A Writing Life
Weintraub, Stanley

Published by ELT Press

Weintraub, Stanley.  
A Writing Life: Revisiting the Past.  
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/77280.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/77280

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2679609
Chapter 10
Victoria and Its Successors

I hadn’t anticipated the media commotion raised by my biography of Queen Victoria early in 1987. While in London early in 1984, I had received a transatlantic call from Sterling Lord, still agenting me. Truman Talley, my editor, wanted to persuade me to do a biography of Queen Victoria, as the last full life, by Elizabeth Longford, had appeared twenty years earlier. Although I had never considered writing about a woman, let alone an almost mythic one, I offered to think about it. “By the way,” I asked, “since I’m an ocean away from my personal library and if I go ahead I would have some research to do to prepare a proposal, how long should it be?” Sterling said he’d ask, and call back. Soon he did. For Whistler I had confidently typed out a brief page, observing that I intended to write a life of feisty, cranky James Abbott McNeill Whistler, about whom there had not been a biography in decades. “What about four pages?” said Sterling. “So he has something on file. Mac Talley really wants you to do Victoria.”

By coincidence, that afternoon, London time, we had planned to go to an exhibition at the Royal College of Music about the many-sided Prince Albert, Victoria’s consort. Among his myriad talents he was a composer. His music was in the sonic background as we toured the exhibition. On admission I had bought the illustrated catalog, which, in our rented flat in Hampstead, became my sole resource for the four recommended pages. A day later I airmailed the proposal, which proved enough substance for a contract although the pages foreshadowed hardly anything I would write.

Realizing that I would be the first American to produce a life of Victoria, I determined from afar that once I returned home I would seek,
among fresh perspectives, colorful evidences of American encounters with her, an aspect of her reign that others had ignored. These would range from Oliver Wendell Holmes, who saw her at fifteen at an art opening in 1834, to Henry James, who observed her funeral procession go by in 1901. “The Princess is a nice, fresh-looking girl,” Holmes wrote, “blonde, and rather pretty. The King [her uncle, William IV] looks like a retired butcher.… [He] blew his nose twice, and wiped the royal perspiration repeatedly from his face, which is probably the largest uncivilised spot in England.” Sallie Stevenson, wife of the American envoy, described the Coronation, which “had a most thrilling effect even upon my democratic nerves, & I dare say drew loyal tears from loyal eyes.” Several American artists memorably limned the teenage queen then, and at Astley’s Amphitheatre at the foot of Westminster Bridge in Lambeth, she visited the young American lion tamer, Isaac Van Ambrugh. On her third return, backstage, she was invited to watch the lions being fed. “One can never see [the show] too often,” she wrote excitedly in her diary. Long after, in 2011, I would put the royal encounters with Americans I found at the time, along with similar later discoveries, from Tom Thumb and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s “Uncle Tom” Henson to Nathaniel Hawthorne, ex-president Ulysses Grant and Mark Twain, into *Victorian Yankees at Queen Victoria’s Court*.

After a month in the cramped, chilly flat on St. John’s Road, a temporary venue close to the myriad shops on Hampstead High Street, we relocated for the remainder of my sabbatical to Defoe House in the Barbican estate on the north edge of the City of London. The Barbican, but for what remained of its chiseled Roman walls and the restored St Giles’ Cripplegate Church within, had been a Blitz-flattened wartime expanse. In 1969 a vast city within the city, in grey brutalist architecture, emerged, eventually with 2014 flats, a concert hall, the Royal Shakespeare Company’s playhouse, and a well-stocked branch of the City of London Library. I could use its facilities. When I asked about privileges to take out books, I was instructed to show evidence of residence, such as letters addressed to me at a Barbican address. Soon I had a library card useful during many future years of sublets in the Barbican, and a research location much closer than the British Museum to begin work on Victoria.
One letter I could use for identification came from my mother. I had written to her that on our arrival we had gone, a short walk away, to Barbican Hall to a concert at which Oscar Shumsky had performed brilliantly the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto. According to the program notes he had been born in Philadelphia and had been a concert star, but on joining the faculty of the Julliard School in Manhattan had ceased performing for thirty years—until 1981—three years earlier. Mom wrote back immediately. Young Oscar, who had learned the violin at three, had been a neighboring child on narrow, row-house Hoffman Street in South Philadelphia when she was in high school. At four he began visiting to play for her family, who were delighted and offered him cookies. Mom would accompany Oscar on their piano. At seven he debuted under Leopold Stokowski with the Philadelphia Orchestra. Had Rodelle and I known, we would have gone backstage and recalled Ray Segal to him.

Exploiting the library at the Barbican, I settled in to write, seeking out the long bookshelves on British royals. In order to evoke the queen as a human being rather than a caricature or an icon, I set out to deal with personal realities, some of them intimate and hardly written about earlier. What was her medical history? How did her actions reflect it? In her early teens she was debilitated and bedridden by what was still unrecognized as mononucleosis, and on recovering was offered for her convalescence the key to Moses Montefiore’s seaside garden at Ramsgate. (Sir Moses had retired from banking at forty to spend his next sixty-one years in philanthropy.) In 1886 Victoria would confide to a granddaughter: “I still possess the key.”

Also early in life she was recognized as hyperthyroid, which led to emotional outbursts and rash intolerance to heat. (Servants at Court would douse fireplaces in rooms she entered.) When my biography was published, with a dust jacket portrait of the queen at age twenty-four, painted by Franz Xavier Winterhalter, I gave a copy to our friend Charles Berst, at the time a patient at the UCLA Medical Center. A nurse looking in exclaimed: “That lady has a thyroid problem!” Her bulging eyes were not diminished by Winterhalter, whose bosomy likeness of Victoria in an off-the-shoulder gown and flowing hair was Prince Albert’s favorite image of the queen.
Victoria’s arranged marriage to Albert, her first cousin from Germany, was always referred to as an idyll only broken by his early death. Was it really so? Beyond producing heirs to the throne, what was their marital life like? And was Albert’s role next to the throne merely ceremonial?

I realized quickly that a nominal role was not possible for him. He was ambitious and soon restless. Besides, in the prevailing climate of false prudery, often mislabeled “Victorian” although it preceded her, a pregnant woman, even a queen, was soon excluded from public appearances, and the period of “lying-in” could encompass further months. Prince Albert, who dictated letters for young Victoria’s signature and was at her side at conferences with her ministers, was effectively an uncrowned king, although Parliament declined all his life to give him a formal title. Victoria would have nine unexceptional pregnancies and births. For almost half her reign her husband was the informal sovereign.

Archives on both sides of the pond were replete with useful documentation. I was overwhelmed by data, some of which had never been examined before. My good friend and colleague Charles W. Mann, Penn State’s Head of Special Collections, turned up a condolence volume for Prince Albert from the rare book shelves, and pointed me toward material often lost to public view—letters offered for sale by dealers and auction houses, quoted in their catalogues, but then vanished into private collections. To whet buyer appetites the manuscripts were often quoted at length, sometimes even reproduced in partial, even full, facsimile. Charlie had files of such catalogs, which I pored over and found pages to copy or photocopy. Claims of copyright or ownership would be questionable, as the documents were in print. I exploited them, as I would also do for other projects over the decades.

One never knows what can be discovered usefully until a search proceeds, and that can require physical presence—much more so in the days before digital proliferation. One unlikely location was the State Archives of South Africa in Cape Town. As the nation moved out of colonialism and then apartheid, technological advances followed. When I visited South Africa at the invitation of its government to report on the progress of modernizing and diversifying universities, I also explored the State Archives—the first library, perhaps in all of Africa, to have its
collections computerized. To test its efficacy, I key-punched “Victoria.” One message emerged from the nether regions of her empire on the occasion of the queen’s Golden Jubilee of her accession in 1887—I would open my biography with that event and flash back. It was from the Christianized Chief Letsie of Basutoland (now Lesotho), then seventy-six. It seemed a rare justification of the White Man’s Burden. “For us,” he wrote to Victoria,

> it is a curious thing that a woman should be a Queen, although we hear out of the Book of God that there was once a Queen of Sheba who paid a visit to the wise King Solomon. If I was not old and infirm I would have liked to go and see her Majesty with my own eyes, as I hear that many kings and princes from far countries have done.... We ourselves owe our present peace and our very deliverance she granted to us in 1868, when we were on the brink of an absolute ruin. And although since then we have gone through troubles and difficulties, still we exist as a people and we have to thank, after God, her Majesty.

Basutoland had been saved from the plundering of the Boer-run Orange Free State, when Chief Moshesh, father of Letsie, appealed desperately to the Cape’s royal governor to protect his country and people, whom he described humbly as “only lice in the Queen’s blanket.” Victoria’s capacious imperial blanket had many uses. I prized the chief’s colorful metaphor.

My first clue to the book’s reception in the queen’s domain would come when at home—a telephone call from London. It was four in the morning. A reporter on the *Daily Telegraph* either failed to realize that Pennsylvania was not in his time zone, or was intent on getting the jump on press competition. “Victoria wasn’t really a Victorian?” he challenged, after my sleepy hello. “Was she good in bed?”

“She wore her husband out,” I said, collecting my wits; and he would front-page a story headlining the queen’s amorous appetites. I noted, now more awake, that she liked to gift him, at birthdays and at Christmas, with paintings and prints of lubricious nudes, perhaps to stir his libido. And I mentioned that Albert himself brought from Germany, to hang above his large bathtub at Osborne House, their country home on the Isle of Wight, a larger-than-life painting of Omphale, the mythical Queen of Lydia, wearing only her long hair, sitting astride the muscular thigh of a nude Hercules, whom she had purchased to be her sex slave and to sire the succession. Possibly, I remarked, Albert was remind-
ing himself regularly of his role. “The canvas is still hanging there,” I added. “I’ve seen it.” And I had put a reproduction of it in my book.

On a visit to the royal estate on the Isle of Wight with our friends Eileen and Alan Hanley-Browne, we had been shown the private and public rooms, and had also seen the lock device on the royal bedstead that enabled Albert, from the sheets, to mechanically keep out intruding servants while the couple coupled. Rodelle had also made an unrelated discovery in the grand dining room. The table and chairs seemed lower than the norm, probably so mandated, for her convenience, by the five-foot queen. As Rodelle extricated a tape measure, always with her then, from her purse and began measuring the height of the table, a factotum rushed over, exclaiming: “Madam, it is not for sale!”

At Windsor, again with the Hanley-Brownes, we learned that Victoria’s journals, begun as a teenage princess with the gift of a diary by her mother, were rewritten from her days onward as queen by her youngest daughter, Beatrice, to eliminate anything she found that might cause distress to the family or influential friends. It would be difficult to find authentic, uncensored passages, but I did locate pages of original texts, pre-Beatrice, in quotations offered to the first biographer of Albert by the queen herself in her Scottish Highland diaries, and in pages she recopied in Hindi when she attempted to learn the primary language of her jewel in the Crown.

At Windsor we were escorted by Oliver Edwards, the Royal Librarian, to the mausoleum at Frogmore, open to the public only on a few mandated days—but for the occasion we were special guests. En route we passed a burial site where a fresh grave was exposed. “The Duchess of Windsor has finally been accepted at Windsor,” Sir Oliver remarked. She had been interred on April 29, 1986 next to her husband, Edward VIII, who had died in 1972 but was not among the royals under the Frogmore roof because the twice-divorced American woman for whom he had abdicated remained ineligible.

Edwards observed to us that Victoria, when enfeebled by arthritic knees and her sight impaired by cataracts, would proceed on memorial progresses through Frogmore in a wheelchair. In the dimness she often fingered plaques and commemorative objects that revived for her the vanished past. Often the queen reached low for a bronze tablet in the right wing, the only symbol in the shrine not family-related. The
plaque had been placed at her instructions and with her inscription in 1883. “In loving and grateful remembrance,” it read, so she thought, “of John Brown the faithful and devoted personal attendant and friend of Queen Victoria whom he constantly accompanied here. These words are inscribed by Her whom he served so devotedly for thirty-three years.” Alan shone his foot-long electric torch on the bronze, and we saw, in surprise, that a typographical error had persisted for more than a century. The “r” in “inscribed” was missing. In the half-light below an ornamental urn the inscription would have been difficult to read even by a visitor with sight more acute than that of the ageing queen. That her stubby fingers could pick out John Brown’s name must have been enough to validate that his memory lived on in the bosom of her family. Yet that her surviving children knew of the flaw in lettering seems certain. That it was never corrected or replaced suggests small yet silent revenge upon the despised gillie, buried far off in Scotland, whom Victoria loved more than most of her royal brood.

I would note that apparent indelicacy in my biography, and newspapers recalled the queen’s curious emotional ties to her gillie, to be exaggerated later in a popular film, *Mrs. Brown*, and later less-than-coy sexual innuendo. The cinematic queen even visited the dying gillie in his Windsor tower bedroom although, by then lame, the actual Victoria could not have ascended the steep staircase on her own. Yet in her fashion the queen did shower affection upon the gruff, fawning John Brown, despite his alcoholism and reek of strong tobacco, sending him valentines, visiting his Scottish family, even treasuring Brown memorabilia after his death. Her retainers cringed at her suggestion, which went no farther, that she write a Brown memoir.

Whatever her obsession, Brown, whose physical connection to her included lifting her into her carriage, could not replace Albert. The British press fixated on the suggestive, nearly erotic pictures she exchanged with the prince, which I reproduced, and the implication that the queen enjoyed tumbling in the royal sheets with the willing Albert. Wherever the Union Jack flew, *Victoria* emerged on the bookshelves.
The French, of course, immediately commissioned a translation, as did the Germans and the Japanese.

Pleased at the book’s potential, my London publishers, Allen & Unwin, arranged for an inaugural dinner for critics at the venerable, pricey Rules, with champagne and vintage wines, and still replete with red velvet and burnished wood. Rules had prospered in Covent Garden since being established by Thomas Rule in 1798, long before Prince Edward of Kent had any thought of legitimate progeny eligible for the succession. His father, “mad” King George III, would live on until 1820, the year after Victoria was born, and Edward had elder brothers to inherit the crown.

Indexing is necessary for much non-fiction, yet a dreary chore. Finding first names for obscure people is sometimes frustrating. Victoria’s dresser, Skerret, tested me. Servants were usually referred to by surnames to remind them of their lowly places. Unable to locate Miss Skerret’s name, I invented one that I guessed fit her status—Annie. Later, researching a biography of the queen’s consort, Prince Albert, I chanced upon Skerret’s actual name: Marianne. The only deliberate fiction in all my biographies turned out to be fact.

Newspapers from London to Sydney were soon full of Victoria, and the book was praised in The Times of London as a rather good biography of their queen—although by an American, and a professor at that. The popular New York Times acrostic puzzle in its Sunday magazine on May 3, 1987, would open with a quotation from Victoria—a line from a fulsome Sallie Stevenson letter. People magazine telephoned to ask to visit to do a photo-interview, which took until early June to happen. A crew was to drive from New York and arrive early on a Friday evening while it was still daylight. Apparently, our routing directions were ignored. Hours and hours passed. A call came from the People offices that the camera team had gotten lost en route and to save time, as a publication deadline was approaching, a replacement pair was being hurried across New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

Wearying of the wait, with darkness approaching, Rodelle and I opened the hot tub on our back patio and soothed our frustrations in the steam. Close to midnight, team two turned up, with a reporter’s young son in tow. It was the estranged father’s turn to keep the brat for the weekend. Now we had him.
Discovering us in the hot tub, the *People* pair decided that it was a great venue for a photo shoot. Could I drag out to the tub rim a typewriter (this episode predated laptops, cell phones and e-mail) and pretend to be writing the next book? Drippingly, I carried out my electric typewriter, dangling the unplugged cord over the unseen side. Floodlights were set up as more time passed, and early June bugs, exotic miniature dirigibles, cruised the scene, the cameraman’s assistant swatting them away with a newspaper. By three in the morning *People* had its interview and the lights were dimmed. The crew would not be going directly back, as it was the weekend. They planned to put their film and script on the first Greyhound bus to New York in the morning for pick-up by a messenger.

*People* had already planted a lead on its table of contents page: “Blue of blood but not of stocking, Queen Victoria was a lusty lady who didn’t mind a good time, says her American biographer, Stanley Weintraub.” The Greyhound bus from Centre County arrived in Manhattan on time for the deadline, but the copy and photo spools supposedly placed aboard were missing. The reporters were long gone. *People* desperately telephoned again to have me do a long-distance wire interview, which appeared in the June 22 issue. Without the images at the hot tub, the story was illustrated with file photos of the queen, and an image of the author retrieved from somewhere showing me in my library with copies of the English and American editions of *Victoria*. The hot tub photos never surfaced.

Just before leaving for London in early April, I had received a call from a woman in Seattle. As it was nine in the morning in the east, I asked why she was up so early, as it was only six in Washington. “I’ve just finished reading your *Victoria,*” Muriel Winterscheid said. “I read right through the night. If I mail you my copy, would you sign it for me?”

“Of course,” I said; “but don’t rush: I’m flying off to England tomorrow to promote the book there. I won’t be able to sign it right away.”

“Wonderful!” she enthused. “My husband is going to a medical conference in London. I’m going along. Can I get the book to you there?” I explained how, and learned later, when I met Muriel and her daughter, that they had walked along Piccadilly toward my talk site and saw a window at Hatchards bookshop dramatically displaying masses
of *Victoria*. She walked in and asked a clerk whether the author had signed their copies. No, he explained; he’s an American, and it would have been impossible. “I’m on my way to have him sign my book,” she boasted, showing her American edition. “He’s here in London now.” My publisher had invited me to England for the launch of *Victoria*, but had neglected possible book signings. It had taken Muriel to arrange my visit to Piccadilly to autograph the bookshop’s stock. Thanks to the lady from Seattle, I signed my books at Hatchards, the oldest bookshop in London, for years afterwards.

*Victoria* was even number one on the *Times*’s nonfiction best-seller list for a week or two. Accordingly, I was invited to appear on Melvyn Bragg’s BBC much-listened-to “Start the Week” Monday morning program on April 6, where a combo sang an indiscreet satire composed for the occasion on the royal couple’s love life, parodying Tennyson’s “Come into the Garden, Maud.” The jape closed with

Here’s a health unto Her Majesty,
With a fa, la la, la la, la la.
Victoria’s the queen for me
With a fa, la la, la la, la la.
Of prudery she is accused
But dalliance she never refused,
For she was very much amused
By a bit of fa, la la, la la, la la.
Fond of whisky in her tea
And a spot of fa, la la, la la.
Sexy pictures she will peep
And every night late hours keep.
Poor Albert doesn’t get much sleep,
For there’s so much fa, la la, la la.

The straitlaced Lord Tennyson would have been appalled. He would not have approved either of a lady in London, then in her late seventies,\(^1\) who filled her Victorian home with immodest royal and other historical memorabilia. Edomé Broughton-Adderley wrote to ask me to visit and see her collections, which included the very porcelain toilet (since planted with ivy, I discovered) on which Margaret Thatcher had perched before she became prime minister. Mrs. Broughton-Adderley had discovered it when discarded as rubbish in Mrs. Thatcher’s garden, as once she relocated to Downing Street, her house was being renovated for another occupant. Edomé asked for it, summoned a
taxi, and had it fetched to her house. By then she also had collected several medieval chastity belts, Henry VIII’s codpiece, a Victoria chemise, and a pair of the queen’s baggy drawers, monogrammed “VRI” and sewn in soft white cotton lawn. Without her maid tightening the drawstring, the undies measured fifty-four inches in circumference—forty-eight around the queen herself. However short, Victoria in circumference was very large. “In fact, she was almost square,” Edomé claimed. “They were not the queen’s party drawers.”

Mrs. Broughton-Adderley had bought the billowing underpants at an auction in 1977 for the equivalent, then, of $272. I was assured that they would even fit me. I was invited to try them on. Rodelle and I visited the high-ceilinged, cluttered house at 9 Cheyne Walk—and, yes, the royal drawers would have fit me, though not too tightly, but I declined the honor. Over champagne and smoked salmon we chatted about her curious collection and I regretted I hadn’t known of her treasures while writing Victoria’s life. In 2001 I was able to refer to the evidence in a new edition, but without the photo Rodelle had taken showing me holding—but not wearing—the venerable drawers. In 2010 the Australian writers Jackie French and Bruce Whatley published an illustrated children’s picture book with questionable appeal for young readers, Queen Victoria’s Underpants, claiming, perhaps for their liberated mothers, that the bottom-concealing fashion was revolutionary garb, concealing what layers of chemises did not.

After a week in England doing interviews I was back in the U.S., where thanks to time zones I was on “Good Morning, Australia,” live, the evening before, from home in Pennsylvania. Worldwide, Victoria remained visible for years, bringing me queries from readers who were certain that they were somehow, on the wrong side of the sheets, related to the queen. A woman from Ohio sent me a photo of a tombstone of a long-deceased relative describing her as an illegitimate sister of Victoria. I was politely skeptical.
A reader in Texas, asking me to sign her copy, wrote that in Dallas, where she lived, was a 1.6 million-square-foot facsimile of the Crystal Palace, one of the earliest prefabricated structures and the site in Hyde Park of the first World’s Fair, initiated by the indefatigable Prince Albert. Lucy Addington included a photo of the structure, and also a photo of an elegantly gowned Lucy in her teens in a painting still hanging in the governor’s mansion in Nashville, Tennessee. Her widower father, a deputy to the governor, lived there with Lucy through her debutante years.

Lucy became an extraordinary fan, sending me such Victoriana as a large group portrait of the royal family in which, in the background, was a bust of Albert, as the queen insisted that his death did not exclude him from visual memory. Mrs. Addington had traveled abroad since 1937, and now would almost always return with some image of Victoria for me. She was, herself, Lucy wrote, “a little old lady who doesn’t drive,” and when in England arranged to be met by the same cabbie each time, who drove her about during her stay. In Dallas she also had a regular driver, who took her everywhere but the small Belgian restaurant a short walk from her apartment, where she dined every day without a menu. The maître d’, Cotie, “decides what I want.” “I keep all my silver in the bank vault,” Lucy wrote, “and haven’t entertained since about 1970, because my late husband was a reclusive invalid.… I was never a recluse myself—I was an illustrator of Prehistory (as a specialist in lithics) for the Anthropology Department of Southern Methodist University for twenty years.”

She had to retire to care for her husband, and afterwards made up for her excess of time by travel and by reading—including all the works of mine she could find in London, exploring every bookshop in Cecil Court, off Charing Cross Road. Other than answering mail, her only writings now were entries in the annual Bulwer Lytton Fiction Contest (“It was a dark and stormy night …”) for the worst, most cliché-ridden first sentence for a hypothetical novel. She received honorable mentions.

On a sudden whim Lucy decided during her occasional correspondence with me to call her Texas cabbie one morning and ask to be taken to a town like the dusty hamlet in “The Last Picture Show.”? That one was too far from Dallas, she said; find a closer equivalent. They
set off on a back road in which taxis were rarely seen and toward noon cruised into a forgettable whistlestop that boasted a single statue—of a local worthy—in front of the humble public library. Bird droppings on the head and shoulders of the figure glistened in the blistering noonday sun.

While her cabbie waited, Lucy strode into the building brandishing her trophy book, and asked the lone librarian:

“Where is your catalogue?”
“I'm the catalogue,” she said. “What are you looking for?”
“Do you have Stanley Weintraub's *Victoria*?”
“If it’s a new book, we don't have it,” the lady at the counter said. “Do you want to donate your copy? We usually get books left to us when locals die.”
“Of course not,” said Lucy. “It's signed to me by the author. Do you have *any* books by Stanley Weintraub?”
“No, ma'am,” the librarian deplored, “we don't have much funding for new titles. Most of our books were left to us by the gentleman for whom this building is named. You've seen him out front on a pedestal.”
“Well, then,” said Lucy, opening her purse and extracting a checkbook, “let me write you enough dollars to buy every book by Stanley Weintraub you can locate, and then some others.”

She was unconcerned that no one would read my books even if the unfrequented library obtained them. Peeling off a check and penning in two thousand dollars, Lucy handed it across the counter.

Staring at the sum in disbelief, the librarian said excitedly: “Wow! Come across the street with me, ma'am. I want to show this to someone.” She locked the door to the otherwise empty building and they crossed the wide avenue, barren of vehicles but for the idling Dallas taxi, to the town police station.

Suddenly Lucy worried that she would be charged with falsifying a check, but the librarian had something else in mind. She crowed to the police chief, who was alone at his desk reading the town’s weekly paper, “Look at this! We have book money into next year!”

The chief glanced at Lucy—elderly, well dressed and coiffed—and then at the check, and announced: “Let’s go next door and get this lady a drink!” He locked the door and the three toasted the gift with Texas-brewed Shiner Bock beer, Lucy gallantly sipping what was never served to her at her Belgian restaurant. Then observing the Dallas taxi at the
curb, the police chief stepped out, waved the cabbie in, and ordered a fourth beer. Hands were shaken all around, and Lucy soon reboarded her taxi for home. I never found out whether any of my books were purchased to enlighten the town.

We would visit Lucy in Dallas early in 1990, in her last decade. As she was to meet us at the airport she wrote to identify herself: “I am 71—a thin-faced ‘blonde’ whose natural expression is one of acute anxiety and hauteur.” None of that was apparent when her driver pulled up in a long, rented-for-the-occasion, black limousine complete with bar service. We visited the mock Crystal Palace and also a collector of Disraeliana she had located, Donald R. Mopsik, who had amassed shelves of Dizzy-related objects and documents. (By then I was working on Disraeli.) Lucy was tireless—until on a later trip to England she suffered a stroke and had to be evacuated home, where she faded away.

More than a decade after Victoria was published, a Portuguese claimant to a blood connection to the queen harangued me implausibly by mail and telephone that he was the rightful English king. An ancestor, he claimed, was a royal child who was the issue of the seduction by the Duke of Wellington of a fourteen-year-old Princess Victoria. Following the boy’s birth, the alleged infant prince was secretly sequestered in Lisbon, where he was raised. His Portuguese putative descendant posted to me pictures of his mother and other members of the family, who resembled, he insisted, the English royals.

I wrote back that Princess Victoria was never illegitimately pregnant, and had never encountered the great duke before her marriage. Diplomatically, I added that the writer’s mother was prettier than Queen Elizabeth II. Undeterred, in facing pages in Portuguese and in English, as if I had really been informative, he listed me in his acknowledgments in his book, O Grande Segredo da Coroa Britânica, which “Francisco Manuel (Hannover-Coburg)”—as he called himself—published in Lisbon to well-deserved press silence. (A reporter at the Daily Telegraph telephoned me about it, then backed away from an ill-founded scoop.)

For a series at the Smithsonian in Washington on the British royal family, I was asked to speak about Victoria, and, to a crowded house I began my prepared remarks—fortunately prepared, as I was silenced after I had hardly begun by laryngitis, the first and only time this happened to me in hundreds of talks and interviews. Rodelle had been lis-
tening from the first row. I held out my papers to her. She came to the lectern and creditably completed the presentation. As I watched at her side I noticed a lady in the last row scribbling furiously in a notebook. I recognized her as Kitty Kelley, author of purportedly scandalous biographies of the famous and the infamous. She never introduced herself afterwards and slipped away. In 1997 she published *The Royals*, about Victoria and her descendants, suggesting for shock value that the family in World War I masked its German ancestry—it had seldom referred to its well-known Guelph and Hanover background—by adopting the Windsor surname. In 1917 it became a widely reported transmutation hidden in the press limelight. In her acknowledgments Kitty Kelley, like Francisco Manuel, thanked me for nothing.

*Victoria* led to two decades of appearances on British television, including a series, *Queen Victoria’s Empires*. By then I had other related books published or in progress. Working on *Victoria* impelled a separate life of Albert. He had become a remarkable figure to me. Although only English by his marriage, he was possibly the most effective royal since the first Elizabeth. As the voice of the minority Conservatives in the Commons, and briefly in ministerial office under Tory governments, Benjamin Disraeli had become increasingly close to Victoria and Albert, who distrusted him at first but recognized his political shrewdness.

The *Birmingham Post* quoted from my biography, published ten years after *Victoria*, a contemporary’s remark: “His virtue was indeed appalling; not a single vice redeemed it.” He dragged Britain into nineteenth-century science, technology and education, conceived the first and most influential World’s Fair—the Great Exhibition of 1851—kept Britain from rashly entering the American Civil War, and was bent on modernizing the monarchy to fit the future century when he died of what seems certainly to have been stomach cancer at forty-two in December 1861. Writing about his long and grim anticipations of his death was painful, not only for its foreshadowings, but because of his immense further promise.

A workaholic in many dimensions, he was also the most intellectual royal in England’s thousand years. His death had been attributed to typhoid because the Court physician, who had published a study of typhoid, claimed to recognize the symptoms. Typhoid fever, however, is
widely infectious and Albert seems to have been the only victim in the vicinity. And his diaries and intimate letters (other than with the excitable Victoria) confided over several years what even Albert recognized as encroaching and inoperable stomach cancer, and his certain demise. In his last meeting, in Coburg, with his brother Ernst, Albert told him that it was their last meeting. He was dying. I pursued the case at the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine in London, and with physicians and pharmacologists at Penn State’s Hershey Medical College. Although I established the diagnosis exhaustively, the many writers about Victoria continue to accept Edward Jenner’s misunderstood verdict—for he was there on the scene and in print. He checked Albert’s pulse, and did little else beyond offering doses of brandy. Other physicians called in were equally incompetent, as Victorian skills offered no remedies. British doctors kill you, Lord Melbourne said; the French let you die. The myth of Prince Albert’s typhoid seems unshakeable. Victoria would ever after see everything in her reign through the lens of her bereavement.

In London, Albert. Uncrowned King (1997) would achieve the front page of The Times’s weekly book review section, while the pithy line I appreciated most came in the Hong Kong Morning Post: “Stanley Weintraub restores Albert to his place in history.” The media everywhere was astonishingly positive, yet the Prince was of less appeal to the buying public, especially in the U.S. Prince Albert was the consummate consort—allegedly too boring to be interesting. As the New York Times’s critic put it, my “richly detailed examination constitutes the fullest … reminder that Albert the Good, as he was unfortunately characterized by the well-meaning Tennyson, was many other things as well.” The Sunday Book Review agreed: “Albert was a marvel.” I had found no scandals to exploit, and manufactured none.

In Britain the book went into several paperback reprintings, but none across the Atlantic. William Buckley wrote wryly in his syndicated column, “The new Prince Albert biography reminds us how successful an arranged marriage can be.” Similarly, the American Spectator described Uncrowned King as “a concentrated look at a man of astonishing intellect and ability that gives Albert his long-overdue place on center stage and offers proof on every page that England, at least, got two for the price of one.”
Offering readers more raffishness, as what is probably my finest biography disappointed their tabloid expectations in the era of Princess Diana and Princess Margaret, I would go on to write *Edward the Caresser* about Victoria’s boorish successor—and also a life of that clever upstart adventurer so crucial to her post-Albert years, *Disraeli*.

Essential to understanding Prince Albert was his dysfunctional family life. His mother was banished from Saxe-Coburg by Duke Ernst, who remarried while not relinquishing his mistresses. He was a petty autocrat of a petty statelet at a time when Germany was divided into dozens of princedoms and dukedoms, all eyed for absorption by the northern behemoth of Prussia. When we flew to Munich and drove to Coburg we found that the Markt, a busy square replete with steaming food stalls, boasted a heroic, white-flecked statue of the duke (“Beloved Father: Ernst I” on its pedestal) ignored by local Völk but not by the fluttering, feathered habitués whose criticism was literal. Duke Ernst was known to his subjects with both accuracy and disdain as “the father of his country.” Albert, the younger of his two legitimate sons, would mourn his death but not his life. Ernst II, Albert’s brother, addicted to damsels and drink, would be a facsimile of his father and predecessor.

The grey ducal castle, now rather ramshackle, lies at one edge of the market square, several kilometers from Albert’s boyhood home, the beautifully tended Schloss Rosenau, once sheltered in a deep wooded fastness, but now shielded only by a few dozen acres from gaudy automobile dealerships seen now over the treetops in the near distance. Victoria visited in 1845, not long after the death of the duke and his succession, by the almost as dissolute Ernst II. Enchanted by the quiet simplicity of Rosenau, devoid of royal splendor, the queen exclaimed: “Wäre ich nicht, was ich bin, hätte ich hier mein wirkliches Zuhause” (“If I were not what I am, I would have my real home here”). Had she not been who she was, this would have been her true home.

Albert’s difficult upbringing and his humane higher education at Bonn would be crucial to the bigotry and blindness he encountered in England, where he was the first member of the royal family to experience a university. However ungentlemanly it seemed to his riding, drinking and hunting peers, the expatriate prince would put his learn-
ing to use to rejuvenate his adopted country, with its hidebound universities, mercantile complacence and lethargic monarchy.

Although Albert dearly loved his daughter Vicky, the royal couple’s first-born child, who was both brilliant and beautiful, reasons of state caused her to be married off as a teenager to the heir to the Prussian throne, who would become Emperor Frederick III of unified Germany in 1888. Tragically, he died of throat cancer after ninety-nine days, leaving his empress bereft and isolated under the manic rule of her eldest son, the “Emperor Willie” of World War I.

Victoria and Albert’s own heir apparent, Albert Edward, the Prince of Wales and future Edward VII, would not accept a name that might contrast him to his father, who could not have been more different. Albert Edward—“Bertie” to his parents—looked back, rather, to the corpulent and pleasure-loving Prince Regent, later George IV. An inadequate student who read racing papers rather than books, and preferred gambling and whoring to letters and learning, Edward was relieved of pretending to be a student at Cambridge by his father’s death. However, he made good copy for me about the mis-education of a king-to-be, and years later I would set about limning his life from his unpromising beginnings to his succession in 1901.

Endnotes

1. She died at 91 in July 2011.

2. The town that Larry McMurtry parodied in the 1971 film was Archer City, west of Wichita Falls, population then about 1,800.

3. In Berlin, Kaiser Wilhelm quipped that he was going to the theater to see *The Merry Wives of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha*.


5. “The Consummate Consort” was the actual title of the *Wall Street Journal* review.