



# **The Mistresses of Cliveden: Three Centuries of Scandal, Power and Intrigue in an English Stately Home**

*Natalie Livingstone*

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**A Sunday Times bestseller, The Mistresses of Cliveden is the extraordinary story of how five women used their home to influence British society.**

From its dawn in the 1660s to its twilight in the 1960s, Cliveden was an emblem of elite misbehaviour and intrigue. Conceived by the Duke of Buckingham as a retreat for his scandalous affair with Anna-Maria, Countess of Shrewsbury, the house later served as the backdrop for the Profumo Affair, which would bring down a government and change the course of British history.

In the three hundred years between the Countess and Christine Keeler, the house was occupied by a dynasty of remarkable women: Elizabeth Villiers, an intellectual who brokered the rise and fall of governments; Augusta of Saxe-Gotha, a minor German royal who almost became queen of England; Harriet Duchess of Sutherland, the glittering society hostess turned political campaigner; and Nancy Astor, the consummate controversialist who became the first woman to take a seat in parliament. Under the direction of these women, Cliveden provided a stage for political plots and artistic premieres, hosted grieving monarchs and republican radicals, was idealised as a family home, and maligned as a threat to national security.

*The Mistresses of Cliveden* is by turns a historical epic, a political thriller, a family drama, and an intimate history of the relationships between people and place. Above all, it is a story about sex and power, and the ways in which exceptional women have evaded, exploited, and confronted the expectations of their times.

## **The Mistresses of Cliveden: Three Centuries of Scandal, Power and Intrigue in an English Stately Home Details**

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## **From Reader Review The Mistresses of Cliveden: Three Centuries of Scandal, Power and Intrigue in an English Stately Home for online ebook**

### **Andrea says**

While some of the history presented was a review of things I've read elsewhere, overall – I found the organization of this book – around a single estate – to be enjoyable and effective. Spanning over 200 years, the book provides detailed history of the estate itself and the various homes built there over the years, the various “mistresses” of Cliveden and the overarching history of Britain. I was sort of disappointed at the final section – not so much because of the book as because I've always rather liked Nancy Astor and this book certainly captured some of her less endearing qualities and beliefs. Yikes!

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### **Jen Campbell says**

I'm chairing an event with Natalie on the 14th March at the V&A if you're in London and fancy coming along :) It's a fascinating book. [https://shop.vam.ac.uk/whatson/index/...](https://shop.vam.ac.uk/whatson/index/)

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### **Aishuu says**

A very uneven read - some of the sections were fascinating, but others dragged. It's not really about the life at the house - it's about the people who lived there. Some of the mistresses had a ton of their pre-house life, while other histories were not as expansive. The beginning is a lot more compelling - it really gets weaker as the story progresses. I also don't trust the writer - she's definitely an apologist for most of the ladies more questionable actions. I suspect this is something that was written for the current Cliveden gift shop....

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### **Bridget says**

Although I wouldn't describe this book as dry, as it is very readable. It is rather dull. I would have liked to learn more about the personalities of each “mistress” and their partners. It is very well researched and sheds a light on 5 not so well known women in history.

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### **Helen Carolan says**

this was a bit disappointing. Miss Livingstone's book was more about the house and gardens of Cliveden than its mistresses. an o.k read but would have liked more written about the women this book was intended to be about.

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## **Myra says**

Natalie Livingstone has produced a well-written debut piece which encompasses considerable biographical and historical information; all utterly new to me. Depicted in this work, is not so much the history of the house, but more that of the rich and powerful group of English women inhabitants. The five ladies presiding over the house of Cliveden during the three centuries were: Anna Maria, Elizabeth, Augusta, Harriet, and Nancy.

I found the book to be well organized, and, especially enjoyed being able to refer to the portraits, the Cast of Characters and the Timeline included in the book.

I should mention that the author and her husband are the current owners of Cliveden and have turned it into a luxury hotel. I would especially recommend this book to the history buffs.

An ARC of this book was provided to me by The Random House Publishing Group through a LibraryThing Early Reviewers contest.

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## **Marguerite Kaye says**

There's no getting away from it, I was disappointed by this book. I was hoping for a good history with Cliveden as the centre piece, but what I got felt like a very contrived link, some not very interesting history, and what felt, ultimately, like a puff piece by the current owner.

I know that sounds harsh. Don't get me wrong, it was well-written, and if you knew nothing at all of the histories involved, then it probably was informative. But here's the thing - and it's a personal thing that I've said over again with biography and history - I like people to be opinionated. I'm not interested in facts, I want discussion, analysis, hypothesis - whether I agree with it or not. I didn't get any of that here, save some rather spurious links between the various chatelaines of Cliveden which were 'scandalous'. What I also got was a lot of glossing over the history that was less than palatable, and an unwillingness to confront some of the less savoury links with the precious house.

I was really looking forward to this book. Perhaps that's why I'm disappointed. But there's no getting away from it, I am.

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## **Carole (in Canada) says**

"On a symbolic level, a 17th Century country house was an index of status and expressed the genealogy, political power, prestige and character of its owner." (quote from the book)

This was a fascinating book encompassing 300 years of history on Cliveden and its occupants. The political intrigue, scandal and escapades of its owners provided history with great entertainment. The book highlights five of the most powerful and ambitious women and their lovers/husbands and families. Each provides nuggets of historical information that give you a glimpse into the mindset and life style of the aristocracy in

their time period. Each put their own stamp not only in the political arena but on the house and grounds. I was very interested in learning more about the Duchess Of Sutherland, but found each of the mistresses intriguing in their own way.

Anna Maria 1642-1702:

"...Anna Maria's name had become synonymous with the vices of lust and violence." (quote from the book)

A pleasure-loving sixteen year old (picture Lydia Bennet of Pride & Prejudice being let loose at court) who was married to Francis Talbot, 11th Earl of Shrewsbury who was 36. When the 2nd Duke of Buckingham, George Villiers first saw her, he was smitten and they carried on an affair (though he too was married) that would eventually lead to a duel between the Duke and the Earl. The Earl would soon die of injuries and the Duke would continue his affair with Anna Maria. It is his love for her and his impression of Versailles, that would inspire him to build Cliveden. Anna Maria would also become known as the 'lost mistress' of Cliveden.

Elizabeth Villiers 1657-1733:

"Her year at Richmond equipped Elizabeth with two immensely important attributes - a strong female sensibility and a sense of ease in the company of royalty. These were skills that would serve her well in the next phase of her life." (quote from the book)

The 2nd Duke of Buckingham was Elizabeth's second cousin once removed. Again political intrigue, religion and scandal abounded. Elizabeth carried on an affair with the Prince of Orange (William) even though he too was married. Elizabeth also provided counsel for William even after he became King of England. In thanks, he arranges a marriage for her to George, fifth son of the Scottish Duke and Duchess of Hamilton and ten years her junior. He is best known as Lord Orkney. In 1696, he obtains the deeds to Cliveden and Elizabeth becomes the next mistress.

"Cliveden had been the vehicle in which Elizabeth could manage her progress from royal whore, spurned and vilified by one queen, to society hostess, entertaining another." (quote from the book)

Augusta 1719-1772:

"Augusta was undoubtedly an astute woman who had a firm grasp on the political realities of her time." (quote from the book)

Augusta, eighteen, was chosen by King George II to marry his twenty-nine year old charming but wayward son, Prince Frederick. Frederick was very protective of her and helped her to deal with public attention and court life. He was hoping to increase his allowance as well. He also was very media savvy. During this time, newspaper production soared.

"Events such as drawing-room functions were crucial opportunities for journalists to gather intelligence, and even international news was commonly prefaced with phrases such as 'it is whispered around the west end': clearly it was proximity to the court, rather than to the site of a newsworthy event, that made a report credible." (quote from the book)

Seems like nothing has changed in over 300 years!

They were able to lease Cliveden from the Villier family as Frederick was a close friend to the husband of Elizabeth Villier's daughter, Anne. Again, political intrigue was at the forefront. Unfortunately, Cliveden's fortunes would enter a period of neglect after the lease ended.

Harriet 1806-1868:

"Despite her tender age, she displayed a sense of serene self-assurance that would shape her life and future relationships." (quote from the book)

In 1823 at the age of 16 Harriet made her debut and within one week was engaged to her cousin, George Granville Leveson-Gower, then Earl Gower. He was 36. This was a love match despite most believing otherwise. The political atmosphere of this time period was turbulent to say the least. It was not until Victoria became Queen that Harriet became Mistress of the Robes and a lifelong friendship would ensue.

"For the next twenty years Cliveden would become Harriet's most rewarding project, her calm retreat and enduring legacy." (quote from the book)

Nancy 1879-1964:

"Forthright and fierce, with an acerbic wit, Nancy was to become one of the most powerful and compelling women of her era." (quote from the book)

Nancy was a divorcee when she married Waldorf Astor. She had boundless energy that needed direction. She went from hosting balls to more serious political events. These would soon set her off on her own political career that would embroil her in her own political scandals.

Cliveden was gifted to Waldorf and Nancy for their marriage in 1906 by his father, William Astor. By the beginning of the First World War, Cliveden would be used as a hospital by the Canadian Red Cross until the end of the war. Nancy had created a cemetery on the grounds of Cliveden for those men who died at the hospital; "42 inscribed stones marked the graves of her fallen soldiers". Nancy would also make other renovations to the property.

Bill Astor, son of Waldorf and Nancy, would inherit Cliveden. One of his renovations to the property would be a swimming pool. This pool would bring down a government...

Each of these women were shaped by their own upbringing, their religion, their marriages and their health. Each, in their own way, made a powerful impact not only in the political arena but on Cliveden. Yes, they are flawed...but aren't we all.

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### **Chris says**

Your reaction to this book is going to depend upon what you think it is going to be or what you want. Is it a history of Cliveden? Despite the title, nope. It is more a history of selection group of women (not all the women) who had control of the property. As such, it is good, if a bit long winded at times.

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### **Suzanne says**

Fantastic. I wasn't expecting this to do anything but entertain but I finished the book significantly better informed on a variety of topics. Centered around the manor house of Cliveden on the Thames, Livingstone tells the story of the home's mistresses. Using this format, you get an education in how the roles of women changed over the three centuries. True, the point of view is primarily of the aristocratic social strata but that bears our attention in the study of the advances of women.

Nancy Astor is a person that has lingered on the periphery of my awareness for many years without knowing anything about her beyond her wealth. What a fascinating woman. I feel like I must know more about her.

I am going to London this spring and wish a trip to Cliveden were on the itinerary, alas, it is not. Double alas because I understand it to be a rather swank hotel now.

The reader was excellent. Her American accent was more than passable. At first I thought it was a bit too Annie Oakley but Astor was of Southern extraction so it worked. Great audiobook.

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### **Mell says**

I've seen this book advertised with the phrase "for fans of Downton Abbey." This book is *\*nothing\** like that PBS series. I want to clarify so that people aren't disappointed. Book begins in the mid 17th century (1660s) and is packed with historical and political minutia through the mid 20th century (1960s). In comparison, Downton covers just 1912 to 1922 and was lite on politics. Both are enjoyable in their own way but are not similar.

Parts of The Mistresses of Clivedon were quite good, and others jumped the tracks into tedious tangents. The author will reference an occasion or fact in one of the women's lives and then go on for pages about unnecessarily detailed points. I have a degree in history and even I found the book a bit tiresome at times.

The chapters are lopsided, with the earlier women's lives less documented due to both number of years passed and the fact that women weren't independent persons but legal extensions of their husbands. I did enjoy the first 2/3 of the book. Nancy Astor's life is the most spotlighted, and she was such a nasty person that I had to force myself to finish. The book has a clumsy introduction and conclusion about the British sex scandal in the 1960s. They are poorly integrated, and read like bad bookends tacked on at the last minute.

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### **Kerry says**

While I do have some complaints about the book, it's overall enjoyable, interesting, and readable, even if it doesn't quite succeed in what it sets out to do. The book is also well-researched, though I'm curious how the portraits of the mistresses can hang in the house when it was severely damaged by fire at least twice. How did the portraits survive, and if they weren't in the house, how did they make their way (back) to it?

The book is framed within the tale of a 20th-century scandal, and while it may be a good hook, by the time

you get to where it picks up again, you've forgotten who was who and what they did and why it was so terrible. And while the histories of the mistresses of Cliveden might have been interesting, the work is so heavily punctuated by the stories of their men that it doesn't concentrate sufficiently on the women to justify the title. So the house had some interesting owners--does it justify writing a book about them?

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## Shelley says

This is the result of a Goodreads giveaway. Although I read a lot of English history, I probably wouldn't have picked this for myself.

3.5, rounded up to 4 because I would have gone for 3, but I'm cranky because it's hot out and I'm taking that into allowance.

The title is poorly chosen. Sure, it's somewhat about the women who lived in (were the mistresses of) Cliveden and they are the scaffolding of the book, but look to the subtitle for what you'll find what's really here: centuries of powerful men who lived there alongside the history of England while Cliveden was built, burned, rebuilt, burned, and rebuilt, then burned by scandal.

Why wouldn't I have picked it on my own? I don't like the trend of women writing about stately homes (with the possible exception of the Duchess of Devonshire because she's a Mitford and Mitford girls get to break all the rules). It's like assuming Elizabeth only liked Darcy because she wanted Pemberley. Also, it's 2016. Women. Writing about homes. My grandmother subscribed me to Better Homes & Gardens when I married, and it seemed quaint then. Does anyone want to know my Wedgwood pattern?

Sorry for the digression.

Although most of the facts align well with what I already know, occasionally the author lets loose with a howler like 1852 being one generation removed from the American Revolution's end. (1781 or 1783, depending on your point of view.)

You will not often find me saying a non-fiction book is too long, but this one is. Someone not familiar with 17th or 18th century history might get lost keeping track of the Annes, Marys, and Elizabeths. For all that, it ends abruptly, the author skipping over Cliveden's time leased by Stanford and then various hotel groups (including her husband's, and her way of hinting they just happened to luck into the place through elbow grease is charming but unbelievable). You can go back and re-read the introduction and timeline, but that only gives you a small picture of what happened after the 60s.

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## Lolly's Library says

*3.5 stars*

An entertaining romp through history, hinged around the singular, magnificent, and infamous Cliveden estate, from its beginnings as a luxurious pleasure palace built by the Duke of Buckingham in the Restoration reign of King Charles II to the Profumo Affair in the 1960s, the sex scandal which took down the British government.

Though the writing is lively, making for an entertaining read, as others have pointed out, the title is misleading as the bulk of the writing really doesn't focus on the women who are ostensibly meant to be the subject. Instead, we see a great deal more of the men around whom these women's lives revolved, as we watch these men build, rebuild, expand, restore, and renovate the house and grounds of Cliveden through the centuries while the women, for the most part, are sort of added in as decoration. Now some might say the author has a conflict of interest writing this book as her husband is the current owner of Cliveden, but I think this simply gives an additional layer to the history she's written as the latest mistress of the house.

There were a great many pictures sprinkled throughout the text, which I found wonderful (I love having lots of visual references), especially the gorgeous portraits which led off each part introducing a new mistress of Cliveden. As an architecture nut, about the only thing I wish would've been added are some floorplans of the house. Also, while a Cast of Characters is provided at the beginning of the book, again, personally I would've preferred having some kind of genealogical tree to show the relationships and descendants.

As someone who enjoys both British history and architecture, this book provided the perfect combination of both. Thanks to The Random House Publishing Group and Goodreads giveaways for providing me a copy of this book.

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### **Gemma (Non Fic Books) says**

A very enjoyably read about five women connected to Cliveden, definitely one for people who think non-fiction cannot be just as fluid to read as fiction.

My only gripe is that the depth of research is rather varied across the women with interesting aspects skimmed over in some lives while comparatively irrelevant detail is discussed in others. But, the author has left me interested enough in four of these five women to search out more in-depth looks at their lives.

Ideally this would be a 3.5\* book for me.

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