



DRESS & FASHION RESEARCH

INSIDE THE ROYAL WARDROBE

A DRESS HISTORY OF QUEEN ALEXANDRA

KATE STRASDIN

B L O O M S B U R Y

INSIDE THE ROYAL WARDROBE

DRESS AND FASHION RESEARCH

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A dress history of Queen Alexandra

KATE STRASDIN

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INTRODUCTION

For over half a century, Alexandra, Princess of Wales and Queen Consort (1844–1925), reigned as one of the most stylish women in Britain. From her twenties to her matriarchal and still youthful sixties, Alexandra's legacy has been defined through dress. She was not, according to contemporary accounts, a brilliant woman, but she was a canny one and she had an innate sense of the fitness of her appearance for any given occasion. In a new world of an increasingly powerful and influential media, Alexandra recognized that how she presented herself to the world mattered.

Now, almost 150 years later, this book offers the opportunity to study in depth and detail, some of those garments, which helped to make Alexandra one of the most popular public figures of her day. It is an interdisciplinary study using objects of textiles and dress, alongside written sources, to gain an understanding of how Alexandra's working royal wardrobe operated. There have survived, in museums across the world, a variety of gowns, shoes, shawls, fans, coats, stockings, gloves, petticoats and nightgowns that once formed part of a vast working wardrobe that required its own department within the royal household and half a dozen full-time staff just to ensure it ran smoothly. The survival of these objects, disparate and random though they are, allows an attempt at an analysis of a life through dress, for clothes 'can reflect in fabric and stitches, the factual and emotional story of their life' (Taylor, de la Haye, Thompson 2005: 14). This then forms the premise for the research which follows, the story which objects, in this case clothes, can tell of a life; the contextualization of a period of history through its surviving material culture.¹ As Ann Smart Martin, long-time champion of material culture studies, states: 'Material objects matter because they are complex symbolic bundles of social, cultural and individual meanings fused into something we can touch, see and own' (Smart Martin 1993: 141).

Why Alexandra?

From the moment she alighted from the royal yacht at Gravesend to enter Britain and marriage to the heir to the throne, Princess Alexandra of Denmark captured the hearts of a British public starved of royal youth and glamour.

Alexandra married Edward on 10 March 1863 in St George's Chapel Windsor, sealing her fate as one of the most prominent members of the British monarchy. It was in essence an arranged marriage, the couple having met in a prearranged location in Belgium at the request of the Queen Victoria to assess their compatibility, but it was to be a union which, if not a love match, at least evolved into a companionable partnership. Perhaps because her youth and beauty sat in such stark contrast to the reclusive Queen Victoria (1819–1901), Alexandra very quickly became an immensely popular public figure. Fifty years later the widowed queen Alexandra was still a public favourite as witnessed by the crowds that lined the streets of London every year for her annual Alexandra Rose Day, which, although a trial for the ageing queen, was still a testament to the enduring regard felt for her in the public consciousness.

However, less than 100 years after her death, she has become a little known consort – a footnote in the history of Edward VII's own colourful life. While scholars might acknowledge the important role played by Alexandra during her years of influence, the public perception of her is slight. A typical reaction to this research on Queen Alexandra seems to be an awareness that she was Scandinavian, thin and married to a philandering husband. In spite of the many civic reminders of her popularity in the nineteenth century – and there are many Queen Alexandra hospitals, Alexandra Roads and Alexandra Houses around the UK as well as internationally in former colonial locations – her place in the collective memory has faded. This being the case why do her surviving clothes matter? Why Alexandra? Working as an assistant within a large costume collection in the late 1990s, the donation of a number of gowns made by the couturier John Redfern in the early twentieth century set me on the path towards this project. Discovering that one of Redfern's most celebrated customers had been Queen Alexandra, I began to try to find surviving Redfern garments associated with her. While these did not in fact exist any longer I found that many other garments did. It soon became apparent, however, that there was a disparity between the objects I was discovering in museums and the traditional published biographies. Given that her popular public image making was so bound up with her appearance, those objects to have survived that were the embodiment of that public persona were stored in museums undisturbed and unresearched. Here was the clothing of a major public figure scattered around the world, their stories untold.

It can be argued that a detailed study of the clothing of the nineteenth-century super-elite is deeply unfashionable territory for an historian to embark upon, what Fine and Leopold called the description of 'every flounce, pleat, button or bow' (1993: 94). What this book reveals is so much more than that. Not only does it attempt to bridge the gap between the written history, the subject and the object but it also encompasses many classes of experience. The story would therefore not be complete without those men and women whose working lives brought them into the sphere of Alexandra's royal wardrobe.

There is no dearth of published biography about Alexandra. Several accounts were written in her lifetime, and others soon after her death and more sprinkled over the course of the twentieth century. While her appearance and often certain occasions of her dress are noted in each one, there has never been a detailed analysis of how she dressed, why she dressed as she did and the wider impact of her choice of dress. The chance to assess the material objects alongside the rich textual record in what is very much a multidisciplinary approach is still relatively new. In 1998 Valerie Steele wrote:

Because intellectuals live by the word, many scholars tend to ignore the important role that objects can play in the creation of knowledge. Even many fashion historians spend little or no time examining actual garments, preferring to rely exclusively on written sources and visual representations. (Steele 1998: 327)

This is not just the story of Alexandra's clothes; it is the story of the life that inhabited them. Brenda Maddox wrote about some of the realities of life writing in a review for the *New York Times* in 1999: 'Initial detachment gives way to genuine sympathy after seeing someone through so much' (Maddox 1999). She did not necessarily *like* the subjects of the biographies that she had written but recognized that 'any life is interesting when looked at close up' (Maddox 1999). There have been times during the research and writing of this, when I have felt an irrational need to apologize for my choice of subject. The excesses of royal consumption and the vast sums of money spent upon the appearance of one woman were sometimes uncomfortable facts set in the wider context of nineteenth-century British society. I wasn't altogether sure how I felt about Queen Alexandra at times although I came to admire her in many ways and I felt I 'knew' her better. Trying to better understand a life via the random survival of the person in question's clothing can be an ambitious project. There are many challenges inherent in such an approach that range from access and condition of the garment, geographical location and therefore cost of access and a lack of adequate information relating to the object itself. It is tempting to apply meaning to an object when it is associated with a well-known person when in fact the significance is not so great. It is important to stress that throughout this text, assumptions made on Alexandra's clothing choices are based on the evidence available. As with so much historical discourse, narratives can change, given a different set of sources.

The surviving contents of Queen Alexandra's wardrobe were fascinating from the outset. The interrogation of the object can be a significant moment – one that Jill Lepore discovered when researching the life of the American scholar Noah Webster. Among his family papers in the Amherst College Library, she discovered an envelope containing a lock of Webster's hair: 'That lifeless, limp

hair had spent decades in an envelope, in a folder, in a box, on a shelf, but holding it in the palm of my hand made me feel an eerie intimacy with Noah himself. And, against all logic, it made me feel as though I knew him – and, even less logically, *liked* him – just a bit better’ (Lepore 2001: 129).

This is a biographical work although it does not cover the entirety of the life in question. The extant garments guide the biographical framework so that it is simultaneously a biography of the objects themselves. However, it has also taken a micro-historical analysis of the person and her clothing, revealing layers of social and cultural complexity involved in the managed appearance of a public figure.

Alexandra’s biography has been written before, both during her lifetime and very shortly after her death. And in more recent decades there have been volumes dedicated to her either as an individual or in partnership with Edward. The more carefree childhood that she enjoyed sits in stark contrast to the rigidity of Edward’s upbringing, although her Danish roots were to be the subject of great anxiety to Queen Victoria when the marriage negotiations were underway (Fulford: 1968: 53). Following their marriage she was to be subsumed by the British establishment, expected to lay aside to some degree her own national identity. The early years of the royal marriage, so scrutinized by Queen Victoria, the British press and the public alike, lived up to expectations. In spite of the queen’s disquiet relating to the social whirl into which Edward and Alexandra threw themselves, the young couple quickly produced an heir and proceeded to enchant the nation with their own brand of visible, glittering monarchy so long denied to the British public. However, Edward’s propensity towards boredom and a desire to be constantly entertained in lieu of a more responsible role was to test both his marriage and his relationship with his subjects (Magnus 1964: 107). The scandals that followed the Prince of Wales from the late 1860s onwards, along with the string of mistresses left in his wake, were to dispel the earlier myths of an enduring love match. If it was not true love, however, nor was it necessarily a deeply unhappy union. Displaying a pragmatism that was a feature of Alexandra’s general approach to life, she came to accept her husband’s failings. At times, and displayed through dress, she might distance herself from his follies. Her choice of white evening wear throughout the 1870s was a display of purity in the face of his transgression and her neat suits spoke of control where Edward’s growing waistbands were indicative of excess. She might feel acutely disappointed and angry with him but by the 1880s theirs was a partnership apparently based on mutual respect, sometime frustration, and acceptance. Romantic love there may not have been but a fond companionship appears to have been the defining feature of their almost fifty-year marriage.

Alexandra’s role as a mother was also one which divided family opinion. She seems to have been a more relaxed parent than Queen Victoria ever was, allowing her children a far greater degree of freedom more akin to her own childhood experiences. Sandringham was a noisy, happy family home and

Alexandra was not the distant maternal figure that Victoria arguably was. She was to become a tenacious parent as the children reached maturity. Perhaps owing to the loss of her baby in 1871 and then the death of her son Eddy in 1892, Alexandra thereafter was to be an intense presence in her children's lives. For her son George this manifested itself in an infantilized correspondence between mother and grown-up son, in which she often used language suited to a child and signed herself 'motherdear'. For her daughter Victoria it was to result in a life of spinsterhood and servitude to her fond but dominant mother. Unlike her mother-in-law, however, Alexandra could and did show her children love.

This relationship between Alexandra and Queen Victoria is one that features prominently at different points in this book. Undoubtedly there were periods of antagonism between the two women, but the records show that here too Alexandra used dress to mollify and flatter her difficult mother-in-law. From the outset she created a grey poplin gown, worn on her arrival in the UK and chosen to represent Victoria's favourite colour. She wore the royal tartan in ball gowns at Balmoral, although her description of Scotland as 'gloomy' suggests that this was a dutiful act. She patronized many of the same suppliers as Victoria as a comparison of her wardrobe accounts and Victoria's office of robes ledgers confirms. As the years passed there was a growing fondness between the two women but although Alexandra might show a willingness to compromise on occasion, she used dress also to assert her position. Her tailor-mades emphasized the slimness of which Victoria so disapproved. Of course, by 1863 when Alexandra married Edward, Queen Victoria was already growing stouter and her girth was to increase as the years passed. This may account, in part, for the disapproval she expressed towards her daughter-in-law's slender frame. Her evening gowns of Parisian manufacture flew in the face of Victoria's fiercely patriotic consumption. Alexandra presumably wanted to distance herself from the black crape of Victoria and project herself as the antithesis to Victoria's clothed body.

From the 1870s, after her childbearing years were over, the Princess of Wales coped with loss frequently – loss of hearing, loss of mobility following a debilitating bout of rheumatic fever. She suffered the loss of an idealized marriage. She suffered the loss of family members from whom she was geographically distant and then the loss of her son Albert Edward, only a month after his engagement to Princess May of Teck (Fisher 1974: 143). Throughout, she maintained her high-profile public life, attending civic events, society entertainments, travelling in the UK and abroad. For the almost forty years that she was the Princess of Wales she coupled this loss and disappointment with a busy calendar of social diversions and monarchical duty. Following Queen Victoria's death in 1901, the new queen Alexandra largely continued to be both entertaining, entertained and dutiful but with a newly regal edge. Edward took to kingship in a surprisingly effective manner with Alexandra as his majestic companion. Their relationship had reached so amenable a place that Alexandra felt able not only to acknowledge but also to joke about his mistresses.

We cannot know if such levity masked a continuing pain at his infidelity but accounts do seem to support a mutual understanding by the early twentieth century. Although the Edwardian years popularly bask in a halcyon glow, perhaps with the hindsight of the turmoil that was to follow, neither Edward nor Alexandra was carefree young monarchs. In their sixties, they still maintained a relentless schedule until Edward's death in 1910.

Although Alexandra did not play an important political or diplomatic role in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it could be argued that without her the republican movement that had been growing ever stronger in the early 1860s would have flourished and gained a greater foothold in Britain: that in some sense she was the saviour of the British monarchy. In 1862 Queen Victoria was widely criticized for the perceived abandonment of her post. Alexandra's admittance into this inner circle of monarchy breathed life into the institution. As the epitome of a 'princess' her clever clothing choices meant that she was both regal as the event required, or through a general conformity of style she made herself more available as a public figure in a way that Victoria had ceased to be. In a sense Alexandra engaged with the artifice of dress as explored by Joanne Entwistle: 'Public roles as performances put a discreet distance between self and "other" and between public and private life' (Entwistle 2000:118). She used her clothing, judged on the merits of any given event or time of day, to both fit into upper-class Britain and to simultaneously stand out as a prominent public figure. It is easy now to be dismissive of so apparently passive a figure – but her role was arguably multifaceted. Civic duties brought her to the people and served to enhance her popularity. Philanthropic work and charitable causes raised awareness of areas of need. Her role was not about challenging the status quo – her position did not allow hugely reformative acts – but she could support causes and thus make a contribution towards improvement as exhibited by her interest in army nursing conditions.

As dowager queen, Alexandra's social life ceased with the loss of her husband. Aside from the occasional public occasion, she withdrew from society's gaze, lamenting the loss of her youth and secluding herself in Sandringham. The tone of her scant surviving correspondence and of those around her point to some unhappy final years during which her deafness and fragility became a burden that was hard to bear in one who had been so colourful a public character. Her death in 1925 was marked by a surge of national feeling, the notable features of her life once again featuring in the nation's press with a surfeit of memorial issues in her name.

This summary of her life arguably presents that which was already 'known' of Alexandra, as disseminated by published biographies, which begs the question: What does this book add to that biography? These facts are unassailable as the accurate events that shaped the path of Alexandra's life. However, in approaching this biography through the material culture that populated her life, an altogether more rounded picture shall emerge.

1

MANAGING THE ROYAL WARDROBE

On the day that Alexandra actually arrived ashore at Gravesend for her marriage to the future king of England, her chosen attire was not yet that of the wealthy Princess of Wales she was to become: 'Among all this new-found splendour Princess Alexandra still kept her old simplicity: ... when at last the day came to leave for England she travelled in a very smart bonnet she had made herself' (Battiscombe 1969: 44). Certainly, Alexandra was at a complete loss when it came to matters of dress deemed suitable to fulfil her new role. One of Queen Victoria's most trusted ladies-in-waiting, Lady Augusta Bruce, was called upon for advice on the matter, who herself first consulted Queen Victoria; 'Three or four trains and *grandes toilettes* will, the Queen thinks, be sufficient.'¹ It soon became apparent, however, that three or four *grandes toilettes*, while considered sufficient in the eyes of an ageing, monochromatic monarch, was far from satisfactory for a young elegant princess in the possession of a new-found clothes allowance. Certainly by 1869, the Queen felt compelled to warn Edward and Alexandra, prior to a shopping trip to Paris: 'Pray, dear children, let it be your earnest desire not to vie in dear Alix's dressing with the fine London Ladies, but rather to be as *different as possible by great simplicity* which is more elegant.'² While Alexandra agreed with the notion of simplicity in dress, the quantity of such simplicity was another matter.

Shopping itself in the manner described by contemporary observers in London was impossible for so popular and easily recognizable a woman as Alexandra. In 1859, Augustus Sala's vivid depiction of one of the metropolis's principal shopping areas draws a scene of social, colourful chaos:

Regent Street is an avenue of superfluities, a great trunk-road in Vanity Fair. Fancy watchmakers, haberdashers, and photographers; fancy stationers, fancy hosiers, and fancy staymakers; music shops, shawl shops, jewellers, French glove shops, perfumery and point lace shops, confectioners and milliners; creamily, these are the merchants whose wares are exhibited in this Bezesteen of the world. (Sala 1859: 145)

The extension of the omnibus service in the city and the migration of the upper classes to the suburbs extended both the range of shops and the means to get to them for the masses. The act of shopping itself was an ambivalent one among contemporary commentators, some of whom feared for the moral integrity of female consumers in the new department stores (Rappaport 2000: 29).

Given this debate, it could be argued that Alexandra had to play the role of an invisible consumer. In order to avoid the critics that decried 'excessive shopping' Alexandra had to consume from a distance. All of her clothes came from well-known retailers and couture houses and yet her presence as a client was not discussed in the press, preventing open criticism of conspicuous consumption.

Arthur Beavan makes a reference to the means by which Alexandra was able to look as she wished, without a trip to Regent Street. The author was allowed access to Marlborough House and the daily life of its occupants and he noted: 'She has a decided penchant for millinery. As a rule Her Royal Highness designs her own dresses: that is to say coloured pictures of the proposed gown are submitted to her, and she, with brush or pencil, alters the picture to suit her own perfect taste' (Beavan 1896: 84). Brief though this vignette is, of Alexandra 'at home', the description of her private decision making far from the public gaze is instructive. Beavan portrays the confident client, the woman who could take a design and customize it to meet her requirements. If this is indeed an accurate depiction of one of Princess Alexandra's means of acquiring her clothes, it also deals efficiently with any concerns over discretion and privacy. Presumably the dressmaker kept a dress form that matched Alexandra's measurements and, once supplied with her amended design, could undertake the commission with a minimum of fuss.

The Parisian firm of Morin Blossier supplied Alexandra with a large number of her evening dresses from the 1890s until Edward's death in 1910. Since she did not visit Paris with great regularity and there was no UK branch of the establishment, there was clearly a means by which her dresses were supplied that did not require her physical presence, especially since couturier workrooms were such busy places. One syndicated newspaper column described the workshop of Morin Blossier: 'In the corsage department is to be noted a vast wardrobe with pigeon holes, where every client has a fitted lining kept in a numbered and ticketed case.'³ Presumably this was a common means by which wealthy clients from around the world might order gowns at a distance from the actual premises.

A single folio of Alexandra's wardrobe accounts from the year 1898 reveals the variety of patronage and the geographical spread of the retailers she frequented.⁴ The page includes payments made between May and November and lists twenty-nine different payees. Of these, eight are dressmakers