

DOROTA BABILAS

(Uniwersytet Warszawski)

QUEEN VICTORIA'S CANINE COMPANIONS



AMONG THE BRITISH MONARCHS, Queen Victoria has arguably been the one to do the most for the protection of animals. Since 1835, she sponsored the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, and awarded it the honorary 'Royal' prefix in 1840. She promoted multiple legislations against animal abuse, and she was one of the most vehement opponents of the practice of vivisection.¹ She strongly believed that "Nothing brutalises people more than cruelty to dumb animals, and to dogs, who are the companions of man, it is especially revolting."² Victoria's private attachment to animals is equally well documented; it is a recurrent theme in her diaries, correspondence and official portraiture. The monarch's lifelong love of dogs was one of the most pleasant traits of her, often difficult, personality.

The official webpage devoted to Queen Victoria's diaries gives the names of more than 640 of her dogs, belonging to more than 30 different breeds, during the 63 years of the longest reign in the history of Britain.³ It was a whole court of animals: beside the dogs there were also cats, horses, ponies, donkeys, llamas, parrots and other birds. Sometimes the names were repeated, so for example there were no less than seven dachshund bitches named Waldina

1 H. Rappaport, *Queen Victoria. A Biographical Companion*, Santa Barbara–Denver–Oxford 2003, p. 38.

2 A. Munich, *Queen Victoria's Secrets*, New York 1996, p. 133.

3 *Queen Victoria's journals* [online], Queen Victoria's Journals, [access: 2014-12-18]: <www.queenvictoriasjournals.org>.

between the years 1840 and 1887, or seven Scotch collies called Sharp (only one of them was the Queen's particular favourite).

The first dog mentioned in Queen Victoria's diary by its name was Fanny. On December 5, 1832 the thirteen-year-old princess recorded: "At a ¼ to 12 we went out walking. Fanny (my dear little dog) was in high spirits."⁴ However, Fanny's popularity was soon eclipsed by the first of Victoria's most memorable pets, Dash. He was a Cavalier King Charles spaniel, a breed associated with the British royal family since the Restoration. Originally, the puppy was a present for Victoria's mother, the Duchess of Kent, from her private secretary, Sir John Conroy (whom Victoria detested), but the princess quickly came to love the dog so much that she acknowledged him as her own. In her diaries she repeatedly mentions "dear sweet little Dash"⁵ in very affectionate terms, as her friend and close companion. When, as a young girl, the future Queen was involved in a serious boat accident, she praised one of the sailors who held "sweet Dash and never let him drop in all the danger."⁶ A persistent (if not fully verified) rumour had it that on the very day of her coronation the first thing Victoria did after returning to Buckingham Palace was to run upstairs to give Dash his bath.⁷

Dash featured on some of Victoria's early portraits. He is depicted in the official portrait of the future Queen, painted in 1833 by the court artist, Sir George Hayter. The dog is positioned at the princess' feet, with a dropped glove held gently between his teeth; his neck gallantly extended towards his lady. A relative novelty was for the Queen to start commissioning likenesses of her favourite pets. The inspiration for such "doggie pictures," as she called them,⁸ came from an expressive painting of Dash's head created in 1836 by Sir Edwin Landseer. This was a present for Victoria from the Duchess of Kent. Soon, the artist's reputation for being the best animalist in Britain was firmly established, as was his cordial acquaintance with the Queen who admired his talent. Landseer went on to work on several well-paid commissions from the royal family, such as *Her Majesty's Favourite Pets* (1837) – depicting Dash in the company of the greyhound Nero, the deerhound Hector and a parrot Lory – or another of a Skye terrier Islay with a dachshund Tilco and some birds (1839).

The fashion for "pet portraits" became quite widespread in Britain. This corresponded with the growing popularity of keeping pets by middle-class city

4 Ibidem, 05.12.1832.

5 Ibidem, 23.04.1833.

6 Ibidem, 02.08.1833.

7 Ch. Hibbert, *Queen Victoria. A Personal History*, London 2000, p. 75.

8 P. Johnson, *Queen Victoria and 'those four-footed friends no bribe can buy'*, "The Spectator" 2000 (14 april), p. 24.

dwellers. Animals as companions of people featured prominently in Victorian moral ideology exalting loyalty, dutifulness and an idealised vision of family life. Adrienne Munich observes that “Victorians revised their thinking about animals, first recognizing their ability to suffer pain and, as an extension, to have other feelings in common with humans.”⁹ Pets became useful examples of admirable qualities of character and thus served as models of “natural” virtue that humans were advised to emulate. Landseer’s spectacular career as an animal painter – his works were reproduced in large numbers – inspired many followers, such as Thomas Musgrave Joy or Charles Burton Barber. They too enjoyed royal patronage, as did some foreign artists like Franz Xaver Winterhalter or Friedrich Keyl, whose commissions included depictions of Victoria’s dogs. The prominent place of Dash was shared, and eventually taken over after his death in 1840, by subsequent canine favourites of the Queen. Among the early ones were the Skye terriers Islay and Dandie Dinmont, a dachshund Waldmann and a special companion of Prince Albert – the greyhound Eos.

Interestingly, Victoria’s role was not only that of a patron of artists, but also of an artist herself. As a young girl she received some instruction in drawing and watercolour painting and continued to sketch as a hobby well into her adult life. The Queen’s journal includes many of her amateur drawings of dogs. There is also an anonymous sketch – possibly made by one of her art teachers – showing Victoria behind an easel with Dash cast in the role of a model, complete with a fashionable set of miniature human clothes. Such games were part of the Queen’s childhood; she dressed Dash as she would a doll “in scarlet jacket and blue trousers”¹⁰ and pretended to exchange gifts with him at Christmas and other occasions.¹¹

The presence of some dogs at the royal court went beyond the private pleasures of the sovereign and acquired symbolic, or even political meanings. Such was the case of Looty, the first Pekingese dog in Britain, brought as a gift for Queen Victoria in 1861 by Captain Dunne, a member of the British troops who plundered the summer palace of the Chinese Emperor during the Second Opium War.¹² The bitch, rescued – or indeed looted – from the burning palace, became a prized possession; she was portrayed in photographs by William

9 A. Munich, *Queen Victoria's Secrets*, p. 129.

10 P. Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

11 Victoria’s journal entry 24.05.1835.

12 *Looty, the first Pekingese dog in Britain, brought by Captain Dunne, 99th Regiment, from Yuanming Yuan, the Summer Palace near Beijing, as a gift for Queen Victoria in April 1861* [online], The Royal Collection. Royal Palaces, Residences and Art Collection, [access: 2014-12-18]: <<http://www.royalcollection.org.uk/eGallery/object.asp?maker=11652&object=2105644&row=8>>.

Bambridge and painted among the fashionable Chinese bric-a-brac by Keyl in 1862. An article from “The New York Times” published in 1912 explained how the (involuntary) present from one monarch to another helped to “establish good feeling” between Britain and China.¹³ The well-being of the little dog, which went on to popularise the exotic breed among European aristocracy through her many puppies, was used as a justification for British imperialism and ruthless military intervention in the Far East.

Throughout her long reign, Victoria had a passion for Scotland. She enjoyed regular vacations in the Highlands, and in 1852 the royal family bought and rebuilt Balmoral Castle to use as their summer residence. Excursions on horseback in the company of children, Scottish servants and dogs became an important part of royal holidaymaking; they were also depicted in paintings. These documents of culture, such as Landseer’s *Royal Sports on Hill and Loch* (1870) or Carl Haag’s *Evening at Balmoral Castle* (1853) reveal another side of Queen Victoria’s attitude towards animals, that is her highly ambiguous treatment of hunting. The Queen was adamant in her condemnation of some traditional forms of hunting for sport, such as the practice of “battue,” an organized hunt in which a group of animals was herded into an enclosure and meticulously slaughtered by upper-class guests.¹⁴ Nevertheless, other types of hunting, especially deerstalking, which was a popular pastime in Scotland, raised no such objections from her. Victoria perceived this traditional sport as more honest (as the hunters had to track down their prey before killing it) and very masculine. The above-mentioned paintings by Landseer and Haag both feature Prince Albert in the role of the quintessential alpha-male, towering triumphantly over some dead stags presented before his adoring wife. Victoria, surrounded by her children and dogs, gazes at the spoils of the hunting expedition with unquestioning admiration. The rhetoric of muscular manliness was reinforced, especially considering the fact that the image of Prince Albert in the popular media (such as the illustrated press) was far from the ideal that Victoria wished to promote. The German prince, lacking any official role at the royal court, was frequently ridiculed in Britain for not being masculine enough. Same caricatures went as far as to present Albert as Victoria’s lapdog, kept on a short leash.¹⁵ The sole purpose of his presence was fathering her children to secure

13 *Famous Dog-Mother, the Story of Looty, which Was Brought from China in 1861*, “The New York Times” 1912 (25 February) [online], New York Times, [access: 2014-12-18]: <<http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?res=F0o812FD385E13738DDDA CoA94DA4o5B828DF1D3>>.

14 H. Rappaport, op. cit., p. 37.

15 J. Gardiner, *Queen Victoria*, London 1997, p. 70.

the continuation of the dynasty. To counteract this embarrassing stereotype, the image of a manly huntsman served to emphasize the royal consort's virility and power, even though he could exercise them only within the private sphere of family life.

One of the most important royal portraits of the early period of Victoria's reign is *Windsor Castle in Modern Times* painted by Edwin Landseer in 1841. It depicts the young Queen with Prince Albert and the toddler Princess Royal (the first of their nine children) in the Green Drawing Room at Windsor. The Prince, dressed in his hunting attire, presents his wife and daughter with some freshly killed birds, while a pack of dogs (we can discern Eos, Islay, Dandie Dinmont and Cairnach) join in the jubilation. The painting plays out the ambiguities of Victorian monarchy and Victorian values. The Queen – being both a sovereign and a wife and mother – had to balance the discrepancy between her private and public roles. She is given the most elevated position in the picture, yet it is Albert who is shown as a seated master approached by Victoria, the child and the dogs. Adrienne Munich calls the pose of the Queen that of “a happy subordinate” and suggests that Landseer's masterpiece should be retitled “Her Life as a Dog,”¹⁶ alluding to Victoria's subservient and fawning, almost “canine,” stance before her husband.

By playing out the trappings of middle-class domesticity, with its strictly prescribed and divided gender roles, Victoria embarked on a conscious public relations campaign in order to win favour with her bourgeois subjects, the most influential class in nineteenth-century British society in terms of political, economical and intellectual life.¹⁷ Children and domestic pets were crucial elements of this policy. As soon as the Queen proved to be a fecund mother – bringing hope of a continuing royal pedigree after decades of severe dynastic crisis – the little princes and princesses started to appear in portraiture. They were frequently accompanied by the Queen's pet dogs. Thus, the public could see Landseer's renditions of Victoria, the Princess Royal with Eos (1841) or Princess Alice in her cradle guarded by Dandie Dinmont (1843). Thomas Musgrave Joy provided a sentimental portrait of the Princess Royal and the toddler Prince of Wales with a begging Islay (1843), and one of Victoria's favourite portraitists, German painter Franz Xaver Winterhalter produced an equally sweet vision of Princess Alice hugging a spaniel (1845). Before being placed in the private apartments of the royal family, these representations of happy domestic life were often shown in exhibitions, drawing the (mostly middle-class)

16 A. Munich, op. cit., p. 135-136.

17 D. Babilas, *Wiktoria znaczy Zwycięstwo. Kulturowe oblicza brytyjskiej królowej*, Warszawa 2012, p. 181-183.

spectators by the thousands.¹⁸ The ideological consequence of their display was what historian Simon Schama calls “the domestication of majesty,”¹⁹ that is symbolic bridging of the gap between monarchy and the people by creating an impression that the former followed the mores of the latter.

In fact, Victoria was never as lenient towards her children as she was towards her pets. Those who knew her personally, believed that she “ruled her nation like a mother, and her family like a Queen.”²⁰ On the other hand, favourite dogs were treated with much indulgence. A Pomeranian called Marco was even allowed to jump on the Queen’s breakfast table. A painting (1893) by Charles Burton Barber shows him just there, posing on a white tablecloth among china and silverware. A similar forbearance was enjoyed by one of Victoria’s later favourites, the collie Sharp. The author of *The Private Life of the Queen*, published anonymously in 1897, recalled that Sharp was allowed to have all his meals in the presence of the monarch, and although he always “behaved delightfully” with her, he was “a most bad-tempered beast” at other times, so much that the servants “with the exception of John Brown, who kept [him] in some sort of order” were “terrified” of him.²¹ There is a photograph of Victoria’s formidable Scottish servant, taken in the 1870s, in which he is surrounded by the Queen’s dogs. Among them are Sharp and another collie, Noble, remembered by Sarah A. Tooley as “the most biddable dog I ever saw. He would hold a piece of cake in his mouth without eating it, until he may.”²² The special privileges enjoyed by John Brown, whom the Queen rather scandalously regarded more as a friend than as a servant, liken him to the affectionate way she treated her collies – and in both these cases the reasons might lay in Victoria’s deep appreciation of sincerity and lack of affectation that characterised the Scotsman as well as the dogs, but were scarce among the titled members of the royal court. The visual comparison of John Brown to a fierce but loyal hound was almost certainly deliberate and could be understood as a *sui generis* compliment praising his trustworthiness and the special connection he shared with the Queen.

When the Queen’s canine companions departed this life, they were mourned and commemorated. Dash was buried in the gardens of Windsor

18 J. Paxman, *The Victorians. Britain through the Paintings of the Age*. London 2009, p. 108–112.

19 S. Schama, *The Domestication of Majesty: Royal Family Portraiture, 1500–1850*, “Journal of Interdisciplinary History” 1986, no 8/1.

20 A. Munich, op. cit., p. 187.

21 Anonymous [A Member of the Royal Household], *The Private Life of the Queen*, New York 1897, p. 146–147.

22 S.A. Tooley, *The Personal Life of Queen Victoria*, London 1896, p. 257.

and honoured with a tombstone carrying a carved epitaph that set him as a model of loyalty and devotion to be admired and followed by humans:

Here lies DASH, the Favourite Spaniel of Queen Victoria
By whose command this Memorial was erected.
He died on the 20 December, 1840 in his 9th year.
His attachment was without selfishness,
His playfulness without malice,
His fidelity without deceit.

READER, if you would live beloved and die regretted, profit by the example of DASH.²³

Ceremonial burials were given also to other dogs. Some of them, like Eos, Sharp or Noble, were laid in tombs marked by sculpted effigies, and pet cemeteries were arranged on the grounds of all of the Queen's residences. Victoria grieved for the passing of her favourites and "ferverently believed that the higher animals had souls and when they died would go to a future life."²⁴

If, in the Queen's view, dogs could set an example of morality to humans, she personally benefited from at least one of such lessons. In the darkest period of Victoria's life, after the unexpected death of the Prince Consort at the age of 42 in December 1861, the loyalty and attachment of dogs – in real life and in art – helped the bereaved monarch come to terms with her own grief. Adrienne Munich observes that the mourning photographs of the Queen rely heavily on allegorical representations of fidelity, echoing some of the popular animal paintings, such as Landseer's *Old Shepherd's Chief Mourner* (1837) in which a dog's chin is resting on his master's coffin. "The dog not only mourns, showing a similarity between human and animal emotions, he also reveals the character of the one he mourns; the dog's sorrow indicates the dead man's worth."²⁵ A very similar pose, with the royal widow gazing forlornly at the bust of her deceased husband, can be seen in a photograph taken by her second son, Prince Alfred, in March 1862.

After Prince Albert's death, the Queen spent much of her time removed from the official life, in her private residences at Balmoral in Scotland and Osborne House on the Isle of Wight. In her travels, she was usually accompanied by a selection of her favourite dogs; this was the time of her greatest attachment to the collies Sharp and Noble. Sharp, acquired by Victoria in 1865, features in a series of official photographic portraits of the widowed Queen, taken a year later by William Downey at Balmoral. Victoria, in her widow's weeds, poses against the backdrop of a stone wall of the castle, standing near an empty neo-Gothic chair. Sharp, depending on the shot, is either reclining

23 E. Longford, *Victoria R.I.*, London 1998, p. 155.

24 H. Rappaport, op. cit., p. 36.

25 A. Munich, op. cit., p. 93–94.

at the monarch's feet, or seated on the chair; his black fur coat completes the outline of the Queen's full crinoline dress. Munich notes that "The portrait follows the genre in which one of a married couple sits while the other stands."²⁶ Symbolically, the faithful dog replaces the dead spouse on the throne-like chair and in the widow's heart, providing emotional comfort and silent understanding that Victoria was too depressed to seek from her human family.²⁷

Except for a few favourites, most of Victoria's dogs lived in purpose-built kennels on the grounds of Windsor Castle. Still, the Queen took much interest in their well-being. She arranged for a little cottage to be constructed near the royal kennels, so that she could watch the dogs being exercised and groomed while taking her tea. The walls of the cottage were decorated with her collection of "doggie pictures" as if they were family portraits.²⁸ In a way, Victoria treated her canine companions on a par with humans. She perceived them as individuals with distinct personalities, worthy of her feelings and capable of reciprocating them.

There are many group photographs taken in the 1870s and 80s that include the dogs in the family circle. Most of them were taken during the visits of the royal parties to Balmoral. Queen Victoria, in her perennial weeds, is surrounded by her children and grandchildren in posed, yet not entirely formal, situations. There are always some dogs in the foreground, usually close to the Queen herself, sometimes joined in the idyllic domesticity by the youngest generation of the royals. They endorse the vision of the royal family as the first family of the land, the model of mutual respect and affection with the monarch in her private role of a grandmother, not so much of Europe,²⁹ but of a loving circle of relatives.

There is no reason to doubt that Queen Victoria's attachment to "those four-footed friends no bribe can buy"³⁰ was anything but sincere, even though some of today's scholars have a critical opinion of both the monarch's historical significance and her personality. For example, Mariusz Misztal, author of Victoria's most recent biography in Polish, concludes his article on the royal pets with an accusation that "Queen Victoria made much of cruelty to dumb, defenceless animals, but she appears to be far less sensitive about the sufferings of her many millions of impoverished, overworked, and abused

26 Ibidem, p. 137.

27 H. Rappaport, *Magnificent Obsession. Victoria, Albert and the Death that Changed the Monarchy*, London 2011.

28 Eadem, *Queen Victoria*, p. 36.

29 G. King, *Twilight of Splendor. The Court of Queen Victoria during her Diamond Jubilee year*, Hoboken 2007, p. 6.

30 P. Johnson, op. cit., p. 24.

subjects.”³¹ We should not forget that it would be quite impracticable for the Queen to engage in mass charity undertakings improving millions of human lives. With regards to social reform, she believed in systematic legal action rather than personal involvement, and the numbers of Acts of Parliament contributing to the betterment of living and working conditions in the British Empire that were signed by her is significant.

Queen Victoria was very much a creature of her times. Her most visible cultural resonance was a result, and reinforcement, of “Victorian values” that were retroactively named after her. To be influential as a monarch, she had to be – or at least pretend to be – morally conservative as a woman. Adrienne Munich proposes an alternative title of “Pets on a Lawn” for an elegantly structured painting of the Queen and her youngest daughter, titled *Queen Victoria, Princess Beatrice and a Group of Dogs*: “Beatrice leans over so that her silhouette nearly imitates the dog at her knees, while Victoria’s pose seems to provide a frontal view of the two dogs in profile who flank her. With no other frame of reference – no houses or other humans – the two women blend with the pets, creating an integrated portrait.”³² The implicit “Victorian” frame of mind assumes the existence of an unseen male master whose position is dominant over the animals and the women; their social role is supposed to be auxiliary and ornamental. Since the death of Prince Albert, there was no such alpha-male around. Nevertheless, even if the reality was – as it is here, in Charles Burton Barber’s work of 1877 – markedly different, the public opinion was fed the conventional imagery of queenly domesticity, blurring the less acceptable traits of the personality of the mighty “Widow of Windsor”.

Following the teachings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the people of the nineteenth century began to value sentiment and seek the calming effects of the communion with nature – a trend that only intensified in time, with the advancing forces of industrialisation and urbanisation. Alain Corbain in his chapter on private pleasures in the monumental *History of Private Life* emphasises the cultural importance of the emotional connection between a woman and her dog. “Fond smiles” and “affectionate gazes” of the lady towards her pet signified her inclination towards tenderness and pity that “accorded well with the ideas about the feminine sensibility.”³³ A woman’s ability to take care of smaller

31 M. Misztal, *Queen Victoria and her dogs*, in: *New Trends in English Teacher Education*, ed. by I.R. Gay, A.J.M. Guijarro, J.I.A. Hernández, Castilla-La Mancha 2008, p. 394.

32 A. Munich, op. cit., p. 136.

33 A. Corbain, *Backstage*, in: *A History of Private Life. Volume IV: From the fires of Revolution to the Great War*, ed. by Ph. Ariès, G. Duby, trans. by A. Goldhammer, Cambridge 1990, p. 526–527.

creatures and an optimistic attitude to life – the virtues not very prominent, as we have seen, in the character of Queen Victoria – were also held as highly praiseworthy by the Victorians. To win the devotion of her subjects, the Queen relied on gestures and they were effective, even if they were purely symbolic.

Victoria's reign corresponded with the rapid development of popular culture, printed and visual. Indeed, as John Plunkett observes, she became the "first media monarch" in the world.³⁴ Her life, both official and private, was carefully observed by the public opinion through the proliferation of the illustrated press, mass-printed photographs, and art exhibitions. The most avid followers of royal celebrity were the members of the urban middle class. Even if they were not able to imitate some of the luxuries of the aristocracy, the keeping of pets was well within the financial reach of many bourgeois families, and soon it became a status symbol. Companion animals, mostly small dogs, were fashionable tokens of the culture of sentimentality and family values. Still, as that culture was increasingly becoming commercialised, they were creatures whose genuine fidelity and devotion could simply be bought.

Queen Victoria's affection for dogs was one of the first deep emotional attachments of her life, and it remained the last. As she lay dying in January 1901, one of her last wishes was that her favourite Pomeranian, Turi, be allowed to sit on her bed.³⁵ When the Queen expired, there were 88 dogs living in her kennels at Windsor. They were inherited by King Edward VII and relocated to his estate at Sandringham.³⁶ The fondness of the British royal family towards their canine companions – documented in paintings, photographs, and on film – has never ceased. Queen Elizabeth II's well known attachment to the Welsh Corgis can attest to that. Recently, one of the first official photographic portraits of baby Prince George, son of the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge (and 3rd in the line to the throne), released in March 2014, shows him posing with the family cocker spaniel, Lupo.³⁷

34 J. Plunkett, *Queen Victoria, First Media Monarch*, Oxford 2003.

35 H. Rappaport, *Queen Victoria*, p. 39.

36 J. Watt, P. Dyer, *Men and dogs. A personal history from Bogart to Bowie*, New York 2005, p. 107.

37 J. Ossad, *Prince George photo released!*, in: "E!Online" 2014 (29 march) [online], E! Online [access 2014-12-18]: <<http://uk.eonline.com/news/526451/prince-george-photo-released-see-prince-william-and-kate-middleton-with-their-son-in-new-family-pic>>.



ABSTRACT

QUEEN VICTORIA'S CANINE COMPANIONS

The Victorian era developed new evaluations of animals, and the biography of its eponymous monarch offers many examples of more humane, sentimental, and often anthropomorphising attitudes towards man's canine companions. Since her early youth, Victoria took interest in animal protection, e.g. shortly after her coronation she granted the prefix Royal to the Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals founded in 1824. Pictorial and photographic portraits of the Queen frequently show her in the company of animals, especially dogs and horses. Usually, the images are given a symbolic meaning, commenting on the emergent bourgeois morality that the monarch herself favoured.

KEYWORDS

Queen Victoria, dog, animal,
Victorian culture, morality