



The Real Life Downton Abbey: How Life Was Really Lived in Stately Homes a Century Ago

Jacky Hyams

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Fans of Julian Fellowes' hit show can step back 100 years to the world of the pampered, privileged upper classes and take a look at exactly what goes on behind the magisterial doors of their favorite stately home

Using the characters and setting of the popular television show as a point of reference for the reader, this is a closer look at the Edwardian period. They were the super rich of their times, pampered beyond belief—the early 20th century Edwardian gentry, who lived like superstars, their every desire or need catered to by an army of butlers, servants, footmen, housekeepers, and grooms. Class, money, inheritance, luxury, and snobbery dominated every aspect of the lives of the upper crust Edwardian family. While below stairs the staff inhabited a completely different world, their very lives dependent on servicing the rich, pandering to their masters' every whim, and rubbing shoulders with wealth and privilege. While privy to the most intimate and darkest secrets of their masters, they faced ruin and shame if they ventured to make the smallest step outside the boundaries of their class-ridden world. From manners and morals to etiquette and style, this book opens the doors to the reality of the era behind TV's favorite stately home.

The Real Life Downton Abbey: How Life Was Really Lived in Stately Homes a Century Ago Details

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From Reader Review The Real Life Downton Abbey: How Life Was Really Lived in Stately Homes a Century Ago for online ebook

Lois says

I really enjoyed this. Downton Abbey is a very idealized picture of what life was like. Staff not only didn't openly interact with their employers, they were required to turn and face the wall if they came in contact with their employers. Staff worked an average of 16 hour days. The female staff had to buy their own work uniforms and often had to start working earlier than their male counterparts to afford the drab clothing. They were also paid less than men who had their uniforms provided free.

Still within the first paragraph the author refers to Maggie Smith's character as the 'Duchess' of Gratham. Her late husband was an Earl and so she was The Dowager Countess of Gratham. The author not knowing or understanding that calls into question for me how accuracy of her other info.

Helen Dunn says

Informative but dry dry dry. I was hoping to assuage some of my sadness after the end of Downton but this did not help.

Allison Smith steffenhagen says

While I did quite a few interesting tidbits, this book feels as though it was a paper written by a teenager, a poorly written paper at that. It is full of random facts, that do not really make sense together. Also the title of the book is quite mis-leading. The book would be be aptly named "What happened during The 20-30 years before Downton Abbey begins"

Mona says

This was a sorry excuse for a book. The writing was horridly disjointed, like the editing process was skipped completely. Such a shame, as the info was quite interesting...which is the only reason it gets 2 stars, instead of one. It read like the notes were put on index cards (senior term papers, anyone?), thrown in the air, and then added to the book as they randomly fell.

Meredith Allard says

As I'm continuing my quest of reading books inspired by Downton Abbey, I found my way to The Real Life Downton Abbey by Jacky Hyams. The Real Life Downton Abbey is a good summary of what life was like for the British upper and lower classes during the time of the beloved television show (early 20th century), and, as you might expect in a book with this title, Hyams uses Downton Abbey as a springboard, often referencing the show as she illustrates the lifestyle at the time. She talks about the Titanic, for example, and shares a menu of an eleven-course meal that would have been prepared by the French kitchen staff. Before

the ship went down, of course.

The Real Life Downton Abbey is a concise summary of the lifestyle surrounding the television show, but having already read *Up and Down Stairs* by Jeremy Musson, along with several other books about the era, I felt *The Real Life Downton Abbey* was a lot of retelling of what I already knew. I can't say I learned anything from this book, though I did enjoy Hyams' easy, conversational tone as she talked about the extravagant upper classes and the poverty of the servants. For example, even butlers made only 50-100 pounds per year for their trouble, and the hardest working servants, the youngest ones who did the most labor-intensive jobs, often the scullery maids, made as little as ten pounds per year.

American readers may be put off by Hyams' use of Britishisms, but she's British so she can get away with it. Since I watch a lot of British television and read a lot of British literature, I feel comfortable saying I speak conversational British English and I wasn't bothered by the British words. Context clues work very well when translating from British English to American English, and if you're reading the book on a Kindle or other e-reading device you simply have to press on the word and the definition pops up. I found the definition for "Toff" to be as follows: a stylishly dressed, fashionable person; part of the upper classes. Not too hard.

For Downton Abbey fans who are beginning their journey into reading about the era, then *The Real Life of Downton Abbey*, with its general overview, is a good place to start. If you've already read about the class distinctions in the early 20th century and have a firm grasp on the subject, then you may not get as much out of the book.

Rebecca Huston says

I really wanted to like this one, but unfortunately, the author's style and comments really turned me off of the book in the long run. He's snide about the upper class -- he refers to them constantly as Toffs throughout, and regards them as parasites. The lower classes aren't too well regarded, pretty much being too terrified to really do anything to improve their lot. There are far better books that tie into Downton Abbey out there, but this is not one of them. Overall, a not recommended and just barely three stars.

For the longer review, please go here:

http://www.epinions.com/review/Jacky_...

Zoe says

This is a book that exists solely to ride the popularity of Downton Abbey. Don't waste your time on this. Read one of the books I recommend at the end instead. I've been reading a lot on the subject of Edwardian England lately, both fiction and non, and this is simply a conglomeration of facts stated in other books, very few of which couldn't be gleaned by a careful watching of the show. An immediate flag is the use of casual and language incorrect for the time: "toffs" for aristocrats (I think - it's never explained), "boss" instead of master or mistress when describing the servant-master relationship, "WAG" regarding fashion (still not sure on that one), servant gossip as the "social network of the day," and so on. It's always annoying when the author talks down to the reader in this manner, as if they have no imagination of their own and need it directly connected to their own lives, however erroneously, to make sense of a concept. The use of the present tense throughout the book is an unnecessary and confusing conceit. The author makes broad

statements that have no place in nonfiction, such as assumptions about the personality traits of "conceited footmen" and "controlling housekeepers." Sure, they may have needed to have pride in their appearance and good managerial skills, respectively, but that is how it should be expressed. The book jumps back and forth and around in circles on subjects, going between the aristocracy and servants with no consistent through-line. The Kindle edition is poorly formatted and desperately needs a copy editor. For a better written and edited look "behind the scenes" into the real lives of people of the era, I recommend: *Over a Hot Stove* by Flo Wadlow (a short account from an actual cook in one of the houses, slightly later date); *A House Unlocked* by Penelope Lively (slightly later but of the same class of house); *To Marry an English Lord: Or How Anglomania Really Got Started* by Gail MacColl and Carole McD. Wallace (focuses on the marriage of rich American debutantes to English aristocracy); *Life Below Stairs: True Lives of Edwardian Servants* by Alison Maloney (also trying to ride the Downton wave but better written). For a fictional perspective on the upper-middle class of the period, *The Forsyte Saga* by John Galsworthy is great. If I come across more and better I'll try to remember to come back and update.

Stephanie says

Overall the book was okay but there were a few places that I know the author was just relaying misinformation. It sort of ruined the credibility for me.

Cyn (RaeWhit) says

I thought this book lacked organization, or perhaps I just didn't understand/see the reasoning behind how the material was presented. The book could've been shorter, as there were many cases of the same information being dispensed more than once.

The part about the Titanic was very interesting, as well as the tracing of the beginnings of the NHS. As I suspected (the author did point this out), the servants at Downton Abbey fare far better than most country estate in-service staff.

Chele Kispert says

great guide for those that want to go into domestic service in the early 1900's

Sue says

I was just blown away by how interesting this was.

stormhawk says

Awful

Remember in 1984, when Winston Smith is writing in his journal, copying from a children's book written by the Party? The one that tells how things were long ago when the rich few oppressed the many poor, and how it's so much better now that the Party watches over us and makes sure that we all have a proper ration of chocolate and a well ordered life and we've always been at war with Eastasia? That's kind of what this book is like. The writing is simplistic, and the author comes across as having a very class conscious chip on his shoulder.

K says

It does seem that these days you need to throw in the words “English Manor” or “Downton Abbey” if you want to sell a book or video. The hit PBS series Downton Abbey has done so much to promote interest in another time and era just like *Upstairs Downstairs* did in the 1970's. Many viewers are suddenly interested in reading about and watching the English manor life of the early 1900's. This book, *The Real Life Downton Abbey*, tries to tell you how life really was for both the upstairs and downstairs people.

As the author states in the Introduction “So who were these toffs and servants that hold so much fascination for us? How did they live, what did they wear, what did they eat, how did they play or form relationships – and how much – or how little – did they spend or earn? In this book I answer many of these questions and reveal, too, a lot more about what went on behind those huge front doors to the grand country house.” So I picked up this book to just find out what life was really like in the Edwardian era and how close does Downton Abbey come to portraying those lives.

While I did read and learn much (and then applied some of that knowledge to Season 3 Downton Abbey to decide what was and was not possible) this book had just a bit too much detail. There were times I felt as if I was slogging through a thick mire of information. And some of that information would be repeated in another chapter. At the same time I am not sure I would call this book a scholarly piece of work. It falls in that in-between stage of easy reading and scholarly text. While the author does write in that light tone of voice it can't always help if you feel like it is too much information. Anyway, I was struggling towards the end to just finish the book (I started to jump to chapters that sounded interesting). And this is from someone who loves to read non-fiction books that sometimes weigh more than a brick!

Chapters are written around a basic subject. These include The House, Money, The Pecking Order, The Rules, Who Runs this House Anyway?, Relationships, Food & Drink, Entertainment & Sport, Getting Around, Morals & Manners, How to Wear It, and Health. And each chapter includes both the upstairs and downstairs life. As an example, the “Pecking Order” chapter starts with upstairs life by discussing The Father and The Mother (caps are the authors). Then it delves into the Servant Roles of Upper Servants (broken up into Butler, Housekeeper, Cook, Valet, Ladies Maid, Nursery Staff, and Chauffeur) and Lower Servants (again broken up by Footman, Housemaid, and Scullery Maid). To end chapters the author throws in some facts that sometimes are part of the chapter subject, and sometimes they are just facts.

The London based Hyams is a journalist, editor, author, columnist and communications consultant according to her bio. She writes for many of the UK and Australia magazine and newspaper brands, writing on social and historical issues besides in depth profiles. Other books written before *The Real Life Downton Abbey* include the nonfiction titles *Time to Help Your Parents* and *Bombsites & Lollipops: My 1950's East End Childhood*. And afterward she wrote *Jennifer Saunders: The Biography*, *The Female Few: Spitfire Heroines of the Air Transport Auxiliary*, and *White Boots & Miniskirts: A True Story of Life in the Swinging Sixties*.

Lori says

I am a big fan of the TV.show, Downton Abbey. I have been interested in reading about real life below stair servants and staff ever since. This book gives a lot of good information about the lives of staff during the Edwardian era. which is the very late 1800s to around the start of World War One. It also gives information about the rich aristocratic families who owned these Stately homes. I liked how they started with the lowest position and worked up to the butler and head housekeeper and described each one of their duties, hours worked and pay. It was interesting to read that there was snobbery between the upstairs staff and the below stairs staff.

the book went on to describe many topics of living during those years, the long hours worked, the food the rich ate and what the staff had for food. the outfits the rich wore often changing four or five times a day. what the rich did for entertainment. the gossip amongst the staff of what happened upstairs. the scandals that occurred with the rich. and many other topics. A good read. I learned quite a bit about this era. and those big houses and the staff and rich who lived there.

Karyn says

While interesting, this book felt like it had been thrown together quickly in order to get in on the "Downton craze".
