

## ILLUSTRATIONS FROM THE WELLCOME INSTITUTE LIBRARY

[Future issues of *Medical History* will each contain short articles on unpublished or little-known items in the Wellcome Institute library, such as typographic ephemera, archival documents, prints, paintings, photographs, and various forms of orientalia. These will be related where possible to other articles in the issue. The following article is the first in this series. – THE EDITORS.]

### THE LAST MOMENTS OF H.R.H. THE PRINCE CONSORT\*

No event in which Queen Victoria's medical household was involved caused more controversy than the unexpected death of Albert, Prince Consort, at Windsor Castle on the night of Saturday 14 December 1861. He was forty-two years old. The event evoked many memorials, among them a massive painting of the Prince's last moments (Fig. 1), in which the four attending physicians stand in an isolated group on the left: Dr. William Jenner, Sir James Clark, Sir Henry Holland, and Dr. Thomas Watson. The public's dismay at the death of Prince Albert was intensified by the belief that the physicians had been less than candid in their published bulletins on the Prince's illness.

The Prince's illness lasted for four weeks, the last two of November and the first two of December.<sup>1</sup> During the first two weeks, the Prince suffered from sleeplessness and pain in the limbs, and felt thoroughly unwell.<sup>2</sup> He was attended by two of his physicians, Sir James Clark and Dr. William Jenner.<sup>3</sup> When the symptoms showed no sign of subsiding in the third week, there were fears within the Royal Household, which were not communicated to the public, that they were symptoms of a serious disease, "low fever" or "gastric fever", euphemisms for typhoid, of which William Jenner had extensive clinical experience. Typhoid, according to Jenner, should typically last for between twenty-one and thirty days, ending in death or very gradual recovery. The characteristic symptom was a rose-coloured eruption on the skin, which should appear between the eighth and the twelfth day.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The following principal sources are used, and cited by author's name only: (i) Sir Theodore Martin, *The life of His Royal Highness the Prince Consort*, 3rd ed. vol. 5, London, Smith Elder, 1880. Martin uses the Prince Consort's Diary and the original MS, now destroyed, of Queen Victoria's Journal. (ii) Cecil Woodham-Smith, *Queen Victoria, her life and times*, vol. 1, London, Hamish Hamilton, 1972. Woodham-Smith draws mainly on (a) Martin; (b) the edited transcript of Queen Victoria's Journal made by Princess Beatrice before the latter destroyed the original MS; (c) Queen Victoria, 'Account of my beloved Albert's fatal illness', MS in Royal Archives; (d) Sir Charles Phipps' letters to Lord Palmerston, Broadlands Archives. (iii) *Letters of Lady Augusta Stanley*, edited by the Dean of Windsor and Hector Bolitho, London, G. Howe, 1927.

<sup>2</sup> The Prince Consort's Diary, Sunday 24 November 1861, quoted from Martin, p. 417.

<sup>3</sup> Woodham-Smith, pp. 418, 422. *The Times*, 29 November 1861, mentions Jenner as one of the Queen's dinner-guests at Windsor on 28 November.

<sup>4</sup> Jenner had published a series of twenty papers entitled 'Typhus fever, typhoid fever, relapsing fever, and febricula, the diseases commonly confounded under the term Continued fever. Illustrated by cases collected at the bedside', *Med. Times*, 1849, 20; 1850, 21; 1851, n.s. 1 and 2. A bound volume containing these articles, presented to his collaborator Dr. A. Tweedie, is in the Wellcome Institute Library. The main article on typhoid appeared in *Med. Times*, 1850, 21: 433–435 (pp. 43–46 of the bound volume).

Before this rash appeared, and while the nature of the illness was still in doubt, the attitude adopted by the two physicians was determined by the characters of the Prince Consort and the Queen. Treatment of the Prince was complicated by his surprisingly fatalistic attitude to death.

He had no wish to die, but he did not care for living. Not long before his fatal illness, in speaking to the Queen, he said: "I do not cling to life. You do; but I set no store by it. If I knew that those I love were well cared for, I should be quite ready to die tomorrow." In the same conversation he added: "I am sure, if I had a severe illness, I should give up at once, I should not struggle for life. I have no tenacity of life."<sup>5</sup>

Therefore the Prince was not to be allowed to suspect that he was in any danger. Any intensive nursing, strict regimen, or issuing of bulletins on his state of health might arouse his fears and hasten his decline. For this reason, Queen Victoria indignantly rejected Lord Palmerston's suggestion that more doctors should be called in.<sup>6</sup>

But the Queen herself also caused problems to the physicians. Sir Charles Phipps, the Prince Consort's Treasurer, told Palmerston confidentially:

The Queen becomes so nervous, and so easily alarmed, that the greatest caution is necessary . . . it requires no little management to prevent her from breaking down altogether . . . what would particularly try her would be any public Alarm about the Prince, which coming back to her through the Public Prints would make Her fancy that the truth was concealed from Her . . . As cheerful a view as possible should be taken to her of the state of the Prince.<sup>7</sup>

The senior physician, Sir James Clark, succeeded on 3 December in assuring her of the innocuousness of the Prince's illness. She wrote in her Journal: "Good kind old Sir James . . . reassured me and explained to Dr. Jenner too that there was no cause whatever for alarm – either present or future. It was not likely to turn to a low fever. My Darling himself was in apprehension of a low fever. This they assured me he need not be."<sup>8</sup> In accordance with their ostensible opinion that the disease was not even potentially dangerous, Clark and Jenner issued no official bulletin. When it was necessary to explain why the Prince Consort was not as conspicuous as usual, a press statement was issued on 3 December, saying that he had been confined to his room by a "feverish cold".<sup>9</sup>

On Saturday 7 December, the end of the third week of the illness, the characteristic pink rash of typhoid appeared. Jenner explained its implications to the Queen in the most optimistic manner, saying that "the fever must have its course, viz. a month . . . that he was not alarmed, and that there were no bad symptoms, but [Albert] could not be better until the fever left him . . . He [Jenner] would tell me everything, I might be sure. Albert himself was not to know of it, as unfortunately he had a horror of fever . . ."<sup>10</sup> Still no official bulletin was issued: in order to keep up the spirits of the principal actors, the Prince and the Queen, the public was given no inkling of the real turn of events. When, in the fourth and last week, the Prince went from bad to worse,

<sup>5</sup> Martin, p. 415.

<sup>6</sup> Woodham-Smith, p. 423; Martin, p. 428; Lady Augusta Stanley, p. 240.

<sup>7</sup> Woodham-Smith, p. 424.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 423.

<sup>9</sup> *The Times*, 4 December 1861.

<sup>10</sup> Woodham-Smith, p. 425; Martin, p. 431.

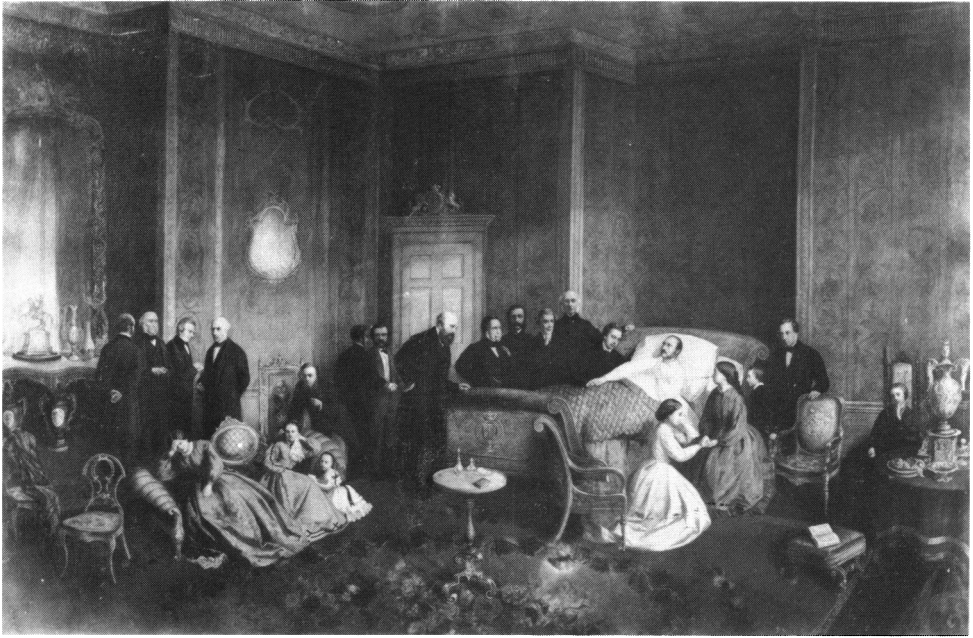


Figure 1. The last moments of H.R.H. the Prince Consort. Oil painting on canvas, 123 x 183 cms., by an unknown painter. Wellcome Institute Library, London.

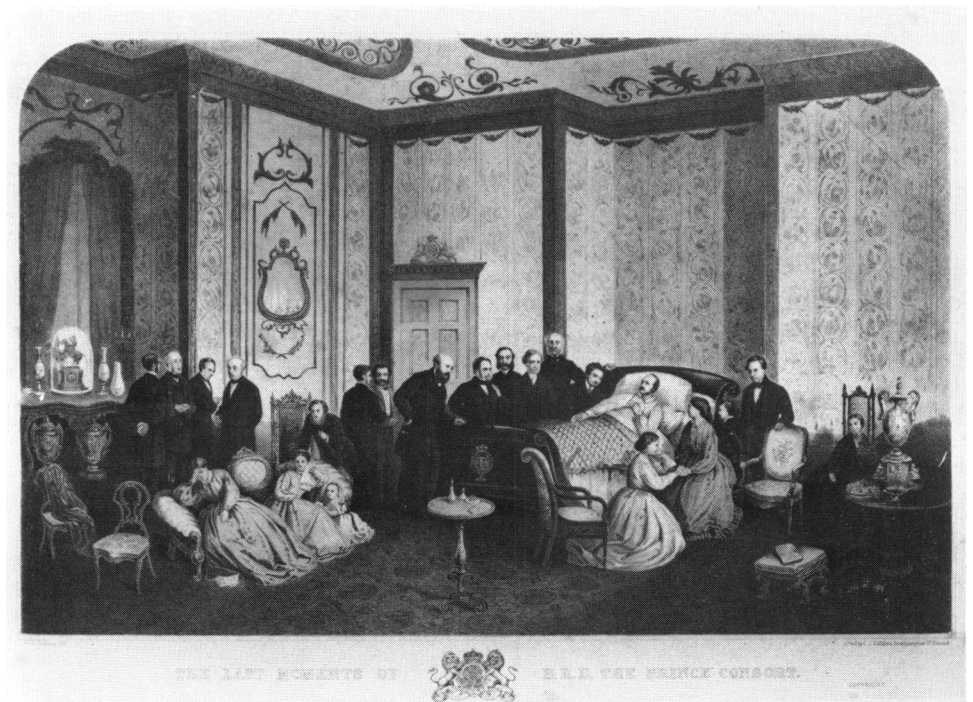


Figure 2. The last moments of H.R.H. the Prince Consort. Lithograph, 26.7 x 42 cms., by W. L. Walton after the painting reproduced in Fig. 1. Wellcome Institute Library, London.

### *The last moments of H.R.H. The Prince Consort*

all the official announcements had to be crowded together into that week, making the Prince's illness seem more sudden than it really was.

The last week can be followed day by day. On Sunday 8 December, Palmerston's repeated suggestion was now accepted, and Dr. Thomas Watson and Sir Henry Holland were appointed to join Clark and Jenner.<sup>11</sup> A second press statement was issued with the impossible object of hinting at the seriousness of the disease without causing alarm: the Prince was still said to be suffering from "a feverish cold"; within the last two days the "feverish symptoms" had rather increased and were "likely to continue for some time longer", but there were "no unfavourable symptoms".<sup>12</sup> There was no mention of gastric fever or typhoid. On Monday 9 December Watson arrived, and pronounced the Prince "very ill . . . the malady is very grave . . . it is impossible not to be very anxious";<sup>13</sup> but on this day the previous day's press statement was published, stating that "there were no unfavourable symptoms". On Wednesday 11 December, Sir Henry Holland arrived, and the four physicians issued their first medical bulletin, which simply stated that the Prince was "suffering from fever unattended by unfavourable symptoms".<sup>14</sup> Not everybody would realize that a "fever" differed from a "feverish cold" as typhoid differed from influenza. On Thursday 12 December, a second bulletin was issued, reporting no change,<sup>15</sup> and the first bulletin was published. On Friday 13 December, the Prince began sinking fast,<sup>16</sup> while the second bulletin was published, recording no change. By about 5 o'clock on Friday afternoon, Sir James Clark decided that the Queen would now have to be told of the seriousness of the Prince's condition,<sup>17</sup> and a third bulletin was issued, stating that "the symptoms have assumed an unfavourable character during the day".<sup>18</sup> On the following day, Saturday 14 December, the Prince died; the third bulletin was published; and *The Times* printed an editorial, concluding:

The fever which has attacked him is a wearying but weakening malady, but it is well understood, and the treatment is in most cases effectual. The Prince has on his side youth and strength, an unimpaired constitution, and the ablest advice that science can give, and we hope shortly to be able to publish a more cheerful Bulletin than that of today.<sup>19</sup>

The confusion did not end there. At Cambridge, where the Prince Consort had been Chancellor of the University, the Vice-Chancellor was informed of the death on Sunday morning, but the news did not spread in the town until mid-day; consequently, many of the churches and Dissenting chapels continued to offer up prayers for the Prince Consort's recovery.<sup>20</sup>

Whether or not the physicians had followed the wisest course, public opinion deduced that the outcome of the Prince's illness had taken them by surprise. The *Lancet* cruelly reprinted the bulletins one below the other, and called for an explanation of their discrepancies.<sup>21</sup> The *British Medical Journal* also called for an enquiry, but when it became obvious that no official report would be issued, turned round and

<sup>11</sup> Lady Augusta Stanley, p. 240.

<sup>12</sup> *The Times*, 9 December 1861. Woodham-Smith, p. 426, citing a letter from Phipps to Palmerston.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 426–427.

<sup>14</sup> *The Times*, 12 December 1861.

<sup>15</sup> *The Times*, 13 December 1861.

<sup>16</sup> Lady Augusta Stanley, p. 241.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *The Times*, 14 December 1861.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *The Times*, 17 December 1861.

<sup>21</sup> *Lancet*, 1862, 1: 14 (14 January 1862).

criticized those who had demanded one for intruding on private grief.<sup>22</sup> The outcry has been described by K. Anderson.<sup>23</sup> It was no doubt partly due to the fact that the Prince died of a disease which was believed to be “the very offspring of foul sewers and ill-drained dwellings”,<sup>24</sup> although, strangely, the word “typhoid” does not seem to have been applied to it until 21 December, when “typhoid fever; duration 21 days” was recorded by the Registrar-General as the official cause of death.<sup>25</sup>

Neither the painter nor the exact date of the picture which records the Prince's death (Fig. 1) is known. It was certainly in existence by 1865, when it was the subject of a poem by one Robert Awde.<sup>26</sup> Some time later, possibly at the end of 1866, it was sold by raffle, together with a painting by W. Holyoake of the marriage of the Prince of Wales, which had taken place on 10 March 1863.<sup>27</sup> This method of disposing of paintings, which was regularly used by the Art-Union, was really an ingenious way to sell prints: a lithograph of the picture was made by W. L. Walton (Fig. 2) and each impression of the lithograph entitled the purchaser to a stake in the painting.

The advertisement for the lithograph includes a key to the painting as follows. The Queen sits on the Prince Consort's left. Before her kneels Princess Alice; behind her is Prince Arthur; behind him Sir Charles Phipps (1801–1866), the Prince Consort's Treasurer and formerly Private Secretary. On the extreme right, Princess Louise. The Prince Consort's right hand is held by the Prince of Wales, called Bertie, later King Edward VII. Behind him from right to left are General Robert Bruce, Governor to the Prince of Wales; the Dean of Windsor, Gerald Wellesley; Major Du Plat, equerry to the Prince Consort; General Bentinck; the Duke of Cambridge, a cousin of Queen Victoria; Lord Alfred Paget, Chief Equerry; Major Teesdale, equerry to the Prince of Wales; and Ernest, Prince Leiningen. On the settee in the left foreground are, from left to right, Princesses Leiningen, Helena, and Beatrice. The four physicians stand on the left. The second from the left is Sir James Clark. The others are less easy to identify, but the two on either side of Clark are probably meant for Jenner and Holland, leaving the right-hand figure as Watson, still fingering his now useless pulse-watch.<sup>28</sup> The portraits are far from convincing, but the whole commemorates with effective gravity an unfortunately unforgettable moment for the Victorian public.

<sup>22</sup> *Br. med. J.*, 1861, ii: 665, and 1862, i: 45.

<sup>23</sup> Kevin Anderson, 'Death of a Prince Consort', *Med. J. Australia*, 9 November 1968, pp. 865–867.

<sup>24</sup> *Br. med. J.*, 1861, ii: 666.

<sup>25</sup> *The Times*, 24 December 1861.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Awde, 'Lines composed on seeing a photograph [*sic*] of the last moments of the late Prince Consort', in his *Waiting at table: poems and songs*, London, J. C. Hotten for the author, 1865. The frontispiece is a photograph of a variant of our picture or of the lithograph after it.

<sup>27</sup> An undated advertisement in the National Portrait Gallery mentions these details. The advertisement includes a key which mentions “the late Col. Phipps”. Phipps died on 24 February 1866. The advertisement also recommends a print of the painting as a new year's gift. Therefore, although the picture was painted by 1865 (see previous note), it cannot have been raffled before the end of 1866. No trace of the painting has been found from then until 10 November 1924, when it was bought at auction for the Wellcome Institute. The lithograph was exhibited in 1977 at the Royal Academy, “*This brilliant year*”: *Queen Victoria's Jubilee, 1887*, no. 57.

<sup>28</sup> The key, which does not differentiate the individual doctors, names Sir William Fergusson, Royal Surgeon Extraordinary, among them. Though Palmerston had suggested that Fergusson be brought in, this does not seem to have been done. Probably this mistake in the key was due to its having been made two or more years after the painting.