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## Review of *The Fall and Rise of the Stately House*, by Peter Mandler

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# Books

## ENGLAND

Peter Mandler

### THE FALL AND RISE OF THE STATELY HOUSE

New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998, 523 pp., 100 illus. \$45.00 (cloth). ISBN 0-300-06703-8.

This is a rich and fascinating book. Over the years there have been innumerable studies of the history and fortunes of the stately home, but as the nicely graded cadence of his title suggests, Mandler tells a particular part of this story, what he calls the invention and reinvention of the idea of the country house as the buildings were transformed from symbols of authority to become museums, stripped of all but the merest traces of the political power they once so defiantly embodied. Perhaps we knew much of this, but Mandler's history is so complex and filled with interesting details, it is as if he is writing here about a new topic. The book also abounds in subtle contradictions, as in the opening pages where Mandler notes that, if the idea of the country house has not always hung over us, it is not a fiction imposed on a merely passive people, and the social context of the country house idea was not one of simple continuity but of sometimes remorseless change that led, in ways not equaled perhaps in the other European countries, to neglect and even contempt for the past of which these buildings were so evidently a part.

The term "country house" appeared first in English in 1592, as a rendering of the Italian "casa rurestra" in Richard Dallington's translation of the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*. But not until 1664 do we encounter the common usage, when Samuel Pepys describes someone going "to his country house," that is to say, a house not in the city. Such rural retreats for the rich have long been associated with the Arcadian myth and invested with a notion of the disinterested contemplation of God and nature, the rural Socrates, and

so forth, but for Mandler politics and history, as much as morality, marked the idea of the stately home. The idea itself was indeed of comparatively recent invention from about 1800, as seen in the notion of "Old England" and in the late medieval and Tudor houses illustrated by Joseph Nash and Samuel Carter Hall and in journals like the *Illustrated London News*, *The Penny Magazine*, and *The Leisure Hour*. This was also the time when a new class of tourists visited country houses—80,000 in one year at Chatsworth, and equal numbers at Belvoir and Warwick Castle. And if this was possible, it came about as the result of a largely tacit compromise worked out after Reform and Chartism, by which, as Mandler notes, owners were left generally unmolested as long as they appeared to exercise their vast privileges less exclusively. But the agricultural depression of the 1870s disturbed such a balance, leading to agitation for taxation of all ground rents and land values, resulting in 1894 in the introduction of a consolidated death duty, the Estate Tax, or what the Duke of Devonshire disparagingly referred to as "democratic finance."

A new appreciation of these houses also appeared at this time. The Arts and Crafts Movement was hardly concerned with them, but in 1897 the first issue of *Country Life Illustrated* (later simply *Country Life*), edited by Edward Hutton, featured profiles of these houses written by H. Avray Tipping, illustrated with lavish plates, and printed with the latest technology. In the 1920s, Tipping was followed by Christopher Hussey; out of concern for the fate of these houses, he called for a sense of responsibility from the landed elite, "a risorgimento of the squires," while offering a new account of what this history could mean. Country houses were now to be taken as a crucial and continuous part of English life, yet also the best of them—if not his own home, Scotney Castle, "the dear jumble of a house"—might also stand,

such history aside, as models of the kinds of houses the new middle classes could afford. Mandler notes that the magazine *Country Life* survived with the financial support of the estate agents Knight Frank & Rutley, founded in 1896 to market country homes, and they support it still together with other firms like Jackson-Stops & Staff, Fox and Sons, Alfred Savill, Curtis and Henson.

Despite the efforts of Hussey and others, the 1920s and 1930s were, by all measures, the low moment in the fortunes of these houses, unloved by their owners and closed to the public. But after World War II, the establishment of the Historic Building Committee of the National Trust served to define a new interest in them, set in a countryside now far more firmly regulated by planners and politicians. If once John Summerson had been chased away from Blickling Hall by the police, now owners were grateful for any interest in their houses. In 1946, the 28th earl of Crawford, then Chairman of the National Trust, and Hugh Dalton, Chancellor of the Exchequer in the postwar government of Clement Attlee, set up the National Land Fund, with a dowry of £50 million, to be used to acquire land deemed by the Chancellor to be in the public interest. The country house was now safe; and if there could be outbreaks still of old class hostilities, the financial revival of the aristocracy in the late 1950s onward, derived from the rise in the market value of properties, and the interest of the aristocracy in repairing their often neglected fabrics ushered in a new chapter in the story of the survival of the country house. Note, for example, that Chatsworth had been empty until 1952, Castle Howard until 1959. Typical of this new age were Lord Montague of Beaulieu and the duke of Bedford, who opened up their homes to motor museums, zoos, and nudist congresses. The rest is history, and if Margaret Thatcher's vision of a new Britain opposed anything about heritage or

even anything commercial, like Laura Ashley, that was based on an idea of this old England, cultural forces larger than Thatcher were on the march. When the National Trust was founded in 1929, it had a mere 1,000 members; by 1980 it had 1 million members and by 1990, 2 million. *Brideshead Revisited* was filmed at Castle Howard, and in 1986 *The Treasure Houses of Britain*, an exhibition at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., organized by Gervase Jackson-Stops of the firm of estate agents, unleashed a storm of unhistorical rhetoric about the wonders of these houses, the objects within, and the discriminating taste of their owners. In the 1920s the duke of Westminster, an obviously interested party, had called the country house the greatest contribution of England to the visual arts, “an association of beauty, art and nature—the achievement often of centuries of effort—which is irreplaceable, and has seldom, if ever, been equalled in the history of civilisation” (343). Yet years later, even Robert Venturi, amid his happy remarks at the announcement of the commission for the National Gallery, London, hinted at the same idea when he said that the project combined his two loves, Italian painting and English architecture.

All this and much more—death duties, capital transfer taxes, graphs of the patterns of demolitions and of visitings—are the materials of this book. Accompanying the text is a series of plates, familiar and unfamiliar; the drawings of Georges du Maurier from the 1890s; images of wartime evacuations; many postwar cartoons from *Punch*; even some nicely staged photographs of the aristocracy welcoming visitors or arguing against increases in capital taxation, as did the earl of March in 1975 in a photograph of himself in one of the rooms at Goodwood, stripped of all furnishings. The wealth of materials is remarkable, and the result, to borrow a phrase used all too often now, is a book that will become the standard account of its subject.

At a more personal level, the book invites us to fit ourselves within this history. I first studied English architecture in New York, at Columbia University, under Rudolf Wittkower. In fact, I had been born in England, but my parents had never taken me to see these buildings, perhaps from some residue of socialist discomfort, perhaps also from the dismissive attitudes to-

ward the houses that they shared with many who grew up in the 1920s and 1930s. But Wittkower, a new arrival, was able to turn a more dispassionate eye upon them, picking out from the history, even amid the darkest days of the war, the part that especially tied things English to the cultural traditions of Europe; think here of the exhibition he organized in 1941 with Fritz Saxl, *English Art and the Mediterranean*, for the Council for Encouragement of Music and the Arts. How Wittkower was first received is not clear; I recall a rather slighting reference to him in the anecdotes of James Lees-Milne, a stalwart of the National Trust in the postwar years. But it is especially interesting to think of Wittkower's work as a mark of gratitude toward his new home—as were also the compilations of Nikolaus Pevsner, based on Georg Dehio's *Handbuch der deutschen Kunstdenkmaler*—yet set within the parts of the more general political and social history Mandler lays out here. History is history; but it is rarely just history.

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*Antony Wells-Cole*

**ART AND DECORATION IN ELIZABETHAN AND JACOBEAN ENGLAND**

Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 1997, xii + 336 pp., 365 illus. \$75.00 (cloth). ISBN 0-300-06651-1.

*Michael Snodin and Maurice Howard, editors*

**ORNAMENT: A SOCIAL HISTORY SINCE 1450**

Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 1996, 232 pp., 241 illus., 139 in color. \$45.00 (cloth). ISBN 0-300-06455-1.

*John Ingamells*

**A DICTIONARY OF BRITISH AND IRISH TRAVELLERS IN ITALY 1701–1800**

Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 1997, lii + 1,070 pp. \$75.00 (cloth). ISBN 0-300-07165-5.

Anthony Wells-Cole has made an important contribution to a recent spate of books devoted to the influence of the printed image on early modern culture in Britain.

The most valuable aspect of his study is three chapters examining the influence of Continental prints on masonry, plasterwork, and joinery and carving. There is also a final chapter on the significance of prints for the decoration of the Elizabethan houses of Chatsworth and Hardwick. Painstaking attention to minutiae has allowed Wells-Cole to go beyond previous attempts in tracing the paper sources for architectural motifs in a book to consult rather than to read. Nevertheless, broader issues do emerge, as when, for example, prints are shown to inspire the ground plan of an entire building and not just the arabesques on its newel posts. A Thorpe elevation in the Soane Museum comes from a plate from Jacques Perret's *Architectura et perspectiva* (Oppenheim, 1613), a print Girouard intriguingly suggested was itself inspired by the design of Wollaton (Mark Girouard, *Robert Smythson and the Architecture of the Elizabethan Country House*, [New Haven and London, 1983], 86). Evidently prints were not merely devoted to the art of appliqué. Their sheer range as source material for craftsmen in Scotland as well as England suggests an aesthetic, different but arguably no less sophisticated, than those prevailing in early modern Continental Europe. The overmantel panels from the richly carved chimneypiece of 1636 in the Guildhall at Newcastle-upon-Tyne are closely based on two prints after Rubens. Not only does this represent a transcription into sculpture of that most painterly of painters, an unexpected and daring achievement unlooked for in a metropolitan let alone a provincial context, but these reliefs demonstrate a fair stab at getting the spirit of the originals by craftsmen *à la page* with the most versatile designer in Europe. Such alertness combined with the enormous range of material consulted in the century after the Reformation suggests it is a serious misconception to assume that Elizabethan architects were trying to be classical in the manner of Jones and Webb in the next generation. Rather, they delighted in the same exuberance and vitality as the builders of the Decorated and Perpendicular churches of the late Middle Ages. There is more in common between a Perpendicular reredos and the Middle Temple screen (1570s) than between the latter and Palladio's choir screen in the Redentore. Insofar as there is any sort of