In spite of the fact that we are living in what might be called ‘republican’ times, the screen’s fascination with royalty continues unabated, writes Brian McFarlane.
HAT, I WONDER, are the attractions of royalty on the screen, not just in countries with resident royals, but in countries whose connections are more tenuous? Australia certainly has a royal, if absent, head of state, but why has the United States, which so definitively severed its royal links in 1776, so often taken screen queens and kings to its republican (and democratic) bosom?

Screen queens and kings

What has royalty going for it to have commanded so much screen time? Perhaps most obviously it offers occasion like nothing else (except maybe an Olympic opening or closing ceremony) for the display of pomp and ceremony, orchestrated within an inch of its life for maximum drama. Think of the television audiences for a royal wedding or funeral. Does even an Oscar-viewing audience outnumber those tuned in for a ringside seat at Westminster Abbey or St Paul’s Cathedral?

Further, in these days of the ascendancy of publications like Hello, New Idea and Who Weekly, brazenly placed at the supermarket checkout to beguile us as we wait, nothing sells like ‘celebrity’. Without lifting a finger, a major royal (and even some quite minor ones) can still pull a buying crowd. We may never have heard of Diana Spencer or Sarah Ferguson, but the moment they hitched their wagons to royal stars they were, whether they sought it or not, instant celebrities, their every move diligently (or opportunistically) recorded for our delectation. The purveyors of this kind of information (to use that term loosely) know that half the world is dying to know whether Wills and Kate will make it to the altar – or, to go beyond Britain, whether all is well between the handsome young Danish royals.

Paradoxically, too, the screen incarnations of royalty may well appeal to monarchist and anti-monarchist alike. The former can bask in a feeling of getting close to the leaders they revere, in the sense of finding them to be ‘real people’ as well as otherwise remote royals. For anti-monarchists, the extravagant lifestyles and internecine conflicts can only be grist to the mill, confirming their worst suspicions about what they know to be an outmoded system. And so on.

The US, having got rid of royalty, has had to invent an equivalent. Some occupiers of the White House have measured up reasonably well, but for the most part America has had to make do with mere ‘celebrities’. It has had to be constantly concerned – and Australia has gone along with this if the supermarket checkout is a reliable indicator – with, say, whether Brad and Ange are still together or whether Tom has won Katie over to Scientology yet. By comparison, royalty may seem like the real thing, giving off a whiff of class and an intimation of permanence, even if its actual exemplars sometimes cut up rough.

And so often, especially in times safely past, there was abundant drama in getting people onto thrones, in securing those thrones and in fending off contenders. The chance of a public beheading, or of ordering one, the complicated sexual manoeuvres with mistresses discreetly available, the odd assassination attempt or abdication: it sounds like Dallas in doublet and hose. Could screen melodrama ask for more rewarding material to work on?
British royals in (mainly) British films

There isn’t space here to do justice to the screen representation of monarchies. Leaving Victoria to one side for the moment, just think of this royal parade down the ages: the charismatic young Peter O’Toole doing a brilliant turn as Henry II, and his contentious queen, Eleanor, making a star entrance from a barge in the person of the quarter-century older Katharine Hepburn in *The Lion in Winter* (Anthony Harvey, 1968); Laurence Olivier, via Shakespeare, calling Englishmen to rally to the nation’s defence in a World War II version of *Henry V* (Laurence Olivier, 1944) and Kenneth Branagh striking a different pose in his 1989 film for the same king from the same play; Charles Laughton stomping about studio sets in Holbein postures in *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (Alexander Korda, 1933), which incidentally was the first British film to break substantially into the American mainstream markets; and Henry VIII’s daughter, eponymously played by Cate Blanchett in *Elizabeth* (Shekhar Kapur, 1998) and *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* (Shekhar Kapur, 2007), as well as by Flora Robson in *Fire Over England* (William K. Howard, 1937) and *The Sea Hawk* (Michael Curtiz, 1940), and by Glenda Jackson, who’d ‘done’ Elizabeth memorably on TV, doing her again on the big screen and crossing verbal swords with Vanessa Redgrave in *Mary Queen of Scots* (Charles Jarrott, 1971).

The list goes on and on, without even touching on American attempts at interpreting British royalty, such as ‘Queen’ Bette Davis, frizzled and later bald, in *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* (Michael Curtiz, 1939). Before *The Young Victoria* (Jean-Marc Vallée, 2009), one of the most recent and perhaps most distinguished of all the ‘royal’ films, there was Stephen Frears’ unequivocally titled *The Queen* (2006), which enshrined Helen Mirren’s uncanny and touching portrayal of Elizabeth II, who needs to reign a few more years to pass Victoria’s record – Victoria is referred to at the end of the new film as ‘the longest-reigning sovereign to date’. Which brings me at last to *The Young Victoria* – according to one source, the ninety-fifth big- or small-screen appearance (since silent days) of this most durable monarch.¹

Victoria on the screen

If royalty in general has exercised filmmakers’ craft and imagination, Victoria appears to have held a special fascination for them. In the 1930s, Anna Neagle famously appeared twice as Victoria.² The first time was in *Victoria the Great* (Herbert Wilcox, 1937), a film that may be seen to reinforce the role of the monarchy in the troubling wake of Edward VIII’s abdication, with the film ‘celebrat[ing] a perfect marriage and a dedicated partnership in the service of the nation’.³ Following the success of this film, *Sixty Glorious Years* (Herbert Wilcox, 1938) appeared the next year, dealing with the latter part of Victoria’s life, perhaps extolling national unity in the face of the war clouds gathering over Europe, asserting ‘the need to protect Britain’s national security’.⁴ Neagle’s is a very ladylike monarch; this is an image one now sees as belonging to an earlier period when royalty was less exposed to the public gaze and to criticism.

There was plenty of criticism in Britain over the importation of US star Irene Dunne to play the ageing queen brought out of seclusion by (fanciful) dealings in *The Mudlark* (Jean Negulesco, 1950). Presumably this casting was for US box-office reasons, as there were plenty of British actresses whose cheeks could just as convincingly been puffed out with cotton wool. There were sketches of Victoria by, among many others, Fay Compton in *The Prime Minister* (Thorold Dickinson, 1941),

¹ ‘What had always interested me about this story ... was the contrast between the public perception of the Queen – a dour, stout figure in black with an expression of permanent disapproval – and the strong-willed, passionate, romantic girl she had been when she came to the throne in 1837.’

– SCREENWRITER JULIAN FELLOWES
urging John Gielgud’s Disraeli to be wary of the threat of Bismarck, and touchingly offering comfort upon the death of his wife; Helena Pickard in the Neagle biopic of Florence Nightingale, *The Lady with the Lamp* (Herbert Wilcox, 1951); Sybil Thorndike in *Melba* (Lewis Milestone, 1953), in which the diva sings to the queen at Windsor Castle; and Mollie Maureen, twice, in *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* (Billy Wilder, 1970) and an episode of TV’s *The Edwardians*. Then, decades later, came Judi Dench’s popular *Mrs Brown* (John Madden, 1997), which made lively cinematic capital of the Queen’s supposed relationship with her Scottish groom, John Brown, played by comedian Billy Connolly.

So why has there been this persistent screen interest in Victoria, outdoing the interest in the superficially more exciting Elizabeth I? There are several possible, if not definitive, replies to this question. Screenwriter on *The Young Victoria*, Julian Fellowes, had this to say on the subject:

*What had always interested me about this story ... was the contrast between the public perception of the Queen – a dour, stout figure in black with an expression of permanent disapproval – and the strong-willed, passionate, romantic girl she had been when she came to the throne in 1837. I felt the audience would be interested to know the girl as she was when she met her beloved husband and they started their tremendously successful partnership. After all, everyone is familiar with the grieving widow, but not many understand the love that went before that.*

Feminists may well be drawn to the idea of a woman doing the top job, unassailably the superior of any man in the realm and especially at a time when a woman’s place was indubitably believed to be ‘in the home’. And that latter phrase, intended to refer to Victoria’s own time, held true for at least another half a century. For those of a more romantic turn of mind, there is the wonderful fact of a genuine love match at the highest level, a fact that is as central to the new film as it was to the Neagle/Wilcox pairings (and they were themselves a love match in an industry not always noted for the longevity of its relationships). And if drama with a touch of mystery is what grabs filmmakers and audiences alike, there is the puzzle of the long reclusive widowhood and the final emergence into public acclaim and veneration – and into becoming, or giving rise to, an adjective. We all think we know what we mean by ‘Victorian’. But do we?

---

**2009 and *The Young Victoria***

*What it is not: (i) ‘heritage’ filmmaking*

*The Young Victoria* can’t help being a costume drama: it is set in the past, so of course it is generically ‘period’. However, it skilfully avoids falling into that now mind-numbing category of ‘heritage’ filmmaking, in which distinguished actors are paraded before listed buildings, as if we should be grateful just for the display of both. Naturally, unless we’re dealing in *Blackadder*-like parody (remember Miranda Richardson’s Elizabeth I imperiously silencing opposition with ‘Who’s Queen?’), a certain degree of authenticity in matters of setting and costume is important to our willing suspension of disbelief. As Julian Fellowes has said:

*I think it tremendously important to put forward a vision of a believable world. The audience must be able to lose themselves in a place where things are done differently*

---

1: *THE YOUNG VICTORIA*  
2: CATE BLANCHETT IN THE TITLE ROLE IN *ELIZABETH: THE GOLDEN AGE*  
3: *THE QUEEN*
from our own time, but in a credible way ... [As to costumes] Sandy Powell is a genius with clothes ... and we have no difficulty in accepting that these costumes are what Emily [Blunt] would have put on when she woke up in the morning.

If, however, our interest is in the drama of human interaction, we shall not normally want our breath to be constantly taken away by the effects of mere pictorialism. Nor will we want to listen to everyone talking with great solemnity as though that were some kind of guarantee of an earlier period, as though our ancestors never fell into the sorts of casual idioms that may characterise our own verbal habits. 'They don't know you like I do,' Albert (Rupert Friend) at one point says to Victoria (Emily Blunt). I suspect such a minor solecism is intentional, a way of 'placing' the ordinariness that even people in high places in older times were prone to. The film's dialogue sounds like conversation rather than a stiff declaiming of written words.

What it is not: (ii) star-centred melodrama

This is not, say, The Other Boleyn Girl (Justin Chadwick, 2008), in which rapidly rising stars Scarlett Johansson and Natalie Portman vie for our attention as they go through the predictable manoeuvres of the plot. It is not even Cate Blanchett stalking the treacherous corridors of the two Elizabeth films, or the Redgrave–Jackson tour de force of Mary Queen of Scots, or, speaking of the latter, Katharine Hepburn and Fredric March in the studio-bound Mary of Scotland (John Ford, 1936). Without making unsustainable claims for the new film, it is not too much to say that its protagonists are not allowed to be dwarfed by either production and costume design or blatant concessions to 'star power'.

What it is

In essence, The Young Victoria's narrative progression and thematic preoccupations take us through three main stages that might be tersely labelled: the Girl, the Queen and the Woman. This kind of structuring ensures that screenwriter Fellowes and director Jean-Marc Vallée keep their eye on the ball. That is, what appears to concern them most is the growth of assurance and confidence in their eponym. They resist being sidetracked into tempting melodramatic possibilities but are prepared to accept that this growth will be a gradual process, articulated as much through small private moments as state occasions. As Fellowes notes:

The film is a story of how a young woman survived being flung into a position of prominence, for which she had never been properly prepared ... of how Victoria's inexperience caused trouble – and a constitutional crisis – for her but how her own strength of character, and the correct choice of partner, pulled her through.

From this point of view it is both plot and character driven, but the emphasis of the film seems to me to fall on the latter.

The girl

A very early voice-over reflects that 'Some people are born more fortunate than others.' Surely the assumption is that a princess is one of the lucky ones, but the next part of the voice-over suggests that 'Even a palace can be a prison.' The girl Victoria, born (as a caption reminds us) in 1819, is caught between two royal houses: that of the British royal family and that of her mother, the widowed Duchess of Kent, the former Princess Victoria of Saxe-Coburg-Saalfeld. The Duchess (Miranda Richardson, not having such a good time as in Blackadder) is now under the thumb of her bullying adviser, Sir John Conroy (Mark Strong), who fascines himself acting as regent to the underage Victoria when she succeeds her childless uncle William IV (Jim Broadbent).

There is a brief flash forward to the coronation on 28 June 1837, with Handel's 'Zadok the Priest' swelling on the soundtrack and, in carefully considered detail, Victoria's feet are glimpsed as not quite reaching the footstool below the throne. A point is made here: this is still a girl who is being thrust into a role she will have to work at filling. When the film reverts to 'A year earlier', the vulnerability hinted at in the dangling feet is accounted for; not just by her age but also by Conroy's attempt to hector her into signing the regency order and her mother's self-interested lack of sympathy.

Out of this justifiable sense of imprisonment, Victoria's determination is beginning to grow. The film sketches a girl remote from the image of the heavy, old queen who gave her name to an era. She is depicted at this stage, in Blunt's spirited, intelligent performance, as having interests that she takes pleasure in – reading, music, dancing, for instance – and without descending to label her 'feisty', she emerges as mildly iconoclastic within the confines of her sheltered world. This world and its restrictions are tellingly encapsulated in her not being allowed to descend stairs without an arm to guide her.

This is a Victoria somewhat different from the usual images. As a young girl wrenched out of one kind of life and thrust into another, infinitely demanding one, this Victoria has affiliations with several other 'royal' films. Most recent is The Other Boleyn Girl, in which two sisters, at the instigation of ambitious parents, contend for the favours of Henry VIII. The Young Victoria also recalls at least two other films in which young women find themselves on a dangerously exposed stage. These are the Kirsten Dunst vehicle Marie Antoinette (Sofia Coppola, 2006), in which the Viennese princess' otherness in the halls of Versailles is reinforced by a pop musical score (in her early twenties, Dunst was better placed to access the poignancy of Marie's situation than the 38-year-old Norma Shearer had been in the 1938 film of the same name by W.S. Van Dyke). The other comparator I have in mind is one that is seventy years old – Tudor Rose (Robert Stevenson, 1936), starring an infinitely touching Nova Pilbeam as Lady Jane Grey, who is torn from her quiet domesticity to be made queen for nine days. Jane Grey's desperately sad story was retold with Helena Bonham Carter as the tragic aristocrat in Trevor Nunn's Lady Jane (1985), which is probably more historically accurate but less affecting than Stevenson's film. An approach to Victoria that draws attention to the arbitrary end of girlhood invests the new film with an understated poignancy. It makes Victoria accessible to modern sensibilities and shows that she is not just an historical personage who was never young and frivolous.
The queen

The film places Victoria’s coronation between the girl and the woman. She will not move from the earlier to the later state in a moment: in this evolving process, the accession to the throne will be a crucial stage. In adjusting to the demands of monarchy, she will leave behind both the pleasures and the restrictions of the earlier life, finding new sources of each in her new status. There are spectacularly dramatic moments along the way – the coronation itself, of course, the conflict with the new prime minister, Sir Robert Peel (Michael Maloney), and the attempted assassination, among other things – but such sources of obvious drama are not foregrounded at the expense of showing how the young queen goes about the discharge of her duties. From her first act as queen, when she has been informed in the middle of the night of the death of the king, William IV, she indicates that she knows a new assurance will be required of her. ‘I am going back to bed,’ she announces as she moves off with impressive firmness of purpose.

That the girl has not been extinguished at a stroke is made clear when after addressing her privy councillors, she all but skips down the corridor (‘I’m aware that a detail like that sounds more jejune in the telling than it is to watch’). I’ll come back to her dealings with Albert when considering how the film presents ‘the Woman’, but clearly they can’t be separated out in this neat way. It is, though, a neat ploy of the film to alternate between Albert’s being gently badgered by Baron Stockmar (Jesper Christensen) and the young queen’s dealings with Lord Melbourne. In a nicely ambiguous character study from Paul Bettany, Melbourne remains an interestingly equivocal figure: as Victoria’s first prime minister, he is both charming and possibly devious as he tactfully instructs her. The production notes are probably accurate when they say that ‘although his motives are slightly self-serving, he truly cares for her and wants her to succeed.’

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of ‘the making of the queen’ strand of the film’s plot lies in Victoria’s gradual way of dealing with those nearest to her. How to cope with and where to house her difficult mother; surveying the preparations for the coronation as Melbourne advises her ‘just be yourself’; Conroy’s fury at being left off the coronation guest list, which is signified by his smashing a glass. Matters such as these are not overstated; rather, they take their place in a narrative that, as I said earlier, eschews melodramatic highlights. Even the clash with Peel, who warns Victoria not to favour exclusively his predecessor Melbourne’s choice of ladies-in-waiting, stays most firmly in the mind for the way Victoria dismisses him with an obviously enjoyed authority. When the government is subsequently brought down and there is outrage in the streets and a rock through the window, what is significant within the narrative is Victoria’s wondering if she is too young and inexperienced for her position – and the growing sense of aloneness that marriage to Albert will assuage.

The woman

For all the film’s careful, unsensational treatment of political events and behind-the-scenes machinations, it is the love story of Victoria and Albert towards which it has been moving and, in the process, the emergence of ‘Victoria the woman’. Albert – Friend looking startlingly like Anton Walbrook in the Neagle films (or, I suppose, both look like Albert himself) – has already been a figure in the life of ‘Victoria the girl’. He has been instructed about her interests, working in a gauche reference to her reading taste for Walter Scott, and there is a nicely semi-skirmishing approach from each as they come to terms with each other, their rapport warming over a game of chess, whose metaphoric significance he alludes to. ‘I know what it is to live alone inside your head,’ he tells her, and these early stages in their acquaintance alert us to the idea that this is to be essentially an intimate story, not an epic of empire.

Albert’s attempts to learn to waltz, for instance, prefigure the more serious challenge of adjusting to his later life of prince consort. But before that, in the playing of Blunt and Friend, with youth and attractiveness on their side, they find real affection for each other. In the face of power brokers to whom their marriage is a political event, that affection deepens into love and will express itself in passion. The film cuts from the touchingly acted proposal and a clinching embrace, to a close-up two-shot of the marriage, which passes with no predictable pomp to the marriage bed. On the morning after their marriage, Victoria announces: ‘Now I am quite married.’ The drama quietly deepens as it charts a certain edginess in Albert’s constraining position: he wants to do things, to exercise a modernising tendency, and they quarrel in the bedroom over his execution of his public role. The processes of adjustment make compelling enough viewing, and the sudden eruption of violence when Albert is wounded while protecting Victoria from an assassin’s bullet takes its place in the more enduring pattern of events that constitutes their lives together. There are some big scenes, certainly, but the film’s overriding concern is with the growth of a whole woman who also happens to be queen.

The royal team

The Young Victoria is technically a UK/US co-production, but in its creative aspects, along with its story and locations, it is essentially a British film, and one distinguished by its intelligence and restraint. The casting of Emily Blunt will no doubt help the film’s US distribution, which must always be a matter of pressing concern for anglophone cinema. She has presumably become a name there following her work in such disparate pieces as The Devil Wears Prada (David Frankel, 2006), Marie Antoinette (Julie Taymor, 2006), and The Devil Wears Prada (David Frankel, 2006),
The Young Victoria succeeds so well partly because it is not an embalment of the past but rather a film with contemporary resonance.

That are of interest today. How to survive sudden and essentially unearned celebrity, for one.

Like Frears’ The Queen, it shows that the monarchy, however protected it may be, is still and always at the mercy of public opinion, which can be stirred by a royal wedding or an unfavourable decision. Like The Queen and The Duchess (Saul Dibb, 2008), it evokes the spectre of Princess Diana and the antiquated sense of young women being married off to satisfy political expediency. In this sense, it rings feminist bells that might be heard well beyond the confines of royal enclaves. Because The Young Victoria offers not a series of stiff historical tableaux but rather a sense of a woman aspiring to independence and warding off self-interested counsel, it has relevance for any young woman – any young person – trying to cut a path through thickets of advice, some of it well intended, some not.

I’ve stressed the screenplay’s importance because it seems to adumbrate the whole tone and direction of the film. Fellowes has a record of discerning studies of high life on film, television and in novels (Snobs, Past Imperfect), and the discriminations he makes among various levels of aspiration and egoism are at the heart of this film. Let him have the last word here:

I was drawn to the subject, as film material, because I did feel that it touched on things that are of interest today. How to survive sudden and essentially unearned celebrity, for one.

Like Frears’ The Queen, it shows that the monarchy, however protected it may be, is still and always at the mercy of public opinion, which can be stirred by a royal wedding or an unfavourable decision. Like The Queen and The Duchess (Saul Dibb, 2008), it evokes the spectre of Princess Diana and the antiquated sense of young women being married off to satisfy political expediency. In this sense, it rings feminist bells that might be heard well beyond the confines of royal enclaves. Because The Young Victoria offers not a series of stiff historical tableaux but rather a sense of a woman aspiring to independence and warding off self-interested counsel, it has relevance for any young woman – any young person – trying to cut a path through thickets of advice, some of it well intended, some not.

I’ve stressed the screenplay’s importance because it seems to adumbrate the whole tone and direction of the film. Fellowes has a record of discerning studies of high life on film, television and in novels (Snobs, Past Imperfect), and the discriminations he makes among various levels of aspiration and egoism are at the heart of this film. Let him have the last word here:

I was drawn to the subject, as film material, because I did feel that it touched on things that are of interest today. How to survive sudden and essentially unearned celebrity, for one.

Like Frears’ The Queen, it shows that the monarchy, however protected it may be, is still and always at the mercy of public opinion, which can be stirred by a royal wedding or an unfavourable decision. Like The Queen and The Duchess (Saul Dibb, 2008), it evokes the spectre of Princess Diana and the antiquated sense of young women being married off to satisfy political expediency. In this sense, it rings feminist bells that might be heard well beyond the confines of royal enclaves. Because The Young Victoria offers not a series of stiff historical tableaux but rather a sense of a woman aspiring to independence and warding off self-interested counsel, it has relevance for any young woman – any young person – trying to cut a path through thickets of advice, some of it well intended, some not.

I’ve stressed the screenplay’s importance because it seems to adumbrate the whole tone and direction of the film. Fellowes has a record of discerning studies of high life on film, television and in novels (Snobs, Past Imperfect), and the discriminations he makes among various levels of aspiration and egoism are at the heart of this film. Let him have the last word here: