The Greedy Queen

THE GREEDY QUEEN

Eating with Victoria

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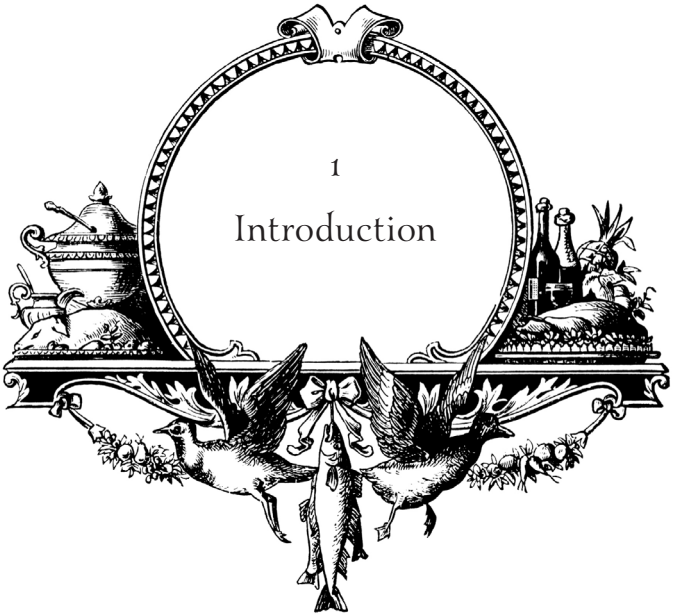


1
Introduction

In July 2015 a pair of extraordinarily large bloomers were auctioned in Wiltshire. They sold for £12,900, breaking the record for the previous pair of similarly generously proportioned underwear, which fetched £6,200 a year earlier, and the news of their sale was widely reported across the media. Embroidered with the letters VR, and verified as genuine by the auction house, they showed our continuing fascination with a woman who died over a hundred years ago. Bloomers of similar dimensions and provenance appeared as part of an online history course run by Historic Royal Palaces in 2016. Reactions were immediate and polarised, from those who peered at them in avid curiosity, seeing them as offering a rare personal insight into a distant figure, to those who found the whole thing sordid, and cried out for people to leave the poor woman alone. Her weight was her

own issue, and we shouldn't be pawing over personal items in such an undignified way, even if she had given the items away as tokens of esteem, knowing that they would be treasured and kept for posterity – and, despite an initial interdiction to do so, eventually sold on.

Queen Victoria, who was, of course, the original wearer of the bloomers, was a complex, fascinating person, whose reign was, until 2015, the longest of any British monarch, and who was head of state during some of the most formative years of British history. A long and influential life has made her one of the best known figures from the past, and over 500 books have been written about her, with countless more about her children, her palaces, her influence and her legacy. This book is about her food.

When Victoria came to the throne, in 1837, she was a petite, elegant young woman, with what commentators called a fine complexion, though a lamentable tendency to pose, when resting, with her mouth slightly open. Very few people knew anything about her personality, which was barely formed at eighteen years old, and she was thrown into the maelstrom of court life with little experience of the world of politics, people outside her immediate circle, or fine dining. She was a party animal, eager for what she called dissipation, but equally ready to work hard. In recent years her damaging childhood and delight in becoming Queen has become better known in popular culture, mainly through films such as *Young Victoria* and the 2016 mini-series, *Victoria*. There has, however, been a tendency to dwell on her personal life and her marriage to Prince Albert while neglecting her very real political significance; although she was a constitutional monarch, she (and Albert, while alive)

had a great deal of influence, both officially and unofficially, through the reams of letters they sent and their personal connections with heads of state abroad. The death of Albert, in 1861, plunged the Queen, in her mid-forties, into a black depression, and she mourned him for the rest of her life. Biographers have been inclined to refer to her as old from the 1860s onwards, which she certainly was not, and it's deceptively easy to divide her life too absolutely into pre- and post-Albert, whereas, as with anyone else, things were just not that simple. It is as a widow that she is best known, however, black-clad and growing ever larger as she turned to food for comfort. She was, too, increasingly sedentary, due to a knee injury that left her lame, and the most abiding image of her for many people, for a very long time, was a distant and forbidding figure in a donkey-cart.

Myths about Queen Victoria are plentiful, and largely unproven or taken out of context, from the 'not amused' comment, to the accusations that she slept with or even married John Brown, and image-searching Prince Albert at work is strictly for those who want to get sacked. Food myths, while not as well known, are equally entrenched: she liked a boiled egg for breakfast, she ate like a bird, she had Brown Windsor Soup for every meal, and she preferred plain food. Most of these crumble in the face of fact, and a far more nuanced story can be told: the only one which even vaguely stands up in examination is her liking for plain foods, but even that has to be seen in the context of someone whose habitual fare involved truffles and cream. In researching this book I did not set out to tackle every aspect of her life. I had no desire to explore the Queen's sense of humour, or her relationships with her family or her ministers, or her

religion or politics or sense of social justice, or any of the other aspects which would form the basis of a conventional biography, and you will find barely a mention of a prime minister or a European crisis (unless there's food involved). Nor did I want to write a book about a woman and her weight, or make any kind of judgement about nutrition and health, which would project modern ideas and cod psychology back into an age with different ideas, and onto a person whom none of us can ever really know. Victoria undeniably had a complicated relationship with food: she used it to assert control as a seventeen-year-old fighting for her individuality, and she sought solace in it when she was abruptly widowed and thrown into mental turmoil after Prince Albert's death, but exactly what she felt and how that was expressed in her eating can only ever be based on guesswork.

The Victorian age was one of enormous culinary change. Many of the elements that were introduced or popularised had roots in the Georgian period, and still others took until the mid-twentieth century to really catch on. Things we associate with the Victorians, such as gas cookery, tinned food, raising agents, food moulds and the use of coal in cooking ranges, all pre-dated Victoria's accession in 1837, while others, such as chemical colourings, mechanisation, gas cookery (again), frozen foods, refrigeration and aspic in everything were as much features of the Edwardian period (and beyond) as they were of the decades before Victoria's death in 1901. Yet it is fair to say that the way food was produced, cooked and consumed altered significantly across the course of the 64 years she was on the throne, and that the eating habits of those living in 1901 were very different to

those who were setting up home in 1837. In many ways the Victorian period saw the birth of modern food culture, complete with fad diets, worries about industrially produced foods, restaurant critics and heavily styled final dishes. Every time we worry about serried ranks of cutlery marching away at the side of our plate, we are being led by the late Victorians, and when we desperately search for novelty in food, while secretly craving a decent pork pie, we are echoing our nineteenth-century ancestors.

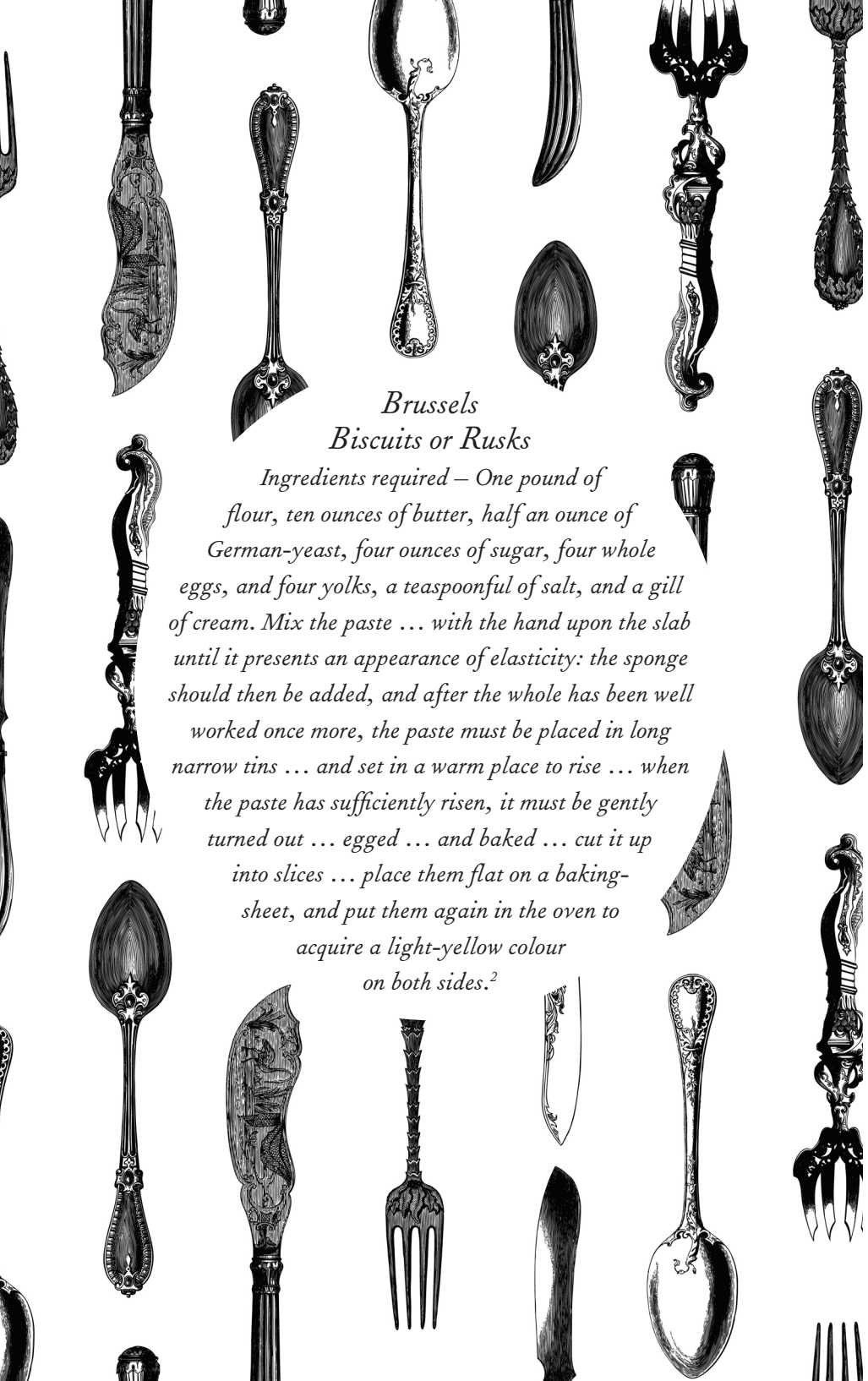
Victoria ate – obviously – according to the norms of the times. Her food, and the way she consumed it, showed more continuity than change, which is hardly surprising given that she had the power to eat the meals that she wanted, and her desires were hardly likely to go hand in hand with the latest gastronomic developments. But any meal is more than just its final form, and this book deals with where food came from, who prepared it, the kitchens it was cooked in, and the way meals worked in practice – elements which were often beyond the control of one individual. In doing so, it sheds light on Victorian food in general, for while the food of royalty only represents a tiny proportion of Victorian meals, the factors which went into preparing it are indicative of a much wider context. Victoria was influenced by this wider context, adopting – eventually – the new dining styles of the era, and eating new ingredients and types of cuisine. She in turn had an effect upon the world outside the palaces. Most of her subjects lived on or below the poverty line, so her direct impact was by necessity limited, but she provided a culinary figurehead. Her meals had to be lavish and luxurious, and eaten off gold – she was Queen, and one of her primary duties was to provide a focus for Britons to look up

to. Reports on her travels, on her dinner parties, and on her receptions, filled the newspapers, and when she disappeared from public view in the 1860s, criticism was swift and severe, and included calls for her abdication. She was only a Queen because her people wanted her to be Queen, and acted towards her in the way that defined her as Queen. In return, she was expected to behave like one.

This book is, therefore, a book about food, and the Victorians, but seen through the life of a woman who ate a lot of one and defined the other. It is a sort of culinary biography, of a person who symbolised an age. Victoria was – and is – a polarising figure; many things to many people, often deeply contradictory. To some, she was a monster, but those who knew her usually adored her; to others she was emotionally unstable and uncertain, but she could also be stubborn, wilful and decisive; she was unable to cope without a strong man to support her, but unwilling to relinquish any power and always aware of her status as Queen; she was a terrible mother, but she doted on her children and did her utmost to give them the childhood she'd never had; she was clingy, she was independent; she did a lot for women, she hated feminism; she was sweet and feminine, and laughed at everything, she was humourless and horrible and bullied her son. People change over the course of a lifetime, and she was all of these and more. However, as this book will show, whatever she was, and whenever she was being it, she remained above all else, a greedy Queen.

2
Childhood

Victoria was born on 24 May 1819, at Kensington Palace. Her father, the Duke of Kent, described her as being 'as plump as a partridge'.[1] He had earlier declared that he did not mind whether his child was a girl or a boy; in the race to produce an heir to the British throne, a healthy child was enough. The Duke was one of a ragtag set of brothers, the eldest of whom was at the time Prince Regent, but would soon be George IV. George had no living children – his only daughter, Charlotte, had died in childbirth two years before – and, despite having been a womaniser in his youth, with a marital history worthy of a soap opera, by 1819 he was single, obese, and uninterested in producing another child. His heir was another brother, Frederick, who had followed in his elder brother's footsteps and was estranged from his wife. Next in line was William, Duke of



Brussels Biscuits or Rusks

Ingredients required – One pound of flour, ten ounces of butter, half an ounce of German-yeast, four ounces of sugar, four whole eggs, and four yolks, a teaspoonful of salt, and a gill of cream. Mix the paste … with the hand upon the slab until it presents an appearance of elasticity: the sponge should then be added, and after the whole has been well worked once more, the paste must be placed in long narrow tins … and set in a warm place to rise … when the paste has sufficiently risen, it must be gently turned out … egged … and baked … cut it up into slices … place them flat on a baking-sheet, and put them again in the oven to acquire a light-yellow colour on both sides.[2]

Clarence, none of whose ten children were legitimate. In 1819, therefore, the Duke of Kent was 51, and had two childless older brothers. The likelihood that he would get to the throne was very low. The likelihood that his offspring would reign, on the other hand, was extremely high.

The Georgians were a dynasty of contrasts. George III had produced thirteen children, but in 1817 his only grandchild died, leaving no one beyond the immediate generation to inherit the throne. This led to an undignified and excruciating scramble for the various brothers – there were nine boys in total – to get married and have babies. Long-term mistresses were unceremoniously dumped, old scandals were dug out and circulated, and German-speaking princesses of any hue were scrapped over like valuable brood mares. They almost all had hideous reputations. Lord Melbourne captured the general opinion when he described them as 'wild beasts … making love wherever they went and then saying they were very sorry, they couldn't marry … they were, as it were, quite invincible'.[3] Their excuse for not marrying was the Royal Marriage Act, passed by George III in an effort to control his offspring's choices, but which backfired painfully for many of his children and those who had the misfortune to become romantically entangled with them. Thomas Creevey, a politician of the time, went further, calling them profligate and unpopular, and stating that they were 'the damnedest millstones about the necks of any Government'.[4] Victoria's father Edward was characteristically impecunious. His debts were huge, and he was unemployed, having been effectively removed from his position in the army after his troops mutinied and plotted to kill him. He had imposed harsh discipline on his

men, but he also believed in self-discipline, and prided himself on his upright habits and on having the constitution of an ox.

That self-discipline didn't, however, extend to his lifestyle. He married his own German brood mare in 1818, settling on the widowed Princess Victoria of Saxe-Coburg-Saalfeld, proven to be fertile by the two children from her previous marriage. When she became pregnant with his child, he declared his intention to move back to England from Germany, where he'd been staying away from the critical British press, to ensure that the child was born on British soil. The Regent refused to pay for the trip, but, after hasty borrowings and wheedlings, the Duke raised enough money to come back. Wending its slow way from Leiningen to London came a bizarre circus of carriages and people. There were seven vehicles, containing the Duke, Duchess, the Duchess's daughter by her first marriage, maidservants, manservants, a governess, two doctors, several dogs and birdcages. There were also two cooks, and a man called Thomas Kingsthorn, whose role was to guard the Duke's silver, which travelled in its own caravan.[5]

They arrived at Kensington Palace a month before Victoria was born. There are no surviving records to show exactly what the weary staff made of their new home. It was infested with black beetles, and hardly the kind of royal palace they would have been used to back in Germany. Kensington had been built for William and Mary in the late seventeenth century, and was site of many a basic fish dinner for that fairly private and down-to-earth royal couple. By the 1810s, it had become a sort of repository for unwanted royals, living cheek-by-jowl in apartments