

its boundaries). On this occasion Wilkes outmanoeuvred the government and in 1774 he did finally become MP for Middlesex. He was re-elected in 1780 and 1784.

Also Lord Mayor from 1774, Wilkes was in his element, publicly visible to all and entertaining lavishly, with his daughter rather than his mistress as his Lady Mayoress. His debts accrued once more but, more positively, he acted to regulate food prices, establish a charity for prisoners, and campaign against prostitutes (somewhat ironically given his earlier years). As MP for Middlesex, he called for parliamentary reform and the political rights of all, including religious dissenters. He helped to suppress the anti-Catholic Gordon Riots.

There are many aspects of Wilkes' career that remain pertinent today and ought to be a part of any Liberal or democratic campaign: against general warrants and for civil liberties, against a tyrannical executive and for the individual, for informed and transparent representation and hence a stronger democracy, against prejudice and for tolerance.

Eagles includes a brief epilogue to underline some of these points and, along the way, describes Wilkes in ways that could equally be applied to one of his successors as Mayor of London (and, in the latter's case, briefly a Conservative prime minister): Wilkes 'ability to reinvent himself', a 'celebrity politician, revelling in the adulation of the crowd', using 'the independence

of London to its full potential', yet 'frequently self-obsessed and never tired of seeing his name in print', with a 'final phase as courtier, Arcadian and translator'.

Without this epilogue, however, the achievements and events that led Wilkes to be called 'A friend to liberty' and illustrate his continuing relevance and appeal today might be lost in a 244-page biography freighted with a further forty-six pages of notes. Both the book and Wilkes would have benefited from an editor's scalpel, with a leaner book better reflecting the pace at which Wilkes lived his life. ■

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## HM: High Maintenance

Anne Somerset, *Queen Victoria and her Prime Ministers: A personal history* (William Collins, 2024)

Review by Peter Truesdale

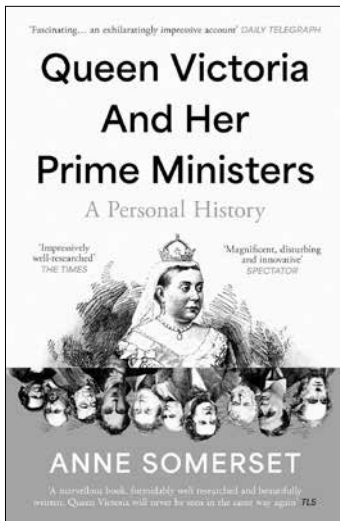
She was ghastly. Self-centred. Opinionated. Obstinate. She had 'absurdly high notions of her prerogative, and the amount of control which she ought to exercise over public business'. Lord Clarendon spotted on with that September 1863 observation.

There was trouble right from the start. The Bedchamber Crisis of

1839 displayed the unreasonable behaviours that showed themselves again and again throughout her reign. She came to the throne a definitive and partisan Whig. She benefitted from the care and guidance of Melbourne, her first prime minister. On 7 May, Melbourne's majority in a vote on the Jamaica Bill was a mere five. It was time for the government to go. A Tory administration must

be formed. This required Tories to replace Whigs as Ladies of the Bedchamber. Whether that meant each and every lady was a moot point. Victoria was immovable. She would keep every single one.

She would not accept Sir Robert Peel, 'a cold, unfeeling, disagreeable man', as premier. Wellington was summoned instead. He declined office. Peel was sent for.



Peel: 'Now about the Ladies ...'

Victoria, interrupting: 'I could not give up any of my ladies and never imagined such a thing.'

Peel, presumably in order to create room for negotiation, asked if she wished to retain them all.

Victoria: 'All.'

Politics necessarily involves negotiation and compromise. An insight denied to the twenty-year-old Victoria, as it was to be throughout the remaining fifty-two years of her reign. Crisis was averted. Melbourne agreed to soldier on.

A coda gives us further insight into the Queen's nature. Victoria did not believe that Peel deserved the courtesy of confidentiality. She wrote gleefully to Melbourne: 'I never saw a man so frightened ... The Queen of England will never submit to such trickery. Keep yourself in readiness, for you may soon be wanted.' Throughout her reign

she deliberately shared with the party she favoured information that she ought to have kept confidential. She did it in 1839 when she was a Whig fangirl. She did it at the end of her reign when she was a Tory cheerleader. The politician who was most abused by this practice was William Ewart Gladstone.

Without doubt, marriage to Albert brought joy to her life. As Albert became more involved in her fulfilment of her duties, he provided a sort of stabiliser to her excesses. However, her grief at his death compounded her self-centredness with a strong infusion of self-pity. She declined to fulfil in person key responsibilities such as the opening of parliament. She preferred Windsor, Osborne and Balmoral to London. The book is peppered with examples of her being out of London when the government needed her there.

The book does provide some good laughs. No one loves the class creep. Everybody relishes seeing teacher's pet getting a hard time from teacher. The queen was famously susceptible to Disraeli's stomach-churning, oleaginous 'charm'. The index directs the reader to nine pages where the author deals with Disraeli's 'mastery of the art of flattery'. Here he is on 26 February 1868, writing to Victoria to confirm his willingness to become premier hoping: '... in the great affairs of state your Majesty will deign not to withhold from

him the benefit of your Majesty's guidance ... your Majesty's life has been passed in constant communion with great men, and the knowledge and management of important transactions. Even if your Majesty were not gifted with those great abilities, which all now acknowledge, this rare and choice experience must give your Majesty an advantage in judgement, which few living persons, and probably no living prince, can rival.'

Toe-curling stuff. She lapped it up: he paid a price.

She caused him significant difficulties. Most particularly during the crisis initiated by the Bulgarian atrocities in the spring of 1876. It ran for just short of two years till the calling of the Congress of Berlin in 1878. On virtually a daily basis, Victoria bombarded Disraeli with unsolicited advice. More often than not, it was extreme, impractical and incapable of winning over the cabinet. It is impossible not to smile at the thought of Disraeli having to deal with her. It is excusable to laugh at some of her more extreme and impractical suggestions.

Victoria's initial reaction to the reports of the massacres was concern for the Christian inhabitants of the Sultan's European provinces. However, pretty soon her deep-seated Russophobia kicked in. By 28 September, she was telling Disraeli: 'Hearing as we do all the undercurrent, and

knowing as we do that Russia *instigated* this insurrection, which *caused* the cruelty of the Turks, it *ought* to be brought home to Russia, and the world *ought* to know that on *their* shoulders and *not* on *ours* rests the *blood* of the murdered Bulgarians.’ (The italics here were underlinings in the original. She used underlinings, exclamation marks and capital letters with gay abandon, rather like a modern tabloid editorial.)

How she had reached her conclusion about Russian responsibility is unclear. What is clear is that Gladstone’s publication of his pamphlet *Bulgarian Horrors and the Question of the East* entrenched her partisanship. As for his campaigning on the matter: ‘... the disgraceful conduct of that mischief maker and fire-brand ... is very, very wrong.’

Good governance broke down. She sent papers to be read to cabinet. Disraeli leaked to her who had said what in cabinet meetings. She threatened abdication. He was obliged to threaten resignation in return. Shuvalov, the Russian ambassador, reported to Saint Petersburg

that cabinet members feared war being imposed upon them as an ‘expression of sovereign will’ and that they were outraged by this ‘conspiracy of a half-mad woman with a minister who once had genius but has degenerated into a political clown’. The minister was to prove he was not a clown by securing a diplomatic triumph in Berlin. Half-mad may be an over generous judgement.

She ended as partisan as she had begun, though now a partisan on the right. In life, some people are fated never to get on with each other. It is the fault of neither. The chemistry is just not right. Victoria and William Ewart Gladstone were such a pair. By the time of his third and fourth ministries, Gladstone was aware but perplexed by his failure to maintain effective relations with the Queen.

Victoria was outright hostile. She jubilantly undermined him. Ironically, one of the particular grievances she harboured against him was his inability to find a duchess to be Mistress of the Robes. None would serve as they were all Unionists. Victoria fumed: ‘It is

atrocious of Mr Gladstone ... to expose *me* to having only half a household.’

She leaked to Salisbury on an industrial scale. This included papers and letters sent by Gladstone for her eyes alone. Clannish arrangements were put in place to keep her in touch with Salisbury. She communicated with anti-home-rule Liberal dissidents Goschen and Hartington. The correspondence was not all one way. Salisbury at her request produced advice on what she should do in the event Gladstone asked for a dissolution. What an odious and dishonourable man Salisbury was!

The book is a delight: well researched, well structured, beautifully written. Taken overall, it is written as a plea in mitigation on Victoria’s behalf. This reader at least was left unmoved by the plea. Go by the evidence. The evidence is clear. She was ghastly from start to finish. Case closed. ■

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## Club life

Seth Thevoz, *Behind Closed Doors: The Secret Life of London Private Members’ Clubs* (Robinson, 2022)  
Review by Michael Meadowcroft

**D**r Thevoz has followed his previous book on early Victorian London clubs,

largely based on his PhD thesis, by this hugely entertaining account of the life and mainly

later times of the leading London clubs. The author sets it in a series of themes: women,