

A LINE ON LIFE

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Skirts of Queen Victoria

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Some readers have indicated that they refuse to read my articles, because " *only write about sex.*" This is in spite of the fact that – up to now – only 3 out of over 50 articles have related to sexuality. Why have these readers reacted so negatively to information about sexuality?

Although there are individual differences, most people tend to adopt the attitudes and values of their culture. The **Judeo-Christian** values in the United States are relatively restrictive in relation to sexuality. However, over the decades, there have been fluctuations from conservative attitudes to liberal ones and back again.

One major cause of these swings is **economics**. In good economic times, sexual attitudes and practices tend to be more liberal. In contrast, lean economics are usually associated with restrictive sexuality.

Another factor is **war**. Wars promote rebellion against conventional sexual activity. For example, World War I was followed by the *Roaring Twenties* with its "flappers" and "red-hot mommas."

To understand Queen Victoria's contribution, we need to step back a few centuries. In the 1400s, the **Renaissance** began in the prosperous city of Florence, Italy. It quickly spread throughout Europe. Among other things, the Renaissance advocated a relaxation of the restraints on sexuality.

In the 1500s, John Calvin started **Protestantism**, which emphasized that people should try to overcome their "sinful" sexual impulses. Calvin opposed singing, dancing, cursing and wearing of "provocative" clothing.

In the 1600s, the **Puritans** — who held Calvin's views — gained power in England and the United States. For the next two centuries, liberal and conservative sexual trends "see-sawed" back and forth.

In this atmosphere, **Victoria** became Queen of England in 1857 and ruled until her death in 1901. She adopted the ideal of **sexual suppression**. Prudery — extreme modesty — was at its height. Words that related to sex in any way were not to be used in public.

"Nicer" words were devised for any word that might hint of sexuality. Breasts became "bosom," and legs became "limbs." Why are legs sexual? First, trees have limbs. Where two limbs come together, there is *no* organ. This is not the case where legs come together. In fact, Queen Victoria even covered "limbs" of tables, pianos and beds. You still can sometimes see pianos or beds with "skirts."

Since then, two world wars, the automobile, the works of Sigmund Freud and Alfred Kinsey, and "the pill" have liberalized sexuality. Still, remnants of Queen Victoria's prudery remain with us. Strong negative responses toward discussion of sexuality in the media stem from these attitudes. As a demonstration of how extreme this was, until the 1950s, Sears' catalog retouched bathing suit photos, so none of the models had belly buttons!

**Even a century after her death,
we are still greatly influenced
by Queen Victoria's views of sexuality.**

How does Victoria's prudery affect you personally? First, most people still feel uncomfortable when seriously talking about anything sexual. Some people still refer to women's underwear as "*unmentionables*." Rather than talking openly about sex, many people still "*beat around the bush*" by using such phrases like "*the nasty*" or "*doing it*." More evidence of this is the bumper stickers that used to be popular. They used statements that had double meanings — "*Joggers do it on the run*," "*Swimmers do it in the water*," "*Golfers do it with their balls*."

The ongoing controversy of sex education in the schools is also linked to Victoria's prudery. Parents, who are against sex education in the schools, tend to believe that the child should be taught about sexuality in the home. (I couldn't agree more.) However, these same parents tend to omit any home instruction, give information under embarrassed or anxious conditions, or give the knowledge after-the fact.

Whether parents want them to or not, *children will learn about their sexuality*. For most children, their main source of sexuality education — typically myths, rumors, distortions and half-truths — is their *peers*. Contrary to what some people believe, studies of honest and accurate sex education have repeatedly shown three trends.

- It does *not* lead to increased sexual activity.
- It reduces the number of unwanted pregnancies.
- It reduces the likelihood of contracting sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

Each person needs to make his/her own decision. Do you want accurate sexual information to be open and available? Or would you want to hide sexuality behind the skirts of Queen Victoria?
