



La duquesa de Marlborough: Una rica heredera americana en los salones de la aristocracia inglesa de principios del siglo XX

Consuelo Vanderbilt Balsan, María José Delgado Sánchez (Translator)

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A new edition of Consuelo Vanderbilt Balsan's memoir—the story of the "real" Lady Grantham of *Downton Abbey*

Consuelo Vanderbilt was young, beautiful, and heir to a vast fortune. She was also in love with an American suitor when her mother chose instead for her to marry an English Duke. She sailed to England as the Duchess of Marlborough in 1895 and took up residence in her new home—Blenheim Palace. She was the real American heiress who lived long before *Downton Abbey*'s Lady Grantham arrived.

Mme. Balsan is an unsnobbish and amused observer of the intricate hierarchy both upstairs and downstairs and a revealing witness to the glittering balls, huge weekend parties, and major state occasions she attended or hosted chronicling her encounters with every important figure of the day—from Queen Victoria, Edward VII and Queen Alexandra to Tsar Nicholas and the young Winston Churchill.

This richly enjoyable memoir is a revealing portrait of a golden age now being celebrated every week behind the doors of *Downton Abbey*.

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From Reader Review La duquesa de Marlborough: Una rica heredera americana en los salones de la aristocracia inglesa de principios del siglo XX for online ebook

Kim says

What a wonderful "sleeper" book! I say sleeper because when I purchased this, I didn't expect more than the shallow musings of a life spent attending and giving parties. I was wrong! This American Duchess whom I had never heard of, led an adventurous life. Through her wealth and altruistic nature she undoubtedly affected future generations for the better.

She lived through significant historical changes, from circulating in royal circles during the reign of Queen Victoria, to championing women's suffrage, to escaping war torn France with her husband. She has imparted her memoirs in an easy to read and entertaining manner. Her candid impressions of prominent historical figures are engaging. Her recollections of Winston Churchill are among my favorites.

This book by a Duchess heretofore unknown to me, is fraught with great historical moments, a good explanation of the customs and protocol of English nobility, and a reminder that things are not as they appear. From the outside looking in, I'm sure Consuelo Vanderbilt Balsan was the object of envy and jealousy by many. However, her early years were far from the fairytale many imagined her life to be.

I thoroughly enjoyed this. The author imparts her memoirs in such an intimate way, that the reader feels as if they are walking beside her, having the privilege of exclusive audience with the American Duchess. This is a book in which I happily immersed myself, but felt a pang of sadness upon finishing. The Duchess is such a character that I will miss the daily reads of her exploits. She is someone I believe I would have liked.

PS--I think that fans of the Downtown Abbey series will particularly enjoy this book.

Angie says

I've seen this book and its author take some rather harsh, and I believe unwarranted, criticism. Granted, I have a particular interest in the history of the Vanderbilts and this is the fourth or fifth book I've read involving their legacy, so I was already familiar with some of what Mrs. Balsan relates here. However, referring to her as "snobbish" simply because of her use of formal English and rather common French idioms says more about the would-be "critic" rather than any hubris of the writer's.

I very much enjoyed Consuelo's writing style, managing to impart her struggles and passions without buying into the "poor little rich girl" narrative with which the world sought to burden her. She never seeks to invoke pity. I also found that she manages to talk about tireless work and great accomplishments in philanthropy without a hint of self-aggrandizement. In her world of such extreme comfort, she found true meaning in helping others.

Another frequent complaint about The Glitter and the Gold is that too much of it reads like a list of famous people the former Duchess met and entertained. Where I do find some of these passages to be a little tedious, "knowing your Vanderbilt history" comes in handy. I also think it would've been interesting to hear more

about her feelings during some of the well-known and public events in her life. However, this is someone for whom publishing the more painful and salacious details would have been untoward. I think the Downton Abbey craze helps sales of books like these but then also condemns them to undue criticism when the "story" doesn't move along like a romance novel. The Countess of Carnarvon's books on Highclere Castle are great examples of this: much of the real (and very interesting) history of Highclere can be found in the plot of the tv show, but people find the books "boring" because they're not "juicy" enough.

My suggestion, for anyone truly interested in the history and culture of this period or this family, is to read "Alva and Consuelo Vanderbilt" first. I think that book gives a far more complete picture and that this book makes a nice supplement to it. Overall, a very enjoyable read.

Georgette says

A beautiful story!

BAM The Bibliomaniac says

I'm a tad confused. In other books, I've read how absolutely miserable Consuelo's marriage was, but there is no mud racking in this autobiography. Amazing how within a couple of generations spurned ex wives would so willingly spill their dirty laundry for all the works to read

Judy says

On PBS.org, Jessica Fellowes wrote about Downton Abbey: "Americans may have picked up on the reference to the Marlboroughs – the marriage, or rather, divorce, between Consuelo Vanderbilt and the Duke of Marlborough. You can read more in her autobiography, *The Glitter and the Gold* – it is a gripping tale of an unhappy marriage in the Edwardian era." This prompted me to borrow *The Glitter and the Gold* from the library; I quickly learned how realistic the BBC series is about American and British aristocracy during the Gilded Age and after. The book includes interesting photos, including a lavish family portrait by John Singer Sargent. <http://www.jssgallery.org/Paintings/D...>

Jessica says

More of a listing of people and events, but an interesting product of her time.

Louise says

A very interesting book. As a Downton Abbey fan, I found the real life goings on of Consuelo Vanderbilt very intriguing. I'm mystified that there weren't more beheadings. Actually I'm surprised that we aren't still beheading people today. The flagrant unfair distribution of the wealth and disregard for our fellow man is

sickening no matter which century it occurs. Consuelo did a very good job of retelling her life. I'm impressed. This book gets an 8 on my 10 scale.

Linda says

Consuelo Vanderbilt's memoir tells the story of a famed trans-Atlantic marriage where the wealthy bride was sold to the bidder with the best title, the 9th Duke of Marlborough. The bride was famously locked in her room in the weeks before the wedding. This is a fascinating look at the world of titled European families in the last years of the 19th century up to the beginning of WWII. For those with money it seemed to be a world of snobbery, rigid hierarchy, obsessive attention to pointless details, and lives mostly lived to maintain the system. Though Vanderbilt criticizes much that she saw and was part of, she never left that life totally behind — even though she spent significant parts of her life working for women's suffrage, and assorted social and health programs to aid women and children. A book that never really revealed its subjects thoughts and emotions where her own life was concerned. She was too much a child of her time to tell tales, especially about herself and her family.

Sarah Beth says

This is Consuelo Vanderbilt's memoir, the tale of her life in her own words. Born in 1877, Consuelo was the great-granddaughter of Commodore Vanderbilt, the founding father of the wealth that made the family famous. Consuelo grew up in great luxury but with a rigid and authoritarian mother who achieved her crowning ambition for her daughter by marrying her off (against Consuelo's will) to the Duke of Marlborough. As Consuelo relates, the marriage was not a success from the beginning and ultimately the marriage was annulled. Consuelo accomplished significant social work through her connections and wealth and enjoyed a happy and loving second marriage as well as the company of family and friends, many of whom are famous and easily recognizable names.

Although I was disappointed that Consuelo is relatively close-lipped about her first marriage, this is hardly surprising given that this is the father of her two sons, who she loved dearly. She is not nearly so circumspect about discussing the harsh childhood she endured under her mother's iron rule - in some cases literally. Consuelo was made to wear a "steel rod" strapped to her spine while she completed her school lessons to improve her posture (11). Consuelo asserts that her mother had a "violent temper that, like a tempest, at times engulfed us all" (5).

Much of Consuelo's account of her life reads like a who's who of British society. She regularly socialized with royalty including the Prince of Wales, was presented to Queen Victoria, visited Tsar Nicholas, and was good friends with Winston Churchill. Indeed, the Prince of Wales was godfather to her oldest son, Blandford and for the coronation of King Edward VII, Consuelo was one of the four duchesses selected by Queen Alexandra to be her canopy bearers. It is evident from Consuelo's descriptions that she found the social obligations, particularly the endless wardrobe changes and household management entailed with entertaining royal guests exhausting and all consuming. She sounds much more passionate about the extensive time she devoted to social work, as she spent years championing the cause of women and children. She opened homes for wives of the incarcerated, helped establish hospitals for mothers to improve pre and post-natal care, and appealed for the rights of workers of sweatshops.

However, despite the value of reading of Consuelo's life in her own words, this reads much as it is: the musings of an elderly woman with relatively little background information or context provided. I found Amanda Stuart's biography of Consuelo and her mother immensely more informative than this memoir. Consuelo provides little to no history of her family and skirts around issues she would rather not discuss at length (most notably her relationship with her first husband). She also fails to discuss key figures throughout the narrative. For instance, she mentions her brothers in the opening chapters and only again refers to them to summarize their lives in the final chapters. Additionally, the memoir concludes quite abruptly, with her escape from Europe in 1940, with no mention of her life after that time. In sum, this read was interesting for those who may already have some knowledge of Consuelo Vanderbilt but would serve as a poor introduction to her.

wade says

I am totally conflicted about this book. It is republished from the original in 1953. It is the autobiography of most of the life of a woman whose family is partial heirs to the Cornelius Vanderbilt fortune. At age 17 Consuelo has an arranged marriage to the Duke of Marlborough in England. It has been reprinted because of the success of the Downton Abbey series on PBS.

What I liked was the incite into the heads to the very, very wealthy of the late 1800's and early 1900's. You meet royalty and important people by the score. You enjoy their formal dinners and their ball. People like Churchill keep popping up at these gatherings. But, even with all the wealth her marriage fails and we are told her second marriage is a much happier one.

What I didn't enjoy was her constant name dropping of royals and others many times with very little explanation about who they were. Also, this is a woman who has a life others only dream about not because of her own talent but only because of her family. Although later in life she does help orphans and sick kids but in general it is a guiltless life of privilege. She has no problem using her wealth to help flee the Nazis from France in the 1940's. I am reading an ARC so the only visual aid is her photo in the front cover. I truly hope that in the published edition in October they will have photos of the important people in her life. The book is worth reading to be sure but it is a flawed work in many ways.

Claudia Banks says

Consuelo Vanderbilt had an amazing life. The Glitter and the Gold gives a look into the days of one of the most famous women of American and English turn of the century aristocracy. Even though she grew up in some of the most famous houses on Fifth Avenue, Newport (RI) and England, her childhood was a sad one. She had the misfortune of having Alva Vanderbilt as her mother. Alva was a strong, selfish and ruthless mother. In fact, she locked away Consuelo and kept her prisoner until she agreed to marry the arrogant and violent Duke of Marlborough. Consuelo disliked the big mansions -- especially Marble House (how could she!!!!) In the end, however, she was able to find true love with Jacques Balsan. The writing is a bit awkward, but somehow adds to the veracity. Even when describing terrible treatment, Vanderbilt-Balsan retains the understated tact of an aristocrat. Interesting read.

❀?Rory?❀ says

This was a fascinating look at how the 1% lived at the turn of the twentieth century, including an interesting description of Winston Churchill as a young man.

Consuelo Vanderbilt Balsan was the American born wife of the 9th Duke of Marlborough. She was a member of the immensely rich Vanderbilt family and her cruel and ambitious mother arranged her marriage to an English duke who needed money to repair his house and pay his bills. An intelligent, well meaning, and kind lady, Consuelo did a great deal of charity work and took it seriously; treating everyone she met with respect.

However, the entitlement, arrogance, stupidity and selfishness of her husband, and many of the titled and Royal people she knew was sickening. They were especially repulsive because they lacked the noblesse oblige and dedication to public service that could have acted as a counter balance to their privilege. I do understand that they were a product of their times and some would say they didn't know any better, but at the same time, this environment produced the energy, brilliance and ambition of Winston Churchill and a dedication to duty and charity in Consuelo Vanderbilt Balsan. Dare I say that their American blood had something to do with it? Yes, I will, though I am a dedicated Anglophile.

Lisa says

I would have given this book 5 stars, but I found out while reading that it was ghost written, and not fully by the author. I was very impressed by the writing and the matter-of-fact descriptions of a sometimes depressing childhood and early marriage of an American heiress who becomes the Duchess of Marlborough, has her obligatory two male heirs and then finds true love with a Frenchman.

The biography/memoir is beautifully written and my love for stories like Wharton's The Buccaneers makes me want to find this book for my own bookshelves.

Pete Sharon says

I think I'd enjoy a third person biography of Consuelo Vanderbilt-- I get the sense that there's a lot more to the story than she herself presents it. Fun for fans of the gilded age, but for the most part not too exciting: the frivolity of the London season is so tiring; weekend hunting parties at Blenheim palace are ever so tiring for the hostess; etc. Then, in the last twenty pages, the story becomes completely and unexpectedly gripping as the author and her husband are trying to get out of the way of the Nazi invasion of France. A decent read all in all, if a bit slack toward the middle.

Linda Lipko says

Oh, poor little Consuelo! When reading this book, I didn't know if I should throw it against the wall, or simply muddle through to see if there were any redeeming qualities about poor little rich girl. Alas, I found none!

Self absorbed, she pats herself on the back for dividing the food in the tins given to the poor. Others, she notes, simple through all the left over food in the container mixing it all together. This indeed, was her claim to fame.

Of course, she hated her domineering mother who locked her in her room, forbidding her to come out until she agreed to marry the title Duke of Marlborough. Finally, when she agreed, she was whisked away to England to a life in Blenheim palace.

Hobnobbing with little Winston Churchill and his mother, there are pages and pages about the families who snipped and sneered.

There were way too many pages of who (royalty), when (always) and how (in high style) gliding their way throughout the glamourous balls.

I should have stopped reading at 50 pages, but after visiting New Port, RI often and touring the homes, I thought this book would be interested.

Not recommended. Save your time and money for something worthwhile. Or, if you buy it, donate it to the poor and be like Consuelo, give yourself a hearty dose of self congratulation for sharing!
