Clearing the fog

This portrait of Queen Victoria's childhood provides a vivid enhancement to the growing library of books exploring different aspects of her life, says Matthew Dennison

Biography
The Young Victoria
Deirdre Murphy
(Yale, £35)

A CHALLENGE to Queen Victoria's own version of her childhood and upbringing as 'very unhappy' lies at the heart of this beautifully illustrated account of the great queen's early life, by the late Historic Royal Palaces senior curator Deirdre Murphy. If Miss Murphy's account does not, as its cover proclaims, offer 'an entirely new perspective', it certainly balances Victoria's highly selective memories to create a less shilling-shockerish portrait of her first 18 years.

Princess Victoria aged nine (1828) by Stephen Catterson Smith

Private Collection/Christopher Wood Gallery, London UK/Bridgeman

> 'Victoria's loathing of her mother's advisor, Conroy, clouded her memories'

The young Victoria's life was undoubtedly isolated; she enjoyed little peer companionship. This book demonstrates the extent to which, in the years before her accession, Victoria's loathing of her mother's closest advisor, the saurian, but dashing Sir John Conroy, came to cloud her long-term memories of an upbringing characterised by marked maternal affection, a rich cultural life and a household at Kensington Palace that included devoted attendants and tutors, visits from doting uncles and a busy menagerie of pets.

Victoria, of course, was an outside runner for queenship on her birth 200 years ago. The daughter of a younger son of George III, Edward, Duke of Kent—known for his martinet approach to military discipline and, surprisingly, an apparently contradictory interest in social reform—and his previously married German wife, Marie Luise Victoria, Dowager Princess of Leiningen, known as Victoire, she might easily have lost her place in the line of succession to a child born to one of her father's elder brothers. In particular, to William, Duke of Clarence, afterwards William IV, and his young wife, Adelaide of Saxe-Meiningen.

Instead, Princesses Charlotte and Elizabeth of Clarence died in early infancy, in Charlotte's case at only seven hours old. In her early teenage years, their robuster cousin Victoria was, therefore, widely referred to as the heiress presumptive.

William IV lived just long enough to see Victoria attain her majority—thereby ruling out the possibility of her mother exercising regency powers—and Victoria became queen at the age of 18. 'The English like Queens,' her maternal grandmother, the Dowager Duchess of Saxe-Coburg-Saalfield, had commented at her birth, and so it proved. For her part, Victoria mostly enjoyed her singular destiny.

Among the strengths of *The Young Victoria* is Miss Murphy's careful separation of the Duchess of Kent and Conroy. Their association was certainly close—indeed, unsubstantiated rumours, afterwards vigorously denied by Victoria as queen, portrayed them as lovers—and Victoria herself struggled to exonerate her mother from her fury at the unscrupulous Conroy, regarding them as partners in crime.

Miss Murphy describes the extent of Conroy's influence over the Duchess of Kent, but also illustrates the Duchess's powerful love for her daughter and her determination to win for her the glittering prizes she considered Victoria's birthright.

In 1825, the Chancellor of the Exchequer pointed to the 'principles of piety and morality' that shaped the Duchess's directing of her daughter's education and upbringing and it is certainly true that the Duchess not only worked hard to educate Victoria to rule, but also took pains to ensure that her efforts won influential supporters, thereby strengthening Victoria's claim to the Crown among key Establishment figures.

The Duchess of Kent emerges from Miss Murphy's telling as a somewhat poignant figure, mostly well intentioned, but misguided in her attachment to Conroy.

Queen Victoria's life has been more often retold and more rigorously researched than that of many of this country's sovereigns. The current account benefits from its author's access to papers in the Royal Archives, items in the Royal Collection and in the custodianship of Historic Royal Palaces.

Here is a wonderful collection of visual source material, too, a beguiling enhancement to an admirable and enjoyable study of the young Victoria.

Matthew Dennison is the author of 'Queen Victoria: A Life of Contradictions' (William Collins)

Social history
Palaces of Pleasure
Lee Jackson (Yale, £20)

Phoebus Levin's 1864 *The Dancing Platform at Cremorne Gardens*

Museum of London, UK/Bridgeman Images

UNLIKE THE roistering Georgians or debonair Edwardians, the Victorians have a reputation for high-mindedness. Not everyone's moral tone, however, was elevated and people still had to enjoy themselves. Where could they let their hair down? This fascinating book is a guide to the pleasure domes of 19th-century England, most of which would have been closed if campaigners for moral improvement had got their way.

The killjoys were not always religious. Gin palaces, brightly lit and glittering with cut mirror glass, were opposed by the powerful brewing interests. The brewers preferred the drinking public to get slowly fuddled in the multitude of cosy rooms in a traditional pub—on beer.

Particular objection was taken to the direct access that a gin palace gave to the street: a woman could dart in without having to run the gauntlet of a male clientele who assumed she was a prostitute. Absence of seating encouraged customers to knock back their 'blue ruin' or 'flash of lightning'—to name two of the many slang terms for gin—in short order.

The establishments' very splendour was thought to be insulting to respectable households, by bringing the luxury of clubs within reach of the poor. However, after a reform in the licensing laws of 1828 prohibited magistrates from having business links with breweries, they proliferated.

Music halls grew out of 'free and easy' nights in pubs, a feature of which was glee singing. Again, moralists complained that women could go to free and easies without censure. Later, music halls, such as the Alhambra in Leicester Square, could be sumptuous and offered a range of acts that might include Léotard on the trapeze or Blondin on a tightrope.

Although Lottie Collins—the high-kicking singer of *Ta-ra-ra Boom-de-ay*—won a libel case against a magazine that called her performance 'vulgar', there was plenty of smutty double-entendre in some turns and the National Vigilance Association condemned the undoubted ease with which the music hall's clientele could meet prostitutes.

Pleasure gardens, such as the once elegant Vauxhall Gardens, slid down the social scale as the 19th century progressed; the Surrey Zoological Gardens, opened under the patronage of Queen Adelaide, ended by offering an Aquatic Velocipedist, a magician and 'shooting saloons, Cave of Mystery, Wire Walkers, Dogs and Monkies, Dagger Throwers, Cosmoramas, Wizards, Ghosts, Swings' among its attractions.

Exhibitions were more improving and seaside piers generally a money-spinner (they had a captive market). The FA Cup final attracted a crowd of 110,000 by 1901. Mass entertainment was on the rise. From today's perspective, some of the entertainments sound more fun than others—yet often more innocent in content than TV.

Clive Aslet

Art/architectural history

Creating the V&A

Julius Bryant
(Lund Humphries, £35)

THE V&A, founded in 1852, is a complex place—Sir Roy Strong, its director from 1974 to 1987, once called it 'a capacious handbag' and others have dubbed it 'the nation's attic'. In this lavishly illustrated new book, a companion to his *Designing the V&A* (2017), curator Julius Bryant explores the museum's origins, telling the story at a splendid pace and, especially, honouring the contribution of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert themselves.

Treasures in Marlborough House, the forerunner to the V&A, in 1857

> 'The area was the canvas for Albert's vision for a national cultural centre'

It was always to be a museum with a serious intent. 'Unlike the British Museum and the National Gallery, which were born of the Age of Enlightenment to provide knowledge and beauty through surveys of historic objects,' Mr Bryant writes, 'the V&A was born in the Age of Reform, to be a useful instrument of social improvement.'

The V&A grew out of the teaching collection of the new Government School of Design, which was founded in 1837 and first housed at Somerset House. A committee was appointed to acquire objects from the Great Exhibition of 1851 and the teaching collection transformed into a 'Museum of Manufactures', which opened in 1852 at Marlborough House beside St James's Palace. Henry Cole and John Robinson were key figures in its development.

Critically, the commissioners of the 1851 Great Exhibition invested its profits in property, an area of land that was rechristened South Kensington. This became the canvas for Albert's further vision for a great national cultural centre, in which institutions for art and science could come together.

In 1853, Albert invited architects to produce ambitious schemes for this vision, but the Crimean War of 1854–56 diverted public spending. A simple, if temporary, solution was agreed when Parliament voted £15,000 for what Mr Bryant calls a 'vast multipurpose prefabricated shed'. *The Builder* magazine dubbed it 'the Brompton Boilers' and the Museum of Ornamental Art moved there in June 1857.

This carefully researched study also explores the flurry of acquisitions (sometimes of whole collections) that were made for the museum: the maiolica, sculpture, altarpieces, fountains, doorcases, chimneypieces, paintings, photography and much more.

Prince Albert had poured his energies into the wider South Kensington project and his death in 1861 might have been a serious problem. However, his widow made sure the completion of a permanent building, designed by Francis Fowke, became a memorial to him. The Duke of Devonshire was given the task of advising the Queen that the museum should be named not only after Albert, but to commemorate them both—and so it became the V&A.

Jeremy Musson

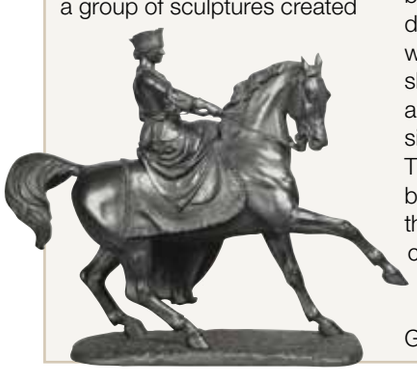
Sculpture

Queen Victoria's Equestrian Portrait Statues

Philip Ward-Jackson
(Public Monuments and Sculpture Association, £8.95)

Queen Victoria was the first contemporary woman—and, indeed, queen—to be depicted in a three-dimensional equestrian portrait, as displayed by a group of sculptures created between 1837 and 1855. The background to their making is a story of rivalry between leading sculptors—principally James Wyatt, Thomas Thornycroft and Carlo Marochetti—of upstaging, art criticism, xenophobia and Pyrrhic victory.

Sculpture historian Philip Ward-Jackson tells it in this scholarly, yet engaging little book, providing insight into the development of these works, which show the Queen as she is not usually envisaged: as a young woman seated side-saddle on a spirited horse. They range from Thornycroft's bronze statuette (*left*: Capesthorne Hall's version) to Marochetti's prestigious statue, first in St Vincent Place and now in St George Square, Glasgow, both of 1853. *MM*



Courtauld Institute, reproduced courtesy of Capesthorne Hall; V&A Museum

Fictionalised family history

A Perfect Explanation

Eleanor Anstruther
(Salt Publishing, £12.99)

THIS IMPRESSIVE debut novel is a fictionalised account of Eleanor Anstruther's dysfunctional family that interweaves themes of privilege and emotional deprivation, motherhood and mental illness. The known facts are almost unbelievable: in 1931, Enid Campbell, granddaughter of the 8th Duke of Argyll, sold her younger son Ian—the author's father—to her older sister for £500.

The book begins on a crucial day in 1964, when Enid, approaching the end of her sad life in a care home, awaits the weekly visit of her daughter, who, she discovers, has arranged to bring along Ian. Enid hasn't seen her son since the day she gave him up and, in a panic, tries to cancel the attempted reconciliation.

Ian has no filial feelings—not surprising, as we soon discover—although he does have his eye on her portrait by Augustus John.

The story unfolds through the interwar decade, returning intermittently to the denouement in 1964. Enid—disturbed, self-centred, unmaternal—is forced to make a duty marriage to provide an heir to the family title and the fortune of her domineering mother. Obliged to keep trying after giving birth to a severely disabled son and then a daughter, she finally produces Ian, but suffers from post-natal depression and abandons her children and unfaithful husband to join a Christian Science community.

Despite her flaws, it's clear that Enid is more victim than villain and her granddaughter, in this honest, compassionate portrait, elicits our sympathy rather than disapproval.

Almost all the protagonists were dead by the time Miss Anstruther was born, but, armed with the facts revealed to her by her father before he died, as well as family archives, she has used her imagination to bring her family vividly back to life through a novel that is both beautifully written and transfixing.

Richenda Miers