RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

The Cliveden Set

Norman Rose

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About the Book

Lloyd George once spoke of ‘a very powerful combination – in its way the most powerful in the country’. Its proceedings were invariably conducted at Cliveden, the country estate of the fabulously wealthy Nancy and Waldorf Astor. Collectively dubbed ‘God’s Truth Ltd’, the group included leading politicians, academics, writers and newspaper editors. Its pedigree impeccable, its social standing beyond reproach, its persuasive powers permeated the clubs and institutions of London, the senior common rooms of Oxbridge colleges, the quality press and the great country houses of England.

Suddenly, in the late 1930s, the ‘Cliveden Set’ was catapulted into uncalled-for notoriety. It had been identified as a cabal that sought to manipulate, even determine, British foreign policy in order to uphold its narrow class interests. It would use any means, however devious – even negotiate a humiliating, dishonourable settlement with Nazi Germany – to maintain its privileges, those of a decaying ruling class. But was the ‘Cliveden Set’ a traitorous cabal, challenging ‘the constitutional structures of British democracy’, or simply an unstructured think-tank of harmless do-gooders?

Norman Rose discerningly probes this fascinating tale, brilliantly disentangling fact from fiction, and setting this privileged clique in the wider perspective of its times.

About the Author

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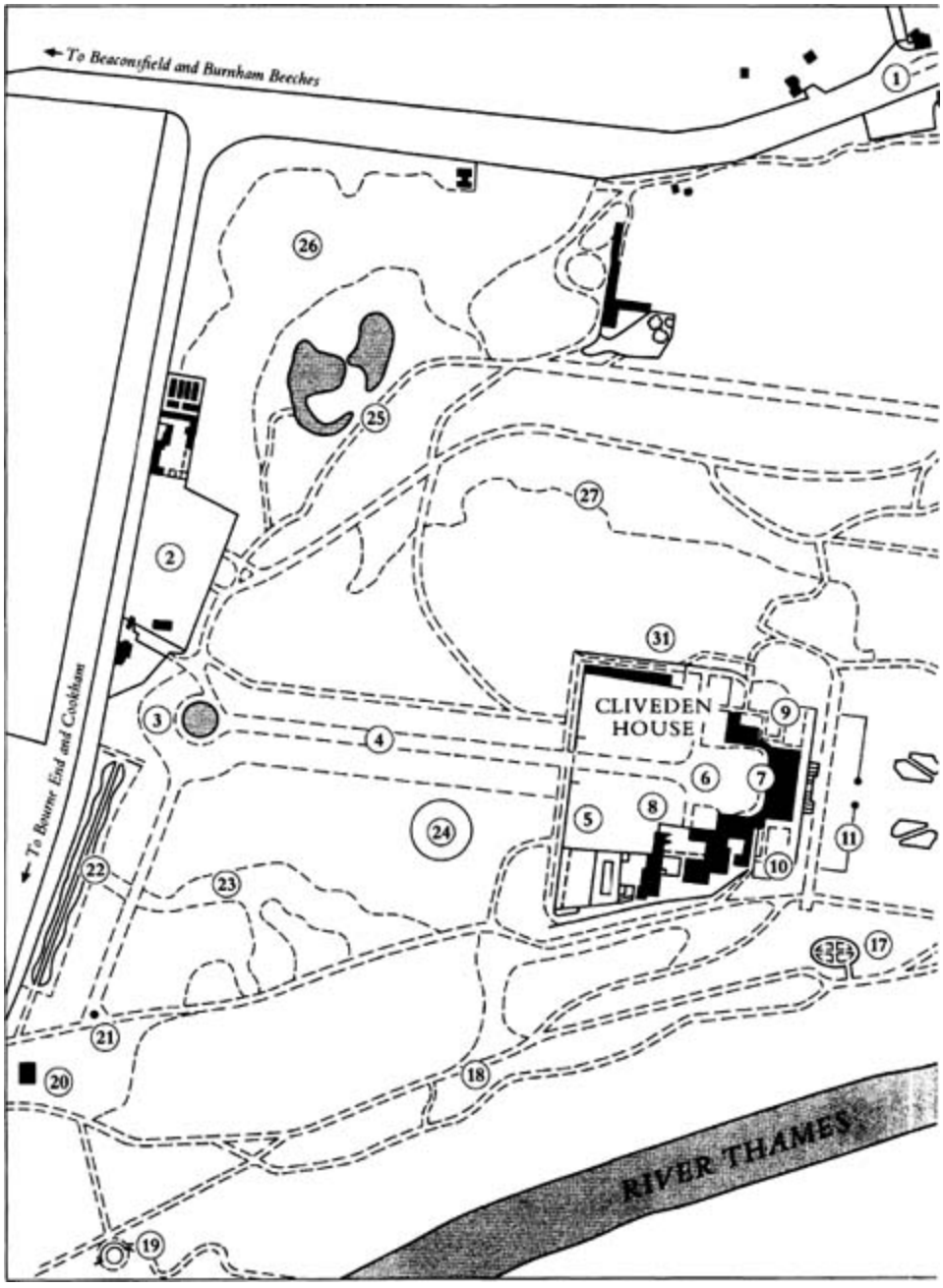
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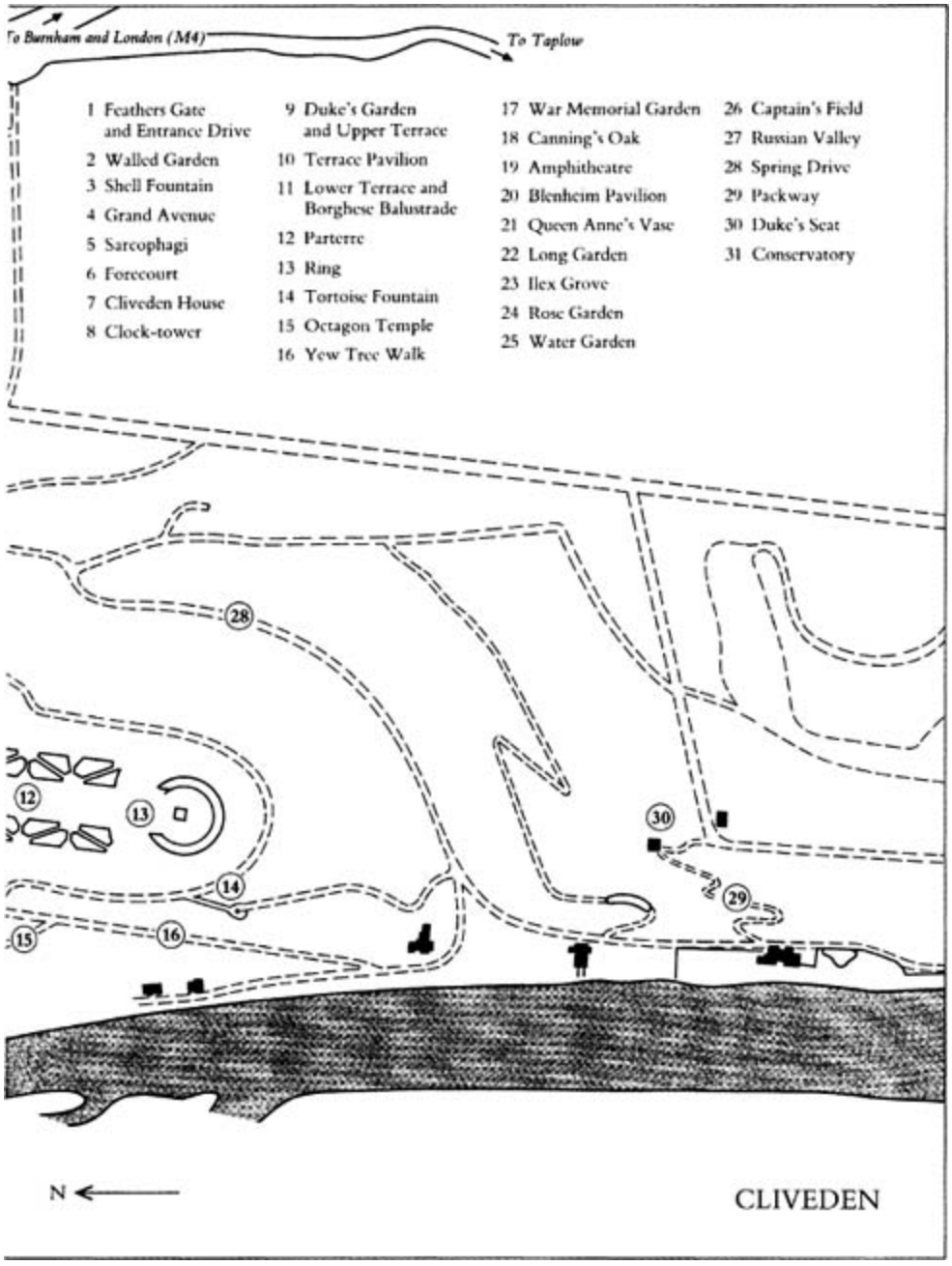
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List of Illustrations

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THE CLIVEDEN SET

Portrait of an Exclusive Fraternity

Norman Rose

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Prologue

In October 1921, Lloyd George spoke to Lord Riddell, publisher of the *News of the World*, of

> a very powerful combination – in its way perhaps the most powerful in the country. Each member of the Group brings to its deliberations certain definite and important qualities, and behind the scenes they have much power and influence.[1]

Jan Christian Smuts, soldier, philosopher and South African prime minister, added that 'the Group's' words were studied 'by nearly everyone who determines public policy or originates public opinion'.[2] On one occasion, Sir Maurice Hankey, Secretary to the Cabinet, himself a puller of many strings, placed them 'among the most influential' of the 'political congeries' operating in London during the Great War. He named names and venues (not all of them entirely accurate).

> They dine every Monday usually at the house of Major Waldorf Astor MP, Sir Edward Carson, or [F. S.] Oliver. Milner is the real leader of this group, which includes Amery, Philip Kerr, and the editor of *The Times* Geoffrey Robinson, as well as the various young men associated with the [group].[3]

Repeatedly described as 'a ginger group', 'a junta', 'a camarilla', 'a cabal', an 'inner circle', it was esteemed for its judgements, which were considered 'careful, weighty, and responsible', even 'indispensable'. Here indeed were 'the great and the good', persons of 'light and leading'. Together they formed 'God's Truth Ltd', a company whose decrees were invariably 'Olympian'.[4]

'God's Truth Ltd' attracted other charges, however. Called by some 'a deadly secret committee', it was held to be 'a clique which encourages every centrifugal force in the

British Empire'. Others considered that its existence ensured that Britain would become 'permanently second-rate intellectually among the nations'. The *Morning Post* regarded it as 'a phalanx or palace guard of idealists, who could be trusted by a sort of spiritual perversion to take a line injurious to British interests on every question'.[5] Joseph Caillaux, a French prime minister, saw it as 'a group of Oxford men, highly placed in British affairs', conspiring to restore 'the tottering power of the caste to which they belong and the strengthening of the supremacy of Great Britain in the world'. By 'gazing too intently at the stars', thought Sir Robert Laird Borden, the Canadian statesman, they occasionally 'fall into a ditch or stumble over a low-lying wall'.[6] Although well-meaning, their influence was 'poisonous', 'a disaster to our way of life'. Forever 'pontificating', or engaged 'in deliberate sabotage' of the League of Nations and collective security, they were fobbed off as 'highbrow noodles'.[7]

What was the true nature of this controversial fraternity? Were its promoters prophetic visionaries or interfering busybodies? Its origins date from the period of reconstruction in South Africa immediately after the Boer War. Lord Milner, the high commissioner, had conscripted a band of young men just down from Oxford, mainly from New College, to aid him in the formidable task of rebuilding the war-torn country. He explained his purpose to a colleague.

> I mean to have young men. There will be a regular rumpus and a lot of talk about boys and Oxford and jobs and all that . . . Well I value brains and character more than experience. First class men of experience are not to be got. Nothing one could offer would tempt them to give up what they have . . . No! I shall not be here for very long but when I go I mean to leave behind me young men with plenty of work in them . . .[8]

Known collectively as the *Kindergarten*, a term of derision coined by Sir William Marriott, a former Judge Advocate-General, who liked neither Milner nor his 'young men', the

group proudly adopted the nickname, elevating membership to its distinguished circle as a mark of special distinction.

The *Kinder* were instrumental in guiding Milner, and his successor, Lord Selborne, towards a process that culminated eventually in the Union of South Africa. The creation of the Union spawned other ingenious ideas. They began to think in terms of union or federation or close cooperation – opinions were divided – between the mother country and the Dominions, the idea being to establish a bloc sufficiently powerful to ensure that Great Britain retained its status as a great power. Drawing on the racial theories of Cecil Rhodes and Milner, they envisaged also an Anglo-Saxon brotherhood, involving close ties between the United States and the British Empire – or Commonwealth, as it was later defined by one of them. And finally, as the ultimate panacea for a troubled international system, the most dedicated of the *Kinder* floated a master plan for world government, a blueprint that would inaugurate an era of eternal peace.

After the Union the *Kindergarten* broke up. A few remained in South Africa, but most drifted back to England. In London, they continued their tradition of conducting Moots to deliberate upon diverse imperial problems.[*1] In 1910 they founded the Round Table movement, with branches in South Africa, Canada, Newfoundland, Australia and New Zealand. In November of that year the first issue of their quarterly review, *The Round Table*, appeared. Disseminating information and informed comment on imperial and international affairs that would be ‘entirely free from the bias of local political issues’, the journal swiftly established its reputation as an authoritative, if somewhat opinionated, voice on these matters. Although the review operated within a regular editorial framework, the Moot – like the *Kindergarten* – was a more informal affair. It occupied no official position, nor did it benefit from a constitution. None of this hindered its activities. A self-appointed pressure-group, its members, as if by divine right,

spiced their colloquiums with a rare kind of intellectual conceit. Its mission, by way of persuading those that mattered, was to stimulate a movement to promote 'the closer union of the British Empire'.[9] These Moots, held either at its London headquarters or at other select venues, characterized the group's activities for decades to come.

Attracting new adherents, this resolute team broadened the scope of its pursuits. It was influential in founding and running the British (later Royal) Institute of International Affairs, originally planned as one of a number of similar institutes to be set up throughout the world. This network, it was anticipated, would act as 'a telephone exchange between the few hundred men in each country who administer foreign affairs and create public opinion on the subject'.[10] Within its walls, the Institute would conduct postgraduate-like 'study and research', bridging the gap between 'men of theory' and 'men of action'. More popularly known as Chatham House,[*2] the Institute's wider purpose, yet again, was to educate opinion, to sort out the tangled relationship between Britain and the outside world. It defined opinion in the narrowest sense of the word, aiming its erudite missives mainly at the members of 'London's clubland'. 'Permeated by the semi-conspiratorial neo-Platonism of nineteenth-century Oxford', they saw themselves as sublime elitists enlightening other, less discerning, members of the same magic circle.[11] And indeed Oxford figured large in their endeavours, for many of them, apart from being graduates of the University, were Fellows of All Souls College, or were welcome guests in its Senior Common Room.

Who were they, these would-be inspirers of leading opinion? The lists of those associated with these fraternities, from the *Kindergarten* to Oxford High Tables, are long and varied. They included many prominent politicians, businessmen, academics, authors, journalists, and members of the landed gentry.[12] But some names reappear time and

again with intriguing regularity: Philip Kerr (later Lord Lothian), a distinguished public servant and Liberal politician of independent means and impeccable aristocratic lineage; Robert (later Lord) Brand, a hard-headed international investment banker; Geoffrey Dawson (né Robinson), a Yorkshire squire and editor of *The Times*; Lionel Curtis, a Fellow of All Souls, driven by an inner force to champion elusive causes; Waldorf, 2nd Viscount Astor, an American-born multimillionaire, the owner of Cliveden, and by association his wife Nancy, by birth a Virginian belle, and the first woman MP to take her seat in the House of Commons, who together acted as hosts to a political-literary-academic salon at their estate at Cliveden or at their London mansion at 4 St James's Square.

By the mid-late 1930s these last names were catapulted into unexpected, and certainly uncalled-for, notoriety. They had been identified by a maverick Communist journalist, Claud Cockburn, as the core members of a cabal that sought to manipulate British foreign policy, and at crucial times even to determine it. 'This shadow cabinet' conspired, he claimed, to procure a humiliating, dishonourable settlement with Nazi Germany. It had loaded and pointed a 'One-Way Gun' aimed at central and eastern Europe, in particular at the Soviet Union, where Hitler would be given a free hand secure in the knowledge that Germany's position in the West had been guaranteed. And it did so, Cockburn stressed, to uphold its own narrow class interests. He named it the 'Cliveden Set'.

This piece of startling information caught fire with astonishing speed. The catchphrase 'the Cliveden Set' reverberated around the world. Journals from Singapore to New York to Buenos Aires picked it up and elaborated upon the sensation, crowning Nancy Astor as 'Queen of the Set' who reigned at the 'Schloss Cliveden'. Cliveden weekend house parties, where the cream of English society – whether prime ministers or literary lions like George Bernard Shaw,

or mysterious adventurers such as T. E. Lawrence (of Arabia) – was regularly entertained, had been for some time a feature of contemporary gossip columns. Claud Cockburn's latest revelation added a new and sinister dimension to these gatherings.

The 'Set' widened. The popular press, at times throwing all caution to the wind, drew up an imposing list. It now included John Jacob Astor V, who, together with his brother Waldorf, owned controlling interests in the *Observer* and *The Times*. The Astor family interest in Parliament alone aroused intense suspicion. Five in the Commons, three in the Lords, they constituted a genuine family lobby.[*3] Other conspirators were named: Thomas Jones (T.J.), one-time deputy secretary to the cabinet and the intimate of prime ministers; Edward Grigg, journalist, Conservative politician, and colonial proconsul; James Garvin, editor of the *Observer*; Lord Londonderry, a former Secretary of State for Air, widely known for his pro-German views; Henry 'Chips' Channon, a dedicated socialite and ardent government supporter; Sir Montague Norman, governor of the Bank of England; Sir Henri Deterding, director-general of Royal Dutch Petroleum. Prominent Cabinet ministers such as Lord Halifax, Sir Samuel Hoare, Sir John Simon and Sir Thomas Inskip were also included. Even Charles Lindbergh, the American aviator, whose wildly exaggerated reports of the Luftwaffe's destructive power received wide currency at the time, was nominated for membership. The list of abettors was, apparently, never-ending. 'The Cliveden Baronage', to use the *Tribune*'s nomenclature, was a veritable 'Who's Who' of passé aristocrats, great landlords, captains of industry and finance, influential journalists, slippery politicians, pretentious academics and over-mighty civil servants. According to the *Washington Post*, it constituted 'the real centre of British foreign policy', menacing and challenging 'the constitutional structure of British Democracy'.[13] Together with their hangers-on, they would

use any means, however devious, even traitorous, to maintain the privileges of their decaying class.

Here was a classic conspiracy theory, appealing, compelling, perhaps comforting to the uninitiated. Its historical truth is another matter. No hard evidence has yet come to light to sustain this fanciful interpretation. But this does not resolve the quandary, it merely makes it more intriguing. For when does a 'Set' become a Cockburn-like 'Set'?[14] What is abundantly clear is that the cadre, the nucleus of the so-called 'Set' – Lothian, Dawson, Brand, Curtis and the Astors – formed a close-knit band, on intimate terms with each other for most of their adult life. Here indeed was a consortium of like-minded people, actively engaged in public life, close to the inner circles of power, intimate with Cabinet ministers, and who met periodically at Cliveden or at 4 St James's Square (or occasionally at other venues). Nor can there be any doubt that, broadly speaking, they supported – with one notable exception – the government's attempts to reach an agreement with Hitler's Germany, or that their opinions, propagated with vigour, were condemned by many as embarrassingly pro-German. The high drama masking their activities sprang from their distinguished pedigrees, their network of social and political contacts, and the glamorous settings in which they concocted their so-called plots.

Today, the 'Set' would be categorized as an establishment group *par excellence*. Henry Fairlie, a prominent English journalist, first gave common currency to this emotive term when he charged that the spies Guy Burgess and Donald MacLean, who had defected to Moscow, had been protected from exposure by the 'Establishment'. By this he did not refer only to the visible 'centres of official power', but to 'the whole matrix of official and social relations within which power is exercised'. Holding down key jobs or maintaining positions of influence in the country's affairs, these establishment figures are 'disinterested and high-minded,

steeped in classical learning', with the added advantage that 'they keep their hands out of the till'. But more crucially, 'they meet each other frequently at lunch and at dinner and appear on the same guest lists on grand occasions, both state and private'. Political power, influence, leverage in England, he expounded, 'cannot be understood unless it is recognized that it is exercised socially'. Not only do they 'run their own shows', they have 'box seats for all the rest'.[15]

The 'Cliveden Set' falls neatly into these categories. Its pedigree impeccable, its social standing beyond reproach, its persuasive powers permeated the clubs and institutions of London, the Senior Common Rooms of Oxbridge colleges, the so-called quality press, in particular its correspondence columns, and the great country houses of England. Concerned almost exclusively with imperial and foreign affairs, it carried on as a disparate, irregular 'ginger group'. Soliciting 'a revolution by dinner-party',[16] it operated within, not against or outside, the parameters of conventional political behaviour. It did not challenge the government, but sought to brace its resolve, to guide it in ways that accorded with its own preconceived opinions. It was plainly a part of what has been identified as 'the foreign-policy-making elite' of Britain.[17] And the members of the 'Cliveden Set' were, so to speak, among its most prominent paid-up members.

No binding majority decisions were taken when the 'Set' met around the dinner table or on the terrace at Cliveden.[*4] Differences of opinion, of emphasis, frequently emerged. And, as so often happens, the more influential or the more motivated of them – or those with more time on their hands – made the running. Leading members of the 'Set' made no secret of their views, nor did they veil their efforts to promote them. On the contrary, they drummed up the widest possible publicity, at times staging theatrical gestures that were designed to catch the public eye. The 'Set' now emerges in its authentic guise, as a kind of self-

appointed, unstructured think-tank. Regarding itself as an intellectual powerhouse, it did not hesitate to provide a rationale for the government's all too often controversial foreign policies. Although it could not be accurately described as 'a second Foreign Office', its members often appeared to behave as an amateur, part-time diplomatic corps, entertaining ambassadors or flying off to Germany to sound out Hitler and his cohorts about the chances of a European settlement. The professionals at the Foreign Office registered strong disapproval. 'Not a very safe intermediary,' ruled Sir Robert Vansittart, permanent head of the Office, about Lord Lothian, a power-broker among the dilettantes.[18]

Much has been written and spoken about this exclusive fraternity. It has been the subject of speculation and gossip, and also of much misrepresentation. Forever associated with Cliveden, the 'Set' regularly gathered there during the inter-war years, when the traditional country-house weekend still flourished, in an atmosphere that has been described as 'partly a luxurious holiday, partly a seminar, partly a retreat'.[19] In its elegant, palatial surroundings they ruminated, speculated, intrigued and – so their detractors claimed – plotted. So Cliveden itself, this imposing stately home, plays a leading role in their story.

CHAPTER 1

Cliveden

In 1538, the antiquary John Leland, exploring the stretch of ‘the Tamise’ between Cookham and Boulter’s Lock (to the north-west of Maidenhead), described it as ‘cliffy ground hanging over’ the river with some ‘Busshis growing on it’. Often rising to a height of one hundred and fifty feet, its chalk cliffs dominate this reach of the Thames and lend their character to the site first known as Cliefden, or as it is recognized today, Cliveden. Divided by a small valley that dips steeply towards the river, its heights afford the most spectacular views of the surrounding countryside, likened by Garibaldi to the ‘mighty river prospects’ of South America.[1] Indeed, the magnificent views it offers provides the most convincing *raison d’être* for building a great house at this point.

But it was not the only reason. Only five miles from Windsor Castle and twenty from Westminster, situated conveniently on the banks of the Thames, Cliveden was readily accessible to the centres of political power. Even in the seventeenth century it was possible to lunch in London and dine at Cliveden. Doubtless it was a combination of these factors that first induced George Villiers, 2nd Duke of Buckingham, to begin building in the late 1660s a palatial home for himself – although, apparently, he was also moved by an urge to impress his latest mistress, Anna Brudenell, Countess of Shrewsbury, one of the great court beauties of her day. The pile that emerged remained as a monument to Buckingham’s grandiose fancies, a queer blend of the

Orangery at Versailles and the famous terraces above the Seine at Saint-Germain.

The 2nd Duke's flamboyant character expressed itself in numerous other enterprises. 'Politician, diplomat, poet, playwright, amateur chemist, gambler, adulterer, and murderer', his scandalous behaviour never ceased to titillate Restoration England. His most notorious exploit occurred at the end of 1667 when he ran through and killed the Earl of Shrewsbury, the unfortunate husband of his mistress, in a duel at Barne Elmes, near Putney – a drama recorded in the Duke's Garden at Cliveden where the visitor will observe a pattern of flints shaped as a rapier, dated 1688, laid out on the lawn. Buckingham's licentiousness was matched only by his political wheeling and dealing. In the long run, it brought him little benefit. Regarded as corrupt, debauched and irresponsible, a reputation buttressed by his inclination for brawling, he was finally dismissed by Charles II and retired to his estates, stripped of all political influence. Thrown by his horse, he died in April 1687, mourned as a 'chymist, fiddler, statesman and buffoon' who was 'always in the wrong'.

After Buckingham's death the house passed into the hands of Lord George Hamilton (later created Earl of Orkney). A distinguished soldier and a friend of William of Orange, he had served with distinction as Marlborough's second-in-command at Blenheim. His wife, Elizabeth Villiers, was a kinswoman of the late Duke. Famously ugly – Elizabeth was reputed to 'squint like a dragon' – she was also, according to the highest authorities, exceptionally astute and sharp-witted. Politicians of the day found Elizabeth 'extreamly medling' in affairs of state, classifying her as a political intriguer of the first order. Orkney was of a quieter disposition. He turned his attention to improving the neglected house and gardens. What emerged was a considerable extension of the parterre and the landscaping of the Thames view of the house. A Yew Tree Walk now led

down to the river, while to its north the wooded river slope was ‘cutt out very agreeably in walks and *vistas*’, to include also an amphitheatre. Orkney also enhanced the approaches to Cliveden. He widened the Grand Avenue, bordering it by two smaller avenues, that now led from the forecourt of the house to a *rond-point*, from which sprang other radiating walks and drives. Orkney had achieved much. Visitors wandering through the grounds today can still enjoy many of his improvements.

On Orkney’s death, the estate was leased by Frederick Louis, Prince of Wales, son of George II. Frequently lampooned as ‘Poor Fred’, the Prince desperately sought to assert himself, searching for that elusive role in great affairs that so often eludes heirs to the throne. He quickly became a focus for oppositionist intrigue against the hated Sir Robert Walpole, the King’s chief minister. Banned from the court, forbidden contact with foreign ambassadors, he received the ultimate slight when his father refused him command of the army against the Jacobite insurrection of 1745. Frederick Louis paid back his parents by cruelly caricaturing them in the *Histoire du Prince Titi*, a spoof that he either wrote or inspired.

Frustrated in London and Windsor, the Prince enjoyed Cliveden as a place for relaxation. Surrounded by his cronies, he amused himself in a routine of pleasure – cards, cricket, house games, or simply drinking at the Three Feathers inn (still in business as the Feathers inn). A cellist in his own right, Frederick Louis combined his love of music with a stab at his political tormentors. On 1 August 1740 he commanded that the first performance of *The Masque of Alfred* – a story of the ‘Patriot-King-in Waiting’ – be given in Cliveden’s amphitheatre.[*1] Owing to a heavy downpour the audience withdrew to the relative comfort of the house to listen to the remainder of the show. Wet and befuddled they might have been, but they must have been profoundly moved when they heard the stirring chorus,

When Britain first, at Heaven's command,
Arose from out the azure main,
This was the charter of the land,
And guardian angels sung this strain:
'Rule Britannia, rule the waves;
Britons never will be slaves.'

It was somehow prophetic that the most patriotic ode in British music should first have been performed at Cliveden.

By the mid-nineteenth century Cliveden was in the possession of the 2nd Duke of Sutherland, purchased for the sum of £24,850, with an additional £9,566 for effects. It had been gutted twice by fire, the last occasion in 1849. This was a major calamity, but the Sutherlands (or Leveson-Gowers, pronounced 'Looson-Gores') were a family of formidable means, having amassed an immense fortune by what Disraeli called its 'talent for absorbing heiresses'. Sutherland employed one of the most notable architects of the day, Sir Charles Barry – then engaged on creating (to much criticism) his masterpiece, the Houses of Parliament – to remodel Cliveden. Seen today, Barry's Cliveden embodies a rewarding 'synthesis of English Palladian architecture with the Roman Cinquecento'. On its seventeenth-century raised terrace now stands an arcaded ground floor supporting a heavy balustraded cornice. On either side, Barry refurbished the curving colonnaded corridors that led into the wings of the house, where extra accommodation was provided to cater for additional guests when the main house was full. Above the first floor he erected another two storeys, tucked in neatly towards the centre and decorated with Ionic pilasters. Topped by a heavy parapet lined with heavy urns that concealed the roof, intended also as a viewing platform, the exterior of this imposing edifice was rendered in Roman cement (a mixture of slaked lime and volcanic ash) on a base of brick, its embellishments being expressed in moulded terracotta.

Seen from its garden front, Cliveden's pleasing symmetry cannot fail to impress the viewer, its southern outlook meticulously bisected by a double stone stairway descending in both directions from the terrace to the gardens and walks. There was one typical Victorian flourish. Gladstone, a close friend of Sutherland, composed a series of Latin inscriptions, embedded in a deep frieze just below the upper parapet, that glorified Buckingham, the founder of Cliveden, Sutherland, its benefactor and restorer, and its brilliant architect, Sir Charles Barry. Later a group of picturesque brick, half-timbered and tile-hung cottages, together with a boathouse, were added to the estate. Adorning the banks of this beautiful stretch of the Thames, they provide a setting that manifestly evokes scenes from the world of Jerome K. Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat*. By 1861, one other structure had been completed. Standing to the west side of the forecourt, an imposing campanile rose to a height of one hundred feet. Disguised as a clock tower, it in fact contains 17,000 gallons of water, pumped up from an artesian well on the other side of the Thames, a practical as well as attractive storage system designed to supply the needs of the house.

Harriet, the 2nd Duke's Duchess, was considered 'daringly radical' for an aristocrat. Under her careful guidance, Cliveden acquired a well-deserved reputation as a prominent Liberal salon. Distinguished visitors from all walks of life were always on hand. Alfred Tennyson, the poet laureate, Sir Joseph Paxton, gardener and architect, Carlo Marochetti, a titled Italian sculptor patronized by the British royal family, a varied assortment of Whig grandees, and, of course, the Gladstones. Even Queen Victoria stayed there during the summer of 1866.

But Harriet's most sensational catch was the Italian revolutionary leader Giuseppe Garibaldi, who arrived in London on his controversial visit in April 1864. His appearance caused a tremendous brouhaha. Not only a hero

to the masses, he was also lionized by London society. Garibaldi retired to Cliveden to recuperate from this rapturous welcome. He planted a tree (it still stands in the Ilex Grove by the Clock Tower), admired the vistas of the Thames, lent his name to ‘the Garibaldi room’, and even, most daringly, smoked a cigar in Harriet’s boudoir. Queen Victoria recorded her displeasure at these ‘follies’. Harriet, the Queen’s Mistress of the Robes, remained resolute, clearly heartbroken at the thought of her favourite leaving Cliveden. ‘Although I cannot expect that the company of a woman who is no longer young [she was fifty-eight] can satisfy you,’ she wrote to Garibaldi, ‘nevertheless I shall try to divert your attention from other women who possess the blessings of youth and good health.’

Despite Victoria’s censure, this seductive combination of high-flown political gossip and intriguing companions, set in the most opulent of surroundings, proved to be irresistible. Lucy Cavendish, Gladstone’s niece, commented after one visit: ‘The perfect taste, refinement, and luxury of the place almost oppresses me. When one lives in Paradise, how hard it must be to ascend in heart and mind to Heaven.’

On the Dowager Duchess Harriet’s death in 1868, Cliveden was purchased by her son-in-law, Hugh Lupus, Earl Grosvenor (created 1st Duke of Westminster in 1874). Although addicted to hunting and racing, Hugh Lupus had wider interests than these traditional pursuits. Deeply involved in national politics as he was, Gladstone thought him a ‘selfish aristocrat’ who had destroyed his proposed parliamentary reform bill of 1866. Throughout the 1870s, when not politicking in London, Westminster spent much of his time at Cliveden. But his main building energies were focused elsewhere, on his principal country residence, Eaton Hall, situated on the Cheshire-Flint border. By comparison, Westminster made only marginal renovations at Cliveden. Naturally, he added new stables. But he also reordered the Grand Avenue, the imposing approach to the house. His one

major improvement was to combine Barry's two drawing rooms on the south front to form a spacious whole, while also allowing easier access to the terrace and gardens. Otherwise, apart from overhauling its heating system, he hardly touched the interior of Cliveden.

By the early 1890s Westminster was anxious to rid himself of Cliveden. He was quite adequately housed. Eaton Hall in Cheshire and Grosvenor House in Park Lane alone provided him with the splendid accommodation that his station demanded. Cliveden was never high on his order of priorities. In June 1893 he sold the property (reputedly for $1.25 million) to William Waldorf Astor, an American multimillionaire who had finally decided to settle in England. Saddened by the news, Queen Victoria mourned for her 'Dear beautiful Cliveden', now in the possession of an alien breed. 'It is grievous to think of it falling into these hands,' she lamented. Cliveden was to remain the home of the Astor family for the coming three generations.

Already saddled with a reputation as a centre of political intrigue, Cliveden, as run by the Astors, would do much to improve on its well-merited image.

If Westminster was probably the wealthiest man in England, the present near owner of Cliveden, William Waldorf Astor, was surely one of the richest men in the world. A scion of the Astor dynasty, his fortune had been founded by his great-grandfather, John Jacob Astor. Born in the village of Waldorf, just south of Heidelberg, John Jacob had left his home at the age of sixteen to spend four years in London, working for his brother making musical instruments, flutes, clarinets and oboes. Having acquired a working knowledge of English, he then crossed the Atlantic to the newly created United States, travelling steerage at a cost of £5. After an arduous journey of four months, he arrived in Baltimore at the end of March 1784. In New York he first set up a musical

emporium with stock he had brought with him from London. A steady, respectable business, it proved to be too humdrum for this bustling entrepreneur. Seeking more profitable callings, he began dealing in furs. Lack of ready capital forced him into occasional partnerships with more established furriers. But John Jacob was of too independent a spirit to tie himself to others. He took to travelling up the Hudson river to negotiate the sale of pelts from the Iroquois and other skin trappers. Annual trips to Montreal yielded him rewarding deals with the powerful North West Company. His business enterprises spread westwards. Within twenty years, he had a monopoly of the lucrative fur business throughout North America, the trading posts of his American and the Pacific Fur Companies spanning the entire continent. From the eastern seaboard, he exported his furs to Europe, an insatiable and remunerative market. On the North-West Pacific coast, at the mouth of the Columbia river, he founded the town of Astoria, an entrepot for trade with the Far East. From here his merchant ships crossed over to China, carrying back tea, silk and spices, netting him even more fabulous profits. The revenues mounted, seemingly without limit.[2]

Gradually John Jacob switched the focus of his business affairs. By the mid-1830s he had closed down his fur companies and had withdrawn from the China trade. Now a person of considerable substance – his sobriquet was simply ‘the richest man in America’ – he extended his business interests to banking (he had already helped to establish the Second Bank of the United States), insurance, government bonds, acquiring land in upper state New York and Canada, and even, briefly, speculating in railroads. But more than anything, he began to buy up chunks of Manhattan real estate. Astor holdings stretched from the Battery to Harlem, along Park Avenue and Broadway, but in particular they were to be found in the area bounded by the Hudson river, the northern extent of Central Park, Fifth Avenue and 42nd

Street. He developed properties, apartment houses and office blocks. In 1836 he opened the doors of the Park Hotel (later, Astor House) at 223 Broadway, with its eighteen shops, three hundred bedrooms and seventeen bathrooms, to the delight of New York's upper crust and its more prosperous visitors. Three years later he decided upon a great civic enterprise, setting aside funds to launch the foundation of the New York Public Library. Despite this dabbling in philanthropy, his reputation as a cold-blooded landlord and avaricious plutocrat preceded him, and would continue to dog his heirs. Yet whatever slurs he incurred, by the time of his death at the age of eighty-five, John Jacob was readily acknowledged as the greatest moneyspinner of his day, enjoying an annual income of about $2 million a year. The founder of the first great American fortune, his wealth was rumoured to be second only to the Rothschilds.[*2]

John Jacob's successors have been widely considered to have lacked his audacity and verve. Perhaps, it was also whispered, they had perfected the gift of serendipity to a fine art. Or perhaps, to be more generous, they felt instinctively that he had guided them in the right direction. At any rate, they distanced themselves from the scramble to control the American economy through risk-growth enterprises. Not for them the wheeling and dealing of the Vanderbilts and Carnegies. Instead, the Astors concentrated on buying up New York City. William Backhouse, John Jacob's son, developed over seven hundred properties throughout the city – stores, offices, apartment houses, hotels, restaurants. His son, John Jacob III, ended his career as the largest private owner of real estate in New York. As New York prospered, so too did the Astors.

William Waldorf, John Jacob III's heir, now owner of Cliveden, realized his share of the fortune in 1890 when he came into his inheritance of $100,000,000 (approximately $2.8 billion by today's reckoning).[*3] William Waldorf was something of a maverick in Astor circles, his temperament

poised precariously between convention and idiosyncrasy. Since infancy he had showed signs of a remoteness and lack of communication with others, characteristics that were to blossom in later life. An only child, he was brought up in a forbidding atmosphere – no whistling, no games on Sunday; instead his routine was tempered with mastering texts of an improving quality. Although he took a law degree at Columbia, he was privately educated, never subject to the rough and tumble of school life. As befitted a solitary adolescent, he was an avid reader, attracted to the historical romances of Walter Scott or James Fenimore Cooper, but also fascinated by the biographies of ruthless despots like Napoleon Bonaparte or the Borgias. Enthralled by the delights of the chessboard, he developed into an exceptionally proficient player, usually travelling with a pocket set, and able to play blindfolded. Chess's 'axioms', he later wrote, 'are a fixed star of methodical procedure'.[3] Order, precision and punctuality were traits that William Waldorf refined to the point of obsessiveness.

Reserved and somewhat strait-laced, William Waldorf could have found little in common with other members of his immediate family. His uncle William, although he maintained the Astor reputation as a thrusting landlord, had also gained a name for himself as a playboy, spending much of his time aboard his yacht, *Nourmahal* ('Light of the Harem'), the most luxurious in the world, where, to the gratification of the press, unspeakable orgies were said to take place. With his imperious aunt Caroline, who reigned over New York's elite, carefully monitoring the Four Hundred couples deemed worthy enough to be admitted to her ballroom, he had even less in common. Out of touch with the spirit that animated New York society life, William Waldorf decided to go into local politics on a Republican ticket, suddenly conscious of his civic duty to serve those who had kindly underwritten his privileged position. But he was no populist. Faithful to his elitist upbringing, he aimed

to clip the wings of the parvenu ‘robber barons’ and their crooked officials, squalid, vulgar creatures who debased public life, and to restore political power to where it belonged: in the hands of an enlightened oligarchy, those few honoured and honourable patrician families who intuitively had the best interests of the masses at heart.

For someone of his fastidious tastes, William Waldorf could not have chosen a worse time to break into public life. Corruption was rife. Assorted gangs of con-artists and fixers openly manipulated the ballot, particularly at the municipal and state level. New York itself had recently fallen victim to the excesses of ‘Boss’ Tweed – of the notorious Tammany Hall ring – who in 1873 had been jailed (where he later died) for having systematically plundered the City’s treasury of sums estimated at anywhere between $70,000,000 to $200,000,000.[4] Still, William Waldorf fought his way into the New York State legislature at Albany, and from there advanced to a seat in the state senate. In 1880 he was nominated as the Republican candidate for New York’s seventh congressional district, losing by the narrow margin of 165 votes. Almost immediately he was asked to run again, this time for the seventeenth district, a wealthier area; but once again he was beaten.

These campaigns were conspicuously grubby affairs. Although, as anticipated, William Waldorf spread his dollars around liberally, his campaign style was judged to be condescending, even arrogant. One commentator noted that when he shook hands with his constituents he kept his gloves on. Press notices were cruel. Gleefully identified as a ‘slum landlord’, his name and reputation were vilified without mercy. Nor would he fight back. Too proud, too remote from the democratic process, too disgusted at the chicanery, he refused to sink to the level of a street-brawler. Instead, he cut himself off from ‘those trained vulgarians’. Exposed to the rancour of ‘the tobacco-spitting’ press, he determined to remove himself from its glare, cultivating a

visible distaste for any kind of publicity. For a man of William Waldorf's renown, this was a self-defeating attitude. Unable to escape public scrutiny, his antipathy towards unsought-for attention intensified.

One consequence of these humiliations was to set in motion a scheme that would allow William Waldorf a respite from the hurly-burly of American life. Alluded to as 'the English plan', it was hoped that he would eventually find his niche in the more genteel, sophisticated setting of late Victorian England. William's father, John Jacob III, a committed Anglophile who, unfortunately, had had to refuse the ambassadorship to the Court of St James, was agreeable to the idea. But then, unexpectedly, Chester Alan Arthur (twenty-first President of the United States) offered William the post of Minister to Rome. What were to be his duties, he asked the Secretary of State. 'Go and enjoy yourself, my dear boy; have a good time!' – cogent advice that he was to keep in mind. Later in life, he wrote appreciatively of the founder of the dynasty, John Jacob I: 'I am glad that my great-grandfather was a successful trader, because in all ages trade has led the way to Civilization.' In Rome, he found 'Civilization'.

William Waldorf arrived in Rome in 1882. In his grandson's words, it was here that he began 'to weave into his life a pattern of formalistic behaviour which fell somewhere between that of a Roman emperor and his idea of an English medieval baron'; and, one might safely add, that of a Renaissance prince. He drew, painted, sculpted in the classical style – one of his statues, 'The Wounded Amazon', stands awkwardly today in the Rose Garden at Cliveden – and wrote two historical novels, *Valentino* (1884), a diligent refashioning of the life of Cesare Borgia, and *Sforza, A Story of Milan* (1886), neither of which caused a great stir. But first and foremost, he became a collector – and a collector on a grand scale; a polished version of the stereotypical American millionaire ransacking Europe of its cultural