

Some Whacky Ideas

"Anything interesting in your magazine this month?" Ruth asked her husband.

"Just reading an article by some guy speculating what might have happened if Prince Albert had died when he was seriously ill in December 1861," he answered.

"Fortunately, he didn't," said Ruth. "He was a great support to Victoria throughout her long reign."

"Very true, dear," agreed her husband. "This guy here has some whacky ideas. He thinks Disraeli would have had far greater influence than he did; he even has Disraeli persuade Parliament to grant Victoria the title 'Empress of India'."

"Good heavens, Bob," exclaimed Ruth. "A bit presumptuous, isn't it? Victoria stepping into the shoes of the Mughal emperors. I don't think so!"

"I know, Ruth," he agreed. "Quite ridiculous. But I think it was Albert's influence behind the scenes that led to the eventual establishment of the Indian Confederation after the British government nationalized the East India Company in 1857 ..."

"Sort of like the Swiss Confederation but on a far larger scale?" mused Ruth, interrupting.

"Exactly," said her husband, "and for not dissimilar reasons in a country with its several different languages and religions. And, as I was saying, it was also through Albert's behind the scenes influence that the Confederation was given Dominion status on a par with Canada and, a year later, Australia."

"Yes," said Ruth, "Albert took an enlightened view of the native populations. I suppose your guy with Victoria as a latter day Mughal emperor sees India developing rather differently."

"I'm afraid he does, Ruth," said Bob. "He sees Britain adopting a divide and rule policy which eventually leads to a break up along religious and linguistic lines. It's very depressing."

"Well," said Ruth, "as I say, it was a good thing Albert didn't die. He was quite concerned about the plight of the working classes and relatively liberal and progressive in his thinking. Surely the various factory acts and the social reforms of the latter part of the 19th century were helped by his encouragement. I suppose your guy sees things developing differently."

"Yes," said Bob. "He thinks that many of the various reforms would eventually have happened but at a much slower pace. He does not, however, see universal male franchise happening until the 20th century."

"Bit of a pessimist, isn't he?" observed Ruth. "I suppose he thinks that with Albert dead things would have developed differently in Germany also. After all, we know Victoria and Albert were hoping to for a united and liberal Germany, especially as their eldest daughter was married to the Prussian Crown Prince, Frederick. That is exactly what they did live to see. It is almost certain, isn't it, that Albert intervened to aid Frederick's father in curbing some of Bismark's more militaristic ventures?"

"Yes, it is," said Bob, "like over the Schleswig-Holstein business where Denmark behaved very incautiously and virtually handed Bismark an excuse for an all out war."

"I know," said Ruth, "and wasn't Victoria annoyed that her son, the Prince of

Wales, and his wife supported the Danes?"

"Well, his wife was Danish after all," observed Bob. "But you're right. It was one of the sources of tension between Bertie and his mother which Albert had to deal with. But he avoided all out war by getting all parties to agree that Holstein and southern Schleswig, which were German speaking areas, should be part of the new German federation and while Danish speaking central and northern Schleswig were retained by Denmark."

"And," continued Ruth, "when that bumbling Napoleon III got the French parliament to declare war on the German federation, Albert was instrumental in bringing hostilities to an end after the French defeat at Sedan."

"Yes," said Bob, "he curbed Bismark's desire to annex Alsace-Lorraine; but he recognized German fear of future French aggression and, indeed, of continuing worries in Britain about French hegemony on the continent and got Alsace-Lorraine recognized as an independent and neutral mixed German and French speaking buffer state between France and the new united Germany."

"But," said Ruth, "I suppose the guy writing your article has Bismark having his own way the whole time. That would surely have upset the European balance of power established at the Congress of Vienna after the defeat of the first Napoleon."

"Oh yes," said Bob, "that's exactly what this guy does and he sees the balance of power upset in quite a dangerous way which, he claims, will inevitably lead to war in the 20th century."

"Uff!" exclaimed Ruth, "war's never inevitable. I told you the guy was a pessimist. I suppose he has Victoria going to pieces about Albert's early death and Bertie, the Prince of Wales, getting even more randy than he was and behaving like an earlier Prince of Wales, the son of George III."

"Well, sort of," said Bob. "Victoria goes into her shell and retreats from public life. But, as I said, he has Parliament creating her Empress of India and she becomes more and more influenced by Disraeli and becomes more conservative and reactionary than she in fact was with Albert. As for the Prince of Wales - yes, he does give him more mistresses than he actually had in real life. Why he even has Bertie have them all grouped together in Westminster Abbey at his coronation in what, he suggests, people will jocularly call 'the loose box.' I mean how stupid can you get? "

"Yes," agreed Ruth. "It's utterly ridiculous. The powers that be aren't going to allow mistresses to be so openly displayed in the Abbey, of all places, when their lover is being anointed King and Supreme Governor of the Church of England. Quite stupid. The guy seems to be not only a pessimist but a fool."

"Probably," agreed Bob. "Good thing Albert did recover and remain Victoria's consort until her death."

"Yes," said Ruth, "it is. I don't know why you bother with counterfactual history. It all seems a bit daft to me."

"Well, Ruth," Bob said, "you mustn't judge all counterfactual history by this one. Some are well thought out and quite interesting."

"If you say so, dear," said Ruth. "Well, I promised Mabel I would call round this morning. I'll leave you in peace - hope you find less silly and more interesting things in the magazine. Bye!"

"Bye, dear," said Bob. "Give my good wishes to Mabel."