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The Perception of Queen Victoria in American Press of Her Times

Alexandrina Victoria, the future Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and the Empress of India, on the day of her birth, May 24th 1819, had little chance of becoming the leader of a superpower. Born as the only child of Princess Victoria of Saxe-Coburg-Saalfeld and Prince Edward, Duke of Kent and Strathearn, the fourth son of George III, the King of the United Kingdom of the Hanoverian house, was fifth in the line of succession after her father and uncles. However, as a result of rather astonishing family matters and lack of strict moral conduct, she remained the only legitimate representative of her generation in the family, born 18 months after the death of Princess Charlotte of Wales, the daughter of George Augustus Frederick, future King George IV, the eldest son of George III.

Victoria accessed the British throne on June 20th, 1837, at the age of 18 and remained the sovereign until 1901, keeping her post for more than 63 years. Until September 9, 2015, she was given the title of the longest ruling British monarch, now surpassed by Queen Elizabeth II. In American press, not much space was devoted to the new Queen at the very moment of her ascension to the throne. The news appeared in "Morning Herald", claiming: *A great political contest is developing itself in England since the death of the King. Queen Victoria may be the last monarch on the isle*¹. High possibility of social, political and cultural advancement had already been mentioned in the same paper: *The death of the King of England is a greater event than the mere extinction of an old man's life can be imagined.*

¹ *A Great political Contest*, "Morning Herald", New York, 28 July 1837, s. 3.

*It is the signal for an entire revolution in the administration of affairs – for a change, not only in the cabinet, but in the principles of the constitution*². The author continues, praising the new Queen: *The elevation of a beautiful and lovely woman to the throne of England, will cause a greater change in its position, than we have seen during the last century. The greatest changes in the action of the English government, have always taken place during the government of a woman*³. Such admiration for the Queen seems rather odd since in the sources she is often portrayed as short and plump. Needless to say, all the praises must have been aimed at keeping proper relations with the English society. Women on the English throne had not been a rarity in earlier times, however Victoria accessed her position in times of great development, in the era of technological advancement, which made her the center of social life even more than her predecessors. The sources claim that her looks was well known by her subjects not only due to pictures (Victoria was the first English monarch to be photographed), but also owing to numerous artifacts, often kitsch and of low value: *Formed during the age that began to exploit mechanical reproduction, her image became a media event, not only through such traditional arts as painting and statuary, but also through photographs and prints, through broadside ballads and advertisements, through souvenir plates, parian statues, buttons and other bric-a-brac*⁴.

The process of linguistic praising of the English monarch in American press may seem surprising due to the fact that only 61 years passed from the moment that the Americans refused to obey the rules of Victoria's grandfather, King George III. The article's author continues, claiming: *The British races have always idolized a woman, a princess, and a queen. Their loyalty to a King is given – but with some severe grumbling. Not so to a beautiful and accomplished female*⁵.

In an article that appeared in "The North Carolina Standard" on August 9th 1837, the author attempts at foreseeing the future course of British politics: *What her policy may be no one knows.*

² *Five Days Later from England*, "Morning Herald", New York, 25 July 1837, s. 2.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ A. Munich, *Queen Victoria's Secrets*, New York 1998, s. 7.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

*I think it will not be very decided. To Lord Melbourne she appears to have a personal dislike; perhaps on account of the Morton case*⁶. General public tried hard to predict future decisions of the new monarch. The fascination was striking, but it was not free from offensive and impolite remarks: *Victoria, the Queen, is getting fairer and fatter every day. If her majesty is really a pretty girl, God bless her – if not God pity her*, the article published shortly said⁷. The dichotomy of presenting the Queen – first addressing her as the monarch and then pointing to her looks is astonishing. Not only is the author malicious, but also unorthodox in drawing such picture of a young woman holding enormous power.

The Queen was crowned on June 28th, 1838, at Westminster Abbey, London. On July, 25th, “Morning Herald” published a detailed description of the ceremony, with drawing of the regalia, the crown among other objects: *A queen-consort wears a circlet proceeding to her coronation, and is crowned with St. Edgitha’s Crown – which is so named in honour of Edgitha, the consort of Edward the Confessor*⁸. The jewel in question was manufactured for the Queen since the earlier version of it was destroyed in the 17th century upon the order of Oliver Cromwell. The elevated vocabulary of the article suggests great admiration for British monarchy: *Thursday the day fixed upon for the coronation of her Majesty Queen Victoria the First, must be one for ever memorable to those who had the happiness to join in its celebration, and of demonstrating the affection entertained by them for their Sovereign. It was a day of unmingled delight – a festival in which the finest tastes and the finest feelings were fully gratified. It was not a mere holiday which the humbler classes could hail as a “day of rest” from labor; nor even one in which they might indulge in innocent amusements; nor please the eye by gazing upon a mere gorgeous spectacle; but it was a national ovation, in which they were actors as well as their Sovereign; for while they hailed her as their Queen, they expressed at the same time the delight with which they looked upon her; and her Majesty expressed, not mere by action but by words, the love she has for her people*⁹. The atmos-

⁶ *Biography of the King*, “The North Carolina Standard”, Raleigh, North Carolina., 9 August 1837, s. 1.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ *The Coronation*, “Morning Herald”, New York, 25 July 1838, s. 1.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

phere during the ceremony was highly elevated, and the lexical items chosen by the author of the article is pompous, yet adequate. It is especially visible in the presentation of the crowd gathered to witness the event: *The joy of the multitude, and their desire to testify it, seemed to know no bounds; again and again were the cheers repeated, and slowly as the cavalcade moved, yet the time appeared too brief for that outpouring of loyalty, which was all but inexhaustible*¹⁰.

The general public shared the spirit of togetherness and delight. The ceremonial proceeding were longish and tiring, yet a great number of spectators attended it with cheerfulness. The newly crowned Queen proved strong as well: [she] *bore the fatigues and excitement of the day – no slight demand upon the nerves of a delicately nurtured young lady – without exhibiting very visible signs of exhaustion; and was no worse next day than many of her more robust but still more tired subjects*¹¹. The monarch's delicacy is mentioned several times in the text. The author surely tried hard to be as polite as possible, but for contemporary readers, that kind of attitude may seem to be a mere mockery, taking into account the fact that she *inherited the Hanoverian tendency to plumpness, she was liable to grow "very fat"*¹². Her looks is under constant debate of the writers: *The Queen of England, although very far from beautiful, has contrived to set many of her subjects' hearts on fire about her. There are now in confinement as lunatics, about thirty persons, who have gone mad with the idea that the queen was to wed them*¹³. Victoria was here portrayed as an object of desire from her male subjects. Not pretty, yet worthy of appreciation, love and immense respect.

The news did appear in American press with delay due to the duration of a journey from Europe to America. No wonder that the article depicting Queen's marriage to a German Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha on February 10th, 1840, was published as late as in March the same year: *Her majesty's marriage took place at St. James Palace, February 10th. The rooms of the palace were filled at an early hour by the nobility, foreign ambassadors, the gen-*

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ *Foreign Items*, "Morning Herald", New York, 27 July 1837, s. 2.

¹² C. Hibbert, *Queen Victoria: A Personal History*, New York 2000, s. 66.

¹³ *English Chit Chat*, "The Madisonian", Washington D.C., 13 November 1839, s. 2.

*tlemen at arms, and yeomen of the guard on duty in the chambers allotted to them*¹⁴. The author does not attribute his/her paper with any comment, presenting facts in a very objective way, stating: *Her majesty's train was borne by twelve unmarried ladies, mostly of the nobility, followed by grooms, ladies of the bedchamber, a long retinue of maids honor and bedchamber*¹⁵. Much more subjective, not to say biased, is another piece written after the royal wedding: *The Queen's honeymoon is over. She keeps her man tied to her apron strings pretty closely. They are very often out together - have been to Covent Garden Theatre several times privately - have been to a concert or two - gone to church to hear prayers, - drive out in the Park, and all that sort of things*¹⁶. The author becomes very malicious when describing the overwhelming popularity of Prince Albert in his new homeland: *The people are said to be Albertizing every thing. Braham's St. James Theatre is now called "The Prince's Theatre". An iron monger in Pimlico has a culinary invention "yclept 'The Albert Gridiron". A tobacconist placards the town with bills of "Real Albert Cheroots", and a snuff called "Prince Albert's mixture"*¹⁷. The young Queen was very much in love with her newly wed husband and full of admiration towards him. Her behavior was very much typical of a wife in the honeymoon stage, yet her conduct and all places she visited, were witnessed by the eyes of her subjects.

In May 1840 there appeared rumor that Victoria was pregnant: *It is whispered, in circles likely to be acquainted with the fact, that her Majesty is in a way likely to prevent the succession to the throne from passing into any other than the direct line. The report derives strength from her Majesty's recent abstinence from her favourite exercise on horseback, and also from dancing, in which she is known to take much pleasure*¹⁸. The gossip was obviously true and the first child (out of nine) of the royal couple, Victoria, Princess Royal, was born on November, 21st, 1840. The birth of the baby was neither anxiously anticipated, nor greeted with hysteria, contrary to contemporary obsession that manifests the appearance of members

¹⁴ *Queen Victoria's Marriage*, "Liberty Advocate", Liberty, Mississippi, 2 April, 1840, s. 1.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ *From the Correspondent of the N.Y. "Evening Star"*, "The Pilot", Baltimore, Maryland, 17 April 1840, s.2 .

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ *Arrival of the British Queen*, "Morning Herald", New York, 16 May 1840, s. 2.

of the British royal family. In American press there appeared doubt whether the child of the Queen would become the future leader: *Is the newly-born daughter of Queen Victoria absolutely 'Queen' is she survives her mother, or is the eldest son of Victoria, in case she have and male children, entitled to the throne?*¹⁹ The question of inheritance was reasonable since the dynasty that Queen Victoria came from, ruled in the Kingdom Hanover, with the Salic law (or rather semi-Salic to be precise), excluding women from succession in case of the existence of male descendants, was still valid. It should be mentioned that due to that rule Victoria was excluded from the Hanoverian throne in favour of Ernest Augustus, her father's younger brother, the fifth son of George V. However, she was appointed as the Queen of England, being the only child. The above-mentioned article states that: *If Queen Victoria has a son hereafter, that son will take the crown in preference to any sisters, whether born before or after him*²⁰, openly calling the baby *heiress presumptive, not heiress apparent*²¹. The paper in a vivid, yet easy way clarifies the rule of primogeniture, favouring male over female descendants.

To common Americans, the citizens of a federal republic, monarchy seemed exotic, yet intriguing. They were anxious to hear the relations of those who could sense the atmosphere of the Old World, Europe with its aristocratic families, traditions and stories. One of such travel records was published in "New York Tribune" and said: *But what of the Queen? You will say; "and how does she look?" – so natural is curiosity of about one so young, and the accidental heir to such a fortune. A lady too! Well, I will first tell you how she does not look. She does not look like any one of the thousand portraits I have seen of her. Painters may call them resemblances, but they are not like her*²². The overall depiction of the Queen is favourable: *I should call her rather pretty; there is a decided expression of gentle, innocent, girlish sweetness in her countenance – just such a face as one who looks on it may well remember for a day, and pray that it may never be clouded with the cares and splendid misery of a sta-*

¹⁹ *From the N.Y. Commercial Advertiser, "Vermont Telegraph", Brandon, Vermont, 6 January 1841, s. 3.*

²⁰ *Ibidem.*

²¹ *Ibidem.*

²² *Victoria and Albert, "New York Tribune", New York, 7 August 1841, s. 1.*

tion such as hers²³. Back then, when the account of the meeting was being given, the Queen was already pregnant with her second child, son Edward. The words of admiration seem frank, yet aimed at making impression on the common readers, who were not able to see the Queen with their own eyes. However, some grain of maliciousness was added when describing Queen's personality: *Queen Victoria, of England, must be remarkable creature, from what the British papers say about her; abounding greatly in wit, judgment and firmness. It is said, that when she was told of the fire at the Tower, and that a great many shells were thrown into the moat, she asked if the Tower was famous for oysters. When she heard that the arms of her soldiers were burnt, she asked whether the legs were injured*²⁴. The quoted passage depicts Victoria as not only fierce and strong character, but also ignorant of the problems of her citizens, cynical and self-centered. Nevertheless, the same article gives account of the birth of the Queen's child, claiming: *All the world knows that she has lately given birth to a son, who is heir to several dukedoms, is Prince of Wales, and if he lives will be King of England. The papers inform us this illustrious child was born just like other children, and that the Queen behaved just like other women on similar occasions*²⁵. There is no denial that Victoria managed to combine both her responsibilities well: she ruled independently and yet during twenty one years of her marriage, she gave birth to nine children, all of whom survived infancy.

The death of the royal spouse, Prince Albert, was preceded by frequent incidents of huge pain, kept from the eyes of the public. When the news came to America, the cause of his passing away was labeled as *gastric fever*²⁶. At the time of his death, the public in America was preoccupied mostly with domestic matters, the outbreak of Civil War, to be precise. However, in a short passage, the Prince was portrayed as *an amiable and well-disposed man, though accused of absolutist prejudices, and of secretly sympathizing with Russia during the Crimean War*²⁷. Due to the intensity of their rela-

²³ Ibidem.

²⁴ *Queen – Prince and People*, “The North Carolina Standard”, Raleigh, North Carolina, 5 January 1842, s. 3.

²⁵ Ibidem.

²⁶ *Death of Prince Albert*, “Belmont Chronicle”, St. Clairsville, Ohio, 26 December 1861, s. 2.

²⁷ Ibidem.

tion, the frequency of pregnant periods and emotional problems linked with the loss of her mother, the Queen relied heavily on her husband. The loss of him shattered her peace and triggered overwhelming despair. Some articles went as far as claim: *Prince Albert's death may, in the opinion of Englishmen here, exercise a great influence upon English politics. Some think Queen Victoria will, in her grief, abdicate*²⁸. Fortunately, this threat was not fulfilled, but the monarch kept wearing black and remained in her widowhood till the end of her long life. Her first and fully justified reaction was despair: *the Queen has borne her loss with exemplary resignation, and a composure which, under so sudden and so terrible a bereavement, could not have been anticipated. When the first passionate burst of grief was over, her Majesty called her children around her, and, with a calmness which gives proof of great natural energy, addressed them in solemn and affectionate terms*²⁹. Victoria was supported not only by her relatives and closest advisors, but also by her subjects. Never before had she witnessed such wave of sympathy and solace.

One of the most commonly gossiped about issues regarding the Queen's private life was her relation with one of her servants, Mr John Brown. The sources claim that twenty years after Mr Brown's death *it came to light that there was in existence a black tin box containing over three hundred letters written by the Queen about Brown to Dr Alexander Profeit, her factor at Balmoral. The Queen's former physician, James Reid, was asked by King Edward VII's Private Secretary, Lord Knollys, to retrieve these letters from Dr Profeit's son, George Profeit, who was threatening to blackmail the King about them*³⁰. Despite that fact, the existence of the documents in question cannot be proven. Since adolescence, the Queen kept writing a diary, with the first entry from the times she was 13 until the last days of her long life. The majority of them were published, but it needs to be highlighted, that the Queen's daughter, Beatrice, did her best at removing some passages. The American press wrote about the relation between Victoria and her servant openly: *Queen Victoria's John Brown is a well-fed, well-looking, lusty*

²⁸ *From Washington*, "Chicago Daily Tribune", Chicago, Illinois, 26 December 1861, s. 1.

²⁹ *Queen Victoria's Conduct to Her Family*, "New York Herald", New York, 1 January 1862, s. 3.

³⁰ C. Hibbert, *op. cit.*, s. 322.

*Scotchman, who serves as a henchman to her Royal Majesty. He rides behind her in her carriage, sleeps on a mat or rug before her door, and is her constant, consistent, and continuous seneschal*³¹. The description is highly offensive, but pointing to a very intimate and devotional attitude of Brown towards his Queen. The article states also: *Through long association in this position, his name and the Queen's have grown to be coupled together by the street classes in that city, when the royal outfit passes, to hear the crowds call out: "Here comes old Mother Brown!"*³². The name the monarch was nicknamed by general public was "Mrs Brown", and some rumour about secret marriage between the two was gossiped about as well. The news was published, claiming: *And now the startling rumour has gone forth that Queen Victoria was married to John Brown just after Prince Albert's death*³³. The comment is highly offensive, especially taken into consideration great devotion of the Queen towards her late husband and it proves Victoria's unpopularity in the early stage of her widowhood. It adds: *We would not be surprised*, which would suggest Victoria's misconduct³⁴. After Brown's death, the Queen used to visit his grave every week, and her wish was to be buried with his photograph, a lock of his hair and a ring that had been the possession of Brown's mother and which she received from him on her hand. However, there exists no proof, no legal document that would support the thesis of Victoria's second marriage.

The general depiction of Queen Victoria in American press during times was rather pleasant. In an article about new war ships built in England, published in "The New York Herald" on February 27th, 1891, the author uses epithets suggesting great admiration and respect. It says: *Great throngs of people gathered here to see the royal pageant accompanying the launching of the new war ships. (...) The Queen, immediately upon alighting from the royal train, was conducted with much pomp and ceremony to the State carriage, which was in waiting for Her Majesty, and was then driven to the dock yard as the air rang with hearty cheers and the military bands*

³¹ *The Queen's Coachman*, "The Semi-Weekly Miner", Butte, Montana, 8 April 1882, s. 2.

³² *Ibidem*.

³³ *And now...*, "The Grenada Sentinel", Grenada, Mississippi, 16 February 1884, s. 4.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

present played the air of the national anthem "God save the Queen"³⁵. Victoria died on January, 22nd, 1901 and the news was soon published in numerous articles. With technological development, there was no necessity for the steamers to bring facts from the Continent any longer. On January, 23rd the issues of newspapers were devoted almost exclusively to the situation in England. "The New York Tribune" says: *The announcement of the death of Queen Victoria was received with universal sorrow at the foreign embassies and legations in Washington, and nowhere was the sentiment of bereavement more poignantly felt than at the British Embassy*³⁶. The whole world looked at Great Britain which had been ruled by the Queen for six decades and waited for the final ceremony to be performed. Her death is described as peaceful and admiration and respect are being expressed: *Queen Victoria is dead and King Edward VII reigns. (...) The end of this career, never equaled by any woman in the world's history, came in a simply furnished room in Osborne house. This most respected of all women, living or dead, lay in a great four-posted bed and made a shrunken atom whose face and figure were a cruel mockery of the fair girl, who, in 1837, began to rule over England*³⁷.

The American press of the time devoted surprisingly much space to the British Queen and her private life. According to the sources it was due to her support towards America and its citizens³⁸. After her death, she was valued as a great monarch and female, with the words of Postmaster-General Smith, cited in one of the newspapers: *She has been a model Queen and a model woman, and her death will be a source of sorrow through the world*³⁹.

³⁵ *Royal Launch at Portsmouth*, "The New York Herald", New York, 27 February 1891, s. 7.

³⁶ *America's Sympathy*, "New York Tribune", 23 January 1901, s. 7.

³⁷ *Victoria Is Dead*, "Abilene Weekly Reflector", 24 January 1901, s. 8.

³⁸ W.L. Arnstein, *The Americanization of Queen Victoria*, "The Historian", vol. 72, no. 4, 2010, <http://www.questia.com/real/1G1-245540981/the-mericanization-of-queen-victoria> (dostęp 12 czerwca 2017 r.).

³⁹ *Mementos of the Queen*, "New York Tribune", 23 January 1901, s. 7.

Abstract

The Perception of Queen Victoria in American Press of Her Times

British Queen Victoria, who gained the throne in 1837, after the death of her grandfather and uncle, had little chance of becoming the future leader of a superpower. Born as the only child of the fourth son of King George III, she was hardly educated to perform such a role. Yet, she managed to build and strengthen an empire, and rule Great Britain for over 60 years. The article is an analysis of the perception of the Queen in the American press of her times. Surprisingly much is said about Victoria in numerous magazines and the materials in question depict her as a powerful politician and a symbol of the kingdom.

Keywords: British history, 19th century, Queen Victoria, American press

Słowa kluczowe: historia Anglii, XIX wiek, królowa Wiktoria, prasa amerykańska

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