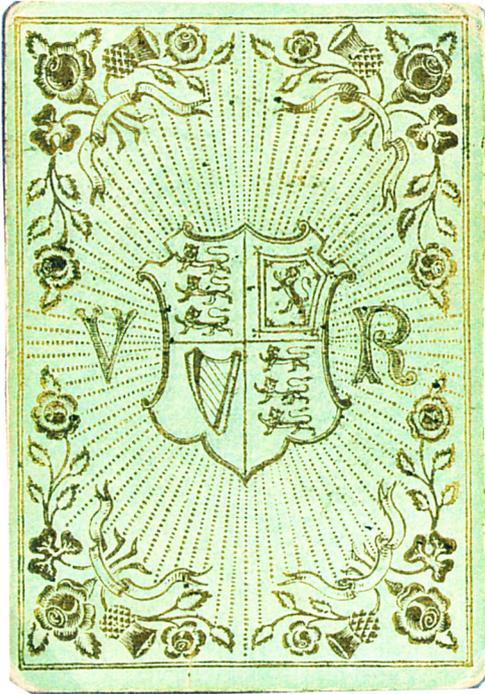


Queen Victoria

An exceptional Monarch who cast a mighty shadow



One hundred years ago on 22 January 1901, Queen Victoria Britain's longest-reigning sovereign died. The symbol of her age, she had become head of the nation as well as its head of state. Queen Victoria was a sovereign of a new type, for it is only during the period of the present reign that in England the duties of a constitutional sovereign have ever been well performed. Victoria's reign coincided with a fundamental change in monarchy by which, its power having declined, its influence came to increase.

Such a change would have seemed highly unlikely when Victoria came to the throne in 1837. The 3 previous sovereigns had been, "an Imbecile(George 11), a profigate (George 1V) and a buffoon(William 1V) ".

Crowned at the age of 18, Victoria entered an uncertain inheritance. Nevertheless, years later Victoria said "The Queen was not overwhelmed on her accession - rather - full of courage. She took things as they came, as she knew they must be."



Were Queen Victoria to ride out from Buckingham Palace on the centenary of her death, what would surprise her most would not be how much London has changed, but how little. The capital remains in essence a Victorian creation, like most of the towns and cities that form the backdrop to our daily lives. But were Victoria to glimpse any modern building, Hyde Park Barracks, perhaps, or the distant towers of Canary Wharf, she would be shocked, not by the scale of the buildings - that could have been expected given the rate of progress she had already experienced - but by their complete lack of decoration. More than anything else, it is this rejection of decoration that divides us aesthetically from the world of Queen Victoria.

Queen Victoria retained to the end of her reign - more than 63 years later - an inborn and inextinguishable consciousness of Queenship. When Victoria came to the throne, the role of the sovereign was very different from what it is today. She was regarded as being personally responsible for all the measures of her government, which needed her confidence to survive. A defeat for the government



therefore, was also a defeat for the sovereign, and a dissolution of Parliament was a weapon by which the sovereign could aid her government. Indeed between 1715 and 1835, no government had been defeated in a general election. The general election of 1841, when Sir Robert Peel came to power, was to be the first in which the voters chose a prime minister in defiance of the sovereign.

Even before Victoria came to the throne, however, there were signs that the position of the sovereign as an independent estate of the realm was under threat. In 1829, George IV had been forced, much against his inclinations, to accept Catholic emancipation. This marked the end of the sovereign's role as an independent power.

The 1832 Reform Act further limited royal power, while Lord Aberdeen's government of 1852 was to prove the last, except for the emergency National Government of 1931, to be formed as a result of royal influence. After the second Reform Act in 1867, the growth of tightly organised political parties left little scope for direct royal intervention. It was only when party lines became fluid again, or when it fell to the sovereign to choose a new prime minister in the absence of a party mechanism for electing a leader – as in 1957, when Elizabeth appointed





Macmillan, or in 1963, when she appointed Lord Home- that the sovereign would be able to act without ministerial advice.

Many felt that the decline of monarchical power under Victoria would render the sovereign a mere cipher; Victoria, however, showed that the decline in power need not reduce the monarchy to a mere piece of constitutional machinery. Power could be replaced by influence. Victoria was the first sovereign prepared to master the endless boxes of state papers sent to her with such monotonous regularity by her Private Secretary. She showed that an assiduous sovereign could exert an influence no less important for being exercised within the framework of constitutional rules which constrained her power.

The Queen was sceptical of, if not downright hostile to, the new political ideas of the Victorian era - liberalism and popular government. Yet the prestige of the monarchy at the end of her reign owed much to its association with parliamentary government, the idea of an executive responsible to parliament in which the sovereign was required to act on the advice of her ministers.

Whereas most of Queen Victoria's many fine legacies to her country are inevitably receding with time, the impact she had on the outlook and behaviour of our present Queen is if steadily growing.

RTW

