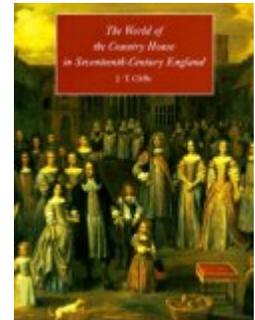


**J. T. Cliffe.** *The World of the Country House in Seventeenth-Century England.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999. x + 232 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-07643-1.



**Reviewed by** Molly McClain

**Published on** H-Albion (December, 1999)

The English country house first captured my imagination on a visit to the Paul Mellon Center for British Art at Yale University, nearly a decade ago. I found myself drawn to a large and brightly colored painting of Wollaton Hall in Nottinghamshire which offered a bird's eye view of the estate. I stood in front of the canvas and imagined what it would be like to step through the frame and to enter into this world. What would it be like to live in a seventeenth-century house surrounded by elaborate formal gardens? To wander through an apple orchard or to stroll down long avenues of lime trees? To ride through the park in a coach-and-four? To command servants, pay wages, collect rents, and offer hospitality?

J. T. Cliffe offers a description of seventeenth-century life written from the gentleman's point-of-view. It was, after all, his house (and his wife, his servants, his park, his horses and his books). He describes how people lived on these great estates. He also offers numerous color photographs, paintings, engravings and portraits which illustrate the physical setting of houses such as Wollaton Hall or Charlecote Park, Warwickshire. The

result is the kind of popular-but-scholarly work that readers have come to associate with Yale University Press.

The book is divided into twelve chapters, each of which explores a different aspect of life on the country estate. The first two chapters describe the physical characteristics of the house. Among the central questions answered are: What style of house was considered to be "fit for a Gentleman"? How much did they cost? How often were old houses rebuilt or improved? How did the shape and character of the entrance hall change over time? How did the gentry use new rooms like the dining-room or the parlour? What kind of pictures did they hang on the walls? The third chapter explores the parks and the gardens. What was the purpose of a deer park? How did landlords deal with poachers? What did the fashionable garden look like? What kind of trees (and how many?) did gardeners plant?

Cliffe also describes the duties performed by the many people who lived on the estate. Chapter Four, "The Squire's Wife," offers an account of the upper-class woman as she was viewed by men.

What financial contribution did she make? What were her household duties? To what extent did she govern the estate in her husbands' absence? Did husbands and wives get along? We learn what Elizabeth felt for her husband Sir Francis Drake of Buckland Abbey in Devon: "I really love, honour and esteem him with all sincerity, nor do I question but he has the same regard for me" (p. 74). Sir John Lowther, meanwhile, admired the bookkeeping expertise of his wife, Mary: "I cannot say I ever lost £5 so careful shee was to give content and keepe all perfect and strayght" (p. 71).

Subsequent chapters describe the roles played by the estate steward, the domestic servants, the coachmen, the chaplains and the tutor. How many people lived in the household? What kind of jobs did they perform? How were they recruited? What were they paid? In the case of estate stewards, chaplains and tutors, how were they educated? What were the qualities of a "good master"? Of a "good servant"? Were servants always respectful? We learn, for example, that a maidservant of Sir Charles Yates of Buckland said that her former mistress was "a very good Lady" but reported her master to be "a fantastical man." She, in turn, was criticized by her former employer as "a light housewife" who had once been "turned out of service for being druncke" (p. 87).

Two further chapters describe the domestic activities and the intellectual pursuits of the seventeenth-century gentry. Did they keep an "open house" in the old-fashioned manner or were they more circumspect when it came to offering hospitality to friends, neighbors and strangers? How important were field sports like hunting and hawking? To what extent did they rely on cards, music and billiards to keep themselves amused? What did they read? Write? How typical was a man like Sir William Guise of Elmore who, according to his grandson, was "never a lover of bookes, butt of all corporall exercises and pleasures, and dancing, hunting, hauking, and such country sports, which made him of a robust com-

plexion" (p. 157)? Or Sir Astor Cokayne who "was esteemed by many...a good poet and a great lover of learning, yet by others a perfect boon fellow, by which means he wasted all he had" (p. 174)?

One of the more interesting chapters, "Coaches and Coachmen," shows how improvements in suspension and the introduction of glass windows turned the private coach into a late seventeenth-century status symbol, not unlike the motor car. Contemporaries appeared to be fascinated by their potential for danger. A bas relief in the parish church at Great Marlow, Buckinghamshire, depicts the coaching accident which killed Sir Miles Hobart as he was going down Snow Hill in Holborn in 1632. Similarly, Thomas Thynne's funeral monument in Westminster Abbey shows his death at the hands of three armed horsemen while he was traveling along Pall Mall in 1682 (pp. 128-129).

Cliffe concludes the book by revealing country house scandals: illicit sexual liaisons, drinking, quarrels, harassment, mental illness and violence. It is as if he needed to remind his readers that the realities of the seventeenth century differ very little from our own.

*The World of the Country House* is based on extensive research in the British Library, the Public Record Office, Historical Manuscript Commission Reports, published diaries and memoirs and archival materials from the East Sussex Record Office and other local repositories. However, Cliffe does not treat these sources critically. The result is a history written from the gentleman's point-of-view. Women and servants appear in the text only when their attitudes and/or activities affect the owner of the estate. He also fails to interpret much of his visual evidence, for example, the bird's-eye views of country estates produced around 1700. What did the Lucys think when they looked at their newly-commissioned painting of Charlecote Park? How did the owners of Sudbury Hall feel when they stood in front of Jan Grieffier's view of their Italianate villa and park? Surely,

such images are crucial in conveying the attitudes of the age?

The most frustrating thing about this book is that it does not tell a story of change. In particular, it ignores the cultural gap which separated Restoration gentlemen from their Elizabethan predecessors. Certainly, it is much neater to keep the whole seventeenth century in a single narrative frame. But it also distorts the history of the country estate in a significant way. We know, for example, that gentlemen abandoned the countryside for London in significant numbers after 1660. They withdrew from the routine of county administration and pursued a private life of privilege in the fashionable suburbs of London. This is so often mentioned by historians that it is almost a cliché. Why does Cliffe choose to ignore it? After all, he need not make an argument for the declining importance of the country estate. His research shows that Restoration gentlemen actually showed more, not less, interest in their properties. They went to considerable effort and great expense to rebuild their houses in the latest fashion, adding Italianate gardens, a Classical facade, long avenues of trees and newly-renovated parks. Sir Walter Yonge reported that his new mansion, Escot House, caused him "no end of charge in building...yet I love the building so well that I should be glad to find a meet help to finish it" (p. 18). This is an attitude which needs to be explained.

Cliffe's book is a solid contribution to the literature on the English country house. The question remains, what is at stake in writing the history of this institution? Why do we continue to enjoy looking at the world from the gentleman's point-of-view?

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**Citation:** Molly McClain. Review of Cliffe, J. T. *The World of the Country House in Seventeenth-Century England*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. December, 1999.

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