



Those Wild Wyndhams: Three Sisters at the Heart of Power

Claudia Renton

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The three dazzlingly beautiful, wildly rich Wyndham sisters, part of the four hundred families that made up Britain's ruling class, at the center of cultural and political life in late-Victorian/Edwardian Britain. Here are their complex, idiosyncratic lives; their opulent, privileged world; their romantic, roiling age.

They were confidantes to British prime ministers, poets, writers, and artists, their lives entwined with the most celebrated and scandalous figures of the day, from Oscar Wilde to Henry James. They were the lovers of great men--or men of great prominence...Mary Wyndham, wilder than her wild brothers; lover of Wilfrid Blunt, confidante of Prime Minister Arthur Balfour (the Balfour Declaration); married to Hugo, Lord Elcho; later the Countess of Wemyss...Madeline Adeane, the quietest and happiest of the three...and Pamela, spoiled, beautiful, of the three, possessor of the true talent, wife of the Foreign Secretary Edward Grey (later Viscount Grey), who took Britain into the First World War.

They lived in a world of luxurious excess, a world of splendor at 44 Belgrave Square, and later at the even more vast Clouds, the exquisite Wiltshire house on 4,000 acres, the "house of the age," designed, in 1876, by the visionary architect, Philip Webb; the model for Henry James's *The Spoils of Poynton*.

They were bred with the pride of the Plantagenets and raised with a fierce belief that their family was exceptional. They avoided the norm at all costs and led the way to a blending of aristocracy and art. Their group came to be called The Souls, whose members from 1885 to the 1920s included the most distinguished politicians, artists, and thinkers of their time.

In *Those Wild Wyndhams*, Claudia Renton gives us a dazzling portrait of one of England's grandest, noblest families. Renton captures, with nuance and depth, their complex wrangling between head and heart, and the tragedy at the center of all their lives as the privilege and bliss of the Victorian age gave way to the Edwardian era, the Great War, and the passing of an opulent world.

Those Wild Wyndhams: Three Sisters at the Heart of Power Details

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From Reader Review Those Wild Wyndhams: Three Sisters at the Heart of Power for online ebook

Phoebe says

Mary, Madeline, and Pamela Wyndham, born into immense wealth, were the A-listers of their day, the Kardashians of Victorian England. This biography delves deep into correspondence, news articles, every scrap of gossip or fact ever saved about the three Wyndham sisters and their privileged lives, their strategic marriages, their affairs and scandals. Descriptions of life at Clouds, their family estate, are really something. At about 350 pages, this book may cause readers to bog down a little--I did--really, how much do we need to know or care about? As a study of the day, though, this book is a masterpiece. Renton traces the spiderweb of politics and societal connections surrounding one of Britain's great families. Pre World War I lifestyles of the rich and famous seem to be of endless interest thanks to Downton Abbey, and of course since this world faded into extinction with the Great War, its exoticism comes under the magnifying glass of historical study. Adult.

Bettie? says

The Wyndham Sisters, 1899 by John Singer Sargent: (l-r) Madeline (1869-1941), Pamela (1871-1928) and Mary (1862-1937). Photograph: Alamy

Description: *Three sisters – beautiful, cultured and aristocratic, born into immense wealth during the reign of Queen Victoria. Their dramatic lives are here unfolded in a rich historical biography certain to appeal to fans of Downton Abbey, ‘Georgiana’ and Stella Tillyard’s ‘Aristocrats’.*

Mary, Madeline and Pamela – the three Wyndham sisters – were painted by John Singer Sargent in 1899. For The Times it was, quite simply, ‘the greatest picture of modern times’. But these beautiful, fin de siecle gentlewomen came to epitomize a vanished world. The languor of their pose reflects the leisured, gilded, existence of the late Victorian aristocracy that was to be dealt a deathblow by the First World War.

Yet the lives of these three Wyndham sisters were far more turbulent than their air of calm suggests. Brought up in artistic circles, their childhood was liberal and romantic. Their parents were intimate friends with the Pre-Raphaelites and the girls grew to become leaders of the aesthetic movement. Bowing to convention, they made excellent marriages but found emotional support from others – Mary with Arthur Balfour and the poet Wilfrid Scawen Blunt; Pamela with Liberal statesman and ornithologist Edward Grey. Their liaisons shocked society, while the First World War devastated their way of life.

‘Those Wild Wyndhams’ is their first ever biography, and is based on the many letters they have left behind – compelling, humorous and brilliantly illuminating. This sparkling debut by Claudia Renton captures them and their age in an unforgettable piece of historical and political biography.

Carole says

The Wyndham sisters were memorably depicted in the famous Sargeant portrait, now owned by the Met in New York, which was dubbed the Three Graces by its many admirers. The portrait is reproduced on the cover of this interesting biography. The Wyndham family was at the center of the circle of English rich and elite at the end of the 19th century. Following their lives brings one in contact with the powerful and influential in both politics and the arts and provides a fascinating insight into the rarefied drawing rooms (and bedrooms) of the ruling class. It also depicts the downfall of this world of opulence and the devastating effect of World War I on old attitudes and the gilded age. The book is absorbing and useful in putting the world of teas and soirees in the context of changing social values and turmoil. The large cast of characters and the habit of naming the numerous offspring after their elders makes following the complicated relationships difficult at times.

But Renton provides a sensitized account of this time of change and the effect of it on one of the most influential families of the period. A good read for history buffs.

Alison says

This was a fairly good book, but like others I lost interest part way.

I think a biography on Mary Elcho alone would have been more interesting.

Larisa says

Excellent read. A historical account of the Wyndham family — an upper-crust powerful family — during Victorian times in England that focuses primarily on the lives of Mary, Mannanai, and Pamela (the three sisters) as the country moves from the mid-to-late 19th century and into the 20th. High up in the echelons of society, these women and their families were in influential political and societal circles and so as great biographies do, Renton's book paints a comprehensive picture of contemporary politics and power plays. Additionally, the scandals, affairs, romances, and losses of these women make the narrative move quickly — I actually took the book with me on vacation as a "beach read." Renton does assume a certain knowledge of certain political events and the hierarchy of British society at the time, but most of that is either easy to figure out from context, or from a quick (and interesting!) Google search. Recommend it highly.

Anne says

I have been fascinated by the Wyndham sisters ever since I saw John Singer Sargent's gorgeous painting of them at the Met, so I was excited at the opportunity to learn more about them. And I did learn a great deal from this book. It is well written and clearly well researched. I had a hard time keeping track of the members of this huge family and all their friends - made worse by the fact that they used the same names over and over again. The family tree at the front of the book was invaluable in that endeavor. These three beautiful, wealthy women were deeply interested in the politics of the day, so much of the book is devoted to late 19th/early 20th century British politics. That was less interesting to me, but I totally understand the inclusion.

Now I have to get back to the Met and gaze and their portrait for a while!

Sally says

"A gilded family of remarkable women"

By sally tarbox on 11 January 2018

Format: Kindle Edition

I really enjoyed this biography of the three Wyndham sisters, (and their two brothers) born to a wealthy, bohemian family in the 1860s. From their childhood, marriages - happy and not - love affairs and children, to their friends and associates. As part of the intellectual 'Souls' set, they mixed with politicians, artists and other notables.

It's quite touchingly written as the three bright young things live through war (the five siblings lost a total of five sons), bereavement and disillusionment and move into a chastened old age. The author describes the political world along with the personal, as campaigns and elections impact on their lives.

Immerses the reader in a distant age of Downton Abbey-type privilege. Very readable.

B/w photos

Yasmin says

I have finished reading *Those Non-wild Wyndhams*. What can I say but for the first half of the book the girls were spoilt over indulged with more money than sense individuals. The cover praise claims "Hilarious, Heartbreaking and Completely Absorbing" well I couldn't find anything hilarious in the book. True enough there was sadness in the death of a little child and the horrors of the First World War in the second part of the book. But it wasn't very absorbing. It was well written but I didn't find anything to match the statement "three sisters at the heart of power", whose and what power? Being in a sort of close relationship with Arthur Balfour doesn't really make for being in the heart of power. The daughter Mary had a flying fling with Wilfred Blunt and goody for her. Compared to the Scarlet Sisters I read earlier these ladies seemed very mild. Yes those sisters lived in the U.S and the morals there were not as strict, however, the times were the same. If you know anything about the Wyndhams Pamela was said to be spoilt compared to the others, however, I can't see her being more aloof than the other two. She fits herself in with her breeding, that is to say, her upbringing. They were all products of their environment which was of the extreme moneyed class and weren't fit for anything more than sitting around, gossiping, and having pointless parties and throwing money around for idle pleasures that gave no enjoyment really for anything or anybody until they reach near middle age where they get spiked by conscience and help with charities. All in all they weren't heartless just mindless well meaning three sisters. I won't say avoid this book, by all means read it and take from it what you will.

Susan says

In 1898, John Singer Sargent began the portrait of three sisters: Mary, Madeline and Pamela Wyndham. The *Wyndham Sisters* was heralded as Sargent's masterpiece, with the Prince of Wales calling it, "The Three Graces." In this book, the author chronicles the times of these three cultured, beautiful and aristocratic women, who as members of The Souls, mixed with those in positions of political influence, as well as artistic

circles.

This book straddles both the Victorian and Edwardian age. Parents Percy (youngest son of Lord Leconfield) and Madeline (from a prominent Irish family, but without a fortune) had a marriage full of affection and love –although, as life always is, not without its difficulties. Their eldest child was daughter Mary, followed by sons George and Guy. The two youngest daughter, Madeline (always known as Mananai, after childish attempts to say her name) and Pamela, were close in age and naturally paired off together. Although the boys were educated at Eton, like many parents at that time, a good education was not thought essential for girls at that time. Mary was almost self-taught and governesses gave basic lessons.

Throughout this biography, we follow the marriages, love affairs, scandals and tragedies of the sisters. The sisters were involved with just about everyone in aristocratic, political and artistic circles – we are taken from the desert in Egypt, to the pomp of India during the Raj and to scandals which rocked the Souls (Harry Cust and Nina Welby) and society (Oscar Wilde and Bosie Douglas). The author does a great job of noting the political events that are important throughout the book, but always keeping the book personal and not overshadowing the characters. However, one world changing event which did completely dominate and change the world of the Wyndham's, and their friends and acquaintances, were the cataclysmic events of the First World War - which comes near the end of the book. You gather that while those who lost early in the war were obviously mourned, the terrible loss of life led to a real stunned sense of disbelief by the end of the war. A whole generation of men were wiped out and the losses changed the Wyndham family, as it did so many others, at that time.

Overall, this is an excellent biography. It is well written, never sight of the personal over the historical, but keeping a good sense of perspective. Very enjoyable and paints a picture not only of three very interesting women, but also of a whole era.

Marguerite Kaye says

This was one of those biographies that started out really well but kind of faded for me. I was fascinated by the early history of the Wyndhams and the many family tentacles that reached into power and politics during the late Victorian period, particularly Margaret (eldest sister) and her relationship with Arthur Balfour - whippings and all!!! That archetypical bedhopper Wilfred Blunt turned up yet again, I don't seem to be able to read a bio without coming across him. This time he managed to have an affair with both mother and daughter - though at different times, at least he had that much discretion.

However, as the book moved from Victorian to Edwardian and into the years leading up to the First World War, the story began to be a bit fragmented and for me, lost its sparkle. Is this because the sisters themselves were submerged in domestic detail? I'm not sure. The fact is that at this point their brothers and men-folk were more interesting, and it felt to me that the biographer was struggling to keep them centre stage.

Don't get me wrong, this was a good read, it was well-written and it was clearly thoroughly researched. But ultimately, just a little bit lack-lustre.

Laura says

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014...>

Andrea Engle says

Three sisters, subjects of a famous Sargent portrait, mirror the Edwardian aristocracy in its heyday ... Mary, Lady Elcho, muse of the "Souls;" "Mananai" Adeane, the happily married one; and Pamela Tennant, later the wife of Foreign Secretary Edward Grey ... their family, the Wyndhams, was decimated by World War I, with the ladies sadly lingering into the twilight of the period between the wars ..."portrait" of an era ... contains an excellent bibliography ...

Caroline says

The Wyndham sisters - Mary, Madeline and Pamela - occupied a special place in the pre-war British aristocracy - the tip of the top, one might say. Born into wealth and privilege, they were young, beautiful, educated yet bohemian, enchanting. They were the central hub of the 'Souls', the exclusive and eccentric intellectual clique that numbered many of the era's most celebrated names amongst its ranks - Lord Curzon, Arthur Balfour, Margot Asquith, Violet Manners, Wilfrid Scawen Blunt. And yet like so many of their era, this 'golden age' of the later Victorian/early Edwardian period was not to last for them.

As much as it is a biography of the three sisters this is a book about a vanished world, the kind of carefree upper-class existence that is still seen as so mysterious and alluring today, as the popularity of television shows like *Downton Abbey* attest. The sisters moved in exalted circles, mixing casually with figures of power and influence, from the arts to politics, so the book is populated with a fascinating and well-known cast of characters. They embodied much of the contradictions of their time, the bohemian attitudes and the rigid social mores, unthinking privilege and noblesse oblige, the imperial triumph of the later Victorian period giving way to the tragedy of the trenches.

It is an enjoyable book, although given the sisters' social positions and wide circle of acquaintances, there are a lot of names to get straight in one's head, especially so when names and titles change upon inheritance! I also found the narrative shifts from one sister to another occasionally jarring, particularly when this involved a chronological shift as well. It could perhaps have done with somewhat tighter editing to correct some of this. But as I said, an enjoyable book and well worth reading for anyone interested in the Edwardian aristocracy of *Downton Abbey*.

Julie says

3.5 The Sargent portrait on the cover drew me into this story of the Wyndham family from the English aristocracy. The subtitle says "the three sisters at the heart of power", but the book is about the entire extended family. Fairly interesting family (though spoiled beyond measure), but more interesting was the British history.

Lisa says

Too many players to keep track of without a score card and so-so writing. Meh
