

# The Era Gap:

## The Relationship Between Queen Victoria and Albert Edward, Prince of Wales

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*This paper was selected as the Outstanding Paper by the Department of History for the 1991-1992 academic year.*

"Bertie returns today -- and then my bad headaches will begin I fear." <1>

The parent-child relationship is a delicate one, even more so when the parent is the queen of England and the child is her heir to the throne. Queen Victoria, by many standards, was a strict and rigid parent, both with her country and her children. She had expectations of unwavering devotion and loyalty justified by rigid moral and ethical codes. Victoria herself was highly devoted (some may argue fanatically) to her husband, Albert, a German prince who, according to the Queen, exemplified German discipline and purpose. Victoria held up all others to the ideal of her husband, most notably her children. Bertie, however, was not a child, or later a man, to be molded by puritanical standards of behavior and thought. Victoria expected the future king of England to conform to the character of his father: morally upstanding, disciplined, intellectual, and devoted to the duty of his country. Bertie lived in a different world, one of continuous social diversions, frivolity, and looser moral codes. The Prince of Wales found himself in several scandalous episodes that horrified his mother and country, but that only predicted the gradual change of moral and ethical attitudes that would engulf England at the beginning of the twentieth century. Victoria's reactions to her son, whether from jealousy or shock, only illustrated the approaching division between Victorian standards and those of the modern world. The clash between Victoria and Albert was not merely a generation gap -- but a gap between two eras.

When Bertie was born, Victoria was queen of England and Albert was Prince Consort. Albert had been a member of the German royal family, specifically through the Saxe-Coburg line and Victoria claimed German descent through the Hanoverians. Victoria had already given birth to a daughter, Vicky, whom she and her husband loved dearly and unconditionally. Vicky was quick at her lessons and characterized as a pleasant child. Bertie was born into a world that alternately feared and respected all that was German. Victoria had grown up speaking German and learning German history, as her mother was German and spoke the language at home. It was not considered unusual that Victoria had married a German. After visiting Albert's birthplace before their marriage, Victoria remarked, "I have a feeling for our dear little Germany which I cannot describe." <2> She had spent her childhood in the calm and practical environment of Kensington Palace, far removed from the activity of Buckingham Palace. Victoria was raised learning how to please those around her. One story relates that as a small girl Victoria was visiting her uncle, King George IV, when he asked her what she would like the band to play next. Victoria's response was, " Oh, Uncle King, I should like them to play "God Save the King." <3> Victoria's childhood had an impact later during her reign when the standards of the time valued discipline, obedience, and deference to the position of those above.

At the birth of her first son, and thus heir, in 1841, there was a great sense of excitement, especially in Victoria's hopes that Bertie would be like her husband. In a letter to her uncle, King Leopold, dated November 29, 1841, Victoria wrote:

"Our little boy is wonderfully strong and a large child, with very large dark blue eyes, a finely formed but large nose, and a pretty little mouth; I hope and pray he may be like his dearest Papa. He is to be called Albert, and Edward is to be his second name ... You will understand how fervent my prayers and I am sure everybody's must be, to see him resemble his angelic dearest Father in every, every respect, both in mind and body..." <4>

Bertie was to be raised differently from other boys, as he was the future king of England. This meant that he would be trained as his father had been, for "upon the good education of Princes, the welfare of the world greatly depends." <5> Albert was Bertie's primary source of education. The Prince Consort planned every hour of every day with some purposeful activity in the company of adults -- Bertie did not intermingle with his peers until he went to study at Christ College, Oxford University in October 1859. <6> Bertie proved to be anything but the willing and eager pupil; in short, he pretty much refused to learn, at least from books and repetition. Victoria, appalled at Bertie's refusal to learn, considered him a dull and lazy creature. In a letter to her daughter, Vicky, the Queen remarked on November 17, 1858:

"He [Bertie] vexes us so much ... I only hope he will meet with some severe lesson to shame him out of his ignorance and dullness..." <7>

Bertie's obstinance and pursuit of pleasure, even from a young age, annoyed the straight-laced Queen and the Prince Consort, who is supposed to have remarked, "Bertie's propensity is indescribable laziness; I never in my life met such a thorough and cunning lazybones." <8>

Although it was a losing battle, Albert and Victoria continued to try and shape their oldest son into the man that was to be a leader and role model. However, it is clear that Bertie had plans of his own. Most of the time, his amusements were limited to hunting, cigars, and the company of his cronies. Time, on the other hand, brought other diversions that would begin to place the Prince Consort in a variety of compromising, and even scandalous, positions. One of the first of these occasions, and the one that would forever affect the relationship of Bertie and Victoria, was in November and December of 1861. Bertie had been placed with the Grenadier Guards at the Curragh military camp near Dublin. Bertie returned to his bunk one night to find that his comrades had led Nellie Clifden, an actress, to his bed. The resulting scandal mortified the Queen and motivated an ill Prince Albert to travel to Cambridge to impress upon his son the disgrace he had brought upon the family. Albert then traveled back to London, only to become bedridden with what was to become typhoid fever and he later died on December 14, 1861. Victoria grew to hold Bertie responsible for the death of her beloved Albert, due to the emotional strain of the Nellie Clifden scandal and its impact on Albert's physical illness at the time. <9> This event marked the true split between mother and son; from this point on, the

differences between the two became more marked and severe. Victoria wrote in a letter to her daughter, Vicky:

"Tell him that Bertie (oh! that boy- much as I pity I never can or shall look at him without a shudder as you may imagine) does not know, that I know all (beloved Papa told him that I could not be told the "disgusting details")..." <10>

Although Victoria would never directly state it, she continued to believe that Bertie had killed his father through his reckless behavior:

"I hope that the old Baron knows the real truth about Bertie? If he does not, would Fritz kindly ask Baron E. to put him in possession of the sad truth, and of the awful fact of its having made beloved Papa so ill -- for there must be no illusion about that -- it was so; he was struck -- and I never can see Bertie without a shudder! Oh! that bitterness- oh! that cross!" <11>

After Albert's death, Victoria tried to keep Bertie at an arm's length while assuming control of his conduct. <12> She considered him too immature and indiscreet to handle government responsibilities, so, in 1862, the Prince of Wales was sent to Berlin to visit his sister and be "Germanised" into the likeness of his deceased father. Yet, what the Queen wanted was not what the Prince delivered or even cared about. If anything, his visit to Germany was a hated bother, with the exception of visiting his sister, and only drove him further away from the ideals that Victoria wished her son to emulate. Bertie's refusal to submit concerned the Queen, as her letters to her daughter illustrated:

"Tell Bertie I am grieved to find that in spite of all I said and all he promised he never writes to Alix in anything but English! This I know is mere laziness and it grieves and pains me as the German element is the one I wish to be cherished and kept up in our beloved home- now more than ever..." <13>

"I hope you have Germanised Bettie as much as possible, for it is most necessary ... " <14>

Bertie only grew to detest all that was German, remarking once that the suggestion of something German spoke of "...narrow-minded, moral preaching, drilling, and brute force." <15>

The Queen refused to allow Bertie to have any influence or knowledge of the running of State affairs, even though he had an interest in foreign diplomacy and members of the Queen's ministry considered it the optimum time to train him for his future duties. Victoria had little confidence in his ability to rule the country one day, particularly because he had no care for matters that concerned her. In a June 5, 1872 letter to Vicky, Victoria lamented, "If only our dear Bertie was fit to replace me! Alas! Alas! I feel t to very anxious for the future ... And so is everyone." <16> Bertie made requests the Queen's ministers to provide him with reports and work, but every time Victoria stubbornly refused. Victoria argued that "Bertie is not to be told anything of a

confidential nature ... The Prince of Wales ... has no right to meddle and never has done so before ... The Queen cannot allow any private and intimate communication ... or all confidence will be impossible." <17>

Barred from partaking in official responsibilities, Bertie found diversion in other areas that only served to reinforce his mother's belief that he was lazy and a mere pleasure-seeker. Unlike his mother, who in her long widowhood shunned social life and its whirl of activities, Bertie was in the center of fashion. From day to day, he jumped from one social engagement to another and could often be found at Evans Music Hall in Covent Garden, where he sat in a reserved box protected from onlookers by a screen. <18> His main group of friends was known as the Marlborough House Set, a group of aristocrats, politicians, financiers, merchants, physicians, explorers, actors, and actresses who were available at a moment's notice for parties, card games, smoking, and hunting. By 1869, the group had formed into a formal club of four hundred gentlemen that, until his death, required the endorsement of the Prince of Wales to obtain membership. <19> The Prince of Wales had a voracious appetite that he satisfied with dinners of no less than twelve courses, caviar at any hour, and crayfish cooked in Chablis. Bertie was also a smoker, something the Queen absolutely forbade in her homes or presence. The Prince of Wales smoked at least twelve large cigars and twenty cigarettes a day. <20> Bertie's restlessness was chiefly abated through travel. He visited all over Europe, but his favorite country by far was England's long-time rival, France. He was especially impressed with the city of Paris. <21> After an 1855 visit to France with his parents, Bertie remarked to Emperor Napoleon III, "You have a nice country. I would like to be your son." <22> During the 1860s, he frequently visited the City of Lights, was a member of the French Jockey Club, and was a welcome guest in the homes of French royal families. The only country that Bertie strongly disliked was Germany. As stated before, the Prince had an aversion to all things German, associating them with cold and unemotional qualities. While it can not be conclusively proven, it is safe to assume that a hatred of Germany was a subconscious retaliation Bertie took against his parents.

Although his life appeared to constitute merely the social, Bertie had a gift of getting along with people of all backgrounds. In many respects, he was a natural diplomat, an advantage that Victoria could have fully utilized for the benefit of England. However, she continued to disapprove of her son and locked him out of government affairs. In one respect, it would seem that Bertie only did it to himself. Although by now a fully grown man, he continued to get involved in situations that were scandalous for a future monarch. He had numerous affairs, including at least one with a stage actress. In 1870, he was named as a co-respondent in the Mordaunt divorce case. In Victorian times, divorce was a disgrace for even common people, much less for royalty. The Prince was called as a witness to explain his position and almost had his personal letters printed by three provincial newspapers. <23> The general irony is that Victoria could have alleviated much of her son's social disgraces if she would have just permitted him to satisfy his interest in foreign affairs. However, Victoria was also jealous of her popular son and feared this rival in the public regard. <24> For all his faults and shortcomings, the English loved their Prince of Wales. He was a man who appealed to all, who appreciated the fun in life without necessarily forgetting what was also duty and seriousness. He was

a contrast to the rigid and stuffy self-sacrifice of his mother's era. Victoria was conscious of the affection for Bertie, even among members of the family. A letter to Vicky complained, "You speak only for the enthusiasm for Bertie! That for your own Mama was I thought much greater." <25>

Although many English had their favorite royals, by the 1870s there was a growing dissatisfaction with British royalty. A democratic movement was sweeping the country that had no room for regal pageantry. Victoria, although respected as Queen, was no longer above criticism and frustration vented by the public. Her popularity had seriously declined during her prolonged mourning because many of her subjects felt that she was neglecting her duties as queen. Then, in December 1871, the Prince of Wales fell ill with a case of typhoid fever. Fears grew every day that the Prince would die and fear grew into panic when it was realized that this was the tenth anniversary of the death of the Prince Consort. Suddenly, the English rallied around Bertie and the Royal Family. As one Irish justice remarked in the midst of the panic, "...the afflictions of the Royal Family had not been without their compensating advantages, for they evoked a feeling of loyalty, the existence of which some people had begun to doubt." <26> Once again, Bertie was compared to his father, for the irony of the illnesses on such an anniversary brought out the superstitious in most people. The true irony is in the fact that Bertie pulled through the fever late in the night on the fourteenth of December. In surviving, Bertie finally carved an identity separate from his father. One newspaper account remarked:

"The fourteenth of December, ten years ago sadly memorable for one of the greatest of national calamities, the death of the Prince Consort, has this year given a Prince back to us. The life's work of the Prince Consort was finished; that of the Prince of Wales is yet unfinished." <27>

Queen Victoria, still attached to the ideal of Albert, viewed the Prince's recovery as a sign and a second chance. A December 20, 1871 letter to Vicky explained:

"We all feel that if God has spared his life it is to enable him to lead a new life- and if this great warning is not taken, and the wonderful sympathy and devotion of the whole nation does not make a great change in him, it will be worse than before and his utter ruin. All the papers and the many sermons all tend to show the same feeling..." <28>

Many of the Victorian newspapers and sermons did indeed take Bertie's recovery as a sign to change his ways and start living a new life:

"...the necessity of the Prince being impressed with the sentiment ... desires him to be a bright example to her [the country], to discountenance frivolity, and to live in purity and uprightness ... Those who surround him must persuade him to read through and through all that has been written in the most notable journals, and let him see that England still expects every man to do his duty." <29>

For a while Bertie was different, as Victoria noted him being "very cheerful and quite himself, only gentler and kinder than ever, and there is something different which I can't

exactly express." <30> This, however, was more likely due to his recovery and weakness than any change in character.

If anything, Bertie now formed a stronger character against that of his mother and deceased father. In 1864, he had made it clear to Victoria that he wished to drop Albert when he was formally addressed and he now reinforced that desire. This act alone highly upset Victoria, who wrote to the Prince:

"...it was your beloved Papa's wish, as well as mine, that you should be called by both, when you became king, and it would be impossible for you to drop your Father's." <31>

After his illness, Bertie's resolve was strengthened and in fact he did drop Albert from his formal title. Bertie continued to associate with people that Victoria found too "fast" and frivolous and who put ideas into his head inconsistent with her own ideas:

"...a number of stupid, soi-devant friends who put all sorts of ideas into his head... You say that Bertie's breakfast must have been charming. I myself think them dreadful and very fatiguing bores, walking and standing about and seeing fresh faces in every direction..." <32>

Although never directly defiant of his mother, Bertie made his own decisions and chose to heed his mother's wishes only when he chose. Victoria pleaded with Bertie not to attend the Paris Exhibition in 1900, but he chose to ignore the concerns of his mother. <33> The Prince of Wales' social life also continued to involve him in scandalous affairs. In 1891, a petty baccarat squabble broke out between the Prince's partner and another player. Bertie's partner admitted guilt to accusations of cheating and paid up what he owed. The entire party present was sworn to a silence pledge about the incident. However, news of the squabble became public and Bertie's partner filed a suit of slander in court. Consequently, the Prince of Wales was called as a witness for his partner. In Victorian times, gambling card games were looked down upon as common and even sinful. When the public was made aware of Bertie's habit of playing cards, the outcry from the Victorians was loud and disapproving. Some subjects cried that they did not want any "gamblers" as king. <34> Others called for his dismissal from his post in the Army. <35> One newspaper, in an account of the affair, stated:

"...while over the throne a black shadow of a ghastly spectre has fallen. Among us has risen a second George IV in the heir to the throne of this vast Empire ... the heir to the throne publicly acknowledging complicity in gambling transactions." <36>

Bertie readily admitted his activity and showed no shame for his actions. Younger members of the British public were not upset with their future king for his gambling, but rather with those members of the public who insisted on assaulting him for his personal pastimes. Needless to say, Victoria, probably reflecting on Albert's sober and restrained character, was appalled. It is interesting that about eight years after the baccarat scandal, a series of letters were published in the overseas newspapers that were alleged to be personal correspondence between Bertie and his brother, Alfred. Although these letters

were deemed fakes at the time, it is ironic that one of the supposed letters from Bertie to Alfred reads:

"Poor father's name is constantly held up ... I must not do this or that, I must always be goody because he was so good..." <37>

Whether the letters were fake or not, they illustrated that Bertie, for all his strength as a man, was still laboring under the shadow of his father.

The friction between Bertie, Victoria, and Albert can easily be attributed to the traditional tension between a monarch and the heir apparent or, in this case, to the tension between a child and parents. The tension in Victoria and Bertie's relationship also has the quality of being a clash between the attitudes of two eras. Victoria represented a morally suffocating world full of rules and limits on behavior. Propriety was a key quality of her time, the guideline by which everything else was determined and judged. There was admiration for discipline and morals, qualities supposedly inherent at the time in the German character. Bertie represented a world that would usher in a synthesis between the secular and the religious. England would move out of her isolationism and be forced to "socialize" with the rest of Europe and the world. There would be a waning of authority and new found liberties. <38> Bertie was the restless spirit trying to break away from Victorian standards. Victoria did everything she could to make her son conform, using Albert as the supreme model, but even the Queen of England could not stop the twentieth century from coming to England. Albert represented everything an English subject at the time was growing to hate: he was a foreigner, a poor horseman, a preacher and practitioner of virtues, pure, and prudish. <39> The Prince of Wales was the exact opposite to all of this; he was one of "us," a man who drank a little, smoked a little, and maybe even every now and then gambled a little. Life was too short and hard to be spending time preaching; there was too much to see and do. Bertie was the living symbol of what was to come for England in the modern world.

### Notes

1 Victoria to Vicky, January 28, 1863, in Christopher Hibbert, *Queen Victoria in Her Letters and Journals* (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1985), p.170.

2 Robert K. Massie, *Dreadnought* (New York: Random House, 1991), p.3.

3 Massie, p.4.

4 Victoria to King Leopold, November 29, 1841, in Hibbert, p. 93.

5 Andre Maurois, *The Edwardian Era* (New York: D. Appleton -Century Company, Inc., 1933), p. 42.

6 Massie, pp. 7-8.

7 Victoria to Vicky, November 17, 1858, in Roger Fulford, *Dearest Child* (London, Evans Brothers Limited, 1981), p. 144.

8 Massie, p. 7.

9 Hibbert, p. 158.

10 Victoria to Vicky, December 27, 1861, in Hibbert, p. 158.

11 Victoria to Vicky, January 15, 1862, in Hibbert, p. 161.

12 Hibbert, p. 13.

13 Victoria to Vicky, November 6, 1862, in Hibbert, p. 168.

14 Victoria to Vicky, November 28, 1862.

15 Massie, p. 18.

16 Victoria to Vicky, June 5, 1872, in Hibbert, p. 228.

17 Victoria to Ministers of Government, quoted in Massie, p. 14.

18 Massie, p. 14.

19 Massie, p. 15.

20 Massie, p. 15.

21 Massie, p. 17.

22 Maurois, p. 43.

23 "The Mordaunt Divorce Case," *The Times*, February 23, 1870, p. 5.

24 F. J. C. Hearnshaw, *Edwardian England* (London, Ernest Berm Limited, 1933), p. 35.

25 Victoria to Vicky, May 18, 1876, in Hibbert, p. 243.

26 "The Prince of Wales," *The Times*, December 20, 1871, p. 9.

27 "The Prince of Wales," *The Times*, December 18, 1872, p. 9.

28 Victoria to Vicky, December 20, 1871, in Hibbert, p. 215.

29 "The Prince of Wales," *The Times*, December 18, 1871, p. 9.



30 Victoria to Vicky, February 14, 1872, in Hibbert, p. 215.

31 Victoria to the Prince of Wales, January 13, 1864, in Hibbert, p. 179.

32 Victoria to Vicky, July 14, 1875, in Hibbert, p. 240.

33 Hibbert, p. 344.

34 Maurois, p. 94.

35 "The Baccarat Case," *The Times* June 10, 1891, p. 10.

36 "Tranby Croft and Baccarat," *The Times*, June 15, 1891, p. 6.

37 Prince of Wales to Prince Alfred, June 6, 1870, quoted in Roger Fulford, *Your Dear Letter* (London, Evans Brothers Limited, 1981), p. 279.

38 Hearnshaw, p. 28. 39 Maurois, p. 41.

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