

“Noblesse Oblige” - High society skeletons out of the cupboard as the family’s latest author exposes forgotten inheritance of another ancestral scandal

Gerry Burke reviews *A Perfect Explanation* by Eleanor Anstruther

THE STAINS of notorious high-society scandals and bloody persecutions have been woven like the fabric of their tartan into the history of the chiefs of Clan Campbell down the ages.

More than a few of the Argyll earls and dukes have been the authors of the most lurid and gory chapters in Scottish history - from the massacre of Glencoe and the infamous gibbeting of James of the Glen to modern front page headlines from the divorce courts.

George Douglas, the 8th duke, was a Victorian exception who conducted his battles in parliament with three terms as Lord Privy Seal and was a big family man, literally - three wives with 12 children born to the first who pre-deceased him, likewise a childless union with a bishop’s daughter, and final wedded companionship with a Tíree lady called Ina.

He was a prodigious author of books on religion, science and politics of the 19th century and a serious collector of the raw accounts of west coast history and folklore. He employed his own roving reporter to compile the unique collection of inherited legends and factual narratives that evolved as the Dewar Manuscripts.

The misdeeds of his ancestors were not spared and he was clearly an early advocate of “publish and be damned” even if it rattled the skeletons in the Inveraray castle and other cupboards.

Ne Obliviscaris

What he would have made of a present-day descendant’s paperback expose of the real-life kidnap and sale of his grandson by the schoolboy’s own mother and the pitiful, short, blinded life of his older brother would be enlightening. Duke George died before these sepia-tinted events came into play but even he might have been tempted to ignore the clan motto: “Ne Obliviscaris” (Forget Not) when some desperately sad domestic memories surfaced.

A Perfect Explanation is the enigmatic title of the bleak, flashback story that Eleanor Anstruther spins around her father’s almost-clinical conception to keep hand-me-down titles and other wealth secure in the coffers of his family line of Argyll aristocrats.

She tells how the innocent, perplexed child was eventually abandoned with the rest of the family by his mentally-afflicted mother, how she snatched him back from extended family care, and then sold him back again for £500, about £35,000 today.

Today, the author’s grandmother, Enid Anstruther of the Inveraray Castle and Strachur Park estate Campbells, would probably be diagnosed with postnatal depression and treated professionally and with compassion. She fled instead to a Christian Scientist community who promoted prayerful intervention over medical science. They cared for her then and in later life but she died apart from her family in 1964 after a one and only visit from her adult son.

In our own times he was titled Sir Ian Anstruther who finally inherited wealth on a huge scale with three baronetcies linked to the Anstruther of his name and prestige property portfolios including Thurloe and Alexander Squares in central London.

Engagement

The domestic tragedy of his early years had its roots in the start of WW1 when his uncle, Capt. Ivar

Campbell, grandson of 8th Duke George, was killed in action against a Turkish position with the Argylls a year after his father Lord George had died. An accomplished and prolific poet he had postponed plans to open a bookshop in Chelsea financed from a very healthy bank account.

But his death caused material and financial problems beyond simple evaluation of cold cash and assets. His mother Lady Sybil Lascelles Campbell (locally, Lady George in deference to her deceased husband) was left with the dilemma of replacing him as the proverbial heir with no spare. There were substantial properties apart from their homes in Bryanston Square, London and the Strachur estate with its 18th century Adam-style mansion.

Legacy and inheritance mattered hugely at this level of society and the perceived pressure to secure a suitable heir was paramount. The obligation to discharge a bounden, hereditary duty fell upon daughter Enid, as sister Joan, who also saw war service tending the wounded, was discounted as a lesbian with no supposed maternal capacity or instincts.

Enid, despite early discouragement, had married Douglas Anstruther, the son of an MP regarded by Lady Sybil as beneath her station. She had demanded a year’s separation before any engagement in the hope the attraction would fade. His mother bulldozed the issue by announcing the engagement in the society pages of *The Times* before the year was up.

The subsequent marriage produced a baby boy, Fagus, as the potential substitute heir and family succession appeared secure.

Tragically, the four-year-old fell down a stair in the big house in Strachur. He developed complications which left him sightless and crippled and now considered unfit for duty as an heir. He would be tied to a chair to keep him upright and struggled to comprehend what he could not see going on around him. He was sent off to a care home on the south coast of England where he remained and died just 15-years-old.

Grand carver

Sister Finetta, as a female, was also considered unsuitable and, when Ian’s conception was agreed and delivered a perfect storm, wrecked the marriage which would end in a lengthy divorce action. At the age of two his mother had decided she could not cope and she abandoned all, possibly due to postnatal depression, and disappeared to a Christian Scientist community in Norfolk. For better or worse Ian would be cared for by his aunt Joan, her lady partner Pat, and grandmother, Lady George, between Strachur and the London home at Bryanston Square.

At one point, the child visited his mother at her London flat with a nanny who returned minus the boy but with a note saying she was keeping him. His aunt Joan, with Lady George at her back, fought in the courts for his return but finally lost the action when he was in his teens. His financially-stretched mother then surprised everyone when she accepted a cheque for £500 and handed her son over.

Ian, whose respite from family affairs was school terms at Eton, was aware of the transaction and was able to state later in life that at least he knew what he was worth.

At some point the matronly aunt Joan became Lady



The author’s father Ian Anstruther with ‘Lady George’

George’s heir and they arranged matters so that when she died in 1960 those inheritances would devolve to him. Apparently she had no idea what the estates were worth and one of them she had never visited.

Other unexpected inheritances meant Ian became chief of the house of Anstruther, holder of three baronetcies, Hereditary Grand Carver to the Sovereign and Hereditary Master of the Royal Household in Scotland.

Like his uncle Ivar before him he became a wartime captain in the Argylls, transferred to the Royal Corps of Signals and survived the D-day landings of the Second World War. His service was broken by two years reading natural history at Oxford before a chance encounter at the end of the war with a neighbouring Cowal estate owner set him on a new career path.

Epilogue

On the upstairs of a London bus, he bumped into the British ambassador to the United States, Sir Archibald Clark Kerr of Inverchapel, at the bottom end of Loch Eck. He took him to Washington as his private secretary but his passion for the written word eventually claimed his ambitions.

One of his many obituarists in 2007 observed his preoccupation with harrowing Victorian childhood characters in his writing, and his research for the Scandal of the Andover Workhouse highlighted the cruelty of the system introduced in the 1800s.

He relished times past as an accomplished author



Centre, Strachur House as it is today. Inserts, Clockwise from top left: Lord George Campbell, Lady Sybil (George) Campbell,, aunt Joan Campbell, mother Enid Campbell.

and is revered in literary circles as an extremely generous low-profile benefactor of the London Library by helping finance the Anstruther Wing - which now houses 40,000 rare and vulnerable books.

Presumably from the first inheritances from his mother he bought the 3,000 acre Barlavington estate in west Sussex where he drove around sedately in the very raciest of sports cars but gave them up because they were too fast. Latterly, he tootled about slowly in a small saloon with a rear sticker admonishing the queue behind: "Actually, I do own the road." He also indulged himself with a sunny retreat in St Tropez.

He had two sons and daughters with two wives and he always dressed for dinner even when alone. His slippers had bells on the toes presumably to avoid startling the housekeeping staff.

The bleak and burdensome detail of his upbringing is contained in the family archive of letters and court and medical reports.

In the epilogue to her book, Eleanor Anstruther, herself a mother of twin boys, states her father gave her permission to tell his story adding he wanted to talk about it and told her much of what ended up on the pages she wrote.

She stated: "It's easy to demonise and make cut-outs of characters never met, it's easy to say Enid was bad and Joan good ... but it wouldn't be the truth and letting them live here again, giving them voice, has allowed that black and white picture to colour."

She adds that Enid wasn't made for children - "They were forced upon her and everyone suffered as a consequence".

Veronica, Lady MacLean and Sir Fitzroy who bought the Strachur estate, met aunt Joan when they were negotiating a sale with her. She recalled in her memoir that she appeared an eccentric lady who had not been interested in men or marriage. She said: "She



Ian Anstruther as a child

pinned all her dynastic hopes on her nephew Ian but he disappointed her by preferring the urban comforts and salubrious climate of west Sussex."

Lady Veronica recounted that there were no ghosts in the house - but the night they moved in the ancient standing stone in the field in front of the house fell down.



A Perfect Explanation by Eleanor Anstruther (above) is published by Salt (£12.99p). Photo, Henry Bourne.