



The Right to Rule and the Rights of Women: Queen Victoria and the Women's Movement,
By Arianne Chernock.

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Arianne Chernock is a Boston historian, whose first full-length book *Men and the Making of Modern British Feminism* (Stanford UP, 2010) won the 2011 John Ben Snow Prize from the North American Conference on British Studies. Chernock, across her two-decade career, first at The George Washington University and later in the Department of History at Boston University, has been able to make significant contributions to the understanding of Modern History through her emphasis on gender and monarchy. In her latest publication, she investigates the issue of gender in constitutional monarchy during the reign of Queen Victoria.

Through this book, Chernock engages with the figure of the female sovereign featuring in the nineteenth-century women's rights movement in England. It is well acknowledged that Queen Victoria was no admirer of women's rights. In the now famous 1870 letter written to Theodore Martin, who was commissioned to write the official biography of Prince Albert, she stated, "The Queen is most anxious to enlist someone who can speak & write etc. checking this mad, wicked folly of 'Woman's rights,' with all the attendant horrors, on which her poor feeble sex seems bent" (1). However, for most of the nineteenth century, the British would have been unaware of such personal views of the Queen on women's rights. Only in the early twentieth century, with the posthumous publication of her correspondence, would they have encountered her direct opposition to female suffrage. Such a discovery makes us reconsider the widely held assumptions of the Queen's utility and interest for the nineteenth-century women's movement.

Few scholars engage with the larger implications of the private exchange and public circulation of Queen Victoria's letters. Though correspondence is the main source for the views held by the Queen on the nineteenth-century 'Woman Question', it would not be judicious to rest our belief in the subversive potential of the Queen simply on her being a female monarch. Chernock's mastery lies in her analytical approach towards unfolding the marginal figure of the woman in a man's world and simultaneously considering Victoria as potentially an active foil to woman's struggle for equality.

Chernock displays remarkable proficiency in problematising the Victorian construction of womanhood and the consequent separate spheres theory, by elaborating on the ambiguous narrative which exists between the Queen's personal pronouncements and her public appearance. She is generous in sharing references made by the biographers of the Queen, citing Julia Baird and others, in developing a refreshing recent reassessment of the regal career. In charting out a design for such reevaluation, Chernock discusses the invocation of Queen Victoria in the mid-nineteenth century campaigns for female employment and calls for the admission of women to

the political system. In doing so, she makes us confront the fate of every wife who, other than a Queen Regent, was under the legal authority of her husband, together with her movable property – this until the passage of the Married Women’s Property Acts in 1870 and 1882. This realisation reveals several faces of feminism in the nineteenth century and further exposes the paradox of women being permitted to rule whereas female subjects were denied rights and privileges accorded to men.

In tracing the overlooked connections between the histories of women, the monarchy, and the constitutional state, Chernock chooses to emphasise rhetorical analysis. Looking at large historical patterns, the book also makes passing references to prevalent notions of biological essentialism in nineteenth century Britain, which consolidated the subordinate status of the female intellect. Given the decorative and fundamentally apolitical role of the female sovereign within the modern British nation-state, the reader is reminded that women were considered better suited than men to occupy the throne because they possessed a “simpler and more instinctive mind” (13) and were thus more willing to perform the routine tasks asked of them. In rethinking the political capability of the female sovereign, then, Chernock is effective in establishing an essential distinction between ruling and governing. Attempting a Victorian reformulation of Renaissance England, Chernock predictably draws a comparison with the royal career of Queen Elizabeth I and stresses both queens’ dependence on male advisers in administration.

Several resources hitherto underrepresented and hardly utilised in this field of academic discipline have seen new light through this publication. Notable among them is the Unitarian William Johnson Fox’s article, “A Political and Social Anomaly” (1832), as well as the 1866 women’s suffrage petition, presented by John Stuart Mill to the British parliament, which Chernock uses in tracing women’s rights proponents’ strategic invocations of the Queen to counter the responses that their arguments elicited from the critics. However, the most notable example of Queen Victoria serving as a crucial figure for several generations of women’s rights activists is presented through a reading of Millicent Garrett Fawcett’s “Public Address” of 1897, in the year of the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee. Chernock’s intelligent handling of this important archival material looks into Fawcett’s interpretation of the figure of the Queen as ‘mother’ of the people, so as to secure female emancipation. Such personalisation of Queen Victoria in the true ‘Victorian’ identity of a doting wife and mother, attending not only her biological children but also ‘children’ of the Empire, is a significant stance that Chernock identifies.

However, though Chernock chooses to restrict the scope of her material to the archives maintained in European states, it might be rewarding to delve into Queen Victoria’s representation in repositories in the colonies of the Empire, and to investigate the politics behind her representative presence in women’s activism across the Third World. Overall, both academic readers as well as the general public will find Chernock’s work to be inviting in its sustained interest in rediscovery and revaluation of the Victorian era.

Shantanu Majee
Department of English
Techno India University, West Bengal