

# Reviews

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## Russell's family: history and traditions

by Kirk Willis

Georgiana Blakiston. *Woburn and the Russells*. London: Constable, 1980. Pp. x, 246; 39 plates. £9.50.

THE DORSET COAST is one of the loveliest in Britain; the austere beauty of its wild surf, ragged cliffs, and isolated beaches has beguiled settlers, travellers, and seamen for centuries. The coast is also one of the most treacherous to navigate, and since Saxon times shipwrecks have been commonplace all along its shore. Just such a routine incident occurred on a cold and blustery afternoon in January 1506 when a vessel carrying the Hapsburg Archduke Philip of Castile, son of the Emperor Maximilian, and his wife, Joanna, foundered off the coast near Weymouth. After a rather protracted rescue effort by local fishermen, the seasick, frightened, and soggy noble pair were taken to the home of Sir Thomas Trenchard, the leading landlord of the district. Linguistic difficulties frustrated the meeting, however, and Sir Thomas was forced to send for his young cousin, John Russell, to join him and his royal guests and to act as interpreter. Possessing an easy fluency in French, Spanish, and Italian acquired through extensive travels as well as active involvement in his family's wine trade with France, Russell proved to be invaluable. Indeed, his competence and manner so impressed and charmed the imperial couple that when they left to move on to the court of Henry VII at Windsor, Philip and Joanna insisted that Russell accompany them as their personal interpreter.

John Russell never looked back. Henry Tudor, ever a shrewd judge of men, recognized the young westcountryman's abilities and started him on a career of extraordinary length and diversity. For the next fifty years Russell dutifully served four very different royal masters as a courtier, confidant, soldier, commander, secret agent, and diplomat, and managed through a remarkable combination of immense industry, absolute

loyalty, cautious cunning, and uncommonly sensitive survival instincts to endure one of the most tumultuous half centuries in British history. Indeed, Russell possessed an uncanny ability to land always on his feet. But he did more than merely survive; he also succeeded in gaining steadily in prestige, influence, and wealth throughout the turbulent reigns of the first four Tudors. New offices and sinecures added to his responsibilities and income yearly, as did generous royal patronage. By 1539 he had been made a baron and given the Garter; by 1547 he had served consecutively as Comptroller of the King's Household, Lord High Admiral, and Lord Privy Seal and had been given confiscated monastic lands in Devonshire, Cornwall, Northamptonshire, Cambridgeshire, Buckinghamshire, Bedfordshire, Huntingdonshire, Lincolnshire, and Leicestershire as well as Covent Garden and seven acres of the Long Acre in London and a large house in Exeter. The pinnacle of Russell's career—as well as the apex of royal largesse—came in 1550 when Edward VI, at long last implementing the provisions of his father's will, created him first Earl of Bedford and lavishly endowed the earldom with the rich ex-Cistercian abbey and manors at Woburn, in Bedfordshire. It was to be on the estates of this twelfth-century monastery that John Russell founded a family dynasty, and it is the story of this dual life—of the Russells and of their home—that is the subject of Georgiana Blakiston's intriguing book, *Woburn and the Russells*.

John Russell provided for his descendants very well indeed. By the time of his death in 1555 he had become one of the ten wealthiest men in the kingdom, with large estates in nine counties and London. But, as his successors were quick to learn, such wealth also brought both power and responsibility; his was now one of the leading families of the realm with considerable and unavoidable obligations. Of necessity their concerns were national, their duties parliamentary, their roles exacting, and their burdens onerous. Francis Russell, the second earl, bore his enhanced responsibilities cheerfully and served as a valuable and loyal advisor to Elizabeth I. Indeed, so capable and devoted was he that the Queen entrusted him with the delicate dynastic negotiations with Mary of Scotland. Perhaps more importantly for the future of his family, the second earl became an ardent Puritan, and when the turmoil of the seventeenth century began the Russells were therefore consistent and strident opponents of the religious and political policies of the Stuarts. A Russell helped to lead the fight for the Petition of Right; a Russell was imprisoned for circulating seditious literature critical of Laud and Strafford; a Russell sheltered John Pym in the family's pocket borough at Tavistock; a Russell directed parliamentary armies against Charles I; a Russell—Lord William—played a leading role in the Exclusion Con-

troversy and Rye House Plot and earned martyrdom for his troubles; a Russell commanded the ship which, driven by the "Protestant wind", brought William of Orange to England in 1688. In all these struggles the Russells were fortunate to have been on the triumphant side, and as a consequence their "loyalty" was rewarded (with additional lands and an elevation in the peerage to a dukedom), their political principles endorsed, their eminence sanctioned, and their duties increased still further. By the time of Queen Anne's accession in 1702, therefore, the Russells had become one of the great Whig families which would dominate English political and social life for the next two centuries.

Wealthy, respected, and influential, the Russells carried on their responsibilities as political and social leaders of the nation throughout the eighteenth century. The fourth duke, for instance, immortalized by Horace Walpole as "our merry little duke", began his long and varied career as an irrepressible critic of Sir Robert Walpole. After Walpole's downfall, the duke enjoyed an almost uninterrupted period of office under the Pelhams, serving as First Lord of the Admiralty, Secretary of State for the Southern Department, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, Lord Privy Seal, and Lord President of the Council. He culminated his career by leading the British delegation to France in 1762–63 and acting as the chief British negotiator of the Treaty of Paris. His grandson Francis succeeded him as the fifth duke in 1771. Out of sympathy with the new Toryism of the younger Pitt but in tune with the radical Whiggism advocated by Charles James Fox, Francis Russell was a bitter opponent of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. So too was his brother, the sixth duke, who entered the Commons in 1788 and was an unwavering supporter and intimate friend of Fox. Indeed, in the dark years of the 1790s when the number of Whigs dwindled to a mere score, the Russells stood fast in the front line of opposition. Though out of national office during the decades of Tory ascendancy from 1783 to 1830—the sixth duke served briefly as Viceroy of Ireland in the ill-fated Ministry of All the Talents in 1806—the Russells remained unfailing adherents of Whiggism.

Throughout the eighteenth and into the nineteenth century, then, the Russell family tradition persisted as strong as ever. Not only did their commitment to political and religious liberalism continue unabated, but their devotion to public service remained constant, with Russells serving as diplomats, soldiers, M.P.s, bishops, cabinet ministers, and local government officials. Accustomed for generations to governing England and considering themselves to be among its superior citizens, the Russells felt they owed a duty to the state to guard its interests and manage its affairs. They governed from duty, heritage, and habit—and, as they viewed it,

from right. After all, they had helped to rescue the country from Stuart despotism not once but twice. Moreover, they represented a class in whose blood, training, and practice over the centuries, landowning and governing had been inseparable. The Russells undertook to manage the affairs of the nation inevitably and unquestionably; it was their ordained role and natural task.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, all this had changed. With one exception—and that a mighty one—the Russells had almost entirely abandoned their traditional role as active public servants. Much of that retreat from responsibility and denial of heritage was due to the personalities of the inhabitants of Woburn during that eventful half-century and after: the seventh duke's passion was botany not politics; the eighth duke was a neurotic hypochondriac who lived as a recluse; the ninth a world-weary cynic without either the faith in or the energy for much else besides estate management; the tenth enervated by disease; the eleventh possessed interests almost exclusively military and zoological. Exigencies of character, then, are a major part of the explanation of the Russells' withdrawal from active involvement in politics and government. An even greater share in the account must be given to the changing role of the aristocracy as a whole during the nineteenth century. After the passage of three Reform Bills and stacks of legislation attacking privilege in the army, church, civil service, and local government, notions of aristocratic "duty" and inherited "right" to rule became impossible to justify. Indeed, for a family such as the Russells, the egalitarian implications of their own left-wing Whiggism produced not merely a crisis of confidence, but a crisis of identity, of purpose. What role could they—what role should they—play in an increasingly democratic state? Was it possible, was it desirable, to use their undoubted and still considerable social prestige and economic influence in the public interest? Was there any useful function at all for a landed, privileged, and hereditary class in an industrial, imperial, and democratic nation?

The search for answers to such questions bedeviled the Russells—and all other aristocratic families as well—in the middle and closing decades of the nineteenth century. By about 1875 the consensus among the Russells was that active participation in national, and even local, politics was to be shunned. Rare was the issue that could make a Duke of Bedford attend the House of Lords; nothing could induce one to hold office. There was, however, one glaring and distinguished exception to this general pattern of withdrawal and disengagement: Lord John Russell, third son of the sixth duke. Lord John was twice Prime Minister (1846–52 and 1865–66), a principal author of the epochal Reform Bill of 1832, and a devoted public servant. His successful struggles in favour of

the elimination of religious disabilities in the 1820s, parliamentary reform in the 1830s, free trade and educational reform in the 1840s, and Italian unification in the 1850s distinguished him as an unswerving advocate of unpopular causes, an untiring proponent of civil and religious liberty, and a warm supporter of the extension of parliamentary government across Europe and the world. And by the time of his elevation to the peerage (1861) and retirement from politics (1868), Lord Russell's fifty years of eminent service in Parliament and dedication to political and social reform had made him, after a career that had raised controversy on every side, one of the most respected members of the British political elite.

Within his own family, however, Lord Russell's career had made him a dinosaur, a throwback to the Russells' seventeenth- and eighteenth-century past. And when, therefore, he and his wife secluded themselves, their two youngest children, and their malleable and precocious younger grandson in Pembroke Lodge in Richmond Park, they created an environment which was based on archaic political expectations, anachronistic social values and political principles, and stale social assumptions and political prejudices. That these expectations, values, principles, assumptions, and prejudices were, by comparison with both the main branch of the Russell family and the overwhelming majority of the British aristocracy, outmoded and old-fashioned does not, however, deny their central role in shaping young Bertrand's own social and political attitudes. He was raised as a self-conscious Russell—knowledgeable of his family's long heritage, proud of their many achievements, and determined to do his part to continue the tradition. He was, however, nearly the last of a species.

*Woburn and the Russells* is an anecdotal, chatty, romantic, and admiring guide through the history of the Russells and their magnificent home from the time of the first Earl of Bedford through the death of the eleventh duke in 1940. Its focus is squarely on the personalities that inhabited Woburn, their lives and loves, and their almost incessant rebuilding, furnishing, and tinkering with the splendid Abbey itself. Students of the Russell family specifically and the British aristocracy more generally will find it an enjoyable and sentimental survey of a way of life and of a cluster of attitudes now both long dead.

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