

THE VICTORIAN AGE

When we speak of Victorian age commonly we refer to the period of English history including the **long reign of Queen Victoria**, that is, **from 1837 to 1901**.

The Victorian Age is very interesting , especially for the many contradictions that characterize it.

The Victorian Age was a complex and contradictory era, as I said, because on one hand it was the age of progress, stability, and great social reforms, on the other it was also characterized by poverty, injustice and social unrest.

Relevant date 1832 the First Reform Act.

BUT WHO IS VICTORIA?

Victoria was the daughter of Edward, the Duke of Kent and Princess Victoria of Saxe-Coburg.

She was born in Kensington Palace in London on May 24th, 1819. Edward died when Victoria was eight months. In 1837 Queen Victoria took the throne after the death of her uncle William IV. Due to her secluded childhood, she displayed a personality marked by strong prejudices and a willful stubbornness. Barely eighteen, she refused any further influence from her domineering mother and ruled in her own stead. Popular respect for the Crown was at a low point at her coronation, but **the modest and straightforward young Queen won the hearts of her subjects. She wished to be informed of political matters, although she had no direct input in political decisions.**

On Feb 10th, 1840, only three years after taking the throne, Victoria took her first vow and **married her cousin, Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha.**

Their relationship was one of great love and admiration. Together they bore nine children - four sons and five daughters: Victoria, Bertie, Alice, Alfred, Helena, Louise, Arthur, Leopold, and Beatrice.

Prince Albert was the dominant male influence in Victoria's life.

She was thoroughly devoted to him, and completely submitted to his will.

Victoria did nothing without her husband's approval.

Albert assisted in her royal duties. **He introduced a strict decorum in court and made a point of straitlaced behaviour.** Albert also gave a more **conservative** tinge to Victoria's politics. If Victoria, at age 23, was to insistently interject her opinions and make her views felt in the cabinet, it was only because of Albert's teachings of hard work.

The general public, however, was not enamored with the German prince; he was excluded from holding any official political position, was never granted a title of peerage and was named **Prince Consort only after seventeen years of marriage.**

On Dec. 14th 1861 Albert died from typhoid fever at Windsor Castle. **Victoria remained in self- imposed seclusion for ten years.** This genuine, but obsessive mourning kept her occupied for the rest of her life and **played an important role in the evolution of what would become the Victorian mentality.**

Victoria's long reign witnessed an evolution in English politics and the expansion of the British Empire, as well as political and social reforms on the mother country.

The national pride connected with the name of Victoria - the term Victorian England, for example, stemmed from the Queen's ethics and personal tastes, which generally reflected those of the middle class.

The Empire

Great Britain during Victoria's reign was not just a powerful island nation. It **was the center of a global empire that fostered British contact with a wide variety of other cultures**, though the exchange was usually an uneven one.

By the end of the nineteenth century, nearly one- quarter of the earth's land surface was part of the British Empire, and more than **400 million people were governed from Great Britain**, however nominally. An incomplete list of British colonies and quasi-colonies in 1901 would include Australia, British Guiana (now Guyana),

Brunei, Canada, Cyprus, Egypt, Gambia, the Gold Coast (Ghana), Hong Kong, British India (now Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Pakistan, Sri Lanka), Ireland, Kenya, Malawi, the Malay States (Malaysia), Malta, Mauritius, New Zealand, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Singapore, Somaliland

(Somalia), South Africa, the Sudan, Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), and Trinidad and Tobago.

Queen Victoria's far-flung empire was a truly heterogeneous entity, governed with heterogeneous practices. It included **Crown Colonies** like Jamaica, **ruled from Britain**, and **protectorates** like Uganda, **which had relinquished only partial sovereignty to Britain**. **Ireland was a sort of internal colony** whose demands for home rule were alternately entertained and discounted. **India had started the century under the control of the East India Company, but was directly ruled from Britain after the 1857 Indian Mutiny (the first Indian war of independence), and Victoria was crowned Empress of India in 1877.**

Colonies like Canada and Australia with substantial **European populations had become virtually self-governing by the end of the century and were increasingly considered near-equal partners in the imperial project.**

By contrast, colonies and protectorates with large indigenous populations like Sierra Leone, or with large transplanted populations of ex-slaves and non-European laborers like Trinidad, would not gain autonomy until the twentieth century.

Christianity, Commerce and Civilisation

This was a popular combination of factors for the rise of the British Empire in the late nineteenth and early twentieth Centuries.

The Protestant aspect of Christianity was seen by many within the British Empire as part of the larger battle with the more 'Catholic' nations of Continental Europe. Ever since the Reformation, **religion represented not merely a spiritual difference between the Catholic and Protestant churches but was part of a far larger cultural and political competition between deadly rivals. Portugal, Spain and France were the Catholic nations** who developed successful commercial empires before the English (and Dutch) were able to do so. **Religion gave an excuse for this commercial rivalry to turn into military and political competition.** The very success of the Protestant nations in challenging the Catholic hegemony in the New World and the East Indies seemed to confirm that God might be on the Protestants' side after all - although this did ignore the fact that the English and Dutch co-religionists were just as frequently found at the throats of one another.

It was certainly helpful that **the Protestant work ethic meant that Christian and commercial ideals could be reconciled fairly easily and in fact was thought to manifest itself in the improvement and development of British civilisation in general.** In pre-industrial Britain, the combination of these three factors would lead to the creation of the settler colonies in North America. Devout Christians would look for economic freedom from feudal relationships in this New World. However, mercantalism and then the industrial revolution meant that this commercial aspect could take on a more sinister role as monopoly power, slavery or exploitative working conditions became a temptation hard for investors or capitalists to resist. It was reassuring to many such capitalists that they could hide behind the idea that by investing in enterprises and schemes around the world that they were serving a modernising and civilising goal and so their consciences could be clear in such a noble enterprise.

The civilisation aspiration could be damaging in its own right. It assumed that **British civilisation was innately superior** to those it was subjugating. Indeed, the very subjugation process confirmed the superiority of British Civilisation! It then assumed that the new rulers were obliged to improve the subjugated peoples that it had taken under its wing with large doses of Christianity and commerce. Of course, this appealed to the positive aspirations that many Imperialists held for the future of a benign Empire. It offered a justification for Imperialism. However, it could also justify some of the more extreme Social Darwinist ideas of racial superiority and it allowed for treating the subject peoples as innately inferior.

In short, **Christianity, commerce and civilisation was a neat way to justify the uniqueness of the British Empire and yet give it a justification for continuing into the future.** It could also be deeply patronising and justified cultural imperialism and racial stereotyping and yet there was a surprisingly large strain of truth behind this reason for the British strain of imperialism.

