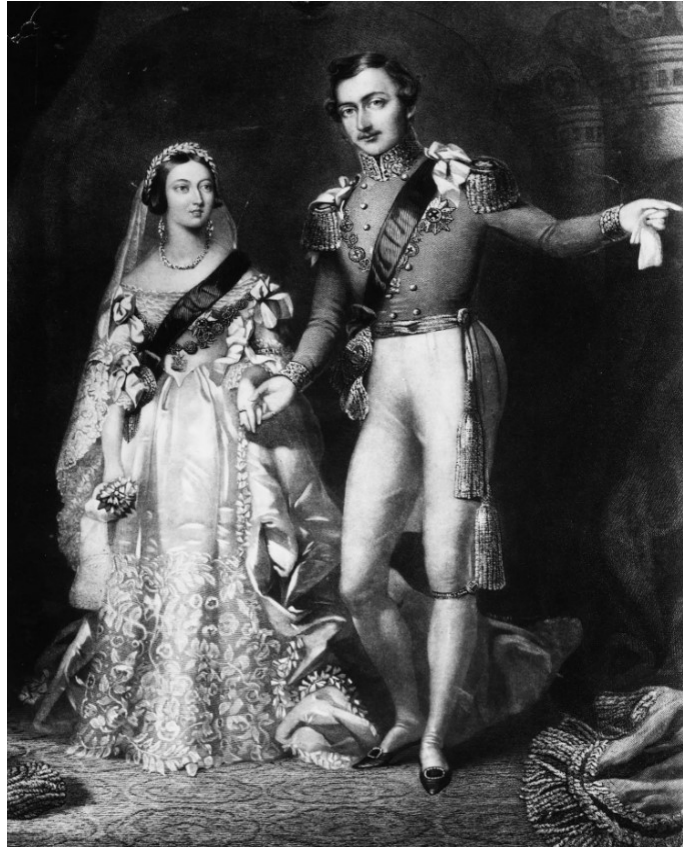


How Queen Victoria remade the British monarchy

The Famine Queen. The Widow of Windsor. Grandmother of Europe. Queen Vic. In the 19th century, Queen Victoria earned all those nicknames and more—testaments to the enduring influence of her 64-year (1837-1901) reign over the United Kingdom.

During the period now known as the Victorian Era, she oversaw her nation's industrial, social, and territorial expansion and became known as a trendsetter who made over European attitudes toward the monarchy. An estimated one in four people on Earth were subjects of the British Empire by the end of her rule. But when Victoria took the throne, the British monarchy was deeply unpopular.



Victoria was the product of a succession crisis in England's royal family. (...) Born in 1819, Alexandrina Victoria's father died when she was a child, and her ambitious mother allied herself with the scheming Sir John Conroy, a member of the royal household who seized the chance to gain power and influence through the future queen. He created an elaborate set of rules that isolated the young princess at Kensington Palace and put him in control of her education and upbringing. Victoria broke free in 1837, when she turned 18 and rose to the throne. In 1840, she married her cousin Albert, a German prince. It was a genuine love match. (...)

During her early reign, Victoria was heavily influenced by Lord Melbourne, the prime minister, and Albert, who was her closest political advisor and whom some historians believe was "king in all but name." Together, they pursued an agenda of modernization and stability in an era of political upheaval. The monarchy's reputation had been badly damaged by Victoria's predecessors, and the British populace clamored to replace the monarchy with a republic. And in Ireland, the potato famine between 1845 and 1852 fomented outright rebellion.

Together with her husband, Victoria faced those challenges head-on, working to strengthen the position of the monarchy in England and throughout Europe, where there was also a growing distaste for royals who expected the public to foot the bill for their lavish lifestyles. In contrast, Victoria expanded the monarch's public role, supporting charities, the arts, and civic reform to counter the view that British royalty wasn't worth the expense. As a result, the queen and her growing family became beloved celebrities and influenced popular culture, introducing England to everything from white wedding dresses to Christmas trees.