



Aristocrats: Caroline, Emily, Louisa, and Sarah Lennox, 1740-1832

Stella Tillyard

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A fascinating insight into 18th century aristocratic life through the lives of the four Lennox sisters, the great grandchildren of Charles II, whose extraordinary lives spanned the period 1740-1832. Passionate, witty and moving, the voices of the Lennox sisters reach us with immediacy and power, drawing the reader into their remarkable lives, and making this one of the most enthralling historical narratives to appear for many years

Aristocrats: Caroline, Emily, Louisa, and Sarah Lennox, 1740-1832 Details

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From Reader Review Aristocrats: Caroline, Emily, Louisa, and Sarah Lennox, 1740-1832 for online ebook

Caroline says

"Remember the Ladies!", as Abigail Adams once enjoined her husband - but so often of course history fails to. All of these women played significant roles in Georgian history, but at most they are footnotes in their lives of their male relatives - the Duke of Richmond, the Duke of Leinster, Lord Holland, Lord Edward Fitzgerald, Charles James Fox. History remembers these names, but not those of Sarah, Emily, Louise and Sarah Lennox.

So this book was an absolute joy to read. Stella Tillyard delves into the sisters' lives in great depth and you really feel as though you have come to know, come to appreciate and understand their personalities, their hopes and fears, their whims and quirks. All four sisters (there was a fifth, Cecilia, who died a nineteen, and a number of deceased infant siblings) led fascinating lives, often full of scandal and independence - dalliances with royalty, affairs, illegitimate children, second marriages. They were all striking personalities and every page of this book in their company was a pleasure, from Caroline who defied her family to marry the man she loved; Emily, who established herself as the steady matriarch of the family; gentle loving Louisa who held the family together; wilful impetuous Sarah, who captured a king's heart, left her husband for another man, married yet another.

Whilst the Lennox sisters are of course the primary focus of this book, Tillyard doesn't skirt over the affairs of the age or the doings of the sisters' more active male kin. This was the era of George III, the American Revolution, the French Revolution, Charles James Fox and William Pitt in Westminster, a turbulent era teetering on the brink of revolution at home and rebellion in Ireland. All of the sisters were interested in politics and their letters are full of actions and opinions, often discordant and divisive.

I could hardly put this down. It's a truly excellent book and I would advise it to anyone who is interested in Georgian history, women's history, the lives of the aristocracy - hell, anyone who is interested in history, full stop!

Sherwood Smith says

Reread while traveling.

This biography of the Lennox sisters (who comprise two generations) covers the 1740s to the end of the Regency period and the beginning of the Victorian era, doing an excellent job of sketching in the cultural changes in the English and Irish aristocracy over these decades.

Relying upon a richness of primary source quotes, Tillyard takes the time to introduce the complicated--really tangled--family trees here, doing an admirable job of elucidating the characters of the sisters and the men they married.

She also takes the time to develop cultural idiosyncrasies and evolving fashions, from gambling to real estate to decorating those vast mansions they were so fond of building in order to enhance family and political prestige. If you know some of the colorful figures of the period (like Horry Walpole, George Selwyn, Lord

Hervey, Mary Wortley Montagu, and Madame du Deffand) the mentions when these people pop up will add layers to the on-going story.

Tillyard takes the time to sketch in the causes as well as the progress of the doomed Irish Revolt of 1798, inevitable after the high-hearted celebration by Edward Fitzgerald and his band who hailed the era of the common man and democracy in 1792, before the Terror ruined the French Revolution.

There are some sections at the beginnings of some chapters where she indulges in some fictional explorations of their inner minds, but I could accept these as the scenes she paints resonate with the facts so carefully introduced.

One quibble I had, and it's small as I know that the alternative would have added massive word count, was relatively little development of their children, other than Eddy Fitzgerald. Charles James Fox is mainly introduced through his gambling, with scant attention paid to his political views and life, and none at all to the discovery on his death of his secret marriage and family.

I also think a little more attention might have been spent on Susan Fox-Strangways, who was found at the center of the storm so often, and who seemed to wiggle free time after time until she, too, mistook reality for fantasy and eloped with her actor.

The focus stays on the Lennox sisters and their husbands and lovers--poor Cecelia, not mentioned in the title getting her innings at last--and comes to a graceful close after the death of Ogilvie, the last of them left alive.

Beata says

Stella Tillyard is a perfectionist! Having done exceptionally detailed research into one aristocratic family, she presents a delightful insight into the lives of the privileged class over the span of several generations.

Sarah says

Wow. This is a fabulously good biography, one of the best I've ever read--erudite but juicy, and irresistibly readable from start to finish. A combination of the writing and the subjects themselves made it so amazing to me; these four Lennox sisters are just ridiculously interesting, every one of them intelligent, passionate, sympathetic and flawed in their own diverse ways. And yet, I've read biographies before of figures who are just as appealing, that still somehow failed to leap off the page like this one did for me--Amanda Foreman's *Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire* comes to mind. So I'm giving a lot of the credit for my newfound collective girl-crush on the Lennox sisters to Stella Tillyard's sparkling and vivid telling of their story. While concentrating solely on these sisters, she manages to give the most fascinating panoramic look at the whole time period in which they lived.

Kelly says

There are so many ways to sell/reasons for me to push this book, it absolutely boggles the mind:

-First and foremost and easiest for both the scandalmongers among us (and really, if we're honest, which one of us isn't, at least a little? :)), all these words, adjectives and happenings are involved in this book, probably many times over: an illegitimate line of the bastard children of kings, arranged marriages... that turn out to be fairy tale romances, forbidden courtships, scandalous secret marriages, elopements resulting in family disowning of the bride, reform politicians who double as impassioned romantic heroes, obsessive jealousy, sexual dominance, beautiful, fickle, expensive young brides driving their husbands to ruin, medieval castles, mistresses, whores, illegitimate children raised with legitimate heirs, European tours, peers renouncing their titles for the sake of Liberte, Egalite, fraternite, affairs with French dukes, a love affair with George III, seperation, divorce, rehabilitation to near sainthood, a duchess who marries her children's tutor, Lords killed for treason and rebellion... etc, etc.

If for some reason that isn't enough to send you running out the door...

-Secondly, this is a fascinating portrait of a world in incredible transition. As we start the piece, the English court moves to medieval rhythms, Dukes have actual jobs at court, Duchesses fetch and carry and sew for the Queen... by the time the last sister dies, Napoleon has been defeated, and Victoria is five years from appearing on the throne. It is so easy to be swept along with the times, watch everything slowly shift just as these incredible, strong sisters from a provincial near backwater to the full might of the British Empire. From a king just as German as he was English, just as concerned with Hanover as he was London to a peculiarly English world where being British was first and foremost.

-Thirdly: These are some truly amazing, kickass women. Yes, they all have their faults, but I can't agree with the one reviewer who said that we never care about them. I don't know how you can't. Yes, they're aristocratic snobs with a very narrow view on life, yes, they're wasteful and extravagant, yes yes, yes... And yet, these are strong women who made their own choices, to the detriment their material well being, be damned to what anyone thought around them, who both flouted convention and became it at the same time. These are women who were still finding themselves well into their mid thirties, showing that you can still keep growing, and changing, and there's no limit to the point when you really find your dreams. That really spoke to me at this point in my life. One of the sisters is completely fallen by the age of 25, and an idol of the cult of motherhood by the time she's forty. These sisters truly show the limitlessness of the possibilities of life.

The one thing I will say about this book is that the focus on the sisters is incredibly narrow. Which is what you have to do for a biography of this kind of course, but it can be jarring. Even when great friends of the family die, or major events happen, we never really get their story and what lead to these great events. This is merely about the sisters. To the point where the American revolution is referred to by the author as, "The drama in the American colonies," rather than a revolution. She also repeatedly refers to "Londonderry," in Ireland, rather than qualifying the name, which is something of a hot button issue. Obviously, if you already know the history of the era, this isn't a problem, it can just jerk you out of the text occasionally.

Other than that, absolutely highly recommended. It blows by like a thriller novel, honestly. Don't let its size fool you.

Emg says

I just couldn't get interested. I kept flipping to the index and family trees to see what was going to happen (and wondering when we were going to get there). In some parts the flow was interrupted by too much detail on purchases, commissions and costs to the extent that it seemed as if the book were about things instead of people.

Margaret says

Aristocrats is a brilliant group biography of a family of noble sisters during the Hanoverian period in England. The Lennox sisters were great-granddaughters of Charles II (through his mistress Louise de Keroualle), daughters of the Duke of Richmond, and wives and mothers to politicians and peers, but also fascinating people in their own rights.

All their lives they wrote letters voluminously, to each other and to other family members, and it's these letters that Tillyard uses in her reconstruction of their lives and their world, quoting liberally so that we hear the sisters in their own words as often as possible. Tillyard's portrayal of Hanoverian England is wonderfully rich and engaging, from politics and society to the details of daily life, and her portraits of the sisters and their relationship are acutely realized.

Aristocrats is that rare and wonderful thing: a non-fiction book so engrossing that it's hard to put down.

Whimsical says

I found this biography riveting. Ms. Tillyard wrote a comprehensive history of the Lennox sisters and their family so much so that I feel I know them intimately. I discovered this book while reading through the bibliography of another book and what a find!

I would recommend this book in a heart beat to history lovers and those love to read well researched, beautifully written biographies .

Wealththeow says

This is the story of four daughters of the second Duke of Richmond. Great-granddaughters of King Charles II, wealthy, titled, and intimate with the political leaders of the realm, the Lennox sisters were envied by many and watched by all. Their story lasts almost a century; it "begins in 1744, as the Jacobites were planning their last, desperate assault on the Hanoverian throne, and ends in 1832, five years before the beginning of the Victorian Age." The eldest, Caroline, eloped and became a rich and famous political hostess. Her eldest son was a dissolute wastrel; her second son, Charles Fox, became an infamous politician. The second girl, Emily, married the Duke of Leinster, the first peer of Ireland. After their parents' deaths, Emily raised her much younger sisters Louisa and Sarah amidst her own gigantic brood (she had, in all, 22 children, only half of whom survived to adulthood). Emily arranged a marriage for Louisa to the richest man

in Ireland, Thomas Conolly. King George III loved young Sarah, but was convinced to marry a German princess for matters of state. Sarah was pushed into a marriage with Thomas Bunbury, a man of little sense, money, or desire for his teenaged bride. Their marriage was deeply unhappy, and Sarah had a very public affair, forcing Bunbury to separate and eventually divorce her. She and Emily each remarried later in life, and had very happy marriages to men of significantly less money and social standing. Every sister but Louisa had a cavalcade of children. And every sister maintained a long, intimate relationship via letters.

Thanks to those letters, and Tillyard's incredible scholarship, the modern age has a pretty good idea of their personalities and daily lives. The sisters themselves are vividly drawn and oft quoted (I'm a sucker for reading the actual words of historical figures), but what truly impressed me was the detail of their surroundings. How their servants were treated, what kind of decorating was in style, how one behaved in Bath, what London was like (the description of London "waking up" every morning was particularly impressive)...Tillyard assembles all this flotsom and arranges it into a coherent world.

Deodand says

3.5 stars. Stick with this book through the first section, it improves once the part giving context to the Lennox sisters' lives is over. I was more curious about their day to day lives than their politics.

Amy Masonis says

If you want to be there, read their letters. Letters had form, when letters were written, as Stella will describe. As in any art form, there is room to diverge, and write that "this is what I should say, but this is how it is". These sisters do that like any of us would. Letters were a sort of newspaper then, so when they have an addition to be read by the recipient alone, then THAT'S the good stuff. Details, details.

Another good part is how the sisters live politics through their husbands. Not quite as subserviant as it sounds, because some of them influenced their husband's actions not through deception, but through frank discussion with them and at least some of their circle.

If you love salons of the 18th century...if you love the enlightenment and what it gave to people who could make a difference at the time...this will draw you in.

If you like historical novels for the atmosphere, you will like this. If you like politics, this will tell in some part how it effected real life (not so much the lower classes immediately, but it did effect the history of everyone eventually, which is why I can relate).

Juicy. Informative. Just like real life. Home life is everything, as anyone will truthfully tell you.

LOVED IT!!

Gabriella says

It is a really amazing and interesting book. I've always loved reading about English history I especially like historical novels or bibliographical ones and this book fulfilled all my wishes.

Apart from the life of the four sisters we can have a glimpse into politics, society, religion, everyday life, classes and military life.

A must-read for those who like me love history and beautifully written narratives.

Lauren Albert says

An excellent group biography of 4 of the Lennox sisters which shows what it was like to be an aristocratic woman during the period. I thought that Tillyard did a very good job of showing what it was like to live through a scandal and how one might become brought back into society (to some degree) afterwards.

Brett says

So I'm obviously both a complete history nerd & a bit of an Anglophile. I still strongly feel that this book could prove fascinating to someone who is neither of those things: the letters written between the four Lennox sisters & to their other family members reveal a world that is simultaneously surprisingly similar to our own & just enough different to be almost jarring at times.

The beauty to me here is the fact that, in history, you just don't tend to hear much from women, aristocratic or otherwise. Presumably a lot of them wrote (after all, this was before email or texting) but domestic matters have invariably been seen as less than important, & so that writing doesn't necessarily survive. The luck here is that the four Lennox sisters were attached, by blood & marriage, to some very important, famous, &/or powerful men, & so their writings got classified as "interesting." They truly are, too. Of course, major events of the times are talked about - & these were fascinating times to live through - but the mundane takes up the bulk of things, & through that, Tillyard shows the reader what everyday life for an aristocratic woman of the Georgian era would look like. The other thing that really spoke to me here was the very real & continual attachment between these sisters, who were distanced by age, experience, & geography, & yet managed to remain absolutely intimate for most of a century. I could not put it down, & I cannot recommend it enough. Tillyard does an excellent job of summing up, & yet letting these fantastic women speak for themselves.

Roopa Prabhu says

A good start to 2018, a year I foresee to be one where I read the most. The narrative gives a peekaboo into the lives of English aristocracy and way of English living during the regency era from 1740s until just before the beginning of Victorian era. It's a relish to read about their ways of thinking and living. It's almost as if you are there and living those lives. The Lennox sisters indeed did a brilliant job by perfectly encapsulating the time period amongst their letters to each other.
