



Queen Bees: Six Brilliant and Extraordinary Society Hostesses Between the Wars

Siân Evans

[Download now](#)

[Read Online](#) 

Queen Bees: Six Brilliant and Extraordinary Society Hostesses Between the Wars

Siân Evans

Queen Bees: Six Brilliant and Extraordinary Society Hostesses Between the Wars Siân Evans

In the aftermath of the First World War, the previously strict hierarchies of the British class system were weakened. For a number of ambitious, spirited women, this was the chance they needed to slip through the cracks and take their place at the top of society as the great hostesses of the time. In an age when the place of women was uncertain, becoming a hostess was not a chore, but a career choice, and though some of the hostesses' backgrounds were surprisingly humble, their aspirations were anything but. During the inter-war years these extraordinary women ruled over London society from their dining tables - entertaining everyone from the Mosleys to the Mitfords, from millionaires to maharajahs, from film stars to royalty - and their influence can still be felt today. *Great Hostesses* looks at the lives of six of these remarkable women, including Lady Astor, who went on to become the first female MP, and Mrs Greville, who cultivated relationships with Edward VII, as well as Lady Londonderry, Lady Cunard, Laura Corrigan and Lady Colefax.

Written with wit, verve and heart, *Great Hostesses* is the story of a society on the brink of revolution, and the extraordinary women who helped it happen

Queen Bees: Six Brilliant and Extraordinary Society Hostesses Between the Wars **Details**

Date : Published September 8th 2016 by Two Roads

ISBN : 9781473618022

Author : Siân Evans

Format : Hardcover 320 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Biography, History

 [Download Queen Bees: Six Brilliant and Extraordinary Society Hos ...pdf](#)

 [Read Online Queen Bees: Six Brilliant and Extraordinary Society H ...pdf](#)

Download and Read Free Online Queen Bees: Six Brilliant and Extraordinary Society Hostesses Between the Wars Siân Evans

From Reader Review Queen Bees: Six Brilliant and Extraordinary Society Hostesses Between the Wars for online ebook

Sue Perry says

The blurb on the back of this book says it is a witty, warm and fascinating story. Wrong. The writing is wooden, the stories are bland and the information is confusing. There is no excitement, no thrill, no pizzazz. I gave up on it long before the end.

As other reviewers have commented, the author constantly jumps between the six Queen Bees, sometimes even within the same paragraph, as well as referring to each by different names, so it's hard to keep track of who's who and who did what.

The author also has a tendency to go off on tangents about other characters, which adds to the confusion but not the interest.

This book needed a major edit to shorten the paragraphs, eliminate the repetitions, gather the information together in a better sequence, cut out the non-sequiturs and inject some life. It also desperately needs more photos and some family trees.

What I did enjoy in the book were the extracts from other people's writings. In particular, an extract from Barbara Cartland's 'The Isthmus Years'. I think that book would be a much better read.

Mary says

A really enjoyable book about British aristocratic, artistic and political society in the first half of the 20th century told through the lives of 6 remarkable society hostesses.

Ruth says

Revealing the often unexplored and understudied history of women. It can be confusing to follow in parts but this is overcome by the interesting stories each of the women in this book have. Highly recommend. I received this book from a Goodreads First reads giveaway in exchange for an honest review.

Hazel says

I received this book for free through Goodreads First Reads.

A spectacle of celebrity, talent and burning ambition, *Queen Bees* combines the biographical stories of six ambitious women who helped to shape the standards of British society between the two world wars. Londoner Siân Evans is a cultural historian who has previously worked with the *Victoria and Albert Museum*, *National Trust* and *Design Museum*, and takes great lengths to thoroughly research into her written subject in order to portray a highly accurate insight to the lives of historical figures. Due to the non-existent political status of women in the early 1900s, the women featured in this book are virtually unknown today, yet they had a great impact during the 20s and 30s and helped to shape the Britain of today.

Although not necessarily born into it, circumstances such as marriage meant these six women were regarded as upper class. In no particular order, the names impacting on the social revolution and thus featured in *Queen Bees* are as follows: Lady Nancy Astor, the first female MP; Lady Sybil Colefax, who became a friend of Edward VIII; Lady Emerald Cunard, also connected with the royal family; Mrs. Ronnie Greville, a rather formidable woman; Lady Edith Londonderry, the founder of the Women's Legion; and Laura Corrigan, the youngest of the set. Evans talks the reader through these women's careers as professional hostesses as they compete to throw the better party, entertaining famous writers and actors as well as members of royalty, both national and foreign.

What is perhaps the most interesting, and indeed the most worth learning, is the way a couple of these women altered the future of the British monarchy. Without their interference the future George VI would never have married Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon, and without their involvement in the relationship between Edward VIII and Wallis Simpson, George VI would never have come to the throne. This is such an important aspect of British history that has been widely left out and ignored. Without these hostesses influence we would all be experiencing a slightly different life.

In terms of the actual writing, Siân Evans manages fairly well to engage the reader as she relates the factual story in a more or less chronological way. A slight issue is the quick, often undetected, move from one woman to the next, resulting in a lot of confusion about who is who particularly at the beginning of the book. A lot of the narrative features other key figures from the same period and often moves away from the main characters, which, whilst interesting, is not what the reader necessarily expected from a book whose title *Queen Bees* suggested it was only going to be about the women's lives.

Footnotes, quotes and extracts from letters and diaries help to make the book appear reliable, factual and believable. Some of the content, without back up, would have seemed rather fanciful or exaggerated. *Queen Bees* can be read as a source of entertainment or as a citation for historical research. What is found within these pages is a more unbiased account of the early twentieth century than would be found in numerous male dominated history textbooks.

Mature readers of all ages are likely to gain something from reading *Queen Bees* – pleasure, knowledge etc., however it is most likely to appeal to the contemporary feminist. With this in mind, be aware that the six hostesses were not feminists of their time; they were not involved in Suffragette movements and were fairly content to live off money earned by their husbands or fathers. Yet, on the other hand, they impacted on the future of Britain as much as the male politicians of the time. Highly political in content, *Queen Bees* is worth reading to discover our own history, but be prepared for initial confusion over who is who and rather lengthy paragraphs.

Dee says

I'm not finished yet, but sadly this one has to go back to the library today and there's a big reserve list.

I am uncertain if I'll get it out again later to try and finish. I've just read through the abdication, which is a particular area of interest for me, though I'm less interested in how things shake out during the war and after. In addition, the author has a love for details, especially interior design details, that is no doubt delightful to the right audience, but just makes things drag for me.

I did very much appreciate the look at the "soft power" exerted by these women in their varying areas of interest. (Indeed, they were such acknowledged pillars of influence that Hitler sent a representative to court their good opinion.) I feel like maybe a little more focus and a little less objective detail might have provided a keener view at their impact, but all in all, there's a lot of interesting stuff in this book.

Roman Clodia says

I read Evans' book on Mrs Ronnie Greville a couple of years ago and this one expands on that taking a wider view of the phenomenon of society hostesses in the between the wars years.

The style is gossipy and uncritical, and ventures towards hagiography especially when excusing these women's support for Hitler, the Nazis and Fascism in general. Stating that many of the British elite and aristocrats thought the same way (not actually true: look at Jessica and Nancy versus Unity and Deborah Mitford) isn't really a justification, especially when the book itself quotes other people dissing these women who talked about Hitler as 'kindly', for example; or Nancy Astor being 'astounded' in the House of Commons when she hears about Hitler's invasion of Czechoslovakia when she had been defending him for years... It's typical of the milieu that one of the women, after being publicly pro-Hitler, tried to buy back her ruined reputation by donating enough money for a Spitfire: less money and more integrity wouldn't have gone amiss.

So Evans overstates the 'achievements' of these women who are foolish, often silly, crashing snobs, and absolutely of the Establishment. I had little sympathy or liking for any of them and found myself arguing back with the book on how radical, influential or even interesting any of them actually were. We're constantly told that these women were witty and sharp but we never witness it for ourselves.

Apart from the content, the style of the narrative needs work: Evans skips too blithely between women and their friends and relatives, so that it's difficult to keep them apart at times. Some political balance such as Lady Ottoline Morell, patron of the left-wing Bloomsbury Group, might have made this less of a paen to the Establishment.

An interesting topic but Evans doesn't really make a convincing case for her assertions: it's not really enough to attribute the changing social positioning of women in the twentieth century to elitist snobs like these women as this book tries to: 'brilliant', 'extraordinary' and 'talent[ed]' is how the subtitle describes them but I can't say I agree and this book did nothing to convince me otherwise.

Abby says

I loved learning more about this era and seeing the connections to people in power/influence today. Churchill bon mots are always welcome. But a fair number of the anecdotes would be told in detail once, and then repeated at length elsewhere (sometimes multiple times). Could've used another edit.

Regina Dooley says

The concept of the book is better than its execution. The book tells the story of society ladies between the world wars. The book flows chronologically rather than each ladies story. The book reads like a gossip magazine rather than a history book. There is some repetition of information but there is a lot of overlapping in the women's social circles so it is forgiven.

There could have been more photos but with access to the internet it is easy to access more information on these society ladies. Worth a read.

Audiothing says

<http://audiothing.blogspot.com.au/>

Review

The lives of the wealthy are fascinating to most of us and, if there is a bit of juicy gossip and some outrageous behaviour thrown in, most of us will want to know more. Added to that is the authors belief that these six society hostesses had a "profound effect on British history". This then is what attracted me to the book.

Book layout

Beginning with a "Dramatis Personae" as a brief introduction to each woman there follows a broader introduction where the author offers an opinion on the motivating forces that drove them. Venturing a little into the world of pop psychology Evans believes it to be "telling" that each of the women were "driven by a volatile childhood or unhappy experiences".

The remainder of the book is divided in to time periods beginning just before the Great War and ending with the aftermath of World War 2. Followed by source notes, acknowledgements and an incredibly long index. The stories of the women are not written separately but alongside each other throughout the time period. The book is filled with the fascinating anecdotes promised by the back cover but because of the layout I did not find it an easy read. I was expecting a more lightweight account of these woman, which it is, in parts. However, I found it difficult to follow because the author included so very many characters that they just became a convoluted blur and I simply couldn't keep track, just look at the length of the index! Historians do hate to leave out the smallest detail and that is certainly the case here.

I would have preferred each woman to have had chapters separate to the others, or, better still, as the author likes to include so much detail, separate biographies.

One of the most interesting sections is what these women contributed to society with their war work, Laura Corrigan who was, by all accounts the least likely to shine as a successful society hostess. She is my favourite, because she rose to the top from very humble beginnings without the advantage of beauty or remarkable wit, I have to admire her iron willed determination. She also had the sense to stay clear of Wallis

Simpson, this choice eventually served her well with the British aristocracy
For her war work in France she was awarded the Croix de Guerre, Legion of Honour, the Croix de Combattant and The Kings Medal.

Who will enjoy this book?

This book merges rather dry historical fact with the more entertaining reports of the outrageous, outlandish and jolly interesting gossip bits. It will be of interest to anyone who loves to read about the outrageous antics of high society, and of even more interest to those who love historical facts.

If the layout could be sorted to make the book less meandering and the facts easier to follow then it would surely be a 5 star read, as it is, it is still deserving of 4 stars.

Mini introduction to the Queen Bees:

Lady Nancy Astor: American born, divorced from her first husband. Later married Waldorf Astor. she was the first female to become a Member of Parliament

Sibyl, Lady Colefax: English born to a well known family,
She married Arthur Colefax (later to be Knighted) whose family made their money in "trade". Later she became a noted interior designer.

Lady Londonderry: Born in Scotland and was granddaughter of the 3rd Duke of Sutherland. The only social hostess of aristocratic birth.

Lady Cunard: American born, married nobility, the 3rd Baronet Cunard

Laura Corrigan: American born, scandalous divorce. later married James Corrigan son of wealthy James Corrigan Snr.

Mrs Ronnie Greville: British born, shady details about her birth. Married Ronald Greville, eldest son of the 2nd Baron Greville

In case you were wondering A Viscount is a British nobleman ranking above a Baron and below an Earl.
Review copy provided by Hachette Australia

Kathleen Wells says

A bigger picture section would have been great (I read it on my Kindle)

Teresa says

This was a very interesting, informative, well written book. It tells the tales of the six 'big' hostesses in England from the late 1800's onwards. They were as different a bunch as you could get but they all had one thing in common, hosting lavish parties, getting the 'names' of the day to come to the parties and being

friends of anyone that mattered, especially the Royal Family.

They were all too sure of themselves and were sure they had the power to make decisions for the country. Some of them even traveled to Germany to try and placate Hitler and stop him starting war.

A comment on the back of the book reads, 'gloriously gossipy' and it is but there is also a lot of history in it, especially about WW2.

If I had any complaint it's that I thought it would be a chapter to each queen bee but it was all one long read. So I had a bit of difficulty following all the people in it because there are a LOT of characters to keep track of. I'd recommend it though to anyone who likes to read about days gone by, likes history and most of all likes juicy gossip!

Susan says

Author Sian Evans has written several works about the period this book covers, including a biography of one of the women covered in this book – “Mrs Ronnie: The Society Hostess Who Collected Kings.” This is a more general work, rather than a specific biography, and it results in a slightly disjointed approach which still has a lot of appeal. All of the six society hostesses in this book were born between 1863 and 1879, in the height of the Victorian era and their lives covered some very tumultuous times – including WWI, the roaring twenties, the depression, the rise of fascism in Europe, the abdication crisis and the Second World War. In a time when women had virtually no role to play in business or politics, they made a niche for themselves and found a role, and influence, in politics, the arts and society.

This book covers Mrs Margaret Greville (the ‘Mrs Ronnie’ of Evans previous biography) who was born to an unmarried domestic servant; the mistress of brewer William McEwan. Margaret’s parents later married and she was brought up as the step daughter of her real father; who launched her into society. Lady Sibyl Colefax, whose parents had an unhappy marriage and who spent her childhood shuttled between England and India and a series of different relatives. Lady Londonderry, who was brought up by her grandfather, the Duke of Sutherland. Nancy Astor, who was divorced with a six year old son when she met Waldorf Astor, and who became an MP. Lady Cunard, who was born in America and later married the heir to the shipping line. Lastly, Laura Corrigan; born in the US as Laura Mae Whitrock and married James Corrigan, heir to a steel company.

Many of these women had humble beginnings, while other came from the landed classes. Many shared a personal insecurity and a burning ambition to compete as the greatest hostess of their time. They spent their time trying to attract the most influential, famous, celebrated names to their homes. This was a time of country house parties, of romance, intrigue and unabashed social climbing. The book covers so many different periods within a lifetime and these range from the moving (for example, a craze for palm-reading just before WWI saw one celebrated palm-reader dismissed as a charlatan when she found herself unaccountably unable to see any future in the palms of the young, male clients who flocked to see her) to the less than attractive flirtation that many of these hostesses had with the early rise of the Nazi party in Germany.

This book is full of names that are instantly familiar – whether they are Winston Churchill, Oswald Mosley or Noel Coward – complaining about yet another intimate supper with Edward and Mrs Simpson... From the great, to the good, to the infamous, this is a story of two wars and the time between them. This is an ambitious book, which attempts to tell all of the six ‘Queen Bees’ stories in tandem and sometimes you feel a little confused about exactly who is who. I have read many books about this period and so I could keep the characters fairly clear in my mind, but if you are unfamiliar with the subjects of this book you will need to

concentrate closely. Overall, though, an extremely good introduction to six very interesting women and to an era which fascinates me.

Rated 3.5

Wenn says

Rather sporadic narrative, jumping from one persona to another. It has potential to be more compelling had it been structured better, but as of now I find it hard to follow, like a haphazard collection of news clippings.

Penny says

This book seemed to take me forever to read. Partly because I was forever googling the various minor characters that appeared, including the gloriously named Major 'Fruity' Metcalfe. But also because at other times it was like wading through treacle.

I loved the idea of taking 6 'society hostesses' (all born within a few years of each other but with very different backgrounds) and telling their stories. Evans has a casual, gossipy style ideally suited to the subject matter.

What I didn't like was the constant repetition of minor facts. The book obviously jumped about between its 6 main characters. However, I certainly didn't need reminding about details over and over again. A bit of tighter editing could have eliminated this irritant.

Altogether I expected more, and I'm glad to have finished it at long last!

Damaskcat says

I found this an interesting and spirited look at six remarkable women between the wars who turned themselves into society hostesses. The book doesn't just look at their careers as hostesses but also looks at their lives leading up to the point where they made the decision to become hostesses. This was definitely a career choice for all six of them. They came from varied backgrounds, not all of them from the highest echelons of society.

Lady Astor - one of the six women who are the subject of this book - also became the first female MP. All six cultivated the great and the good and the interesting from all walks of society including aristocracy and royalty. They brought society to life and caused it to sparkle. This book really brought that era to life for me and I felt as though I was there, an observer at those glittering society events.

I would have preferred the book cover fewer of the women, all of whom really deserve books in their own right. I found it difficult to keep the six separate in my head while I was reading. Undoubtedly the book does give a real flavour of the era but I think it would have been better with fewer main characters.
