



Lady Almina and the Real Downton Abbey: The Lost Legacy of Highclere Castle

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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.

Lady Almina and the Real Downton Abbey: The Lost Legacy of Highclere Castle **Details**

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From Reader Review Lady Almina and the Real Downton Abbey: The Lost Legacy of Highclere Castle for online ebook

The Lit Bitch says

This book was absolutely riveting! I would call this one un-put-downable...it was a smashing read and I enjoyed every page! Books like this make me excited about history! Don't we all wish we could wave our magic wands and become the Crawley family living the high life at Downton Abbey? For Lady Almina Carnarvon that dream was a reality!!

See my full review [here](#)

Leah says

First of all, let's just address the fact that Downton Abbey (the awesome BBC series that has swept the nation) should carry the message "based on a true story" somewhere in each episode. Yes, the series is fiction, but I was truly surprised by the similarities between the show and what actually happened in history.

Even more amazing about reading this book is how incredibly strong and courageous the lady of the house proved herself to be. Lady Almina Carnarvon was a kind, generous force to be reckoned with who kept that household running, and was a patron to soldiers during the war by forming a hospital where they could rest and recover from their injuries. The role Lady Almina played in nursing and caring for soldiers was a vital one. At the time of WWI, hospitals were privately funded by benefactors, so without the organization, funding, and spirit of Almina, countless men might have died. The book details letter after letter from grateful recipients of her care.

The Carnarvon family also had a passion for Egyptian artifacts and went to Egypt on several archaeological digs, some of which discovered alabaster vessels and golden statues of gods, but the most incredible discovery was that of King Tut's tomb. The Earl of Carnarvon died shortly after the tomb was discovered, but his partner, Carter, was funded by Almina to continue the work of documenting the find. Many of the relics seen in NYC's Metropolitan Museum of Art come from that discovery.

Similarities between real life and the BBC include, but are not limited to:

- + Downton is saved by the marriage of an Earl to a woman of means named Lady Almina.
- + There are characters from history whose names appear in the BBC series, such as Crawley, Bates, a Turk named Kemal, and Mary.
- + One of the Earls had a penchant for cars and was badly injured in an accident.
- + There is a butler who is incredibly devoted to his job and the family.
- + There are a couple of relationships between household staff that end in marriages.
- + Several British dignitaries visit Highclere and lavish parties are thrown for them.
- + Highclere Castle is turned into a hospital during the war by the decree of Lady Almina. Many soldiers convalesce there and find physical and emotional healing from their war injuries.
- + There is a staff member who becomes involved with a soldier and is dismissed from her position.
- + There are a couple of household staff who go off to war and are killed.
- + Lady Almina comes down with the Spanish flu.
- + The Earl had a faithful dog to whom he was quite attached.

Dorothy says

I was captivated by the Downton Abbey drama on PBS and so when I discovered this book on Highclere Abbey (where it was filmed) and Almina, Countess of Caernarvon, I knew I wanted to read it and I was not disappointed. The book is written by the current Countess, Fiona Caernarvon, who became interested in researching the subject when the script for the TV series was being written. The result is a fascinating account of how a large Estate is organised and the activities of the family who owned it. Almina herself was the daughter of Alfred Rothschild and therefore brought money into the family which helped to maintain the estate and their other houses, and also helped to finance her husband's archeological interests. It was her husband, the Earl of Caernarvon who teamed with Howard Carter to discover the tomb of Tutankhamen. Also of interest is the activity of the family during the war years when both Almina and her step-mother were involved in financing and running hospitals for the wounded. This is a great read for anyone who enjoyed the Downton Abbey series.

Lau says

Si conocen la serie de televisión Downton Abbey entonces habrán visto la magnífica mansión que en realidad se llama Highclere Castle. Esta es la historia de sus habitantes, centrada principalmente en la vida de Almina, quinta condesa de Carnarvon.

La autora comienza diciendo que este libro no es una biografía exactamente, y después de haberlo leído me doy cuenta de que tiene razón. Sí, se narra la vida de Lady Almina Carnarvon con lujo de detalles, pero también se incluye una buena porción de la vida de muchas otras personas que tuvieron contacto con la Condesa tanto por amistad, simple conocimiento (y notoriedad social) o por haber trabajado en Highclere Castle. Además hay una muy completa información histórica para ponernos en contexto, además de algunos capítulos dedicados de forma muy detallada a la Primera Guerra Mundial.

Así que no, no es simplemente una biografía, es una historia llena de historias en la que se destaca esta notable –aunque un tanto frívola– mujer llamada Almina, que supo dejar a un lado la vida cómoda y privilegiada para dedicar su tiempo y recursos a servir, ayudar y preocuparse por el absoluto bienestar de muchísimas personas.

Almina, hija ilegítima de un próspero banquero, nunca fue reconocida oficialmente pero gozó desde el comienzo del cariño y sostén económico de su padre biológico. Siendo muy jovencita conquistó con su belleza y carisma al quinto conde de Carnarvon, quien luego sería mucho más famoso mundialmente por descubrir la tumba de Tutankamón.

Ya desde el comienzo el libro me conquistó. Al margen de que soy horriblemente parcial hacia cualquier cosa que involucre una linda descripción de ambientes y flores, comenzamos con la descripción con lujo de detalles de la boda de Almina. Sí debo admitir que me hice un considerable enriedo de nombres y títulos en este momento, pero con el correr de las páginas se vuelve todo mucho más claro. Si bien los Carnarvon vivieron rodeados de gente, no vamos a volver a encontrar una lista tan larga como en el día de la boda.

Realmente todas las historias que se narran son interesantes, además de que la autora tiene un estilo muy ameno y fácil de leer. Veremos con gran detalle (considerando que es una biografía sobre una sola persona) tanto a los personajes más importantes de la alta sociedad como a los sirvientes de la residencia. No deja de

ser notorio, y creo que es parte de la intención de la autora, que durante la época de tranquilidad los sirvientes trabajaban como locos para que los lores pasaran sus momentos de ocio. Hay que ponerse un poco en la mentalidad y costumbre de la época, y recordar que para muchos era un gran honor trabajar para personajes tan distinguidos.

Sí se sabe de todos modos que los Carnarvon eran muy justos con sus empleados, hay muchas descripciones de muestras de generosidad (narradas por quienes las recibían) que sospecho que debían ser bastante inusuales en otras casas. Dice la autora: «*Highclere era un sistema simbiótico y la clave de su éxito era el respeto mutuo*».

Hay, si, algunas especulaciones por parte de la autora sobre los sentimientos de las personas, ya que toda la información que recabó fue obtenida de cartas, relatos de quienes aún viven (o sus descendientes) y diversas anotaciones o artículos de la época. Esas especulaciones de todos modos son razonables y en ningún momento se siente que está inventando algo sólo para entretenernos.

Pero lo verdaderamente impactante llega cuando comienza la Primera Guerra Mundial.

Es muy triste y dura esta parte. Hay muchos detalles, estadísticas espantosas y lo peor, pérdidas de personas que llegamos a conocer y muchas veces querer las páginas del libro. Personas jóvenes, reales y valientes, que formaron lazos de amistad y lealtad ante el horror de la guerra. Bajo el fuego de metralla no existen los títulos y todos tienen el mismo color de sangre.

Almina, con el incondicional apoyo de su filántropo padre, convierte Highclere Castle en un hospital para los heridos. Con esto Almina descubre su verdadera vocación, aquella que la apasionará durante toda su vida: la enfermería.

Almina logró crear un hospital dedicado en comienzo a la recuperación y luego al tratamiento de los heridos. Su objetivo era que los enfermos se sintieran como en casa, que tuvieran comodidades y si es posible, placeres como la belleza o el arte. Es encomiable y maravilloso el esfuerzo que realizó tanto ella como su muy seleccionado equipo, valiéndose de paciencia, recursos y sobre todo, humanidad.

Pasó años y años dedicándose a los demás, y ese esfuerzo fue agradecido en numerosas y emocionantes cartas de los combatientes, sus familiares e incluso aquellos a quienes salvaron la vida con medicina de vanguardia.

En el transcurso de la I Guerra Mundial infinidad de personas trabajaron, al igual que Almina, para proporcionar un servicio médico de urgencia. Ella era plenamente consciente de que no lo habría conseguido sin sus médicos y enfermeras. Como es lógico, era agradable que se reconociesen estos esfuerzos y Almina desde luego lo apreciaba, pero las infinitas muestras de amabilidad, los funerales a los que asistió personalmente, la exquisita atención a los detalles que hicieron sentir a los pacientes como en casa y la buena disposición para agacharse a vendar un muñón gangrenado ella misma, todo lo hizo por el propio bien de los hombres sin esperar nada a cambio.

Algo que me dio mucha curiosidad, y es creo que una pequeña perla para quienes miramos Downton Abbey, es que realmente existió un Mr. Bates. Si bien el verdadero no era un ayuda de cámara sino un clérigo, la descripción física e incluso de la personalidad tiene muchas coincidencias con el personaje de la serie. ¿Casualidad? Quiero pensar que no.

El final me dejó triste, ese es el tema con las biografías, todo lo que uno lee es real. De todos modos es un

libro muy bueno, que toca temas tan amplios como la vida en sociedad, la guerra y las expediciones a Egipto y el valle de los Faraones.

Es impresionante la investigación que hizo Fiona Carnarvon y el modo en que se documentó.

Es marcadisimo el contraste entre las dos vidas: tanto de la Belle Époque como del contexto de guerra. Si les gusta la historia les va a interesar mucho, es muy interesante, tanto si conocen la serie como si no.

«No cabe duda de que Almina era frívola y dominante, pero también cambió muchas vidas con su imperioso deseo de hacer felices a los demás. Por ello, muchos la correspondieron con su cariño incondicional.»

Reseña de Fantasía Mágica

Bonnie says

Are you at a loss after viewing the Season 2 final episode of Downton Abbey wondering how you will make it until Season 3 airs??? Then pick up this book and snuggle in for a great read. I think you will enjoy reading about the "real" people and recognize those who have lived and loved beautiful Highclere. Almina inherits gobs of money from Albert Rothschild and becomes a real catch in the late 1890s Victorian/Edwardian society of London. The 5th Earl of Carnarvon picks her and they make a love match. She is strong, bold, energetic and knows how to ask for even more money from Rothchild to accomplish all she wishes to do. Trivia -- do you know who discovered King Tut's tomb? Read this!!! Now while I wait for Season 3, I must read more about WWI and the tragedies of Gallipoli, Ypres, the Somme and how my grandfather might have survived crawling across Belgium.

Ghost of the Library says

I have a confession to make - i am not a member of the DA fan club..maybe because after awhile it all started too much to sound like a soap opera to me...and i have always been one to prefer facts.

So, it was with a good deal of curiosity and interest, that i borrowed this one from the local library and, somewhat to my surprise, loved it!

The present Countess of Carnavon may not be a professional writer but she does a splendid job of bringing to life the fascinating 5th Countess, Lady Almina.

Of course the wonderful habit of diary keeping and scrapbook making helped in her endeavor, not everyone probably has such easy access to this good a base of research but still, its her voice and her voice alone that succeed in bringing to life this particular period of Highclere and England's recent history.

I for one especially liked hearing about her work towards assisting WWI soldiers and how many thank you letters and pictures are still preserved at Highclere.

There is of course the story of King Tut - yes it was Almina's husband that worked with Howard Carter and was the first "victim" of the Pharaoh's curse (joking btw!).

Anyways i would recommend this for anyone interested in this particular period of english history and also the "trend" of marrying rich heiresses - ultimately that's what Almina was, even if an illegitimate one by all accounts - because although this is about Highclere, it doesnt delve at all into Downton (for that purpose there are more suitable books out there).

It may have glossed over certain aspects of Almina's life that are less "picture perfect" but let's face it, the big

charm of the show and the reason for it's success, was the portrayal of a fairy tale life in a fairy tale castle in an almost forgotten golden age of good manners, butlers and romance, so you can't blame the Countess for carefully selecting what to tell and how to do it - she's family.....we all like to protect our own, don't we?

happy readings

Roberta says

I haven't watched Downton Abbey yet, though apparently I must. This biography of Almina, the 5th Countess of Carnarvon, written by Fiona, the 8th, is not brilliantly written. However, it is a time period I find interesting and I did learn a lot about the years leading up to WW1 and the war itself. How a country recovers from something like that is beyond me. How the survivors were able to carry on is also beyond me.

Hard to imagine the vast amounts of money and leisure some people had while others starved or slaved. Also hard to imagine the casual acceptance of privilege and position. Very hidebound, almost feudal. I don't find that whole Upstairs Downstairs inherited position thing quaint or reassuring in the least. It's a "know your place" kind of system with a thin overlay of security. Can't deny the good work Almina did though, even if she did scrounge most of the money from her father.

What I also found strange was the author's apparent insight into Almina's most personal thoughts and feelings and how she makes her out a kind of superwoman, glossing over the less positive details. It's also strange how little the Earl emerges as a character. He's flat, in spite of his personal accomplishments.

Overall, more a 2.5 but I've given it a 3.

Sarah says

13/11 - You can really see Fellowes' inspiration for Downton Abbey in the true story of Lady Almina and Highclere Castle. I love that the book was written by the current Countess, and she is quite the writer, not in the way of writers whose words are described as 'lyrical' or 'beautiful', but in the way that you just want to keep reading. Her storytelling is accessible and she makes what could be dry facts into a compelling, and sometimes enthralling story. To be continued...

14/11 - There were a few editing errors - in one instance on page 96 she called Elsie, the 5th Lord Carnarvon's stepmother, his mother-in-law

*"Lord Carnarvon had sold his two Somerset estates, Pixton and Tetton in 1901 to his **mother-in-law**, Elsie..."*

then on page 116 she talked about 'Jessie' when from the context it's clear she actually meant Mary Weeks, Almina's secretary

*"It was an adventure by anyone's standards, and one imagines **Jessie** and Almina rolling their eyes together at the privations they were both expected to bear. **Jessie** was a regular traveller since she accompanied Almina wherever she went, but it was the first time the two women had roughed it and it proved too much."*

The fact that 'Jessie' is described as being a regular companion to Almina on her travels is what told me that she was actually talking about Mary Weeks, as that is exactly how Mary's job as Almina's secretary was described earlier in the book.

Fortunately, these slightly glaring editing errors did nothing to tarnish my enjoyment of the true story of the real Downton Abbey and when I finished it I immediately added the second book in the series on her husbands' ancestors that Countess Carnarvon has written, *Lady Catherine, the Earl, and the Real Downton Abbey*.

Sally Wessely says

The book is interesting in many ways. It gave me great insight into the life and times of Lady Almina Carnarvon and the castle we all call Downton Abbey, but I also found the book lacking in many aspects. It is not written particularly well. In fact, I found a number of errors in the book that caused me to wonder if the author had an editor. I also found that I was sometimes confused about events and people that were discussed in the book. It seemed almost as if the author was looking at the guest book from the castle and writing a narrative based on entries in the guest book, or she loosely strung together tidbits she took from letters and tried to create the narrative of the story.

I was not previously aware of much of the history of Lady Almina, the wife of the Earl of Carnarvon who along with Howard Carter discovered King Tutankhamun's tomb. I had not even linked the two of them to Highclere Castle where Downton Abbey is filmed, so I did enjoy learning the history of the people and the place. I also was interested in the part that Lady Almina played in caring for the wounded soldiers of WWI.

Despite the fact that I found the topics of the book interesting, I found the lack of focus and poor writing distraction enough to give the book a low rating.

Will Cross says

We should know our betters : know that toffs will not be transparent. They will only tell you what they want you to know and to minimise the scandal they will painfully minimise the accuracy. Despite pointing out the howlers in the captions on several photographs, and the historically flawed text in Highclere's "Lady Almina and the Real Downton Abbey" (after the hardback came out in the UK, last September) the transformation of this book into it's new " First US Edition", with the inners unchanged, confirms that view.

The book does have an attractive new cover but it's still the content that counts.

It's all another instance of Herbert history repeating itself. There is already a less than honourable pile up of Carnarvon-family scribes who put their heavy-handed gloss on the accuracy regarding past members of the clan. Elsie, the second 4th Countess of Carnarvon, rigorously controlled and censored the posthumous biography of Henry, the 4th Earl of Carnarvon, a notable Victorian politician and Cabinet Minister. Lady Winifred Burghclere, the sister of George, 5th Earl of Carnarvon of Tutankhamun fame (Almina's husband) did exactly the same, stopping the leak of any embarrassing fall out about "Lordy!" (the name the Egyptian natives gave Lord Carnarvon in the Valley of the Kings). In 1923, Lady Winifred crafted an elegant and impeccably worded posthumous sketch of her adored brother, George, but as seen through her very rose

tinted glasses, and it made no mention, of faults, or George's darker proclivities. Almina was demolished by Winifred's blast of the trumpet in a single, dull, sentence. Then there was the womanising 6th Earl's ghosted memoirs that stopped well short of fact about his catalogue of carnal cavorting. And, unsurprisingly, the ghost writers have done it yet again with this book, portraying Almina as a saint. This lady was no saint!

But there's a lot at stake in only offering up a sanitised edition of Almina's life with the rake-in being synonymous with the public popularity of Highclere Castles' expansive (and expensive) use as the backdrop to a television programme called "Downton Abbey".

People actually believe in, and follow this TV series as mesmerised as grazing sheep watching car headlamps flicking in the winter darkness of night. But the same extremes between fiction and reality portrayed in "Lady Almina....." are at best an attempt to confuse the masses to make them actually believe the fiction, much as Orson Wells first deceived half of America into leaving their homes as they thought the men from Mars were about to land.

What good features there are in the book – and there are some genuinely interesting and worthy parts – albeit only carefully selected examples from Highclere's Secrets Archives- are lost in the colossal wave of hypocrisy by the painfully irritating plotters. Almina's true-life experiences are often scuttled, just as assassin or assassins scuttled an earlier biography of her in the 1990s– the reason being that on that occasion evidence was found that Almina had "strayed", the 6th Earl's paternity was in very great doubt. The gene pool of Porchey Carnarvon's father is mentioned in the narrative but in the wrong places, to bring him out with any meaningful recognition. But you will find this confronted in another biography of Almina, Countess of Carnarvon in addition to the rest of her secrets.

Besides the paternity issue, which remains an open wound, Almina's own paternity is a matter of some dispute. Porchey, the womanising 6th Earl of Carnarvon, who absolutely hated his mother, was first to claim, publically, that the millionaire banker, Baron (he was never a "Sir") Alfred de Rothschild was Almina's biological father. This, despite a birth certificate that states her dad was " Frederick C Wombwell", a gentleman, although also a cad. Wombwell believed he was Almina's father, but he is ridiculed in Highclere's text. They choose also to ignore Almina's brother, who was a visitor at Highclere and to whom the Countess raised a fine memorial when he died.

Going back to Almina being a Rothschild bastard, this nonsense has been maintained with constancy and the Wombwells discredited. But there is NO proof in favour of the Rothschild in this book, indeed they are as frigid as the fiction of Downton Abbey on the central point of their treatise.

It seems a case of employing the technique of Mr Goebbels that if one utters a big enough untruth and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it. In this case when the golden opportunity presented itself, to reveal the full facts about Alfred and cite the evidence for these claims of Almina being a Rothschild, the book can only declare limply ". the question of Almina's paternity can't be conclusively determined with any certainty...."

The strengths of " Lady Almina....." include the descriptions of Highclere ramparts at war. Almina found her forte as a nurse and spent over thirty years working steadfastly (and often waywardly) in private nursing care, mainly pampering to the Royals, the rich and the famous. But none of Almina's story in the later period of her life is included in the book.

Almina transferred her Castle for the Great War and later moved her wartime nursing home activities to London's Mayfair. But all this storyline (which is well enough told) is small glory, in what is otherwise a

cowardly approach, messing with a woman's life and only stating her pleasantries. Almina's real life, the character and make up of the woman, her struggle for love, and for own carnal pleasures, as well as her motives in wanting to do something worthwhile don't get mentioned. Perhaps they were afraid of scaring the horses at Highclere stud, the beasts were once owned by Almina, who was made bankrupt by 1951, and lived with a man twenty years her junior, in a apple orchard in Somerset, completely unknown to Highclere's hounds.

The book makes a good meal out of the rituals of Society entertaining and Almina's brave challenge to be the grandest hostess of the hour. The stay at Highclere Castle by the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VII) in 1895 is a good chunk, but this was published in a previous book by the same stable, so it's double dipping.

Another weakness of the book is in its abrupt ending. Almina's story is cut-off suddenly in 1923, just after the 5th Earl's famous mosquito bite and then cruel demise. That said, the last page refers to her second marriage, to an ex- army Colonel (whilst saying nothing of the blackguard plunging her into a scandalous Court case of DENNISTOUN v DENNISTOUN in 1925, which cost her \$100,000 worth of misery). In summing up Almina's next four lively decades in a single paragraph – and not a very good one – it leaves the brainwashed reader with only that other biography to best reflect the Countess's full life and loves, her glories and her descent into bankruptcy, but ultimately to her greater story, which in being told without warts or blemishes leaves this important, unstoppable, eccentric woman, who really didn't give a damn, a much lesser figure than she really was. She deserves a much better memorial than a nice new book cover.

Suzanne Mccandless says

I was surprised by how much I learned from this book. I had expected a good deal of fluff about house parties and social events in the early 20th century. there was that but also a great deal about WWI and about the discovery of King Tut's tomb.

Rebecca Huston says

A very entertaining look at the real Downton Abbey -- Highclere Castle -- and one of the countesses that lived there. Almina Wombwell was pretty, but also very wealthy. Where it gets unusual is who Almina's real father was -- Alfred de Rothschild, and his wealth is what got Almina accepted by England's aristocracy. She grew up wealthy, privileged, and would marry the Earl of Carnarvon. She bore children, supported her husband, modernized Highclere, and would help back the event that launched Carnarvon into history -- the discovery of King Tutankhamun's tomb. While the writing isn't top-notch, the story that it tells is. Four stars overall, and recommended.

For the longer review, please go here:
http://www.epinions.com/review/lady_a...

Chari says

Esta es la historia narrada por Lady Fiona, la actual condesa de Carnarvon, sobre la figura de la quinta

condesa, Lady Almina, desde el momento en que se convirtió en la señora de Highclere hasta que dio paso a la siguiente generación, la de su hijo tras la muerte de su marido Lord Carnarvon pocos meses después de haber descubierto junto con Howard Cáster, al que le unían quince años de amistad y colaboración, la tumba intacta del faraón Tutankamón hecho que los catapultaría a la fama. (Esta es otra historia paralela, la de este tándem del mecenas y del arqueólogo y egiptólogo que de siempre me ha embelesado y de la que ahora tengo necesidad de saciar conocimientos)

Entre medias veremos retratada la extraordinaria historia de una época desaparecida, con minuciosos detalles del suntuoso nivel de vida social de Almina, el funcionamiento de una de las casas solariegas victorianas más exquisitas de Inglaterra, y una documentada crónica histórica general de la Primera Guerra Mundial que me gustó mucho, un periodo durante el cual Lady Almina con dotes de enfermera transformó Highclere Castle en hospital para soldados.

Confieso que me ha resultado una lectura fascinante, para mi visita (todavía me hallo en la nube de la incredulidad..) a Highclere Castle (omg.. Downton Abbey!) estaba ávida de información y este libro me ha proporcionado múltiples datos de interés.

Nicholas says

I'm of two minds here. On the one hand, as someone who not only likes Downton Abbey, but also really likes pretty much anything British and Victorian/Edwardian (think: Mitfords, Sackville-West, Waugh), this was a whole lot of fun. On the other, it was a little disconcerting just how much the author fawned over her subject. Perhaps this is because she's followed in her footsteps, is also the Countess of Carnarvon (married to the 8th Earl; Almina married the 5th), and is clearly using this book to promote her home, Highclere.

Case in point: Almina remarries, despite being all manner of devastated (and about seven of its synonyms) at the death of the Earl, about seven months later. No comment from the author, who never hesitates to tell us exactly what Almina felt or thought about everything else that happens. Here: silence. She also was involved in a ridiculously high-profile court case between her new husband and his first wife, but that gets only a tiny mention near the very end. Almina lived to be 92, dying in 1969. But we see none of that. I understand that this was perhaps just a biography of Almina when she was at Highclere, but even then we get a TON of true tedium about her operating a hospital in London and her endless trips to Egypt to support her husband's archaeological work. In other words: stuff not happening at Highclere. So why not give us the full story? Methinks it's because Almina just isn't so appealing or glamorous anymore and the author was loathe to portray her as anything other than an altruistic wonder.

It's a quick read and the first half is really quite entertaining. But the second half drove me a little crazy.

Caroline says

I thought this would be fluff, but it turned out to be the very opposite. Through photos and excerpts from family archives, the focus is primarily on Lady Almina, the Countess of Carnarvon after her marriage to the 5th Earl of Carnarvon. Highclere Castle may be the setting for the popular TV series, Downton Abbey, and there are some similarities in events that took place in both the fictional family seat of the Crawleys and the Carnarvons, but this generation of the Carnarvons made contributions to society that have endured to present time.

Almina Wombwell, alleged illegitimate daughter of Alfred de Rothschild, married Lord Carnarvon, into the Herbert family and became the next mistress of Highclere Castle.

While we're treated to an insight into the glittering lifestyle of the wealthy and titled during the late 1800s, there was eventually more to this family than frivolous self-indulgence. It is a snapshot of the times when Queen Victoria reigned over the great British Empire. There are references to the families who live in the Castle to maintain the Castle and serve the family, who work the grounds and the village around the castle, but the focus is solely on Lady Almina and Lord Carnarvon, and later, their two children, Lord Porchester (always known as Porchy) and Eve.

The most interesting portions of the book, in my opinion, is the coverage of England when the Great War breaks. Men from Highclere's staff enlist or are called up, including Lady Almina's son, Porchy. Lord Carnarvon as a result of poor health, is spared, but his step-brother, Aubrey, despite poor eyesight, is determined to do his bit for his country. As the war progresses and more soldiers are injured or die on the front line, Lady Almina finds her calling. Believing that soldiers recuperate better if they're in calm and luxurious surroundings, she proceeds to convert Highclere into a recuperative hospital, with funds from Alfred de Rothschild, hiring dedicated nurses and doctors. Her unflagging energy and determined concern for the soldiers earn her enormous respect, love and gratitude from their families, to whom she wrote missives, letting them know how their husbands, sons or brothers are doing, and at times, even inviting them to come for a visit.

Lord Carnarvon's passion, on the other hand, is Egypt, and archeology. He is introduced to and teams up with Howard Carter. Despite poor health, he continued to fund and spend the cold winter months in Egypt, hoping to discover important tombs and to increase his collection of Egyptian antiquities. Eventually, of course, he and Carter discover Tutankhamun's tomb and we all know how his life story ends.

Following the death of the 5th Earl, Lady Almina steps down as the Countess of Carnarvon and the reigns are turned over to her son, now the 6th Earl of Carnarvon, his wife and their son, and there the book ends.

Written simply and with an engaging style, I found myself completely captivated.

Teresa says

Fantastic read!! I couldn't put it down.

Tarissa says

This title is certainly a lovely find... especially for anyone who enjoys digging up intriguing history. You don't have to be a fan of the TV show to enjoy the book, as there is maybe only mention to the show, at the beginning of the book, and that's it. From there on, it's pure and actual history.

My favorite parts of the story are about how Highclere was turned into a hospital during World War I. There's a lot that Lady Almina had to do to keep it up and running -- but it seems like a very worthwhile job.

There's tons of interesting tidbits interspersed all throughout. Such as learning the fact that children growing

up in the nursery had to use the servants' back stairs -- to stay out of sight from the adults in the family. (That was a shocker.)

I loved the book, myself. If what happened at Highclere Castle is any indication of what was happening to other similar estates at the time, it sure was intriguing to study up on. Lady Almina made a fine lady of house -- she was industrious and knew how to get in and do the work to pull a big plan together. She's a strong woman, and it made her story an interesting one.

Leslie says

I loved this book. LOVED it. If you read it looking for Downton you will be disappointed. If you read it as the story of the life of an amazing woman and an amazing time it is brilliant.

Lady Almina, the 5th Countess of Carnarvon, was the illegitimate daughter of a Rothschild. She inhabited a world of luxury and convenience that even a modern woman will be awed by. Her marriage to the 5th Earl was to wash clean her background and to remove the debt from the family. Her dowry included Rothschild paying off all of her husband-to-be's debts. As well as an annual income of £22,000 per year. Her first year of marriage included a State Visit from the Prince of Wales.

Her husband was the Earl who supported Howard Carter's excavations in the Valley of the Kings that culminated in the discovery of the tomb of King Tut. But Almina was an empty headed socialite. She was a campaigner and when WWI started she became a working Nurse at Highclere and later a hospital in a London home. At this time there was virtually no public health, it was up to the wealthy to create and staff hospitals. She demanded the best from her staff and her doctors and had an amazing survival rate.

While the wealth and privileges were astonishing... she embraced with great power comes great responsibility.

Jennifer says

Although I enjoyed this book it was lacking in many respects for me. But let me start with what I did like.

I enjoyed the glimpse into the life and world of Lady Almina, the 5th Countess of Carnarvon and the 5th Earl of Carnarvon. They lived and managed Highclere Castle from the late 1800's until the Earl's death in 1923. I knew of Earl Carnarvon because of his discovery of King Tutankhamen's tomb, but I never connected him to Highclere. Lady Almina was someone I was not familiar with and I enjoyed reading her story and learning more about her. I also enjoyed the brief history of the castle, the family's personal involvement with WWI, and the journey of discovering Tutankhamen's tomb.

However, the book fell short for me in many places. I don't believe this book was edited, which it would've benefited greatly from. There seemed a lack of focus; I'm not sure if the book was supposed to be on Highclere Castle itself or the 5th Earl and Countess of Carnarvon. In either case, just a glimpse was given into both -- it felt lacking in that regard. I would've liked to have learned more about the people and the castle. When it came to the family the story was biased, and there was a lot of speculation on what people were thinking and feeling.

With that being said, I did enjoy the book and it has whet my appetite to learn more. I appreciate all the research the author put into it and the inclusion of so many pictures.

Jason Koivu says

Yeah, I read this. Why? Because I'm a lady, you see. Please, pay me no heed.

This is the story of Highclere Castle at its prime. Specifically it focuses on Lady Almina, her husband Lord Carnarvon and their family.

As the subtitle suggests, Highclere is the impressive house better known to the world these days as Downton Abbey, and that is why this book exists.

There are marked similarities between what viewers of that hit television show will recognize and what actually happened at Highclere, especially during the Great War period, so DA fans will not be disappointed.

They may however be more bogged down with history than they expected. This is not a place you'll receive a full, erudite lecture upon Victorian and Edwardian England, but it is serviceable. In fact, the very beginning is somewhat hard to follow, what with the lords and ladies with their numerous names, often French or German in origin, that come out marble-mouthed, as if your tongue has been stewing in a vat of anesthesia. Those who relish pomp will delight in chapter one's description of a wedding and marriage that only money could buy. However, those same people are probably going to be exhausted by the history lesson, which is why they may not like this book and why I enjoyed it more than I expected.

I didn't have high hopes that there was going to be anything of substance herein. In fact, I'm surprised to be writing this review, never mind giving it 4 stars, because I figured I would've given the book up as a waste of time about halfway through. But I did read this smooth, yet workman-like book to the end and enjoyed its insights.

The Carnarvon family were aristocrats and part of me is sickened by their excesses...buuut then I remember I live in America, I recall the fairly privileged life I've led and it humbles me. Looking beyond the entitlement, you can't help but like these people for their charity, the part they played in the war, the many philanthropic efforts, etc etc. Yes, yes, they had plenty of money that they didn't "earn" so why shouldn't they should give it back. But not all of them did...or do. The way the system works, I guess we should be glad of the Bill Gateses of the world (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bill_%26...).

Beyond all that, the family had long reaching contacts, not only in society and government, but in the world in general. There were fascinating connections to the *Brideshead Revisited* novelist Evelyn Waugh and the most incredible archaeological find of all time that made for interesting sidebars. I would've liked to have heard more about the building of the house and what it looks like on the inside, but then I suppose Fiona Carnarvon, the current lady of the house, didn't want to sap the tourism cash cow generated by visits to Highclere. Daily attendance must be through the roof lately!
