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DAVID SEDDON

## Queen Victoria in Switzerland

Queen Victoria died on 22 January 1901. In 1868, at a low point in her life, she made a little-known visit to Switzerland. Prince Albert had died of typhoid on December 14th 1861 but for many years the Queen was haunted by his death. By 1865 she ‘... longed to spend four weeks in some completely quiet part of Switzerland where she could refuse all visitors ...’ She had much to concern her, not least the strain of a succession of short-lived administrations and the amorous escapades of her two eldest sons, the Prince of Wales and Prince Alfred. During the summer of 1868 Disraeli, who had assumed office only in February of that year, was only just holding onto the reins of power. Gladstone was acknowledged to be the Prime Minister in waiting and his relationship with the Sovereign was already strained. In private, Gladstone lamented that the memory of Albert was not just sacred to the Queen: it was frozen in time. Finally, although the Fenian Brotherhood had ceased to be a political threat, it remained a personal one. Colonel Henry Ponsonby, the Queen’s long-suffering Private Secretary, had considered the Tyrol as a possible destination but the distance and the war of 1866 between Austria and Prussia weighed against such a choice. Prince Albert had visited Switzerland in 1837, and so to Switzerland Queen Victoria was to go.

On August 5th 1868, with her fourth daughter Princess Louise, aged twenty, she embarked on the royal yacht *Victoria and Albert* before joining the train provided for her by Emperor Napoleon III. In Paris, she was greeted by the Empress Eugénie before travelling incognito to Lucerne as the Countess of Kent. There she stayed in the Pension Wallace where she lived in relative simplicity. Princes Arthur and Leopold and Princess Beatrice (aged 18, 15 and 11 respectively) were also present. Princess Louise mischievously signed her name as Lady Louise Kent. Sir Thomas Biddulph, Master of the Household, remarked to one of the Ladies in Waiting, ‘It won’t do for you to have Marchioness of Ely on your luggage. You will be grander than her.’ She replied ‘No dear, I shall put plain Lady Ely on my boxes.’ John Brown won a place in the Queen’s carriage while wearing a kilt. His insistence on treating Switzerland as part of Britain irritated everyone. ‘J.B. of course, asks for everything as if he were in Windsor Castle,’ wrote Ponsonby to his wife. ‘If anything cannot be got, he says it *must* – and it is.’

Sir William Jenner, Court Physician, was not familiar with foreign sanitation, and rushed around looking for smells. Jenner, later to become President of the Royal College of Physicians, had been the first to distinguish

between typhoid and typhus fever and had attended Albert during his final illness. Perhaps surprisingly, he had retained his position as the Queen's physician.

Victoria made expeditions to the Rigi and Pilatus. John Brown attended her assiduously with her favourite carriage 'the Balmoral sociable', as well as her favourite ponies, Sultan and Flora. A particular expedition was made to the Teufelsbrücke in the sombre defile of the Schollenen. Here flanks of jagged rock plunged down into an abyss. Turner had painted this scene following his first visit to Switzerland in 1802. At the Furka Pass, the Queen and her entourage took over a small inn for three days, much to the irritation of other travellers, one of whom later complained to the Berne newspaper *Der Bund*. As the mist cleared, the Queen and her party made their way to the Rhone Glacier, then much more extensive than it is today, and would have seen into the heart of the Oberland. Other less strenuous expeditions took her to Engelberg where she visited the monastery and was received by the Abbot. She was sometimes carried in a *chaise à porteur*, a sort of sedan chair, an experience she later described as humiliating. A local guide instructed her on the names of the surrounding mountains.

The Queen and Princess Louise sketched and painted as they went, and Victoria painted both the Rigi and Pilatus. Perhaps she had seen some of Turner's watercolours of Switzerland. He had painted a number of views of the Rigi; the *Dark Rigi* and the *Red Rigi* are among his finest late watercolours.

The Queen's departure from Switzerland threatened to develop into a diplomatic incident. While under pressure from the Foreign Office to return the visit of the Empress Eugénie in Paris, Victoria had already agreed to receive the Dowager Queen of Prussia who was also about to visit Lucerne. What could have been a tiresome impasse was averted, as the Empress was at Fontainebleau and could not come to Paris. Queen Victoria could therefore chat with the Prussian Queen before she left for London, where she arrived on September 11th. The Queen left Windsor for Balmoral a few days later to find the skyline of her 'ain dear hieland home' distinctly flat.

And was she cheered by her travels? Lord Jenkins records in his biography of Gladstone that, on his accession to power later that year, Gladstone found the Queen '... kind, cheerful, even playful ...'

During her sojourn in the Alps, she had begun to sketch and draw people again, something she had rarely done since the death of Albert. Perhaps, at last she was a little better.

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