

The Telegraph

Legendarily extravagant

Philip Ziegler welcomes an accomplished Life of a much-loved woman

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SHE was born a Spencer, was thrust into public life when still almost a child, was married to a man who treated her with cool courtesy and had all too evidently other emotional fish to fry. She exploited the press and her own vibrant personality to establish herself as a celebrity in her own right. In her prime, she was one of the best-known and best-loved women in England. She was Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire (1757-1806).

Amanda Foreman very properly eschews direct reference to the Duchess's contemporary counterpart, but the parallels are obvious. So also, though, are the differences. Georgiana was well educated, wrote competent poetry and plays, took a keen interest in chemistry and metallurgy. Her passion, except for gambling, was politics. Her lovers were not Captain Hewitts or Dodi Fayeds but, possibly, Charles James Fox and, certainly, Charles Grey, future architect of the Great Reform Bill.

There is little new to tell about the sexual antics of the Grand Whiggery or the convolutions which filled the nursery of Devonshire House with a bevy of assorted by-blows. But Lord Bessborough was less explicit than Miss Foreman; Arthur Calder Marshall and Brian Masters, less substantial. This is much the best account of that bizarre gallimaufry and one can see no reason why there should be another for many years.

What is more important is that Miss Foreman succeeds in conveying the personality of Georgiana: the warmth, spontaneity and sense of fun which won so many hearts; the frivolity and lack of self-control which tried the patience of her fondest admirers. "The Duke of Devonshire," observed the Town and Country Magazine, "was the only man in England not in love with the Duchess", and her charm, indeed, was almost irresistible. But there was a stridency, even vulgarity, about her public exhibitions. Her critics mocked her exaltation of the "common touch" and nicknamed her, after Ben Jonson's trickster, Dol Common.

Her extravagance was awe-inspiring. She came from one of the wealthiest families in England - her father inherited an estate worth some £45 million at today's values - and married into another which was twice as rich, yet her ferocious depredations put these vast fortunes into jeopardy. Time and again, the Duke settled what he believed to be her total debts, only to find that his wife had concealed the scale of her liabilities and was back at the gaming tables in an effort at least to pay the interest. Georgiana admitted in 1784 that she owed "many, many, many thousands". She had cost her husband "immense sums" every year of her married life. She would lose in a night what a country gentleman required to live on for 20 years. The miracle was not that the Duke occasionally cut up rough, but that he tolerated her at all.

Miss Foreman is particularly strong on the physical agonies which even the richest were required to endure in the 18th century. Indeed, the rich possibly suffered most, since they could afford the doctoring which seemed designed to cause pain rather than to heal. Even a physician as enlightened as Erasmus Darwin treated Georgiana's failing eyesight by attaching primitive electrodes above her temples. "It certainly did her no obvious harm," writes the author charitably, "despite the fact that it could deliver a hundred shocks a minute."

Miss Foreman makes large claims for Georgiana's achievements as a supporter of the Whigs - larger, probably, than any political historian would be prepared to credit. One can accept that the parties at Devonshire House bolstered Whig morale; that the Duchess was a dab hand at kissing tradesmen and winning votes; even that she was a considerable influence on the Prince of Wales. But to claim that her role in the - anyway short-lived - rapprochements between Fox and Pitt and between Pitt and the Prince of Wales was "particularly effective - perhaps even decisive" is surely pitching it too high.

The Ministry of All the Talents would have stumbled into power even if there had been no Duchess of Devonshire, and although Fox may have considered her "one of his chief whips", it was the death of Pitt, not Georgiana's machinations, that proved the decisive factor. But the author makes valid points and her work is a welcome corrective to those who treated Georgiana as no more than a charming and decorative lightweight.

This is an accomplished and well-written biography; remarkably mature for a first effort; diligently researched and entertainingly presented. Amanda Foreman is a writer to watch and one from whom much can be expected.