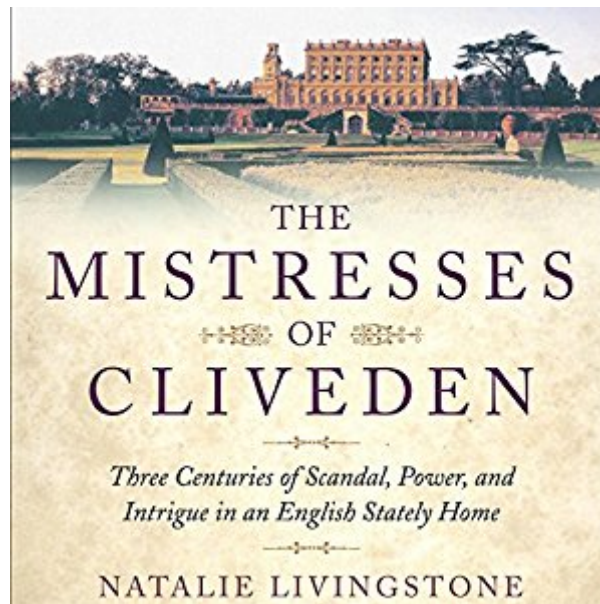


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The Mistresses Of Cliveden: Three Centuries Of Scandal, Power, And Intrigue In An English Stately Home



Synopsis

For fans of *Downton Abbey* comes an immersive historical epic about a lavish English manor and a dynasty of rich and powerful women who ruled the estate over three centuries of misbehavior, scandal, intrigue, and passion. Five miles from Windsor Castle, home of the royal family, sits the Cliveden estate. Overlooking the Thames, the mansion is flanked by two wings and surrounded by lavish gardens. Throughout its storied history, Cliveden has been a setting for misbehavior, intrigue, and passion - from its salacious, deadly beginnings in the 17th century to the 1960s Profumo affair, the sex scandal that toppled the British government. Now, in this immersive chronicle, the manor's current mistress, Natalie Livingstone, opens the doors to this prominent house and lets the walls do the talking. Built during the reign of Charles II by the Duke of Buckingham, Cliveden attracted notoriety as a luxurious retreat in which the duke could conduct his scandalous affair with the ambitious courtesan Anna Maria, Countess of Shrewsbury. In 1668 Anna Maria's cuckolded husband, the Earl of Shrewsbury, challenged Buckingham to a duel. Buckingham killed Shrewsbury and claimed Anna Maria as his prize, making her the first mistress of Cliveden. Through the centuries other enigmatic and indomitable women would assume stewardship over the estate, including Elizabeth, Countess of Orkney and illicit lover of William III, who became one of England's wealthiest women; Augusta of Saxe-Gotha, the queen Britain was promised and then denied; Harriet, Duchess of Sutherland, confidante of Queen Victoria and a glittering society hostess turned political activist; and the American-born Nancy Astor, the first female member of Parliament, who described herself as an "ardent feminist" and welcomed controversy. Though their privileges were extraordinary, in Livingstone's hands, their struggles and sacrifices are universal. Cliveden weathered renovation and restoration, world conflicts and cold wars, societal shifts and technological advances. Rich in historical and architectural detail, *The Mistresses of Cliveden* is a tale of sex and power and of the exceptional women who evaded, exploited, and confronted the expectations of their times.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This is a tumultuous history of one of England's great houses, over three centuries from roughly 1660 to 1960, built and rebuilt under the direction of five different aristocratic mistresses -- "mistresses" in this telling, and in many senses of the word. Indeed, its history begins when the Duke of Buckingham fights a duel with, and kills, his mistress's husband, the Earl of Shrewsbury in 1668,. The story ends with a 1961 nude swim in the Cliveden pool by Christine Keeler, in an affair involving her, a Soviet spy, and John Profumo, Secretary of state for war. We know all this from the foreword, no spoiler, and the fact that the author's family bought Cliveden in 2012, hence her interest. She brings it to full life here, in what reads like an epic romantic novel -- only it's a true story. In between, the book follows the five women, their extended aristocratic families, and the Cliveden manor through considerable intrigue, wars, fires and scandal. The first four women would be friends of Britain's monarchs, sometimes romantically so, whose fortunes and power would rise and fall with changes in rulers and history. The last mistress, Nancy Astor, first serving woman MP and a boisterous, controversial, often abrasive personality, is perhaps best known, and this telling does at least explain her ties to Nazi Germany, the so-called "Cliveden Set" of the 1930s. This is also a social history. We see how the landed gentry participates in the governance and economy of Britain through the Stuart, Hanoverian and Windsor dynasties, and how the landed estate system and great houses would decline with changes in industry, finance and demographics, particularly in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. We see how women could exert power through family connections, marriages, wealth, society entertainments and well-chosen liaisons, at least till women like Nancy could acquire power in their own right. It's all well-researched, well-told and an immersion into a vanished world of wealth and privilege, set in a famous house. It could serve as an epic miniseries that would make "Downton Abbey" seem small in terms of scope, time-span and aristocratic power. Highest recommendation.

In her introduction, this is how Natalie Livingstone encapsulates Cliveden, the beautiful estate in Buckinghamshire, which has been leased and operated as a hotel since 2012 by the

author's husband. The author's particular focus is on five notable women who were the mistresses of Cliveden during those three centuries: Anna Maria Talbot, Countess of Shrewsbury and mistress of George Villiers, 2nd Duke of Buckingham; Elizabeth Villiers Hamilton, Countess of Orkney (and lover of William III); Augusta, Princess of Wales; Harriet Georgiana Leveson-Gower, Duchess of Sutherland; and Nancy Astor, Viscountess of Astor and first female Member of Parliament. The book is well-researched and Livingstone has a lively and very readable style. She gracefully blends the personal lives of her leading ladies with important events of their day and the architecture and interior design of the estate itself. Most of the time, that is. I've long been fascinated by 20th-century English history, and Nancy Astor and Cliveden are right in the thick of so many important events, scandals and intrigues, like the so-called Cliveden Set, the Profumo Affair, and Nancy Astor's become the first woman Member of Parliament. Because of this interest, the fifth part of the book was the one I most looked forward to. Unfortunately, it didn't deliver nearly as well as I'd hoped. Maybe the problem is that Livingstone devotes just 113 pages to cover most of the 20th century. It may also be that there was little development or change to the estate during that period and, therefore, none of the descriptions of the estate that enliven the other parts of the book. Whatever the reasons, the feel of this part is much more superficial and a bit scattered. Livingstone also assumes a greater level of detailed knowledge of that time than many American readers are likely to have. The disappointment of the Nancy Astor part brought down my rating of the book, but I want to be clear that the prior parts make excellent reading. Along with a wealth of illustrations, Livingstone also helpfully includes a cast of characters list for each part, a timeline, notes, a select bibliography and an index. 3.5 stars

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