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Introduction: Victoria's Self-Fashioning: Curating the Royal Image for Dynasty, Nation, and Empire

Michael Hatt and **Joanna Marschner**

This introduction sets out the structure and contents of this issue of *19*: 'Victoria's Self-Fashioning: Curating the Royal Image for Dynasty, Nation, and Empire'.

William Nicholson's coloured woodcut, *Queen Victoria* (*Fig. 1*), included in his series *Twelve Portraits* of 1899, presents an instantly recognizable image of the Queen. Dressed in black, she is an immovable and indomitable force in spite of age and frailty. While Nicholson's print has a satirical edge, this version of the Queen has retained its familiarity and circulation in the twenty-first century, often in more sympathetic iterations; one need only think of Judi Dench as Victoria in the film *Victoria and Abdul* (2017), viewed by millions around the world. Indeed, Queen Victoria's image, sculpted or painted, still dominates public spaces scattered throughout every continent and her name identifies streets, squares, parks, towns, geographical features, and institutions around the globe.

Fig. 1. William Nicholson, *Queen Victoria*, 1897, coloured woodcut, NPG D768. © National Portrait Gallery, London.

The very familiarity of Victoria as an icon, along with the sizeable bibliography of works devoted to the narrative of her life, would suggest that there is little more to be said. In the bicentenary of her birth in 2019, which brought another slew of biographies,

it might appear that analysis was exhausted. This issue of *19* challenges this idea; indeed, we contend that this very repetition has forestalled serious discussion of the Queen's public image, its creation, use, and legacy. What has been too often overlooked is that Victoria herself was in large part the creator of this iconic visual construction and that this process of self-fashioning was central to her constitutional, political, and imperial ambitions. The mythology created by the Queen herself continues to structure much discussion, and reductively so, framed invariably within a chronological narrative. The litany of key moments — the naive young girl of eighteen, thrust on to the throne, the mother balancing duty to family and duty to the nation, the widow in mourning, and the little old lady in black — is still too often taken at face value in historical biography, in popular culture, and in museum displays.

As a consequence, the image of Victoria is often radically depoliticized. However, Victoria indeed understood the power of emotion, and established an image of herself defined by sentiment, anecdote, sympathy, and narratives of personal struggle rather than of the exercise of power. Interpretations often end up consolidating the affective image that the Queen herself crafted, and thus reinforcing rather than challenging its ideological work. This is why we consider this proposed publication an important intervention in scholarly terms, and in the wider debate about culture, power, and empire. In examining the complexity of the royal image and its curation, we hope to identify its ideological force; that is, how it was designed to make the Queen-Empress's subjects align their own interests with hers, and how that purpose both failed and succeeded from Victoria's own reign to the present day. Only by making the familiar unfamiliar again can we get to grips with Victoria's image and its extraordinary pervasiveness, power, and longevity.

This publication emerges from an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)-funded Research Networking Project, *Victoria's Self-Fashioning: Curating the Royal Image for Dynasty, Nation and Empire*, which explored the making, deployment, and legacy of Victoria's image. Important research about this had, of course, been undertaken in the past two decades, but this scholarship needed to be reappraised and developed. Scholars in museums had written in more empirical or descriptive ways about Victoria's dress, jewellery, or engagement with photography; and literary historians, most importantly Margaret Homans and Adrienne Munich, examined the construction of womanhood and femininity in Victoria's public profile.[1] However, there were limits to this scholarship,

[1] Adrienne Munich, *Queen Victoria's Secrets* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); *Remaking Queen Victoria*, ed. by Margaret Homans and Adrienne Munich, Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture, 10 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); and Margaret Homans, *Royal Representations: Queen Victoria and British Culture, 1837–1876* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

not least in the way that Victoria's image was often treated first and foremost as an *illustration*, a visual or material adjunct to the work of text and political action, rather than as a political agent. The most notable exception is John Plunkett's pioneering book about Victoria and her embrace of modern media technologies, *Queen Victoria: First Media Monarch*, but while this has been much cited, historians have not followed up its approach.[2] As such, Victoria's image has remained curiously unexplored in terms of its political function, and the ways in which image was continually recast in order to adapt to new cultural and political circumstances. Our AHRC-funded project sought to remedy this. It was organized by three themes.

The first of these was Victoria's curating of her own image. Of course, it is not surprising that, like any ruler, she was concerned for her public image and how this was presented to her subjects. However, the cultural and political contexts of the nineteenth century, with the need to craft an image of female power in an increasingly complicated global frame, made the task of fashioning a public image for the Queen far from a straightforward task. This is why we have chosen the term *curated* in discussing this process. Victoria was attentive not only to the detail of her public representation but to the means of presenting it as well; not only constructing images of herself but also encouraging forms of display and manipulating its circulation in order that its interpretation might be controlled. Her interventions could be direct and practical such as in scratching through the photographic medium on a glass negative so that an image deemed not useful could never be reproduced (*Fig.* 2). Moreover, her fashioning of a public image, including the public image of her private life, was curated through the conscious creation of a moderated personal narrative. Each individual image, each iteration of her persona from accession to death, was woven into a biography, unfolding with specific emphases, and continually adapting in reaction to changing political context. Victoria not only aimed to control the visual character of her image but, through the selection and organization of materials, to craft a definitive narrative of her life and character.

This curating was at times literal: for example, in her selection of articles of her own handiwork for the Victoria Era exhibition at Earl's Court in 1897, as well as the loaning of copies of ceremonial paintings recording pivotal moments in her life course, and her active participation in the creation of the display about her life that opened at Kensington Palace in 1899.[3] At other times it was a more oblique process, but one that involved the selection, organization, and display of material about her life: for instance, the publication of a popular edition of *Leaves from the Journal of Our Life in*

[2] John Plunkett, *Queen Victoria: First Media Monarch* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[3] See Joanna Marschner's article in this issue of *19*.

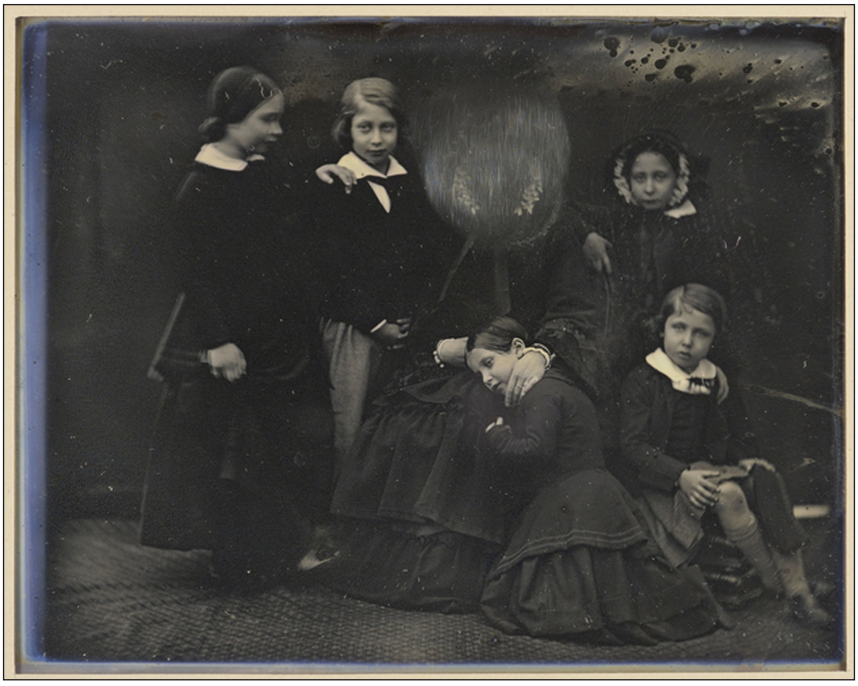

Fig. 2. William Kilburn, Queen Victoria with the Princess Royal, the Prince of Wales, Princess Alice, Princess Helena and Prince Alfred, 17 Jan 1852, daguerreotype, Royal Collection, RCIN 2932491. © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2021.

the Highlands (1868) with its many illustrations. While the volume was conceived as a family venture, it was Victoria who chose to disseminate it more widely and thus embed her image in homes around the world; the translation into Marathi in 1871 is emblematic of the political work the book was intended to do (*Fig. 3*). Similarly, this attention to reception and audience is evident in her insistence that she be represented in the National Portrait Gallery, not by the coronation painting by Sir David Wilkie which had been offered to the gallery by the Earl of Normanton, but by a copy of the coronation portrait by Sir George Hayter, originally made in 1838, of which the Queen owned both prime version and a reduced scale modello, and considered 'excessively like, and beautifully painted' (*Fig. 4*).[4]

This curating was framed by, and sought to resolve, a series of conceptual concerns. It was necessary to create an image of female power, which resolved Victorian norms of sex and gender with monarchical authority. While Victoria's femininity has been much discussed, it is often described as a hindrance or contradiction, whereas the emotional

[4] Windsor, Royal Archives, *Queen Victoria's Journal*, RA VIC/MAIN/QVJ/1838, 18 August 1838. *Queen Victoria's Journal* can be accessed online at <http://www.queenvictoriasjournals.org>. The painting by Sir David Wilkie, *Queen Victoria as a Young Woman* (1840, oil on canvas) is now in the collection of the Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight, Merseyside.

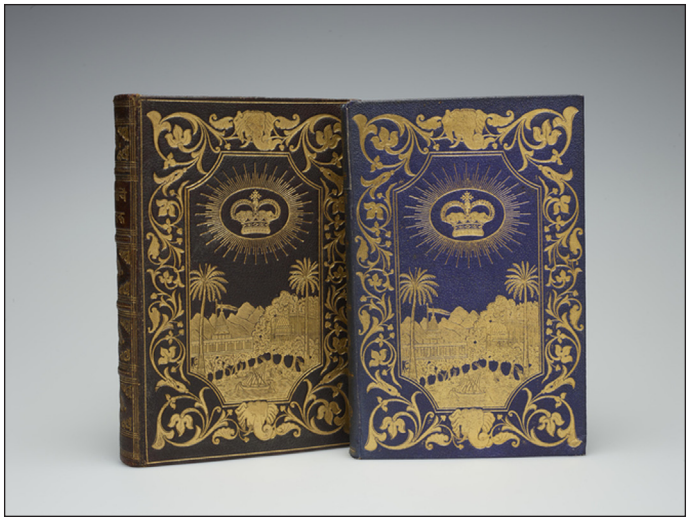

Fig. 3. Queen Victoria, The Queen's Book, or, 'Leaves from the Journal of Our Life in the Highlands', translated into Maráthí with the gracious permission of Her Majesty the Queen by Rao Saheb Ganpatráo Morobá Pitalé, 1871, Royal Collection, RCIN 1053106. © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2021.

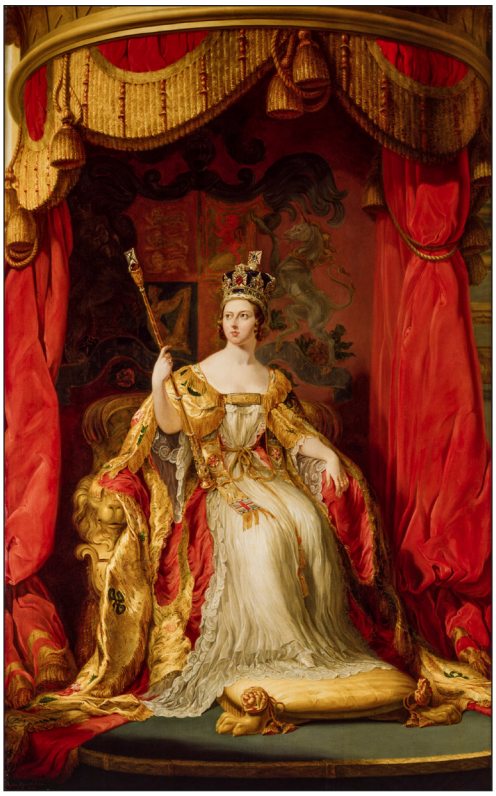

Fig. 4. George Hayter, *Queen Victoria*, 1863, replica of work of 1838, oil on canvas, NPG 1250. © National Portrait Gallery, London.

culture of the nineteenth century and the centrality of ideas such as character and duty to Victorian high politics meant that sex and gender could be used as positive assets in the curating of royal image. Similarly, the shift to constitutional monarchy challenged royal power, but Victoria found ways of drawing advantage from the new political environment. The casting of the monarch as neutral, above party politics, was supported by formally commissioned images of Victoria as mother and grandmother, as well as by many popular depictions of her in the role — the sentimental moral guardian (*Fig. 5*). While this image could be deployed to disavow her political agency, it also indicated, and enabled, her subtler but powerful political influence. This would play out within arenas extending far beyond the confines of the dynasty to the nation and empire. Victoria as Queen and Empress but also as matriarch is captured, for example, in Thomas Barker's painting *'The Secret of England's Greatness' (Queen Victoria Presenting a Bible in the Audience Chamber at Windsor)* (*Fig. 6*).

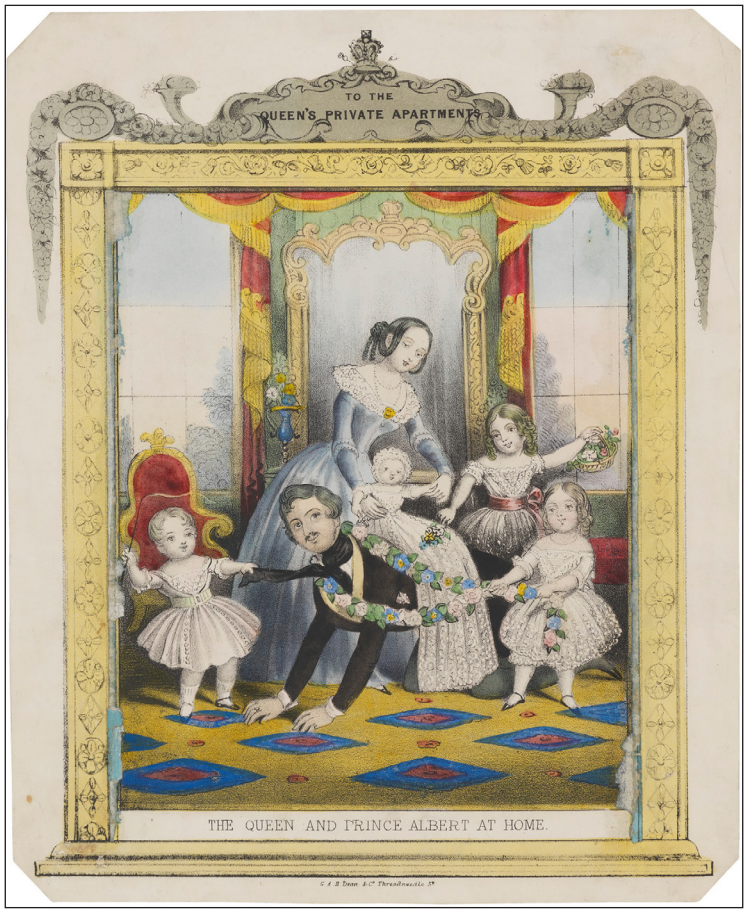

Fig. 5. Unknown artist, *The Queen and Prince Albert at Home*, published by George Alfred Henry Dean, *c.* 1844, hand-coloured lithograph, NPG D20925. © National Portrait Gallery, London.

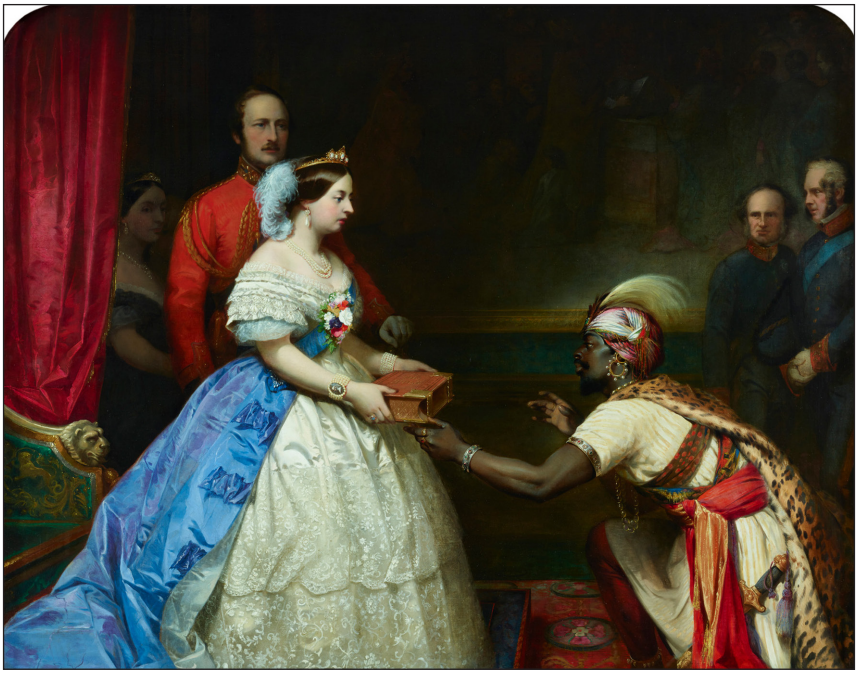

Fig. 6. Thomas Jones Barker, *'The Secret of England's Greatness' (Queen Victoria Presenting a Bible in the Audience Chamber at Windsor)*, 1862–63, oil on canvas, NPG 4969. © National Portrait Gallery, London.

The second theme of the project was the circulation of this image, particularly across the British Empire (including within the United Kingdom since empire is not only overseas). On the one hand, the image of Victoria served as a means of unifying the empire, not least in the many monuments erected around the globe, but also in the easy repetition of the image afforded by modernity on coins, medals, and postage stamps. Thus, the heterogeneous or, to use John Darwin's term, 'unfinished' empire could appear coherent, the image occluding the deep divisions both in the United Kingdom and throughout the colonies.[5] This unifying mirage reached its acme in the Diamond Jubilee celebrations, where Victoria embodied the seamless continuum of the shared interests of nation and empire.

On the other hand, the Queen and Empress's image revealed the limits of control, becoming a target for colonial resistance and political dissent. On such occasions the image stands not for unity but for the heterogeneity and instability of empire. Attacks on public monuments, such as the pouring of boiling tar over her statue in Bombay in 1896, are obvious examples. There are, however, more complex instances in which Victoria served as an image of the tensions between colonial subjects, settler colonies,

[5] John Darwin, *Unfinished Empire: The Global Expansion of Britain* (London: Allen Lane, 2012).

and the Crown. As Sarah Carter and Sharon Venne have demonstrated, the treaty medals bearing the Queen's image worn by First Nations people in Canada are still used to signal the precedence of imperial treaty over national displacement (*Fig.* 7).[6]

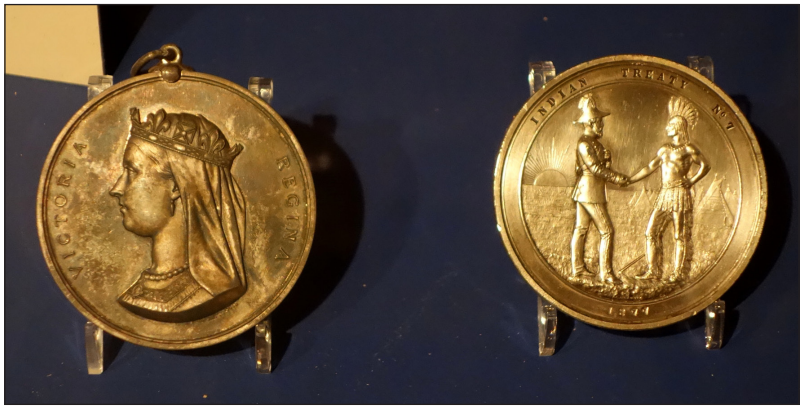

Fig. 7. Treaty medal, brass. The medal marks Treaty 7, 1877. Exhibited at Glenbow Museum, Calgary, Alberta, Canada, 2013. Daderot, Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0.

All this requires greater attention to Victoria's own ardent imperialism, evident in comments from her journals and letters, her favouring of Disraeli over Gladstone, her expansionist views, and her indifference to — and sometimes enthusiasm for — imperial atrocities; in her diary she details the numbers of those slaughtered by British troops in India during the 1857 uprising and describes instances of hand-to-hand combat in the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879.[7] The complex structure of racialized thinking in the Victorian world is evident in Victoria's own relationship to the empire, and her strategic exploitation of personal relationships, her sense of moral guardianship, and her curating of empire in locations such as Osborne House are all implicated in the ideological function of her image.[8] Unable to travel to India herself, the Queen learned Urdu, recruiting Indian nationals as her attendants, and devised her own local Indian environment in the construction and furnishing of the Durbar Room between 1890 and

[6] Sarah Carter, '"The faithful children of the Great Mother are starving": Queen Victoria in Contact Zone Dialogues in Western Canada', in *Mistress of Everything: Queen Victoria in Indigenous Worlds*, ed. by Sarah Carter and Maria Nugent (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), pp. 78–99; see also Sharon Venne's contribution to this issue of *19*.

[7] *Queen Victoria's Journal*, RA VIC/MAIN/QVJ/1857, 15 September 1857; and RA VIC/MAIN/QVJ/1879, 9 September 1879.

[8] For a particularly important discussion of Victoria's relationship with India, see Miles Taylor, *Empress: Queen Victoria and India* (London: Yale University Press, 2018). See also, Priya Atwal, *Royals and Rebels: The Rise and Fall of the Sikh Empire* (London: Hurst, 2020); and Shrabani Basu, *Victoria and Abdul: The Extraordinary True Story of the Queen's Closest Confidant* (Stroud: History Press, 2010).

1891 at Osborne House, which was used as a setting for public entertaining. Members of communities throughout South East Asia were drawn into this royal residence through the many portraits commissioned by the Queen from Rudolf Swoboda (*Fig. 8*). This practice has generally been viewed as benign, and Victoria certainly did have close emotional engagements with Indian servants and friends, but recent scholarship has pointed to the political and racist foundations of Victoria's relationship with India and Indians, and we would argue that the use of emotion to define this relationship, both by Victoria herself and subsequently by writers, curators, and film-makers, has been a means of occluding racial and imperial politics.[9]

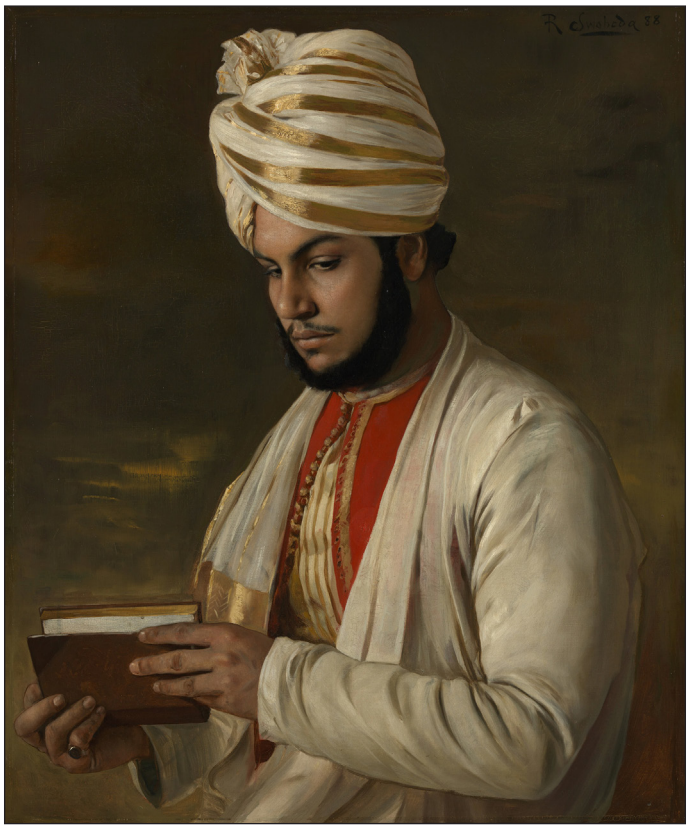

Fig. 8. Rudolf Swoboda, *The Munshi Abdul Karim*, 1888, oil on canvas, Royal Collection, RCIN 403831. © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2021.

This leads to the third theme: how do we interpret and understand Victoria and her material legacy in a decolonizing age? How can we move from a world where the gatekeepers are the very institutions in which she fashioned her image to a world where

[9] Saloni Mathur, *India by Design: Colonial History and Cultural Display* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

colonial resistance and complicity, violence, and cultural exchange can become fully part of the history? What is at stake in the curating of Victoria today? What is clear is that the curation of Queen Victoria's histories is thoroughly politically charged and must remain dynamic as old narratives are reshaped during a process in which the formally absent, and even lost, voices bring their contribution. This publication has its origins in research undertaken in anticipation of the bicentennial celebration of Victoria's birth in 2019, and even since this time the cultural-political landscape has shifted dramatically. The essential re-examination of the history of Britain and empire within the academy and in the museum, in conjunction with newly forensic studies of the history of slavery, has been intensified by political movements lobbying for social reform and racial equality. This has led to direct action in the wider community with attacks on statuary commemorating those associated with these deeply troubling histories, including on statues of Queen Victoria, who has come to be seen by many as an eponymous image of empire. A recent example is the toppling of a statue outside the Manitoba legislature in Winnipeg in July 2021, in the wake of the appalling discovery of the unmarked graves of hundreds of indigenous children in Canadian residential schools, victims of imperial policy for which Victoria was the figurehead.

These three strands, which structure this issue of *19*, are not discrete; indeed, it is important to draw out the connections among them. As such, the articles and features not only explore the links between the domestic and the imperial but also examine the connectedness of Victoria's own curating and its effects on the legacy left to us today. We intend to trouble the apparent clarity of the pervasive 'public image' and the complex histories and politics that hide beneath what is so familiar.

The first set of articles, 'Visualizing Victoria', discusses Victoria's crafting of her own image — in painting, photography, and book illustration — and the knowing use of different forms of representation to similar ends. Pamela Fletcher addresses Victoria's concern for her image in painting. Through a careful appraisal of William Powell Frith's painting made to commemorate the marriage of the Prince and Princess of Wales in 1863 she explores the question of visibility and the politics of that visibility in managing the public and private aspects of Victoria's life. Helen Trompeteler examines how the Queen used the photographic medium in managing her private grief and public duty. She discusses how this image of widowhood underpinned Victoria's self-fashioning for the remainder of her life. Morna O'Neill turns to a publication authored by the Queen — *Leaves from the Journal of Our Life in the Highlands* — published in order to consolidate relationships among royal family life, sovereignty, and empire. She examines the illustrations in detail to establish how the life narrative was positioned and how the moral agenda of this volume was given impact and resonance: illustrations, not always

explicitly of Victoria herself, but of her life and milieu, chosen to intersect with her text. Together, these three articles bring to light three aspects of this, exemplary of the ways in which the Queen worked to make and deploy her image: first, the imbrication of the domestic and the international or imperial; second, the managing of public and private and the constitution of each through the other; and third, how any individual iteration of the image is intended to be understood within a context of the biography.

The second section, 'Circulation and Display', focuses on what happens when the image of Victoria circulates through nation and empire within her lifetime and beyond. The journeys enabled by traditional media and new technologies traversed social hierarchies, many different political and cultural contexts, and time. The Queen's image was variously accepted, rejected, reshaped, repurposed, and then returned, sometimes accruing power, but always politically charged on the way. John Plunkett interrogates the ambition, execution, and reception of architectural and sculptural landscapes in London and Calcutta conceived as monuments to Queen Victoria following her death in 1901. Joanna Marschner discusses the ways in which royal houses particularly associated with Victoria's life narrative were repurposed as historic house museums and made publicly accessible as places of her commemoration. One of the features of Victoria's reign, as John Plunkett explored in *Queen Victoria: First Media Monarch*, was the use of new reproductive technologies to reinvent the monarchy and its public image. Victoria was fully complicit in this use of the press, print culture, and photography. Jeremy Brooker, Bryony Dixon, and Plunkett return to this history and extend it through images and film which examine the role of screen media: one that could reach new audiences, in creating new spectacular means of displaying the Queen. They consider both how Victoria exploited these media and how those working with the media also became complicit in the consolidation and shaping of the Queen's image, and the extension of its reach.

This leads to the final section, 'Victoria Today', which takes up these questions of political contestation, geography, the legacies of Victoria's imperial image, and crucially, how the image of Victoria should be interpreted and addressed in the contemporary world. On the one hand, Victoria is more popular than ever, as evinced by the numerous TV programmes, films, popular history books, and articles in the press and online. As a recuperation of the Victorian period has taken place, so Victoria has become ever more visible, and has been increasingly sentimentalized, personalized, and made sympathetic. On the other hand, this has coincided with a growing concern for decolonial thinking and a need, as Catherine Hall puts it, to 're-remember' the empire and its legacy.[10] Thus, a film such as *Victoria and Abdul* was a popular success but

[10] Catherine Hall, 'Whose Memories? Edward Long and the Work of Re-Remembering', in *Britain's History and Memory of Transatlantic Slavery: Local Nuances of a 'National Sin'*, ed. by Katie Donington, Ryan Hanley, and Jessica Moody (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016), pp. 129–49.

at the same time pilloried for whitewashing the history of empire; and as monuments to Victoria across the world have been graffitied and defaced as a response to colonial violence, television audiences from the UK to China have delighted in ITV's *Young Victoria*.

This section begins with an article by Laura-Maria Popoviciu and Andrew Parratt, which connects past and present more explicitly in their account of the history of Queen Victoria's painted portraiture in the British Embassy in Tehran, Iran. They chronicle how local, national, and global politics have had an impact on the artworks as contexts shifted over time, and how this has been manifested both intellectually and practically. This is followed by Michael Hatt's article that features five works by contemporary artists from around the globe, as a kind of online exhibition. Taking counter-ceremonial as the underpinning principle for the artists' different approaches to rethinking monuments, Hatt explores the way in which artists use aesthetic means to expose what the monuments hide, or to reveal the ideological work of the imperial aesthetic that Victoria deployed. Alongside the articles by Plunkett and Popoviciu and Parratt, this becomes part of a broader discussion about the troubling legacy of Victoria's memorialization, both in relation to specific places, from Wakefield to Guyana to Iran, and in general terms: the ambition of empire to encompass the world in a single icon.

In the forum on 'Victoria and the Politics of Representation', a range of thinkers respond to the question: how should we curate Victoria today? Their responses consider the relationship between the particular demands of their institutional, geographic, and disciplinary locations and the broader political and moral concerns that underpin the debate. Their statements, which are both polemical and practical, alert us both to the complexities of the apparently straightforward question faced by many historians, curators, and town planners, and to a wider community charged with the responsibility, or convinced of the imperative, to address new ways of engaging with Victoria's image and its legacy in our own time.

The issue ends with an afterword by Margaret Homans and Adrienne Munich, two of the most important scholars of Victoria and her public image. Their publications — Munich's *Queen Victoria's Secrets* (1996), Homans's *Royal Representations: Queen Victoria and British Culture, 1837–1876* (1998), and their co-edited volume *Remaking Queen Victoria* (1997) — constituted a major intervention in the field, bringing feminist and interdisciplinary perspectives to the debate and, as we point out above, in many respects a starting point for this project. In this brief afterword they offer a critical reflection on this issue of *19* and the project from which it emerged, and outline future directions for the scholarly field.

What underpins this entire issue is that a historical understanding of Victoria's self-fashioning is necessary for a thorough appreciation of the mechanisms by which the Queen and the monarchy worked to serve the interest not only of the royal dynasty, but also of the nation and empire. The construction, curation, and deployment of image was so carefully managed in her own lifetime that it continues to carry weight today. The articles collected here all point to the ways in which we might challenge the persistence of the image that Victoria crafted by close attention to the specificities of its representation and circulation. Simply to wipe away the image of Victoria is not an adequate response since this would also be to wipe away the complicated politics of her reign and its legacy. If we are to re-remember Victoria, that re-remembering must begin with critical historical analysis.

Acknowledgements

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