



Servants' Stories: Life Below Stairs in Their Own Words 1800-1950

Michelle Higgs

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Step into the world of domestic service and discover what life was really like for these unsung heroines (and heroes) of society. Between 1800 and 1950, the role of servants changed dramatically but they remained the people without whom the upper and middle classes could not function. Through oral histories, diaries, newspaper reports and never before seen testimonies, domestic servants tell their stories, warts and all - Downton it isn't! * Revenge on a mistress with a box of beetles * The despair and loneliness of a 14 year old maid * The adventure of moving to London to go into service * An escape from an unhappy home life Find out about the 'servant problem' and how servants found work; how National Insurance began to improve their lot; the impact WW1 had on domestic service; and what was done to try to make the occupation appealing to a new generation. Praise for Michelle Higgs 'A delightful layman's guide for tourists from 2014, where you'll glean plenty of juicy detail to paint a more accurate picture of your ancestors' lives.' Family Tree (for A Visitor's Guide to Victorian England) 'An enjoyable and well-written social history, helpfully revealing more about what life would have been like 'below stairs'. Who Do You Think You Are? (for Tracing Your Servant Ancestors) 'Daily life is recounted with both historical detail and sympathy, aided by numerous first-person accounts.' Your Family Tree (for Life in the Victorian and Edwardian Workhouse) 'A lively text which should do much to open up the world of the Victorian prison to the general reader.' Who Do You Think You Are? (for Prison Life in Victorian England)

Servants' Stories: Life Below Stairs in Their Own Words 1800-1950 Details

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Angela Buckley says

Whether it's a grand house, like Downton Abbey, or a more modest residence, there is an enduring fascination with life 'below stairs' and the relationships between servants and those they served. But, what was life really like for individuals in service? Was it as positive as is often portrayed on screen, or was it a life of drudgery? In her excellent book, Michelle Higgs answers these questions and more on this fascinating topic, through the 'voices' of those who lived through it.

Drawing on oral histories, contemporary newspaper reports and diaries, Michelle presents the stories of individuals in service in a refreshingly different way. The first hand accounts are compelling and each 'character' draws the reader into their world, sharing their trials and triumphs; their daily tasks and personal role in the strict hierarchy of domestic service. The inimitable style brings their stories back to life and gives an illuminating glimpse into this now-vanished lifestyle.

Michelle Higgs' skill lies in knowing exactly when to intercede in the narrative and when to hold back to let others speak – she sets each story clearly in context, with background information about the speaker. The book is divided into four distinct eras, and each is prefaced with an informative explanation of development and characteristics of domestic service at that time.

What surprised me the most about this elucidating book is the range of experiences – I had no idea that servants changed jobs so frequently, or that the occupation was so precarious and they were entirely at the mercy of the master and mistress of the house or, on a more personal level, how homesick many of them were. The speakers themselves vary from butlers and housemaids to undercover journalists and political activists, covering significant topics, such as the role of women in society, equal pay, industrial action and the rise of leisure time.

Servants' Stories is not only for lovers of historical period dramas, but also for everyone who has a passion for history and would like to step behind the green baize door. I would highly recommend it.

Sue Wilkes says

How Hard They Worked!

Servants are the stars of the evocative look at life below stairs from the Regency era until the mid-twentieth century. Many of these Servants' Stories are previously unpublished. Mary Ann Ashford was only thirteen when she began work as a maidservant, and it's hardly surprising she was exploited by several employers. William Tayler, a footman, kept a diary which gives a fascinating insight into life working for the gentry in the 1830s. One young girl, Amy Grace Rose, left a good situation because her mother found her another place, and almost died from overwork. It was also very difficult for servants to 'better themselves' through education, as they rarely had a moment they could call their own. You'll find yourself wanting to cheer on the rare occasions when a servant was able to turn the tables on an over-exacting employer. I thoroughly enjoyed reading these stories, some of which were extremely moving.

This book is essential reading whether your ancestor was a domestic servant, or if you are just interested in

the world of domestic service and the real heroes and heroines who kept homes running like clockwork, often at the cost of their own health.

Lauren says

The stories themselves were the most interesting part; the background information, while useful, was a little dull.

Peggie says

I found this book to be similar to reading a textbook from a class taken years ago.
