

Head of the greatest empire on earth, Victoria was a woman of contradictions. She detested public life but loved being an Empress. Her offspring ultimately ruled much of Europe but, when they couldn't get along, their quarrels led to the First World War.

Born in 1819, she became heir to the throne when her father, Prince Edward (Duke of Kent and Strathearn and fourth son of King George III) died young (Victoria was six months old at the time) and her uncles—George IV and William IV—had no surviving, legitimate children.

Vowing to do better than her uncles (who both had bad reputations), twelve-year-old Victoria—who was brought up at Kensington Palace—declared: "I will be good."

When William IV died, in June of 1837, Victoria became Queen. Her uncle had fulfilled his desire to live long enough for Victoria to turn eighteen. She exceeded that goal by just a few months and was greeted by the cheers of a million people when she was crowned at Westminster Abbey.

Victoria's reign was marked by enormous achievements. In Britain itself, cities were doubling in size and railways connected the country. People were able to travel at 33 miles per hour—a previously unimaginable speed.

William IV had cautioned his niece to move slowly, but Victoria had drive and spirit. William Lamb—also known as Lord Melbourne—became her chief advisor. He was devoted to her, and she had faith in him.

When Melbourne lost an election, and Robert Peel took over, Victoria refused to change her ladies-in-waiting to those approved by the Tories. She was, as she declared, "Queen of England." Peel was never able to gain influence with her.



Pressed by her advisors to find a husband, Victoria would not be bullied into a choice she did not embrace. She decided to marry her first cousin, Prince Albert. She had liked him, when they met in 1836, but three years later she was smitten.

As Queen, Victoria had to be the one to propose marriage. The couple married, on 10 February 1840, and eventually had nine children—four sons and five daughters.

Albert was smart and confident. As Victoria's Prince Consort, he considered himself her key minister and wanted to serve as one of her advisors. Not everyone—including Victoria—always agreed that was a good plan.

One of Albert's most successful projects—and achievements—was the Great Exposition of 1851. Featuring 100,000 exhibits, the spectacle attracted 6 million visitors before it closed.

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A Portrait of Queen Victoria

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