

Queen Victoria. By Walter L. Arnstein. (Palgrave Macmillan: Hounds Mills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS and Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010, 2003. Pp. ix + 209. Preface, appendices.)

Walter L. Arnstein is Professor Emeritus of History and Jubilee Professor Emeritus of the Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Arnstein wrote his biography of Queen Victoria to introduce British politics in general and the Queen's role in particular, to those not familiar with the British system of constitutional monarchy. The introduction reads like a who's who of Queen and royal biographers. He lists each, by title and author, including their lengths in page numbers. Whether this is done to rank his book among them or as just free information for the reader is unclear. Arnstein makes it his duty to point out that each subsequent biography, his own on the Queen capping the list, was made using newly found letters, and other "hitherto unpublished" (11) works.

Arnstein begins, appropriately enough, at the beginning. He focuses on the Royal family up to the time that Victoria is born. The book hits enough of the high points for the reader to understand the popular feeling of the monarchy in the early nineteenth century. Arnstein reveals the struggles Victoria endured under her mother, but also balances it with a good deal written about her education.

The teenager takes the throne on page twenty-nine and the country, the monarchy, and the world are never the same. Arnstein's book points out clearly that the new Queen would stand on her own under the crown. Her decisions however are not made alone, and Arnstein through intensive research quotes correspondence after correspondence between the Queen and her trusted advisors. Arnstein also shows how the marriage of the Queen to Albert helped add another facet to the Queen's cut. No longer was the

monarchy old, stuffy, and sometimes insane. The new Queen was the embodiment of youth, vitality, courage, and with Albert, domesticity. Arnstein uses the Queen's own words to paint the portrait of Albert. A bit of a biased source, but one can but thumb through the intro to find alternate titles that would give a more three dimensional view to the young prince.

The book focuses more on the married life of the Queen and the influence it had on her life. Arnstein lists all the new places that the Queen's husband would buy and remodel. Listing all the summer homes and travels abroad the couple made, adds to the books interest. The travel could be better understood, however if a map or two were included.

With the travelogue out of the way Arnstein gets down to the brass tacks of the British system. The book all but lists reforms, reformers, Prime Ministers, Exchequers, secretaries, Lords, Barons, Radicals, Tories and Whigs. Personal secretaries to the queen are named; personal friends of the Royal Family are named. The book at this point, for those with no background in the British system, becomes too muddled with who the actors are in politics to clearly explain the scene of the politics. However, someone with just a bit of British History and patience can wade through the parliamentary jargon and glean some new information from it. For a book meant to "whet rather than to sate the reader's appetite" (206) there is amass of political terms, movements and players that may make it difficult for someone just sitting down to the table.

Throughout his explanations of the changes taking place in government Arnstein places the children of the Queen. Each of their lives, as best as can be quoted from Victoria's journal, or even their own later in life, is unfolded. The author deals more with

how the young affect the Queen and less how the Queen affects her brood. The former is more the point of the book and the latter more the point of world history. It is with the histories of the family and the procession of wars that Arnstein stands to lose many of his readers. He takes each one chronologically forward to an arbitrary point and then suddenly changes the subject. One child is talked about until a young adult and another not mentioned until they are one. The absence of any kind of segue makes his mini-biographies harder to follow than his political tirades. At one point he talks about the results of a war before the war breaks out. The histories are all in order *per se*, but when placed together in the text they fall like so many scattered leaves.

The author prides himself on the shortness and frankness of the book. It is, at the same time, a culmination of the latest “hitherto unpublished” records research, as well as the jumping off point into the sea that is British Royal Biography. The book, as a whetting of a historical appetite, is like a young person’s first strong drink: there are so many things going on that one is scarcely finished with a single experience before one is bombarded by another. Like strong drink, such a work will either leave a reader thirsting for more, or decidedly turned off of the subject forever. There is little doubt that any kind of literary intoxication will be the result of following the life and times of Queen Victoria in this short book, but if anyone has ever bought the house a round on the British System of constitutional monarchy, it is Walter L. Arnstein with *Queen Victoria*.