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COUNTRY HOUSE LIFE

Creating paradise: the building of the English country house, 1660–1880. By Richard Wilson and Alan Mackley. London: Hambledon, 2000. Pp. xx + 428. ISBN 1-85285-252-6. £25.

The polite tourist: four centuries of country house visiting. By Adrian Tinniswood. London: The National Trust, 1998. Pp. 224. ISBN 0 7078 0224 5. £24.99.

Country house pastimes. By Oliver Garnett. London: The National Trust, 1998. Pp. 48. ISBN 0-7078-0284-9. £4.99.

The British country house in the eighteenth century. By Christopher Christie. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000. Pp. xvi + 333. ISBN 0-7190-4724-2 (hb); 0-7190-4725-0 (pb). £49 and £17.99.

The fate of the English country house. By David Littlejohn. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. Pp. xviii + 344. ISBN 0-19-508876-X. £20.

The dukes: the origins, ennoblement and history of twenty-six families. By Brian Masters. London: Pimlico, 2001. Pp. x + 390. ISBN 0-7126-6724-5. £12.50.

It is nearly a quarter of a century since the publication in 1978 of Mark Girouard's magnificent study, *Life in the English country house*.[1] The book appeared at what we can now recognize to have been an important moment for the stately homes of England. After the years of post-war austerity, the growth in private car ownership had begun to make the countryside increasingly accessible. Many of the weekend journeys spawned by this new affluence were to country houses, a trend speeded up by the exposure several high profile houses enjoyed as period settings for television dramas. *Brideshead revisited* in 1981 was the pioneer, set as it was in the grounds of Castle Howard. In many respects it has never been bettered, but it has certainly been followed, to the extent that hardly a great house has failed to attract a film crew and some have been visited repeatedly. Nor has this new exposure been confined to the cinema and television. The private mansions from which the working classes were traditionally excluded have opened their doors to paying customers, and their shops to anyone with cash and credit cards.

Girouard's contribution to this renaissance of the country house was to rescue its past from the hands of the architectural technicians who wrote detailed accounts of every finial, every Doric column, and every Adam fireplace, to turn it into a serious subject of social history. As he poignantly and elegantly noted, country houses were homes, admittedly sometimes rather cold and inhospitable ones, but their architectural detail reflected the way in which they were intended to be used. Describing them in fine detail in the pages of *Country Life* gave no real sense of the domestic role of these houses, and Girouard sought to balance the analysis of style against the reality of everyday life. In subsequent work, notably *The Victorian country house*,[2] Girouard began to explore in more detail the themes he mapped out in 1978, and where he led others followed. While the resulting books have almost always been marketed by their publishers with an eye towards the coffee table – glossy covers and multiple pictures, often in colour – the

[1] (Yale, 1978). [2] (Yale, 1979).

study of the country house has moved on apace. We now know far more than we did about pastimes and games, servants,[3] breweries,[4] gardens, parks,[5] art,[6] and, with the appearance of Richard Wilson and Alan Mackley's book, even the cost of house building. We have come to accept that the country house is a subject for serious academic study, hence Christopher Christie's description of his book as 'an overview of the different kinds of scholarship which have been concerned with the country house, and … some of the wider cultural issues of Georgian history, which affected them'.[7] This is a long way from the straightforward architectural descriptions we associate with the multiple-volumed 'Buildings of England' series pioneered by Sir Nikolaus Pevsner.

The agenda set by Girouard has provided us with a great deal of territory in which to work, because the country house is now as much the province of social historians as of their architectural colleagues. Until recently, however, neither architectural nor social historians have paid all that much attention to the origins of the country house. We recognize of course that each house made a statement both about its founder and the family living within its walls. The third earl of Carlisle built Castle Howard to 'produce in the mind of the spectator an awareness of the lineage of the Howard family and its place in history'.[8] Stowe, the palatial Buckinghamshire house of the Grenvilles (earls Temple, marquesses, and subsequently dukes of Buckingham) was built and rebuilt to reflect the family's social and political pretensions.[9] After reading Wilson and Mackley's splendid study of post-Restoration country house building no one will seriously question the authors' claim that country house architecture expressed 'the dynastic ambitions and fine education of the landowning class' but, crucially, we now appreciate how far these ambitions were 'confined by their means [and] … practically linked to their pockets and the careful management of their projects'.[10] Something like one in ten of all heads of families in their sample (confined mainly to Cheshire, Gloucestershire, Norfolk, Northamptonshire, Suffolk, and Yorkshire) was at some point between the Restoration and the 1880s involved either in building from scratch or remodelling a country house. As they quickly discovered, it was not something to be entered into lightly; indeed, any reader who has recently added an extension to their house will sympathize with the young lady who wrote from amidst the turmoil of Hardwick House in Suffolk in 1839, 'Pray sir, don't think of building, you can't tell the misery of it.'[11]

Since the house had to match the family's status or, in a number of unfortunate cases, aspirations, ideas of rank and a sense of dynasty underlay the architectural pretensions of many eighteenth-century families, none more so than the new dukes created by monarchs grateful for support in assuring the Protestant succession. Brian Masters's book is a light, popular volume by an accomplished journalist, but no one can read his

[3] Jessica Gerard, *Country house life: family and servants, 1815–1914* (Oxford, 1994); Chrístie, *British country house*, pp. 117–23.

[4] Pamela Sambrook, *Country house brewing in England, 1500–1900* (London, 1996).

[5] Stephen Daniels, *Humphry Repton: landscape gardening and the geography of Georgian England* (Yale, 1999).

[6] Karen Hearn, Robert Upstone, and Giles Waterfield, *In celebration: the art of the country house* (London, 1998).

[7] Christie, *British country house*, p. 1.

[8] Charles Saumarez Smith, *The building of Castle Howard* (London, 1990), pp. 9, 12, quoted in Wilson and Mackley, *Creating paradise*, p. 48.

[9] John Beckett, *The rise and fall of the Grenvilles: dukes of Buckingham and Chandos, 1710–1921* (Manchester, 1994).

[10] Wilson and Mackley, *Creating paradise*, p. 49.

[11] Quoted in ibid., p. 145.

pages without recognizing that his ducal subjects have without exception lived in sumptuous surroundings – in the case of the war heroes, Marlborough and Wellington, the state even provided the appropriate mansions at Blenheim and Stratfield Saye in order to complement the title.[12] And part of the fun of having a country house was to visit everyone else's. Long before the first age of mass country house visiting in the mid-nineteenth century, aristocratic families spent much of their lives visiting each other. Of course this was primarily for socializing, but any would-be house builder could use such visits to look at what was in vogue, to update himself on current good taste, and to pick up tips about good building practices. Gentlemen excursionists into eighteenth-century Norfolk might use as their pretext a desire to visit the county's lauded farms, particularly those on the Holkham estate, but they seldom missed the opportunity to visit Holkham itself as well as Houghton, Raynham, Wolterton, Blickling, and Narford. Jane Austen's fictional Elizabeth Bennet, the heroine of *Pride and prejudice*, met Mr Darcy again while touring Derbyshire houses. Pemberley may have been fictional – although the story itself was surely invented for British television! – but Miss Bennet's tour was based on what was then the current reality of country house visiting.

Adrian Tinniswood dates this tradition of visiting to the pilgrimages of the Middle Ages, as well as to the great tours made by monarchs prior to Elizabeth I. Antiquarians and foreign travellers of all generations were likely to be found hammering on kitchen doors and requesting admission, but it was in the eighteenth century when roads were improved and houses bulged with rich pickings plundered on the Grand Tour that aristocrats began a seemingly ceaseless round of visiting and, not unnaturally, commenting on what they saw. Celia Fiennes noted of Bretby, the earl of Chesterfield's Derbyshire house, that it was rather old fashioned because 'the roof is not flat as our modern buildings', and 'none of the windows are sashes which in my opinion is the only thing it wants to render it a complete building'.[13] Alas, poor Chesterfield. This was in the 1690s, but it was not long before upper-class visitors were to be found in every significant house, attracted by a cultural climate 'which made an acquaintance with art and architecture an integral part of upper-class social behaviour'.[14] Much of the art and sculpture on display was the product of pickings from Italy, France, and the Low Countries, brought to England by discerning (and sometimes not so discerning) Grand Tourists.[15] Visitors toured the house, but they also wanted to see the gardens, and these too had to be in good, fashionable taste, whether in the Versailles-style of the early eighteenth century, or increasingly the landscaped garden (Stowe, Stourhead, and Hagley were the leaders here). And having moved through the house and the gardens, visitors wanted everyone else to know what they thought of it all: a new house, Tinniswood writes, 'deserved some comment, even if only a criticism of the builder's lamentable want of taste, since criticism denoted discrimination, and the ability to discriminate was becoming a decided social asset'.[16] Everyone it seemed, had to have, and to demonstrate that they had, taste.

Taste was, as much as anything, a social indicator. To insult someone one simply criticized their taste, hence the earl of Oxford's comment on Sir Robert Walpole's Houghton, in 1722, 'I think it neither magnificent nor beautiful. There is very great expense without either judgement or taste.' He twisted the knife by adding that 'a man

[12] Christie, *British country house*, pp. 30–48.
[13] Quoted in Tinniswood, *Polite tourist*, p. 26.
[14] Ibid., p. 63.
[15] Ibid., pp. 64–74; Christie, *British country house*, pp. 179–273.
[16] Tinniswood, *Polite tourist*, p. 81.

of taste and understanding' would have used the available finance to build 'a much finer house, and better rooms and greater'.[17] Oxford and Walpole, it need hardly be added, were not on good terms. As the number of polite tourists calling at country houses grew owners increasingly felt the pressure to show taste, if only to demonstrate to their social equals that they understood what it was all about. Tinniswood writes about visitors, but the pressure to conform pushed many owners into considering, if not actually carrying out, measures designed to improve their houses. This could range from changing the windows, to adding a 'modern' extension, to demolishing the existing – old-fashioned – building in order to replace it with a structure which demonstrated their taste. An alternative was to close one's doors, but disappointed visitors such as the Honourable John Byng were likely to take this as proof positive that an owner lacked taste: when he was refused admission to Shirburn Castle in Oxfordshire he declared the house to be 'a very ugly place … the whole appearance is melancholy and tasteless'.[18]

This was too much, and anyone with aspirations had to build. Sir Nathiel Curzon demolished his early eighteenth-century Derbyshire house in order to build Kedleston Hall, partly to indulge his passion for the architecture of ancient Rome, partly to show off a fine art collection gathered together during his Grand Tour, and partly to press his claims for the barony he acquired in 1761. Of course he also attracted polite tourists, but he can hardly have been dissatisfied with the rave reviews that they, with one accord, gave to his creation. It supposedly cost £70,000, and even the ever-critical Horace Walpole thought it was 'in the best taste'. Yet Walpole also revealed something about how contemporary values worked when he added that the house was 'too expensive for his estate'.[19] Curzon probably thought that a barony and a good reputation made it worth every penny.

Since everyone who owned a house was busy visiting everyone else, no one could plead ignorance for failing to keep up with the architectural Joneses. A family was more likely to be regarded as either exceptionally stingy or rather less wealthy than they would have the world believe if they failed to build on the appropriate scale. So family after family was drawn into this murky world, in which the buildings we admire and visit today rose from the ground amidst a great deal of heart searching, money, mess, confusion, and annoyance. Wilson and Mackley put it aptly when they comment that the majority of England's 5,000 or so country houses – no one seems to know the exact figure – were 'buildings which captured in bricks and mortar the means and aspirations of the bulk and bedrock of England's landowners'.[20]

So how was it done? The easy part was the modern do-it-yourself equivalent of choosing the wallpaper. This meant travelling around looking at houses, talking to their owners, and finding out for oneself what was fashionable. Armed with an outline design the would-be landowning builder now came to the practical problem, the modern equivalent of hanging the ceiling paper. First, he needed to convert his ideas into a working design. In the seventeenth century it might have been enough to sketch them on paper and bring in a master builder to do the rest, a kind of design-and-build architecture for the country landowner. In time, and especially from the 1770s and beyond, the gentleman designer was increasingly displaced by the professional architect. At around the same time management of the building process was removed from the

[17] Quoted ibid., p. 88.
[18] Quoted ibid., p. 94.
[19] Walpole is quoted by Wilson and Mackley, *Creating paradise*, p. 297. For the cost see p. 243. Also Tinniswood, *Polite tourist*, pp. 106–12.
[20] Wilson and Mackley, *Creating paradise*, p. 32.

hands of an estate steward employing a few local tradesmen and given to a master builder. While this latter change enabled scrupulous owners such as the third Earl Fitzwilliam to spend hours deliberating about estimates and costs it also threatened to divorce the landowner more firmly than before from the building process. A few resisted, insisting on being present for as long as it took to finish the building, and sometimes acting as their own specialist estimators in an age before quantity surveyors, structural engineers, and other experts. But cost and project management 'caused the most prolonged headaches for builders over the years',[21] so it is not surprising that owners who expected to spend many months of the year well away from their self-imposed building site looked instead to hire a proficient clerk of the works to get the house built: 'a good clerk of the works clearly saved considerable sums of money for his client', at least prior to the mid-nineteenth century when he started to give way to the general contractor building to a fixed price.[22]

Even with a proficient clerk of the works house building was far from being a smooth process. Bricks were often made on site but stone and slate, lead, timber, and ironwork had to be brought in, often from a distance. Labour had to be recruited, sometimes to be temporarily accommodated, certainly to be disciplined, and finally to be paid. Different skills were required for different parts of the process, which meant ensuring a flow of specialist labour across the site. While most labour was relatively cheap, skilled craftsmen could be pricey, and in the absence of any major technological developments in building during this period multitudes of men were required on site for many weeks at a time. It was not dissimilar to a military operation keeping everyone fed and happy. And once the final bill had been paid to the interior decorators, marking the end of the building process, there were still the furnishings to be acquired. These also had to be in appropriate style and taste, since they were further indications of the owner's status and personal magnificence.[23]

Hardly surprisingly, it cost a small, or sometimes even a great, fortune, but how much precisely? This is a difficult area, and one which architectural historians usually slide over; indeed, in this company Christopher Christie's bland opening chapter on wealth, which simply asks what money was available rather than making a direct link to building costs, is disappointing. It is a shame he did not have the benefit of reading Wilson and Mackley's work, because they demonstrate just how difficult it was to keep costs within bounds. Estimates were little more than informed guesses, and as a result the final bill often turned out to be well in excess of the sum the landowner had originally budgeted. Architects blamed owners for changing their minds, and owners blamed architects and surveyors for doing their sums wrongly. Only a minority of new houses were finished on time and on budget, so it was probably fortunate that for most owners a financial return on their investment was not a significant motive. In any case, the major financial decision was taken in advance: 'Economy was perhaps the most important factor in an owner's decision to remodel rather than to rebuild from scratch.'[24] Unfortunately economy suggested financial travails, and since most owners were interested in following architectural fashion it was not always possible to take the cheapest route. In the end, despite some sophisticated analysis of extant building accounts, Wilson and Mackley conclude that few landowners were able to relate house expenditure to rental income, and mostly they ended up spending far more than they had intended.

[21] Ibid., p. 146. [22] Ibid., pp. 159–60. [23] Christie, *British country house*, pp. 48–61.
[24] Wilson and Mackley, *Creating paradise*, p. 273.

House building was about emulation, particularly about cutting a financial dash in the countryside. Much venom was reserved for rich London merchants who could parachute into a country estate and immediately deploy their financial gains in building on a scale beyond the means of a landed gentleman. But this was more or less inevitable among newcomers who brought investable wealth with them into the country. 'A country estate and a fine house was the most obvious way , in a highly wealth-conscious society, by which the affluent could demonstrate their great riches and success to the world.'[25] And sometimes they did a remarkably fine job. Lord Byron's Newstead Abbey would not be there today without Colonel Thomas Wildman, who poured his West Indian fortune into restoring what was a semi-derelict property when he bought it from the poet in 1817.[26]

Building and visiting houses kept many families busy, but what exactly did one do in a country house? Girouard moved country houses into the province of social historians by demonstrating how the physical structure of houses changed through time to reflect the type of lifestyle which went on within their walls. As visits of weeks and months gave way to weekends, as formality gave place to informality, and as servants made way (or, more pertinently, disappeared) to be replaced by technology, houses inevitably changed, and lifestyles altered. Oliver Garnett's little book introduces us to some of the delights of the country house pastimes. Jane Austen's heroines give the strong impression that the hours dragged in the country house, and there are plenty of other literary references which imply much the same. Wet days seem to have been particularly disastrous, especially for young gentlemen anxious to be riding to hounds. Somehow gentle exercise in Hardwick Hall's long gallery, which began life in the 1590s as a place where one could take a gentle stroll, were not exactly demanding, although badminton seems to have been played in the Long Gallery at Chastleton in Oxfordshire, and both football and cricket at The Vyne (Hampshire). In general activities within the house were primarily sedentary: family and guests took robust exercise, if they took it at all, outside, chasing foxes, shooting duck, fishing salmon, and snaring wild fowl, hares, rabbits, and badgers. Squire Osbaldeston, Master of the Quorn, excelled at boxing, pigeon-shooting, steeple-chasing, billiards, cricket, rowing, and tennis, but he seems to have been particularly active.

Indoors, music loomed large in the life of any country house, either through the employment of professional musicians, as at Canons or Cliveden, or through amateur performances given by family and friends. Evidently it helped social intercourse if everyone could either play an instrument or sing. It was important to be able to dance: as Lord Chesterfield told his son in 1745, 'I desire you will particularly attend to the graceful motion of your arms; which, with the manner of putting on your hat, and giving your hand, is all that a gentleman need attend to.'[27] Theatricals were also popular, either through the employment of a professional company to perform on a home-made stage or, increasingly from the eighteenth century when acting was less frowned upon, by family and guests alike. Most houses had a suitable room – Jane Austen turned the billiard room into a makeshift theatre in *Mansfield Park* (1814) and in real life the fifth marquess of Anglesey converted the chapel at Plas Newydd into a private theatre after he inherited the house in 1898. Spending on theatricals is said to have ruined him, and he died in Monte Carlo in 1905, already bankrupt at the age of

[25] Ibid., p. 46.
[26] John Beckett, *Byron and Newstead: the aristocrat and the abbey* (Delaware, 2002).
[27] Quoted in Garnett, *Country house pastimes*, p. 8.

thirty. In the early twentieth century the magic lantern, and then private cinemas, offered new forms of entertainment which made few demands on the skills of country house visitors. Music and acting tended to take place during the evening: the daytime was given over to drawing and art, to reading, letter writing, diary making, needlework, shellwork, model making, and billiards – which both men and women played. Cards and board games provided yet other entertainment. Garnett's little book offers a beautifully illustrated outline of all these alternatives, and Christie would have us believe that pleasure was a driving force in house design in the eighteenth century. His chapter on entertainment is an excellent read. Yet when all is said and done it must still have been awfully dull in a country house on a wet day, despite the best efforts of landowners to remodel their houses to accommodate the interests and activities of their guests. And in winter they were still likely to be distinctly chilly. Thomas Creevey noted of Knowsley, the earl of Derby's house in Lancashire, that in the new dining room built in the 1820s to accommodate house parties of thirty to forty people the cold was 'quite petryfying'.[28] It is easy to see why London seemed so much more attractive than the countryside in winter.

Tinniswood's polite tourist was gradually overtaken as the eighteenth century progressed by a whole new range of visitors. The growth of visitor numbers forced owners who easily tired of showing unexpected guests around their premises to introduce open days and opening hours. Horace Walpole issued advance tickets permitting entrance to Strawberry Hill (although he banned children). Outside the house a whole new commercial world emerged as enterprising booksellers and stationers began producing guidebooks, whether official or unofficial, for would-be visitors. Tourists, of course, did more than look at houses. As Tinniswood explains, they moved on from gardens in the early eighteenth century to a new affinity with landscape during the Picturesque movement of the later eighteenth century that took them to the Lake District, Scotland, and Wales, among other venues. Forced by war to abandon the Grand Tour and stay at home, many also took to studying medieval architecture. They went to Tintern Abbey and Fountains Abbey, and they prized Gothic ruins such as Hardwick Old Hall. Once they had read Byron's romantic description of Newstead Abbey in *Don Juan* they made it into a place of pilgrimage in the years following his premature death in 1824. In Scotland tourists turned Abbotsford, Sir Walter Scott's Roxburghshire home, into another place of pilgrimage, and south of the border they set off in search of the castles and abbeys which had appeared so prominently in his work, including Kenilworth, Warwick, and Woodstock. By the middle decades of the nineteenth century tourists were to be found everywhere, including Hampton Court and, in the 1850s, the state apartments at Windsor. Railway excursions brought visitors to every corner of the country, so much so that the polite tourist was quickly and numerously supplemented at the housekeeper's door by not just the new middle class but even the occasional artisanal inquirer.

Peter Mandler has recently argued in *The fall and rise of the stately home*[29] that by the late nineteenth century interest in the country house was in decline, and that through the interwar years visitors dwindled to a trickle with only a couple of dozen houses regularly open to the public. Certainly for most of the twentieth century the country house was regarded as a liability. Once the age of the servant passed, and the tax man arrived, the upkeep and expense of these great houses sometimes outran the social cachet

[28] Quoted in Wilson and Mackley, *Creating paradise*, p. 62.

[29] (Yale, 1997).

of having one. Living in a handful of rooms, huddled over a coal fire, seemed less attractive as the twentieth century wore on. As Heather Clemenson showed twenty years ago, many families simply quit. Either they sold up, often to see the house converted into a school or nursing home, or they simply blew it up.[30] Nuthall Temple, a Palladian villa built 1754–1757 by Nottinghamshire landowner Sir Charles Sedley, and supposedly modelled on the Villa in Vicenza, was burnt down by its owner in 1929, in front of an invited journalist who next day described what he saw as an 'impressive scene' and 'a wonderful sight'.[31] Neither *The Times*, nor *Country Life* though it worth conserving, although had it survived it would surely have been Grade 1 listed today. John Harris, who visited 200 country houses in the fifteen or so years after the Second World War, recalled in his autobiography a visit to neighbouring Watnall Hall in 1957 which he found empty with 'the bulldozers waiting to pounce'.[32] Country house gloomery came to a head in the 1974 Victoria and Albert Museum exhibition evocatively entitled 'The destruction of the country house, 1875–1975'. It started a trend in the direction of doom-laden titles which has continued ever since, and which is reflected in David Littlejohn's book. The problem is to distinguish between what Mandler has argued was the professional pessimism of country house owners, and what could be interpreted as the very real good fortune of post-1945 country house owners because of the growth of the heritage industry.[33] When he wrote *Brideshead revisited*, Evelyn Waugh thought the country house was finished. In his preface to the 1959 edition he noted that 'it was impossible to foresee, in the spring of 1944, the present cult of the English country house'.[34] Mandler believes that the revival turned into a veritable renaissance from about 1974, and as a result made possible the defence of the country house as a national institution. And, of course, at the heart of this revival were visitors, but not now the polite social figures of the eighteenth century, but the very hoi polloi who had been carefully excluded for generations. The simple fact that country houses have become so popular with the weekend car tripper has moved the goalposts: now, as their owners are quick to claim, they are not so much private possessions as national heritage.

Of course this is not a disinterested viewpoint. It has arisen because of financial need. If building country houses was a headache, maintaining them is a migraine. Of course profligate owners have always struggled with the cost of upkeep. Contents sales, whether in whole or in part, have long been a straightforward means of enabling a cash-strapped landowner to raise much-needed funding. Admittedly in the nineteenth century this was usually to pay debts rather than to fund upkeep of the house, as David Littlejohn shows in a handful of (sometimes garbled) examples. Since the 1880s the problem has intensified, partly it has to be admitted because of agricultural depression and the introduction of death duties and other taxes from 1894 onwards. As a result, just when visiting fell away landed families could not afford their houses. Some were demolished, and many others sold to become schools, nursing homes, corporate headquarters, conference centres, hotels, even country residences for senior ministers of the crown (since, naturally, even Labour ministers need a decent country retreat from a post-industrial society). Littlejohn demonstrates all of this, but the real debate is one

[30] Heather Clemenson, *English country houses and landed estates* (London, 1982).
[31] *Nottingham Evening Post*, 1 Aug. 1929.
[32] John Harris, *No voice from the hall: early memories of a country house snooper* (London, 1998).
[33] R. Hewison, *The heritage industry: Britain in a climate of decline* (London, 1987).
[34] Waugh is quoted by Littlejohn, *English country house*, p. 3.

which he rather skirts around: are those which are left 'national' treasures which should be given public support to maintain them for the nation?

Littlejohn is a professor of journalism from California, and he occasionally lapses into language which implies that the main role of the country house is to be available for north American tourists 'doing the stateliest' (to use his own inelegant phrase). Yet through the interviews and questionnaires which underpin his book, he also makes some telling points. The vast majority of country houses are not open to the public, even by appointment, and many owners who do open their doors are reluctant hosts fulfilling, often minimally, the requirements made of them in return for grant aid. In other words they still do their utmost to maintain the so-called national heritage as a private domain. As a rule of thumb, the doors open only when financial necessity dictates. Of course even these owners would argue that since the great majority are listed buildings legal restrictions in place since 1975 mean that they cannot be pulled down, and so some form of grant aid is needed to keep them in repair. Littlejohn notes the contradictions all this implies but avoids discussing the broader heritage issues. One wonders how he and the other purveyors of country house gloom would respond to Brian Masters's comment written in June 2000, that 'less vicious fiscal policies, coupled with the astonishing resilience and enterprise of many a ducal head, have enabled houses to survive and flourish'.[35]

What stands out after reading these books is that country houses are both a blessing and a curse. They offer something distinctively British and unique in the world of art and architecture. Those open to the public are a much prized recreational facility, and millions who will never step inside a country house can view them through the medium of television and film – *The madness of King George*, a recent film watched by countless Americans, was filmed on location at Broughton Castle near Banbury. The really successful houses, among them Chatsworth and Castle Howard, can be big business: Masters notes that Chatsworth 'has gone from strength to strength', and the Howards have never really looked back since Castle Howard was turned into *Brideshead*. The curse of the country house is their cost. Wilson and Mackley drive home on almost every page of their book the undoubted fact that the whole process of building and remodelling houses was expensive, and the best efforts of landowners to keep control of costs were usually futile. Now those remaining have to be maintained. While a few have been rescued by falling into the hands of millionaires willing to restore and conserve them – as happened in earlier generations – financial pressures mean, to quote Christie, that we are aware 'that country houses are either disappearing or changing beyond recognition'.[36] The heritage debate is likely to run and run.

One other point arises from these books. There is still some way to go to bridge the divide which Girouard sought to straddle. Wilson and Mackley write like social historians should, carefully selecting and defining their sample, analysing the surviving building accounts, and tempering their conclusions so as not to be seen to be going beyond the limits the evidence will bear. Christie, by contrast, is much more at home with architectural and artistic matters. His opening chapter on finance simply tells us that aristocrats had a great deal of money, and his chapter on the family and servants could apply to the aristocracy in any guise, not simply within their houses. Where he comes alive is in the discussion of architecture, decoration, and furnishings. But Christie, Tinniswood, and Garnett cherry pick their examples. All houses and all gardens are fair

[35] Masters, *The dukes*, p. x.

[36] Christie, *British country house*, p. 1.

game for them, and there is no attempt to analyse according to chronology or regional pattern. One cannot help feeling that the country house is simply a place to be milked for the book they are writing. This is particularly so of Tinniswood's book, in which a text written in 1989 and only very lightly revised, reappears in 2000 between hard covers in a coffee table format (colour photographs abound) and with a more catchy (if, strictly speaking, slightly misleading) title.

The trouble is that by popularizing country houses, television, the National Trust, and the various pressure groups concerned with their survival, have helped to spawn a vast leisure interest, which brings thousands of townies into the countryside at weekends. They have to be fed (tea rooms and cafés) and satisfied (craft shops, farm shops, bookshops, nurseries, garden centres, evening concerts, even car boot sales). In terms of reading matter they are perceived to prefer glossy books – exemplified in this collection by Tinniswood's translation from black and white to full colour on glossy paper – which set out to entertain. The National Trust feeds on this demand. Academic studies have to find academic publishers, but even then the lure of the market looms, since a full colour cover with a classical country house (Harewood House for Christie, Duncombe Park for Wilson and Mackley) is clearly seen as a selling point. And publishers do, naturally enough, need to sell books. But there is still an uncomfortable divide between the scholarly and the popular, and between the social and the architectural historian. It is perhaps surprising that Girouard's efforts of twenty-four years ago have been only partially successful because the country house today thrives as it always has done on visitors. And what do these visitors want to know about? Is it architectural detail, art, plasterwork, carving, or period furniture? Maybe, but, in Littlejohn's words, country house owners are anxious: 'to persuade the visiting public that this is still a "family home", and not just a business or tourist attraction: a home lived in by people not unlike themselves'.[37] One wonders whether Littlejohn noticed the irony here. After centuries of keeping visitors, especially the wrong type, out, and just as we were beginning to find out for ourselves something about life in their houses, aristocratic owners now want us to know that we were all the same after all! But there is an agenda here: the owners wish to promote their private property as national heritage, and that surely is the key issue which remains unresolved. We may now know far more about life in the English country house than we did in 1978, but we still do not really know what the stately home stands for in our post-industrial society.[38]

UNIVERSITY OF NOTTINGHAM J. V. BECKETT

[37] Littlejohn, *English country house*, p. 7.

[38] The journalist Simon Jenkins has recently suggested that it is the continued residence of the aristocratic families in their ancestral homes which helps to keep up visitor numbers: *Times*, 29 Aug. 2001.