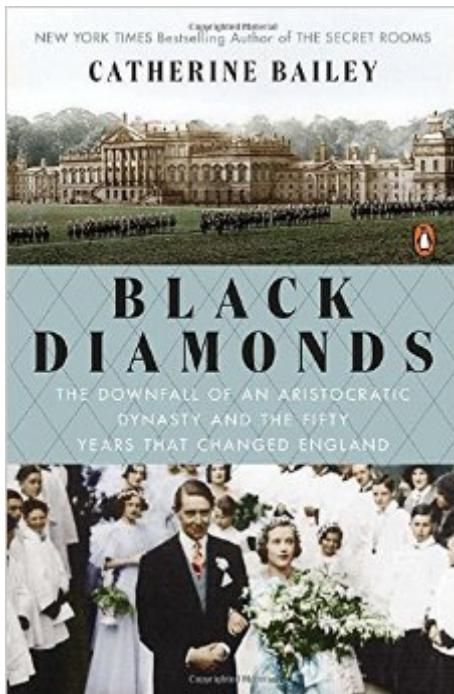


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Black Diamonds: The Downfall Of An Aristocratic Dynasty And The Fifty Years That Changed England



Synopsis

From the New York Times' "bestselling author of *The Secret Rooms*, the extraordinary true story of the downfall of one of England's wealthiest families" Fans of *Downton Abbey* now have a go-to resource for fascinating, real-life stories of the spectacular lives led by England's aristocrats. With the novelistic flair and knack for historical detail Catherine Bailey displayed in her New York Times bestseller *The Secret Rooms*, *Black Diamonds* provides a page-turning chronicle of the Fitzwilliam coal-mining dynasty and their breathtaking Wentworth estate, the largest private home in England. When the sixth Earl Fitzwilliam died in 1902, he left behind the second largest estate in twentieth-century England, valued at more than £3 billion of today's money—a lifeline to the tens of thousands of people who worked either in the family's coal mines or on their expansive estate. The earl also left behind four sons, and the family line seemed assured. But was it? As Bailey retraces the Fitzwilliam family history, she uncovers a legacy riddled with bitter feuds, scandals (including Peter Fitzwilliam's ill-fated affair with American heiress Kick Kennedy), and civil unrest as the conflict between the coal industry and its miners came to a head. Once again, Bailey has written an irresistible and brilliant narrative history.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Fascinating study of an aristocratic British family that died out over time due to secrets and family bickering. I received this as part of the Penguin First to Read program to give an honest review. There are three main storylines here. The first deals with a son with epilepsy in which the family tried to keep him from having an heir, but ended up failing in the long run. (No other child is

ever been discussed as being epileptic in the book.) This was in the 1860's to 1880's where epilepsy was looked at as a mental illness. The next story is about Kathleen Kennedy (Lady Hartington) and Peter Fitzwilliams love story. This was all hushed up at the time due to Peter being a married Protestant and Kathleen being Joe Kennedy's daughter and a widow of a peer. Tragic story of what religion forces people to do in place of love. Rose Kennedy because of her devout faith comes up the villain in this piece. She was ready to never have anything to do with her daughter again and throw her out of the will. Even after Kathleen's death she was said to have said, "God's judgement." We end the story with the son's of the Earl fighting out in court after their father's death because their mother (a former Gaiety girl actress) was upset when her eldest son married the daughter of a draper. She began putting it about that he was born before they were married, which from the book seems highly unlikely. There is also a side story of an illegitimate son of an earl who is born by a servant girl. Everyone believes he is deaf and dumb and is taken away from his mother and placed in an insane asylum. A nurse discovers him when he is in his seventies and discovers he can write perfectly and can hear.

Catherine Bailey's Black Diamonds was not at all what I was expecting, but it was fascinating just the same. At first I thought it was going to be very Downton Abbey, as it is set in early 20th century in England and about a family with a palatial family home that is--this was hard to even imagine--THREE times as long as Buckingham Palace! The home still exists and remains the largest private home in England, but it is no longer in the family that built and managed its estate for generations, and the house and grounds have fallen into disrepair. Apparently one man lives there, though no one has ever seen him! But I'm getting ahead of myself. What I did not expect of this book has to do with the title. The Black Diamonds are coal, and this is a scathing exposé of the horrors of coal mining in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The families who grew wealthy and built huge homes and estates, and owned several homes in England and Ireland, grew wealthy at the expense of the lives of the miners and their families. While the miners toiled beneath the earth in dangerous and deadly surroundings, up above them the elite had fox hunts, and shooting parties, and balls, and entertained the King and Queen for a weekend visit. The family at the center of the book, the Fitzwilliams, was actually much more compassionate about its miners, estate workers and house staff than most of the other wealthy families in the area. However, I learned about the absolute squalor in which the miners and their families lived, in "homes" that were owned by the mine, for which they paid rent, and which had no heat, no electricity, no water, and no toilet facilities.

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