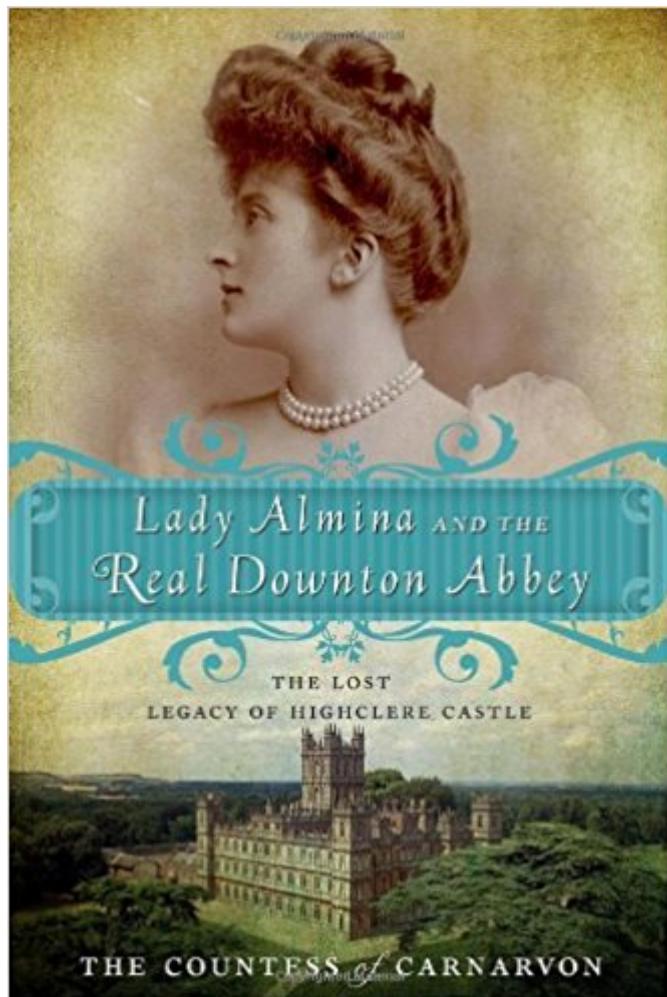


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Lady Almina And The Real Downton Abbey: The Lost Legacy Of Highclere Castle



Synopsis

Lady Almina and the Real Downton Abbey tells the story behind Highclere Castle, the real-life inspiration and setting for Julian Fellowes's Emmy Award-winning PBS show Downton Abbey, and the life of one of its most famous inhabitants, Lady Almina, the 5th Countess of Carnarvon. Drawing on a rich store of materials from the archives of Highclere Castle, including diaries, letters, and photographs, the current Lady Carnarvon has written a transporting story of this fabled home on the brink of war. Much like her Masterpiece Classic counterpart, Lady Cora Crawley, Lady Almina was the daughter of a wealthy industrialist, Alfred de Rothschild, who married his daughter off at a young age, her dowry serving as the crucial link in the effort to preserve the Earl of Carnarvon's ancestral home. Throwing open the doors of Highclere Castle to tend to the wounded of World War I, Lady Almina distinguished herself as a brave and remarkable woman. This rich tale contrasts the splendor of Edwardian life in a great house against the backdrop of the First World War and offers an inspiring and revealing picture of the woman at the center of the history of Highclere Castle.

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Customer Reviews

I received this book as a Christmas gift and enjoyed it very much. I think the other reviewer's review is off the mark and it's duplicitous of "William" not to mention is that he is the author of a self-published bio of Lady Almina. The author of this book, the current Countess of Carnarvon, drew largely from primary sources in the Highclere archives. She also examined contemporary periodicals and previous family memoirs and bios. The focus of the book is, as the subtitle indicates,

Almina's connection with Highclere. So, it begins with her wedding to the 5th Earl of Carnarvon and ends with his untimely death in 1923, as that event marked the end of Almina's time at Highclere. There is a concise discussion of Almina's pre-countess life, including her paternity (that Almina was in all likelihood Alfred Rothschild's natural daughter is stated plainly). There is also some background on the 5th Earl: his parents and childhood, and a short history of the Highclere estate. The 5th Earl was in debt when he met Almina and in need of a large infusion of cash, which Rothschild provided. The book goes on to cover Almina's arrival at Highclere as a 19-year-old bride and her triumphant success as a society hostess, which was something Edwardian women aspired to and were admired for. The visit by the Prince of Wales (later Edward VII) for one of Highclere's famous shoots in 1895 was a major event at Highclere and it is appropriate that it should be included here, even if written of previously in other works.

I picked up this book because I'm a fan of Downton Abbey, although I knew before I bought the book that it had little to do with the fictional world of those characters. If you are looking for information on the Downton Abbey television show, there is a marvelous book by Jessica Fellowes which will probably better suit your needs. This is the story of Lady Almina Carnarvon who lived at Highclere Castle which is the real world setting for the fictional television program. If you want to know more about the lives of the real people who inhabited that world during that same era, keep reading. Any biography is a story being told, and each story has a unique voice. In this case, the voice is a member of the Carnarvon family. She seems to draw from source documents such as journals, letters, and other historical references to create a picture of Almina Wombwell who became the wife of the Fifth Earl of Carnarvon. (Yes, this was the same Lord Carnarvon who worked with Howard Carter and discovered King Tut's tomb in Egypt.) This book is told primarily as Lady Almina's story after her marriage, although it can't help but touch on the story lines of many of the other principle players. While the book is historical in nature, that doesn't make it dry reading. There is scandal (Almina was most likely the illegitimate daughter of the wealthy Alfred de Rothschild), wildly fabulous wealth (Almina lived a lavish and luxurious lifestyle prior to WWI), Egyptian adventures, and ultimately heartbreak as WWI touched almost every family in Britain.

Some of the reviews herein are very disparaging of Downton Abbey fans. Since I count the adventures of those characters among my not-so-guilty pleasures, I'll certainly not do that. I will say it is interesting to read about the real people who made Highclere Castle their home. I have read (and reviewed) several books on Howard Carter, Lord Carnarvon, et al, so to me this was simply

intended as a source of inside material as well as the DA connection. I didn't know a lot about Lady Almina so as much as anything that connection with the Downton characters pulled me in. I wanted to see the story of the real hospital started by Her Ladyship. I was a little disappointed. Not just in the read - more on that in a moment, but in the hospital. The hospital at Highclere averaged between 12 and 20 patients at any given time. That's all. Over 24,000 British casualties a month were coming back to England. But Lady Almina's patients were special. All were officers, many of her social class. Lady Almina made sure she had a representative in Southampton screening prospective patients. She insisted also that her nurses be attractive on the premise that it made the boys more cheerful thereby healing quicker. Imagine that in a diversity context today. The biggest complaint about this book is the author's clear worship of Lady Almina. She is a candidate for sainthood in this book. She does no wrong. Many years ago, as a young man in college, I was taught to read critically, to look for bias in an author, to try to discern what ideology he/she is selling the reader. Works showing only gushing admiration in a biography leave out the human side of real people. In that respect Fiona Carnarvon does Lady Almina a great disservice.

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