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Breakfast in the Afternoon — or One Hundred Years of Royal Garden Parties

It is one of the most common and deep-seated assumptions about the Victorian monarchy - standard interpretations of Victoria's reign stress her public visibility before 1861 and then contrast this with her withdrawal into invisibility after the death of Albert. David Reed argued that this supposed dichotomy is doubly false. Victoria was never much interested in showing herself to her subjects. To her, as the dutiful pupil of Albert and Baron Stockmar, the proper business of monarchy was government. It was enough that she ruled her kingdoms from her desk. Yet, equally, her supposed invisibility during her long widowhood can be overstated. In one respect, the years immediately following Albert's death actually saw her becoming more visible to at least some of her subjects. These were the years in which the concept of the royal garden party was invented. From 1868 outdoor receptions were held annually and their success ensured that they quickly became a fixture in the royal calendar. From 1870, first at Chiswick and later at Marlborough House, these events were hosted by the Prince and Princess of Wales, but with the Queen in attendance as the guest of honour. Under Edward VII, the new Prince and Princess of Wales continued the tradition. Then, and later during their own reign, George V and Queen Mary proved to be uncharacteristically willing to experiment. Themed parties were held, such as those for London teachers in 1913 or for holders of the Victoria Cross in 1920. As in so much else, what was done under George V became the established practice for the rest of the century. However, by the 1920's, the prevailing tone of press reports about these events was already flippant and light-hearted. Reed prefers to take a more thoughtful view. The garden parties have become some of the best known features of the royal year that makes the monarchy part of the rhythm of modern British life. **AB**