

***Queen Victoria's Empire*, 2001. Brook Lapping Productions, Ltd. Written, produced, and directed by Paul Bryers. Narrated by Donald Sutherland. Distributed by PBS Home Video at shopPBS.com (\$29.98) and PBS Video at shopPBS.com/teachers (\$69.95). 219 minutes on two VHS tapes.**

Victorian Britain has recently been treated by no less than three major historical television and video productions without even counting A&E's miniseries *Victoria and Albert*, which is clearly more love story than history. Simon Schama's *A History of Britain*, a BBC and History Channel production, carries the story into the Victorian era where he focuses on emerging concepts of gender and family life and the hubris of liberal humanism and colonialism. Patrick Allitt of Emory University delivers a series of lectures for The Teaching Company that focus on the achievements of Victorian Britain as well as the strange internal contradictions of a time that seems remarkably close to our own in so many ways. PBS's entry in the current Victorian video derby is *Queen Victoria's Empire*, part of the Empires Collection that includes *Egypt's Golden Empire*, *The Greeks*, *The Roman Empire in the First Century*, *Islam: Empire of Faith*, and *Napoleon*. And it is, well, just so very PBS in style and format. The viewer will not be disappointed in this solid, well crafted, well paced production, but neither will it leave the impression that one has just viewed four hours of something memorable. A lot of this can be explained by the fact that PBS markets toward a classroom audience while Schama looks toward the home market. *Queen Victoria's Empire* employs dramatic re-enactments, voice-over narration by Donald Sutherland, the historical words of individuals read by actors, and talking-head commentary by the likes of Lawrence James, Roy Jenkins, and Stanley Weintraub, as well as a descendant of David Livingstone, which seems to be his only qualification for the task. They all perform admirably, giving the production the patina of scholarship so vital for this type of documentary. As the title implies, the videos focus on personalities of the time beginning obviously with Queen Victoria herself and her beloved Prince Albert, and including the usual pantheon of eminent Victorians: Isambard Kingdom Brunel, Gladstone, Disraeli, Livingstone, Charles Gordon, and Cecil Rhodes. One can carp at this approach but given the large number of eccentric, colorful, and larger-than-life figures that came out of Victorian Britain, it does have some legitimacy beyond the narrative ease provided by such an approach in a documentary.

All of this can make such a documentary quite trite and very staid, something you would expect to be used in a classroom setting. The topic of industrialization, for instance, never gets very passionate beyond Prince Albert's fascination with new technology. Victoria's morbid preoccupation with Albert's death is not exaggerated, nor is it dismissed as some sort of psychosis. It just became part of her personae. The relationship that the Queen had with John Brown, her Scottish servant, and the subject of a movie in its own right, *Mrs. Brown*, receives appropriate and accurate treatment. Speculations about a sexual relationship remain just that, speculation. But there is no mention of Abdul Karim, "the Munshi," who replaced Brown in Victoria's affections

when he became her servant in her old age. Brown's death in 1883 devastated the Queen and after Victoria's death, the Munshi was pensioned off and he returned to India.

The production has as the central theme the relationship of the Queen to all the central Victorian players, especially Gladstone and Disraeli, and this might skew the historical perspective, but still there are some images that do stand out. The Indian Mutiny and massacre at Cawnpore are particularly vivid, showing the violence inflicted upon the perpetrators by the British. When British troops recaptured Delhi, Cawnpore, and Lucknow, they killed all the defenders and looted everything they could find. The sequence dealing with Sudan and Charles Gordon presents an almost comic opera aspect as this hero of empire is sent off to the Sudan with no money and with British generals resorting to raising money at gentlemen's clubs in the middle of the night to get him on his way. Gordon remains the ultimate imperial hero, martyr, and eccentric, an evangelical Christian who carried not only the Bible but an ample supply of brandy with him at all times. His passion was adopting orphan boys off the street, taking them home with him, cleaning them up, educating them, and sending them off into the empire. No one hinted at any other motive than that of Christian charity. But that is certainly no more eccentric than Gladstone's habit of going out at night, wandering the streets, looking for prostitutes to reform. He would frequently take them home, and sometimes sent them out to his country estate. In his diary entries he would draw a whip indicating that he had to scourge himself that night if he felt any sexual lust. The Queen never thought much of this activity, and since she didn't like Gladstone as much as Disraeli anyway, his night prowling only increased her suspicion of the man. Also when she met Cecil Rhodes, who never married and who much preferred male company, she asked him if he was a "women hater," to which he deftly responded, "How could one be such a thing in the presence of such beauty as your majesty?" H.G. Wells once referred to Queen Victoria as a "great paper weight that for half a century sat on men's minds," and maybe that was true for something called "Victorianism," but the Queen herself was much more complicated than a dead paper weight.

Queen Victoria's Empire then takes the PBS middle of the road approach to historical documentary: predictable, yet instructive and straightforward, neither sensational nor bland, but including some memorable moments and scenes, and also some omissions. Where are the trade unions? William Morris? Today we are all too aware of the exploitativeness, insularity, sexual hypocrisy, pompous piety, and materialism of the Victorians. This video in concert with modern popular and scholarly notions of Victorians focuses more on these traits and their ill-treatment of servants and colonial subjects, while not completely forgetting the legacy of public culture, morality, and high public and political standards. Victoria and the Victorians are hard acts to follow.