The Marriage of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert

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The Marriage of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, 10 February 1840, Chapel Royal, St James’s Palace, by George Hayter. Find a copy of the painting at http://www.queen-victorias-scrapbook.org/contents/3-6.html

The Artist

Sir George Hayter was Queen Victoria’s ‘Portrait and Historical Painter’. He covered several significant events during the early stages of her reign including her coronation, her marriage to Prince Albert and the christening of the Prince of Wales. In his painting of Victoria and Albert’s wedding, Hayter can be seen in the right-hand corner, behind the altar making preliminary sketches. Lithography was the means by which Hayter’s interpretation of this significant event was reproduced and circulated around the British Empire.

The Royal Wedding

Hayter’s interpretation of Victoria and Albert’s wedding is not that dissimilar to royal weddings that have occurred in recent years. These have been grand events, with large processions, lots of pomp and ceremony and numerous aristocracy and officials in attendance. Prince Albert’s procession entered the Chapel Royal at St James’s Palace, to the sound of ‘See the Conquering Hero’. He wore the uniform of a British field marshal and over his shoulder hung the collar of The Order of the Garter, the highest honour the Queen could bestow on him. When the Queen’s procession entered the chapel the British National Anthem was playing. The bride’s dress, made of rich white satin, was trimmed with orange blossoms which she also wore in a wreath on her head. As was the tradition for royal brides, her veil did not conceal her face. The designs for her dress were destroyed after the lace had been made, so that it would remain unique.

Members of the British aristocracy and elite circles made up the 300 people who attended the event. Among them were the Duke of Sussex who gave the Queen away in her father’s absence; the Queen’s mother, the Duchess of Kent; the Dowager Queen Adelaide and Albert’s relatives including his father and brother. Politicians including the Prime Minister Lord Melbourne, the Duke of Wellington and Lord Liverpool were also present.

Victoria and Albert’s large public wedding was actually quite unusual in that for more than century, British royal weddings had been private ceremonies held at night. Queen Victoria thought the chapel was a ‘shocking locale and would have preferred to get married in one of the rooms at Buckingham Palace. But such a move would have done little in favour of good public relations. Lord Melbourne, the Prime Minister advised her, ‘It’s of great importance that you should get over that dislike of going amongst everybody; mustn’t let it be known; it would be very injurious’.

The Royal Marriage and Victorian Ideals
Queen Victoria was only 20 years old when she married her German cousin, Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha. Just a little more than two years earlier, she had become the Queen of England. She reigned over the British empire for just under 64 years (1837-1901): longer than any monarch that preceded her. The Victorian Era became known as a period of industrial, political and military progress.

Female inheritance of the throne was not unusual in Britain, which did not observe the Salic law that only a male could become Sovereign. Victoria’s father and her uncles had done little to improve the reputation and popularity of the royal family. Among the British people, some hoped the rise of a female monarch would provide a better example of the virtues of marriage, fidelity and parenthood. When Prince Albert agreed to marry Queen Victoria, he had ambitions of fulfilling the Victorian ideal of the male: to play the dominant role and become Victoria’s protector and guide. Queen Victoria, however, did not immediately yield to the position of dutiful and dependant wife and mother.

After her coronation in 1837, Queen Victoria wasn’t in any great rush to get married. She wanted to enjoy her freedom first. When she met Albert in 1836, her impressions of him weren’t favourable. Much to her disappointment, Albert didn’t seem to have the stamina or interest to endure the parties and dances in which the youthful and energetic new Queen took so much delight. She also thought he was too young and needed to be more proficient in English. On their second meeting three years later, Queen Victoria had a change of heart. Not only had Prince Albert undergone further education and grooming in Europe, Victoria thought he was ‘excessively handsome’. Having decided she wanted to marry him, and knowing that Albert ‘would never have presumed to take such a liberty to propose to the Queen of England’, Victoria played the dominant role and proposed to Albert.

While Albert agreed to be the Queen’s husband, he was given the title of His Royal Highness. Parliament refused to give him any official status in the running of the country or the British Empire. Much to Albert’s frustration, Queen Victoria was reluctant to share any of her powers as Sovereign and she refused to take him into her confidence regarding political matters. The Queen feared that any disagreements they might have over political matters would create disharmony in their domestic life.

It wasn’t that Queen Victoria was entirely independent; it was more that the role Albert wanted to fill, the role that would enable him to fulfill Victorian ideals, was already occupied by others. The Prime Minister, Lord Melbourne provided the Queen with the political advice she required. He became a close friend and fatherly figure. In this regard, their relationship contradicted expectations that the Queen should not show favour for either political party. On the home front, the Queen’s governess, Baroness Lehzen proved to be an obstacle, preventing Albert from gaining control over management of the household. Lehzen managed the finances, and Albert believed she was the one who ‘hardened the Queen’s resolve to keep her prerogatives and reign alone’. He wrote to Prince William Löwenstein explaining ‘In my home life I am very happy and contented; but the difficulty in filling my place with the proper dignity is that I am only the husband, and not the master of the house’.

The turning point in power relations between the couple was triggered by the Queen’s pregnancy. Knowing the practicalities of becoming a mother would alter her lifestyle, the Queen was anything but happy when she found out she was pregnant a few weeks after her wedding. Even though she and Albert were to have nine children together, she was definitely reluctant to fulfill the Victorian ideal of the nurturing mother.
‘I’m really unhappy about it and its spoiling my happiness; I’ve always hated the idea and prayed to God night and day to be left free for at least 6 months, but my prayers have not been answered and I am really most unhappy. I cannot understand how anyone can wish for such a thing, especially at the beginning of a marriage.’

In preparation for the possibility that Victoria might die while giving birth, the Regency Bill was passed in 1840. If Victoria died, Prince Albert would be regent, head of state, until their child reached the appropriate age of 18. As her pregnancy advanced, Victoria had no choice but to share her responsibilities with her husband.

Queen Victoria became increasingly dependent on her husband as events transpired to remove Lord Melbourne and Baroness Lehzen from the picture. In 1841, a new Parliament with a Conservative majority, signaled the end of Lord Melbourne’s leadership as Prime Minister. Although the Queen maintained correspondence with him for a while this gradually came to an end. Baroness Lehzen’s departure from the royal household took place in 1842, when the couple’s first child Princess Royal Victoria became sick. Albert blamed the nursery staff appointed by the Baroness. While the Queen didn’t initially agree with Albert’s criticisms of Lehzen, she eventually gave in. Albert suggested that Lehzen take 6 months leave for her health. The arrangement was to become a permanent one.

These events helped pave the way for Prince Albert to become the Queen’s ‘private secretary, her political advisor and co-director of her family and household.’ The partnership between the couple became so strong, that Queen Victoria’s reign could also be considered as Albert’s ‘reign’ too. Albert himself said he sought ‘to sink his directing individuality in her, to put his will, his perceptions, his ability so much at her service as to be fused with his own’. When Prince Albert died of typhoid fever died in 1861, at the young age of forty-two, the Queen was overwhelmed with grief and went into a long period mourning. The extent to which she had become dependent on her husband was revealed in her withdrawal from public life. Rumours circulated that she was ill or insane. While some argued that she should abdicate in favour of her son. She never did.

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2 Ibid.

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Image reference
The Marriage of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, 10 February 1840, Chapel Royal, St James’s Palace, by George Hayter. Sovereign Hill Museums Association