

Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>)

Albert. A Life

Review Number:

1200

Publish date:

Wednesday, 1 February, 2012

Author:

Jules Stewart

ISBN:

9781848859777

Date of Publication:

2011

Price:

£19.99

Pages:

288pp.

Publisher:

I. B. Tauris

Place of Publication:

London

Reviewer:

John R. Davis

At a time when the book as a physical object is apparently under threat, one point about Jules Stewart's *Albert* is that it forms part of the counter-attack. It is beautifully produced. Its front cover shows a photograph of Albert of stunning reality, revealing in particular the much-noted clarity of the Prince's eyes. The typeface, line spacing and page layout – and not least the reasonable price – make this inviting as a readable object. The 16 pages of images and photographs at the heart of the book are useful and supportive of the text. Everything about the book's appearance suggests accessibility, and it does indeed seem that the main aim of the book is to present Albert for the first time to readers who otherwise do not read much history or, if they do, prefer it well packaged and in digestible proportions. There is nothing inherently wrong with this aim. Indeed, there is much to be said in support of a work which encourages wider historical consciousness and points to the main contributions of Albert, still one of the most significant and yet under-appreciated figures in 19th-century British history despite the monumental official biography by Theodore Martin, and Stanley Weintraub's more succinct and up-to-date *Albert. Uncrowned King*.⁽¹⁾

The book delivers what one might expect. It produces a narrative with general chronological coherence, tied together by reference to the obvious intensity of Albert's relationship with Victoria, on the one hand, and the long – but tragically curtailed – list of good causes in which Albert involved himself on the other. There is some attempt to explain Albert's motives in terms of his own broken family background, Protestant

devotion to good works, and sympathy with the plight of the working classes. The role of Albert's close mentors is illuminated – King Leopold of Belgium, his tutor, Florschütz, Sir Robert Peel and, of course, the ubiquitous Baron Stockmar. So is that of his arch-foes – the Tories of the early 1840s, the British press and, naturally, Lord Palmerston. Albert's successive victories over, and acceptance by his enemies gives the book its sense of momentum. The attempt is made to indicate Albert's legacy particularly in terms of the South Kensington complex and the many other cultural institutions he was connected with, as well as the trajectory – and longevity – of the monarchy as an institution in Britain. In terms of research on Albert, there are no surprises. But then this, it seems, is not meant as an academic work, and it therefore should not be judged as such. It is attractive, readable, generally comprehensive and interesting.

For academic researchers of Albert, then, the book does not contain new information. Its interest for academics might be rather a back-handed one of textual analysis, for its narrative style is typical and exemplary of many works on monarchical subjects, and useful as an illustration of the strengths and weaknesses of the genre and of the challenges and pitfalls the historian faces when dealing with these subjects. It is also indicative of the dangers of treating an historical subject so closely located to discourses of nationalism, and so intensively intertwined with a range of areas of British history, and yet – these days – so far removed from political science and serious historical investigation. For, despite the advances made in terms of historical scholarship on monarchs and aristocracy, the very nature of the subject has insulated it from rigorous investigation and serious academic consideration.

A crucial problem is that many of the sources historians must utilise are produced in a laudatory, hagiographic fashion, and the documents produced by those closest to the monarch or royalty are usually the most hagiographic of the lot. This, one might argue, is even more the case with Albert than with other members of the royal family, given the premature and sudden nature of his death, the interrupted trajectory of his life, and the iconic way in which he was treated for the rest of Victoria's reign both by the monarch herself, but also by large sections of government and society.

Added to this, the public discussion of royalty rests, and indeed apparently thrives, upon the personal narrative. It seems that either large numbers of us must attempt to view royalty as like ourselves and normalise their existence, or we are unavoidably drawn towards the personal and private side of their lives. The patently abnormal nature of their lives, the complexity of the world in which they must operate, and the dexterity which they show, or do not show, in managing their affairs are made less apparent. Another result of this is that monarchs become the centre of the action. Their importance is underlined again and again. Here, Albert is seen as having caused this to happen, or having been responsible for that, when clearly one person could not have done these things alone – the Hadrian's Wall phenomenon. This book is full of such claims. Albert defused the bedchamber crisis. He was responsible for the success of the Great Exhibition, and so forth. It makes easy reading, and this, in itself, should be an interesting feature to the historian. But it is generalisation, and overlooks the complexity of both the prince's motives for involving himself in something and the many factors contributing to the evolution of such projects. It derives from the contemporaneous desire to place the monarch at the head of things in order to demonstrate loyalty, to promote a cause, to move one clique in front of another, to give the official stamp of approval, and so forth.

Equally, the political milieu and changing constitutional setting of the monarch become secondary. The oddness of Albert's existence and the complexity of monarchs' lives in legal, financial and political senses are diminished. This is a shame, as the way in which monarchs managed their finances, or the mechanics of such things as estate ownership, are significant dimensions of the monarchical story. True psychological analysis is also set aside. In its place we are presented here with some tantalising, but analytically moribund points about Albert's 'inherent morose character' (p.151), his closeness to – but alienation from – his mother, and his obviously problematic relationships with his father and brother.

More worryingly, the author ascribes many aspects of Albert's character to his nationality. This is probably anachronistic and misleading, given the state of German national culture, the parochialism of Germany, and the atypical nature of the aristocratic class in the early to mid 19th century. What is interesting about this for the academic historian is that it seems instead to be evidence of a generalised, prejudicial, Anglo-centric way

of thinking one might expect in loyal, monarchical history. For example, the book presents the reader with a series of generalisations about Albert's 'German' character 'his 'characteristic German thoroughness' (p. 87), the fact he came 'from a culture in which the accepted way of settling offences to one's honour was with sabres or pistols ...' (p. 195), and the way in which setting art into a historical context was 'characteristic of Albert's orderly, Germanic mind ...' (p. 227). This mode of thought may be looked at by non-academic readers uncritically, or even with applause, today, when we are presented successively with repeated assumptions about the 'German character' in the press. Popular curiosity about Albert is certainly derived from the fact he was German, so this will again strengthen its attractiveness. But it does not move historical scholarship forward.

In a similar vein, we have in the book a series of heroes and anti-heroes, which in the cases of the Hanoverian monarchs or Baroness Lehzen verges on the pantomime. Even if one were to disregard these instances as part of the campaign to place Albert at the heart of things, it is less possible when the caricature extends to Queen Victoria herself: we are told at one point she 'possessed not a fraction of her husband's refinement or knowledge' (p. 89). This, however, will not do. Generally, Victoria is presented as emotional, sensual, dependent, uninterested in politics and child-bound. This way of looking at Victoria, it seems to this reviewer, has become fashionable, and has emerged out of desire on the part of later generations to debunk the myth of prudish Victorians. While Strachey might do this in order to point to Victorian hypocrisy, later historians have reacted to Strachey's caricature in turn, and attempted to stress the aspect of Victorians as real people, just like us. In the case of royalty, it also triggers prurient curiosity about what went on, and what goes on, behind the scenes. Victoria, however, was not unrefined or ignorant. She was not sex-mad or dominated by Albert. She was 'comparatively' highly cultured, well versed in literature, art and music, spoke several languages fluently, at the heart of things constitutionally from the start of her reign, and no push-over, even in her dealings with her husband. She was a formidable presence in family but also in politics, and bound the two spheres together with skill. She was intelligent. She and Albert both learned on the job. They were both highly unusual figures and the product of their very unique environment. This does not make easy reading, but it is as it was.

Given the focus is on Albert, but also in the light of the Anglo-centric viewpoint, the highly complex but momentous state of European politics in the period can only be sketched, and this with some inaccuracy: the significance of Ernest (and, via him, Albert) in German nationalism in the 1850s and 1860s is overlooked. Coburg was undoubtedly small, but its geographic position made it the centre of things in terms of national liberalism in the late 1850s. Stockmar's role in the revolutions of 1848 does not get a mention, and the political dimensions of the Great Exhibition not just in Britain but abroad are underplayed. Baron Bunsen 'the other prominent German in Britain, and a collaborator with the Prince' is not mentioned. Lyon Playfair receives a bit-part, despite his closeness to Albert. Though generally reliable, there is some confusion on the multiple and layered German family 'possibly understandable. Vicky did not come to the throne ten years after Albert's death (as stated on p. 197) but much later. And so on.

It is, of course, nigh on impossible to capture fully a life as extensive in action as Prince Albert's in a volume this size. There are many omissions, but it has to be conceded that, even though his life was so short, Albert is typical of many great Victorians in testing the biographer's abilities and knowledge to the limits. The Victorian elite included an extraordinary number of polymaths. Albert was one of them, but his range of activity was international as well. Generalisation is inevitable. Given the dearth of linguistic skills in Britain the historical treatments will also remain endemically parochial. Still, the concern remains that popular assumptions and public history must be challenged, rather than repeated and, in many respects, reinforced. This is the challenge for academic historians, but it is not one that has been strongly embraced. As discussed, there are many reasons for this, but one final point is that academics have generally 'though not exclusively' looked down on monarchs and princes as a serious academic subject, and have tried to divest themselves as a rule from being drawn into the establishment. This has left the field open to historians with no such qualms, and who are not prepared to treat with due criticism the documentary trail left behind. It has also, however, meant that monarchical history has become separate from constitutional history, and the position of the monarch in a legal and political framework and the way in which this position has evolved over time,

have become hazy in academic historical consciousness.

Despite these thoughts, this book is an enjoyable, attractive and intelligible survey of Albert's life. It does not aim to contribute new scholarship on the subject. Perhaps, instead, it will serve to encourage interest in a prince who actually earned respect rather than simply expecting or being given it.

Notes

1. Theodore Martin, *The Life of the Prince Consort: Prince Albert and His Times* (5 vols., London, 1874-80); Stanley Weintraub, *Albert. Uncrowned King* (London, 1997). [Back to \(1\)](#)

Other reviews:

Weekly Review

<http://www.theweeklyreview.com.au/article-display/Taking-an-interest-in-Prince-Albert/4648> [2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1200>

Links:

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/7857>

[2] <http://www.theweeklyreview.com.au/article-display/Taking-an-interest-in-Prince-Albert/4648>