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# Reporting Royal Dress: Queen Alexandra and Royal Image Making

**Introduction**

On the occasion of Alexandra, Princess of Wales’ first drawing room in May 1863, the official Court Circular published in *The Times* gave the following description: ‘Her Royal Highness wore a train of rich white silk, having a deep trimming of white crepe and wreaths of white lilac and Honiton lace. The petticoat richly trimmed to match the train. The headdress of the Princess was formed of a diamond tiara, feathers and tulle veil.’ (*The Times*, May 18, 1863)

Of the same event, Louisa, Lady Knightley of Fawsley, recorded in her diary with some disappointment, that Alexandra Princess of Wales was: ‘a bit of a thing, with a white gown and a white face, two curls and a tiara’ (Cartwright ed, 1915: 56) The spectrum between these two descriptions of Alexandra is instructive, illustrating the formality, indeed the blandness of the official report next to the more colourful account of the memoir. (Fig.1) The reporting of royal dress since the advent of the moving image is a familiar aspect of the British monarchy’s public face where, first in black and white and then in colour, it was possible to see the monarch and members of the royal family and their relationship with clothing writ large upon the screen of cinema or television.

This chapter seeks to explore the different mediums utilised by the British monarchy in the dissemination of their public selves during the 19th century. The reign of Queen Victoria coincided with the invention and popular engagement with photography, the rise of popular press outlets, the growth of the mass-produced souvenir and in the final years of her life, the new technologies of the moving image. The creation of a popular public persona was perhaps most successfully achieved by Queen Victoria’s daughter-in-law, Alexandra (1844-1925) whose almost forty years as Princess of Wales placed her at the forefront of the British establishment and so the chapter uses Alexandra’s experiences as the lens through which to view the reporting of royal dress. From the outset of her life within the traditionally rigid hierarchies of the British monarchical institution, Alexandra navigated her way through its minutiae to build a popular image of herself that was due in no small part to the visible impact of her clothed royal body. In addition to print media she engaged with the emerging market for the carte de visite and even created her own photographic ‘album’ that invited a willing audience into her ‘private’ life. She utilised her many civic duties and diplomatic state visits to cement her popularity through canny clothing choices, setting the precedent for generations of royal women that followed. As Princess of Wales and later Queen Consort, Alexandra recognised that her clothes mattered and that the presentation of her public self played a part in perceptions of monarchy more broadly.

**The Court Newsman**

The Court Newsman is a figure for whom little scholarly attention has been given. It was a post first created by George III in the latter years of the 18th century in an attempt to curb some of the journalistic inaccuracies that abounded relating to the King’s engagements and occupations. The earliest incarnations of the Court Newsman’s work manifested themselves as short statements containing the bare essentials of the monarch’s daily schedule, printed in one corner of a page in *The Times*. However, his role began to gain some credence as more information was supplied to the press – the newsman acting as the intermediary between sovereign and editor, offering selected information at the same time as preserving monarchical privacy. Previously it was the penny-a-liner – the local hacks who followed the royal family avidly taking note of their every move to send back in time for the morning editions - who contributed most material relating to royal activities.

John Plunkett has examined the role of the Court Newsman from within his wider research into Queen Victoria’s relationship with the media and he asserts: ‘The court newsman was the monarchy’s own penny-a-liner; an institutional attempt to exploit the benefits of publicity.’ (Plunkett, 2003: 225)

The role was not without its critics. Punch cartoons depicted the court newsman as a peeping tom, prying into the intimacies of the royal family, whilst an editorial column in the Court Journal of 1833 took an opposing tack, maintaining: ‘the Court Newsman is a person whose only duty is that of *keeping* court secrets…’ (cited in Plunkett, 2003: 226) hinting that the banality of the reports was nothing more than smoke and mirrors, distracting from the real goings on at court.

It was during the reign of Victoria that the Court Newsman attained a position that underscored the Queen’s developing relationship with the press, Plunkett once more revealing: ‘He metamorphosed from a semi-official hanger on – a recorder of the haut ton – into an established royal functionary.’ (Plunkett, 2003: 227). It was in Victoria’s reign, too, that a choice appears to have been made from within the Royal Household to release details regarding the Queen’s attire at formal State functions. From the early 1850s, a short description of the Queen’s dress accompanied the official information disseminated in the Court Circular, this from May 3 1855: ‘The Queen wore a train of white and gold moire silk, trimmed with white satin riband, gold blonde and bows of red velvet. The petticoat was white satin trimmed with gold blonde and bows of red velvet. Her Majesty wore on her head an opal and diamond diadem and feathers.’ (*The Times*, May 3, 1855). Here then is a glimpse of the Office of Robes at work – that branch of the royal household concerned with ensuring that the Queen was appropriately dressed at all times, that her garments were ordered, paid for, maintained and packed for the whole spectrum of her public and private life. Whilst there is no evidence to date of the communication between Office of Robes and Court Newsman, the level of detail revealed in the descriptions of the gown down to the type of silk and variety of lace suggests a formal dialogue. Presumably once the garment had been selected for the Queen’s Drawing Room or concert or State Ball, the dresser or possibly the Mistress of Robes would communicate the details to the Court Newsman for its release in the Circular.

By the time of Alexandra’s marriage to Queen Victoria’s eldest son Edward in 1863, the monarchy had undergone a crisis of unpopularity following the Queen’s retreat from public life after her husband’s death. It fell to Alexandra to reinvigorate the public appetite for prominent royal figures and both she and her new husband recognised that the press must play a part in the generation of their public personas. On one of their earliest tours abroad, The Times correspondent William Russell was accorded the previously unheard of role of royal correspondent, documenting the trip in 1868, subsequently publishing his account with their blessing in two volumes a year later. He included watercolours of the party during their visit, capturing supposedly candid vignettes of the young Prince and Princess at play, travelling incognito as Mr and Mrs Williams. This pseudo-informality supposedly invited the reader into an intimate world of the royal couple with Russell acting as the official interface between public dissemination and private space. (Fig.2) Alexandra was depicted in her ‘Nile’ suit of striped cotton, ordinary looking garments that positioned her as an accessible figure, accompanied by Russell’s verbal sketches of informal outings: ‘Once again the Princess, attended by Mrs Grey, mounted on donkey back set out on a ramble through the never-failing delightful labyrinth.’ (Russell, 1869: 419)

At home, descriptions of Alexandra’s attendance at court functions subscribed to the formula established earlier by her mother in law and indeed the descriptions were to become, if anything, more detailed still. A sophisticated vocabulary of garment and fabric terms suggested a reader that could access such terminology in the absence of images and therefore imagine the vision they described, garments such as, from March 1876: ‘Her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales wore a dress of Venetian brocade, embroidered in pearls over a jupe of Nacre satin, with festoons of gauze de neige, bordered with dark fur, and a train of Venetian brocade lined with gauze neige trimmed to correspond. Headress – a tiara of diamonds, feathers and veil; ornaments, diamonds pearls and sapphires. Orders, Victoria & Albert, Catherine of Russia and the Danish Family Orders.’ (*The Times*, March 25, 1876) Alternatively, it could be argued that the vocabulary was deliberately exoticised, generating a narrative that was not supposed to be accessible but rather reading as a catalogue of unimaginable, unreadable luxury. The inclusion of the jewelled ornaments and orders worn at each occasion certainly underscores the hierarchy of those in attendance and the untouchable wealth in the mind’s eye of the reader.

What becomes apparent, and thus supports the argument that it was the office of robes disseminating these descriptions of Alexandra’s dress for the Court Circular to print, are the two distinct voices that emerge from the column depending on the occasion in question. For the evening and State functions, the formalised very specific sartorial information, delivered in the same formula year in year out suggests this official relationship coming from within the Royal Wardrobe. For the much scarcer descriptions of daytime, civic functions a different journalistic style emerges, descriptions redolent of opportunistic glimpses captured by one inexpert in the finer details of dress. The Court Circular recorded on May 22 1874 for example, that: ‘..on his arm leant the Princess of Wales, dressed in some delightful combination of black and maize, which the pen of man is powerless further to describe.’ (*The Times*, May 22, 1874) In other words, he hadn’t the first idea what such a delightful combination consisted of. In another, somewhat apologetic description from November of the same year: ‘The Princess wore a pale blue dress, the skirt of which had many small flounces and a long train; a cashmere shawl, polonaise jacket (this may be far from the proper name of a most becoming garment, but we hope it will convey an idea), and a dark bonnet trimmed with a pale blue feather.’ (*The Times*, November 4, 1874).

These distinct and separate voices from within the Court Circular are indicative of the division that still existed between press and monarchy – the official diffusion of Alexandra’s appearance at State functions in contrast with the unofficial verbal sketches captured by one of the many reporters following the Prince and Princess on their daily duties. Alexandra had recognised from an early point in her marriage that her appearance and positive reports of it increased her popularity. Queen Victoria felt some anxiety about her son and daughter in law’s propensity for fashion, writing in a letter to Edward in 1869: ‘Pray, dear children, let it be your earnest desire not to vie in dear Alix’s dressing with the fine London Ladies.’[[1]](#endnote-1) Alexandra knew, however, that without a public, political voice, her clothed body and descriptions of it were a means of ensuring her continued place at the top of the monarchical hierarchy, even at times when her husband’s popularity suffered serious setbacks. Popular images of her were circulated in their millions, the playful young mother, the recuperating invalid, intimate portraits that somehow prophesy a blurring of public/private boundaries now familiar in the contemporary celebrity tabloid.

Certainly the language adopted by the unofficial reporters of her public duties was intended to flatter. One reporter wrote on January 20 1874 that: ‘The Princess of Wales looked charming, but then to say so is like giving “her zone to Venus or his bow to Cupid”, and one feels with the rhyme that all such adjectives are “trite and stupid”. Her Royal Highness wore a dress of some brown material trimmed with the fur of the silver fox.’ (*The Times*, January 20, 1874) and in June 1888 when Alexandra was aged 44 the Court Circular concludes: ‘The first [carriage] contains the Princess of Wales, looking almost absurdly young, and her three daughters.’ (*The Times*, June 2 1888) She is variously described as looking charming, tasteful, lovely, delightful and youthful, hyperboles that were reinforced by the publication of retouched photographs of the Princess seeming to verify the constancy of her appearance. (Fig.3) The Court Circular itself was never subject to illustrations and so Alexandra’s dress continued to be captured and communicated verbally, reliant on both the authorised descriptions of her garments and the less polished but enthusiastic attempts of the roving reporter.

Easily lost amongst the elaborate description is, of course, the acknowledgement that real objects are the subject of these written accounts. Given that the root of this research is object based, founded on the 130 surviving garments of Alexandra’s now in museums around the world, matching description with garment in this context proved almost impossible. In two cases, however, it seems conceivable to attribute a particular Court Circular record with the garment in question. One evening gown now in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York seems to match the following report of Alexandra’s dress at the marriage of Alexander of Teck in February 1904: ‘The Queen looked charming in a dress of tulle covered with mauve, and glittering with paillettes of the same colour.’ (*The Times*, February 4, 1904) Similarly this account of a State Ball at Buckingham Palace describes: ‘Her Majesty in an essentially becoming gown of pale yellow satin embroidered with mauve flowers and gold intermingled with lace.’ (*The Times*, April 14, 1903)

Reinserting the object into the often-bland description of it is illuminating. It reveals the physicality of the clothed royal body, the full extent of the glitter, the embellishment, of what these things actually consisted of. It shows how, as Barbara Burman has asserted: ‘the material and textual illuminate and reinforce each other.’ (Burman, 2007: 157)

The post of the Court Newsman continued until 1918 at which point the role was subsumed into the remit of the Press Association. The Court Circular is still published today, printed daily in the larger broadsheets and updated on the British Monarchy’s official website but it has largely become an engagement calendar. It no longer records details of dress, this having long been absorbed into more visual sources, disseminating dress in an instantly more accessible fashion. For the many years of Alexandra’s popular royal career, however, the Court Circular functioned as one of the many ways in which she shared and controlled the public perception of her sartorial royal body, astutely aware of its power, albeit subtly, to promote a positive image.

**Like-Dressing – A Case Study**

By the early 1870s, Alexandra had become well versed in the reporting strategies of the British press and the increasingly sophisticated ways in which the Royal household could ensure that positive reports of royal activities were disseminated far and wide. It is perhaps no accident that some of Alexandra’s most determined and coordinated displays of her royal figure coincided with periods where her husband had proven to be less than predictable as a partner and as a public figure. In 1871 he wrote to Sir William Knollys, saying: ‘I fear fresh bothers are brewing – from abroad – in which my brother and myself are concerned.’[[2]](#endnote-2) These fresh bothers relating to a French courtesan by the name of La Barucci were another in a long line of scandalous episodes involving Bertie, something that was beginning to take its toll on the reputation of the British monarchy: ‘For the first time since the reign of George IV, the monarchy was facing a crisis of legitimacy. Not just the Prince of Wales but the Queen herself was under attack, drowning in a tide of gossip and innuendo.’ (Ridley, 2012: 134) The frequency and variety of Edward’s misdemeanours dogged Princess Alexandra’s life in the late 1860s and early 1870s. Given the context of their position, Alexandra knew what was expected of her: ‘She knew that to complain, privately or publicly, would inevitably lead to loss of dignity for herself as well as for Bertie, and that there was nothing to do but bow to the inevitable.’ (Hough, 1992: 173). To all intents and purposes this is what Alexandra did, but she knew that ultimately her power lay in the public’s perception of her. Throughout the trials and tribulations of Edward’s private life making very public headlines, Alexandra’s popularity was unwavering and she used the detailed reports of her public appearances to her advantage. The reports in the Court Circular that described her formal gowns were based primarily around colour and whilst there was much in her life that she could not control, this she could. Alexandra wore a whole range of shades according to the Court Circular descriptions but a survey charting the frequency of colour in her wardrobe revealed that the colour reported most frequently by *The Times* during the periods of Edward’s infidelities and misbehaviours was white. It is tempting to speculate that at a time when both her husband and her mother-in-law were at the receiving end of widespread public criticism, Alexandra was presenting herself as pure – as the anithesis of the brooding black of Queen Victoria and the murky shadiness of the Prince of Wales. Dress was a place of agency, of control over the message disseminated to the public and through those reports she might appear as an angel in an otherwise dysfunctional monarchy.

In a similar vein, Alexandra sensationalised her wardrobe and conveyed much about herself and her family loyalties in a piece of sartorial theatre that took place in 1873. A State visit of her sister Dagmar and husband, the young Tsarevitch and Tsarevna of Russia following their marriage in 1866, prompted plans between the two sisters to ensure that the visit was a dramatic one. Perhaps as a tribute to the playful atmosphere of their shared upbringing the two sisters determined on a sartorial display which deserves some consideration here, for its performative qualities and the desire to dress in a way that was in many ways ‘other’ in a public context and therefore intended to provoke comment in the press. In a biography of the Russian Czarevna, Corynne Hall explains: ‘She and Alix determined to make it the highlight of the Season and soon hit on a novel idea – they would dress exactly alike, day and evening (Fig.4). Soon their letters were full of dress patterns, materials, hats and trimmings.’ (Hall 1999: 58) How this was achieved given the great distance between them is testament to their organisation but also their familiarity with the workings of the couture houses. Worth claimed that his atelier facilitated the plans of the sisters, the Russian Czarevna already a loyal customer of the Parisian maison. De Marly writes: ‘It was this empress’s fervent admiration for Worth’s confections which persuaded her sister Alexandra, Princess of Wales, to visit the house, for the two liked to dress alike even though they lived far apart. When a meeting was likely letters flew between them secretly arranging to arrive in identical clothes and sometimes Worth was involved in the conspiracy.’ (De Marley 1980: 131) It may have been that their physical presence was not in fact required. Wealthy clients of many leading couturiers had their measurements kept on file, or even a dress form dedicated to them.

 Such a phenomenon was not uncommon in the nineteenth century. (Kirk 2013) Teenage sisters were often photographed in matching garments – Alexandra’s own daughters were similarly attired on occasion. The significance of Alexandra and Dagmar’s decision however, lay in the very public nature of the visit and their mutual positions as consorts-in-waiting of two of the world’s largest empires. No longer teenagers, they were both wives and mothers. In creating matching wardrobes for a prolonged state visit and appearing in matching gowns, they planned and participated in the performance of dressing up for an audience. The spectacle was timed to commence from the minute of the Russian Imperial couple’s arrival: ‘In June the Imperial yacht sailed into Woolwich, where it was met by the Prince and Princess of Wales. The Princess and the Tsarevna were dressed identically, each in a white dress and a straw bonnet with cherries on it. Such a sight had never been seen before on a royal occasion.’(Hall 1999: 58)

The performance was not only reserved for formal occasions: ‘Dagmar and Alix were determined to enjoy every moment. Crowds gathered as they took a morning drive in Hyde Park wearing blue and white foulard dresses: in the evening they caused a further sensation when they attended the great balls given by the leading Society hostesses.’ (Hall 1999: 60) Louisa, Lady Antrim wrote of one of these occasions: ‘the sisters set each other off and became the centre of a glittering crowd wherever they went.’ (Antrim 1937: 20) Dagmar’s married life had quickly followed a path at variance to Alexandra’s. Marrying into the Imperial Russian family, she was not only obliged to change her faith, becoming a member of the Russian Orthodox Church, but also changed her name in line with royal tradition. She married a man more comfortable when at home with his children than out in society and she married into a country that was beset with divisions. She became Empress at a much younger age than her sister, but like Alexandra was aware from a young age, just how much her appearance and the correct choice of dress given her position, mattered to those who observed her.

For the duration of the visit periodicals recorded the like-dressing of the two women, including occasions where it had been executed with a variation as described on August 2 1873: ‘HRH the Princess of Wales wore at the last garden party at Chiswick, pale blue silk trimmed with velvet of a darker shade and a bonnet ensuite. The Czarevna was in pink silk made in the same style and a bonnet to correspond.’[[3]](#endnote-3) A number of photographs captured the visit and the sisters in matching gowns, including perhaps the most famous image of the two women together in spotted silk day dresses. It is likely that Maria Feodorovna was referring to this dress two years later in a letter to her sister dated April 5 1875: ‘I just realised that I brute (sic) never paid you for all the dresses, and I have lost the bill; I'm sending you a little dress by opportunity, which every day shall take the place of our poor dear old spotted one. It's a lovely present! Hopefully you will like it!’ (Cited in Klausen 2001:56) Whilst this missive suggests a degree of reminiscence for their visit in 1873 and the device of dressing alike in public it is also indicative of a continued flow of acquisition between the sisters taking the form of gifts or the placing of orders. Official photographs originating from Russia attest to a similar correspondence of dress six months later when Alexandra and Edward travelled to St Petersburg for the wedding of the Duke of Edinburgh to the Grand Duchess Maria Alexandrovna. As young women still in their youthful twenties their ability to bring off such a sartorial performance at such great distance offers a compelling insight into another facet of Alexandra as consumer but also as a performer who knew just how visibly powerful this kind of display could be. It was not so much for the benefit of the few who witnessed their like-dressing at first hand, although this doubtless caused a stir in their social circle and amongst attendees at the formal functions at which they were both present, but was a conscious strategy designed to fill column inches in the newspapers and periodicals. Divided though these sisters might be, both geographically and culturally, they were united by family love and loyalties. Their own national identities had been swallowed by their respective marital dynasties, Queen Victoria adamant that Alexandra should distance herself from her roots. The Queen wrote to her eldest daughter Vicky in 1862 after Edward and Alexandra’s engagement: ‘the very thing dear Papa and I disliked so much in the connection is the Danish element.’ (cited in Fulford, 1968: 126) Their familial solidarity was thus articulated through dress and communicated in a way that would have been impossible in any other medium.

**Alexandra and the Photograph**

If the written word remained powerful as a means of conveying the aesthetics of Alexandra’s public persona to a keen general audience, the photograph was to become central to popular perceptions of her. Her marriage in 1863 coincided with the boom in affordable cartes de visite, the small albumen prints that were such a popular phenomenon in the 1860s especially, photographic studios selling 300-400 million prints in England alone between the years 1861 and 1867 (Rudd, 2016). Records of the Copyright Office of the Stationer’s Company list dozens of professional photographers who captured and sold Alexandra’s likeness to an enthusiastic public audience (Dimond, 2004:183) The dissemination of these cards were part of a popular visual currency, a shared connection between monarchy and the people that helped to cement the popular perception of Alexandra as somehow accessible. This new and powerful medium of photography was a means of relating to an otherwise unobtainable person, ‘Even as cartes existed in vast volumes and were infinitely reproducible and transmissible, they still retained a connection to the distinct human being who once sat in front of the camera to pose for their portrait.’ (Rudd, 2016: 199). The sartorial aesthetic that Alexandra chose most often to present in these popular souvenirs was one of ‘ordinariness’. Susan Stewart suggests that the function of the souvenir, ‘is to authenticate a past or otherwise remote experience’ (Stewart, 1993: 139). If we accept that Alexandra herself was the remote figure, the dissemination of her image arguably contributed to the authentication of her public persona that was at once both ordinary and extra-ordinary. Two of the most popular images created at Alexandra’s own request were generated in response to a serious illness that she suffered following the birth of her daughter Louise in 1867. After some weeks of patchy news, the British public were beginning to display their discontent at the lack of information relating to the health of the ever popular Princess of Wales. When the Prince of Wales attended Ascot, he was welcomed with, ‘a very flat reception as the Princess was not there but suffering at home.’[[4]](#endnote-4) (Royal Archive, 1867). As a direct response, the Princess took the unprecedented step of commissioning a photograph that captured her in a moment of candid recuperation. In the image by James Russell & Sons taken in August 1867, Alexandra was seated with her arms crossed in a pale day dress, possibly a more informal decorated wrapper, without the structural crinoline and significantly with her hair lying loose on her shoulders. (Fig.5) She was looking not at the camera but at some indistinct point beyond, a day dream of an image suggestive of a subject lacking in strength and photographed without her knowledge. It was an intimate glimpse of her recovery, an invitation to view her vulnerability in a garment that was not royal, but relatively ordinary. Far from projecting an image of monarchical invulnerability, Alexandra acknowledged her illness and made her ‘ordinariness’ available to the masses. Bookending this particular image was another, issued by W & D Downey in 1868 (Fig.6). To mark her recovery, Alexandra was photographed in a smart day ensemble, carrying her now one year old daughter on her back. This time she looks directly down the lens of the camera and beyond to the viewer, the picture of maternal fondness to a degree seldom witnessed in members of the royal family at that time. More used to the more formally chilly display of motherhood demonstrated by Queen Victoria, this playful composition proved to be equally as popular as the earlier image, two photographs that circulated in their millions and cemented Alexandra’s reputation as a princess of the people. She had achieved this not through glittering regality but rather through a royal body that looked anything but. Her garments in each image, whilst undoubtedly costly, were nonetheless relatively plain, informal or safely fashionable. Alexandra was not an ordinary person – her life was a rarified one that was at odds with the vast majority of the British people – but her canny sartorial choices in these widely available images created the fiction of similarity between princess and public.

Alexandra was a keen photographer herself although did not start developing her skills until the mid 1880s when her children were older. The earliest surviving album documents her life at this time in 240 circular photographs taken by a No. 1 Kodak camera: ‘The subject-matter of the photographs ranges from the Princess’s family and friends to horses, holidays and sea trips. The impression they give is of someone who is enjoying the use of her camera on every possible occasion.’ (Dimond, 2004: 61) Her knowledge of the process from composition to development and compilation of family photograph albums may have led to her most famous photographic contribution in 1908. *Queen Alexandra’s Christmas Gift Book – Photographs from my Camera* was published by the *Daily Telegraph* with the intention of raising money for charity. The book consisted of 136 photographs taken by the Queen, 46 of which were printed to resemble original prints and pasted onto dark green pages, interleaved with sheer tissue leaves just as many a middle class family photograph album would appear. The photographs captured her family at play, smiling sepia portraits that were a counterpoint to formal court representations. Selling for 2s 6d, copies of the album sold in vast numbers raising money for 30 different charities. Alexandra had succeeded in selling to the public a democratised face of royalty. Dressed in tailormade costumes and tweeds this was the accessible monarchy as rarely seen before, stripped of their royal orders, their jewels and their silks. An intimate family photograph album that could be purchased by everyman brought royalty to the shelves of millions of domestic spaces, a royalty that was dressed in familiar fashion.

**Diplomatic Dress**

For the duration of their married life, Edward and Alexandra travelled widely for pleasure but also for State and civic visits that were afforded detailed descriptions in both local and national press reports. From the late 1850s, this kind of royal activity was an accepted part of their role: ‘Royalty was now defined increasingly by its ‘public’ engagements rather than its involvement in high politics.’ (Plunkett, 2003: 53) The opportunity to use dress as a form of non-verbal communication in this context was not lost on Alexandra who, knowing the extent of the coverage that would follow their public appearances, ensured that her garments would convey appropriately flattering sentiments. Whilst Alexandra certainly reinforced this as a royal sartorial strategy, it was actually Queen Victoria who set the precedent for these diplomatic wardrobe choices. During her first visit to Ireland in 1849, the Queen had attended a State dinner at Dublin Castle on August 8: ‘that evening Victoria wore a dress of green Irish poplin lavishly embroidered with gold shamrocks and adorned by the blue ribbon and star of St Patrick. By then she could do no wrong in the eyes of Dubliners.’ (Arnstein, 2003: 80-81) Undertaking many more royal engagements after her marriage in 1863, Alexandra took this strategy and mastered its potential, relying upon the appetite for public descriptions of their appearances to spread the image of her appropriately attired royal body. During their own State visit to Ireland in 1885 at a Drawing Room and Levee, *The Times* reported: ‘The Princess of Wales wore a dress of bronze velvet draped in gold embroidery embossed with shamrocks.’ (*The Times*, 1885: 12) Following their return to England, Alexandra, who was aware of the important political significance of their cordial trip to Ireland, paid homage to their visit via her choice of dress for a public visit to the races: ‘All that the Princess could do to show the friendly Irish populace that she had not forgotten them was to appear at Ascot in the same outfit that she had worn at Punchestown Races, a green dress of Irish poplin trimmed with Irish lace, with Irish shamrocks in her white bonnet.’ (Battiscombe, 1971: 96). A further, and more unusual account, appeared in *The Times* in May that year. Dressmakers were never identified in descriptions of Alexandra’s clothing, at that time making such a connection between monarchy and commerce was, for *The Times*, not part of their remit. However, they wrote of Alexandra’s gown at a Drawing Room in Buckingham Palace: ‘a dress of rich yellow satin and silver brocade, draped with silver lace, corsage to correspond, made by Mrs Sims of Dublin.’ (*The Times*, 1885: 11) The communication of this detail can only have come from the royal household itself, demonstrating the control that Alexandra exerted over details released to the press relating to her appearance. These small but important sartorial nods to a different national or cultural space were to punctuate Alexandra’s royal career, details as seemingly insignificant as the choice of a hat. In 1871 during a trip to Austria to see the famous Passion Play at Oberammergau, Lady Constance Battersea recalled of the day: ‘I remember how attractive the Princess looked in a green Tyrolese hat.’ (Battersea, 1923: 91) An accessory it might have been but the significance would not have been lost on the local population.

**Conclusion**

In their insightful volume that decodes different European monarchies, media and power structures, Blain & O’Donnell suggest that: ‘obsession with Royal events is a British media habit.’ (Blain & O’Donnell, 2003: 2). Whether via the pages of glossy gossip magazines, websites or social media feeds, the appearance of prominent royal women is still scrutinised minutely. In 2018, *Hello Magazine* ran an article that described seven occasions when garments worn by the Duchess of Cambridge sold out within hours of their public appearance: ‘the term ‘the Kate effect’ was even coined to describe the impact she had on fashion brands after being pictured in their clothes.’ (*Hello Magazine*, 2018). The Duchess of Cambridge has taken on the now customary tradition of dressing to flatter the host nation during State visits just as Queen Elizabeth II has for decades and as Queen Alexandra once did, decades earlier again. What is now viewed as commonplace, especially in the presence of 24 hour news and a voracious tabloid press, was once a novel strategy, regarded by Alexandra Princess of Wales as a useful tactic through which she could manage and manipulate her public image through a long and often turbulent royal career. Male royals of the 19th century expressed power often through uniform, as Philip Mansel explores in *Dressed to Rule*: ‘The nineteenth century would be the century of military monarchy.’ (Mansel, 2005: 111). For a woman in Alexandra’s position, no matter how recognisable a figure she might be, she had no public voice. Dress became the means through which she might influence public opinion, shape her royal persona and at times even communicate emotions through her choice of clothes. To manage this effectively she had to be complicit in the dissemination of her royal wardrobe to agencies beyond the palace walls – to the Court Newsman, the professional photographers, the journalists and the couturiers who all collaborated in the construction of her celebrity. The last word then, goes to Alexandra herself whose resolve on sartorial matters after decades of successfully negotiating such details, was by 1902, unwavering. When challenged on decisions relating to her Coronation gown she pronounced: ‘I know better than all the milliners and antiquaries. I shall wear exactly what I like…’ (Cited in Esher, 1934: 318).

**Images**

**Figure 1.** Alexandra, Princess of Wales in 1863, cabinet card, author’s own collection.

**Figure 2.** Alexandra, Princess of Wales, in her ‘Nile’ costume, 1869, illustration by William Russell, author’s own collection.

**Figure 3.** Alexandra, Princess of Wales, 1890s, Rotary Photographic Series, author’s own collection.

**Figure 4.** Alexandra, Princess of Wales and her sister Maria Feodorovna during the Russian state visit to London, 1873, Myall & Co, albumen print, Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2020.

**Figure 5.** Alexandra, Princess of Wales, recuperating from illness, Aug 1867, James Russell and Sons, albumen print, Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2020

**Figure 6.** Alexandra, Princess of Wales carrying her daughter Princess Louise, Sept 1868, W & D Downey, albumen print, Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2020

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1. Royal Archive, RA/Z/449/51 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Royal Archive, VIC/Add C07/1/0691, B to Knollys, 20 July 1871 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. *The Queen, Lady’s Newspaper and Court Circular*, British Library Colindale, LON MLD 45, 1873 Vol 2: 101 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Royal Archive, 1867 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)