

November 29, 2013

The Help and the Helped

By LEAH PRICE

SERVANTS

A Downstairs History of Britain From the Nineteenth Century to Modern Times

By Lucy Lethbridge

Illustrated. 385 pp. W. W. Norton & Company. \$27.95.

“Downton Abbey” fans may be disappointed to find that Lucy Lethbridge’s lively history of British servants concludes with “Upstairs, Downstairs,” the 1971-75 television series created by the children of a housemaid and an under-butler. On-screen, this costume drama may have looked like a period piece, but behind the scenes, class tensions persisted. Upon arriving at the set, the actors playing the downstairs roles discovered they had been allotted inferior dressing rooms, with showers monopolized by the

actors playing their masters.

The era in which “Downton Abbey” and “Upstairs, Downstairs” are set marked the last gasp of a centuries-old relationship. Until World War I, most Britons either were servants or had servants. Some occupied both roles: Teenagers traditionally learned the trade by waiting on the butler or the housekeeper, and the 10 upper servants who supervised the 80 indoor people staffing the Duke of Portland’s house had 10 under-servants to wait on them. In 1900, domestic service remained the single largest occupation in Britain; over a quarter of the four million women in the work force were servants.

Why then, Lethbridge asks in “Servants,” does E. P. Thompson’s classic “The Making of the English Working Class” refer to domestic workers only three times? One answer is that servile flunkies embarrassed Marxist historians. (With good reason: One valet refused on principle to accept a job offer from the former editor of a Communist newspaper.) Yet servants’ invisibility shouldn’t be blamed entirely on scholars; their lives are hard to document because going unnoticed was their job. Etiquette books even warned domestics not to “breathe heavily” when their masters were in the room. In

some households, staff members were required to turn their faces to the wall when their employer passed.

Servants' absence from the historical record tempts researchers to glean evidence from fiction, although, as Lethbridge points out, writers could be the most neurotic of masters, because the least sure of their own social status. The modernist Katherine Mansfield was so shaken by encountering the "dishonest hateful old creature down in the kitchen" that she had to lie down on the sofa. What good was a room of one's own without the perfect servant to clean it?

Lethbridge, who has written for numerous British publications, draws on literature, not for evidence of how servants really lived but for clues to their masters' attitudes toward them. She also trawls servants' own memoirs for vivid (sometimes catty) accounts of their own lives and their masters'. Seen from below, the ruling classes come across as petty if not obsessive. One employer weighed the vacuum cleaner bag to check up on the housemaid: "A cup and a half of dirt was considered a job well done." Lady's-maids were expected to wash their mistresses' loose change, since no one knew where it had been. Servants themselves didn't have the luxury of cleanliness: Maids' uniforms were dark to hide stains, and their laundry was consigned to a different, less skilled, laundress than their masters'. In one household, a third-ranking laundress was assigned to the lower servants' clothes, along with the masters' and upper servants' towels.

As late as World War II, even country-house air raid shelters were organized by rank, from "First cellar: . . . Wilton carpet, upholstered armchairs, . . . a ration of best bitter chocolate, . . . a Chinese lacquer screen concealing an 18th-century commode," down to "Third cellar: for chauffeur, boot-boy, gardeners . . . a wooden bench, wooden table, an electric bell connected with first cellar in case owner should wish to summon masculine moral support, . . . no screen."

Household service provides Lethbridge with a window into almost every corner of social history. The labor market drove fashion: High-maintenance Victorian outfits flaunted the fact that you had servants to lace you up. And class tensions shaped house layouts, whether by multiplying corridors in the 18th century or eliminating them in the 20th. The upstairs, downstairs arrangement alluded to in Lethbridge's subtitle is newer than you might

think. Medieval households dined at the same table, and in the 17th century Pepys took for granted that servants would join in their masters' games. Only in the 19th century did the middle class's newfound desire for privacy force servants to walk up and down back staircases from the attic where they slept to the basement where they cooked.

With servants no longer sleeping at the foot of their masters' beds, dumbwaiters and pneumatic speaking tubes came onto the scene. Modern apartment buildings literally put the cook on a level with diners; eventually, mistresses sick of eavesdroppers or short of funds sought out flats small enough to be managed without help. In the suburbs, meanwhile, the postwar open-plan kitchen made the labor of cooking more visible, until takeout and pre-washed salad pushed prep work offstage once more.

Most of all, master-servant etiquette reflects the collapse of social deference. Sometimes Lethbridge is able to trace these changes within a single diarist's lifetime. One housemaid started her job in 1939 addressing as Sir and Madam the employers who called her Mary Ann; by the end of the war she was calling them Dr. and Mrs. Mere and being called Mrs. Mann, and a few years later she was addressing her master simply as Dick. Equally revealing is the march of new coinages like "babysitter" (an Americanism that implied social equality between the girl next door and her employers), "houseworker" (a professionalizing euphemism that never caught on) and "au pair."

After World War II, commentators predicted that the welfare state would conspire with electric appliances to kill off domestic service. By 1947, 94 percent of households surveyed employed no help, and between 1951 and 1961 the number of domestic servants halved. However, Lethbridge's story ends with a twist. Since 1978, household expenditure on domestic service has quadrupled, bringing the absolute number of domestics in London back to Victorian levels, according to some estimates. One explanation is growing income inequality, not only within post-Thatcher Britain but between countries. Servants have always been migrants, whether farm girls streaming into London, refugees from Nazism or, today, nannies from the Philippines, where raising someone else's offspring on a different continent may be the only way to pay your own child's tuition. For drawing-room and basement, we've substituted North and South.

This isn't to say that history is repeating itself. These new domestic workers' lives are less intimately entwined with their masters'; they're less likely to live in, and where one Victorian household could employ dozens of servants, today's hourly cleaner patches together a living from dozens of jobs. Lethbridge conveys these changes through dry statistics, whereas the few surviving valets come to life in personal anecdotes. The absence of comparably vivid stories of charladies is hardly her fault: Just as aristocrats leave more records than ordinary people, so do aristocrats' servants. Besides, the lifestyles of the rich and famous make for good reading: There's less to say about linoleum scrubbed with Lysol than about mosaic floors swabbed by hand with milk.

Lethbridge's final chapters draw on the kiss-and-tell biographies issued after World War II by aristocrats' manservants. And she ends with Chinese oligarchs hiring British butlers: tradition for export. Lethbridge's own tone remains torn between outrage at the upper classes who treated human beings like tools and fascination with the exotic rituals of their stately homes. Our scorn for their learned helplessness may mask envy.

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