Chapter 14
Farewell, Victoria!

Queen Victoria once confided that she wanted to outlive her eldest son, who she felt was unfit to be king. In that she inevitably failed, although he was fifty-nine before he succeeded her in 1901. The life of her lackluster heir, who would become Edward VII, is the only biography I have written about someone I thoroughly disliked even before I wrote the first page. I knew more than I cared to know about him after writing lives of Victoria and Albert, and Disraeli and the Rothschilds. Yet I wanted to close my biographies of Victorian figures with the symbol of that era’s end, and determined to do so by dealing only with the Prince of Wales’s long mis-education as a future king. Victoria had long neglected her backward eldest son, and Albert had attempted to push him beyond his capacities. After Albert’s death he would demonstrate for decades, despite the apologetics and denials of later biographers, a remarkable incapacity for anything but pleasure.

Even contemporaries with little stomach for royalty saw Edward VII as a relief from the dowdy widow of Windsor, who had outstayed her welcome. Bloomsbury author David Garnett wrote in a memoir, to my surprise: “Edward VII was a most admirable monarch and his work in promoting the Entente Cordiale with France laid the foundations of a sane foreign policy.” Yet in the war which followed the pact with France, for which the Francophile king was only a fa
cade, Garnett was a conscientious objector.

No paragon of a prince, Albert Edward made good copy. Recognizing that, the venerable firm of John Murray in London had arranged for a revised reissue of Victoria, and encouraged me with a further contract for the king in waiting. Writing about a prince who lived for pleasure both before and after he ascended to the throne was more than I cared
to do. The after would become only an afterword. Early on the prince recognized that his deficiencies would be magnified if he ascended the throne as Albert I, with its inevitable comparison to his incomparable father. Monarchs can choose their own calling cards. Alexandrina Victoria when still a young princess discarded the “Alexandrina.” George VI on the abdication of his worthless brother David, who had succeeded his father as Edward VIII, rechristened himself as “George” although he was, until his accession, yet another Albert (equally certain, like his grandfather, of his limitations) and had a brother, Prince George.¹

Albert Edward was hardly more than twelve when in the 1850s the hostile American press began alleging his inadequacies, some of which in the interest of taste I forebore including in the biography—much as I had left them out of Victoria. In 1853 the weekly Pennsylvanian claimed, very likely from gossip equivalents arriving from England, that “his royal mamma … storms the sleeping apartments of all her household every morning at daybreak, besides divers miscellaneous thunder squalls ‘at the royal consort’ during the day.” Also put aside for its unreliability was such innuendo as

Here is a half idiot boy, who has scarce reached his teens, appointed to a high military rank, with half a million of dollars added to his already enormous salary as Prince of Wales…. It is a fact notorious as daylight that this heir apparent to the British throne, is sadly lacking in his mental development—in other words that there is something lacking in the upper story; that there are upper apartments to let, unfinished and unfurnished.

Yet when the prince visited Canada and the United States at a callow eighteen, carefully conducted and briefed, he became an enormous celebrity—yet perhaps only famous for being famous. Whatever the reasons, he did not disappoint, then, his worried royal parents.

My chapter about his visit in 1860, “Celebrity,” which was fun to research and write, showed him, without requiring authorial embroidery, at the finest moments in his life. After that, but for a press-manipulated outpouring of sympathy and prayers when in 1871 he seemed near death from pneumonia, it would be, in rumor and on the record, downhill for his reputation all the way. When no longer covered up by the indefatigable workaholic Albert, who had died in 1861, Victoria’s personality defects and her retreat into purdah had led to an exhaustion of
royal reverence. Her heir earned his own public disapprobation in extravagances that recalled George IV and the unforgotten Regency era.

My American contract for the book was for an Edward the Caresser, a label owed to Henry James at the time of the king’s accession. The UK publisher, John Murray, unduly concerned that lèse majesté, however attractive at the cash register, was in questionable taste in a monarchy, substituted The Importance of Being Edward. It made no difference that the Jamesian tag remained in the text, and that the prince’s caresses, as much as I knew of them then—and there were many I have learned about since—remained uncensored.

Despite Edward VII’s many shortcomings, his subjects found him a welcome contrast to his aged and ever-mourning mother. Yet nothing I found in my burrowing, which happily included the scurrilous scandal weeklies of the day, seemed likely to overturn his image as playboy up to, and even beyond, his coronation. The most respectable, and commercially successful, of the gossip media, was the impudent Punch, in which columns of print, and cheeky cartoons, regularly satirized the Prince of Wales, and even the queen, but cautiously offered readers nothing beyond innuendo. Travel an hour each way on the Northern Line with Rodelle to the British Newspaper Library (then at Colindale) seemed short as we looked forward to calling for and reading the plethora of brittle, yellowing gossip magazines that seemed beyond—or below—charges of libel. Who among the vilified would go to court to deny extremes of behavior that even if not factual under the rules of evidence would expose the accuser to public ridicule? The chief press culprit was Truth, edited by Henry Labouchère, who happily courted the anger of the Court. Even more overtly hostile was the Sunday-only Reynolds’s News.

The oft-told story of Bertie’s sexual initiation had to be re-told, but my problem thereafter was how much to tell about the repellent escapades that followed his father’s death. Other than some harmless scoldings, his mother preferred to ignore him—and them. When widowed she gave him, as untrustworthy and marginally educated heir, little to do, enabling his racing and gambling debts and skirt-chasing. Harriet Mordaunt, hysterical over an ailing infant, claimed several possible fathers for him other than her husband Sir Charles, including the Prince of Wales. Catherine Walters, the expensive Paris courtesan known as
“Skittles,” and Cora Pearl, who exhibited herself to paying gentlemen wearing only a string of pearls or a sprig of parsley tucked into an obvious crevice, were linked to the prince in the gossip columns, and in Florence, upon her death in 1870 Madame Barucci (a tubercular) left scandalous letters from her clients which the Prince, through a Court intermediary, had to ransom. The desperate Susan Vane-Tempest, widow of the insane Lord Adolphus and pregnant with HRH’s child, was also dealt with by the loyal and discreet Francis Knollys, who for his services would rise in the Prince’s household.

Many potential embarrassments did not surface, but the Sheffield Daily Telegraph reported that HRH would be cited as co-respondent in a divorce case between Lord and Lady Sefton, and the prince complained to his bedroom-prone brother Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh, in a letter lifted and published in the Indépendence Belge and the Madras Mail: “Here nine years after poor father’s death I am expected to sit in sackcloth and ashes to his memory.” The queen dismissed the new allegation in a letter to daughter Vicky in Berlin as “a fiction invented abroad.” At home, however, the fictions, skirting close to fact, emerged, as I found in Beeton’s Christmas Annual for 1872. In a parody of Tennyson’s Idylls of the King, the verses had “Prince Guelpho”—the queen came from the German Guelph family line—the easily identifiable prince, at many-paged length, sow “a tidyish crop … of wild oats.” Not anticipating any flurry of lawsuits, Beeton’s in 1873 and 1874 published more about the scandalous Guelpho. In The Coming K-, his royal mother upbraids him for his sins. Nonplussed, the prince charges that the infractions do not matter:

Suppose I am all that they say I am,
I’m better so than [to] live a priggish life.

The Siliad continued the scurrility, but W. E. Gladstone, then prime minister, argued to Earl Granville that taking action to suppress the charges would only publicize them further. And, counting upon royal immunity, HRH cared so little that he suggested through Knollys that the wealthy Earl of Rosebery, a future prime minister then only twenty-six, permit the use of his London mansion as a rendezvous for Bertie and Alfred, when not patronizing prostitutes in Paris, to bed willing London ladies, of whom there were apparently many available. The indiscretions continued, and, at one point, Alexandra, the Princess of
Wales, barred Bertie from Marlborough House during the Christmas holiday season. He had long been barred from her bed.

Flouting decorum even further when king, Edward VII even arranged for his coronation, that solemn ceremony at Westminster Abbey suffused with church tradition, in what became known behind the scenes as “the King’s loose box.” The term, a stall for unrestrained horses, was playfully used to refer to his ordering reserved seating in the Abbey for past and present mistresses. In Court attire sat Sarah Bernhardt, Lillie Langtry, Daisy Warwick, Alice Keppel—the king’s maîtresse-en-titre—and Olga Alberta Caracciolo, now the Baroness de Meyer, the wife of society photographer Adolphe de Meyer, who bore a Saxon title arranged by her “godfather.”

HRH’s record as royal caresser was so voluminous and open that as biographer my problem was to balance that personal dimension with whatever else he did with his public and private life. It was increasingly obvious to me that the Queen’s decades of widowed aloofness from public life and her heir’s thin pretense of public duty had eroded beyond recovery the active function of the Crown in a parliamentary monarchy. Before the onset of a representative democracy in English government the pleasure-loving Charles II, in Bernard Shaw’s satiric view in “Good King Charles’s Golden Days” (1939), subtitled A True History That Never Happened, had a viable if ironic conception of the royal role. I should have quoted it in Edward the Caresser. King Charles explains to his queen, Catherine, loyal despite her husband’s open excesses:

Why am I a popular king? Because I am a lazy fellow. I enjoy myself and let the people see me doing it, and leave things as they are, though things as they are will not bear thinking of by those who know what they are. That is what people like. It is what they would do if they were kings.

Although the Prince of Wales, as heir and as king, may not have been capable of such subtleties of thought, it was how he ordered—or disordered—his life. “Daisy”—the Countess of Warwick—flaunted her intimacy even as her royal companion publicly assumed a role as guardian of public morals, applying his double standard to lesser gentlemen, to the drama, the ballet, and books he never read. In the 1890s he was with her at racing weeks, at long-weekend parties at Warwick Castle, at fashionable restaurants, and even at her church. When it was socially
necessary to be with his cold and increasingly deaf spouse, Alexandra, he wrote, by her side, passionate and marginally literate letters to Daisy. “Now, my loved one,” Bertie uxoriously concluded a note while Alix sat passively nearby: “I bring these lines to a close as I must dress and breakfast. God bless you, my own adored little Daisy wife.” He signed it “Your only Love.”

The misused term applied to other unacknowledged ladies or their children. I wrote earlier in the book that according to the taunting weekly *Town Talk*, after reporting that the Prince of Wales was “susceptible to feminine charms,” he challenged the editors, ostensibly in his own defense: “Point me out one woman who can say, ‘This man has wronged me.’” It was a safe, if daring contention, worthy of a Q.C. (Queen’s Counsel), for there were ladies in Bertie’s life with children who may have been his. In a rare contemporary novel that mentioned the prince slyly, Anthony Trollope’s *Marion Fay* (1882), Lady Amal-dina and her Welsh lover, Lord Llwddlythlw, talk of marriage and children, and recall that the Prince of Wales “had declared that he hoped to be asked to be godfather long ago.”

Being godfather, readers of society gossip well knew, sometimes signified more, as I observed about another professional beauty beloved of photographers who purveyed “cabinet” reproductions. She was Mary (“Patsy”) Cornwallis-West of Ruthin Castle, Wales, and 49 Eaton Place, London. Daughter of an Irish marquis and wife of William Cornwallis-West, honorary colonel of a battalion of the Royal Welch Fusiliers, she was charged by *Town Talk* with cooperating with commercial photo portraitists to such an extent that she earned thousands on sales commissions. The colonel sued for libel. Although he won his slander suit—few ever did—that only encouraged rumors of her dalliance with the Prince of Wales. When the small daughter of a laborer on the estate of the Duke of Westminster told her father that she had seen the prince “lying on top” of Mrs. Cornwallis-West in the woods, the girl “was struck a violent blow and told she’d be killed if she repeated the story.”

The prince became “godfather” to Patsy’s son George, born in 1874. “The Prince of Wales often came,” George Cornwallis-West recalled, “and was invariably kind to me and asked to see me. Never a Christmas passed without his sending me some little gift....” Later when king,
Edward would watch over his godson’s early military career and intervene to promote it. Ironically, Cornwallis-West would marry the much older but still attractive Jennie Jerome Churchill, who had evaded the prince’s advances.

Society beauties came and went in Bertie’s amorous life. I wrote of another—mezzo-soprano and pianist Mabel Batten. She possessed the plump curves in fashion in the 1880s, made much of in portraits painted by Edward Poynter and John Singer Sargent. As added impetus to HRH’s interest, she had been born in Barrackpore and had the reputation of being “fast” in the amoral Anglo-Indian colony in Simla, where the Prince of Wales may have met her on his elephant-shooting tour. She had been married at nineteen in India in 1875, and soon thereafter had affairs with colonial dignitaries, including the Viceroy, Lord Lytton. Later, in England, Bertie would become godfather to her eldest grandchild, having been something more to Mabel.

Although I realized that I had not identified all of the Prince’s bedmates, and wrote about others as well, I had missed at least one. Perhaps his most significant, if unacknowledged, offspring, was Stewart Graham Menzies, born in Mayfair on January 30, 1890. His mother and ostensible father, heir to a distillery fortune, were on the fringes of HRH’s set and speculation persisted about the child’s paternity. There were pronounced physical differences between young Stewart—especially his “Windsor blue eyes”—and his elder brother, Keith. Menzies’s mother Susannah, a great beauty known as “the pocket Venus,” a daughter of a partner in the wealthy Wilson Line shipping firm, had climbed quickly into the highest Court circles, abetted by George Lindsay Holford, leading equerry, and others, to the randy Prince.

Menzies’s early career was looked after by the king. Although there was no vacancy in the Household Cavalry, a place was made for Menzies. When his legal father literally dissipated his millions and died of tuberculosis in 1911, only months after Edward’s own death, his mother Susannah married Holford, who had an enormous estate himself, and Stewart Menzies prospered further in the military, joining the intelligence service of the Grand Staff in France in 1915. When the next war came he rose to “C”—chief of British Intelligence: MI6. On a wall in his suite overlooking Parliament Square was a painting of Edward
VII—not the expected portrait of George VI. He took his whispered paternal relationship seriously.

I even found that on the prince’s pre-accession visits under transparent pseudonyms to prostitutes in Paris, special arrangements were made for his pleasure. One fashionable house of joy had a pulley device provided so that his bulky body could be lowered onto a willing and well-paid performe. My source was then a young man heir to a publishing fortune (but not a sexual client) who would become, decades later, American ambassador to Britain. For Walter Annenberg, the unromantic setting was unforgettable.

Despite reader disinterest in the U.S., where no paperback reprint would be produced, bookshops in Britain had shelves of books on royals, and the electronic media were also attuned to that audience. A television channel commissioned me to be filmed at Madingley Hall, the rented suburban mansion where the Prince of Wales had resided under perfunctory supervision by a royal “governor” while at Cambridge. Bertie (he was, then, still “Albert”) would leave the university, with obvious relief, at his father’s death, and even before that had evaded even passive oversight. The TV director intended to show how the voracious prince slipped out of his bedroom, his overseer unaware or indifferent, to consort with ladies of the evening.

Unfortunately, the producer had failed to alert, or prevent, the university authorities from stripping the long-maintained upstairs bedrooms in preparation for turning the spaces into administrative offices. What had been the unaltered milieu of the early 1860s had become on our return only disappointingly bare walls. I had been jetted to Heathrow, chauffeured to Cambridge and ensconced in a downtown hotel before the frustrating reality emerged. As a cold January rain was falling, after checking in I hurried to a nearby Marks and Spencer shop and bought a raincoat.

The next morning, we had to re-enact Bertie’s surreptitious exits with only a fireplace and his bare indoor fire escape to suggest the unrecoverable past. While I commented on camera at the bedroom stairwell, a face-unseen young gentleman in mid-Victorian togs and topper scuttled past me and down into the arms of a décolleté-clad damsel acting amorous despite the chill January drizzle. At least the façade of Madingley was unaltered. The camera exploited that. Another TV ap-
pearance, this time in London, used the Reform Club interior because of its Edwardian decor, but almost nothing Edwardian was visible to the camera and the producer had not known that the street below the drawing-room setting would be broken up by pneumatic drills as he set up his improvised sound stage. Outraged negotiations began but the road crew was unionized and adamant. Finally, the crew chief agreed to let the filming proceed during somewhat prolonged rest breaks. It became a very tedious day. Still another filming took place in a house in Richmond rented expensively because of its Victorian furnishings and art, but the channel’s scenic expert took down the pictures he didn’t like, and moved the furniture about until it was hardly visible on-screen. A further handicap was that the house proved to be on a busy and noisy bus route. A flunkey had to be stationed at the front door to warn us when to stop—and restart—the filming.

When I claimed inability to make yet another flight to England, a BBC crew promising a Victorian setting near campus came, instead, to Penn State. Rodelle had procured the building, once a coal baron’s mansion, and now the home of the Centre County Historical Society, for a morning. The BBC camera crew insisted upon utter silence within, evicting everyone. Rodelle was told that her distant turning of a newspaper page created too much sound interference. Then all objects in the room that seemed Victorian were removed, and I was seated in a chair below a mantelpiece lit by a single candle. The filming could have been accomplished remotely from London via university TV, with a background imposed digitally. With the assignment completed, minimally, the crew packed up its equipment and left in a rented van, happy to have time to shop in Manhattan before the flight back. The various misadventures seemed almost as if the shade of the Prince of Wales was at work to mitigate the shady sides of his life.

Fig. 36 Stan, still authoring books, in his early 80s
My *Farewell, Victoria! English Literature 1880–1900* (2012) hardly mentioned Bertie, as it was a collection of updated pieces on the close of the Victorian years, opening with “Exasperated Admiration. Bernard Shaw on Queen Victoria.” Published the year before, *Victorian Yankees at Queen Victoria’s Court. American Encounters with Victoria and Albert* (2011) was my final book-length look at the nineteenth-century royals, including the embarrassing king-in-waiting. I had accumulated so many refreshing American perspectives on the royals while working on the biographies, some not publishable because of space considerations, that I had long wanted to include them in a book about the eyewitnesses from across the Atlantic to the era before the monarchy had dwindled into little more than an historical symbol, tourist attraction and media fixation on the ongoing anachronism. To what I had already gathered over the decades, I found even more occasions of the collisions of the Old World with the New. Victoria’s long reign encompassed much of the time during which the young America was growing up. The responses of Americans toward Victoria, Albert and Edward not only revealed what Yankees thought of their fading relationship with the empire of which they had been a part, but reflected their own ambitions, confidence, smugness, insecurities—and sense of loss.

In the age of sail, and even more in the new age of steam, Americans had voyaged to Britain in the tens of thousands. Some of them even remained, in a reverse emigration—becoming subjects of the queen, obtaining knighthoods or other royal honors, amassing wealth then unobtainable at home, establishing roots in the soil of their ancestors. Many more sniffed the sooty air, persevered through the chronic fog, trod the greener grass, examined the venerable buildings, ruins and monuments, sensed the impalpable mystique of royalty, then returned across the narrowing Atlantic.

Many Americans I retrieved from the shadows were fresh faces and names, from the original “horse whisperer” from Ohio who tamed Albert’s stables to the daring lion tamer from Kentucky who became a darling of the young Victoria, who visited the menagerie several times and fed the animals. There was the society lady from Alabama who returned to become one of the unsung founders of the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association, which restored George Washington’s home, and also the clerical lyricist from Philadelphia, a guest of Victoria who
preached at Windsor and who wrote “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” I thought that the brash, bewildered and beguiled travelers, from P. T. Barnum’s famous “Tom Thumb,” who performed at Buckingham Palace, to the later, legendary sharpshooter Annie Oakley, who shattered decorum by shaking the queen’s hand, were page-turning figures. Then there were literary lions like Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and James Russell Lowell who charmed the cloistered widow and offered another dimension of the remote woman who might have been their sovereign had the rebellion, decades before, failed.

At the beginning of my story, one of the most memorable Americans to catch a sight of the teenage princess who would become queen was a young physician, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and at the close was Henry James, who viewed the funeral cortege intending to scoff and then thought better of the deceased widow who encapsulated her country’s modern history. Early on there had also been Herman Melville, whose first recorded “Prince of Whales” was not Moby-Dick, then not even an idea for a book, and Nathaniel Hawthorne, American consul in drab but busy Liverpool, with ideas for novels about compatriots returning to “Our Old Home” to claim an alleged portion of their heritage. Toward the close appeared the venerable Indian chieftain in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show (in a performance staged for the queen), who revered “Grandmother England,” and Mark Twain, who wrote two striking souvenirs of his long sojourn in London. A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court wryly looked at Victorian Britain through a medieval lens, and his The Prince and the Pauper began in its first draft with young Prince Albert Edward changing places with a rags-clad cockney boy in an early Victorian slum setting, and the little pauper suffering the horrible miseries of princedom.

Americans in Victorian England, I thought, had encountered the symbolism and panoply and continuity of which only remnants remained at home. In the Victorian century the price of a republic and a presidency—but for the remarkable exceptions—had been a succession of Van Burens and Fillmores and Tylers, and Johnsons, Grants and McKinleys. Yet the price of a colorful hereditary monarchy, even a parliamentary one, could be an Edward the Caresser or an Albert and Victoria.
Although I thought that *Victorian Yankees* had the potential to secure a wide audience, my agent, one of the successors to Sterling Lord, was unable to interest a publisher, and my own inquiries to uncommercial presses also failed. Finally, I resorted to a rather faceless semi-academic publisher, Rowman and Littlefield, which printed the book but seemed to have neither capacity nor interest in marketing it. There may have been a few reviews although I don’t recall any of them. Yet stealth publishing had its positive dimension. The book was not shoplifted by other writers, an experience I had encountered, earlier, much too often. *Victorian Yankees* was a real farewell to Victoria.

**Endnote**

1. As Duke of Kent, Prince George—the other George—died in a flying accident in 1942.