

Last of the Duchess(公爵夫人之死)



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Intriguing, suspenseful, and witty, this is the story of journalist and novelist Caroline Blackwood's search for the late Duchess of Windsor. It is also a provocative exploration of the often bizarre connection between heightened celebrity and approaching death--in Blackwood's words, "the fatal effects of myth." First serial to New York Times Magazine.

Novelist and journalist Blackwood has pulled off quite a coup here: she has written a biographical portrait of the late Wallis Simpson, duchess of Windsor, without ever having seen more of her than the outside of her magnificent house near Paris and a murky photograph taken through the window by an Italian paparazzo. In 1980, the Sunday Times of London sent Blackwood to interview the 84-year-old duchess for a piece to run with photographs by Lord Snowdon, Princess Margaret's husband. The assignment was dynamite, but the pair are stopped dead by Suzanne Blum, an 83-year-old eccentric and vitriolic French lawyer known as Maitre Bloom, who identifies so closely with the duchess that her life is a round of suing newspapers, perpetrating both lies and legends of her charge's beauty and good health. Maitre Bloom firmly takes over this book. A few derivative chapters cover the well-known details of Wallis Simpson's early life, but Maitre Bloom shapes every page with her

tantrums and vanities. The portrait is interesting psychologically and one admires this poised effort to salvage an aborted assignment. However, the absence of denouement--neither Blackwood nor Lord Snowden make it past the ferocious protector--makes the reader wonder why she is paying this much attention to a little-known, if complex, eccentric. In the end, one can only feel sorry for both the obsessed and the object of her obsession.

In 1980 when the London Sunday Times commissioned Lord Snowden to photograph the 84-year-old Duchess of Windsor, then living outside of Paris, Blackwood was asked to accompany him as a reporter. Alas, this journalistic scoop was not to be, for blocking all access to the duchess was her lawyer, the fierce and formidable Suzanne Blum. Interviewing such contemporaries of Wallis Simpson as Lady Mosley and Lady Diana Cooper, Blackwood discovered that the octogenarian Maitre Blum, one of France's most powerful attorneys, had complete control over the duchess and her estate. Since Blum kept the ailing duchess isolated in her shuttered mansion, Blackwood could not verify whether Wallis had fallen into a coma, as rumored by her friends, or whether she was still as beautiful and witty as ever, as Blum maintained. And that is this book's problem; offering inconclusive speculations, it reads like the extended Vanity Fair article it should have been. For larger collections.

-Wilda Williams, "Library Journal"

A strange book--no, a fascinating one--about a strange situation. Most everyone knows something of the story of the duke and duchess of Windsor. As King Edward VIII, he gave up the British throne in 1936 to marry American divorcée Wallis Simpson, and they subsequently lived in France as little more than social butterflies. In 1980, novelist Blackwood was asked by the London Sunday Times to write an article about the widowed and elderly duchess of Windsor. Little did Blackwood know that a "total cordon sanitaire of silence" had been thrown up around the duchess by her forbidding lawyer, the infamous Maître Blum. On more than one occasion, Blackwood talked with Blum, but never once was she allowed to visit the duchess herself. Indeed, Blackwood's book about the entire episode is less about the duchess of Windsor than about the cantankerous Blum, who is most definitely an interesting figure in her own right. Blackwood's amazing account of attempting to verify the duchess' state of health in the face of Blum's deterrents--a story that reads almost like a gothic novel--can finally be published now that not only the duchess but also her guard-dog lawyer are both deceased. (The latter actually threatened Blackwood with death if she published a negative word about her famous client!)

Brad Hooper

Daughter of the Marquis and Marchioness of Dufferin and Ava, Lady Carolin Blackwood was born in 1931 and grew up in Northern Ireland. Her first husband, Lucian Freud, whom she married in 1953, has immortalized her youthful beauty in several of his finest portraits; she was later married to the American poet Robert Lowell; she has four children. Her first novel, *The Stepdaughter*, was published in 1967 and won the David Higham Fiction Prize; her last book, *The Last of the Duchess*, was published in 1995. In all, she published five novels, four nonfiction works, and, with Anna Haycraft, an idiosyncratic cookbook entitled *Darling, You Shouldn't Have Gone to So Much Trouble*. Resident in her later years in Sag Harbo, New York, She died in New York City in 1996.

作者介绍:

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