

Victoria & Albert Art & Love

Mr Macready and his monarch

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Although he deserves a place in any pantheon of eminent Victorians, even the basic details of the life and work of William Charles Macready are not as widely known as they deserve to be, or indeed, for today's purposes, need to be. Briefly then: Macready was born on 3 March 1793 in what is now Stanhope Street, near Euston station, the fifth of eight children of actor William Macready/M'cready and his wife Christina Birch. The fortunes of the elder Macready fluctuated greatly, but in 1803 they were sufficiently buoyant for him to send William Charles to Rugby School, where the boy set his sights on a career in the Church or Law. Alas, in December 1808, a downturn in his father's fortunes resulted in Macready's removal from Rugby, his enlistment in the family firm and – on 7 June 1810 – his debut as Romeo in Birmingham. Following extensive provincial experience Macready made his London debut on 16 September 1816, but success in the capital did not come until his performance as Richard III on 25 October 1819, which invited comparison with Edmund Kean. Compared with Kean, Macready lacked mercurial energy, but he brought great intelligence, powerful vocal delivery and a strong physical presence to this and other roles in his repertoire.

During the 1820s and 1830s Macready established himself as the head of the profession of which he was ever a reluctant member. He successively managed the two great patent theatres, Covent Garden (1837–9) and Drury Lane (1841–3). These theatres still enjoyed the monopoly on the staging of Shakespeare in the capital, which dated back to 1660, but was finally abolished by the Theatre Regulation Act of 1843. Their status as 'National Theatres' was fiercely contested at the time. As a manager Macready was innovative in several ways: restoring the text; holding painstaking rehearsals; paying detailed historical attention to sets and costumes; making the auditorium comfortable and respectable for middle-class audiences; and encouraging the likes of Robert Browning and Edward Bulwer Lytton to write plays.

Macready was one of the first actors to establish an international reputation, visiting Paris in 1822 and 1844, performing before Louis Philippe about whom, as a professed republican, Macready had mixed feelings, and making friends with George Sand. He visited republican America three times (in 1826–7, 1843–4 and 1848–9), and even seems to have considered retiring there, but on his final visit he was associated with Anglophile elitism and his rivalry with the American actor Edwin Forrest culminated in the Astor Place Riots (which led to nearly thirty fatalities). Macready's motive had been to build up his funds for retirement, and on his return

he carried out a series of farewell performances, culminating in *Macbeth* at Drury Lane on 26 February 1851 and a grand dinner masterminded by Charles Dickens on 1 March. He had already settled on the impressive Sherborne House as his retirement home. Sadly, his first wife and several of their children did not live long enough to enjoy it. However, in 1860, at the age of 67, he married 23-year-old Cecile Spencer, who bore him a son, Nevil, who was to become a much-decorated soldier and baronet. Macready died on 27 April 1873 and was buried in the family vault at Kensal Green.

Two years after Macready's death his friend Sir Frederick Pollock published *Macready's Reminiscences and Selections from his Diaries and Letters*. By the standards of the day the diaries were considered to be extraordinarily frank. The *Athenaeum* review (27 March 1875) declared: 'There is nothing omitted that a reader has a right to look for in such a record, as regards the history of the stage and the home life of the actor.'¹ However, in the Prefatory Note to a new edition in 1912 William Toynbee referred to 'a considerable portion of the diaries' withheld by Pollock, but 'after the lapse of nearly forty years the reasons for this suppression no longer hold good'.² Toynbee therefore included several hitherto omitted sections, but by no means the unexpurgated text: when J.C. Trewin came to prepare his edition in the 1960s he found that Nevil Macready had destroyed the manuscript at the outbreak of war in 1914. Nevertheless, William Macready's diaries are unquestionably the single most important and valuable source on the theatre in the first half of the nineteenth century and a wonderful complement to the journal kept by that enthusiastic theatregoer, Queen Victoria herself. Having the same occasion described independently by two diarists is a rare occurrence. (Some years ago I worked on Lewis Carroll and the theatre, drawing on the diaries that he kept from 1855 to 1898, but only twice did I find a matching description between Carroll and another eyewitness of the same occasion.)

Both George Rowell in *Queen Victoria Goes to the Theatre* (1978) and Richard Schoch in *Queen Victoria and the Theatre of Her Age* (2004) drew substantially on Victoria's diaries, as I have been fortunate enough to be able to do with the narrower focus of Macready. The monarch's journal and Mr Macready's diary provide my essential source material. On 22 June 1837, two days after the 18-year-old Victoria had succeeded to the throne, Macready expressed himself as follows:

June 22nd. Overtook an omnibus on my way to the theatre, in which I found [John Bryant] Lane,³ who showed me a drawing he had made (which he acknowledged to be too handsome) of the young Queen for a medal – the gold medal to be £10 10s., the silver £1 10s., the copper 10s. Does it not sicken a rational mind to see the great gifts of reason enslaved and debased to such senseless folly as that men should set up these golden calves of worship, of their own fabrication, and then bow down to them, instead of keeping their eyes fixed on the mighty God who made them, and all His mighty works that He created with them and for them? The crowd of fools that herded together yesterday to

*sweat for hours under a burning sun, choking the streets, and lining the house-tops and the windows upon the occasion of the proclamation of Queen Victoria, shows how distant is the hope of the people of this country living for themselves and seeking the real truth in the knowledge and machinery of Government!*⁴

This may be compared with his entry for 19 August 1837: 'Wrote my memorial to the Queen, requesting her to let me call the Covent Garden players, "Her Majesty's Company of Performers." Inclosed [sic] it in a note to the Lord Chamberlain and sent it.'⁵ On 27 July Macready had discussed his proposal for royal patronage of his theatre with the barrister and writer William Wallace (1786–1839), who had encouraged him and agreed to try to enlist Lord Durham (1st Earl, 1792–1840) in the cause, but to no avail. A message from the Lord Chamberlain on 23 August revealed that 'the Queen ... had great respect for Mr. Macready and admiration for his talent, that the precise object of his request required consideration, but that if it should be deemed impracticable to concede, that she trusted other means might be found of rendering assistance to his undertaking'.⁶ As Richard Schoch observes, 'the actor's hypocrisy was in vain', but the incident set the tone for the future: 'Macready forever after bore a grudge'.⁷ One unintended outcome was a request from the Queen for a reduction of the annual rent on the royal box from £400 to £350.

Victoria had been a keen theatregoer before she became queen. Her remarks about Macready were perceptive and positive. She considered that he 'acted beautifully' as King John at Drury Lane on 9 December 1833, adding that '[w]e came to the very beginning and stayed to the very end. We came home at 10 minutes past 12. I was very much amused. I was soon in bed and asleep'.⁸ One of the Queen's particular favourites was Bertulphe in *The Provost of Bruges* by George W. Lovell, the first night of which she attended on 10 February 1836 at Drury Lane. Macready again 'acted most beautifully', but this time the ardent young theatregoer had rather more to say:

*The strange mixture of immense ambition, pride, revenge, and doating [sic] paternal affection Bertulphe's character, the bursts of passion, despair, anguish and again placid calmness, were most admirably, nay splendidly depicted by Macready, never did I see him act more beautifully. He displayed such feeling and expression. He is so natural, his very eyes, hands, and every limb were so much in character in their actions ... Macready was very much applauded throughout.*⁹

In less than a week (on 16 February), Victoria again found Macready acting 'if possible, still more beautifully than he did the other day':

*All this, and everything in the tragedy, Macready acted beautifully. The speech here, in which he relates his birth, and how he made his way to the high station of Provost, is very spirited, as are many of the other speeches in this fine Tragedy. The way in which Bertulphe stabs himself and dies, exclaiming in half-broken accents, 'I am not a serf', is splendidly realised by Macready... After it was all over loud cries of 'Macready' were heard and he appeared and gracefully acknowledged the applause of the spectators.*¹⁰

Probably, unwittingly, Victoria picked up some of Macready's distinctive traits of: rapid transitions of mood from, say, 'passion' to 'calmness', as well as Bertulphe's pride in an office he has achieved rather than been born into. As Byron's Werner at Covent Garden, on 17 November 1837, Victoria criticised Macready for 'ranting a little too much at times',¹¹ as he was increasingly prone to do.

It is a testimony to Victoria's love of the theatre that she maintained her interest in it after her accession to the throne and her marriage to Prince Albert, with the ensuing pregnancies. By background and temperament Albert was a more serious-minded theatregoer. He came from the tradition of continental court theatres, and his turn of mind chimed with German scholarship on Shakespeare, which often led the field. What evolved might be called the royal couple's three-tiered approach to the theatre: private visits to public performances at London theatres; command performances, also at London theatres, but specifically for the monarch and her entourage, though still attended by the public; and, from December 1848, performances at Windsor Castle, exclusively for the royal family and the court. This approach embraced many different theatres and, indeed, forms of entertainment – the Queen's penchant for Isaac Van Amburgh and his lions at Drury Lane was a source of great irritation to Macready ('January 25th [1839] Read in the *Morning Post* the account of the Queen's third visit to Drury Lane theatre to see the beasts, and of her going upon the stage after the pantomime to see them feed'¹²).

Though not without its irritation, a private royal visit to a London theatre was the least disruptive for the actor/manager. Thus on 5 February 1839 Macready received a '[n]ote from the Queen's equerry, informing me of her intention to visit the theatre this evening ... The Queen came but was not recognised.'¹³ Victoria herself simply recorded that "'The Tempest' is very well got up, and was acted well by Macready as Prospero';¹⁴ she was less complimentary about Helen Faucit as Miranda. At this stage she was no admirer of the actress who was to marry Theodore Martin, the Prince Consort's first biographer. Similarly, Macready received short notice of the Queen's visit to *King Lear* on 18 February, though it was enough for him to seize the opportunity to point 'at her the beautiful lines: "Poor naked wretches!"'.¹⁵ For her part Victoria appreciated that Macready's revival was 'according to the text of Shakespeare', discarding (most of) Nahum Tate and restoring the Fool ('delightfully' played by Miss Faucit), and she judged Macready 'in parts ... very fine, particularly in the last Scene, where he brings in Cordelia's body, but at times he was much too violent and passionate'.¹⁶

Macready may have overdone his delivery of 'Poor naked wretches', but Victoria's response to *King Lear* occasioned a lively discussion with her Prime Minister, Lord Melbourne. Melbourne regarded *Lear* as 'a rough, coarse play, written for those times',¹⁷ but chronicle plays such as *Henry V*, which the Queen attended on 15 July 1839, clearly struck a chord with the nation's developing sense of patriotism.

Again her decision to attend seems to have been spontaneous, 'it being the last night but one of the season and Macready going to give up the management'.¹⁸ As with *King Lear*, she arrived when the play was well under way, but was suitably impressed by the splendid scenery (by Clarkson Stanfield) and aware of Macready's textual probity.

The extent, range and balance of the Queen's patronage of the theatre were the subject of debate. During the nearly two years of Macready's Covent Garden management Victoria had attended 14 times, but this is compared with a total of around ninety visits during the same the period, many to the opera at Her Majesty's and seven to Van Amburgh's lion-taming show at Drury Lane between 10 January and 26 February 1839. The Queen's record during Macready's management at Drury Lane was no improvement, amounting to only four visits compared with 26 elsewhere.¹⁹ On 11 March 1841 she attended *Gisippus* by the late J. Griffin, commenting on Macready's wonderful acting in the title role, and on 4 April the royal couple went to *Macbeth*, which Albert had never seen before. Macready referred to neither occasion. In contrast, the royal couple's attendance at the command performance of *As You Like It* on 12 June 1843 was a major event for all concerned. As with the performance of *Henry V*, that of *As You Like It* marked the end of Macready's management.

Not surprisingly the *Theatrical Journal* observed that this royal patronage came too late to save Macready as manager, but the tide of history was flowing towards deregulation, in which the status of the patent houses could not be preserved: 'The two patent national houses are now without tenants.'²⁰ As the Queen reported, '[t]he House was immensely full' – which was to put it mildly. As with previous command performances, Macready had resisted the temptation to raise prices for the paying public. No doubt he saw this as some grand egalitarian gesture, but the result was severe discomfort for most of the tightly-packed audience – but not for the Queen, of course, who looked regally radiant in black velvet with diamonds and the Garter Ribbon, accompanied by Albert in full military dress. After 300 professionals had sung the National Anthem from the stage, the performance got under way, with Macready – not by nature a comic actor – seizing his moment as Jaques to pronounce 'the famous speech about the 7 Ages beautifully'.²¹ His duties were not confined to the stage, for custom required him to reappear in court dress to 'light' the royal couple out. Macready, who tended to mistake ordinary courtesy as evidence of exceptional personal favour, recorded: 'When the Queen came out of her box ... she asked for me. She said she was much pleased, and thanked me. Prince Albert asked me if this was not the original play. I told him: "Yes, that we had restored the original text"'.²²

There was a valedictory air to the performance of *Henry VIII* at Drury Lane on 10 July 1848, attended in state by the royal couple, since the occasion marked Macready's

imminent departure for America. This time Macready's resistance to raising seat prices resulted in such a crush that he had to ask the 'queen's leave to address the audience', requesting that those in the galleries accept their money back and leave the theatre. In his diary entry for 6 July he vented his spleen at the way in which he was ignored by the court:

*July 6th. – Read the paper. In the list of the Queen's State Ball I see numbers of my own acquaintance, and certainly several who have not the respect of society that I and mine enjoy; but I cannot be permitted to appear at Court – I am not fit to be presented where such masses of vulgarity and offensive manners and morals as the --- family have the entree. Well- There is a world elsewhere!*²³

Although Macready's indignation was undoubtedly on behalf of his profession as well as personal, it was intensified by his rivalry with Charles, the Eton-educated son of Edmund Kean, who, on 13 July, wrote to his mother: 'I have received instructions to give English performances once a week at Windsor Castle, commencing after Christmas – for six weeks.'²⁴

Thus the Windsor Theatricals were born, the brainchild of Prince Albert, Chevalier Karl Bunsen and Charles Beaumont Phipps, with the objective of raising the status of the theatre throughout the kingdom. The inaugural performance (*The Merchant of Venice*) took place in the Rubens Room, on 28 December 1848, with further performances until the death of Prince Albert brought the venture to a close. Macready took part only once. On 22 June 1849 he recorded visiting Buckingham Palace, where Phipps '[t]old me that the Queen wished to have theatrical performances at Windsor this Christmas as before, and wished me to act Brutus and Hotspur'.²⁵ He pointed out courteously – and not unreasonably – that Hotspur was no longer in his repertoire or within his range. The next day, 27 December, was settled upon for his appearance at Windsor. That the negotiations were conducted through Phipps may have been because of the acute rivalry between Macready and Kean. In fact, the performance of *Julius Caesar* took place on 1 February 1850, with Macready preoccupied by the ill health of his 'own beloved [daughter] Nina' (Christina Letitia, born 24 February 1830), who was to die that year, on her twentieth birthday.

Macready's preoccupation with his daughter's illness may have contributed to his natural tendency to separate himself from other members of his profession. He busied himself with arrangements for the journey to Windsor, booking a *private* train for his return, at a cost of seven guineas. He dined *alone* at the Castle Inn, took a cab to the Castle, where he admired the paintings (by Moretto, Tintoretto, Parmegiano) in his room.

By his own estimate, he acted Brutus 'in a style of reality and earnest naturalness that I think did, and I felt ought to, produce an effect on my auditors'.²⁶ Alas, the most important auditor signally disagreed:

*I February 1850. We went over to the Waterloo Gallery shortly after 8. Shakespeare's 'Julius Caesar' was given, such a finely written Tragedy, full of beautiful and celebrated speeches ... The principal characters of Brutus and Marcus Antonius were performed by Macready and C. Kean ... Kean's acting was quite perfection, and he gave the celebrated speech in the Forum admirably. Poor Macready, I thought not good, ranting too much, and being so affected in manner – his voice cracking and gulping, and having an unpleasant way of stopping between every word. The quarrelling scene with Cassius was the only one in which he acted well.*²⁷

Unaware of his monarch's private verdict, when Phipps 'came to me from the Queen and Prince Albert to express how much they had been pleased', Macready responded fulsomely: 'I requested him to offer my duty, and that I was most happy in the opportunity of offering any testimony of my respectful homage.'²⁸ So spoke the true republican!

There were still a couple of uneasy scenes to be played out between Macready and his monarch, or, in one case, her husband. On 3 February 1851 the royal couple attended one of Macready's (very nearly) farewell performances, *King Lear*, in which the Queen considered that he overdid the curses but was 'very fine [in] the last scene, when he brings her [Cordelia] in dead in his arms, mourning over her ... most touching and painful'.²⁹ Alas, like many Victorian fathers, Macready was no stranger to the grief of a lost child, most recently Nina. Following his final valedictory performance (*Macbeth*, on 26 February 1851) there remained a grand dinner, at which the Prince Consort had been invited to preside. He had declined, on the grounds that 'it would be impossible for His Royal Highness to take the Chair at a dinner of personal compliment to an individual, however eminent and excellent'.³⁰ 'Eminent' Macready undoubtedly was, as reflected by the title of Alan Downer's 1966 biography, *The Eminent Tragedian William Charles Macready*. A man of considerable contrariness and contradictions, he was a republican who never quite received the recognition he so craved from his monarch. Perhaps what he ultimately valued more than royal approbation was endorsement from a higher source, as Tennyson, recently appointed Poet Laureate, suggested in what John Forster described as 'a few lines of poetry' composed especially for the occasion of Macready's retirement:

*Farewell, Macready; moral, grave, sublime;
Our Shakespeare's bland and universal eye
Dwells pleased, through twice a hundred years on thee.*³¹

Notes

1. *The Athenaeum*, no. 2474 (27 March 1875), p. 417.
2. Toynbee 1912, vol. 1, p. v.
3. John Bryant Lane (1788–1868) was a portrait painter.
4. Toynbee 1912, vol. 1, pp. 400–401.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 407.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 407.
7. Schoch 2004, p. 109.
8. Royal Archive, RA Z429, pp. 61–2.
9. Royal Archive, RA Z430, pp. 45–6.
10. Royal Archive, RA Z430, p. 53.
11. Royal Archive, RA Z432, p. 20.
12. Toynbee 1912, vol. 1, p. 493.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 495.
14. Royal Archive, RA Z437, p. 321.
15. Toynbee 1912, vol. 1, p. 496.
16. Royal Archive, RA Z437, p. 47.
17. Esher 1912, vol. 2, pp. 121–2.
18. Royal Archive, RA Z439, pp. 203–5.
19. See Rowell 1978, Appendix: 'A Calendar of Queen Victoria's Theatregoing'.
20. *Theatrical Journal* 4, no. 187 (1 July 1843), p. 200.
21. Royal Archive, RA Z332, p. 197.
22. Toynbee 1912, vol. 2, p. 212.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 398.
24. Rowell 1978, p. 46.
25. Toynbee 1912, vol. 2, p. 429.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 446.
27. Royal Archive, RA Z346, pp. 29–30.
28. Toynbee 1912, vol. 2, p. 446.
29. Royal Archive, RA Z348, p. 42.
30. Pollock 1875, p. 655.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 666.

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