

Scandalous Behavior in the Eighteenth Century

Privilege and Scandal: The Remarkable Life of Harriet Spencer, Sister of Georgiana

By Janet Gleeson.

Crown/Random House, 2006. xix + 419 pages.

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Reviewed by Christine M. Mitchell.

Janet Gleeson's biography of Lady Henrietta Frances Spencer gives readers a candid look at the life of the "rich and famous" in Regency England. Gleeson depicts a world that we expect to read about in the pages of a celebrity magazine or see in a daytime soap opera. Yet, Henrietta's life was something of a soap opera, from start to finish.

Gleeson traces Henrietta, or Harriet, as she was nearly always known, from her birth in 1761 as the second daughter and youngest child of John and Margaret Georgiana Spencer through her tumultuous love affairs, marriage, and pregnancies, to her unexpected death in 1821. Readers will find that Harriet packed an extraordinary amount of life into 60 years.

Harriet's beauty and intelligence led her into any number of exciting and problematic situations. Her mother, Lady Spencer, cautioned Harriet constantly about the need for respectable behavior and keeping up appearances. However, she paid her mother little heed.

We see Harriet resign herself to marriage to Frederick, Third Earl of Bessborough, a man whom she convinced herself would provide her with a good life. Frederick did give her four children, but he also became increasingly ill-tempered and often chastised Harriet publicly for her actions. Harriet and her sister Georgiana flitted about English society

... something of
a soap opera



with abandon—picking up lovers, dallying in politics, gambling, and going to great lengths (literally and figuratively) to conceal illegitimate pregnancies from their seemingly indifferent husbands.

Harriet spent 1794 to 1804 in an affair with Lord Granville, the love of her life. Together, they had two children and spent many hours discussing politics. Harriet's contentment was short-lived, however. In 1806, her beloved sister died, and soon thereafter, Granville began his search for a suitable woman to marry, as a young man of his status must. Ironically, he chose Harriet's niece, "Harryo" Cavendish, Georgiana's second daughter. His marriage ended the sexual affair, but Harriet and Granville remained emotionally close until her untimely death in 1821.

Harriet spent the remainder of her life involved with her children and grandchildren, all of whom she loved dearly. While on a trip abroad with her husband and family, Harriet became seriously ill after the sudden death of her youngest grandson, Henry. She died less than a fortnight later in Florence. While her detractors were circumspect in their sympathies, Bessborough, her children, admirers, and former lovers were distraught over her death. She was buried next to her beloved sister.

Gleeson's research is plentiful, with citations from over 100 sources, including both published sources and original ones from family and royal documents. She writes with a sympathetic eye toward Harriet as a woman, without either criticizing her numerous peccadilloes or overlooking her inappropriate behavior. As the book draws to a close, Gleeson offers a very brief look at Harriet's life

from the perspective of the twenty-first century, observing that she was a woman before her time in many ways, yet also a woman constrained by and part of her society and its mores.

The biography presents a candid retrospective not only on Harriet's life, but on the lives led by the upper classes of the time. Someone who has read only novels of the period may find the heroines somewhat silly and obsessed with clothing, manners, and society balls, or the men too focused on card games and gambling, or the girls' mothers preoccupied with finding the perfect (i.e., financially suitable) match for their daughters. What *Privilege and Scandal* demonstrates is that these concerns were exactly what took up the time and energy of much of the aristocracy in late eighteenth-/early nineteenth-century England.

Although there is more intrigue, scandal, and real-life tragedy in the story of Harriet Spencer and her coterie, the biography lacks the introspection of the period novels that imitate Harriet's life. We feel for Jane Austen's heroines in a way we do not for Harriet, Georgiana, and their various lovers and children. Perhaps because there is no dialogue to provide introspection, the chapters read like articles in *People* magazine—tales of who is sleeping with whom, who fathered which baby, and who is deepest in debt.

Privilege and Scandal is an interesting examination of the life of Regency nobility with all of their foibles. Through Gleeson's use of personal letters, we learn about lives we could only imagine from another time and place. Yet we should note that the events and actions that seem so removed from our own are played out even today in some social sets. We cannot forget that the Spencer sisters have a famous descendent, known for her own dalliances and intrigues, the late Princess Diana.

For more on the Harriet and her more famous sister, Georgiana, don't miss the film *The Duchess*.

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