

BOOK REVIEW

Joan Coutu, Jon Stobart and Peter N. Lindfield, eds. *Politics and the English Country House, 1688–1800*

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Politics and the English Country House, 1688–1800 explores the “relationship and interplay of politics and the country house” during the long eighteenth century (xv). Its ten essays are arranged in roughly chronological order, though the volume is more weighted to the second half of the period (six cover post-1750 material, with three spilling into the early nineteenth century). One of its many strengths is the variety of contributors and approaches that it brings together. The essayists are British, Canadian, and American scholars from both the university and heritage sectors, and they represent a diverse range of disciplines, including history, literature, art history, visual culture, architecture, and museum studies.

The book's starting point is that the English country house—broadly defined to include landed estates, town houses, and villas—was “a tangible manifestation of the owners' social standing and, in many cases, their political aspirations” (3). It then investigates how owners used different aspects of their houses to fashion political identities. The essays are attuned to both the formal elements of building design as well as the practical ways in which these spaces were used for meetings, entertaining, and politicking. The volume takes a case study approach, allowing the micro-narratives to concretely illustrate some of the wider social, economic, and political changes of the period. At the same time, the collection “unsettles and complicates the country house,” since individual case studies sometimes go against larger and more established narratives (17).

For example, Amy Lim uses William III's 1695 progress to interrogate the assumption that country house owners built opulent state apartments in hopes of attracting a visit from the monarch. Lim shows that the king's itinerary did not privilege houses with state apartments and that owners who had them—like John Cecil, 5th Earl of Exeter, at Burghley House; and William Cavendish, 1st Duke of Devonshire, at Chatsworth—turned down visits for reasons of expense and political disaffection. Instead, Lim argues that state apartments were built primarily as expressions of aristocratic magnificence for local political circles and were intended as dynastic legacies—“to commemorate their own greatness”—to family descendants (42).

Meanwhile, Juliet Learmouth examines the London town house that Sarah Churchill, 1st Duchess of Marlborough, built alongside Queen Anne's palace at St. James. When the house was begun in 1709, the Duchess was attempting to shore up her political influence and deflect public criticism—a context which Learmouth astutely connects to her choice of architect, style, furnishings, decoration, and even window height. A few years later, when the house was nearing completion and the Marlboroughs were out of favor, the Duchess commissioned a mural cycle as “a visual protest against the apparent ingratitude shown by the Queen and her Tory advisors towards the Duke” (65).

Two essays tackle the increasing prominence of the Gothic style and its fertile relationship to politics. Because Gothic art was associated with a version of ancient constitutional “liberty” embodied in Magna Carta, it appealed to Whigs both ideologically and architecturally. Matthew Reeve traces Gothic discourse in the writings of Horace Walpole and his contemporaries and in buildings like Arundel Castle and the House of Lords, and suggests how the meaning of Gothic changed (and narrowed) between c. 1750 and 1850. Similarly, Peter Lindfield explores the Gothic design and evolution of Henry Pelham’s Esher Place to show that even in the 1730s, not all Whig country houses were in the classical Palladian style.

Two other essays look at evolving architectural styles through the same Yorkshire estate: Wentworth Woodhouse. The house was begun as a Baroque edifice in the 1720s but finished in the Palladian style in the 1730s. By then, explains Dylan Wayne Spivey, Palladianism had emerged as a clear medium for owners like Thomas Watson-Wentworth to proclaim their Whig values, and thus reflected the commodification of architectural style that books like Colen Campbell’s *Vitruvius Britannicus* (1715) were helping to bring about. After Thomas’s death, his son Charles, 2nd Marquis of Rockingham, formed part of the Whig opposition to George III. Using Edmund Burke’s writings, Joan Coutu carefully elucidates the Rockingham Whigs’ political values and shows how they were enacted by the rooms, stuary, paintings, collections, and gardens of Wentworth Woodhouse.

Two essays engage with the eighteenth-century pivot toward empire and explore the extent to which “rural Britain was an imperial space” (198). Elisabeth Grass examines two slaveholding Caribbean colonists who bought country estates in East Anglia in the 1750s and 1760s in order to gain entry into elite society and launch parliamentary careers. Meanwhile, Kieran Hazzard investigates the controversial Robert Clive and tracks his family’s multi-generational acquisition of almost 500 South and East Asian artifacts. Using letters, account books, and diaries, Hazzard considers how the objects were chosen, acquired, and ultimately displayed in the family’s Powis Castle in order to tell “a story about their dynasty and its role in building the British Empire” (223).

The final essay uses recently discovered house inventories to trace William Pitt the Younger’s modification of three residences that he occupied during his time as prime minister (1783–1801, 1804–1806): 10 Downing Street, Holwood House, and Walmer Castle. Rowena Willard-Wright provides careful descriptions of the houses and their spatial organizations, but—given the volume’s political focus—she might have fruitfully extended her analysis to assess what these changes say about Pitt and his political identity.

Politics and the English Country House is enhanced by some 91 illustrations that vividly recreate the architecture and art under discussion. They are particularly useful in John Bonehill’s essay on the genre of estate portraiture, which features several close readings of representative paintings. The volume is felicitously concluded by an Afterword that looks forward to new approaches, including the Jane Austen-inspired idea of focusing on estates as social spaces—“seek[ing] to identify users and inhabitants of a building” rather than “focus[ing] on the architecture that surrounds” them (280–81). Overall, this is a varied, stimulating, and insightful book that promises to enhance our engagement with the English country house.