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BOOKSHELF

Two Books on the English Country House

Once the domain of kings and dukes, the English stately home has had to find more modest uses in modern times.



‘Chatsworth From the Derwent’ (ca. 1890) by Charles Wilkinson.

PHOTO: PRINT COLLECTOR/GETTY IMAGES

By Moira Hodgson

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In 1974 the Victoria and Albert Museum held an exhibition called “The Destruction of the Country House.” The director, Roy Strong, noticed that visitors were in tears as they came to terms with all that had disappeared—well over a thousand grand houses had been demolished since the 1870s. In the exhibition catalog, the National Trust expert James Lees-Milne opened his essay by calling the country house “as archaic as the osprey,” a bird of prey extinct in England since 1840.

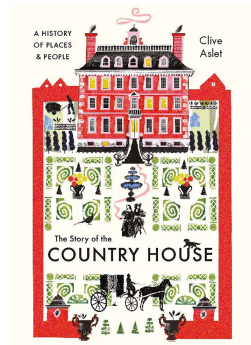
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The Story of the Country House: A History of Places and People

By Clive Aslet

Yale

256 pages



Two very different but equally compelling new books by major British architectural historians strike a note of optimism. Clive Aslet’s “The Story of the Country House: A History of Places and People” is an eclectic scholarly account, tracing the evolution of the country house from the hunting lodges of the Middle Ages to the modern villas of today. Adrian Tinniswood’s erudite and delightfully gossipy “Noble Ambitions: The Fall and Rise of the English Country House After World War II” examines changes in the status of the great houses in postwar Britain, old versus new money, and social upheavals.

Mr. Aslet is an elegant writer with a wry sense of humor. He introduces such colorful personalities as A.W. Pugin, the Catholic zealot who pioneered Britain’s 19th-century Gothic revival; the restless, neurotic King John, whose baggage train drowned in a river with the crown jewels; and James I, who upon his coronation set free prisoners, “except those held for really serious crimes such as Papistry.” Henry VIII had 63 palaces and traveled between them with more than 50 trunks, each packed with the contents of a room so he would find “the same configuration of furniture wherever he was” (a sort of Holiday Inn mentality, I guess).

Mr. Aslet writes: “Even country houses that strongly evoke a single period are often palimpsests where one era overwrites another, a process that may happen again and again until the deep past is no more than a ghostly, indecipherable smudge.” To make his point he introduces Stansted Park, a magnificent stately home that began life as a medieval hunting lodge and went through many permutations, among them as a 19th-century college where, of all things, “young, impecunious Jews could stay, be shaved and baptised, and train as missionaries to be sent to their own people. A donkey-riding school prepared them for travel in distant lands.”

What to Read This Fall

Our picks for fiction, history, children's—and more.

Nonfiction Books

Children's Books

Cloud Cuckoo Land by Anthony Doerr

Fall Books Collection

Stansted Park's latest iteration is as a grand Edwardian manor, the epitome of the golden age of the country house that "in the novels of Henry James," Mr. Aslet tells us, "evokes an ideal state of human existence which, after centuries of evolution, has reached a level as close to perfection as it is possible for mortals to achieve."

In lyrical prose, Mr. Aslet discusses the influence of Inigo Jones, who "streaked like a meteor across the Stuart sky" with his designs based on the Italian classicism of Andrea Palladio. He explores the Baroque style that began in the 1680s, with its dazzling illusionism. "Gods and goddesses seemed to burst out of walls and ceilings. . . . All was movement, spectacle, drama. . . . Statues disported themselves on skylines. Gardens, laid out with gravel paths and clipped hedges, seemed to go on for miles."

One such Baroque masterpiece is Chatsworth House, home of the dukes of Devonshire. A princely 126-room mansion dating from 1686, Chatsworth housed a girls' school during World War II to avoid requisition by the army. Soldiers' vandalism was legendary. "Tales abound of jeeps driven down grand staircases, garden ornaments used for target practice by drunken troops," Mr. Tinniswood writes, "and family portraits turned into makeshift dartboards."

In 1950, when the 10th duke died suddenly at age 55, his successor was faced with catastrophic taxes of some 80%. For the 11th duke, selling Chatsworth would have been a personal failure: "I don't want to be the one to let it go." With the help of his wife, Deborah, the youngest of the Mitford sisters, in 1959 the duke moved his family into a modernized suite of 20 rooms and opened the state rooms to the public.

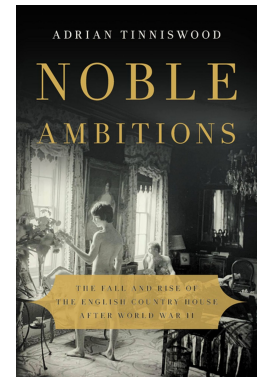
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Noble Ambitions: The Fall and Rise of the British Country House After World War II

By Adrian Tinniswood

Basic

429 pages



Mr. Tinniswood recalls that Blenheim Palace, home of the Dukes of Marlborough and designed by John Vanbrugh in a glorious park by Capability Brown, was taken over part of the war by MI5, “whose top-secret presence there was heralded by conductors on the bus route from Oxford to Woodstock, who used to call out as they reached the gates of Blenheim, ‘Anyone for MI5?’ ”

After the war, aristocrats whom the author dubs “showman-peers” found inventive ways to raise money. At Beaulieu, a 7,000-acre estate, Lord Montagu created a motorcar museum, and in 1956 started a series of jazz concerts that eventually drew more than 20,000 people. In 1960 there was a riot as fans of modern and traditional jazz clashed. Undeterred, Montagu held another concert the following summer. When the crowd ran wild in the village, he brought the festival to an end.

In 1966, Lord Bath opened a safari park at Longleat, his 130-room Elizabethan mansion on 9,000 acres. Forty-six lions eyed the “meaty cows in the parkland beyond.” Bath also held rock concerts and was once forced to barricade himself inside with the performers as screaming girls hammered on the windows. When 20,000 people showed up to see the Rolling Stones, there were 200 casualties. Bath was unimpressed. “ ‘So few hospital cases out of 20,000 is not a bad record,’ he told the press, with aristocratic insouciance.”

Musicians didn’t merely perform at the grand houses, they bought them. Mr. Tinniswood writes that “in the 1960s rock stars and stately homes went together like cannabis and cookies or Rolls-Royces and swimming pools.” Celebrities and rich Americans bought them too. J. Paul Getty owned a Tudor mansion. He was so tight-fisted that he had his telephones fitted with locks and installed a coin-operated one for his guests.

Mr. Aslet suggests that during Covid lockdowns those lucky enough to have even the most ordinary country house “returned to a state of social relations more akin to the age of Jane Austen than the twenty-first century: family members had to rely on each other for company, since they were not allowed out. But this was not such a hardship as elsewhere, given the amount of space in the house, the grounds to walk in, the vegetables from the garden, the larders and freezers heaped with emergency supplies and perhaps a well-stocked cellar.”

Meanwhile the osprey has made a comeback. Perhaps that’s a good omen for the future of the much-beloved English country house, portrayed so vibrantly by these two writers.

—*Ms. Hodgson is the author of “It Seemed Like a Good Idea at the Time: My Adventures in Life and Food.”*

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