and Addresses of His Royal Highness the Prince Consort*. London: John Murray, 1862.
- . "To Charles Wood." 29 May 1860; 22 Sept. 1860. Oriental and India Office Collection. Mss Eur. F. 98, Box 4.
- Alexander, Michael, and Sushila Anand. *Queen Victoria's Maharajah: Duleep Singh, 1838–93*. London: Weidenfeld, 1980.
- Arnstein, Walter. "The Warrior Queen: Reflections on Victoria and Her World." *Albion* 30 (1998): 1–28.
- Auerbach, Jeffrey A. *The Great Exhibition of 1851: A Nation on Display*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1999.
- Bearce, George. *British Attitudes towards India, 1784–1858*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1961.
- Benson, A. C., and Vct. Esher, eds. *The Letters of Queen Victoria: A Selection from Her Majesty's Correspondence between the Years 1837 and 1861*. 3 vols. London: John Murray, 1908.
- Blunt, A. "Embodying War: British Women and Domestic Defilement in the Indian Mutiny, 1857–8." *Journal of Historical Geography* 26 (2000): 403–28.
- Buckle, G. E., and W. F. Monypenny. *The Life of Benjamin Disraeli, Earl of Beaconsfield*. 6 vols. London: John Murray, 1920.

- Buckle, G. E., ed. *The Letters of Queen Victoria: A Selection from Her Majesty's Correspondence and Journal between the Years 1862 and 1878*. 3 vols. London: John Murray, 1926-28.
- Cannadine, David. "The Context, Performance and Meaning of Ritual: The British Monarchy and the 'Invention of Tradition,' c. 1820-1977." *The Invention of Tradition*. Ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983. 101-64.
- . *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire*. London: Allen Lane, 2001.
- Cohn, Bernard S. "Representing Authority in Victorian India." *The Invention of Tradition*. Ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983. 165-209.
- Davis, John R. *The Great Exhibition*. Stroud: Sutton, 1999.
- Durrans, Peter J. "A Two-Edged Sword: The Liberal Attack on Disraelian Imperialism." *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 10 (1982): 262-84.
- Feldman, David. *Englishmen and Jews: Social Relations and Political Culture, 1840-1914*. London: Yale UP, 1994.
- Gell, Simeran Man Singh. "The Inner and the Outer: Dalip Singh as an Eastern Stereotype in Victorian England." *The Victorians and Race*. Ed. Shearer West. Aldershot: Scolar, 1996. 68-83.
- Hobhouse, J. C. "To Queen Victoria." 10 July 1837; 3 July 1838. Oriental and India Office Collection. British Library, London. Mss. Eur. F213/1.
- Homans, Margaret. *Royal Representations: Queen Victoria and British Culture, 1837-76*. London: U of Chicago P, 1998.
- Jenkins, Edward. *The Blot on the Queen's Head; or, How Little Ben, the Head Waiter, Changed the Sign of the "Queen's Inn" to "Empress Hotel, Limited," and the Consequences Thereof*. London: Strahan and Co., 1876.
- Kaye, J. W. "The Royal Proclamation to India." *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 85 (Jan. 1859): 113-26.
- Knights, L. A. "The Royal Titles Act and India." *Historical Journal* 11 (1968): 488-507.
- Martin, T. K. *The Life of His Royal Highness, the Prince Consort*. 5 vols. London: Smith and Elder, 1875.
- Metcalf, Thomas. *Ideologies of the Raj*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994.
- Palmegiano, Eugenia M. "The Indian Mutiny in the Mid-Victorian Press." *Journal of Newspaper and Periodical History* 7 (1991): 3-11.
- Paxton, Nancy L. "Mobilizing Chivalry: Rape in British Novels about the Indian Uprising of 1857." *Victorian Studies* 36 (1992): 5-30.
- Smith, Paul. *Disraeli: A Brief Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996.
- Stanley, Brian. "Christian Responses to the Indian Mutiny of 1857." *The Church and War*. Ed. W. J. Sheils. Studies in Church History 20. Oxford: Blackwell, 1983. 277-89.
- Stokes, Eric. *The English Utilitarians and India*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1959.
- Taylor, Miles. "Empire and Parliamentary Reform: The 1832 Reform Act Revisited." *Rethinking the Age of Reform: Britain, 1780-1850*. Ed. A. Burns and J. Innes. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003. 295-311.
- . "Prince Albert and the British Empire." *Prinz Albert: Ein Wettiner in Großbritannien*. Ed. F. Bosbach. Forthcoming. Munich: Saur, 2004.
- Victoria, Queen. "To Lord Palmerston." 18 Sept. 1857. Broadlands Papers. Hartley Library, University of Southampton. RC/F/845/1-2.

- Washbrook, David. "After the Mutiny: From Queen to Queen-Empress." *History Today* 47 (1997): 10-15.
- Wellington, Duke of. Memorandum. 9 Dec. 1842. Wellington Papers. Hartley Library, University of Southampton. WP2/95/41-5.
- Wohl, Anthony S. "'Dizzi-Ben-Dizzi': Disraeli as Alien." *Journal of British Studies* 34 (1995): 375-411.