

Reviews

A well-connected Liberal in the court of Queen Victoria

William Kuhn: *Henry & Mary Ponsonby* (Duckworth, 2002; pp302)

Reviewed by **Tony Little**

Queen Victoria reigned for so long that it is inevitable that the constitution developed and changed under her sometimes unamused glare. We tend to focus on the extension of the franchise and the power of the premier within the cabinet as the significant constitutional innovations. Occasionally it is worthwhile considering the degree to which constitutional change impacted on the monarchy itself. Less than thirty years before Victoria came to the throne, George III felt able to take executive decisions. George IV manoeuvred to keep the Whigs out of power and William IV, Victoria's predecessor, committed no constitutional outrage in dismissing the Whigs in 1834. Yet by the end of Victoria's reign, while she retained the power of selection of a prime minister in some circumstances (as does our current Queen), she was unable to resist Gladstone's resumption of the premiership in 1880 or 1892, despite her marked distaste and reluctance.

The keys to this withering in Victoria's political role are her marriage to Prince Albert and his death. The Prince Consort set out to rescue the young Queen from her over-reliance on Melbourne. Kuhn argues that he sought to strengthen the monarchy by creating an independence from the political parties and setting an example of moral rectitude. Even the slightest exposure to the relations between Palmerston and the

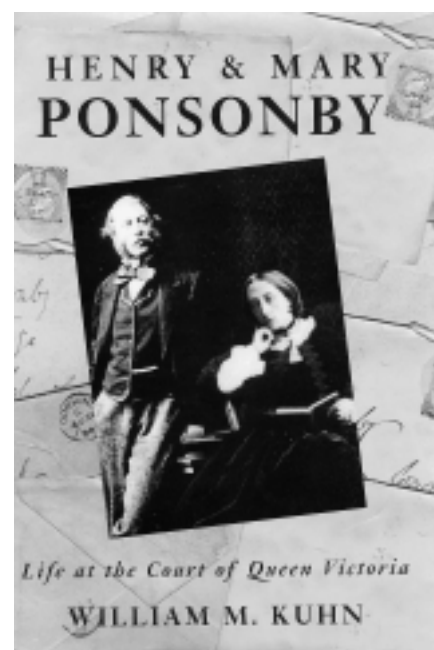
royal family in the 1840s and 1850s confirms that Albert had no intention of the monarchy standing outside the political and diplomatic process – he wanted the monarch to influence policy, not party. His premature death created a vacuum. The Queen, in her grief, withdrew from public ceremonial and found that she had been over-dependent on her consort for holding her ministers to account.

It is into this gap that the private secretary was required to step. It is no accident that British ministerial titles resonate with Secretary of State for this or that. Originally that was the role entailed, and before George III, there was no separate private secretary to the monarch. Even then, Kuhn argues, the role was made necessary only by the King's physical incapacity to read and write state documents. At intervals over the next three reigns, ministers, particularly Whig ministers, resisted the continuation of the post, arguing that it combined an excess of power without parliamentary accountability. Under Melbourne, the Queen was so much in the company of the prime minister that a secretary was unnecessary and, after her marriage, Albert undertook the role. Even when Albert died, first Palmerston and then Russell argued against official recognition of the post though unofficially making cabinet documents available to the equerry/ Keeper of the Privy Purse who unofficially managed a private office.

Nevertheless the Queen's stubbornness paid off and Henry Ponsonby undertook the diplomatically impossible task of interpreting the Queen's not always practical wishes to governments and government's wishes to a Queen not always focused on the day-to-day business of statesmanship.

Kuhn is an equal opportunities biographer. Chapters on Henry Ponsonby are succeeded by those on Mary. This gives a more rounded portrait with greater weight to family life and a wider range of Victorian preoccupations than is normal in a political biography, but he is handicapped on two fronts by the material. Firstly, while his correspondence with her has largely survived, fewer of her letters have endured. Secondly, and almost inevitably for a Victorian couple, he had more opportunities for an active life than she, despite her efforts to the contrary.

Both were born to Whig families. Henry Ponsonby, the son of a veteran of Waterloo and the grandson of an Earl of Bessborough, was born in 1825 on Corfu where his father commanded the British garrison. Mary Bulteel, the granddaughter of Earl Grey on her mother's side, was born in the year his reform act passed into law. Inevitably, Henry Ponsonby was destined for the army and Mary for marriage and family. For him escape from destiny came through the offer to the young



officer to be the private secretary to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, his uncle Lord Bessborough, in the 1840s. After Bessborough's death he served his successors, largely cut off from the impact of the Irish famine. Service in Ireland drew him to the attention of the Prince Consort and with the exception of a short interval in the Crimea he remained attached to the Court.

Mary struggled harder against her destiny. When young she pursued religion with a passionate intensity which led initially to thoughts of a vocation in an Anglican religious community. Her confused feelings led her to break off an engagement with (Sir) William Harcourt, later Gladstone's Chancellor of the Exchequer, and left her available for marriage to Henry Ponsonby. If Henry's politics were Whiggish/Gladstonian, Mary's were more radical. Naturally, she took up women's suffrage and education. She was a pioneer supporter of Girton and of allowing women students to qualify as doctors. She worked for the Society for the Promotion of Employment of Women. Children were a distraction from this work but she remained actively engaged in political debate, tending towards socialism in her later life. She contributed to one of the higher brow Victorian journals. Darwin's theories and Henry's Arminianism wore down some of her religious enthusiasm and while she pursued a friendship with George Eliot in an effort to assuage the doubts created, she never lost the appreciation of the beauty of Anglican services. Kuhn makes much of Mary Ponsonby's friendships with women, such as the composer Ethel Smyth, and with doomed younger men, such as Everard Primrose, half suggesting a sexual element that to this reviewer does not seem justified and which probably reflects more Victorian use of language and sentiment than repressed lust.

As private secretary, Henry was of assistance to Gladstone in the abolition of the system by which army commissions were bought and sold

rather than promotions won on merit. In principle the measure had the support of both front benches, but in practice it was impossible to carry and after the Lords rejected the bill in 1871, the royal prerogative was brought into play. When Disraeli succeeded Gladstone in 1874, Ponsonby found himself increasingly sidelined, but the Queen took a considerably greater interest in what was being done in her name. Traditionally, this is attributed to Disraeli's laying on the flattery with a trowel ('We authors, Ma'am') but Kuhn argues that Disraeli also played up her power and indispensability, though always with an air of sarcasm that Ponsonby, though few others, appears to have noticed. Ponsonby's opposition to Dizzy's Royal Titles Bill, which made the Queen Empress of India, increased his isolation at Court and led to the development of an alternative system of communication with the premier using the Ladies In Waiting – a system which played to the Queen's convenience and Disraeli's skills.

By the end of Disraeli's premiership, the Queen was a confirmed, if undeclared, Tory and so she remained until the end of her reign. Nevertheless, the return of Gladstone to government, however unwelcome to the Queen, rescued Ponsonby from irrelevance. Once more he was a full participant in the interpretation of the wishes of the government and an ameliorator of the increasingly difficult relations between Victoria and Gladstone which reached one nadir with the death of Gordon at Khartoum and a second with Home Rule, perceived by Victoria as the beginning of the destruction of the British Empire.

Ponsonby did not long outlive the retirement of Gladstone, dying of a stroke in 1895. His tact and loyalty made him a success in the smooth transfer of further power from the monarch to the politicians. His sense of humour allowed him to cope with the symbols and ceremonies indistinguishable from monarchy in both public and private. Mary survived

until 1916 and remained active, debating with H. G. Wells on Fabianism and making contributions to *The Nineteenth Century* on literary topics and the role of women in society.

The politics of the Victorian court have probably received less attention than they deserve. The Ponsonbys were a central part of that court for all of their married lives. Their correspondence throws an interesting sidelight on the struggle between the Queen and her later Liberal ministers. And so it is disappointing to be forced to conclude that this book lets the reader down.

For this, I believe that there are two principal reasons. The author does not trust his sources and he does not trust the reader. He seems unable to resist the temptation to quote from a letter without then repeating the substance of its contents in his own words rather than allowing the quotations to substantiate his case. Since he is based, at least part-time, in Carthage College in the US, he may be writing primarily for an American audience, which could explain a higher degree of explanation of aspects of British history than would generally be assumed for a British audience. Nevertheless, he appears to have succumbed to the temptation to cram in every piece of research he has conducted. For example, a reference to Lord Clarendon, the Victorian foreign secretary, appears to require a potted biography of Clarendon the Stuart statesman and historian, though the Victorian Clarendon comes from a separate creation of the peerage. A reference to 'theatrical royalty' leads to an unconnected diversion into a potted history of the theatre and the role of the Lord Chamberlain. Occasionally, as in the paragraph on St Theresa's non-existent martyrdom, this leads to error. Underneath these irritations struggle both the life of an interesting couple and a sidelight on the development of the constitution. A book to borrow, not buy.

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