



*Prince Albert:
The Man Who Saved
The Monarchy*

A. N. Wilson

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Review by: Aidan Jones



Prince Albert: The Man Who Saved The Monarchy. By A.N. Wilson. London: Atlantic Books, 2019. ISBN: 978-1-782-39831-8. xvii + 430 pp. £25.00.

In a review of A.N. Wilson's *Victoria: A Life* (2014), Professor Jane Ridley remarked that the book's biggest surprise was Wilson's treatment of Prince Albert. Ridley observed that "in a very small, buried footnote he [Wilson] claims that he is Albert's greatest admirer, but one would hardly credit it from the texts." Ridley continued, "In spite of his abundant talents, the prince emerges here as a fussy stickler, a hypochondriac and a humourless pedant. How it was that the emerging, sparkly-eyed young man of Brocky's drawing of 1841 turned into the heavy, depressed workaholic of only a few years later is a puzzle which still remains to be solved." In his new biography, Wilson sets out to solve this puzzle.

Published to mark the bicentennial of Prince Albert's birth, Wilson's biography presents a more convincing and assured portrait of this Coburg prince than the reader gained in his earlier work. As the sub-title indicates, Wilson believes that Albert was the "man who saved the monarchy." In the opening pages of the book, Wilson regales the reader with an encounter he experienced with the current Queen's consort, the Duke of Edinburgh. On being informed of the subject of Wilson's work, Prince Philip expressed the view that "the world did not need yet another book about Prince Albert" (xi). The author bravely replied that "there had not, as it happened, been many, or indeed any, full biographies, since that of Sir Theodore Martin in the nineteenth century" (xi). Indeed, it is true that the last full life biography was published over twenty years ago. It is equally true, however, that Wilson's biography adds little new knowledge about the life of Albert that has not already been revealed in the works of others, like Stanley Weintraub (1997) or the Albertian scholarly literature of John R. David and Karina Urbach. This is a little disappointing.

Nevertheless, what the biography lacks in originality it makes up for in creative synthesis and analysis driven by an entertaining and engaging writing style. This is still an ambitious and enthralling portrait that matches subject and biographer, and it gives this important historical figure the reverence and recognition that he is due. This is because Wilson is a prominent figure in the world of literature and journalism, and a prolific biographer, having written on topics related to the Victorian and monarchical world in other books, starting with *Eminent Victorians* in 1989, and more recently *The Queen: The Life and Family of Queen Elizabeth II* (2016). Additionally, he is also able to make use of and interpret the vast array of original materials housed in the Royal Archives at Windsor Castle, the boyhood home of Prince Albert in Coburg, the other

state and royal archives in Germany and the United Kingdom, and he rounds out his scholarship with a comprehensive knowledge of secondary sources.

In this absorbing and entertaining read, Wilson's approach carefully explores the multi-faceted aspects of Prince Albert's life and legacy, which enabled Disraeli, with some emotional exaggeration, to declare in December 1861, "This German Prince has governed England for over twenty-one years with a wisdom and energy such as none of our Kings have ever shown." Wilson's gripping study presents the Prince Consort, a title Parliament would grant Albert in 1857, as a royal advisor, administrator, reformer, educationalist and university chancellor, diplomat, statesman, musician, activist patron of the arts and sciences, matchmaker, founder of a dynasty, husband, father, sibling, cousin, a superb organiser, and even an interior designer. He was, according to Wilson, "a civil servant in a coronet" (232).

Although Albert only lived for forty-two years, Wilson's sweeping biography of this "architect of British constitutional development" (390) positions him at the centre of the nineteenth century's educational, scientific, technological, and cultural advancement. Several stand-out chapters are worthy of attention. Wilson rightly devotes time to Albert's domestic achievements, and the role of this visionary royal in modernising the monarchy via its impact on public life. Albert's most defining and spectacular achievement was the 1851 Great Exhibition that not only signalled Britain's position in a new world order—urbanised, commercialised, and industrial. But it also solidified the British monarchy's function and role within the evolving system. Wilson observes that "the fact that Victoria and Albert had walked among their people without the slightest danger was a source of pride to the political classes" (259–260). He goes on to claim boldly that "it could not have happened in any other country in the world" (260). While the Prussian king feared terrorist attacks and communists murdering visiting royals, Prince Albert not only gambled by associating the monarchy with the risk of failure, but was also willing to expose the personal safety of his family and himself to possible attack. Wilson also comically draws attention to what he terms an "Albertian question" (253): namely, the danger of fire breaking out in the Exhibition's Refreshment Rooms. This was something Lord Granville, Vice-President of the Board of Trade since 1848, assured was of little risk, because "the meat is to be cooked away from the building and brought in cold—the potatoes to be steamed by steam which will be given to the Contractors" (254).

Wilson's insightful work further demonstrates the pioneering impact of Albert on particular aspects of British national life, by exploring the tightly contested election of the prince as Chancellor of the University of Cambridge in 1847. If the heads of the Colleges expected Albert to adopt an ornamental

role for this honorific position, they were soon disabused of this view. As Chancellor, Wilson shows that Albert was influential in broadening the university's curricula, and introducing history, law, chemistry, astronomy, and modern languages into a curriculum previously dominated by classics and theology. Drawing on his own pragmatic German educational experience at Bonn, Albert conducted an extensive re-organisation of university life, and turned it in another direction—a direction that helps explain one of the origins of the revolution in British education that began in the middle of the nineteenth century and dragged the hidebound Oxbridge system into the new era. This re-organisation offers an insight into why Cambridge arguably remains more of a scientifically oriented university than Oxford. Albert's success in carving out a distinctive position for himself expanded expectations of the role of any future consort, with the Duke of Edinburgh becoming elected to the Cambridge chancellorship in 1976.

Prince Albert: The Man Who Saved the Monarchy is accessibly written and takes the reader through the life, achievements, and legacy of a prince who did much to shape and develop the modern monarchy. Interspersed are titbits regarding Albert's hunting abilities, his battle with baldness, his involvement in the abolition of slavery, and his lasting legacy on British society, including the model farms at Windsor Castle. These titbits sit beside the more revealing and informative sections that detail Albert's extraordinary impact in royal marriages (both his own and his children's), his influence on foreign policy, and more specifically, on the constitutional development of Prussia and the German states. Although not new, or entirely convincing at times, Wilson's highly readable account of a prince torn between two heartlands shines a much-deserved light on one of the nineteenth century's more modern princes, as well as his enduring legacy on British royal life.

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