

A COMMONER'S TOUCH

Kate Middleton's dazzling social high-jump—from the pretty middle-class daughter of self-made millionaires to the future queen of England—is spectacular. But singular? Not really, says historian **Amanda Foreman**, who argues that Middleton's climb to the top is actually part of a centuries-old—and very (gasp!) American—tradition.

Illustration David Hughes

For Americans, there is something undeniably familiar about Kate Middleton, the 29-year-old who, on April 29, will become the wife of Britain's Prince William. And although it's partly her polished appearance—her perfect, impossibly straight white teeth and glossy hair—that strike a chord stateside, there's something else about her that seems recognizable as well.

So what is it? It's not, of course, that Middleton is actually, secretly American; in fact, she's never set foot in this country. But she does represent a sort of story that is both familiar and treasured in America: that of the commoner who, through pluck and charm and determination, transcends her middle-class origins to win the heart of a future king. Before she and William met at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, Middleton may have been a student at the pricey and socially prestigious Marlborough College, the alma mater of her future cousin-in-law Princess Eugenie, but despite her grand education she is really the daughter of up-by-their-bootstraps parents, members of the newly wealthy.

It's a narrative with a long tradition—and, as it turns out, a very American one indeed. Although

Middleton may be the first *British* commoner to marry so spectacularly into the upper echelons of British royalty, she is preceded by two centuries of American women who, armed only with their beauty, charm, and new money, periodically sailed to England to find husbands—and in doing so collectively helped save the nobility from its own encroaching irrelevance. It's something that Middleton now has the chance to do for the British monarchy itself.

The tawdry history of Edward VIII's marriage to Mrs. Wallis Simpson (the Baltimore-born divorcée) aside, the first Americans to marry into British aristocratic circles were, much like Middleton herself, confident of their position and eligibility in any marriage market. Like Middleton they were beautiful, educated, and the first generation of their families to be raised with money. (Her parents live in Oak Acre, a \$2.5 million mock-Georgian house in the affluent village of Bucklebury, Berkshire, and own an online party supply business, Party Pieces.)

The original alliance, the one that started it all, united Anne Louise Bingham and

Alexander Baring, the first Baron Ashburton, in 1798. Bingham was the younger and prettier daughter of Senator William Bingham, the richest man in Pennsylvania and one of the co-founders of the Bank of North America. By marrying the wildly ambitious Ashburton, the head of Barings, Britain's oldest merchant bank, she was also responsible for the first transatlantic corporate merger.

The women who followed in Bingham's wake were no less wealthy. One of the most dazzling American-British marriages of the time was Helen Magruder's nuptials to the third Baron Abinger in 1863. Although Magruder was not as rich as her predecessors, her personal story contained more than enough romance and tragedy to seduce British society. Her father was a naval officer from the South, and her uncle was the Confederate victor of the Battle of Galveston. Any doubts that London society might have entertained about the Southern belle were dispelled once Queen Victoria pronounced her to be “a beautiful creature.” The queen even stayed with them at their castle, Inverlochy—a mixed blessing—during one of her annual Highland tours.

Fig:2. GROOM:



These early American invasions into the higher echelons of society taught a valuable lesson to the British. Not only was the aristocracy forced to accept that upbringing could make a lady just as much as breeding, it also realized that there was something about these newcomers that set them apart from traditional women. They were independent without being rebellious, confident without being arrogant. To the British, theirs was a wholly modern way of behaving—albeit one whose merits they had yet to accept.

By the late 19th century, the trend had gained even more momentum as oil, mining, railroads, and construction fueled the greatest period of economic growth in American history. Known as the Gilded Age, it was the era of the first plutocratic tycoons and the robber barons, such as the Rockefellers, Dukes, Harrimans, Fricks, and Goulds, whose insatiable desire to create

empires crushed all before them. In response to these newcomers, Mrs. William Backhouse Astor Jr.—the Mrs. Astor—and her sidekick Ward McAllister, a Savannah native whose lilting Southern accent hid his predilection for malicious gossip under a thin veneer of charm,

unwittingly encouraged the trend when they tried to regulate New York high society. In 1872, McAllister, William Astor, his brother John Jacob Astor III, and 22 other self-proclaimed blue bloods (each selected by McAllister) formed a social committee known as the Patriarchs. Three times a year the committee held a gala in Delmonico's in New York, to which each Patriarch was allowed to invite just 25 people. The purpose was to keep the newly rich from insinuating themselves into the ranks of those whose families had been free from trade—meaning all professions except the law or banking—for at least two generations. McAllister and Mrs. Astor succeeded so well that they drove the nouveau riche to seek social acceptance abroad. As far as the Europeans were concerned, all Americans were alike; it didn't matter how many generations separated the Astors (who made their first fortune in the fur trade) from the Vanderbilts (who had made theirs from railroads). Their money had the same ability to rescue great estates from the iron grip of high taxes and declining agricultural profits.

It was the 19th-century British aristocracy's inability to distinguish or care about the finer gradations of self-made fortunes that enabled the exotic Jennie Jerome, daughter of New York financier Leonard Jerome, to marry Lord Randolph Churchill, the younger son of the seventh Duke of Marlborough and a rising statesman in the Conservative Party. (The small detail of Churchill's large debts was obscured by the glittering political future thought to be ahead of him.) Two years later the ravishing and even more exotic Consuelo Yznaga del Valle, the daughter of a Cuban sugar mill owner and a Southern heiress, married Viscount Mandeville, the future Duke of Manchester. Yznaga had been raised on a Louisiana plantation before being taken in her teens to New York, where her family did not fit easily into society; she was sniffed at until her illustrious marriage in 1876. Suddenly, a British husband, preferably one with a title and a significant estate, became the latest must-have accessory for the daughters of America's early tycoons. It was, after all, the most immediate path to social acceptability and legitimacy. A duke was obviously the best catch, followed by a marquis, then an earl, a viscount, and finally a mere baron. Baronets were a last resort.

These marriages were not happy ones of the sort depicted in the recent, critically acclaimed television series *Downton Abbey*, in which an

American heiress marries an English lord. The 22-year-old Duke of Manchester was a lying, lazy spendthrift who fled England to escape his creditors. Marriage, even to the sensual Yznaga, failed to change his ways, and as soon as his wife produced a son, he disappeared into a life of drunken excess, never bothering to contact her except when his allowance was late. Randolph and Jennie, on the other hand, married for love, but their union was doomed by his inexorable descent into syphilis-induced insanity (an occupational hazard for the young man-about-town before condoms and antibiotics), which ended in their eventual disgrace and bankruptcy. They did, however, manage to produce Winston, Eng-

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land's greatest prime minister and statesman—and arguably the most superb outcome of these alliances.

By 1894 more than 80 titled aristocrats had American wives. The following year another nine were added to the list. The most celebrated of these weddings was that of Consuelo Vanderbilt (Consuelo Yznaga's goddaughter) to the ninth Duke of Marlborough at St. Thomas Church on Fifth Avenue in New York. The duke was facing ruin, and the bride was under the sway of her forceful mother, Alva Vanderbilt, who had sworn to defeat her social rival, Mrs. Astor. The Vanderbilts had been dismissed by the Astors as parvenus because their \$60 million fortune had been amassed only in the mid-19th century, whereas the first John Jacob Astor had made *his* money two generations earlier. (The fact that Mrs. Astor's husband William had doubled his father's wealth by becoming a notorious slumlord was somehow



THE MARRYING TYPES Jennie Jerome (top), Winston Churchill's mother, married into nobility in 1874. So did fellow American heiress Consuelo Vanderbilt (right), with C.Z. Guest in 1955), who wed the Duke of Marlborough in 1895.

considered less *déclassé* than the money that had come from the Vanderbilt railroads.) Every year Mrs. Astor pointedly excluded the Vanderbilts from the Patriarch balls, until Alva retaliated by holding at her new \$3 million Fifth Avenue manse the most sumptuous costume ball ever seen in New York. Invitations were sent out to 1,200 guests—but not to Mrs. Astor. The excitement over the ball was matched only by Mrs. Astor's embarrassment at not being invited to it. After 13 years of pretending that Alva didn't exist, Mrs. Astor swallowed her pride and paid a courtesy call to the Vanderbilt chateau. An invitation followed the next day.

Alva's swan-necked daughter dutifully produced an heir (and a spare) to the Duke of Marlborough, but it took less than a decade for the excitement of running Blenheim Palace to dull—although not before her money was used to make over the entire western side of the building. In 1905 the bored duchess shocked society by running off to Paris with the married Viscount Castlereagh. The relationship soon ran its course, after which Consuelo proceeded to pinch a few other women's husbands before married bliss arrived in 1921 in the shape of a Frenchman named Jacques Balsan.

The Vanderbilt-Marlborough marriage was the last straw for the press on both sides of the Atlantic, which had become obsessed with the slew of "dollar princesses" being snapped up by the scions of Britain's grandest families. The British broadsheets claimed to be troubled by the triumph of vulgarity and excess over ancient lineage. The *Strand Magazine* characterized the American interlopers as "cold, calculating and devoted to the pleasure of social excitement." Questions of whether they were "up to the job" abounded. The mothers of these brides were also subjected to particularly vicious treatment.

One can't help seeing an uncanny echo of that criticism in the sort that is now being directed against Middleton, her father, younger brother, sister, and, in particular, her mother. Before Middleton's parents founded their business, her father was an airline pilot and her slim, sporty mother a flight attendant (a fact with which the meaner-spirited tabloids have had much fun). Thanks to long-lens cameras and loquacious "insiders," the whole world now knows of Mrs. Middleton's various faux pas, which have been well documented in the British press. How, upon meeting the queen, she said, "Pleased to meet you," and how, in the royal presence, she



OLD-FASHIONED GIRL Clockwise from left: Middleton with Prince William at a charity ball in 2008; in a candid moment; Oak Acre, the Middletons' \$2.5 million home; and with her parents, Michael and Carole. The British press has taken glee in documenting Mrs. Middleton's faux pas.

both used the word *toilet* and, later, chewed gum. But Mrs. Middleton should take comfort, for she is in good company. Alva Vanderbilt, Consuelo's mother, was in her time a favorite item of scorn for the press, which painted her as a mercenary gorgon. Some habits, it seems, are hard to shake.

But there is one fundamental and crucial way in which Kate—happily for her—differs from her socially ascendant American forerunners. The British press may have sneered at the American heiresses' perceived lack of manners, polish, and politesse, but for the American media the chief problem with these marriages was that the

brides were far superior to their titled and entitled grooms. Newspapers on the East and West coasts agreed: Nothing was more disgusting than the spectacle of rich upstarts selling their daughters for the sake of a bankrupt title. "When the American woman comes to London today," sneered the *San Francisco Call* in 1906, "she is welcomed, petted and fussed over, for she is the fashion." But make no mistake, insisted the *Call*—she was desired only for her money.

And indeed, there was no denying the large sums involved. By the early 20th century these heiresses had brought over with them the equivalent of \$1 billion, which was gleefully used to shore up sagging roofs and repurchase

The BEST of the REST

Marrying a royal may sound dreamy, but it's hardly uncomplicated. There's the public scrutiny, the cumbersome security detail, the inability to watch a morning news show without seeing one's own face. Just look at poor Charlene Wittstock, soon-to-be-wife of Prince Albert of Monaco, who, in addition to suffering the loneliness and isolation she's complained of, has spent the last year studying a thick file of royal protocol. Tedious indeed. Fortunately, charm, power, and wealth don't come only with a title. These eligible bachelors may be commoners, but they're anything but common. DANIELLE STEIN

Key

-  = An estimated billion
-  = An Ivy League (or equivalent) degree
-  = Potential future in politics
-  = A name that opens all doors
-  = Celebrity/Hollywood proximity factor
-  = Boy toys (race cars, planes, boats, bachelor pad)
-  = Descended from an established family dynasty

family treasures. The Americans' money paid for the installation of bathrooms at the Earl of Craven's Hamstead Hall, and the Viscount Curzon was not only able to restore the magnificent Palladian mansion Kedleston Hall thanks to his wife Mary Leiter's money, but also to buy and restore two other castles.

The spectacular collapse of the Vanderbilt-Marlborough marriage lent credence to the popular American perception that these alliances were doomed to failure. In 1909 the *New York Journal* took great delight in examining some of the more recent scandals under the headline "How Titled Foreigners Catch Americans."

But to reduce these marriages to mere business transactions is not only dismissive, it's unfair. There is no denying that the American

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brides' fortunes played a fundamental role in restoring the British aristocracy to its former splendor. However, more than their money, it was these women's cultural expectations and independent spirits that ensured the adaptation of these old and intermarried families to modern life. *Downton Abbey* had a real-life parallel in the marriage of Lord Abinger, a charming but dull man with a taste for beautiful architecture, and Helen Magruder. Although Abinger never had any ambitions beyond maintaining his beloved castle (the romantic Inverlochy in Scotland is now a hotel), their daughters would have made any American parent proud. Ella became the first aristocrat, and one of the first women, to qualify as a doctor. In 1900 she went as a single woman to Korea, where she was engaged as the court physician to the Imperial Household.

Her younger sister Evalina assumed a leading role in the suffrage movement. In one famous incident she threatened to take out her revolver and shoot any policeman who tried to manhandle her fellow suffragettes.

And it's a similar can-do (and, yes, very American) optimism that Kate Middleton projects, and that makes her so attractive. Her common roots are now labeled her greatest asset. The knowledge that this is a genuine love match between two young people from vastly different backgrounds has silenced the usual cynics. And although she will not be bringing money to her marriage (the Windsors are estimated to be worth about \$600 million and so have no need of Mr. Middleton's fortune—although the Middletons did reportedly contribute money toward the wedding, which is estimated to cost at least \$10 million), she *is* bringing her own brand of refurbishment, which the monarchy does desperately need and which she can uniquely provide. Even William has said that taking on a royal role should not have to define his bride—rather, it will be the other way around. Marrying into the British aristocracy is, he said, "about carrying your own future and making your own destiny—and Kate will make a very good job of that."

In the past two decades, the monarchy has been hobbled, both by traditions and by its recent scandals. Middleton, on the other hand, comes with no unpleasant baggage, no fusty snobbery. She represents an infusion of fresh energy and new attitudes; her very presence makes the monarchy seem modern, lively, open to change. The fact that she has not yet publicly declared her postmarriage plans for the world to analyze is both to her advantage and to her credit. In contrast to the disgraced and debt-ridden Sarah Ferguson, for example, Kate appears to be thinking hard about how she can be useful to the Windsors, rather than about what they will do for her. Polls show that she has already revived the popularity of the monarchy in Britain to heights not seen since Diana married Prince Charles 30 years ago. And, curiously, as an outsider she is in a position to exert a far greater influence on what the next generation of Windsors will be like than any previous royal consort. All she needs for success is an understanding that she must take her role as the future Queen of England seriously and the strength of character to teach her children that anything is possible—because she is proof that, in today's England, anything is. •

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1 SAM BRANSON
son of Virgin honcho

AGE: 26
PRIMARY RESIDENCE: London
PROFESSION: Documentary filmmaker
DOWRY: His father's \$4.2 billion fortune; Virgin airlines, megastores, mobile phone companies, etc; the entirety of Necker Island
RED FLAG: Inherited father's love of death-wish stunts; a recently fizzled relationship with actress Isabella Calthorpe; also, blonder than you are

2 ALEJANDRO SANTO DOMINGO
son of South American beverage magnate

AGE: 34
PRIMARY RESIDENCE: New York City
PROFESSION: Director, Santo Domingo Group
DOWRY: His family's \$6 billion fortune; a Harvard degree; board positions on several of his family's 100-plus holdings
RED FLAG: Modelizer (his current relationship is with *Sports Illustrated* model Julie Henderson); constant business travel

3 ROBERT F. KENNEDY III
son of American royalty

AGE: 26
PRIMARY RESIDENCE: New York City
PROFESSION: Filmmaker
DOWRY: The Hyannis Port compound; enough funding to have spent the last year in Italy filming the independent comedy he wrote (which co-stars Alec Baldwin); and, of course, the Kennedy name
RED FLAG: Dubious style (his shirt's always one button too open); rumors of a past dalliance with Mariah Carey

4 ERWIN CREED
son of fragrance dynasty

AGE: 30
PRIMARY RESIDENCE: Paris
PROFESSION: Fragrance developer, Creed
DOWRY: A seven-generation family business that he'll inherit; a jet-setting lifestyle (job requires "research" trips to exotic locales); great hair
RED FLAG: Very present in-laws (Erwin not only works side by side with his father Olivier but also skis, golfs, and travels with him)

5 KIRBY SCHLEGEL
son of dry concrete king

AGE: 33
PRIMARY RESIDENCE: Dallas
PROFESSION: Sports team owner and consultant
DOWRY: An uber-extravagant family manse; penthouse in the W Dallas; minor league baseball team
RED FLAG: Pentchant for partying with athletes and playing the field. "Sports, business, women, health, philanthropy, women," Schlegel once told a reporter of his interests.

6 CHARLES ROCKEFELLER
son of U.S. senator

AGE: 37
PRIMARY RESIDENCE: New York City
PROFESSION: Graduate student
DOWRY: A significant piece of his family's fortune; Stanford, Georgetown, and University of Pennsylvania degrees; an appreciation of art; a sense of civic responsibility (he plans to work in corporate social responsibility)
RED FLAG: Seemingly none

7 A.G. "GREGG" SULZBERGER
son of newspaper baron

AGE: 30
PRIMARY RESIDENCE: Kansas City
PROFESSION: Journalist
DOWRY: Good work ethic; a Brown degree; oh, and presumably the *New York Times* (he's the son of *Times* publisher and chairman Arthur Sulzberger Jr.)
RED FLAG: Proving himself more than just the boss's son has required taking a Midwest bureau chief post, meaning at least a couple of years jetting around glamorous locales like Missouri and Wisconsin

8 PIERRE SARKOZY
son of French president

AGE: 26
PRIMARY RESIDENCE: Paris
PROFESSION: Rap producer
DOWRY: Son of the president of France; former model; is a white rap producer
RED FLAG: Son of the president of France; former model; is a white rap producer

9 DAVID ELLISON
son of software bigwig

AGE: 28
PRIMARY RESIDENCE: Los Angeles
PROFESSION: Hollywood producer
DOWRY: His father's \$28 billion fortune; his \$20 million Cape Cod-style house on Malibu's Carbon Beach; a bright future as a Hollywood producer (he was recently named to *Variety's* Dealmaker list)
RED FLAG: A daredevil streak (he's an aerobatic pilot); fancies himself an actor

10 ERIC FOK
son of Hong Kong tycoon

AGE: 28
PRIMARY RESIDENCE: Hong Kong
PROFESSION: Vice president, Fok Ying Tung Group
DOWRY: Several billion in family fortune (initially reaped from his grandfather's investment in Stanley Ho's Macau gaming enterprises); fast cars (he's rumored to drive a \$385,000 Ferrari); business ambition
RED FLAG: An on-again, off-again relationship with actress Zhang Ziyi