

The Jewel in the Crown -

Abdul Karim was twenty-four years old when he arrived in England from India. He became Queen Victoria's servant and confidant.



Abdul Karim was painted in cream, red and gold by the Austrian artist. The portrait showed a handsome young man in a reflective mood, holding a book in his hand. He looked more like a **nawab** than a servant. The artist seemed to have captured the Queen's romantic vision of the subject. I learned later that Queen Victoria had loved the painting so much she had copied it herself.

Along the Indian corridor of **Osborne House** were portraits of Indian craftsmen, specially commissioned by the Queen. **Weavers, blacksmiths** and musicians stared back from the walls, 10 all meticulously painted so the Queen could **glimpse** the ordinary people of India. The striking life-size portrait of Maharajah Duleep Singh painted by Winterhalter stood out amongst the canvases. It captured the Queen's fascination for the young boy who had presented her with the Koh-i-Noor - one of the world's largest diamonds and still a part of the Crown Jewels - when the British had defeated the Sikhs and annexed the Punjab after the Second Anglo-Sikh War in 1849.

The Durbar Room, restored by English Heritage to mark the centenary of the Queen's death, had its own revelations. The room spoke to me of the Queen's love for India, the country she knew she could never visit, but which fascinated and intrigued her. If the Queen could not travel to India, then she would bring India to Osborne. The marble ceiling, the intricate carvings, the balconies with their Indian-style jali work were the Queen's Indian haven. Here she sat as Empress of that faraway land to sense its atmosphere. Fittingly, it was at her beloved Osborne, with its collection of Indian antiquities, that she had died. Was her love for Abdul an extension of her love for India and the Empire, her way of touching the Jewel in the Crown?

Shrabani BASU, *Victoria and Abdul*, 2010

nawab : nabab - **Osborne House** : a former royal residence on the Isle of Wight- **Weavers** : *tisserands* - **blacksmiths** *forgerons* – **glimpse** : *avoir un aperçu de*