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The Right to Rule and the Rights of Women: Queen Victoria and the Women's Movement

Arianne Chernock

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The Right to Rule and the Rights of Women: Queen Victoria and the Women's Movement. By Arianne Chernock. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. ISBN 978-1-108-73537-7. xi + 249 pp. CAD $33.95.

During her reign (1837-1901), Queen Victoria did not disguise the fact that she was not a supporter of women's rights, recording on several occasions in her private correspondence her aversion to women's suffrage. However, while Arianne Chernock details that the monarch's personal views, first revealed in a private publication in 1876, were not widely published until after her death, Queen Victoria was nevertheless perceived to have a certain subversive potential for those who sought to further the agenda of the women's movement. Although during her lifetime and well into the twentieth century the Queen was seen as preserving traditional gender roles, Chernock places Victoria at the heart of the women's suffrage debate, demonstrating how her image was appropriated by suffragists and anti-suffragists alike to further their arguments. Tracing the rise of the women's rights campaign from the 1830s up until the Edwardian period, the author brings to light "the Victorian women's rights campaigners' savvy and sometimes stubborn efforts to appropriate their sovereign" (8) and structures the book to highlight the entanglements between "the intricate and often over-looked connections between the histories of women, the monarchy, and the state […] during the nineteenth-century" (9). Across five distinct chapters, Chernock traces the development of the women's movement in relation to Victoria chronologically over the course of her life and reign.

Beginning with an assessment of female rule in Britain prior to Queen Victoria, Chernock demonstrates the radical nature of a female monarch and contextualizes this within the movement for women's rights up until the Victorian period. Owing to the debauchery and various scandals of her predecessors, King George IV and King William IV, and coupled with rising support for women's rights, which had grown steadily since the 1790s, Chernock posits that the 1837 accession of Victoria was viewed in an "extremely hopeful light" by feminist supporters (41). Given that the nation had not had a female monarch since Queen Anne (d. 1714), Victoria's accession briefly created a gender panic among those who were worried about what having a female monarch would mean, while others perceived her to be a harbinger of women's emancipation. It is this latter view that Chernock traces throughout the subsequent chapters of the book.

Starting in 1832, when Victoria was just thirteen but already considered to be the likely heir of her elderly and childless uncle, King William IV, she began to be incorporated into a feminist narrative by supporters of female emancipation. For the period between 1832 and 1876, Chernock traces the strategies of feminists who sought to project their beliefs onto the Queen and use her position to advance their own agendas. Indeed, as the author relates, many suffragists called attention to the fact that a woman held the highest position in the land, while, for her female subjects political, legal, and social barriers limited their rights, including access to education. Although she gave little encouragement to the campaigns of the women's movement and indeed held views that would have been disappointing to many women, Chernock argues that invoking the name of the Queen could prove successful in advancing some arguments relating to female emancipation.

Many activists genuinely believed that Queen Victoria was beneficial to their female emancipation efforts, but Chernock suggests that this had less to do with Victoria herself and more to do with the responsibilities that her position entailed. It was Victoria's paradoxical position as

a female monarch in a patriarchal society that made her a weapon in the hands of activists. Hence, while much of her book deals with how Victoria was appropriated for the cause of women's rights, Chernock engages with this facet and explores the efforts to "establish new historical foundations for and philosophical justifications of female sovereignty" which "undercut women's rights activists' claims about the powerful example and legal precedent set by queens regnant" (90–91). Within this conversation on the nature of queenship Chernock traces new understandings of gender and rule that emerged during Victoria's reign, and explores the contemporary debate surrounding the role of a female sovereign as the head of a modern constitutional monarchy.

Building on the theories presented surrounding queenship, the emergence of male heroism during Victoria's reign, and the use of the Queen by anti-suffragists, this study contributes an assessment of how activists responded to this interpretation, and to the revelations made in the 1870s regarding Victoria's own negative view toward their efforts. Supporters of female emancipation therefore spent the duration of the 1880s and 1890s trying to reclaim the Queen for their cause. Chernock concludes that, although supporters of the women's movement committed themselves to using Victoria to their advantage and were desperate for a positive affirmation from her, they were ultimately disappointed.

The arguments made by Chernock cast Queen Victoria in a new light previously unnoticed by historians, which is particularly significant given the fact that, at face value, there is little to link Queen Victoria to any form of support for the women's movement. Through examination of primary sources produced by women's rights activists and opposing figures alike, Chernock has tapped into archival sources largely overlooked by historians of the monarch. Overall, the author situates her research among recent scholarship on Queen Victoria which seeks to extricate her from Edwardian perceptions that emerged after her death and have stubbornly remained until recently. No longer is she viewed as an archaic dinosaur lacking any real power: instead Chernock, like other modern historians of Victoria's reign, highlights the subtle ways the Queen was able to exert her influence. As shown in this study, she was hardly a disinterested figurehead; even if Victoria did not always exert her influence to further a cause, she took a great interest in all aspects of life, including the women's suffrage movement. It can be difficult to say anything new about Queen Victoria given the plethora of material already produced by scholars, but Chernock's contribution is both entirely unique and offers a fascinating new interpretation of one aspect of the monarch's life.

Not so much a book about Victoria's own views on the women's movement, *The Right to Rule and the Rights of Women* explores the hitherto underexamined nature of how the Queen's image and position were used by the suffrage and anti-suffrage factions alike, and what her reign represented to each. Through examination of periodicals and journals published during the Victorian period, Chernock shows the contested place that Queen Victoria occupied within this movement, simply by being a female monarch.

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