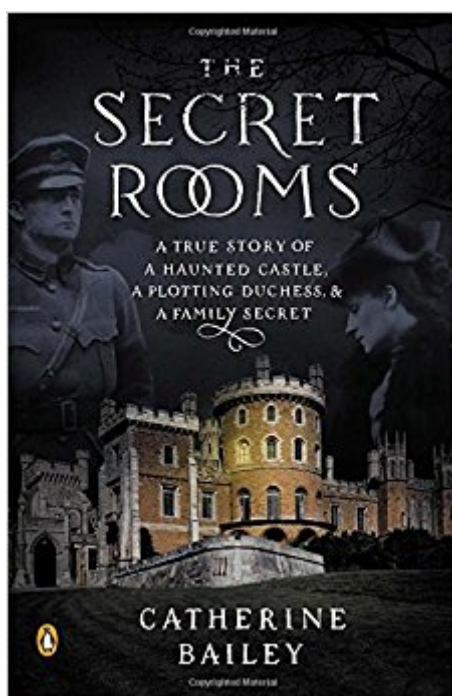


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The Secret Rooms: A True Story Of A Haunted Castle, A Plotting Duchess, And A Family Secret



Synopsis

For fans of *Downton Abbey*, this New York Times bestseller is the enthralling true story of family secrets and aristocratic intrigue in the days before WWI. After the Ninth Duke of Rutland, one of the wealthiest men in Britain, died alone in a cramped room in the servants' quarters of Belvoir Castle on April 21, 1940, his son and heir ordered the room, which contained the Rutland family archives, sealed. Sixty years later, Catherine Bailey became the first historian given access. What she discovered was a mystery: The Duke had painstakingly erased three periods of his life from all family records—but why? As Bailey uncovers the answers, she also provides an intimate portrait of the very top of British society in the turbulent days leading up to World War I.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

While researching a book on WWI, historian Bailey stumbled on a crackerjack real-life mystery revolving around the life and times of John Henry Montagu Manners, the ninth Duke of Rutland. A meticulous curator who organized his illustrious family's documents and correspondence, he died in the archives suite of Belvoir Castle in 1940, refusing medical treatment until he completely expunged all records pertaining to three distinct yet interrelated periods in his life. As Bailey painstakingly unearths secret after secret in order to deduce what really happened between the years 1894 to 1915, the ghosts of scandals past surface in full force. Populated with a bevy of real-life aristos who played by their own twisted and privileged set of rules, a searing portrait of family intrigue, dysfunction, and hubris—à la *Downton Abbey*—emerges.

--Margaret Flanagan

“In pages more reminiscent of Edgar Allan Poe than Evelyn Waugh [Bailey] reminds us why this seemingly insignificant story bears telling.” *The New York Times Book Review* “With gripping detail and graceful prose Bailey’s work can best be described as a work of probative history written with the storytelling skills of a latter-day Agatha Christie.” *The Richmond Times-Dispatch* “Populated with a bevy of real-life aristos who played by their own twisted and privileged set of rules, a searing portrait of family intrigue, dysfunction, and hubris •a la *Downton Abbey* emerges.” *Booklist* “Bailey is a truly dogged detective | a compelling exposé” *Kirkus Reviews* “Bailey deserves commendation for her meticulous research as well as her storytelling.” *Publisher’s Weekly* “Gripping. Reads like the best kind of mystery story. It is a tale of mistresses and heirlooms, cowardice and connivance.” *The Sunday Times (London)* “Compelling. A remarkable piece of research which throws a bright shaft of light on powerful people, hypocrisy and the First World War.” *The Guardian*

Having really enjoyed the authors previous book *Black Diamonds: The Rise and Fall of an English Dynasty*, I was looking forward to reading her new work. *The Secret Rooms* is the story of how Catherine Bailey set out to do some research for a book which ended up taking a completely different direction. When the author came to Belvoir, family home of the Duke of Rutland, she was intending to write a book about the 1,700 men of the estate who left to fight in WWI. However, when she attempted to look at the correspondence catalogued by the Duke, she found that there were three gaps: one in 1894, just before his ninth birthday, the second in 1909 when he was working in Rome and the third in 1915. When she looked at his war diary, the first pages were crammed full of war progress and movements, but after July 1915, it was a blank. What follows is the author first attempting to find what happened to the missing letters and then her search for what happened during those blank periods becomes the story she wants to write. John Henry Montagu, the 9th Duke of Rutland, was a second son. His elder brother died shortly before the first gap in his edited correspondence. He had three sisters, one of whom was Diana, later the socialite and wife of Duff Cooper. Bailey takes us methodically through her search for the truth. She asks why the Duke died in 1940, locked away in a set of rooms to which only a handful of people were admitted, at his family home Belvoir Castle? What made him spurn a more comfortable sickroom for the spartan one he

chose, in order to remain there completing his work, even when he was seriously ill? What, in other words, did he have to hide? This is a work of great research and the author involves you completely in John's life and that of his family. While I have read much about his sister Diana, I knew little about her parents. John and Diana's mother Violet was a woman who enjoyed intrigue and who never recovered from the death of her eldest child. The problem with the book is that much is conjecture and, although Bailey solves the main mystery concerning WWI, she glosses over parts of the story she is unable to solve - the section regarding John's time in Rome is quite weak compared to the rest of the book. However, I enjoyed following the author's progress as she unravelled the mystery of the missing letters, tracking down the story and uncovering long held secrets in a time when the aristocracy would do anything to present the image they wanted to show the world.

To begin with, I feel the title is misleading which no doubt contributes to disappointment/confusion. The end result is a sad tale of wasted potential; sad in that it deals with rather purposeless, self-centered people who inherited privilege which seemed not to have given them depth or compassion. The exception would be Lady Diana Manners who did become a nurse, working very hard to do her patriotic duty when the times certainly did not encourage young aristocratic women to do such. As a researcher/writer, I would be in pure heaven if given the opportunity Ms. Bailey was by the current Duke of Rutland; I would be literally beside myself with glee if I could comb through all those private correspondences and war records. Thank goodness people once wrote copious letters and kept them all for how else would we have a personal take on history? However, if one is not inclined toward this, the very premise of the author's work to uncover the "mysteries" could become tedious. There is repetition and the author's habit of Italics for emphasis which I found distracting in that I am able to decipher on my own when a moment is pertinent. As for the Downton Abbey tie in, this is not a fictional drama or a novel but it does offer insight on how the household of a ducal system operated and good descriptions of the castle and the land. I found the photographs especially enlightening. If one is a history buff as I am, the significance of Belvoir Castle remaining in the hands of the same family and their ability to trace their ancestry to the man who carried the banner for William the Conqueror compelling. Having an interest in World War One and the details of the horror of life in the trenches would go a long way toward finding this a good read.

The title promises a mystery of gothic proportions. In fact, it is an interesting story about an aristocratic mystery. In the start of the book the author tries her hand at a fictionalised account of the

last days of the 9th Duke of Rutland. It does get you in and you think this how it is going to be for the rest of the book. This narrative stops and we then focus on the search of the author to parse through an enormous amount of documents associated with the 9th Duke. In the process she uncovers the solution to a family mystery through her dogged research. Full marks for the solution, which I will not reveal. That said the solution is less than intriguing. She does say early in the book she came across this treasure trove of documents while researching another book about WW1. Bailey seems compelled to include stretches of what seems like a book written before she got the idea for this book. Then we are privy to every letter, quoted at length. I skimmed a lot of this book because it is over written. Where are the editors these days? Nick

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