

## *Review Essay*

# The “Downton Boom”: Country Houses, Popular Culture, and Curatorial Culture

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*Downton Abbey*. Written and created by JULIAN FELLOWES; Executive Producers, GARETH NEAME, REBECCA EATON, and JULIAN FELLOWES; Historical Advisor, ALASTAIR BRUCE. Filmed at Highclere Castle, Berkshire, England. Production company, Carnival Films.

Wilmington, Delaware and Houston, Texas are a long way from the green fields of England. Yet in the summer of 2014, the English country house dominated the cultural life of both of these American cities. At the Winterthur Museum, *Costumes of Downton Abbey*, an exhibition of forty historically inspired costumes from the television show “displayed and supplemented by photographs and vignettes inspired by the fictional program and by real life at Winterthur,”<sup>1</sup> was the most popular exhibit in the museum’s sixty-three years of public opening.<sup>2</sup> At the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, *Houghton Hall: Portrait of an English Country House*, was the first international foray for the renowned collection of decorative art assembled by the Cholmondeley family from Sir Robert Walpole to the present day,<sup>3</sup>

1. *Costumes of Downton Abbey*, accessed July 21, 2014, <http://www.winterthur.org/?p=1139>.

2. Laura Jacobs, “Upstairs Timelessness, Downstairs Precision,” *The Wall Street Journal*, July 8, 2014, accessed July 21 2014, <http://online.wsj.com/articles/exhibition-review-upstairs-timelessness-downstairs-precision-1404861153>.

3. “Houghton Hall: Portrait of an English Country House,” Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, accessed July 21, 2014, <http://www.mfah.org/exhibitions/houghton-hall-portrait-english-country-house/>. In 2013, the exhibition *Houghton Revisited* attracted a record 114,000 visitors to see Walpole’s redisplayed art collection. For the exhibition catalogue, see Thierry Morel and Andrew Moore, eds., *Houghton Revisited: The Walpole Masterpieces from Catherine the Great’s Hermitage* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2013).

prompting the *Houston Chronicle* to conclude that “Houghton Hall” peeks at a real “Downton Abbey.”<sup>4</sup>

Both of these exhibitions hint at the enduring transatlantic interest in the English country house. This interest is nothing new. Indeed, it has been almost thirty years since the original blockbuster, *The Treasure Houses of Britain: 500 Years of Private Patronage and Art Collecting*, attracted 990,474 visitors to the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC.<sup>5</sup> Back in the United Kingdom there has been a surge in visitors to country houses. According to a 2013 report from VisitBritain, almost one in three tourists who visit the UK go to see an historic house or castle.<sup>6</sup> Members of the Historic Houses Association (which represents around five hundred privately owned properties who open to pay-at-gate visitors) welcome more than thirteen million visitors per year,<sup>7</sup> and of the top ten National Trust paid-for locations eight were country houses and estates.<sup>8</sup> In a series of revealing press releases, Visit England identifies “The Downton Effect” for a “revived interest in stately homes,”<sup>9</sup> and other properties that have featured in the series—including Inverary Castle and Basildon Park—have reported year-on-year growth in visitor numbers.<sup>10</sup>

The difference from previous fillips of interest in the country house is the extent to which this surge in interest has been laid at the door of one particular (fictional) country house, Downton Abbey. The real Downton Abbey, Highclere Castle, home to the Carnarvon Family since 1679, is a Jacobethan masterpiece designed by Sir Charles Barry.<sup>11</sup> The house opens to the public for seventy days every year and last year was fully booked through advanced ticket sales.<sup>12</sup> The “Downton Effect” has also been linked to surging demand

4. Molly Glentzer, “Houghton Hall peeks at a real ‘Downton Abbey,’” *Houston Chronicle*, June 20 2014, accessed July 21 2014, <http://www.houstonchronicle.com/entertainment/arts-theater/article/Houghton-Hall-peeks-at-a-real-Downton-Abbey-5568249.php#0>.

5. *The Treasure Houses of Britain*, accessed July 21, 2014, [http://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/exhibitions/1985/treasure\\_britain.html](http://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/exhibitions/1985/treasure_britain.html). For the exhibition catalogue, see Gervase Jackson-Stops, ed., *The Treasure Houses of Britain: Five Hundred Years of Private Patronage and Art Collecting* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1985).

6. “Downton Abbey and Harry Potter Locations a Major Drawcard for Tourists,” VisitBritain, accessed July 21, 2014, <http://media.visitbritain.com/News-Releases/DOWNTON-ABBEY-AND-HARRY-POTTER-LOCATIONS-A-MAJOR-DRAWCARD-FOR-TOURISTS-e651.aspx>.

7. *Heritage Means Business: Enabling Britain’s Inspirational Places to Meet New Challenges* (Historic Houses Association, 2014).

8. Stourhead (356,023), Attingham Park (353,681), Cliveden (349,307), Wakehurst Place (343,225), Fountains Abbey Estate (336,326), Waddesdon Manor (324,918), Polesden Lacey (289,889), and Belton House (288,694). *National Trust: Annual Report 2012/13* (National Trust, 2013), 72.

9. VisitEngland, accessed July 24, 2014, [http://www.visitengland.org/media/pressreleases/2012\\_trends.aspx](http://www.visitengland.org/media/pressreleases/2012_trends.aspx).

10. “The Downton effect boosts tourism at Scots castle,” *The Times*, May 24 2013.

11. For an architectural history of the English country house, see Michael Hall, *The Victorian Country House: From the Archives of Country Life* (Aurum Press, 2009).

12. For studies on the impact of film on visitor numbers, see Nichola Tooke and Michael Baker, “Seeing is Believing: The Effect of Film on Visitor Numbers to Screened Locations,” *Tourism Management* 17, no. 2 (1996): 87-94; Anita Fernandez Young and Robert Young,

for Savile Row suits, bowler hats, butlers, afternoon tea, riding side-saddle, tiaras, vintage lingerie, luxury wallpaper and interior design, and country houses themselves. As Robert Compton, the President of the Historic Houses Association, concludes, “*Downton* has done us all a great service because it’s reminding people about our heritage. It’s bringing history to light.”<sup>13</sup>

Historians and cultural commentators have, unsurprisingly, spilt much ink debating the meaning of the series’ phenomenal success. Most articulate an understanding that, “as a metaphor for contemporary Britain beset with economic and social difficulties, *Downton* acts as an idealized vehicle of reassurance for its audience.”<sup>14</sup> Rather than debate the minutiae of *Downton*’s various plots and sub-plots, this review article will explore the impact that character-driven historical dramas have had, and continue to have, on the public appetite for the past, the ways in which the past is consumed, and the extent to which this has influenced the curatorial direction taken at country houses across the UK.

For those who work with the country house from an academic or curatorial perspective this popularity poses a number of problems; not least is how they can ensure that “when people stand on the spots where history was made,”<sup>15</sup> they can interpret and understand what they see. The country house has always been a place where visitors are able to feel an umbilical connection to the past, and visitors are hardly a new phenomenon.<sup>16</sup> Even the guidebook has a rich pedigree stretching back to the eighteenth century.<sup>17</sup> The veil between past and present is at its most permeable in a place where families lived and loved, thrived and died, often over multiple generations. Country houses are able to create an emotional link with visitors in a way that museums find very hard to do with their audiences. However, many critics—of whom Laurajane Smith has been most vocal—have observed that this is an emotional link that is only available to a select few:

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“Measuring the Effects of Film and Television on Tourism to Screen Locations: A Theoretical and Empirical Perspective,” *Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing* 24, no. 2-3 (2008): 195-212; Joanne Connell, “Film tourism—Evolution, progress and prospects,” *Tourism Management* 33 (2012), 1007-29.

13. Robert Hardiman, “Defending the real Downton Abbeys: Why Britain’s stately homes are struggling,” *The Spectator*, March 9, 2013.

14. Katherine Byrne, “Adapting Heritage: Class and Conservatism in Downton Abbey,” *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* 18, no. 3 (2014): 324.

15. “Heritage rocks as a record one million people flood to Britain’s historical sites in August,” *The Daily Telegraph*, September 18, 2013.

16. See, for example Peter Mandler, *The Fall and Rise of the Stately Home* (Yale University Press, 1997); Adrian Tinniswood, *The Polite Tourist: A History of Country House Visiting*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: National Trust/Harry N. Abrams, 1998); O.J.W. Cox, “A mistaken iconography? Eighteenth-century visitor accounts of Stourhead,” *Garden History* 40, no. 1 (2012): 98-116.

17. Jocelyn Anderson, “Remaking the Space: the Plans and the Route in Country-House Guidebooks from 1770 to 1815,” *Architectural History* 54 (2011): 195-212 and “Remaking the country house: country house guidebooks in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries,” (PhD Thesis, Courtauld Institute of Art, 2013).

The *English* middle class conserve the English past. What of course, they are conserving, however, is not simply ‘a house’, but the social values that underpin middle-class deference, social position and place, and, by inference, the social and political position of the elites.<sup>18</sup>

Likewise, Alison Oram has highlighted the challenges of inserting queer histories into the country house,<sup>19</sup> and Caroline Bressey believes that “challenging the whiteness of British country houses requires a reconfiguration of British history” through a broadening of the dominant discourse to include those of slavery, colonial expansion, and empire.<sup>20</sup> Margot Finn’s *East India Company at Home, 1757-1857* project has also stressed the need for “new methodologies of collaborative research and new paradigms for interpreting the British historic house, interpretative strategies that recognize the home as a dynamic site of interlocking local, regional, national and global processes.”<sup>21</sup>

The challenge, for academics and the heritage industry alike, is how to use the quasi-historical shorthand of *Downton* as a way of enticing visitors into the longhand stories of the country house that can only emerge through detailed archival research and effective interpretation strategies.

Julian Fellowes, who created and writes *Downton Abbey*, believes that his work has made a significant impact upon curatorial direction. In conversation with Giles Waterfield at a conference to celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of the Attingham Trust in 2012, Fellowes confided that:

I suppose one thing has changed, and I would like to feel that I have had some influence on it, which is that, years ago, when these houses were shown by the National Trust or by private owners, you saw the drawing rooms and the libraries and the ballrooms and the picture galleries, but the Trust particularly would take over all the kitchens and ancillary rooms for their offices.

He continued:

Because of this approach, we used to have houses presented to us as the homes of the upper class, or the former upper class, and there was no real thought about how they ran or the rest of the working community there. That is out of date now and, today, a much wider audience feels rightly that these houses are part of their own history and the history of their family.<sup>22</sup>

18. Laurajane Smith, “Deference and Humility: The Social Values of the Country House,” in Lisanne Gibson and John Pendlebury, eds., *Valuing Historic Environments* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), 45.

19. Alison Oram, “Sexuality in Heterotopia: Time, Space and Love between Women in the Historic House,” *Women’s History Review* 21, no. 4 (2012): 533-51.

20. Caroline Bressey, “Contesting the Political Legacy of Slavery in England’s Country Houses: A Case Study of Kenwood House and Osborne House,” in Madge Dresser and Andrew Hann, eds., *Slavery and the British Country House* (London: English Heritage, 2013), 121.

21. East India Company at Home, 1757-1857, accessed April 1, 2014, <http://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/eicah/think-pieces/think-piece-1-overview-may-2013/>.

22. Giles Waterfield and Julian Fellowes, “Perspectives on the Historic House: Giles Waterfield interviews Julian Fellowes,” in Giles Waterfield and Rebecca Parker, eds., *Looking Ahead: The Future of the Country House* (London: Royal Geographical Society, 2012), 65.

Inevitably, historians have expressed dismay at the series' anachronisms—from television aerals and modern slang<sup>23</sup>—but Fellowes has found solace in the verisimilitude provided by the main filming location, Highclere Castle:

the great advantage of Highclere is that it's a house that had been in continuous ownership by one family and accordingly it already has the kit that such a family would have. We couldn't possibly have afforded to create the same effect in a studio, or in a house that had been stripped of its contents. Basically we have borrowed the Herberts and made them into the Crawleys, so they decorate every wall and suggest that the history of this family is our history.<sup>24</sup>

Fellowes goes further to suggest that the great advantage of Highclere for a filmed narrative is that “although clearly a very large house, it's a straight-forward one.”<sup>25</sup> The viewer can quickly grasp the internal geography of a house with a great hall, and a circuit of rooms surrounding this atrium space. The challenge for curators at other properties, therefore, is to explain the complicated social nuances of architectural space within the country house. How can a visitor understand the tactical deployment of an enfilade suite of rooms, or the meaning of a Doric order frieze, in terms that move beyond a narrowly connoisseurial understanding of architectural forms and practices?

Moreover, rather than create a new curatorial direction, what *Downton Abbey* has done is to accelerate existing trends in the presentation and interpretation of country houses. After all, showing servants' quarters is nothing new. Erdigg Hall was acquired by the Trust in 1973, not for its architectural importance, or its contents, but because of the existence of extensive sources about the servants who worked there.<sup>26</sup> Since re-opening in 1977 visitors have entered not through the main entrance into the piano nobile, but instead start their experience downstairs in the servants' quarters. This is a trend that has continued. The visitor route at Dyrham Park, near Bath, was altered in the early twenty-first century to include restored Victorian kitchens, and at Ickworth in Suffolk, the National Trust, beginning in 2010, invested £744,000 (\$1,198,520) to re-create the domestic service areas.<sup>27</sup> Servants' quarters, which require the least amount of prior knowledge for meaningful interpretation and engagement by the public, tend to enjoy the longest visitor dwelling times. For academic historians, this retreat to the servants' quarters is symptomatic of the discrepancy between history's popularity and the inadequate historical literacy of much of the population.<sup>28</sup>

Speaking about the properties owned by the National Trust, the organization's chairman, Sir Simon Jenkins, unleashed a howl of protest when he

23. Byrne, “Adapting Heritage,” 313-4.

24. Waterfield and Fellowes, “Perspectives on the Historic House,” 66.

25. Waterfield and Fellowes, “Perspectives on the Historic House,” 67.

26. On Erdigg's servants, see Merlin Waterson, *The Servants' Hall: The Domestic History of a Country House*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Trafalgar Square, 1990).

27. Museums and Heritage, accessed August 21, 2014, <http://www.museumsandheritage.com/advisor/news/item/2881>.

28. Holger Hoock, “Introduction,” *The Public Historian* 32, no. 3 (August 2010): 13.

observed in an interview with *The Daily Telegraph* that, “there are things we can learn from Disney.”<sup>29</sup> Jenkins’ aim remains “bringing our places to life” and “to make properties more welcoming.”<sup>30</sup> Critics, including the cultural commentator Stephen Bayley, launched broadsides against this “sort of retro-kitsch fantasia” arguing that, “you don’t need a Mills and Boon costume drama to appreciate architecture and understand history. It’s so patronizing to the public.”<sup>31</sup> The playwright Alan Bennett was equally uneasy at the new direction taken by the National Trust in his 2012 play, *People*, where he:

imagined the Trust as entirely without inhibition, ready to exploit any aspect of the property’s recent history to draw in the public, wholly unembarrassed by the seedy or the disreputable.<sup>32</sup>

However, David Rosenthal, author of the seminal *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, observed:

You get a few stuffy critics writing in *The Times* about Disneyfication, but the vast majority find it hugely desirable to be able to walk into a country house and actually sit down on the chairs, and actually handle the books, and actually participate in something. So what if it’s a replica rather than the real thing?<sup>33</sup>

Put simply, are the custodians of England’s country houses forced to choose between authenticity and visitor engagement? Television drama continues to emphasize the country house as a living entity, which creates a series of expectations in the visitor that may be contrary to conservation priorities and practices. The real challenge is to find the balance between conservation and an enjoyable, authentic, visitor experience accessible to all.<sup>34</sup> As Suzanna Lipscomb has argued, there has always been “a spectrum of meanings of ‘authenticity,’” but that the key aim should always be to provide the visitor with the opportunity to “feel the past in experiences that work intellectually, emotionally and physically.”<sup>35</sup> Currently, it is the servants’ quarters in country houses that achieve this aim most consistently.

However, this shift in the presentation focus away from the collections and great art of the family, towards the opening up of service wings, brew houses, and kitchens, is not without its issues. It has the danger, as Anna Keay has

29. “Simon Jenkins interview: ‘There are things to learn from Disney,’” *The Telegraph*, October 16, 2010, accessed July 28, 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/8067831/Simon-Jenkins-interview-There-are-things-to-learn-from-Disney.html>.

30. “Message from the Chairman: Simon Jenkins,” National Trust, accessed July 28, 2014, <http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/article-1356392265937/>.

31. “National Trust is ‘Disney-fying’ its country houses, say critics,” *The Telegraph*, May 29, 2010, accessed July 28, 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturenews/7778870/National-Trust-is-Disney-fying-its-country-houses-say-critics.html>.

32. Alan Bennett, *People* (London: Faber & Faber, 2012), ix.

33. Sarah Edwards and Juliet Wilson, “Do we do the past differently now? An interview with David Lowenthal,” *Consumption Markets & Culture* 17, no. 2 (March 2014): 109.

34. Anna Whitelock, “The National Trust needs its Cultural Revolution,” *History Extra* (blog), November 29, 2011, accessed July 28, 2014, <http://www.historyextra.com/reborn/>.

35. Suzannah Lipscomb, “Historical Authenticity and Interpretative Strategy at Hampton Country Palace,” *The Public Historian* 32, no. 3 (August 2010): 101, 111.

argued, “that the experience of historic houses may be becoming Hamlet without the Prince.”<sup>36</sup> If the great rooms of the house—typically of most interest to academics and curators—are seen by a smaller and smaller percentage of visitors, it is incumbent upon those with expert knowledge to think creatively about how to insert meaning back into spaces that are often incomprehensible for the general visitor.

The question, therefore, of what to do with the collections is the greatest challenge facing curators, owners, and managers of country houses that open to the public. In the post-*Downton* world where human stories and personal narratives dominate, what role does the art and material culture that comprises these houses’ collections play?

Not all that much. The key, as Christopher Ridgway has argued, is to unlock the public value of collections:

These art works may have been assembled through a system that handed wealth and power to a select few, but in an age of international mass tourism their meaning must be articulated in a more demotic manner. And this does not mean dumbing down.<sup>37</sup>

The problem is where to start. When confronted by an abundance of objects and paintings, how can a visitor understand their function and significance? As Ridgway has suggested, “selectivity and not stamina has to be the basis of their experience, otherwise they would never leave the building before nightfall.”<sup>38</sup> There are different strategies available: the room guide (the staple and backbone of the National Trust and other publically accessible properties); the guidebook, which has undergone a considerable broadening of focus away from high art towards social history in the past quarter of a century; and increasingly the turn to digital. This need not be a significant financial investment in new technologies and software. For many visitors, a simple re-tweet from a heritage property, or a cleverly crafted hashtag, is enough. This action breaks down barriers and creates a sense of community and conversation between the “provider” and the “customer.” The other advantage of this kind of social media engagement is that it can provide instant feedback on visitor experience and also hint at those areas of the collection that appeal to the public.

The popularity of *Downton Abbey* should encourage academics and curators to re-evaluate what is most important about the country house. *Downton Abbey* has reinforced the importance of bringing alive the country house, challenging academics and curators to explore how competing personal narratives can be used to explain the architectural container that shaped and determined the evolution of these stories. The country house now holds

36. Anna Keay, “Nationalised Buildings: Reflections on their Presentation, Past, Present and Future,” in Waterfield and Parker, eds., *Looking Ahead*, 98.

37. Christopher Ridgway, “Country House Collections: What Do They Mean Today?,” in Waterfield and Parker, eds., *Looking Ahead*, 35.

38. Ridgway, “Country House Collections,” 36.

potent sway over the visiting public through the personal stories of those who lived upstairs and down rather than the tactical deployment of an enfilade suite of rooms, or a particularly fine collection of paintings and porcelain.

Yet we must be careful not to exaggerate the impact of *Downton Abbey*. Many country houses have seen a steady decline in footfall over the last decade. Those that have bucked the trend have been “those that continue to take a degree of risk in terms of innovation and diversification.”<sup>39</sup> Crucially, heritage consultants argue that it is “no longer viable to open a historic house or garden and expect the attraction to survive on its own merits.” Lady Carnarvon, chatelaine of Highclere Castle is only too aware of the danger of resting on one’s laurels:

You have to look thirty years ahead because you’re trying to make this house relevant to today’s local and national community in order that it has a future. If it’s a white elephant, just lived in by rich toffs, it won’t have a future, not long-term, it will just pass from hand to hand and then be destroyed.<sup>40</sup>

This drive towards diversification could be interpreted as a threat to the core purpose of the country house as traditionally understood in academic and curatorial circles. If the visitor is no longer inspired by great art, architecture, and the real histories of the estate, then what marks out a country house visit from a visit to an amusement park?

39. “Diversity in the UK Heritage Industry,” Hudson’s Historic Houses & Gardens, accessed July 24, 2014, <http://www.hudsonsheritage.com/Heritage-Articles/domestic-tourism-business-building.aspx>.

40. “The Downton Effect,” Hudson’s Historic Houses & Gardens, accessed July 24, 2014, [http://www.hudsonsheritage.com/Heritage-Articles/The\\_Downton\\_Effect.aspx](http://www.hudsonsheritage.com/Heritage-Articles/The_Downton_Effect.aspx).