



The Secret Rooms: A True Story of a Haunted Castle, a Plotting Duchess, and a Family Secret

Catherine Bailey

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For fans of *Downton Abbey*: the enthralling true story of family secrets and aristocratic intrigue in the days before WWI

After the Ninth Duke of Rutland, one of the wealthiest men in Britain, died alone in a cramped room in the servants' quarters of Belvoir Castle on April 21, 1940, his son and heir ordered the room, which contained the Rutland family archives, sealed. Sixty years later, Catherine Bailey became the first historian given access. What she discovered was a mystery: The Duke had painstakingly erased three periods of his life from all family records—but why? As Bailey uncovers the answers, she also provides an intimate portrait of the very top of British society in the turbulent days leading up to World War I.

The Secret Rooms: A True Story of a Haunted Castle, a Plotting Duchess, and a Family Secret Details

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From Reader Review The Secret Rooms: A True Story of a Haunted Castle, a Plotting Duchess, and a Family Secret for online ebook

Pink says

This started out so well and with such promise...."a castle filled with intrigue, a plotting duchess and a mysterious death"

I was hooked from the first page. What was the big mystery? I loved finding out as Catherine Bailey picked away at clues, painstakingly researching this very well written book. Then about halfway through I began to suspect that we'd never really learn the truth. There were too many gaps in the letters, too much of a cover up of events long past. The little facts that were gleaned, were by that time very disappointing.

What started out as an eager "What happened, what happened, what happened?" turned into a disappointed "Oh, was that it?"

Laura says

Page 28:

Whatever it was that kept the Duke closeted in his secret rooms in the last hours of his life haunted his family too. Shortly after he died, his son, Charles, the 10th Duke of Rutland, closed them. In 1999, almost sixty years later, they were finally opened to outsiders. Today, only a handful of people have been inside them.

Page 58:

Had I stumbled across something? Was there a link between the missing war letters and whatever it was the family had wanted to hide?

Page 59:

Briefly, I explained what I had discovered: how, after 6 July 1915, until December of that year, there was a large gap in the family's correspondence, and that the start of this void coincided with the date John's war diary had stopped.

Page 99:

I focused on the three missing periods. There was the gap in the summer of 1915 when John had been on the Western front, and which had begun with the blank pages in his war diary. Then there was the one in the summer of 1909 - the year he was at the embassy in Rome. The third gap - in 1894 - was the most mysterious of all. The bought that John had felt compelled to cover up an event in his childhood was disquieting.

In order to avoid spoilers, I won't add anything else concerning the Rutland's family secrets.

The author made a meticulous research work involving the reader in this suspenseful book.

I am looking forward for her first book written, The Black Diamonds.

NY Times review.

Anne says

Catherine Bailey visited Belvoir Castle with the intention of writing about the part played by the Rutland family and the workers from the estate during the First World War. When she started to do her research she stumbled upon a mystery that had been hidden for many years, once she started to delve, she came across a story that has now become the focus of this book - a completely different book to that which she had planned, but one that is incredibly detailed and often reads like a fiction novel.

In the opening chapters, the ninth Duke of Rutland; John Manners is dying. For the last few years of his life he has shut himself away in the 'secret rooms' amongst the servant's quarters on the ground floor of Belvoir Castle. These rooms were cramped, with no luxuries at all, so different from the sumptuous suites on the upper floors of the Castle. After John's death, his son sealed off the rooms and until Catherine Bailey arrived to do her research, no one else had entered them.

The Duke was a strange and solitary man throughout his life, he collected and catalogued items constantly including birds eggs, photographs, and most importantly, the family correspondence going back hundreds of years. As the author carefully made her way through the thousands of letters kept in the rooms, she found that there were three periods of John's life that were missing, these were from 1894, 1909 and 1915. Everything else had been carefully catalogued including the estate accounts, so what had happened to John during these times of his life that he was determined to erase?

John was the second son of Henry, the 8th Duke of Rutland and his wife Violet. Their first born son Haddon tragically died at the age of 9. Haddon's death occurs at the time of the first batch of missing correspondence in 1894. John, aged just 7 at the time, was sent away from home immediately after the funeral to live with his Uncle Charles - his mother Violet could not bear to look at him and Haddon was deeply mourned by his parents. Violet's apparent cruelty, neglect and lack of compassion to her second son continues throughout his life, not once did his parents visit him when he was sent away to school and it was not until he was due to go to France as an Army officer in the Great War that they began to take notice of him again. It was not that they feared for John's safety, it was purely because they needed the Rutland name to be continued and the Belvoir Estate to remain in the family. Violet's manipulating and pressurising of leading Army figures is astonishing to read, she comes across as a driven and hard-faced woman who will stop at nothing to get what she desires. John's father Henry was a weak man, more concerned with appearances than with his son's feelings.

It is no wonder that John grew to be a damaged, vulnerable and needy adult. A man who found it difficult to love and to be loved and preferred to surround himself with inanimate objects and who was determined that no one would find out the family secrets. And there are so many secrets uncovered in this story; just how did little Haddon die? Where exactly did John spend most of the war years?

Catherine Bailey is a historian and successful television producer. She has produced a story that is accessible and well written, that reads like a novel but is in fact the whole truth. This is a fascinating look at how the wealthy and titled lived their lives, raised their families and how they behaved on the battle fields and beyond during the Great War. A war that hundreds of thousands of ordinary men never returned from, but a war that Dukes and Lords often looked upon as a bit of a 'jolly' as they tucked into their luxury hampers whilst watching the battles from afar.

The book is beautifully presented, with a detailed family tree, black and white photographs and a plan of Belvoir Castle.

Ghost of the Library says

If I didn't know this was true I would have given sincere congratulations to the author for a very well balanced and inspired tale worthy of a movie adaptation...this reads like a Brideshead Revisited or an Agatha Christie mystery - even if none of the deaths happen on purpose.

The Secret Rooms started, as the author notes, with a very different purpose/topic in mind - to investigate the background of the many that fought and died in WW1, more specifically the men belonging to the estates of the Dukes of Rutland.

However, as CBailey is given access to the family papers, locked away since the 9th Duke's death is 1940, a different story literally falls into her lap and leads her on a journey just as compelling as any Gosford Park or Downton Abbey - only this time its the real deal.

When he died on April 20th 1940 the 9th Duke of Rutland, John, had spent the last years of his life methodically going through his family archives - no one really sure of what exactly he was doing, but so intent on it that he spent his last days locked away in those rooms and died in there.

His son inherits the Dukedom and then proceeds to lock away the Muniment Rooms and its content, until the time that the author comes along to investigate the ties of the family to ww1 and the lifes of the men who fought in it.

Sorting through boxes and boxes and papers she comes across missing pieces of information in the life of the Duke and these end up taking her in a completely different journey through the life of John, 10th Duke of Rutland.

Having become heir to the title by the early, and tragically sad death, of his big brother Haddon, John carries most of his life the guilty of this death and the heavy burden his grief consumed mother and his distant father place on his shoulders.

Intrigued yet?...lol..you should be, i'm not making this one up, I promise!

This reads really well, and makes for a compelling read, especially for anyone interested in british society during WW1 - especially british high society.

The author assumes a secondary role, almost one of simply gathering information, and letting these ghosts of Christmas past do all the talking through the many many letters she uncovered over the course of her research - ah, the wonderful art of proper letter writing...shame its almost gone.

What I found especially interesting was the many passages devoted to WW1, John was involved in it, and through letters and diary extracts we are given a privileged look at a world long gone, but still fascinating and compelling.

I wont go into plot details, I don't want to spoil the fun of reading this one - suffice to say its worth the time and trouble...yes indeed it is!

The style of writing was a times a little tired but nonetheless, the story alone is worth all effort!

Happy Readings!

Teresa says

I don't usually read a lot of non-fiction but something about this story really drew me in and, to use that well-worn cliche, "you couldn't make it up". From a daunting mountain of documents, Catherine Bailey has succeeded in excavating an intriguing and involving true story of one man's life - a very sad story emerges as she fills in the gaps in the life story of John Manners, the 9th Duke of Rutland.

This is a very detailed and extremely well researched account which highlights the immense power held by the Manners family - power which is abused by Violet, John's mother, who is portrayed as a manipulative matriarch, determined to safeguard the future of the family line, at any cost. Could duty to one's family possibly override duty to one's country at a time of war? When you don't have the luxury of "an heir and a spare" does the end justify the means?

Despite John's efforts to cover up events, he hadn't reckoned on the tenacity and investigative skills of Catherine Bailey. It makes you feel quite sorry for some of the aristocracy although that is tempered a lot when you consider the immense numbers of Rutland estate workers who died in the trenches during the Great War. A very engaging and eye-opening read.

Michael says

What the hell was this? No seriously what the hell? At first I was apprehensive about reading this but knowing my reading history, I like to give every book a chance. Unfortunately. I wanted to personally rip out every page of this book and not recycle anything. I did not have a clue what this book was about, does it suppose to be mystery? Ohh creepy, horrific, thrilling right? Puh please this book is abominably bad, not even worth the time or effort. For the life of me, I do not understand why books like this get critically praised, maybe it is not my type of genre or whatever. This book was just atrociously bad, just pathetic!

Diane says

There is a saying: "More money, more problems." After reading this book, I think there should be an addendum for nobility: "More titles, more drama."

"The Secret Rooms" is the story of the 9th Duke of Rutland, John Henry Montagu Manners, and the family secrets he tried to hide. Before John died of pneumonia in April 1940, he locked himself into his archive rooms at Belvoir Castle and would not come out, working ceaselessly on a mysterious project, even against his doctor's orders to rest. After John died, his son closed the rooms and no one was allowed in them for nearly 60 years.

"[John's] obsession with collecting struck me as pathological. The pursuit and ordering of objects appeared to lie at the core of his personality. It seemed to go far beyond mere interest -- it was all-consuming, a

compulsion. It looked as if these collections represented some sort of refuge, a form of escape into a private world. But what had he wanted to escape from?"

In 2008, writer Catherine Bailey was working on a book about World War I and was one of the few who was granted access to the closeted archives, called the Muniment Rooms. While going through family letters and papers, she found several gaps in the collection, as if John had deliberately removed correspondence to try and hide something.* Bailey got on the trail and ended up writing a very different kind of book than what she started. What she found was a lot of family drama, a scandalous coverup, and at the heart of it, a deeply unhappy child. (At one point, my heart broke for sweet little John and I wished I could have given him a hug.)

(view spoiler)

"I was becoming more and more caught up in the mystery behind this man, and starting to follow a different story -- his story. In creating the gaps in his biography, he had erased so much of himself -- and so thoroughly."

There were a lot of things I liked about this book: the inside look at a duke's family; the workings of an English castle; the historical setting; the details of how estate life changed during the Twentieth Century; and some fascinating details about the start of World War I, when John was sent to France.

Bailey mentions the incredible privileges the ducal families were afforded, but she also discusses the immense social pressures they faced. I liked having this humanist perspective on the bookish, introverted John; it seems he would have chosen a very different life for himself if he hadn't been under a tremendous amount of pressure from his parents to live up to his future role as duke.

My complaint about the book was with the writing style. Bailey told the story from her perspective; everything plodded along as she found various letters and clues, and she often closed a chapter with a trite tease, such as: "What I discovered next changed the course of my research entirely." I even wrote ARGH on a post-it to flag such a page. I admit I can be fussy about writing, and other readers might not be bothered at all by the chapter teases -- they might even like them.

I wondered if this book could have been better if Bailey had not told it in first-person, because she sometimes got bogged down in too many *me-me-me* details and descriptions. Could the story have been better told in third person?

Despite this complaint, I was still drawn into the story and was anxious to solve the family mystery (or mysteries, to be more correct). The blurbs for this book usually reference Downton Abbey, and I would agree that fans of that TV show would probably enjoy delving into the real-life drama of an aristocratic family.** I would also recommend it to my fellow Anglophiles, or anyone who likes a good family mystery and historical drama.

My rating: 3.5 stars rounded up to 4

*While reading, frequently I wondered what kind of archivists we are today, with so many communications only in digital texts, emails or in social media. We save so little correspondence in print.

**For those who would like to read more about the American heiresses who married into the British nobility in the late 1800s and early 1900s, I recommend the fascinating book, "To Marry an English Lord" by Gail

MacColl.

Kaethe says

After years of reading fictional gothic horrors, it's kind of a weird delight to discover that there are even stranger things going on in real life. As mentioned in my review of Black Diamonds, I loved it so much I immediately had to get a hold of this, which was her first book.

Baily is an historian who is granted access to the Duke of Rutland's private archive. She's going through these beautifully stored and catalogued collections of letters (so many letters), and there are three gaps. The rest of the book is the painstaking collection of evidence to fill in those gaps and solve those mysteries. It's like watching Sherlock at work, as Bailey describes what she has to find next, and how, only she reveals what she discovers as it comes to light. The process is fascinating, as are the things those people got up to a century ago, not least because where did they find the time to plot and write all those letters?

The most entertaining sort of history. It's amazing, really, how quickly family history can be hidden. Props to the current Duke and Duchess of Rutland, for giving Bailey such access and assistance.

Library copy.

Diane S ? says

3.5 When Catherine Bailey goes to Belvoir Castle in Leicestershire, it was with the intention of writing a book about the impact of World War I, on the Duke of Rutland's estate. Let into rooms that had been closed, the 9th Duke having died in them, she finds a treasure trove of letters and other historical documents, she also finds a mystery. Certain time frames have had all letters and documents from all members of the family excised. The mystery of why is too much to ignore and so the focus of her book changes.

It was very interesting following her as she attempts to piece together the why of the missing documents. Loved following her mind as she makes, at first small, and then larger discoveries. The duke's remaining letters create a vivid picture of the lives and morals of the very top of Edwardian society. From a tragic happening in his youth, to his enlistment in World War I, and his marriage we get a clear glimpse of what life was like for this Duke. Speaking of dysfunctional families, this family had it all. His mother the Duchess was a major=r piece of work, and his father not much better. I did understand and excuse certain things about his father, because he was under enormous pressure to keep up appearances and the large family estate together at a time when all fortunes were declining.

The letters detailing his life in the war and the reason he did not go to the front, were very illuminating. From other letters in his possession and the facts uncovered by the author we get a horrifying look at the War, the battle of Ypres, and the major cost of lives on this estate alone. Over two hundred young and older men would die in the war.

IF I have one complaint I think a few of these letters could have been kept out without a detrimental effect on the story, they sometimes just seemed like overkill. All in all though this is a solid look at lives of the last few Dukes of Rutland and the uncovering of a mystery that was 1/2 century in the making. Also loved that

the author doesn't just end the book but lets us know the fate of all the leading players. Very solid and interesting historical.

Krista says

I am not giving this book any stars because as much as I tried to get into this book each page was a chore to read. Labeled a gothic mystery it should have been labeled a informational documentary. I read the first 45 percent or a little more of this book. I did find the history good, author Catherine Bailey really did her research, the story was interesting me being a history buff. However it read so boring as just informational. The pictures were nice that were in the book. I only wish I had enough muster to read the entire book I however could not bring myself to that much boredom.

I do see on the review thread of this book that it has mixed reviews so this is just one of those hit or miss books. You either love it or not. Me not....

Sdscattergood says

The author drags you along for over 600 pages, promising revelations, secrets revealed, mind boggling suspense. What you get is a dry history full of a largely unsympathetic main character, his aggravating and shrilly selfish mother, and the rest of his detestable family. One of the main "secrets" is never actually even explained, but constantly brought up throughout the book. Excellent reading fodder if you are trapped on a plane with nothing else to do for about eight hours.

Maya Panika says

An absolutely corking tale, better by far than most novels I've read recently. I don't think I've ever read a non-fic book with so many cliff-hangers.

My one and only bug bear (and it is but a small gripe) is with the chapters on the Great War where there is, to my mind, a lot of superfluous detail about the war. Obviously some historical background is necessary, to put the events of John's life into context. I don't think we needed quite so much as we got. I can't help but feel that Catherine Bailey's original intention to write a book about the Belvoir Volunteers - the 'mysterious army of ploughmen, horsemen and field workers', an entire generation lost to the war - meant she found herself with a lot of surplus-to-requirements research on her hands that was such good stuff, she was determined to put it in anyway. It's interesting stuff in its own right, but it's not all pertinent to John's story and it does slow the - otherwise terrific - pace dreadfully.

It is my only complaint and it's a *VERY* small one. In every respect, this is a richly detailed, beautifully (but not overly) descriptive, engaging and *terrifically* well-written biography of a privileged life with more than its fair share of mysteries.

It's a crying shame Ms Bailey never discovered the whole truth about Haddon's death (I so wanted to know!). It seems John covered the details around that particular tragedy far too well.

The Secret Rooms is a wonderfully good read. It's 450 pages long and I read it in 3 days, I just couldn't put it

down. A brilliant book. Highly recommended.

Courtney says

This book bills itself as more riveting than it is. It does have a mystery- three actually- but is limited by the destroyed historical record, made all the more intriguing because it was done by John, the protagonist. Bailey is great at creating tension and suspense, but the pay off is extended and not complete enough. I would recommend reading this book if you know you can finish it in a short period of time; I read it in a week and that pace was even agonizing for the reveal.

Slight spoilers below

- I wish the ending would have had a coda, with the author trying to link all three cuts together.
- When she "solves" the mystery and heads on to the next to "follow a lead" I feel like there should be more resolution, but the nature of the document chain doesn't allow this.

Overall I feel like the book jacket promises more answers than the author could possibly deliver, which taints an otherwise interesting historical account.

Erin says

Find this and other reviews at: <http://flashlightcommentary.blogspot....>

I've been bouncing around thoughts on Catherine Bailey's *The Secret Rooms* for a couple of weeks now, vainly trying to convince myself that I don't know what I want to say when in reality I've just been putting off a review I wasn't in the mood to write. Something about wanting to like a book more than I did, having to rectify deflated expectations against the reality of experience, call me crazy but it just doesn't insight much enthusiasm.

Now, before I get too far ahead of myself I want to say I love the mystery Bailey uncovered at Belvoir Castle. I think it a genuinely authentic intrigue that says a lot about the family's dynamics, society in the early twentieth century, etc. and so on. Honestly, if *The Secret Rooms* were streamlined exclusively to the mystery surrounding John Henry Montagu Manners, 9th Duke of Rutland, and restructured to follow a chronological timeline of his movements, I'd be giving this book four stars if not five, but that's not Bailey's style.

No, Bailey skips back and forth over the established timeline, making it necessary for the reader to piece together events from a chaotic hodgepodge of information and often follows random tangents about flowers, sunlight or minor characters for pages before returning to her central story. She also tends to make mountains out of mole hills, routinely overemphasizing events that are only loosely related to her primary subject and finally, her penchant for repeating herself ad nauseam is more than a little annoying.

Could I overlook the mechanics of the text and focus on Bailey's thesis? Of course, but I can't say I'm particularly inclined to do so. Why? Probably because I felt the same way about Bailey's 2008 release, *Black Diamonds*. Bailey has a nose for unearthing provocatively alluring material, but superior subject matter

aside, her haphazard construction and irregular formatting make her books somewhat tedious and at times, frustratingly incoherent.

DROPPING OUT says

As another reader wrote, "A lot of fuss over nothing." It is, indeed, a well-researched family history, but while the Duke of Rutland was an important figure in English society, he was a vain and shallow man, married to a vain, petty, and scheming harridan, and together they ruined the life of their son.

The first half of the book went quickly, and a sense "mystery" was fueled by mysterious gaps in the family archives. But the last quarter was, I found, sheer slogging as an unearthed cache of a letters unraveled the "mystery" in agonizing detail.

If such were the movers and shakers of Edwardian England, and I suspect, elsewhere in Europe, then it is no wonder that a completely preventable war broke out in 1914.

Knowing what I know now, I do not think I would have ever begun reading the book.
