



Servants: A Downstairs History of Britain from the Nineteenth-Century to Modern Times

Lucy Lethbridge

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The vividly told lives of British servants and the upper crust they served.

From the immense staff running a lavish Edwardian estate and the lonely maid-of-all-work cooking in a cramped middle-class house to the poor child doing chores in a slightly less poor household, servants were essential to the British way of life. They were hired not only for their skills but also to demonstrate the social standing of their employers—even as they were required to tread softly and blend into the background. More than simply the laboring class serving the upper crust—as popular culture would have us believe—they were a diverse group that shaped and witnessed major changes in the modern home, family, and social order.

Spanning over a hundred years, Lucy Lethbridge's in this "best type of history" (*Literary Review*) brings to life through letters and diaries the voices of countless men and women who have been largely ignored by the historical record. She also interviews former and current servants for their recollections of this waning profession.

At the fore are the experiences of young girls who slept in damp corners of basements, kitchen maids who were required to stir eggs until the yolks were perfectly centered, and cleaners who had to scrub floors on their hands and knees despite the wide availability of vacuum cleaners. We also meet a lord who solved his inability to open a window by throwing a brick through it and Winston Churchill's butler who did not think Churchill would know how to dress on his own.

A compassionate and discerning exploration of the complex relationship between the server, the served, and the world they lived in, *Servants* opens a window onto British society from the Edwardian period to the present.

Servants: A Downstairs History of Britain from the Nineteenth-Century to Modern Times Details

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Sara says

More like 3 1/2

I've gotten used to narrative non-fiction, both through reading and podcasts, and this book is NOT in the narrative vein. It is more academic and expository. The author organizes the book by topics and themes, which sometimes correspond to a specific time period, and sometimes take a longer view. For example, a section titled "Bowing and Scraping" talks about the way servants often felt dehumanized in their roles, and the author provides examples and quotes from a variety of people through many decades. The scholarship that went into this book is impressive: the author obviously waded through an abundance of diaries, letters, newspapers, and interviews to construct this book. Certain "characters" show up in several chapters, such as an American journalist who went undercover as a servant in the late 1800s, or a career butler who retired in the 1960s. But with *so many* examples and "characters", you never really get any kind of narrative thread, because it's not that kind of non-fiction.

I picked up this book because I am fascinated with the idea of servants, because it is a pretty foreign concept to me. I learned quite a bit from this book, both about how common it used to be to have servants in the home, and about how the role of servant evolved over time, until servants finally began to disappear and how the burden of running a household fell on the woman of the house. It is crazy to think about how lifestyle gurus such as Martha Stewart exhort individuals (women, usually) to aspire to the fussy perfection and elegance of an Edwardian-era noble considering that this kind of domestic perfection required sometimes dozens of hired help.

It is interesting to think about how western society has gone from in-home servants to an externalized service industry. (this theme is only lightly touched on in this book).

This book gave me a lot to think about, and while it was fairly exhaustive, it actually made me think of many more questions about servants and service I would like answers for.

Andrea Seaver says

Truth in reviewing first..... I received this book as part of a Goodreads giveaway.

Servants is a non-fiction work detailing the lives and attitudes both of and towards domestic servants in the late nineteenth century through to the late twentieth century. Some references are to earlier periods, but as a whole this book begins with the late Victorian and Edwardian periods, and is sectioned into time periods based largely on world events. Pre-WWI and then the twenties, etc. The author has limited source material, but as she explains, sadly, these servants either had no time to themselves to actually write a diary, or letters, or that if they did, who would have saved them? Servants was if not exactly an eye-opener for the reader who has a base of knowledge in the time period, a sharper focus, rather, on those that toiled their lives in the shadows.

I was amused by stories of how helpless the upper classes were such as the young lord considered one of the most intelligent and literary of his generation who was unable to open a window, as a servant would have always done so for him, so simply broke it for fresh air. And appalled in turns as servants were treated as

almost sub-human, living in dark damp rooms as afterthoughts.

Servants brings to us a broadened spectrum of those that filled this role, and the ever changing times in which they had to perform their duties. The minutiae that they had to contend with, the oversight and nitpicking by their "betters" who thought nothing of having a 12 year old girl up at 4am to lay their fire, but insisted she turn her face to the wall if the master or mistress entered the room. Strange to consider, coming from so modern a day. But there was true depth of feeling as well, such as the young maid in the 30's whose employer was nearly destitute, who would act as it were the most natural thing to eat nothing but potatoes and margarine for meals, so as not to hurt her elderly mistresses feelings. I thoroughly enjoyed the book, and the voices of those that Ms. Lethbridge wrote, using their letters and ledgers. I do wish however, that the source material was slightly broader, it was a narrow group of people from whom to learn a complex subject. Servants was an echo back to a lost time, one that is for many nostalgic, and for us at a distance, something more sterile. Now that I know exactly how these domestics had to live, and be treated, I will never think of them as "good-old days" again.

Tocotin says

A book of high interest for anyone who doesn't consider history to be the exclusive domain of mighty lords and ladies. A refreshing look at otherwise progressive and well-meaning intellectuals as well (Bloomsbury and others). The refinement, detachment and poise, all these things were possible because of the neglected and degraded humanity wasting their mental and physical strength on them. It's mind-boggling really, the hold that money and class still have on us – most books and movies and other stuff of dreams is about those parasites and their lolproblems. Did you guys know that the servants were supposed to turn towards the wall when they were cleaning the room and one of their employers happened to walk in? Would you like that? Whose shoes would you rather be in? Is there even a true answer to this question?

Anima says

“For many of those American heiresses who did marry into the aristocracy it was often their spouses’ practical incompetence – being stumped by the simplest of daily tasks – that proved most perplexing to their new brides. When sitting beside a dwindling fire, a poker at their feet, it was usual to ring for a footman to poke the fire using the very same poker. Yet at the same time, they often went to great lengths rarely to encounter most of those who did the work for them, never to brush up against the spectacle of manual labour itself. ‘If someone walked into the room and all they wanted was a handkerchief you had to stop whatever you were doing and walk out until such time as they did this,’ remembered an Edwardian maidservant.”

“In 1900 domestic service was the single largest occupation in Edwardian Britain: of the four million women in the British workforce, a million and a half worked as servants, a majority of them as single-handed maids in small households. Hardly surprising then that the keeping of servants was not necessarily considered an indication of wealth: for many families it was so unthinkable to be without servants that their presence was almost overlooked....Yet, despite their constituting the largest working group, the records on servants are often hazy, their lives rendered indistinct. Servants were simultaneously visible, their presence a sign of status, and invisible, the details of their individual experience subsumed into that of their employers; and it was employers who controlled the historical record.”

“The Duties of Servants in 1890 stressed that ‘only a girl possessed of a very attractive appearance, tall rather than short, smart in her dress and deferential in her manners should undertake the duty’ of opening the

door....a parlourmaid must have long arms in order to reach things on the table, and a housemaid should also be tall, else how can she put the linen away on the top shelves and wash the looking-glasses in the drawing room?....

It was hardly surprising that most servants, some of them formerly of the orphanage or the workhouse, poorly fed and many barely pubescent, fell far short of the ideal height requirement for front-of-house work. The extent to which Britain's poor were stunted by disease and malnourishment was made fully apparent after the outbreak of the Second Boer War, when recruiting offices reported that a majority of working-class recruits were unfit for active service, their diet consisting for the most part of little more than the 'staples' of bread, dripping and tea; leftovers, sold off cheap, constituted rare treats for the poorest, including bruised fruit, broken biscuits and offcuts of meat."

Sklape says

I heard about this book on Fresh Air and since Downton Abbey is currently airing, I thought this book would be a compliment to the show. I thoroughly enjoyed this social history. Service for many was the last possible option among working class people. Referred to as "skivvies" by their working class counterparts, those in service were viewed as contributing to the problem of class stratification. The resistance on the part of the aristocracy to adopt labor saving devices was based on the belief such devices would make their servants lazy and soft. Also, service in a middle class home was one of the worst positions to hold. Keeping up appearances necessitated a servant forgoing other basic needs to pay the meager wages for the all-purpose cook-maid. These women worked long hours and suffered repeated humiliation from their employers. Lethbridge is an engaging writer and uses voices of those who served to enrich the story. I highly recommend this this book.

Susan says

Well, it started out interesting, but then went on. And on. And on. I struggled to keep going, but confess to skimming the last half. It was, as another reviewer notes, strangely organized, and seemed to tread the same ground in chapter after chapter. Here's the CliffsNotes: being a servant in England pretty much sucked, and the middle and upper classes were jerks. The End. Now bring on the next season of "Downton Abbey."

Paola says

In this very interesting book Lucy Lethbridge traces the history of domestic service in Britain (well, England, mostly) concentrating mainly around the first half of the twentieth century, from its apogee of the Edwardian period to its essential extinction in the sixties.

In so doing she also sketches a social history of England, of the evolution of the attitudes to the class system and the role of women in the house and in the wider society.

Lethbridge draws from an impressive range of sources, from better known various published memoirs (from Margaret Powell's *Below stairs* to Jean Rennie's *Every Other Sunday* or Winifred Foley's books), to more obscure unpublished diaries (e.g. those of Alice Osbourn, who covered various roles in service at Rectory Farm, in Taplow), letters, editorial and articles in newspapers new and old (from *Time and Tides*, here described as a 'suffragette magazine' to the *Manchester Guardian* to *The Times*), interviews, BBC radio programmes from the forties, and other fascinating works as Mrs Alfred Praga's 1899 *Appearances: How to*

Keep Them Up on a Limited Income manual for the middle class housewife struggling to keep control of her household - indeed, just following up a fraction of these leads would keep me busy for a few years! Lethbridge manages to convey a remarkable amount of information, analysis and contrasting points of views in what is a relatively short book, which flows effortlessly and leaves you wanting for more: no summary would do her justice, just read the book :-)

Andrea Broomfield says

Lucy Lethbridge's *Servants: A Downstairs History of Britain from the Nineteenth Century to Modern Times* is the best comprehensive history I have seen on the topic of domestic labour in Great Britain. Using a methodology that resembles that of my favorite historian, David Kynaston (see *Austerity Britain: 1944-1951* for example), Lethbridge did a copious amount of primary research, relying on diaries, correspondence, newspaper columns, and interviews with former servants and employers to tell the complicated story of life below stairs. Lethbridge also brings in fictional accounts, as well as devoting time in her final chapter to the popular 1970s ITV series, *Upstairs, Downstairs*. Lethbridge does a superb job of documenting her sources, using both endnotes and a bibliography that will guide scholars and interested readers who wish to pursue this topic further.

What I most appreciate about this study is Lethbridge's determination to update the story of domestic labour by moving past the Victorian and Edwardian era (where the bulk of scholarship on the topic exists) and instead detail the decline of the occupation after World War Two. In doing so, she has answered many of my own questions about the status of domestic service in Great Britain today, going so far as to discuss the domestic recruitment agencies, such as Greycoat Lumleys (<http://www.greycoatlumleys.co.uk/about...>) and Norland Agency for nannies, (<http://www.norlandagency.co.uk/>). Who employs a full battery of domestic servants after World War II up to today?

Lethbridge has done extensive research to answer this question and also to determine how the relationships between employers and servants have changed and why. She even goes into the semantics, how terms such as "servant" and "master" have changed to accommodate (or not) changing sensibilities towards domestic labour; namely, the shift to "candidate" and "client", to use Greycoat Lumley's terminology.

Portions of Lethbridge's study reminded me of a 2000 Wall to Wall/PBS production, *1900 House*, (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sD9bFc...>) where a modern-day family goes back to 1900 and becomes for all intents and purposes a lower-middle-class Victorian family. On their budget they can afford one maid-of-all work. Although the maid does take a load off of Joyce's shoulders (she is the mistress of the home), early into the maid's employment, Joyce realizes that it is only because of her maid that she herself is free to think, create, rest, or become an activist—whatever she chooses to do. Her guilt about her station and that of her maid's results in Joyce firing the maid. I remember being intrigued by Joyce's keen sensitivity as to what "domestic service" meant, and also how her decision to fire the maid left the maid out of work and, had it been the Victorian era, possibly on the verge of destitution. Lethbridge introduces this topic as well. She writes about Ethel Mannin, a 1920s-era feminist and socialist who hired domestic help in order to free her for her life's work. Lethbridge writes that Mannin's "socialist principles were apparently untroubled by the maid. . . . As Mannin saw it, domestic help was a necessary component of her freedom. 'It was snobbish; it was class distinction; it was exploitation but it worked,'" Mannin wrote fifty years later (Lethbridge, p. 165).

It is Lethbridge's attention to these complex themes that draw me to it. Although dense with information, Lethbridge writes in a straight-forward style, using little jargon and "telling a story that is true", my favorite

definition of what history is. I highly recommend this book and am grateful that Lethbridge cared so much about the topic to do a lot of original research and investigation in order to share her findings with readers.

Andie says

The perfect antidote to those people who are living in the golden haze produced by too many hours watching Downton Abbey and other movie/TV shows that portray English servants in the early twentieth century as happy employees in harmony with their upper class employers, this well-researched book will put to rest any such fantasies. Instead it shows servants in the first half of the century to be over worked while being underpaid as well as under appreciated.

The author uses interviews, letters and diaries of former servants to bring this long gone world to life. Highly recommended.

CatBookMom says

Somehow this book just didn't keep my interest enough to want to finish it. There were interesting bits, particularly that even English families of very low income levels had at least one live-in maid/cook/laundrywoman until quite late in the 19th century, in some cases into the early 20th.

Shari Larsen says

This book explores the culture of domestic service workers in Britain, from around the 1890s through the 1960s, and the families that employed them, and how the two world wars affected those occupations. The author details the work of cooks, parlor maids, footmen, scullery maids, butlers, etc, through interviews with former domestic workers, and through letters and diaries.

This was a very interesting read, and I really enjoyed it, though there were 2 or 3 chapters that to me, seemed a little too bogged down with repetitious details, but overall, this is a great book both for history lovers, and those that enjoy historical fiction and just want to learn more about the lives of servants. I really enjoyed the many interesting stories that the workers themselves had to tell about their employers.

Rae says

Quite frankly, I couldn't finish this book. I suspect many other readers will be attracted to this title for the same reason I was, interest in knowing more based on enjoyment of the show Downton Abbey. Unfortunately, poor organization and repetitive information drag a book that had the research and promise to be a truly interesting read into something that became unreadable for me.

My primary issue was a lack of organization. Each chapter seemed to rehash similar information, cover

broad periods of time, and revisit similar themes. Were it to be organized chronologically, by service area, by household size, really ANYTHING it would have been much better. The lack of narrative direction made this book feel like a poorly organized undergraduate thesis rather than the fascinating body of research it could and should have been.

There are moments of organized thought and direction, which kept me hanging on as long as I did, but I frankly can't recommend this to anyone who doesn't have the patience to plod through such an immense amount of information with so little direction.

Blue says

Thank you Goodreads First Reads for a copy of this book!

Well, watching *Downton Abbey*, I find myself thinking often that *Fellows* has used too much poetic license. I think, no way! Reading *Servants*, I realized just how much of DA is actually textbook stuff. This was really surprising. Things that seemed puzzling, like how Carson (the butler) was always huffing and puffing over the smallest details, and how he is often dressed to the teeth for dinner downstairs (in the kitchen, mind you!), and why the driver was such a class of his own compared to the other servants, and if one of the ladies of the house were to elope with any servant, why in the hell would it be the driver, and not, say a footman... Well, many things that don't make sense seem to make much more sense reading Lucy Lethbridge's account of the lives of those servants from Victorian, then Edwardian, and through the 20th century. Lethbridge does a good job of putting things in perspective, and giving anecdotal as well as demographic information pertaining to the lives of servants and how service changed as the British identity that was partly defined by its servants changed over the last century.

The study of service, presented here by Lethbridge in meticulous detail peppered with many accounts of aristocrats as well as servants, really is a study of how the changing political and socioeconomical landscape shaped modern ideals in hospitality, domesticity, and personal freedom. Some of the changes reveal very interesting international dynamics; how the lords and ladies returning from the colonies were considered too spoiled and incapable of managing British servants effectively, how waves of European and Jewish immigrants brought some stark differences between England and continental Europe into focus... It is fascinating to see how the uber-rich British families living in large estates with many servants resisted technological changes (like central heating, gas lamps, gas ovens, fridges, vacuum cleaners, washing machines...) and valued elbow grease as the only valid form of domestic work that was clean enough, good enough, perfect enough. It is interesting how they valued organic, whole grain, farm-grown over mass-produced, how they resisted buying clothes "off the peg" and kept their wardrobes of 5-layered dresses, each layer requiring a different iron setting... Hmm, parts o this is starting to sound like Brooklyn: in fact, the stuff that the estate did, Brooklynites are doing as hobbies now: pickling, canning, raising chickens, beekeeping... Except, no servants. So how far we have come to thing these laborious things for wholesome living have become hobbies rather than back-breaking chores for invisible servants. The main difference is perhaps that we do not have to can our own food, or make our own pickles. We can walk out to the corner and buy it from the corner store, or order it online. We have, it seems, learned to value exactly the opposite things for the same reasons as these aristocrats. Very strange.

What's perhaps even more striking is how poor the poor were, most of whom would have a much much better quality of life if they went into service. Complete lack of freedom and back-breaking work for amazing amounts of food, and good, fresh food, with lots of unaffordable stuff like butter and tea and meat

meat meat. So reading this book I learned that the British poor used to be poor like the poor in the rest of the world. The poor in the rest of the world have remained as poor, and the British have perhaps ceased to be as poor. It is unbelievable now that they were that poor, eating dripping and bread every day, maybe once a day. Yet there are millions who are this poor now in the world, and I am not sure if this means there is hope or absolutely no hope.

Lastly, the book gave me some interesting vocabulary like donkey stone (a scouring stone used to scrub the front steps of the house, usually first thing in the morning, like 5 AM), butler's pantry (which has no food), and dripping. How fascinating!

Recommended for those who like history, 20th century, gossip, velvet, and laundry.

Ruth says

Really, really enjoyed this one. The author has pieced together, from a wide range of sources, an astonishingly coherent history of servants and life in service from both the perspective of the servants and their employers, from the mid-Victorian era to today.

It was a far more thought-provoking read than I expected. Viewed from today (when you might generally have child care help or a weekly cleaner, if you're one of the lucky ones), the days when everyone had help in the home seem like a different planet. The sheer panic which rises from the pages as middle class women contemplate less help in the home is something I'd never realized. I was far more able to understand the "never again" feelings of the former servants as they contemplated life without having to conform to someone else's ideals of what their lives should and should not be.

One of my grandmothers was in service in England, and so it felt like more of a personal history for me than it would for some. She was a daily woman, who cleaned a local big house. I never got to speak to her about it, and much of her history is, therefore, lost. It's through carefully researched books such as this one that a big part of my family's history lives on, I guess.

5 stars. I loved it.

Mel Campbell says

Domesticity is such a fraught space. Women have long been told that they should build their identities around home-making, and so the people who can afford to outsource their domestic labour are demonised as lazy and uncaring, and the servants who actually make homes are robbed of the dignity and purpose that our culture associates with work because the credit for that work goes to their employers.

And while we like to think that these relationships and economies are quintessential to some contemporary zeitgeist, what I found most fascinating about Lethbridge's book is the realisation that all this is not new. It's as much a book about the evolution of domestic life, home design and technology as about the people who make homes so nice for their employers, but whose presence (or absence) continues to be a source of angst.

My ideas of English domestic service and the class who employed servants have come from fiction, especially *Downton Abbey* and *Gosford Park*, with a soupçon of Jeeves and Wooster, *The Remains of the Day* and *The Stranger's Child*. So I was surprised to learn from this book that employing servants was a key indicator of status and respectability across all British classes. It wasn't just for lords and ladies on country estates; poor people would scrimp in all sorts of ways but would still maintain at least one servant (even if it was just a 12-year-old maid-of-all-work), and even the poorest of the poor still outsourced tasks like laundry and childcare.

Lethbridge's decision to frame the book in the 20th century – the decline of traditional English service – makes it more focused and more emotionally charged. Adam Nicolson's *Gentry: Six Hundred Years of a Peculiarly English Class* also charts the decline of a class; and it was interesting to read about servants immediately after having read about their employers. But my overriding emotion when reading this narrative of entropy is nostalgic melancholy. It's strange, since I have no personal stake in the fate of the British class system (except for a vague cultural heritage of that system).

But both the servants and employers whose voices Lethbridge quotes so vividly also tend to share my feeling that the heyday of service was the Edwardian era, when everyone knew his or her hierarchical place and there was a place for everyone, from the youngest to the oldest. I really enjoyed the parts of the book that described in detail the labour undertaken by servants and the arcane rules of their work: yes, it was dreadfully hard, thankless and pedantic, but the skills were prodigious and the results were beautiful.

I found myself yearning to live in a serviced home, where my clothes were beautifully kept, the rooms always spotlessly clean and filled with fresh flowers, and delicious meals cooked and cleared away. But thanks to this book I recognise the indulgence of rendering invisible the people who enable such a pampered lifestyle.

Housework is not edifying or fulfilling in the slightest. But as Lethbridge documents, employers fatuously couched hard labour as morally necessary for the servant class, and labour-saving devices and methods were adopted grudgingly late in England. And as the servant workforce dwindled in the 20th century and housewives had to do the work themselves, they too were sold the virtues of domestic labour.

Now we can see that so much of what servants were made to do was not even useful, but was often unnecessarily elaborate busywork intended as a display of economic and cultural power, and an exercise of that power through human bodily capabilities. Footmen and parlourmaids were perhaps the clearest illustration of this power, as they were valued primarily for their appearance.

I was fascinated by the complex and ambivalent attitudes of servants themselves to their places in this system, their attempts to be socially mobile within it, and the ways in which they responded when the system began to break down and change. Service has oscillated between being a respectable, desirable career and a despised form of servitude. The power dynamic has shifted within the employer/servant relationship, and the labour movement struggled to include servants in its campaigns for better workplace conditions.

Lethbridge is also quite astute in showing how service has always relied on immigrant labour, from colonial retainers through to the employment of WWII refugees and contemporary migrant workers. Yet there's an essential attractiveness to deferential British service that remains culturally alluring, so that Chinese and Russian tycoons now specifically want English butlers and nannies.

I recommend this book highly to anyone who wants to understand today's service and 'assistant' economy, as well as the complex attitudes of people who undertake this sort of work. It's not an explicitly political book,

but it's one that tackles socioeconomic inequality in an environment that's rarely examined because it's so intimate, and its workers so rarely speak out because their profession demands deference and discretion.
