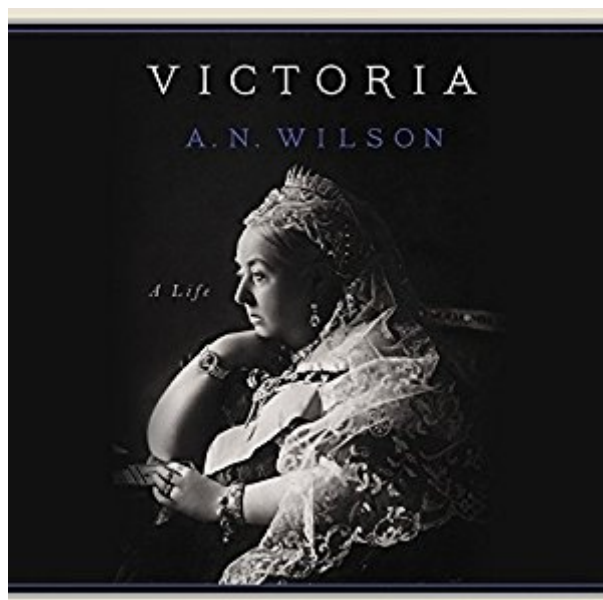


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Victoria: A Life



Synopsis

Acclaimed historian A. N. Wilson gives a sweeping, definitive biography of one of the most recognizable, yet enigmatic monarchs of all time. The longest reigning British monarch and female sovereign in history, Queen Victoria was a figure of profound paradox who has mystified historians for over a century. Now in this magisterial biography, A.N. Wilson rebukes the conventional wisdom about her life - that she was merely a "funny little woman in a bonnet" who did next to nothing - to show she was in fact intensely involved in state affairs despite a public façade of inaction. More than just the stock image of a stuffy, unsmiling widow in mourning, Wilson's complete immersion in Victoria's countless letters and journals reveals a carefully nuanced portrait of a monarch possessed by family immigrant insecurities, a reluctant public figure who learned to exploit public display, a mother who hated pregnancy, and above all, a political luminary who created and controlled the story of her life, true or otherwise. Victoria brings to life its subject in all her many moods and phases: her so-called miserable childhood, her early years of political inexperience as a pawn to advisers and statesmen, her passionate marriage to Prince Albert and the incessant public criticism, her famed mourning period after Albert's early death, and finally, the captivating last decades of her rule as Empress of India. After nearly two decades as an eccentric, reclusive mourner, she emerged, self-confident and robust, as an out-and-out imperialist who harnessed royalty with British foreign policy and as the figurehead of military and economic world domination. Wilson tells a story of victory against painful odds and gives the portrait of a woman battling with demons and overcoming them, largely alone. Despite everything, she came to embody the British people's experience of their own lives.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This review is based on an uncorrected proof. Victoria, A Life has 624 pages and a shipping weight of 2.2 lbs and may not be for the casual reader who may find the book dry, dense and tedious with the plethora of characters and their connections and actions that impact and are impacted by a multilayered and complicated European history and the zeitgeist of Victoria's time. For others this book will be a treasure. There is so much here, in this behemoth of a book that I will list only a few of the things I found interesting that have nothing to do with this book's massive and necessary political history. Author A.N. Wilson writes, "Loving Victoria--which many people were to do--was learning to live with a furious irascibility of temper." Much of what we know about Victoria's thoughts and feelings is revealed through her many letters. She writes about the 'bliss beyond belief' of her wedding night. We learn how she treats her mother, her husband and her children; about her mental torments; how she felt about her pregnancies; the post natal depression she suffered, and we learn the surprising revelations about her playfulness which made her seem at times like two different people. She blames her son Bertie for Albert's death. She thinks Bertie is dull. "...never neglecting the opportunity to denigrate him or to find fault." She bickers with her husband and neglects her mother, choosing to believe her mother had been cold and unfeeling when actually, according to the author, her mother had been a constant supportive presence in her life. The author discusses the 'Did they' or 'Didn't they' relationship with John Brown. This may be the definitive book on Queen Victoria and her time. It is a major achievement. But it is not for everyone. I was one of those mildly curious readers and found the book overwhelming.

Queen Victoria was a complex woman. One of the strengths of Wilson's biography is that through the use of her letters and journals he is able to show us the internal life of the Queen. Victoria was married, presumably happily, to Prince Albert. They produced nine children, and his death left her prostrate. Albert was a strict Victorian husband treating Victoria often as a child and using severe methods to raise the children. Although Victoria loved Albert, her love for her children was less pronounced. Her relationship with her heir, Bertie, was particularly fraught with unpleasantness. After Albert, she engaged in two relationships that could be described as scandalous. She spent many years with John Brown, Highland John, and may have been married to him, but if so the record or such an alliance has been destroyed. Her later relationship with Munshi, her Indian Secretary, paints the picture of a lonely old woman taken in by a successful conman. However, seeing Victoria

in these three relationships makes her more of a real person. The author is adept at bringing the political situation into the biography. He shows how Victoria both shaped events and was shaped by them. For me, this was the best part of the book. I did learn some interesting things about Victoria's childhood. She believed that she had a lonely childhood, but using her journals, the author shows that she grew up with the stepbrother and stepsister, the children of her mother's first marriage. This is a long book and the writing is often scholarly to the point of dryness. However, if you're interested in Queen Victoria or the Victorian Age, it's well worth reading.

Reading this book seemed initially like a daunting task and one that I was ill prepared to take on. In order to keep this biography straight with a cast of characters that could populate a small country, I broke it down into small segments read over the course of several days. The common perception of Victoria is that she was a disinterested monarch who had a large number of progeny whose sole duty was to marry other foreign royals and spread the Union Jack all over the globe all while behaving themselves and conducting themselves with some decorum. Victoria was also perceived as someone who took to her widow weeds when she wasn't sobbing in a darkened bedroom waiting to join her Prince Albert in eternal solitude. Based on Victoria's own sideline as a copious letter writer and diarist, author A.N. Wilson may have finally broke through a wall of misinformation and finally set the record straight about Victoria as a queen, mother, friend, and even a lover. I found this book to be very interesting because it portrayed Victoria as someone who took her position very seriously as she helped form public policy through her prime minister Disraeli. Both she and her late husband had imperialistic visions for England and this was a driving force throughout her lifetime. Victoria could form strong opinions and also strong attachments, was frequently exasperated by her children and particularly her heir Prince Bertie, and was connected and involved with things going on both domestically and internationally. As for her storied relationship with John Brown, the author tends to put some credence to the gossip that they were definitely far more than friends. What I took away from this book was an understanding of British History during the Victorian era, some insight into what type of ruler and person Victoria was, and an understanding of the overall family structure that she and Prince Albert created. Forgive this highly simplified review, but this is a very detailed book that is virtually impossible to review in a few paragraphs. I felt that the author did a very thorough job of researching Victoria and her times, managed to keep even the dry material fairly interesting, and helped this reader manage to keep everything straight over Victoria's sixty-four year reign.

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