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Elite hostesses as disruptive forces: the country house in interwar Britain

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ABSTRACT

British high society in the interwar years was led by a small group of hostesses who were instrumental in heralding consistency after the upheaval of the Great War. Yet, they were also beacons of change, introducing the famous names of the day to each other. Likewise, the country house was entering a period of adjustment as many changed hands or were utilised more often due to the advent of the motor car and quicker travel. This article analyses the role of two hostesses who were at the centre of two of the greatest scandals of the 1930s and argues that the seclusion of the country house was significant to events. Wallis Simpson's role as de facto hostess at Fort Belvedere is explored through the writings of her contemporaries and analysed in the context of the Abdication Crisis. Nancy Astor's role as chatelaine of Cliveden House is explored in relation to her involvement with the Cliveden Set.

KEYWORDS

Twentieth-century;
aristocracy; royalty; women;
elite history

On 10 December 1936, King Edward VIII renounced the throne in order to marry the twice-divorced Mrs Wallis Simpson, originally of Baltimore, Maryland. Upon leaving the House of Commons that same day, the diarist and politician Chips Channon heard Lady Nancy Astor remark, 'people who have been licking Mrs Simpson's boots ought to be shot.'¹ In Lady Astor's opinion, Mrs Simpson was an interloper who had disturbed the status quo and those who had pandered to her were as good as traitors. Yet, in her own way, Nancy had been disrupting the status quo for decades. These two women were certainly not friends and did not even move in the same social circle. Yet, they are similar in that their role as hostesses in two of the nation's great country houses was to lead them into scandalous controversies. For most people today, the closest experience they will ever have with country houses is as a visitor for the day and it can be difficult to see past the glass display cases and the cordons directing them through the rooms. Yet, these places were, and in many cases still are homes. For centuries, they were the sites of births, marriages, and deaths and played host to diplomatic conferences, liaisons, and scandals. This article takes two country houses as case studies that, due to the actions of their hostesses in the 1930s, were central to disrupting the idyllic image of

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the house that had been created over centuries. Fort Belvedere on the Windsor Estate was originally built as a grace-and-favour folly and housed a succession of minor royals and courtiers before becoming home to the Prince of Wales in 1930.² Cliveden House in Berkshire had seen several iterations throughout its history, with residents including Frederick, Prince of Wales and Harriet, Duchess of Sutherland. In the interwar years, it was home to the Viscount and Viscountess Astor. While the Prince was the tenant of the Fort, it was his mistresses who acted as hostesses, first Thelma Furness and later Wallis Simpson. Nancy Astor was the chatelaine of Cliveden and was regarded as one of the most prominent political hostesses of her day.

To become the mistress of a great country house had been the challenge of young elite women for centuries. The social class and financial status of one's spouse were of primary importance but as the Georgian period came to a close, love was considered when making matches.³ The Victorians took a more stoic approach, but by the time the interwar period came around, love, or at least companionship, was back as an important element in any elite marriage. A more constant element was the role of the mistress of a country house. While the separate sphere theory is much debated, it must be given some attention in this instance as in the interwar era, the mistress of the house was still largely responsible for the interior and played the role of hostess. Indeed, hostesses had such an important role that the unmarried Sir Philip Sassoon often asked his sister to perform the role of hostess in his houses.⁴ Ownership is another matter, as country houses were predominately owned by the husband. However, after marriage, a woman yielded almost complete control over the running of her country house. Ulla, Lady Hyde Parker recalled moving into her husband's ancestral home and being informed that he wished to have nothing to do with the house. He put money in the bank, instructed her not to become overdrawn and let her decide the rest. A twenty-two-year-old from Denmark was now the chatelaine of Melford Hall.⁵ It would be simple to dismiss this as another example of a husband thrusting his wife into household servitude. However, the alternative view is to consider that this could be an opportunity for elite women: the chance to occupy their own space and utilise it as they saw fit.

Girouard argued that the purpose of country houses was to act as seats of power.⁶ This power was derived from ownership of land and the owner of a country house commanded great resources and derived his wealth from the rents paid by tenants. By the interwar era, many elite landowners were also involved in the stock exchange and development of land in cities. Their local power was somewhat diminished by the more equal franchise, but power was retained in other ways. Power derived through land ownership might imply that this power was masculine in nature, but as we have seen in the case of Lady Hyde Parker, the wife was often in charge of the interior of the country house, giving her a degree of power too. Throughout the Victorian era, train travel made it easier to reach rural locations and the advent of the motor car improved this further. Therefore, it became possible to retire to country houses for short periods of time and they were used more often for diplomatic conferences as well as social gatherings. The mistress of the house had control over guest lists, and were, therefore, able to socially engineer meetings and alliances.

There may be an inclination to think that once women began to be elected to Parliament, a greater degree of equality was automatically achieved. In reality, throughout the interwar period, there were never more than 15 women MPs in the House of Commons at one time.⁷ The majority of legislative advancements that

benefited women in the era, mostly confined to family law, had little to do with the actions of these women MPs and were built on previous legislation from the Victorian and Edwardian eras.⁸ Furthermore, while some women MPs were dedicated to female causes, others were not, and they could not be relied on to advance women's causes. The women in Parliament were concerned with staying there and cementing the position of women in politics. To do this, they had to adapt to existing structures and were not able to change structure or policy immediately. Therefore, while the study of these early female MPs is of importance to any study of women in the interwar era, it is equally important to consider other ways in which women were using their influence, forwarding their causes, and disrupting the status quo. Due to the position of women as the mistresses of country houses, these locations provide excellent case studies. Colley has argued that the type of power exercised by women in Parliament was unprecedented and would have been alien to their predecessors.⁹ Yet, while this new form of political power was taking shape, previous methods had not immediately fallen by the wayside.

Biographies of elite women in the interwar years are plentiful, yet these women continue to be a mere footnote in most historical analyses. Great emphasis has been placed on women's war work and their partial emancipation in the immediate aftermath but then they tend to disappear from most narratives. Writing in the 1970s, Arthur Marwick emphasised that 'social history is not the history of high society', and in this, he would be correct.¹⁰ However, any attempt to study social history without consideration of high society is an obsolete endeavour. Colley and Jones have both emphasised the need to consider elite women, especially when investigating political and social power.¹¹ Lerner emphasised the fact that elite women were often 'closer to actual power than many a man.'¹² For centuries, they were the daughters, wives, and sisters of the men in power and had first-hand knowledge of matters ranging from laws to treaties to scandals. Before the Second World War, politicians were also often among the leaders of high society, and their wives were therefore responsible for cultivating connections to further their husbands' political careers.¹³ It cannot be denied that elite women were inherently privileged, possessing great wealth and advantages. Yet, they often utilised this privilege to influence society and to become disruptive forces in a world that had too long attempted to confine them to the home sphere. Their actions in the privacy of country houses are apt examples to use as a case study of how elite women could be disruptive forces and alter the society in which they lived.

Arguably, the interwar years were the heyday of the country house as with the advent of the motorcar, they became increasingly easy to reach, facilitating quick escapes from the city, even for those who worked throughout the week.¹⁴ Due to the reduced time it took to reach country houses, invitations for the weekend increased, providing the perfect opportunities for people to meet and mix in situations that were often more relaxed than in London. Country house weekends were presided over by hostesses, many of whom curated their guest lists to perfection and aimed to introduce various acquaintances or engineer resolutions. While the phrase 'country house weekend' has become common historical parlance, few of those attending at the beginning of the era would ever have referred to them as such.¹⁵ One of the earliest references to a 'week-end' was made in *Notes and Queries*, at the end of the nineteenth century, by one contributor who wrote, 'if a person leaves home at the end of the week's work to

spend the evening of Saturday and the following Sunday with friends at a distance, he is said to be spending his *week-end* at So-and-so.¹⁶ Hostesses would arrange all sorts of delights to keep their guests occupied, ranging from riding and fishing to tennis and golf. The key was to 'keep people amused without making them feel too organised.'¹⁷ The highlights of the days were meals, where the whole party would come together, and dinner could be followed by dancing to the gramophone, card games or playing the piano.¹⁸

Many *Country Life* covers from the era did not feature photographs of houses or country pursuits. Instead, they featured portraits of elite women, often with their heads bowed over a book, arranging flowers, or surrounded by children. They are portrayed as peaceful, submissive creatures, the epitome of the idyllic well brought up debutante who was destined to make a great marriage. The subjects of this article, Wallis Simpson and Nancy Astor do not fit the mould of dutiful, submissive wives. They both went through at least one divorce and were subject to public scrutiny and criticism. Fort Belvedere and Cliveden provided safe havens where they could retreat on weekends, away from prying eyes and public duties. Country houses offered a chance for women to be in control. This article dismantles the notion perpetuated by *Country Life* that all women were peaceable, submissive creatures and analyses the ways in which two examples disrupted the status quo.

Wallis Simpson and Fort Belvedere

In 1930 Edward, Prince of Wales requested the use of Fort Belvedere from his father King George V. The prince recalled:

When I went to my father to ask if I might live there, he was surprised. "What could you possibly want that old place for? Those damn week-ends, I suppose ... Well, if you want it, you can have it." I thanked him. My real reason for desiring the property lay deeper than a mere wish for a place to spend week-ends at. I was thirty-five years old; the rolling stone was beginning to seek a resting place ...¹⁹

By the standards of the day the Fort had a casual atmosphere and Edward took great delight in personally working in the gardens. It was the antithesis of the formal palaces inhabited by his parents and gave Edward freedom away from their watchful glance.²⁰ This resting place soon became the perfect spot to take his mistresses. When Thelma, Viscountess Furness began her affair with Edward, her marriage was already breaking down. She and Edward soon began to spend long weekends at Fort Belvedere, which he always referred to simply as 'the Fort.' Thelma recalled that when they were seen together in London 'eyebrows were raised and tongues began to wag.'²¹ The Fort offered them an escape from prying eyes, and they could entertain friends in peace while enjoying a quiet domestic life.

The Fort was a place created to be idyllic, where Edward flew the flag of the Duchy of Cornwall rather than his personal standard in a symbolic move.²² Thelma's affair with Edward was significant as it marked disruption in this idyll. A married woman was playing house with the heir to the throne, who was still unmarried in his mid-thirties. A prince having affairs was nothing new, but the heir being unmarried in his thirties was worrying for the continuity of the royal line. Yet, it has been argued that none of

the guests who visited the Fort found Thelma's role as hostess out of the ordinary. Donaldson argued that it was accepted that one of the ladies present should act as hostess for the bachelor prince and his mistress was the ideal candidate.²³ This was not the convention in most bachelor households, making the Fort unique in this respect. Had convention been followed, Thelma and Wallis would only have been hostess in their own homes. Instead, they were subverting convention by acting as hostesses for a prince, later king.

In a cruel twist of fate for Thelma, she introduced Wallis Simpson to Edward in early 1931. Having met Wallis through her sister Consuelo, the two became great friends, a friendship that lasted until Edward fell in love with Wallis. Wallis described the Fort in her memoirs as 'the most romantic house I have ever known—that half-enchanted castle ...'²⁴ Diana Mosley stated in her biography of Wallis that the Simpsons' first visit to the Fort set in motion all the events that were to come.²⁵ She also suggested that the Fort was instrumental to their burgeoning relationship as time spent in the peacefulness of the countryside allowed them to become friends before romance entered the equation.²⁶ Mosley's account is incredibly biased towards the Windsors as she was a good friend of theirs and often visited them in France in later years. Even though she largely portrays Wallis as a tragic figure, her analysis regarding the Fort is telling when it comes to its seclusion and the romance that flourished there. Wallis returned to the Fort countless times, often accompanied by her husband and she came to love it as much as Edward. Wallis knew a good amount about the Fort before her first visit, having seen numerous photographs of the exterior in the printed press.²⁷ It was here that she discovered facts about Edward unknown except to his closest friends, for example, the fact that he enjoyed embroidery. The routine was 'amazingly informal', and Edward retired early for the night to be awake early in the morning and out in his beloved garden.²⁸ Wallis never considered the Fort to be hers, but she was undeniably the hostess after the end of Edward's relationship with Thelma. After 1935 Edward took a guest book with him wherever he went, and after the first entry, Wallis' name disappears.²⁹ She was there so often that she was no longer considered a guest, she had become the hostess: a semi-permanent fixture.

The stability of the monarchy was deemed essential to the stability of the country and by proxy the empire, with any disruption to the status quo carrying great risk. The fall of several European royal houses and the dismantlement of empires in the wake of the Great War highlighted how fragile ancient dynasties could be in the modern world. To the British throne, Wallis was disruptive. Her failure to be completely in awe of the monarchy made her especially attractive to Edward as he rejected those he deemed to be social climbers.³⁰ She was also not afraid to voice her opinion and would tell Edward if she disagreed.³¹ The very qualities that made her attractive to Edward made her dangerous to the stability of the nation. She was unpredictable, did not hold the desired obsequious view of monarchy and seemingly had more influence over the King than any of his advisers. This influence may not necessarily have been bad; Wallis could have helped Edward become an effective king by pursuing his interests, even if they were markedly different from his father's.³² Wallis recounted being fascinated by the enthusiasm with which Edward spoke of his passions and his desires for the monarchy in a modern age.³³ Had the Establishment and courtiers been aware of these conversations, they might have felt differently about what they saw as Wallis's meddling. As it was, they could

not see past the assumption that Wallis was making the King look like a fool for having a twice-divorced American by his side.

As the daughter of the Duke of Rutland, Diana Cooper was well-placed to be a close friend of the Prince of Wales. The second volume of her three-part memoir detailed the budding relationship of Edward and Wallis from the point of view of someone who was part of their close circle and often invited to Fort Belvedere. Despite suggesting that she did not entirely approve of Wallis, Diana had a great eye for detail and remembered Wallis appearing 'admirably correct and chic' at the Fort as well as seeming fashionable.³⁴ Diana recalled that little changed when Edward ascended the throne. Weekend parties at the Fort continued and Edward persisted in being attentive to Wallis, evidenced by fetching her a nail file when she had torn her nail.³⁵ Diana's memoirs give a fascinating insight into the relationship dynamics between Edward and Wallis. The King appeared to be waiting on Wallis, as if he was not the King but a mere footman. Diana quoted excerpts from Edward's conversation at the Fort and most referred to Wallis and focused on her enjoyment. If we judge the situation in light of Diana's memories, Edward was besotted with Wallis and spent every waking moment focused on her comfort.

Edward had never enjoyed a particularly close relationship with his parents. He had been born in an age in which aristocratic mothers left the care of their children to nannies and governesses, seeing them only once a day. Queen Mary's lack of warmth and tenderness prevented Edward from turning to her in times of trial and according to Freudian theory, it is possible that he turned to other motherly figures. Wallis's domination of him may have appealed as he was seeking a motherly figure who would tell him what to do. Ironically, Edward did not listen to Wallis's appeals for him not to abdicate, such was his determination to marry her.³⁶ This devotion to Wallis enabled her to subvert convention further as Edward began to reject his closest advisors, replacing their counsel with Wallis's. After Edward became king, it was suspected by courtiers that Wallis was viewing official documents, something she had neither the right nor the qualifications to do. Indeed, the government began to worry that she could become a security risk due to her relationship with the German Ambassador.³⁷ Wallis's advice replaced that of Edward's previous mistresses, his family, and his courtiers. Those who had previously been in his inner circle found themselves dismissed. Not only did this result in resentment from those being shut out, but it limited the viewpoints the King was exposed to, and many felt that he was abandoning his work and failing to put the good of the country before his own desires.³⁸ Red boxes stayed at the Fort for longer than they should have, and the chain of custody was disrupted. Wallis may well have been reading secret documents and have had access to highly sensitive information.³⁹ Despite having unauthorised access to documents that few women, if any women, would have seen, this was an important matter of security. Neither Wallis's qualifications nor lack thereof, were of any importance. If Wallis did see secret documents, it went beyond disruptive to potentially treasonous. Indeed, the Marburg Files, discovered in 1945 in Germany suggested that Edward and Wallis might have been even more involved with the Nazi regime than had been feared in the late 1930s.⁴⁰

While Wallis asserted that she never considered the Fort to be her own house, she certainly exerted her dominance over aspects of its running. She infuriated the staff

through such acts as dismissing a well-liked footman who had been hired by Thelma Furness and leaving a mess behind in the kitchen after cooking bacon and eggs in the middle of the night.⁴¹ Ziegler argued that she was not quite rude to the servants but assertive and left no doubt that she was in charge.⁴² At this point in their relationship, she was still acting as a semi-dutiful wife to Ernest Simpson but was also playing the role of 'shadow queen', spending most weekends at the Fort as the King's hostess.⁴³ There could be little doubt in the minds of those who visited that Wallis was more than a friend, more than a mistress, she was a dominant force in the King's life. Bloch has analysed the guestbooks from the Fort and found that the company was mixed, with courtiers, socialites, and diplomats.⁴⁴ Wallis had risen from being on the edges of high society to mixing with those in power.

Wallis' role as hostess was not accepted by everybody who visited the Fort. After Edward ascended to the throne in 1936, she began to apologise to members of the King's Household when she had not been there to greet them on arrival.⁴⁵ Her actions were viewed as presumptuous and a deliberate show of power that she did not legitimately possess. Historians agree that high society was split by the Abdication crisis. Chips Channon divided people into Cavaliers and Roundheads *à la* English Civil War, in other words, those in the King's camp or those in the camp of the Yorks.⁴⁶ Sebba argued that the definite moment of this split was a visit to Balmoral in the summer of 1936 when the Duchess of York refused to be greeted by Wallis, stating that she had come to dine with the King. With Wallis sleeping in the same room as had been occupied by Queens Victoria and Mary, the King had set up a situation where the Royal Family and the whole of society were 'painfully divided.'⁴⁷ While friends and courtiers could initially overlook Wallis's indiscretions, taking the place of former queens was considered a step too far.

Fort Belvedere was not to remain the home of Edward and Wallis. It was from the Fort that Wallis took her leave of England when her impending divorce and the scandal surrounding the Abdication Crisis caused her to flee to France. She would never return as hostess, nor to live in the place where she had wielded authority. On 10 December 1936, the Fort played witness to one of the biggest constitutional disruptions in British history. Edward VIII signed the Instrument of Abdication, witnessed by his three younger brothers. While certain pieces of furniture, including the desk on which he signed the Instrument, stayed with him for the rest of his life, the now Duke of Windsor never returned to the place that had given him his independence. The presence of Wallis at Fort Belvedere led indirectly to one of the biggest disruptions that Britain had ever witnessed. The King's determination to marry Wallis split high society into two camps, one which championed his cause and one which leaned decisively toward his brother who had married the correct woman and produced heirs. The Abdication has been portrayed as an unparalleled love story by historians such as Sebba and by countless film directors and novelists. At the same time, the contemporary press, the political Establishment, and many members of high society saw it as a gross dereliction of duty. Whichever version one prefers to argue, there is no disputing the fact that Fort Belvedere stood at the centre, a rural refuge where matters developed and came to a head.

Nancy Astor and Cliveden House

Nancy Astor was the first female Member of Parliament in the United Kingdom and chaperone of Cliveden House in Berkshire. Since her marriage to Waldorf Astor in 1904, Nancy had been a prolific political hostess, hosting on behalf of her husband who was a Member of Parliament. After her own election in 1919, she continued to host prominent political and media figures for country house weekends. Her election as the first female MP was not tied to any of the suffrage movements, nor did she have a feminist agenda. She had campaigned for her husband in his Plymouth constituency for years, and when he was called to the House of Lords, she was the obvious caretaker of the seat.⁴⁸ Nancy was wealthy, considered by some to be a great beauty, and was cognisant of the political landscape. These factors stirred great press interest and her campaign was avidly watched by observers.⁴⁹ Once elected, Nancy faced the same plethora of problems that would plague all women MPs throughout the era. There was a lack of office space, they were not invited to the casual meetings between male MPs, and they suffered from the stigma of being women.⁵⁰ Furthermore, only 37 women were elected during the interwar years with never more than 15 serving at the same time.⁵¹ This made it difficult to present any unified feminist agenda; they were more concerned with keeping women in Parliament than campaigning for the lives of those outside.⁵²

Nancy's name has often been heard in conjunction with interwar fascist sympathies and a lack of concern for feminist issues. To believe these assertions is to misunderstand the context of her situation. This article will proceed to argue that fascist sympathies have been misaligned with the very common goal in the 1930s of avoiding another war with Germany in order to save lives. Furthermore, while Nancy was not an outspoken feminist, she did contribute to several advances for women, working within the obstacles placed in the way of early-day female MPs. Thane has recently written a pivotal revisionist article on Astor, demonstrating that previous conceptions of her have been erroneous. Thane has demonstrated that Nancy had a correspondence with Emmeline Pankhurst during the Great War and expressed sympathy with suffrage issues.⁵³ Yet, Ray Strachey described Nancy as 'lamentably ignorant of everything she ought to know' regarding feminist issues but then proceeded to become her private secretary and educate her.⁵⁴ In 1921 Nancy became Vice-President of the feminist Six-Point Group and in the 1930s publicly supported the International Alliance of Women, an anti-Nazi peace group.⁵⁵

Alongside her parliamentary work, Nancy continued to be a prolific political hostess and her home, Cliveden House, was often at the disposal of the Conservative party. Unlike parties held in London, it was rare for the press to be invited to country houses and so details were scarcer and occasionally fabricated. In the late 1930s, Nancy and her guests were catapulted into scandal and would soon become known as 'the Cliveden Set' or as coined by Ribbentrop, 'the Astorgruppe.' In June 1936, a little-known Communist periodical called *The Week*, published an article called 'The Best People's Front.' It alleged that a secret network was being run out of Cliveden, with the purpose of undermining the elected government in matters relating to Anglo-German relations.⁵⁶ Later allegations claimed that Lord Halifax travelled to Germany to open negotiations with the Nazis without the knowledge of Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden. *The Week* was by no means part of the mainstream press and this article was initially overlooked and could have easily been resigned to the archives without so much as another thought.

Churchill referred to *The Week* as a 'scandalous leaflet' and Jessica Mitford described it as 'a mimeographed political muckraking journal ...'—perhaps not the kindest comment from a diehard Communist.⁵⁷ The significance of the timing of this publication was that it coincided with the rise of the popular press and a vast expansion in newspaper readership. Once the mainstream press picked up on the allegations of a secret group working out of Cliveden to undermine the government, any illusion that Cliveden was a respectable private residence was shattered. While it was a far-fetched narrative, sensationalism sold, and Cockburn had landed on something, that even if it was just speculation, was sensational to the extreme. A group of government insiders plotting to manipulate the government has something of a Machiavellian nature to it and other newspapers gradually began to pick it up. The fact that the first female MP was at the very centre of the scandal, indeed as the hostess, attracted those who still believed that women neither should nor could govern.

Norman Rose provided a definitive explanation and evaluation of the Cliveden Set in his book of the same title. Published in 2001, Rose had access to a multitude of documentary evidence that earlier historians did not, including previously censored foreign policy documents. His account is incredibly detailed, dedicating several chapters to the press controversy. Rose emphasised that those involved in the Cliveden Set were by no means strangers to each other. Many of them had been involved in the unification of South Africa as part of the so-called 'Milner Kindergarten Group' at the end of the nineteenth century.⁵⁸ Indeed, Lloyd George referred to the group in a 1921 conversation with Lord Riddell.⁵⁹ As the hostess, and having been married to Waldorf for over thirty years, Nancy would have considered the Milner Group to be some of her closest friends and companions. When Cockburn 'discovered' the group in 1936, he revived the coverage of a group of politicians and aristocrats who had been involved in empire building for decades.

As with any historical source, press outputs must be carefully analysed to find the hidden agendas of the writers. As Lord Riddell, former managing director of *The News of the World*, pointed out, 'We must admit ... that journalism is a commercial business, and that a newspaper lives by selling news and views.'⁶⁰ As a member of the group of press barons that included Lords Northcliffe, Rothermere and Beaverbrook, Riddell highlighted the press's susceptibility to economic pressures. However, Riddell also argued that 'journalists are not to be bribed or "got at."⁶¹ As such we are left with a somewhat contradictory message as to the workings of a press establishment. While they aim to sell as many copies as possible, they also aim to tell the truth and not adhere to the bribery of other external powers. While this might be the case in principle, the principle does not always stand the test and thus we see political agendas working their way into the press, particularly during the later interwar years.

The idea of the set took on a notion of plausibility when it was picked up by several more mainstream publications. The term 'Cliveden Set', though often attributed to Cockburn, was not in fact coined by him. *Reynolds News*, another left-wing periodical, gave it this moniker in November 1937 and it soon caught on.⁶² *Time and Tide* also reported on the supposed set and at the end of 1937, Ribbentrop referred to the 'Astorgruppe' in a report to Hitler on the chances of an amicable Anglo-German relationship.⁶³ Ribbentrop was disillusioned as to the amount of power the set had and was also under the impression that high society wielded extensive political power as it had in previous

centuries. As such, he was known to court society hostesses, placing undue prominence on the aristocracy.⁶⁴ Nancy was among the hostesses who did not take Ribbentrop's overtures seriously and enjoyed teasing him. She once informed him that Britain would never take Hitler seriously as long as he had a 'Charlie Chaplin moustache.'⁶⁵ As an MP, her comments could have been seen as inflammatory. Indeed, Nancy was never hid her antipathy towards the Nazi regime, a fact already highlighted in her involvement with the International Alliance of Women.

One of Nancy's particular areas of interest was the promotion of friendship between her home country of the United States and her adopted country of the United Kingdom, and she regularly travelled across the Atlantic, conducting lectures while acting as an informal ambassador in both directions. Nancy was not known for her subtlety and had a wicked sense of humour. On another occasion at her St James's Square townhouse, Nancy had her guests, which included the German, Russian and American ambassadors, play musical chairs after dinner.⁶⁶ Her inventiveness when it came to activities promoted goodwill between her guests and permitted them to enjoy themselves rather than being solely focused on work. When goodwill was forged in the drawing room, it was more likely to translate into constructive work in the Houses of Parliament or the boardroom.

Returning to the Cliveden Set, Sykes, among other historians, has fiercely rebutted Cockburn's allegations. Halifax had been invited to join the German Hunting Association in Berlin and was thus in Germany for a completely legitimate reason.⁶⁷ Furthermore, as Sykes argued, there was a fundamental flaw in Cockburn's argument. Halifax had not been present at Cliveden on the supposedly treacherous weekend when the plan was created but Anthony Eden had been.⁶⁸ Furthermore, Eden was perfectly aware of Halifax's proposed visit, even requesting that a meeting with Göring and Hitler might be arranged.⁶⁹ By simply referring to a selection of foreign policy documents it is easy to break apart Cockburn's argument. Naturally, he did not have access to the same documentation that historians today do but his articles were a series of pointed guesses, seldom based on the facts. Lord Riddell's assertion about the press being a financial institution comes into play here. The idea of the Cliveden Set was sensational, and sensationalism sells copies. As writer, editor, and owner, Cockburn had to keep his venture afloat. If a story receives attention, then it is natural to continue pursuing it.

Cockburn's sources, or lack thereof, have been a subject of contention for decades. Cockburn himself stated that Vladimir Poliakov, a former Russian foreign correspondent of *The Times*, was his original source.⁷⁰ It is possible that as a correspondent of *The Times*, owned by Astor and edited by Dawson, another frequent guest at Cliveden, Poliakov passed his information on to a friend he felt could make use of it. However, even though Poliakov was anti-Communist, it remains unclear as to where he would have attained such information. Jessica Mitford claimed that Cockburn wrote 'stories garnered from undercover sources' and that his main Berlin informant was the lowly secretary to Herr von Papen, a member of Hitler's cabinet.⁷¹ These sources were tenuous at best. There is always the possibility that there was an inside informant at Cliveden but without supporting evidence, Cockburn's sources are flimsy and uncorroborated. Press articles rely on their sources and the evidence to substantiate any claims made. Cockburn's reporting is lacking in this area and he later admitted that some readers believed the Cliveden Set to be a mere 'invention.'⁷²

As prominent members of the political scene, and as political hosts, the Astors were expected to entertain foreign diplomats, including German Ambassador Ribbentrop.⁷³ It is true that they were largely pro-appeasement, but that was the official government policy, a policy that was at its height in 1937. Despite this, the Astors felt it necessary to publicly repudiate the claims made against them. Waldorf Astor wrote a letter to the editor of *The Times* (ironically another supposed member of the set) in May 1938, in which he completely denied the existence of any plot: 'to link our weekends with any particular clique is as absurd as is the allegation that those of us who desire to establish better relations with Germany are pro-Nazis or pro-Fascists.'⁷⁴ Nancy, who probably due to her sex had been vilified more than the other members, also wrote to the *News Chronicle* and the *Daily Herald*, as well as an article in an American newspaper *The Saturday Evening Post*, denying the existence of any set. Lord Lothian also denied the allegations in early 1938, showing foresight and cementing his place as anti-Fascist before it became politically expedient to do so.⁷⁵ Indeed, the fact that both Waldorf Astor and Lothian denied the allegations before the Munich Crisis adds to the argument that they were working for British interests and were not pro-Nazi. Furthermore, they cleverly used the press to refute a story that had been conceived by the press. Writing to *The Times* gave them substantial reach and ensured that their side of the story became public knowledge.

Nancy felt vindicated in 1945 when she discovered that she had been placed on the Gestapo's 'Black List' of people who would have immediately been arrested had the Germans occupied Britain.⁷⁶ She always argued that her guest lists were composed to bring a variety of different people together and that she could not possibly agree with each person who crossed her threshold. She claimed, 'I am too impulsive to plot or even to plan ahead.'⁷⁷ Despite the evidence that suggests Nancy was not guilty of plotting against the government or of being involved in any other nefarious dealing with the Nazis, her name has forever been tarnished. Most of the set were male and yet, it is Nancy who has been vilified most often. Indeed, a statue of Nancy in her seat of Plymouth was graffitied with the word 'Nazi' as recently as 2020.⁷⁸ Judith Rowbotham stated in a BBC News article that Lady Astor was never a supporter of Nazism and that 'she was one of many people at the time who hoped to avoid war because women and children always suffer most in war.' Rowbotham continued by stating that the claims had 'more to do with misogyny and ignorance than reality.'⁷⁹ Furthermore, Cliveden House itself is most often mentioned in connection with scandal: the Cliveden Set and the later Profumo Affair. For many who were wary of, or even prejudiced towards, the upper classes, the allegations of a pro-fascist plot constructed at Cliveden was all too believable.⁸⁰ Nancy's son Michael argued that the real damage caused by the allegations was that they helped solidify the German belief that the pro-German faction in Britain was more powerful than it was. Fort has argued that this might have increased the risk of war, though thankfully for the British, Ribbentrop came to the realisation that the aristocracy might not possess the power he had initially imagined.⁸¹

Conclusion

The late 1930s were a time of rapid political change and social uncertainty as Britain dealt with the death of George V, the Abdication of Edward VIII, and the ascension of George

VI. She was a nation moving ever closer to global war and clashes between different ideologies were at their height. Gottlieb and Toye highlighted that historians have often treated 1928, when full suffrage for women was achieved, as an endpoint. They assert that this is a misleading argument as voting reforms have continued throughout the twentieth century, with some of the most recent occurring in 2014 during the Scottish Referendum on independence.⁸² Likewise, women did not automatically become equal in all regards, with the marriage barrier still in place in certain sectors, equal pay a far-off reality and great disparity between the achievements of women of different classes. The atmosphere of Westminster was one of uncertainty and country houses offered a welcome relief, particularly at the weekends. Furthermore, the country house provided a safe refuge away from the prying eyes of the press and enabled women to orchestrate affairs and host prominent politicians and diplomats. As argued by Chalus, if we expand our knowledge of political culture to include social politics, we gain a better understanding of the functions of power in interwar Britain.⁸³

Power was not confined to Westminster and Whitehall and the elites ensured that it maintained relevance in the private houses of the nation's aristocracy. Country houses provided meetings and negotiations with privacy and a welcome respite from scrutiny. Politicians travelled to country houses to advance their careers and plan the nation's future. Members of the Royal Family retreated away from the public gaze in pursuit of seclusion. Yet, the distance never offered complete privacy, with the mass media finding ways to intrude. Wallis Simpson first learned of Fort Belvedere through the press and her relationship with Edward would eventually be reported and scrutinised, leading to a constitutional crisis and the necessity to abandon their beloved Fort. Wallis's role as hostess was itself controversial and contributed to the biggest constitutional crisis of the twentieth century. In her position as a female politician and political hostess, Nancy Astor was a target for an unscrupulous journalist, who lacking solid facts, saw fit to fabricate them. Nancy maintained that had she agreed with everyone who had visited Cliveden, she would have to be 'a lightning quick-change artist.'⁸⁴ As a major political hostess, Nancy entertained those of all political affiliations, nationalities, and backgrounds. Despite multiple attempts to clear her name, Nancy's reputation would forever be marred. Likewise, Wallis published her own autobiography, which naturally paints a sympathetic picture and presents the Abdication as a great love story. Yet, her actions in the lead-up to the Abdication continue to be a matter of great debate.

These two case studies merely tap the surface of the ways in which elite women used their newfound societal freedoms to reshape their lives. They were at the very centre of country house life, acting as hostesses, running large houses with multiple servants, in fact fulfilling the role of a manager. In the process, whether deliberately or inadvertently, they came to disrupt the idyllic *Country Life* image of the country house, the one in which women were domestic angels whose only purpose was to raise children and ensure that the drawing room looked pretty. They were entertaining the titans of society and politics, while creating the perfect breeding grounds for scandal and controversy. It has been highlighted that country houses are often criticised for 'conservative, if not reactionary, imagery and symbolism.'⁸⁵ Scandals linked to political extremism, especially right-wing extremism, are likely to provoke further antipathy. In recent years, Cliveden House has taken on a new lease of life as a country house hotel, catering to wealthy guests as well as

hosting an annual literary festival. On the other hand, Fort Belvedere has never recovered from the events of December 1936.

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There is something deeply ironic about this as Wallis undoubtedly was a social climber. However, she did not fawn over royalty as others did, nor was she afraid to speak her mind.

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